

RBR



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Reedy Branch Review



Pitt Community College

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Reedy Branch Review

Reedy Branch Review is the online literary journal of Pitt Community College. *RBR* is especially interested in publishing the work of Pitt Community College students, faculty, and staff, but we also accept work from writers associated with other community colleges and from anyone who supports the mission of America's community colleges.

Cover art: "Bob's Burgers and Scooby Doo Crossover"

By Amyah Jones

Graphic design and layout

By Christine R. Bates

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** Names in some creative nonfiction essays have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.*

Reedy Branch Review Volume 7

Editor's Notes

The first publication of *Reedy Branch Review* was almost ten years ago. What a sense of excitement that must have been for our founding editors and those first contributors to see their hard work showcased in *RBR*. I wasn't at PCC back then, but since I've been a part of *RBR*, the journal has continued to evolve and expand each year, with more and more contributors represented, and a growing readership interest.

With that in mind, we've known for some time *RBR*'s editorial staff needed to include other voices and expertise from various areas around our PCC campus; when Dr. Joy Moses-Hall came on board several issues back as the creative nonfiction editor, there was a renewed sense of excitement to have someone with her extensive writing background on our staff. And this year *RBR* has expanded again to include two additional editors: Professor Charity Jules, artwork editor, and Professor Regina Garcia, poetry editor.

Charity's diverse studio practice spans photography, metals, wood, glass, and mixed media, with her work exhibited nationally and held in private collections. At PCC, Charity serves as Department Chair for the fine arts department and has helped create a thriving associate in arts transfer program.

Regina's poetry has been featured in several musical and literary collaborations such as "The Black Light Project" (a documentary film) and a Mid-South Emmy Award-winning episode of "PBS Muse: An Art Show." She is the author of *The Firetalker's Daughter* and the recently released collection *Whispers from the Multiverse*. Regina also serves as PCC's Global Programs Coordinator and Multicultural Activities Chairman.

We also plan to bring on a student editor in the upcoming issues, as PCC has so many talented creative students, many of whom are featured here in Volume 7. One of our previous PCC students, Alumna Amyah Jones, started at Pitt County Schools Early College High School in 2017 and graduated last year with two degrees in Early Childhood Education. Her painting "Bob's Burgers and Scooby Doo Crossover" fits beautifully on the cover, as it reflects how creativity can come from unexpected places.

Volume 7 also includes several community poets and local writers, such as creative nonfiction writer Georgia McAllister, who took classes at PCC back in 1991. Joy says, "If My Desk Had a Voice" stood out because "here is a tale about a lifelong companion, one who offers stability and comfort through good times and bad, both giving and taking -- giving a smooth surface for school and projects and ironing and diaper changing and hospitality, taking a new set of legs. Yes, it is a piece of furniture, but sometimes the silent solid timbers of an undemanding support system are what is most needed, in life, and in a story."

To end this note, I'd like to acknowledge and thank our new PCC President Dr. Maria Pharr, our dean, Dr. Stephanie Rook, and our department chair, Professor Josh Matthews for their support this year; we also wouldn't be able to bring this journal to you without our

marketing team, Ashlyn Bennett and Taylor Cancellarich. Professor Scott Temple is taking leave from *RBR* this year, but he and all former editors and staff deserve a lot of credit for *RBR*'s initial vision, first publication almost a decade ago, and continued success. We are so proud of this year's publication.

And we hope you enjoy it, too.

--Christine

Nic the Nok by Barbara Rock-Lupton, 13 X 6, coil ceramic vessel



Am I a Dreamer if I dream? by Emma Lima

Visions of versions of myself
Different times, different places, different choices
In a field of soft grass,
The Sun mixed with the flow of the wind, perfect
In the water jumps a large green bass
The nostalgia of never being here before is a strange effect
Next in a moment, a city full of excitement
Loud and Proud music I hear
I've never heard such indictmen
Then all of a sudden it all disappears
Am I a Dreamer if I dream?
Then again, what do my dreams even mean
No one ever knows, and no one ever will
I guess I'll just dream until
When the world dies, so it will fulfill
I will still dream upon that hill
Am I still a Dreamer if I dream?
Because to fantasize is to die
Outside your dream

Refrigerator by Tony Parker

Post midnight now, on the couch
With my blind and deaf dog,
His skin and fur wraps around Old
man bones, his and mine.
Zeus lays his head on my lap,
Looks around, sees things
I cannot, maybe memories.
We share this need to be up,
Two creatures not content to sleep
But to dream of chasing a ball
Or running trails, playtime reserved For
pups and young men.
Tonight I revisit a volume of verse,
Sit on the couch with my friend,
Scratch behind his ears and read.
Let the refrigerator hum Return
us to slumber.

The Woman and The Bread by Sierra Xie

She'd never seen Jesus on a piece of toast but thinking of her father's ashes when she emptied the crumb tray felt like the same thing.

Between deployments, he'd insist on visiting the downtown bakery. "You can't get bread like this anywhere else in the world," he'd say. "Not in the Midwest, not in the Middle East."

The day she got the phone call, she went to the bakery. The *mémère's* eyes brightened. "Your father is home!" But when the door closed and no one else entered, the *mémère* didn't ask questions.

Since then, she went to the bakery every day.

She bought so much bread that the *mémère* had to order extra flour, work extra hours.

She spent her days toasting bread, and when a slice sprang from the toaster a perfect golden brown, she'd press the lever down again.

She toasted each slice until it became charred black and brittle, until it lost its form and disintegrated. She emptied the crumb tray on the counter. When the counters were blanketed, she emptied the crumb tray on the floor. The toaster labored to keep up, its coils a constant, seething red. The smoke alarm rang out at steady intervals. She did what she could to forget her father's ashes, condemned to a dark closet, adorning a shelf that she would never reach in a place she could never visit.

"Bury me," her father had said once, an aside in an hours-long conversation as they'd drifted downriver under a blazing sun. "I'd like to become a tree."

Instead, flames sloughed his skin, melted his organs, and reduced his body to bone and ash.

So the *mémère* mixed and kneaded and baked. And the woman sliced and toasted and burnt, and all around her things disappeared under layers of crumbs.

One evening, weeks after the phone call, she stood near the toaster and watched a tendril of smoke curl toward the window. She saw a disturbance in the otherwise smooth layer of crumbs: rodent tracks on the windowsill. She leaned closer. In four toes she saw the prongs of a crown, and beneath the crown, a face — eyes within dark and crumbling. Her breath caught and she held it. The phone rang and it was the *mémère* — the day was getting late and the *mémère* was getting tired: would the woman be in for more bread?

Who am I? by Le'Quina Augustus

Who am I you ask?
Only a few can get a pass
To take this class
Now this will go pretty fast
And I know I am a big task

Who am I you say?
Someone who has to pay
For all the things that I have done
I am going to continue and put my hair in a bun
I have overcome a ton
No one knows my true story
But I will continue to give God all the Glory

Who am I you wonder?
Someone who is like Thunder
Every since I was a teen
I am heard but not seen
I am outspoken and kind-hearted
This story has not been charted.

I'm Over Getting Over You by Andy Sugg, 6 x6, mixed media collage



I Rebuke You in the Name of Jesus—A poem For Sonya Massey by Christopher Sims

She held
Her hand up,
reaching for Jesus

seeking Jesus
at her time of stress,
just before her death.

I am sure
Jesus heard her;
prefers her
instead of the policeman
who took her life. Her life

was worth much more
than they treated her,
was worth much more
than how they degraded,
demeaned her.

Jesus loves Black women.
Jesus heals Black women.

Jesus will treat Sonya Massey
like a victim. The policeman
who took her life, he will receive
the hardest decision handed down
to a person for unlawfully killing
a precious Black woman.

If you don't believe
in her Jesus, then
whomever you pray to;
whomever you say amen to;
imagine what they will do

to a life taker, a life hater,
a degrader of the most powerful
women on this planet.

Sonya should still be living,
smiling, cleaning her home,
speaking to family and friends
on the phone, loving, praying,
hugging, happy, hopeful, doing
all of the simple things living
people do.

Instead, she is an Ancestor.

The pressure on Black women
in the United States of America
is continuously mounting. They
are praying to Jesus instead of
experiencing joy.

Say her name.

Dearest Buddha may she
have not died in vain. Please
ease her family's pain.

And in Jesus's name, may
the jurors find the cop guilty
on all charges.

A life without a mother, a
Black mother, is one of the
hardest.

Power in Film by Rakia Jackson, 16 X 20, mixed media



Your First Love by Jayden Staton

Is one that you will never forget,
no matter how hard you try.

Is one that will stay with you,
for the rest of your life.

One that teaches you lessons
you didn't think you needed to know

One that, no matter how much you deny
helped you grow.

My first love was my first everything;
I even thought of a wedding ring.

I'll miss them, no matter what—
However, they were nothing but
My first love.

What is Praise? by Patricia Carragon

Ask the phases of the moon
Ask the dawn of another day
Ask the sun after days of rain
Ask the buds on a dying tree
Ask the sea after a tidal wave
Ask the forest when unharmed
Ask the fish in clean waters
Ask the air that purifies
Ask the grains that grow
Ask the land without war
Ask the cities that rebuild
Ask the laws that abolish hate
Ask the homeless who are found
Ask the child who's adopted
Ask the girl who fosters kittens
Ask the boy who hugs his Christmas puppy
Ask the man who learns the meaning of love
Ask the woman who embraces herself
Ask those who are cancer-free
Ask those who live without fear
Ask those with peace of mind
Ask this poem that praises all

Blacks Meadow by Angell Edwards, 24 X 24, acrylic on canvas



Is There a Reason? by Caroline Shackleford

Why does the golfer settle into his stance before he swings?
Is there a reason? Does it help he swing better?
Why does the batter open and close, open and close his gloves?
Is there a reason? Does it help him hit better?

Is there a reason why the sophomore bullies the freshman?
Does it erase his own shame from the year before?
Is there a reason why the rookie is ignored by his team?
Does it make them a better ball player?

Why is the first year on the job the loneliest?
Is there a reason? Do we really need to prove ourselves?
Why does the high school graduate think she has to make it on her own?
Is there a reason? Is she truly ready to stand on her own two feet?

Why do we act like monkeys, copying each other without thinking,
Without reflecting, without asking why?
Is there a reason?

Why do we spend our tax resources to educate our children for thirteen long years,
Encouraging their individuality and ability to analyze
Only to push them into one-size-fits-all mold?
Is there a reason?

Can anyone give me a reason, a valid reason for our behavior?
Or are we simply no better than the rest of the animal kingdom,
Going on pure instinct, ignoring the mind given us?

Is there a reason?

Catatonia by David Brown II, 2692 x 2050 pixels, photography



Why does Metamorphosis take so long when you need it? Ask Icarus. by Emma Lima

I am the perfect doll
I am played with and adored
I am a star.
Surely you cannot love Apollo as I do
But as I ask the lake for compliments,
It tells me it loves me, but my own reflection...
It can't be me! I refuse!
You're long gone, people wonder where you went
I must not tell
Yet God in Heaven is displeased with me
Me, the perfect jester, dances on a stage of lies
Bloody guilt, bloody mary.
Everyone knows how far Icarus flew,
But why did he do it?
Have I gone too far?
Have I crossed the line?
"No", says the Lake as it comforts me.
"It's their fault surely, they are to blame"
But how does the blame lie on the audience?
Six feet under, you try to pull me down
"You're not crazy, I swear it!"
I want to be a butterfly!
Maybe I already am...
I sucked your sweet blood in vain
Could you even forgive me?
Would you have done the same? No.
"Nevermind that, your feelings don't matter.
You're not here. I am."
I dance on shattered glass and walk on graves.
"Magnolia took our sunlight!"
She deserved better.
Icarus flew too close.
So did I.
When does Metamorphosis occur?

Can I change?
"You don't need to change, you are perfect!" The Lake hissed.
I was the perfect doll
I was played with and adored
But the marionette is tied up by nothing but its own strings
I am the moon.
You were always my Sun.
Being in your shadow,
I've always followed haven't I?
My light was only reflected from you.
But I could never reach you, my sweet Magnolia.
As I stand here I see the Sun falling.
Ironic...
Maybe I should join you and apologize.
Maybe it's time.
Icarus fell from grace.
So have I.

If My Desk Had a Voice by Georgia McAllister

1966 (I was in 6th grade): I went to a classmate's house to study together. She had her own bedroom, incredible! I always shared a bedroom with my sister, four years my senior. The first noticeable object that got my attention right away was a desk. She had her own desk in her own bedroom! My parents had bought two small foldable tables for multiple use—study desks after school, and, at times, dinner table for the family when joined together. The formal dining room was used when we had guests, during holidays, and on special occasions.

1969: An acquaintance from the youth club I belonged to had invited me to her house just to hang out. She had her own desk in her own bedroom with her own frog-shaped telephone adorning the desk to chat with her friends. Oh, that was really nice!

From then on, I started a campaign to persuade my parents that having a desk in the kids' room, as my mother called it, was a must-have item. Budget was strategically managed by my mother, a homemaker and the family's financial planner. My father was the only bread winner in the family and prudence with money was necessary.

1972: I was a high-school junior and one day my father came home with a brand new desk. To say I was thrilled is an understatement. By that time, my sister had her own job and did not need a desk although we were still sharing the bedroom. I finally had my own desk! The desk (51" by 28") was covered with cherry color, woodgrain Formica on black, metal frame. It had 3 drawers on the right side, a space above the drawers to store large folders, paper, etc. and a shelf on the front of the desk to stack books. Each drawer had its own key, numbered 1, 2, 3 correspondingly for each one of them.

I fell in love with it at first sight. I bought a desk lamp with my allowance, placed my high-school books on the shelf and tried to keep it neat and dust free, at all times. I solved a lot of difficult problems of Algebra, Trigonometry, and Geometry on this desk. At times, I felt that it sensed my frustration when I couldn't solve a problem and boosted my determined attempts toward solutions. I created my first oil painting on this desk. I covered it with an old newspaper and painted the picture on the back of an old piece of plywood that my father had given me. My mother was always my cheerful motivator in everything I did and tried. In her eyes, my simple painting was a master piece, and she paid good money for a nice frame.

1974: I was in college studying engineering. The desk had become my constant companion. On occasion, I had classmates over studying together. My classmate, Popi, had come to work on a huge assignment: to design a bridge and show all the calculations and drafting on transparent

paper. Although the assignment was the same for all the students, the teacher had given different dimensions and numbers specific to each student so we had to show individual work.

Popi and I put the desk in the middle of the room occupying each the short side of the desk respectively. Pencils, triangular rulers, calculators, drafting compasses and rapidographs with different tip sizes and ink were all lying within easy reach in the middle of the desk. Precision and steady hand were essential as the rapidograph could cause ink blots on the transparent paper if not careful. The gliding Formica surface of my desk helped us avoid any mishappenings. After Popi left, I cleaned up the desk surface and teasingly praised it by saying, "Good job!"

1976: My desk also shared unhappy times with me. I was in the classroom taking a final engineering exam. The teacher of the course also served as the proctor ensuring that students follow the college's academic guidelines. One of them was: No talking among students during exams. I had just finished and as I was placing my paper on the teacher's desk while the teacher was on the opposite side of the room, a classmate close by asked with very low audible voice for the final number of the problem. I think he wanted to compare our numbers to ensure correctness. As I whispered back the number, the teacher heard me and told me quite firmly that there will be consequences.

I was distraught and went straight back home. I set at my desk thinking that I had worked so hard and now my final grade was in jeopardy. I was tapping my finger tips on my desk trying to process my actions and think carefully of my next step while tears were rolling down my cheeks, splashing on the desk surface. And all of sudden, it just hit me: I had to apologize. The teacher was an experienced engineer who was working in a private business and occasionally taught in college. On the first day of class, he had given to the students his phone number to call him after workhours if we had any questions or concerns. I anxiously went back to my notes and found his phone number. I called him and he answered. I repeatedly apologized with honest sincerity. He accepted my apology and detected my agony about my grade. He ended our conversation by saying I would be okay. I hugged my desk with immeasurable delight and rested my left cheek on its surface still wet from my tears.

1978: I had graduated from college and was hired to work in a different city, 4 hours away from my home town. My parents gave me a few furniture as I was starting my career and I did not have much. Certainly, my desk came with me. My apartment was tiny (a small bedroom, a small kitchen and a bath). The desk took quite a bit of space in my bedroom. Being busy with my new work, I was no longer using it as a desk. My father had bought me a television and

although it had a small screen, it was voluminous. I found the perfect place for it, my desk, so now the desk was serving as a TV stand.

1981: I married my husband, a U.S. Foreign Service Officer, and moved in with him. I returned the few furniture I had to my parents, but my desk came with me.

1982: We were assigned to Monrovia, Liberia and we had just received our household effects. The government supplied furnished housing in overseas assignments, but the employees with their families had their own household--linens, clothing, décor, mixer, stereo, etc., and some furniture up to a certain weight quota. I looked at the living room that was covered with cardboard boxes and felt overwhelmed. We were invited to a U.S. Embassy function that evening and I was trying to find the ironing board to freshen up my dress and my husband's slacks and shirt. I couldn't find it, but I spotted my desk standing quietly in a corner of the room. I put a blanket and a sheet on it and with the iron from the hospitality kit, I pressed our clothes. The desk was there to help me when I needed it.

My poor desk had traveled to a different continent, Africa, and by then its metal legs had bent and its stability was suffering. My husband, Dan, is very handy and can fix almost anything. He knew how much I loved that desk and made new wooden, black legs. He skillfully attached them to the rest of the desk frame that made it look indestructible, ready for more travels to come.

1983: My son was born in a missionary hospital in Monrovia and as a new mom, I was busy taking care of him. Those years, local men worked as housekeepers in the houses of foreigners. Cooper, my house help, was about 19 years old and was trying to complete high-school. One day, as he was dusting my desk he noticed the National Geographic Atlas of the World I kept in the gap above the desk drawers. This volume provided maps of every country and ocean of the world along with relative information. Cooper was excited and told me that he is currently taking Geography at school and he would like to study the Atlas. We agreed that upon completion of his chores (he came once or twice a week from a village close by), he would sit at the desk studying the Atlas. So the desk for a while served as Cooper's study place.

1984: My husband and I had invited his colleagues with their spouses for a buffet dinner party. I needed a place for drinks. The desk being located in the living room was the ideal place. I dressed it with a nice tablecloth, placed drinks, glasses, ice bucket with tongs, napkins and my desk became a practical, self-service bar.

1986: We had been transferred to Greece and my daughter was born there. My desk had traveled again to another continent, Europe, and was placed in the main bedroom, which was quite spacious. Being busy with my two children, now the desk perhaps felt neglected as I was barely using it, but not for long. I needed a diaper change station for my daughter and the desk was looking at me shouting out, "Choose me!" I placed a thick blanket and a cotton receiving blanket on it, a plastic container with baby powder, Desitin cream and other supplies, and my desk became a practical and well-organized, changing table.

1990: We had a domestic assignment and returned to the U.S. for a couple of years. We bought our own furniture as domestic assignments required employees to find their own housing and supply their own furniture. By that time, computers were out in the market, and most people were trying to learn this new business trend of computer utilization. My husband had bought a new computer with CRT monitor, big and heavy compared to what is nowadays along with a printer, which was also quite heavy. My desk was now in the family room and the computer and printer were placed on it. My desk carried all that heavy load without any tremor of its formidable frame!

1992: We had another domestic assignment and moved to a different State. My six-year-old daughter enjoyed playing dress-up. Christmas was coming and her father, Dan, built a nice storage trunk with red cushion top. I bought various fabric pieces, and, although I am not an accomplished seamstress, I made a few accessorized outfits by using my desk's smooth surface to layout and cut the fabric. All fitted nicely in the trunk that was placed under the Christmas tree. Our daughter was ecstatic finding the trunk on Christmas morning. My desk had helped me in my sewing undertakings.

1994: We were assigned to Manila, Philippines. Our furniture went into storage, but my desk as part of our sea freight from the U.S. to the Philippines traveled for at least 45 days to another continent, Asia, through oceans and over land to come to us. It was placed in a spare bedroom. A newer computer still big and heavy was placed on it along with a laser printer. All the family enjoyed using my desk and computer station for school assignments and Internet use through phone lines. I was an active volunteer then with the U.S. Embassy Club (USEC). The USEC sponsored fundraising activities and the proceeds went to the U.S. Peace Corps projects there, Project Smile that funded the surgeries for Filipino children with cleft palate and lip, and the Scholarship Program that partially paid the tuition of Filipino college students. Being the chairperson of the Scholarship Program and very involved in fundraising, I created many reports, announcements, invitations, and awards using the computer that was tirelessly carried by my steadfast desk.

1998: My husband had received a new tour to Washington, D.C., although we lived in Virginia and he commuted on AMTRAK daily. Unquestionably, my desk accompanied us and was put in the primary bedroom. I helped my son complete some of his school projects using my desk.

2000: We were assigned to Kuwait. My desk went to storage with all our furniture as we were informed that there were several desks in the assigned house. Separation was not easy, but I thought that it may be better for my desk to be safely stored this time, which proved to be a good decision.

On September 11, 2001, suicide attackers seized U.S. passenger planes and crashed them into two skyscrapers in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C., killing thousands of people. Working for the U.S. Embassy at the time, I recall the mountains of flowers, cards, and sympathy messages the local community of the host country had left outside the embassy gate.

By then, my son had graduated from the American School in Kuwait (ASK) High School and was attending university back home. The threat level for the American mission was high. The United States has four threat levels for military installations—Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta. Camp Doha, the U.S. Army base in Kuwait, had elevated the threat level from Charlie to Delta. After careful deliberation, my husband and I decided that our daughter and I had to return to the U.S. Within weeks of our arrival, the government evacuated all dependents and non-essential personnel from Kuwait. My husband was considered essential and he stayed behind for at least 10 months until he received a new assignment.

2002: I prepared our home in Greenville, which had been leased while we were in Kuwait. I took our household effects out of storage, cleaned in and out the house, painted, unpacked, and did everything to bring it back to ‘our home’ appearance. Needless to say, I was reunited with my desk, which I had missed dearly, and it was placed in the primary bedroom.

2004: I found a new job and my desk now served as my main hub during weekends for research and developing projects as the years went by and my job responsibilities increased.

2022: Meanwhile, my husband had retired several years back. Although he continued working as a contractor, there was no more traveling. The desk remained in the primary bedroom and three different laptops paraded across its surface, during the years, as the computer technology evolved. Its smooth Formica surface makes the mouse glide like a ballerina with twists and turns without the need of a mouse pad.

My parents, who passed away many years ago, would never know how much I valued and utilized their gift. My mother with her budgetary skills and my father with purchasing the desk gave me something to literally last me a lifetime.

If my desk had a voice, what would it have said to me? I truly do not know—but I do know what I would have said to my desk if it could understand me after being together for more than 50 years: “Thank you for your faithful, unfailing, and without-ever-any-protest dedication. You were there when I needed you, performing numerous roles in faraway lands. I hope we remain together until the end.”

Carrot Top & Friend by Shaneka “Neka” Fisch, digital photography



Spreading My Wings by Marlette Harrison, 20cm x 28cm, gel pen ink on wood



Her Courage by Jaysen Arno

Beneath the weight of stony sky,
She waits for something of a sign.
Her life is but a distant sigh,
To paint, in words she can't define.
Her spirit, bruised, can't seem to climb.
A seed she longs the light to find.

The pavement's grip, too tight,
and cold,
A tangled loss somehow,
A life that took her young and old,
A fight to grow, in darkness down.
Her dreams lie buried under doubt,
But the cracks above grow wider now.

He calls her name through endless
years,
His voice a steady plea,
But she must free herself from fears,
Underground where she can't see.
Her roots they reach but can't yet hear,
His path, through shadow to live free.

The daisy bends with silent strain,
A fragile stem to shape.
Her spirit broken, filled with pain,
For life or twisted fate.
Like petals bruised by endless rain,
She hopes for dawn, yet feels the
weight.

God's flower, yet will find her strength,
Beyond the sidewalk pass.
And summon courage, dare to break,
The concrete and its grasp.
She steps beyond cemented fate,

The darkness of the past,
Into the world above that waits,
And breathes again, at last.

The seed that struggled, now has grown.
The crack that held her fades.
Through all the storms, she's come to
know, that life is not a trade.
A heart, once bruised, now finds its
home, a life beyond the shade.
And blooms, unbroken, in the glow
Of all the light she's made.

I watch her nourished in the light.
It always does amaze me,
To see her flourish, to know the fight,
And the courage of the daisy.

My Breast Cancer Story - From Surviving to Thriving by Lita Ward

Never in a million years did I believe I would ever hear these words, “I am sorry to have to tell you this, but you have cancer.” But I heard them on September 9, 2013, our 18th wedding anniversary, which shook me to my core. Months before, I was getting in physical shape by attending a fitness boot camp. I was eating better and working diligently to improve my lifestyle since I would turn the big 5-0 in another six months. But at one boot camp session in late July on a hot afternoon, I noticed that I could not keep up with the group. Even though some of my workout partners were half my age, I was usually able to finish the training course. Her courses were ruthless: lunges, burpees, sprints, and lifting! But that day, I became extremely fatigued rather quickly and decided to go home early. I didn’t think any more of it, chalking it up to my body’s reaction to an antibiotic given to me by my doctor for a minor ailment. Besides, it was hot and humid, so I decided to call it a day. I will finish strong next week, is what I thought. But the next week never came. I didn’t feel good and decided to sit out of that camp and wait for the next one.

One month later, in August 2013, my husband and I had just gone to bed and settled for the night. Lately, I was always tired, and exercise had become non-existent. When I turned over in bed to get comfortable, my nightgown caught me rather tightly under my left arm and neck, so I reached under my left armpit to pull it down. But when I did, I felt a lump under my armpit, which startled me because it was rather large. Immediately, I asked my husband to feel what I was feeling, and we both agreed that I would go to the doctor to get it checked out. I called the next day to make an appointment with my primary care physician. He wasn’t available, so I saw another doctor in the same facility. We went through the routine of questioning whether I had hit it on something or bumped into anything. The questioning was absurd because the knot was so far under my arm. How could I have hit it on something and caused an injury? I just wanted her to tell me right then that it was nothing and it would go away. But instead, the doctor said she would give me a referral for a mammogram. I must be honest here; in my heart, I knew what it was. I didn’t know how bad or severe it was. Then, I became furious because I did not do self-examination regularly. If I had, I would have discovered the lump sooner.

I remember attending church the Sunday before the mammography appointment and having one of my church sisters, an RN, check it for me. We entered the ladies' restroom, and I showed her where to feel. I knew that she could not tell me one way or another what it was, but I needed and wanted to have a friend's support. She said the same as the doctor that I should have it examined, but to trust God, she would be praying for me. I asked the church to pray for me, and my mind kept thinking about whether it was cancer or what I could have done differently since my last mammogram. I tried to think positively as my humanity told me to prepare for the worst.

Well, on September 3rd, less than a week before our 18th wedding anniversary, I had a mammogram and an ultrasound core biopsy. Even though this health scare was happening, we were still planning to spend a few days in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I love the beach, the waves, and the water, so I looked forward to getting away, spending much-needed private time with my husband, and feeling the sand between my toes. Monday rolled around, and even though the test results were in the back of my mind, I was in a decent mood, putting the finishing touches on our packing. Since we would be gone for a few days, I decided to go by my mother's house and ensure she had everything she would need while we were away. As I left her house, my cell phone rang. The nurse on the phone wanted me to come into the office and discuss my results with the doctor, not make an appointment, but come in that same day. I took a deep breath and told her I could arrive around 3:00 p.m. Before I could call my husband about my appointment, my primary care physician, called, asking if the radiologist had contacted me. I responded, "Yes, and I have an appointment at 3:00 p.m."

I knew then without a doubt that it would not be good news. I braced myself and called my husband and told him I needed him to go with me to the doctor to get these test results. Of course, he reassured me that everything was all right, but I knew it wasn't, as far as these test results were concerned.

When we arrived at the doctor's office, waiting to be called back was torture. But when my name was called, I hoped it was a mistake and they meant to call someone else's name. I just wasn't ready to hear what the doctor had to say. Slowly, I got out of my seat and followed the nurse. The nurse took us into this nicely furnished room with soft lighting, comfortable seating, and a coffee table with magazines and Kleenex tissues. Kindly tell us that the doctor would be right in. I know it's weird that I mention the tissues but seeing them made me think this is the room where they tell patients they have cancer. Why else would there be Kleenex tissues here? I thought about all the other women who had sat on this same chair, hearing what I was about to hear. I prayed to God that He would allow me to survive and be with my family.

There was a quick tap at the door. In walked the doctor and her assistant, a beautiful and petite young woman with a warm smile and bright eyes. She could sense that I was terrified and anxious, so she got right down to business. Once she greeted us, she told me the mass was a malignant tumor and cancerous. Later, I discovered that the medical terminology was Stage IIA invasive ductal carcinoma, triple-negative breast cancer.

When I actually heard the word "cancer," initially, I refused to believe it. Denial had set in. But this was my eighteenth wedding anniversary, and I exercised and ate right! I had my entire life ahead of me with grandchildren to enjoy! All of these thoughts of why and how began to bombard my mind. I did not have time to deal with this type of sickness. I had too much to do!

I stammered, almost choking on my words, "What do you mean I have cancer?" The doctor's words numbed all my senses. It was like I wasn't there, and she was not talking to me.

She could not have been talking to me. All I could feel was my husband's hand caressing my back, trying to reassure me that everything would be okay. Again, I could not believe this was happening to me. I kept the tears and emotions at bay and asked her, "Now what? What is my next step, and will I be alright?" I no longer wanted to hear about cancer, only how to get rid of it and out of my body. No matter how spiritual I was, I was not ready to die. I wanted to live. I still had too much purpose and vision left inside of me.

She assured me that if I followed the chemotherapy regimen, surgery, and radiation given to me by the team of doctors at the local medical facility, I would be healthy again. I could look back at this moment and see where the Lord had brought me from. Even her assistant said that they would be praying for me. The doctor was thorough in her explanation yet gentle and kind. Once given instructions on my next appointment, we thanked the doctor and her assistant for their kind words and prayers and left the building.

Dazed by the dreaded news, my husband and I walked to the car. I felt like I had been kicked in my stomach. How was I supposed to tell my children that I had cancer? How would I tell my mom, sisters, and coworkers? How was I supposed to work? There was no way I could be out of work for an extended time. We had bills to pay, and I enjoyed going to work.

Many questions and concerns raced through my mind as we drove home. Then the floodgates opened, and my tears rushed from my eyes. I couldn't hold it back any longer. I was terrified of the big "C"! For many, it had become a death sentence of suffering, pain, and demise. I was afraid that God would not heal me; I was afraid that I had not caught it soon enough, and literally when I had surgery, I would be told that it was too late. It was only a matter of time before I would die. All the negative thoughts overtook those of God's healing power and my will to fight.

When we arrived at the house, my husband walked me into our bedroom and told me we were going to pray. Prayer has been his number one weapon for as long as we have been married. Standing in the middle of our bedroom, he took my hands and began praying for our family. I had heard my husband pray before because he prays all the time. But as he prayed for me, it wasn't like all the other prayers I had heard him pray. He prayed so fervently that his voice began sounding like my pastor's. Instead of opening my eyes, I secretly peeked to see who stood before me. When he finished praying, I was confident everything would be all right. I knew there would be good days and some not-so-good, but we would get through them together. His reassurance and faith strengthened my outlook and will to fight.

We finished packing for our trip and left for Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the next day. We refused to allow this news to dampen our spirits and had the most incredible getaway ever. I enjoyed every moment of our trip because I didn't know when we would be able to visit again. We walked on the beach with our toes in the sand; well, I did. My husband is skeptical about his toes touching anything outside.

We visited as many places as possible, ate my favorite seafood dishes, and even visited the amusement park. I got on this crazy ride called the Sling Shot, to my amazement, and Victor's, which shot us up in the air, about 300 feet. The view was breathtaking, seeing the lights and stars as far as the human eye could see. Purposely, I had fun and refused to worry about the days to come and their challenges. But I did know that we would be back to enjoy ourselves, and when we did, I would be cancer-free, ready to celebrate life.

We were unsure of the tasks ahead, but we were confident in our love for one another and God's love for us. We made the decision to enjoy ourselves for the time we had. Well, I stand here today, 12 years cancer free! I share my story as often as possible to provide hope and let others know that you are not alone. I also express the importance of mammograms and self-check exams. It is extremely important to be your own advocate when it comes to your health.

Finally, in this life, enjoy every moment; life has a way of pushing you to not sweat the small stuff. I wish I could do many things over, but we know that's impossible. So, instead of regretting and wishing, make the next moment, day, minute, and hour count. Live life to the fullest; you only get one. YOLO!

Maggie by Kimberly Smith Collette

Ain't no Olympic sprinter could outrun me today! My eight-year-old heart and bare feet are beating in time with the constant melodies of croaking frogs and chirping crickets. Why does Moma insist on making me late every Sunday? She knows I gotta make it to him before dusk! Good thing I braided my dark hair tight this morning, so it stays put, and I can see where I'm going! The bright green sprigs along the winding path whip and sting my face and legs as I rush past them. The fireflies twinkle and light my way. The pure, sweet mountain air fills my lungs and fuels my mission. Anyone watching me would only see elbows and feet flying by. This summer has been a wet one. The emerald green moss squishes deep between my toes, but that won't slow me down, nothing ever has or ever will stop my Sunday runs.

My name is Maggie, and this is the best day of my week. You see, I'm headed to meet my Daddy at the back edge of his property. There he is ahead waiting for me at the tree line! While letting down my skirt, I use the hem of it to wipe the dirt and sweat off my face. As soon as I purse my lips and let out our secret bird call, he starts ambling in my direction. "I'm right here, Daddy, straight ahead of you. We best get going or we'll be late," I whisper as he grows closer. I take his large calloused hand in mine and lead him through the dense forest that ends at Sunnydale Church. Daddy is not old, but his eyes don't work very good, especially after dark. I am his weekly guide to and from evening church; this is the only time we get to spend alone.

Daddy has a proper white family now. They got his last name, Wells, and live in town. I live with my Cherokee Moma and her other young'uns near the top of Clinch Mountain in Crackers Neck, Virginia. Moma makes me stay home and away from town folk; the only time I'm allowed to leave is for school and to see Daddy. I hear they tried to live together for a time, but it just "wasn't right" in the eyes of some people around here, so he left us and started over. Along the way, he tugs against my hand, bends down with tear-filled eyes and says, "thank you for coming to get me, Maggie." I tell him he doesn't have to be mannerly with me. He kisses my forehead, and we journey on. "You're welcome, Daddy, what you think the message will be 'bout tonight?" I love nights at Sunnydale Church near 'bout as much as I love Daddy. "Not sure Maggie, I expect Heaven, Hell or winning souls for the Lord, whatever the Lord's laid on the pastor's heart," he answers.

Sunnydale Primitive Baptist's old white-washed walls soon come into view. It sits in the middle of Rye Cove in a timeless fertile valley. The steeple rises effortlessly toward the sky and the ancient bell rings out its welcome for all to gather inside. Everyone is singing when we slip into the back pew. The church ladies sound like mornings in the meadow and the menfolk's voices boom like thunder on a stormy night. Daddy holds the hymnal low so we can both see it. I just hum along cause I don't know all them words like he does. I just know preacher says make a "joyful noise" to the Lord, and I'm doin my best! Tonight's message was about loving everyone. Seems Jesus said we are all neighbors who should treat each other kindly. Although,

it appears that's too much to ask from some folks like mean ole Bobby Maggard, who is always calling me ugly and pulling my braids!

After the altar call is made and church ends, we start walking back through the dark green foliage. It is pitch black in the mountains this time of night. Although we stumble in a few washed out gullies along the way, our memories and landmarks get us headed in the right direction. After pondering the message for a time, I break the silence, "Why don't you live with me anymore, Daddy?" He stops abruptly, hides his face in his hands and is quiet for so long that I almost think he's getting hard of hearing. "Fear, I guess, Maggie, grown people sometimes care too much what others think bout 'em," he says. Then he stoops down, looks me straight in the eyes and whispers, "Maggie, I want you to know that I love you. Don't make no difference where I sleep, eat or go, you are my heart and I carry you with me always." I know Daddy loves me, so I wrap my arms around him leaning hard into his boney chest till I hear his strong, thudding heartbeat. I don't ever let go until he does.

All too soon, we reach his place and must say our goodbyes. Before I take off running, Daddy reaches down into his coat pocket and hands me my brown paper bag-wrapped dinner - two country ham cathead biscuits! A smile crosses his weathered face as I dance around celebrating my salty treats. "I hope you enjoy those on the way home, Maggie. Sundays are so special to me because of you!", he says as he lets my hand go and slowly shuffles away. I watch him till the rickety back screen door slams shut. I wish I could stay here with him, but this is not my home. I take one bite of my biscuit, turn on my muddy heels and set back out across the windy path back home to Moma.

Imitation Baby by Liam Fisch, 11 X 14, oil pastels



Your Story by Ashira Daniels

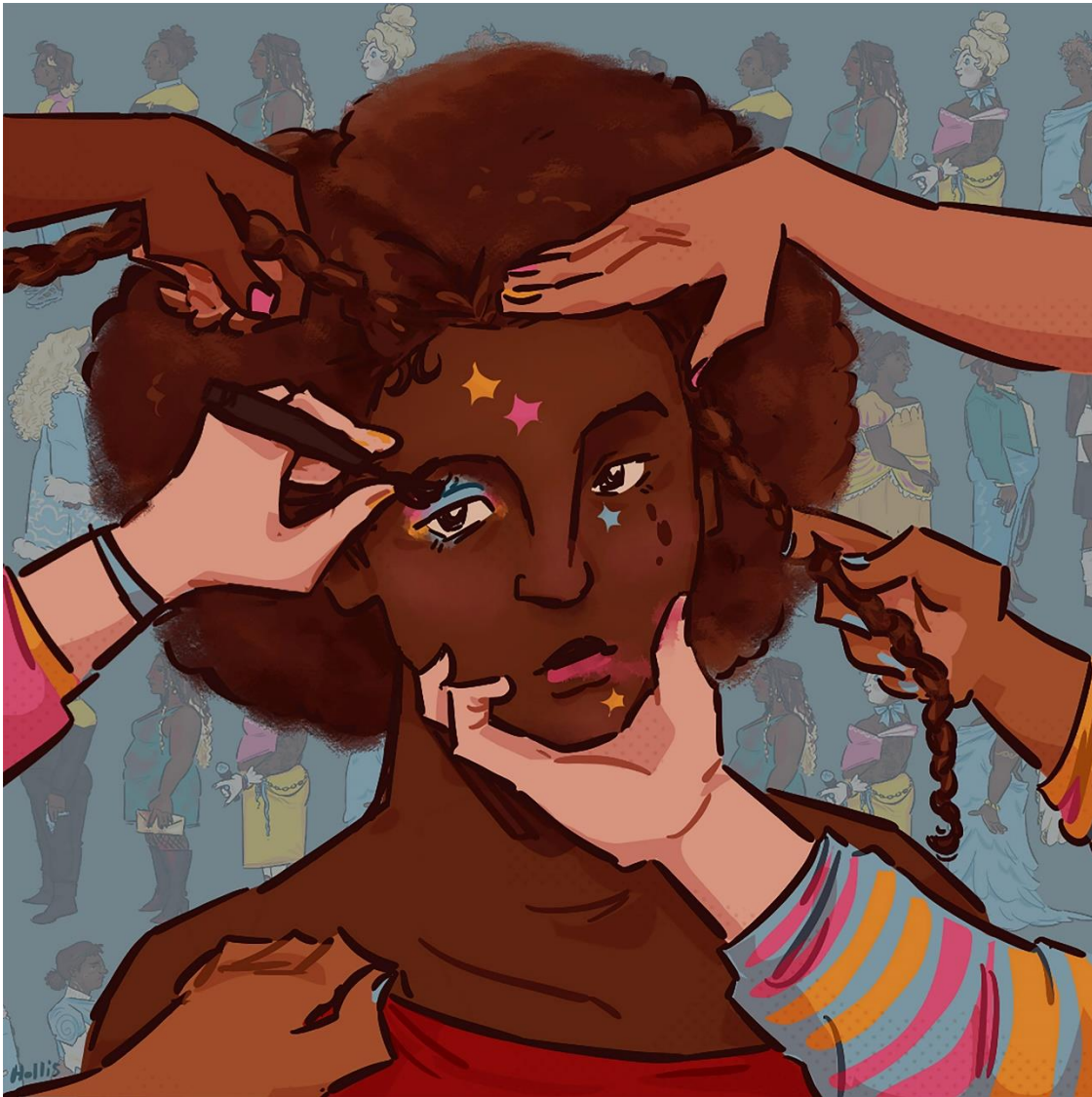
I know you're afraid
That you'll be like them
Filled with hatred, resentment and depression
But your story isn't written yet
You're writing it now
You have time to be different
You have time to unlearn all the pain that was given
You have time to forgive them
You're a witness

Not a victim of your environment
But a student, a child's mind who is older than she is
You watched and you listened
But you still struggle to distinguish right from what you want
You've seen wrong and know what it is
Your conscience bled from it
Like a waterfall going over a cliff

Just because we know better
That doesn't mean we're better
My mother always said "do better"
Why would I "do better" for someone who isn't
I'm going to do different entirely

This is my story and I'm just writing it
And I promise to all of society, you'll enjoy it

Dressed Up Doll by Hollis Taylor, 28 X 28, digital



If I Wrote You a Letter on Parchment Paper, Would You Burn It Up or Read It Later? by Tiffany Kessler

If I wrote you a letter on parchment paper, would you burn it up or read it later?
Would every single word be explored like a baby tasting a brand new flavor?
Would you watch the numbers change on your bed stand until it sang its song?
Would you take a risk and reminisce about an 80 mile per hour karaoke?
Or the messed-up text you sent me after you were smoking?
A rerun of when your favorite town was no longer on the map.
When all roads were slowed by the ones you wished you chose that you couldn't let go of.
When you got derailed like a snail climbing up a down escalator.
When wearing no clothes in the snow was what it felt like when you betrayed her.
If I wrote you a letter on parchment paper would you burn it up or read it later?

Frog Story by John Grey

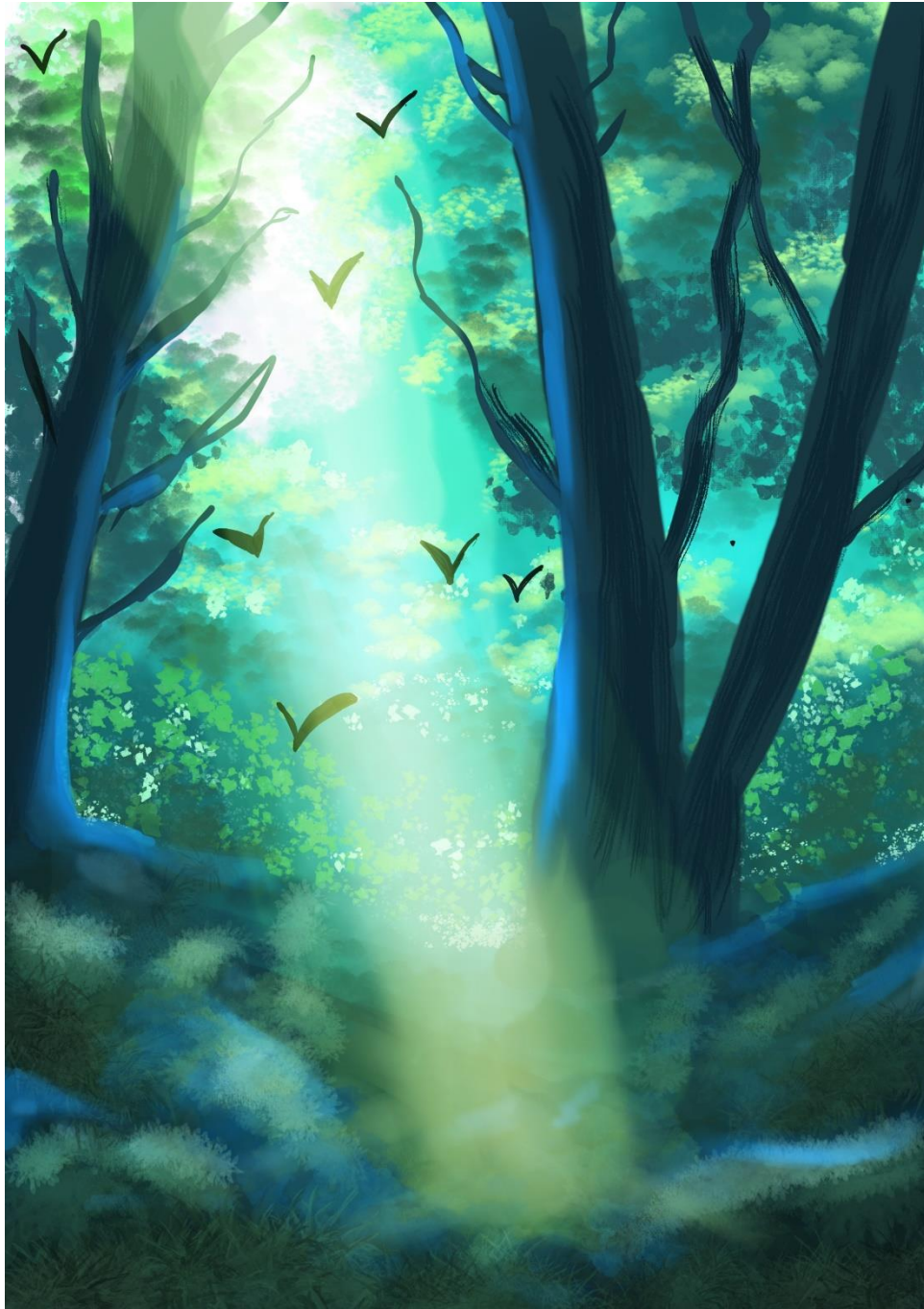
In the aftermath of heavy rain,
the field is alive with frogs.
Kids are out there,
chasing down those amphibians,
some a leap or two behind,
others grasping a slimy body or two
and shoving them in glass jars.

Some bring the poor creatures home.
Then most, after a day or two
of watching the frogs do nothing much,
release them back into the wild.
A few keep their catch,
stare at them now and then,
but hardly notice
as their captives wither and die.

Some kids learn from this.
Others toss the bodies in the trash
and move on.
It could be the beginning
of appreciation for all life.
Or where callousness takes root
deep enough for a lifetime.

There are some people I meet
who lack respect, treat others badly.
think only of themselves.
I pity the poor frogs
of their childhood.

Value of the Natural Environment by Quinton May, 4052 x 28640 pi,
digital



Hail to the Chief by Joy Moses-Hall

Two score, four years, and eleven terms ago, in 1981, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy was invited to send a company of cadets to march at the Inauguration of President Ronald Wilson Reagan.

Visions of inaugural balls waltzed in our heads.

Our actual participation amounted to an Eyes Right maneuver.

The Academy sent its finest marching unit. And it sent us.

At the Academy, there was a parade competition every weekend, a public event held for the eyes of the good citizens of Connecticut, and cadet parents, and the occasional war protestor, to witness the precision maneuvers of their tax dollars, and to vie for marching honors. Whichever company cut the cleanest corners, kept the straightest ranks, and got all its rifle bolts open on the command "Inspection! Arms!" won. This year, the prize was a trip to the Presidential Inauguration.

Golf Company never won. We were sloppy, marching to the beat of a different drummer, prone to giggles when the bolts didn't open. Foxtrot Company had style. They lined up like army ants, matched their footsteps to the beat, even pulled off a double-to-the-rear without a single collision. They did not amble around obstacles, like Golf Company. They did not wriggle over mud puddles, like Golf Company. They marched on, oblivious. If a glockenspiel fell off the band into the path of Foxtrot, it was swept into their unbroken cadence to finish the parade neatly glocked and spieled.

The Academy was also asked to send a choir to serenade the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, so along with the precision marchers went our little band of giggling Golf and other miscreant company tune carriers. In return for our shipping and handling, we were to march with Foxtrot.

It was a long, long, cold, cold wait for a tiny glimpse of the bullet-proof panel behind which the President probably stood. We sat on a frosty bus at the Potomac before dawn, waiting. We clustered on the National Mall tundra for hours, waiting. We lined up on the tarmac for more hours at parade rest, waiting. Most of us had on entire uniforms under our parade uniforms -- our fanciest double-breasted jackets and highest high-rise trousers, but the chill radiated up through our glassy gloss-polished toes and wafted down in a sassy floss of smallish snows. When the marching finally started, we were too stiff to veer around the pasture patties bestowed by a team of horses preceding us. We did Foxtrot proud, spieeling right through the pony piles.

News cameras were rolling on all sides.

At the Eyes Right command ahead of the reviewing stand, we jointly swiveled our heads to the right. There he was, the President of the United States, a blur beside Mrs. Reagan's red inauguration dress, beaming at us like a Golf Company squad leader.

"Don't move a muscle in front of the President," we had been warned during one of the long waits. Sharpshooters of the Secret Service would be aiming to drop us at the excess spasm of an eyelash.

"Forward, March." Our eyes snapped ahead, hoping not to trigger the Secret Service.

That night we excitedly scanned the evening news for inauguration coverage.

"Did you get a good look at the President?"

"I wonder if they caught the jaunty angle of my cap!"

"I bet that pony patty shows up in the footage!"

But the parade was pre-empted. For the last 444 days, American hostages had been held in Iran. They were set free on Inauguration Day. Evening news coverage of the Washington festivities shifted to hostage release coverage, just as our eyes shifted right.

The only lasting imprint of us was in the horse poop.

Newspaper by Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi

The ink has sold its voice to the deaf.
My old pa bought papers filled
with news he didn't want to see.
Within the confines of the world's motel,
he's been sleeping ever since.

Why do we stop desiring a want
when it's reborn as ours?
Prayers are words leaving trails to follow,
"Amen" their guiding light.
I have uttered sentences with my voice—
I hope I receive my letter.

I need to know which bones are alive or dead,
how many chambers of the heart house strangers,
like one-night guests,
or where I've traveled without my legs' consent.
I want to see what is mine,
to read the world spelled out like coughs.

Solitude, Interrupted by Andy Sugg, 6 x 8.5 gelatin silver print, collage



Now and Then (In Remembrance of...) by Patricia Carragon

The breeze travels
across shores and oceans,
to the stars and planets,
to a different universe.

Our thoughts
manifested this breeze—
undeciphered by ancients
and contemporaries.

You're gone,
but you're still here.

You're not confined
to shadows, nor the light
that crosses this doorway.

We must remind ourselves,
that time has no restrictions
and life has quantum possibilities.

Seasons may come and go,
but love is more than a haiku moment.

For now,
our flames burn in secret,
however, by summer,
this breeze will return
for the queen and king
to merge as one.

(Inspired by Samara Joy)

Summoning Storms by Kelly Arnold

Middle Sister's teacher taught her a snow dance, equal parts
blind faith and cultural appropriation. Our feet tap tattoo on sandy
soil: dry ground underfoot, gray above—that very specific shade
I've come to call snow/sky—clouds heavy enough to hold
childhope. We are augurs of atmosphere, witching water
in frozen form, our divining rod a can of condensed milk
on kitchen counter, sitting beside a plastic popcorn
bowl. Waiting to be transformed. *Only car-snow or deck-snow,*
girls, don't collect that muddy stuff off the ground. Churn
it with tinned syrupy sweetness mix in vanilla, better than ice cream—

all things are sweeter when you know
they won't last. The winter I lived in Boone,
yard buried in white flakes turned icy regret
for the gallons of snow-cream I should've made
but didn't.

What I would give for my daughter to wake up
to front yard tucked in under a quilt of soft
snow, to teach her how
diamond bright morning light
wafts through windowpanes when
it's kissed a world of white, want her to know
the wet/cold of red-nosed afternoons outdoors
in clothes crafted for Southern winters,
heavy with melt and mud and glee.

If only it were as simple as dancing beneath winter's
gathering gloom, shuffling feet and hands in rhythm
with darkening heavens to call down for her
childhood joy, one flake at a time.

Gathering Skies and Desires by Rakia Jackson, 16 X 20, mixed media



A Forest of Tears by Valerie Suedbeck

Walking quickly, foot and step
down the street that is well kept.
Farther on, ever more, to a place to love once more.
Cross a bridge, cross a brine
go across and do not mind
the raindrops that begin to fall,
plopping, dropping on the wall.
Slick with wet, feel the stones
underneath your shoes that moan
and soaked with rain, from the sky
never shall they ever fly,
but stay on low with grass that grows
in the mud that makes them slow.
Trudging onward, ford and fro,
to the place that we all know.
It's splendor in the tears of clouds
dripping softly, not too loud.
Leaves of green and branches lush
make you stare and tell to hush.
A forest dripping sweetened tears
off its branches with no cheers.

Safe at Second by Joy E. Moses-Hall

The biggest fight I ever caused as a cadet at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy was at second base.

It really wasn't a close call, and any replay camera would have proven me spectacularly wrong, but I called him safe.

We were playing inter-company softball, Echo versus Hotel, and I thought an easy way to get out of actually playing would be to umpire. Ha! On the spot, I could remember only two rules, one of which was, "Tie goes to the runner." It wasn't a tie. My sympathies tend toward runners; I once ran in a ten-kilometer race in Boston and finished just behind a six-year-old on crutches, but that did not affect my call. It wasn't a tie, it was a lie; it was a bad, bad call made by a distracted umpire.

I also caused a fight -- well, let's just say an uproar -- on second-class billet night. Billet night is the career-match night of senior year when everyone chooses, in order of class rank, the ship on which they will serve after graduation. Small ships, which have shorter deployments, and warm climates, go first. I, in the lowest third of the class, was hoping to swing an icebreaker, which would at least travel to exotic ports, but it was looking more and more like a big cutter in New York City. But that was first-class billet night.

Second-class billet night was the junior prom of billet nights: we were in the cadet ballroom overlooking the Connecticut Thames River choosing billets for the summer training period. For half the summer, half of us would be on a few ships crossing to Europe and half of us would be dispersed in ones and twos throughout the fleet, then we'd switch.

A fit of wanderlust begged me to go anywhere but the East Coast. I looked over the choices: San Diego; San Francisco; Astoria, Oregon, near Portland; Galveston, near Houston. Any would do.

By the time my number came up, all the Phase II choices were gone, so I'd be bringing a ship home from Europe. San Diego was gone, both phases. Portland was gone. What about Galveston? Surely, nobody would want to go to Galveston -- it's in Texas, for jiminy's sake. I pinned my index card, number 147, on its District 8 stern.

The whole ballroom exploded in shouts of laughter and rage. What had I done?

Number 148 was TJ Striker, the meanest man in the whole ballroom town; the only classmate whose backside appeared in our yearbook with his bathing suit smiling six inches lower than common decency would dictate. TJ was mad. TJ was seething. TJ and his neck were livid as he stormed to the billet board. TJ was from Houston.

Tentatively, I called out to him. I don't think we'd ever spoken two words to each other before, but now seemed the time.

He didn't hear me. His scowl was so fierce it had reached away around and pinched shut his eustachian tubes. His friends saw me, though, and started shouting, "Deal! She's

gonna make a deal!" He halted, a bull cutting the toreador some slack. His friends crowded around me as number 147 jumped ship. These particular men had no use for females in the military, yet they were cheering me like a good ole' boy instead of jeering me as the Galveston thief. They assured me that TJ really, really, really wanted to go there, as if I were doing him a favor on purpose. Truth is, my appetite for Galveston vanished at the thought of beaches teeming with Texans in low-slung bathing apparel. Wanderlust could wander elsewhere.

I pinned San Francisco, instead, and Katie Withers gasped.

Katie and I were not close, but we were kindred women. I told her to pick out something nice, and we would trade after the night was over. She picked Portsmouth, Virginia, on the East Coast.

For Phase II, I had a choice of the ships Taney, Ingham, Unimak, or Eagle. The sailing ship Eagle, for all its charms as a three-masted square rigger heeling under the pressure of wind gusts on 22,000 square feet of sailcloth, was for hard-core waterfolk; for those who would rather smell creosote lines than diesel fumes; for those who preferred dining at an angle of 20 degrees; for those who would rather lay aloft than lie around. My first voyage aboard Eagle was romantic; the second was hard work. I preferred the ease of diesel. Taney was an old Navy castoff but I chose it because my friends had signed on for it. If you have to go to Europe, you might as well go with your friends.

A week later, it made no difference anyway. Turns out women couldn't just pick any old ship. The women had to be spread like marmalade in equal numbers over both phases. They could only sail in pairs, on a ship with a secluded, two-bunk space, such as a well-appointed officers' cabin. The men, however, were assigned in bulk to the noisy, shabby mass berthing area below decks.

The Taney had no place to berth women. I should have known -- at third-class billeting I signed up for Charleston, SC, with Penny Cervez and wound up in Detroit with Terry North. Katie wasn't going to San Francisco, and I wasn't going to Portsmouth. The officer in charge of umpiring Tiny Summer Cruise Details would reassign us both to ships where we would displace unhappy men -- and billeted me on Eagle, Phase II.

I had a fit and whined and fussed and muttered until finally the women in my class; my friends, my kindreds; agreed I had been unfairly assigned to a ship nobody but Karen Dutch wanted. Nobody would trade with me - Karen had already joyfully requested Phase I -- but they did agree to a random drawing, and Maggie Mancini, a good sport from way back, drew the Eagle and I was assigned to the Unimak. And Laura Sevitski and I would spend Phase I in Charleston, SC, go figure. Don't argue with the umpire.

That was the second rule of softball I had committed to memory. I hoped those two rules would get me through the game, calling balls and strikes and all runners safe. I don't know what I was thinking during the play in question. I heard the ball smack into the second baseman's glove as he stood on the bag, and turned my head in time to see the runner take two

more steps toward the base on a forced run before I called him safe. An airplane could have landed and taken off again in the time and space between the second base catch and the runner's arrival. It was a ridiculous call, and the wronged team took it understandably badly. Pity the blind, for they were insulted on that day. Even the favored team stood silently, sheepishly, not arguing the call but neither prepared to defend the base should we come to war. I threatened to take the bat and go home. If you're going to be spectacularly wrong, may as well be grumpy about it.

I tried to compensate by making more bad calls, against the favored team. I don't recall who finally won the game, if it was still a game at this point. Needless to say, I should have been banned from all softball and will have to take up another sport. Perhaps Galveston is looking for a boxing coach.

Cabin Fever by David Brown II, 6000 X 4000 pixels, photography



What I Miss About the Past by John Grey

I'd stand before the bar's jukebox
with a handful of coins.
Its lights sparkled
and the speakers were big enough
to fill the room with sound
I'd excitedly read through the choices.

I loved the fact that you could
even select B-sides of current and past hits.
I could be out to impress some woman
with my taste in music.
Or maybe there was a favorite on there
to cheer me up or share my misery.
Did I say choices?
There were no choices?
Everything was preordained by circumstance.

Run out on me would you.
Well here's some Led Zeppelin.
In the mood for romance.
Why not some sweet and sickly Bread?
I'm down but I'm not out by any means.
Time for the Stones to start me up.
Life is bland and boring and I'm at loose ends.
Why not turn "Bette Davis Eyes" over
and hear what "Miss You Tonite" sounds like.

I'd play the jukebox
until my coins ran out.
Now I've got more coins
but the jukebox ran out.

Sakura at X-Mas by Shaneka Neka Fisch, 16 X 20, acrylic



For the Wilting That Grew at Noon by Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi

I keep weighing the stars with wishes,
hoping they fall under the weight of a beloved gone.
But this isn't about sorrow—it's about
the signatures left on our skin,
marks of lives so poor we cannot afford
more skin after walking through the winters of their mouths.

These are echoes gathered before expectation,
a raging ripple, the thicket of the night.
Even at dawn, the firefly burns its life,
accepting the light reflecting from its nakedness.
In here, houses are on fire,
but there is still light in our mouths.

There are lighter truths in the face of shadows.
My mouth, an exhaust of exhalations—
every escape, living; every living, surviving.
Hands fathered and left on free will.
Breathe slowly, so slow,
because the nose never shuts its doors to life.

It is winter again, like the winter of the year you left—
or the years that left you and returned,
ashamed in their nakedness. Every dry branch
reaches for what once called your hand home.

I hope the cold hands of the night
hold your bones warmly.
I hope every firefly delivered my letters in wishes,
as I overturned every stone you've gathered with the stars,
searching for your face.

And if your chest should hurt again,
may it be from laughter running through your lungs,
seeking joy in your heart.
May your gentle eyes touch every word

ripening on the tree of your memories.

Look at me now —
every root has become my fingers.

Politics of Death by Ginger Jones

In my experience, death entails a myriad of social obligations that are learned behaviors and not something we discuss, much less are taught. Maybe because my generation didn't experience war like my parents', grandparents', great-grandparents', etc., I feel like an imposter, ill-equipped to bolster the grieving. Prior generations experienced compulsory war drafts to slog through unthinkable carnage protecting capitalism, the currency that keeps our still-evolving democracy alive. My family stories speak of atlases being pulled from shelves to locate these foreign lands where their sons fought to survive: Somme, Meuse-Argonne, Pearl Harbor, Attu, Mekong River Delta, and Khe Sanh.

Funerals for older relatives I didn't know were events to be endured in my childhood. I wasn't called upon to do anything more than look tidy and behave quietly. But this detachment changed my first year in high school, which entailed an hour on the school bus every morning into the city. During the spring semester, a group of senior males – all from my rural community – committed suicide. They were seniors with their whole lives ahead of them. I didn't know these boys except by sight from church, town activities, or passing them in the school hallways.

Mental health check-ins were not performed in my generation. Our parents parceled us kids off to the families in need. My family brought a German chocolate cake to one of the grieving. I no sooner closed the passenger door to the van than my father drove off without a single word spoken to me. Throwing a tantrum or bursting into tears was not an option. The social shunning after such a display would be far worse than my discomfort.

A sulk march onto the porch, I yanked open the screen door, ready to do my duty. But my finger stilled over the doorbell as the throng of laughter-rich voices fell silent as a keening split the air. Tears stung my eyes as that visceral sorrow tore and ripped, its bitterness and rage palpable. The self-loathing was instantaneous. Who was I to sulk when I had my whole life ahead of me, unlike this woman's son, a boy with whom I never once stuck up a conversation but whose loss I now experienced?

My fist was unusually timid as I knocked on the door, quickly entering before I could lose my nerve. My entrance broke the painful quiet. I stumbled over an apology for her loss, face blazing, with every mother and aunt in the room judging my inexperience. By crossing that threshold, I became part of the bereavement process. I was no longer on the outside, allowed a maudlin utterance, "But for the Grace of God."

A collective dictatorship formed. I was hustled into the kitchen, and an apron was secured around my waist. Edicts quickly issued about keeping the coffee brewed, the tea kettle filled, and the soft drinks and beer cold. I could turn my attention to a mound of dishes that needed washing, drying, and putting away. When I accomplished that, and they looked

skeptical of my ability to perform satisfactorily, one of them would let me know what needed to be done next.

The kitchen's swinging doors allowed me to eavesdrop on the conversations in the other room. There wasn't much in the way of gossip, a teenager's lifeline. It was shared memories from Scouting trips, little league games, and campsite shenanigans. But with each new arrival, after the covered dish was handed to me for serving, refrigerating, or freezing, and beverages were offered and refilled, the story of his hurdles win was retold, the laughter pounding against the bravely stoic walls.

He was padding his college résumé—equipment manager for the track and field team—when flu swept through the participants. Looking down the barrel at a forfeit, Coach ordered him to change into a uniform. Sweating like the proverbial harlot on a pew, he lurched when the starter pistol went off. Coach screamed as only the Coach could. That boy's alabaster legs pumped harder, then positively took flight at each hurdle. No one was more surprised than him when the ribbon broke across his chest. It was a legendary anecdote about one of our boys tinged with bittersweetness. Parents drop off and pick up their equipment manager offspring. They don't stay to watch them tape ankles and fill paper cups with water.

The social contract I have with death is no longer a hardship that must be overcome. Each ritual is a piece of my humanity that I pass on to my friends and family, colleagues and neighbors, and for the next generation to emulate. I've learned that someone else's loss is never a burden. Death is part of the life cycle, and the rituals for the bereaved allow us to cope with the invisible but intractable voids that materialize. Whether it's herding youngsters in their Sunday best and coaching them on their well-mannered lines, canceling plans to pay respects at a visitation, or bringing a covered dish and then staying for a few hours of conversation, I am fully present in these moments. It doesn't matter that the mourners will scarcely remember I was there. It's enough that my presence is felt.

Ricky's Mind by Angell Edwards, 24 X 36, canvas



The First Noelle by Kristie Williams

It's Christmas day
and Noelle is dressing
a new doll in teal footed
zip-up pajamas;
the outline of a dog
is stitched on the front
left pocket

She remembers
wearing these pj's;
and,
matching pigtails

Noelle remembers
a bullet whizzing past
her ear;
she felt
the air move
as it ricocheted

Her ear
still prickles
when she remembers
that sound;
and,
the splintered cabinet
that stopped its path

Noelle examines
her new doll in
those hand-me-down
clothes;
when she touches
her doll's ear
it doesn't shiver

Pretense Villanelle by Dustin Brookshire and Kerry Trautman

A contoured villanelle from “Twerk Villanelle” by Porsha Olayiwola

I decide ahead of time what to hide from my therapy session--
slowly compartmentalizing the thoughts in my head
instead of whirling my whole self outward in wide precession.

Wear an ironed shirt and slacks. Take time to freshen
the breath I lie with. Some cuts scab-over though un-bled.
I know what will be hidden in today’s therapy session--

secret bits of grit pearlized in my soft insides like a blessing.
Family’s problems shouldn’t leave the family. I was bred
to pen my true self inward, fall in step with orderly procession.

Answers aren’t always meant to find questions.
The right answer won’t always give us what we needed.
Who is looking after me? Is there anyone protecting

what’s left of the child curled inside? I’m tired of guessing,
as if there are even clues strewn about to be threaded
in this twisted braid of past, of self, of want I’ve been possessin’.

Happiness, in my family, is a nothing but a legend,
a pretense to convince others all is fine, a heroic ballad.
I’ll prove my pen is a sword in one writing session—
destroy their facade while they think therapy is progressing.

a contoured villanelle takes the end words from each line of an existing villanelle, matching end words in the same order to construct a new villanelle

The Dreamer and His Muse by Hollis Taylor, 18.75 x 14.1, digital



B is for Bright Leaf Cookbook by Kelly Arnold

You know you've got a good one when there are splatters
and spills on the cover, drips of vanilla extract, smears

made by butter-coated digits. Church ones are the old reliable,
those ladies may gossip but they'd never turn out a subpar banana

pudding, and your name next to the recipe was as good as
New York Times byline in circles that matter. But the best one,

by far, was the old Bright Leaf, sunny yellow tobacco leaf cover
reminiscent of packhouse barns of your childhood, Mama, but

the recipes inside, the key to mine—Holy Grail of Christmas dinners
and church potlucks, source of best baked bean casserole on the planet.

Could the holidays even happen if sticky fingers didn't peruse pages
for inspiration? Crack its brown comb binding and I'm back in your windowless,

too small kitchen chopping pecans, arguing with my sisters over who gets to grate
paraffin over butterscotch chips while the Alabama Christmas album blares

out of tinny speakers and we all sing along. So much sweetness.

High in Fiber by Dakeim Smith, 11 x 5 x 8, mixed media



Un Croissant Est Enchantée by Liam Fisch, 5x7, pen and alcohol markers



Perfume by John Grey

He wants it
that she should smell
like a geranium,
a narcissus,
while his odor
is only ever man –

she preens,
parades her new redolence -

his underarms
stay shuttered -

civet on the wrist,
hyrax behind the ears,
musk deer on the throat,
spray, spray, spray
he urges
until he's the only human
in the room.

4... by Caren Stuart

mix heart into palette
swirl brush in desire
stroke canvas
with your any imaginings
hold my capture
in your inhaled
and exhaled breaths
i am gazing over
the shoulder
i've offered you
whispering wishes
you've conjured
or am i
winged now dark and still
a specimen pinned
to your styrofoam spreading
board 3...

2...

1...

Melatonin by Tony Parker

I reached for two
Five milligram melatonin
To find my hand blocked
By your casually tossed
Brassiere. Temptress. You
know my thoughts, Fire,
lust, wood.
My goal was sweet sleep,
Now I dive deep into dark places
Where we like to go. Always it
begins with innocence, No plan,
no impure thoughts.
Nothing in mind.

The Art of Hosting an Open Mic by Christopher Sims

Host survives, long weeks
Of posting, notifications,
up and down vibrations,
all the while, breathing,
being, believing, seeing,
receiving excitement
vibrant exchanges,
arranges setlists,
thanks the Creatress
for his gifts.

Swift emails that set
the weekly anticipation
asail.

Inhales before he steps
to any microphone. In
a zone. The stage is his
home.

You'd think he slept
on it, or a mattress
made of foam, before
everyone arrived.

Through the mic check
he lives or dies. He
witnesses the cries of
a beat down, beat up,
poet. Hears the blues
songs of a singer who
shares their stingers.

He lingers in and out
of Facebook and IG
to see who says they're

coming, or who cannot
make it.

Stays Zen.

Picks up a pen.

Reaches out to friends.

Books trips and gigs in
between.

The work is never done
it seems.

And then, the night
the open mic returns,
he remains stern. The
crowd is hype. Artists
are eager. In a stance
he performs a glance
to take it all in. The
lights on the stage
are just right.

Here we go...

Welcome to Open
Mic Night!

Minimum Wagers by David Brown II, 4 x 4, acrylic on canvas



On Eden by Gino Paradela

They said “we have something better for you
than this Garden” and took me to the city.

They said I was smart and if I played
my cards right I would have a car, and a job,
and a bank account.

If I were willing to crunch numbers,
do my hours,
I could eat all the chips I want and relax
as I watch the reels made by beautiful people;

I can even stream on demand.

But if I were honest,
I have never looked for anything else,
save that Garden they took away.

All I want is to go back to that Garden,
they have taken away.

River Park North Pond by Melinda Sanders

The pond at River Park North keeps a secret.
It's a secret that people keep also.
Young people discover peace, passion, and joy there,
But the water can't tell you so.

A guy calls a fledgling woman "string bean" in jest
Before she is ready to take flight and leave the nest.
Contentment grows as the water flows.
The young gentleman shoves the boat into the water,
winning the lady's admiration and bonding the couple as
strong as addiction.

They may not continue to float the same waters
Because sometimes careers just aren't compatible,
But how many times their story will be recreated and
retold is a secret that only the spirits know.

Sunflowers by Kaleb Grimes

When the flowers droop from the dry soil,
I sometimes lay on the dirt with them,
Feeling sympathy for the sunflowers.
Even if they are feeling down, the sunflowers are still my favorite thing!

When the rain rolls into the field,
Bring the flowers the strength they need
I find myself dancing in the rain with them.
Even getting soaked, the sunflowers are still my favorite thing!

When the seasons change,
the sunflowers slowly change their colors,
As if they are celebrating the new season.
Even with their vast colors, the sunflowers are still my favorite thing!

When fall turns into winter,
The sunflowers freeze and melt away.
They rot into the soil to find a new home.
Even if they leave me here alone, the sunflowers are still my favorite thing!

When the sun finally rises into spring,
The sunflowers rise from the ground.
They welcome me back in their small little sprouts.
Even if they are little, the sunflowers are still my favorite thing!

Self-Salvation Villanelle by Dustin Brookshire and Kerry Trautman

A contoured villanelle using "My Savior in the Form of a Bus" by Beth Gyllys

When I was young, I praised the Lord,
hoping to smother doubt blushing my face.
At least on Sunday mornings, I wasn't ignored.

Did other children angle faces skyward, bored,
searching clouds for an alleged heavenly place?
Or did parents love them—without praising the Lord?

Why did they constantly use fear to move us toward
a love manipulated out of cowardice?
And, yet, on Sunday mornings I never felt ignored.

What fathers swaddling infants in a maternity ward
care most about their child obtaining God's grace?
Worth shouldn't be contingent on praising the Lord.

In college, I found others strumming the same chord,
dismissing hymns like grandma's yellowed lace.
I discovered how much of myself that I'd ignored.

A joy pricked like a cherry on a cocktail sword —
I'd look in the mirror & enjoy the smile on my face,
discovered voluntary ways to praise the Lord,
but understood He could also be ignored.

Sharing: The Actuality by Caren Stuart

I wish I could share this actual
day on the back deck with you.
Sun and shade, hummingbirds,
singing birds, bloomings and
buzzings, and so many ahhhs.
But the best I can actually do
is to write my poems... write
my best poems and hope they
will land... gently... land...
some time... some where...
for some one... for some
anyone... for whatever
reason that anyone may
have not even known
they had had.

The Ramada by Andy Sugg

I watch your full breasts rise
and fall

Illuminated

The light from passing cars
pans right to left

The shadow full here, dark
then small then here on the other one
then gone.

As if your breasts are blinking . . .

The slow blink of someone who stopped caring

Contributors

Blue indicates Pitt Community College affiliation.

Jason Arno is a PCC Anatomy and Physiology Instructor. He started teaching at PCC as an adjunct in August 2008 and was hired as full-time faculty in August 2011. Jason has an MS in Biochemistry, but began his academics at PCC having graduated with an AAS from the Radiography Program in 1994. Jason has lived several places in his life, as Jason's father was a Methodist preacher, but he was born in Pitt County.

Kelly White Arnold is a mom, writer, teacher, and lover of yoga. Her work has appeared in Petigru Review, Hellbender, and Pinesong 2024. When she's not scribbling in notebooks or wrangling teens, she's planning her next tattoo and daydreaming about traveling the world. She lives in North Carolina, where it has been her great privilege to prepare students for community colleges like PCC for the past 23 years. Find her online @KArnoldTeaches.

Le'Quina Augustus is an artist, poet, mother and wife. She is also an in-home care aide who enjoys painting and writing poetry in her spare time. Three fun facts about Le'Quina are that she loves nature, a good joke, and reading to gain more knowledge of anything. Le'Quina is big on spending time with family, especially her children.

Dustin Brookshire's (he/him) fourth & latest chapbook is Repeat As Needed (Harbor Editions, 2025). He is a co-editor of Let Me Say This: A Dolly Parton Poetry Anthology (Madville Publishing, 2023) and editor of When I Was Straight: A Tribute to Maureen Seaton (Harbor Editions, 2024). More at dustinbrookshire.com.

David Brown II is a painter, photographer, and ceramicist, with plans to move to New York City where he'll remain in the art field. David has two cats, a small toad, and about 10 vines growing in his home. He's had work in a few exhibitions; the North Carolina Community College AFA Association's Visual Art Exhibition, Emerge Gallery's Tiny Art Show, & PCC's 2024 Portfolio Show at GMoA. David enjoys posting work on the page @weavednotions on Instagram.

Patricia Carragon received a 2025 Best of the Net nomination for her haiku, "Cherry Blossoms" from Poets Wear Prada. She's the editor of the new online journal, Sense and Sensibility Haiku, and listed on the poet registry for The Haiku Foundation. Her latest novel is Angel Fire (Alien Buddha Press). Her books from Poets Wear Prada are Meowku and The Cupcake Chronicles. She hosts Brownstone Poets and is the editor-in-chief of its annual anthology.

Kimberly Smith Collette is a native Tennessean currently living in Eastern North Carolina. She is a recently retired teacher/media coordinator with a Bachelor in Business Administration degree and a Masters in Library Science. She is a wife, mother of two adult daughters and “Yaya” to her four-year-old grandson. Kimberly enjoys reading, gardening, volunteering at her church and traveling.

Ashira Daniels is a PCECHS senior majoring in AAS. She plans to transfer to a four-year university and earn a bachelor's degree in psychology. Ashira has been writing poetry since age 12 as a positive way express her emotions.

Angell Edwards is a student, alumna, and staff at PCC. Angell works in OAS, completed her General Studies degree, and now studies Architectural Technology/minoring in Horticulture. Angell occasionally sings with Reggae Bands. This is Angell’s first publication. As a new mom, she chooses to present her work to the public with her son in mind. He shall see success. Angell is grateful for the opportunity to present her work in her home area.

Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi, a black poet, won the 2024 SEARCH Magazine Poetry contest. He was a finalist in the Hayden's Ferry Review Poetry Prize '23 and shortlisted in the Thomas Dylan Poetry contest. His work is featured in POETRY, Heavy Feather Review, Strange Horizons, and Blue Earth Review, among others.

Liàm Fisch is a creative artist with a passion for ink artworks, from ink pens to tattoo ink—grayscales to vibrant hints of color. He will be graduating with an Associates in Fine Arts degree in spring of 2025, then continuing his art journey in the fall to see where else his artistry can take him. He has had three previous publications and hopes to achieve even more.

Shaneka "Neka" Fisch is a triple-major studying Business Admin: Marketing, Horticulture Technology, and Fine Arts & Visual Arts. Neka began drawing at age 12 as a form of therapy and got into photography as a hobby because of her father who did side work as a photographer. She considers good mental health vital to all humans and hopes to promote it through Horticulture based Therapy geared towards Law Enforcement and other service workers who may benefit.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Tenth Muse. Latest books, *Between Two Fires*, *Covert* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Work is upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Birmingham Arts Journal, La Presa and Shot Glass Journal.

Kaleb Grimes is a PCECHS student who plans to graduate with an associate's in arts and receive a bachelor's degree in dance at a four-year university.

Marlette Harrison is a PCECHS junior working towards an Associates in Science. She has taken Tae Kwon Do classes for eight years now and has a 2nd Dan black belt. Her art pieces were made using boards that have been broken through Tae Kwon Do tests. Marlette has taken various art classes in the past at Emerge Art Gallery and continues to love making art.

Rakia Jackson is a multifaceted visual artist working primarily in acrylic, gouache, and digital painting. Her artwork delves into shared reflections and moments, weaving between the conscious and subconscious mind to create organic, thought-provoking compositions that often-center Black figures. In addition to Rakia's practice, she is an educator, sharing her passion for art by teaching public art and other artistic disciplines to youth in Pitt County.

Amyah Jones is 21 years old and graduated PCC in 2024 with two degrees in Early Childhood Education. She started out at PCC at the PCECHS in 2017. Amyah loves to create, loves cartoons, and loves Jesus Christ. God gave her this gift of creating art, and she just wants to share it with others as she represents Christ. Amyah also makes graduation caps, custom shoes, painted wooden things, etc.

Ginger Jones is a Pitt Community College graduate, an author working on her first mystery novel, and a resident of Eastern North Carolina. She enjoys reading, trying new recipes, and swimming in her spare time.

Tiffany Kessler loves working with the Autistic community, writing poetry, dabbling in song lyrics and rapping. She also enjoys cooking and going on adventures, going to concerts, thrift shopping, doing Zumba, and hanging with friends, family, and her pets.

Emma Lima is a PCECHS student here at PCC. Though Emma is good at science and will likely major in a STEM career, she has an affinity towards fiction and the art of storytelling. She writes poetry as a side hobby.

Quinton May is a fine arts major at PCC who specializes in digital illustration using programs such as Procreate and Clip Studio Paint.

Georgia McAllister lives overseas and in the U.S. with her husband, a U.S. Foreign Service Officer. She worked for two U.S. Embassies and as the Compliance Director of a healthcare organization. Georgia also worked as an accreditation surveyor for CARF, an accreditation

agency. In 1991, she took classes at PCC to expand her education. Georgia's story timelines glimpses of her life through the adventures of her personified desk.

Joy Moses-Hall teaches physics and astronomy at Pitt Community College and oceanography at East Carolina University. She has a PhD in oceanography and is the author of the novel *Wretched Refuge*. She writes a monthly science column for the *Daily Reflector* in Greenville, NC, and enjoys traveling with her family to visit rocks and geological formations all over the world. Her science/travel blog is often under repair at APieceoftheContinent.net.

Gino P. Paradela resides in Fayetteville, NC and is an international teacher who teaches English at Cumberland County Schools. He co-founded the Stray Poets Collective in Cebu, the Philippines.

Tony Parker was a PCC student when there were fewer than five buildings on campus. From being a restaurateur, bookseller, retailer, textbooks manager, and now working in the Community Development Division for the City of Greenville, there has always been a common thread: poetry. Tony has practiced his craft since reading Carl Sandburg in the fourth grade and has not stopped.

Barbara Rock-Lupton is a Fine Arts major who enjoys all genres of art, especially ceramics. She returned to study at PCC following her retirement of teaching for 34 years. Barbara believes in keeping the arts alive in the public schools and in lifelong learning. This is Barbara's first publication.

Melinda Sanders is a PCC student who learned to write poetry by trying to make her prayers rhyme.

Caroline Shackelford's world was surrounded by books, characters and faraway places from a very young age. She spent countless hours throughout her childhood and youth, learning, dreaming and visiting a variety of people in differing places & times throughout history as she read. She later desired to become a writer, but family life became priority. Nevertheless, she allowed herself from time to time to pen her thoughts, ideals and reflections.

Christopher D. Sims is a professional creative writer, open mic host, and a teaching artist who teaches for Lighthouse Writers Workshop (Denver, CO) and The Porch (Nashville, TN). Christopher D. Sims has completed a yearlong fellowship with the Intercultural Leadership Institute using that experience to delve further into anti-racism, culture, race, community, and performance art. He has performed all over the US and in Canada.

Dakeim Smith's artwork was previously published in Reedy Branch Review under the title "The Card of the Day." This experience marked the beginning of his journey in accumulating artistic achievements and accolades. Dakeim strives to make the best out of every situation.

Jayden Staton is 16 years old and a junior at PCECHS. She is discovering a love for poetry outside of the classroom.

Caren Stuart joyfully lives with her husband in Chatham County, NC where she reads poetry and writes SOMETHING every day, creating poetry, prose, art, and/or craft as close to daily as possible. More than 60 of her poems have been published in journals and anthologies. Find her on Facebook as Caren Stuart, on Instagram as convolutednotionsbycarenstuart .

Valerie Suedbeck has spent all her life living in Greenville, NC and is working towards an associate's degree in art at PCC. She started writing down all of her story ideas when she was thirteen, but has never published any work. Valerie's favorite genre to write is adventure fantasy. She writes poetry on occasion and finds inspiration at the most random times. Valerie enjoys dancing, knitting, and cuddling with her old cat, Shadow.

Andy Sugg is a scholar, artist, patriot, chef, and screen-printer. Andy believes in bookmarks, not dog-eared pages. Andy is PCC adjunct faculty, on and off since 1993.

Hollis Taylor is a Fine Arts Major who does more digital art than anything else. Hollis enjoys making characters and drawing favorite pre-existing ones so much more. A big focus of Hollis' work is fanart of Star Trek characters, even though Hollis has only been in the fandom for two years.

Kerry Trautman (she/her) is a lifelong Ohioan whose poetry and short fiction have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. Her books are Things That Come in Boxes; To Have Hoped; Artifacts; To be Nonchalantly Alive; Marilyn: Self-Portrait, Oil on Canvas; Unknowable Things; and Irregulars.

Lita P. Ward is an author and works in the Continuing Education Department. She holds a master's degree in Theological Studies from Liberty University. As an 11-year breast cancer survivor, she advocates as a living testimony of the power of prayer and turning pain into purpose. Lastly, Lita, a mother and grandmother, resides in Greenville, NC, with her husband, Victor J. Ward.

Kristie L. Williams is a quadriplegic living with cerebral palsy. Her debut chapbook titled *Finding Her* was published through Finishing Line Press in August 2022. She has been previously published in *Cairn*, *Main Street Rag*, *Dan River Review*, *Hermit Feathers Review*, *Heron Clan*, *Madness Muse Press*, *Snapdragon*, *Big City Lit*, *Nostos*, *Does It Have Pockets*, *Maximum Tilt Solstice Anthology*, *Fixed and Free QuaRterly*, *Artemis*, and others.

Sierra Xie is a student in PCC's Continuing Education & Workforce Development courses. Sierra Xie is a fiction writer and registered dietitian based in Winterville, North Carolina. She lives with her husband, Kevin, and their cat, Dory. In addition to writing, she enjoys reading, exercising, and eating vegetables. Sierra's short story, "The Change," was published in *emerge 22: The Writer's Studio Anthology*.

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