



Creative writing and photography by the students of
Housatonic Community College



Photograph by B. Garrett

IMAGES

Creative Writing and Photography by
the students and faculty of
Housatonic Community College

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Cover Photograph by Holly Patrick

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Arline

Gail Ostrow

Arline had lists for everything:
the night's dinner ingredients,
family birthdays and special
occasions,
books to read, movies to see,
friends to call or write...

Each time she moved/changed,
the list of ingredients for her own
life
transmuted into another surprise—
college, road trips, rock climbing,
writing poetry, teaching English,
collecting authors and their words.

Sometimes, her lists were litanies:
children and grandchildren to love,
a satisfying job that pays well,
a car that's paid for, an apartment I
like,
money in the bank...breast cancer.

At night, in the hospital,
lying side by side,
we made lists: what to do
with her personal belongings;
what to do with her life itself.

At the graveside, the rabbi
speaks of Arline's lists—

the ones she lived by and
the ones all who loved her
heeded to journey with her.

As I leave her son's house
he slips her scarf from his pocket
and hands it to me.

"It was on the list," he says.

Whilst



Photograph by Jason Tournas

Father
Konrad Mazurek

we dance

Amongst the light
Within the smoke's embrace
We forget the sacrifice
Made by our fathers
For the sake of our chance
They who yearned to be artists
Labored on the steel high rise

Don't forget
Don't let it go little child
When you see your father's smile
See what's beneath his tired eyes



Photograph by Monica Freitas



Gail

Gail Ostrow

My name
short – abrupt
like me

harsh start
no middle
full stop



Photograph by Holly Patrick

High Standards

Cody Hill

The guy in the wheelchair glared at me as he was being pushed up the entrance ramp by some male nurse. I exhaled a cloud of smoke as they passed by and the man coughed a little. That caused the nurse to give me a look as if he was deciding if it's worth losing his job for beating up a scumbag like me. He could've done it, too. He was much larger than me, with broad shoulders and forearms as big as my waist. Besides, I've never been a good enough fighter to back up my words. He thinks better of it and continues to push the guy through the hospital entrance to some ward were he'll die.

I take one last drag on my cigarette before I grind the butt beneath my boot heel. The hospital doesn't allow smoking, but my lungs are already aching for another puff as I follow the death procession through the automatic doors and into the lobby.

I don't want to be here. The thought keeps repeating itself in my mind as I stop at the information desk to ask where room 207 is. The desk is across a well lit lobby and I had to bob and weave through a half dozen human derelicts to reach it. There's a cute nurse working there, and I arrive just in time to enjoy the view of her bending over to get something out of a low file cabinet. She stands up with the wayward file and greets me with a thousand watt smile.

"May a help you, sir," she asks in a tone way to perky to be sincere. I gave her the once over with my eyes, and I was impressed enough to flirt a bit. "I hope so," I said, admiring her ample dimensions as she started scribbling words onto the file while straightening her short black hair. I leaned intimately over the desk as I asked, "Could you help me find room 207?"

Her smile faltered for half a second before she regained her composure. "Room 207?" she asked, half hoping I said another room number. Her dark eyes seemed to lose their optimism. I gave her my most charming smile as I tried to salvage my sinking chances, "Yes, room 207."

She pushed the file away and grabbed a yellow post it note. She jotted down the directions without saying a word. She handed it to me with the saddest

expression I've ever seen on a woman I hadn't broken up with. I take the directions and retract my smile a bit. "Thank you very much. Are you sure these are good?" I asked in a last attempt to jump start a conversation. She just nodded and threw herself eagerly into some unforeseen work. Her loss.

The directions said I needed to go to the third floor, so I made my way to the elevators on the far side of the lobby. I pressed the call button and examined myself in the door's gleaming surface. Maybe I've underdressed, I mused to myself as I smoothed out some of the creases on my bike jacket. I admired how the dark purple shirt I was wearing was offset by the complete blackness of the leather jacket. It's a beautiful thing when your clothes just seem to go together like mine do.

The elevator dinged and my mirror pulled itself apart. Where I was admiring myself, there was now some little kid in a hospital gown looking up at me. He looked squirrel-like and petrified underneath his mess of brown hair. He took a second to examine me, and then bolted out of the elevator and down a hall as fast as his little legs would carry him. As I stepped into the elevator, I heard some orderlies burst from the staircase door calling after the boy. They were shouting something about the painlessness of some procedure as I press the button for third floor.

The doors slid shut, and I was left alone to face myself again. I ran a hand through my hair. The kid reminded me that I needed a haircut as well. I could use a shave, too. My goatee was starting to get shaggy and my cheeks were showing the early signs of a beard.

All too soon the elevator reached my floor and I stepped into the hallway. It was blindingly white and sterile in there, and my eyes had to adjust to read my note. "Take a left out of the elevator, walk past two hallways, take a right into the third, second door on the left," I read to myself. Her handwriting was delightfully feminine if not a little hard to read.

I set off following the directions, trying to keep my mind off the task at

hand. I passed by hallway number one and I saw that it lead to a little living room kind of area. There were some nondescript couches, a TV, and fish tank in the room. I could see some patients lounging in there, talking amicably as I walked by.

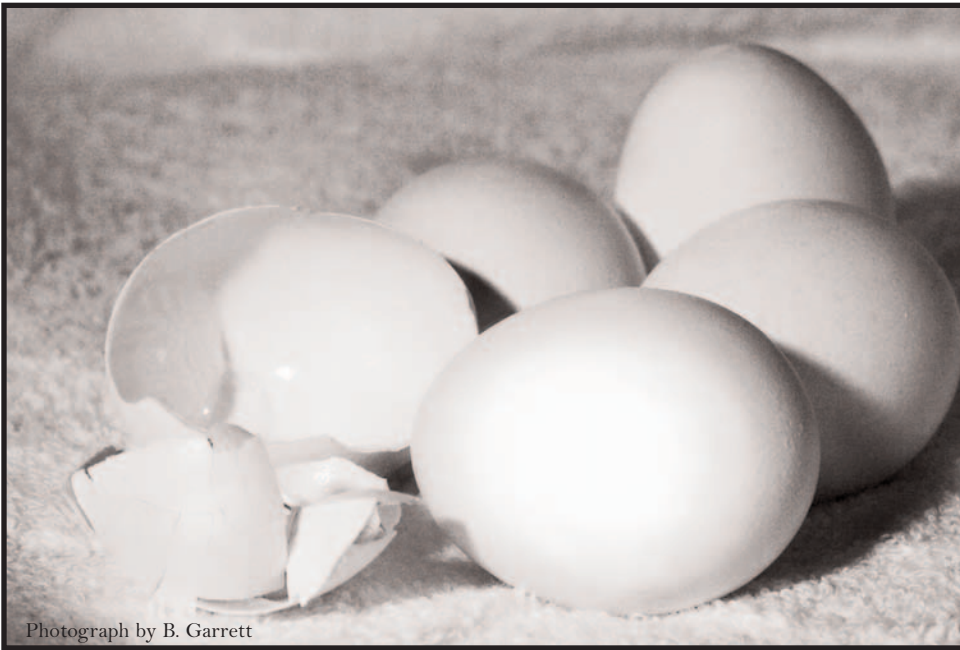
I passed hallway number two, and saw a similar scene. Except this one had people I knew sitting in it, talking in hushed voices as they stared at the fish. One was an old friend of mine and the other was another friend's mother. Mike and I were old friends in high school, and we still got together once in awhile. His naturally dark features were darkened further, and he stopped looking into the fish tank to hang his head and mumble something I couldn't hear.

The woman was my friend Adam's mother. She was starting to get up there in years, and her once fair hair was almost completely gray by now. She was always short and thin, but now she looked anemic. Her once bright eyes now had dark circles that showed through her eyeglasses. She looked ready to cry as she patted Mike on the back and tried to console him. He started to shudder and then grabbed her in a desperate embrace as they both vented their grief.

I hurried down the hall and out of sight before they realized I was a witness to their raw scene and asked me to join them. The last thing I needed right now was to get dragged into some weird sort of pity party. I took a right down the third hall, and was confronted by a long corridor of doors. I expected another living area, and was taken aback by just how many doors there were lining the hall. "How many patients must be here?" I wondered out loud to no one in particular. I prayed that each door didn't contain some sick variation of the one I was trying to find. I regained my senses and started slowly down the hall.

I paced myself, taking short, slow steps. It was only the second door on my left, but I suddenly wished it were further down the hall. It was just about right in front of me as I entered the hallway, yet it still took me five minutes it to reach it. I stood there; hand on the door knob, trembling. In all my life, I had never once felt so much trepidation as I did then. I tried to convince myself to

turn and leave this godforsaken place with its glaring orderlies and terrified patients as quickly as possible. Thoughts of escape still danced in my head as I turned the doorknob and eased the door open.



Photograph by B. Garrett

The room was beeping. The sound pulsed through the room, bouncing off every fixture before burrowing its way into my ears. I took a step into the room. The lights were off, but the room was illuminated by the eerie green glow of the beeping machine. There was another sound, slower than the beeping, but with much more menace. It was a whooshing sound, slow and deliberate, like the chugs of the unstoppable train of death.

My eyes searched the mess of tubes and machines covering the hospital bed. It took me minutes to find a human in the faint light of the machine's emerald

fires, but I could faintly make out a frail shape after an eternity of seconds. I closed the door and grabbed the chair that was near it. I pulled it close to the bed and sat on it backwards, arms crossed and resting its raised surface. I stared at this half human, half mechanical abomination and searched for words.

Adam was driving to school when his car was t-boned. The driver was some young punk racing his friend down a back road when Adam was pulling out of his driveway. He didn't have a chance. If one didn't hit him, the other would've as they tore around the corner taking up both sides of the road. He was rushed to this hospital in a helicopter because the hospital he was initially treated at couldn't treat the severity of his injuries. As they were sewing him up and setting the bones and all those other words with meanings that are beyond me, he slipped into a coma. Mutual friends said something about blood pressure to the brain or the loss of fluid or something like that. I was too stunned from the news to try and decipher the jargon.

That was three weeks ago. It took me three weeks to gather the courage to see my best friend from high school like this. It had been almost two years since I'd seen him at all. After school we just kind of drifted apart. He was always more driven than I was.

As I fell into a cycle of cheap women and muddled time spent in a mostly drunken stupor, he went off to college. We kept in touch for awhile and he'd tell me about his good grades and how college was fun and how he was enjoying himself. I'd tell him about how I lost another job or broke up with another girl. He'd try and sound interested, but I could tell he was unhappy with the way my life turned out. We used to compete, and now I was just piddling my life way. My guilt for not reaching my friend's expectations led to our further growing apart, until eventually we stopped talking all together.



Even in the darkness I could see the seriousness of his condition. His once tanned skin had become as pale white as his hospital gown, and his lips seemed to have lost their vibrant color and became a soft pink. His eyes were closed and his hair was covered by a mass of bandages. The tubes snaked into his nose and down his throat were keeping him alive, but to me looked, they seemed to be drawing the last bit of life out of him.

As I sat there searching for words, they suddenly came to me. Slowly at first, but with more and more determination as I started to speak.

“Hey Adam,” I said softly. “It’s been awhile, huh?” I added meekly. “Did you see the nurses at this place? They’re fine, for sure. I’m sure you’ll appreciate them when you wake up.” My attempts to lighten my mood were failing, but I trudged on. “Is that where they feed you from?” I asked pointing to a tube lodged into his throat. “That kind of takes all the fun out of eating,” I said. I was greeted by the beep of the machine and the steady whooshing of the train.

My eyes started to well up. “This isn’t fair, man!” I started, growing angry at the beeping. “You were the good one! You went to church. You didn’t stay out late or screw every woman in sight. You forgave people and all that crap! Why is this happening to you?” I stood up and knocked the chair over with a sweep of my hand. “This is the God you believe in?” I spit out. “This is the fair and just lord you love so much? The one who puts you in the hospital while I sit here and try and make small talk? Why!?!?! Why, why, why...” I trailed off. I picked the chair back up and sank into it.

I buried my head in my hands, and tried again to find the words. “You just always seemed to have it together. You were going to be someone. You were going to do something important. Why are you here and I’m not?” I lamented. “I’m the one not going anywhere,” I said tersely, “I’m the one who’s done all the bad things. The one who’s led the sinful existence. Why are you dieing and I’m not?” I begged of the unresponsive body laying there.

“I guess I always wanted to be like you,” I continued dejectedly. “You always

seemed so sure of yourself. So sure you were doing the right thing. I've never felt like that," I took my head out of my hands and looked towards the door. "I've never hurt as bad as I did when I thought I was disappointing you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I was never the friend I should have been," I said, regretful that he couldn't make out my words. "I'm sorry I was never the friend you deserved to have."

I felt something cold and damp on my hand. I turned my head quickly in alarm and saw Adam's weak hand resting on mine. The beeping sped up slightly, but the whooshing continued on chugging regardless. His eyes fluttered open and he turned his head slightly to look at me. His expression was a calm contrast to the rage and confusion in my face.

His pale lips parted and he took a breath on his own accord, just to spite the machines. "I," he exhaled painfully. "I...have always," he was struggling to form the words, and his face narrowed as he tried to force them out. The words were barely coming and I had to lean forward to hear them. "I have always... admired... how you were...," he paused to take another breath and I waited patiently for him to continue, "...able to... be yourself," he finished. "Never...ever... change," he said. He smiled at me and I smiled back. I watched as his expression relaxed and he turned his head away from me.

I stared at him as the beeping leveled off and the train came to collect its one and only passenger. I absorbed as many details of the room and my friend as my mind would allow. Then I fled the room before the hospital staff arrived. I passed by both hallways with out looking down them. I reached the elevator and stared at the floor so I wouldn't have to face myself. I couldn't face myself. I took the elevator down to the lobby and headed to the exit without even glancing at the cute nurse reaching for another file behind the desk.

Once outside, I grabbed a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled it as fast as my lungs would take it in. I blew out some smoke. I also blew out the last bit of anger and regret that didn't make it out in my confession to Adam. As I was

smoking, a nurse was approaching the entry ramp pushing along an older patient hooked up to an oxygen tank. It was the same nurse as before, and he glared at me, practically begging for me to start something. As they passed by, I ground the cigarette butt beneath my boot heel. I took a breath of fresh air, but already my lungs were burning for another cigarette.

I turned around to follow them through the doors and back into the hospital. Mike and Adam's mom would just be getting the news now of his death. Adam would be disappointed in me if I didn't try to be there to console them.





Photograph by April Woods

Mahogany Pride

Shaday Davis

I'm the kind of woman that would leave a man amazed in
Such a way
That he would become mesmerized, even hypnotized, by
The sweet rhythm
Of my thighs that sway.
I walk in a room and all eyes are on me
Not because it's who's coming through the door they
Wish to see
But it's their illusion, that they could seduce me, all the while wishing that they
could never awaken from such a pleasant dream.
I walk by them with my head held high
being ever so careful to only expose one thigh
That I might leave them in bewilderment
Wondering if the other was also molded in the same
pecan perfection.
My skin enveloped in the kind of mahogany
That looks like a glimpse or touch would bring you to
ultimate ecstasy.
When I pass by, you hear the gentle melody of African
drums
That seem to be in tune with every step I stride.
I'm the kind of woman that would seduce you in front
of your wife
You handing back to her the bundled up child
Telling her to run on home, that you'll only be a
short while
She would take her baby and run home
For there is nothing much she can do to protest, my mahogany has her heart

racing, her softness wet,
And her two small soldiers standing at attention
around the curves of her breast.
I'm the kind of woman that has young men, old men, your
Men,
Young woman, old women, your women granting me my
inner most desires and
Flocking around the hem of my skirt,
These
 manicured hands of mine are too pretty to
work.
Wait a minute I don't want you to get it all
Wrong, for me to get what I desire no one has to
penetrate
My softness or devour my sacred walls
I don't have to give in order to receive
Because I have power over whom ever I desire.
I am in fact God's most beautiful creation
From the crown of my head to the very sole of my feet
To the curve of my breast that heaves rhythmically when my
heart beats.
My two lilies must be shaped in pure perfection
For when a man sees them erect he falls to his knees
begging for one touch of affection
My areola is curved in such a way
That when babies see them they're not hungry anymore for
They're afraid
To disturb such a beautiful display.

My hair doesn't have to be a blond bundle of curls
that cling

To my neck when I walk

My naps are just as pretty when I leave them loose or
simply tied up in an vibrant Nigerian frock

I don't have to bleach my skin and
pretend that I'm vanilla,

my sexy chocolate attracts it's own attention and like my flavor there is no other. I'm deep and thick with wisdom imitated but not duplicated. Respected because I'm made in the creators image, Loved because my heart is bigger than my sexuality. There is more to me than just virginity. I wasn't conceived to believe that I had to live up to society's perception of me. Mahogany isn't a set back, or curse by my definition. Black means I'm the backbone of this country even if my people weren't given any recognition. I left my slave mentality on a plantation, there's nothing I can't have my skin won't cripple me it's the very thing that has proven over time that it can elevate me.

Black isn't a color it's a statement that says, yes I have pictures on my back, yes I have calluses on my hands, my feet are big because you don't need shoes to pick cotton, I'm never seen at night after the sun has gone to bed because my complexion camouflages me. There's pride because you won't see me on the cover of a model magazine I won't let society molest me to become an American idol, I won't be a gunny pig for doctors to break God's mold and deface my temple. I won't wear a wig and I won't paint my face, I've been called a monkey too long to disgrace my race. My mahogany must be displayed for the entire world to see. I'm black and I'm strong slavery didn't kill me. Chains couldn't bind me and illiteracy just kept me from reading the plan to demolish me.

My mahogany was there when I took my first breath and while the rhythm of my heart ceases to beat, my skin will still be enveloped in sweet mahogany.

Our Bare Hands

Ed La Salle

The summer of '05
we had missing fingernails,
mine was sliced with a razorblade,
and refused to grow back. Yours was
the result of something the doctors
just couldn't figure out, and so they offered,
"Nail cancer? Very rare, but it happens."
Cancer, their answer,
and acknowledgement, to God.

We shared a Canada Dry with
the Haitian wash lady,
at the inner-city Laundromat on my corner.
Her lieutenant was there, the big woman,
who reminds you of yourself,
when you laugh, confident and loud.

My apartment was on the
cross street where the two kids
got shot, that summer of '05,
when gangs of teenagers carrying pistols
rode on Huffys and Schwinn
like Hell Angels, disrupting traffic patterns
on the main avenues.
"Don't disrespect me mutha-fuckah."
The color of your skin

didn't matter any more.
It was beyond race now.
The whirl of window fans,
and the summer heat
created white noise
on my telephone.
I was glad. I was hoping
no one would call me,
because right after I got stabbed
by that lily white skinned, tattooed, junkie chick,
who pulled the knife out of my back
and said, "I had to stab you, I don't like violence,"
I really didn't want to talk to any body.

Then I met you, and I lived by the phone,
listening to Beach Boys songs, and dreaming
of Key West. You called one day and said,
"You're being hungry, again."

That summer, I started to wonder,
if the kids were on to something.
If in this life, we just have to take what we want,
and when love comes by, we have to snatch it up
like a killah collects lives, or like we
pull meat off of a broiled chicken
with our bare hands.



Photograph by Holly Patrick



Rope

Peter Ulisse

You are seventeen,
past puberty not
fully adult.
Parents secure
as your bedroom,
restrictive as jail.
They don't understand
You
where you hurt
trying to protect
your innocence
in a hostile world.

You've gone from
baby to
baby sitter,
playing dress-up
to prom gown.
You don't hate them.
All you want is
to fly
but not all the way,
reach for sky but
tumble home at night.

You understand
their need for rope-
only wish
it could stretch.

She'vil

James "Solo" Graham

U have no horns; don't even hold a pitchfork. But you walk like u got hooves and talk like you suppose to. You dress so attractive even I wanted you. Trickin my brothers into selling their souls. They love you without thinking or knowing what you do to people. You bring almost as much evil as money, but ironically I need money to have you. Then when the green's gone you find someone else to lean on. But you not the only one, there's a race of you. And most of you are faker than the new dollar bills. Outside the house you're classy and beautiful. But when you get back inside all that will change. You're taking out your hair while picking at your teeth. Thinking you can sing with smoke filled lungs. What's left of your hair you tie in a ponytail and sit on the porch. Unlike you, you fat tailed devil, I stay real my walk, my talk, what I write in my scriptures, I stay real. Like it or not you can't have my soul. I won't change.



Photograph by Holly Patrick



Photograph by Monica Freitas

The City

Konrad Mazurek

The city swallows stars
Her grotesque outline absorbs light
She feeds on those who come too close
Like an artificial vampire, with skin of asphalt
Bridges mark her mouth
Her fangs, the concrete high rise

Children create makeshift wings here
Picking up abandoned feathers off the sidewalks
Gluing them together desperately with tears
Grey caricatures of 'Daedalus' legacy
When their hearts turn to stone
They pray in lost temples, deep inside

They scrape their skin
Erasing those monotonous fingerprints
As to become something better
These creatures with destinies crafted in watercolors
Rather than carbon and common dust
Reaching for the heaven out on the radio waves

The New Year

Yusuff Abdu

“No!”

“No! For Heaven’s sake, NO!” Deirdre screamed silently as she uncovered her brother’s frighteningly still body under the heap of ripped apart boxes and crumpled newspaper.

“Buddy, wake up. Wake UP!” she screamed at him, shaking him frantically. Buddy’s eyes stayed tightly shut.

“WAKE UP!” Deirdre screamed again slapping him.

“Oh, My God! He isn’t waking up,” she mused placing her palms on his cheeks. They were piercingly cold. But again, they always were, like hers and everyone else who lived in that alley.

Deirdre instinctively removed her gloves and slid them under her brother’s several jackets. She held her breath as her hands got through his last protection from the harsh winter and found his left chest.

A sigh of relief escaped her mouth when she felt his heart behind the walls of thinning muscles and solid bones. She backed up from him and ran her frozen fingers through her tangled hair.

“He’s alive. He’s just sleeping. Thank God. But why isn’t he waking up?”

“Buddy?” she called again as she shook him once more, “Wake up, dammit!” Deirdre was getting anxious now.

She slapped him across the face a couple of more times without Buddy rousing. Deirdre cringed as a passing car poured light into the dark alley, illuminating her brother’s weathered face. His stillness frightened her.

“Not on New Year’s Eve. Please, God, not just before the New Year” she whispered to herself.

“He’s been like that for awhile now,” a figure from behind another pile announced.

“Wha- what?!” Deirdre stuttered glancing at the familiar silhouette.

“He’s been like that since you’ve been gone,” the figure revealed himself from

under his insulation of newspaper – his needle point eyes visible in the darkness, even under all the hair and beard.

Deirdre sucked in a sudden sob. Dread washed over her. She intuitively took her brother's arm and pulled back his sleeves. She frantically looked for any signs of needle intrusions.

None. She found none – and on both hands too.

“Did you see him shooting anything, Mr. Ed?” she asked the neighboring man.

“Nope, he isn't that type of kid,” Mr. Ed replied hollowly.

“I know! But he's not waking up!” Deirdre held back her tears.

“Did you bring anything back?” Mr. Ed asked.

“Noo!” Deirdre announced, frustrated, “The Community Center was closed by the time I got there. I wasn't able to get any food.”

“Why would they close so early? It's New Year's Eve.”

“Yeah, some hot shot decided to close it down because of some health violation,” Deirdre replied impatiently. She tried warming Buddy's cheeks by rubbing her palms on them.

“That's not what he needs, Deirdre. He needs food. The kid needs to get something hot in him,” the man advised. He slowly crawled out from under his pile and pulled out a bottle from his coat.

Pulling off the lid, he placed the mouth of the bottle on the Buddy's lips and allowed the strong liquid in it sip out. Even though much of it ran off Buddy's cheeks, the little that stole into him roused him. His eyes slowly slid open and he murmured something before slipping back into himself.

“Buddy!” Deirdre screamed, elated to hear his voice. The incoherent gibberish sounded so melodically sweet to her ears. The girl couldn't help but let out a wide smile.

“He's okay!” she laughed to herself.

“Don't get too excited. He's worse than I thought. The kid needs to get

something to eat very soon” the man trampled on her newly hopeful demeanor.

“Is anyone bringing in food later?” Deirdre asked.

“Yeah, Shirley and Footwork are. But I don’t know when they’ll be here, and he shouldn’t wait too long before he gets something to eat.” Mr. Ed said calmly taking a sip from his bottle.

Deirdre watched Mr. Ed keenly. He sounded very calm, just like he always did, and that’s why Deirdre knew the situation was more dire than the man was letting out to be.

“I’ll go find something quick,” she finalized getting up, a furrow of concern on her face, “Watch him, okay?”

“Sure. You better hurry, doesn’t look like he would last long. Why don’t you try one of the shelters?” Mr. Ed asked.

His question weighed something on her, making her suddenly conscious of an object stuffed under the lining of her belt. It made her shoot Mr. Ed a glare. He knew perfectly well she couldn’t go anywhere near a shelter.

Deirdre briskly walked away from him and into the lights of the adjoining street. She hurriedly threw her hood over her head, hiding her face from all the cheerful lights. Her plight for concealment made her collide into another burgeoning body.

“Sorry!” she called as she scurried away, before she was discovered.

As Deirdre hurried away, she suddenly became aware of how fast her heart was pumping blood. The thought of losing Buddy terrified her. It was just something that was completely unfathomable. The run wasn’t making it any easier on her either. She needed to stop. She needed to stop and breathe. She needed to stop and cry.

But as she thought of it, she knew she didn’t have the luxury of crying at the moment. Buddy was counting on her. This was not the time for her to break down. This was not the time for her to get scared. But she was scared; she was completely and utterly ridden with fear.

Deirdre's heart suddenly leaped as she caught a glimpse of a couple of police officers heading her way with the rest of the incoming traffic of crowd heading for the New Year Count Down at the Square. Ducking into an alley, she hid behind one of the city's garbage bin and felt the cold metallic object hidden under her clothes press against her belt.

Everything had gone terribly wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong. That's why she had shot at and missed the social workers who'd tried to take her brother away from her. That's why her and her brother's picture was up at every shelter and who-knows-what around town. That's why they both had to hide...and starve: the empty feeling in her stomach reminded her.

Deirdre's sore feet beckoned under her for release. The painfully numbing feeling in her fingers was becoming unbearable.

"Ouuu..." she moaned silently as she slid down the wall she was leaning on. She wanted to stop crying. She wanted to be stronger, but the image of Buddy dead still at the corner of the alley weighed on her strength.

The desperation she had felt when she had shot at the social worker was creeping back up her stomach. Deirdre knew she had to find food soon.

The passing crowd was thinning away. It didn't surprise her that the many who passed and sighted her had looked away immediately, pretending not to have seen her. They all had smiles on their faces – gleaming fat faces still stuffed with Christmas food. They were all happy, why should they all ruin their good time to help a teenage girl who was obviously in trouble.

"If only mum was still here", Deirdre cried. She ceased the flow of tears immediately as she remembered that Buddy was waiting for her. She needed to get back to him. He was not spending the New Year's alone. She had promised her mother that she was going to take care of Buddy. She had promised that she would never leave him.

Just as she found her legs, Deirdre's ears caught the slamming vibrations of a door closing. Her head snapped towards the shadows of the alley where it

came from.

“Happy New Year! F-ing Bastard!” she heard someone murmur.

A figure approached her. It was a he, and *he* was in some sort of fancy waiter suit.

‘Waiter’, Deirdre’s mind calculated as she realized she was behind a restaurant. The waiter was carrying a filled plastic bag. The glands in her nose soon picked up the teasing smell of all the hot leftovers he was carrying. Deirdre’s stomach churned in eager keenness. The anticipation of the night’s hearty pay and generous tip the waiter had earned made her fingers twitch. They had to have it.

The waiter had noticed her. He had frowned at her presence. Obviously noticing her haggard appearance, he had hesitated to advance.



Photograph by T. Monteiro

Deirdre's anxiety suddenly became feverish; she briskly got up and proceeded toward the waiter. Her hands cunningly disappeared under her coat.

Like the waiter anticipated what was to come, he stepped back clumsily.

Deirdre pulled out her weapon and pointed it toward the waiter. Her hands shook under its weight. And even as a finger found its place by the trigger, the object felt foreign in her hands.

"Gi-gimme your money and whatever you have with you there or I swear I'll pass a bullet through your fucking head" she announced.

* * * *

"Yo! Jeremy, hot-shot with lady company at table twelve", the manager yelled.

"But I'm done in five", Jeremy yelled back as he collected his things into his backpack.

"You're done when I say you're done. Now get your ass in there," the burling manager pointed out.

Jeremy sighed angrily. Now there was no way he was going to get back home to his Grandma before the clock hit New Year's Day.

"It's going to take over an hour to wait on the promising couple," he thought bitterly as he found his charges – "a young corporate guy with a \$200 Rolex watch and \$500 Armani suit, accompanied by his assumed blushing bride who is quite a number," Jeremy noticed.

"I'd have to call Granny and have the countdown with her via phone," Jeremy mused as he made his way through the maze of tables, "There is no way she is spending it alone."

"Good Evening, I'm Jeremy. I'll be your waiter tonight," Jeremy announced charismatically, handing them the menu.

They both nodded at him thankfully. Jeremy noticed the lady's eyes lingered a little bit on him before she glanced at her menu. A swarm of blood rose to his

face.

“You look a little bit young to be working here. How old are you?” she asked.

Her male companion frowned at her displaced interest.

“Nineteen”, Jeremy replied.

“That’s not so young Tracey. I used to buss tables when I was sixteen”, the man said.

“Well, I guess you’re right”, the lady finalized. “Honey, now remember, I don’t want to try anything too adventurous. I had to shut down a community center today. That place was infested with all sorts of atrocities”.

Her companion nodded in acknowledge as he knew she actually meant she didn’t want him trying anything adventurous as well.

“I don’t know why you’re still doing that health inspector job. When we get married you won’t have to work at all,” the man noted.

The lady frowned, irritated.

“That’s if I say yes, Stuart. That’s if I say yes”, she glared from behind her menu.

Jeremy suddenly realized he had been standing by their table for too long. He should have left them to make their decision for dinner a while ago.

“I’ll come back when you’re ready”, he said hurriedly as he backed away from their table, but not before he caught the cold draft that had descended between the couple.

His aching legs carried him to the waiting area where the streaming lights of a passing car assaulted the sensitivity of his eyes. He strained it before finding a vacant chair at the corner. Sitting down, he fumed angrily at the fact that he was not on his way home already.

“Jeremy, could you get up for a minute, I really need to sit down,” a fellow waiter approached him.

“Aren’t there any other seats?” Jeremy asked.

“None out of the view of the whale,” the other waiter pointed at the

manager who was surveying the room with his eagle eyes.

Jeremy groaned before getting up. He walked to another spot and leaned on the wall. The couple he was waiting on appeared to be having a hissing spat.

“If I’m lucky, they’d just call it a night,” Jeremy thought.

As if on cue, the lady shot off her seat and stormed toward the door.

“Tracey...Tracey”, the young man hissed after her.

“Yes!” Jeremy silently rejoiced. He immediately headed towards the kitchen; the manager shot him a stare as he went.

“Jeremy! What are you still doing here?” someone called from behind him as he got to his locker.

“Hey Kelly” Jeremy greeted listlessly, “The big Kahuna made me wait one more table before I leave”

“Oh Jeremy, why do you let him walk over you like that?” Kelly asked as she sat by his packed things.

Jeremy stared at the little chef assistant sardonically; her chubby build made her look shorter than she actually is.

“Because he’s my boss” Jeremy finally answered.

“It’s not only him. You’re like that with everyone”, Kelly stated. Her eyes darted away from him as someone approached them.

“Hey kiddo, got any of those basil cheesecakes in there,” the intruder referred to Jeremy’s bag of leftovers.

“Ahh...yeah,” Jeremy answered as he watched the intruder search the bag of leftovers without permission.

“You don’t mind, do you?” the guy asked pulling out the cheesecake wrapped in foil paper.

“It’s actually for my Grandma...”

“Oh, come on, Jeremy. I’m sure the old girl could do without it for just one night.”

“I really—”

“Thanks buddy, I knew you’d understand,” the intruder cut him off. Giving him a slap on the back, he walked away.

Kelly was fuming.

“I can’t believe you let him take the cheesecake” she scowled, “I wrapped that up especially for your Grandma.”

“I know. I didn’t tell him to take it. He just took it!” Jeremy protested.

“And you let him!” Kelly shot back, “Jeremy, face it. You’re just too passive. Your new year’s resolution should be to grow yourself a pair of balls.”

Jeremy slammed his locker shut. Kelly jumped back.

“Temper, kid. Temper.” Kelly frowned.

“I’m sorry,” Jeremy apologized, “I didn’t mean to do that. It’s just that I’m not really up for being criticized right now. I just want to get home to my Grandma.”

Kelly observed Jeremy closely as he wore his jacket and threw his backpack over one shoulder. She found herself realizing that Jeremy already knew he was a doormat for everyone to wipe their feet on. And she knew he was particularly mad that he couldn’t get his Grandma that piece of cheesecake. He wanted to get her something special for the New Year. It was the first one she was spending without her husband.

“How’s she doing by the way?” Kelly asked.

“She’s better, but she really misses my Grandpa,” Jeremy sighed. “She still wakes up at night crying for him. And I have to keep reminding her that he’s dead.”

“It’s really, really sweet that you’re taking care of her,” Kelly noted.

“Well, it’s not about being sweet,” Jeremy corrected. “My grandparents are the only family I know. Right now, I’m the only one my Grandma has. I’m definitely not going to put her in a home after she raised me.”

“I understand,” Kelly told him solemnly.

“And anyway...” Jeremy continued, “...before my grandpa died, I promised

that I'd take care of her. I'm never going to leave her alone. She has that fear you know, that fear of being alone. She and my Grandpa used to eat cheesecake by the television while they watched the countdown to New Year's at Time Square."

Kelly noticed how his eyes were distant as he opened up to her. Now she realized how important the cheesecake was to him.

"Jeremy", she chanted, "Why did you let..."

"I know. I know. I hate myself, okay?" Jeremy scowled, glancing at his watch, "Now I won't be home on time to watch it with her." He grabbed the leftovers and strolled toward the backdoor.

"Happy New Year, Jeremy!" Kelly shouted after him.



Photograph by T. Monteiro

“Happy New Year,” Jeremy greeted back.

“Hey, Jeremy, Happy New Year!” someone called from behind him.

Jeremy turned and found the cheesecake snatcher waving at him.

Stepping out of the back door, Jeremy murmured: “Happy New Year, F-ing bastard.”

The darkness of the alley covered him as he closed the door. He appreciated the piercing cold of the night to the stuffy warmth of the kitchen. “If I hurry, I could catch the hour’s train to Soho,” he told himself. But his thoughts were stopped short at the sight of something sitting on the floor behind the garbage bin.

The figure had noticed him too. As it turned toward him, he caught a glimpse of a disgruntled face. It was a girl – no older than he was. The state of her clothes told him that she was homeless, but the sight of uncertainty and fear in her eyes told him she was in trouble.

Before he could respond to her presence, she stood up and walked towards him. The way her hands disappeared under her jacket and the way she approached him with such determination made him realize that he was the one in trouble. Fear gripped his heart.

She pulled out a gun and pointed it to his face as she stepped up to him.

“Gi-gimme your money and whatever you have there or I swear I’ll pass a bullet through your fucking head!” she announced.

* * * *

“Pass on the cash!” Deirdre yelled. Her hands were shaking more vigorously now.

Jeremy noticed this, and offered his wallet to her immediately. He didn’t want to press anymore stress on the girl, just in case she accidentally pulled the trigger.

As she grabbed his wallet, she noticed a wad of money stuffed in it. She

smiled.

Jeremy didn't know what frightened him the most, the barrel of the gun or the look of frantic desperation in the girl's eyes. Her eyes. The dark pools within them danced around, unfocused.

"I want the food too," Deirdre demanded.

Jeremy held his hand in front of her to give her the bag.

"Like taking candy from a baby," Deirdre laughed forcefully.

The statement made Jeremy withdraw his hand. It reminded him of what Kelly had told him.

"I am not a doormat for everyone to walk over," Jeremy mused. Then aloud, "The food is for my Grandma. Why don't you buy your own food with some of the money?"

"Yeah, like I care the food is for your granny," Deirdre replied. "Give me the bag or God help me I will shoot you."

"No," the word came out of Jeremy, but he had no idea *where* it came from.

Deirdre swayed from one foot to the other. Her hands were really getting unsteady.

"Don't make me shoot you," Deirdre warned. "Please, don't make me shoot you. I just want to get some food for my brother. Please, don't make this any harder than it is." she mused.

"You're not going to shoot me", Jeremy told her. He was breathing fast now. Something was feeding him with anger, maybe it was Kelly's words, and as he watched the gun shake in the girl's hand, he knew he had a chance – a chance to get the gun.

"Okay, take your money. Just give me the food!" Deirdre told him, throwing his wallet to him; it fell on his feet. She could see her options disappearing one by one. She needed the food more anyway, and she would be risking exposure if she went to a store to buy some food.

"I told you I'm not giving you the food. It's for my Grandma," Jeremy stood

his ground. He watched as the girl leaned from one leg to another.

“Are you blind or something,” Deirdre yelled, “I have a gun. I can kill you!”

Jeremy sucked in some air. Adrenaline was pumping through his blood. It was filling his head. His palm tightened around the polyester hand of his backpack.

“As I said before, I seriously do not care about your granny. She isn’t starving, is she?” Deirdre continued, her voice sounding frantic.

“I gave you my money. Buy what you need with it. Leave the food for me,” Jeremy reasoned, determined. “It may not be cheesecake, but I’m getting my Grandma something special for the New Year,” he said within himself.

“I really don’t have time for this,” Deirdre swallowed as sweat moistened her palm uncomfortably. “I just need the food. I may not have time to go buy something for Buddy. Buddy may not have much time left. I have to hurry. I have to hurry before it’s too late.”



Photograph by Jason Tournas

Deirdre's hand took a tighter grip on the gun. Her eyes suddenly became hard and cold. Her lips moved in restrained frustration: "Give me the bag."

With those words, Jeremy slung his backpack at the gun. Deirdre hadn't expected it. She hadn't even noticed the backpack on him.

The backpack cleanly hit the gun out of Deirdre's hand. The weapon spun in the air for a short while before it fell on the cold floor and slid toward the alley wall.

At the sight of its resting place, the two scurried toward it. Clambering toward the gun, they both reached it at the same time. They struggled for control over the weapon, their hands wrapped around the gun in a pull of wills.

As they grunted and wrestled with the gun, they barely noticed the increasing volume of voices that filled and consumed the icy air, shouting out the seconds to the death of a year and the birth of another.

"Five!" the air moaned.

Jeremy grabbed the barrel of the gun and pulled it towards him.

"Gimme the gun," he uttered.

"Four!"

Deirdre's left hand was stuck under the pressure of the waiter's right hand. Though he was stronger, she was still able to keep the gun between them.

"Three!"

To Jeremy's disadvantage, the girl was surprisingly strong. He turned the barrel up, pointing the gun to an angle.

"Two!"

Sweat seemed to be pouring through Deirdre's pores at impossible rates. She knew she was losing the fight. Maybe she could point the barrel toward the waiter before it was too late.

"One!"

Jeremy tried yanking the gun out of her hands when he saw they were sweaty and slipping off. Summoning all his strength, he tightened his grip on it,

and wrenched it forcefully.

“Happy New Year!!”

The gun went off. But the explosions in the sky muffled the bang the gun had let out. Jeremy’s body fell on top of Deirdre’s. Trapped under it, Deirdre could only make out the sky beyond the dark concrete structures. The fireworks in the sky sparkled in her eyes. It was absolutely beautiful; all those pretty lights in the sky, exploding and blossoming through the night. Sheering in illuminating ecstasy like the climax to something – to something brilliant. It all reflected in her eyes – her eyes reflected it all... like a cold hard mirror. And it occurred to her casually that while some of the fireworks exploded in radiance, some exploded under the radiance of others.

Everything had gone terribly wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong. As the warmth of a liquid started filling the length of her clothing, all Deirdre could think about was Buddy. Poor Buddy. She had to get him food. She had to get him food as quick as possible.

* * * *

“Poor kid,” Mr. Ed uttered as he stared down at Buddy’s body. “Poor Buddy. I couldn’t get him what he needed on time.”

“What was that?” Buddy asked, shifting toward him.

“I mean I couldn’t get you the chicken wings on time. They’re all gone!” the old man said settling beside him, “But I was able to get you some more meatballs.”

“Thanks!” Buddy collected the dish the old man was offering.

“Happy New Year, kid,” Mr. Ed mouthed in his nonchalant way. “It’s a good thing Shirley and Footwork came in the time they did. God knows where you’d be right now, if they hadn’t.”

“Yeah!” Buddy laughed weakly with a mouthful of meatballs. His eyes wandered to the fireworks in the sky. He had noted earlier that some of them



sounded like gunshots.

“Is Deirdre back yet?” Buddy asked.

“No, but don’t worry...” Mr. Ed replied, “She’ll soon be here. You know how she can’t leave you alone for long”.

Buddy nodded in agreement. His eyes wandered back to the sky.

“So this is the new year?” he stated, “I don’t feel different.”

“Were you expecting to feel different?” Mr. Ed asked.

“Not really. Well, I’ve just been having this feeling that something was going to be different about this year.”

The sound of sirens caught his attention. Soon after, a police car and an ambulance zoomed by.

“I wonder what that’s all about” Buddy pondered loudly. He tried getting up, but he just swayed back to the ground. His head was still spinning with blood. And his whole body was limp with weakness.

“Here,” Mr. Ed offered him his hand. “I’ll help you up.”

Leaning on the old man, they both walked to the adjoining street. The lights blinking not so far away told them the disturbance was just ahead.

Mr. Ed helped the boy up the street to the police car and ambulance. A crowd had already collected around the site.

The paramedics were carrying a body in a zipped body bag into their vehicle. And someone was being led into the police car.

It was a waiter. He didn’t seem to be in trouble since he didn’t have any cuffs on. He apparently was also on the phone with someone. Buddy could hear him converse as he passed by them.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t make it for the countdown, Grandma. But don’t worry, I’ll be back tonight,” he said as he entered the vehicle. A couple of other waiters waved at him as he was ushered away.

“So this is the New Year,” Buddy observed as he motioned to Mr. Ed to take him back.

The River
Konrad Mazurek

On a summer afternoon.

The river sang beautifully.
How I once longed to bathe in it.
I shall leave it to its fish.
They may keep its current.



Photograph by Jason Tournas

Today

Nina Maldonado

A drought once came, following a deep, dark patch of wallowing fog.
It approached me from above and its cold mist pressed against my face
I held out my hand clenching every drop of earth that fell.
I once saw an old man,
and as he sat along the side of the road, I saw tears roll down his cheek.
I said to myself, “why must you cry old man?”
“Why must you shed life’s fears in one whole sitting?”
A bird hazed my highest point and landed on a silent branch,
he swept his feathers over his head and fell asleep.
His sorrows then faded.
Today a weepy willow sat beside me on the side of a resting bench,
delicate as it was it roughened by the incoming winds.
As it swayed in the overlooking breeze, a coldness came over me.
I then stood and relocated myself away from the empty bench.
As I walked my redundant pattern down a friendly steep hill,
I clasped, but my feet were still holding my frame.
Today I realized that not only was I a victim,
but that I was the villain that corrupted my inner self..
I am my worst fear, my nightmares, I make them happen.
Today I passed an old man, and not only was he crying,
but he was also laughing at my pathetic, feeble, minded soul wallowing around the
cold earth.
A bird then passed me
but he didn’t sleep he just soared through the sky with open wings, still
holding on.
Today I will learn to breathe air, and see life.
Tomorrow I will die.

Untitled *on lines* by Amy Carratini
Stephanie A. Hart

The pious pour themselves
into little thimbles
filled with light by a window
open to the moon, their true
desires a feast of fancies.
They gorge themselves on pomegranate skins,
meditations for the daring and devout.
The territory of your prayers
is an exercise
in the tactile –
no tedious examination
of modestly yielding seeds,
but a full bight of the fruit.
My skin is rich with your touch.
The idea of love is a tender berry,
But the flesh of it
Is a full bodied pear –
Sweet and moist and meaty.





P



Photograph by Holly Patrick

What Really Matters

Glenn Kindilien

philosophers come
philosophers go
just as we do: a spark,
a flash of light, a bang
a blip on the screen
and then it's beside the point

forever

What counts is the here and now
(there may be more
but no one really knows for sure)

And if this is all there is, why think
it's less than what it should be?

This is enough
we are here
you and I are here
doing the best we can
in spite of the cost
against the odds

*What matters most
is not the mystery
of what-may-be
but the mystery
of what-is*

No one asks about
Mona Lisa's politics
or philosophy
or her views of the afterlife

What awes us is her smile

So, as we spark and
flash and bang our way
into the ever-illusory unknown
let's smile, even laugh out loud,
it's what makes us *triumphant*

We soar, like geese,
V-shaped in the sky.

Winter Solstice: Horsefly

Peter Ulisse

Solstice sun

nests on bald trees,
arch distant
as a lost love.
But today light beams
like California haze.
Mud grips shoes
where ice should be.

A horsefly stings my hand.
Instinctively I swat.
Stop.
I decide not to kill him,
let him go
wherever horseflies go
in Winter.

In the dark season
time is short
for horseflies
and humans.





Photograph by B. Garrett





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