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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

As you flip through the pages of the 2021 issue of Off Center, we hope you acknowledge and appreciate the collaboration of the MTSU community. This is especially important considering the unprecedented academic year we all experienced. Despite the uncertainty both then and now, it is comforting to know that the art of writing remains an outlet and that reading remains an escape for many. With that in mind, we hope you enjoy this year's issue of Off Center with a renewed appreciation for collective work.

Your Editors

Patrick Gilchrist

[6]

Em Dash

Gah, finally!

I stand confident, strong,
Three full hyphens long!

Some call me informal...
Pish posh! Who are they?
Don't let them determine
What writing wants to say.

Adding thought to a sentence—
That's my job—I do it well!
Sneaking past ole syntax,
I just want to rebel!

So use me in texts,
In essays, and the like:
You never know when the
Need for interjection will strike!

And look for me in books,
I'll be waiting for you.
A clause here—over there
Suddenly, eyes flash!

Don't fret, dear reader,
It's only me,
Your friend,
The Em Dash!

[7]

En Dash

Met my brother, I see,
So cocky, is he not?
Em thinks he's so great,
But he doesn't do squat.

I'm better—I promise!—
And I'll tell you why!
I show range, time and number:
Such as "Tues. - Fri."

I'm often forgotten:
Displaced, misunderstood!
I fear Em and Hyphen
Overshadowed me for good.

"What's an En Dash?" they'll ask,
"Never heard of or used one."
My existence is fading:
I'll soon be gone.

Author's Commentary:

This sequence of two poems was selected from a document containing short pieces for each major punctuation mark. Originally meant as a just-for-fun activity scribbled down in my journal, that body of poems was inspired by the ways in which punctuation is used to capture the pacing and hint at the subtext of spoken language. The earliest versions lean towards the instructive—a pedagogical tool for children embarking on standard written English—but as I wrote, the lines developed playful tones, anthropomorphizing the marks and highlighting their fictionalized relationships as much as their individual utility. Indeed, it now seems but appropriate that the poems bring a liveliness to the material symbols that have, themselves, materialized the liveliness of spoken language. Paying little mind to poetic convention, the works do not strive for any noticeable literariness, deriving their success-value, instead, from aiming to make readers smile, if only for a moment.

Cutthroat

By force of will, Ben Cantwell throttled back his rage. He should have been shaking the principal's hand instead of watching from the bleachers, the sweat on the back of his legs sticking his khaki slacks to the varnished wood. It was bad enough that a tonsillectomy knocked him out of the running, but fate's cruel hand had put his archrival on stage in his place.

Page Reynolds was the epitome of all he despised from her blue headband to her, "Yes, ma'am," and, "No, ma'am." What a phony! It galled him that no one saw through her act. That's why he'd made it his mission to prove that an authentic student could win the Albert Camus Middle School Perfect Attendance Award. As Page showed her certificate with the gold stamp and blue ribbon, he vowed that next year he would take her down.

Page held the hem of her skirt and curtsied before accepting her prize and giving the assembled student body a dazzling smile. Even in her moment of triumph, the past haunted her. She remembered her grandmother's final days in the intensive care ward when a nurse said, "Little girls with sniffles can't go in because our patients have weakened immune systems." Because of her cold, Page never got to see her grandmother one last time, never got to tear the IV out of the old bat's arm, cut off her oxygen until she turned blue, or rip the catheter from between her legs. After that day, Page vowed she would never let an illness stop her again. She'd learned from her father, a lawyer for a tobacco company, that you had to do whatever it takes to win even if it means sabotaging the brakes on Marci Linehan's bike!

On her way back to the bleachers, Page sized up next year's competition. Winning was going to be a breeze. Marci would pose no challenge due to her upcoming surgeries, and Ben Cantwell, with his white socks and thick glasses, wasn't even worth considering. Honestly, if Page had a little sore throat, she would have gritted her teeth for three months. Bleeding tonsils? What a lame excuse!

Ben couldn't get a break. On the first day of school the following fall, the alarm blasted him out of a dream in which he fought a dozen leprechauns armed with shillelaghs, dodging under their swings to take them out with uppercuts or clocking them in the head with spinning back kicks. When he sat up, his body listed like a container ship battered by forty-foot waves. A battalion of viruses, each with pickaxe or drill, dug into his nasal membranes, and his limbs ached as if the leprechauns of his dreams had landed their blows.

He stumbled to the bathroom, placed a thermometer under his tongue, and stood shivering and sweating until he had a reading of 102 degrees Fahrenheit. His quest for this year's attendance award was over before it began.

No! He'd be damned if he'd let Page Reynolds win again. Somehow, he made it through breakfast without his mother noticing. Somehow, he made it to the bus stop on his rubbery legs. By the time the trip to the school, a two-story bunker located on an ancient Indian burial ground, was over, he'd drenched his handkerchief with snot and it rode cold and wet in his back pocket. Feeling fragile as a glass flower, he plodded to the classroom, its walls painted gloss yellow not for cheeriness but for ease of cleaning splattered blood and other bodily fluids.

Jon Wesick

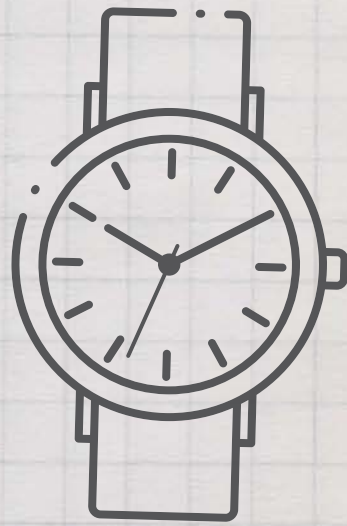
[10]

Inhabiting Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell would have been a breeze compared to Ben's day at school with his snuffling, chills, and throbbing head. The day was not a total loss, however. He managed to wipe his germ-laden handkerchief on Page's desk as he walked out at the end of the day.

The week dragged on. Too feverish to concentrate on Mrs. Knopfler's math and English lessons, all Ben could do was grip the edge of his desk to keep from falling over. His upper respiratory infection moved from his nose to his throat, returned to his nose, and finally settled in his bronchial tubes, leaving him panting and coughing like some tubercular character from a nineteenth-century novel.

He recovered somewhat over the weekend and gained solace from the fact that as he began to feel better, Page got worse. Ben could hardly repress his glee when he heard her scratchy voice and chest-rattling cough. But Page proved herself a cunning and stubborn competitor by hugging and kissing classmates on the cheeks to spread the virus faster than a SCUD missile loaded with anthrax. By Wednesday, the class had become a symphony of sniffles, sneezes, and coughs. By Thursday half the class was home sick, and a substitute teacher had to take over the following Monday because Mrs. Knopfler came down with pneumonia.

With so many students out sick, Ben's bus stop was deserted. He looked up and down Rushmore Lane and saw only stucco houses and the empty field across from the DeLoreans that the Northwest Construction Company hadn't gotten to yet. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes early.



He heard a whine that sounded like a distant mosquito, turned, and squinted to make out the source, but it was too far away. The noise grew louder and louder as the object approached. Ben realized the sound came from the motor on a radio-controlled airplane, a remarkable start to his day. Whoever built it had made a faithful replica of a crop-duster biplane complete with pilot, decals, and guy wires connecting the wings. After fantasizing about how cool it would be to own such a plane, Ben realized it was flying right at him. At the last second, he dove face-first into the lawn and the plane skimmed over his back, missing him by inches.

Ben got to his feet and spat out grass. The plane banked to make another run at him. Dropping his backpack full of books, Ben dashed into the waist-high milkweed with the radio-controlled biplane seconds behind him. Heart pounding, he swiveled his head to gauge the plane's progress and threw himself flat, dodging his attacker at the last moment and getting a hand full of thorns in the process.

Then, he was up and running as the plane made another pass. He made for shelter behind a Toyota Prius parked by a speed limit sign. Ben sprinted for all he was worth ignoring the burrs sticking to his socks and pant legs. The car was fifty feet away. The plane's engine roared louder. Twenty feet! He wasn't going to make it. Ben threw himself flat on the rough ground. At the last moment, the plane pulled up to avoid the car but was too late. It collided, throwing up a roiling fireball of sooty smoke and orange flame.

Dusting himself off, Ben returned to the stop as the yellow school bus pulled up. The driver got out and the two stared wordlessly at the spectacle before climbing aboard and continuing on their way...

Jon Wesick

[12]

Page stashed the binoculars and remote control under her bed, grabbed her backpack, and ran downstairs to where her mother stood stabbing a smartphone with impatient fingers. Dutifully, Page followed her to the silver-gray Audi and took her customary spot in the back seat. Not two blocks from the driveway, Mrs. Reynolds blared her horn at a woman pushing a baby carriage and scared the young mother back on the sidewalk. Page barely noticed because aggressive driving was all she knew. Instead, she went over the morning's failed attack, looking for some lesson that would make the next one more effective. Mrs. Reynolds pulled into the parking lot and dismissed her daughter with a customary wave of the hand. Page entered the field of combat and met the day's next challenge at the bottom of the stairwell.

"My mom made peanut butter cookies. Want some?" Hayley Green presented a plate.

"Can't. I'm allergic." Page pushed past and took the stairs two at a time.

Instead of stopping at her locker, she rushed to the classroom, dropped her backpack under her desk, and sat on the chair which promptly collapsed, tumbling Page to the linoleum. By reflex she extended her arm to break her fall, but this only gained her a sharp pain in her wrist.

"My goodness, Page!" Mrs. Knopfler said. "Are you all right?"

"Just fine, Mrs. Knopfler." Page cradled her swelling wrist and glared at Ben.



Throughout the fall semester, the two struggled for advantage. Despite such juvenile pranks as bear traps, scorpions in gym shorts, rattlesnakes in mailboxes, umbrellas tipped with toxic ricin, and chocolate milk spiked with radioactive polonium, neither gained the upper hand. The only outcome was Marty Quigley's death from leukemia, but he could just as well have gotten that from bad genes or chemicals in the tap water.

On the last school day before the Christmas holiday, Ben stomped off the snow and paused by the makeshift memorial to Marty by the entrance to remove his rubber galoshes, unsnapping each metal buckle with numb fingers. He expected no ambushes. What point would there be in infecting or injuring him when he had the entire holiday to recover?

As Ben dialed the combination on his locker, he reflected on the fall term. Despite bird flu, Zika, dengue fever, West Nile virus, and acute encephalitis, he'd planted his butt at his desk for each school day. If he kept it up, winning the attendance award would be a cinch.

Ben rotated the combination wheel past zero, changed direction to the final number, and opened his locker to find a block of white powder wrapped in plastic and secured with tape. Page! It had to be Page, but how did she get his combination? There was no time to think of that because Principal Himmler was walking the hall heading straight for him.

Ben scooped the kilo into his backpack, dashed to the boys' room, and entered the nearest stall. Ripping at the tape that contained grounds for his expulsion, he tore a fingernail. With no time to find the tape's loose end, he tore a hole in the plastic and began shaking the powder into the toilet bowl while spilling a significant amount on the bathroom floor.

Jon Wesick

[14]

When the bowl was half full, he flushed but the damning powder simply circled the bowl.

No time! Ben dumped the remaining powder in the neighboring toilet and flushed. This time the water backed up, flooding over the rim and spilling onto the tile. Strangely enough, the other three toilets did the same and the urinals joined in. Ben jumped back from the pooling water, raced to the door, and yanked but it wouldn't budge. He was locked in.

The water continued to rise, first soaking Ben's shoes and then his knees. Grabbing the door handle with both hands, he braced his feet against the wall and used his legs and body to pull. His feet slipped and he landed on his butt, soaking his clothes in putrid water. Desperate for escape, he looked for an exit. The window was just large enough for him to shimmy through if only he could breach the reinforced glass. He scanned the room for something heavy and wasted precious minutes trying to free the towel dispenser from the anchor bolts securing it to the cinderblock wall. By now the water was up to his chin. His only hope was to break off a toilet seat.

He heard a scratch at the lock. Then rushing water washed him along as the tidal wave of sewage rushed out the door and into the hall. Ben lay the floor like a beached carp and gazed at the janitor who'd saved his life.

"Better get to class or you'll be late."

Ben squished to the classroom and sat dripping at his desk. Wet, cold, and miserable, he suffered through the morning. It would be a hungry afternoon because the flood had made the contents of his lunchbox inedible, and he didn't have enough money for the cafeteria. He had only enough for a pack of peanuts.

Satisfaction came around 1:00 PM in geography when Page began gasping. Eyes turned to see her face swollen like the Michelin Man in a 747's unpressurized cargo bay.

"Page! Are you all right?" Mrs. Knopfler asked.

"Just fine, Mrs. K." Page stabbed her thigh with an EpiPen and glared at Ben. "Just fine."

Page reached under the mare to tighten the girth before letting down the stirrups. Once satisfied, she used mounting block to climb into the English saddle. Page started the mare out with a walk and then squeezed her knees to urge her into a trot inside the metal fence.

Posting with the rhythm of steps, Page forgot her worries and became one with the animal's motion. Page picked up the pace and felt the warm, California wind in her face. It was so much more comforting than the bitter cold of home and she regretted that the family's winter vacation would last only a few more days.

Lost in thoughts of year-long summers, Page unconsciously loosened the reins and the mare's pace went from exhilarating to scary. Page pulled back but instead of stopping, the mare shook her head and set off in a burst of speed.

The sudden acceleration knocked Page back in the saddle. Hands scrambling, she reached for anything she could hold on to. Eyes burning and mouth foaming, the previously gentle mare bucked and kicked, sending Page airborne. She landed with a painful jolt on her elbow and covered her head with her hands to avoid the sharp hooves.

Jon Wesick

[16]

Trainers entered the pen, forced the psycho mare away, and helped Page to her feet. Later, when Page sat with a bag of ice on her hurt elbow, one showed her a jagged leaf.

"Loco weed. Found it in Millie's feedbag."

The first weeks after the holiday had been tough, but by February, Ben was coping well with Page's booby traps, despite his bloody cough, chronic diarrhea, and low-grade fever. On a Monday, he dialed his locker combination, lifted the handle, and stepped aside as a spiked pendulum crashed into the door. After untangling the bent sheet metal and hanging up his coat, Ben took a flight of stairs to the second floor where he shielded himself with his Kevlar backpack from a dozen poison darts launched from blow guns hidden in the walls. A trap door opened, and he teetered on the edge, arms waving in desperation to avoid the sharpened stakes below. After regaining his balance, he skirted the edge but as he continued toward the classroom, he felt a rumble behind him. Ben turned and saw an eight-foot-diameter stone ball rolling down the hallway toward him. Shoving students and teachers out of his way, Ben ran for his life, the stone sphere chasing his heels like a demonic border collie of death. With only milliseconds to spare, Ben ducked into an open doorway, letting the stone ball roll past. On its way down the hall, it squashed a significant portion of the student body before crashing through the window and crushing a Volvo in the parking lot.

Ben picked the darts out of his backpack and tossed them in the metal trashcan before taking his seat. Before the lights went out for the educational movie, he glanced at Page as she wiped drops of pus from her eyes. Clearly, the conflict had settled into a stalemate. This couldn't go

on forever. If Ben wanted to win, he'd have to take desperate measures and he knew just the thing.

Separated from the public in level-four containment facilities at Fort Friedrich, scientists studied the world's deadliest diseases such as Ebola, Marburg, and Hantavirus. For years they had done so in safety. However, in this age of tight federal budgets, accountants implemented a new policy that would save thousands of dollars per year. Instead of washing their lab coats in the facility laundry, the scientists and technicians would now have to wash them at home. Alex Walters' dad worked at Fort Friedrich. Ben made plans to visit Alex after school.

The plague swept through Middletown like a hot chainsaw through butter. Within weeks, tens of thousands died. With no treatment or vaccine, the few who were lucky enough to obtain medical care had only a one-in-five chance of survival. Despite masks, gowns, and latex gloves, medical staff became infected and died. Many who were healthy deserted their posts in fear.

Even though they had to step over corpses, avoid those with bleeding orifices, and steer clear of airborne and surface contagions, Page and Ben spent each school day planted in their seats. Class size dwindled as students, teachers, and substitutes succumbed. Declaring a public health emergency, the governor closed all schools. Still Page and Ben passed piles of burning corpses and entered the now deserted building through a broken window on the first floor to sit at their desks.

By the third week, Page knew she wouldn't survive. Fighting fever, delirium, and bleeding eyeballs, she trudged to school and somehow made it to her desk. Ben was waiting for her. Though in better shape than her,

Jon Wesick

[18]

It was obvious that the plague would claim him, too. He'd been a worthy opponent, but Page would be damned if she let him win. She fingered the remote control in her pocket and pushed the button.

It sent a radio signal to the basement where the ten-kiloton nuclear device she'd purchased from the A. Q. Khan network with her father's credit card lurked. Dozens of detonators fired simultaneously, setting off a sphere of plastic explosives that compressed kilograms of plutonium until the device went critical. The resulting nuclear explosion obliterated everything within a half mile, first sterilizing all life with a burst of gamma rays, then flattening buildings with overpressure, and finally leaving radioactive fallout behind to poison anyone who wandered into the area.

The souls of Page and Ben glared at each other from their desks in a classroom in hell while demons added charcoal to the braziers under their seats. Flesh blistered and charred. The air smelled of burnt meat. Both Page and Ben vowed to sit on their respective griddles until the other moved or for eternity, whichever came first.

Author's Commentary:

"Cutthroat" is one of my many experiments with a short story format. This time, I chose stakes that couldn't be lower, a best attendance award. My challenge with experimental fiction is to write something that rejects the formula (conflict, climax, and resolution) but still keeps the reader's interest. Parodies and absurdism work well. "Cutthroat" also expresses my annoyance with coworkers who bring the flu to the office instead of taking sick leave.

[19]

Marcus McIlough

Some Call Me Brother

Some call me brother, though we never shared a room

Some call me brother, though we never shared a womb

Some destroy with weapons, they choose to call a tool

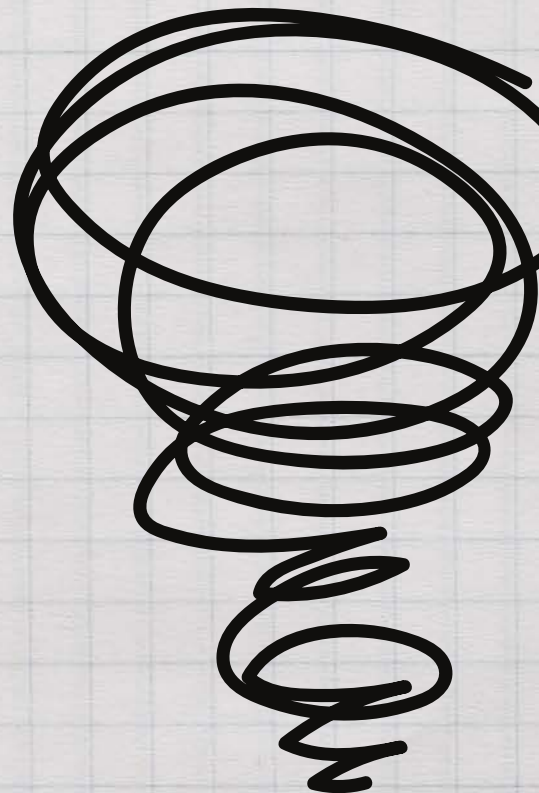
Yet a tool is used for building, destruction is not what I can do

Some call me brother, though we do not share parents

Some stigmatize, if you choose to be transparent

Some decide that my demise is necessary for their growth

You cannot call me brother if you haven't seen my home



Hedera

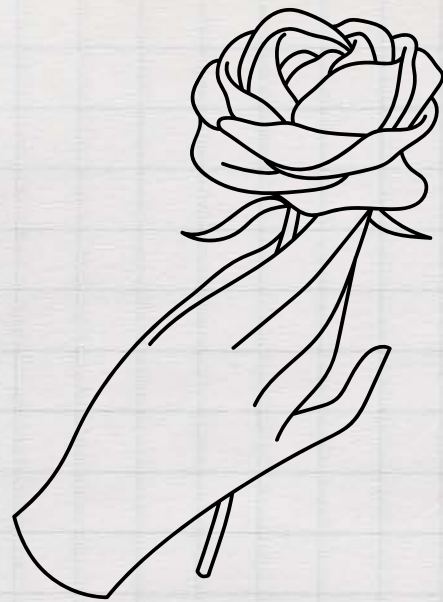
Rose

Can't trust me by myself,
I get inside my head.
No more motivation
To get out of my bed.

I've been stuck for ages,
Seems time is flowing fast.
Daunted by the future
And haunted by the past.

Struggling to keep up,
I'm drowning every day.
No one knows the conflict
That never goes away.

Times that I feel higher,
Will bring me to new lows.
Just beneath this flower
Are the thorns of a rose.



[20]

Rise above the brambles,
Find beauty in the briar;
Listen in the silence,
Hear kindness from the choir;

Planted as a seedling,
All you know is rain;
Soaking in the insult
While pushing through the pain;

Sprouting through the soil,
Subdue these fleeting woes;
Underneath the heartache
Is the beauty of a rose.

Author's Commentary:

A rose can be interpreted as thorns of torment or petals of pleasure. The metaphor of the rose complements the two-voice structure of the conversation.

[21]

Audrey Morelock

Persephone's Garden

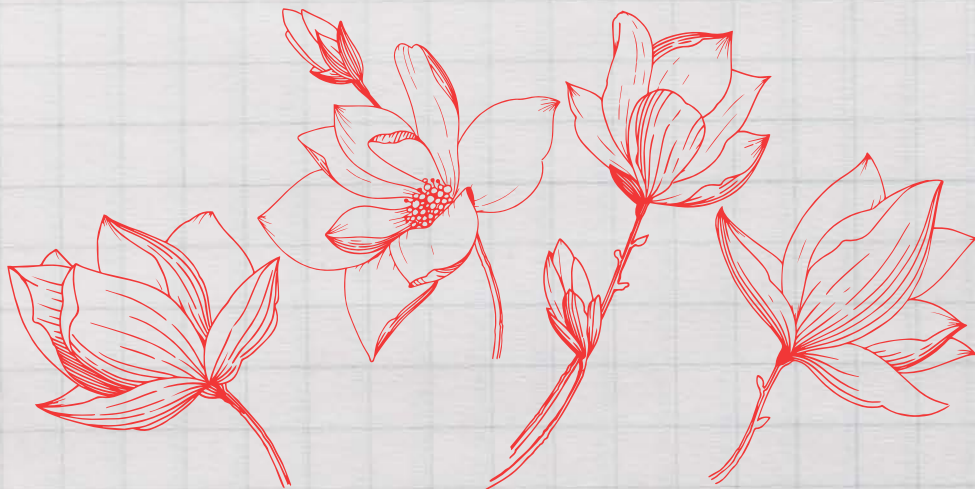
A new bloom, freshly opened
And covered in dew from the rain of the
night before,

Clinging to its mother branch, awaiting the
honeybee to taste its sweet ambrosia.

Its bright red petals,
The perfect lure for the most timid
hummingbird.

Light filters in around thorn-tipped branches,
Golden and delicate.

Around it
Buds wither and fall
Replaced with pomegranates filled with garnets



Author's Commentary:

This was a fun play on the senses, which is one of my favorite things to write about. I wanted to incorporate themes of life and change into this poem. Oftentimes, metamorphosis is depicted as a caterpillar into a butterfly, but that change is normally very peaceful. Sometimes change can look ugly and frightening but the outcome is beautiful, much like how a flower will shrivel and drop before a fruit is borne.

Max Lichtman

[2 2]

To the Deer

Brueghel on a hill

Overseeing

A completed winter hunt

Soaked boots and paws of

Man and beast

Return single-handedly

A lone fox shouldered

And emptiness

In their bellies

Beneath bare trees

Sniff the hounds

Who track overlooked morsels

The masters may

Have missed

In search of another fox

Or perhaps some deer

White tail

With brown against the snow.

All warm themselves

Near fire

Where the final pig roasts

Below the ridge

Skaters

On an icy lake

Pirouette past the frozen

Mill wheel

Pausing its sips for the season

Blissful and unaware

For the roast

Dominates their noses

The hunters and hounds who

Know winter

Listen to its message

The forest has moved on

Without farewell

It left you all behind

[23]

Abigail Wells

crotonol

In memory of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
and the stars-- many still unaccounted for--
of Dresden, Saxony, Germany, 1945

Hell, like hot air, rose to the top.
the constellations made from collective kitchen windows
and streetlamps were no longer lit--
no longer had names to identify themselves by.
man-made meteors fell and
as the sky collapsed on the people of Dresden,
so did the buildings.
the black stone backdrop of the city burned.

some were forced to trade foxholes for
slaughterhouses.
armed children guarded those sacrificial lambs--
they were buried underground to stay alive.
in the corpses hung from the ceiling,
they saw themselves.
and when they were resurrected,
when they crawled out of their communal tombs,
they saw what butchering had been done above.

Abigail Wells

[24]

everyone was dead
including the living—
who unearthed the dead
only to bury their bodies again.

war does funny things to men.
so he laughed at the sight of the wasteland
in fear that if he did not, he too would crumble.
this was a time when people used soap made from
other people's flesh and fat.

i will never understand why
we keep scrubbing our hands
as if the blood washes away.

Author's Commentary:

Kurt Vonnegut was a POW during World War II who survived the firebombing of Dresden by being kept in an underground slaughterhouse. Once the bombing stopped, it was POWs' job to uncover victims' remains and then cremate them in mass graves. To survive hell on earth, people had to, essentially, be buried alive; I liked this role reversal and played on that for most of the poem. By being compared to constellations the city lights going out signify death and massive loss, as if the universe is coming undone in some devastating way. Many of the soldiers were young-- basically just kids themselves, so that's why I compared them to children and lambs. The title is pretty much gibberish, like a kid who cannot spell "colonel." It doesn't make sense, but then again war doesn't either.

[25]

Abigail Wells

horatius

hollow metal horses gallop
in spear-straight lines towards the city.
robotic generals bark orders at the thousands ten
who quickly fall into rank and file
then disperse in all cardinal directions.

the consul calls, asking if anyone else wishes to exit
but you're the only one getting off here.
so, you button up your overcoat like armor
to go outside and brave the cold
alone.

marching past the marketplace
everything is painted Etruscan and evergreen.
everyone is wind-burned, drunk on wine.
nothing is built like it used to be--
it could all come crashing down at any second.

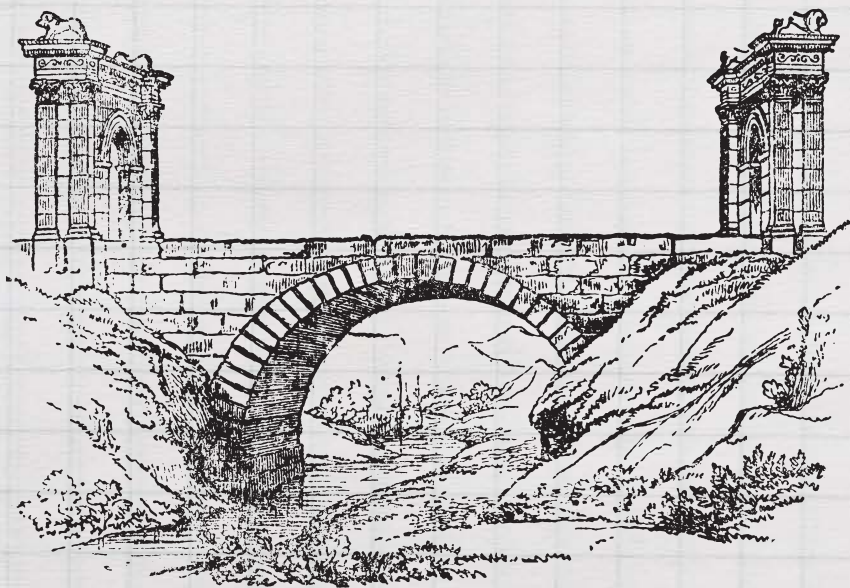
you lower your head, guard the temple's gate

Abigail Wells

[26]

and when you cross the bridge on the way home
you stare down at the water
watching the ashes of your fathers fall--
counting the ripples before they disappear
as if they are your inheritance.

it is thankless work.



Author's Commentary:

In 1842, Thomas Babington Macaulay published *Lays of Ancient Rome*, a poetry collection my close friend introduced me to. His favorite work is "Horatius at the Bridge," depicting the story of Horatius Cocles, a hero who defended Rome from the invading Etruscan army in the late 6th century. This was my attempt at modernizing the lay, envisioning my friend as the subject. Soldiers are not invading Rome on horseback, but rather riding the subway to work, school, wherever. In the lay, Horatius defends the gate alone, demonstrating his bravery; however, to juxtapose this, I had my subject exit the subway without company, showing how alienating the modern world can be. The city around him feels fragile, mirroring the fall of the Roman empire, and the sense of defeat he feels on the way home displays how overlooked his everyday efforts are. Like ripples in the water, his joy is fleeting.

Notes on Fiction

"What can I do for you, today?" The travel agent was tall and as skinny as his lapels and tie.

"I need to get away," A customer collapsed into the chair, opposite the travel agent, and ran a hand through his unkempt hair. "Work is exhausting, the nation's going down the toilet, and my ex-wife's lawyer is a barracuda. Hey, that looks nice!" he pointed to a poster of a sandstone cliff.

"Yes, it's part of an all-included holiday. We throw you off a cliff, trap you without food or water for five days, and force you to cut off your arm with a Swiss Army knife to escape."

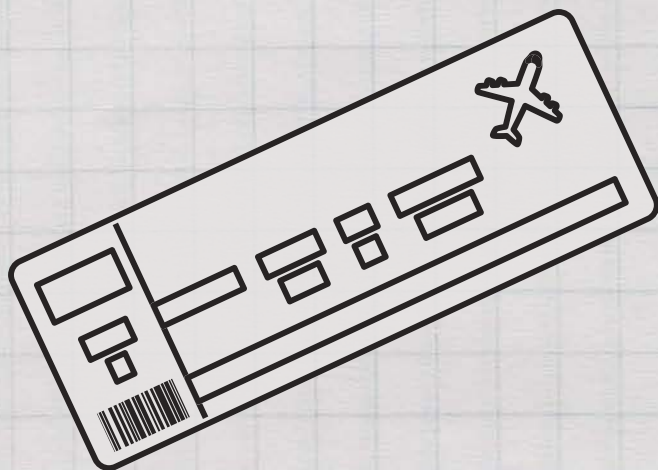
"That doesn't sound like fun."

"Really? It's gotten great reviews. How about this? We'll arrest you for a murder you didn't commit and convict you on perjured testimony. You'll endure gang violence and knifings in prison for thirty years before getting a chance to prove your innocence."

The customer shook his head.

"A bit of nostalgia, perhaps? We'll locate the bully who beat you up in high school and let him whale on you for a few days."

"No!"



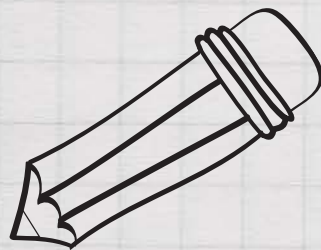
Jon Wesick

[28]

"Fair enough! You're an intellectual who prefers something subtle. I have just the thing. We'll send you to a totalitarian society full of informers who'll denounce you to the secret police for even the slightest deviation from the party line. No? How about having your wife cheat on you with a back-stabbing business partner? A life-affirming battle with a terminal illness, perhaps?"

"Couldn't you just send me to the beach?"

"Sir, if that's your attitude, I'll have to ask you to leave!" The travel agent sprang to his feet. "A journey is nothing without conflict!"



Author's Commentary:

I've lost interest in most novels, movies, and TV shows because of their overreliance on conflict. We're taught that a story revolves around conflict, but there's so much discord in politics, work, and relationships that I'm fed up with it. I need a break from people and their problems, but entertainment serves up nothing but people and their problems. I wrote "Notes on Fiction" to communicate my frustration with fiction in the language of fiction. I imagined it as a Monte Python sketch with John Cleese as the travel agent.

[29]

Sarah MacIntosh

Eye, I

I had decided

I would

Stop

Nope

Not one

More tear drop

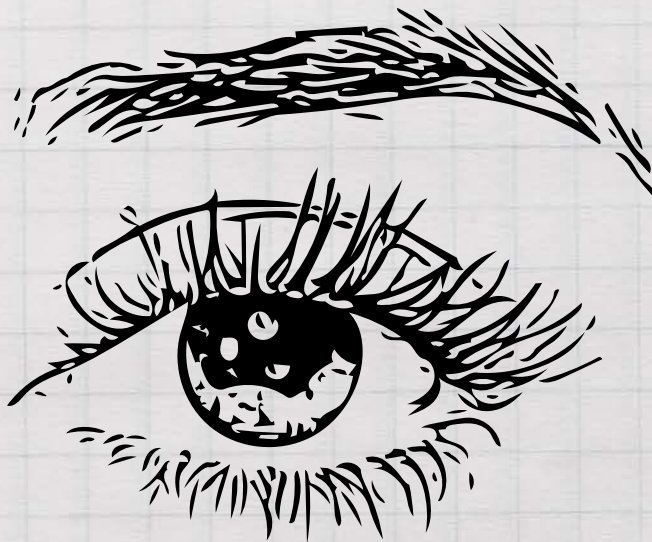
But

You fell anyway

Oh

You never

Listen to me



Damn

Dam

Damn

It

Do your business

Eye

Mean

Eye

I

Mean

You're meant

For holding

Grief

In

As if

I have

Not lived

Enough

Quite

Quiet

Endurance

To silence

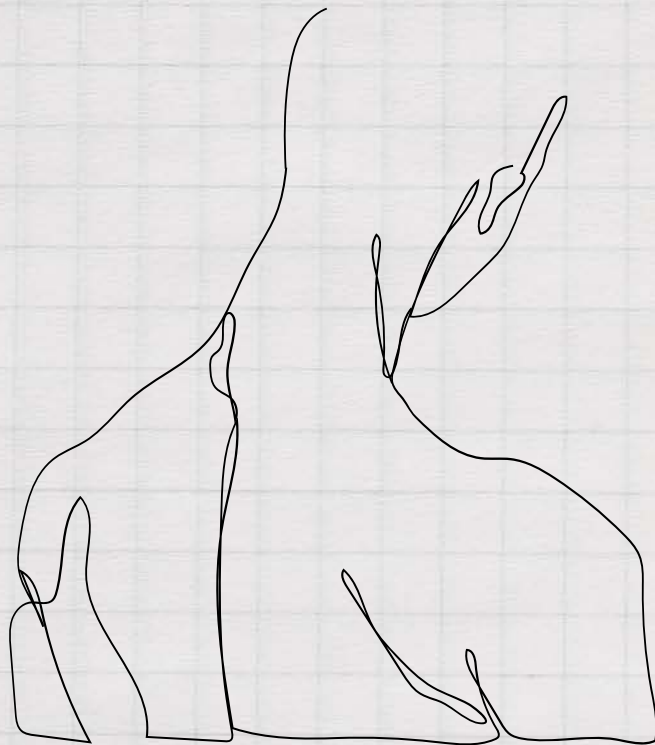
Sarah MacIntosh

[30]

Such a simple
Thing as
Sadness

But
Down
Down
Down
My face

You rain
You run
You ruin
The mask
I make
To mask
My
Fallen Countenance



Fine
I'll fashion
A patch then
Blindness
Is better than
Abuse is

Isn't it?
Condemn?
Amen?
Eye, I?

The Price of Eggs

Eugene smelled biscuits, and he sat up in the feather tick mattress and sniffed. Gravy, too. And coffee. Shoving aside his little brothers, Euthan and Corky, he crawled to the bed's foot and down. He frowned. Where were his clothes?

Dressed in his red-checkered shirt and faded overalls, he followed his nose into the kitchen. At the iron cook stove, his Mama stirred white gravy and his grandmother, Mammy Sally, plucked hot biscuits from the baking pan, piling them into a bowl. Eugene's mouth watered. He wanted to eat now. He was lucky to have food, Mammy Sally had told him. There was a depression going on, she'd said. Most people in cities had no money for food, so they had to stand in lines to get free soup and bread. Farm people, like them, were better off.

"Yep," he said, looking over first the metal stand of lard rendered up from Pappy's hogs, then the stands of flour and corn, milled from their grain. "Yep." He remembered their cow and her sweet milk and buttermilk sitting in crocks in the cold spring water. He tiptoed to the long, wooden dining table. Just a taste of sweet, chocolate gravy. That'd do. Was it ever good over a buttered biscuit. His finger raked across the top of the chocolate and into his mouth and out again, reaching for another taste.

"Stop," his Mama said, catching his hand in hers. "Eugene, you're the best-looking boy I've got with them big, brown eyes of yours, but you trouble me the most. Go get your brothers and we can eat."

After breakfast and a trip to the outhouse, a maneuver to outsmart his Daddy and Pappy, Eugene sneaked back into the house and followed his nose to the kitchen and Mammy Sally.

Brenda Warren

[32]

"You making pie for dinner?" he asked.

She placed a stack of plates in a metal pan on the counter and looked down at him. "Yep. Egg custard. Yer Pappy's hens is outdoing theirselves, and I'll have droves of eggs for custard. Will that please ya?"

"I guess." He shrugged. Blackberry was better, he thought, but egg custard was all right.

"Bring me some fire wood," Mammy Sally said, pouring hot water from a kettle over the plates. "Then go help your Daddy unload the wagon of wood he's cut. He's out back."

Outside on the front porch, Eugene breathed in the smells of hay and dirt and horses carried by the hot, summer air.

"Ps-s-s-t. Ps-s-s-t."

He looked toward the sound. At the side of the raised porch, his blue eyes peeking over the edges, was Eugene's cousin, Aubrey.

"Hey, Aub."

"Come down here," Aubrey whispered as he ducked down and disappeared behind the porch's rock foundation. Eugene crawled in beside his cousin. "Let's go eat blackberries," Aubrey said. Eugene's brown eyes opened wide, his taste buds tingled, saliva flooded his mouth. He sighed.

"Ah, Aub, I gotta get fire wood for Mammy Sally."

"Do it fast as you can, Gene. Then meet me at the beech tree back of your Pappy's pasture fence."

"Alright."

In the field, they picked and ate blackberries, but it was late July, and there weren't too many left. So, they sat down in the fence row's tall, dusty grasses. Aubrey stretched out and pulled his hat over his eyes. Not having got enough blackberries, Eugene pouted as he ruffled the

the green and gold grasses. His fingers brushed a warm smoothness, and he jerked away his hand. Then he giggled. Reaching in gently, his fingers cupped the object and lifted it. A brown, speckled egg. Even though his Pappy's hens had nests in their chicken house, they delighted in laying eggs in the high grasses of the fence rows.

"Aub, wake up."

"I ain't asleep, Gene."

"See this egg?"

"Yep. I see it."

"Mr. Morris down at the store buys 'em for a penny apiece."

They walked the fence row, squatting, spreading the grasses, finding two eggs, then two more and then another.

"Run get a bucket, Aub." With the bucket, they searched another fence and found six more eggs.

"We got a dozen," Eugene said, clapping Aubrey on the arm. "Let's follow the fence beside the road." After walking and searching until sweat soaked their dusty shirts and overalls, they found twelve more eggs.

"Land-a-Goshen, two dozen," Eugene said. "Let's get to the store." Two miles away, the gray, dry boards of Morris's store didn't tell the weary stranger of the cool, delicious pleasures inside it. No strangers, Eugene and Aubrey knew. Opening the screen door, stepping inside and scooping up a ladle of water, their nine-year-old, sun-parched bodies revived.

"What ya got there in the bucket, boys?" Mr. Morris asked. He pushed his glasses farther up his nose, and rubbed his hand across his bald head and leaned his elbows on the stained, wooden counter. "Is it eggs? I'm needin' eggs."

Brenda Warren

[34]

When the counting was done and the money handed over, Eugene held in his palm two silver dimes and four brown pennies.

"Look, Aub. Look at it."

"I'm looking, Gene, and I see maple candy and tabacky."

"The candy's two cents a cake and the 'bacca's a nickel a bag," Mr. Morris said.

The boys conferred.

"We'll take six candies," Eugene said.

"And a bag of 'backy, some rolling papers and matches," Aubrey said.

Settled again in their hollow in the fence row grasses, Eugene and Aubrey opened their brown paper bag.

"Three for you and three for me," Eugene said, as he chomped into and savored his first fist-sized maple candy cake. Aubrey nibbled, but not for long. After their first taste nothing could have stopped them and sooner than they liked all six candies were gone.

"Let's have a smoke," Aubrey said. From watching their parents and grandparents, they knew what to do. Aubrey spread the cotton drawstring on the tobacco bag and thumbed out two papers. He spread tobacco in his paper and into Eugene's. They rolled the papers, wet one edge with their tongues, pressed the edges together, twisted the papers' ends, put the cigarettes between their lips, and with a flick of a thumbnail the match flared and set alight their smokes as they sucked air through the tobacco.

"Burns like fire," Eugene said as he coughed and gagged.

"Does, don't it."

"Is that tree going in circles?" Eugene asked, covering his eyes

[35]

Brenda Warren

with one hand.

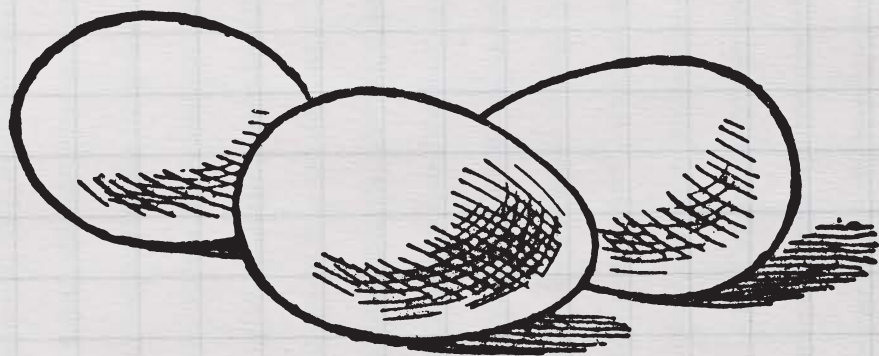
"Mine's about gone," Aubrey said. "Let's light up another."

"Sure, Aub."

After three smokes, Eugene and Aubrey stopped. White around their mouths, they lay on their sides with their knees pulled up into their chests. Groans wheezed out of Eugene; whimpers sputtered out of Aubrey. First Eugene vomited, then Aubrey. They laid back down until they could sit up.

"Aub, the sun's straight up. Dinnertime," and Eugene sprang up, racing home. He'd catch it for not helping his Daddy, and they'd probably make him wait last to eat. But while they ate, he'd sneak a big slab from one of Mammy Sally's egg custard pies.

THE END



Hedera Fast

[36]

There was a man where I'm from
Who desired to have a dance;
He'd prowl around to find the one
Who'd offer him the chance.

First he'd swing her off her feet
And then waltz her off the floor;
Course she'd take him back to her
place
For a private encore.

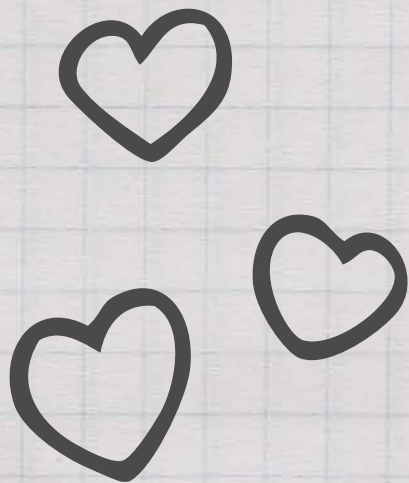
He traveled through the country
Leaving mem'ries as he passed;
See 'em, Want 'em, Kiss 'em, Got 'em
Go slow then get out fast.



By the time his wife found out
This boy broke another heart;
No one here could ever tame him
Except his other part.

That girl yelled it out on him
So he stumbled to the porch;
Flicking another cigarette
Intentions for a torch.

He traveled through the country
Leaving mem'ries as he passed;
See 'em, Want 'em, Kiss 'em, Got 'em
Go slow then get out fast.



[37]

Til one cheated husband went
Toe-to-toe to this disgrace;
He tamed the wild womanizer
By meeting fist with face.

A one-hit-wonder knockout
Delivered overdue deeds;
In his last breath, the child taunted
"Real men meet their wives' needs."

He traveled through the country
Leaving mem'ries as he passed;
See 'em, Want 'em, Kiss 'em, Got 'em
Go slow then get out fast!

Author's commentary:

"Fast" was inspired by a traveler and evolved into a complexity of love, betrayal, and revenge.

Sarah MacIntosh

[38]

Laughter Lifter

She led a life where
Laughter left her
Leaning over
And gasping for air

Bloody-nosed
But never knowing
Where

Who

Or why

She

Should

Beware

Back to front
and front to back
Oh, she'd rewind
the scenes to
Track the instant when
Sorrow came sneaking in
And slithered on her
Like a second skin

Then
After all those
Aching hours
Of painstaking
Patient

Scouring

She caught him

Lying

In the freeze frame

Still—in the scene

Motionless lest he be seen

The stealer of her glee

Her lover

He

Was her laughter lifter

That Filching

Nipping

Pinching

Thief!

He

Was wearing her smile

Upon

His face

uprooted

he cuts herbs off the shrubbery with a pocket
knife.

soon my fingertips smell of lemongrass and
his lips taste like rosemary.

i wince and whisper i love you--
an empty oath, an obligation.

i cough the words up like a piece of meat
i did not chew thoughtfully enough.

it's late and he has grown drunk on uncertain
sentiments.

with slurred speech and far-off stares,
he longs for a life long lost.

a life that allowed me in at arm's length.



Abigail Wells

[40]

the bushes are bare.
he tucks thyme behind my ear
and regurgitates what is expected of him.

i thought this was happiness.
for a long time i tried
to convince myself he thought so too.

but now stomach acid crawls up my throat
as he pours liquor down his
and we both beg for this feeling to stop.



Author's Commentary:

“uprooted” is about the last time I saw someone I cared for very deeply during a time when it didn't make much sense to. I still care even if it doesn't make much sense now either. All the events really did happen, but writing this poem helped me find meaning in the painful experience. I think the overall message is that our ability to love others is not always enough. We must be ready to receive it too. In terms of literary devices, vegetation typically represents growth, but in this case, my partner cutting from the plants represents all he took from me. Thyme is tucked behind my ear, demonstrating the ever-present thought that maybe, in due time, we'll be okay again. I wrote the last two stanzas long before I lived them. Maybe, sometimes, life really does imitate art.

[41]

Nqsh Meqde

Severed

I sit on the beach at the edge of night,
When waves kiss the sun in evening flight.

I listen to the sound of ocean waves
As they crash among the coastal caves.

But, connecting to the waves of the sea,
Means nothing without you next to me.

Deep in the forest, I touch the old trees,
And listen to the wind in the leaves.
I walk among the scattered wildflowers,
And wonder if there will be showers.

But, connecting to the flowers and trees,
Means nothing without you next to me.

I can still feel our fingers intertwined,
While your voice calls out inside my mind.
Severing the dream I wake to nightmare,
As I remember that you're not there.

With a resounding cry I take my place,
And hopelessly wait for your embrace.
And there, among the chiseled gray stones,
I weep and hope to be taken home.

Fatima Alerou

Water

[42]

The feel of smooth, deadly texture
A texture so consuming, so relentless
The ripples it brings, seen
A face distorted, otherwise compromised
The face, one, but many

The eyes shift, with its own miniscule pool

Desperate eyes follow the ripples
A ripple through time
Perhaps, searching for mercy
Searching for envy
While traumatized by the past

A past full of anguish

Friend or foe, the pool seems to calm
The ripples are dead, now
Feet are one with the pool
The pool shifts, yet again
Fearing the invader and fear for one, last, breath

The invader submerges, fully, completely, without a doubt

The lungs are full, now
Even the veins are excessively gluttonous
Each intake burning and satisfying
While becoming one with the pool
A final last gurgled breath heard

"I am one with the water."

Author's Commentary:

"Water" was a way to focus on my own anguish and battles within me, past and present. Unexpected changes with myself, family, school, and work have been overwhelming in the past; however, it feels wrong to have those very emotions. I grew up in a culture that didn't encourage direct and overt emotions. To this day, I am still working through that very thing. I realize that it's okay to struggle because it means I'm still trying. I also recognize that many others experience much worse in life. Life will bring unexpected changes, but it doesn't mean I have to let it bring me down. "Water" symbolizes my freedom and my escape from a rather dark place. I want to continue to embrace what comes next, good and bad, and I hope I inspire others to do the same.

Abigail Wells

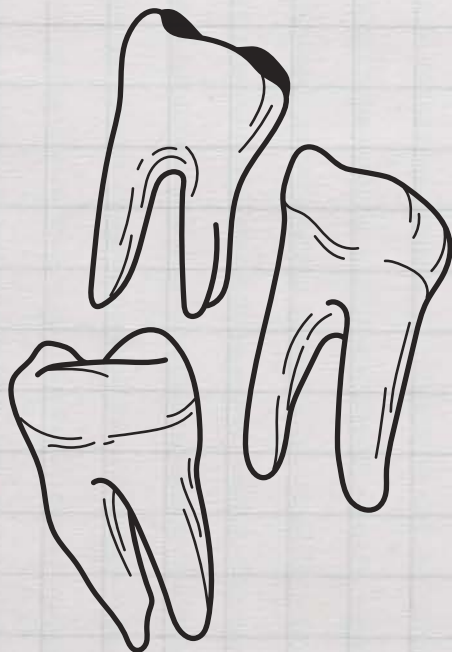
[44]

my teeth are falling out

the toothbrush snaps
and my mouth runs red.
life drips down my chin--
falls into the sink.

i fasten the fossils to a chain,
like spikes around the herding canine's neck,
to give myself a fighting chance--
to ensure that i survive this.

drowsy, my mind fills in the gaps of lost time and missing teeth.
i count them like old friends, make sure they stick around.
this is the fourth time this week.
the Interpretation says i am experiencing profound loss.

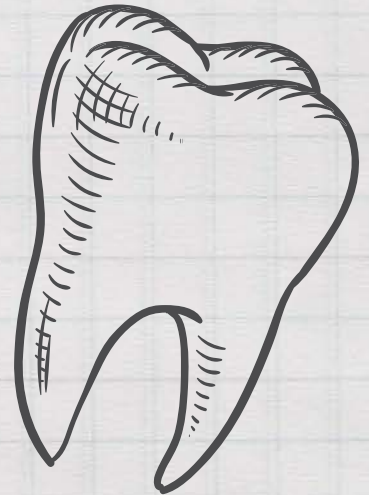


[45]

Abigail Wells

then the elevator doors open, and i am swept away again
by pomegranate ambrosia, my scarlet immortality.
heavy-handed is the disquiet from blood-stained white blouses--
how many nights must i taste my own ichor?

you said you learned how to lucid dream.
i wish you had taught me, too, before you left.



Author's Commentary:

I have this recurring nightmare where I'm staring in the bathroom mirror and my teeth start falling out, blood getting all over my clothes. When I experienced the loss of someone I loved, it became more consistent, so I'd stay up nights on end to avoid it. Tying the teeth around my neck mimics herding dogs who wear spiked collars to survive wild animal attacks, conveying my desire to not feel powerless anymore. In the third stanza, I wake up and count my teeth, coming to realize it was all a dream, but by the next stanza I'm asleep again. I reference Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, while the elevator doors opening allude to Stephen King's *The Shining*, and diction like "ambrosia," "ichor," and "immortality," reflect elements of classical mythology. The poem is very Dali-Surrealist, for I explore my subconscious grieving.

Audrey Morelock

[46]

Best Case Scenario

Trigger warning: Themes of stalking and terror.

It is only a block to walk, so I count my footsteps anxiously. My keys are clenched tightly between my fingers while my other hand grips the pepper spray that my father gave me when I first went off to college.

"You never know," he warned. "There are monsters everywhere." Orange light from the streetlamps penetrate the intermittent darkness of the street. Uninhabited cars sit in rows on either side like shells of giant insects. "I once heard about this guy that would hide underneath women's vehicles so that he could grab their ankles," my father had mentioned once when I was getting old enough to drive. I inch closer to the furthest side of the pathway, alternating between watching the road ahead and the ground below.

Something scuffs behind me. I whip around immediately, mace at the ready. Nothing but a deserted street is there to greet me. You're just freaking yourself out. I'm almost home anyways.

I take out my phone and check the time. 10:57 p.m. Another glance around me proves that there is not another soul in sight. No one to hear me cry for help. I shake the intrusive thought violently from my mind. But ... just in case. I go into my systems preferences and turn on my location tracking. Another scuffing sound comes from behind. This time, instead of stopping, I grip my keys tighter and speed up my pace, keeping my chin high.

[47]

Audrey Morelock

What you have to do is square your shoulders, look straight ahead, and think 'Murder.'" My mother had told me this once when I asked how to make people move out of her way. "It's all in your eyes. Have a look that can kill." How old was I when they started teaching me how to fear? How to look at everything as a threat? How to survive?

A twig snaps behind me.

"I have a gun," I call out. It is a lie, but my father told me they didn't have to know that. More shuffling. Finally, my resolve breaks and I begin to sprint. The last few bounds to my house are filled with my frantic breathing coupled with the sound of footsteps. I collide with my front door so hard that I bounce off. By some miracle, my keys find their way into the deadbolt on the first try and I am inside, behind two locks and a chain before I can catch my breath. I look through the keyhole in an attempt to see the bastard who failed at making me another statistic and see, instead...

A stray dog. Trotting the rest of the way down my street.

Author's Commentary:

I did my best to depict a common fear here. Even from a really young age (I'm talking, like 8 or 9), my dad would warn my sister and I about all kinds of things. Rightfully so, and it has taken away my naivety, but I now live in the world of content fear for my safety and that of the women around me. I didn't really want to write something quite that heavy, though, so even if someone hasn't experienced something to this extent, I think everyone can relate to the concept of thinking up the worst-case scenario only for things to turn out completely fine.

Fatima Alerou

[48]

What Is the American Dream?

What is the American dream?

it has to be Life,

Liberty,

and the Pursuit of Happiness, or--

when wanting a somewhat equal wealth distribution becomes
Socialism

while so-called Democracy is slowly withering

when the Right doesn't try hard enough

while the Left tries too hard

and those in the Center aren't accepted

when Racism still threatens

while Sexism continues to be encouraged

when Equality is still being fought for

while Poverty thrives

and Capitalism matters more than actual lives

when Opportunity can be at every corner

while Police Brutality isn't being denounced enough

when there hasn't been a solution to Gang Violence

while Peaceful Protest isn't respected

and Looting and Rioting is more newsworthy

[49]

Fatima Alerou

when Unqualified Leaders continue to act like the best
while Manipulative Leaders continue to gain support
when Educated Leaders are portrayed as the enemy
while Hate Speech is being encouraged among leaders
and Free Speech is used as the defining argument by hateful
people

when Equal Opportunity is slowly dying
while Institutionalized Racism still has to be proven
when Denying the existence of Racism has become well
accepted
while Discussing Racism turns into a controversy
and kneeling during the National Anthem isn't a "proper way to
protest for racism"

when the once-defeated Confederate Flag is still flying high
while the American Flag is victor and will always be victor
when some scream about Black Lives Matter
while others taunt with All Lives Matter
and continue to ignore that not everyone is treated Equally



Fatima Alerou

[50]

when Change continues to happen for the better
while some will continue to deny the Wrongs of this world
when it seems nothing is being learned from the Past
while many have begun to Embrace an ethnic diversity
and those privileged have finally started Looking Inward

So, what is the American dream?
because it feels far from Life,
Liberty,
and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Author's Commentary:

I'm an Ivorian American, but I also appreciate this country. All great countries are not perfect, and that's what can make them great at times. This country has been a refuge and a chance at something new for many, and that includes my family and myself; however, there are deep, dark things that are forever being ignored. Race issues are still a prominent issue in this country (and everywhere else really). "What Is the American Dream?" explores the conflicting ideals in this country I am still trying to grasp. How can a country so great be number one in incarceration? How can a country so great allow racism to flourish? How can a country so great lack equal healthcare? These questions come from a place of curiosity and improvement. For this country to be great, it must acknowledge its own faults and improve upon them.

[51]

Audrey Morelock

Soft Apocalypse

If the world is to end in with a whisper
And not with a bang
Then who is to say that grief will be there
To occupy the hearts of men who watch?

Who's to say that humanity would not go back
To orchards of fruit trees
Stories of old gods
And hand-sewn dresses
Dyed with purple hyacinth?

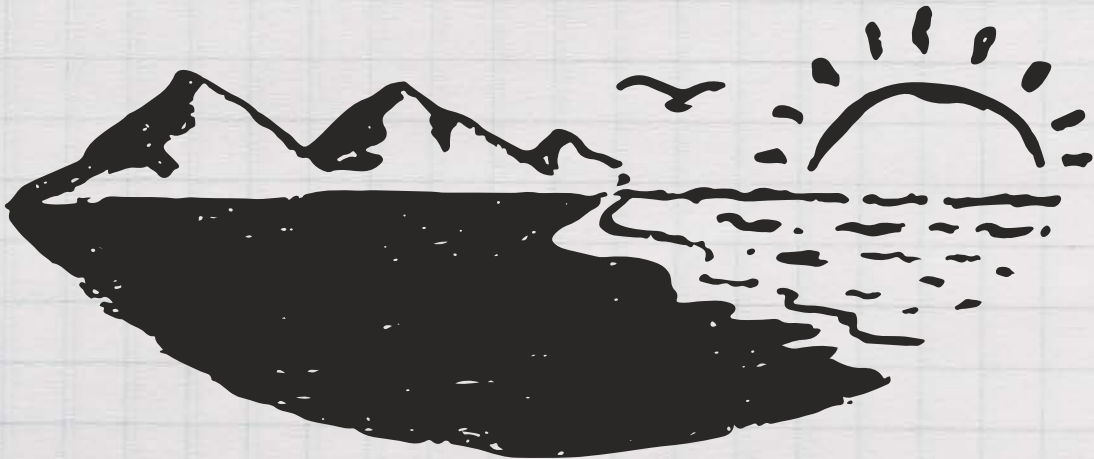
Who's to say that tears will be shed
And wails will be heard
Instead of sighs of relief and laughter
As the weight of modernity
Slipped from every shoulder?

Would humanity not go back to simplicity,
With children unafraid to play
Without an iron fence,
But instead in clear streams
And unpolluted air?

Audrey Morelock

[52]

And who is to say that people would not
prosper
From allowing nature to reclaim
And taking only what is needed
From the healed Earth they now call home?



Author's commentary:

I wrote this when we were in the midst of quarantine last summer. I had played with the idea of that famous quote by T. S. Eliot that inspired the first two lines. What if the world did end quietly and not all at once? And what if it was peaceful, and not how it is depicted in sci-fi horror? I guess this poem sort of represents the questions I asked myself while pondering a life where cities are replaced by giant forests, and everyone is working together to cultivate the land as a community. Foolishly optimistic, probably.

Chiseled Abs and Ancient Geeks:

Breaking Stereotypes

Jock or geek? It is an age-old question; at least, that is how it seems here in the U.S. Realistically, the idea that one is a jock or a geek is probably no older than modern U. S. sports traditions, which would mean that the stereotype that has given middle and high school students anxiety has only been around for a century or so at most. The stereotype, of course, is pretty simple: either one is smart and weak or strong and dumb. Typically, thanks to the outright worship of professional athletes, being strong and dumb is considered the "better" of the two stereotypes, although I would argue that neither is particularly flattering. But, alas, the stereotype continues past high school and into college, and from there into even the professional spheres. "Gamers" are the kids who never grew up, but the thirty-something football (a game) player who makes seven to eight figures to throw a ball is considered a "leader."

Now, as I said, neither stereotype is a good thing, but clearly Western culture has valued one stereotype over the other, much to the chagrin of philosophers ancient and modern. Although particularly clear within the sports and gaming sphere, it moves into more ironic territory the further one goes down the rabbit hole. Consider how we treat Hollywood celebrities like gods and goddesses descended to earth. The reality is that they are theatre kids; you know, the kids that get bullied from middle school through college for picking something that they will "never make a dime" in. Or, what about musicians? The man whose pastime is singing in high school is laughed at for being effeminate, but

Nqsh Meqde

[54]

put him on a stage with some lights, and he is the next Harry Styles. And yet the stereotypes continue.

But this is just the surface level. This is only the perception of one group over another and the irony surrounding said perceptions. Sadly, though, this epidemic of stereotyping has much deeper problems. So deep, in fact, that the dichotomies of strong/weak and smart/dumb are harming both ends of the spectrum. To see why, one must go back many thousands of years, when the Olympics was an emerging professional pastime and what we call modern philosophy was beginning to bloom.

Starting sometime in the fifth century BC, we find a Greek man by the name of Socrates. For some time, he was a simple teacher and rhetorician, asking probing questions of the elites of Athens, earning him the name of "gadfly." Everything changed, though, when the Oracle at Delphi spoke. Socrates thought highly of the gods, contrary to what the council of Athens may have decided, and, when someone asked the Oracle who the wisest man alive was, she said, "Socrates." He was shocked at the news, but this simple proclamation led him to become the founder of modern philosophy that we know today.

As Socrates traveled around Athens, he slowly but surely gained a small troop of followers, among whom was an Olympic wrestler known by his WWE name: Plato. Yes, that is right; Plato is not actually the name of the man who wrote the Republic, nor was he a frail old man, as was often depicted. No, the man whose name literally translates to "broad" was ripped, and yet he spent his years creating some of the most profound philosophy that is still as relevant today as it was then. We will come back to this later, but first we must talk about his star student: Aristotle.

Aristotle was just as prolific as his teacher, writing books on just about every aspect of rhetoric, science, and philosophy. As tutor to Alexander the Great, he had access to effectively all of the knowledge of the world at that time. Although we know little of what he may have actually read and researched, it seems that he had East Asian influences in some of his thought processes. His beliefs about the balance of mind and body line up nearly identically with such ideas as Zen, Taoism, and Yoga, which seems to point to an overlap.

Although the east Asian traditions seem to have pointed out the importance of mind and body first, the Greek philosophers started to codify and consider it in a way that became more accessible to Western Europe. Plato, in the Republic, stated that the Guardians (those set to protect the city) should be trained in both music and athleticism. Aristotle continued this train of thought in his Nicomachean Ethics, stating the need of both physical and mental activity in achieving eudaemonia. In many East Asian traditions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, part of one's work is removing the body's impediments to achieving a higher meditative life. This typically includes healthy eating habits, yoga, and other physical meditative practices. In fact, of all of the sutras of yoga, only one speaks to physical posture; the rest are about breathing and meditative practices.

Of course, in ancient times, physical activity was more intrinsic to daily life. One would walk miles a day to go about daily business, like bartering in a marketplace and visiting friends or family. Health and exercise were intrinsic to daily lives, even if they did not realize it. Now, in our digital age, such activity is not nearly as necessary. I can order anything and have it delivered to my door within a few days. I can work entirely from home, text friends all across the world, and engage in a

Nqsh Meqde

[56]

game with someone in Germany all within a single day without leaving the chair that I am sitting in. Although sedentary life is not the issue at hand here, it may be one of the contributing factors to the slow demise of our ability to achieve the good life.

As has been pointed out by the above philosophers and sages, a core part of a good life is one that is balanced. Daily exercise in conjunction with daily meditation is the path to peace. Yet, in typical fashion, Western culture has managed to bastardize even this simple notion. One practices yoga without all of the meditative concepts added in, in most cases. One spends hours meditating and ignores the need for physical activity. One goes to the gym to "feel the burn"; one goes to the library to read for hours in the same place. The geeks should never go to the gym for fear of being bullied; the jocks should never open a book for fear of losing their "cool kid" vibes.

What may be even worse, however, is the intention of either of the extremes. As Aristotle often pointed out, the intention behind an action is just as important as the action itself. Physical exercise is great, but not if one is using it to harass others. Reading and trying to increase one's intelligence is wonderful, but not if it is being done to make snide comments about the "fools" around oneself. This is even compounded by the habituation of these actions. Again, Aristotle thought that habituation was a good thing with good ends, but not if it began to control one's life. If one is going to the gym every day to get chiseled because that is what one does, then the goodness of doing so has been lost. If one reads books at an absurdly fast rate just because one can, one has lost the purpose for reading. Culturally, though, we value these extremes. The smartest person is the one who has read the most books, and the

greatest athlete is the one who spends four hours every day in the gym. Those dedicated to the extreme of their craft are the ones praised for having done the most. When one's humanity is lost for the sake of one's career or action, then one is praised for being one of the greats in one's craft. The best doctor is the one who can spend sixteen hours five days a week at the hospital; the best writer is the one who can write six thousand words a day.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with being dedicated to one's craft; however, there is a problem when craft supersedes humanity. The jock whose life revolves around the next sports game on television and the game they will play in on the weekend has forfeited their humanity, but so too has the geek whose life revolves around the next online tournament and practicing five or six hours a day. The good life is not perfection of a particular craft, nor is it absolute dedication to it; the good life is filled with balance. A healthy body creates a healthy mind. A healthy mind leads one to pursue a healthy body. Play soccer with some friends on Saturday; read a book on Sunday. Pick a favorite football player; find a favorite author.

And yet, we still uphold the extremes. And yet, those who provide entertainment for a living are considered to be wise and to be leaders. And yet, the wisest are considered useless and foolish, and the most foolish are considered wise. We may pretend that the jock and geek paradigm disappears when one becomes an adult, but it does not. Streamers are mocked on late night television while athletes are praised for making unfounded and ignorant comments about things they do not understand. People who go into philosophy are bound to never get a job; the student who has a full ride to an Ivy League school because they

Nqsh Meqde

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can throw a ball really well is going to make millions. A genius in high school who worked to get into Harvard only to miss out on a full ride for all of the work and who endured the mockery receives less money than the jock at the same school because he can swing a bat really well. A professor at a higher institution makes right about six figures; coaches can make as much as eight. A college might not have enough money to build a new building for the liberal arts student, but they most certainly do for a new stadium for a team that has a one and six win/loss record. Why? Because we value entertainment, but only certain kinds of entertainment. Even though we love our actors and our musicians, we do not recognize them in college like we do the football and basketball players.

Now, this may seem like just a rant about higher institutions, but this paradigm poisons people's ability to live the good life. The jock is expected to be dedicated only to his sport, and the geek is expected to only be dedicated to his chosen genre of geekdom. They both lose the good life. Dedication to something other than oneself will always end in a neglect of true happiness and goodness. To fight the poison, one must revolt. Geeks must rise up and get chiseled; jocks must sit down and read some philosophy. The only way to fight stereotypes is to prove them wrong. One must live individually, showing that stereotypes are structures designed only to limit individuals and categorize the fundamental uniqueness of people. Prove to the world that balance and individuality are what should be praised, not extremist dedication and entertainment value.

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Bah!

There are wolves in the Fold!
There are wolves in the Fold!
They wear sheep's clothes
And because you are afraid
You don't drive them out
Much less, call their bluff
I know
I know
I know
Good God, forgive us

You think to yourself
Surely, I have been deceived
And sheep have claws upon
their feet
Teeth meant for tearing meat
And a howl
That you have never found
The vocal cords to match



Sarah MacIntosh

So, you baa, baa, baa
And repent
As you again attempt
To file your teeth into pointy tips
And fill your hooves with claw-like
Thorns
Yes, you screech while teaching
Little ones to do the same
And though it takes a
A great amount of shame
To force the small
To hate
Who they already are
You do it anyway
To protect them,
You say
You were born depraved
Bent, deformed, misshaped
So, listen to me, obey
And you shall be saved!

Do you see those long-legged ones
How they tower over us
Do every single thing you must
To look, live and sound like them
Then,
Surely,
You'll be born again
A lamb

Sarah MacIntosh

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For Talking

I will play on words
and play on words
and play on words
See-sawing
Back and forth
Till the world
Tilts and swirls
Around me

And I want to say:
"I am like Jesus this way"

But I don't
I skip
And go
To hang
Like a monkey
Under bars
or
Bury
My little
Word wealth
In a sand box

I say,
"Good God!
Someone could
Get killed
For talking like that!"

And God says,
From the park bench,
"I know, baby girl.
I know"

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Nash Meade

I Lost Religion To Find My Faith

I lost religion sitting in a pew,
Watching the young, lulled to sleep,
And the old in too deep,
As they listened to an old man preach his view.

I found faith in the dead of night,
Watching the lightning flash,
And listening to the thunder crash
In God's orchestra of light.

I lost religion, listening to the men
Who claimed to be persecuted,
For having their faith disputed,
While sitting in a cozy den.

I found faith walking the beach,
Hot sand under my feet,
Hoping dolphins come up to meet
This young man trying to reach.

Nash Meade

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I lost religion, reading after men,
Whose only read books are the sixty-six,
And who think they can fix
The qualms of a world with a good "amen!"

I found faith in the philosophy
Of men and women long dead
Whose lives were fully led,
By the principles which govern me.

I lost religion to find my faith
In places long since left,
By those who think themselves deft
At understanding what God will embrace.

Meditation

This was her favorite time of the day, just before dawn, when light filtered over the horizon and colors were muted. She took her seat on the navy blue cushion, dead center on the wooden deck overlooking the ocean. The rhythmic sound of waves and periodic calls of sea birds were, as always, relaxing. She folded her legs in a traditional lotus pose, balanced her hands on her knees, thumbs to index fingers, and closed her eyes. Took several deep breaths to center herself.

Breathe in, breathe out.

High-pitched laughter sounded from her left.

Dammit! There it is again. Thoughts disturbed her serene calm. Off and on, for a week now, strange sounds had intruded on her morning meditation.

Just my imagination. She took an extra deep breath, held it, and slowly let it out, refusing to break her routine and open her eyes.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Another laugh, lower pitched and almost gravelly, closer on the right.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Laughs, snorts, whispers—not very loud but persistent, coming from all directions. Once, she felt something soft brush by her face.

She ignored it all.

Breathe in, breathe out.

As always, the sounds faded out, proof it was all just her mind trying to distract her.

A small smile was all she allowed herself as she sunk deeper into her own head.

Audrey Dorofee

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Breathe in, breathe out.

Breathe in—

It was quiet. Too quiet. Had the waves stopped?

Her pulse quickened. She kept still, breathing carefully now, trying to hear—anything, anything at all.

Nothing.

Her eyes popped open.

Ugly yellow eyes, set in a big green and brown reptilian something, were only inches from her own. A forked tongue flicked her nose. She tried to scream but couldn't. Tried to breathe, but her lungs refused orders. Her heart stuttered and stilled. Muscles locked into unbreakable rigor. She froze in her meditation pose, eyes wide with horror.

The brownie sighed. "You won. I can't believe it. We've been trying all week to get her to open her eyes. Nothing worked."

"I even flew by her face and touched her. I thought that would do it!" A pixie grumped.

The brownie, three pixies, and a horde of fairies hung out on the deck railing, studying the meditating corpse and the back of the reptilian being standing in front of her.

"Fools! Good meditators can shut everything out and focus inward," the basilisk sneered. "After all the noise you made, the complete silence was too unusual to ignore. Of course she opened her eyes." He carefully donned his wraparound, mirrored sunglasses, hiding his deadly gaze, and turned around. "Pay up!"

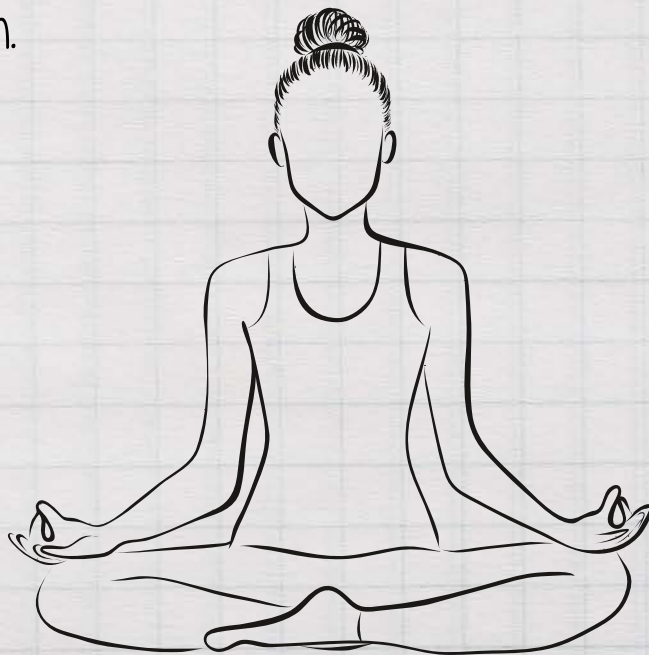
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Audrey Dorofee

Gold and silver coins went into the basilisk's pouch. Not that he needed the money. But winning this bet was just too good an opportunity to miss.

One of the fairies hovered in front of the dead woman's face and poked her in the nose with a tiny spear, testing. Nothing happened. Bored already, they walked or flew off in search of more entertainment.

She sat on her navy blue cushion in the perfect meditation pose, never to be disturbed again.



Author's Commentary:

After a few decades of writing useful, boring, technical papers, books, and reports, I did a complete turn-around to urban fantasy, usually with a dark, twisty sense of humor. This story was inspired by my own meditations, interrupted one morning by that creepy feeling that you are not alone. Upon opening my eyes, I spotted the centipede making a beeline for my bare feet. We'll pretend the screaming and scrambling for a shoe to beat the multi-legged monster to death did not occur.

I wrote this later that day to box up my anxiety. It worked, although I still occasionally crack an eyelid. Just in case. My first few pieces of fiction were short stories, while lately I've been trying my hand at writing novels. But I like to dash off a short piece now and then, whenever the stray, oddball thought crosses my mind.

