

SPRING 2024

ISSUE 9

ISSN# 2475-9805

Off Center

Creative Writing Magazine



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Creative Writing Magazine

A Publication of the University Writing Center

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A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Angela Benninghoff

Writing is a spring storm—a gentle cadence, rain chattering like teeth in the crackle of lightning and the tremble of thunder, struck charges cracking like a blown fuse.

Ernest Hemingway once said that writing is bleeding at the typewriter, that it's splitting your soul open and spilling it onto the page, but I have always preferred to think of writing as a storm. Sirens of inspiration, strikes of distraction, warnings of approaching deadlines, and the rain—well, a drought cannot be cured until the water flows. There are the ups and downs so fitting to the weeks of spring, when everyone's seeking shelter and sneezing into tissues, when writers order another cup of coffee and scribble onto notepads in creative surges at midnight. Then, there is the result: spring flowers, so nostalgic of childhood and summer romances, and completed projects. The tempest of creativity that creates beauty, when we share experiences and see a piece of ourselves in one another.


Together, we experience storms as much as the fluorescent result—daffodil and hyacinth, iris and ivy, narcissus and laurel in whites and yellows and purples and greens. A series of rose bushes blossom at the gate of an apartment complex, and the scent of freshly cut grass warms the early morning routine. Artists see beauty share its blossoms—pinching, plucking, and pulling petals into the literary, visual, and audio.

My goal for this edition of *Off Center* was to celebrate the different stories of our artists, and the different places from which the creators are working—some who have been published and some who haven't. The magazine is a representation of who we are: various writers, writing styles, and cultures, whose stories remind us that we are more alike than different and that the result is always worth the effort.

May you find a piece of yourself—your own experiences, knowledge, and passions as you read through the magazine.

Freedom Fighting

by Kaleena Gaines



No one will ever know the price I've paid to be so peaceful.
Nobody knows the amount of times I've cried late at night.
No one knows how much I've walked the floors just to calm down.
Nobody knows how much I want to respond in my flesh but my spirit won't allow me.
No one knows how I silently suffer with battles they can't fathom.
Nobody will understand how in adversity I can still encourage others.
No one will ever know how much sleep I don't get.
Nobody knows how much I've been under attack but still keep pressing.

Silently suffering but outwardly praising.
This fight isn't about me.
This fight is for what will be birthed from me.

Generational curse breaker am I.
Curses are broken off my bloodline.

Chains are released and destroyed, no longer able to be picked up.
My suffering is so the 3000 ancestors behind me know their toil wasn't in vain.
Nobody will understand great pain until they understand great reward.
The fight must continue even though
Nobody knows the pain I feel.

No one will understand it takes a great fight
To have faith stronger than fears.
The price I pay for freedom of my bloodline
Nobody will ever know.

Author's Commentary:

I was inspired to write this poem because I deal with a lot of pressure and stress. I strive to do things the way I was taught to do them and to operate in my faith. It is not easy having to fight for everything, but I was having a moment one day. I realized that my fight is not in vain and it is not about me. I fight for the ancestors that came before me and the offspring that will come after me.

Maybe It'll Be the Birds

by Meghan E. Chamblin

Coffee-rain morning,
Puddles crowd the sidewalks,
The birds sing,
Chorus of nature.
Tired faces walk past.
The trees drizzle excess off their leaves.
They twirl in their plot.
I walk around and breathe in the humid air.
You know that smell the earth has after it's rained?
I think that might be my favorite smell.
I seek comfort in the rain, in storms;
Chaos is complex.
There is beauty in disturbance.

I see an older man stop in his tracks,
He looks up,
His briefcase is now on the damp ground,
A camera appears in his hands,
I hear a couple of clicks.
Captures a photograph of a family of birds, nestled in their twig nest.
His smile was uncontainable.
Like a butterfly effect, I smile in return,
Reminded of how the small can make the day feel big.
Even if for only a few minutes you find relief in your own storm;
Refuge.
I'm on the search for my small,
My happiness of the day.
Maybe it'll be the birds with their songs,
Maybe it'll be the rain as the day goes on,
Or maybe it'll be a dinner I grab all alone in the comfort of my storm.

Author's Commentary:

This is depicting the search for trying to find the smaller things to find happiness in. I wrote it while outside during rainy weather and noticed an elderly man taking time out of his day to take a picture of something on the building's roof with a smile on his face. In a way, his small act made my day indirectly.

Cecropia Moth

by Kylie Petrovich



Artist's Commentary:

I have always had a fascination with moths. Most people love butterflies, but I believe moths to be just as (if not more) spectacular. The Cecropia Moth is the largest moth in North America. Its colors and patterns made it the perfect specimen to paint. I use watercolor, and I apply salt to the paint when it is still wet to give it a textured appearance.

The Dam

by Jesse Peart

Every morning and each night, I look and see your eyes.

I look and see them in my dreams, and deep within the sky.

Your touch I feel, although not there, your voice it sings so sweet.

I long to touch, to feel, to hear; I long to one day meet.

To find your heart, for love, from whence, an endless, boundless maze;

The halls are deep, a man there guards, 'tis he that holds its gaze.

So close, so far, so wait I shall, for long I cannot know.

A sea of love I have to give, but dammed it may not flow.

The love shall sit and build and rise and watch and grow and wait.

Have I found my future wife or Sisyphean fate?

Author's Commentary:

I have not much for commentary. I was in love. She loved me. But she wouldn't leave her partner who was very bad for her. And she never did.

The Creek, or Water

by Elijah Crouch

The water meanders.

it follows

blindly?

carving rock

creating the path

it must follow

the end is determined

the end is made

it is a participatory act

along with the water

which was there before it

(that is, before it in location

but not before it in nature,

for it is the same age)

no one drop can carve

rock or feed the foliage

on its bank

only the whole

yet some must come first

it creates the path

which it is bound

to follow

there are bounds

and no bounds

the thing which it slowly

becomes is the thing it must

be

yes, it is susceptible to

sudden strong storms

which try to form

a new, wider path

quickly

storms subside

it goes back to the slow, narrow path

it is the way it must go

“To whom else would we go?”

though there seems to be no difference

day by day

there will be a difference

generation by generation

Longevity.

it leaves

a lasting

legacy

it leads

following

the course it slowly sets

the course

which was set beforehand

Over time it smooths the rough.

To “smooth the rough fast”

is an oxymoron.

In its haste to smooth it only succeeds

to roughen

(for fast is the Mephistopheles

of our day

and we are Faust

wishing for magic).

To smooth it must be slow.

the path of love

the “three mile per hour God”

“in His time”...

it will come to pass

over and over the jagged edges

again and again,

“Are we there yet?”

“My child, where do you want to go?”

“To you.”

“Then you are both here and not here.”

still and quiet, slowly moving

smoothing

following

Author's Commentary:

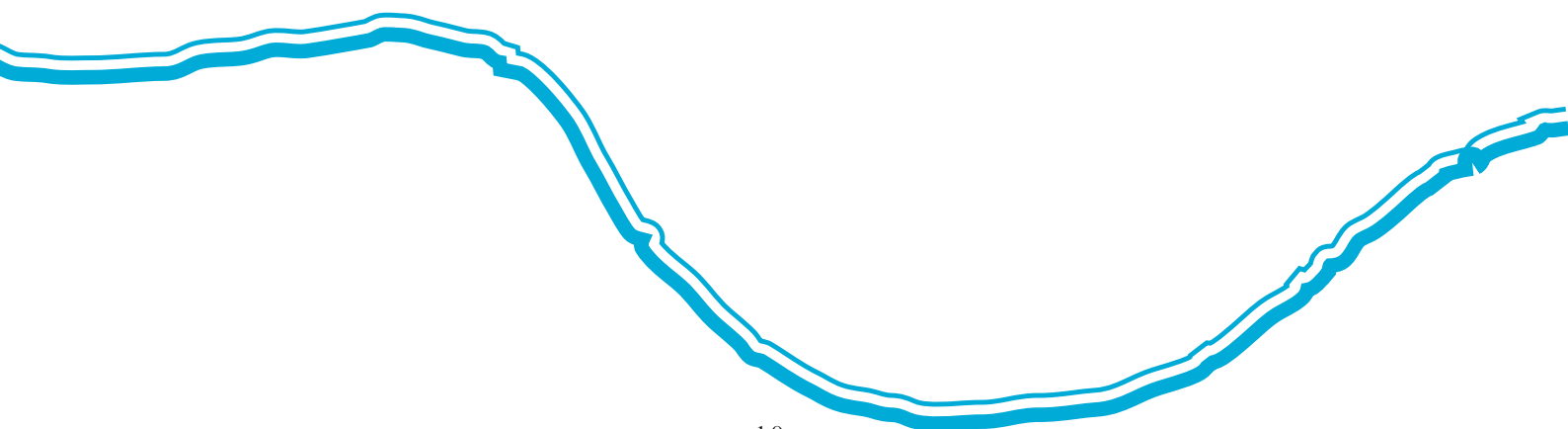
This modern, free-verse poem is about the water in a small creek and its parallels to the spiritual journey (particularly the Christian's spiritual journey). It speaks of slow, deliberate processes of formation, the necessity of following older generations, and the importance of slowness in a fast-paced world. It references the Bible, *Three Mile Per Hour God*, and *Doctor Faustus*. I wrote this poem with pencil and paper while sitting on the bank of a creek during my weekly Sabbath. It was influenced by T. S. Eliot and Wendell Berry.

The first movement is a reflection on the creek (and the water) itself. The water "meanders," which is to say it follows a winding course, but also that it has worn down the tough ground over time, creating a lasting impression. The flowing water carves out its path over time, and the path that is carved is the path it must follow. The many drops of water that have carved the rock create the path which the subsequent drops of water follow. This is why it is "a participatory act." The current water drops in the creek are the same in nature, and are just as old, as the previous drops of water flowing through the creek. Despite this separation between the old and new water drops, all of them come together to make one whole--the creek--that feeds the foliage on its banks. This is another way it is "a participatory act."

The second movement is a reflection on how change ought to come about. Change (to the creek bed) can come about rapidly, through flooding and storms, but despite its immediately apparent impact this sort of change is not lasting. The creek soon returns to its normal state, basically forced to continue to carve the banks slowly. The influence of the water on the bank is unrecognizable day to day, but over time the change is clear. This is akin to the best sorts of change in humanity, which do not seek to force their way to power but allow for time to smooth jagged edges with generations of careful soft power. The quest for quick change is a Faustian bargain, where we trade what we want most (lasting change) for what we want now (the feeling of change). Love is a good way to affect change, and love takes time.

The third movement is a reflection on God. God is slow (2 Peter 3:9), not always acting as fast as we wish He would. This can be frustrating at times, which is why the person asks, "are we there yet?". God responds by showing the person that the goal is not only to achieve certain goals, but also to simply be in relationship together--for the person to simply follow.

The final lines tie together all three movements.



Black Kings

by Kaleena Gaines

Sirens wailing, screams louder than the police cars
Blood stained pavements unable to be washed with tears
Lifeless cold brown bodies laid in the streets
Mothers holding sons, crying over killed dreams
Children confused as to where daddy has gone
Wives/girlfriends lost for words with anger in their eyes
Another senseless murder of our black kings
When will this murdering of kings end
Media blasting noncompliance, life felt threaten
What's so threatening about brown/black skin
Black is beauty, brown is sun kissed
How are these skin tones threatening
Black is strength, brown is pride
How does skin tone threaten life
Let's be honest and real it's hate that causes senseless killing
Our people are doctors, lawyers, teachers, and community leaders
Yet from the lightest hue of brown to the darkest black of night walk on eggshells afraid
Will they be next
Our people are full of pride and have been driven to anger
Our black kings were born from black queens
Tell me how is the beauty of our queens admired but our kings slaughtered
Senseless murdering of our black kings
Tell me when will this end

Author's Commentary:

A few years ago this country was faced with a horrific tragedy that ended up in the death of George Floyd. I thought the killing of this man to be horrific and uncalled for and something that should not have happened. My heart hurt for his family and for this country. I was inspired by the events that happened to write this poem. As a black woman who has brothers and nephews, all I wanted to do during this horrific tragedy was hug my nephews and brothers.

Blood Moon

by Kylie Petrovich

The hunter has killed the man on the moon

It is dripping with sacrosanct blood,

I sat here and watched it happen.

What could I do?

The slaughter pre-ordained,

a divine sign that soon He will arrive.

An inflamed crystal ball forecasting the

great and dreadful day of His coming¹.

A miracle or punishment?

Am I the only one who sees the battle waged above?

The cabernet washed moon cleansed

Even the drunkard's God is forgiving.

Small white wafer drowning in plasma,

I consumed his body through my eyes.

What message does this crimson shadow convey?

The veil lowered between his world and ours,

will the sinners be saved

or sacrificed in the name of blood?


1 Part of a biblical verse from Joel 2:31

Author's Commentary:

I wrote this piece during the occurrence of the last actual blood moon. There was a power that seemed to emanate from it, and it intrigued me enough to do research. There is a religious passage in the Bible, specifically from the Book of Joel, which states (in so many words) that the blood moon signifies the end of days and the Lord's coming. The Bible verse informed much of the poem, and I tried to evoke imagery that had both religious undertones and described the blood moon itself.

Autobiography

by Kaleena Gaines



Anger, hurt, frustration, mistrust
Happiness, joy, trust, freedom
Life, death, heaven, hell
Oh, what contrast these words give!

Anxiety, depression, PTSD, PCOS, HSV
Diagnoses, diseases, incurable, untreatable
Medical jargon, labels, charts
Lost, confused, hopeless, helpless
A mind's pondering on what it all means.

Tears, screams, yells, fist pounding
Is there any fight in you left?
Heart, kidneys, ovaries, uterus
Organs, tissues, veins, cells, DNA
You must continue to fight for offspring.
Hope, love, strength, wisdom, faith
Oh, what energy arises within!
Stand, fight, KEEP PRESSING!

Author's Commentary:

I was inspired to write this poem because it allowed me to put to words things that I have been dealing with. I am not always bubbly. Deep inside I am just a human being that is dealing with multiple incurable diseases and sometimes it is hard to deal with. This poem provided me a way of expressing the deep pain inside I was feeling at the time. A few months before I wrote this poem, I was diagnosed with HSV, and I felt devastated and had to process through all of my emotions. I am always the one that tells people to keep pressing and to keep going. I also tell people "You got this," but when I wrote this I allowed myself to express the hurt I was feeling inside.

Jasmine

by Sara Abdo



Artist's Commentary:

Growing up in America with Arab parents means having a messy, patchwork understanding of my mother language. Lately I've been hungry for knowledge, trying to catch up and learn more about the language I lost.

In this artwork, I chose to showcase two Arabic phrases I grew up hearing. The first is *zayy al amar*, which means "beautiful." Translated literally, it means "like the moon." I've always thought this was a sweet comparison, a beautiful way to show someone your love.

The other phrase, *zayy al ful*, means "perfect." I never knew the literal translation of this phrase until recently, when I ran across it while trying to translate something on the internet. It means "like jasmine." I was surprised. There's so much I don't know! I thought these two phrases would make great imagery together—as a small glance into my language that isn't really mine.

Pith of Theseus

by Bailey Cabbage

If I displaced a mind shrouded in thorn,
trimmed the branches of the inapposite,
and unlimited way for sun be born,
would the joyous mind be predominant?
If situations procure acceptance,
but change stains your notions with apathy,
please tell me how there's still significance
if injury plagues that mentality.
A mother be lost, a babe lays silent.
Another will weep as kin laid to rest.
A process that's so mentally violent,
how does one know, can life supersede death?
If a vessel and its boards don't remain,
Please tell me again are we made the same?

Author's Commentary:

For this poem I knew I wanted to write it in the style of a Shakespearean sonnet as this structure seemed like a fun challenge and a good format for the topic of my poem, which touches on the heavy idea of the morality of human beings. The inspiration for this idea came from the legend of the Ship of Theseus from Greek mythology. In the legend, the Greek king of Athens, Theseus, rescues the children of Athens from King Minos after slaying him and escaping via ship to Delos. His ship became a celebrated sentiment as Athenians commemorated him by taking his ship on a pilgrimage to Delos, but later this would raise a question by philosophers: if after so many centuries of sailing and maintaining the ship, would it still be the same ship if every part was replaced one by one? This philosophy got me thinking about how it applied to us as humans. If we change so much as human beings, whether it be our mindsets or our morals, are we still the same person as we age and evolve? If we come out of a dark place and finally see the light in our lives, are we still the same person that we once were? If we're considerate and accepting people, but our environments "stain our notions with apathy" are we still worth something as human beings? These ideas also reminded me of a song by LIVE called "Lighting Crashes" that follows the story of a mother dying while giving birth, while down the hall a baby dies while entering the world. At the end of my poem, I took inspiration from this song as well to add the question: is life replaceable in the same sense that the boards on a ship are?

Head Echo

by Kaleena Gaines

Your voice echoing in my head
The sound piercing through my heart
Tantalizing my soul and making a home
Words flow from your lips with elegance and openness
Words that erupt out of your soul
That causes my mind to grow and heart to open
You stir sexual desire and fulfillment in word form
You are my heart's answer when words won't form
Wordless moans that communicate heavenly desire in earthly form
Desire stained with longing, craving of your lips pressed against mine
Lips that utter wisdom and intelligence but also give into lust and desire
Longingness for your touch and to feel flesh against flesh
Dreaming of the day, counting down the minutes until
Words unable to describe the moment desired for
Your voice a constant companion in my mind
It follows me off to dreamland and awakens me into daylight
One day this voice will be more than just a dream
Your voice echoing in my head
The sound pierces my heart as I drift back to sleep

Author's Commentary:

I wrote this poem to express my feelings toward this man that I was getting to know. We had a connection that I had never experienced before on that level, and I could literally hear his voice in my head. The connection to him was intimate and very unexpected. It helped me to open my heart again after it had been utterly shattered.

Writing Lessons

by John S. Duffy

Memoir.

The worst of fictions.

Edited, cut, pasted, rewritten over time into pages of prosaic forgetfulness. Illiterate, guttural emotions remedied my memory and gave me time to tell tales over and over until that first punch of the keys, the first scribble of the pencil. The words flew and flowed, victims of my bankrupt imagination. It felt strange, erotic, and powerful to see those phrases move from somewhere else to head to hand to page and then into my first reader's eyes. They piled up, got lost, stained, thrown away. I shared one with my mother. I refuse to remember her response. Then other readers came along, and I showed them. I ripped myself open and showed them.

A girlfriend who crushed and gushed over me until even I believed the words I wrote were really me and that I was romantic and kind. "It's not Jackie Collins, but I like it. You should write one about me." It was a story about my dad leaving and how I felt corrupted by the betrayal. It involved a duck, two truck drivers, and a handful of playing cards. It made less sense then.

An Army friend who read and read while *In Living Color* played in the background and we drank Michelob Dry. "All I can say is, just keep writing." The small sentence lacked a positive attribute but stung less than the words in my own head when I burned those pages. I don't remember what the stories were about or how drunk I was when I wrote them. My Army friend died of a drug overdose on my twenty-eighth birthday. I found out when I was forty-two. Those pages haven't been written. One day, perhaps, when I can see Homie the Clown without looking away.

Then my freshman English class. A short, wide-hipped high school teacher in her first year teaching community college. "Tell me about a day that changed your life," she said with a hopeful smile. Nothing came that I wanted to tell. Dad left. Mom stayed. We were poor. We were a broken family. Just enough money to disqualify for welfare but not enough to avoid eviction. But this adjunct with her Sunday school smile, thick pixie-cut hair, and glasses seven years out of style threatened to read the results out loud. And this is where it got ugly.

I made something up. Something based on a truth that wasn't my own. The vacant fiction that makes up so much of what we all read. I got an A and she read it aloud.

All the makings of an illustrious career were there suddenly. Early emotional issues, a working relationship with honesty, and a talent for words that cut across genres: I could make up jokes, song lyrics, poems, fables, allegories, analogies, and witticisms for any occasion. I could make people laugh and had been for years. But there, in that class that night, I learned I could make people cry. Even me.

The college put the story in a magazine. One of those college things designed for English majors and artsy folks. I read it over and again. It was wrong. There was so much first person that it was hard to tell it was the wrong person. I wrote another one but didn't show it to anyone. Then another story came that was perfect for the trash can. I wrote three more before I dropped out of college. They were good stories—simple, sometimes funny, often sad. I couldn't see it then.

Years came and went but no more stories. The well of imagination wasn't dry. On certain nights when the beer and music were exactly right, the words, ideas, and stories came back with a vengeance. I could close my eyes and imagine the entire page from the first indent, down to the misplaced commas and inconsistent tense. They were bolts of erratic lightning ripping across the landscape of my mind that was obsessed with bills and responsibilities and the what ifs that grab us sleepwalking and drive us to dark places of regret. My reddened eyes would move closer to the mirror, close enough so the eyes lost focus and also became the focus. *What are you doing?* I thought. *Where did you go? Yes, you. Deep down.* I didn't want to hear the words anymore. I wanted to *feel* something in them.

I was lost inside my life. A part of me, that once felt so powerful and alive, slept below the surface covered in a blanket too heavy for me to lift. My voice was empty. My words vacated by my inability to put a single true thing in them. A true thing about me. About how I felt, lived, or dreamed. A feeling of having cheated myself coursed through me, guilted me into submission.

I don't want to write to quiet the voices in my head. I don't want to write for the beginning, or the middle, or the end. Not the process, not the journey. I don't want to write for you to read it, reject it, or publish it. Don't say any damn thing at all. I want to write so that when I—the first reader of my life—read those words I can say, "I'm alone no longer."

And so, I do. Slowly, surely, I am.

Author's Commentary:

"Writing Lessons" is the answer to a question: After all these years, all the rejections, the gut punches, and embarrassing editing sessions, what have I learned? Write first, worry never.

October 31st, 2020

by Kaleia Branch

I wake to strings of crusts in my eyes, a groan escaping between my lips as my arms stretch underneath the duvet suffocating me like a coffin. My feet meet carpet as they drag me towards the mirror. I'm haunted by my reflection; mouth covered in dry spit, my curls wildly askew.

My heart pounds against my ribcage at the sudden sound of heavy footsteps. They grow louder and closer until they stop. I can see feet through the tiny slit beneath the door. I run to jump back in bed but it's too late; the door flies open and he walks through it, light revealing my father in all his morning glory. His large hands reach out to touch me. I wince but he does not notice. Or maybe he pretends not to. They grasp at the curls atop my head and squeeze around the circumference of my waist. I can see us in the mirror; his large stature looms over me, bloodshot eyes looking downwards trying to reach mine. A wry, yellowing smile, the stench of alcohol pouring from his mouth. He speaks. "Today's the day." He stands there for a beat. My eyes widen when I start to feel tear drops hit my back and a loud sniff. Suddenly his grasp relinquishes and he exits as quickly as he came. I finally take a breath and get dressed. All black.

The sky darkens as we drive. A chorus of black people in black clothes surrounds the white church. We walk in line, faces stuck sagging downwards as if the etchings of a mask were imprinted on our faces. The pews creak in the otherwise eerily silent church as we wait for the program to start. Soon after, the church fills with the chilling screams and shouts of a people left haunted.

Our somber swarm makes its way to the graveyard, trotting rhythmically like zombies to the open wound in the Earth. My father and I sit front row, royalty amongst the dead. His hand reaches out to swallow mine; I want to pull away like usual, but I feel the urge to look into his face. No longer do I see the potbellied man who slung back beers and threatened to hit me for my bratty ways. No longer do I see the monster who abandoned me. I see a boy, his eyes misted with tears as he watches the nightmare unfolding before him.

Grandma Callie's casket lowers beneath the Earth.

Author's Commentary:

"October 31st, 2020" was inspired by the real and sudden death of my beloved grandmother. I wrote two pieces about her death, this one being my favorite. I remember when I attended the funeral, I found something poetic about it occurring on Halloween and felt the need to write about it. Three years later, I was able to finally process my grief as an assignment for Dr. Arroyo's Beyond Flash Fiction class. My writing process occurred on my notes app in bed as most of my best writing occurs when I'm living and thinking authentically. I really wanted to lean into the horror aspect of both Halloween and losing a loved one--the mythical and the authentic. I wanted the mythical to exaggerate the experience so that the reader could experience the emotions and thoughts around experiencing grief. Thank you for reading my piece.

If I Only Had a Voice

by Catherine Berresheim

At 19 years old, I was an eager blonde ingénue and I knew I had the body, the dance moves, and the dedication—I just didn't have the voice.

Along with a dozen other chorus girls, I was sitting in the make-up room finishing preparations for that night's performance of *Guys & Dolls*, and despite being scantily clad in a pair of shorts and my padded, push-up, push-em together bra, the director, Jim Crabtree, poked his head in the door and asked if he could "have a word." I grabbed a button down and met him in the hallway.

"I'm not sure how to say this, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you from our next show." I didn't have to ask why.

That summer of 1981, I accepted an apprenticeship at Cumberland County Playhouse in Crossville, TN earning \$30.00 a week filling the role of Hot Box Girl number six for the main-stage show *Guys and Dolls*. Doing summer stock was a rite of passage for thespians, and I was delighted to work for this company, earn my way, and maybe increase my chances of being hired for bigger roles, and really "make it" as a stage actor. The mid-season show, *Cole Porter*, was a musical revue, however, demanding talented voices. Auditions were held the previous morning, and I sang my hardest. Although I have to admit, my rendition of "Happy Birthday," sounded more like a moose mating call. In the effort to be fair, they intended to give all apprentices a part. Even me. Despite their commitment, Jim had cut me from the show.

"You just don't sing well, Cathy. I can't have that in *this* kind of show. So, uh, you don't have to come to rehearsal in the morning..."

A knot formed in my throat. So, I couldn't answer.

"Okay, then," he said, patting my hand. I stood motionless, eyes brimming, trying not to let the tears overflow and ruin my make-up.

He seemed unsure of what to do next. "You just report to the shop and you can help build the set. Okay?" and he turned to walk away led by his potbelly.

I ran to the front of the theatre looking for a place to hide and compose myself, deciding to duck into my friend Barbara's private dressing room just offstage of the proscenium. The vanity surrounded by so many bouquets of roses and carnations smelled like a funeral home. We could hear the voices of the audience grow louder as the seats were filled, as the horns in the orchestra warmed up with scating honks. For a bit of privacy, she led me outside to the loading dock, where the sobs came so hard, I could only speak in gulps to recount what happened.

“He shouldn’t have done that right before a show. What was he thinking?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, snotty nosed.

It wasn’t for lack of effort, I told her. I took lessons, “I can’t help it. I try my best.”

She nodded, and put her arms around me as if she understood. She didn’t. Barbara had the female lead, playing Sarah Brown, she could belt out the songs, hit the high notes, and sustain them.

The stage manager gave the 15-minute warning and I made my way back across the stage to the stairwell down to the make-up room, avoiding the other actors dashing about.

Rounding the corner to the orchestra pit, Annie, Jim’s wife and vocal director, called for warm-ups. I stood silent as the others “me-me, ma-ma, mooed.” Afterward, and before I could get away, she patted my shoulder saying, “I’m so sorry about this, Cathy. You are capable of learning, but right now, you just can’t sing. I can’t ride a bicycle anymore since my car wreck.” Like this would make me feel better. The tears came fast.

Finally, I made it to the make-up room, sat on the stool with the R4 pancake and covered the wet streaks the tears of humiliation made. *The show must go on*, I told myself.

The stage manager yelled, “Places, please. Five minutes.” I rushed upstairs to stage right, dodging three other actors scurrying to their stations, and nearly ran into one of the male dancers, Bill, already in place in front of me. I grabbed my ankle from behind in a deep quadriceps stretch.

“What’s wrong? I heard something about *Cole*.”

“Yeah, I was just cut from the show.”

I bent over spread-eagle in a full hamstring stretch to avoid looking at him, head to the floor, elbows touching the stage, the dust from so many Danskin shoes clung to my elbows.

Bill squatted down to look me in the face through my legs, “Oh, that’s too bad.” Rising up I nearly crashed into his head.

This was enough to set me off again, and as the overture played, I pranced out, the only Hot Box girl with glistening puffy eyes.

After the show, Jim gave me a new adlib line for the “Take Back Your Mink” number, and I gave Jim my copy of the libretto for *Cole*.

In the days that followed, I wasn’t used to that amount of free time I suddenly had. There was little for me to do in the shop. I kept working on the Tuesday and Wednesday evening show *Belle of Amherst*. Serious about gaining all the experience I could out of this apprenticeship, I volunteered to help backstage. I was the only apprentice to do this. Mary Crabtree starred in this one-woman show and I designed and ran sound for it. I fell in love with Emily Dickinson because of her performance.

Mary was also the playhouse owner and costume designer. She came to the apprentice house a few evenings after my removal to get measurements. While Debbie and Patrice were fitted for their costumes, I sat pretending to read a book. Before leaving, Mary gave me a sideways hug, which felt like pity. Although I was disappointed, I understood that I did not meet the vocal requirement.

The days grew more awkward until a week later, when at the close of the Friday evening performance, I ran into Jim backstage, caught his eye, and quickly looked away.

“How are you, Cathy?”

Unable to avoid him, I said, “I’m fine, Jim.”

“Good, good.”

Feigning poise, I asked, “Do you have a copy of *Bus Stop*? We’re doing it this fall at my university, MTSU, and I want to prepare for the audition.”

“I’ll look. You would make a great Cherie.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, it’s a perfect role for you.”

“Yeah, and there’s only one song, and she’s supposed to sing off-key,” we both laughed.

With this exchange, things began to feel normal.

When the other apprentices left for rehearsal the following Monday, I was to wait at the house for Mary. Just before noon, her black Cadillac arrived and we exchanged our uncomfortable hellos as we headed out for lunch.

As we drove, she spoke. “I am really sorry about what happened with *Cole*. Jim is no longer the director of the show. He’s too busy and asked if I could take over. I told him I would on one condition.”

“Oh,” I said, to let her know I was listening.

“I told him I admire your dedication and I wanted you back in the show.”

“But, Mary, I don’t sing well.”

“I know this, and you know this, but the audience doesn’t have to know.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Look, all the other girls are short or heavy and my costume designs need your tall thin silhouette to make at least one dress look good. So, here’s my idea. You learn all the lyrics and the choreography, but you will only mouth the words and not make a sound. Just be there and look beautiful.”

The bargain was struck. I looked fabulous in the off-the-shoulder black with silver sequins dress, I danced flawlessly, and I lip-synced the entire libretto.

In Act Two, I sat on the edge of the stage with Bob, my partner, night after night; I mimed all the lyrics, gazing into his eyes looking the part of lovers in love. Every now and then, a note or two would squawk out, and Bob would squeeze my hand reminding me to hush. My head tossed back in laughter at our private joke. At the curtain call, we received the most applause. The audience adored us. If Bob felt slighted getting paired with me, he never said so.

As for me, I was content being allowed to participate. More importantly, that was the summer I learned the valuable lesson on how to make the most of my attributes.

Author's Commentary:

"Why write if I'm happy?" has been my adage. As a teenager, my journaling was a place of solace, and I grew dependent on the aid. But, what does a writer do once the tough stories are told? The answer to this paradox came when I was in graduate school. My fellow students thought I told humorous anecdotes, and encouraged me to explore the art of comicality in my nonfiction. They say comedy is "tragedy plus time," so for this short memoir piece I turned to one of the most humiliating experiences of my life when I was a young theatre student. I tried to capture the awkwardness, the embarrassment, and most of all, the story behind learning to make the most of my strengths, minimize my weaknesses, and accept disappointment. I focused on dialogue to convey the narrative and provide the universal humor of this coming-of-age understanding, that although we do not always succeed in life, sometimes our failings teach us the most.

The Sun Sets (Over and Over Again)

by Joshua Best

Devin sat on a stool atop a hill overlooking the pier. Tiny dots frisked about like ants on a wafer and Devin painted the scene on his canvas, covering blank whiteness with full images of life as he saw it. The sun was setting, the subtle sea consuming the brilliant gold, ramifying the brilliance and embracing the people on the pier without them knowing of its benevolence. The pier from Devin's perspective atop the hill, bare and without vegetation, was clean and orderly. He couldn't see the discarded funnel cakes and melted ice cream. He saw only dark boards and enormous Ferris wheels and colorful booths. Devin saw cars pulling in and pulling out of the lots and he only included the few he found pleasing in his picture. The sun was very bright and it dominated his scene, unbeknownst to the acting ants on the pier.

After many hours, he was finished and the moon dominated the cloudless sky. The air was cold and the breeze wasn't being kind atop the hill. Devin looked at his painting and smiled. The sun was immortalized in the painting while the real thing blessed the other side of the world. Warm and cozy. *It'd be nice to fall asleep inside the sun.* Devin wrapped up his easel and set in his bags and suitcase, lighter than when he got there, and set off down the hill--satisfied and feeling alive and proud of his work. He passed grateful trees and smiling leaves, felt gratifying wind in his hair and pinecones dropped to the ground to congratulate him. The ground beneath his feet yielded to his every step and his tread was lighter than feathers.

When he reached the bottom of the hill and the pale light of the moon hounded him as he traversed the crowded walkways, Devin doubted his step. He nudged and apologized for his clumsiness. He stepped on others' shoes and tripped on curbs. People frowned. "Watch where in the hell you're walking, stupid! Eyes must be crossed *and* blind." Devin threw his painting into the back of his car, assured in its ugliness and lack of worth. *Just like all the others. Can't walk straight, can't paint straight. Worthless.*

Devin drove home in a monotonous haze. The traffic kept him in his lane and his eyes on the road. The blinding lights seared his eyes but kept him alive on the roadways and awake enough to get himself home. And home was dark. His girlfriend must be at the bar again. Devin had left his key inside before he left. *The woman never said she'd be going out tonight. Has she ever?* Devin smacked himself in the face. *My fault.* He squatted at the door and resisted the overwhelming urge to kick the door down. *Wouldn't be strong enough anyway.* The urge passed and he found his phone in his car. Three texts from his mother. She missed him. She wanted to see him again, not with his girlfriend. Mom and dad were watching the finale of their favorite show and wanted to know what Devin thought. Devin ignored the texts and called his girlfriend. He looked up at the moon and frowned at it and the stars which smiled at him.

“Hello,” said Devin’s girlfriend. He could hear music and crowds trying to engulf her. “What’s up?”

“I locked myself out of the house again,” said Devin.

“Oh my God. I just got out here, Devin.”

“I’m sorry. Listen, I’ll just come to you and—“

“No! No. I’ll come let you in, just . . .” She whispered to somebody but Devin couldn’t make heads or tails of it. “Just wait a . . .”

“It’s alright, baby. I’ll figure something out. Did you lock the backdoor?”

He heard her talking to somebody else on the other end.

“Did you lock the backdoor?”

Nothing but crowds and music and laughter and drinks and shouts and lack of answers. Devin ended the phone call and dropped his phone into his pocket. He went around the back and forced the side-gate open. A fleeting moment of pride. Strong as the average man is strong. Devin tried the backdoor but it was locked too. Failure. Typical bad luck. His cat sat on the mat inside and looked at him, laughing at him, surely. “Laugh it up,” said Devin. “Laugh it up.”

Devin turned around and looked at the moon again. Big and round and white tonight. *Can’t stand for how bright the moon is, and those mocking stars, so far away not doing a damn thing for here.* Devin went to his car and sat in the back seat. Wait and wait and wait. *She will be back home before the sun gets back.* He unwrapped his painting and stared at it. *Should have waited for it to dry. Now it’s smeared and ugly. A hazy, incoherent image of oversaturated motifs. Tried time and time again with much failure and no success. Everyone sees the sun; fools try to paint it.* Devin painted it, though it’s been done before. *How many thousands of souls had painted the sun? How many worthless attempts to capture what every soul has seen?*

Devin got out of the car and set the painting behind the back wheel. He got into the driver’s seat, started the car, and paused. He turned off the engine, got out, and picked up his painting again. He hugged it, apologized to it. He looked up at the moon and gave it the finger. He looked back down at his painting. *My poor child, ruined and desolate. Your creator ruined you with oversight and carelessness. Time is what you needed to grow sure and sharp. Time, instead, was spent and rushed and it destroyed the beauty of you. I’m so sorry.*

Devin gently placed the painting back into the car and sat beside it, his head in his hands. Wait and wait and wait. Time is always worse to those who are waiting for something. Time is annoying, so superlative, relative, crushing narratives, highly repetitive. *Away with time and I’d be much happier.* All would be infinite, and all would be well. Wait and wait and wait.

A taxi pulled up in front of the driveway. Devin jumped up, painting in his arms and watched his girlfriend stumble up to the door with her purse in one hand and a bottle of cologne, her phone, and a bottle of water in the other. He took her arm and helped her search her purse for the keys. Condoms, gum, mints, deodorant, coke, and . . . keys. Devin unlocked the door and helped his girlfriend to bed. “Here,” she said, one eye open and one closed. “I want you to start wearing this.” She handed him the cologne.

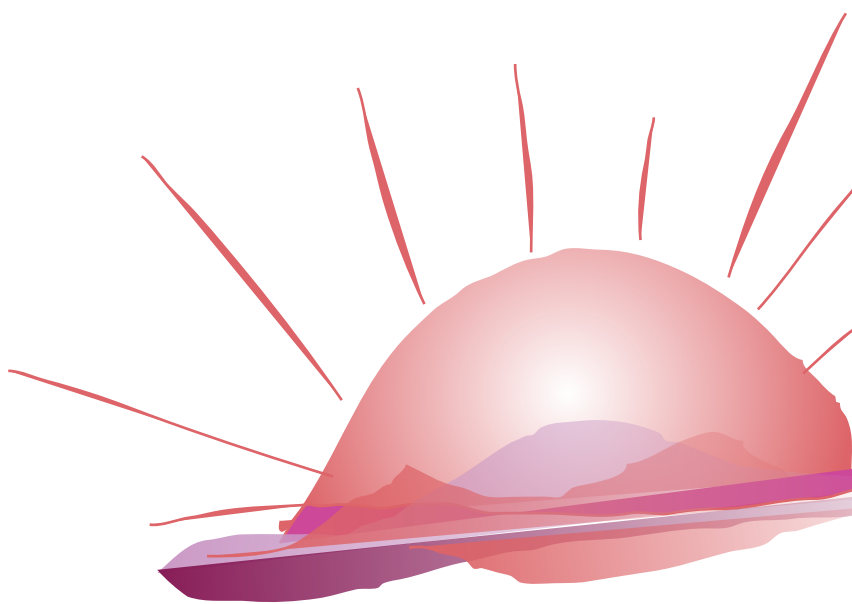
“Alright,” said Devin.

“Goodnight, Dylan.”

“Goodnight, baby.” And he threw the cologne in the trash where it clinked and cracked with the others.

Devin set the painting on the couch and lay next to it. He stared at the dry ceiling and jutted out his jaw. Think, try to think, but it’s all blank like a canvas. He looked at his painting. *God, it’s beautiful but so worthless.* He closed his eyes. *Sleep, try to sleep, but it’s all crowded and confusing and I’m stumbling and walking on shoes and tripping on curbs.* He opened his eyes. Dry ceiling, moonlight trickling in, illuminating nothing, and . . .

Worthless. Wait and wait and wait. The sun should be coming back soon. Back to the hill overlooking the pier. Another painting. Another triumph. Another failure. Another night. Another time. Another sun. Another moon. Another . . . Another . . . Another . . .



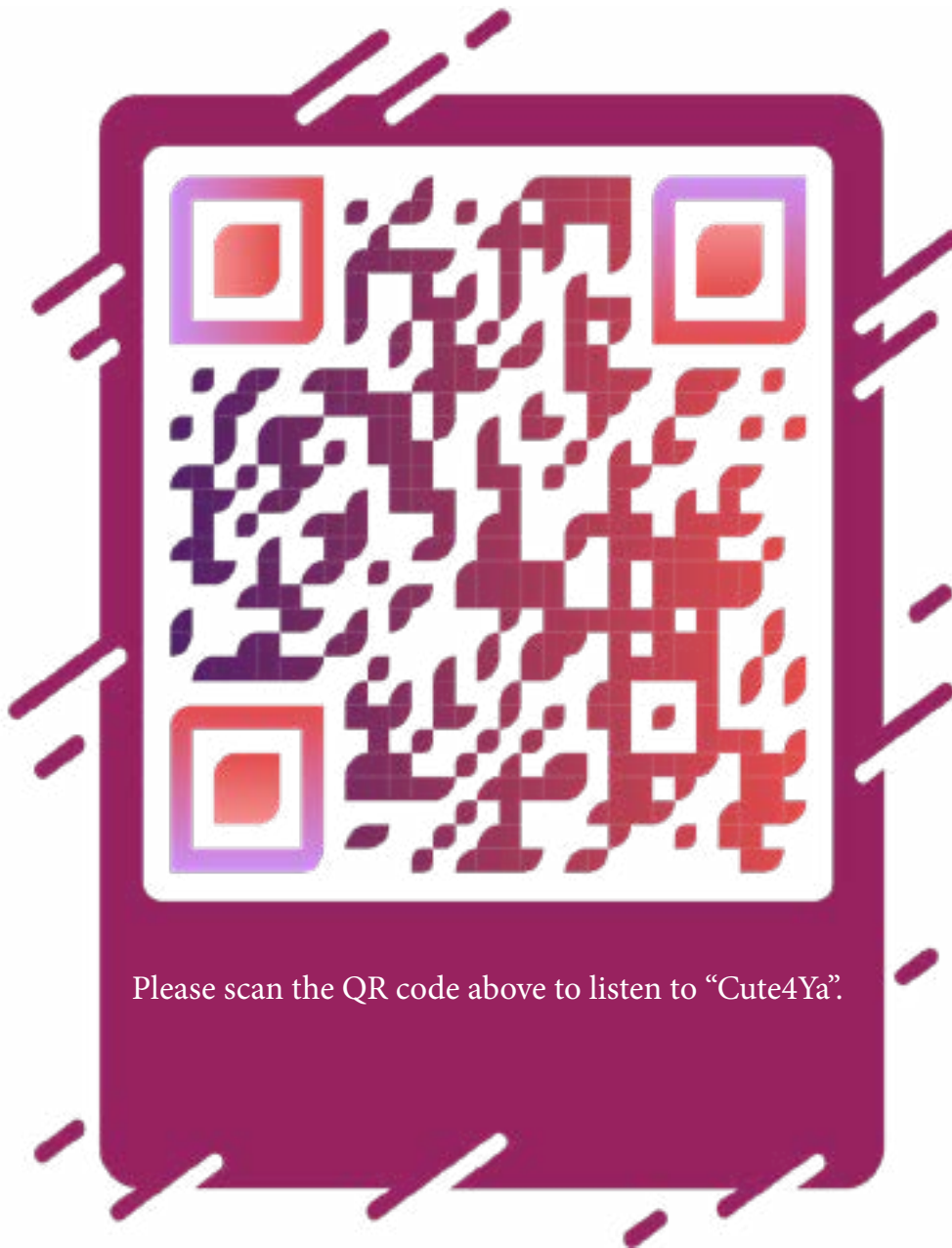
Author’s Commentary:

My writing inspirations are innumerable, but for this specific piece I was inspired by the common plight I’ve seen artists go through. Van Gogh, specifically, has a story which has been particularly engrossing for me for many years now. I try with my utmost abilities to convey a raw truth of human consciousness as I understand it, and I believe some stories and opinions go unvalued by the masses today. People go unheard, unappreciated, unseen. I attempt in everything I write to give a voice to people who have trouble speaking or articulating how their world is. Empathy is unfortunately becoming a bygone trait, ceasing to be relevant, drowning in the increasingly murky past. So, my inspiration is always the underdog, if you will. All the true artists I have known have been underdogs.

If I learned anything from the experience of writing this short piece, I learned about a certain worldview I didn’t know I shared. I didn’t realize how much I appreciated something that once seemed as simple and routine as sunlight. But in the process of writing this story, it dawned on me how much I love the sun.

Cute4Ya

by Audrey Rose Conley



Artist's Commentary:

This song was fully inspired by the first time I heard the beat. My friend Prodyuu sent it to me, and I thought "this is the cutest thing ever." I instantly felt in tune with it and started writing with dreamy eyes about how I wanna feel when I'm with someone. It's all about love, support, trust, and being with someone that makes you wanna go that extra mile.

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