Instress

Journal of the Arts

2020

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Instress has been published by the students of Misericordia since December 1966. The word *instress* was coined by Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Bernadette Waterman Ward describes instress thus: "Instress is an action of the will—a moral action, for good or evil. Instress is assent, to use Newman's term, to an inscape. To call out an inscape is a pleasure, though not one necessarily leading to God; . . . But the ability to see and instress inscapes is the imaginative faculty that makes love possible." *Instress* at Misericordia is therefore an opportunity of the artistic and literary imagination to make possible something—call it *love* or even *grandeur*—like the following, from Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur":

> . . .
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

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Waves

Kayla Binner

The waves roll
with certain firmness
towards the shore.
It's as if,
with determination,
they have some place to go.
Do they reach it?
I do not know.
They must, because they recede,
and quietly return
home.

An Evening Boat Ride



Megan Oldak

Stray

Kayli Boyes

I'll come running back,
A stray baying outside your door.
Humility cast aside in preparation for an attack,
Once again, my entire self has fallen prey to your lure.
Feed me love and compassion in regulated portions.
Just enough, but not quite, so that I'll grovel at your feet.
Speak the spell, do the deed, instill the false notions,
That this love is eternal and can withstand defeat.
A creature of habit, I go back to what I know,
Which is nothing but bountiful false hope,
Words devoid of meaning,
And the cotton placed in my mouth that prevents the word, "No."
Forever a humble servant, your will has been mine since the Beginning.
The shackles have been removed, what's a free man to do?
Answer is quite simple; I'll just crawl home to you.

Shipwrecked

Juliana Cofrancesco

Once we were just little girls, bright eyes that held such wonder. We stared in awe at the magnitude of a ship coming to rest from weeks at sea, and feeling adventurous, hopped on the ship the day it was to leave port, unaware of the other's presence. This is where our story begins. Don't you remember? I shyly asked if I could play with you and you gladly opened your arms. Upon the smooth wooden boards, we raced, and rolled, and laughed as particles of salt cascaded in gentle waves from our wet hair. The crew thought we were as lively as the Sea, and humor dotted the sternness of their eyes, showing the full spectrum of human emotion that lays buried deep beneath the confines of human flesh. I was always able to read your eyes: those big brown orbs that held such life, such spirit. We would stare into the sun, squinting our eyes as we recounted tales of our past and imagined our future, the saltwater gently rocking the ship to ease the storm we did not know was brewing.

I wait at the bow of the ship, thinking of all I have done for you. It is not a frivolous love that glorified heavy gems and beaded conversations that hang so daintily and false upon a woman's powdered breast. It is not the love of a lover who woos and swoons whenever our eyes meet, and I do whatever in my might to impress you— I only care about being honest. The love I share for you is agapeic in nature, and I would do anything just for you . . . But you have forgotten our vows; you have discarded our carvings on the bottom of the mast we used to run around as children, and you cry pardon to a Sun that was our only witness to the converging of our souls.

So I sit, like a fool, and wait for a friend that no longer exists. The sea and my tears have become so interchangeable that the waves no longer leap with joy but sing mournful hymns while weighing life down and dragging it towards its watery grave. I hear the whisperings of the crew: they gossip behind our backs and wonder if hurricane season has come early to this part of the world. They remain indoors all they can . . . They do not want to be caught in any crossfire. Not that you're aware of any of this. You're so far up your own ass that you can't even see

that you've become the one thing we swore to never be. You broke your promise, and with that, the spell has ended and I see you in your true form: a selfish.

You tell sweet lies to fool yourself, but I am not so easily tricked by honeyed words meant for trapping gullible creatures in your weak wit. You planned on abandoning ship the minute you saw him, and you never thought of anyone's feelings. Do you know how my blood has bubbled and boiled until the raging burn is normalized, and all I feel is a dull heat in my chest? It feels like I am slowly dying from the inside out, and no amount of water can quench the pain. You leave without a second glance, your raven hair whipping behind you in a tangled mess. I needed your help that night. The deep swells began to capsize the boat, blue and black water shaking the ship like an old toy on the verge of breaking. Alone, I am left alone in the darkness.

Crack.

The ship splinters into serrated daggers that the sea violently claims as its own. There is nothing calm left out on the horizon, the bottle has finally popped and the model ship inside is left to the mercy of its holder.

And if we were to cross paths again, you would say you never meant to hurt me. But you can't hurt me anymore than you already have, for you have left me shipwrecked.

Perception

Ayanna Dexter

Aren't we all the same?
Of course, you may not see it that way, but we are.
We all may think differently, but in all reality,
Isn't our thinking differently the same?
Is the color of your blood the same as mine?
Maybe, maybe not.
While I sit and believe the color of my blood is red,
You may perceive yours to be blue,
Right?
What about the way we feel?
When your heart breaks, are you not heartbroken the way I am?

A Place Can Change You



Kristin Kuntzman

Cries from a Flower

Jessica Johnson

The warm heat hit my face as the rays from the sunlight entered my room. It's another morning, another morning to be nourished and grow. I'm excited today to be loved and cared for. I wait patiently to be watered, all my flaws to be plucked away; but as the day goes by, no one shows to tend to my needs. I sit there in my window watching the day turn into night and the night into day again. I am becoming dry and malnourished; I am discolored and depressed like an old silk cloth wading in the sun. My bright confidence is gone, my head hangs low like the weeping willow. My strength is gone, I am now weak and lethargic. I can feel my roots crumbling beneath me like gravel being stepped upon.

The day turned into night once more. I can feel myself fading away. Everything that was once beautiful about me is now a thing of the past. I can feel myself slipping into the darkness, the place you go when all hope is gone. That night, I felt my soul die. It was only a matter of time before the rest of Me followed.

Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? The darkness was darker than ever. I've never seen darkness so dark. I closed my eyes to accept what I thought was the end. I opened my eyes . . . what is this? It was daytime again.

A Bloom in the Night



Adam Myers

Funny

Noni Silas

Glued to the couch no more,
Temporary stay,
Hands no longer cold,
Toes no longer frozen,
But the pain still lingers,
A stabbing feeling
A jolt of electricity sends me back
To a place of darkness

Never long but just long enough
To make me sink back into the couch cushion.
My fear of the outside world fades
Seeing the happiness that spreads across their faces
And I realize that I smile as well.
Not fake or painted, but
True happiness
Even if it does last for a while,
Even if it lasts as long as my darkness,

My happiness is true,
Extraordinary,
And long lasting.

Bear and Mole



Annette Ritzko



Angela Alaimo O'Donnell is a writer, poet, and professor at Fordham University in New York City where she teaches English, Creative Writing, and American Catholic Studies. She also serves as Associate Director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. O'Donnell is a graduate of Penn State University and holds a Master's and Ph.D. in English Language & Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. O'Donnell offered a Master Class on Flannery O'Connor and a poetry reading in 2019 at Misericordia University followed by her poetic introduction at the Misericordia Winter Commencement 2019.

Preface: Mercy on the Mountain

Greetings, Misericordia Class of 2019!

I am honored to be here with you today and honored to deliver the Invocation, a poem I have written for you to celebrate this great occasion. I'd like to say a few words about the poem before I read it.

"Mercy on the Mountain" is written in a form I have invented based on the classic Sestina form. It consists of 8 stanzas, each of which has 8 lines. Each line in each stanza ends with these same 8 words:

Grace, Face, Hearts, Arts, Learning, Yearning, Duty, and Beauty

As I recite the poem, you will hear these 8 words come back again and again, in different locations in each stanza and used in different ways, the meanings of the words slightly morphing and changing.

Repetition is a form of music, and the idea is to create a kind of celebratory song. The words form a kind of mantra or refrain.

Repetition is also a pattern often used in prayer. We tend to pray for the same things again and again. No matter how much our lives may

change, no matter how much time may pass, truths remain constant, resist the flux of time and change.

Thus, the poem is both a song and a prayer.

Second, "Mercy on the Mountain" is set here, in the Back Mountain of Northeastern Pennsylvania, a place native to me. This poem is a celebration of the gifts that have been given to us by Misericordia University and by its founders, the Sisters of Mercy. It is also a celebration of you and the work this education has prepared you for.

Mercy on the Mountain

A Prayer for the Graduate Commencement,
Misericordia University, May 11th, 2019

Do Justice,
Love Mercy,
Walk humbly with thy God.
—Micah 6:8

Earth is a fact, Mercy is a grace
that grounds us here, teaches us to face
the hard, hard world that wants to break our hearts.
But Mercy saves us. Practice in the arts
of love and justice is holy learning,
the only kind that satisfies our yearning
to serve and do our human duty,
to flood the world with God's own beauty.

It starts at the arch. The road to the heart
of our journey begins in this place of grace.
Here every science, here every art
is revered and offered. The radiant face
of knowledge shines in all her beauty.
There is joy in our work, joy in our duty.
And yet there is no end to our yearning.
We keep on growing. We keep on learning.

And why would we not? This gift and grace
of education wears Mercy's face.
It guides us to the beating heart
of wisdom. *How Great Thou Art*
a song we sing whose truth we're learning
even as it feeds our yearning
to practice goodness, do God's duty,
enact justice, be-come beauty.

With this good brain and this good heart
we can set the world on fire. Part
the waters and calm the seas, grace
the world with words that please, face
evil with certainty, do the duty
Mercy teaches us to do, the beauty
that comes to me and you through learning
while Mercy stirs and spurs our yearning.

But then this brain. But then this heart.
There is no limit to the duty
they might do. What kind of beauty
depends on merely human art?
None. For Mercy is the grace
that lets us become the living face
of God, the goal of all our yearning,
all our labor and all our learning.

Thanks for this brain. Thanks for this heart.
Thanks for this work. Thanks for this art.
Thanks for the deep demands of duty.
Thanks for these lives in need of beauty.
Thanks for leading us through learning.
Thank you for planting in us this yearning.
Thank you for hope. Thanks for the grace
to see that Mercy hasn't just one face.

We've spent our lives acquiring learning,
mastered our minds and mastered our art,

driven by discipline, fired by yearning,
to do the work that will heal the heart,
restore the body, brighten the face
of the suffering soul in need of grace.
Mercy's a joy, Mercy's a duty,
Mercy is all we know of beauty.

Earth is a fact, Mercy is a grace
that grounds us here, teaches us to face
the hard, hard world that wants to break our hearts.
But Mercy saves us. Practice in the arts
of love and justice is holy learning,
the only kind that satisfies our yearning.
Let us go forth and do our human duty.
Let us flood the world with our own beauty.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell
Fordham University

Venus Flytrap

Deidra Cali

I think I'd best compare our non-relationship to that of a Venus flytrap and its prey. You open your mouth and I am so drawn to your sickening, soothing sweetness, poison masqueraded as ambrosia.

So drawn to you that I sacrifice my own body to have some kind of physical contact with you; I'd gladly let you swallow me whole if it meant I could kiss your lips for even a single second. You snap yourself shut whenever I get a little too close and I am trapped, a prisoner of my yearning.

Oh, how I can love so hard that I'd fall for temporary sweetness without thinking of its bitter aftertaste.

You're a carnivorous plant and I'm so f***ing vulnerable, because really, what else is there to be in this world?

Focus



Megan Oldak

Achilles and Patroclus: A Ballad

Lauren Schuster

Lay me to rest, ashes mingled with yours.
We whisper words behind closed doors
Ariadne winds her thread
and knots our fates in crimson red.
Our fates are mirrored like twin stars—
a tragic romance, but it's Ours.
My final oath on dying breath:
I swore I'd love you until death.

Lay me to rest, ashes mingled with yours,
Signed dearest Achilles,

forever yours.

Before It's Gone



Kristin Kuntzman

The Daughter of the Kingdom

Leah Brown

"Through the arch, down the main street, past the vendors, to the gates, ask for the King, give him the letter."

This mantra was one the girl in the purple cloak murmured to herself as her eyes hovered anxiously on the entrance of the royal city. She felt incredibly small, subconsciously gripping her cloak tighter. She was accustomed to grassy fields and humming cicadas, not the boisterous shouting and hurried footsteps of what felt like thousands of people. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through the arch, the cobblestones bumpy beneath her leather boots.

"Down the main street, past the vendors, to the gates . . ."

Head down and face hooded, she hastened her movements toward the castle looming in the distance. She clung to her murmured chant, the words making her task seem less daunting, less impossible. She remembered her mentor's many warnings: *"Don't show your face until you're within the castle gates. Keep my name on your tongue; it's your master key. And if he doesn't take the letter…"*

She took a shaky breath, the intensity of the words seared into her long-term memory. She felt the icy fingers of her mentor digging into her shoulders as she stared into her soul and delivered her final instructions.

"*Burn it."*

The envelope felt like a hunk of lead in her pocket. She passed through the noisy, crowded marketplace where eager vendors presented their wares to anyone willing to make eye contact. However, she stared straight ahead in the hopes of not attracting any unwanted attention. The bustling city was overwhelming to her, almost claustrophobic, and she could not afford to be dragged within its embrace. Attention was her enemy, and she knew to keep herself enigmatic.

"To the gates, ask for the King, give him the letter."

She stared up at the golden castle gates with wide eyes, amazed that anyone could call such a place their home. The King had been scheduled to return from a campaign with a handful of soldiers, who paraded down the main street toward the castle. She saw a head of graying raven hair and a branded shoulder, the ink dark and eye-catching in the sunlight. While she was too far away to make out the design in the moment, she knew it to be an arch with a circle beneath its apex. The King had endured a great war in his youth, one that had seen the reigning Queen perish and himself ascend the throne. He and his surviving soldiers had agreed on the brand to commemorate their success. Her mentor had chosen to have her brand on her right hand.

"Ask for the King, give him the letter."

Pushing her way through the cheering crowd, the girl managed to get close enough to see the merriment of the King and his guard. The soldiers began to spill inside, quite raucous in their conversations and movements as the King laughed along with them. The girl was taken aback by this supposed ruler—no glimmering crown, no fur-lined cape, no stoicism and pompous air.

She took another step forward, the toe of her boot barely stepping out of the jostling mob before a soldier with gleaming armor stood before her. The King disappeared from her view. Her pulse quickened as her heart plummeted into her stomach.

"Step back, miss. We wouldn't want you to be injured."

She craned her neck, stepping to the side and nearly daring to weave around the imposing knight. He may have been strong, but she was small and swift and always on her toes. The knight's eyes narrowed as he attempted to peer into her hooded face.

"Ask for the King, give him the letter."

"Miss, may I help you?

"I have to speak to the King," she stated, trying to keep him in her sights through the sea of bobbing heads.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid His Majesty desires some rest after his journey. You'll have to make arrangements for some other time."

"But I have this letter," she explained hurriedly, pulling a yellowing envelope from her pocket. She kept an iron-grip on the parchment, refusing to hand it off to anyone but its intended recipient.

"From whom, may I ask?"

She glanced around nervously, not wanting to say the name too loudly. "It's from Her Majesty Queen Perdita," she whispered.

The King stopped in his tracks. The girl froze, fearing she had made a grave error at evoking such a name. Queen Perdita had disappeared from the kingdom roughly fifteen years prior. She had left a note to the King in her chamber upon her vanishing, begging him not to look for her and to watch after their two children in her stead. Her love was unwavering, but, for reasons unknown, she had to leave the castle and her family behind.

The soldier looked taken aback, almost appalled. "Miss, how dare you—"

"Send her in."

The soldier looked at the King with shock as he approached, leaving the young girl shaking in her boots. "But, milord . . ."

"I said, let her in."

Begrudgingly, the knight moved aside, allowing the girl to step forward and follow the King inside the castle gates, which closed with a metallic thud. The King turned to face the hooded girl, and her breath caught in her throat. She had dreamed for years of meeting the man who stood before her, of even speaking a few words in his presence. Although he was clearly older than the hero of her bedtime stories, the King's blue

eyes still shone with the intensity and liveliness she had imagined they would.

"So, this letter you speak of . . . ?"

Nodding, she thrust the envelope in his direction. "It's from Her Majesty Queen Perdita."

The King eyed her skeptically. He gingerly took the letter, running his fingers over the elegant cursive writing on the front. "This is her handwriting," he whispered, a sad smile crossing his face. "It's been so long since I've seen it."

The girl fidgeted nervously as she watched the King's eyes scan over the letter. She hadn't been told what had been written, and she feared what details the paper might contain. For a moment, he froze, looking at the girl who stood before him with pure shock.

"What?" she asked, suddenly self-conscious. "Is something wrong?"

"Hold on," he mumbled, rushing through the words of his wife, of the woman he couldn't seem to forget. He cleared his throat, shakily tucking the envelope into his pocket. "Thank you very much for getting this to me."

She nodded, sadness closing around her heart. She wanted to talk to him, to ask him questions, but her job had been completed to perfection. *"Through the arch, down the main street, past the vendors, to the gates, ask for the King, give him the letter."* There was no "answer his questions," no "appeal to his emotions," nothing more to say or do for fear that if she tread any closer, she might never allow herself to leave.

The King stared at her with an expression she couldn't quite read. "Could you remove your hood?"

The girl tensed. Taking a deep breath, she did as she was told, revealing a pale face with bright blue eyes. Her long brown hair was tied back and tucked into her cloak.

The King let out a strangled gasp. "You look just like her," he breathed, his voice far away. "Just like her."

The girl felt herself smile. "Thank you," she whispered.

"My daughter . . ."

The King couldn't process the sight before him: excluding the striking eyes that mirrored his own, she looked exactly like her mother. The Queen must not have known she was pregnant when she fled that fateful night. She must have raised their youngest all on her own. The thought made tears gather in his eyes.

"Is she . . . ?"

Slowly but surely, the girl repositioned her hood, not wanting her emotions to betray her intentions. "She fell ill two years ago and passed away. I've been on my own since then. She was as brilliant a mother as she was a mentor."

She took a few more small, hesitant steps backward as the King began to pour over the letter once again, his eyes scanning furtively for answers he would never find. Her mentor would be anxious for her to return, she knew, and it was not in her best interest to keep her waiting.

"This letter doesn't even give me your name," the King remarked, laughing a bit to himself. "Though I suppose I could just—"

The King froze, his words hanging in the air. His daughter had vanished, and he almost questioned whether she had even been before him at all. He noticed the castle gates were ever so slightly ajar.

The girl breathed heavily as she hurried down the main street, past the vendors, as far from the gates as her feet would carry her. The King's questions would have only worsened her situation, and she doubted the King would still welcome her if he had discovered her deception. Besides, she had higher orders, more imperative goals to complete.

After all, Her Majesty was waiting.

The Castle



Kayli Boyes

I Wish We Lasted

Peyton Ross

Veins pump liquor into my brain;
walls dance in place as I crawl,
swim, to the door that leads me to him.
Opening, creaking, my eyes focusing,
peering in, his face so endearing;
sleeping, he's dreaming, and I am leaping
to him, his arms a place I knew.
Wrap them around me, close the gap,
pressing against me, caressing
my hair, his hand rests on my thigh.
Breathing slowing, hearts beating,
skin glowing, lips sipping on gin
sleep creeping in, but this I want to keep.

Eyes fluttering, a lovely sunrise,
lonely surprise, empty, myself only
left lying here, missing his chest.
Was he here? Or was it the beer?

I hope it wasn't the alcohol.

Flip Your Perspective

Christina Celona

I am unworthy of love
I do not believe that
I can transcend my pain
And it is apparent that
I can't achieve my dreams
Nobody can tell me that
When I change my perspective
I will find happiness within
This anxiety will persist forever
It is outrageous to think that
I am strong enough

Reflective



Megan Oldak

Dunamis

Kristin Kuntzman

Earthly things and Earthly beings
are merely here to show us
the immensity of eternity.
What we have within us
is meant to show us
Who we are meant to go to.

We spend far too long searching for
worldly acceptance
When we already have it from the one
Who holds the Universe.

How much easier
Would it be if we recognized
The Jesus that lives in each of us.

But, we are human.

Indecision

Kayli Boyes

Yes, no. Yes, no.
Don't you fret, it's only my heart on your yo-yo.
Oh, you need time?
Okay, just waste my own with vacant promises of being mine.
It's perfectly alright, what's there to lose really? Nothing!
Except precious years, emotions, and my sanity!
On, off. On, off. Can't decide which?
These feelings get more action than an average light switch.
But everything is fine! Everything is just . . . *perfect.*
I desired more but by now this is what I should expect.
Nothing more, nothing less, nothing in between.
Your "almost" is the greatest waged war my heart has ever seen.
Years I've sat, waiting for your decision.
Never going to get it with a personification of indecision.

Weeping Willow

Kayla Binner

The man in the grey suit hated surprises. Surprises meant disorder and he did not have any room for disorder in his perfect life. He did not like waking up to a cloudy day when the weatherman said it would be sunny. He demanded that his crooked haircuts be fixed. He plotted routes around sidewalks with excessive cracks. Most of all, he avoided his neighbor, a woman with red hair. Whenever he ran into her, there were always surprises.

The last time he saw her, he scolded her for wearing a polka dotted shirt over striped pants. She simply cocked her head at him, a lock of stray red hair falling into her eyes. Her face was covered in a constellation of freckles. They were so disordered. "Life is too short," was all she said. Then she adjusted the camera hanging around her neck and strode away.

On this particular day, the man in the grey suit could not get away from the disorder he despised. His alarm did not go off. His paper was not delivered. His coffee pot handle broke off in his hand.

He hoped to regain his routine at his job, but it was no better there. The copier broke. He lost his biggest customer in sales. His boss wore a mismatched outfit. He figured that she would not take criticism as lightly as the girl with the red hair.

Desperate for a sense of normalcy, he walked swiftly to the park. It was the only place that he could find peace. He slowed when he reached his favorite part—a paved walk by the side of the river lined with willow trees. The man in the grey suit adored the orderliness of the willows. He loved the way the wind lifted the branches in the air, destroying their regularity, only to have them return to their normal state. To him, it represented how life worked. Chaos happened sometimes, but it always had a peaceful, orderly resolution in the end.

Just as he was passing two people in dark suits, he detected movement.

He looked up to see the girl with the red hair poised and ready to take a picture. There was the distant sound of a shutter clicking. She put the camera down to review the picture. The wind swirled the red hair around her face like a fiery storm cloud. The man in the grey suit approached her, his face set in a frown. He confronted her about the picture. She only smiled, crinkles forming at the sides of her eyes. "Look at this picture," she said. "Look at it and tell me it isn't beautiful, even though it is out of the ordinary."

The man in the grey suit looked at the picture. At first, it looked like nothing was different. The branches of the weeping willow still pointed down. Then, he realized that the picture was sideways. She had caught the moment when the wind lifted all the tree branches sideways and somehow made it look as though they were at rest. He saw himself, deep in thought, jutting out horizontally from the tilted earth. The picture struck a chord within him. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again.

The girl with the red hair nodded at him and walked away.

As he watched her, he noticed that she was wearing different colored socks, but he found that he did not even mind. She was right. There was something beautiful in the abnormal. There was something beautiful in the disorder.

Together in Spirit

Ayanna Dexter

I must prepare my heart for what's to come. Going from being with you every day, just one on one. I thought I had it all planned out, but not this time. Every hour, minute, and second of the day— there's no way that you don't cross my mind. Not one moment is erased from the times we've shared. I'll see you again one day soon because our love has always been declared. With this promise ring, I wear faithfully every day, you won't ever have to think of me giving your love away!

I'm Tired



Annette Ritzko

Common Sense. By: A Teacher's Pain

Juliana Cofrancesco

Wouldn't it be common sense
If students could only see
Couldn't it be common sense

Shouldn't it be common sense
That I am here to guide them, to be the best that they can be
Wouldn't it be common sense

I worry at my own mind's expense
At their own fragility
Couldn't it be common sense

And if I push them to be better, they go on the defense
They want to be "cool" exhibiting "normalcy"
Wouldn't it be common sense

Putting up a mass pretense
They care not for self-pride and responsibility
Couldn't it be common sense

With bated breath, the bell rings and I wait in suspense
They should act upon agency and follow academic policy
But shouldn't it be common sense?
It isn't common sense

Eden

Lauren Schuster

The rivers clear in Eden run,
While in the grove the sunlight plays.
The roses blossom one by one
As languidly do pass the days.

Your fingers tangle through my hair
Distracted, yes, but ever calm.
I lean against your chest and there
We find repose in nature's song.

As Eden's gates loom rusted, torn,
I do not waver, do not fear.
I find myself in you reborn,
Still resolute since you are here.

Our love is ever verdant in
The deep of winter, or in rain.
Your truest beauty lies within,
Beyond the gaze of mortals plain.

Your fingers interlace with mine—
Two souls in balance intertwine.
Your love shall warm me after death
And keep me safe 'til final breaths.

Receiving Happiness



Ayanna Dexter

A Matter of Life and Death

Leah Brown

In the beginning, there was no wind, no sound, no existence whatsoever. The nothingness was just *there*, this oddly present absence. Then maybe it turned away for a moment, maybe blinked for a split second, and there they were: Life, in her beauty and splendor, and Death, his aura of gloom and pain almost suffocating. There was a world, with dark forests and glistening waters, with creatures that traveled in packs and beings that evolved from brutes to civilization. But this world, with all its planets and endless galaxies, had an edge, a cliff where Life and Death appeared, where they overlook everything they inexplicably have a hold of.

But of course, they did not always sit there, were not always the heavenly queen and heartless king of the world as we know it. Life had to come first for Death to follow.

From her first moment of existence, Life was carefree, her soul like a butterfly freshly burst from its cocoon, her eyes as sparkling as the stars that burned in space. She gazed over the world like an awe-filled child, amazed at how the plants could grow, how the animals could run, how the people could think and feel and love. Life fell down at the edge of the cliff with a bumbling flourish, a giggle erupting from her throat. She ran her fingers through the long, verdant grass, watching joyfully as tiny pink flowers poked their way through the soil simply at her touch. Everything felt right, looked right, sounded . . .

Wait.

She felt the scream before she heard it. It was ever so faint from her raised seat at the ceiling of the universe, but she could not place the anguished sound, had never heard anything quite like it before. The scream was quick, abrupt, and then ceased entirely. Life felt something slip from her, like water running through her porcelain fingers.

Then she felt it, felt her world shift as shadowy tingles prickled up her

spine. She turned around to see, striding toward her, a looming figure clothed all in black, his skin corpselike and eyes glowing red. Each step he took killed the plants beneath his feet.

Unlike Life, Death's steps were careful and calculated, his approach sudden and silent as he took his seat at the cliff's edge beside her. He looked her over, studied her aquamarine hair that resembled ocean waves and her kaleidoscopic eyes that reflected the sky. Life did not have to ask to know who he was, much like how even young children can understand the difference between living and dying. She just knew, smiled his way, and accepted his presence.

"A woman just died," Death stated in his deep, monotone voice.

"A baby was just born," Life responded.

"A man was just murdered," he added, trying to one-up his companion.

"And another baby was born," she breathed, smiling warmly as she peered over the cliff.

"That car crash killed a family of three," Death said, gritting his teeth with irritation.

Life gasped happily. "Oh my goodness, triplets! And they were all born healthy!" She turned to Death, her smile wide. "Isn't it just amazing?"

He avoided her gaze. "Sure, it's great."

Death had been playing the balancing game for ages now, trying to win some battle in his mind that he felt would explain everything to him. He knew he was hated and dreaded by all living creatures, knew that everyone despised him. He also knew that Life was loved by all, was considered a cherished gift by millions. How could they always balance each other out in such a way that kept the world in a constant state of equilibrium?

He glanced at Life out of the corner of his eye. She had to resent him slightly; he knew he would if their roles had been reversed.

"Without me, you would prosper, aging and changing in the most beautiful fashion."

She turned to him, pushing her blue waves out of her face. "Without you, I would have no purpose or meaning. Neither of us can exist without the other."
He sighed, slumping slightly forward.

"When I end, you begin," she stated, smiling. "It's a beautiful thing, don't you think?"

"Why do so many fear you?" Life asked one day, leaning forward to peer into the face of Death.

It was startling to be so close to something so pure, so . . . *alive*. He inched backward, instantly uncomfortable from the warmth radiating from her.

"For the same reasons you would guess. I'm permanent, inescapable, unavoidable," he stated, ticking each word off on his bony fingers. "People love you, have always adored your light. You're wanted and needed. I, on the other hand, am dreaded. People cower in the darkness and suffer in the grief I cause. No one can look me in the eyes for fear they'll be swallowed up in despair."

Life looked almost saddened by those words. "Why would you look upon yourself in such a way?" she asked sincerely.

Death gazed out into the infinite universe that stretched beyond him, beyond her, beyond everything. "I know of no other way to explain myself. The act of dying is not something that causes joy."

Life smiled her good-natured smile. "It has its bright spots."

Death looked at Life with dumbfounded curiosity.

"Everything has light in darkness and darkness in light."

Death inwardly sighed; another one of Life's eloquent, almost cryptic

phrases. "If that's how you want to explain this, then yes: you are the light, whereas I am the darkness. You are a radiant beauty, and I am a grotesque monster."

Life adamantly shook her head. "I am not always beautiful," she whispered.

Death looked her over and failed to find fault. She was the ocean and the sky, the sun and the moon and the twinkling stars. She was full of bright things that people desired more than anything.

"Disease and war and famine are not beautiful things, but they are a part of me all the same."

"So much of you is beautiful, though," Death pointed out. "You are seen as a gift, and I am seen as a curse. Your beauty outshines anything negative you could possibly convey. I have nothing beautiful to speak of."

Life turned to Death, offered a sunny smile to his sullen pout. "Remembrance of those who have passed on is beautiful. A family brought together by death is beautiful. The fact that dying does not permanently erase a person from the world, that it allows the person to live on in memory for eternity . . . *that* is truly beautiful."

Death mindlessly nodded at her words, trying to absorb them properly and fully. He was beautiful. He was pain and misery and suffering, but he was also beautiful.

Both Life and Death knew of the balance they were a part of, knew that there was some sort of metaphorical scale they both stood on that always stabilized itself. Life understood that she came first, and Death believed he stepped in and took the reins when Life's work drew to a close. Two halves of a whole, but a whole with a definitive line down the middle.

Suddenly, the view of the world, its many planets and galaxies twinkling out in space, shifted. Both Life and Death stood, confused; such a thing had never happened before. A harrowing scene played out before them: a young woman was going into labor.

Life tensed; a new life, something that could become a part of her, hung in the balance. She turned to Death and could tell he sensed it too.

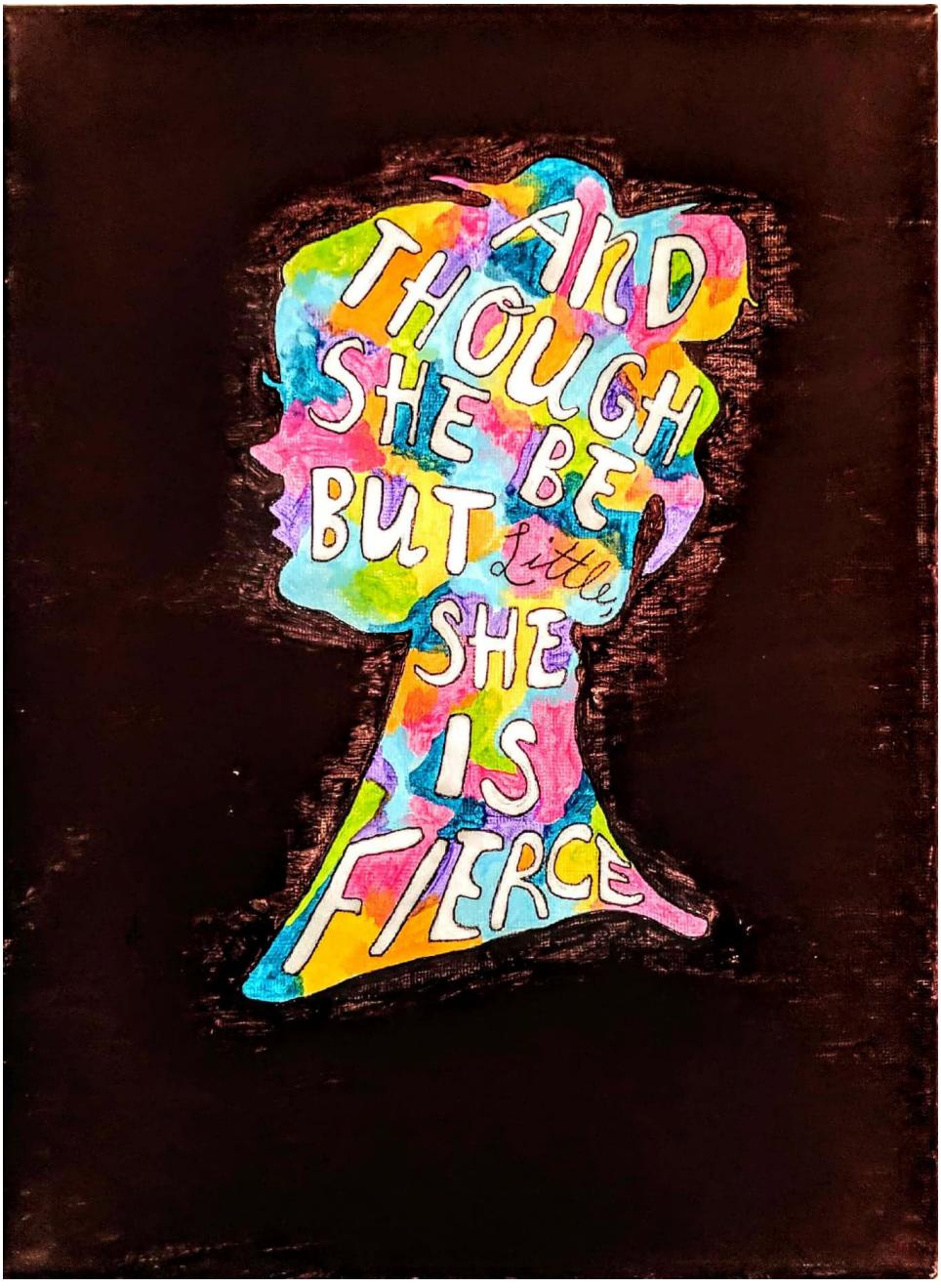
"She's dying," he whispered.

Their balance was being altered, the scale teetering between the two of them, unsure of how to settle. Death watched, amazed, as the baby came into the world, kicking and screaming. Life exhaled, defeated, as the mother fell limp. Death felt a squeeze on his hand and looked down to see Life's small hand in his large, skeletal one. Death couldn't remember when he took her hand, but she held firmly to his all the same. As always, she reminded him of what he tended to forget: the way of the world was not Life, then Death; the world was a matter of Life and Death, the two entities interwoven. There was no fine line between Life's light and Death's darkness; they melded into one another, with a sprinkle of beauty and misery in each.

Death squeezed her hand back.

And so they sit on the edge of the cliff as they overlook the world, Death's legs folded beneath him, Life's feet dangling over the precipice. The wind blows, and Life laughs into the air while Death shivers. Life accepts the misery she can bring while Death realizes his beauty that was there all along. They may appear to be polar opposites, one a lovely, glowing image of happiness, the other a dark, brooding visage we all must come to terms with. Nothing could be more different than Life and Death, not in a million years, not when time stands still and space reaches its limits. But both lean back on their hands, their palms pressing into the grass beneath them, their fingers intertwining every now and again.

Technicolor Dream



Juliana Cofrancesco

Fate's Spiderweb

Peyton Ross

We are interwoven together
in a spiderweb of fate
draining our life forces
from our veins, injecting
us with poison to numb
the pain as we slowly,
quietly, die out.

We cannot escape one another
yet the closer we get, the
harder it is to breathe as the
silk tightens on our bodies.
I wish to crawl across
the web to you, but
I must live.

Fate may be cruel, but I am crueler.
I love you, but to escape
this destiny I must no longer
sacrifice myself to reach you,
to touch you, to be caught in
this endless loop of loving
and leaving.

Perhaps You're Just a Train

Deidra Cali

That never stops for me.
And I wait at the station
And wait
and wait
and wait and
Wait.
I still haven't gotten the schedule down quite yet.
I don't know if I ever will.
Maybe I'm at the wrong station to begin with.

Andrew's Glade at Blarney



Kayli Boyes

He Who Holds Me

Kristin Kuntzman

He who holds *me*
holds the world.
He who is jealous for *me*
weeps when I do.
He who became flesh
became so to save *me*.

He has felt everything
I have felt
and will feel.

He loves me anyway.

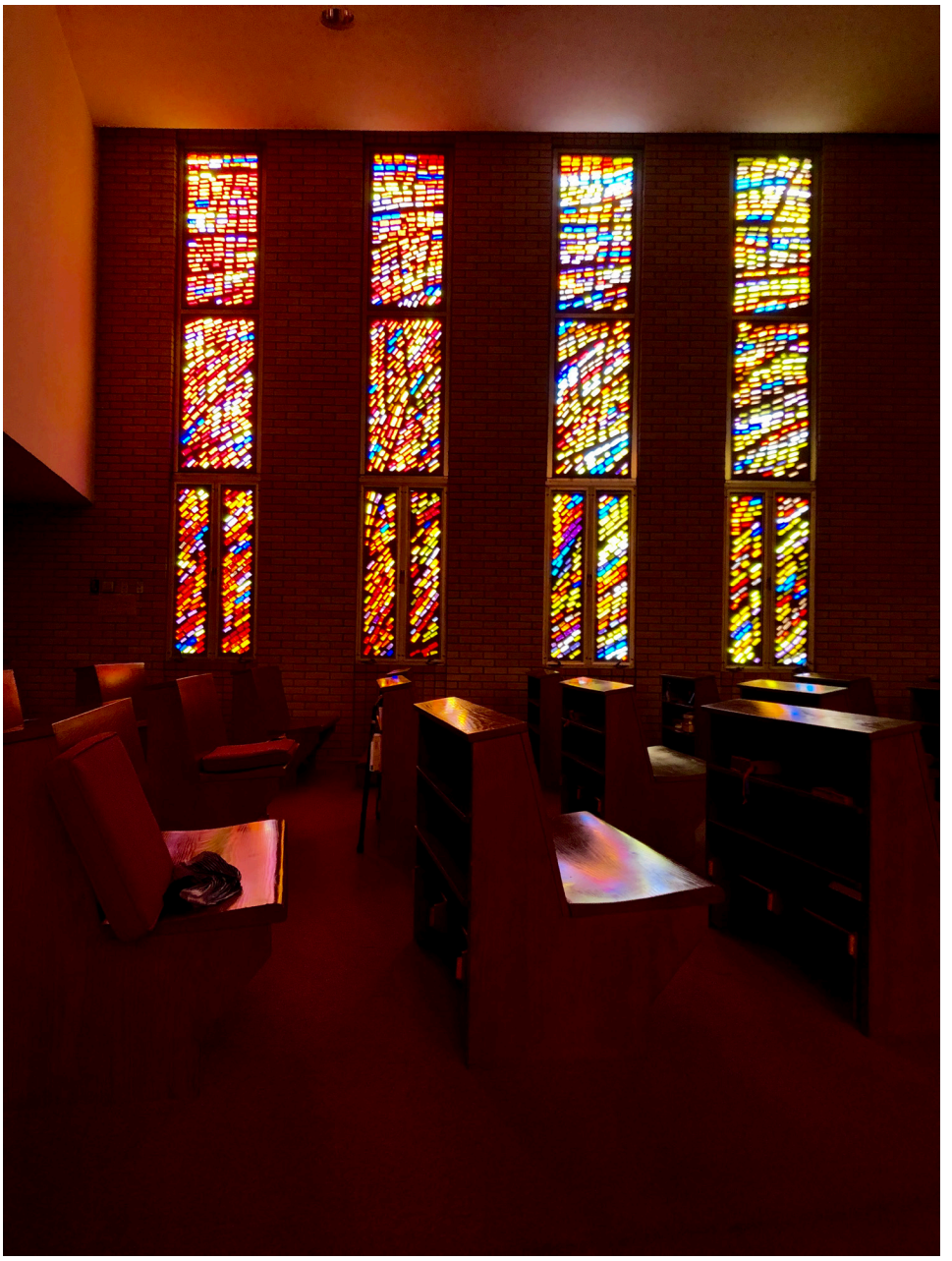
~On understanding Jesus

Home To You

Kayli Boyes

I'll come home to you.
After the warmth begins to fade,
And the cicadas cease to sing.
I'll come home to you.
After the leaves begin to fall,
And the air begins to bite.
I'll come home to you.
After the sun retires early,
And the stars extend their stay.
I'll come home to you.
After the darkness claims the day,
And the moon shines brighter than the sun.
I'll come home to you.

Home Rejoicing Brought to Me



Kristin Kuntzman

Shenanigans

Ayanna Dexter

From hard work and dedication to love and good intentions, I am the energy that every person needs around. I fill the room with positivity on good days and with knowledge that things will be better on bad days. Aside from being a parent of one, I find co-parenting a dedication with tons of support on my back. I enjoy cooking not because I'm a parent and I have to cook, but because it's a craft in which I can be as original as the next person. To touch those around me with great advice and lifelong friendships is all I want to do because no one was ever there for me, but who knew?

Wojtek and Paddington



For Dani, I hope England is treating you well!

Annette Ritzko

For Dr. Okla Elliott

Juliana Cofrancesco

We mix our lives together like paint
Each person a different shade of humanity
The paintbrush dips itself into a splotch of color, then another, and then another
This brush interchanges from long strokes to quick jabs in a staccato-like tempo
Between milliseconds and years, the paintbrush works
Sometimes using a color once, and other times mixing it into a spectrum of possibilities
Some combinations working out better than others
Throughout time, the entire canvas is filled with art
An intricate masterpiece that could not have been created
If each pigment did not intertwine with others

The trouble with people nowadays is that we view ourselves as monochromatic
One color, one inspiration, the singular "I"
We are not, however, defined by merely ourselves
Each person we meet touches our lives in some small way
Whether it is a stranger we bump into on the street, never to see again
Or a best friend we keep by our side throughout life
We have an impact on each other
We mix and mix until we are drowning in each other's vibrant colors
And cannot even remember what pigment each person originally was
It is a chaotic goodness that only people together can create
A bit of green, a splash of yellow, maybe mix in some fuchsia for fun—
And what do we create?
A people riddled with contradictions and constantly changing ideas
But it is a masterpiece nonetheless

The people who come into our lives enter it for a reason,
Just remember that the creation that is you would be slightly different in shade or hue
If one color had not been mixed into your life with a paintbrush

Sanctuary



Ayanna Dexter

Rain Boots

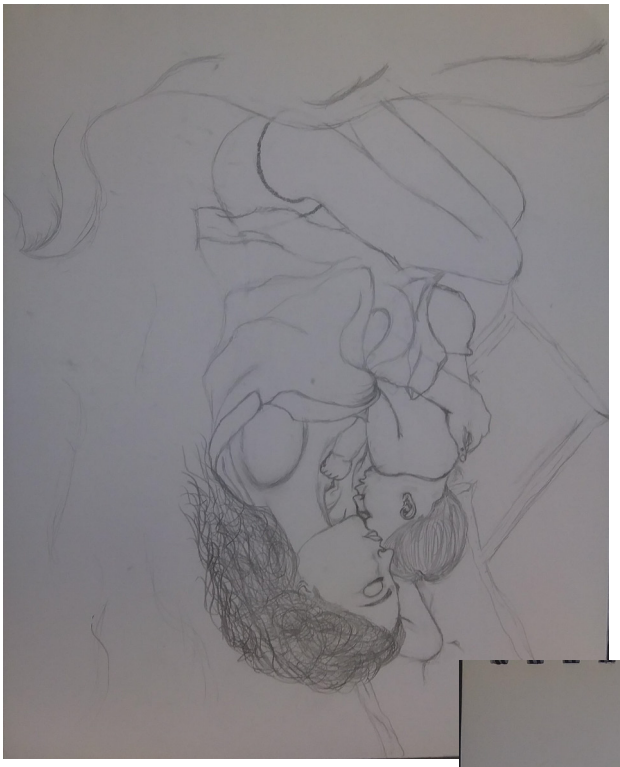
Peyton Ross

Let the storm clouds roll in
and watch the rain pool around your feet.
As she jumps from puddle to puddle,
slide on your rain boots and join her.
When her smile brings out the sun once again,
appreciate it, describe to her its beauty,
and when she laughs, laugh with her.
Never, ever laugh at her.
Do not simply praise her beauty,
but her intelligence, her integrity;
remind her of her humanity.

Love was never your strong suit,

Therefore I write you now
to preserve the hearts you have yet to break.
To mold out of clay a man
to replace the boy before me.
Allow my hands— her hands— to touch you
in ways no other person has;
to shape yourself into the god you thought
yourself to truly be.
And when the sky opens up
and the rain begins to drown her,
this time stay.
Slide on your rain boots, and teach her
how to dance in the rain.

Vera





Jessica Vera

Un Coup de Foudre

Lauren Schuster

Your stars and mine are so perfectly aligned
and my heart skips and stutters when our hands intertwine.
Your lips brush my neck; I forget what I've said when
you lean in so close that I'm sharing your breath.

I feel my cheeks tint in a rosy pink hue and
I feel my thoughts turning to *you, you, you, you.*
The words in my brain can't be freed from my tongue.
You make me so giddy and starstruck and dumb.

I crave your embrace and your tender grace;
You hold me and heal me, I know that I'm safe.
There's no more I need, darling, you are enough.
You've pulled me in close and you've taught me to love.

A Person Can Change You



Kristin Kuntzman

8/29/2019

Deidra Cali

I was an icicle snuggled beneath your sheets.
But that night lit a single match and
The campfire-like warmth of
Your Honesty
Was more than enough to keep me warm.

That was the thing about that one particular night,
It warmed me just as much as it froze me.
It gave me that bittersweet taste
Of what it could be like if we were actually together—
The sting of reality slipping down my throat and
The euphoria that trails behind it,
Tail between its legs.

I was drunk on you and this idyllic idea
That waking up frozen beneath your sheets
Every weekend wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Prom Night



Megan Oldak

Once Upon a Time, I was Perfect

Ayanna Dexter

I would look into the mirror and brush
My long silky hair with my thousand-dollar brush.

Every strand being the same length and holding nothing,
But nutrients and love.

When I'm done,
I would strut into my queen enchanted room, decorated with
White marble flooring and royal furniture.

A California king just for little ole me.
I fall back onto my bed that's fit just for a queen.

I hit the comforter so softly,
As if I were floating on clouds.
If I fell asleep, it would be for a while.

I'd dream of being fed strawberries
Dipped in chocolate and given a cute glass of wine that
Only the wealthy could receive.

My life, so perfect as it is perceived to be.
When I wake up,
I'd see that it was all only a dream.

I would wake up in my dark apartment
With brown wood floors and gray wall paint,
The color of depressed clouds.

Dragging my feet to the empty, bland bathroom
As the floorboards creak.

I would then look into the mirror with a crack that sits
On the top right corner and pick up my two-dollar brush that was

Purchased from the Dollar Store.

My hair so brittle and uneven,
If I had the guts, I would take scissors to it.

For I am wealthy and I have only dreamed this dream
A million times a day as I see what sits in my view.

Once upon a time, I was perfect
But not in thid time.

Preserving the Past



Adam Myers

Untitled

Barbara Soyka

July 1st, 1972

Like some antique Celt
rejoices in winter solstice
and knows that mistletoe is green
even in the bittersharp
cold of the Yule,
I went to the mailbox today
and found that the mailman,
that unlikely harbinger of Spring,
had brought the seed catalogs
on the bleakest January day
I can remember.

These missives bear the postmarks
of West Grove and Spring Hill,
which surely must be the last
citadels of Eleusian worship;
some bucolic pockets where
faith never wavers,
and paganism is just
beneath the crust of civilization.

Those glossy pages, lying within
the black metal box, are rich
with the promise of crimson
dahlias and succulent melons.

How sage they were to choose
this gray, dank day
to pierce the frost
with their profusion of bloom
and bounty of vegetables.
They knew that spirits were flagging

and that despair as chill
as any wind
can grip the man who lives
with winter.

Memories



Megan Oldak

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