



Brush
&
Ink



VOLUME III
2024



Brush & Ink is a compilation of short stories, poetry, photography, and art by Sachem Public Library patrons of all ages. Submissions for Vol. III were accepted from January to March of 2024.

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Disclaimer: This magazine contains some language which may be offensive to some readers and/or inappropriate for children. Reader discretion is advised.

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Seasons of Change

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Message From The Editors

We are endlessly proud of our contributors for bringing *Brush & Ink* into its third volume. When we began this endeavor in 2021, we did not know it would become an annual venture. It is the creativity and diversity of our patrons that makes this literary magazine possible.

The landscape of librarianship is an ever-changing field. Being able to experiment, try new things, adapt, learn, and create new works is incredibly valuable and exciting. Seeing and reading the talented efforts of our community is one of the best aspects of this career. We thank all of the artists, writers, poets, and photographers who submitted their work.

There would be no *Brush & Ink* without our astounding Board of Trustees, Director and Assistant Director. Your trust and leadership makes all things possible. We are endlessly grateful.

Enjoy the magazine. We will see you in 2025.

Christine Latham
Sara Neil
Editors-In-Chief

Seasons

of

C H A N G E



WINTER



AND I KNOW IT'S A LOT - TO TRY AND OWN THE STARS

AND I KNOW IT'S A LOT - TO TRY AND OWN THE STARS,
TO GRASP AT SOMETHING SCINTILLATING FROM AFAR,
HOPING YOU MIGHT THINK OF ME FOR THE GOOD - NOT THE SCARS.
I CANNOT EXPECT TO ECLIPSE THE DREAMS IN YOUR EYES,
OUTSHINE THE MOON THAT RULES THE TIDES,
I ALWAYS SHIFT, LIKE LYNX CHANGING ITS LOCATION THROUGHOUT
THE YEAR -

MY PRESENCE STILL UNSURE, OUR BOND CONTINUOUSLY UNCLEAR.
YET WHEN YOU GAZE AT THE SKIES,
LOOKING AT A CEILING OF CONSTELLATIONS, DISGUISED,
AT A LIBRARY MIMICKING THE MUSIC ROOM IN VILLA STUCK,
I HOPE THAT SCENE WOULD MAKE YOU THINK OF ME - AN IMAGE
DISTILLED IN MEMORY.

THAT JUST MAYBE, YOU'D REACH FOR YOUR PHONE TO LET ME
KNOW,

BEFORE DECIDING BETTER AND LETTING THE IMPULSE GO,
SINCE WE WERE NEVER CLOSE ENOUGH FRIENDS, AND WHAT WE
HAD WAS FILLED WITH WOES
THROUGH SPACE AND TIME WHEREVER OUR STARGAZING MIGHT
LEAD US THOUGH.

BUT SOMEDAY I DREAM WE'LL STAND TOGETHER, SIDE BY SIDE,
MY PLACE SECURE, MY DOUBT PUT TO REST,
AND WE CAN APPRECIATE THE STARS ABOVE THE GLIMMERING
WATER IN ITS HIGH TIDE,

NO WHAT-IFS LINGERING LIKE SOME FAILED TEST.
TO KNOW IF IT WAS TRULY WRITTEN IN THE STARS TO HAVE YOU
WHEN I DID,

IF MY GRAVITATIONAL PULL FADED AS YOUR ATTENTION SHIFTED.
SO DID I REALLY OWN THE STARS TO YOU
OR WAS I JUST TEMPORARILY THE HIGHEST BID?

SEASON OF STILLNESS AND STARS

WINTER CALLS YOU INSIDE
INVITES YOU TO SNUGGLE CLOSE TO EARTH
BENEATH THE TURBULENCE OF LIFE
TO SEARCH THE DEPTHS OF YOUR SOUL.
ON SNOWBOUND DAYS
EMBRACED BY SWEET UNBLEMISHED STILLNESS
AT DUSK AS SILVERY SKELETAL BRANCHES
FRAME CRIMSON SUNSETS
AT NIGHT WHEN DISTANT STARS SPARKLE
IN THE COLD BLACK SKY
GO DEEP.
INSPIRED BY NATURE
COCOONED IN YOUR CHRYSALIS
SHED YOUR COLORS AND COSTUMES
RETURN TO YOUR STARK BARE ESSENCE
TO LET TRUTH REVEAL ITSELF.
GIVE TIME TO MUSING
LISTEN FOR THE WHISPER OF BURIED HOPES
PROTECT AND NURTURE SEEDS OF LONGING
DREAMS THAT MAY AWAKEN IN SPRING.
WARM YOURSELF IN REVERIE...
AND WAIT.





Watching the Moon

On a cold winter night watching the moon begin to show
Its orange color reflects on the water below
On this beautiful winter night
The stars appear and Orion's belt is bright

Thinking of warmer weather soon
As each new month passes, we look up at the moon
when the birds head north, and the crocus will sprout
The groundhog will pop his head out

The seasons keep changing with new things to see
A bird chirping, a bee buzzing, the new leaves on a tree
There are so many wonders about
Spring will be here soon I have no doubt

Pieces of the Heart

Winter

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” said Jackie, as she stood outside with Andrew looking over the installation of the new shop window.

“I’m glad you think so. I hope it wasn’t too cold while I worked,” said Andrew, adjusting his hat. The cold weather was in full force and Andrew could feel the cool wind blowing down Main Street to reach them at the corner.

“No, not at all. I knew when I moved here it would get cold. That’s why I bought this,” said Jackie, as she posed in her puffy coat which looked stylish and warm. Andrew’s heart fluttered. Before today he hadn’t met Jackie, the owner of this new boutique fashion store, personally. They had only communicated through emails and some phone calls. Now that they had met face to face, Andrew was smitten.

“Now here. This is the fee from the email, with some extra, since you did such an incredible job,” said Jackie, holding out an envelope.

“Oh, well. That’s very kind but I can’t accept that. I’m just your friendly neighborhood glazier,” said Andrew, laughing awkwardly.

“No, no, please, take it as a thank you for that beautiful work you did. The name you painted was beautiful, was that a machine or...?”

“Uh, no. I’ve hand painted pretty much every shop’s name at this point. I like to paint in my spare time so I love to add it in when I can,” said Andrew, embarrassed.

“Oh, I love to paint! Watercolors or acrylics?”

“Acrylics, I like the watercolor style but I prefer the clean look of the acrylics. And yourself?”

“Whatever I’m in the mood for,” said Jackie lightly, as she stepped towards the front door. “Would you like to come in for a minute? It’s freezing out here!”

“Oh, I should probably go. Got a few other things to get to before the end of the work day, you know how it is,” said Andrew, feeling foolish.

“Oh, of course. Us shop owners are very busy people naturally. Well, I hope you will stop by! I’ll need all the business I can get or else you’ll be installing someone else’s window next year. Not that I’m trying to guilt you into buying. I just need business to go well or I won’t be able to afford the store, or the apartment upstairs, for much longer than that.”

“Oh, well. I’ll be sure to buy a few scarves then. It is cold after all; I could wear them all at once.”

“Well, I’m not sure about that, but by all means stop by and buy as many as you like. See you soon!” said Jackie, shutting the door. Andrew watched through the window. She seemed to be floating before him like a vision in his mind. Jackie began chatting with a customer, a beautiful smile on her sweet face, as she brushed some of her long black hair behind her ear. Andrew was stricken by her beauty and grace. They locked eyes and Andrew felt as if he would crumble as he gazed into her soft, inviting

dark eyes, tucked behind adorable glasses. She waved and he waved back before he finally forced himself away.

Andrew returned to his truck feeling like a damn fool. *She invited you in, you dope. Maybe next time, don't just stare at her through the window like a weirdo. After all it looks like we only got a year or she'll be gone.* The thought of never seeing Jackie again struck Andrew like a painful blow. *Well, I'll come back, that's all,* Andrew thought, as he drove his truck down Main Street in the bitter cold of the winter.

Spring

Andrew didn't come back. At least, not at first. He meant to, certainly. He passed by one day after getting lunch and thought he would. Then on his way to the market another time he thought, *maybe*. Then finally on his way to the diner he said, *certainly I will*. But he hadn't, and winter had proceeded in all its cold brutality as a harsh reminder of his shyness and insecurity.

No more, Andrew thought. *Today I will definitely swing by the shop and talk to her, maybe even ask her out.* Andrew felt foolish, but he was determined not to let his worse traits get the better of him. He only had a year after all, and he was wasting it being a coward.

Andrew pulled into the lot and was brought right back to that first day where he installed the window and saw Jackie's bright smile. Andrew almost immediately backed up and drove home, but knowing that it was likely he had been seen from the window he had to go inside.

He stepped out from the car, walked into the store, and began to look about like a thoughtful customer. Panic struck Andrew as a handsome man was casually chatting to Jackie, who smiled and nodded attentively.

Damn, I've already waited too long, Andrew thought gloomily as he considered leaving.

"Oh, hey Andrew! Look around and let me know if you need anything. It's good to see you!" said Jackie politely from behind the counter. Andrew waved as the other customer continued his conversation. Andrew waited and had a thought, scooping up three scarves of varying colors just as the customer left.

"Hey, sorry about that. So, how are you, did you find anything?" Jackie asked from behind the counter.

Andrew brought over the scarves before saying, as casually as he could muster, "Hey, no worries, so I know it's been a spell, but I'm here to make up for lost time." Andrew laid the scarves on the counter. Jackie laughed, remembering.

"Oh, no, don't do that. Here, I have just the thing," said Jackie, who walked to the back for a moment, then returned with a thick scarf in hand. "I saw this the other day and thought it was perfect for you. See it's heavy, but it looks a lot better than wearing three at once. I know the weather is starting to get nicer, but I figured you could save it for next year." Jackie held it out invitingly.

"I'll take it!" said Andrew immediately, digging for his wallet. Jackie laughed.

"Wow. I didn't even need to give my sales pitch. Ok, hold on." Jackie began punching

in numbers and they completed the transaction. Andrew felt it was now or never.

“And here is your receipt.”

“Would you like to go out sometime?” Andrew regretted it as soon as it came out. “I mean, if you want to, I know it’s a bit sudden but, I could take you about town, since you’re new here. And –”

“Let’s do dinner sometime. That diner has good food, right? I haven’t tried it yet, but I heard good things.”

“Oh, I go there all the time. It’s great. What time works for you?”

“Let’s say, six thirty?”

“Ok, six thirty it is. I can’t wait,” said Andrew happily. Jackie giggled.

“Me too. See you then! said Jackie with a smile, and Andrew couldn’t help but admire how beautiful she was as he walked out into the spring air feeling triumphant.

Summer

Spring passed as it always did, quickly, and as the trees that lined Main Street bloomed, so too did Andrew’s relationship with Jackie. Their first date had been a success, and they met up again the following week to see a movie. Then their third date had involved a walk through the park. Now they had gone to a fair held every summer, and they had a wonderful time. Jackie wouldn’t do the rides, but they did play multiple carnival games where she excelled at beating Andrew at just about everything. They had just grabbed a snack and were heading back to Andrew’s truck.

“Oh my God, these are so good!” Jackie exclaimed as she bit into the fried dough. Andrew laughed, the powdered sugar having completely covered her mouth and face.

“Hold on,” said Andrew chuckling, as he took a paper napkin and gingerly wiped her mouth. “Small bites,” he playfully suggested, as Jackie devoured what remained in her hand. She began to reach for another when a group of teen boys hurried past. One of them had bumped into her shoulder causing her to drop the bag. Jackie looked angry, as if she would shout after the teens but her mouth was full. Andrew bent down and retrieved the bag.

“No worries, didn’t lose a single one,” said Andrew returning the bag.

“Thank you,” said Jackie softening, grabbing his hand. The two continued to walk hand in hand.

Andrew glanced her way, admiring her beauty and her long sundress.

“What? I don’t still have some on my face, do I?” Jackie asked shyly.

“Maybe, right here,” said Andrew, stopping. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. His heart fluttered as he locked eyes with her, feeling as if he could melt into the ground.

“Now it looks like you have some,” said Jackie softly, as she closed her eyes and leaned in. Instinct took over as Andrew, closing his eyes, continued forward and kissed her for the first time on a lovely summer evening.

Fall

Summer felt more fleeting than spring. They regularly went to the diner for dinner, and spent as much time together as they could afford. One of Andrew's favorite dates, aside from the fair night, had been drinking wine at Jackie's place and painting together. Now the weather was growing cold all over again as Andrew drove home in the dark quiet of the night. As he drove, something bright caught his peripheral vision. He glanced towards the passenger seat of his truck and noticed Jackie's coat. Andrew decided to turn around and bring it back to her, since it was her coat for the cold weather.

As he drove something else out of place caught his eye. Four teens had gathered in front of Jackie's shop. Before Andrew could figure out what they were doing one of them hurled a brick at the window shattering it into a million pieces. Andrew was stunned. He sped up. They look startled for a moment as he pulled to a stop in front of them. Andrew blared his horn to try to scare them off. While one or two looked nervous, another had a cruel grin, as he mocked Andrew. Andrew was furious, and reached to grab his phone to dial the police, when a voice caused him to look up.

Jackie had appeared, baseball bat in hand, and was shouting as she headed towards the teens. Andrew began to free himself of the car, nervous for Jackie, when suddenly she swung the bat down into one of the teens, hard. She didn't let up. She continued to pummel him with the bat as if he was an oversized insect. Andrew ran up attempting to tear her away, but she resisted, elbowing Andrew as she continued her assault. The teens stood in shock as Andrew struggled to hold Jackie back. When he finally managed to get his arms firmly around her, the terrified group scrambled to help their bloodied friend up, and retreat behind the buildings. Jackie struggled against Andrew shouting obscenities at the group.

"Jackie! Relax, look at me!" Andrew shouted, as Jackie continued to resist.

"Those bastards were going to hurt you, I know it! I wasn't going to let them! They smashed the beautiful window you made! If I ever see them again-"

"Jackie, it's ok. I'm alright. I'll make you another window. I'm your friendly neighborhood glazier remember? It's ok, just breathe."

Jackie grew quiet, like a low burning fire. They stood there, silent for a moment, before Andrew got her inside where he made her tea to calm her nerves. When the truck was moved, and the tea drank, they settled on her couch where they stayed until they drifted to sleep, snug and protected by the other's embrace.

Winter

As the leaves fell away bit by bit the bitter cold returned. Andrew and Jackie walked down the aisle of the grocery store adding to their cart. They didn't call the police that night, they knew they were kids, and it felt pointless after Jackie's display. Instead, she filed her claim as an unknown accident and the insurance covered the repair. Andrew offered to replace the window himself but Jackie wouldn't have it.

The whole thing had unnerved Jackie, and Andrew found more and more often that he was spending the night at her place. As they got more serious, Andrew often reflected on Jackie's aggressiveness that night. The image of her pummeling that boy with a baseball bat floated to the forefront of his mind more frequently than he liked. At first it bothered him and he became concerned about what else she may be capable of. He began to notice other things, like how quick she was to strike a broken vending machine, or honk her horn while driving. Andrew wasn't sure what to make of this, until one night, after a particularly busy day, they had fallen asleep in each other's arms on the couch. The television sang softly in the background as the quiet of the early morning hung in the air. Andrew looked at Jackie, softly sleeping in his arms, and knew in his heart that she could do no wrong. He loved her, everything about her, and he wasn't about to throw this incredible person away simply because he didn't like this one piece of her.

So, when Jackie revealed that she wasn't sure she could continue business for another year, Andrew realized a solution immediately, living together. At first Jackie had protested that she didn't want him to feel obligated to solve her problems, but for Andrew it wasn't even a question. They both admitted it would be nice to live together after all the nights they had already spent together, and now with Andrew's contribution she would be able to stay for another year at least, if not more.

It's the perfect solution, Andrew thought as he walked alongside Jackie, who was looking for an item on the shelf. They had reached the end of the aisle when a boisterous woman rounded the corner and slammed her cart into theirs. Jackie was startled by the impact, and anger clouded her face.

"Sorry, 'scuse me," said the woman frantically as she quickly moved around them.

Jackie turned, furious, but Andrew grabbed her hand.

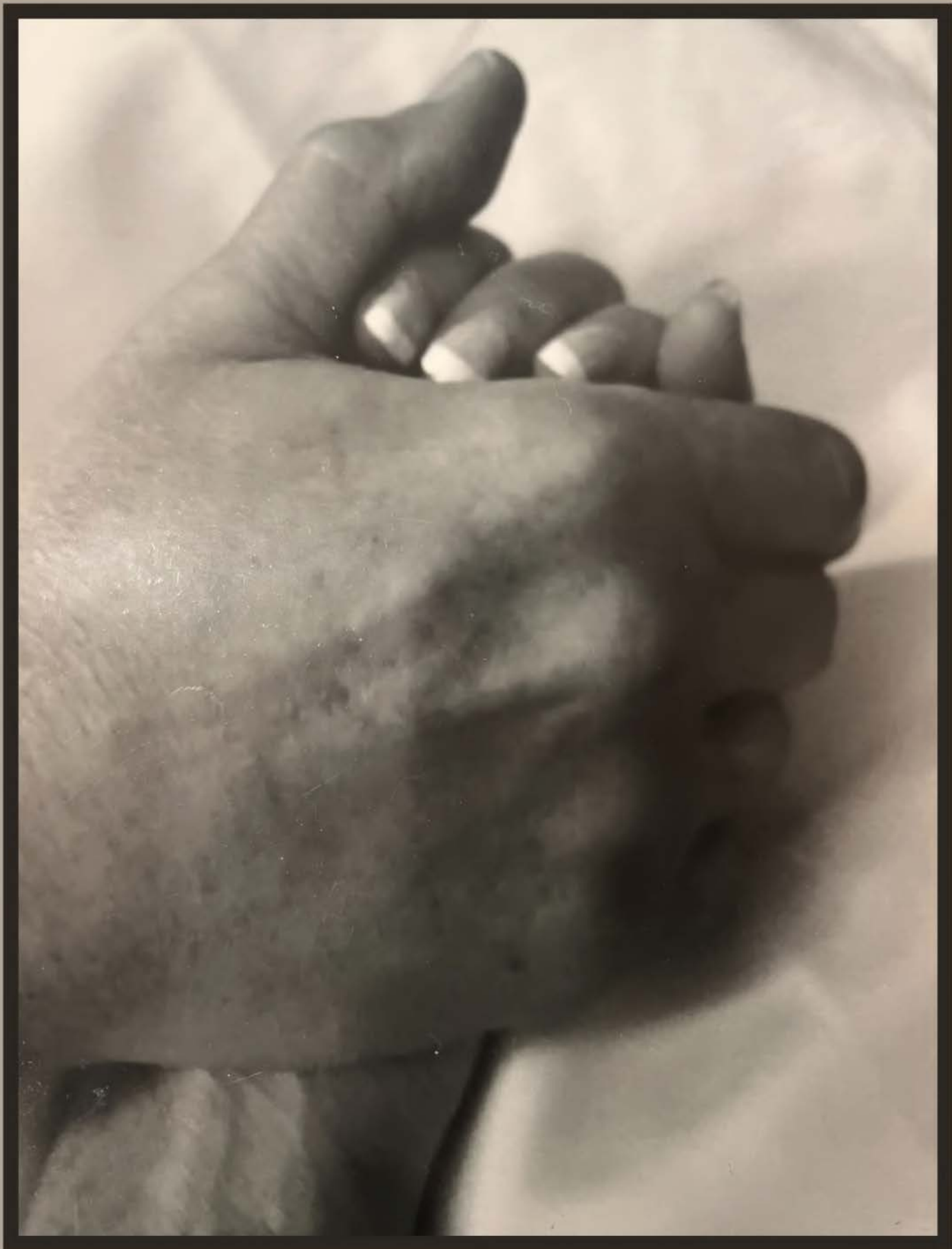
"It's alright. Just an accident, don't stress it," said Andrew calmly. Jackie sighed.

"What would I do without you?" said Jackie, touching his arm.

"Probably beat the shit out of that woman," said Andrew jokingly.

"Wow! So I'm just never going to live that down, huh? I was protecting you, you know," said Jackie jokingly.

"I know, and thank goodness I have you," said Andrew, as he leaned in and kissed Jackie, long and deep.

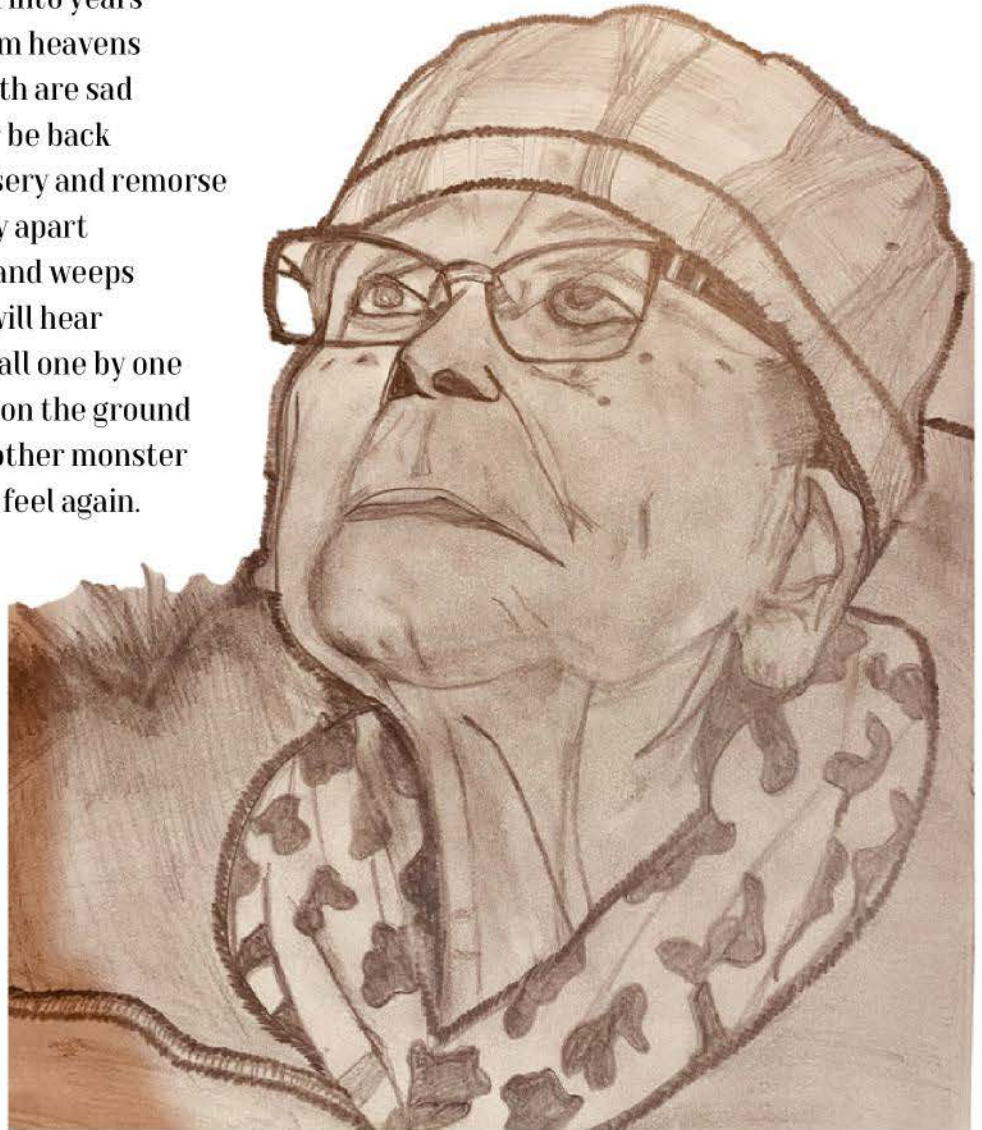


Your Snow Angel

I didn't even need to go outside
In the winter
To realize how cold you were
How absent your hands felt
When the snowflakes on your tongue melted
This snow angel meant something to you
I looked from outside your window that you thought
The spring's view didn't make any sense
You brought something inside, once a flower of glory
Turned into a decaying mess
I thought you were going to water the plants
I had all hope in your sunflowers, but then they lowered to the ground, and
yourself did too
You called me last, in the fastest night of the summer
Something about your path in life is now forever
Covered in heated obstacles
But you never told me how concretely it was
Until the earliest sunrise gave me a clue
You were too young for this to happen, I thought to myself, blooming new life to
this world
And then autumn start to fly down,
Your acceptance to the consequences of your new path changed
Every time you ran into a leaf-pile,
as your capitulum grew heavy in thoughts
But you grew more and more not only in your soil, but in meaning
Later on, as you learned your lesson, a snow angel falls upon your hands, a love
you now learned to hold

Lady Lone Moon

He says to her
"Let me fall so you can breathe"
She reluctantly agrees,
A lady with a chin of snow
Her lips covered with amber kisses
Trailed away at the midnight sky
Dispatches herself from her children
That try to mingle with their tingle
The lady does not see him
Her feelings of despair, streaks her white cheeks
She pounds herself nightly
Night after Night
As her fists turn to craters
As months turn into years
Dreams fall from heavens
Skies of all earth are sad
He will never be back
Sorrow filled with misery and remorse
Eat the lady apart
She crumbles and weeps
But no one will hear
Even the planets fall one by one
And start crawling on the ground
Afraid from the mother monster
Who will never feel again.





The True Meaning of Christmas

Once there lived a cardinal named Jacob in a village called Cardville, and he was so happy that Christmas was coming because of all of the gifts. Every year if he didn't get at least 50 presents he would be angry at his parents for an entire month. This started when it was his second Christmas, and he learned that presents are stuff you get for free. So he started doing this. Jacob was very greedy; he would never give presents, Jacob would demand presents. This year his parents didn't give him any presents besides a pine cone with glaze drizzled on it. Jacob didn't even like glaze. So Jacob went outside the warm and cozy house. He saw families showing admiration and love, and figured out that Christmas is not about the presents. It is about love.



BOOK ENDS

THE LIBRARY'S COMMITMENT TO "GOING GREEN"
INCLUDES SHREDDING IN A GIANT MACHINE
LEFTOVERS FROM BOOK SALES BY THE FRIENDS
RESULTING IN SOME UNLIKELY ENDS

FOR THESE BOOKS

IS THIS A UNIQUE BEGINNING
OR THE LAST RECYCLING INNING

FOR THESE BOOKS

MIGHT YOU SEE SNIPPETS FROM TOLSTOY'S TOME
OR ¼ LINE FROM THE FALL OF ROME
PIECES FROM A JACK THE RIPPER CRIME
OR COLERIDGE'S ANCIENT MARINER RHYME
BITS FROM CAMPBELL'S MYTHOLOGIES
OR BILL SHAKESPEARE'S BIOGRAPHIES
PAGES FROM POE OR STEPHEN KING'S THRILLERS
WILL THEY BE USED AS FLUFF OR AS FILLERS

IN

MATTRESSES, FOOT PADS OR PUFFY TOTES
CUSHIONS, OTTOMANS OR BULKY COATS
WORDS - SO MANY WORDS IN A GENTLE FLOAT
OR STUCK AS THOSE IN A TIGHTLY CRAMMED BOAT

BEAR IN MIND

YOU MAY FIND

THAT LIGHTLY TUFTED PILLOW PLACED ON YOUR BED
IS STUFFED WITH SHREDS OF A BOOK YOU ONCE READ





Reorder 25

Measuring Success

The room is ice cold
And so is she
The monster with the booming voice
Tearing through my soul
You're not good enough!
You're not working hard enough!
Maybe they would do better without me...?

I throw her words in the trash
I am better than she thinks I am
I will prove it to her
I am not the weakest link

She started to soften
The monstrous voice changed
To a more gentle lion grumble
She talks to me
She asks how I'm doing
Does she really care?

I find my passion again
I do it for myself
Days filled with tears and doubt
Were replaced with friends and laughter
This is my way to measure success



The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of overlapping circles in various colors including pink, yellow, green, and orange. The circles vary in size and opacity, creating a bokeh effect. The overall color palette is warm and bright, evoking a sense of spring.

Spring

Memories of Sycamore

*Wandering amid the
Empty trees of winter
Above,
Blew the snow and the
Song of the dove.
And silence with her by
The waters:
Bring forever to me a
Sound from the trees
With -
The leaves of Spring,
Where we had been.*





The Reunion

The flight will last 45 minutes. Then less than an hour until reunion. The madness of two senior citizens: He closed his eyes to conjure up this woman who had changed his life twenty-five years ago.

“Expected time of arrival in Buffalo is 10:17 AM,” the pilot’s voice announced. Buffalo and Deirdre Quinn. How was it possible? She wouldn’t meet him at the gate, though, like the first time before they had ever seen each other. He had told her he’d be the man in the beige sport coat with a rose in his teeth. She hadn’t given a clue about herself, except that she had green hair.

Deirdre had written him a few days before. He placed his right hand over the breast pocket of his jacket, as though he were pledging allegiance to the flag, feeling the outline of her powder blue letter with the large gold “D” logo whose contents he knew by heart. “Dear Angelo, I regret not being able to meet you at the airport,” she wrote. He had recognized her bold script with the peculiar slant of a left hand. “I will have to meet you at McMillen Park on the Canadian side of the falls,” she continued. “I’ll see you at our spot by the willow tree next to the brook. Love, Deirdre. P. S. - Thank you for the Ovid.” He had sent her a rare edition of *The Heroines*. It was going to be just like that day in late May 1968.

At the airport in Buffalo, he produced his Medicare and university faculty identification cards to qualify for the extra bonus “frequent flyer” mileage. Then he paused before a mirror, wincing at the pink lesions his psoriasis bequeathed his forehead and chin, smoothing back the scant yellow-white hairs above his ears, and checking his nostrils for any unsightly growth. Angelo took a small, purple and silver box from the breast pocket of his jacket and popped three “Sen-Sen” into his mouth. Then he straightened the gold VFW pin in his left lapel which had moved when he returned the box to his pocket.

Once beyond the security check point, Angelo put on his eyeglasses and looked for a “Ground Transportation” sign. His heartbeat, whose control had been transferred to a pacemaker device, thudded against his rib cage and echoed Deirdre’s name loudly through the hearing aide concealed inside his left ear.

Angelo's cab dropped him off in front of the Falls View restaurant where he and Deirdre had lunched that first day, watching the white curtain of plaited water plunge continuously into the Niagara River. He moved slowly in the mounting heat of the morning, shuffling his way toward the park and the "lovers' glade" where he would meet Deirdre. En route, he stopped to buy a bouquet of her favorite flowers: daisies, pansies, and violets with rosemary.

When Angelo reached the glade, the brook was burbling softly in its shallow but clear transit around the willow tree. He automatically looked at his watch, but Deirdre had not specified a time. He sat on a bench under the tree near the brook which narrowed from eight to five feet where it circled the tree. At that point an arching, wooden foot bridge, wide enough for one person to cross, spanned the brook.

In the water near the bridge lay countless coins, bronze and silver, thrown by pairs of lovers for nearly half a century to seal their pacts of devotion. One in particular glistened more than the others. Angelo decided to look more closely and had to get down on his knees. He lifted his glasses onto his hairless scalp and peered at the copper-colored coin a few feet away. Suddenly, he saw the blurry outline of a figure reflected in the water before him.

"Did you lose something? Perhaps I could help you find it."

Angelo turned, still on his knees, and saw a woman all in black with a hat and mourning veil covering her head and face. She leaned over and assisted him back to the bench. He turned to look at the willow tree. "Your name's not Deirdre by any chance?" he asked, somewhat embarrassed. "She's a dear friend of mine," Angelo said dejectedly, "We were going to have a reunion after many years."

"I'm sure she'll come for you," the woman whispered. "Goodbye."

Angelo turned to say goodbye but the woman was walking away. He sat down on the bench. He wiped his face, as he looked into the brook again and this time the glint of an oblong, silver object caught his attention. As he knelt down to get a closer look, a young couple, perhaps 18 or 19 years of age, walked slowly into the glade. They were on the opposite side of the brook, moving toward him but never taking their eyes off of each other. Thus preoccupied, they sat down on the grass not more than four yards from Angelo who looked on in fascinated silence.

Removing something from the breast pocket of his beige, summer sport coat, the young man spoke. "With this token," he said solemnly, "I pledge to you my undying love and devotion." He removed a tiny bronze coin, no larger than a dime, from a clear plastic envelope and placed it in the young woman's right palm. Her coral lips parted and her brown eyes looked up in wonder at his face.

"What is it? I've never seen anything like it."

The young man placed his open right hand under her right palm, gently grasping it, and with his left index finger he pointed to the coin. "This is a drachma of the ancient Grecian city, Syracuse. It's been in my family for seven generations. My paternal grandfather brought it with him from Calatafimi, Sicily in 1909. It may have belonged to my ancestors 500 years before Christ."

The young woman's mouth widened in awe. "Oh, I couldn't accept this from you, it's a family treasure."

"All the more reason I want you to have it. I give something of my past to you who will be all of my future."

"It will be my most favorite possession, always," she whispered as tears filled her eyes. She sniffed and smiled, asking, "What are those markings on the coin?"

"That's the head of Arethusa, a green-haired nymph of Artemis in Greek legend," he began. "There's a spring named after her in Syracuse. It seems she tried to escape a would-be lover, the river god Alpheus, by throwing herself into the sea. Artemis transformed her into a spring, but when she reached the islet of Ortygia, where the spring gushes from the rocks to this day, Alpheus transformed himself into a river and united with her forever."

Clenching the coin tightly, the young woman threw her arms around him and covered his mouth with hers in a warm, moist kiss. Then she sighed, "I have something for you too! With this token I pledge to you my undying love and devotion." As she completed her vow, she put something into the young man's left palm. It was a flat piece of silver-colored plastic about an inch and a half long, in the shape of a bridge, with a small loop at its top for a chain to pass through.

“It’s nice, but I’m not sure what it is?”

“It’s the Brooklyn Bridge. I mean it’s a charm representing the bridge. My father gave it to me as a special remembrance of our first trip to New York City for my sixth birthday. I’ve treasured it because it represents all the hopes and dreams of the wonderful life I planned after visiting New York. I want you to have it, since you are that bridge, now.”

A rush of blood within the young man’s body made him blush. “This is the most precious gift I’ve ever received. I love you!”

“I love you, too!” she replied.

He knelt, looking deeply into the brook.

“You’re sure they’re after you?” she asked.

“I’m certain,” he said, tracing her name in bold arcs through the flowing water with his left index finger. Then he rose to her side. “They have no jurisdiction in Canada, but I know of cases where they cooperate and arrests somehow get made on the American side. Then it’s prison for sure and a life of disgrace! My father already disowned me. Your family’s all dead. We’d be apart and you’d have no one to turn to. There’s only one way we can remain together.”

Tears were trickling down Angelo’s hollow cheeks. “I’ll help you!” Angelo shouted from the other side of the brook. “I have connections!”

The young couple resumed staring at each other.

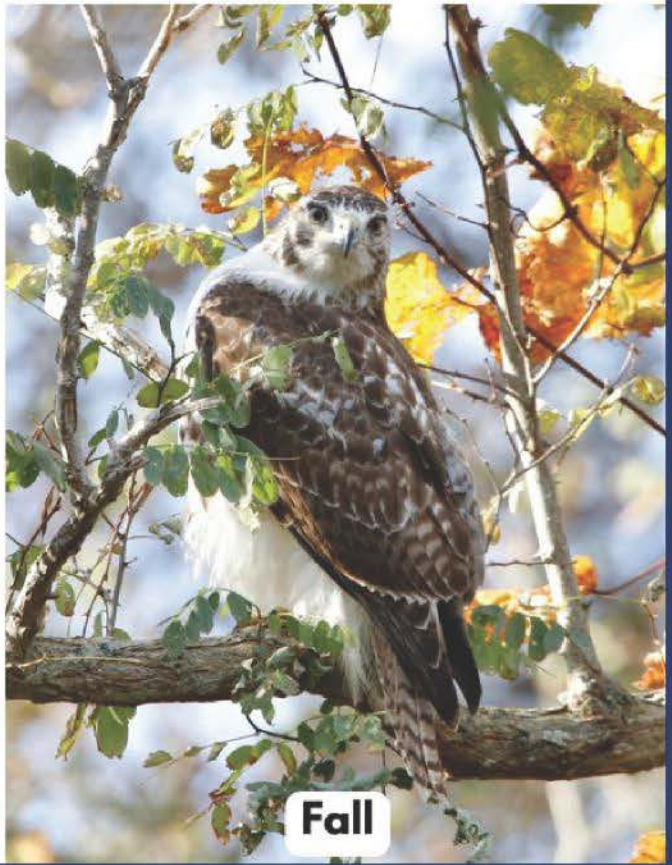
Angelo yelled at them, “Don’t do anything desperate, I can help you!”

Without speaking another word, the young couple locked hands and stepped into the brook. They stood in the shallow water side-by-side then knelt down, whispering “Hold tight. Don’t let go,” and proceeded to lie prostrate in the water until motionless.

Angelo had risen to his feet, and started to wade into the brook himself, when he felt an explosion in his chest. He grabbed the bouquet of flowers and toppled helplessly into the brook, as daisies, pansies and violets with rosemary scattered and were swept around the willow tree. An ambulance was called by a passerby who discovered Angelo's body.

After Angelo had been removed from the cardiac care unit to a ward room at St. Steven's Hospital, his day nurse accounted to him for his personal belongings. Among them she had found a blue piece of paper, partially disintegrated, with a gold "D" logo. Angelo asked the nurse to put the paper in his hands. After she left, he read the words scrawled in fading letters, as though for the first time: "Dear Dad, I know you can't help how you feel and neither can I. I must do what I think is right. Please forgive me and don't hate me. Some day we'll be together again in peace and harmony. Love, Angelo."

A single tear rolled onto Angelo's cheek and he pressed the paper to his chest. He realized that for the first time in 25 years, a bouquet of daisies, pansies, and violets with rosemary had not been placed under the plaque on the willow tree in McMillen Park. For the first time, too, he could remember the plaque's inscription: "In the brook beside this tree on May 25, 1968, Angelo Donato, Jr. and Deirdre Quinn took their lives to protest the war in Vietnam. May their souls rest in peace, forever."



I Can
Day by day I try,
Held back by
The thoughts that
Swirl in my head.
Caught in a net of
Uncertainty and anxiety
Defending against the
Unknown.
Holding on,
Unsure of what
Time will yield.
Sticking to what is
Most familiar,
Not able to grasp
The tasks.
Rationalize the moments
Of what cannot be
Accomplished—
Struggles to overcome.
Then I see...
The brightness,
As darkness begins
To fade.
Ideas come into
Thought,
Cut away those ties
That bind,
Unravel the knot
Holding me prisoner—
And then I think...
I CAN



Friendship Bond

**On a big yellow bus.
two worlds converge.**

**A little girl with a bookish mind.
A little boy with spirit for adventure.
come together.**

**Sitting side by side on their journey.
through laughter and whispers, a friendship takes hold.
Sharing secrets, like treasure they build a castle of trust.**

But life's road diverges, tearing their connection apart.

She misses his games, his laughter, his smile.

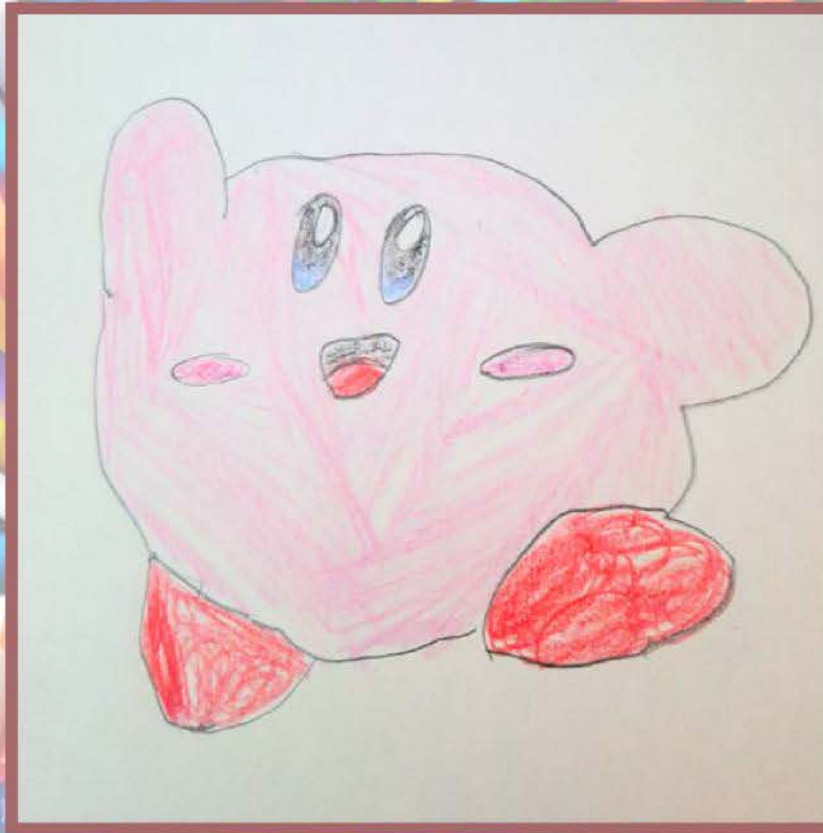
He misses her wisdom, her anger and scowls.

The distance of time continues to stretch.

Wishes on a star are made,

to sit side by side,

one day.

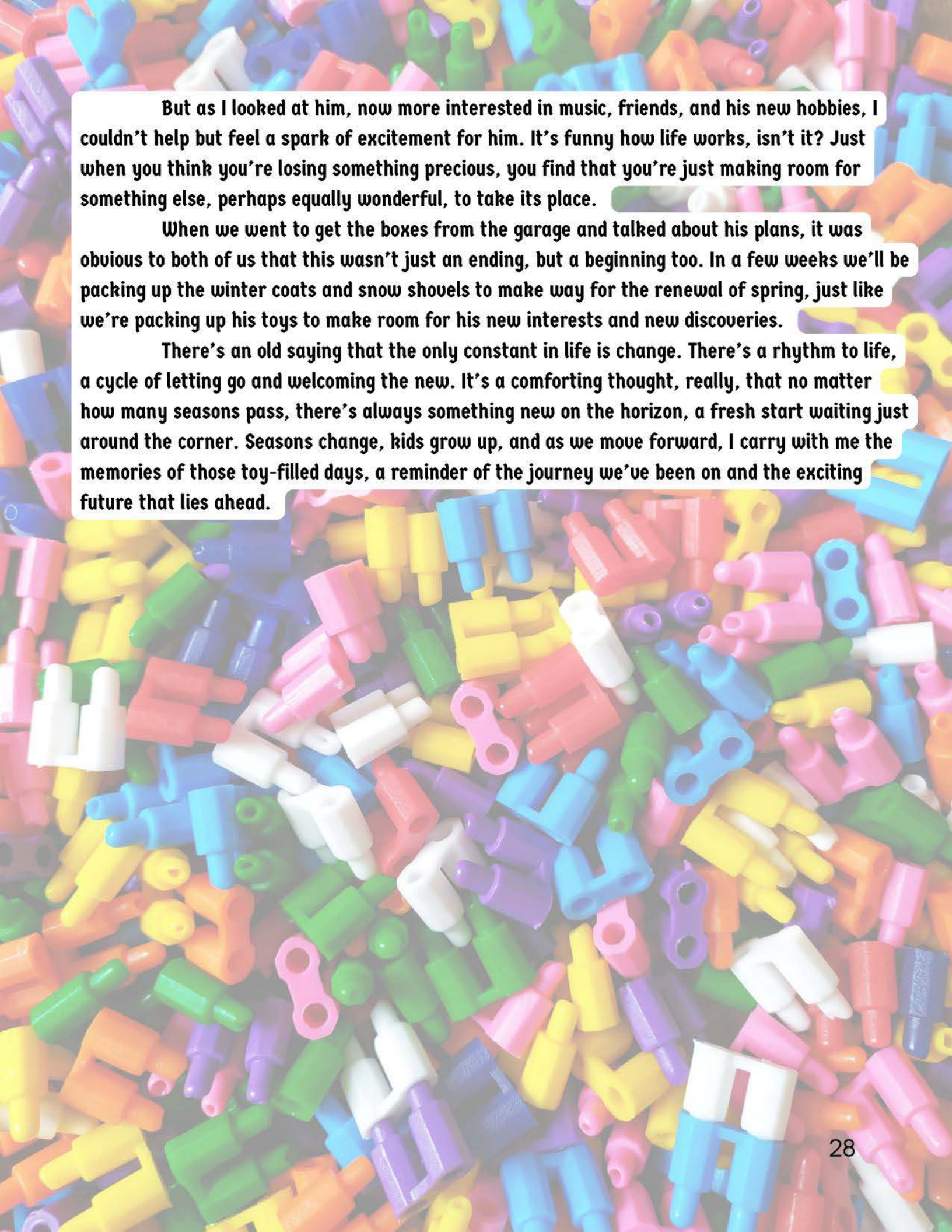


TOYS

Every year, as winter turns to spring, we go through my son's toys to see which toys he still wants to play with and which ones we can put in storage or donate. When he was about 7 or 8 years old, he wanted to keep playing with his LEGO mini-figures and his superheroes, but we decided that his stuffed animals could go in the garage or to a new home with one of his younger cousins. A few years later, some of his toy cars and trucks followed those stuffed animals out the door to make room for some lightsabers and Nerf guns. Every year some would stay and some would go. The types of toys would change with the season, but the toy box always remained.

That changed this year. As we made plans to go through his toys, it dawned on us both that he hadn't played with any of them in a long time. Most of them were in the same place they were when we decided to save them last winter. We both felt nostalgic about some of his favorites, the ones I would see him play with for hours just a few years ago, but he didn't want to keep any of them in his room this year. I've watched him grow since he was a baby, but it became clear in that moment that he had crossed from one season of his life to another.

Packing up those toys felt like I was boxing up chapters of his childhood, each action figure, each LEGO set, each spaceship a bookmark in the story of his growing up. It was a bittersweet task, realizing those once-beloved objects were no longer a part of his daily adventures, now just relics of a time that seemed so recent to me. Just as we were planning for trips and concerts to add to our calendar once the cold winter turned to spring, I was watching my own son transition from one stage of life to another, leaving behind the world of action figures and make-believe.



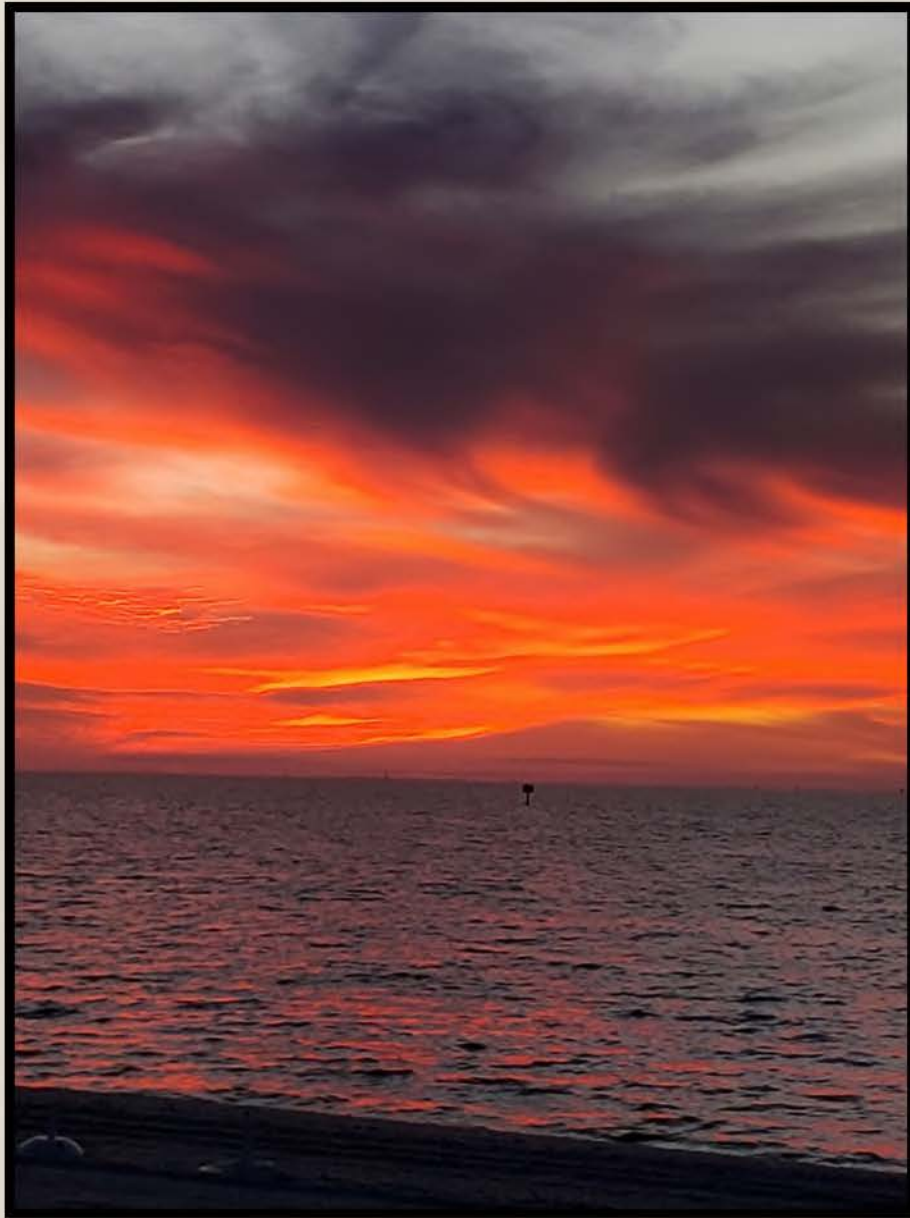
But as I looked at him, now more interested in music, friends, and his new hobbies, I couldn't help but feel a spark of excitement for him. It's funny how life works, isn't it? Just when you think you're losing something precious, you find that you're just making room for something else, perhaps equally wonderful, to take its place.

When we went to get the boxes from the garage and talked about his plans, it was obvious to both of us that this wasn't just an ending, but a beginning too. In a few weeks we'll be packing up the winter coats and snow shovels to make way for the renewal of spring, just like we're packing up his toys to make room for his new interests and new discoveries.

There's an old saying that the only constant in life is change. There's a rhythm to life, a cycle of letting go and welcoming the new. It's a comforting thought, really, that no matter how many seasons pass, there's always something new on the horizon, a fresh start waiting just around the corner. Seasons change, kids grow up, and as we move forward, I carry with me the memories of those toy-filled days, a reminder of the journey we've been on and the exciting future that lies ahead.



like a butterfly
emerging from its cocoon
hints of bright red blooms



A Glimpse

A glimpse
I wake.
Before the sun.
It's dark.
Up top! There's light.
Hills and trees in my way.
I crawl. Softly.
I climb. Hopefully.
Darkness surrounds me. I look up. I peak.
A glimpse.

A glow between treetops.
I creep. I clamber through rock faces.
There's promise.
I go. I'm pulled by the glimmer. I go.
I reach.
My hands seek the surface. My eyes touch the sky.
I breathe. I peak. I see.
A visual cacophony!
Sunrise!

The Rabbit

your gentle nature,
so soft of face.
new life you gift,
flowers you bring.

a little bit luck,
a little bit fortune,
in tune with the earth
and all her omens.

aligned with your senses,
trusting gut feelings,
intuitive listening,
embraced sensitivity.

adapting to change,
found freedom in the rain.
mapped where it's safe,
choosing when to be brave.

underestimated
but bright all the same.
prosperous, purity.
the hare, the rabbit.
if kindness had a name.

The Brave One

During the first week of April, 1971, my armored cavalry regiment was making its final arrangements for its road march to its new assignment in Cu Chi. My sergeant and I had packed our medical unit's supplies into our assigned Conexes. Later that day the Transportation unit would load our equipment onto five-ton trucks. I was the lower-ranking medic; ergo, I would drive the Jeep behind the trucks. Sergeant Hardfive would be the passenger.

In mid-afternoon our mess hall crew gathered our remaining perishable food supplies into a crate four feet by four feet, and three feet deep. We needed several guys to wrangle the crate onto a deuce-and-a-half truck. We were going to deliver the food to our base employee's village down the road as a parting gift later that day, but well before dark.

All of our base employees resided in the village. Every morning they arrived at our base. After work they all traveled a few miles down the road to their homes. There was a mature man beyond military age who was the elder statesman of the group; several women ranging in age from adolescence to maturity; and two adolescent boys whose sole job was to remove and burn the solid waste which accumulated in the cut down 55-gallon drums beneath the latrines. I will name these boys Van, age 15, and Truong, age 13. Van had suffered polio in childhood. He survived, but his left arm withered in a way that made him ineligible for military service in the South Vietnamese Army. The younger boy envied him for his disability.

In the general area of Thu Duc and Xuan Kat, a collection of ramshackle dwellings built on dirt and sand comprised the village. Nominally, this village was under the protection of the South Vietnamese Regional Forces, Provincial Forces. Often called RF/PF. Supposedly the local militia. Something akin to our local police forces merged with our National Guard. Rumors abounded that after dark the RF/PF personnel act in concert with the Viet Cong. - a la the fox guarding the henhouse.

Our two-vehicle convoy arrived at the village in that golden hour preceding twilight. We noticed the RF/PF building alongside the road. The truck stopped at a spot several yards off the road, about twenty yards from the row of scruffy little shacks. The villagers came out to meet us. They helped us unload the crate. We moved it to an open space nearer the shacks.

What had begun as a tranquil, poignant moment of villagers thanking us for the food, and troops saying good-bye to folks they have known for several months, soon turned to a time of edgy anxiety. The armed RF/PF troops double-timed from across the road. They entered the village carrying their rifles at high port. They gathered around their leader. He spoke and gestured to them like a quarterback in a pickup game. They were planning something.

The leader of the pack indicated to the village elder that the crate belonged to the RF/PF. He wanted the crate for his men. I walked over to the crate and sat down on the front left corner. I cradled my M-16 over my left elbow and pulled a cigarette from the pack as if I owned the crate and the soil beneath it. The leader looked at me. Then he said a few words to his men.

As the leader strode toward "my" crate, his men suddenly formed a single line, and ran along the edge of the open areas. I thought that they were going to form a firing line. This could have turned into a horrendous incident.

The leader sat down on the adjacent corner of the crate. He looked to me, and gestured that he wanted a cigarette. Smokers speak a universal language when it involves a cigarette. Especially someone else's cigarette. On the outside, I was a cool, staunch, forthright individual. Inside, I realized that I had overstepped my limit. I had raised the stakes while holding a pair of deuces. Now what will I do?

Now and then in times of dire desperation, someone else will step up. Today's contestant was Van. He had often come around our aid station to wave hello, and help unpack supplies. He seemed to like being nearby, as if he was on my side.

Van stood between me and the riflemen. He spoke to me in a pleading tone. "Please. Go away. Now!" I read his eyes as he spoke. He also thought that something dire was about to happen. He may have heard the words the leader had spoken to his men.

I stood up. I shook hands with Van and told him that he was a "number one man." Then I turned to the Vietnamese leader, and shook his hand, as if to say, "You win."

I turned to face my guys. I made sure to hold the M-16 away from my body. There was space between the trigger and my right hand. I announced, "Men, time to go." I was reluctant to give up the crate, but I realized that soon we would leave the village and the RF/PF group would remain. I figured that the villagers and the militia both spoke Vietnamese, and sooner or later they would figure things out. Four years later the US government would arrive at the same conclusion.

The US troops got into their vehicles and we began our trip back to camp. I took a look back at the village. As twilight painted the sky all seemed peaceful. In all likelihood Van had prevented a serious incident. I hope that he emerged unscathed after the North Vietnamese took control of the South. As I steered my jeep through the camp gates, I realized that the bravest, stand-up man I had ever met was a 15-year-old boy. Truly the brave one.



A bright sunburst in the upper right corner of a yellow background.

Summer



Seasons

What's better than a season change?

The hope, the light, and there's more Sun
Is it More than the first awakening and morning dew -
Birds chirping - sunrise new
sweet smell mesmerizing fragrance -
Bitter sweet cause it comes with the allergen
what is better than the season's change

What is the season that the son's birthday closes one
Snowfall comes
blinding layers of pure white blankets
Covering the green
Snow day please
Children like they used to -
children like they should be
Laughing and playing jumping and sledding -
Snowball in the face
Teeth chattering state

Can you see it
The change
We feel it
To need it
Last season's decision inevitable to concede it
The change
Now a wish upon a sun
Flowers before noon the beach to run

Beat upon my face
Laughter with rose fragrance -
carries the weight of a ton
Too hot we complain
Rain season we disdain
But we know and accept
All seasons not the same

A little rain must fall
Our anticipation stands tall
As we trudge through the final steps of the season
Mastering the qualities - understanding the subtleties
Grieving the causalities -
this season its actualities-
We have no choice but to adjust to its reality.

We compare and contrast a season of weather and a Seasonal life
Some seasons of strife
Turmoil so real it cuts like a knife
We get that fall must occur so spring leaps forward
Embrace our seasons of joy - camouflaging our seasons of plight
Joy in the morning
Means we endure through the night
And whether the weather or existing endeavors
We have learned the nuances of winter comes with the summer of better

What's better than a season change



Warm

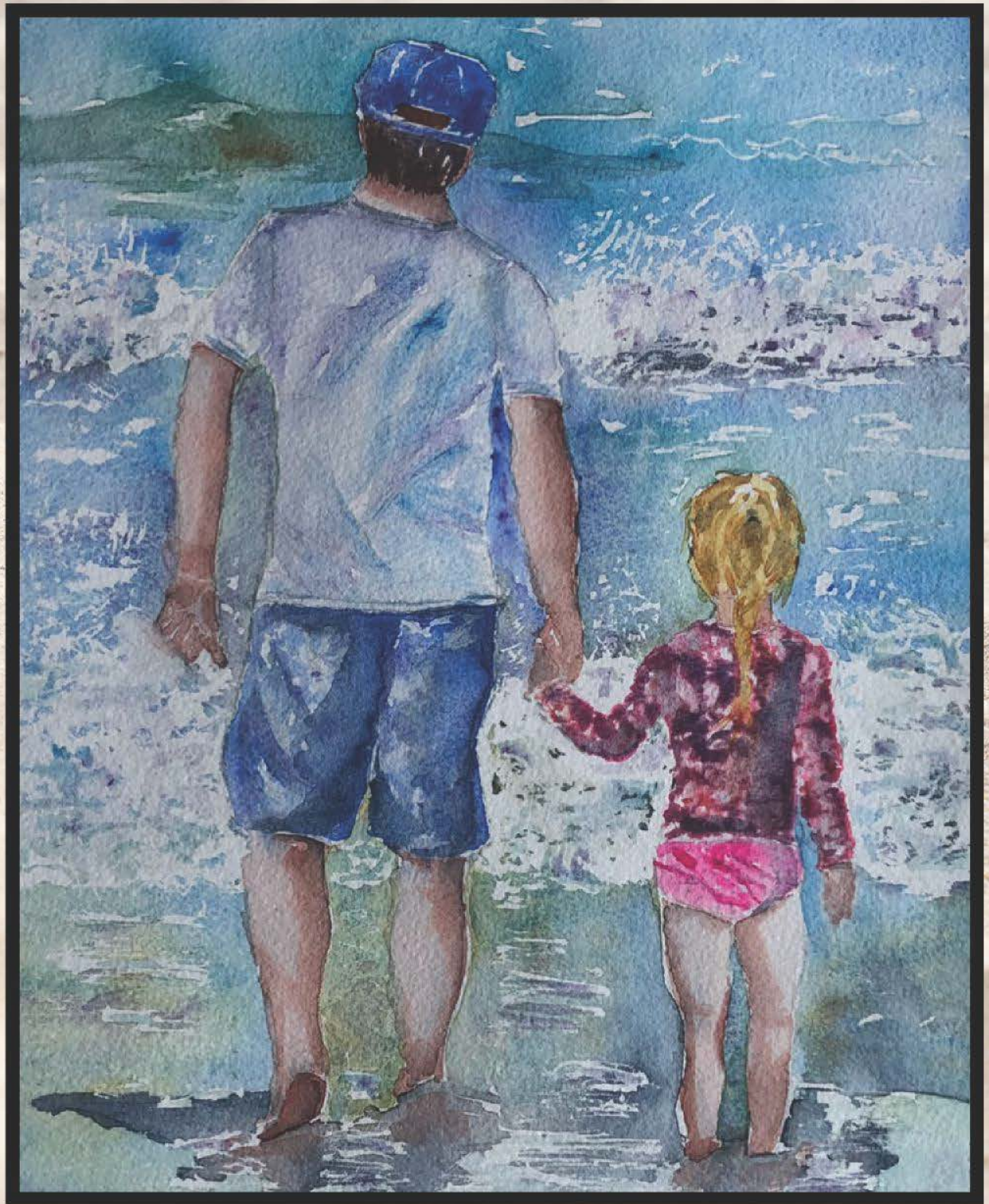
Seasons come in many forms
Some are hot and scalding
Fierce and bright
Others are dark and dreary
Cold and scary

Some seasons are in between
They are both bright and dark
Hot and cold
A mixture creating something familiar
A warm content

Experiencing the intensity of fire and ice
Is exciting yet dangerous
Risks exist in the extremes
Remember to always return to the comfort of
warm
Before the burn

Our memories are full of hot and cold
But the best ones are warm
They are filled with friends and family
Comfort and safety
Laughter and joy

Take the risk
Reach for the flame or the frost
Weather the storms of change and growth
But remember to return to the warmth
That's where you will find home



THE FOUR SEASONS

Everyone knows there are four seasons: Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring. But have you ever wondered what would happen if they switched places?

It was February, and Spring started to appear while Winter slowly receded. Winter noticed that people were happy about Spring's arrival, but this wasn't anything new; it had been happening for thousands of years. Seeing this, Winter said to itself, "I am done with this. The humans are so happy because it's getting warmer that they don't even appreciate the cold."

Winter grew so mad that it refused to let Spring come. Spring tried to reason with Winter, reminding it that humans appreciate Winter, too. Humans look forward to Christmas and many other holidays because of Winter, but Winter didn't care. Winter said to Spring, "You're just saying that because you know that humans like you and Summer more."

Summer chimed in, agreeing with Winter's sentiment. "You're right. Humans like us more than you because you're just a cold, dark season, and we are warm, sunny, and bright," Summer said. Autumn added, "Summer is right. That's just the way you are."

Winter's anger grew so strong that Spring, Summer, and Autumn couldn't do anything about it; Winter was just too powerful. At first, people didn't notice anything major. They thought it was just climate change. But then, when birds returned from migration, they got confused. Farmers' vegetables didn't grow, and eventually, people started to worry. Some even built underground bunkers to live in.

It got so cold that animals started to die. The whole world plunged into an ice age. People's food began to run out, and even tropical areas turned into permafrost. Scientists anxiously searched for a new, suitable planet for humankind. The whole world fell into pandemonium.

As things started to die out, Winter felt guilty for all of this. Finally, when Winter let Spring come, it was too late. Everything was covered in permafrost. Most of the humans died, and the important people left Earth in rockets.

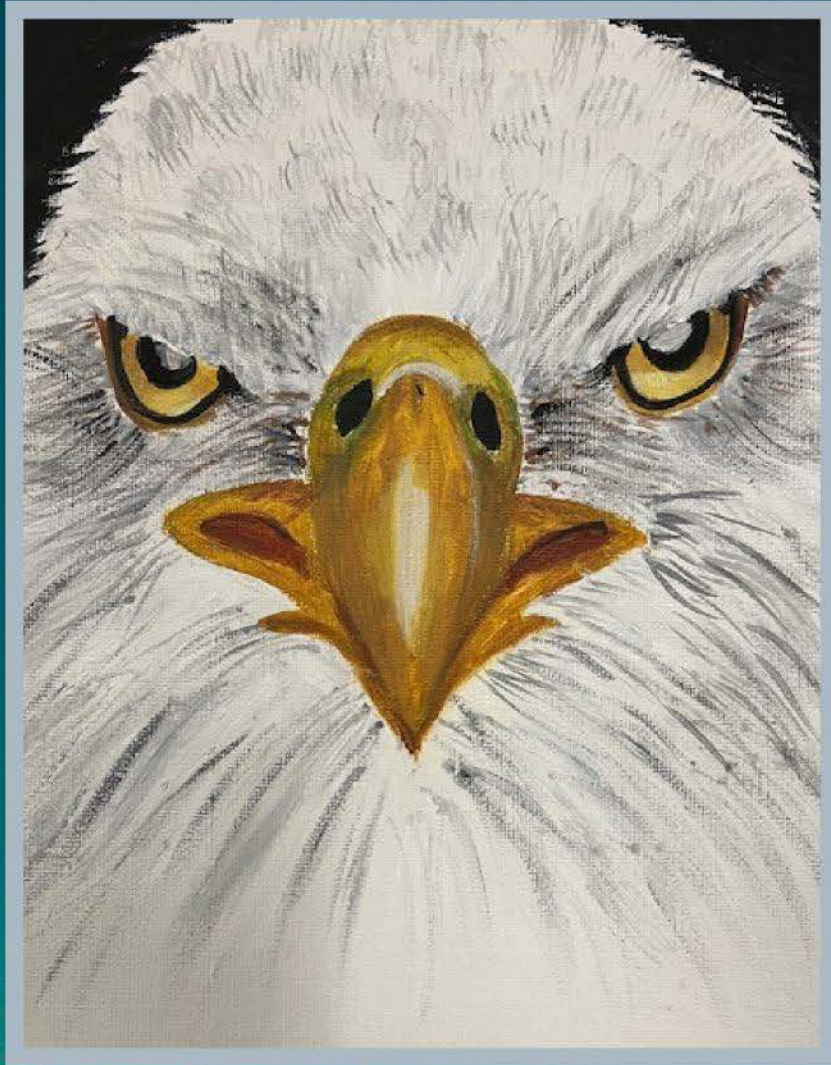
Winter felt so guilty that it promised the other seasons it wouldn't show its face again for a thousand years. Then the other seasons said, "You better." A thousand years later, when Winter finally returned, it saw that Earth was brimming with life again.

There were no mammals yet, but life was thriving.

The seasons decided to give Winter another chance. But Winter was worried, "The animals and the trees aren't ready for the cold." Autumn reassured Winter, saying, "Don't worry. I trained them to adjust to the cold." Autumn was the responsible one among all of the seasons after all. Slowly but steadily, mammals started to appear, and they became smarter. Then, mammals similar to humans appeared. They created their own language, and everything started to go back to normal. History repeated itself.

All of the seasons learned something: never mess with Mother Nature, and everything has its own purpose.







Porcelain Flowers

A garden of starlight, twinkling in
pink roses,

porcelain flowers grow in Winter's
frosty chill.

Spun into gold, ivy cracks and
twitches, longing

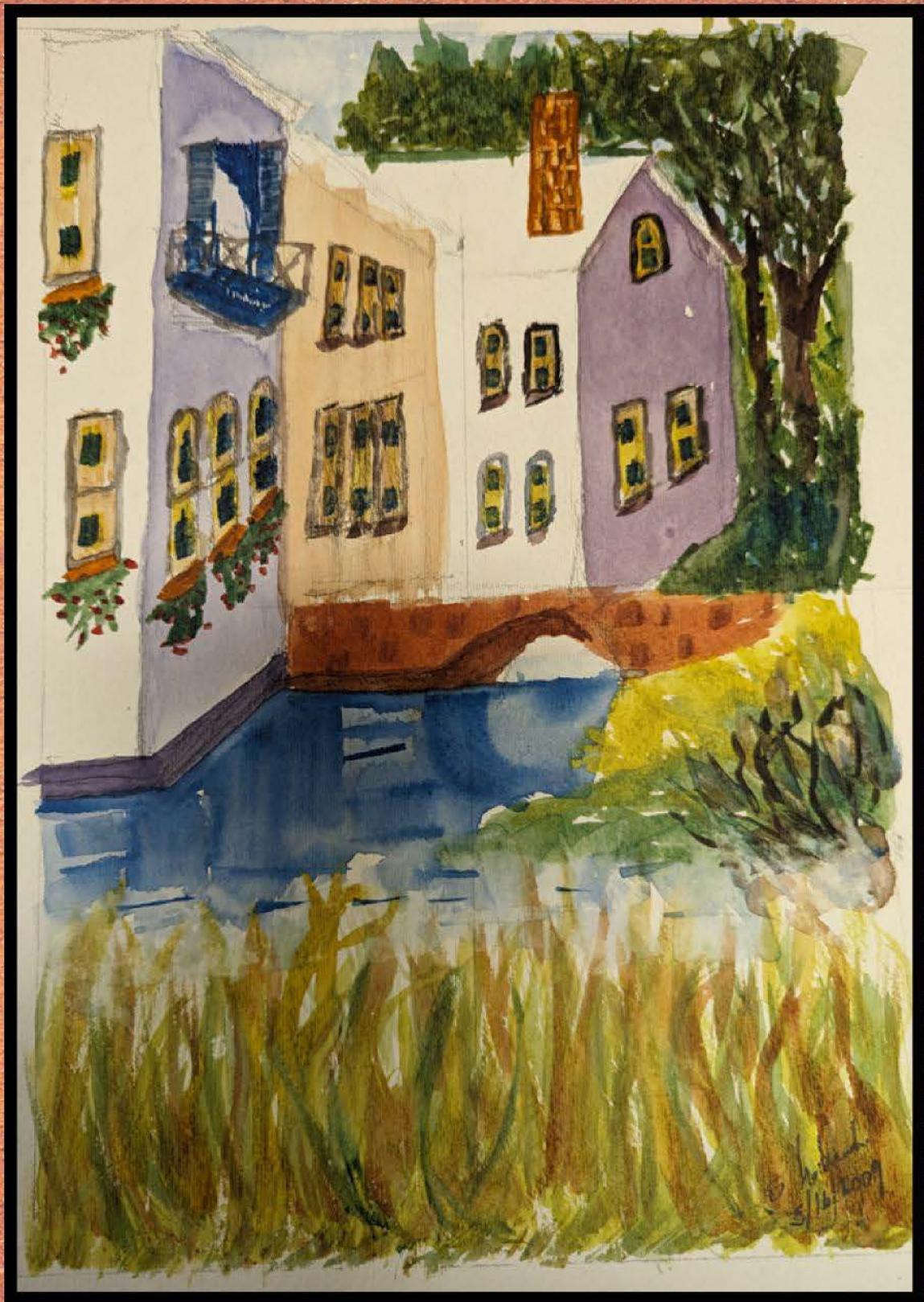
to twist into Spring's muddy troughs.

Dragonflies rest on Summer's
blooming lavender,

happy to sway with ocean salty
breezes.

A maple leaf crimps and crochets
Autumn's

blanket, a quilted memory of sandy
sleepy seasons.



Every Dog Has Its Day

In a cozy nook, where shadows play
A Pomeranian spends his day.

With fluffy coat and bright, round
eyes

He greets the world with gentle
sighs.

Upon the table, a sandwich waits
With peanut butter, a tempting fate.

The Pomeranian, with eager glee,
Approaches with curiosity.

In springtime's bloom, the windows
wide

He savors each lick, his joy untried.
With budding flowers and skies so
blue

He nibbles away, his spirits anew.

Summer's warmth, a golden hue
The Pomeranian enjoys his chew.

Beneath the sun's soft, dappled
light

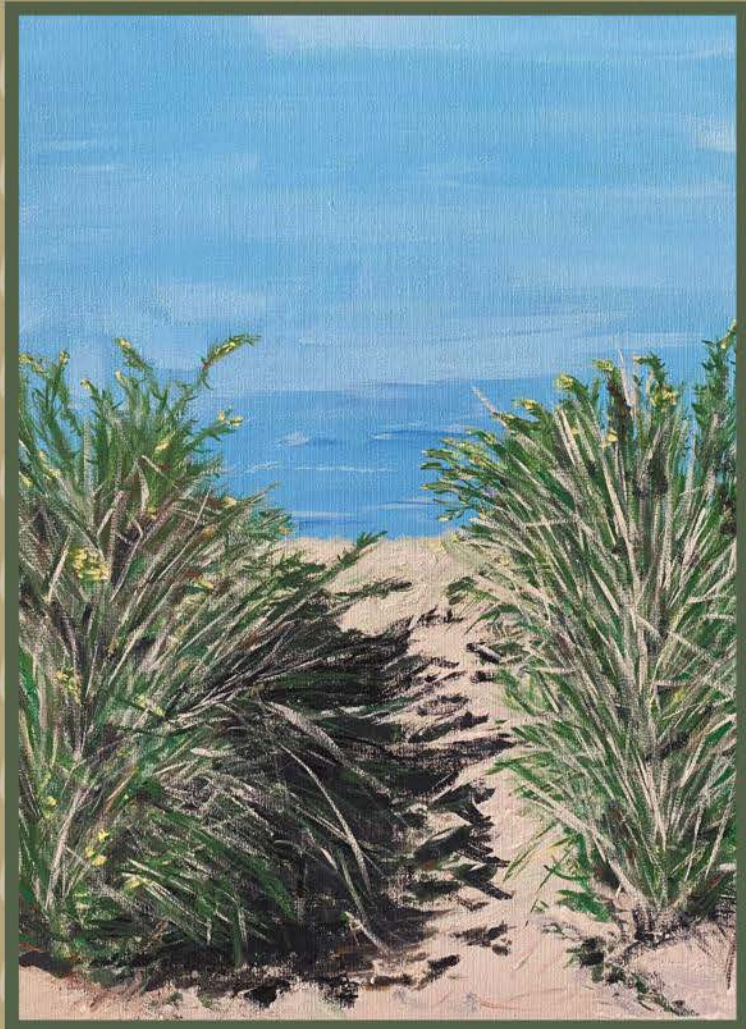
He relishes his sandwich bite.

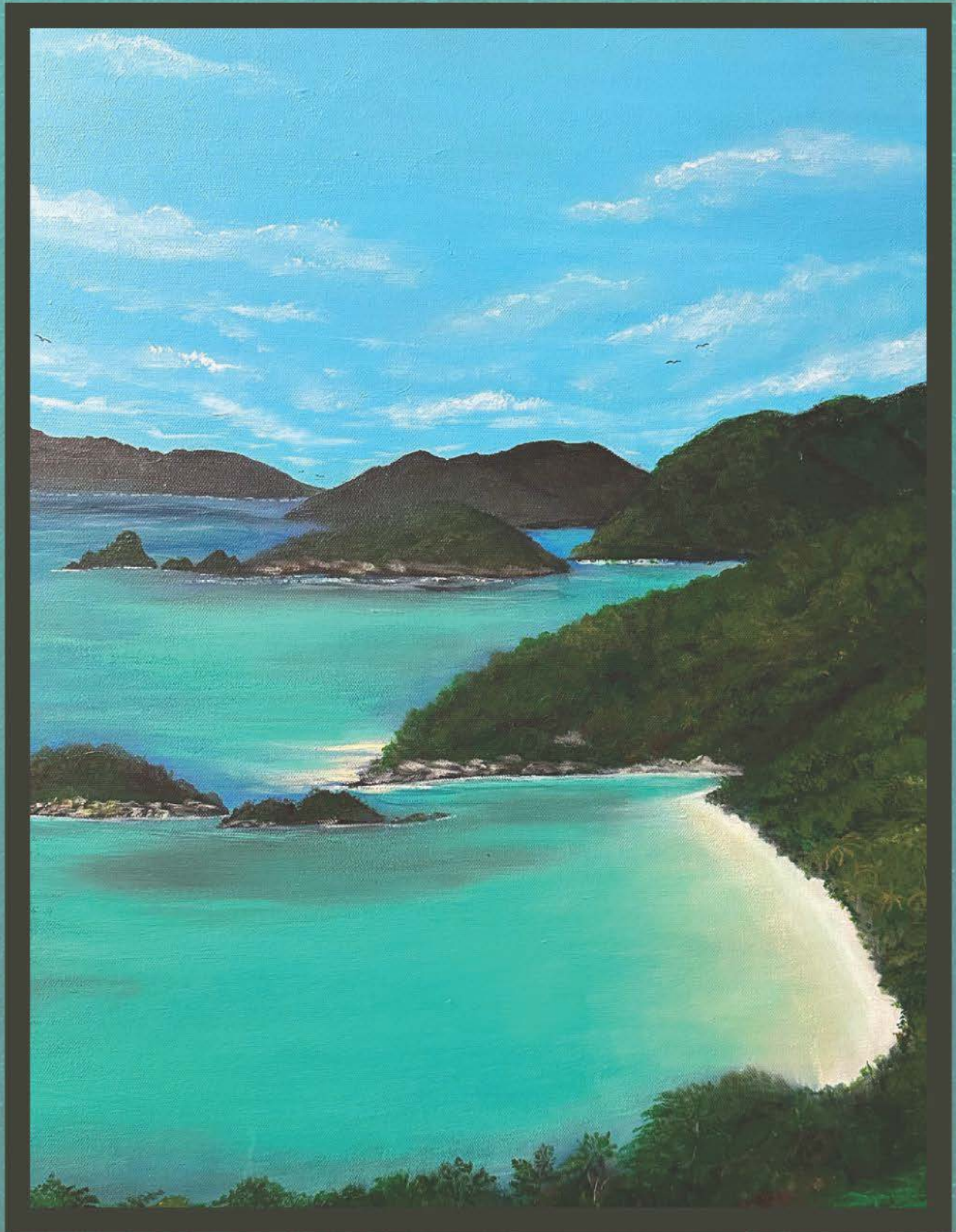
As seasons change, his joy remains

In peanut butter's sweet refrains.

Through every moment, love
sustains

In each scene, his bliss maintains.





Minnesota Night Lice

In the land of Minnesota, under moon's soft glow,
Where breezes whisper through the pines, a secret they bestow.
There dwells a curious creature, small but full of might,
The elusive Minnesota Night Lice, a wonder of the night.

They dance upon the prairie grass, their wings a silent flight,
Glistening in the starlight, a spectacle so bright.
With antennae twitching gently, they navigate with ease,
Through fields of golden wheat and woods of ancient trees.

Their song is but a whisper, a melody so fine,
It harmonizes with the crickets, in a nocturnal shrine.
They weave through blades of grass, in a graceful, rhythmic spree,
Creating magic in the air, for those who care to see.

Though small in stature, they hold a mystic charm,
In the heart of Minnesota, where the nights are warm.
So if you're lucky, on a quiet summer's night,
You may glimpse the Minnesota Night Lice, a spectacle of delight.

AUTUMN

Autumn on Long Island

All around me people speak of the fall grandeur and beauty of upstate New York and New England. I join in with tales of lacey yellow leaves twining up trees and telephone poles, scarlet sumac against golden beeches, vines of berry red and pumpkin orange climbing granite. I don't need to leave the island for autumn's splendor; I see this daily as I travel Long Island's parkways, highways and backroads.

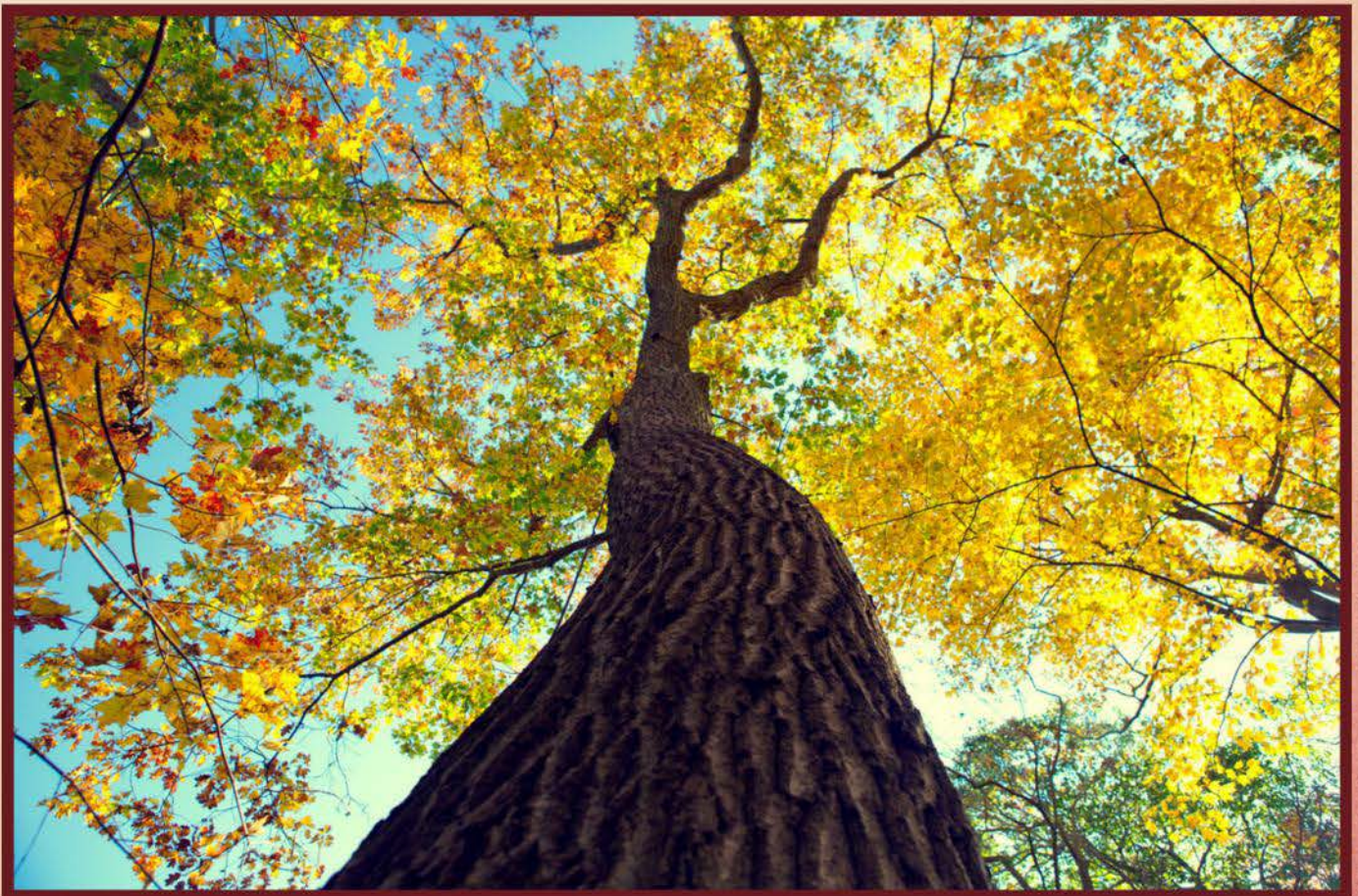
All commuters have autumn's glorious colors outside their windshields. From Nassau to Eastern Long Island there are quilts of orange, red, and gold, everywhere you turn. Going east on Sunrise Highway through Bayshore and the Islips the rising sun turns the trees all sulfur yellow, neon orange, and blood red. Along the partition fence goldenrod and wild aster bloom against a backdrop of multi-colored vines and bushes softening the view of the malls and businesses on the service road.

Stuck in traffic at the Oakdale merge, one can reflect on the blaze of color along Bubbles Falls and Rattlesnake Creek that flames upon their waters, a train passing beyond, whistle blowing. On the north side along the Connetquot Park border green pines alternate with brick red oaks to frame the beige grass of the meadow where deer graze at dusk. Traveling onward it's a potpourri of rust red, mustard yellow and purple. Passing beyond Patchogue one can see eastward the meld of trees and brush of all colors marching to the east.

Traveling on Northern State or Southern State is a reminder of what Robert Moses's vision was. Passing Belmont Lake Park on Southern State dark green pines tower on one side, fiery bushes on the other. The maples and oaks mirrored on the lake is a living Monet painting, right down to the rowboats and swans placidly afloat. The trip along the parkway is a constant explosion of color. Bushes turn wine red from the bottom up, palely green atop. Red fruits against yellow leafed trees and ever-present vines of scarlet and gold clambering over granite overpasses. Northern State is much the same, a tapestry of color skirting the roadway.

For more solitary moments we have but to enter the many parks of the Island. For ordered ranks of color and bloom we have Planting Fields Arboretum, Westbury Gardens and Bayard Cutting Arboretum. Like your color on the wild side? Try Wildwood, Connetquot, or any of the other large parks and preserves on Long Island. At any of these places you might see a cormorant practice his diving, ducks facing off, chipmunks scooting through the underbrush, all against a backdrop painted by Mother Nature's palette.

I have no argument with the beauty and grandeur of our northern neighbors at this time of year. But as I look out over Long Island down to the bay from the Vietnam Memorial in Farmingville the beauty that is right here in our own backyard overwhelms me.



Big Wind

The storm rattled the shutters making the window panes shake violently as the gusts reached up to sixty knots or more. More than three days it constantly battered the coast in its fury, knocking anything that showed weakness down in its path. The ocean stripped away beaches leaving exposed the sands of time. Dunes which were spurned from mother ocean through the course of time returned to her womb, leaving nothing anyone living would recognize.

A small beach shack stood near the shore's edge, built years before what had developed around it. Built with the craftsmanship of an old-world ship builder, able to withstand any force nature could throw against it.

Its only occupant, Vernon Howell, was eighty-seven years old and had been through more in his life than most people would believe possible. The reality was he knew the years had eroded away at his youth, and he accepted that, but the storm was eroding his fragile nerves as every blast of air slammed the outer walls of his abode. He was the only weak link in the structure that evening, as he sat in his chair listening to the wind howl out of control.

Vern had been through it many times before, but that was in his youth. Up to seven or eight years ago he considered all of it his youth. The day he left the sea to live on land was the day he decided he was too old. Now as he sat with the will of nature swirling around him, he felt he had lost control of the only world he had ever known. Things would never be the same, he thought.

Vernon Howell began reliving his life. His fatigued mind captured visions of his past. He remembered the time he bought a twenty-two-foot cabin cruiser and was piloting back from New Jersey. In those days weather forecasts were a little better than looking out the window. Vern had no idea a hurricane was moving up the coast but he found the humor of the situation as he told the story years later.

"I was fighting to stay off the sandbars with each wave. The boat was taking a beating. I was soaked to the bone. The beach was in sight, but I didn't think I could swim the distance in a washing machine. My life preservers were just out of reach. I was afraid to let go of the wheel to get one! All I kept thinking was, 'I wish I bought a bigger boat'."

Vern smiled to himself now as the gusts battered his little shack. He got up and picked up a bottle of whiskey. Looking at the patch that covered his right eye in the mirror he thought, "Guess the wind has been eating away at me for years."

He sat in his chair again holding the bottle of whiskey. His mind wandered to a day even further in his past. Back to when he was running rum during Prohibition. A violent storm quickly crossed the island heading out to sea. He was still reefing the main sail when the wind blasted the boat broadside, snapping the standing rigging on the port side. Vern never saw it coming, or his eye again after the line whipped through his eyelid taking the eyeball with it, as it thrashed wildly in the wind.

"If I managed to live through that, I can handle a little storm like this." Vern spoke aloud taking a swig. "Hell...made it through the storm...and the Coast Guard! This ain't nothin'."

Only this wasn't a little storm. The forecasters were calling it the worst storm of the century. Vern had no idea since he didn't have a radio.

The candles flickered as the wind tried its hardest to enter. When Vern was on the water he felt he had control of his fate, but sitting in the dimly lit shack he was at the mercy of the wind.

A sudden burst of atmospheric energy tore a shutter from its hinges, leaving the glass window to withstand the pressure of the wind on its own. Vern was instantly up on his feet. He couldn't stand it anymore, but a sudden rustling in the garbage distracted him from his train of thought. Startled, he jumped back as the bag fell over. A rat.

"That's it! I'll get you!" But something came over him as he watched the rodent scavenge for food. All this little fellow was trying to do was survive, like he had for so many years.

Things weren't that bad. It was just the wind. Even though the wind seemed to affect his life more than any other being on the planet. Rummaging through a drawer, he pulled out a couple of slices of bread and tossed them over to the rat.

"You don't bother me and you can stay till the storm's over, little feller." Vern took another swig of whiskey and walked over to the window. Without the shutter he could see what was happening out on the water triggering another memory from his past.

It was World War 2, Vern was serving aboard a merchant cargo ship in the North Atlantic. He watched from the bridge as the ship rode up the face of an approaching wave then was covered from bow to stern as the peak washed over the decks tossing around a couple of hundred tons of steel like a cork.

"Ain't nothin' compared to that, is it little feller?"

The rat continued to nibble away at the bread oblivious to his host. Vern felt a little better knowing he wasn't talking to himself for a change.

"Gonna hav'da fix that shutter come mornin', that's provided this shack's still standin'." Vern sat back with his whiskey bottle watching the rat fill its stomach.

"You gotta family, little feller? I did, once. A wife and a son." Tears began to swell in his eye as he began to reminisce of a past that seemed so long ago.

"My boy was killed in Korea by friendly artillery. The army never admitted the absurdity of firing a barrage of rockets during a typhoon. They were blown 30 points off their target. Officially it was listed as 'an atmospheric condition rendering the mission unsuccessful'."

Vern looked down at the bottle. "Damn politics, is what it was! That's what got my wife too. She couldn't handle the lies. It ate away at her till it won." Vern took another sip watching the rat as it watched him back. He couldn't help but smile.

"I'd give ya a name, but you ain't stayin' and don't start thinkin' otherwise!"

Something flying on a blast of air smacked into the window pane cracking it. The wind did the rest as it blew the glass into the room shattering it on the floor. Vern found a way to cover the empty space. It was then he realized what he missed most, the fight to survive. On the sea it was constant, but old age started to make him accept the inevitable. Living in the cabin he felt he had lost the will to fight but now he found it again.

First the shutter, then the glass. What would happen next? He knew he was ready to fight back now, but he was surrounded by a storm he couldn't control. He sat back with his whiskey to wait it out. He looked for his little friend, but he was gone. Vern would find him in the morning and send him looking for new quarters.

The wind seemed to be easing and the whiskey was warming his soul. He sat listening to the water lapping at the pilings of the shack he called home. It reminded him of the sounds he heard living on his sloop. It was in the comfort of these thoughts that Vern fell asleep.

When he awoke to the sunshine of the new day, the wind was now a steady breeze compared to the night's fury. The flood waters were diminishing as Vern assessed the damage. Not quite as bad as he had imagined it would be. It wasn't until he began closer examination of the pilings that Vern discovered the dead rat.

Tears came to his eye as he gently picked up the body like it was a lost pet. It must have been scared to the point that it gave up its life looking to escape its fear, when it had been safe all the time. Vern understood, like no one else ever would.

Vern found a spot next to the shack to bury his compadre. He covered the grave with a brick so it would always be marked. He even scratched an epitaph in the piling with the name 'Junior' and the date.

The beach shack and Vern were about the same age. It was the first hundred years' storm either of them had weathered. With a smile, Vern couldn't help thinking, "That was nothin' compared to '38!"



Autumn Morning

Sunrise blinds my eyes.

As I try to perceive,

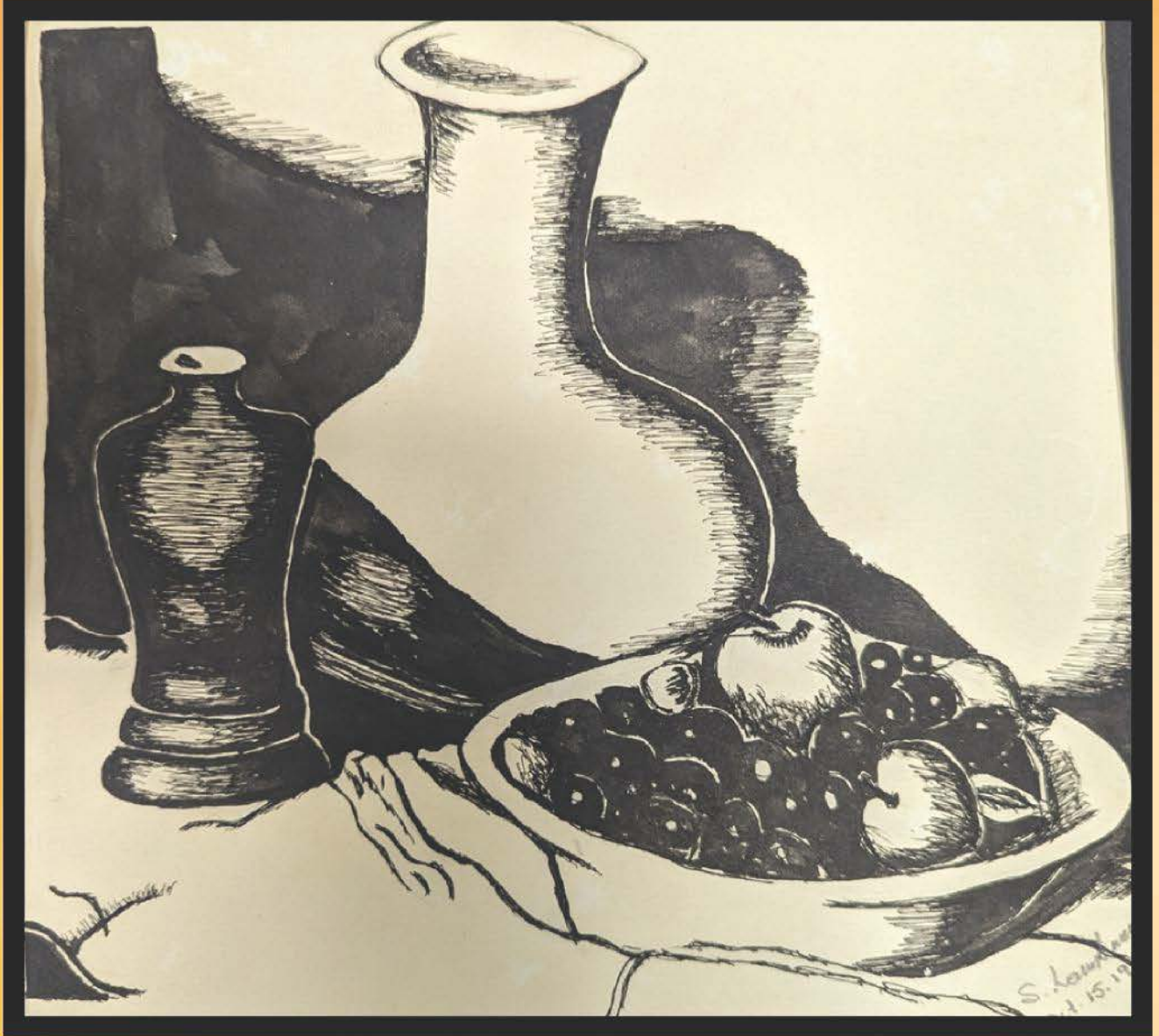
the canvas of colors in the morning sky.

Listening to whispers of a cool waking breeze,

steering the leaves on tranquil trees.

With each ray of color a timeless tale.

Beginning of a new autumn morning.



Tainted Lies

Your eyes
They are your true disguise
It's the pain that leads to a black eye
Don't hide your eyes
I remember your cry
That cry for help at midnight
You got to your knees and prayed to be
the same
But there is not a standard

You asked god to have you assimilated
to baby blues
But how can you ask when you are
about to take a deep dive into the
ominous blue?
How much can someone ask for
How much endurance does one have
How eroded are those lies
You can't hide
Honey, you are your demise

Rewired

Buried deep in the recesses of my mind and heart
There are wires carrying strong currents

Anger, fear, loneliness, resentment, regret
Are running within the strings of red, black, green, grey, yellow
The wires of trauma, abuse, depression, isolation

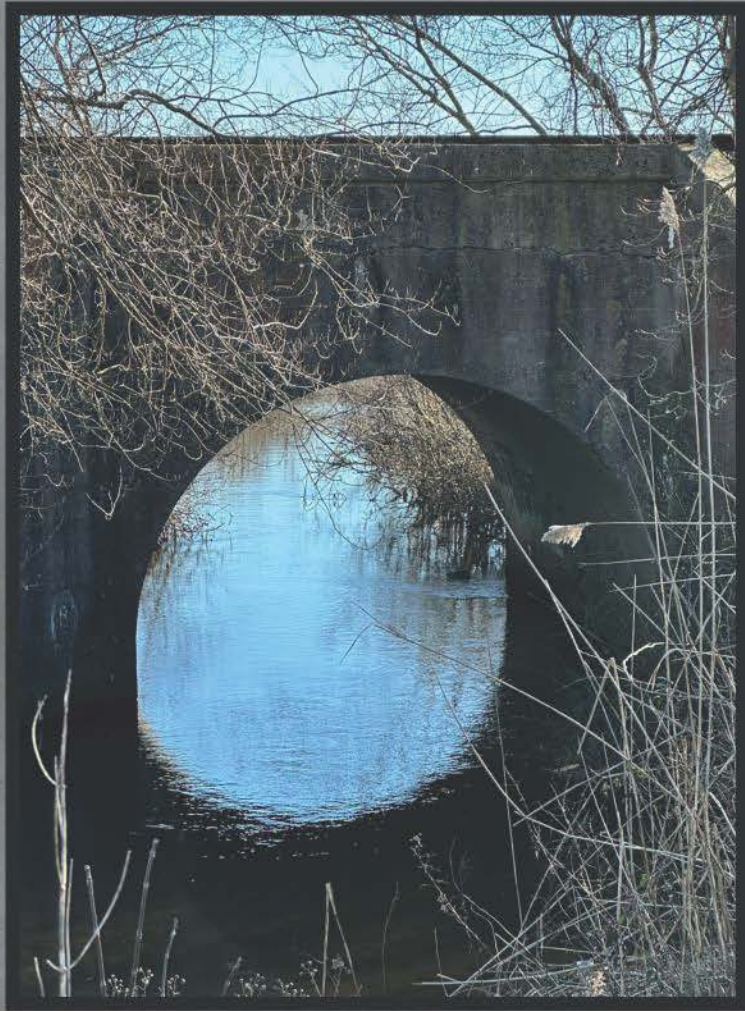
I look and see the wires tangled
Intertwined so tightly
I can hear the dark hum of electricity

How do I replace them?
What do I replace them with?

I find wires of forgiveness, acceptance, faith, hope, love
But what tools do I use to replace those destructive wires?

I look again and see where I can cut
I cut Loneliness with Friendship
I cut Anger and Resentment with Acceptance and Gratitude
I cut Regret with the True Knowledge of Accomplishment
I cut Fear with Faith

Slowly and carefully each wire is cut and replaced.
It takes a long time
There are some shocks in the process
When I'm finished, there is
a strong new energy running through me.



It Wasn't Just About My Hair

Although I haven't insured my hair for \$1 million like Tony Polamalu, most of you know me as "the one with the big head of hair." My hair has gotten me work, allowed strangers to share a kind word, offered photographers some fun shots, and keeps me warm on those cold winter days. My hair is often a topic of conversation, but my most recent interaction was a bit different. We never know what someone is going through but sometimes we need to take a moment to listen - I mean really listen.

We live in a "rush here, rush there" type of world. People are like robots and we are constantly on the move. We have become accustomed to thinking that we need material things and we look for the nicest clothes, most expensive cars, and the biggest homes. We compete for everything and we involve our children in competitions. Is this type of behavior healthy? Are children learning how to love and laugh or are they being taught to fight? Are relationships amongst teens healthy?

I was chatting with the cashier as she rang up my items and as she went to place an item in my cart she walked behind me and said "Wow, your hair is beautiful and so long." I thanked her as I always do when I receive a kind word about my long locks. She then said, "My daughter used to grow her hair that long." So I thought "typical kid, doing crazy things like chopping off her hair, adding silly bangs, or changing it to some outrageous colors," but it seems that I was way off. I replied with "Oh, she doesn't like it long now?" The woman answered with, "My daughter was murdered." Not exactly the discussion I thought I would be having as I placed my gluten free bread in my cart. I continued to bag my groceries but was suddenly taken to a whole different place.

She continued with, "My daughter was an 18 year old honor student and I think they're trying to cover something up." I felt at this point that it would be alright to ask questions since she brought it up. I said "What do you mean by 'cover it up?' I am so very sorry to hear this." She said, "My daughter was with a friend in Suffolk County but her body was found in Nassau County." She mentioned how she never really received any answers and didn't know where to turn. I did not want to pressure this woman into getting answers, but as I saw this pretty young lady in the locket around her neck I felt compelled to inquire.

Everyone grieves differently and it certainly was not my place to tell her what to do. She asked where she should start and I told her you go to the top, and the top of that one, and so on. I said "Don't stop until you get some answers." And she said "You're right, I need to do this, thank you so much." I wished her luck and my big head of hair and I walked out.

I think it is important that if someone gives us a compliment or says "we remind them of so and so," this may go much deeper than just a surface remark. We are living during some very difficult times and although this story was not what I expected, I think that I may have helped this woman in a roundabout way. So the next time a stranger stops you and offers a kind word it may be a small moment for you but something that has a huge impact on them for the rest of their lives.

When was the last time you provided a stranger with a kind word? Have you helped someone who was struggling? Did you find time to reach out to a relative you haven't spoken with in a long time? Isn't it time to stop looking at the clock and to start looking at life?



The Hand

I had never seen a ghost before, not really. Of course, when I was younger I was afraid of ghosts - everyone was - or at least it seemed that way. In school, rumors circulated about a black hand that would descend from the ceiling in the third-grade girls' bathroom. I resented my classmates for sharing their poison, yet I myself became a vector of their plague. *Did you hear about the black hand in the bathroom? No? It's like this.... You saw it? What was it like?*

For all I spoke of it, I didn't want to think about the hand, not really, but the mind has the wonderful tendency to fixate on the very things we should care about the least. Each morning, five mornings per week, I entered my classroom and sat at my desk, assuming the guise of a student—but I was not a student. I was a strategist, a general in the war between the natural and the supernatural. I had to protect myself. Soon enough, I got it all figured out: if nature were to call, I would wait until lunch and use the safe, non-haunted cafeteria bathroom.

That was the plan, anyway.

I aligned myself with nature, but nature did not always align with me. There was a time when its call came so loudly, so urgently, that it filled my senses and became impossible to ignore, and I didn't want to go to the haunted bathroom, oh no, and my heart raced and my breath shallowed and my eyes darted and I started to sweat and my teacher had told me there was no such black hand, no such things as ghosts, but how could she be right when my own body was fighting to keep me from harm, when my mind was screaming, *DON'T GO, DON'T GO?*

And yet what choice did I have in the face of that horrible call?

So I went. I marched through the no-man's land of the hallway. I stood before my destination as if loitering at the gate of some dark bastion, and I entered the place that was supposed to be a bathroom but which had morphed somehow, tilted, shifted, recognizable to the eye but alien to the heart. I hurried into a stall, yanked a pink plastic ring off my finger, set it on the toilet tank, and got to business, all while glancing this way, now that, chasing shadows in my peripherals, sure that the hand was coming to get me, that it was my turn to see it just as others had claimed they had, that the next glance would bring me face to hand with the unnatural.

But the unnatural did not come.

I still feared that bathroom for the rest of third grade. That day, I fled the place with soapy hands, and I did not return so long as I could help it, not even to retrieve the ring I had left in the stall. The ring did not matter much, though I must admit that I missed it. Still, I had descended into the land of doom and returned intact to tell the tale. That's an ordeal to be proud of—but not repeated unnecessarily.

Over time, I stopped believing in ghosts. Friends would tell their tales even into middle school, but I had lost the need to heed their words of warning, had become immune to their plague. Eventually they, too, awoke from their fevers, and ghosts ceased to come up as a serious topic.

I even returned to that old bathroom—quite recently, in fact. I don't like to take work home, so I often stay in school late to grade my students' work and plan for the next day. Nature called. There are faculty bathrooms, but the third-grade girls' bathroom was the closest, and besides, why not revisit the object of so much childhood drama?

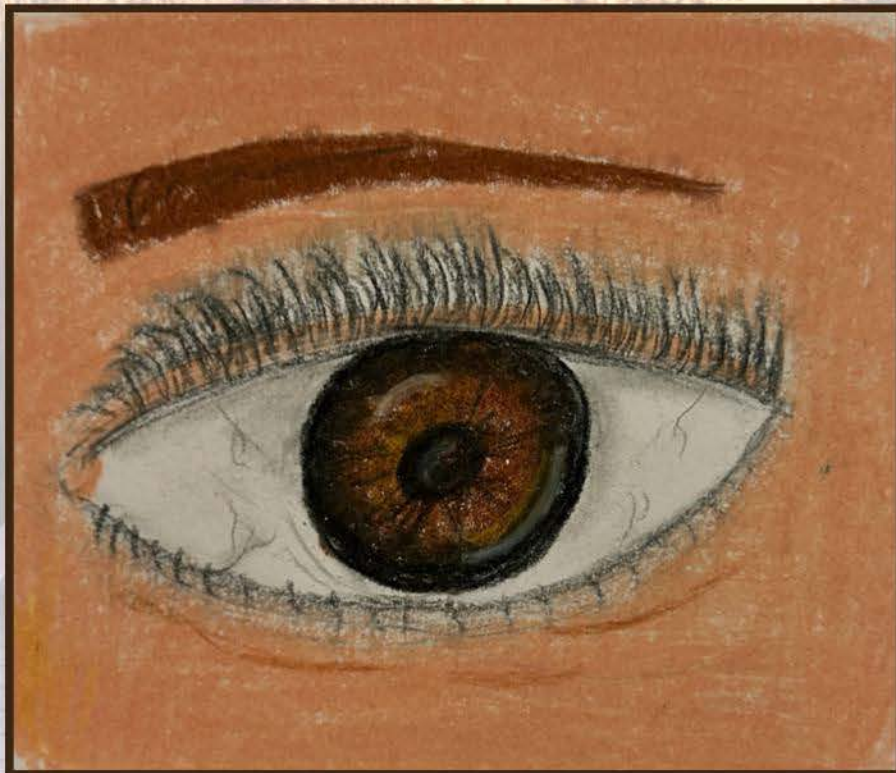
So, I went. The place was just a regular bathroom, not shifted, tilted, nor morphed, contrary to what my panic had led me to believe so long ago. It was even quite nice for a student facility, save for a missing ceiling panel above a sink. I chose a stall and got to business. After I finished, I washed my hands, turned to go, and—

Clink!

I turned back around, looked in the sink, and found a pink plastic ring. I looked up into the space in the ceiling.

And there I was, face to hand.

I had never seen a ghost before, not really—but as they say, seeing is believing!









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