

The TORCH
Spring 2015



The TORCH

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EDITORS

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MESSAGE FROM THE ADVISOR

I salute the editors Laura Neal, Emmanuel Smith, and Melanie Young for their insight, commitment, and patience.

The process of bringing this issue of *The Torch* into being has been marked by challenges, and Ms. Neal, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Young have handled the challenges with grace, dedication, and faith. I have asked a lot of them. My salute is far more than a shout-out for work well done; it is my heartfelt acknowledgment of their beauty as exceptional human beings who have worked very hard to offer something of value to the University community.

I also celebrate the contributors for their wonderful creativity, and I thank everyone who participated in the shaping and support of this journal. A special thanks to the Friends of *The Torch*, and Bowie alum Maiyanna Ridgley, our design consultant.

We look forward to your feedback.

Yours in Peace—Monifa Love Asante

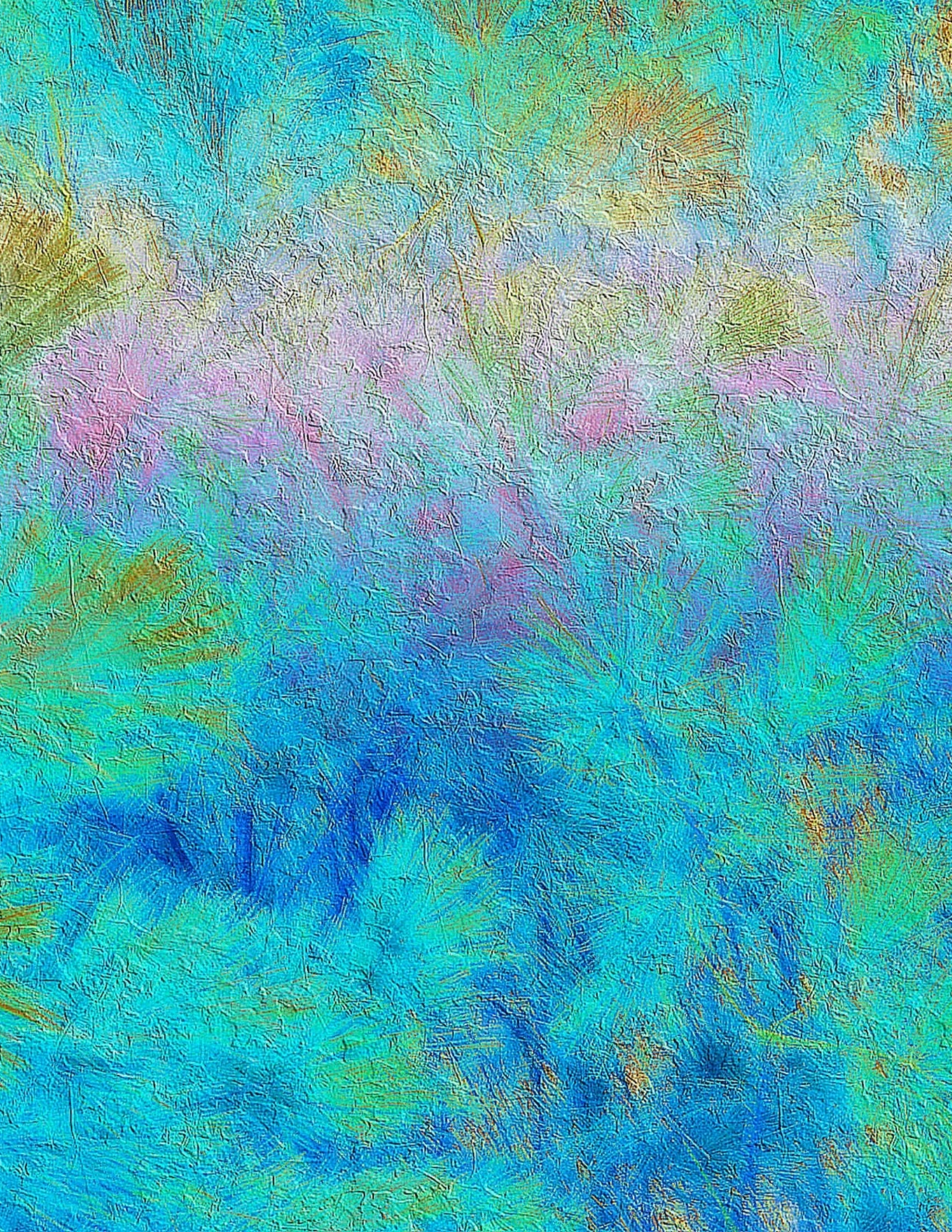
EDITORIAL STATEMENTS

When all of the editors came together to take on this project, each of us had our own vision and disposition on the magazine's theme and destination, but the deeper we ventured the more we realized that writing, organizing, and editing *The Torch* was a recursive and shifting process that transformed into something wonderfully abstract. It is a collection of work that expunges limitations and is capacious in its ability to reach beyond the expected. The array of selections represent a variety of voices that I hope inspire and encourage the community and even the world to embrace and create language and art in order to share in what connects us all...the human experience. —Laura Neal

The creative writing process organizes language to catalog experience and share a common emotive space with its audience. It has been amazing to see the diversity of Bowie State University's creative minds and be rejuvenated by the powerful art presented in this publication. In the opening poem, Zahra Essa explores a people's unwavering commitment to religion without understanding its finality; Jonathan Young's keen allegory for racism echoes a bystander's cheers for the underdog to prevail. One of the

most enjoyable moments occurs when the nude artwork of Alisha Taylor is matched up with the terse language in Stephanie Battle's poem, "Breasts." Alumna Brittany Anderson is featured in a compact piece that questions the ideals of love and Candace Wiley beautifully depicts a family's strength in the midst of a brutal storm in the poem "Hugo, 1989." We come to art to make better sense of a world where the answers given don't suffice; we come to art to give our emotion a controlled environment; we come to art for magic, for sanity, and for resolve. We, as editors, hope you can find refuge under *The Torch*. — Emmanuel Smith

In the stirring lyrics of Bowie State University's *alma mater* our school is "the flame of faith, the torch of truth to guide the steps of youth." My greatest wish is for that legacy to be realized as our readers are guided by *The Torch* and the truth therein just the same as the torch in our moving school song. We, the editors, hope you will enjoy the work of the talented students, alumni, faculty, and staff who have created the beautiful and poignant writing and art that we have had the privilege of bringing to life. —Melanie Young



After

Zahra Essa

The call summons sheep
Shuffling to prayer.

Rough floors scratch
Paper thin skin.

Belief a ball of light
To a blind world.

Mourn for the non-believers.

Confusion shouts,
reason whispers.

Tears swim down faces
Drops land in soup bowl hands.

One day all will know
The truth will expose
The true color of life.

A man dies, followers bow.
The stench of death
Masked by perfumes of prayer.

The fast is finished.
Eat the date, watch the pit.

A white sheet & simple box.
Clean body with a
Pure soul and light heart.

Up

Marcel McIntyre

It seems the closer I get to
God

The more frightened I
become.

Step by step hearing a higher
calling

Trying to overcome the fear
of falling.

Finding God

Emmanuel Smith

We usually run
from
God
until it's too late,
or after it was almost too late,
maybe somewhere in
between an omen
and a raised sidewalk
stubbing the thumb toe.



Daydreaming

Laura Neal

What to make of a dream in a small town? Can it thrive in the city?
Brim filled with fresh-air ideas, but will they survive in the city?

Looked into the blue sky, I heard that there were clouds in the North.
Heard pollution stretched miles high, dust all over the sky in the city.

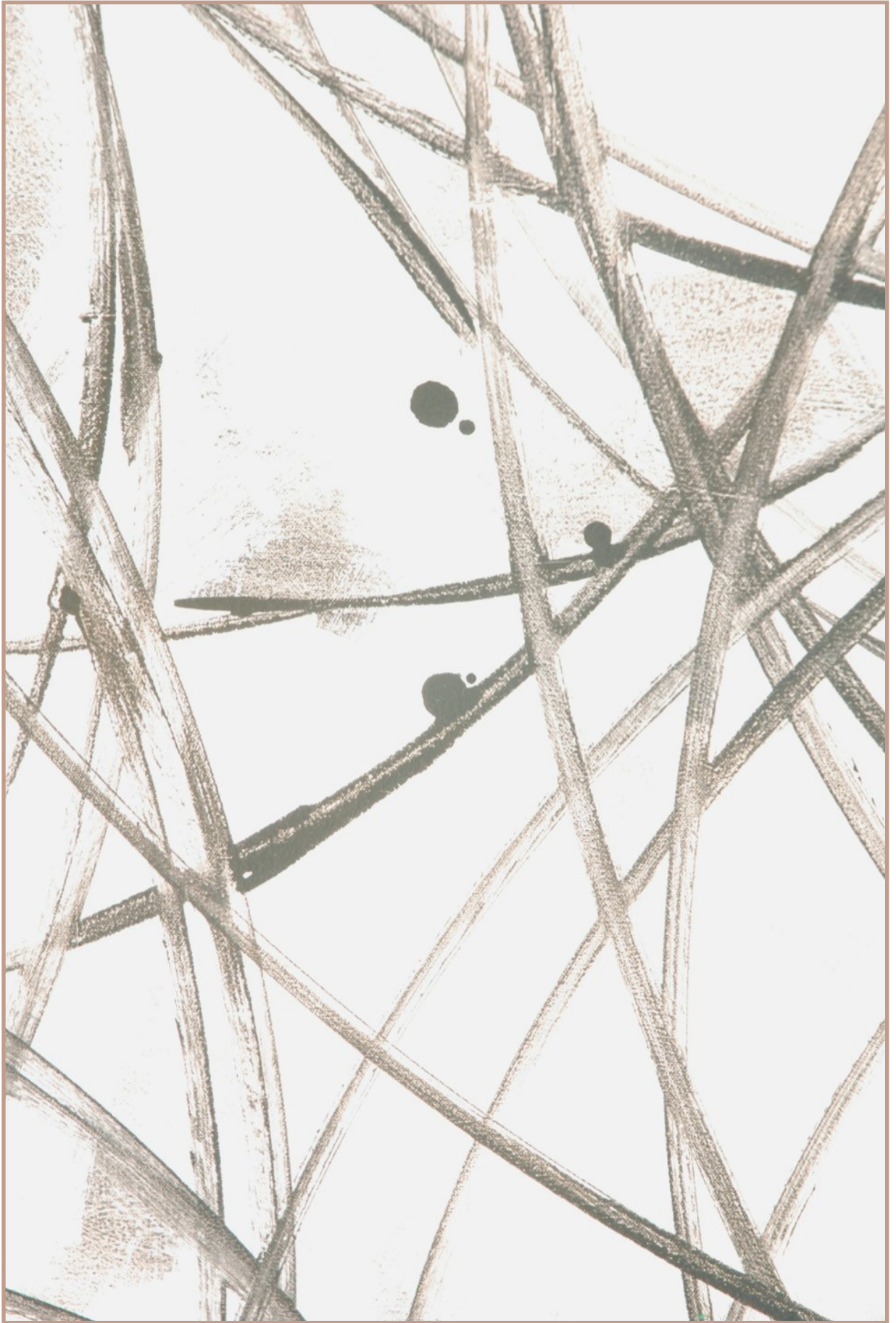
Can my dream sift through the mainstream smoke and breathe
Lungs open and free, filtered from inhaling smog in the city?

In the South, birds commune in the solemn blue pool of the sky
I wonder if flocks of birds fly through the dust in the city.

Flying, do their feathers gather granules and crash-land on the
ground?
Take shelter; hide in the shadows of buildings hovering in the city.

Soaring, these dreams jet and expand along the horizon.
Laura, wordsmith warrior, must strive high in that city.





A War in Winter

Jonathan Young

In the lip-splitting cold
Where the winds can cut through armor
I stand alone in a football field
waste scattered beneath the bleachers,
a crow appears, then five, then ten
each hunting for its next meal.

Poking their black beaks for scraps
the crows find food to feed
their children at the nest
but lazy white seagulls swoop down
from the dark sky
Just in time to steal a free meal.

A war begins.
Black and white feathers twist and spin
I wrap my arms tighter around myself
and hope the crows win.

Nonviolence: The Highest Order of Kind

Michael Hughes

Historically men have gone to war
With their enemies' demise in mind
But Dr. King had foresight for
A nonviolent strategy of war designed
A servant of The Sovereign Lord
Committed to doing God's will
Led a nonviolent Holy war
With no intention of inflicting ill
Even toward his enemies who
However much they hated
Love was returned to them too
And new consciousness was created
That ancient proverb not well understood
That one should love his enemy
That Christ promoted to bring about good
Was the foundation of Dr. King's strategy
And unlike all the violent wars
That cost millions of men their life
With guns and bombs and death in scores
King called for a different kind of sacrifice
The war was fought to save our souls
And to uplift the consciousness of mankind
To move men's hearts to the positive pole
That would gradually manifest in time
Against generals standing with soldiers amass
Looking to devour their enemies' flesh
They had primitive thinking that should have passed
So King advanced Gandhian tactics afresh
Rather than killing one's brother

As has been done throughout our history
One transforms the soul of another
Who once was thought of as the enemy
And with the Father of the universe
As the source of Martin's thought

He went forth in courage facing the worse
And valiantly in crisis nonviolence he wrought
To guide humanity through the ages
To advance us beyond our own destruction
With the wisdom drawn from the wisest of sages
Ushering in life where once was mental corruption
And giving mankind the hopes to soar
Beyond the woes of the small foolish mind
A new kind of strategy that was established for war
Was nonviolence the highest order of kind.



Can We?

Chanel Davis

can we be
butterflies
vivid and lifted
in light wind
drifting from tulip to rose
sipping puddles
napping in petals?

or how about
I be an island coast
and you the sea?

kisses grow harder
moon appears
can we ignite under the sun?
become steam
rise and fall
slowly when the day cools
spread over grass
be rounded dew drops
sliding down
tall blades into soil
giving birth to Life?

Breasts

Stephanie Battle

Seamlessly Rounded
Fitting cupped palms

Soft texture
Desirable touch

Beautiful symmetry
Perfectly imperfect

Wells overflowing
With milk and honey

Celestial orbs
Heavenly mounds

Ripened fruit
Home grown





Gigglin' n' Shit

Emmanuel Smith

Sometimes, she tries to be beautiful
and honestly *honestly*
those are the only times she's not

like one time, her giggle
turned into a seismic Steve Urkle snort laugh
by accident but by design

to me it was divine
an etheric sex
solid emotion

to her
a shock.
so much shock her eyes went

end of a bad dream wide
and her hand
was quick

to cover her mouth
like that kind of pleasure
was forbidden

Wishes

Brian Mason

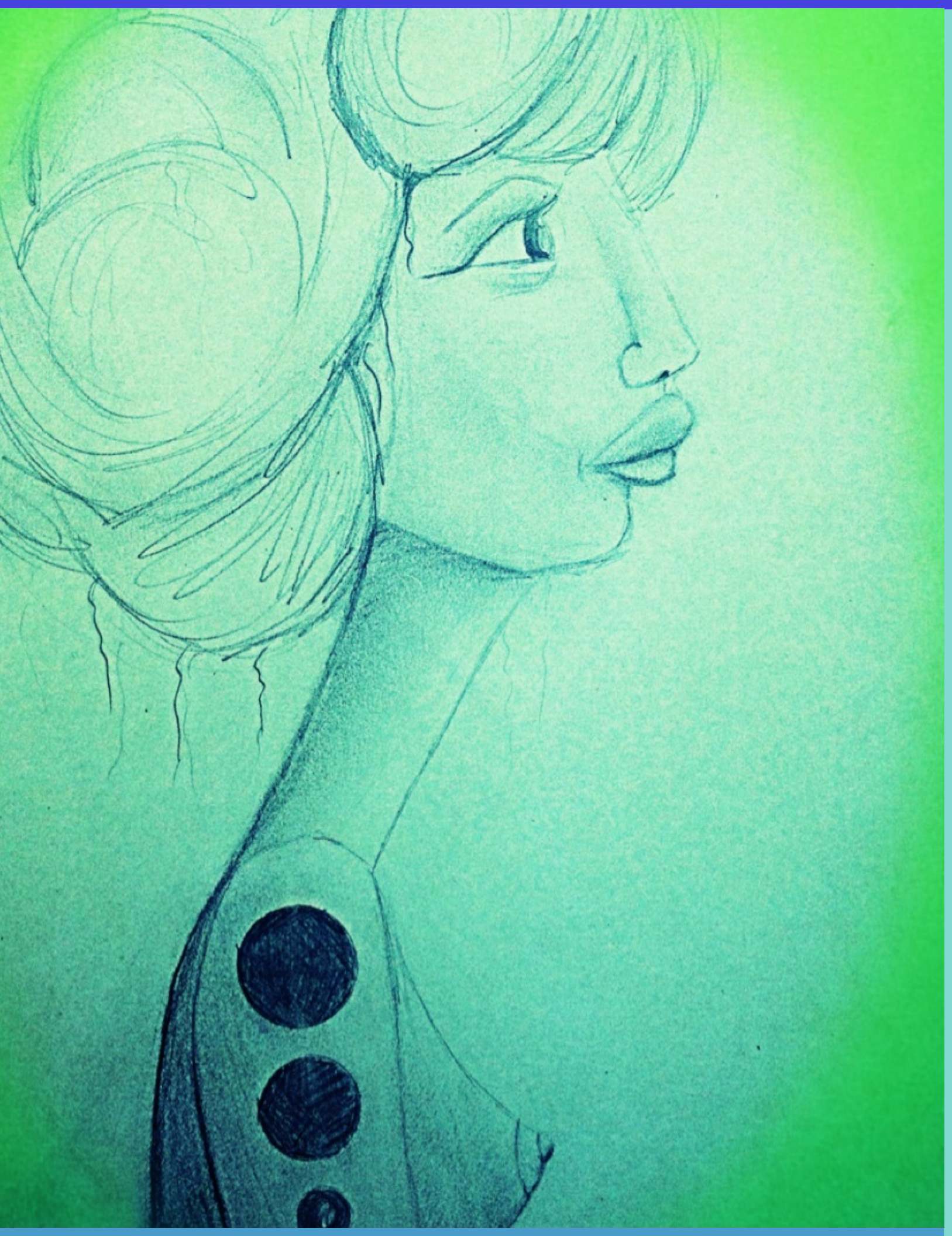
I wish I could tell you I don't love you
but I can't seem to verbalize
the love that has crumbled us in two.

I wish I could tell you I don't love you
it sorrows me to look into your eyes
your face alone makes me ill.

I wish I could tell you I don't love you
I'm like a cancer patient feeling life through dying
alone, begging for my pill.

I wish I could tell you I don't love you
your name alone is my kryptonite
forcing bleeding ears and blinding sight.

You said you loved me last night.
I wish I could tell you I don't love you
but we promised each other truth.





Learn

Brittany Anderson

Regrets feel like we shatter
and shattering means we're
falling
and falling feels like love.
So maybe we love really,
really badly.

Entertainment

Christina Taylor

Sometimes I scream in front of deaf people
I jump in front of the blind
Punch the paralyzed
and speak to the mute

I entertain in my grief.

Sometimes I entertain my thoughts,
thoughts I try to suppress.
Suicide, can't be worse than life.

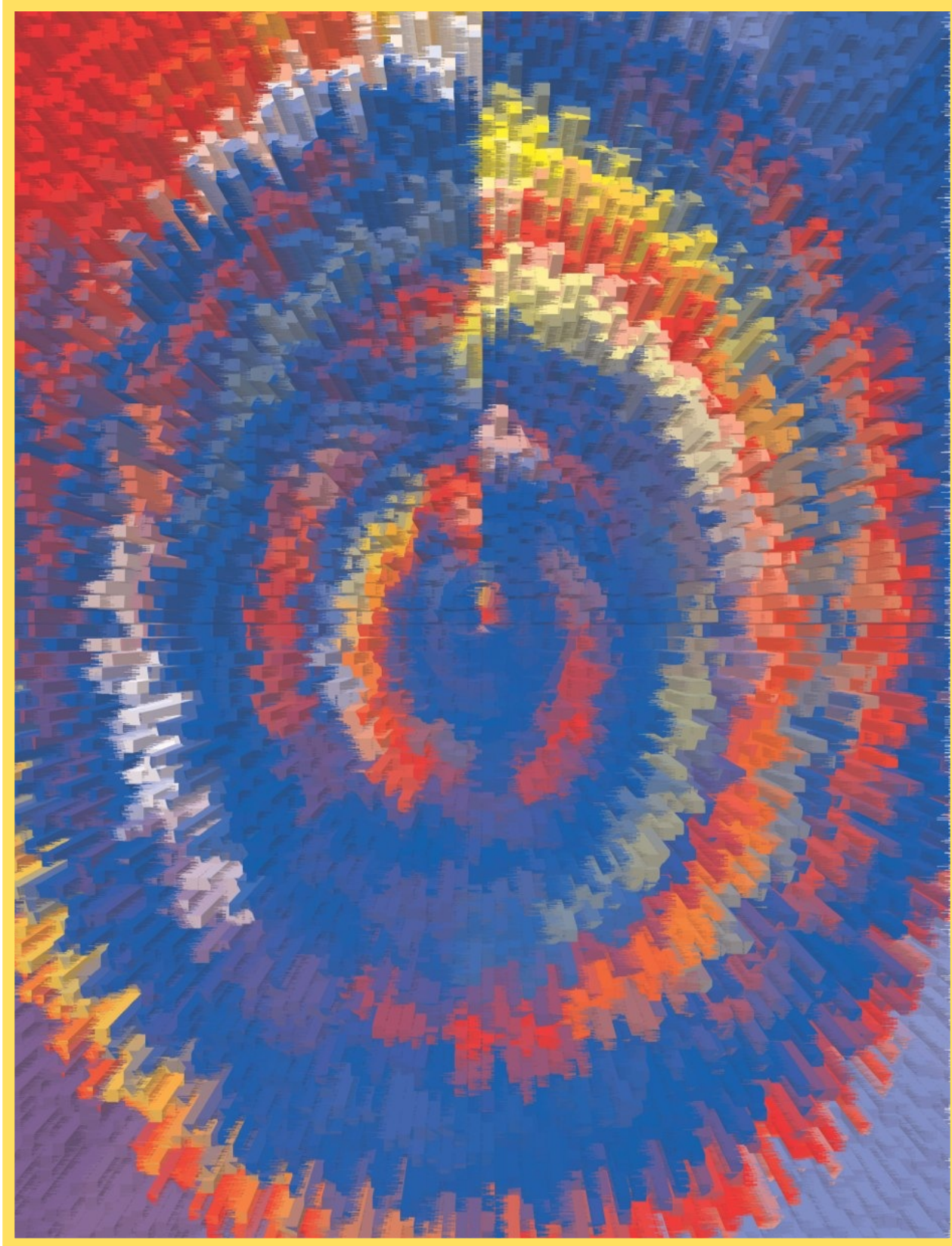
Sometimes I wish I could kill them.

I hate blood. It may be thicker than water
but water is substance, essential to nature.
Sometimes I question whether God is real.

Maybe faith is a word game on the soul.

At times I feel like a science experiment,
lacking hydrogen, I am a suffocating star
void of light.

So I scream at the deaf
Jump for the blind
Punch the paralyzed
and speak to the mute
looking for answers in my invisibility.





Live and Let Die...Please!

Melanie Young

Death is disgusting. I don't even mean the blood and guts or maggots feasting away on our rotting, stinking flesh or the way our organs can liquefy and swell up until they burst out of our unpreserved bodies. All of that is fine with me. That may sound strange, but despite how grotesque it is, those things are natural and normal and meant to happen. It is the *unnatural*, *abnormal* things that people shackled by the conventions of "polite" society do when someone dies that are hard for me to stomach. As a self-proclaimed misanthrope, there is already a veritable cornucopia of things people do that I find downright detestable, but folks really rise to the occasion when somebody bites the big one.

The first thing I take issue with is the semantics surrounding death. I have a huge problem with the obnoxious euphemisms that have been crafted as a verbal detour around the word "dead." Saying that someone has "passed away," "transitioned," or "entered eternal rest" is laughable. Being so bombastic is only putting lipstick on a pig, and this verbiage is akin to the garbage that a "sanitation engineer" picks up for a living. Yes, "dead" is a four-letter word, but it's not a dirty one, but none of this jargon changes anything, so why not just call a spade a spade?

Next on the agenda is what I like to call the selective memory phenomenon. Recollections of the deceased become romanticized facsimiles of what actually transpired and no one mentions any of his or her less than saintly attributes. Okay, someone is dead now so all of the mourners must bawl their eyes out whilst adopting the role of spin doctor putting the stiff on a pedestal no matter what. I'm all about being respectful, but wouldn't honesty honor the deceased more than acting like they walked around with wings and plucked a harp all day?

As if the revisionist history lessons weren't bad enough, what really rubs me the wrong way is how painfully aware of their mortality people can become and the subsequent nonsense that ensues. All of that *carpe diem* rubbish takes hold and everyone's bucket list instantly becomes a mile long. One person's expiration date is now a wakeup call for another when the metaphorical snooze button had been an instrumental part of daily life for them before. Sadly, these feelings are just like New Year's resolutions; they start with good intentions, but so much more often than not they do not last. So to recap, you won't start

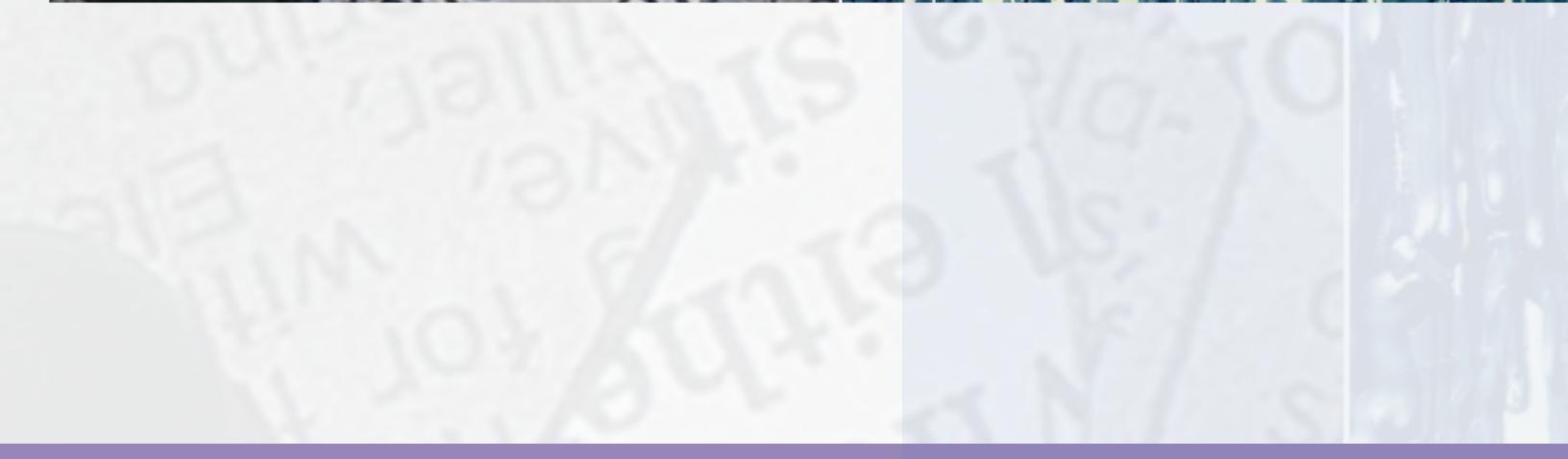
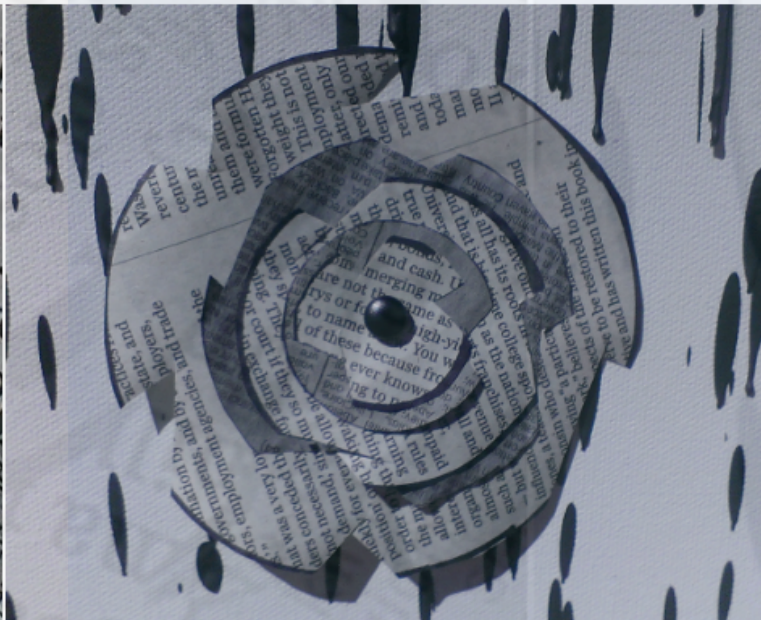
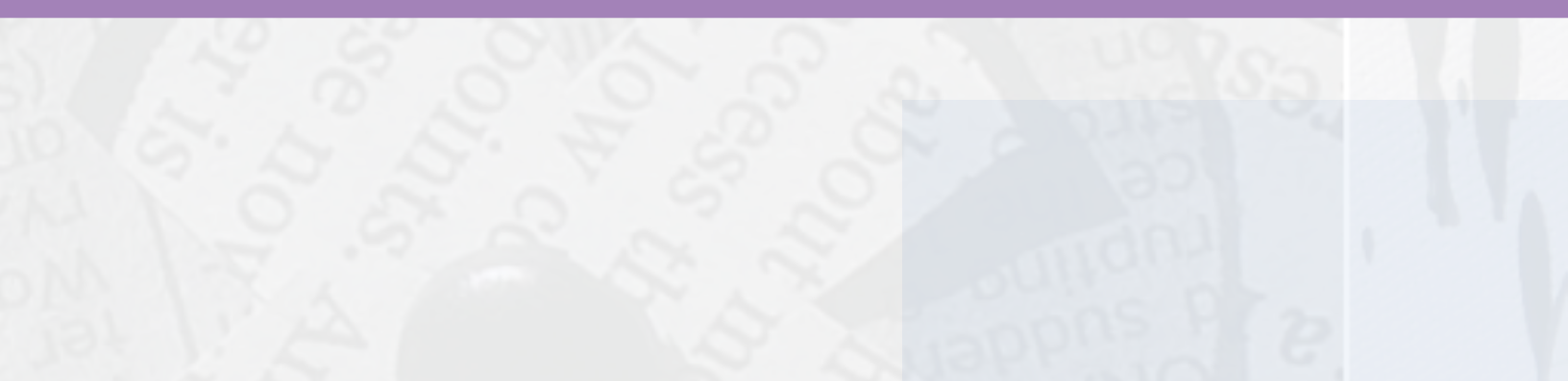
calling your mother every week, or ditch those love handles or suddenly live up to your full potential as a human being just because a friend or relative took a dirt nap. Once you start to get over everything, that fire that had been lit under you is abruptly extinguished and your old self rises from the ashes like a fickle phoenix.

The absolute worst thing about death is how people try to convince those in mourning that they shouldn't be sad and celebrate instead. Don't get me wrong, I think that trying to comfort a grieving person is a kind gesture. However, don't for a second dare try to convince *me* that I should be happy that people I love are dead. I will never see them, feel their touch, or hear their voices again because they are "in a better place"?!? Besides, no one would want to look down on his or her own funeral to see that everyone was tossing confetti into the air and there was a conga line of smiling, laughing people making its way around the pews. Everyone knows they wouldn't *really* want others to rejoice when they're dead, so why it is a good idea to offer this advice to others is beyond me.

So now I've huffed and puffed and tried to blow down all of your social mores in an admittedly reductive fashion, but at the end of the day I get it. Death is scary and hard to deal with, and I understand that all of these social exercises are meant to make things easier to manage. However, I still submit the following requests for your consideration concerning the handling of my own death.

For starters, don't feel obligated to invent any sugar-coated vernacular to say that I'm no longer alive. Ultimately, it shouldn't make a bit of difference whether I was "called home to heaven's pearly gates," or I'm "just worm food." As long as I made my time on this Earth meaningful, you shouldn't have to gussy up what you call it when I'm dead.

Next, when it comes to the eulogy, you have permission to say whatever you want whether it be good, bad, or ugly. My negative traits are part of who I am just like the good ones are, and turning a blind eye to that would do me a disservice. Furthermore, please don't wait until I die to start making changes in your life that you already know are necessary. I get that there is a certain clarity that strikes when you remember you aren't immortal, but be your own wakeup call because cliché or not, tomorrow really isn't promised. The biggest favor I have to ask is that you be sad. Seriously. You don't have to leap onto my casket and shout to the heavens that it should have been you instead with tears streaming down your face. That would be overdoing it, though it would earn you some style points. All joking aside, I sincerely hope that when my time comes, I will have lived in a way that would make celebrating my death at least a little bit challenging...



Elegy for a Garden

Laura Neal

A week has passed since my mother roused me from bed
to hoe the grass from rows or pile peas in a bowl.
My work jeans torn, stained, from grass and soil
are folded neatly on my hamper.

Outside, our field lay outstretched, barren.
I ask my mother what happened to the garden
she said, “we get vegetables for free now,
your uncle brings them in from the field.”

As the day passed, I stared out the window
watching for deer and rabbit that peruse the land;
a pile of nothing but weeds and grass
rows of vegetables now a landfill of vegetation.

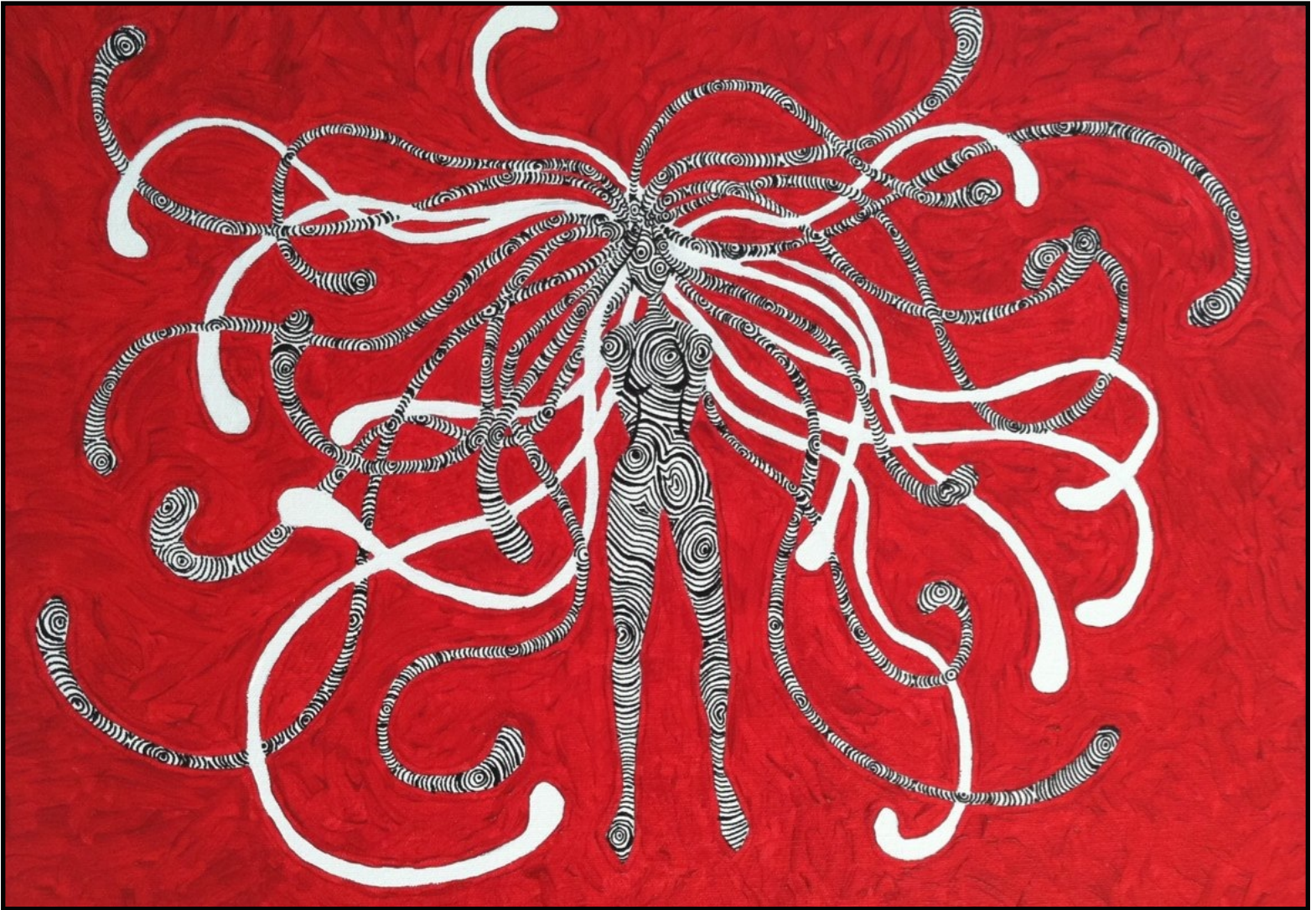
The next summer my uncle stopped working in the field.
My mother is no longer a Master. She retired into modern labor.
Our knees are not in soil, but upright leaning against refrigerated
shelves, sifting through brown-tipped bunches.



All change is
not growth,
as all movement
is not forward.



- Ellen Glasgow



Hugo, 1989

Candace Wiley

We camped out
in my parents' room glowed
with lamp and lightning slippery

wicks nursed flame in oil whispers
and wails cracked the corners
of the house. Rain one-finger

shushed us. Dad measured time
by the sound of hundred-
year-old trees fainting, Mom

by only-child breaths.
That small girl did not
have to beg but was wakened,

invited to a candled room
of covers and snuggled
to the thrum of thunder.

Alabama Nomad Blues

Christina Taylor

I left my shoes at the front door,
Because home is a place I don't kno' no mo'

Walk de path dat's free,
Strange fruit on de tree,
Shoes at the door,
Cause home I don't kno'

A man is hangin' his white sheets,
He say, "you don't belong here Boy"
There, is where, shoes are at the de door,
Home, don't kno', no mo'

Get kicked on Route 66,
At de juke joint get your fix,
Cause shoes be at de front door,
Home, is a place, no mo'

Take a ticket from Uncle Sam and go,
Follow de moon on dat railroad,
Leave shoes at de door,
Home, don't kno', no mo'

Waiting for dat mule an' acres,
Farmin' all night long, to give to the takers,
Those shoes will sit at de door,
Cause home, don't kno, no mo'

Run from all you know,
Follow de wind, like a rolling stone,
Torn shoes be at dat door,
Home don't kno', no mo'

Molasses is too fast, changing paths,
Five finger separation, make it last,
Shoes. Door.
Home. no mo'

'Bama boy makes it across dat river,
Looks out at past sees his past wither,

I left my shoes in 'Bama, at the door,
Because home is a place, I don't kno' no mo'

An excerpt from *Childhood's Tears*

Richard White

The damp walls of the cavern glistened in the flickering torchlight as Rowena burst out of a side passage and paused in the small chamber. Her eyes glanced nervously at the room and she noted two passages ahead of her, leading off in different directions. Her breath sounded raspy in her ears as she leaned forward, her thin hand white from clutching the hilt of her rapier. She held her breath and cocked her head to one side.

Satisfied she was alone for the moment; she tucked the rapier beneath her right arm and pulled a worn, wrinkled piece of parchment out of the pouch on her hip. She angled the torch to shine on the paper and aligned the map to the room. Once she was certain where she was, she tucked the map away and checked her supply of torches. She felt the sack containing the scrolls and other items she'd acquired on this trip and then realized she had three torches left. *Can't be helped. The guardians don't like light. Course, if I don't get moving, they won't have to worry about it.*

Grabbing her rapier, she began running up the right passage, noting with some relief it was beginning to take an upward slope. The slap of bare feet against the limestone caught Rowena's attention and she paused for a few seconds to guess how close her pursuers were. The torch sputtered in her hand, the flames inching closer toward her. Running again, she turned the corner and saw the tunnel divided ahead of her again.

She heard a faint noise to her left and just managed to sidestep the bony hand that thrust out of the darkness from a side passage, missing her by inches. She shoved the torch at it and the emaciated form of the wight withdrew, its red baleful eyes gazing at her in pure hatred, its pale leathery skin drawn tight on its body.

She made sure it retreated far enough down the passage before continuing. She slowed her headlong pace, keeping a closer eye for more passages as she made her way toward the surface. *When I get back to Tarraco, I'm going to have a little talk with the Count. The wild creatures, the traps, the false burial chambers . . . they're all a part of the job when you make your living recovering lost artifacts. Undead tomb guardians? That he should have warned me about.*

She lit a new torch and tossed the flaming stub behind her, hoping it would discourage any pursuit for a few moments. Continuing through the maze of tunnels, she heard footsteps growing closer. Though the wights couldn't speak, she had no difficulty imagining what they were thinking as they pursued her. Their dogged pursuit showed they objected to her stealing those items from Arch-mage Mistico's tomb.

The constant presence of the guardians began to weigh on her and she felt her nerves trying to give way. She put on a burst of speed as she approached what she hoped was the exit. As the torch burned down, she turned another corner and saw two things. One was an exit, illuminated by the dim light from Arcturos.

The other was a guardian standing between her and it.

She felt the creature's icy cold aura as it attempted to force its will onto her. A sudden warmth on her chest told her the amulet her patron, Count Kaikala, had given her was working. However, it wouldn't keep the creature at bay forever. Dropping the torch stub onto the ground, she drew a dagger and brought the rapier into a low guard.

The creature almost smiled at her, as if it found her challenge amusing. It rushed forward, extending its leathery claws to tear out her throat. She waited until the last possible second and then swept up the rapier against the outside of the wight's right wrist, guiding the grasping hands just out of the line of attack. She stepped to the side and let the creature's own momentum carry it past her.

Spinning around to face it, she began retreating toward the wan moonlight streaming into the dark cavern. The wight raised one hand, shading its eyes against the light, trying to spot her. Rowena began chanting as it approached, while she kept the rapier lined up with the creature's chest. Her chant began to take effect, and she could see the runes in her dagger begin glowing faintly.

The wight paused as the glowing runes caught its attention. It seemed to realize the danger and attempted to prevent Rowena from completing her spell. Rushing forward with a preternatural speed, it was on her almost before she realized it had moved, impaling itself on her rapier in its attempt to reach her. One hand clawed at her dagger while the nails of the other tried to dig into the skin around her throat. She jerked her head back to avoid the worst of its attack and then swung her dagger up, burying it deep into the creature's chest.

The wight arched backward in a silent scream as a glow began to emanate from its chest. It clasped its hands around the dagger attempting to pull it out, and Rowena did a sweep kick, sending it crashing to the ground on its back. The glow brightened, and the wight forced its head up with a deliberate motion to glare at her. She watched as the red glow of its eyes dimmed and turned black. She stepped on its chest and pulled her rapier out with a sucking sound, sheathing it with a practiced move.

She started to pry the claws apart to retrieve her dagger when she heard the steady approach of feet and knew running was the only option. *All right, you wanted the dagger so bad, you can keep it.*

She felt the anger from her pursuers as they realized she was going to reach the exit before them. *The good thing about guardians, they're bound to the location they protect. If I can reach the nearby forest, I'll be safe . . . from them, at least.*

ARTWORK CREDITS

Kassandra Bishop: “Peacocks at Play,” front cover, “She Who Entangles Men,” p. 28, “Growth,” p. 37, “Medusa,” p. 38, and “Sankofa,” back cover.

Stephanie Burgess: “Still Life,” p. 15, and “Oshun,” p. 20.

Carren Cecilio: “Wallpaper,” p. 8, and “Leaves of Flame Pt. 1,” pp. 12-13.

Sheila Crider: Detail of “In Hiding,” p. 24.

Gina Lewis: Detail of “Pendulum,” p. 16.

Laura Neal: “Floating,” p. 11.

Alisha Taylor: “Strength,” p. 23, and “Peace,” p. 27.

Michael Wilder: “Emotional Spiral,” p. 31.

Melanie Young: “Words in the Face of Death,” p. 32, and “Words and Death Up Close,” p. 35.



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