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# Pegasus Literary Publication

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### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

*"Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on."*— Louis L'Amour

It has been such a privilege to read each submission from the students here at DCCC. I'm astounded by the amount of talent in this magazine. Some themes we noticed in the submissions were nature, beauty, and life, so we tried to incorporate that into the magazine's design. The writers crafted their pieces thoughtfully, often capturing important moments from their lives. From the beauty of the world to the ugly parts of life, there is always a story to be told—and that is what these writers did! If there is one thing readers should take away from this edition, it is that we encourage you to tap into your frontal lobe and delve into your creativity, whether it be writing, art, or something else. We all have talents waiting to be explored. Scientific research supports that creativity increases positive emotions, reduces depression and anxiety, and improves our immune system. Increase your dopamine and get creative!

This magazine wouldn't be what it is today without the help of a handful of wonderful people. Thank you, Professor Pat, for selecting me as the student editor and for graciously helping me every step of the way. Your advice and guidance have been truly eye-opening. Thank you to Sarah Dougherty, our graphic designer, for being my sidekick in this journey. I couldn't have asked for a better partner to bring our vision to life. Also, thank you to the wonderful members of the Creative Writing Club for your time and efforts in perfecting this magazine with me. My appreciation for you all goes beyond words. Best wishes to all of the students at DCCC in your future endeavors! I hope you enjoy the magazine as much as I do.

**ERICA CRIST** 

2022 Editor

# ELIZABETH O'BRIEN · Flower Boy



GRACE FEENEY • Tulips of Tomorrow

I bought you flowers today—

Tulips and roses.

The clouds cleared from your eyes

And a forgotten smile tugged at your lips,

Just for a second—

I can see who you were before the world beat you down.

I see the oceans you swam

The flowers you grew

The tears of my birth

And the tragedy of tomorrow.

Who would've thought joy was a fossil fuel?

I bought you flowers—

Not because I'm the nice girl you say I am.

No.

I'm a vampire feasting on your youth

Sinking my teeth into the flesh of your former self.

Who were you?

When did the clouds in your eyes kill the tulips in your

garden?

# ALAYSIA HAWKINS • Enemy of Reflection

I feel it coming out of me
The release of exhale
The prayer that surrenders
The soul.

The body returns at ease Control is beyond reach Comprehension is a skill one Can't *teach*.

Ignoring key observations
Honoring scars of reality
Defaming of character
Equates to *fatality*.
I feel it coming out of me
The caged demon inside
Now linked with the angel
Crowned from the other side.

This image is a reflection Of *me*.

The dark truths unable to Be seen.



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# WILLIE D. BESTMAN . A Note to Death

To death a note I write to thee.

How close you are, a friend it seems.

I hate to say you're here to stay.

My love for life mends your hate.

You won't give in till you have won.

My heart that is, or lack thereof.

A pleasant thought that plagues my mind.

When will you strike what day, what hour.

It matters not I know the end, you are the end, that's just the plan.

It's up to me to learn and grow and live this life till death do part.



### KAY TRAN • A Dancer's Silhouette

Enraptured is the audience, as a natural performer takes the floor—adorned in layers of tulle sprung to life once they take off, gliding as if the stage were ice, as if their strides held a swiftness that even their shadow silhouette struggles to keep pace with.

They draw a picturesque scene with fluid movements, with false ease, but their exhaustion lies in traces of rosy pink in their cheeks—their commitment is painted in faded blemishes, in stars aligned, with a palette of red and blue waltzes—their passion falls under a spotlight, far greater than the sun, that captures their every pose, striving only for perfection.

### SARAH DOUGHERTY · Jesse

The ray of light 'ning crashing down. Words don't come out the way you want.

Rage in waves down passersby, with shrieks and cries out without thought.

For those around just want to help.
But no one can, just watch and pretend

The world is theirs, not yours but why can't we find a middle ground?

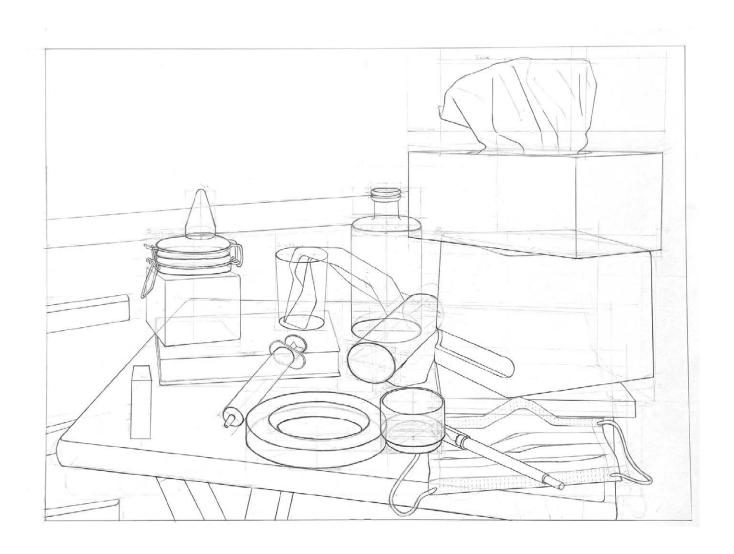
Between what's ordinary 'ly extraordinary, my boy you have a mind that will light up worlds. Underneath those wild thoughts, like wishes, stars and dreams take flight or fight, no in between that certainty no one else can create.

Find your ray of light sweet child. Your words will come with time and mean so much more, more than can be seen.

For you are the future, you are what matters, someway, somehow, and you will be heard.



# CATHERINE RICE RIVERA · Still Life



# BRANDON NAPOLE . Guitar Ghazal

I perch on the porch, grab my guitar, gliding fingers over strings,

Plucking melody, strumming harmony, making notes ring through strings.

I hold it's body, its smooth wooden curves arch over my thigh.

I imagine the music—notes rising, clouds of sounds resonating, emanating from strings.

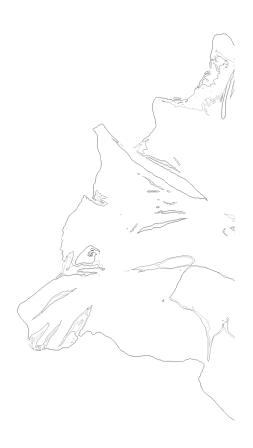
Building chords, playing with noise; a progression ensues, a song is born.

Thinking of Dylan and Cash on guitar, their hands trembling on strings.

Through keys and chords I am sorting, I listen to a song, recreating the recording,

But for a moment, my hands are cramped, fingers frozen, lingering above strings.

Lessons help to guide the player, relieve stress. Fingers wrapping 'round the neck,
A nervous wreck, and with intent of choking the strings.



# SAMANTHA HENDERSON · Domestic Cat

The cat's tail swishes, he glares intensely out the window at the squirrel.

The dog "bothers" him. He doesn't like being sniffed, but he likes the warmth.

He licks his lips and stretches out on the big couch, hogging it all up.

The bowl is still half full of food, but he screams like he's never eaten.

He sits on the shelf in a little wooden box. Now he is ashes.



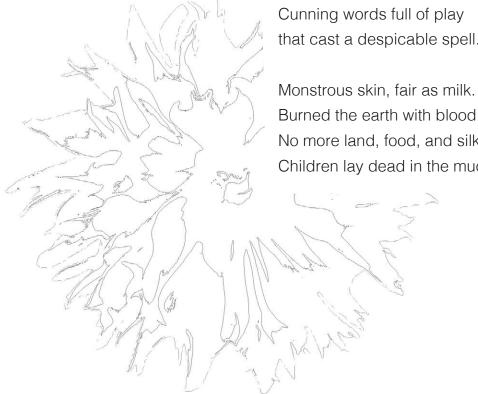
### TATIANA COCERES · A Land of Peace and A Land of Tears

The tranquility of the land. Serene ripples in a river. Buffaloes bellowed in a stand. An arrow sailed from a quiver.

A gracious feast by the fire. Olden tales awoke a presence. Melodies, tobacco, and desire. A night of debauchery in essence.

They came during the day. Demons and fiends of hell. Cunning words full of play that cast a despicable spell.

Burned the earth with blood. No more land, food, and silk. Children lay dead in the mud.



# AHN PHAM. Fish



# PRISCILLA ZHANG · Broken Wings

It was my dream to become a concert pianist.

As my mom was a piano teacher, I began learning piano from the age of four. Every day I would step into endless stories, pictures, and emotions crafted simply from the notes on the music sheets. It all depended on the way I touched the keys, the feelings I let flow from my soul, the dexterity of my fingertips.

I entered competitions, recitals, and scholarships, bringing home hundreds of dollars, trophies, certificates and first prize awards. But it wasn't the awards that drove me to play. It was the world of music that beckoned me towards the piano. As I would begin Chopin's Scherzo no. 2, the beginning trills resembled a devilish laughter, a slight rumble in the lower keys, and sudden, strong chords that followed: a majestic knight's response. It was a conversation between a joker and a strong, majestic knight who refused to succumb to fear. The conversation continued with quick descending scales and a similar rumble in the lower keys, a display of the knight dashing towards the joker, and missing him. The joker snickers. Yet, I could change the appearance of the characters if I touched the keys more delicately, revealing a tender, soft side to the joker. Or, depending on my mood, I could transform the knight into an evil character who unfairly challenges the joker. Each piece was a new story, a new world, a new set of emotions.

Because of the endless possibilities held by the piano, the outside world dimmed in importance. Why would I go out with friends, take walks, or do anything else if I could immerse myself in the magic of music? Why waste my time with anything other than making my music perfect, making myself perfect?

One hour a day became two hours, as I entered middle school.

Two hours became three in high school.

It was when I began practicing eight hours every weekend that my wrists began to ache. I placed my hands on the keys, ready to enter an enchantment that carried me away, when my wrists would cry out in fatigue. I continued to play, yet the pain would jerk me from the world of music back to the piano bench I sat upon.

The first hand specialist told me it was merely a mild case a tendinitis. "Just rest, ice, and wear a brace; you'll get better in just a few weeks," he assured. I sighed in relief; if I could get better, there was hope.

Each day I passed by the piano, a feeling of deep longing ached in my heart. Unable to control the swelling of emotion, I delicately felt the smooth keys. Just a few minutes, I promised myself as I sat down at the bench. I was suddenly pulled into Debussy's Jardins Sous Les Pluies, a scene of a serene garden under the rain. The flowers danced beneath the delicate yet plentiful raindrops, swaying to the rhythm of nature's song. Yet, the scene began to fade as my wrists announced their punishment with increasing intensity. My hands hovered over the keyboard, desperately wishing I could play more. I don't care about the pain, I told myself. Another voice scolded, You must rest. You'll hurt yourself even more if you continue. Whereas my wrists now throbbed with pain, my heart throbbed with guilt. I forcefully tore myself away from the piano.

Days crawled into weeks. I saw the hand specialist again, yet he had the same response: that time will heal. We saw doctors, physical therapists, acupuncturists, occupational therapists, too many doctors for me to count. Each doctor would test my wrists' functions, abilities, and flexibility and repeat, "There's nothing wrong with you, but since you're still feeling pain, just rest, ice, and wear your braces."

"Why am I still feeling pain?" I pleaded; I was desperate for an answer.

"Some cases of tendinitis take longer to heal."

Time would heal, I assured myself. I just have to wait.

Weeks crawled into months.

Slowly, steadily, my dream slipped through my fingers. Without my wrists, I was like a painter who couldn't see, a runner who couldn't run, a bird who couldn't fly. Above that, my identity slipped through my fingers. The years of spending hours with the piano had caused me to grow into it, to see it as a part of me. It was my music, my world, myself.

Who was I without my wrists?

I could no longer prove who I was. I could no longer lose myself in music to escape from the worries that I wasn't good enough. If I was practicing piano, my perfectionistic voice was silenced from scolding me for wasting time, not working hard

I collapsed on the couch, unable to lift even the pages of a book. I opened my laptop to complete my homework, yet after just a minute of typing, my wrists cried out in exhaustion. I pulled out my math worksheet, decorated with trigonometry symbols and problems. I reached towards my backpack and pulled out a pencil. In the upper right corner, I carefully wrote my name. I spelled out each letter, beginning with the P. Yet, as I got to the last letter of my last name, my wrists slumped as if lead flowed through my hands. Tears began to prick at my eyes as an overwhelming wave of helplessness washed over me. I couldn't do anything without my wrists.

enough, not doing my best. My self-worth depended on how many hours I sat at the

I had nothing. I was nothing.

piano, how well I played, how much progress I made.

As there was nothing more I could prove, nothing more I could do, I did the only thing I could: I stepped outside to go for a walk. Worrying about the future had no use to me now.

My attention was drawn to the trees I was surrounded by. As my head tilted back to see the height of the tips of the branches, I was taken aback. Normally a tree would just be a mundane object I passed by, yet this time something was different. This tree contained an awe-inspiring power that I never noticed before: the grandeur of its size, the countless intricate patterns of branches, the various textures and hues of the tree trunk. As I took a step forward, I noticed the way it felt to shift my pressure from my heels to my toes, each step spreading my body weight equally from my heels to my toes. I noticed the feel of the soft foam of my blue Asics running shoes, the slight change of weight distribution if I stepped on a pebble.

What was this?

The same neighborhood that surrounded me for the past 5 years was different. When I turned around to take in the tree I just walked past, my eyes were brought to the tips of the trees once again. I continued to look up at the sky, and, for the first time,

I noticed the richness of the blue that painted the sky. It stretched for as far as I could see, with a few tufts of gray littering the blue. I stopped and stared. The tufts of gray, once I stopped completely, were moving. They were moving, albeit incredibly slowly..

My heart began to swell with awe. Simply observing the clouds pass by so slowly, so beautifully, held a wonder that I had never paid attention to. How was it that I had never realized how beautiful this world was? Every day I would go outside, but I had never slowed down to appreciate what it was that surrounded me every day.

Day after day, I would go on walks. Sometimes once a day, sometimes twice, for hours at a time. When I was walking, it didn't matter what my wrists felt like. It didn't matter that I didn't know what tomorrow brought, or whether I would ever heal. The words that tens of doctors told me scaled back in comparison to the vastness and power of the environment I was surrounded by. After months of walking, I finally realized: In the worlds of music, I wasn't living my life as it was. I was constructing my life to be what it "should" be: perfect. I can only truly live if I allow myself to be present in the moment.

What does it mean to be present?

It means to fully embrace the moment at hand: the feelings, the sights, sounds, sensations. In this moment, perfection didn't matter. It wasn't even about perfection. It was about this moment, as it was. This moment didn't have to be measured in perfection. There was no measuring stick. It just was. And I let myself simply be. Not what I was supposed to be, not what I had to be, not what I wanted to be.

I just was. As I am. Imperfections and all.



# JILLIAN GORMAN · Roots Take Hold Below

A strength brews within that only you know, Accept and honor your youthful dares, I have seen trees split stone to grow.

Others may tempt you, make you their shadow. Beware, sinking ships light enchanting flares. A strength brews within that only you know.

With calloused hands, nurture these seeds you sow, Patience will sweeten the fruit they shall bear, Wait and see. A tree will split stone to grow.

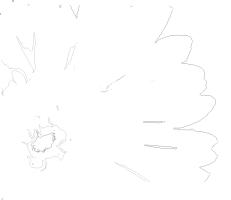
Praise the untouched fields with delight and crow! In open space you can find your place where A strength may brew within. Only you know.

The weakest crops come from the neatest rows, Competing for light—a ruthless affair.

I have seen trees split stone to grow.

Treasure your flame with its wild glow
A blaze so organic is rather rare,
A strength brews within you and I would know,
For I have seen trees split stone to grow.

T A A F



### PREMISA KERTHI • Golden Autumn

Autumn just knocked upon our doors
It came differently this time
Full of colors,
Blending red yellow and orange

As the most beautiful sunset evenings

Wondering why it felt the most comfortable of feelings

As the new life began

And indirectly, my heart answered

Because you are holding your baby in your arms

And walking with your Ivy around
The crackling sounds of the leaves that I

touch with my feet

Scratches the rooms of my heart

As a child touches your hurt and deeply .

inserts

Uncountable tons of love.

Feels exactly like I am a mother of Nature Who brings life to lives,
Especially me who gave life
To the most beautiful flower in world, Ivy

What a powerful meaning.

Walking with you, Ivy, around

It names everything around with a second

meaning

Like leaves as life

Like sunshine as fulfilment

Like flowers as diamonds

Like mother as a bringer of life

And specifically here, in America

The place where dreams come to live

While I walk on the boardwalks

These big, old trees talk to me

As older people do

Teaching me wisdom with their silence

The power of colors

The power of silence

The power of mother nature

The power of autumn season

It fills my lungs with freshness and life

And this year autumn

Shines in my heart differently

Because from the garden

It gave me the most magical flower

To hold, to smell, to keep forever in my hands

My Ivy

From now and forever

You will be called:

"Golden Autumn."

# ALBARA JAPPAH • Black Coffee

He felt like warm coffee And smelt like it too. His hair was like chocolate But his eyes were so blue.

Blue like the blueberry scones
That made me choke on my words.
And, even with warm almond milk,
I still couldn't tell him that.

I wanted to be the warm cup of coffee
He drinks in the morning.
I wanted to be the warm cup of tea
He drinks when he is sick.
I wanted to be the warm cookies
He eats as a treat.

But, for now, I will watch him pour

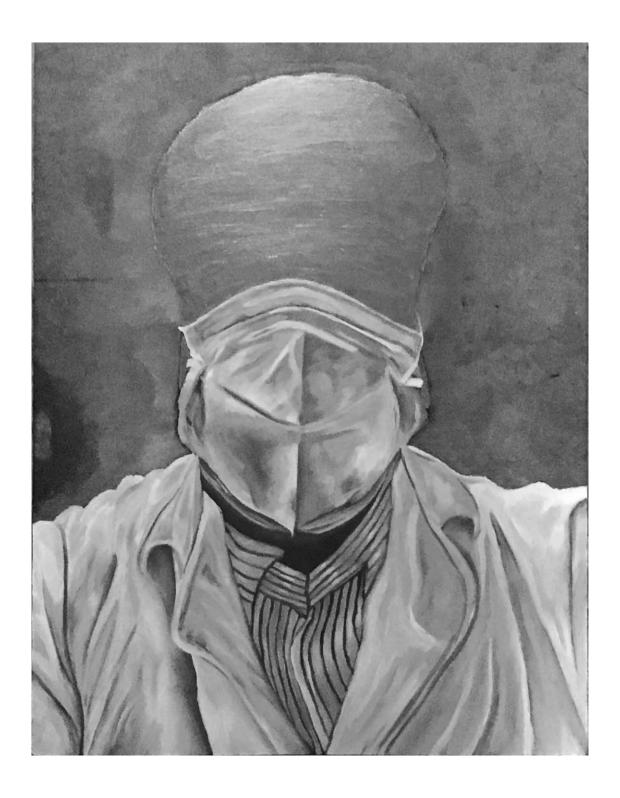
Creamer into his coffee,

Even though,

Black looks more like me.

pour

# SLOAN GLOVER • Dr. Zhang and Healthcare Workers



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### ANIYAH BARR · It Was All a Lie

Heartbreak after heartbreak,

I finally found the courage to love again.

You were my first everything.

First love, first kiss, the first person to see the good in me

But, sadly, you turned out to be like the others

I saw the note that you left me,

Where you said that you were leaving me.

Reading it again puts chills through my body.

Even now, I can feel the tears from that day,

And my heart still sinks from the reminder.

When you left I lost a part of me.

I'm sure you don't care.

How could you leave?

I keep telling myself that this heartbreak won't last forever.

Now all I have left are memories.

You would come over, we'd watch our favorite TV show.

Staying on the phone until 3:30 A.M.

I miss it. I MISS YOU!

I used to blush every time I saw your name come up on my phone

Every time I heard the knock on the door;

And see you through my peephole

I'd get so excited.

But those times are no more.

I'm just so lost now with you gone.

Good luck on your wedding day.

You'll make a handsome groom.



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# MEGAN GRANT . Southern Wind

Through folded lips, words echo over destitute land.

Letters carved beautifully on lifeless stone.

The air wails from the absence of souls

and tattered sticks stain whole beings.

Over miles the church bell rings but not for us does the choir sing.

As dusk draws near the mob appears

And blows the southern breeze to ruffle the back of our hair.

Sacks packed to hold our precious objects unable to unravel the stories.

The songs of past ravage through our minds as we link together in grisly times.

The birds and fish stay still to warn our warm-bloods to stay calm.

Our tongues don't move until we reach new land.

Our speech is foreign but holds more volume

and our trinkets symbolize our sorrows

Though the southern breeze no longer howls.

It's in their eyes and the way they scowl

In the movement of their walk and the tongues they use to talk

So the howling wind of the south follows us all.

# ISAIAH CUNNINGHAM • Talk

Is "I love you" the right phrase?

Maybe it's more the thought

That pulls my arteries taut

Plucked by your fingers

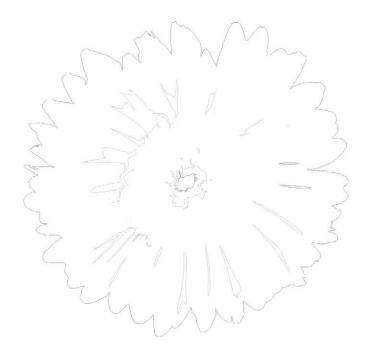
Like the bleeding of a harp.

I harp on the thought

And lie still.

I shouldn't bother you on a Sunday I want to send the message but I shouldn't worry. Just talk.

But it seems that's all I am.



# KATHERINE WEBB · A Day After Christmas

The trash is crowded into the corner.

The drinks still on the table.

The crumbs scattered around our modern stable.

The present wrapping covers the floor.

It's the day after Christmas

And I don't know what is in store.

The Christmas dishes got washed and put back.

And the pleasantries won't be spoken for another couple

hundred of days after that.

I was in his arms and I still felt trapped.

It's the day after Christmas

And it isn't coming back.

The TV is showing all the bad news again.

The shops have all the sales with the small fine print.

And I'm already asked if my resolution is going to a gym.

Christmas is over.

Something else is about to begin.

I sit around fake trees, a nativity, and ribbons.

Chocolate covered pretzels in the fridge in my kitchen.

I'm alone but I am at least certain.

It's the day after Christmas

And I'm still hurting.

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# ANNALISE DEVITO · A Beautiful Mother is Dying

Vast. Open. Soft and calm. Dark. Dolphins. Birds. Fish, and food.

Sharks and stonefish, and octopi oh my! Long, never-ending sea. A home. A mystery. A whole new world.

New things, new creatures, new findings Beautiful and graceful. But with beauty... comes pain

Trash, plastic, and cans. Bits and pieces clog our seas

Every day we throw in trash. Nets and ropes choke our animals.

She grows warmer every day

Who is the enemy? Who is the monster?
Who is to blame? Who is beauty?
Who is the beast?
We are. We are the beast.

We're changing too much we're destroying too much
We're killing too much. It's no big doal. It's

We're killing too much. It's no big deal. It's not a problem.

Well tick tock. That clock is ticking. We are procrastinating
Our mother is dying. Hanging by a thread.
Time is flyin' we're wastin' time. It's not enough. It's not. Enough!

One day...The sea will be poisoned... The animals dead from poisoned seas...

And nothing... Nothing will be left...

Beautiful. Vast. Big. Strong. Wonderful. Magnificent
We can change.
We can help

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The only question is...

Will we?

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# SAMUEL MUSSELMAN · Pallbearer

As I sit among familiar faces,

More grave than I have ever seen them,
I think about the last time I saw her—
The first since moving home
From a world away.
I see her face radiate when she sees mine,
Hear her say my name, "Sam-U-EII"
Exactly as she's said it a thousand times before.

Even then she was saying
How something didn't feel right.
This fatigue wasn't like the ones before,
Her body heavy from the
Years and years and years
Of caring for all of us.
Of pain and loss.
Of showing us God.

We sing about her flying
To a home far away,
But I can feel her weight
In the box I shoulder from the hearse.
The pastor speaks of reunion,
A day when we'll see her again,
But I just remember that
I got to see her one last time

And it was enough.



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# GARY HERNANDEZ • Sometimes I Daydream About an Oak Tree

Gazing beyond this glass wall

I watch the silent snow fall

Though my eyes begin to focus on something that reminds me of me.

Why do I always compare myself to a tall oak tree?

Perhaps it is the oak tree's brown bark

A relatable complexion, any black man would remark.

Or maybe it is the stoic way the tree stands, clinging to the Earth.

How different might things be, if I resembled a plant of more delicacy, at birth?

Not gnarled or as rough as a tall, brown oak.

Rather like a rose, soft, with beautiful thoughts that I would provoke.

Maybe then might a man want to gift me with a kiss.

What if he still got repulsed by the very idea, and cursed at me with a hiss?

An oak caked in snow isn't so bad though.

In the sun it sparkles until its mask is melted away or disturbed by a breeze's blow,

Gone with nature's natural hideousness cure.

Oh why is white so beautiful and pure?

Like this glass window I frequently peer through

I wish I was translucent, see-through, so my thoughts were someone that everyone knew

But I know to not dwell on things beyond my might

Human beings are only similar to oak trees in dreams, right?

### JEN WARNER • Hey There, It's (Still) Me

It would have been easier if she died. Who thinks that about their mother? I stared in disbelief at my mom in her intensive care room at Jefferson Hospital. Hospitals have always made me feel uneasy. The beeping machines, the whoosh of the ventilators, the unpleasant and unidentifiable smells; they always invaded my senses and made it hard to focus. My mom laid propped up in her bed with a feeding tube in her nose. Her hair was matted with dried blood and iodine from her preventative brain surgery that had gone awry. Her face was bruised and misshapen and her eye was dark and oozing. Her previously wrinkled skin was smooth with edema. She looked as if she'd burst if you got too close with something sharp, like a water balloon filled to maximum capacity. She was alive, sort of. But for the first time in her entire life, her future was uncertain. I couldn't see a way through this. I wasn't certain what I was supposed to learn from this. It was too cruel. I was a planner rendered useless as nothing was in my control. I wasn't sure if I'd be planning for a homecoming or a funeral. My thoughts were ugly and confusing and hard to be alone with. It would have been easier if she died, I remember thinking in that moment.

My mom was a visiting nurse for most of my life. She finished nursing school when I was just two years old. For most of my childhood my mom was usually running late for a dinner my grandparents made for us because she was "finishing up with a patient." I never resented her for it though; I knew even then her gift was helping people. When I was little, she used to come in the door from work, drop her nursing bags, and hold her arms out. I'd run to one side and my sister Danielle would run to the other. She'd pull us in so tight and hug us for what felt like forever. Her frizzy, chocolate hair was always pulled back out of her face with a tortoise shell clip but if I close my eyes, even now I can feel the loose strands from a long day tickling my nose. I didn't even care that the laminated corners of her nursing badge dug into my cheeks. Mary Grace Brown, RN, I was always so happy to see her. As we grew, she never missed my

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jazz festivals or my sister's Irish dance lessons. When I would remember about a school project the night before it was due, she'd stay up all night with me crafting, practicing, and perfecting my presentation. She scheduled her first patient after school drop off so she could start our days off right. When my high school boyfriend dumped me, she insisted we do a full makeover to my room. She let me paint my room a vibrant teal and hung a surfboard on my wall. She helped me move into my first apartment at nineteen years old, and eventually helped me move back into my childhood bedroom with my children after my marriage dissolved. This was who she was at her core. She was everything that everyone needed at all times. Like mortar she filled in the cracks and hardened to keep me strong and standing upright.

There are few better examples of my mom's acts of selflessness than when her brother, my uncle David, suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm a couple of years ago. It was a rude awakening for his siblings. To no one's surprise, she didn't leave his side: I loved that about her. She was there every day, translating medical jargon and leading people in prayer. The first time we truly felt the ground tremor beneath us was when we learned that my uncle's aneurysms were a familial type. They were hereditary and my mom's siblings all needed to be tested. This news felt a little too close for comfort but testing revealed that one by one my aunts and uncles were cleared of brain aneurysms. Then there was my mom, who has spent decades now "finishing up with a patient" and couldn't seem to find the time to fit it in her schedule. As I got older, I felt myself mother my mother more than I could help. I did this whenever I saw her giving too much of herself away. After 29 years of watching my mother give people an article of her jewelry simply because they complimented it, I recognized a need for my protection. After much nagging on my part, she finally agreed to have the proper tests taken so we could put this all behind us.

After all, this was a formality. Her siblings were all healthy.

My mom called one afternoon when my kids were napping. She has greeted me on the phone the same exact way for years, so much so that it became a joke. When her phone would ring in my presence, as she'd reach to answer it I'd do my best MG

impression. "Hey there, it's me" I'd say. That always made her laugh. She almost sang it. I have dozens of voicemails that start this exact way, and I could never delete them. This time was different. "Hi!" I said. I remember the silence was broken only by the sounds of her breathing. She mumbled a low "Hey." My stomach rolled up into my throat. "I just. I wanted to tell you that. I needed you to know..." I could tell that whatever she was about to say would become too real for her the second she told me. I held my breath. "My doctor called today. It turns out I have five aneurysms in my brain. I'm really sorry," she cried.

I was so confused. I was beyond confused; I was mad. This marked the start of some of the darker thoughts I would have throughout this journey. *So, you're saying my mom could die any second, but my terrible Aunt D. is just fine? Where are her ticking brain bombs?* And I wasn't just mad for myself. I was mad for my dad, who has been living with a chronic form of leukemia for over a decade. *He can't lose her.* I was mad for my sister, who hasn't yet found her twin flame or had children of her own. *She can't lose her.* Most of all, I was mad for my kids. I remember having active grandparents in my life until I was an adult. My children were all under 10. *They can't lose her.* Nothing about this felt right. My mom takes care of sick people; she's not sick. In revealing the news to me, she apologized. She was taking care of me even then. She told me said she was scared. At just 56 years old, she would need to have open brain surgery almost immediately to clip at least three of them, as they were the most life threatening. After she healed from that, she'd need another surgery to treat the remaining aneurysms. I remember in that moment feeling like it could be a long time before things felt normal again. *I can't lose her.* 

Her first surgery was brutal for all of us. It was invasive. It was barbaric. Her skull had been removed and titanium clamps neutralized the threats in her artery walls. She had dozens of staples that snaked their way around her shaved head in what looked like an unending coil. She was in a great deal of pain. She slept for so long, even when she came home. But when she woke from her rests, she was herself. We were relieved, because this was supposed to be the worst of the treatments. After

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a couple months of recovery, she returned to work. When she was recovered even further she'd require one more small procedure, but it would be done with a tiny little wire through her wrist and she'd be back at the office a couple weeks later. She'd be back to driving my daughter to dance class and finishing her nurse's notes in the waiting room. She'd be back to scooping up my babies for those hugs I talked about; the ones she'd give me when I was little. I felt so close to being able to say my mom wasn't sick anymore.

After her second procedure, my dad and I went back to recovery to see her together. We noticed she was extremely swollen on one side of her face and alerted the nurse. The doctors were concerned and kept her sedated to complete further testing. She was in good hands and it was getting late, so we headed home for the night. Selfishly I was relieved for a break from the incessant waiting room chatter of my mom's nervous siblings. We made our way to the hospital first thing the next morning and eagerly called from the car for an update. The doctor asked that we speak in person when we arrived, which is never a good sign. We were shown to a small room and given the news. My mom had an allergic reaction to the metal used in her treatment. She had a stroke, and a brain bleed behind her left eye leaving her permanently blind on that side. She was paralyzed in her right side, and her speech center was compromised. She'd spend a week or two in the ICU, and two months at a rehabilitation hospital to try to regain some function. We spent weeks prior to surgery convincing my mom that she wouldn't experience an outcome like this. The chances were 1%, things like this don't happen to people like her.

Again, my thoughts were dreadful and all consuming. We were told that this specific reaction has been documented just three other times in the world. As someone who takes comfort in numbers, this infuriated me. I made lists in my head of all the people I knew who I felt should be in her place. My days were spent at the hospital, breathing through my mouth to avoid the scent of IV's and foley catheters. I turned my head when the nurses rolled my mom in her bed to prevent sores. Still, her magenta bruises from her blood thinners would puncture my peripheral vision and my peace of mind. My nights were spent convincing my littles that "Mom-mom was great" and

was "asking for them." I lined her room with their drawings and wondered if they'd be scared of her now that everything was different. Would they cower in fear at the sight of her stitched eye, or would they fight over who gets to push the wheelchair? I wasn't optimistic. I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't me.

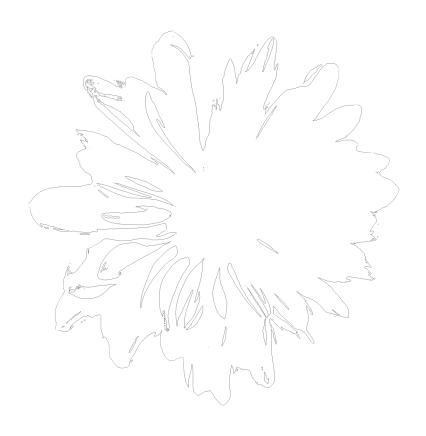
My mom would come home one day, but life would never be the same. When I was a kid my mom used to run her fingers through my hair until I fell asleep in her lap. In the hospital I was the one running water through her hair until the dried blood rinsed out. She used to pull out her entire nurse's kit for a rug burn just to make me feel taken care of. At her ICU bedside, it was me holding firm pressure on my mom's gushing eye wound with a gloved hand while she writhed and begged me to stop. She used to drive me to band practice. Now I was driving her to outpatient therapy. She'd hold my hand during every flu shot and fumble through the lyrics of a song. Now I squeeze hers during dozens of Botox therapy needles while tears stream down her face. She taught me how to ride a bike. Now I was teaching her how to walk, how to stand, how to eat. She'd scribe my birthday cards in her best Catholic school cursive. Now I was showing her how to be a lefty. She taught the long complicated true names of flowers. Now I was teaching her that those pretty things in the window were flowers, not "oatmeal" as she called them. She used to call me Jenni-Jen. Now she calls me Jessica, or girl, or whatever object she looks at right before looking at me. Now she calls my kid's names I've never heard before. She calls her husband dad, and her dog the names of pets long gone. My mom changed my diapers, now I was changing hers. Her once frizzy, clipped back chocolate hair was now wiry grey and falling out in clumps. It would have been easier if she died. I could think of little else.

But she didn't die. She's here. And she's working tirelessly. And she's never complained. My mom is young. She's blind in one eye and has a field cut in the other. She is paralyzed on her right side. She combs her brain for the right words to express even the simplest thoughts, leaving those around her to anxiously decide if they should finish her sentence or let her keep trying. She will never treat a patient again. My mom is disabled, permanently. Still, she's not outwardly angry. Still, she laughs a lot. She makes up new dance moves with her cane, before challenging herself by leaving it somewhere

out of reach and shuffling across the room. "I can keep a better eye on it this way," she'd say when my Dad asks why she made the trek without it. She has this comedy bit where she talks to her formerly dominant now paralyzed arm and asks it to do things.

I'd been given the chance to take care of my mom as she'd always taken care of me and I was wasting that chance on these negative thoughts. I was robbed of so much, but she was robbed of more. I couldn't control much of what happened to our family, to my beautiful mother. But I could control my response to it. I wouldn't continue to wallow on her behalf. I wouldn't waste the precious time I had with my mom, in any form, wishing for another outcome. Pining for an end date to her pain wasn't the answer. Instead, I concentrated on easing her pain. With medicine, with jokes, with home cooked meals, with movie quotes that she mostly remembers, she finds comfort.

I learned to cry with my husband about the way things were and then laugh with my mom about the way things are. He's so good with her, my husband. He tells her he loves her and speaks slowly. My kids adore her as she is because this version of her is all they know and all they'll remember. I label her flowers; I paint her nails. I make her dinner and I dress her up. I fill in the gaps because it's what she's always done without question. It's what she raised me to do. Most of all, I learned to let go. I let go of the relationship I had with my mom to make way for a wonderful new one. I let go of planning because plans change. I let go of what's fair to focus simply on what is. I'm a better person because of my mom, even more so after her perseverance and positivity throughout this entire experience where I've watched my mom redefine what it means to be disabled while I pout with my four working limbs and complete sentences. My mom is stronger than I ever knew. I learned that too.



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