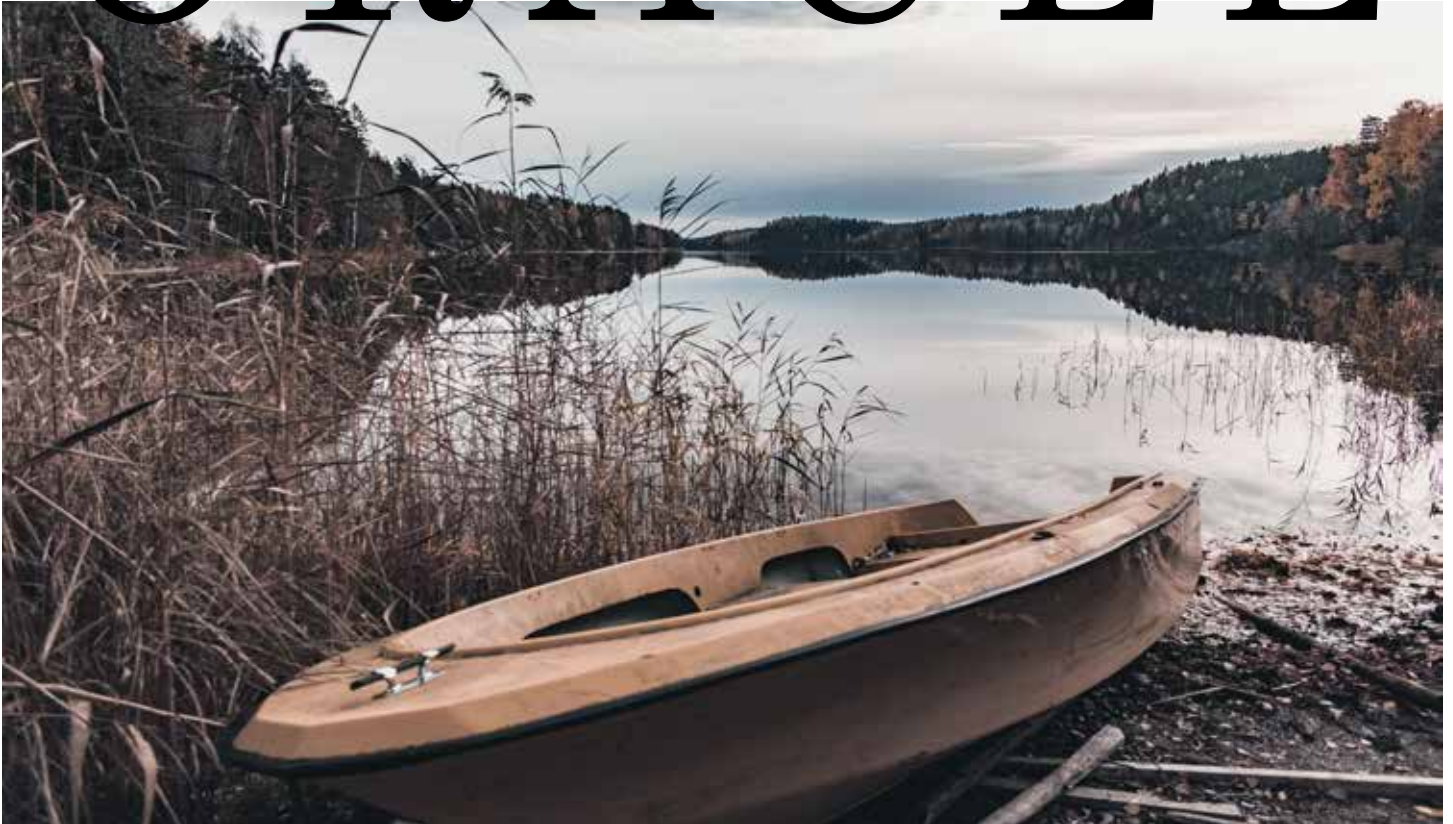


ODYSSEY WRITING GROUP

ORACLE



Poetry • Short Stories • Nonfiction • Artwork

FEATURING

Denise Marie Hardnett | Corey Dean
Marilyn Sims | Tiffani Puccio
Quishanta Cary | Derrick Allen
Marisol A. Gonzalez- | Billie Kelsey
Rodriguez

WITH an introduction by OWG
founder Gabrielle Kelenyi

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first edition of the OWG Oracle, a publication of work by members of the Odyssey Writing Group (OWG). The Odyssey Writing Group is a weekly writing group for alumni of the UW-Odyssey Project generously supported by a HEX grant from the Center for Public Humanities. OWG is a supportive writing community where we meet to write, give and receive feedback on our writing, and develop and reach our writing goals. The goal of OWG is to help writers feel confident in and capable of accomplishing creative, professional, personal, and academic writing projects. As an option for alumni of the program, it aims to extend the sense of community the Odyssey course builds by providing a collaborative writing community as well as more opportunities to write with support after Odyssey graduation.

Group members are teachers, parents, students, professionals, storytellers, poets, rappers, novelists, short story writers, children's literature authors, life-writers, community activists, and much more. Member ages range from early 20s to early 60s. This publication includes work by most but not all of our members, and it is a labor of love.

On the following pages, you will find poetry, personal essays, short stories, and excerpts from larger works that address topics like love, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, reflection, struggles, history, family, and much more. Included with each piece is also a writer's memo that explains the purpose of the piece, why it was written, and what the author hopes the piece will achieve for our readers. These memos might help orient you to the piece, give you important background information, and/or simply explain what inspired the writer. They provided a chance for the writers featured in these pages to address you, dear readers, directly about what they wrote and why. Thus, we strongly encourage you to read them together.

Acceptance into the OWG Oracle comes as a part of membership in our writing group, and my role as editor was to facilitate the inclusion of as many members' pieces as possible. At OWG, we believe in speaking your own language, sharing your stories using your own words in your own cadence; we are not in the business of whitewashing language and we seek to decenter Edited American English. At OWG, we seek to avoid the love/hate relationship with language(s) that requires writers to leave their cultures, their families, their backgrounds, their (home) languages, their meanings and understandings and perspectives at the door of the classroom, or in this case the writing group. Thus, as an editor, I have not made any significant grammatical or punctuation edits to anyone's pieces; furthermore, all edits were approved by the writer first. Thus, I encourage you, dear readers, to read each piece with special attention to the voice of each writer. Those commas, capitalized words, ellipses, emojis, periods and lack thereof are meant to be there to guide you to hear--no listen-- to each piece in the way it was meant to reach you. OWG encourages you to take each piece in the following pages as it is and be open to its message, its wisdom, its purpose. There is so much to treasure in the pages that follow. Thank you for taking time to discover it.

Sincerely,

Gabrielle Isabel Kelenyi

Statement of Purpose

We, the Odyssey Writing Group, meet to learn from one another and support one another in our writing endeavors. This means that we listen thoughtfully to one another and give each other kind, constructive writing suggestions to not only make what we write better, but to help all of us become better writers. Therefore, our feedback and suggestions are grounded in our reactions as readers/ listeners and our own experiences and expertise as writers.

We commit to sharing our materials with one another for easy reference, to being open to multiple and new perspectives, to asking questions, and to using our time together to share, give and receive feedback, and most importantly to write.

As a writing community, we value honesty, and we trust that what happens in our group stays in our group. We value each other as friends and teachers; we all come to this group as learners. We respect each other as people, writers, teachers, and learners.

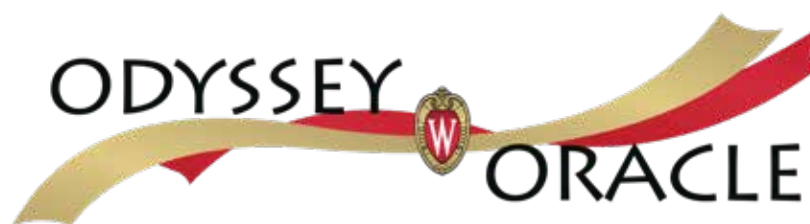
Our writing group norms include:

- ◇ We believe that the writer is the owner of their own work, and therefore we trust them to make writerly decisions that are right for them and their piece, even if we don't agree.
- ◇ We believe every member should be able to speak freely during group meetings, and we will assume the speaker's/ writer's best intentions as the audience/ listeners.
- ◇ We believe in waiting for authors to ask for feedback, and we will encourage authors to be specific about what type of feedback they're looking for, if any.
- ◇ We believe we should always find something positive to share about someone's writing.
- ◇ We believe that this isn't a competition but a space to share and be supported, so we will be open to and encouraging of different writing styles and taking writing risks.
- ◇ We believe in lifting each other up and not putting each other down; therefore, we commit to learning to just listen to each other's words and emotions.

We, the members of Odyssey Writing Group, will develop and take away writing strategies, ideas, and expertise to use not just for and in this group, but to use and share with others out in the world of writing. We will pass it on.



Odyssey Project
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



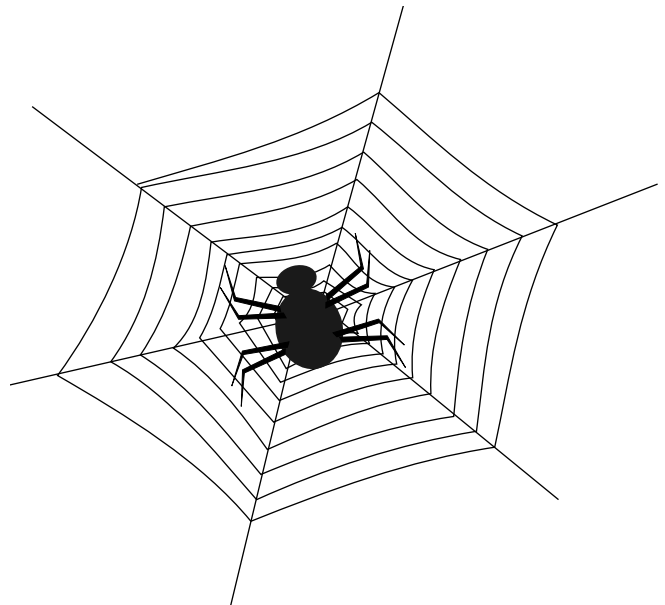
Writer's memo

I was sitting outside mid October, enjoying the weather on a bench, when I noticed a floating object in my peripheral vision. I stood up, to inspect it further. I hadn't ever seen a bug like that before. It seemed to be hanging from a web. I thought at first, it was someone's lunch. Then his eight legs came out of the yellow shell. It was a spider! I hadn't ever seen one of these. I did a quick Google search, and found out his name; the spinybacked orb weaver spider.

Ode to the Orb Weaver Spider

by Tiffani Puccio

Oh strange thing
Hovering overhead!
It looks like a
curled yellow leaf, but strangely
Suspended in mid air.
I stand to get a closer look.
Eek! Does this
Leaf have legs?
Did I see them move?
What a strange bug.
Maybe he got caught
In a spider's web,
And is almost free...
Oh wait!
He's ascending the
Invisible line, but I
Can see the growing
Bunch in the middle.
It's a shelled spider-
Like a horseshoe crab
Or even a hermit crab,
Yet small as a ladybug.
I continue to follow the
Ascent with my eyes.
Oh!
No wonder why
He was in a hurry...
His guest rang
The lunch bell.
Enjoy your lunch, orb spider!



Although the Cage is Made of Gold, It is Still a Prison by Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez

Today we are forced to stay in our homes. Forced to stay in a place that is comfortable, that we know we will be okay, a place that we can call home. Even though many of us are afraid to go out, we are afraid to stay in for too long too. We are afraid to not know what is tomorrow going to look like. We are afraid of the life challenges, the present, the uncertainty of our future, we are afraid to let go of our past because it is the only thing we know, but we can no longer have. Because now we are forced to live a new life.

We need to adapt to the new way of doing things, many of us struggle with technology we get frustrated we miss to hang out with our friends, we miss the social parties, we miss the dinners in restaurants, visiting relatives, friends or just discovering new places, we can't wait for this pandemic to be done. We miss the freedom of doing whatever we want.

Sometimes we think of just going out for a short walk but all of the sudden this idea comes to our minds: What if I get infected during my walk? And the fear of the what if? starts rising inside us. These are the same fears an undocumented immigrant experiences every day since they cross the border. In every decision of their lives, it is always the what if question: What if police give me a ticket for driving without a license? What if la migra appears in my job and this is the last day I will see my family? What if someone blames me for a crime I did not do but just for not knowing the language, not having enough money for a lawyer and for being Brown I get put in jail? What if my employer makes the decision to fire me without paying me because he wants to take advantage of my immigrant situation? Since they leave their countries in their minds the fear of what if I don't ever come back to my land and my family is constant. The same as now with covid they also ask themselves what if I died a long way away from my loved ones?

This is the life of the undocumented immigrant! Every day since they are forced out of their country, because of poverty, capitalism, corruption, politics, and fear. They always miss their family, friends, neighbors, neighborhood, their roots, the place that they can call home, their past life that no longer exists. The life they loved but are forced to give up. Because although the cage is made of gold, it is still a prison. This is the everyday truth for many undocumented immigrants. Maybe this experience can help us to be more aware of our neighbors, friends, community members that are immigrants forced to stay in the golden cage called the United States.

Writer's memo

This is a piece I wrote in reflection on life during the pandemic and all of the challenges of a life that is totally new and the struggles that we suffer in order to adjust. Even though for many the economic situation is not an issue, it's still very hard, this new life. I challenge the reader to try to put themselves in the shoes of the undocumented immigrant who have experienced these challenges since they made the decision to get out of their countries.

Writer's memo

This poem is dedicated to my father.

In 2010 I was faced with a decision. On July 21 my mothers phone rang at 10pm. It was the end of the line. We rushed and crammed into her booger green Buick with the tan interior while waving goodbye to the driveway indefinitely. Someone was dying tonight, and I knew who it was. Hurling in slow motion down Century Ave, taking a right onto Allen Blvd and a left onto University Ave for a straight shot to our last embrace. For years I knew this would come, I had been told all my life it would, but nobody ever told me a date, until now. Catching and breezing through every red light in sight she finally parked her car in the single story parking garage after what had seemed like 10 years of driving. We ran inside and confronted the receptionist about the whereabouts of where the lord wanted us to be. After being told that our destination was just right down the hall we stormed that way like a two man army looking for the sliding glass doors shielded from the outside world by a layer of interior curtains. We walked deep into the hurricane of tears and sorrow. It was impossible to tell us apart. Whether it be my mother or the man on the bed. To think earlier that day I was walking back from the apartment outdoor pool when I saw the only thing transitioning the sprawling black parking lot from the midday summer sky. An ambulance. I would have never thought in a million years I would see the melding of hospice to final resting place in a matter of just 8 hours. I was making my way to the bed when I saw what looked like dead treasure with tubes and wires going in and coming out of every orifice. I was in shock. Right when I started to process a fraction of the gravity of this situation I felt a hand grab my arm and kindly yank me into the bathroom to be met with a choice. In the claustrophobic forest of Uncs and Aunties my grandma squatted down and the words that came out of her mouth were, "do you wanna take yo daddy off life support?" My mom, who was by my side echoed the question to me again, but this time when the question was posed, my aunt Yoshi let out a sharp piercing cry within the walls of the bathroom bunker. I had already made up my mind before the question was even asked and I had told my mother my answer in the car. "If the doctor doesn't take dad off of life support I will run behind the machines and unplug the cords myself". I was 10 years old. My reasoning was that my father had been fighting sickle cell anemia for the last 33 years. His fight was exhausted, old and tired. He didn't want to die but with failing organs everyday, strokes, lungs overflowing with fluid and pain and crisis he needed to be set free. He was exhausted. When I decided to pull the plug on my father I did it because I knew he needed to go. I wouldn't have been standing in a bathroom deciding somebody else's fate if he was meant to be with us tomorrow. I knew that even though he wasn't a perfect dad, or even a consistent one, he had always watched out for me so I had no reason not to do the same for him in the best way I could. If it was up to others in my family he would have stayed on life support but my mom quickly told me that he would've lived another 30 minutes. Sometimes to this day I still think about what I did. Why was I the one to choose? Why did I have to see him earlier that day just to watch him leave? What would he have wanted? I don't know the answers to any of these questions. One thing I do know though is that I did what I thought was best for my father. Earlier on Fish Hatchery when my dad was being visited by the hospice nurse, him and I were in a little room together, just the two of us. He looked at me and turned on the TV. What was on before me was Avatar The Last Airbender, the final episode. I was sitting with my back against his small bed on the floor and over the corner of my shoulder, through a thick heavy exhaustion, the kind of exhaustion you only get after realizing your day of peace was just around the corner, he asked "do you like this?" I said "yes." We had never watched tv together before. We didn't need to start now, but instead of letting his death slowly eat him away in the cramped little room, he decided to bond. He looked out for me until the very end so I had to do what he taught me to do. Right before he was taken off life support I promised him that I would do everything that we couldn't do together because I knew he would always be with me.

I Pray For You, a musical poem

by Corey Dean

I pray for you;
I pray for you.

at this very moment
I cry and I pray for you.

What lie at the feet of this very big stone?

Like father like son
Like father like Job

All your organs failed you but your heart stayed in it
All them missed calls is just long lost minutes
And all them wrong calls, kept my pride on the line
In a room on a respirator
I had to decide.

If at 10 years old,
Is this greyhound gone

And yo old black granny
sing my black ass song
To them two wrong ears
we was two live crew

You was born like me
I was born like you

So I pray for you;
I pray for you.

At this very moment
I cry and I pray for you

What lie at the feet of this very big stone?

Like father like son
Like father like Job

It was time to deploy
So we went to illinois

I've been fighting with goliath
Since I was a little boy

Why the ice in my veins was prison
To squatters law
I lived through hell frozen over
And chicago
When it thawed

Thank god

I was scrappin in the streets
With Terrence

But if I live to see tomorrow
Bet some money on my cowboys

Daddy in a convoy
Mama out on allied
Somewhere out on Fish Hatch
Dispatch to the South Side

I think I'm dyin.



Writer's memo

This is a personal essay about my personal account of being homeless in the midst of a pandemic. If this essay encourages one person then my job is done. I don't look like what I have been through. I hope it reminds our readers that there is always someone worse off than you.

One Hundred And Eleven Days In Quarantine

by Marilyn Sims

First and foremost I am extremely grateful for this experience as well as the opportunity to be transparent with our readers. In February of 2020 I found myself without a roof over my head; like some young people would say "Just straight up homeless." For three months I was a resident of Sarah's Circle, a women's shelter located in Chicago, Illinois.

On May 5, 2020 God answered my prayer. About two weeks prior the staff and all of the residents at Sarah's Circle had been tested for coronavirus. We had all been blessed and our results were negative, nevertheless, any resident 60 years old and above were considered high risk.

A representative from Heartland Health Alliance, the agency that administered the test, and a minister from Lawndale Christian Health Center who partnered with the city of Chicago who was allocated millions of dollars to keep the homeless well and safe.

Ironically, I was the first name they called into this tiny little office that had three chairs, one small round table, and one copy machine. The only privacy we had was some curtains that looked like they had been crocheted by Sarah's Circle's first resident 29 years ago.

I sat down with my mask on and six feet away from a minister who proceeded to tell me that I have the option of going to a five star luxury hotel. Apparently some residents from other shelters he had been visiting were reluctant to go to the hotel. He'd throw in a few perks like a gift card and daily doctor care. Little did he know, I would have paid him if I had any money, all I could say was thank you Jesus. He asked me if I wanted him to come back the next day like several of the other residents or go with him that day. My lips didn't hesitate to let him know that I wanted to leave that day with him. My mind was screaming yes make haste, make haste to deliver me.

I left that little office with such a praise in my spirit. I ran to the staff at the front desk and asked her to please unlock the area where we slept so I could pack my belongings. She looked sad to see me go but she was really happy for me. She handed me an oversized gray plastic garbage bag to put my things in. I had a few small overnight bags as well. I packed my stuff so fast and was sitting near the door waiting while he interviewed two other residents. While I waited a couple of the residents wished me well and offered to help take my things downstairs.

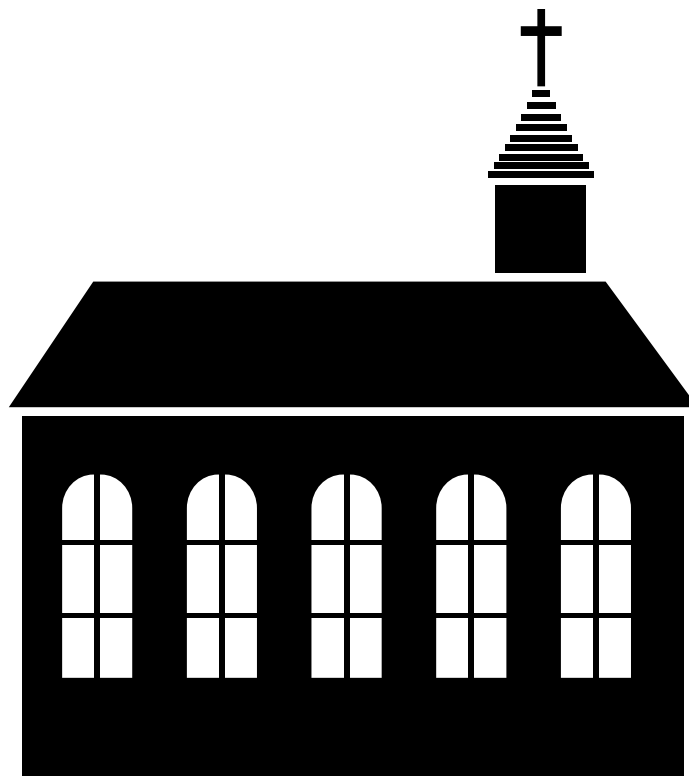
The reason I felt so confident was the minister came from a community church whose pastor was my former high school english teacher. Not only was God sending help and answering my prayer, he sent the love, care and integrity that I needed to say yes. Don't forget that I'm still holding this irrepressible praise.

Their church van was waiting right in front of the door which is so rare usually there is never a parking spot right in front of the door of the shelter. The driver had been taught well. He took my bags, placed them in the back of the van and held my hand to help me up the stairs of the van. He waited until I was seated and fastened in properly before he pulled off.

My room number was 1503. I tell you when I stepped in my room at 166 Magnificent Mile I couldn't wait any longer. Once I saw the purple décor, and purple is my favorite color and the color purple stands for royalty, at first I just said "thank you Jesus." Yeah I was trying to be dignified. Once the staff explained the rules and regulations, they left the room.

I went into an undignified praise. I was singing "If It Had Not Been For The Lord." I was kneeling in humble adoration. I am now and will always be eternally grateful.

I pray that this personal testimony will bless and encourage someone to keep the faith in God and his sovereignty.



Writer's memo

For this piece, I took an excerpt I remembered writing in an old Journal. My Journals and Diaries are like my best friends because I can like myself and talk/write the way I want to. I can really get into my words without trying to hide or not putting my Whole Being out there, expressing like a relationship I am having. So in this piece, I'm explaining my loss from not having time then, expressing my innermost feelings for the night I'll be able to once again have Writing all to myself. Hope you enjoy it!

My Letter to Writing

by Quishanta Cary

Dear Writing,

Hey! What's up??! How's everyone's writing going? How has their penmanship been doing?? I know I myself haven't been talking to you a lot, lately. I've been so missing you so much, actually a whole lot! But now, since I have the chance I need, now I want to tell you how I really feel, to express my undying love to you with Writing.

When I'm writing to you, you always make me feel in ways I've never felt before. I can be myself around you with no worries or embarrassments, whatsoever. I can share, open up to you with my innermost secrets and deepest, excited thoughts, etc. You know all my feelings in and out. To be with you is like (or will be like) a dream come true.

I love the way I can love you through my writings with my feelings, expressions! I can be ME, totally all me! While talking to you, my Writing, my everything!

WOW! I can't believe how open and alive I feel right now. You make my body shudder with feeling to the point that I need a drink after.

Writing, I cannot wait to get you back to the way we were. In bed with me alone having you all to myself, and continue expressing my ultimate everything to you, my Writing!

Yours Truly,
4ever and ever more
ALWAYS,
Quishanta Cary



Letter to Squanto

by Tiffani Puccio

Writer's memo

This is a piece from one of the peer led OWG sessions. Quishanta presented information about the first Thanksgiving, and the Wampanoag tribe. The information she presented inspired me to write a letter to Squanto, from one of his tribesmen, who is upset (understandably) about Squanto being so generous to the white men who slaughtered their tribe. I also implemented terms that the tribe used for objects like canoes and tents that I had learned in the presentation.

Squanto,

We have many questions, as your brothers. These savages enslaved you, long before they enslaved and massacred our people. Why did you not come to warn us? Instead, you insist that we invite them inside the wetu and break bread with them. You knew of their savage ways, yet you still invited them to be a part of the tribe.

They knew nothing of our nassamp- they said it lacked both flavor and substance- and instead, gave us porridge, that was bland and heavy.

We shared with them our quail stew; again, they weren't happy.

They came to us ill, and found comfort in our bar fur blankets. The tribe suffered, yet they were nursed back to health by the warmth of both our blankets and fire.

When their families grew and needed more space, at first they asked. Then they realized that we were just pushovers, and our land and resources were taken from us. They set fire to our wetu. They desecrated our land, women, and children.

There weren't enough mushoon to carry us away from the slaughter that you helped welcome. Sure, we were all fooled by their kindness upon landing- but you knew the truth of these people, and the horrors they were capable of. Then, they forced us to change the ways of our ancestors-- forgetting our personal relationship with the earth mother-- and how we had her to be thankful for. If we didn't abide by their ways, we fared far worse-- death or slavery.

Why Squanto, why?

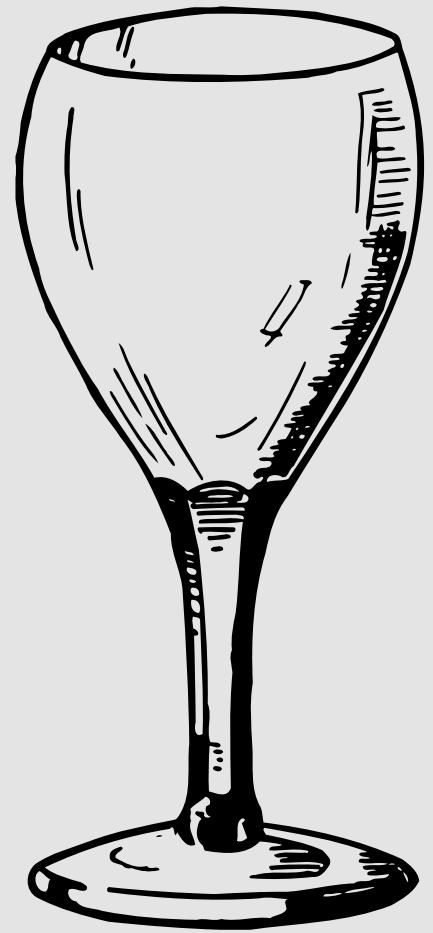
How are we to survive these conditions?

We have lost too much.

Why Squanto, did you bring this onto our people?

Writer's memo

I wrote this poem about my first toxic relationship as an adult. I had just broken up with the woman who I thought I would be with forever 6 months prior and my reptile brain thought it would be the perfect time to play the field. Ya know, to take my mind off the negative emotions instead of dealing with them directly. This did not work out well. The person who I started hanging out with was not somebody who made me feel good or appreciated. We did not have the same interests in music, we couldn't joke around with each other, and I didn't feel comfortable around her but in the wreckage that was my life at the time I didn't quite care. I assumed it was natural to feel this way and over time things would change. Perhaps I would grow to appreciate this person and we could become closer together? Nah. I should have known. We never hung out during the day and when we did, every minute felt like two. Something was wrong but I didn't have the courage within myself to realize how I felt. Until, she moved into her new apartment. That's where this poem takes place and that's where I confronted my wisdom. Let me break it down. It was a Friday night and she asked if I wanted to come over. I didn't, but days before I told her we could see each other on the weekend so I was obligated. I left my friend Tavian's house where we had been working on music and drove to her new crib. I drove downtown, pulled up onto her street, parked, and walked through the double set of glass doors hidden on the backside of her building. My heart was distressed. I walked inside and rode the crusty elevator to her floor and walked through the hallways until I found her door. I reluctantly opened it and joined her on the couch. "Want some wine?" She asked. I said yes. This was a mistake because I was already uncomfortable and in the end drinking just elongated the discomfort but what was I gonna do? In the short term it seemed like the only thing I could do to get me over the awkwardness. We sat and watched "90-Day Fiance" for a short time before going to her room to pass out in her bed until the coming morning. I woke up with a new feeling inside of me. I'm not sure what happened, maybe I just had enough of this ugly charade but I assembled my things, composed myself and manifested my courage into these following words "I don't want to hang out anymore". You can never get offended by the truth. I realized I was not hanging out with her because I enjoyed her company, I was doing it because I was wishing she would be someone she wasn't. This took a lot of strength. I put my backpack and shoes on and gave her one last hug and proceeded to walk out of the door, as well as her life, forever. This was one of the healthiest choices I could have made and I have not regretted it since. I learned a lot from that experience and although those lessons appeared to me at first as curses, over time, I was able to find the wisdom inside the pain. I was able to resurrect the honesty within myself which gave me better insight into what I now truly want.



Box Wine

by Corey Dean

I saw the sun die
The soon obsolete shine sang sermon into the dead bugs
buried inside the translucent bulbous pulpit
On the ceilings depth of this elevator
The yellow lulls, ennui, unrest
Bounces a heavy buzz atop the slow jostled strands of
Old frittered wallpaper.
The bloated moths of this aluminum carcass swarm like buzzards over hot bodies
And my stomach caught fire on the ride up to your floor

I wish I wasn't here.

The big metal coffin climbed the cable until the big behemoth
Doors allowed me out of its mouth
It wasn't like this 15 months ago
A cold whisper is all I'm surrounded by
Covered in a thin oily mirth just light enough
To carry each strand of every broken promise I made before
Coming here
I trudged through your hallway like it's waist deep tar
A solemn lackadaisical lumber through and around every corner
I see the illusion of never making it there at all
But the closed shadow door
borrowing bad ideas between the boards
Covering uncertainties ambiguities horrors
Was right in front of me
My soft copper flesh caked and clasped the bronze door knob
And rotated it like an old metallic factory cog
My anxiety made of glass over an anvil, tied to a rope as secure as wet sand

I walked in.

Box Wine
is only around to reunite the people who we masquerade around as
For each other
This new mirth of intoxication inhibition is a facetious fluid to unloving, dissatisfaction
We sat on the couch in a half hearted attempt to prove,
Anything.
But it was that very nothing which moved us
From the couch, to your bedroom
In about the time it takes to smoke four cigarettes
Understanding nothing is going to be different
This night

Writer's memo

This short story is of a particular experience where I was so sure that I was the victim of my circumstances, where I was in so much emotional pain that I was willing to try anything to gain my serenity. I definitely didn't think that meditation could be the cure of many of my problems but what a big surprise to discover that meditation really works.

Meditation Really Works

by Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez

I had an incident where I feel discriminated against. This is something that happens to me often. I have a sickness of perspective due to trauma I had experienced in life.

The incident happened when a person told me in a rude way to turn off my camera in a zoom meeting when I was trying to assist my daughter who entered the room crying. My microphone was on mute but I guess it was disturbing.

Immediately I felt bad, this happened because in my mind it wasn't fair, she wasn't polite, and nobody told me before that it was a rule for children to not appear on camera. I let my emotions take control of my mind and body and I start to cry. I apologize and I made the angry decision to not turn my video on never again. Weeks later, the same person called me and told me that I need to turn on my video in order to participate in that meeting. But I need to remember that kids are not welcome. In my mind

I think this is a personal attack since I was the only Latina with children in that meeting. I hate this person, I start thinking all of the reasons this is not fair and how I am a victim again. I cry again, once more I let my emotions dominate my mind and my body with more tears coming out.

At this point my mind is infected with all of those emotions of self pity, hate and sadness. I feel angry with my children, my husband and the world for days. For me one injustice opens a wound in my mind and I react by producing emotional poison because of my beliefs of what is fair or unfair.

What if I told you that most chronic problems are associated with emotional dysfunctions? What if I told you that my dear friend has cancer and she believes it is because she was angry most of her life, feeling that life is unfair?

I looked for help, because I felt stuck. I couldn't think of anything just that it was not fair and that I was a victim. I felt like a hamster in a spinning wheel. I was a prisoner of my emotions. There is nothing more in this world that I want than the sense of freedom. So you can imagine my agony! That's when I hear, "Can you imagine being able to not react to conflicts? To stay calm and serene when problems arrive? To walk in life with a smile on your face and feeling grateful most of the time?" One of the tools I received seeking help was meditation. I didn't understand how keeping quiet could help me. I'm a doer. I want immediate solutions. I can't sit and wait for justice to happen on its own. I need to do something, or maybe not?

Soon I learn that the real freedom I have sought my entire life is the freedom of the mind. Being able to control my mind and emotions is the key to happiness, the thread that unravels the skein. With a healthy mind I can use all of my energy in the things that I enjoy, I can see problems with a different perspective and find solutions easily. Meditation is not just to sit and do nothing. It is to train my mind to focus and take control of my mind and emotions. Meditation is the training required to experience true freedom.

After a couple of days of intense meditation the solution came to my mind. I decided to no longer be the victim of my circumstances. I give thanks to the person inviting me to the meeting and I forgave the person that was rude to me to free myself, remembering that forgiveness is for me. I started a new meeting where mothers with children are welcome and tolerance is our main principle and all of this is thanks to meditation.

My Love for Dolphins

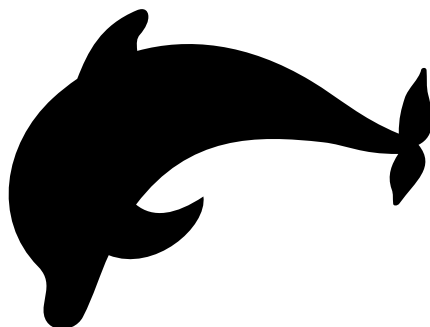
by Quishanta Cary

As I was visiting this particular place in Jamaica, I was sitting back on this comfy beach chair sipping on what was supposed to be a Margarita and staring out into this luscious, 3 shades of blue water. A dolphin came up to me, just started walking right out of the water and spoke to me and said, "Here, put this on your head and this on your body". Then he asked, "Do you trust me?" Now one would think this is crazy because they would say dolphins can't talk to humans. But, I know what I heard and was STUNNED 🤯🤯 because I'm the only one they spoke to and no one else. And so I responded, excitedly 😁, "OH YES, I LOVE YOU GUYS!"

So, he grabbed my hand and helped me on top of him to where I can hold on to his fin. Then I saw his other dolphin friends already walking up to us with seaweed in hand ready to tie my hands to his fin so I don't slip off. After they did that, and knowing that my love and trust for them were so strong, off we went! My friend the dolphin, took me up and down, in and out through the waters doing tons of tricks, flips, and dives along with other dolphins. They were all sooo very protective to not let me drown nor get hurt by sharks and whales.

All of a sudden, I started hearing loud ringing in my ears and felt the dolphin shaking back and forth with me still on him. Then saying, "Mommy, Mommy, wake up!" When I finally woke up, my 10 year old daughter had thrown water on me to wake me up since, obviously, my alarm didn't seem to do it. She was also shaking me so I can make her breakfast while she gets ready for her virtual class. She also claimed that I was talking in my sleep.

On my way to fully waking and getting up, as I looked to my right I found these dolphins looking at me on my bed. Okay, so they're not real dolphins but my small miniature dolphins my daughter got off my shelf to play with along with the miniature whales, too. But, wouldn't it be really kool if we could pull whatever, in this case a mammal, out of our dreams?!! Or, they actually left you something from your dream when you awake to remember...



Writer's memo

I adore Dolphins sooo much! They are very gentle, tricky, protective, and love-able mammals! I love cable shows or any shows, especially the Animal Channel, that shows something about Dolphins! I try to record these shows when they show anything dealing with Dolphins. I wished that I was as lucky as my older nephew, his wife, and their 3 children. Or, at least had the money because they ALL went to SEE the Dolphin Show also to have fun at Disney! They ALL got to swim, pat, and take pictures with the DOLPHINS! THAT SHOULD'VE BEEN ME CAUSE I LOVE DOLPHINS MORE THAN THEM 🥺!! Seeing those pictures my great-niece put on Facebook of them doing ALL THAT just made me really jealous that I wasn't with them (except the swimming part, cause I can't swim). I am the one that's a HUGE FAN OF DOLPHINS! SIGH! I ALWAYS wanted to be able to see one up close, but one can dream, RIGHT???! I wrote this story because I LOVE DOLPHINS and just feel that I guess, whatever you love make a story out of it. Either, it is true, fake, and/or rather some part of it is half truth. It is your story and have fun with it!

Writer's memo

This is a poem of forgiveness and hope between a mother and her child. It's about a mother's need to share her deepest feelings of hurt and regret, to be vulnerable and transparent with her child, to say I was broken and unknowingly allowed the wrong person into our hearts and minds. Please forgive me. It is not your fault. This is for all children that have experienced living with domestic violence and abuse. It's not your fault and you are not alone. Allow forgiveness and healing for a better you.

Then There Was You

by Denise Marie Hardnett

As a teen Mom I loved you, my child, before you were born.

I had to grow up fast and it wasn't about me, but you. Only thinking of a better life with you.

My child, you mean the world to me, this poem celebrates you.

The day you were born Heaven opened and spoke--then there was you, an angel.

Innocent, precious, and new...

As you grew to use your wings to soar.

Then there was you, my child. I would know you anywhere.

Your smile sweetly warms my heart.

Your eyes' sparkles brighten my day.

Your touch gently soothes me.

Your smell invigorates emotions in my soul.

Your voice calmly gives me peace.

Was all uniquely you.

Along the way I lost my way. Please forgive me. Daddy hitting Mommy is never okay.

It was not your fault. My child, you always deserve the best that I have.

Then there was you sharing my pain to see me cry, broken, and bruised.

I was hurt and broken-hearted. Because of me, so were you experiencing my pain. No one--including you and me-- deserved to be treated less than the best.

I apologize for all the pain--please forgive me. It was never your fault.

I am responsible for you, my child. It's not your fault you couldn't save me.

Then there was you, please forgive me. I have forgiven your Daddy and myself. Forgiveness is for us. We can heal and the stronger we will be.

You didn't choose me, but I chose to have you.

Then there was you with me, loving you. I love you, my child.

Then There Were You
A Story of Forgiveness between a Mother and Child



by author

Has the pandemic helped us to be more human or dehumanized us?

by Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez

We live in a multicultural neighborhood where the majority of the residents are Asian.

One day my daughter came to me in the beginning of the pandemic saying that she couldn't play with her friend Kira because Kira went to her house crying. I asked her, "Why? What happened?" She answered that she, Kira and a group of girls were playing together when another girl arrived at the group saying that she would not be hanging out with Kira anymore because she was from China, and Chinese people brought the coronavirus. She also said that she thought none of the other neighbors should play with Kira either.

When I heard this I told my daughter that it was terrible. More than anything, I wanted my daughter to understand that what that girl said was not true, and how important it was to not judge anyone and speak that way. I told her about when President Trump referred to all Mexicans as drug dealers and rapists. That is not true, not all Mexicans are like that. If we thought that way, then could we say that all North Americans are mentally ill and killers? No!

I told my daughter that 16 years ago, when I came to live in Madison at Allied Drive, my Latino family and friends told me not to hang out with African Americans, that they were drug addicts and bad guys who would hurt me. I remember walking nervously by the streets of that neighborhood. But the truth is, nothing ever happened to me or my family. On the contrary, many times the young Black guys offered me their seat on the bus. One time, I was walking out of a store when my bag of groceries broke. An African American guy took off his shirt, tied a knot, put my things in his shirt, and walked me home.

Nobody ever told me that African Americans and Latinos have more things in common than differences. For example, we share the same neighborhoods and schools, we are low wage workers and we cannot afford to live in the nicer neighborhoods with better schools. We are both discriminated against because of our skin color, and there is a big lack of opportunities for us as Black and Brown people, jails are full of African Americans and Latinos. No one ever told me that we have more things in common than differences, and that if we join forces it is possible to move forward together. But in that sentence there is a keyword, the keyword is "together"! Why is unity so difficult in our society?

I explained to my daughter that Kira was not responsible for the coronavirus. Nor were her mother, family, or any of our Chinese neighbors. Not even Chinese people in China.

I contacted the mother of the girl who said that horrible comment. I also sent a message to all of the parents of the children involved. I told them that it is enough to listen to the words of ignorance from the United States president to also hear them repeated from the lips of our children. That we need to educate our children and be careful of what they say. That the apartment office sent us an email before saying that it would be zero tolerance for xenophobia.

I also told my daughter to find Kira later and to play with her. She did. They spent the summer together. Sometimes working in the garden, other times on bike rides, and many times at the beach. At the end of the summer, Kira had to return to China. Today, my daughter has a long-distance friend. A time difference of thirteen hours to be exact. But the power of kindness and friendship knows no borders. Their playdates are virtual, like everything else is now ... When it is night for my daughter, it is morning for Kira. But the best thing is that they don't have to wear masks during their time together.

Writer's memo

This short story is about a horrible xenophobic experience where my daughter and her Chinese friend are the protagonists, in the beginning of the pandemic. And how that experience turned into a good life lesson. But most importantly, it is a story of a friendship that doesn't know borders.

Writer's memo

This poem was impromptu. I was watching the Bucks opening 20-21 season game against the Boston Celtics (Damn you Jayson Tatum) and after Giannis missed a critical free throw that would have tied the game, a wrestling match came on. I was in such disbelief at how the game closed out that I was dumbstruck enough to fixate myself onto an AWE opening bout. I haven't watched wrestling since I was in middle school so I was incredibly reluctant but I saw Chris Jericho, who was in his wrestling prime while I was in mine, so I decided to stick around. Age and weight had clearly caught up to him but I was excited for the chance to see if he could still do his signature move, The Code Breaker. I soon came to find out that this was going to be a tag team match. So Chris and his teammate, some guy who looked like Generic Muscle Lunk Silicon Valley Wrestler #32, walked to the ring in anticipation to get revenge on a team that had beaten the breaks off of them last week. I was on board. When their theme music stopped and all 12 people in the audience, some of whom were not wearing masks, stopped clapping, their opponents walked out from behind backstage and down the catwalk. It was two brothas! Literally and figuratively. I was excited, not only did I get to see Chris Jericho unlock the code, but I would also get to see two young, athletic light skinned brothas with BLM bicep bands take home a W for our people and clean up the previous mess I watched. But none of this happened. When the match started everything was looking fair, the ref was vigilant, both sets of fighters didn't do any "low blows", and whoever wasn't tagged in was patiently waiting for their chance to do some pulverizing behind the turnbuckle. THIS was fair and fun wrestling; but it didn't take long for this match to become something more uncomfortable than what I unassumingly signed up for. The darker skinned light skinned brotha and Jericho were going head to head in a slug fest consisting of fake family friendly punches and drop kicks until one side started to slowly defeat the other. Jericho and his ragtag thespian teammate started subbing between each other to whittle down their initial opponent. It was hard to watch. Obviously a change had to come, so the darker brotha tagged in his even lighter brotha in an attempt to even out the match. Now when I say his brother was light, I mean light light. I was asking myself some ethical questions while these men were trading blows but he had the same BLM bicep band on all the same as his brother so in that instance I knew we were all related. This realization caused me to cast away my cautionary hesitancy about this fair king and I was naturally incited to offer complimentary words of support and encouragement through the customary uplifting colloquialisms of my people; "Whoop that n****" "you better get up" "OOOOh get that n****". This didn't happen either and my words of support did nothing. Over time the fight unraveled. I was watching my brothers get stepped on, kicked, and dehumanized by two crusty dusty Joann Fabrics lookin employees made out of flab and muscle milk. You hate to see your kin lose. After a while the ref didn't give a f*** what was going on. She sat idly by and watched as both Chris Jericho and Muscle Lunk Wrestler #32 beat on the people with the BLM bands and melanin. All she was missing was a cell-phone to record it all. During the long, drawn out, sloppy fight, the end result was becoming clearer and clearer. There was no hope. We were not going to win. This upset me to no end in an erratic way. Normally I don't give a f*** about wrestling because I have bigger fish to fry but something about this fight got to me. During the final leg of the fight Chis Jericho's bum ass teammate caught the darker skinned brotha between the ropes and with his thumb he made a decapitation motion against his throat. In one weird ass movement #32 DDT'd the king who looked like me between the larriets, causing his face to hit canvas and his stomach to bang against the ring's thick elastic wiring. This negus wasn't getting up. It was over for all of us. In the wake of watching my favorite basketball team lose and witnessing my people suffer against what seemed to be a perfect metaphor for the African American condition within this country, I could do nothing else but write a poem. Because I was so angry.

I arm wrestled racism

by Corey Dean

I arm wrestled racism till a vein was about to pop

All I heard was static like a live grenade was dropped at our feet
Or a tear gas burn out building window riot was roaring in my brain

I kept wrestling

You can't stop the blood from rushing through my narrow veins causing red river rapids to crumble every brick
in every prison with hot radiant pressure extending to wildest radius

I wrestled racism, I slapped his head against the brick canvas and held his hand like a one armed man trying to
find someone to clap with

I wrestled racism,

In one long river of blue under brown the stretch of my skin could pop the sound barrier, and stretch my mel-
nin, creating more
Watching his snaggle toothed face cry when I bent his arm so far back it came back around again

I wrestled that racism to hell overtime
And I showed whose stronger,
Me



Writer's memo

These two stories are part of a larger one, the story of my life. When I wrote about these memories, it was hard to return to those moments but it allowed me to see them with more perspective so I could heal. I believed my mom sent me away because I was adopted, but she made it seem like it was because I was out of control. We never got to talk about these issues because she passed away right when I got back to Chicago. My story is about recognizing that I was always getting fed by sound and music and higher powers when I was growing up. So I am writing this piece to bring awareness about mental health and how I struggled with mental illness in the past and how I am healing from it now and in the future.

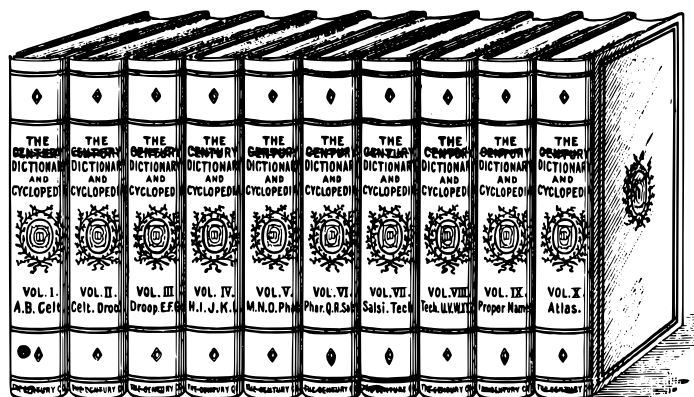
Struggles, Music, and Deity: The Story of Derrick

by Derrick Allen

The First Trauma

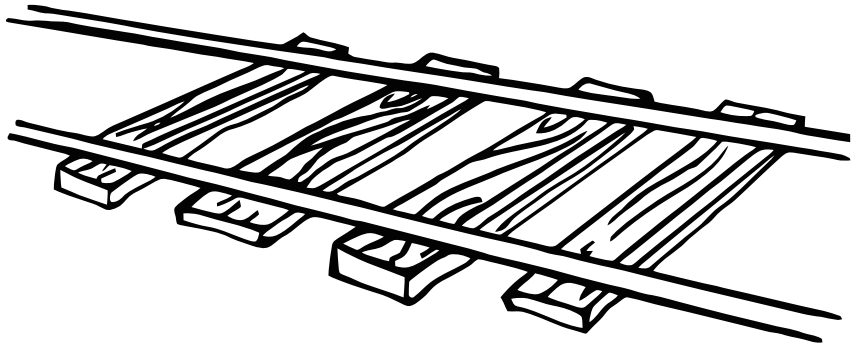
Growing up, I didn't have a care in the world, I loved catching grasshoppers and nursing stray dogs and alley cats back to health. I received a lot of love from my mother in the form of hugs and whoopings! I hated school because of the bullying I had to endure. See, I wasn't into gangs and fighting, I just wanted to save animals! My mother bought me encyclopedias, and I wanted to be like Encyclopedia Brown, a ten-year-old boy who solved mysteries with the knowledge he got from reading encyclopedias. I was at the age where I wanted to know everything.

But that all came to an end, at the age of fifteen when my mother caught me in a stolen car, a car I didn't steal but enjoyed the ride. Understand, my mother was the strictest of mothers. I had to be in the house when the street lights came on, I could only play on my porch and in front of the house. So being in a stolen car was suicide! I don't know what I was thinking, maybe I just wanted to be free. My mother was over-protective and I didn't understand, until the day she kicked me out of the house. I was fifteen, living in the streets of Chicago in the nineties, where drugs, gangs and poverty was the order of the day. The only place I could go was my oldest sister's house. A two-bedroom on the other side of State Street on the southside of Chicago. And that's where I learned the truth. ADOPTED!! I couldn't believe it. How was this possible? So many emotions ran through my body all at once. But like a jedi knight (Star Wars was my favorite movie), I knew it to be true. As my sister stood there telling me that she was adopted and I was adopted, anger, the emotion I knew all too well, started to manifest. The feelings of abandonment made me sick to my stomach.



The Second Trauma

Moving forward in my life not knowing who I am and where I come from was hard. Knowing the truth and living back at home, the tension was high. My mother was mad. I was mad, but I dare not speak to her about being adopted. The violence in my neighborhood was getting worse and I started to get more rebellious and my mother feared that I might get killed. I believed she was fearful of me confronting her about what my sister Sandy said. But before I could even muster up the courage to, I was on a train to Quantico, Virginia. My niece and her husband lived in Quantico, a military family raising two beautiful children. My mother believed that my niece's husband, who by the way is a drill sergeant in the Marines, would help me get my act together. I thought to myself, I'm from the streets of Chicago! No marine is going to tell me what to do. And that was my attitude... Until I met Mr. Coleman, whose very voice shook my soul. This man, if you want to call him that, stood at least seven feet tall and weighed three hundred pounds. You might think I'm exaggerating but this guy was a machine! He would get up at four in the morning, run ten to twenty miles, wash his car, and then he went to work. One night he came home and learned that I had all Fs on my report card. This drill sergeant from hell was beyond pissed, he yelled at me as if I was in boot camp. He was ready to rip me a new one, until Tish, his wife and my savior, stopped him. The seventeen-year-old from the streets of Chicago started crying like a baby ready to go home and talk to my mother about everything... about the adoption, my behavior, about the stolen car.



Finally, I was on a train back home, back to Chicago, the Windy City. I couldn't wait to see my mother and friends. I was so excited to see my mother, and when the train came to a stop I looked for her. Where is she? I thought to myself while grabbing my things. As I stepped onto the platform, I spotted her. I began walking faster, all the pain and anger I felt about being adopted was gone. As I tried to embrace my mother, she seemed cold-- no emotion, no love, she didn't even hug me back. I thought maybe she was still upset about my report card. Could it be she's just afraid that I'm back at home? I didn't know. As we got closer to the car my mother collapsed right into my arms. I tried calling her name but she wouldn't answer. She snored and woke up. She went in and out of consciousness. I yelled to my father for help but he stood there motionless, in shock. Imagine a seventeen-year-old boy trying to put an almost seventy-year-old unconscious woman in the car. I put the top part of her body into the car and then kinda folded her lower part into the vehicle. Finally my father got into the car but he had no idea where he was going. He stopped at a police station and my mother received CPR. Meanwhile a police officer walked toward me and looked me dead in the eye and asked loudly "Who dropped dead now?" And like that, my anger was back with full force, ready to fight the whole police squad.

Writer's memo

I have been writing this poem for as long as I have been alive. Many people have told me over the last 23 years that my hair is too “crazy” and my hair will “make it harder for me” out in our overly complicated western way of life, but I disagree. Well in actuality, I don't care. Why would I want to prosper in a world where I can't fully be 100% myself? If I have to change myself to succeed in the eyes of the wicked then am I the one truly succeeding, or is it my fine tuned illusion? What seems like a cosmetic afterthought to some is something that I incorporate into my everyday sense of self. I have always felt that my hair represents me almost as well as I represent it because we are both loud, over the top, and expressive. I have gotten to the point where I only cut my hair if I need to let go of the things attached to that specific crop so I can start fresh with a new beginning. Things like moving, relationships, trauma, or a need for a new freedom are the only true reasons I would sit down at J.P.s. I don't care much for any job that wouldn't hire me because of my hair, since, in my opinion, that is “old people thinking” and I was always brought up in a family and country that says you should judge people based on their character instead of their exterior. This lesson sounds cute in theory but I quickly came to the realization that this little phrase completely dissolves when it isn't convenient for another person's personal comfort. In my opinion, as the older generation exits the universal stage left and makes room for our younger generations we will soon see all sorts of people in businesses with free self expression. Have you ever seen a company C.E.O. with face tattoos and dreadlocks? How about a car salesman with blue hair? Or a realtor with 13 different facial piercings? OR a successful Black man in America with an afro? All of these things to some level are feared by old people thinking but under the fear is the reality that these people bleed red just like you. People who cry when they are sad and love laughing with their friends. They are all human beings, just some of them have some extra sauce. To me it's archaic to judge somebody off how they choose to express themselves through what nature gave to them because in the end who decides what is “weird”? Who gets to sit on the supreme court of public opinion and say “you there, I sit in judgment of you”? Plus, don't we all have more important things to do than sit around judging the bald barista who's making your grande whatever who actually turned out not to be bald because she actually has a 12 inch rat tail hidden in the back? I know I do. That's why I wrote this poem. I have more important things to do than hang myself on your toxic concern, so me and my hair are going to keep it pushin for eternity.

My Hair

by Corey Dean

I've had people talk bout my hair like it was on they head

- No it won't - make it harder for me to get no job
- No it won't - make people look down at me
- And no it won't - make no police shoot me

Cuz the job I'ma get, don't require a hair style

no one'll talk out they neck while lookin down on me
And police would shoot Carlton off Fresh Prince, so I know I'm a
goner already

So F*** it



I keep my hair to be me and to be free

It does take a long time to deal with in the morning

I gotta get up, start the shower, and make sure I put it in a ponytail, so the whole thing don't get wet

Ironically, my mama hates it when the kitchen is dirty but lord knows if my sh*t gets too wet

- It's a wrap

And you see why right?

It's because my hair sends knots to my stomach

It is the orbiters of my veins, relaying information as fast as lightning while getting a good look from the outside

It is because my hair is always in my vision and my vision is to express myself to the fullest extent

A lot of people talk about having a goal

But it's a whole other one, to have it within yo sight every day

You tell me, have you ever had somebody try and undermine you because of the follicle on your head

All because a sister got more tracks than soul train, now I gotta be out here in the cold?

Not me

Couldn't be

Maybe you?

But not me.

I gotta keep my hair on edge at all times

Because if I don't wear my hair for what I wear it for

If I don't style it when nobody watchin and comb my sh*ts to the side like Lando Calrissian when no one watchin

on the one day out of the week I wash it

Because I got Black people hair

I will never be brought down by what you think above my head

You can't touch it cuz it's sacred
I cut it when I need to talk with myself
You may grow your hair out like me,
if you can

Lock arms with me at the disco because tonight, it's all of our night to shine

And last but certainly not least

Don't let your hair look some typa way because people around you with the Darth Vader with no helmet haircut got something to say

I stay true to myself and my hair knows it

That's why I ain't losing sleep over

- No job
- No talk
- No 12
- No nothin

Cuz my hair know just what's goin on here

This a anti discrimination

No nonsense out the neck

No ultra haters with something to say

I am not to be judged or discriminated against for what I have on top of my haid, I will never limit my self-expression for your convenience, I'ma keep bein me shorty

Keepin myself alive

Mis lágrimas de otoño / My autumn tears

by Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez

Writer's memo

These poems I wrote in my bed looking out the window feeling sad with longing to see my parents again because autumn reminds me that one more year has passed and I still can't hug them again.

Mis lágrimas de otoño (1)

Veo el cambio a mi alrededor y me cuestiono que necesito cambiar yo?
Veo las hojas caer y siento lágrimas correr por mi rostro.
Veo el tiempo pasar... y deseo estar a tu lado.
Veo el otoño en su esplendor y veo mi corazón roto.
El viento, el otoño, el cambio...
Te veo otoño y no me entiendo...
No me gusta el cambio, por eso lloro.

Mis lágrimas de otoño (2)

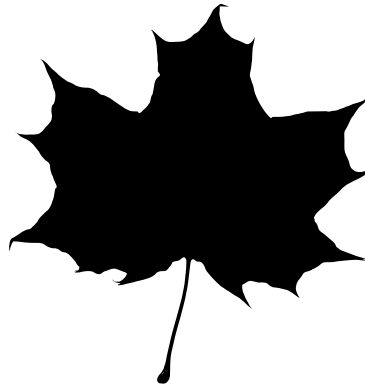
Lloro sin saber ¿por qué?
Río sin saber ¿por qué?
Sufro sin saber ¿por qué?
Veo el otoño y cuestionó el cambio.
Veo los colores del otoño y sonrió.
Un otoño más y yo sigo tan lejos de ti.
Mis lágrimas de otoño son como las hojas de los árboles...
Caen por qué tienen razón de ser.

My autumn tears (1)

I see the change around me and I wonder what I need to change?
I see the leaves fall and I feel tears run down my face.
I watch time go by... and I want to be by your side.
I see autumn in its splendor and I see my heart broken.
The wind, the autumn, the change...
I see you autumn and I don't understand myself...
I don't like change, that's why I cry.

My autumn tears (2)

I cry without knowing why?
I laugh without knowing why?
I suffer without knowing why?
I see the fall and questioned the change.
I see the colors of autumn and I smiled.
One more autumn and I'm still so far from you.
My autumn tears are like the leaves of the trees ...
They fall because they have reason to be.



Mis caderas femeninas / My female hips

by Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez

Writer's memo

This is a poem that I wrote thinking of the woman's body parts that have many functions, not just curves.

Mis caderas femeninas
Cargan el dolor del embarazo,
La alegría del recién nacido,
La pasión del enamorado.

Mis caderas son el nido donde te guardo,
Son la base donde te cargo,
Son el soporte donde te agarras y no te sueltas hasta
sentirte saciado de mi.

Mis caderas femeninas
Guardan en sus curvas: la fuerza, el dolor, la alegría, la
pasión y el amor.

My female hips
They carry the pain of pregnancy,
The joy of the newborn,
The passion of the lover.

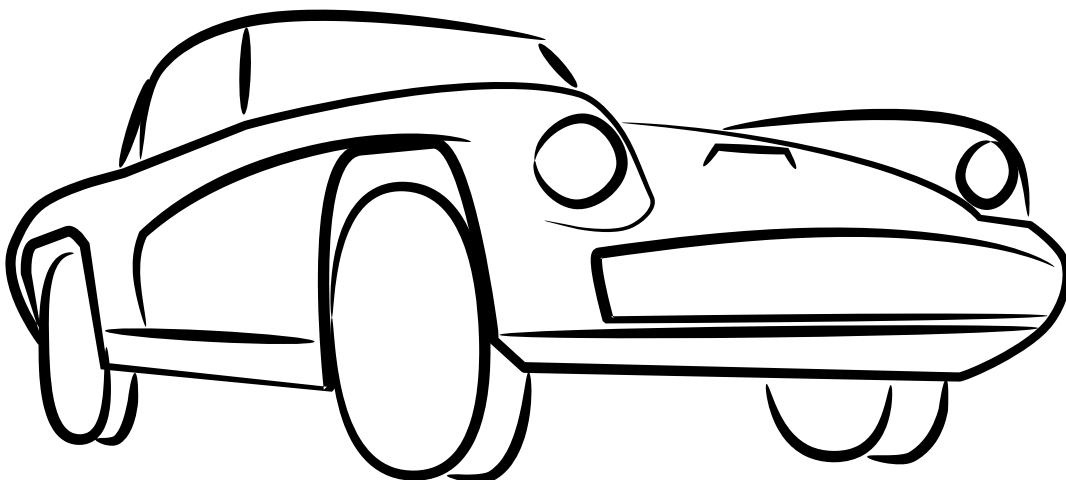
My hips are the nest where I keep you,
They are the base where I carry you,
They are the support where you hold on and do not
let go until you feel satisfied of me.

My female hips
They keep in their curves: strength, pain, joy, passion
and love.



Writer's memo

This little number is about me and the first person I thought I would spend my entire life with. On the last day of 2019 I broke up with the woman of my dreams, or so I thought, and moved on to focus on myself. During this time I had no idea how much I would have to learn about Corey Dean before I could begin to understand why what we had didn't work out. While learning these things I was faced with many emotional hardships that I wasn't ready to admit to anybody. Shame, loss, loneliness, and the biggest one, regret. It took me until Today O' Clock to begin to feel better about myself and what I went through. I really stepped away from the elephant and realized that what I was, was unhealthy. I was not the person I should have been and I was not the person who I wanted to be and if i was to change this perception I would have to change my behavior and that started with focusing on myself. BOY IS THAT A DOOZIE! Have you ever tried focusing on yourself? You'll find that you're a real character. I learned what I need and don't need all because this person and I (unlike the poem implies) separated at light speed. We were on top of the world together one moment and the next we didn't want to associate with each other if it meant we would get a fresh pair of gills. Do you know how much treasure is in the ocean? Neither do I but I imagine it's enough to make a person be civil. Throughout all of 2020 I focused on myself and what I need to grow into the person that I want to be, as well as the person I want my child to be. I broke down what I was unknowingly (or knowingly) doing wrong in my old relationship and outgrew certain behaviors. I equate this to the moon and the earth. The moon came from the earth once. A big ol asteroid gave the earth a big ol kiss right on the cheek and gave us an orbital gift in the long run. Just like her and I. We were one, but due to how I had to develop a meteor lit me ablaze. I wasn't the same hunk of rock that she knew me to be and if I was I finally reached a point in my life where I knew I had to take action for myself. I was an anxious wreck that blamed her for all of my misfortune and stress. "If only I was single I would make better music." "Why would I commit myself to one woman at only 22?" "Think of how much life I have to live." The one thing nobody told me was, life is not worth living unless you have people who care about you in it. I had to learn this. I had to learn how to make myself into somebody I was cool spending time with. This took a while. It was not an overnight process and I know that because it is still a metamorphosis I am going through right now as I type this Memo. It sucked but it was educational. Just like the moon taught the earth about water, SHE taught me about myself. All though absence. I have done all I can to right any wrongs I had committed but as you understand you begin to acknowledge that things are not permanent. Nothing is. The moon is floating away from the earth at this very moment and there is not a lasso big enough next to your cowboy boots to hold it still. You have to learn how to adapt and change with time and constantly stay moving. This is why I wrote this poem.



Lunar Limo

by Corey Dean

I understand us -
as the planet and the lunar limo

Two seminal distances adjacently crystallized in the same starlit forge,
A cold vacuum nobody assumed love could squeeze

Strangled.

you ran off with a piece of me and rose like the budding sun
And sunk
like a deep desire

I realize inch by inch the gravity of our dependence
Was gifted and allowed us no space to breathe
Or fruit to grow

so I wonder why,
No matter how close or far we organically formed

You are not the star I thought you used to be

But who is?

Since we came from each other - are there not flaws I can look and reflect upon
Beaming from my own surface
But go as deep as I do?

Maybe one's crater is another's mountain
A surmise I was a day late to reach.

Maybe survival is only what the tiniest minds on either of us pine after?
Maybe we shouldn't get swept up and away by confusion
But instead

Grow apart.

Writer's memo

I started writing these poems about 6 weeks after the murder of George Floyd. I was horrified of images of his murder video and did my best to avoid polluting my mind with its brutality. It was a hard video to avoid, and while I never watched the whole thing, I did see this knee ending a life. The image of a disembodied knee with a life of its own came to my mind as maybe a way of mitigating the pain.

The Knee Murder Series

by Billie Kelsey

#1

Colin and Derek both took a knee
Colin lost his job because his knee
Symbolized
World wide
His protest against the murder of
Black humans by police
Derek lost his job because his knee
Symbolized
World wide
The embarrassment and shame of many white humans
unable and unwilling
To admit what Colin's knee had said
All along
This must stop

#2

The knee that ended a life and changed the world
Was a left knee
It wasn't birthed by woman to end another woman's child's life
But it did
What a defilement of a knee;
Life spark crusher
Racist revengeful rage regurgitated and recruited to intentionally show how hurt and
damaged some humans are
By racism
Let us pray
That a knee never again bends to crush a life

#3: *The lynching of a knee*

The Knee

Can we knee cap it?

A la jim crow?

It only takes a stick and some willingness

To disempower a knee

We can make a day of it

Complete with “souvenirs”

And a picnic

Who doesn't love a picnic?

Will we listen to the high pitched music of pain

As we eat our sandwiches?

As the knee is disabled

Will we smell the burn of hatred?

With ice cold cokes in hand, and as our freedom from oppression is resisted

Will we have strange fruit with our picnic?

Will it swing in the southern breeze?

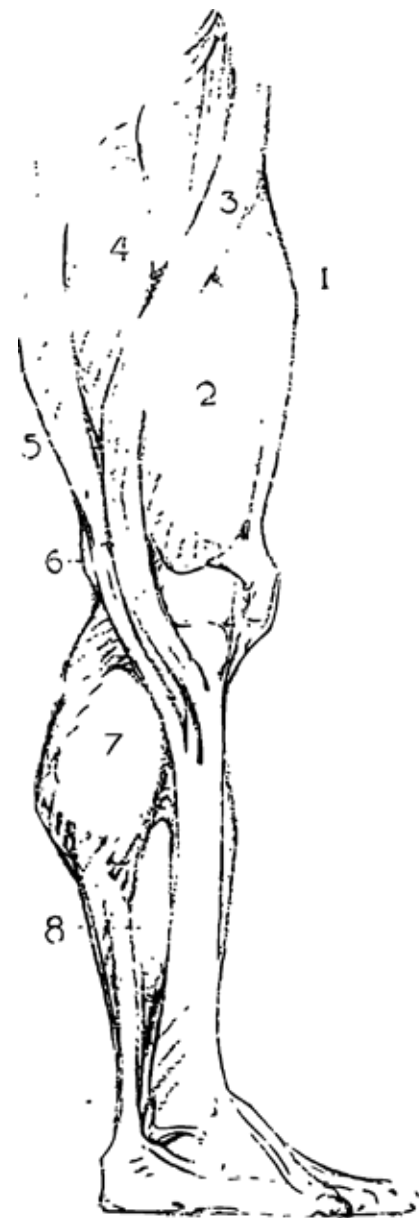
Again?

What and who will burn in protest of the knee's rights?

The right of the knees lust for murder

Who will defend the taking of a knee

To prevent a murder?



Writer's memo

"Jade's Heart" is written for all women that find themselves in an abusive relationship. It shows you not to blame yourself, but find a way to free yourself. Believe in you and speak out. Know that you are not alone.

Jade's Heart

by Denise Marie Hardnett

"Forgiveness adds richness to your life." DMH

Have you been used, abused, hurt, wronged or was you the one using, abusing, hurting and doing wrong?

"What don't kill you, will only make you stronger". I really understand what this quote means to me.

Jade has been married for several years and things are not getting any better. The backbone of the family, it seems like the more she gave, the more he took; the more she understood, the more he took her for granted. The more she worked her fingers to the bone to pay the bills, the less time he used to find real work. The more she made sure everything was flawless and perfect, the more it seem like he tried to find something wrong. It was always someone else's fault or a misunderstanding, why things had not worked out right when he was wrong.

When you're in a relationship, sometimes you really can't see or understand what's really going on because of hope. You want so badly for the marriage to work, be supportive or hold him down.

Jade loves her man, she's supportive, nurturing and encouraging. Jade's expected to keep the house spotless even the closets and under the bed, he doesn't have a problem with waking her or children up in the middle of the night to clean. She was always looking for ways to please and change herself and along the way, Jade lost herself. It was always the children or the man. When it came to what she wanted she didn't know.

After a while, Jade started seeing more of her husband's bad behavior that she hardly recognizes him. He had a short temper, lying, moody, drinking, drugging, not sleeping, starting arguments just because or to go out clubbing. Eventually Jade lost her good job because the workplace didn't understand the effects of domestic violence and abuse.

Jade became pregnant and because of the emotional and physical abuse, Jade lost the baby at three months. Her husband blamed her.

Jade's emotional state was messed up, with him being verbally and physically abusive. She was blamed for her miscarriage. "You too fat, you too skinny, your hair is ugly; I don't want you in pants..." and the list went on and on.

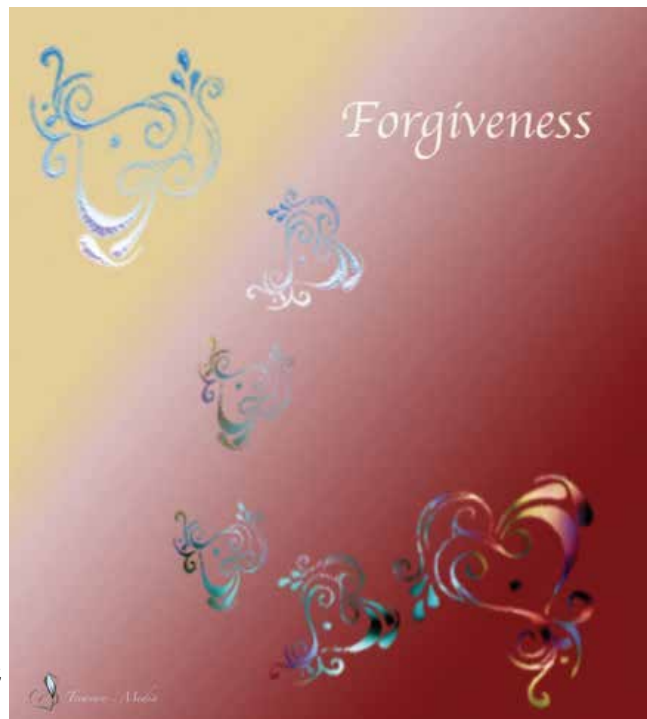
Her husband's words ring in her ear, "don't nobody want you but me". Jade would do anything to please her man, praying for things to get better.

Jade could no longer excuse or fail to notice the signs of abuse. Jade finally realized the relationship was unhealthy but was afraid to confront her man because she didn't want to die and leave her children.

Jade sat alone, in her bedroom putting the pieces of her life into perspective. Trying to understand why and how she ended up in an unhealthy relationship.

Jade reflected on the events of her past and realized she didn't have many examples of healthy relationships. After the abuse and a bad marriage, Jade started working toward her bachelor's degree in Graphic Design but didn't have the confidence to apply for a job in her field, get out of her abusive relationship, worried, afraid, depressed and living in fear.

Jade started attending church and received counseling through her church. There she learned that she has been holding on to guilt and shame from her past. She blamed her parents for not watching her closely enough to allow someone to hurt her. Jade had guilt because she was abused. The guilt and shame made her feel unclean, unworthy of love and when she looked in the mirror she didn't see beauty, even though she was very beautiful inside and out. Her past affected her life but learning to forgive and be forgiven changed her life forever.



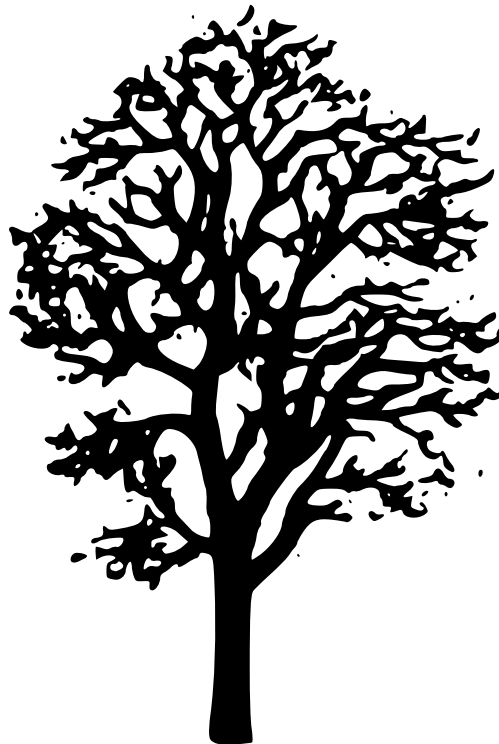
by author

Today, Jade has forgiven everyone that hurt, wronged, used or abused her. She has forgiven them because in God's words, if we want to be forgiven by God, we have to forgive others. Forgiving is not saying you agree with what happens to you, but you are freeing your soul of heartache and pain. So you can be a better person inside and out. Jade is still attending church and counseling, applying for work in her field, and no longer in an abusive relationship. Jade has learned how to forgive herself and others, even though she will not forget. But the pain is not there any longer. With faith, believing, hard work and determination we become stronger and wiser. Like Jade use your pain to strengthen and help others not go through the same thing. Be the change.

Guilty Ex. 34:7, Hebrews 10:22, John 4, Ps 51:5, John 3:16

Writer's memo

I was looking out my window. I could see the air Middleton used to breathe because I saw the trees outside of my window that had been there since I was born. When I was looking out of my window I wondered what those trees looked like back in the day. Were they still as tall and marvelous? Did they have less branches and skinnier trunks? Were they even there at all? I had no idea but it fascinated me, just at that very moment I thought "If those trees had been there since I have been born, I wonder how many other people who look like me have seen those trees." This got me thinking about all the people in my predominantly white neighborhood who have found good times and refuge under those sprawling woods. This got me thinking even more. I live on Century Avenue in Middleton and right down the street there is a place called the Stamm House. The Stamm House, like the trees out my window, has some age and is heavy with history. I wondered if the two correlated with one another. I was whirled up in the thoughts and theories of the past. Back in the day the Stamm House, or at least as I've been told, used to operate as a stop in the underground railroad, making it completely possible that negroes used to sprint down my street millennia before its inception towards the red house of freedom. I wondered if one day a negro was running south down Century Ave as fast as he could, nearly escaping the slavers and hounds on his tail by ducking and dodging through what would have been at that time marshland. I wondered if he ever ran underneath the leaves I looked at outside of my window and looked up to see rays of sun peering through the swaying roof of foliage. What was his mind thinking? Did he ever think some hundreds of years later a person who looked just like him would be living in a duplex harkening back to his experience. I don't know and I might never know but it fascinated me. This line of thinking was intriguing me until I remembered that the Stamm House got renovated into a gentrified restaurant with overpriced hors d'oeuvres 3 years ago. What was once a red barn of freedom with complementing earthy brick now had a big sign outfront that said "\$18.47 - all you can eat shrimp poppers." This made me upset. I don't know what I would expect from Middleton, Wisconsin but this was a left field low blow. Instead of turning the historical monument that they were initially going to tear down, into a museum or historical business, they made it into a restaurant. A restaurant that only white people can afford to eat at. A restaurant that's whole branding is "underground railroad." Do you see the irony or is it just me? I wondered if all of these things tied together. Me, the tree, The Stamm House, and my ancestor. How did we all fit together in this big piece? And how different could it all be?



A 200 Year Negro

by Corey Dean

A negro, 200 years ago
ran under the tree outside of my window
Sprinting himself to the Stamm house down the street
which acted as a passage to the underground railroad
today, a gentrified restaurant
He searched for freedom

I look at that same tree and wonder what he saw when under the brush
Were the hounds at his heels?
Was his last look -- the tree's leaves turning burgundy, like his beaten brother's blood on a whip's tip?
Surely he had hoped to see paradise, being all the way up here in the north.

But can a runaway slave get a chance to catch his breath
In this neck of the woods?
Are the calluses on his feet soft?

I wonder if he saw automobiles
blue, pearl ivory, and red
Roaring down the road with people who looked just like his oppressors
And some who shared their same opinions
Scowl at him, as if he muddied up their porcelain promise land

I wonder if he saw the sky through the branches and wondered if his sister
Who died in the south
would come down from heaven tomorrow

When I look out this window I know that some 200 years later
I'm surrounded all the same.
paraded and heralded as animosity's fascination
I am hated and harassed for my innocence.
loathing that swells since I have not yet been convicted as the monster they desperately wish to hate me for
being

I look out the window to my long lost brother and wonder if he knew I would be waging the same war.
Challenging the norm for the simplest acknowledgement and acceptance to grow into myself
To flourish with roots that run hundreds of miles though dirt
brown as my skin.

I wonder if he thought I would know freedom
I wonder if he ever found freedom

But I suppose nobody could answer all of my questions
Not even the family tree, outside of my window

Writer Bios



Marilyn A. Sims is a born again believer chosen by God before the foundation of the world to bring peace to hurting souls. She is a poet, songwriter, and vocalist. Marilyn was born in Jackson, TN where she spent most of her summer vacations as a child. Nevertheless, she was raised in Chicago, IL where she graduated from Farragut High School and obtained a Secretarial Certificate from Taylor Business Institute. She received IBM computer training from Robert Morris College. She divorced after a marriage of 21 years. She currently resides in Chicago, IL. She is the proud mother of three fabulous daughters and the joyful grandmother of eight grandchildren. When she writes she prays that her unique tone of voice and manner of sharing will cause her readers to feel a special bond with her.

My name is **Quishanta Cary**. I am 49 years old. I am a single Black mother. I was 38 when I had my very first and only child, my daughter Blessing. We both attended the Odyssey Project back in 2018 and both graduated in May 2019. I guess you can say my Profession is Writing and it varies on what I love to write. I have never published anything, but that doesn't mean I won't. I'm trying to write a book to hopefully get it published in the near future. And I had the love for writing at a very early age from my 2 sisters who were also Writers.



Denise Marie Hardnett earned a Visual Communications Media Degree in Fine Arts from Madison College, Madison, Wisconsin. She graduated from the UW-Odyssey Project in 2006. She also completed coursework at Savannah College of Art and Design, Atlanta, Georgia. Denise started writing books to help empower women to develop survival skills. She is the author of a children's book entitled *I Love ME* and a teen book entitled *I Love ME from Pieces Made Whole* (to be published December 2020). In her professional life she is a Special Education Assistant with the Madison School District, Mentor for Online Verbal Abuse Journals, and Advocate for Domestic Violence and Abuse. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Hello, my name is **Derrick D Allen SR**. I was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic Cancer in July 2020. I have a wife and six beautiful children. I grew up in Chicago, Illinois until I was 22 years old. I love to meditate and play my Tibetan singing bowls or read a great book. I'm also an Odyssey alumni, class of 2018.



Writer Bios



My name is **Corey Dean**, I am a 23 year old Hip Hop artist, poet, community activist, 2019 Odyssey graduate, and son. I spend all my time working on music, reading, and in the summer, playing basketball. I like to long-board around my hometown of Middleton at night to clear my head, and before the pandemic hit, myself and the Hip Hop group I'm in, Supa Friends, used to host open mics on every first and third Friday of every month at the Goodman Community Center/ Lussier Community Center as well as perform at other shows around the city. One day I want to be able to support myself purely off of the art I create. Emotionally and monetarily. I also want to live in L.A., Japan or New York one day and start a family.

My name is **Marisol A. Gonzalez-Rodriguez**. I graduated from the UW Odyssey project in 2017. I'm a writer, poet, storyteller, business owner, Spanish tutor, mother, wife, and advocate for justice. I love nature, camping, traveling, and meeting new people. I have a beautiful family, my husband, and 3 beautiful children. I'm an immigrant from Mexico City, I came to the USA at the age of nineteen to achieve the American dream. I will always be grateful to the Odyssey Project for everything I have. Thanks to Odyssey I find my passion for writing and my purpose in life, which is putting on paper my voice and ideas to strive for equity. I am changing the world by writing diverse children's books and I'm working on a collection of short stories about my life as an immigrant.



My name is **Billie**, I am a Black woman, community member, friend, mother, sister, daughter and protector. I love life, people, food, art, plants, words, learning, and playing.

Tiffani is a 2007 Odyssey graduate. She has enjoyed writing for most of her life, and is grateful for the Odyssey Writing Group. She also enjoys reading, baking, gardening and other outdoor activities. She currently resides in North Carolina.



This magazine was designed by Odyssey Writing Group Resource Coordinator Benjamin Severt as part of the Undergraduate Exchange Program, funded by the Center for the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For more information and to stay updated on the UW Odyssey Project, please visit odyssey.wisc.edu.

