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## FLOWERAMA

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# FLOWERAMA

A Creative Project Submitted  
to the Graduate School of  
John Carroll University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Demitri J. Cullen  
2023

Writing, at least for me, has always been a deeply central aspect of my life. For as far back as I can remember, I've been writing; so, to begin my foreword, let me walk you down my life in the realm of creative writing. I promise, it's all relevant, though I will attempt to be brief.

In preparation for this project, I actually dug out the first concrete evidence I have of wanting to write: a stapled together, hand-drawn storybook about my family getting shipwrecked on a volcanic island, only to be saved by my pet iguana, who just-so-happened to have magical powers. Funnily enough, I've never had an iguana in my life. I suppose that's just how magical he was; not only did he save us from fighting over who gets to be Tom Hanks and who gets to be Wilson, but he wiped any trace of his existence from our lives, save that one book. That lingering—the tendency of writing, no matter how silly, to stand the test of time and perfectly encapsulate one's mind at that exact moment—is what draws me to writing. I, admittedly, have a poor memory. I rely on my calendar and hastily scrawled notes to keep a lot of my day-to-day operations running smoothly; often, to lean into a cliché, I can't remember what breakfast I've eaten on any given morning. But because my childhood self—some rascal with a bad haircut and an itch to put words on paper—decided he wanted to write a short story, I feel like he can reach forward and communicate with me, even today.

Writing is, in simplest terms, memory made concrete, and that is astounding. Even before that, though, I had a love for the fantastic. Growing up, to honor our heritage, my mom read me Greek myths as bedtime stories. I heard about Icarus's folly while he plummeted into the sea, the insatiable lust for hunger and domination of Kronos as he devoured all of his children but one, and the triumph of Theseus over the

Minotaur so many times that they practically set me up for a deep-seated love of fantasy. She was tilling the proverbial soil of my mind, getting it ready for everything that would come after. I read so many stories that delved into magic, elves, warriors, and kings that I lost count at an early age. That kind of fiction was such a focus for me.

Though I do still hold a great love for fiction—I've written much more of it in the past year than I could have ever expected—I have been drawn strongly to poetry since high school. My sophomore year, the 2014-2015 academic year, my English teacher, Mrs. Kathy Knox, did the unthinkable: our class was to take a break from Shakespeare and historical literature to delve into the world of poetry. We took two weeks just to read, write, and share our poems with the class, and I leaned into that unit as fully as I could. Here, I was first exposed to both "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley and "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley, which remain in my shortlist favorite poems to this day. In fact, my little pod of miscreants started referring to ourselves as the "Poetry Boys," and we kept writing stray poems and sharing them amongst ourselves for the next few months afterwards. That year was the first time in my conscious life—that is, any section of my life that I actually have real memories of—that I remember not only writing in my free time, but actively loving it. Now, I had always gotten good grades in my English courses and, like any other "former gifted kid," I wanted to explore any avenue that would result in me writing less, not more. I loved loving writing, but as we all do, I drifted away from it again for a while after the Poetry Boys dissolved into other fads of the time. I don't even have anything written from this period anymore, and I think that is for the best. Regardless, Mrs. Knox certainly planted a seed that, unbeknownst to either of us, would take its time germinating into something incredible.

Later on, in my senior year, I was proving consistent in my desire to avoid any possibility of a large workload; I simply wanted to coast until college. So, naturally, I took the easiest math class available to me (Advanced Math, which rehashed a fair chunk of Algebra 2 and Geometry), a study hall, and, remembering my fondness for poetry two years earlier, a creative writing workshop. Not much of merit came from this period—I began posting poetry and short fiction online—but it did wake up that creative seed for good this time. I began writing in my spare time once more, including, embarrassingly enough, a lot of fanfiction; this fanfiction was all surrounding the universe of the *Fallout* series of video games. I took submissions from the online community for characters, backstories, and character arcs, and I wrote their stories and wove them together. They're still online, though I hate looking back at them. I've grown as a writer since, thankfully.

The bulk of that growth, though, didn't happen until just after the Covid-19 lockdowns. Classes had gone fully virtual, everyone was sitting at home, and understandably, a lot of things in my life had gotten shaken up. Due to the nature of having a nationwide lockdown, I was no longer able to complete my internship requirement for a Digital Media major—I had completed an internship that previous summer, but because I had never formally registered it with the Communications department, I could not receive credit—and was forced to reduce that major to a minor. However, that change, even as heartbroken as I was at the time, was a blessing in disguise. With my minor requirements already met, I was free to rearrange my schedule for my senior year, and in doing so, I made a familiar choice; in attempting to coast through another final year of education, I took a creative writing workshop.

This move, grounded in the comfortable selfishness of wanting an easy close to my schooling, completely altered the direction my life was taking. I took an “Intro to Creative Writing” survey course with Dr. George Bilgere, mainly because my girlfriend had taken a similar course with him and thought his teaching style would be perfect for me, and she was certainly correct. Classes were virtual at the time, so things were a bit strange at first, but the seed that Mrs. Knox had planted in the soil my mother cultivated burst forth into a quickly growing sprout. After the most creatively fulfilling semester of my life, I immediately registered for the Advanced poetry course in the final stretch of my undergraduate career, where I continued to write the kind of poetry that really helped me. I hadn’t realized, but I was able to use my poetry to really process a lot of things that were weighing on me; the stretch from 2016-2018 was a particularly difficult time in my life. I lost both of my grandmothers in the span of a few months in 2016, my mental health issues returned in full force, and then at the start of college, the woman I’d dated for the entirety of high school broke up with me. I used those workshops to finally process all of those events that I didn’t notice I had been holding on to. I really transformed myself over that period, both in terms of my relationship with writing, but also my relationships with my current girlfriend, my family, and myself. Then, at the recommendation of Dr. Debby Rosenthal, I applied for the Graduate Assistantship here at John Carroll, which brings us squarely to the task at hand: *Flowerama*.

This collection, *Flowerama*, is the culmination of my writing journey, and as such, it reflects my own history up to this point, much like I’ve just laid out for you. I have separated the collection into three sections: “Seed,” “Sprout,” and “Stamen,” each meant to represent different stages of my life. The first section, “Seed,” is my early life,

and focuses on exploring a new world and beauty, though also highlights a child's discovery of pain. The second section, "Sprout," is my adolescence; things are beginning to take shape, but first, we must overcome mankind's oldest obstacle: death. The third and final section, "Stamen," is named for the male reproductive organ of the flower, and as such, deals with more mature ideas like love and heartbreak. All the while, my family are prominently present throughout. It is my hope that this collection encapsulates my growth throughout my life; I'm entering my mid-twenties, and would certainly like to believe myself fully grown. Of course, even flowers at the end of their life have many more transformations to experience, and so, my aim was to preserve these aspects of my life for the sake of looking back in much the same way that I did as a child with some crayons, a stack of paper, a stapler, and a story about an iguana.

As for influences on my writing, I have read and enjoyed many poets over the course of my collegiate career. Especially early on in my writing career, I was enamored with poets like Philip Larkin, Tony Hoagland, and Simon Armitage; I enjoyed a less formal and more colloquial writing style that made full use of blank verse, slang, and carefully integrated profanity with a focus on contemporary life. As for those poets, I feel as though "Stucknessitude" is an example that aligns with the spirit, at least, shared amongst them. In fact, that's one thing that the bulk of my current inspirations have in common: a focus on contemporary life. In much the same way, I'm currently deeply interested in following the careers of current poets like Ocean Vuong and Danusha Laméris, who have quickly become some of my favorites. Though, that is not to say that I'm only inspired by up-and-coming poets; specifically, I was greatly influenced by Thomas Lux's *God Particles*, which I had the pleasure to read whilst writing this

collection. In particular, his poem “The General Law of Oblivion” (which itself makes heavy reference to Proust) had me write “It Breaks My Heart” immediately after finishing the poem.

It will become evident over reading this collection that I am particularly fond of free verse narrative poems such as “Flowers for Sylvia” or “The Lady of Berea, Ohio.” These longer, storytelling poems are something I am now trying to move away from as a writer; I have been, conversely, pushed by both Dr. Bilgere and myself to write shorter, more condensed poems throughout this process, such as “Deflowered,” “Hyacinth,” and specifically, “My Memento,” which has become one of my favorites in the collection. I want to break this down in depth, just to get a deeper understanding of the thought. I will reprint it here, stanza by stanza, as I walk through:

There is a groove—  
a dash across my spine—  
no wider than two centimeters.  
I have other meaningless scars, sure,

I open here, very deliberately, with an image: that of a scar I have in the center of my back. The word “groove,” to me, evokes music, or something rhythmic that can be followed and “understood,” in a sense. I follow by giving a brief summation of some other scars gathered in my childhood from an innocent lack of understanding of my surroundings; these scars, which I brand “meaningless,” are as follows:

like those wrapping my right pinky  
from a stubborn garage window,  
or the indent above my brow  
from a collision with a radio,

These are straightforward enough; I do make an attempt to condense the stories as much as I can whilst preserving context. In the initial draft of this poem, each scar was



its own stanza with a more robust tale for each, but in attempting to condense my writing, I allocated just two lines for each. They are, in truth, less emotionally charged scars than the one I intended to write on, regardless, which I introduce as follows:

But the one on my back  
is special to me.  
That scar, my memory incarnate,  
is a memento from a woman

The first two lines serve mostly as introduction, and so, in fairness, not as much thought was put into them as the last two. However, ending on “me,” I feel, helps to further inject myself into the poem. I describe other scars as meaningless, therefore “lesser,” but here I outright say that it is special to me, thus immediately placing more importance. This is my one “no subtext” line I’ve allowed myself. I invoke some comparatively loftier language in the next two lines, using words like “incarnate” and “memento.” These words, in my mind, are associated with death and religion—plus the Christopher Nolan film. However, the last line is most important, as it can almost end the poem itself. The other meaningless scars are haphazardly self-inflicted by a clumsy, headstrong child, but the scar that is special—that is my savored memento—is from a woman. Using woman as a stanza break, I feel, is a strong move. I follow:

that wouldn’t settle for marks  
left only on the soul,  
her nails like autumn plows  
tilling rows of soil in my flesh,

Here is the introduction of two opposing, but deeply connected, ideas: life and suffering. The first two lines, the fact that the woman must mark my body alongside my spirit, alludes to the heartbreak behind the piece. However, I continue with horticultural imagery, describing her fingernails as though they were farming implements, scoring the

skin of my back like a field of crops. This juxtaposition—heartbreak and farming—is deeply intentional. The idea of fertility is also no mistake; it should be clear how this scar was inflicted. If it is not:

channeling her pleasure  
effortlessly into my pain.  
It is a memento of a time  
when our cries dripped not sorrow,

Here, we have the age-old coupling of pleasure and pain; the effortless nature of this transformation should speak to the ease—the comfort—of the encounter. The next lines repeat the word “memento” (thus marking three uses, including the title) and calls back to when “our cries dripped not sorrow.” Here, again, the joy is hidden behind pain, just as before, the pain was hidden behind life through farming. I tried to employ layers in this poem. “Cries,” too, has a sad connotation, and I have chosen it for this reason; however, in this use, I use it to represent sounds of pleasure, by saying in the closing of the poem:

but instead loudly celebrated  
our Corinthian embrace, reveling  
in the innocence of newfound pleasure  
before we were left alone with our scars.

I quite enjoy the stanza break between the pairing of “sorrow” and “celebrated.” I’ve shifted us back and forth in time, masking one emotion behind another—as anyone who has endured the end of a serious relationship knows, these emotions bleed together with time—as the memory of the experience warps. I describe the union as a “Corinthian embrace” due to my Greek heritage—I slip these in where I can—but also because it, too, invokes the divine, as the prostitutes of Corinth existed to celebrate and revere Aphrodite. This is just one of many allusions to Greek mythology and culture

throughout the collection, but it serves as one of my favorites (second only to the reimagining of myself and my partner as Hypnos and Pasithea, respectively, in the poem named for the latter). I close the poem by coupling “innocence” with the salacious idea of sexual “pleasure,” intentionally de-coupling the latter from “pain” earlier. Again, this choice of repetition and re-coupling helps to not only tell the story in miniature—of splitting and finding a new partner—but also reinforce the idea that these emotions muddy each other with distance. The final line of the poem—the idea of being “left alone with our scars”—also speaks of re-coupling, but also of lasting damage and isolation. I really love this poem, and I truly hope to write more like it in the future.

Finally, I’ve ended the collection with what may be my favorite poem, “Slugs,” which I have just received news that it is to be published in *The Lamp Journal* in their upcoming volume. I think it marks the exact tone I want for a closure to this kind of chapbook: so many awful, emotional, and life-changing things have happened, but I’ve got so much more life to live. Frankly, I’m excited to live it with poetry at my side.

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# I Seed

**I stare up at the counter  
to watch my mother work.**

**She is unstoppable.**

## Teletubbies

The young boy stands  
amid a crowd of his peers  
with arms thrown wide,  
fists clenched tightly with joy  
above his unkempt bowl cut  
and too-big navy sweater vest,  
cheering with ignorant glee  
at the sight of Dipsy and Laa-Laa  
in his very own back yard  
to celebrate his Fifth.

Perhaps he let out a joyous cheer  
as he watched Tinky-Winky  
hand yet another flaccid balloon  
to Po, manning a bent bike pump  
in an attempt to satisfy  
the mob of wriggling children.

That boy does not see his mother—  
taking a drag from a dwindling cigarette  
to calm her nerves as it dawns on her  
why their services came so cheap—  
and has no knowledge of the disgust  
marking the faces of his aunts  
and the stifled laughter from his uncles.

He doesn't recognize the smell  
of stale booze and nicotine  
wafting from beneath  
their cavernous, wide-eyed skulls,  
pungent souvenirs of their previous stop  
at Mutt and Jeff's two blocks down,  
nor the tell-tale curves  
the inflated tube takes  
as Laa-Laa's mitted hands  
twist it into a bright pink cock,  
complete with defined balls  
and a twisted-off tip.  
He does not see Dipsy  
tie a blue one into a thin slit,  
peeling it open to welcome  
the bobbling, inflated shaft  
in memory of that child's beginnings.

## **My Friend, Armadillidium Vulgare**

My bug, tater bug, pill bug, ho,  
tell me where you need to go.

Roll up, curl up, rest in my hand,  
toss you right back to the land?

Sunshine, small whine, far too hot?  
You need to sleep where petals rot!

Cool down, slow down, hear leaves crunch,  
I'll give you these old stems to munch.

So round, dirt mound, that's the life,  
save me from this coming strife!

Mulch chunks, swim trunks, garden air,  
have you no room for me there?

Mom calls, bug falls, time to leave.  
Please, don't make me go and grieve.

Dig down, I frown, must you flee?  
I thought you'd stay to comfort me.

My bug, tater bug, pill bug, ho,  
trunks off, suit on, time to go.

## **In the Act**

My lovely parents, dressed to the nines,  
did everything that brides and grooms do  
at weddings;  
they laughed,  
they danced,  
and they gathered to taste  
their beautiful cake.

The enchanting white frosting  
cascaded down to hide the moist  
and sprawling sponges of chocolate,  
lying eagerly in wait  
for the most important guest of all:  
Me.

The littlest ring-bearer  
in his most formal attire.  
After all, could there ever be a wedding  
without an adorably unaware ring-bearer  
in a too-big-for-a-two-year-old suit  
who, as any child would,  
wants a taste too?

It was meant to be a heist for the history books,  
when that slice disappeared off the plate.  
Straight into thin air, expertly masterminded  
by the junior D. B. Cooper.

But the hubris of a child does not account  
for the omnipotence of a wedding photographer  
lurking just behind every preserved moment.

I hear a click, and I know I am finished.  
Before I can react, I am blinded  
by the shining light of remembrance.  
I am doomed to stand, front and center,  
as a testament to mischievousness:  
a Trickster God forever captured  
in a photo album opened not once a year.



## **Deflowered**

As I kid, I loved pruning  
the thorns from roses  
in the back of the shop,  
each flower its own labor,  
and each clipping  
a thoughtful movement.  
Smoothing the stems out  
was a passion of mine.  
There's a pleasure  
in running a finger  
down a verdant stem  
without feeling a single bump,  
and an artistry  
in knowing that bouquet on display  
was a labor of love

Now, I shove the roses  
into the TER<sup>SM</sup> J2 floral stripper,  
where in just five seconds  
the whole bouquet emerges  
stripped and bare.

## **The Unsold Bouquet**

begins to brown  
at the edges.  
Two weeks ago,  
we were keen  
to replace  
just a sheaf  
or two  
of leaves,  
but now,  
there was no  
fixing it.

Stephanie  
had crafted  
that one with  
just as much  
care  
as the rest,  
but it died  
unhomed  
regardless.

Yet  
we saw them  
every day.  
We watched them  
bud,  
bloom,  
and die.  
So that bouquet;  
that single,  
dead  
bouquet?  
That one  
was for us.

## **Dirt and Oil**

My mother's hands are rough and dry,  
a gritted texture gifted to her  
by a rose's hidden thorns  
and the unshakeable cling of soil.  
She mends with lotions and oils,  
organic and natural slickeners,  
to smooth the coarseness  
left by nature's own organic oils.  
Her nails are painted with earthy tones,  
muted browns or subtle greens,  
when they are free from the stains  
of bleeding chlorophyll or itching eucalyptus.  
She gently arranges flowers, creating  
lovers' bouquets and memorial vases,  
collages of color and life  
without a petal out of place,  
with the same care she offers  
to her loving sons.

My father's hands, though,  
are soft and smooth,  
but certainly not from delicacy.  
They carry that kind of smoothness  
a table gains after hours of scouring  
with sandpaper and three coats of wood stain.  
His hands, too, are slickened,  
though not by baby's breath or lavender,  
but by motor oil and polyurethane.  
A refurbisher, mechanic,  
a bona-fide handyman,  
his nails are trimmed and neat,  
hidden beneath thick gloves  
or smears of muck and grease  
after hours spent clutching drills  
to tighten bolt after bolt on the line  
or toiling in the fumes of our garage.  
A force to be reckoned with  
when holding a wrench or a jack,  
turning old into new, stasis into motion,  
while I hold the flashlight  
and watch him tinker away.

## Stucknessitude

is a word I have coined.  
It's a noun, I'm fairly sure.  
It's something that you're (read: I'm) full of.  
It's that knowledge of a pen's weight.  
It's knowing your fingers won't reach the keys,  
and if they do,  
it won't be to crank out anything useful.  
It's seeing that book—  
you know the one—  
that's been on your nightstand for weeks,  
bookmark still just three chapters in.  
It's that glue in your brain  
that picks up stray hairs and lint  
and other greebles  
like hard candy on an old carpet,  
so you don't want to stick it  
in your mouth anymore.  
It's the list of *ideas* that stay that way.  
It's not synonymous with lazy,  
though it might seem like it.  
It's meant to have those other variations, too,  
like Shakespeare went and did enough times  
for the rest of us, and then for a few more on top.  
For example, if you are (I am) often full of  
stucknessitude,  
you may be stucknessitudinous.  
You can measure one's stucknessitude  
by their quotient of  
stucknessitudiocity.  
All of those high-falutin folk are using it nowadays,  
even if Webster hasn't gotten back to me.  
It's a great word, I think.  
Although,  
the layman might just say  
instead  
(and he is right to do so)  
that you are stuck.

## Buried Treasure

Huddled under the pool deck,  
armed with our trowels and our greed,  
we dug a trench around our obstacle:  
a single rotting wooden beam  
that rose from Grandma's sandbox,  
towering an impressive two inches  
above the miniscule dunes.

*Hippies buried their time capsules  
under markers just like this one!*  
With only one lie from Sam,  
I volunteered three precious summers  
to chipping away at damp sand,  
hunched to avoid hidden webs  
spanning the supports of the deck.

Of course, we pulled it out one day  
and there was no ancient treasure  
hidden from the distant seventies,  
but we resolved to become our own hippies.

Soon, Pepsi cans, batteries, a dollar bill,  
and an entire Fisher Price firetruck  
(complete with lights and sounds)  
among other accessible "treasures"  
that wouldn't be missed *too* horribly  
found their way into that cavernous hole,  
buried for the next generation  
of ill-informed treasure hunters.  
We marked our bounty with a pyramidal stone  
that earned glances from the aunts and uncles  
and knowing smirks from all the cousins.

They must have dug it all up last fall,  
but it wasn't some waist-high fortune seekers  
with imaginations ablaze with possibilities.  
Instead, it was the realtor who razed the whole yard  
to make the home appear more modern  
and get a return on his investment.

## Flowerama

I sit on the floor, cupboard drawers  
swung open for me to occupy myself  
as the girls go about their business.  
The buckets have all been scrubbed—  
I saw to that myself—but I want  
to be here. To stay here. So I said,  
*I should alphabetize the marquee letters*  
and my mom was thrilled to hear it.

The store is huge, at least to me.  
Around me, piles of discarded greenery  
lies in clumps beneath unwavering sneakers  
and Stephanie has just finished another wreath,  
no sprig of baby's breath or fan of leaves  
out of place. I cannot look, though;  
the little plastic sheets have places to be.

The door rings, and more folk flood in,  
more orders are placed,  
more shelves are cleared,  
more sweat beads  
at my mother's forehead,  
but I do not see the fatigue. Instead,  
I see her smile at me,  
sitting puzzled on the floor because  
I cannot tell if this is an M or a W,  
and Stephanie cannot tell if she  
should replace that chunk  
of football mums on the left again  
and I cannot tell that, either,  
though the girls all assure her  
that it is perfectly fine as is,  
just like the last four times.

She replaces them anyways,  
and I cram the letter in  
with my eyes closed.  
Stephanie winks at me.  
*It should work out, she says.*  
*I mean, it has so far.*

## Thomas and the Magic Railroad

Not a week went by without that young boy  
asking, eyes teeming with want, sparkling bright,  
the question that filled his parents with dread:  
*Can we please watch Thomas again tonight?*

Of course, how could they say no to their son?  
They could not resist, and so I readied  
my crumbling case to be torn again  
by my favorite boy, my nerves I steadied;

And so my case was again over-bent,  
his soft face inches from my blue plating  
defending my aging VHS reel,  
before plunging me into the grating

old machine, almost as tired as I,  
where Alec performs for the next 2 hours  
before being crunched back into my box.  
But as I wait for next time, my heart sours

when I do not feel the incoming quake  
of his feet towards my now-forgotten drawer  
for what seems like weeks—no, it must be years—  
as when I at last hear feet on the floor

the door creaks open, my blue coat catches  
his eye at once. After so long alone,  
a sad smile dimples his now-furry cheeks.  
I'd not expected that my boy had grown.

# II

## Sprout

I sit atop the counter  
to watch my mother work.

She is flawed.



## LYB

My bat clinks my heels as I walk,  
freeing the mud held captive in my cleats,  
leaving a trail of misplaced turf  
in my wake like the ripples of foam  
that chase ferries out to Kelleys.

I turn around to ensure my Grandma  
can glide her walker around my debris,  
careful not to leave her in the dust.  
After all, no money finds its home  
in the pockets of baseball pants.  
That honor goes to half-emptied  
Big League Chew (and that clover  
from the outfield that I swear  
had four leaves when I picked it).

We trot, more or less, to concessions,  
where I know I will shout,  
*One Rainbow Slushie please!*  
and my Grandma will laugh and produce  
a five-dollar bill, kindly asking  
for a Pepsi of her own to sip,  
before we sit at our picnic table.

She will park her walker next to me,  
and I will slurp my concoction happily,  
spilling some between the cracks  
in the concrete, nourishing the weeds  
that would grow in ten years' time,  
when there would be no more ball to play  
and no one to sit at our table.

## Behind the Glass

Roses bloom behind the glass  
and thorns and leaves are plucked away  
and primped so nicely to perfection  
to let these flowers' beauty shine

And thorns and leaves are plucked away  
by Maria's girls, hard toiling away  
to let these flowers' beauty shine  
arranged just so, to catch the eye

by Maria's girls, hard toiling away  
for another funeral coming in today  
arranged just so, to catch the eye  
demanding perfection inside a vase

for another funeral coming in today  
from familiar parents with another lost child  
demanding perfection inside a vase  
and we cry with them, then take the money

from familiar parents with another lost child  
because sorrow is business among the blooms  
and we cry with them, then take the money  
because if they are the roses, we are the thorns

because sorrow is business among the blooms  
and another dead child is another sale  
because if they are the roses, we are the thorns  
and roses bloom behind the glass.

## Always

We were perpetually stuck  
in stop & go traffic on the way home.  
At least, that's how it always felt  
driving home with her, each pump of the brakes  
Like the rhythmic thrumming  
of her heartbeat (which, I should add,  
was aided by a valve from a cow).  
The sight of her van after the bell rang  
was always enough to make me smile.  
There she sat, polka blaring, always on time,  
though sometimes still in curlers, ready with  
a *Howdy!* and a donut, or a burger, or an iced tea  
for her (favorite, but who cares?) grandson.  
But the greatest gift that was always there was,  
strangely enough, the big box of Pepsi cans,  
always caffeine-free, and always way too warm.  
But they were always the best after school drink.  
And they were always there.

Eventually, the polka quieted.  
The pulsing beat of the brakes stopped cold.  
The Pepsi ran out.

The first time I visited, sprawled out  
next to her smooth marble marker,  
I made sure I had my Pepsi there with me.  
Always warm.

## Hunger

For the crows in the road  
pulling eyes  
from the flattened squirrel.

For my hamster I watched die  
on the morning of my birthday.  
How the tumor strangled Ben  
from inside his own cheek.

For the long-dead phones  
stacked in the back  
of the drawer.

For the familiar lumps  
swelling and dangling  
beneath Buddy's dark fur.  
How he coughs and gags  
and sleeps.

How the injections  
no longer ease  
my father's knuckles.

For the hole in the garden  
where we buried Ben.  
How a hungry raccoon  
defiled his rest to survive.

How we switched  
from cardboard coffins  
to lunch tins.

For the moss growing cracks  
in Grandma's headstone.

How Buddy won't fit  
in a lunch tin.

For the growling of stomachs  
while crows and raccoons  
wait for rodents to die.

For the hole  
in the sole  
of my boot.

## The Lady of Berea, Ohio

I had seen The Lady once,  
while I was delivering flowers alone  
for the very first time  
on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

It was my last vase of the batch,  
you see, and I was taking it  
to a house in a tiny little neighborhood  
in northeast Berea.

The Lady's house was a squat little one,  
a one-story ranch made of tan bricks,  
and an old man—at least eighty—  
was gloved up and plucking gangly weeds  
from the sides of the driveway.

I stepped out of the old Ford Escape,  
the black one, not the red one  
we traded it for, and gave a nod.

He took one look at me,  
smiled beneath his sunglasses,  
and pointed a bouquet of chickweed  
at the open garage door.

*Oh, you can put those in the kitchen.*

I shrugged, said *sure thing*,  
and approached the door  
before he called out behind me.

*And make sure you see The Lady!*

The lights were off in the house,  
and I placed my vase on the counter,  
calling towards the darkened hallway.

Then she stepped out of the dark,  
her pale, veiny skin drooping over  
too-thin beige underwear,  
breasts like mashed potatoes  
hardly veiled by her white silk robe.  
she brought a small pair of glasses  
just up beneath her silver curls,  
and let out an almost-surprised *Oh!*  
but made no attempt to hide  
herself from my widening eyes.

I muttered some half-baked apologies,  
sprinted out of the shadowy home  
and into the afternoon sunlight,  
past The Lady's husband,  
grinning even wider than ever,  
as he asked a question  
he knew the answer to.

He spoke, his smile perfectly audible  
over my heart pumping in my ears.

*Did you see The Lady?*

And I nodded,  
because I had.

## Dad Telling Stories After Lunch Downtown

You see this big empty lot?  
This all used to be a power plant,  
and they'd pump in lake water  
to cool the place down  
and push it out right down at this pier,  
meaning the water would be hot year round,  
so they called this spot the Hot Waters.  
Since the water's so warm,  
there'd be tons of fish all  
all down this stretch of the lake.  
When I was a kid, man,  
this pier was lined with fishermen.  
And what I really want to do  
is get down here  
and start magnet fishing.  
I bet you'd find all kinds of stuff.  
I mean, this place was always packed.

Hey, want to hear a story  
about my dad?  
So he's working overnight,  
and he really has to take a piss  
so he comes right down here,  
parks his cruiser at the end of the pier  
and pisses right into the lake.  
But the winds were blowing hard,  
and his cap blows right off  
into the lake. Couldn't grab it quick enough,  
and it just sunk right down to the bottom.  
So he had to go to his sergeant  
in the middle of the night  
and explain why he needed a new hat.

Could you imagine  
if I caught my dad's hat  
out here magnet fishing?  
It had that big metal badge, you know  
so it's probably down there.  
That'd be...  
Well, I think that'd be awesome.

## **It Breaks My Heart**

that I have already forgotten you.  
Of course, I tell all of the stories,  
like how I'd never seen  
an old woman move  
as fast as you did  
when that old grandfather clock  
nearly made me  
an only child.

You are strong to me,  
and that strength is evident  
in that one, time-worn tale.  
Even later, confined to your bed,  
your body still asleep  
but your mind, your eyes,  
your heart  
was awake.  
Was strong.

I cannot conjure your face  
outside of the frame on my desk,  
nor the sight  
of you taking a step;  
only there, on one knee,  
an Atlas that held not the world,  
but time itself.

You only exist, now,  
as a stone in a rocky field,  
lost somewhere  
I cannot find my way to  
and locked at the bottom  
of a too-full voicemail.

And, my god,  
I never noticed  
how tired you sound.



## Poor Dolores

As I carried our standard funeral spray  
(about \$300 with all the trimmings)  
into Ripepi's Funeral Home,  
the funeral attendant's eyes  
widened in fear.

I could see the sweat flying  
from his too-tall forehead  
as he whipped his head  
from the packed foyer  
to the arrangement in my arms,  
uttering the panicked words  
that no funeral deliverer wants to hear:  
*You can just put it in the room.*

I walked past the memorial display,  
past the painstakingly drafted words  
on poor Dolores, mother of three,  
dead too soon.

I walked in, spray in hand,  
heart pounding,  
and looked at her lying in the casket.  
It was the first dead body I'd seen  
that was *only* a dead body to me;  
not a grandmother or friend,  
but a right and true corpse who,  
honestly, looked alive *enough*,  
dressed in what was probably her finest dress  
and finer pearls that shimmered  
in the low, warm parlor lights.

How might her children have decided  
on this ensemble in particular?

*We can't put her in that, she hated it.*

I'm sure they said.

Maybe they found that blue dress,  
smothered in the back of the closet.

*Hey, isn't this the one  
from your graduation?*

*Yeah, I think so. Does it fit?*

They dusted the thing off,  
hoped that it was a favorite of hers,  
and sent it off to the mortuary.

I stood there,  
lingering in the doorway,  
thinking of those motherless children,  
cradling the plants that will soon die  
in memory of poor Dolores,  
mother, wife, and corpse,  
thinking of my own mother,  
only a year her senior, at the shop  
toiling away on another spray  
to be brought to another mother's casket  
and then I set the arrangement down  
and left,  
now carrying only the guilt  
that her children's tears  
would not be the first to fall  
into their mother's open casket.

## Twenty Again

The girls at work kept telling her  
to try a Truly—  
one of those hard seltzers—  
and so for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday,  
Mom bought twelve.

When late March finally hit,  
six of the dozen cans  
hissed open in our garage  
and fizzed over onto the patio  
where she paraded into the night  
that she felt twenty again,  
and she drank accordingly.

*Agricultural school is full of farm kids,  
she kept on saying,  
and they could drink.  
And I could drink any of 'em  
under the table, easy.*

She sang along with Duran Duran  
and danced to Rihanna under the stars  
until we had to corral the dogs away  
from the decades puked away in the grass.

The next morning, she sat again at her desk,  
calling distributors and codifying receipts,  
her head still pounding  
as her twenties  
withered to fifties.

# III

## Stamen

**I lean over the counter  
to help my mother work.**

**She is just like me.**

## **The idea of flowers as gifts**

quite obviously started with the Greeks.  
If you'd fight me on that—invoke the Egyptians  
or the Syrians or the Sumerians or  
another similarly distant horde of folk—  
I ask only, "Where do you think they got  
that idea?" The answer being, if you haven't  
yet caught on, us far-thinking Greeks.  
I'm not saying that to be clever, or to  
raise myself above you lot (though I would  
very much like to, at times; at others, you know  
I'd cast myself at your feet like  
the little wretch I am), but the Ancient Greeks  
were just far more in touch with nature  
than the rest of them. Take a look  
at Demeter (who has a splendid name;  
worthy of imitation, even) who brought  
to us great harvests, our mighty health,  
and the Hades-diving (perhaps too literally)  
beauty that is her darling daughter Persephone.  
So it was a no brainer to those old Greeks  
that those same offerings they gave to the gods—  
the sheafs of wheat, the ripened fruits,  
and the budding flower—should, too,  
end up in the hands of anyone we dared say  
could rival their vernal beauty (Psyche  
notwithstanding) with a gift of suspended life  
that will wither and die, in theory,  
long before the recipient would.  
Like a way of proving to your lover  
that their beauty will outlast anything (even  
if it be a lie) by showing them one  
fragile, beautiful, dying thing  
that is designed to wither  
at the whim of a lonely heart.

## **Pasithea**

I admire the rose in my hand;  
it has been cleaned,  
ready to be placed with the rest.  
My eyes follow my fingertips  
as they slide down the sleek stem,  
each curious finger feeling  
the roses' supple smoothness  
that reminds me  
of your arms, soft and smooth,  
curving around my shoulders  
with your fingers  
tangled in my knotted hair.  
My own fingers trace familiar patterns  
down your forearm  
follow that same sleek curve  
that brings my hand to rest  
on your cheek,  
leaving goosebumps in their wake  
as I beg you drift  
down the Lethe with me.  
Dare I admire you now,  
dreaming in my arms,  
my Pasithea, my life,  
my waking dream,  
the way I would that rose.  
The flower cannot admire me—  
cannot stir from my touch  
to pull my hand to its petals  
and plant another too-fleeting kiss  
on my wrist before drawing me closer—  
but it reminds me of you regardless.

## Greatness Made Manifest

I am a Great Horned Owl. Of all the owls in the western hemisphere, I am by far the most widely found, and I am proud of this fact. I have yellow eyes that are large, even for an owl, that ranking highly in size among terrestrial vertebrates, of which I eat many. While I often aim for smaller rodents, mice, or voles, dogs are not off the table. After a meal, I digest my prey between two stomachs. Inside, I grind up the meatiest portion of my meal, breaking it down and leaving the bones, fur, feathers, and scales within my gizzard. That is my second stomach, for those not aware of what a gizzard is. Few are. Then, once the hard bits are thoroughly stripped and crunched together, I vomit them up as a neat pellet. I sometimes aim for the windshields of cars, if only to cause inconvenience and disgust. I cannot spell “calendar” on my first attempt. I can rotate my head up to 270 degrees. I rented a cabin in Colorado with my roommates in college for two weeks. I was given the name *Bubo virginianus* by scientists that surely stifled laughs for a full twenty minutes afterwards. I take some solace with my colloquial name—Great Horned Owl—though I don’t think it fits. The plumes on either side of my rounded skull, those horns in question, are fine enough, but I’ve been meaning to get them trimmed. Chelsea told me to grow them out, and I did for her, but without her I’m not sure why I’ve stuck with it. I have powerful talons, with my tarsals landing anywhere from 2.1 to 3.1 inches, allowing me to apply at least 300 lb/in<sup>2</sup> of crushing power. This strength is comparable to that of some eagles. My grandfather made a living by stitching pockets onto Levis in a factory in the 1930s. I am one of the earliest-breeding birds in North America. Do not laugh. I typically mate for life, meeting the same female year-after-year, but once our offspring reach a certain level of maturity, we can grow distant, which explains things. I was once thought to be strictly monogamous; a few years ago in Reno, after my cousin’s bachelor party, I was discovered mating with two females simultaneously. I received many high-fives from the observing researchers in the days after. Perhaps that is why they have labelled me great. The truth is, I just feel empty.

## Hyacinth

The plastic pot sits on the island  
just across from the sink window,  
still wrapped in lavender foil  
smattered with pink and green eggs.

Not two days ago, they were content  
to remain their chunky purple clumps,  
but now, from the sandy soil inside,  
our humble hyacinth blooms.

It seems they long to touch the sky,  
the way they stretch their starrish petals  
out from behind the veil of wrapping tissue,  
gently wafting vegetal clouds of florality

(That is, to a professional,  
their deeply floral essence  
which dips so coolly  
into a subtle kind of spice).

We have not killed them yet,  
and though next week  
they may be dead enough,  
right now,

in the morning light,  
verdant leaves outstretched  
as if to graze the sun itself,  
it blooms.



## **My Memento**

There is a groove—  
a dash across my spine—  
no wider than two centimeters.  
I have other meaningless scars, sure,  
like those wrapping my right pinky  
from a stubborn garage window,  
or the indent above my brow  
from a collision with a radio,  
But the one on my back  
is special to me.  
That scar, my memory incarnate,  
is a memento from a woman  
that wouldn't settle for marks  
left only on the soul,  
her nails like autumn plows  
tilling rows of soil in my flesh,  
channeling her pleasure  
effortlessly into my pain.  
It is a memento of a time  
when our cries dripped not sorrow,  
but instead loudly celebrated  
our Corinthian embrace, reveling  
in the innocence of newfound pleasure  
before we were left alone with our scars.

## Things in the Memory Book

Nineteen photographs: seven polaroids, twelve photo booth strips. Six bottlecaps. Eight nametags: five events, three door decks. Three love letters. One “it could have happened” letter. Two apology letters. One vaguely threatening note found on my windshield. Ten show tickets: eight stage, two screen. One caricature of the three of us, from back when I was the third wheel instead. Five business cards: all college affiliated, save one Uber-Driver-Turned-Luxury-Clothing-Mogul. Four Bottle caps, various brands. One Icon print. Five fortunes: three vague, one nonsensical, one “Be a Winner.” Three finished writing prompts. Eight breakups: one (the first) that stuck, eight that did not. Twenty-six unread book recommendations. One plastic candy stirrer. Three parking passes: two from school, one from a \$40 charge from a rude lot attendant. One shattered Apple Watch protective case: Apple Watch not included. Two acceptance letters. Rejection letters... somewhere else. One note, with “do not call her” written in someone else’s handwriting. One call. Too many mistakes. Three takeout tickets. One David LaGuardia quote. One paper sunflower. Nine wristbands: three hospital, six recreational. One stray A/V cable. Four trading cards. Two wedding invitations. Fourteen sticky notes. One sticky, stretchy hand. Three unfinished checklists. Seven all-nighters. Seventeen nights drowned in tears. Twenty-eight nights drowned in liquor. Two sad poems. One printed GameStop replacement CD insert. One origami Pikachu. Six years (read: one fourth) of my life.

## Sweet Escape

The heat of the fire warms my face  
as the itchy blades of grass wriggle  
between my toes. Mom comes back  
with two fistfuls of margaritas  
and she hands one to me,  
but my fingers are bound

by strands of melted chocolate  
and marshmallows that made a dash  
from their appointed cracker.  
I can feel their sugared brothers-in-arms  
plotting a similar jailbreak as they,  
in unison, choke my laughter  
from behind thick, enameled bars.

George's finger flailing  
in every direction in an attempt  
to finally find and put an image  
the elusive Big Dipper  
nearly knocks Dad into the fire  
and with just one breath,

the sugared ruffians surge  
on my stifled breath just enough  
to escape their dental prison,  
fleeing downwards from my chin,  
landing in the fallen ashes,  
fleeing through too-tall blades of grass

and chasing only starlight.

## Flowers for Sylvia

*Hey, I've got a delivery for Sylvia?*

It was the standard line,  
and one I'd dished out  
dozens of times that morning already—  
names used interchangeably, of course—  
so naturally,  
I expected the standard response.

Instead, my words lingered  
above the front desk. The blonde  
receptionist looked to her peers,  
and slowly—  
gently and quietly—  
takes the arrangement from me,  
saying, *I'll take this to her.*  
I gave some generic farewell,  
probably a simple *have a great*  
*Valentine's Day*, before climbing  
into our old Escape  
to take the next four bouquets.

An hour later, in the midst of loading  
bright arrangements and teddy bears  
into the car, my mom  
pulls me aside,  
whispering behind the towers of buckets  
*What was the name on that delivery?*  
*She just called in. Her husband*  
*suddenly passed away last night*  
*and she wants to—*  
*she needs to know*  
*if they're from him.*

I closed the hatch of the car  
and slid into the passenger's seat  
to rifle through my stack of slips.  
My eyes landed on Sylvia's name,  
and the undying love of a dead man  
staring back up at me,  
refusing to be forgotten.

## Slugs

Maybe I am a slug  
sluggishly sloshing  
across the driveway  
of some ancient Florida retiree's  
ill-advised timeshare,  
where he, too, is a slug,  
but in his own sluggard way  
where he lives  
with his slug of a wife  
in a slimy old bed  
he pulls his old bones out of  
to hop on his boat  
named *Slice of Life*  
before sliding out to sea  
where he'll sit all day  
in the same shitty chair  
with a fishing rod in hand,  
stockpiling the sludge  
of contempt in his heart  
for his slovenly wife  
he wishes he'd never met  
and dreams of absconding  
with the waitress at *Shakers*  
before slurping his scotch  
and sliding back home  
where he'll resent  
the woman he pledged to love  
before slumping into the sack  
with her for another sorry slumber  
and by now I still have  
half of the driveway to cross  
because slugs are not fast  
and I am a slugabed slug  
who would rather not exert myself  
this early into my life.