A collection of works by Calhoun Community College students, faculty, staff and alumni.
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muse: def.

muse v. To ponder or meditate; to consider or deliberate at length. 2. To wonder.
N. (Greek Mythology) Any of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, each of whom presided over a different act of science. 3. In general, the spirit, or power inspiring and watching over poets, musicians, and all artists; a source of inspiration. 4. (Archaic) a poet.

The works contained in this publication do not necessarily represent the views and/or opinions of Calhoun Community College, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, or the Alabama State Board of Education.

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Jill Chadwick, Editor – Faculty in the Language & Literature Department
SKD sponsor of the Theta Beta Chapter

Foreword:

For the first time, this year’s MUSE has a photograph as our cover, taken by one of our SKD (Sigma Kappa Delta) honor students during our National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. Erin Speed was taking a photo of Vita Schiavone, who was taking a photo of Louisville from our hotel! It’s a perfect cover for a literary/art journal whose title is MUSE; inspiration often comes from traveling to a new place, meeting other people who share common interests. Our Fine Arts faculty has again generously sent work gathered from classes this year. Our poems, essays, short stories, and photography were submitted from our current students at the Huntsville and Decatur campuses as well as alumni, staff, and faculty who take time to remember us with their contributions. Kelsey Thacker of SKD served as our student reader, and Claire Powell of SKD assisted with all of the technical difficulties that accompany creating a journal where entries are judged without benefit of names, to ensure objectivity. We are fortunate to have so much talent in the Calhoun Community. May you also be inspired as you read this year’s MUSE.
Rock against the Rune
by Daniel Byford

What is gathered and what is lost
from summer’s dew to winter’s frost
from autumn’s leaves to spring’s flowers?
What grants us joy then steals our powers?

While all our hopes and dreams reside
within a frozen sphere of fear inside,
one part forever grows green in a glowing place
where echoes trace some pained and ghostly face.

There is a rhythm of our knowing that sings
inside that hermetic realm within,
caressing with a lullaby that brings
tears to the eyes and forgiveness to the sin.

We may not name this haunted tune
nor know what truth its notes decry,
but we reel in time and rock against the rune
it scribes upon our hearts and wonder why.

For all good souls, a secret lies in wait.
It is our test, our moment, our riddle, and our fate.
And whether we face it wise or blind, quick or late-it will swoop down on us when we slip outside the gate.

Oil Painting by
Zhao Hong Sheng
Some Distant Rain
by Daniel Byford

Tired winter bones buried
deep in the April earth
await magic morning airs
to spring them up into new flesh

of passion and power and fresh
feelings flowering a storied
pattern. We have a winter’s worth
of puffing out cold and practiced prayers

and surviving the daily bungee jump
into our safe skins. At night all season
we dream of soulful sun baking the brain
into some mystical gel that matters.

After all, we’re mostly mad as hatters
and late for dates with destiny. We bump
up through the topsoil of our tired reason
stretching thirsty lives toward some distant rain.

The Divided Self
by Shelly Estill

Chasms separate identity from truth.
Reality becoming biased objection.
Falseness of being. Distortion of life.
Circumstance seen through jaded eye.

Trueness perceived through corrupt emotion.
Boundaries crossed by calloused hands.
Toxic words spill from poisoned tongues.
Edifices ended as destruction begins.

Mightier walls are built by minds than men,
Sealing us in within ourselves,
Creating our own hell within this false safety.
Insulating us from truth and bliss.

It’s hard to hear through stone and mortar
What happens around us as we cocoon.
Conjecturing alone with our separated selves
We create a truth not at all true.

"Green Flame Eye"
Airbrush by Shannon Braun

"Attentive One"
Photo by Ginger Jones
The Tide of Existence
by Shelly Estill

Entwined within gossamer ribbons of light and dark,
Solitary and cornered within blackened lace and night,
Hidden amongst the stacks of dust-covered memories
Lie thoughts and ideas long dead among their pages.

Hidden away by the yellowing of time and thoughtlessness
A storm of despair blows through the abandoned corridors,
Concealed by the bellows of anger and regret
Dreams lie shattered lost among the ruins.

Fragments of thought, sketches of remembrances
Elusive within the shadowed halls of contemplation,
Oblivious to the measure of existence
Mortality a dream more than a state of being.

A journey fraught with trepidation awaits any traveler
Who journeys the road of Regret and Could have's,
The Should have's, and the Should not have's,
Wrong rights, and Right wrongs.

But, the journey of light and dark always ends the same.
Alone within the recesses of our own thoughts and minds,
A submission to fate, and the knowing we are who we are
And who we are meant to be by the choices we have made.
Circus of Freaks
by Rachel Greathouse

Keep your chin up kid
You’re feeding our ways
With your 0-gauged ears
And teal hair for days
Because everyone needs
the weird, the punk,
the Goth and the geeks
Or as they used to be called
A circus of freaks
You’re the horrific delight
And the indulgent fright
Because we all really need
The “eww” and the “ahh!”
The weird and the strange
The sweet, but the odd,
and the lovely
deranged
Like the bearded woman,
they all stop and stare
At the kid in his neon
Or your mohawked hair
But we need you, we do
No matter how they laugh
Because they stare at you
with eyes so bright
While looking at your back
“Did you see that?”
Or
“Did you notice this?”
That’ll give ‘em something
To tell to their friends!
So tattoo your face
And stretch your nose!
Because without you
around
Everyone knows
It’d be bland, we’d be bored
We’d try to replace
The amusement we once
got from your face
No! the boots they aren’t
too tall!
But the make up you have
on is all too small
Go for bigger! Try for extreme!
And soon you’ll discover
The secret American dream
So go on chick with your
liberty spikes
Raise hellions out of your
little tykes!
Hello art boy with your
painted face
I spot something
That needs a replace
You’re drabbing it up
Because of the man
Who rudely called you
An ugly toucan
But can’t you see? It’s all a
façade
We need you ALL, so keep
being odd!

We All Just Wear Costumes
by Rachel Greathouse

All manner of baubles and trinkets
All here meant to endear
You don’t have to spend much
Don’t have to be yourself
Because these are just costumes, my dear
You could be swathed in lace
Or swaddled in darkness so sheer
No, there’s no need to fret, or tell me your tale
Because these are just costumes, my dear
Just hide out here while your plans unfold
I could offer you leggings
Or a nice parasol
Trash to most, but treasure to some!
And I can tell you are one of those special ones
Oh no! Don’t give up
We have all sorts
Did you check the corner
Where I keep my vintage stores?
No there’s no need to talk
Or even be too sincere
Your name’s unimportant
Because these are just costumes, my dear
What’s that you say?
You ask of my name?
No one ever cares to ask why
That I am just here
Chipper and cheer
But the truth is, it hurts when I sigh
Because we all just wear costumes, my dear
Beetles
by Laura Herbek

A noise that is angry,
The return of a beast often feared.
Harsh lines on a vindictive face, hands like talons.
My dirty feet and purple toenails, skittering away
Out the door and over toasty concrete
Like insect legs.
Fresh blue in my hair and my nose,
The safest world lies underwater.
Orbiting me in small but perfect circles are the quiet water beetles.
We tread lightly.
And like a dainty insect, I have learned to
Escape.

“Scarlet Bouquet”
Oil Painting by Tony Khounmano
Leaves, Limbs, Ashes
by Laura Herbek

A seed slips between layers of soggy dirt
Sprouting, drinking, rising, weaving
Up through the dewy grass,
Its tender limbs tangling and stretching like arms
Towards the beaming sun, whose face
The tiny buds reach for with soft baby fingers, as
The widening base grows tough and thick,
Volunteering itself as a willing display for
Carved initials of springtime lovers,
Jagged letters thriving inside a crooked heart,
As the cracked earth sinks farther and farther below
Its bumpy branches, which thicken to cradle
A climbing child who is swinging out of a tree house and into
adulthood,
Soaring past its leafy expanse as it patiently shades
A cheerful family picnic in its cool and gentle shadow until
It trembles naked and warped in an icy wind,
Only to live again in spring when the twittering birds return,
Pulling ripe fruit from warm summer limbs,
Fleeing again in the crisp fall breeze,
Their wings scattering the papery leaves
Around its ancient trunk as loggers
Jerk their roaring chainsaws through it,
Pushing and twisting as hard as they can until
The heavy logs careen towards them and
Land in an ashy fireplace, where
Flames curl into the dry bark,
Licking away at the lonely remains.

The Empty Porch Swing
by Molly Oppman

She walks alone
Day by day
By the swing
Refusing to sit
Listening
To the sound
Of her own steps
She sways
She moves
She walks
The swing sits
Alone
Beckoning
Waiting for her to sit
Months she has resisted
Sitting on the swing
But tonight
She gives in
And sits
The empty swing
It curves to her body
And she begins to relax
It does not feel
As empty as she thought
It would
It feels quite nice
Quite peaceful
Not lonely
Or forsaken.
Big Cove
by Margaret Vann

Too early for wild flowers,
we were scouting old cemeteries
and found one in Big Cove—
a grove of red oaks and cedars
beside a white frame church—
a mixture of Woodsman of the World &
granite stones bearing photographs of the dead

We saw a new grave—
a red wound among the limestone graveled plots,
sprays of fading flowers banked about the still-mounded grave,
on a metal placket:
an old Big Cove name, birth and death dates

A mongrel dog lay curled
in the coffin flowers on the mound
we tried to call it away
he looked up with sad eyes & refused our comfort
we offered scraps
from our picnic lunch to no avail
We left food and water

Even now, years later
I wonder about that small dog & hope
someone lured it away
with kind words & love

And still I wonder at the devotion
of the dog for its master
or if I go back today,
will the dog still be there?

who would mourn my death with such love

“Curious”
Photo by Ginger Jones
Treasure
by Margaret Vann

A pressed-glass berry dish sits
in honored place within Auntie’s china cabinet.

Often to escape the Valdosta summers,
I crawled into the dank dark beneath
Granddaddy’s turreted Queen Anne house.

Under the house set up on brick pillars,
I found not only cool but also spiders & bones:
cat bones, squirrel bones, mysterious bones—
such treasures as broken Haviland,
shards of pressed glass, bent silverware.

Leaning against the cool brick pillars &
looking through the notched brick wall facing the street,
I wondered as the light came in as squares—
illuminating more bones & yellowed vines & mysteries.

Here in this secret place, I heard footsteps overhead.
Perhaps it was Aunt Marion setting the dinner table for
fourteen or
Annie checking biscuits in the black iron stove or
I might hear the murmuring of muted adult voices.

But once, just once, in the ashes and the dirt,
I found a treasure—
an unbroken dish of pressed glass.

In honored place, the small bowl is filled with
memories of cool dark innocence.

Ill Conceived
by Emma Wheeler

I sit here,
A woman waiting.

A book on my knee,
Not a baby.

It was over years ago.
My bare knowledge must suffice.

“Waterfall in the Smokies”
Photo by Ginger Jones
Everybody has at least one secret. Families have secrets; couples have secrets. My husband and I have a secret: we are closet moon watchers. While we both revel in watching the night sky, we enjoy it for different reasons. My husband enjoys the science of the moon and the stars while I love the mystery surrounding those heavenly bodies. In either case, moonless, hot black nights make us lonely and even cranky; we, in coyote-fashion, want the moon for company.

The mystery has taken hold of my life in a variety of ways. For months after my father died, I went out each night after supper, unbeknownst to anyone, and looked at the stars and the moon, searching for the mystery of the dead while simultaneously attempting to fill the endless void of his absence.

The moon is my companion. In fact, I have a great view of the fat, full patent-leather moon now as I sit writing, and my husband comes by the desk reminding me to notice our brilliant moon. We help each other in this way; we are moon companions.

Thinking back over the years, it occurs to me that our marriage can be measured in moonbeams. For instance, on several occasions, we have set our alarm for the early morning hours (usually around 3:30-4:00 a.m.) to go outside and watch the heavens in...
search of falling stars or to enjoy the moonlight. Sometimes these are planned events, but often they are born of the moment.

The same year we moved to our farm, Hale-Bopp passed across the sky, and every night we went out and watched it go over the western sky across the back pasture. It traveled just above the line of trees on a small hill, magnificently, and we thought everyone had as clear a view as we did. It wasn’t until weeks later that we realized our view was so good because there were no lights anywhere around us to deflect from the comet. Had we realized it earlier, we probably would have held a Hale-Bop BYOB (bring-your-own binoculars) party.

A few years ago, when the moon was going to be closer to the earth than it would be again in our lifetime, we invited a friend over, ate supper, and then went out to watch the moon. As we stood in the chilly air of the front yard wearing black coats, accompanied by three dogs, two of which were black, and 3 cats, 1 of which was black, I had the thought that if anyone could see us, he might mistake us for a witches’ coven. We stood there delighting in the dazzling moon while casting long shadows across the moon-blanch landscape.

Recently, during a house renovation, I wanted triangular windows installed at the apex of the wall leading to the cathedral ceiling in our bedroom. My husband could only think of the cost, until I said, “We can see the moon trail across the sky without getting up,” so he was sold on the windows.

Many nights on long car trips, we have whiled away our time with a made-up game that goes like this: I start singing songs about the moon, and we take turns singing moon songs. As the miles pass away, we sing bits of such standards as *Blue Moon*, *Fly Me to the Moon*, or *I’ll Walk Just Beyond the Moon*. The big thrill is thinking of a song we haven’t mentioned before. Evidently, the romance of the moon runs rampant among song writers and musicians.

The other night when the moon was in total eclipse, my husband reminded me of it just as it was beginning, so we decided to have a little fun. First, I called my mother to let her know that there was an eclipse. I knew she would want to see it, too; after all, she was the one who had let me and my brothers stay up late to sit outside and watch a lunar eclipse, and again to watch the lunar landing on television and walk outside afterward to look at the exact same moon where Neil Armstrong was perched.

Next, my husband and I put on Van Morrison’s *Moondance* and took turns running out into the cold night air to report what was going on with the moon while the other one stood watch peering at the moon through the window. It was our own private moon party.

Finally, as the eclipse was ending and the bit of shadow was passing across the top edge of the moon, we noted that the moon looked as if it were wearing a beret tilted to one side of its head. Once the eclipse passed, we settled into our individual routines, but we held the secret of the moon and our private moon dance, knowing that in future years, it will be part of the immense bond of partners in the vast and intricate journey of life.
My Kazakhstan Experience
by Diane Floate

Sitting on the international flight to Kazakhstan, a Central-Asian country, I thought I was prepared for a new cultural experience vastly different than my American one. I had never been more wrong in my life. I was far from being prepared to encounter the different culture awaiting me. I would soon learn that I had never experienced fear, anonymity, and discrimination in as few steps and little time as I did in the Kazakh airport and taxi ride to the motel.

Having arrived in Kazakhstan after nearly thirty hours of traveling, my friends and I exited the mammoth-sized airplane and trudged down the cramped and elongated walkway to go into the airport. As we entered the bustling airport, it seemed as if we stepped into another world. The atmosphere changed from easy-going and casual to militant and severe. We each had to stand in a different line to have our passports and other documents inspected.

When it came time for me to submit my papers for inspection, the overbearing man dressed in a military-type uniform snatched my papers out of my hand. Shocked at his hostile demeanor, I, hesitantly, smiled up at him. In response, he glared at me and continued to examine my papers. Finally, after confirming that all the documents were accounted for, the disgruntled employee shoved the papers into my hands and waved me through with a look of intolerance. Thus, an overriding fear began to pump swiftly through my veins.

As I walked through the airport with my companions, waves of alarm and uneasiness began to roll over me. Everywhere I turned, it seemed like people were staring at me. Men, mostly from Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian descent, glared at me with looks of animosity and disgust. Trying to understand the employee’s severe actions with the stares of these other men, I looked around and realized that I was the only American woman in the entire place. Then, I remembered information that I had read before going to Kazakhstan concerning one cultural difference between Central-Asian countries and the United States — men in these countries do not hold women, especially American women, in high respect. In fact, men in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries are domineering toward all women. My apprehension and dread intensified.

After we had gathered our bags from the one baggage claim area in the airport, we went off in search of our Kazakh guide and translator. Shuffling through the overcrowded terminal, we came to the entrance of the airport. We saw two men dressed in oversized wool coats waving at us. They greeted each of my companions, all men, and extended their arms for a manly handshake. The younger of the two men said, “I am Alexei. I will be your guide and translator. This is my friend, Sergei. He will be transporting you to your motel tonight.” Then, he asked for introductions from the men. Even though I was standing in the center of our group, Alexei and Sergei never made eye-to-eye contact with me. Furthermore, they never asked to be introduced to me. For
this reason, I felt they had intentionally ignored and excluded me. It was as if I were invisible to them. At that moment, my anonymity had begun.

Next, it was time to go to the motel. Alexei and Sergei told us to follow them to the taxi. As our group headed toward the double doors that led outside into the frigid night, Kevin, our appointed leader, came up behind me and said, “Diane, do exactly what I tell you. Do not look to your right or your left. Look straight ahead. Walk as fast as you can. Do not stop for anything or anyone. Go! Go, now!” My fear skyrocketed. I was scared to death. Until that moment, I had not realized how dangerous this trip was for a woman or that my life could be imperiled.

Upon reaching the taxi, which happened to be an old, battered, decrepit van, I hustled inside. The interior of the van was as dilapidated as the outside of the van. The tattered and torn bench-like seats reminded me of church pews with one exception - they faced one another. With everyone facing each other, the men began to talk as we rode toward the motel. Alexei began to ask my male comrades all sorts of questions. He engaged all my friends in conversation, but he continued to ignore me. It was as if I did not exist in his or Sergei’s eyes. I had been completely shunned as if I carried a mark on my forehead as in the classic, The Scarlet Letter. As a result of a few minutes of anonymity in this foreign country, I had begun to feel more isolated and alone than I had ever felt in my life.

While sitting in the darkness of isolation, I realized that discrimination can happen in all walks of life. In Kazakhstan, I was discriminated against not simply as a woman, but an American woman. As minutes turned into hours, hours turned into days, and days turned into weeks, I traveled on a journey that took me into the heart of prejudice and antipathy. Traveling from place to place within Kazakhstan, I continued to face paralyzing bigotry and domineering commands. For example, at our motel, Alexei approached me for the first time and said, “You are to go to your room, shut and lock the door. You are not to come out for any reason. You will not come out until morning. Do you understand?”

In short, my days of fear, isolation, and discrimination would continue until my journey’s end.

Even though a few years have passed since my Kazakhstan experience, the memory of the fear, anonymity, and discrimination I felt in the male-dominated society continues to resonate inside of me. Often, I have pondered over the treatment of the women in countries such as Kazakhstan. Although I walked in their footsteps of subjugation for only a brief moment of time, I realized it can take merely a single step and a single minute to capture one’s security, identity, and respect. As a result of my enlightenment, I have found a new sense of empathy for women around the world who face these trials.
Hope IS Human
by Chris Hooie

Hope. What images does the word bring to mind? We might think of a tweenage boy hoping the next popular video game will soon be released to the masses, a lonely young man hoping the young woman he loves will fall for him in return, a grown man hoping that a return to college will change his entire existence for the better, or maybe an old woman sitting beside her dying husband, hoping he will live a bit longer. Each of us could envision images that would define hope for us personally. In his book Eight Habits of the Heart, Clifton Taulbert considers hope one of the habits that enhance our lives. Hope is such an ingrained part of our thoughts that often we don’t even realize it is there. Hope IS the essential human emotion. We find hope in our dreams, our future, our children, or even in nature. We find these in literature, sometimes as a central theme, sometimes in the background.

Hope can be the central theme in a literary work. It is powerful enough to stand alone, and often does. We find it a dominant theme in “Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes. The vision of hope is often illustrated as a dream. Our dreams define us; where are we going, what will we be, or what will we do with our life? Hughes asks us,“what happens to a dream deferred?” In essence, what happens when we force that dream to wait? What happens when hope must be deferred or put on hold? Does it “fester,” “stink,” or “dry up” as Hughes suggests? Of course it does. If the realization of hope or a dream is not achieved, the hope or dream will consume our thoughts to the point of destroying us. This destruction is evidenced by the last line of the poem, “Or does it explode?” This work is a powerful example of what hope can do to us.

Hughes also brings us the idea of hope for a brighter future. In his “Theme for English B,” he speaks as a black student to his white instructor. He hopes to convey that his
blackness does not make him different mentally or in his human desires. He states that “…being colored doesn’t make me not like / the same things other folks like who are other races.” He also hopes to get the white instructor to understand he likes things that other people like: “I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love. / I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.” He wants us to understand that even though whites are “somewhat more free,” we are all Americans (972-3).

One of the things hope is associated with closely is time. We look to the future because we have it in front of us. We cannot go back and change the past, however much we would like. We therefore wish to make sure we do not repeat mistakes already committed, and we also hope to teach our children not to make those same mistakes. In “Ulysses,” Alfred, Lord Tennyson tells us his version of the mind of the hero Ulysses. Ulysses not only ponders his past and future; he hopes for his son. He says of him, “This is my son, my own Telemachus, / To whom I leave the scepter and the isle.” He wishes for his son to be a good ruler, to “subdue them to the useful and the good.” He hopes that Telemachus will be “decent not to fail / In offices of tenderness, and pay / meet adoration to my… gods, / when I am gone.” He hopes he has taught his son well (746-7).

As human beings we look for, and find, hope all around us. We even seek it out in nature. One beautiful example of hope can be found in “Loveliest of Trees” by A.E. Houseman. In this poem he talks of the hope he has to see the beauty of spring blossoms for all the springs to come. He sees the “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough.” He hopes to see many more such visions of the beautiful cherry in the future. He is still a young man, “…of my threescore years and ten / twenty will not come again.” He knows that given the average seventy year lifespan spoken of in the Bible, he has fifty yet to go. He also believes this too short a time to view the beauty of nature and insufficient to truly see it all. He tells us that “to look at things in bloom / fifty springs are little room,” to reiterate the point that there is never enough time to see the beauty in the world. He hopes to convey that we should seize the moment to view that beauty whenever possible (792-3).

Yes, to hope is the essence of being human. Perhaps we can define it for others better on paper than aloud. We often can feel the expression of it when we read literature, as we can imagine ourselves in the story or poem. Emily Dickinson may have said it best in her famous work, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers / that perches in the soul / and sings the tune without the words / and never stops at all.” How can we better illustrate it? Hope resides in our heart and soul. We may not know what is coming, but we continue anyway.

Below Grade Level
by Julie O’Flaherty

I was attending a Christmas party with Joe, my pseudo-husband, when my phone rang. It was my sister. She said, “Jul, Dad is dead.” At that moment, the world stopped, changed, and became mine. When I was little, late at night I would lie in my bed and think about how safe and good the world would be if I did not have to share it with him. I would fall asleep feeling safe and happy only to have my father appear in my nightmare in the starring role. My dad played a starring role in many people’s lives; for my mother, sister and me, he played the villain. September 6, 1972, was the first time he saw me. My face was red and swollen from the trauma of my birth. His face was red too; he was drunk. December 15, 2003, was the last time I saw him; my eyes were red from crying; his covered with make up, trying to disguise the grey of death.

As the news of my father’s death sank in, so did my heart. Angie, my sister, and I met at the funeral home to make arrangements. Mom would not be there; she escaped his grasp many years before. What would he be wearing? No shoes -- the dead do not need them. What music would play, what prayers would be said, and what about flowers? Who cares, just get him in the ground below grade level. Bury him deep below the surface of the earth, his anger held back by a ton of earth, where it cannot show its ugly face. The whole time all I could think of was it’s finally here, the day I’ve waited for all my life is here! I was not happy or sad. I was relieved. He was gone. I would not bump into him accidentally and recoil in fear of a fist. I would never hear his voice again. His words were always slurry. Like snakes, they would slither into the air and hang there holding imminent danger and a venomous bite. His breath would never poison the air and burn my eyes with intimidation again. He could no longer stand upright, tower over me, and make me feel insignificantly minute.

He died of a heart attack at work; standing upright, he grasped his chest and fell to the ground, his body rendered useless. The doctor said he was dead before he hit the floor. I had always imagined his death as bloody. Shot, stabbed, or beaten to death, his angry blood would pour out onto the ground and stain it as it had me.

With the preparations for the funeral made and the body prepared for viewing, Angie and I entered the chapel at the funeral home. We were alone with our dead father. We sat there and thought about looking. I had images of horror films running through my mind. At the climax of the movie, the villain lays dead and the tortured soul gets up close for a better look. Just then, the villain grabs the innocent person and kills him and the credits roll. I knew if we went too close, he would grab us and pull us into death with him. I told Angie what I was thinking. She said, “Me too.” We thought it was funny, and we laughed a loud totally inappropriate laugh that broke a lonely, deafening silence. A throat cleared from some far hall in the funeral

As thenew sofmy father’sdeath sank in ,so didmy heart. Angie, my sister, and I met at the funeral home to make arrangements. Mom would not be there; she escaped his grasp many years before. What would he be wearing? No shoes -- the dead do not need them. What music would play, what prayers would be said, and what about flowers? Who cares, just get him in the ground below grade level. Bury him deep below the surface of the earth, his anger held back by a ton of earth, where it cannot show its ugly face. The whole time all I could think of was it’s finally here, the day I’ve waited for all my life is here! I was not happy or sad. I was relieved. He was gone. I would not bump into him accidentally and recoil in fear of a fist. I would never hear his voice again. His words were always slurry. Like snakes, they would slither into the air and hang there holding imminent danger and a venomous bite. His breath would never poison the air and burn my eyes with intimidation again. He could no longer stand upright, tower over me, and make me feel insignificantly minute.

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home; we forced ourselves to keep the laughing to a minimum. We looked; he did not grab us.

The day of the funeral came with the regular stress of getting a family of five ready for a once-in-a-lifetime event. As I looked at myself in the mirror that morning, I heard my dad slurring at me, “You’re an unforgiving bitch.” I hear it a lot when I look in the mirror. He actually said it to me on the night of my wedding. After the reception had ended, the wedding party returned to my house to continue the good time we were all having, but the drive home gave the alcohol time to infiltrate our blood streams. My new husband was carried into my house and passed out on the floor of my bedroom in a pool of vomit. It upset me. I was disappointed. I had hoped for a nicer end to the day. My dad came into the room, grabbed my arm, pushed me down, and slurred with poisoned breath, “You are an unforgiving Bitch, just like your Mother!” He had me crunched into a ball on the floor between my closet and the wall. That was unforgivable; I was wearing my wedding gown. He had walked me down the isle 8 hours before. I had to take the abuse from my dad as a kid, but not anymore. I never spoke to him again.

I was ready to bury my father. We were all in the same room again; this was the first time my Mother would be seeing my Dad since my wedding nine years earlier. This time he was dead. We sat in the first row of the church trying to keep our families quiet and still. From my seat, I could only see the bridge of his nose and the shine of his bald head. People I did not know or could not remember were stopping and saying how sorry they were that Dad had died, what a good guy he was, and wasn’t it nice to see Mom—it had been so long since the divorce. He must have played the hero in their movies.

The church became quiet. Dad laid front and center in the cheapest casket available. His life insurance policy was miniscule; $5000 is not much money to permanently dispose of a human body with. Angie was afraid we would have to pay for the funeral. She had picked everything; I just sat there relieved he was dead. She had been the better daughter since I stopped talking to dad. Just after the wedding, they moved to Georgia; he went along uninvited. She and her husband had fed, clothed, and sheltered him until the year before he died. She came back to Nebraska for a visit and dropped him off in his hometown 60 miles from where I lived. I cringed every time I answered the door; I was afraid it would be him.

The music started and the priest and processional ceremoniously walked up the isle while a church choir sang the praises of God. Until that moment, I had been fine with Dad being dead. It was all so surreal. The hairs on my neck stood on end, chills raced up my back, and my eyes began to sting. This was it. He would never apologize to me; I would never forgive him. I would never understand what made him so mean. I would never know who hurt him so badly that he could not love without causing pain. Again, it was time to view the body, and the horror movie clips flashed into my mind. This time I hoped he would rise, so I could hug him and tell him I loved him and forgave him. He did not rise. Tears streamed down my face, my throat closed; I could not breathe. There we stood side by side -- Mom,
Angie, and I, looking down at the shell of my father. He looked old, fragile, and strangely peaceful; he was gone. Mom put her hand on his collapsed chest and said something loving and forgiving under her breath, Angie put a picture of her family in his pocket, and I stood there ashamed of myself for hating him. As the tears dropped from our eyes, little wet spots appeared on his freshly laundered suit. The four of us had never been this close, nor would we ever be again.

It was below zero as we sat under the tent next to the casket. The wind was cold and piercing through our coats. Angie was crying uncontrollably. I could hear Mom’s whimper over my shoulder. I knew it was her; I used to lie in bed and hear her cry herself to sleep. I sat and watched my father’s closed casket as it was lowered into the ground. Joe stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders; he had never met my dad. He had never heard a happy story about my dad; they are harder to remember. I thought about Dad’s sober years; they were the good ones.

My father passed away December 13, 2003. He was 55. He gets an “F” in the grade book of life. He tried to be a good man, but he did not know how. He was an alcoholic. He was funny. He loved to have fun. He took us to Worlds of Fun and rode the Orient Express with me. He taught me how to drive in a 1950’s jeep with the gearshift on the steering column in 10 inches of mud on a creek side access road. He took me out of school for two weeks so that I could go hunting with him. As long as he was not drinking, I loved to be around him. Sadly, it was not often enough to erase the drunken horror stories from my heart. I miss him and think of him often. He was not the ideal dad, but he was mine.

“Skateboarding”
Photo by Ginger Jones
Shelter in the Leaves
by Julie O’Flaherty

July 1983 was unbearable. Nebraska summers can rival those of the desert. Stepping outside was like stepping into an oven. Hot dry air stole the breath from my lungs and any movement zapped my energy. The sun was torturous; its rays hit hard, brutally burning any exposed skin. After being outside, tiny water blisters would form on the surface of my sunburned skin. Some days the wind would keep the air moving, and other days it blew up the dust and dirt from the streets leaving a sandy crunch in my mouth. The only relief was sitting in the shade of the oak tree.

My parents had separated for the final time. Mom, my sister Angie, and I had moved back into the house where my family had lived as a unit. One-night weeks before, accusations of adultery flew as well as my father’s fists. Both landed squarely on my mother’s body. The smears of blood had been wiped from the hallway, but I could still see it.

Neither Angie nor I had seen Dad in weeks. One Saturday afternoon, as we sat in the cool living room, we heard his van pull up on front of the house. Paralyzed only momentarily, we darted for the back door. We ran for the oak tree. We had spent endless hours, legs dangling from our favorite branches and making plans for the future when we did not have to live here, like this. It held firm as we climbed its branches welcoming us up into its canopy. We crouched on the balls of our feet with our arms wrapped around a higher branch for balance. Our breathing was fast and deep. My heart was beating so fast I could see my shirt vibrate. As the adrenaline raced through our bodies, we heard the backdoor squeak open. The screen door’s bottom edge scraped across the cement pad to a deafening stop.

Through the dense leaves, we watched Dad step out and yell, “Angie. Julie.” We held on to the branches and did not move. I held my breath. I was afraid he would hear me.

There was no wind to cover the sound. Angie would never forgive me if I were the one to give our location away. We held perfectly still as we looked down upon our father scanning the back yard for us. He did not see us. We were sheltered by the leaves.

It was hard to stay still and not answer, but not as hard as it was watching him beat my mother. After a few minutes, he turned and went back into the house. We stayed still. Our legs and feet cramped and the sweat rolled down our backs, but we stayed still. Some time later, we heard him start his van and pull away, but we did not move.

The sun had begun to set and air was cooling down. Angie and I had adjusted ourselves to our favorite branches, let our legs hang down, and talked about how life was living here, like this, now that dad was gone. We heard the back door squeak and the screen door scrape against the cement pad. Mom stepped out and said, “Girls, you can come down now. He is gone.”
Faerie Tale Dream
by Kelsey Thacker

“Tell us a story, Grandma!”
“Yeah, a story!”

The two children’s grandmother looked at them sternly. “And if I do,” she asked, “you two will go to bed without complaint?”

The twins, brown-haired little sprites with pleading eyes, nodded in unison and chorused, “Yes, Grandma.”

“All right,” their grandmother conceded, adding, “Hush! None of that,” when they cheered joyfully. “Into your pajamas and under the covers,” she ordered, helping the two into brightly printed pj’s. Once she was done, two pairs of bright eyes stared eagerly at her soft, time-engraved face as it was lit by their nightlight. Their grandmother took her time settling herself into a chair, folding her hands comfortably over her cozily soft middle and, with a glance at each pair of eyes peeping over the blankets, began, “Once upon a time. . . .”

And this is the story that she told.

Once upon a time there was a faerie princess who lived in a beautiful kingdom beneath the earth. She, as any good princess ought to be, was tall and slim and pretty. Her blue eyes seemed always to laugh and her hair was the vibrant color of autumn leaves. A truly lovely maiden she was and well beloved by her kind in the faerie raft.

While the faerie princess cherished her world and all those in it, she loved the world above as well—the world of mortals. She walked that world as often as she could, and her favorite spot was a cliff above the sea. This cliff was carpeted with lush green grass that spread richly from the very edge, down the slope, and all the way to a wood on the brink of the water. The wood was very nice, with bright clearings and mysterious thickets as a wood should have, but the faerie maiden preferred the cliff. Her cliff had arrogance and power, the black rock jutting out over the water like a chin—one daring the ocean to take a swing.

The princess would stand on the edge of that cliff and look out over the water just as the sun went down and any passing travelers that caught a distant glimpse of her would think the sun had planted a fiery spear in the rocky edge, for her hair would billow out like flame when the sea breeze caught it. And then the sun would sink beneath the horizon and they would shake their heads, sure their eyes had played a trick upon them.

It was night, always night, when the faerie walked the cliff. On clear evenings, the sky would stretch out before her, rich and black, with more stars winking to life as she watched than could be counted—even if one took an eternity. Those were the nights she loved best, when the sky was clear and the sea was calm, reflecting the black sky and its glimmering fragments of light. The faerie maiden would turn her face to the cool pearly light of the moon as it rose. On the edge of that cliff with the sky above and the sea below, it was as if she floated in the heavens, surrounded with stars. This night was not clear, but still the faerie stayed. Rain spilled from thin grey clouds, a shimmering silver sheet illuminated by the faint starlight that managed to eke its way through the hazy cover. Below, the sea was the color of coal. A wind blew every now and then, cool, almost cold.

Above, the clouds split, revealing a thick wedge of star strewn sky. And, in that wedge, the faintest hint of gold began to spill. The sun was rising. Unexpectedly, a wind blew, not cool but truly chill, as if to make sure it was not forgotten. It made a shiver skate down the faerie’s back, but even the biting breeze did not make her welcome the sun’s light. As the fiery disc lifted from the horizon, setting the sea to flame, a single tear traced down her cheek.
That disc was high and yellow as the hunter trudged wearily through the wood. He was tired and footsore; his belly ached from emptiness. The hunter had traveled for days and knew not where he was, only that the woods were cool and welcoming and offered him a chance to soothe the hunger that made his steps unsteady.

A flicker of movement caught his eye. There, in a space between two trees, he saw it. A doe stood regally beautiful, its glossy coat more russet than brown. The hunter lifted his bow and pulled an arrow from his quiver, notched it, took careful aim, and released. The arrow leapt from the string, piercing the doe in her side. The hunter picked his way towards the fallen doe, a new energy in his step. But when he reached her and saw her eyes, the hopeless blue drained the excitement from him. Forgetting his hunger, he laid bow and quiver aside and knelt next to the doe. She still lived. The hunter gathered the doe in his arms and lifted her, carrying her to a small cave in which he had found shelter the night before. Laying her on the cold, stone floor, he tended to the wound he had made as best he could.

Outside, the sun began to sink beneath the horizon and, as it did, the doe began to change. The hunter watched as hands replaced the slender hooves and the short coat of red fur began to lengthen into silky hair. Once the sun had fully disappeared, the change was complete, and the faerie maiden lay where a doe had moments ago. The hunter reached for her hand and she for his, but his had begun to change. The palm roughened and the nails thickened into claws; his black hair rippled down his body in a shaggy pelt.

The faerie gazed at the wolf the hunter had become. She thought not on the fact that he had wounded her, only that he had cared for her. And though she could feel his desperate hunger, the wolf did not leave her, staying instead by her side to protect her. When she shivered, he pressed his fur against her to lend her his warmth.

In time, the sun began to rise again, and again the changes began. In the brief instant when both faerie and hunter shared a common form, they reached for each other. But hand passed through hand like smoke. Then their moment was lost, for the hunter was the hunter and the faerie was the doe.

Even now, he would not leave her, not to slake his burning thirst nor to fill his long-empty belly. All the strength and care he had he gave to her and she, in turn, did the same. And every time the sun rose and the moon fell, they would reach for each other again, but neither could ever touch the other.

Slowly, their shared strength began to wane. But still, one would not abandon the other. When again the dawn began its steady rise, both the hunter and the maiden knew neither of them would see the fiery ball sink again. Despair and hope were in their eyes as yet again they reached for the other’s hand one last time, knowing that it was in vain. But this time... this time the love that pulsed so strong between the two broke the spell and hand clutched hand at last.

Hunter and maiden were free, and when they spoke their only words were those of love.

The grandmother’s voice had risen and fallen with the pacing of her story, easing the twins into sleep like a lullaby. Her gently creased face slipped easily into a tender smile as she gazed at them, sprawled out in the carefree slumber of children. Lovingly, she drew their sheets up around their chins, smoothing out the creases with a feather-light touch. Noiselessly, she flicked their nightlight off, and the warm yellow glow faded into velvety darkness—a peaceful backdrop for dreams.
“I pushed her water bottle off the windowsill.”
“What? Why did you do that?”
“Cause I don’t appreciate it one bit the way they came in here as if they own this place. This place is ours, and they could have asked before they brought all that noise in here—stomping around as if they had no respect.”
“You best be glad they’re here.”
“Uh! Do you hear all that noise they’re making?”
“Of course I do, Mary Alice! I’m not deaf. After that storm the other night, we were lucky anyone even bothered to come here. So many homes blown away. Just awful. You did hear the storm?”
“Yes, of course I heard the storm. How could I not hear it? All those old trees come crashing down. You know that old big oak back behind the house? It fell just like a young sapling. Pulled up by its great foundation, its roots exposed to the very sky that brought the storm. Never thought it would ever fall. It was so big...so old. I played under that tree as a child. I guess those interlopers are taking a buzz saw to it too.”
“Mary Alice,” John Martin chastised his wife of forty years. “They have no choice. This place has to be cleared out just like everything else. You should be thankful they aren’t removing stones from your own dwelling. That’s what would be happening if the little brown house had gotten blown away. Those precious stones lain by the very hands of our loving children.”
“John Martin, hush. I won’t have that kind of talk. Our little brown house is safe. It survived the storm of the fifties...April the fifteenth, I believe...and it survived this one.”
“Mary Alice, that storm was on the other side of the road.”
“Makes no difference; the little brown house survived! And it survived this time if I can keep that person from trashing it.”
“One bottle of water isn’t trashing it. She was probably thirsty.”
“Huh! She could have set it on the ground. If she can bend over to drag brush, why not bend over to pick up a water bottle? Have a little respect for a person’s dwelling. Did you not see how they came stomping over everything. They don’t care where they’re walking, how many flowers are trampled. Dragging all those limbs over everything, tearing down the grass. You saw where they put it, didn’t you? Right over there next to the fence,” Mary Alice said scornfully. “What good will that do? Just a bigger mess!”
“I don’t believe they will leave it there. Why move it all the way from the back, just to leave it there. No...no...they have a plan.”
“Yeah, some plan. Come in here, making all kinds of noise, cutting this, trampling that without one word to anyone.”
“What did you expect them to do? Just because you don’t like what they’re doing doesn’t mean everyone else feels that way.”
“They should have asked. Before they entered that fence, they should have stopped, and in a loud voice cried, ‘Do we have your permission to enter your yard? Do you want these grounds cleaned up? Do you want loud saws brought into your yard?’ But oh no, heaven forbid to have any respect. Just like that worker, putting that bottle on my windowsill. No respect. At least, she had to bend over to pick it up.” There was a light chuckle to her voice at the thought of her silently brushing the bottle from the windowsill.
“Mary Alice,” John Martin said, hoping to change the subject. “Did you hear the animals the night of the storm scrambling...
around? I know there were at least three squirrels who sought shelter under the roof of the little brown house.”

“Yeah, I heard them. Kinda reminded me of when those kids used to come here and play, all the noise they were making. I guess their home was in one of those huge trees. It was awful—so many homes destroyed…lives lost…oh, John Martin, it breaks my heart when I think about all that was lost.”

“I know, dear, and that’s why you shouldn’t fuss so when the workers come in. They are only here to help.”

“Let ‘um go across the street and work. The church across the street was damaged. See…those men are putting on a new roof. The whole top’s blown off one side,” Mary Alice remarked.

“That steeple wasn’t harmed…again. It survived the storm of the fifties, and now, years later, stands through another one. Thing must be welded on mighty good.”

“God’s hand—all you can call it—God’s hand.”

“Nonsense,” John Martin rebuked. “Why would God hold on to wood and metal and let people go flying through the air? Foolish talk, woman!”

“And what do you think held it on?”

“Good nails.”

“Good nails? Is that all you could come up with? Look, there’s that worker coming back this way…bring somebody else with her. I guess she’ll put her drink in our window, too.”

“Mary Alice, don’t be so scornful. I know what your problem is. You wish you were right out there in the middle of it all.”

“What if I do! In my young days, I would have been too, and I’d show that young filly a thing or two that’s running that buzz saw there. I’d have been right there…right in the middle of the storm, helping save lives, cleaning up…right there with the best of them. But time has a way of sneaking upon a person.” She looked at her husband. “You ever thought about that, John Martin? How time sneaks up on you, and all the things you thought you’d have time to do, all the good intentions…your youth…your life…all of it, and then there’s no time left in which to do anything. Time steals it all away.”

“Don’t think about that, Mary Alice. You weren’t thinking about that the other night when that storm came through, now were you?”

She laughed. “No, that’s one night I was thankful we were safe in our little brown house.” She laughed again. “I imagine there were a lot of people under the ground that night in little houses!”

“I heard one of those workers say there were winds over three hundred miles an hour,” John Martin said.

“I wonder why God makes tornadoes?”

“Who said He did?”

“What?”

“Tornadoes—just the winds at war—hot air/cold air can’t get along. Just like people—they have wars—people get killed…just because they can’t get along. Nations have wars just because they can’t get along. Why should we expect the winds to get along? People don’t. Don’t go blaming God for everything that can’t get along. Blame the devil. If it wasn’t for God’s hand, how much more death and destruction? Need to get your story straight before you go blaming God, Mary Alice.”

“I will have to admit, I never thought about it like that before. I just figured it was God’s angry hand coming down from the heavens.”

“Perhaps it’s the evil one’s wicked hand reaching up.”

“Well, what about those workers coming in here—stomping over everything—breaking down the flowers and grass. I guess you’re going to say that’s the work of the devil too,” Mary Alice encouraged.

“Oh, no, my dear one. The hand of God removing each branch, each torn roof, or broken picture frame. He uses the workers to heal the pain, mend the broken pieces as well as hearts. Don’t you hear the laughter of the people as
they work, see how workers and victims embrace one another. That’s the love of God spreading among the people. He’s here. He sees all this destruction. His love is touching the hearts of the workers and the tornado victims.

“The workers aren’t trampling over anything that won’t put out again. The flowers will bloom again—the grass will stand tall again—the birds will sing again. Listen…you hear them? The birds are singing again already.”

“It’s hard to hear them over the loud buzz saws.”

“When the workers rest and the saws are silent, listen—you can hear them. Stop being jealous just because you can’t be out there with them.”

“If I could… I’d be right there…helping.”

“I know…then was your time…now is theirs.”

“Shh…here comes two of them. That’s the one who sat that drink in the windowsill. Does she have another drink?”

“Shh…”

“Look, Karen, isn’t that pretty. That must have taken a lot of time and love to build,” said one worker to her friend.

“That’s beautiful…so different,” Karen Tanner replied, leaning upon the windowsill of the little brown house.

“John Martin…Mary Alice. He died in 1924, and she died in 1922. She was born in 1858.”

“What about him?”

“I can’t quite make out when he was born. This little house is over seventy-five years old.”

“I see you like the little brown house,” another worker commented as he walked over to the two women. “I’m almost sixty and it was here a long time before then. We used to come in here at night, play around.”

“You played in here at night?” Karen said, a grin upon her face.

A mischievous smile spread across the worker’s face as he remembered. “Oh, yes. Of course my parents didn’t know…until someone told them about seeing me in here. We didn’t hurt nothing though. We’d always tell somebody how we saw someone in the little brown house…always wanting them to look inside. Of course, they would play brave and daring, marching right up to the windowsill and leaning in, and we’d push them right inside. We’d run, screaming like every grave had opened up, and whomever was dumped inside would be coming out of that little brown house as if there really was a ghost after him. It was just good clean fun.” He fondly lay his hand on the roof of the little brown house. “I’m glad it survived the storm.”

“I saw a sign over there stated this cemetery was found in 1870. That’s over a hundred years. Most of these graves are very old.”

“I noticed some very old markers over near the cedar that was downed.” Their voices softened as they walked away, continuing the work of clearing the cemetery where the little brown house sheltered the graves of John Martin and Mary Alice.
A collection of works by Calhoun Community College students, faculty, staff and alumni.