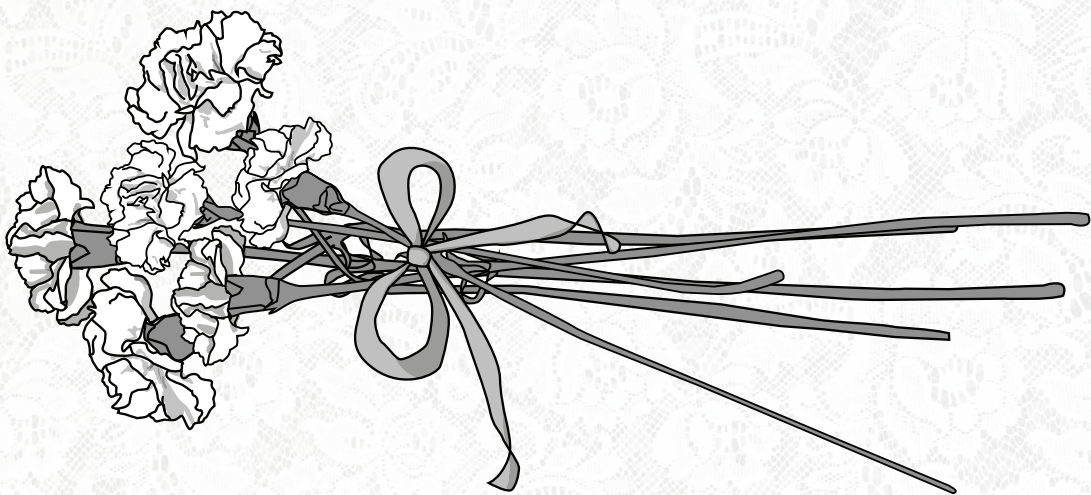


Bittersweet Ruminations



written and illustrated by
Jaida Brown Hancock

BITTERSWEET RUMINATIONS

By

Jaida Brown Hancock

To the 85-year-old matriarch of my family:

Oma

*You nearly always cry at my poems and always
always help me remember who I am*

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*"Whatever pain you can't get rid of,
whatever joy you can't contain; make
it your creative offering."
-Susan Cain*

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Dark

Dark

.05mm

Growing up, my siblings (or my friends, I can't really remember which) taught me the hilarity of declaring in a distressed voice, "Oh my *gosh!* Your epidermis is showing!"
A smile still manages to dance down from my brain to my face whenever I recall how clever we believed ourselves to be

The human epidermis, or outermost layer of skin, is only .05 mm thick
Printer paper is 0.1 mm thick
If I pasted two epidermides one on top of the other and printed on them, likely I could fool you into thinking it a regular piece of mundanity

How is it that half the thickness of a solitary sheet of paper has caused wars, ineffable torment, and multitudinous sorrow?
How can something so thin divide so deep?

I could pretend that the .05 doesn't matter
Because it has never gotten *me* pulled over, harassed, or dismissed
I grapple every day with how I can provide space for healing while simultaneously attempting to bridge the divide

But, if I'm being honest, that minuscule space from the surface does matter
It matters because I feel so deep
Way deeper than .05 mm, to be sure
And when I see hurt, I mourn within my deep
And in my bumbling way, sometimes I come out all wrong
When all I want to do is LOVE

Though I will never fully understand the special brand of ache that saturates the words "Black, Indigenous, People of Color,"
I do know agony and anguish
They and I have been acquainted some time now
They don't care about the .05mm

So, if you see me coming your way in my awkwardness, I beg you let me sit with you
I would love to walk with you
And witness your story
Since underneath the .05, we're both human
We're humans who have loved, lost, and lived
And we continue to live
We are children of the Divine trying to make our way

And the only way,
The only way
To get there
Will be
Together





HELP

If ever you need help
You can call on me
Trustworthy? I am
You're never trapped

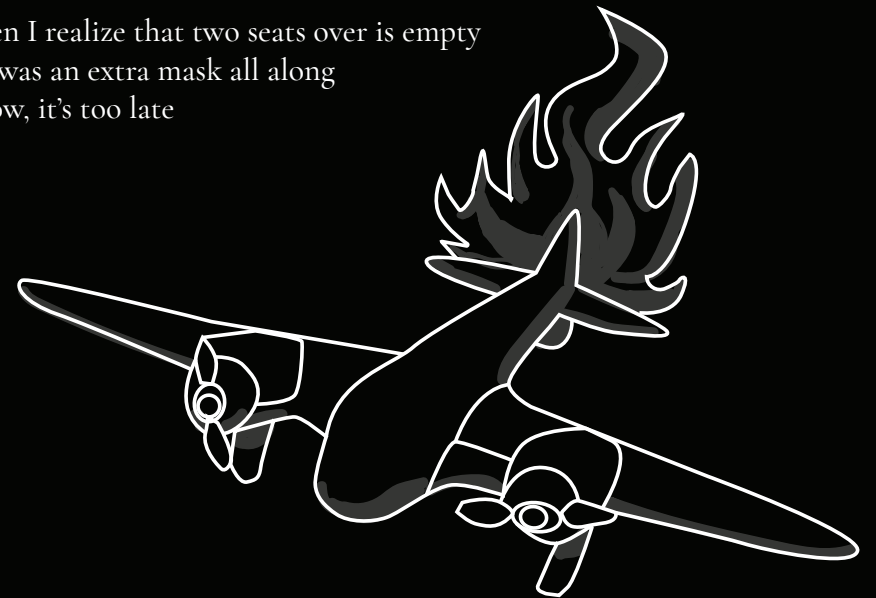
THE PLANE'S ON FIRE

Sometimes life
Feels like the plane I'm in is on fire
And its descent is picking up speed

Over the dozen or so times I've flown,
The woman or man in an immaculate uniform (that for some reason
is always some shade between navy blue and raccoon stripe)
without fail reminds passengers, in case of an emergency:
"If you are traveling with a child or someone who requires assistance,
secure your [oxygen] mask on first, and then assist the
other person"

But, as the plane's jarring rattles intensify, I'm vaguely cognizant that
everyone's mask but my own has dropped
The masks fall down from some unknown place
And swing violently like yellow nooses that give life rather than take it
So I help until my world grows blurry

It's then I realize that two seats over is empty
There was an extra mask all along
But now, it's too late



BUT 7

You are but seven
Seven, my dear!
What a wonderful age
Full of fun, games, and cheer

And you told me you wished you could die

Never before the total encompassment of the experience of parenthood
did I understand what it means for a heart to undergo the
proverbial breakage
Not really

my heart, My Heart,
My H E A R T
They say it is the hardest working muscle in the body
Who are they? It matters not
What matters is that this beautiful, strong, hard-working muscle...
it is breaking
Rather, it is already broken
It has been ravaged and ripped at over and over again
Yet, it still pumps

How can something labor so tirelessly while being
So
Completely
Broken

It hurts my beat-up heart to hear those words leave your lips because
you are seven
But in all truth it will hurt if ever I hear them again
Whether you be twelve, forty-six, or eighty
It hurts because you are woven throughout *my* most
hard-working muscle

There is more to my heart than you know though
Because tucked away on my poor abused heart are *tiny little stitches*
Those stitches are made from the love notes you have written me
They are made up of the secret smiles we share, and the dance parties
The giant hugs, endless books, and gentle spoken words that find their
way out of those same lips
They float into my consciousness like dandelion seeds being blown
into the welcoming arms of the wind
They drift languidly from my brain all the way down to my heart to
form a special kind of stitch that can bear up under the most
heavy of burdens

Love is bewildering
How can one thing—love—
How can *love* both break a heart and repair it?

I know you are confused
Did you know that I am too?
That is why sometimes—despite my very best efforts—I fail and lose
my temper
I snatch and grope as my temper wiggles its way out of my grasp
“Come back!” I want to yell
“You can’t leave me like this! It’s not right!”

It is because I know too much
And I know nothing at all

I am so consumed with the wanting to protect you
And to protect me
And to protect everyone else
That I sometimes forget you are just as bewildered as I

My heart is oh so broken
But it is also mended
And mending
Because after you spoke those devastating words you snuggled me
And we talked about things you love
And I cried
And you squeezed my hand

I think your little seven-year-old beating heart looks a lot like mine
It is just younger
It will endure many more abuses
But it will also be filled with the iridescent stitches that only grow
magnificently out of the moments that will sustain you for
the rest of your life





TOXIC BROWNIES

The world has been feeding you brownies
Only, with a pinch of wolfsbane
Betcha didn't realize chocolate can cover the taste of almost anything!

Nobody ever really asks what the ingredients are
And, *you* know,
FDA labeling loopholes

One bite tastes like "crying is for babies"
Except
If you don't allow yourself to cry, all those tears will swell up inside
and drown your soul

Another bite says, "all the pleasure you need is *one. click. away.*"
How can that be,
If objects are incapable of replicating the caress of those who have
loved in the truest sense of the word

A third bite has hints of, "caring for children is a woman's job"
But, c'mon, caring is a *human* job

By now you might be feeling a little strange
However, you still choose to take another bite
This bite's flavor is "avoid being a loser at all costs" with perhaps a
dash of "losing is unacceptable"
Only, losing does not a loser make
Embracing loss actually means you win

You swallow the last bite, which screams on its way down that "anger
and pride are the only acceptable emotions"

Yet
The times you've felt the most seen have been the moments you
allowed yourself to hold hands with vulnerability

Without warning, you feel your body rapidly losing function
Numbness spreads and everything slows
You're laying wherever it is you happened to fall, trapped inside your
paralyzed body,
Wondering how something that tasted so good could've done this to you

At the same time, you are brought to the awareness that although the
brownies of the world are distributed freely they are *never*
given without a price

FIREFLIES

I have glimpsed fireflies by the light of day many times
I am always struck by how unremarkable they are in daylight
With their plain black antenna and sunflower-seed-like bodies

Sometimes, I neglect to remember the truth that the firefly's majesty
can only exist in the absence of the light

How easy it is to forget that it is in the darkest hours
That mothers across ages and seasons
Have rocked their sick babies into peace

The dark is where all who have ever existed began
It is where we grew and thrived in safety and nourishment

Big bang or God,
In the beginning
The light was divided from the darkness

The dark is the only place we will obtain the sleep that will renew
us over and over

If not for the dark,
Light would have no consequence

Do not be afraid
The dark is there to gift you *light*



Light

Light

BOOTIFUL

“Hey bootiful”

Sometimes when I walk into a room that you’re in, this is how you
greet me

Even though you’re eleven years old and know how to properly
pronounce the word “beautiful,” I still find it extremely
endearing that this particular pronunciation is reserved
specifically for me

You utter those two words just often enough that I feel inordinate
delight whenever I hear them

They bound from your lips like an exuberant puppy and jump right
into the eager arms of my heart

Surely this is only feasible because every time you speak those words
into existence, it’s with absolute sincerity

Your definition of beauty diverges from most others in the world
Coming from you, the word feels like I’ve been detected all the way
from the inside out

You have a special way of seeing me like that

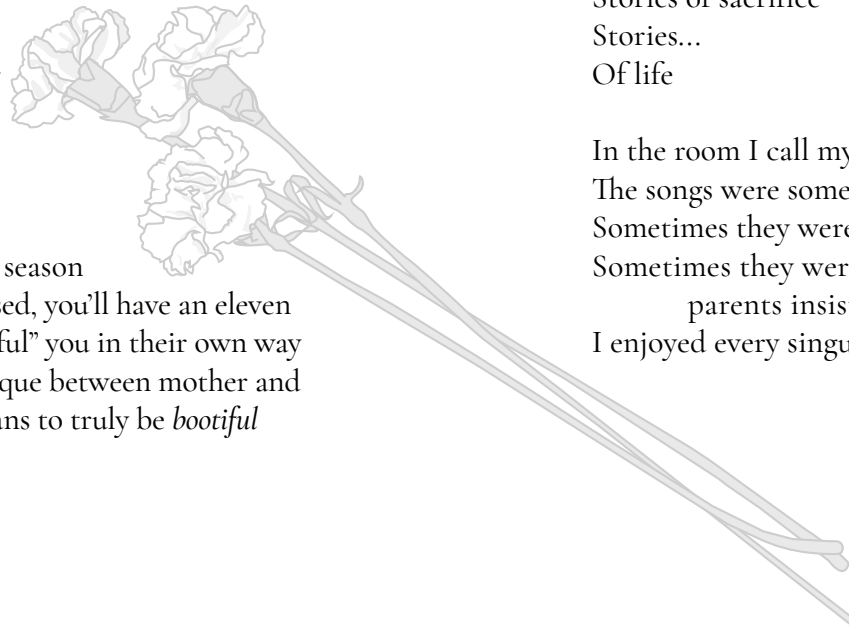
“Hey bootiful”

This combination of eleven letters and one space means more to me
than you know

When you say it, sometimes what I hear is:
I love you even though you make mistakes, or
I appreciate how you exist in the world, or
I know how hard you try, and I’m grateful

So, hey bootiful

I’m extremely thankful that you’re mine for a season
And maybe, someday after this season has passed, you’ll have an eleven
year old of your own who’ll “hey bootiful” you in their own way
Then, you’ll join me in the knowing that is unique between mother and
child and feel the depth of what it means to truly be *bootiful*



THE FIRE AND THE TRAVELERS THREE

I am a fire

I burn bright and dwell deep within the woods inside an unremarkable
cabin— unattractive some might even say

There are small cracks in the cabin

Occasional drafts find their way through these cracks

Within this cabin where I live,

I have the blessing of providing warmth from the most bitter of
winter nights

All are welcome round my hearth

I have aided in cooking the food that nourished the mortal bodies
surrounding my glow

No weary wanderer is turned away from the comforts I can supply
It matters not whether the individual be rich or poor, male or female,
fat, thin, old, young, whole, broken, and so on

I am here

Round me have stories been told

Stories of matchless love

Stories of loss

Stories of unimaginable horror

Stories of sacrifice

Stories...

Of life

In the room I call my home, songs have been sung

The songs were sometimes off key

Sometimes they were lovely

Sometimes they were mumbled out of the lips of children whose
parents insisted they partake

I enjoyed every singular one

Within the vastness of this world, over and over again I meet three
travelers:

The first traveler acknowledges me and is grateful that I am
Before leaving my presence, they throw on an extra log to nourish me
and express their gratitude

The second traveler expects that the next sojourner to come upon
my unremarkable cabin will nourish my flame
They walk away failing to recognize the energy I have burned up to
give them relief
I did not ask them to provide me with what keeps my flame alight
because I thought they would know
Despite their oversight, I still burn
Because, if I don't, who will?

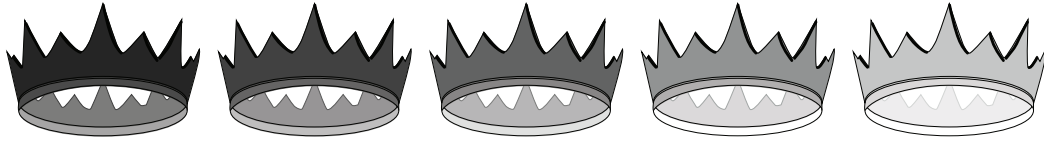
The third traveler is the one who abuses what I am
They throw ice upon me—
Upon this gift I have so willingly given, simply because they like the
hiss the ice makes as it melts within my depths
This traveler dispassionately watches as my incandescence slowly
Slowly
Fades
Until all that is left is the most negligible of embers

It is painful to not be able to fulfill what I was made to do
Traveler three had no more need of me and perhaps did not realize or
did not care that I still had work to do
More bodies to warm
More light to provide

It is after the third traveler leaves that I hold on
But simultaneously wonder if I should stop being what I am
Stop giving so much because I never know when the third traveler
will, by and by, come into my home, my sanctuary, my peace

Inevitably, as I question why I was born to be fire, a pilgrim arrives
to light me anew
And I let them
Because I am given the chance to burn up something old in order to
create something new
And even though I know that I will see many, many more travelers
Travelers of every type
I will choose to keep burning
Because I am a fire





SITTING WITH QUEENS

My cup runneth over
I look around the room,
So Entirely Full,
Wondering what kind of good thing I must've done to be deserving
of the privilege to be here

I am sitting with Queens
They are absolute, stunning, wise, and fierce
They have seen and felt and lived things that many never will
They have been painfully stretched and broken in order to grow
into these stronger versions of what they were when they
first arrived

I am in the midst of true greatness
This is the kind of greatness that can only be achieved through the
striving to be good rather than great
These Queens intimately know the difference between the two

These glorious women sit across from me and beside me,
With such humility that you would recognize who they are *not* from
their clothes, but from their manner, and the gentle power
with which they speak

Their smiles tell me that even though they have seen the worst of the
world, they *still choose joy*
I don't even know how I know this
But I perceive it in the depths of that place inside me as if it's always
been there

The collective wisdom in the room is so thick I feel that I might be
able to stand up, twirl around, and have a little of it catch on
the hem of my calf-length dress

And the love here, in this moment...that is even thicker
It is a kind of love and acceptance that speaks to something even
deeper than the physical

It resonates within a place that is so beyond this world that sometimes
I forget it's there
These Queens know themselves
They know who and what they are without anyone needing to confirm
the truth of it
This kind of knowing only comes through decades of struggle and testing
It was not easily won, and they still have to fight to keep that truth
burning brightly

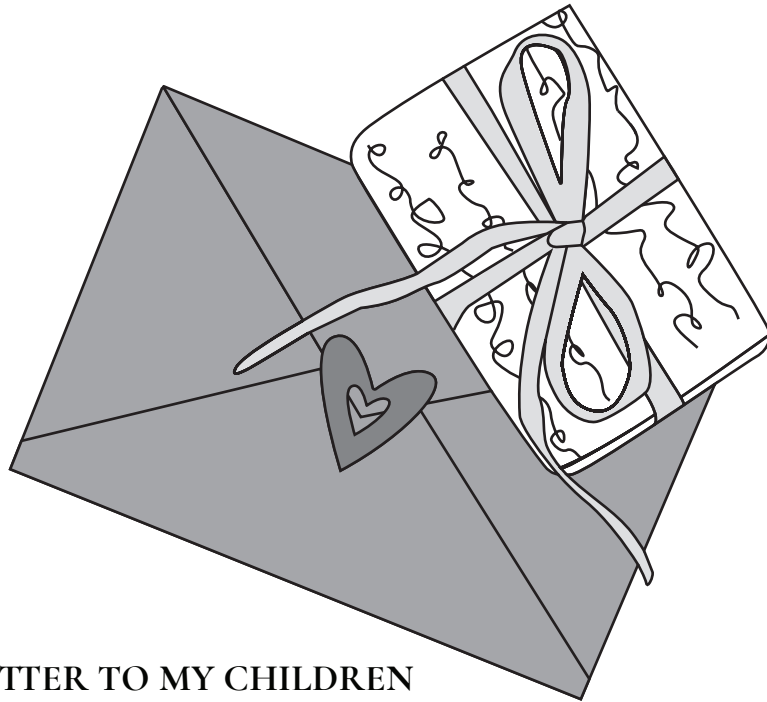
They know that *what others think of them* is none of their business
But, they have made *what others think of themselves* their business
They use language that is leaven
Because words matter
And the Queens' words form in order to rise and lift rather than
tear down

It is such a remarkably beautiful gift for me to be sitting among these
blessed spirits
I am Feeling. So. Much.
The bigness inside me is swelling more greatly than I thought possible

This moment feels like my favorite herbal tea that has only five
ingredients, all roasted to perfection, and engenders a feeling
of luxury every time I drink it
This is the first sip on a frigid winter's day when my fingers are so cold
they hurt a little when they bend
The comfort spreads outward from my heart until my fingers no
longer sting

I recognize this juncture can't last
That wouldn't be good for me anyway, to never have something to
contrast it with and never again experience gratitude for the
lovely moments

I never want to forget this night though
The night that I sat with Queens



A LOVE LETTER TO MY CHILDREN

Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh
You cannot possibly remember this
There was a time when within my temple I housed your heart, body,
and mind
Every day you grew—another piece of me, forming into you

This is why I feel so much
When you are in pain or delight
Because you are little pieces of me detached but still there

I never could have known it would come to pass like this
Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh
This elation and distress
With one point of origin
Within one being (or more) the capability to within me create a war

For you I reach toward ideals
Sometimes I see you do not comprehend
How I ache to protect you
Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh

Can you be a child for just one day more?

I shall let you fly
And fall too
Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh
I shall gather you in after the crash leaves you broken and feeling
unable to mend
I shall share in your anguish as I gift you more pieces of me
Yet I will find myself more whole than before

Can you know how much I pray for you?
Can you know how much I care?
Can you know of the numberless tears which have rolled down my
face in despair?

Wondering whether the love I have will ever be enough
To sustain you through the times that come
Those times will be so tough

At the conclusion of this mortal part
Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh
I will proclaim these thoughts with all heart:

Every piece
Every tear
Every late night
Every scare
Every joyous time and strain
Every thought stuck in my brain
Every time I held you tight
Every fear you felt at night
Every meal I made for you
Every sketch for me you drew
Every glorious smile you shared

Every gripe you ever aired
Every snuggle I partook
Every time we read a book
All of this and more
All of it I shall adore

You took these pieces of me and gave me
New life
New meaning
New thought
New vision
You pushed me and stretched me to places unknown
Pieces I did not know existed have grown

Am I perfect?
Well, no
Does that matter?
I think not so

Because blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh,
We will develop and expand and flourish and then
We will develop and expand and flourish again

With you by my side
Through eternity we will glide
And grow and grow and grow



RIDING WITH JESS

I have this thing that happens to me on very rare occasions
It feels dichotomous—
Available to all, yet solely mine
Expansive, yet contained in my apparently-the-size-of-a-balled-up-
fist heart
Exceedingly joyful, yet sad for the knowledge it will soon end

I know this moment will be brief because I've experienced this before
Certainly more often than I've taken the time to record

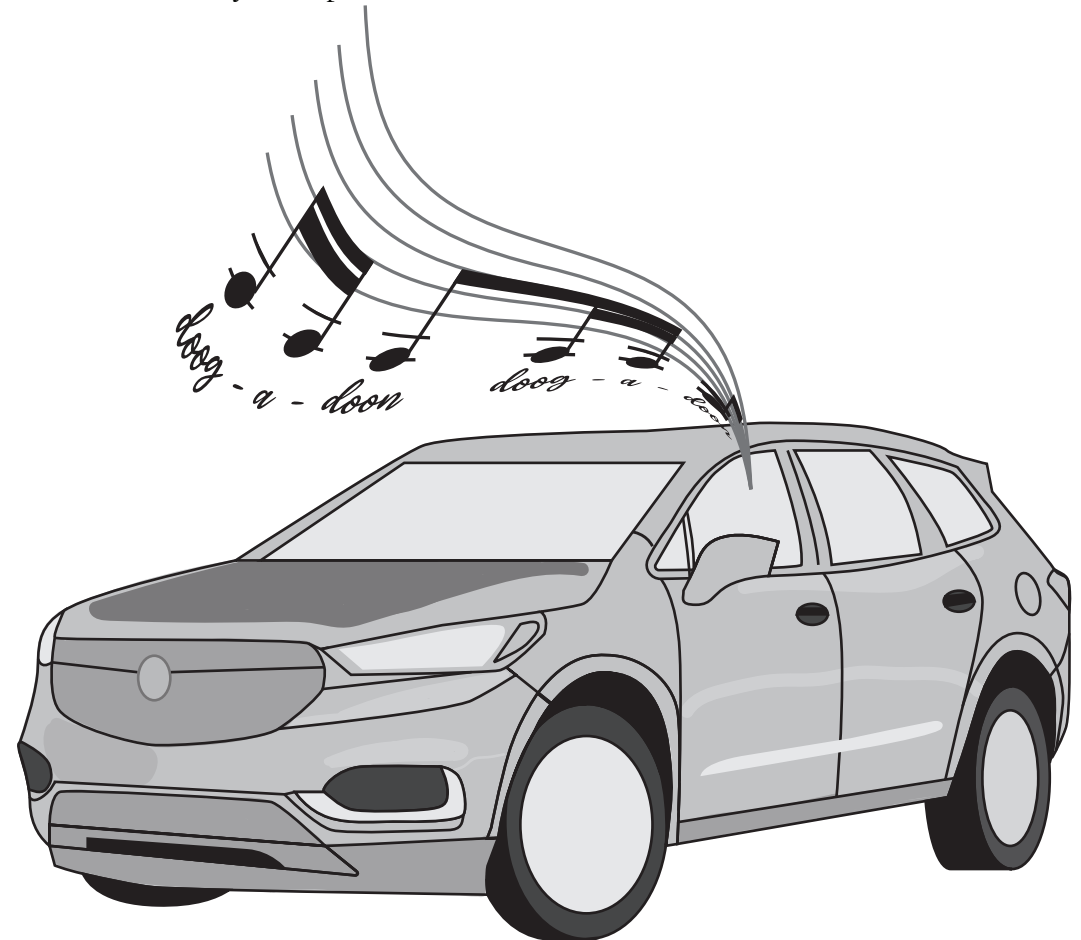
You are driving me home after I revamped a 4-foot tall wooden bunny
you'll put in your front lawn
We're coming up on Easter and you love decorating for holidays
You are all the more dear to me because of this

You pull up one of your favorite songs to play over the car speakers
It's called "Movin' Right Along" and it is sung by the muppets named
Fozzie and Kermit
It's from the muppet movie that was released in 1979

Even though that movie came out 43 years ago, you still don't know
all the lyrics
That doesn't stop you though
You are thoroughly in your element
You're singing the song as though it's brand new and still novel
You are using the full power of your lungs to give this song the proper
support it deserves

You keep telling me about how much you like the "doog-a-doon doog-
a-doon" sound Kermit repeatedly makes throughout the song
And all I can think about is how desperately I wish something like a
Polaroid picture for feelings existed

What you couldn't have possibly known is that while you were singing your
heart out, I was having one of those special moments that makes all
the hard parts of life worth enduring
Even though it's something small— sharing a loved song and singing it like
you personally own it—
I still feel like I've just been gifted the world
I'm seeing you in my periphery and I feel so grateful to be your niece
Not everyone gets to see you like this, which truly is a shame
But I did
And I think you're spectacular



THE SYNCHRONICITY OF LOVE

I'm laying in the dark with a grin on my face
It only lasts for a few seconds
But it's enough time to recognize what a strange sensation it is to
smile in the dark with no one there to witness the act

It's some time in those hours between night and morning proper
You just scampered your little four-year-old body over my not-so-
little thirty-four-year-old one and snuggled yourself so near
to me it's almost like we're glued together
I wrap my arm around you and I hear you whisper, "Mmmmm. You
comfy," in your voice that is unbearably endearing and only
possible because you are four

I notice how cold your body is compared to mine
It's the end of October and the nights have been that distinct brand
of crisp-chilly that only comes this time of year
As you cuddle up just a fraction of a space closer, you murmur, "I
love you, Mama," almost as though it's an afterthought
You're starting to breathe a little more deeply now
"I love you too, my baby"...so, so, so, so, so much

I can tell you're falling toward the precipice of a sleep that can only
occur next to someone you trust implicitly
As the expanding and contracting of your four-year-old lungs slows I
note that your body has warmed up under my touch
There is something curiously fulfilling about knowing that in such a
short time I was able to do this just by being near
It feels like this moment of transferring some of my body heat to you
while still maintaining my own is a physical manifestation of
what it is to love you
Love is beautiful that way
Now you are fully asleep
You mumble a couple of unintelligible words and I smile again
because apparently you sleep talk
I used to sleep talk when I was a child too

I take in a deep breath and savor this moment
The touch of your soft hair against my cheek, your unique smell,
And the way that, somehow, our temperatures have achieved
synchronicity

I feel an unfiltered joy and completeness that has only visited me in
the briefest snatches throughout my short time on this earth
It's these moments that sustain me through the rest of this very
difficult existence

Now my breath is deepening
As I'm drifting to that same place as you, I'm grateful to have touched
a little piece of heaven





BABY SHAMPOO

It seems fitting, somehow, that I should write this now
You are 5 years old and the fifth and final child of my womb

I'm mortified to admit that I still wash your hair with baby shampoo
It's called "Baby Magic" and the bottle tells me that it's "Made with
Real Lavender and Chamomile"
Naturally, the lettering is white on a dark violet colored strip that sits
atop the light lavender bottle
Because, *marketing*

But I'll tell you what— they were right about the name
It sure is magic, baby
Combined with the singular smell of you, the scent is marvelous
I treasure when your hair has just dried and we're snuggled up in your
bed, reading together
You're still young enough that when I bring my face near and draw in
a full breath to absorb both the smell and the moment, you
don't ask me, "Why are you being so weird, mom?" like your
older siblings would

But if you did ask me that question, my answer would be this:
It might seem weird to you, but your hair smells like middle-of-the-
night breastfeeding when you used to clutch my finger as tight
as your wee hand could manage so as to show me that as you
take, you also give
This is the pattern of our relationship

Your hair smells like you when you were fevered and only able to
sleep on my chest
Your hair smells like the first smile I ever saw you form,
The first step you ever took,
And the first time I heard you stumble over the word Mama with
those perfect little pink lips

It might seem weird to you
But your hair smells like love

