

River Voices

Spring 2024

River Voices Spring 2024

Editors

Shauna Hayes
Sean Colcleasure

Assistant Editor

Kelli Loughrige

Student Editor

Sidney Gould

River Voices is an annual literary magazine published by the English Department at Muskegon Community College. It showcases and celebrates the work of current students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

We are grateful to all our contributors, and in addition, would like to express special thanks to the faculty and staff members who collaborate to make this publication possible: Becky Evans, Kevin Kyser, Erin Hoffman, Ronnie Jewell, Kelli Loughrige, and Diana Casey. Thank you for your encouragement, support, and contributions.

River Voices is sponsored by Sigma Kappa Delta (SKD), Muskegon Community College's English Honor Society. The student members and officers contribute to the magazine, help with editing, and participate actively in the bi-annual Creative Writing and Art Contest. If you are interested in learning more about SKD, please visit: <https://www.muskegoncc.edu/englishcommunications/sigma-kappa-delta/>.

If you would like to submit your creative work, we encourage submissions of poetry, prose, essays, art, and photography. Please visit: [muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices](https://www.muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices) for further details.

Cover Art: *Empowerment*

Cover Artist: Anaida Avakova

Cover Artist Statement:

Empowerment enlivens a strong sense of possibility. The feeling that transpires when the most difficult and nearly impossible becomes attainable. The red circle symbolizes the strength and power one experiences when the goal is finally reached after overcoming obstacles (towering blocks). The sense of empowerment is centralized in the shadow figure as it confronts all the obstacles as if to say, "Everything is within my ability."

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ARTWORK

Fall 2023, First Place -“Garbage Painting #2” by Camber Tanis

Winter 2024, First Place -“Outside at the Shelter” by Camber Tanis

PHOTOGRAPHY

Fall 2023, First Place -“City Shortcuts” by Ashley Streng

Winter 2024, First Place -“Buoy Shack” by Finn Conner

POETRY

Fall 2023, First Place -“Bigger Dreams” by August Hawley

Winter 2024, First Place -“A Waking Fire” by Jessana Sorto Gavarrete

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Fall 2023, First Place -“Outside Hospital Room #243” by Hailey Witner

Winter 2024, First Place -“Bikini Girl” by Taylor Johnson

FICTION

Fall 2023, First Place -“I Want to Be a Storyteller” by Liam Knisely

Winter 2024, First Place -“The Angel that Came to See Me” by Taylor Johnson

10-MINUTE PLAY CONTEST 2023

What the Puck? by F.J. Hartland

Clawed Monet

Emma Marshall

You were like a Monet
A pond of reeds and algae
Where water lilies float above it all

I was but a pond of green,
The background to your sea
Of gentle, lonely, golden-white stars

I never could be
What you wanted from me
But still, I tried despite the pain

And then, like the algae
I sank below thee
And became the background to your mighty glow

Bigger Dreams

August Hawley

this is an ode to the boy turning gray, to the boy with the rust between his bones. he's searching for a heart only to find scrap metal or a stopwatch or a time bomb. he doesn't know what love is, only that this can't be it.

I won't tell you the answer, darling. you'll have to learn it over and over either way. you've always known it's normal to do the wrong thing — to lie, sometimes — if it's for the right reasons. but you don't know, yet, that you don't have to fall in love, you don't have to be quiet, you don't even have to swallow the blood in your mouth. it's all you, angel.

maybe this isn't an ode at all, but instead, a love letter to a boy who thought himself unlovable, who built himself into a tin man, who got poisoned by his own skin. I'm telling him that he's safe, that this feeling won't last much longer, that he'll never have to be fifteen again. in some ways, I'm still swallowing the blood in my mouth, still being quiet, always lying for the right reasons

from here, even a step in the wrong direction is a step that gets you somewhere else. forgive yourself for all the times before. the scars on your skin will fade away, the scars everywhere else will turn to white noise. pain is still pain, even if you can live with it; metal is still metal when it's not cold to the touch.

no, not a love letter, a eulogy: dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mourn the loss of someone who was never really here at all. if only he'd checked the time. if only he'd screamed louder. if only he had a heart. maybe then, he would've been worth saving. maybe.

I went about this all wrong. to a boy long dead, I'm sorry.
this is an atonement. you didn't know love isn't meant to
bleed. you did what you could; I did what I
had to. that's okay. we both had our reasons. and I got us
this far, but angel, it's all you from here.

A Canvas for Death

Skylar Carlisle

Hatred pierces through me
It paints itself on my body as though I am a canvas
A work of art assembled together by desperation and hurt
Scraped over and torn up
It appears visible in the red that pools through my broken skin
As if the tainted claws of death are trying to rip me apart; however, its
touch is as gentle as a leaf that falls upon the ground
Death caresses me
Soothes me
Cares for me in its hold
I am captivated by its lure and compelled to do whatever it wishes
Whatever it takes
Yet it doesn't free me
It leaves me in this trance

Snow in the Sky

Teri Mallos



Photography

The Road Home

Jonah Hayes



Photography

The Traveler

Maria Basaj

Fair wanderer, drifting abroad at sea,
What beauties does your mind conceive?
What wondrous journeys do you travel unseen?
While you stare out at the bleak reality below,
Your vision not at all limited by the scope of your window,
Does your skin burn with the harshness of desert wind?
 Or perhaps you dart from reef to reef, your mind's eye as your fins?
 Oh, to feel your heart swell, as you spring from tree to tree!
 Leave your breath behind you, leaping through flowers with glee.
What greater bliss than to fly in the clouds, to escape the world below!
What greater pain than to come crashing down when someone says, "Hello."

Outside Hospital Room #243

Hailey Witner

I don't want to write this.

Currently, I'm sitting outside a hospital room filled with my family. If I weren't writing, my hands would be on my face, the heels of my palms digging into my eyes as I try to stay strong. I like to imagine that, if my hands are strong enough to hold back my despair, I'd be strong enough to later hold my sister while she cries.

But I'm writing, so I can't keep myself strong in that way. Writing still helps, though — gives me something to focus on.

Everything feels like it's too much — the too-bright fluorescent lights assault my eyes, their incessant drone barely audible above the symphony of monitors that echo down the long hall in front of me. The offensive white walls are too sterile, the stench of disinfectant too strong, and even the plastic feel of the chair beneath me is too hard. Everything is too much, and I just want it all to stop. I want it all to just be okay. The only thing keeping me sane is my grip on this pencil in my hand.

For those who don't know, my grandmother is lying in the bed in the room behind me. At the moment, she's saying goodbye to all the people in her life that she knows, because that's all she can do. She doesn't know if she'll leave her hospital room alive.

My aunts and uncles surround her. My mother, her daughter, is by her side holding her hand, trying to keep herself sane while the woman who raised her slips away. My sisters stand by the window holding each other, the only cousins in the room. My other cousins are downstairs in the cafe, not knowing how to deal with the death of a woman they barely know.

I'm outside because I know Grandma too well.

I'm not strong enough to deal with this. I'm not. One moment, I'm at home, and the next my parents and I are driving four hours because they say Grandma won't live through the night. My mom's been trying to stay strong for me and for herself, and we're both pretending that she didn't break down crying in the driveway just a few hours before. I know that if I were to go back in the room, I would find my mom laughing with my grandmother about some story from her childhood that we've all heard a thousand times. I can't go back in there though. I can't.

I feel like I'm drowning. The irony is that, right now, my grandmother, a pillar in my life, is also drowning — the difference is, while I'm drowning

under the weight of emotion, she's drowning as fluid fills her lungs. Another difference is that one of us will probably make it out alive.

Conceptually, I understand that death is an integral part of life. Everything and everyone ends. But, I've never had to deal with death in this way before. Sure, I've had people in my life die, but I've always dealt with their deaths in a detached sort of way. My grandma's death is another story.

Realistically, she's been on this earth for 93 good years. That's longer than most get. But she can't leave me. No one has the same humor she does. No one laughs like she does. No one meticulously curls her hair like she does, watches Law & Order with me like she does, or tells stories like she does.

I can't be in the room because, if I am, all I'll be able to think about is the time that she cut across four lanes of Detroit traffic to get Arby's. All I'll be able to think about is the story she loves to tell about how she and Grandpa met, and how happy she'll be to finally see him when he dies. And if I think about that, I'll start thinking of the afterlife, and my personal fears about it – if it is just a deep dark nothing, she'll never see Grandpa again. And I know that she wants to so horribly bad. He's been gone for forty long, lonely years.

I can't be in the room because it'll remind me of just how many people she's impacted in her life. She raised seven children, and has forty grandchildren that, without fail, she writes birthday cards to every year. (The woman is the sole reason CVS remains open.) I'll be reminded of how she knows every single person her kids ever went to school with, and how her name is known throughout all the churches in the area due to her talking to anyone and everyone she ever came into contact with. If I go in that room, she'll look at me with those too-blue eyes of hers: my eyes. She'll smile at me, and I know the dam will break because I'll think of how many smiles she has doled out to people over the years.

On a less positive note, I'll be reminded of how those eyes wouldn't be able to see me breaking, since she has been losing the majority of her vision for the last ten years. And she wouldn't be able to see me smile back at her. She smiles at nothing as she embraces (what possibly could be) nothing. Almost poetic, in a way.

All I've been able to think is that it isn't fair. She can't leave. She can't leave without getting to shoot the shit with me one more time. She can't leave without eating another caramel sundae. She can't leave without her Vernor's float (which she keeps asking for, and yet people keep bringing her Pepsi for some reason. She hates Pepsi). She can't leave without hugging me one more time, which is difficult now because she's in a bed, and I feel as if I hugged her too hard, she'd break. She can't leave.

Like a petulant child, I keep repeating that it's not fair. It's not fair. She can't leave yet. She cannot leave.

But, I know she wants to. Not because she's in pain; she's not in pain. She just hates being an inconvenience more than anything. That's another reason why I'm sitting here. I feel like I'm almost preserving her dignity, in a way. She knows I'm here, but she's glad I'm not actively seeing her in a hospital bed, being hand fed bland food because she is too weak to lift her arms. My grandmother is fiercely independent and very proper. She hates being seen as weak, and she can't accept sympathy or dependency. I know that, while she loves seeing everyone, she's uncomfortable being seen this way.

I feel like an ass, writing this. I can't look at her, but she can't leave. What kind of person am I to dictate her fate? What kind of granddaughter am I to insist she stays on this earth, praying that she walks out of this hospital, when I know all she wants is the opposite? Selfish. I am so incredibly selfish. I don't have the guts to not be selfish, but that's no excuse. I know better.

I know that everyone dies eventually. Grandma is no exception. I need to deal with this future absence, this concept of loss. I keep saying I can't deal, but I'm going to have to try. Writing this, even though I will likely burn the evidence later, helps me process. I don't want to write what I'm thinking out, as it's too complex to fully explain, but I need to try.

One of my teachers in high school said that love is to will the good of another, and I love my grandmother so incredibly much. If this is what's good for her, if this is meant to be, I need to accept that, no matter how much it devastates me. I will eventually move on. I will not forget, but it is my prerogative to move on. I'll remember her as I know her — a spunky, little old woman who loves potato chips, mysteries, and her family. I have stories that I can cherish forever, and pass down to those who did not know her.

Right now, though, I will grieve a future without my grandmother. I'm allowed to.

My mom's waving me inside. She says it's time to say goodbye. I think I'm ready to, now.

(Also, I found her a Vernor's. I can't wait to see her smile when she finds out she can finally have that float.)

Finest Bits of Matter

Carter Sibson

The finest bits of matter
Bitter yet so sweet.
They get my heartbeat going
And rid me of my sleep.

The warm taste of Columbia
Or Christmas time in France.
I don't care if it spills a bit
Just get it in my hands.

Cause I've got a thesis due
Plus a slow start to this morning.
And the finest bits of matter
Are all that keep me going.

I Want to be a Storyteller

Liam Knisley

College Application #42

Clever and Unique Essay Question for you to Answer that We Judge your Entire Personality and Worthiness as a Human-Being off of #7:

What are career aspirations? What are your goals and ambitions that attending [INSERT PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITY NAME HERE] would help you achieve?

I want to be a storyteller. No, not the “old, wizened man in a lavish chair by the fireplace retelling ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ for the millionth time” kind of storyteller.

(Seriously though, that story sucks. Who the fuck sells a cow for beans? I don’t give two shits if they’re magic or not—they’re *beans*. Even if they lead to a magical castle in the sky with gold-egg-laying geese and treasure-hoarding giants, in reality, you’d be mutilated by those giants in seconds—your viscera splattering across the pristine, angel-white clouds, painting a bloody canvas that even Francisco Goya would squirm at. All while the geese peck and honk at your twitching eyeballs [because geese are assholes]. Case and point, terrible story. Anyway . . .)

I want to tell stories that nobody understands—stories that make Harold Bloom say: “The fuck is this?” [read like General Butt Fucking Naked from the hit musical *The Book of Mormon*] (now *there’s* a story). I want my stories to make no sense at all because I tell stories to make sense of the world around me, and no one can truly experience what it’s like to be me—to be inside my weird mind and to see life as I see it. I don’t care if my stories are “not relatable” or “not applicable to a broader audience.” Do you think I’m writing this for you, you narcissistic cretin? I want to tell stories that the “girl who doodles on her math test for forty-five minutes and suddenly realizes she’s only on the third problem” can relate to—stories for the wallflowers and weirdos of the world. I want to create odd-ball works of art that the people who play role playing games, the anime lovers, and the ones who’ve taken Zoloft and Adderall since middle school because their brains are so fucked up that they’ve not been “normal” for a second might see themselves in—people who think to themselves:

Huh, maybe I could stop Ketharin the Unleashed from destroying the world and be the hero. Maybe I could do that someday.

I want to be a storyteller because escaping to a fantasy land where I can live out any dream I've ever wanted is a million times better than sitting in my therapist's decrepit office while she asks: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your depression?" for the hundredth time. I'd rather slay dragons and down flagons before I face my anxieties. I can triumph over hordes of orcs and goblins, but reflecting on the fact that I hate my body? Fuck that; I can't do it.

I think we are all storytellers, however. We're all trying to make sense of an increasingly chaotic world around us—one where our stories matter more than ever. Those stories keep us sane. It's hard to think that there's hope in the world when NBC reports another school shooting—calculating the deaths and tallying each human life as if it's a graphite mark on a piece of paper. I think that's why we tell these tales: our lives are so complex and overwhelming that it's easier to write yourself as a superhero who saves the day or a knight in shining armor who gets the prince than to look in the mirror and peer behind the mask. It's easier to be someone else.

So, I want to tell stories. I want to leave a lasting mark on the world around me. I want to matter. When my body is reduced to dust, I would love for a presence to be felt through the air whenever a young mind with a dream craves adventure. If the stories I weave can spark a flame of creation in someone, my scattered soul will smirk once more. That's what I want to do.

I am a business major, and I have a lot of money.

I Stopped Eating Cake on Birthdays

McKenzie Millar

As a sophomore in high school, I checked in at five feet and four inches tall and weighed 220 pounds. I hated the way I looked, and I really did try to love and accept myself as I was, but I could not. The only thing I knew how to do was criticize. I had spent hours upon hours of my adolescence poking at my stomach in the mirror. I was hyper-fixated on the stretch marks that trailed from my stomach to my thighs. *I wish I was skinny and could stand to look at myself without feeling the need to cry.* I had had enough.

The wishing became a want and soon that became a need. I would not stop until I was skinny. Sure, there are many things you can do to lose weight; you can eat healthier, work out, and consult a doctor. However, there is always a simpler way. You could shove your fingers down your throat forcing yourself to puke, but that was cliché.

It all started with birthday cake. I wouldn't allow myself so much as a lick of frosting. Birthday parties became my personal hell. Something I had loved once. *How can anyone resist a piece of cake? Think of the way the frosting melts in your mouth. Ugh stop, I can't, I won't.* The cake is the best part of birthdays. Who doesn't get giddy for a piece of cake? Me, that's who. My love for cake turned into a burning anxiety.

Soon enough I was "forgetting" to eat lunch, and my friends began making bets if I would finish my dinner or not. The weight dropped, and people applauded. It was almost euphoric, or I was lightheaded.

I was convinced that I did not have a problem. I thought being skinny would make all my problems go away. I thought I would feel beautiful and confident. Instead, I was starving and felt even less confident than I did before.

All because I stopped eating cake on birthdays.

Ophelia Nymphaea

Mady Simon



Oil Painting

Silence Can Come With Death

Dan Kong



Digital Art

Otherworldly Unicorns

Ray Phinney



Digital Art

Outside at the Shelter

Camber Tanis



Digital Art

A Mother's Love

Ronnie Jewell

As my cat kitties watched perplexed as the big mama bird frantically dug through the snow to feed her baby birdies, from leftover breadcrumbs I tossed out in the middle of a blizzard, suddenly those weird crackling noises the cats were making stopped.

Mama bird fed those little, tiny birdies breadcrumbs bit by bit, digging through that snow pile, making sure each baby was fed ample pieces of breadcrumbs that were about to go to the garbage collector.

I'm glad the window opened.

Bikini Girl

Taylor Johnson

I was a high schooler, maybe a sophomore, combing the Target women's bathing suit section. This was a tradition of mine, because every time summer came around, I decided I hated the bathing suit I wore the year before. Bathing suits were always tricky for me for some unidentifiable reason. I never found one I liked enough to keep around for longer than a year or so. I blamed this on fashion trends.

I always liked trying things out of my comfort zone, and I had never before worn anything remotely like the bikinis I noticed other girls around my age wearing, so I had officially decided that this year was the year I'd become a Bikini Girl, a girl who wasn't afraid to be a woman and show off a little skin. The fact that I was raised in a conservative environment that demanded women "dress to please Jesus" (and to prevent men from needing to pluck out their eyeballs) only made this desire of mine stronger. I had no problem when it came to challenging such close-minded ideas. I was a feminist, god damnit! The thought of my poor mother begging me to return a skimpy swimsuit made the proposition even more exciting to me.

Brimming with this newfound rebellious giddy, I sorted through all of the different colors and styles of immodesty, picking out handfuls of whatever caught my eye. I tried each one on in a consumerist frenzy. I had picked out so many I only had time to make sure they fit correctly, take a quick look in the mirror to make sure everything looked right, then throw that one to the side and move onto the next. After an hour of this, I decided upon a somewhat skimpy olive-green bikini decorated with swirling floral patterns.

I came home triumphantly, announcing to my mom that I had gotten a new bathing suit. When she asked to see it, I snickered with evil glee.

Get ready, Amber. I'm a woman now.

I put the bathing suit on again, feeling a bit worn out. The fitting room buzz had faded, and that excitement I always felt before making a risky purchase had passed.

I was going to take a quick glance in the mirror before I presented the abomination before her.

My gaze lingered.

I examined myself in the mirror.

I examined myself in the mirror more than I had in the fitting room. I looked at myself for a long time, just staring at my body in a trance.

It still looked as good as it did in the Target fitting room. Of course it did. I was thin and tall. My relatives made sure I knew how grateful I was supposed to feel about that. I had the body that girls my age were skipping meals for. Although I had never exactly been showered in praise and compliments concerning my appearance as a whole, people made it

known to me that at the very least my body was something to cherish and be proud of, though I really had done nothing to “earn” it in the first place. So allegedly, I was meeting at least some sort of beauty standard, and thus the bikini wasn’t “unflattering” on me in any conceivable way.

So, why did I feel so fucking *uncomfortable*?

My eyes were glued to the body in the mirror as a sense of dread creeped inside my chest- a sense that something was deeply wrong. If the girl in the mirror had been anyone else, I would’ve thought she looked good. I would’ve thought she looked like a proper Bikini Girl.

But, the girl in the mirror was me.

This body was mine.

The chest, the waist, the ass, the legs- it all belonged to me.

I felt myself sink deeper into this strange despair as I processed the fact. Seeing myself so exposed had forced me to retreat into the back of my mind, pushing up against the very back of my skull, looking at myself far behind my own eyes. My vision went in and out of focus as I began to feel very far away. I didn’t like this. I really did not like this.

But, I was supposed to. This was what I was supposed to want, and I felt almost guilty that I didn’t. I was supposed to feel good, empowered, grown up, but instead I fucking hated it. Not because I was too fat or too skinny or not proportionate or had hip dips or whatever the fuck other complaint I had heard other teenage girls give about their bodies in the school locker room.

It was something else entirely - a feeling of entrapment. Of claustrophobia. This repulsion was not fixated on any specific nonconventional part of my vessel, but the entire thing as a whole. Everything felt deeply wrong for seemingly no reason. This feeling of absolute dread was no stranger to me; however, I usually chalked it up to Normal Teenage Girl Insecurities™ and tried to ignore it. But now, I was staring this thing in the face, unable to break eye contact.

Eventually, I collapsed onto my bed, frustrated, and defeated. I shoved my palms into my eye sockets, trying to regain composure, to evade the unhelpful tears, to reason with myself.

It was my first bikini. My first bathing suit that exposed me to this extent. Hell, I was a few flimsy pieces of fabric away from being completely naked! Yeah. That made sense. I just wasn’t used to it. I wasn’t used to being seen like this. I was nervous. That’s normal. I’d just have to get used to it, that’s all. It was fine. It was normal.

And when my mom sees it, she’ll definitely demand I return it. I won’t put up a fight. I’ll sigh, I’ll pretend to be annoyed. Maybe I’ll even protest a little, give some half spirited “my body my choice” rant. But in the end, I will return it, and I’ll never have to see it again.

I opened my door to show my mom the bathing suit.

“Oh, nice. Looks good on you. I like it.”

I mumbled a thanks and turned back into my room.

Fuck.

Each Other

Liam Snipes

I love watching my customers
Watching, observing, interpreting them
Each one is different, yet they are really all the same
I think I know every single thing about them

Sometimes couples come into my store
And I know their most intimate details
I know they haven't touched each other in years
Except for the grip they have on each other's throats

Sometimes they look so scared, walking up to the glass
Two children, they are each other's mothers
But they can't both hide behind each other's skirts
They look at me tearfully, I know better than to bother
One look at them and I know their minds are intransigent

I don't think they know how to choose for themselves anymore
He decides her meat, she decides his bread
Each vegetable only comes after a questioning look and an approving nod
She is his mother and he is her father, I think they both beat each other

Each bill is a bludgeon, each smile is captation
I just nod. I'm only here to make their sandwiches

A Journal of Separation and Reunion

Mae Mabrito

Separated at a tender age, my sister Bentleigh and I yearned for each other's presence. She was in an orphanage in Koltas, Russia, and I was in one in Arkhangelsk.

My heart pounded fiercely in my chest as I watched the door slowly creak open. There she was, standing before me with a radiant smile that illuminated my world. Overwhelmed with joy, I rushed into her embrace, feeling our hands intertwine as we held each other tightly. In that moment, all the pain of our separation melted away, replaced by an unbreakable bond of lifetime sisterhood.

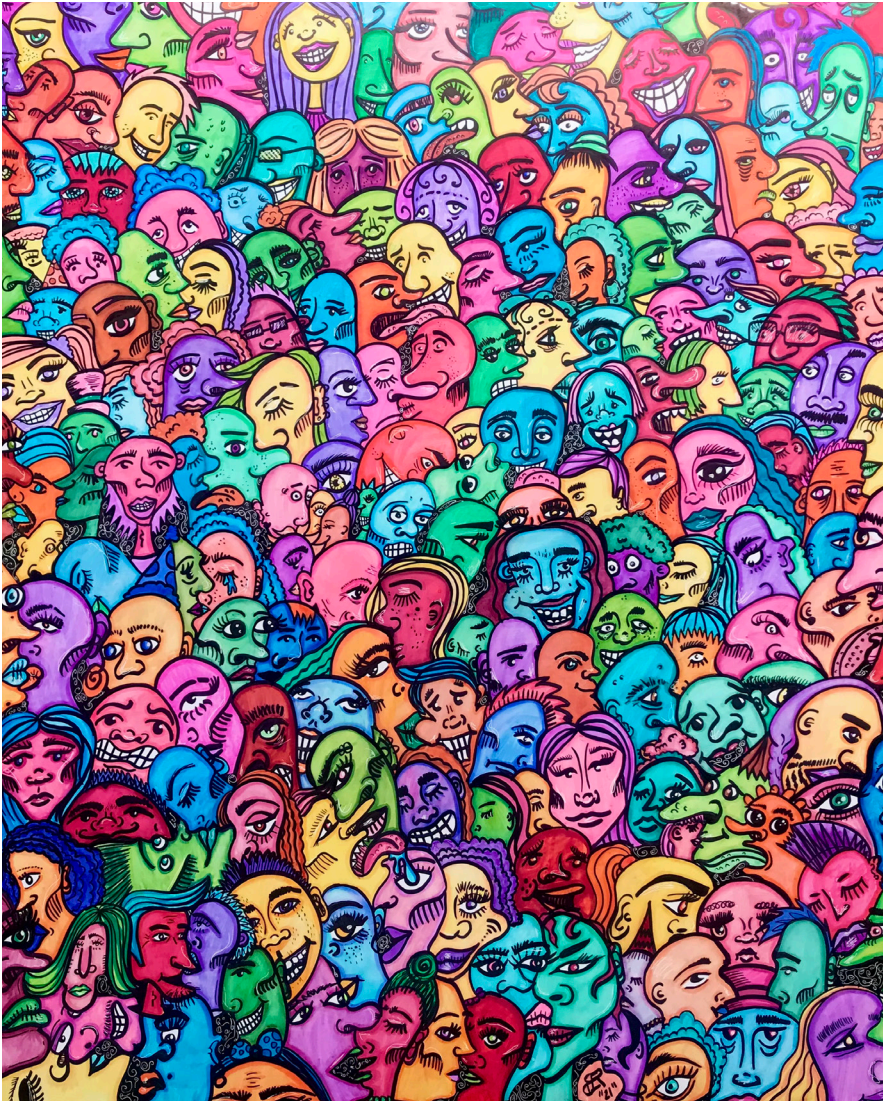
Eyelashes

August Hawley

I don't know what it's like to be in love,
but I know what it's like to be fifteen
and realize how big the world is, and how
small you are, and how nothing
really matters because it all turns to dust
someday. and I know what it's like to turn to dust.
and I know what it's like to be too old
for wishes but make them anyway.
I know. I know. I know
what it feels like, being afraid to turn around,
being afraid of the world,
being more afraid of living than dying.
and I don't know what it's like to be in love,
but from what I've heard, it's
a little bit like every moment before being
fifteen.

Faces

Camber Tanis



Marker on Foam Board

My Monkey

Nic Taylor



Acrylic

Eyes Never Lie

Jillian Parson



Charcoal and Gel Pen

Reincarnate

Erin Hoffman



The collage was created with relief prints of woodblocks previously used and collaged onto a monotype printed background. The figure was cut out of a field of Civil War soldiers. The black and white background is from a print with a hodge podge of electrical wires.

Breath of Time

Kimhouy Nong

In the dance of time, we humans
age, like trees, our stories on each page.

Bark etched with tales of years gone
by, roots deep, reaching for the sky.

Seasons pass, colors fade, yet
wisdom in each branch is displayed.

Limbs weathered, yet they stand
tall, witness to life's rise and fall.

In autumn's gold and winter's chill,
we find beauty, serene and still.

Just as trees, we weather storms,
Embracing change in all its forms.

So, let us grow with grace and poise,
like trees, finding strength in life's noise.

For in our aging, like the trees'
embrace, we find the beauty of time and space.

A Waking Fire

Jessana Sorto Gavarrete

I am the first steps on foreign ground, the dreams my mother whispered aloud.
A daughter of an immigrant's courageous heart.
A seed of potential, a new world to start.

I am the fire that burns within her soul.
A flame of determination, a goal to unfold.
To rise above the challenges of the past,
To forge a brighter future,
To make it last.

I am the bridge between cultures and lands,
A fusion of traditions, joining hands.
The strength of heritage, the drive to explore.
A journey to succeed and open doors.

I am the voice that echoes my mother's hopes and fears.
A reflection of her tears, her joy, her years.
A daughter born of courage, seeking to rise.
To make her proud, to light up the skies.

I am the dreams she dreamed, now taking shape.
A story of perseverance, an unfinished cape
With every step, I pave a path anew.
A daughter of an immigrant, seeking success true.

I am a dreamer, a heart full of fire,
A mind that's determined, reaching beyond desire.
A individual seeking success, shaping my fate,
With every step forward, I create my own state.

I am a river, flowing through challenges vast, carving a path, refusing to be
held fast.

I adapt and evolve, embracing each test, growing stronger proving my spirit's
quest.

I am a light, shining bright in the dark, illuminating my journey, leaving a
spark.

A beacon of hope, guiding me through the night,
A promise to myself, a radiant, victorious light.

I am a warrior, armed with resilience true,
Fighting for my dreams,
standing tall, anew.

I conquer fears, doubts, and uncertainty too, for success is my aim, and I know
it's within my view.

I am a canvas, painting my own tale, a masterpiece of triumph, with colors that prevail.

Crafting my own way, I'll rise and shine, seizing each new day.
My mother's courage fueled my journey's start,
An immigrant's spirit, a beating heart. Her dreams and tears, a fire that still ignites.

A flame that guides me through life's labyrinthine nights. In a new land, I've planted my feet. A stranger's soil, where my roots now meet. I've adapted, grown, and learned to embrace the beauty of change, a new culture's grace. Still, I seek success, a summit to attain, A dreamer's horizon, where aspirations sustain.

I weave together past and present threads. A tapestry of identity, where my story spreads. I am a bridge, connecting lands apart. A fusion of memories, a heart that still imparts. A daughter of Honduras, shaped by the past. A woman of resilience, forging a future that will last.

Teeth

Caroline Jeisy

Tuesday, April 20xx

I think that I'm hearing things. It started when I got home on Thursday last week and found that the trashcans I put out at the end of my driveway had been rummaged through. I live in a suburb, though, so I just assumed that it was a raccoon or opossum. It was pretty normal for the first couple of days. Wake up, work, come home. I didn't pay it any attention.

Tuesday, April 20xx

I got up for work this morning as one does for a standard nine-to-five nightmare. It was silent, save for the alarm. It's the middle of spring. There were no birds.

Tuesday, May 20xx

I think my neighbors' dogs keep watching me. I don't like how they look.

Tuesday, May 20xx

I think there's something in my house with me. I can hear it scratching underneath my floorboards and running in my walls. It doesn't stop. I've tried headphones and earplugs and music and static. I've tried drinking until I've blacked out. I've tried smoking until I can't stand up. I keep the TV on at all times. Nothing stops it. I can't sleep at night. I'm so so tired.

Tuesday, May 20xx

I need it to stop.

Tuesday, June 20xx

I saw it for the first time today. Just stood there, barely out of my line of sight. It doesn't do anything, but just stands there, waiting for something.

Tuesday, June 20xx

It spoke to me today.

Tuesday, July 20xx

It keeps talking to me. It makes a sound like TV static or a chorus of nails on a chalkboard. Every time I hear it, I feel my breath catch. I run cold and start to sweat. I can feel myself start to hyperventilate. I wish I could describe it better. It tells me things about my friends and family. It whispers about my acquaintances, my neighbors, my coworkers. It tells me that I'm *wrong*.

Tuesday, August 20xx

No one has noticed anything different. they talk to me the same, ask me what

I did on my weekend and such. I can feel them watching me when I turn my back. Their gazes burn holes into my back. I hate it. I haven't been to work in a week. I took some medical leave to figure this out. I think I might be going crazy.

Tuesday, August 20xx

I've started to avoid mirrors. Being home has made it worse. I can't go anywhere else. I can't trust anyone else.

I don't think I can call myself fully human anymore. My reflection stopped being me a while ago.

Tuesday, September 20xx

My eyes are a little too big. Teeth a little too small. Smile a little too wide. Fingers a little too long.

It's not me. It's no longer me.

Something keeps trying to get out. It just keeps standing in the corner of my eyes, right out of sight. I know it's there, and it just keeps taunting me. It tells me there are worms underneath my skin. I can feel them there, writhing and moving. It makes me sick.

It whispers that my eyes are unclean and that my nails aren't made of keratin. It tells me that my teeth are falling out. I need to get to them first.

I feel my breath start to pick up. They feel wrong. I need them gone. They need to be right pliers. *Fuck*, where are my groove pliers? I know I have them here somewhere.

I stick them in my mouth. I taste cold steel. I grip them tightly and pull. Hot tears sting my eyes. I feel the nerve pull away from the gum. I pull harder.

A hot lump rises in the back of my throat. It's not enough. The taste of hot copper pools underneath my tongue as I put the pliers back in. There are far too many of them.

It's all so wrong. There's so much work to do.

Valeria

S.G. Siebert

Far and wide traveled I, looking for my lost love
love lost long ago, rekindled only now
Love only sweetest Valeria could bring back to me
I still recall, whence the time our love conquered all
Before I left to conquer all

We were born but one day apart, one day too long I was without you
We ran through the castle, laughing, yes laughing that was all
Skin soft as a rose petal, shaded as fair as fair could be

With hair that waved with no care, oh my sweet Valeria, return to me
My fair Valeria, her complexion, sprinkled with dots like stars in the sky
In our youth, we would trace these dots, looking at patterns, in a world
with not

A world with no pattern, no rhyme no rhythm, just our love, a future king
all in due time

Her mother, my nurse. While my father, the king. I, the fair prince, one
day may she be my queen

Late in our teens, we promised to marry, finally you would be my queen
One night your mother took you away, to a kingdom far too far away
later in life, the hurly-burly done. With many kingdoms conquered, and
battles won

I venture forth from my kingdom with love, in search of only you, no
more, no less

From the cold dismal artic, we found a frozen rose

To the warm, serene tropics, we found only your locket

Oh dear, my fair Valeria you have been busy, traveling across the world

Back to my homeland, your name rings through the mountains

Final stop, the place I dreaded so

Why, there you are, my fair Valeria. May I lay next to you? Or rather your
tomb.

No more, my fair Valeria hath been taken too soon

Inscribed upon the grave, it read: "Valeria, her final wish; to love and be
loved by the oh so fair prince."

No more will I lay, empty in my bed, sulking into the noon

Soon, I shall join my fair Valeria

Join you in your tomb.

The Hermit

Emma Marshall

Seated beneath a canopy of trees,
Eyes closed as he listens to the wind,
The Hermit reflects on the events of the day
Stars glimmer through curtain branches
Of a willow tree as old as Earth itself,
Sheltering him from all distraction

A creeping moss paints the stones in the clearing
A pulsing pale blue that illuminates the cool night
And calms him as he retreats into his thoughts
What a beautiful world we live in
Where little treasures lie all around
If we can only teach ourselves to see them

A child bites into a ripe peach,
The juices running down his fingers
And making his chin sticky with nectar
A girl comes home from school
And her little dog runs to greet her
Wagging his tail and licking her hand
Two lovers hold hands, seated on a bridge
Dangling their legs over the babbling brook beneath them
Embracing, shedding tears, as she tells him she forgives him

And the hermit smiles to know that despite the turmoil,
Despite the evil of the world around us,
Today has been a good day.

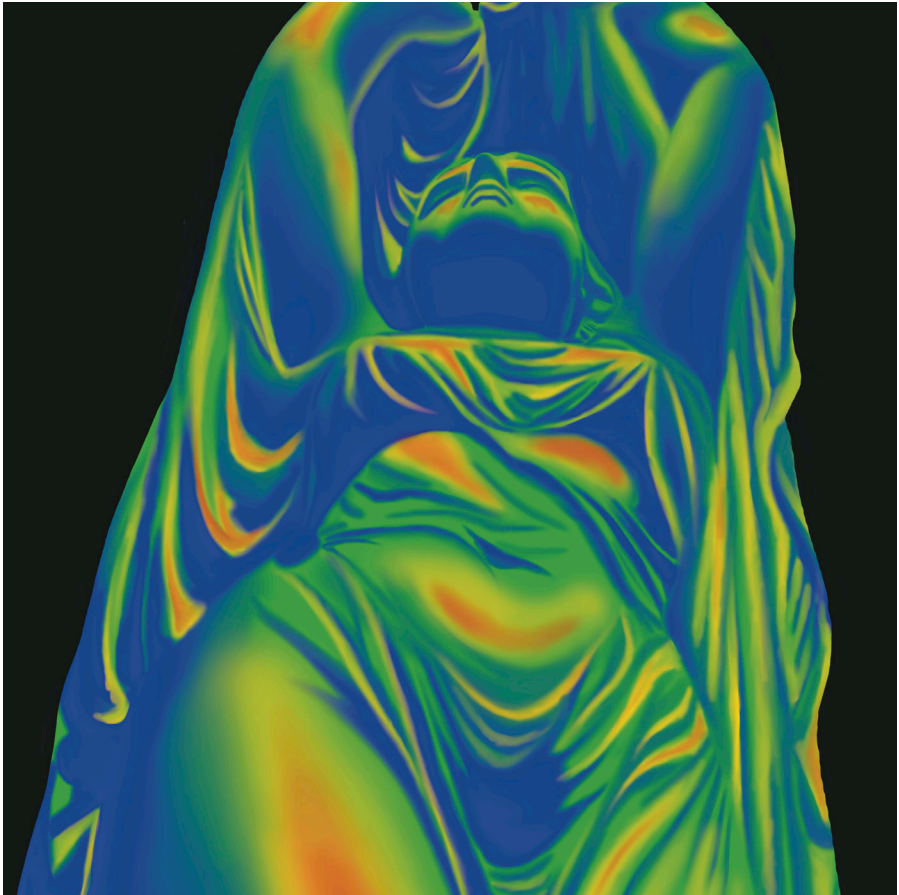
The Stories We Don't Tell

Isabel Post

Dad's face was red, spit flying. I prayed I'd escape unscathed. Playing his game was dangerous, but I needed to. "Do whatever you want, it's not like you listen anyway." Waiting for his mind to change, I quietly gathered clothes, trinkets, and a box of untouchable memories. Cautiously, I opened the basement window. Walking through the snow toward my car, I left footprints he'd find. The picture of my sister and I on the dash stared at me as the car roared to life. Revealing his abuse, a game of manipulation and fear, was the only way to protect her.

Thermal Rising From Waters

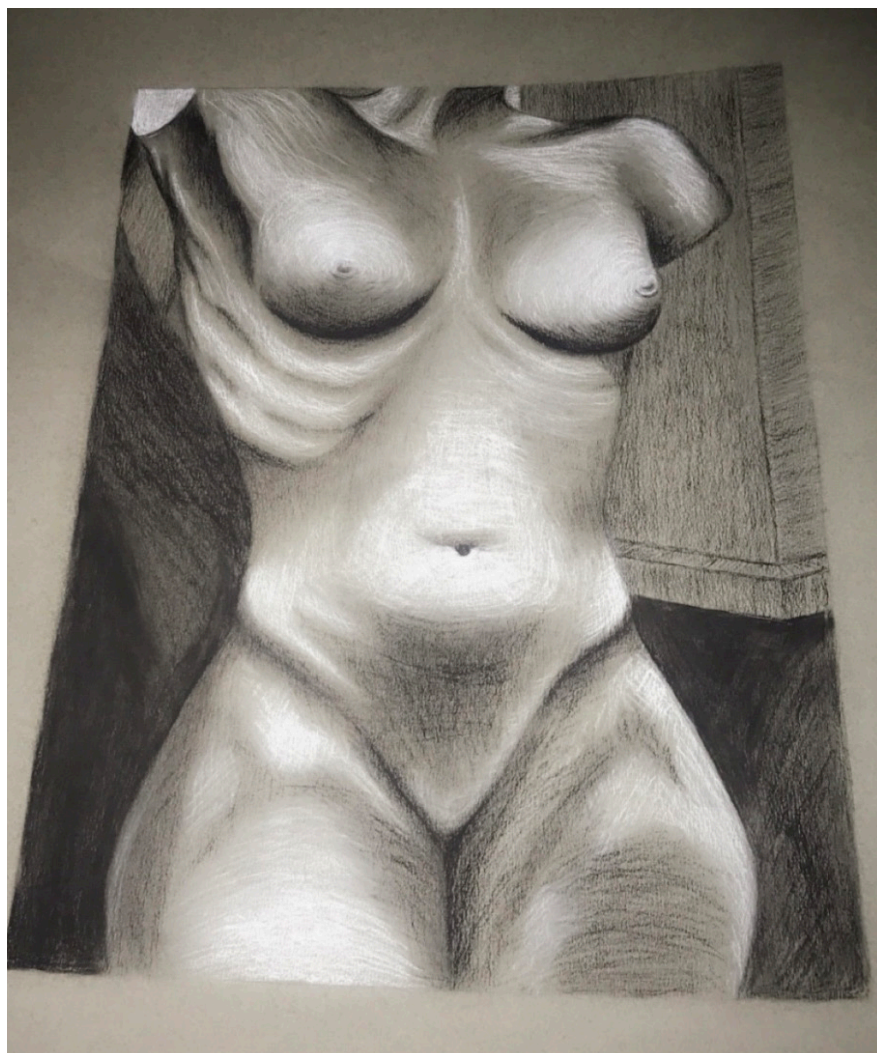
Haylee Spicklemire



Digital Art

Woman Statue

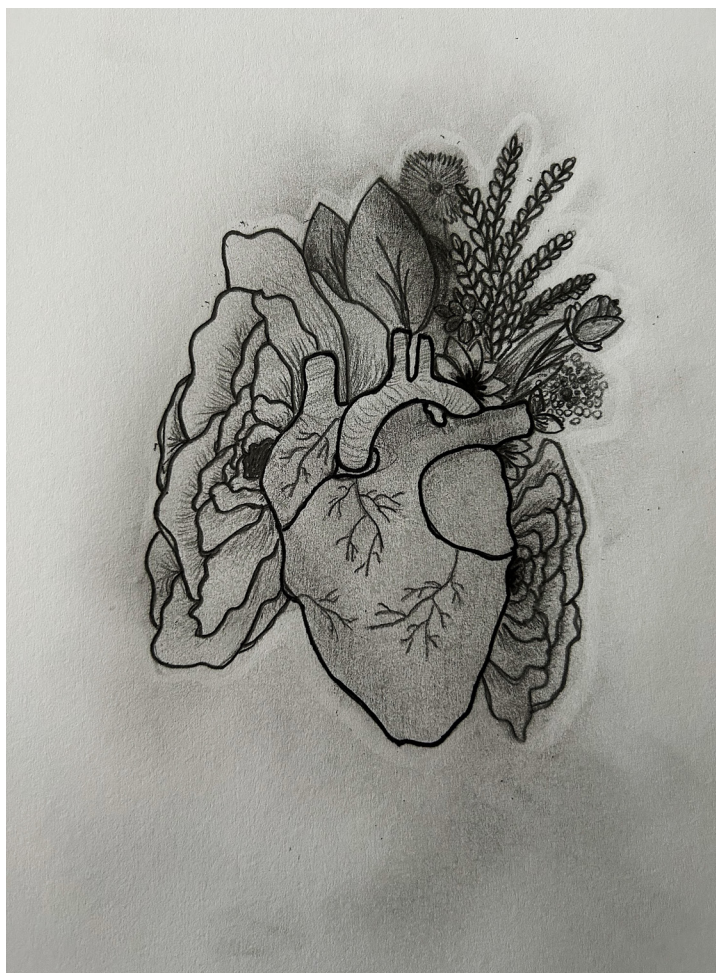
Alicia Alvarado



Charcoal

Regrowth

Rylee Lintz



Charcoal

Red Tulip

Jonah Hayes



Photography

The Flower

Maria Basaj

Once I knew a flower who sat upon a hill,
It sat by trees and water its view so nicely filled.
In morning it said, "good morrow,"
At noon time spake "good day,"
But in night it only whispered its petals closed away.
When often times I'd visit to ask it "how d'you do?"
It replied in songs and riddles as flowers often do.
While birds discussed the winter and where they'd ought to be,
The flower still talked of summer and of visits from the bees.
As wind and weather cooled and leaves began to fall,
The flower spoke as ever regardless of this all.
But one morning frost had struck on and the hill I found
Not of the flower but withers the summer still in their sound.

She Was Home

S.K. Gould

The morning humidity was a bit jarring paired with the heavy sway of the ship, causing Ruka to bond with the whispers of the waves outside. Despite sleeping far more than she used to, she still rises before the sun, leaving her to bathe in the darkness with the crew still sound asleep.

Each morning, to pass the time, she'd blindly study the room. The way the sun-beaten curtains would mimic the waves—how their crimson drapery had fallen rugged to the salt water. The careless blouse and boots tossed onto the floor, and the captain's cap hung tenderly from the coat rack near the door. The globe, now faded blue due to a curious wanderer's hands, sat on top of a tattered dresser; its mirror still webbed and cracked at the center. The ship was broken, as much as her, but it was home.

The woman beside her tugs the pillow closer to her chest, her hand resting underneath and her other placed on Ruka's stomach. Her curly black hair ventures across the sheets and cascades down her face. Ruka gently moves her hand to tuck the hair behind her ear revealing her glowing brown cheeks, button nose, and faint dimples at the corners of her mouth. She keeps her hand at her ear for a moment before moving it to brush her thumb along the freckles of her cheeks; Ruka always loved how they looked like stars. Her face was the only thing she had come to memorize each morning—she never wanted to forget it. From how sound she slept, she never resembled the fierce Captain that the sea had grown to fear. She was her Selene, and in this moment, that was all that mattered.

She was home.

Understanding the Understood

Madisen Thompson

Seeking understanding from those around,
My voice, my heart, so eager to be found.
Mother, father, sister, and friends,
I hope they grasp where my essence blends.

In a world of noise, where connections yearn,
The heart seeks approval, a desire to discern.
Yet, head and heart, two realms apart,
Feelings within, where life's journey starts.

Longing for recognition, for a voice to ring,
A dance between two places where humans cling.
My heart feels at home, a beacon of light,
While the mind weaves expectations, a complex plight.

For years, I fought to be heard,
To be seen, to matter, my soul stirred.
But in the pursuit of understanding grace,
I lost myself in a lonely, frustrated embrace.

The solution wasn't in being loud,
Or in exhaustive explanations, I avowed.
Speaking up, valuable and true,
Yet understanding's chase left me blue.

Speaking up and being understood, not aligned,
A realization profound, a perspective redefined.
It's not that I shun understanding's glow,
But intrinsic worth, a confidence to show.

Proud of my story, I stand tall,
Speak up, be courageous, hear your call.
Yet, in the quiet, powerful space,
Confident in self, a serene embrace.

I want you to be proud, to boldly proclaim,
Courage and confidence are your intrinsic flame.
Not tethered to approval or validation's sting,
Live with quiet joy. Let your essence sing.

Simple yet profound, a truth to wield,
I'm okay, not understood or appealed.
In comfort with self, joy finds its berth,
Live boldly, speak up, and embrace your intrinsic worth.

The Flashing

Candace Cloud

I don't know why her cries are so vivid in my memory, but after fifteen years, I still hear my late wife, Toni, waking me up by screaming from the first floor, "Get out of the house!" Ironically, I had a dream she had shrieked those exact words because a burglar was breaking in, and instinctively, the nightmare was coming true, and the police needed to be called. I quickly grabbed the home phone and crawled under the bed, clearly the safest place to be because everyone knows thieves never peek under beds for any hidden treasures.

This was before my Lasik eye surgery, so I could not see anything unless it was directly in front of me. I dialed 9-1-1 and listened for the ring. Nothing. Not a peep because there wasn't a dial tone. I tossed the phone away and pondered what to do. Toni yelled for me to get out of the house again. It wasn't until I heard the word, "fire," that panic began to set in. I sucked air into my lungs and crawled out from under the bed and sprinted to the window. I opened the blind, window, and hit the screen and began climbing my upper body out of the window with my arms flailing into the air, "Someone save me!" Oh, by the way, I used to sleep naked.

Obviously, glasses help people think, and when the neighborhood looked blurry – I knew I needed to put mine on, because that wasn't the best decision I ever made. After sliding back inside and grabbing the glasses. I took a deep breath for a moment of clarity. I wrapped myself in a robe and walked downstairs without looking at the fire, because the sound and heat coming from the patio slider was traumatic enough – I knew my butt would be on a couch talking to a therapist about the noise of a potato chip bag closing, and it would trigger my PTSD. After walking out the front door and seeing the entire neighborhood staring at me, I glanced up at my bedroom window and laughed because my boobies were dangling out a minute ago. My neighbor, Richard, never looked me in the eye again. Instead of dropping my hair for Rapunzel – I dropped him a boob.

During the chaos and watching smoke escape from your rooftop, things sort of happen – it's hard to stay present and practice mindfulness when it feels like Rome is burning because I handed my Nissan Titan truck keys to a neighbor without even looking over – no clue who the man was but simply gave the keys to a stranger. My eyes were glued to the smoke and continued to think, this can't be happening.

It wasn't long before Middletown, Odessa and Townsend fire departments came to rescue our home, and if they had delayed five more minutes – we would have lost everything. Toni was emotional and my conscious was getting the best of me.

A police officer approached Toni and asked, "Do you know how this fire started?" She shook her head and replied, "We had a fire on the

deck last night.”

He lifted his finger and pointed it at her and accused, “It looks like someone poured gasoline from the fire pit to the house.”

In tears she pleaded, “I don’t know how that happened. We had a fire last night. It was windy, but I put water on the fire before we went to bed.”

Now, it is confession time, and it is long overdue, but since this fire happened on the East Coast, and I am no longer the owner of this home, it may be time to announce to the world that I may have been responsible for that fire. I had purchased an Ove Glove and may have sent a spark or two under the deck when I picked and dropped a burning log. We were just lucky Toni was friends with the Fire Marshal. There wasn’t even a question that we may have tried to burn down our home for insurance money or even prove that Ove Gloves were not to be played with as a toy.

Elementary Education: A Memory

Natasha DeLonge

Trying to take a look back at my elementary school days at Jack D. Jones to find something significant to write about is difficult. I only come up with glimpses here and there.

I recall, in the first grade, a fellow student getting in trouble for looking up Mrs. Kolk's dress. And, in second grade, I sat next to this boy named Jeff; he had a bowl cut and red hair. We found that one day we both had the same song stuck in our head and started singing it out loud together. I cannot for the life of me remember what song it was though. It was hard to pick out anything from third grade other than I had a split class with 2nd and 3rd graders, and it was also split between two teachers, Mrs. Van and Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Van did drive a really cool Mazda Miata; it was red and had winky headlights. Fourth grade for me was the hardest. My father died. I remember nothing from when I came back to school directly after that. I remember racing to get our morning times table quiz done in under a minute because the first three students to complete it and get all the answers right got a candy treat. But not any candy, it was a spicy cinnamon Fireball. I do not know why I rushed. I hated those things. I had to take it out and set it on the wrapper to wait for the whole that was burned in my mouth to go away before putting it back in. I had to do this multiple times in order to finish it.

Like my time there at school, Jack D. Jones Elementary School is gone, forgotten. A torn up ceiling dangles in the gymnasium. Mold spread through the halls where I used to run. No one had visited in years other than to play on the playground that once was brand new to us 3rd graders. But that was eventually abandoned, too. The place became so eerie you would think it was haunted. Sadly, about two years ago, they came in with hazmat suits and heavy machinery and hauled away every last trace of my school and my ability to revisit memory lane.

Grandpa's Little Girl

Malaina Peterson

When my grandpa first asked me to feed the cows, I was four. Lighting up with excitement, I could not wait to head to the farm. Grabbing his hand and setting out to sit on my grandpa's lap, I held the bottle for feeding the calf. But as I became older, so did he. Growing sicker day by day, as cancer spread throughout his body, he weakened, and feeding the cows no longer existed for us. It's been six years since he passed, and I often find myself looking through pictures, wishing I could help my grandpa one last time.

Wake Up

Collin Byrd

Gently she slides her silk touch hand over my shoulder and across my chest, pulling herself in and up against my body. I feel her warmth meld with mine as our bodies connect. I feel her hair lap over my skin like waterfalls as she leans in close to my ear. Her breath heats the side of my face with the sweet smell of lavender and lilacs, whispering sensually, “Wake up.”

I smile and slowly turn over expecting to see my other half, but I’m met, not by the inviting eyes of my love, nor my bed, nor anything at all. Frankly, I wasn’t even sure if my eyes were open, so I blink hard and deliberately a couple of times, but nothing. The human warmth that was once at my back was now gone and the smell of her wildflower aroma was ripped from my senses. Rubbing my eyes vigorously with my fists, still nothing. I put my hands down to ground myself. However, the bed I fell asleep in was no longer there. I was in freefall in the vast open darkness, letting out only the scream you let out when you are falling to your demise. My deathcry rings out to the blank and travels far beyond my ears. No echo comes back to me. Looking around again, there is absolutely nothing and the dark is overwhelming. The deafening silence rings loudly in my ears as I can hear every movement of my body, every ligament and joint, every heartbeat and nothing else. My limbs reach out to no avail. My hands grasp at air as I’m frantically treading on the currents of this dark ocean. I am adrift at the whim of the void.

People say the longer you stare into the abyss, eventually it will stare back, but I am far beyond staring. I am in the abyss and I will soon become one with it. If I have not already. After an epoch of silence and loneliness, I finally feel something. Something is beginning to stare. Where or what it is I can not tell, but I feel its longing gaze and it sends a shiver up my spine. A reminder that I am not in control here, so I stare back, unblinking. Unmoving.

For as long as I could, I didn’t cease looking for what could possibly be out there. Off in the distance, there is a soft glow. Not so much a light, but a glow. In the center of the lumination is an eye. The eye that has been watching me. The eye I have been watching back. The relief of finding the culprit of my paranoia washed over me but was soon replaced by the fear of not knowing what this being is. I let nature take over and allow fight or flight to do what it does but neither option was able to be achieved. So I froze, continuing to stare. Soon the eye begins to pulse ever so slightly, giving away its real nature, for it pulsed with the heartbeat of my own and I know now it is merely a trick of the mind. I break my contest with the eye and blink. As I thought, it is gone.

My misplaced fear in my imagination soon costs me dearly, and the terror of the unknown void soon takes back its strangling grip. I desperately look in all directions, hoping for some point of reference but I

can't even see my own hands in front of me. I dare not feel my body for any injury, for in this instance, ignorance is bliss. To panic any more will be the death of me, so I begin to focus on the one thing I have left: my breathing. In and out, in and out; my heart rate lowers, my muscles relax some, the aura around me seems to feel looser, less confining than it had before. I slowly trust in my head again and listen to what it has to say, but all it had were query and questions.

Where am I? Why am I here? Who was that I saw? That was definitely no human eye. Is it here hunting me? Question after question rattle off in my head like a firestorm, the thoughts pile on and I begin to panic once more. All that work to calm myself has been for naught. I spiral into an abyss of doubt, angst and unease as the weight of loneliness falls on my shoulders and I realize I am truly alone, for that thing, whatever it was, must not have been real, but in my head. That can be the only answer. Any hopes I may have had were crushed before me by the nothing I am mired in.

From the sea of black, came an ominous sensation. A sensation so unfamiliar and unique, my instinctual reaction is to violently kick at whatever passed by my leg. From what I could tell I was not moving, so whatever it was, must have felt out to me. I recoil in my skin as I can't recoil in the open and I turn to what can only be to my left... and I see it.

It hangs there, expanding and contracting, changing shape at every instance, each glance I take is different from the previous, even as I look in what has to be the same spots. It is a mass of moving ligaments and limbs, teeth and mouth, eye and nostril. It forms again and again, conforming to the shape of the void, never being the same from moment to moment. All that you could fear, or hate, or dare I say love, flashes by in the skin of the beast, but still, yet it still remains camouflaged to the backdrop of the blank. I can see everything, yet nothing. My mind seems to have loosened its grip on reality once more and I closed my eyes. Or so I think I do, but it stays there all the same. In the same spot. Watching me. I open them up but it still stands, floats, hovers at an incomprehensible distance. For what could stand between it and I could be galaxies, or mere atoms. It looms just outside of reach, just outside of perception, just outside of reality.

Opening my mouth to scream, I push out all air left in my lungs through my vocal chords with such force I can taste iron and blood. It is an ancestral yell of pure terror and a last attempt to scare off this miraculous being. The only sound produced however is a silent breath that is swiftly consumed by a deafening hush. With one limb, it slowly reaches out to me. Fingers and hands shape and unshape, claws, talons, teeth, flowers, oceans, and stars form along the appendage as it makes its way towards me. I can do nothing but watch in awe of the beauty. Inches from my forehead it begins to glow, then brightens and brightens more and soon I am blinded by a holy flash so loud and colorful, it permeates my very being. Colors I've never seen streaking across the sky and down under my feet. Clouds of unearthly composition gently float on the streams of light, breaking around the astral monoliths that are scattered, floating across the expanse. Each reflecting the cosmos in its geometry, they loom just off the

horizon like open doorways. Then at the center, at the point where the sun should be, an inhuman eye looks lovingly down at me. An eye floating in the middle of a dim, radiant and fluorescent glow. Soon the smell of the lost lilac and lavender I had stolen from me returns and I am flooded with the nostalgia of my true love. I must dismiss these binding memories as she is far away from me now.

I slowly smile as I recognize my old friend. Finally, a familiar something to keep me grounded in a groundless existence. It comes close, eager to see me in its home. After many invitations I must have finally accepted. I reach for it and its warmth encompasses my hand entering its light. The supermassive celestial being continued to shrink as I drew closer, just until it could fit in the palm of my hand. Tears of joy stream down my face as I can finally let go, become one with it. Who knew the dark void would be so colorful. But then, as if snatched from the cliffs of insanity, I feel a soft and gentle hand wrap around my shoulder and across my chest. As if laying face down in the murky pools, I am rolled over, thousands of miles a second to only have moved a few inches, and I am awoken to the sweet smell of wildflowers and a velvet voice that whispers,

“Wake up.”

Rainy Day

Keely Obregon

The clouds once white and cumulus now turn grey and nimbus as the rain pours down on the dirt road. Liquid rain drops pour inside and out as little spiders crawl all about looking for shelter. Puddles form in the muddy ground mirroring the sky as the low clouds drift by. Flowers and shrubs brighten up in nature's shower covering them in a thick layer of water. Clouds cry throughout the atmosphere covering the sun's comforting rays from the flowers down below. Everyone is tucked away inside, safe from the downpour outside, listening to the pitter patter of the water on their roofs. The pitter patter tempts you into slumber as if it's your own personal lullaby. Speckled water on windows looks like tiny glass shards as they slip down. Bundling up in your cozy bed everything fading slowly. A cat jumps up into bed making sure you're not lonely. Calming down, feeling your limbs loosen, letting nature's song lull you to sleep. Fading quickly now, the only thing you hear is peaceful rain.

Trick-or-Treat

Ronnie Jewell

My favorite holiday as a youngster was Halloween.
No Christmas trees or heart-shaped Valentines
or dyed Easter eggs to frantically search for after Sun-Rise Service.

Just CANDY! Halloween CANDY!

My favorite costumes were Casper (The Friendly Ghost).
Superman!
And Michael Myers (but that's another story . . .).

I would race down the wet-rocky roads, Halloween sack in hand (actually, the sack was a used Partridge Family shopping bag)--awaiting the treasures that I would soon collect!

And I NEVER let my little friends trick-or-treat with me
Because they just SLOWED me down!

Back home, I would arrange all the goodies in a big round bowl: Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Candy Corn, Tootsie Rolls, Smarties, Suckers, Bubble Gum, and of course that horrible brown candy tied up in black and orange wrappers.

My Halloween treat bowl arrangement was a work of art!

I NEVER ate the candy.

Mother always tossed it out before Thanksgiving.
Her trick, not mine.

Merry Halloween

Katherine Hedges



Photography

Over the Rainbow

Teri Mallos



Photography

North Manitou Bliss

Brooklyn Jebb



Photography

City Shortcuts

Ashley Streng



Photography

Creatures of the Night

Berlyn Nickerson

Don't fret about the darkness of the night
As the sun begins to hide away,
Look for the moon and stars shining bright.

The sky glows with art creating quite a sight
Be careful to not be thrown into disarray;
Don't fret about the darkness of the night.

Shadows swallow the sun's warm light,
And creatures of the night come out to play.
Look for the moon and stars shining bright.

They do not mean to cause such a fright
The wind blows and the trees sway
Don't fret about the darkness of the night.

Look up to the sky for some excite;
Bats gleam in moonlight, searching for prey
Look for the moon and stars shining bright.

Acting as nature's own knight,
Nocturnal friends keep pests at bay.
Don't fret about the darkness of the night
Look for the moon and stars shining bright.

What the Puck?

F.J. Hartland

CHARACTERS:

Speed, a construction worker, 30's

Duffy, another construction worker, early 30's

SETTING:

A beam of a skyscraper under construction, high in the air over Pittsburgh. Spring. Noon.

NOTE:

While the play has references to Pittsburgh, the river, the town, hockey team name, and name of the hockey player may be altered to fit the location of the production.

AT RISE:

Two construction workers are preparing to have lunch. Both Speed and Duffy are in their thirties, Speed slightly older. Both wear construction helmets. They are removing their lunches from metal lunch buckets.

SPEED

Helluva view, eh, Duff? Can see all the way to the Mellon Arena.

DUFFY

What? What about the Mellon Arena?

SPEED

I said, it's a helluva view. Lucky son-of-a-bitch who gets this office.

(Duffy suppresses a yawn.)

You say somethin'?

DUFFY

Naw.

(He suppresses another yawn.)

SPEED

Damn! Egg salad. Ma knows I hate egg salad. Wanna trade? What you got?

DUFFY

Braunschweiger.

SPEED

Shit! Hate that worse'n than egg salad.

(A big yawn from Duffy—one he can't suppress.)

You are yawnin.'

DUFFY

No, Speed, I'm not.

SPEED

You been yawnin' all mornin'.

DUFFY

No...

SPEED

'S'okay. A yawn is your body's way of gettin' more oxygen to your brain.
To keep you alert.

DUFFY

How you know this, Speed?

SPEED

I watch the Discovery Channel.

(Duffy gives a snort of disgust.)

What? Ma likes to watch and we only got the one TV.

(Duffy yawns.)

Didn't sleep?

DUFFY

No.

SPEED

Go to bed late?

DUFFY

Usual time.

SPEED

Bad dreams?

DUFFY

No...yeah.

SPEED

About what?

DUFFY

What?

SPEED

What was the dreams about?

DUFFY

Can't talk about it.

SPEED

Talkin' about it can help.

DUFFY

How you know that, Speed?

SPEED

I watch Dr. Phil.

(Duffy gives his snort of disgust again.)

Ma likes him. So what's the dream about?

DUFFY

Okay...Sidney Crosby.

SPEED

Why would a dream about Sid the Kid keep you up all night?

DUFFY

It's what goes on in the dream...

SPEED

What? He kill you?

DUFFY

No.

SPEED

You kill him?

DUFFY

No.

SPEED

Lose the Stanley Cup?

DUFFY

I can't tell you.

SPEED

Sure, you can, Duff. We been friends working together for what? Six months now?

DUFFY

More like eight.

SPEED

And we gotta trust each other with our lives up here, right? So...?

DUFFY

You can't tell anyone about this. Swear, Speed, swear.

SPEED

I swear.

DUFFY

In the dream, I'm...well...I'm...kissing Sidney Crosby. I'm kissing Sidney Crosby.

SPEED

Are you fuckin' —

DUFFY

No! Hell, no. I wake myself up before that happens. Besides, I barely know the man. We're just kissing, that's all.

SPEED

What kinda kissin' we talkin' about here?

DUFFY

What?

SPEED

An innocent peck on the cheek? Or more?

DUFFY

More.

SPEED

Open-mouthed? Or more?

DUFFY

More.

SPEED

You mean...?

(Duffy nods "yes.")

DUFFY
Tongues.

(Slowly, Duffy begins to get “swept up” in the memory.)

In the Mellon Arena. After a game. In the locker room. The hot steamy locker room. Kissing...

(He snaps out of it.)

Ya think this means I’m queer?

(Speed begins to slide down the beam away from Duffy.)

SPEED
No. No. Hell, no.

(Pause.)

Well, maybe.

DUFFY
Oh, God.

SPEED
And you’re not supposed to say “queer,” no more. Only the queers can call each other “queer.” You’re supposed to say “gay.”

DUFFY
You know this, how, Speed?

SPEED
I watch *The View*. Ma likes it.

DUFFY
Yeah, I know—your ma likes her. Well, I’m not qu—gay.

SPEED
‘Course not. It’s just a dream.

DUFFY
Damn straight. Just a dream.

SPEED
About kissing Sidney Crosby.

DUFFY
Let’s just leave it, Speed.

SPEED

Sure.

(Pause.)

Not that he isn't a handsome man.

DUFFY

Speed!

(Duffy takes a napkin from his lunch pail, lays it on his lap.)

SPEED

What's that?

DUFFY

What?

SPEED

On your lap?

DUFFY

A napkin.

SPEED

You don't find that qu—odd? Usin' a napkin up here?

DUFFY

I'm neat, that's all.

SPEED

But not gay. Hey, maybe you're metrosexual.

DUFFY

Metro-what?

SPEED

A heterosexual man who is...neat...and gets manicures.

DUFFY

I don't get no manicures! Where do you get this stuff?

SPEED

I read *People Magazine*. Ma subscribes. She leaves it in the bathroom.

(Pause.)

How old are you, Duff?

DUFFY

You know how old I am.

SPEED

Yeah. And you never been married.

DUFFY

So? You older than me. You ain't married.

SPEED

I got a sick mother to take care of. What's your excuse?

DUFFY

I don't need no excuse.

SPEED

Okay.

(Pause. Then Duffy begins to whistle "Send in the Clowns.")

What are you doing?

DUFFY

Whistling.

SPEED

What?

DUFFY

A song.

SPEED

That ain't "a song." It's a show tune. "Send in the Clowns" from the Stephen Sondheim classic *A Little Night Music*.

DUFFY

How do you know this shit?

SPEED

I watch PBS.

DUFFY

So what you sayin'? Whistling a show tune makes me gay?

SPEED

Well...

(Duffy stands.)

DUFFY

I'm not the one who knows about metrosexuals and lives with his mother and watches *The View* and knows fuckin' show tunes!

(Speed stands.)

SPEED

So what are you sayin'?

DUFFY

Maybe you're the one who's gay.

SPEED

I'm not the one havin' dreams about kissing Sidney Crosby!

DUFFY

I am not gay.

SPEED

Me, neither.

(When Speed says this he moves towards Duffy and his foot knocks his lunch box from the beam.)

Aw, shit!

(He lunges for the lunch box. In doing so, he loses his balance and begins to fall off the beam.)

DUFFY

Jesus Christ!

(Duffy reaches and stops Speed's fall and gets his back on the beam.)

Holy fuck that was close.

SPEED

You saved my life, Duff.

(Pause. Their eyes meet. Pause. Suddenly, passionately, they kiss. They stop. Look at one another.)

Feel anything?

DUFFY

Nuthin'. You?

SPEED

Nuthin'. Guess that settles it.

DUFFY

We're not gay.

SPEED

Nope. Let's finish lunch.

(They sit.)

DUFFY

You want my apple?

SPEED

Better-n-nuthin'.

(Duffy hands Speed the apple.)

DUFFY

I gotta tell you this, Speed. Sidney Crosby kisses better'n you.

SPEED

I kiss just fuckin' fine.

(He bites into the apple.)

Helluva view from up here, eh, Duff? Can see all the way to the Mellon—
er, Mon...The Mon.

(Speed hands the apple to Duffy. Duffy takes a bite and holds out the apple to Speed. The men stare into each other's eyes.)

CURTAIN

You Sent Me A Scarf

S.K. Gould

Spiders thread webs
Inside my mailbox outside.
Your words lie empty
In my flooded mind
As I wait for a reply.
Something to free me
From behind these panels.
A word to save
A dying gaze.

So you sent me a scarf.

Rose and orange silk,
Tattered trends.
It robs the spiders of their webs,
As it floods my empty mind.
Ink words sketched in
Perfect ease.
About memories that
Once tortured me.
Your words burn,
Now that I see them once more.
In this letter, I was once begging for.
In this scarf.

And when I read it,
It never ends.

The Story of Her Hands

Donna Ginn

Her Hands.

Her hands, the color of charcoal,
Flattened out on desktop, looking firm, in charge,
Her hands, the color of hard work,
Responsibility in every crease and bent knuckle.
Her hands so dry and undemanding,
Never comforting herself, only those around her,
Those that need someone, someone strong.

Her eyes, the color of midnight,
The still moon shining in them, piercing
All who look squarely into them.
Eyes, circled by dark rings of encompassing
Thought and circumstance and divergence.
Her eyes, full of thoughtful worry,
Hope and love, taking charge of those who can't or won't.

Her hips, broad and flat, determined, her own kind of swagger,
Carrying her boldly, making her way past other smothering mothers.
Her hips know the pain of childbirth and the joy of sitting
On red hard buckets for fishing off the dock for supper.
Her hips, moving to the beat of Brother Blues and tap,
Stop, tap, dancing harmonicas, on the corner downtown,
Under the lights.

Her heart, open for pain or joy, always guarded, and protected
By her own electric fence, prickly pear cacti, and snarling
Rottweiler, pulling at his chain, taut and ready.
Ready for anything, everything, love or hate,
Anticipating, cautious but ready. Ever so ready.
Her heart flashes on and off like the neon
Liquor sign red glow, on and off, in rhythms,
A mournful tempo.

Her life. Worth all of this. Worthy of all that follows.
Mason jars full of spectacular joy,
An ocean of sadness and pain,
Mountains of triumph and come-uppance
A prairie of tomorrows just ahead
Around the next disappointment or
Dizzying glory.

Her hands.
I know her.

She knows me.
I know her hands, her hips, her heart, her life.
Her hands. Gripping tightly, hanging on.
Holding onto mine.
Hers. Mine. Ours. All one.

The Nights You Couldn't Talk

Shelbie Schoenborn

One of those nights again. Minimal words spoken, as he chokingly said, “Grab me another from the garage.” Looking up at his face, my throat tightening, seeing him swollen with grief. I discovered young that it was better to grab the beer from the garage than ask what was wrong. “I love you, Dad.” It broke me to see my dad suffering and drinking through the nights he couldn't speak. Those days aren't spoken about and likely won't be, but he's better now. I say now just as I wish I would've then, “I'm proud of *you*, Dad.”

Winter Slumber

Kelli Loughrige



Photography

Desert Day

Holly Swain



Artwork

Tomorrow's Forrest

Nic Taylor



Acrylic

Garbage Painting #2

Camber Tanis



Acrylic

The Eye of the Storm

Kassity Perrault

The rain pelted onto the ceiling. It echoed, almost loud enough to cover the sound of the few leaks we had. The invading droplets fell into already half-filled buckets imitating the constant ticking of a clock. I was reminded of class. I should have been there now, another insanely hot, bright, Thursday, watching the clock like a hawk, waiting to be dismissed. Instead, I was shaking on the floor curled up against my twin-size mattress we hauled over and onto the wall to cover the wet windows since we didn't have shutters. I thought back to a short conversation my mom and sister had to distract my racing mind.

"No, not that way. Twist it to the left." My mother grunted while lifting one side of her blue sheeted queen-size mattress through her single bedroom door.

"My left or yours?" My sister questioned from the other side of the mattress, tilting her head to see my mom. I looked down as I lifted both my hands, and stuck out my thumbs and pointer fingers to make a mock L.

"Whatever way you're not turning it now, Mak."

"Of course, Ma'am."

I laughed under my breath then at the memory of my sister dropping the mattress to salute. I stuck out my hands again, figuring that my time could be spent trying to learn my directions. It took almost three minutes before the boredom overwhelmed my mind again.

Peeking over the mattress, I could see my neighbor's trash lid floating down the street as if it were a raft struggling to survive atop the harsh ocean that's not so far from me now. I watched its journey as it created ripples through the murky, harsh stream. I imagined my sister and me as fairies, struggling to direct the lid toward safety until it started to sink under one of the many palm trees obstructing the road, getting stuck halfway and spilling water off the sides like two waterfalls. A shiver ran over my body. With no power, heat, and the thought of being outside, I had to face forward and focus on the room I was in, or I feared I'd freeze.

The thunder boomed louder as I looked towards my pacing sister. Her face, illuminated only when lightning would strike, comforted me. Normally, she would have joked about something, scared me further, but instead, she knelt beside me, as we huddled at the bottom corner of my pushed-up mattress. I felt her shivering, whether it was from the cold or fear I didn't care and moved to share my blanket with her. Her behavior made me the most anxious, yet, if Makayla couldn't handle this, how was I supposed to? I went into her room during long storms or Halloween nights. It wasn't fair to keep that pressure on her, I knew that, but it was almost second nature to rely on her.

“How are you doing?” she asked me while fiddling with the torn-up edges of her red and purple sweater sleeves.

“I’m okay.” I slightly choked out, quickly moving my head to the side as I didn’t want her to see I was crying. She never cried.

“Really?”

“I miss dad,” I whispered. Yesterday, the Coast Guard station called my dad into duty, he left at 11:00 p.m., through the rain and darkness. I was barely awake, and everything was hazy. It felt like a nightmare as I watched the only brightness outside, provided by his silver truck’s headlights, disappear into the night. I was surrounded by darkness again and felt completely alone. I knew he was out on the water or in the streets trying to help who he could, but I wished he was just here to help us. I could only think about how hard it would be to drive a boat in this weather. Why would they ask that from anyone?

I was brought back to the times we would ride out together not anticipating the size of the waves and relentlessly rocking up and down. It was exhilarating then. I told myself he should be having the most fun, I tried to make myself jealous, but as I observed my mother, I knew that this time was different.

I swallowed ready to continue the short conversation we’d been having before my interrupted daydreaming, but realized how dry and scratchy my throat was. “Hold on.” I stood up and walked over to the table placed directly in the middle of the room. It was wooden and stained a dark, reddish, brown. On top lay a line of different flashlights from earlier camping trips we took. I grabbed my dad’s favorite bright black flashlight to guide me down the long hallway and through my parents’ room to reach the master bathroom.

Canned and packaged foods lay stacked in the corner next to two filled gallons of clean drinking water. There should have been three, but by further inspection, I found that one tipped over during the day and soaked our grey rug. This had all come from the grocery store down the street. I’d never seen it so packed before. I walked over to the bathtub that we filled with water in case we ran out before the hurricane ended. I decided to fill one of the plastic cups with water from the tub instead of the gallons to let my family get as much fresh water as they could. I grudgingly took a sip of the lukewarm tub water and grimaced. I squeezed my eyes shut, tilted my head back, and drank the stagnant water as fast as I physically could, the feeling of drowning caused me to cough like an old smoker once I finished. Through the narrow hallway, I heard the sudden roar of thunder above me and felt the floor shake below, causing three of my favorite posed and pristine family photos to fall and shatter. It felt like Zeus was out to get me. I ran into the safety of our living room and crouched down next to my sister.

The eye of the storm had passed. The rain that previously settled into a continuous rhythm had begun berating me as it shifted gears into that of a pounding heartbeat.

The lightning lit up the room as it relentlessly flashed. I began seeing shadows form in the darkness and hid my head on my sister's shoulder. I needed to know when this storm would end, but the power was out, and we had no access to the weather, news, or outside life. The fear was overbearing. I finally sobbed, not caring if I got my salty tears on her sweater or if they heard me. I felt my brave, intelligent, put-together sister tightly wrap her arms around me, and I heard her snuffle.

The Angel That Came To See Me

Taylor Johnson

It is Sunday, and this church is foreign to me. It only has vague traces of the last one. The high ceilings, the chatter, the stained glass, the overhanging cross up front.

This one promises it can cleanse me, that it can somehow make my soul more palatable for our Creator, that it will transform me into a man God can make good use of. My mother asked around for a while to figure out which church had the most effective techniques for my condition. She risked the townspeople knowing her son is a homosexual in order for me to get the best treatment she could find. She said I should be thankful for that. And I am. I do desire to live absent of sexual deviance.

The pastor here is an expert in this field, from what I've been told. The men and women he had worked with had all allegedly been cured, even being able to maintain heterosexual marriages and start their own families.

It is not who you are, my mother always assured me, it is merely a symptom of the human condition. You're my son. I know you best. This became a comfort to me, the idea that this was something temporary, something ultimately within my control that I could eventually overcome if given the proper resources.

I take the place in, enjoying the smell of wood and the melodies of a piano. The glass windows go up to the ceilings, bathing the congregation in colored light. Dust floats in the air. I observe the people - the women in their fancy dresses and pretentious hats, the children bustled up next to them. When it comes to the men, I try to avert my gaze. I don't know what these people have heard about me, and I do not want to repulse them. I smile and greet them, locking eyes with their wives, and then choose a seat somewhere in the back. I will give people a chance to sit with me, but I will not force them to by choosing a seat near them. There are mostly families here. I do not want to worry them.

No one sits near me. They're all very polite, but they all seem to prefer the front few rows. They are not as afraid as I am to face their God.

I do not want the pastor to notice me. I've already met with him once before today. He kindly introduced himself and made some polite small talk, intending on getting to know me. When we got to the subject of what I was there for, his demeanor changed as he sternly requested a complete confession out of me, claiming that the more honest and open I was with him, the more likely he'd be able to help me. Thoughtlessly, I obliged, and spilling out of me came all my impure thoughts and treacherous compul

sions, all my most intimate secrets laid out before him while he nodded and jotted things down, an iron stare. He says that we should begin immediately, meeting three days out of the week. I do not know what God has in store for me, but I know God has put him in my life for a very good reason. However uneasy I feel about this man, however anxious I feel about what he has planned, I must trust that God has a plan for me.

The sermon starts, and as his voice echoes throughout the high ceilings of the building, my stomach twists as I recall all the things I told him, all the shame that poured out of me in that tiny office of his. I did not know whether or not I was imagining the hints of disgust seeping through his stern expression. I feel a pang in my chest.

I cannot listen to this sermon. I cannot not look at this pastor, or any one else in this room for that matter. I scan my eyes over the breathtaking iconography in the glass windows as my mind races. I find Jesus and his disciples, giving each one a proper examination before moving on to what I guess to be angels.

One unfamiliar portrait catches my eye.

I assume it to be an angel, as it has a halo of light around its head, short blonde curly hair, and one of those gentle yet elegant expressions angels are always depicted to have. He is draped in multicolored robes and enshrined in luminous color as the sun shines through all of his glass pieces.

Who is this? I wonder hazily. I do not recognize him, and yet he stands out to me among all of the other identifiable figures.

The man has a softer, almost effeminate look compared to the other portraits, his eyelids heavy as he looks down on those beneath him, his hand hovering over his heart. Something about this angel - the androgynous features, the pose, the sultry expression - feels almost seductive, as if it's tip toeing the line being displayed in such a place as this.

My mind drifts off on this strange tangent of thought for a moment before a Bible being slammed down on the pulpit forces me to tear my eyes from him.

No, that can't be it. It is merely my sinful nature. How dare I think of an angel's depiction in such a way? I close my eyes and beg God's forgiveness for my lack of self-control.

For a while, I am able to focus on the sermon, or at least appear to be doing so. The pastor must be excited about this topic, as he gestures about chanting bible verses with barely contained excitement. I try to share in this passion. I try to find meaning in it. But ever so slowly, my mind

wanders back to the image of the angel. Before I can stop myself, I am engulfed by him once more.

Who could've made such a thing? I question. Perhaps it was an artist with pure intentions, but who's lust just so happened to show through this particular piece of work. Maybe it was a woman. I couldn't imagine a man getting away with creating such a tantalizing image of another man, much less a supposed holy figure. Then again, were angels really male or female at all? Or did people just prefer to imagine them as such?

Was the image really tantalizing at all? Or was I just looking at it through a lens of sin? Of desire? There isn't anything downright immodest about the image, simply an amorous aura I felt emanating from it.

I struggle to decide which one of us is at fault for the sin. Is the artist sinful for making the piece despite whatever good intentions they had? Is the art itself at fault for existing as it was made? Or was I, the observer, to blame for my personal interpretation of it?

I left the church that day not having listened to a single word of God.

I try to forget about the image altogether, deciding that no matter who's fault it was, it wasn't right for me to linger on such things because I know that at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what I think. It was for God to judge, and thus I gave up the issue to him in prayer, attempting to rid my mind of the angel in the window.

However, he seemed to have followed me home. And that very night, he visited me.

I sit under a tree in the dark, overlooking a vast expanse of water. I had felt a weariness like no other come over me and had ended up collapsing under a willow tree. It cradled me in its branches and draperies as I slowly regained consciousness.

Before I can adjust to the setting, a light shines through the curtain of leaves disorienting me further. My initial reaction is confusion and fear, but soon an overwhelming calm expands within me.

He's come to see me, wearing the same multicolored robes he wore in his portrait. His golden blonde hair glows golden against the night, against his soft features. He is shining into me, emanating warmth into my very core, those heavy eyelids hanging over the gentle eyes that are now focused entirely on me.

The golden embellishments on his robe make a sound like a wind chime as he floats toward me. He kneels before me, examining me. His eyes suddenly be

came wet and sorrowful. Though his mouth never moves, his melodic voice is a tingling sensation at the back of my skull, the velvety tone raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

“You poor thing.”

I stare at him in silence as his voice makes its way through me, listening to the internal echo of it. He chuckles softly with a hint of sadness.

“You are so willing to sever off parts of yourself all in order to sate your guilty conscience. Your attempts to suffocate your own affections are so earnest that you don’t even realize the slaughter you are committing in your heart. You offer your soul to those who wish to spiritually mutilate you. Why? Because you think it’d be easier to live as someone else? You strive to be someone God can make room for in heaven, without considering the implications of a creator that creates beings he knows he cannot tolerate nor save.”

As his words strike several chords within, a wave of painful emotion threatens to overtake me. I try to open my mouth, to apologize. For what, I do not know, but he seems to sense this urge and shakes his head.

“We do not have time for repentance, nor am I the one to whom you should repent. I do, however, have a question I’d like to ask you.”

I nod. He comes closer, placing his palm against my cheek. I close my eyes and lean into his hand. This is the most at peace I’ve ever felt. My mind is blissfully quiet.

His voice is a whisper in my ear, an embrace.

“Will any of this be worth it if you were wrong?”

He explodes into a million different light rays as I sit up in my bed, eyes squinting against the sun shining through my window. I am disoriented, but the feeling of internal quiet has not left me.

I decide then and there I will not be meeting with the priest, for I can’t bear the thought of losing this newfound feeling of contentment. I turn over and return to my slumber.

The Girl in the Mirror

Ava Garcia

Pretty, kind, and happy
Those are the words others always use to describe me
Selfless, loving, and caring
The way my family and friends describe me
Their kind words touch me like a warm blanket on a fall night
Their love and kindness are so immense that I almost forget what the girl
in the mirror said to me
Ugly, rude, and worthless
The girl in the mirror told me last night
Selfish, unlovable, and destructive
The girl in the mirror whispers to me every morning and night
Suddenly the bright and perfect day is filled with stormy clouds
I was happy once,
Until the girl in the mirror told me I shouldn't be

Ingredients for a Painting

Kenzie Cregg



Photography

The Little Things

Natalie Dufon



Photography

Staircase Melancholy

Logan Green



Photography

Buoy Shack

Finn Conner



Photography

Everything I Do

Xaundra Rosales

I dream of a house.
A house I call home.
A home filled with books and colorful foods,
a place I can freely roam.
A place no one can take from me;
a place of my own.

I dream of a piano
sat against the wall of my living room.
No, I can't play
but I'd try even if it were out of tune.

I dream of two separate rooms
Filled with beds, homework-filled desks, and décor.
I dream these rooms stay colorful and true.
Never a bore.

I dream these two rooms
are filled by me and you.
My little sister
who has held beauty and grace since she was new.

I dream of a house.
A house we can call home.
A place where we can feel safe.
That's something we've never known.

The Daughter After Me

Anna Grace Lubbers

If I were superstitious, I would think that the women in my family were cursed
I don't talk to my mother very much, and she barely talks to hers
I can follow the tragedies that happened from my nana, to my mother, to me
I know that life is hard, bad things happen to everyone
But it's hard to fight the feeling that if I had children, the curse would get them too
Would it be my fault? Or would I just feel like it was? Does the difference matter?
I don't know how to tell my family that I don't want children
My peers are outraged, we're being left a world ravaged by powers we can't control
Mom, Dad, there are more fires, more droughts, more heatwaves, sometimes I feel
like there's no point in trying, if the world will end soon anyway
Tell me it isn't true, even if it is, I don't want to believe that
Would that be my part of the curse, having my daughter live in a world that's cooking
her alive?
Would you be disappointed in me, for not giving you a granddaughter?
I shouldn't care, it's my life, and it would be cruel to bring another one into this world
out of obligation
But I want you to be proud of me so badly, I wish I didn't, but I do
I hate lawns, I've read about how they destroy habitat, and keeping them maintained
wastes water
I think about that as I mow the lawn, because my father asked me to
I dodge the wildflowers, the milkweed, I move slowly to give the grasshoppers time
to flee
I don't see a piece of plastic trash in time, and the mower shreds it into little bits
Micro plastics too, I think, staring at the puzzle pieces of shopping bag on the grass,
she would have to deal with them as well
If I told you that's why I didn't want children, would you think I was blaming you for
having me, when the world is like this?
Am I mad? Not at you, I'm mad at corporations and politicians, a kind of rage that
festers and leaves me exhausted and sad
Would my daughter blame me? Would I be the next in line of cut off mothers?
People are working to fix things, it will get better, but slowly
Would I break the curse? Can I be better, do better, for her sake?
"Children are so expensive!" I say instead when you ask

I Have a Twin Sister

Olivia Ward

I have a twin sister.

Anyone with a twin knows that the common idea that twins are always together is quite true. My sister goes everywhere with me: school, the gym, shopping — even the bathroom (gross, right?).

Anywhere you can imagine, my twin is there.

Although twins, we are not all the way identical; we are more fraternal, I would argue.

My light brown hair contrasts greatly with her pure black color. I would say my eyes are a much lighter shade of hazel, as they definitely hold more life than hers. My sister is pretty, of course, but I would have to argue that I am much more beautiful.

A harsh comment to make about your twin, you would say? I agree, however, as the common phrase states, “Beauty is from within,” and my sister is most definitely not beautiful within.

Anyone who knows me knows that I am a bubbly character, full of humor, joy, and optimism.

My sister is not.

My sister is depressive, cynical, and extremely pessimistic.

My sister is hell on earth.

My sister and I have always fought over our differences like every sibling does.

However, this past year, we have been at our absolute worst.

Although I try not to let it happen, my sister gets the best of me.

I often wake up in the middle of the night to her tauntings, dripping cold sweat that often falls onto my pounding chest.

Her late-night whispers travel throughout my head.

“You’re dying. You’re dying. Your heart is failing. You’re dying. You are going blind. You are dying. You are dy—”.

The only way I know to stop the taunting is to call for my mother, just like I did as a child.

“MOM, MOM, SHE’S DOING IT AGAIN”

My mom runs into our room and shields me with her arms of safety.

My sister’s tauntings always slightly fade when my mother comes in.

“I’m so sorry honey, I wish I knew how to stop her,” is a common phrase my mother always says when in this situation.

Why can’t you stop her? She’s your child?

Do something, please, Mom.

These thoughts never leave my head.

I know she is her child, but I also know there is not much she can do.

My sister feeds off the idea that my parents can not stop her.

This past year, my sister has used this advantage over me in every situation.

She knew I was terrified of her, which fed her cynical soul.

Unfortunately, I obeyed her every command.

“PULL OVER THE CAR YOU’RE DYING”

I pulled over the car and cried until my mother came to get me.

“YOUR HEART IS STOPPING IN THE MIDDLE OF CLASS, YOU NEED TO GO HOME”

My boyfriend brought me home in the middle of class.

“MOM CAN’T GO TO WORK, YOU WILL DIE WHILE SHE’S GONE”

I begged my mother to stay home from work so I would stay alive.

In May of 2023, my mother and father had had enough of seeing their daughter tormented.

They handed me a paper.

“Pine Rest Urgent Care, what’s this?”

It was an urgent care that was designed to help people like my sister. A place that helps people like *me* deal with people like *her*.

I remember sitting in a bright-colored hospital room with my mother holding my trembling hand.

“She’s gonna get better, honey; it’s what both of you need.”

I remember the psychiatrist looking at me with the same pair of glasses the world views my sister with,

The pity glasses.

“I can’t imagine how you’re feeling; let me help you.”

In all honesty, I credit me and my twin’s new found relationship to this

psychiatrist.

She is the one who gave me the kryptonite for my twin's invincible torment;

100mg of Zoloft and a small bottle of Xanax, one taken a day as needed.

My twin sister's name is Anxiety.

Her legal name is Anxiety and Panic Disorder.

Anxiety and I haven't fought much since the time I met with the psychiatrist at Pine Rest. In fact, we don't really fight much at all anymore.

I mean, we have our moments, but all siblings do, don't they?

Anxiety is still there with me at school, the gym, shopping — and even the bathroom (still gross, right?).

However, Anxiety learned to love me, and I learned to love her. After all, we do share the same DNA.

My life is so much more enjoyable now that she and I are on pretty good terms.

My family is happy as well, as we can now go back to the way life has always been;

A family of four.

My father, my mother, my younger brother, and me.

Just us four.

One Son

One Daughter.



The Ebony Clock

Maria Basaj

As music spins webs through candlelit air Dancers turn under cherub's
ethereal stare.

A clock strikes midnight with booming gong

And all gold glittering light seems suddenly gone.

The sound tolls on, as though to stretch into space And the dancers halt,

held in their place. Unrecalled sentiments seep in with the boom

The draft of remembrance in an overwarm room. The horrid clock ceases
its drawn-out song

But still no one stirs after sound is gone.

Because the clock may have stopped, but on goes the boom.

The sound of stones sealing a long-forgotten tomb.

The Gifted Kids Pipeline to Failure

Cora McGinn

Ever since you started school, you were told you were incredibly smart
In 3rd grade, you were doing 6th grade math
Smart became your personality
Nothing else mattered
Not your interests
Not you
Nothing

You are told you would do amazing things and solve the world's problems
So smart you could do whatever you put your mind to
Doctor, lawyer, scientist
Your future has already been planned out for you

Peers came to you to ask for help on their homework, or to help them cheat
on a test
Designated smart kid
Only words they would say to you are "mhm" and "thanks"
Teachers would assign you to go help other people
You tell yourself you like that, it makes other people know that you are smart

Everything a teacher could teach you becomes so natural and easy that they
don't even bother to help you
You know everything
The praises keep coming
"You can do whatever you put your mind to"
Your goals were too little for them
The only effect you could make on the world would have to be something big

You make it to high school
You have to decide your career for the rest of your life
People now tell you your goals are too big
"That's impossible"
"Do something better with your life"
You no longer can do anything

Then, something happens.
You struggle.
Math makes you question
Grammar makes you confused
You can't remember the formula for chemistry

The smart kid can't function
Anxiety
Depression
You are no longer the person you thought you were
Everyone lied to you, you are not gifted, you are a failure

Does It Matter?

Ronnie Jewell

Shakespeare once asked, “To be or not to be?”

Was there ever an answer? Not sure that there is an answer. But I believe I am on this planet for a purpose and for a reason.

Having someone come over and just pull my trash can up from a very long slippery driveway. Yes, it mattered today!

Does it matter when you have no family nearby and you need a ride to the hospital to have another back surgery? Yes, it DID matter that day!

Does it matter when a close friend drops by and brings pies and cakes and homemade pasta over because she knows you are not able to make this on your own? Yes, it matters!

Does it matter when friends come over and remove bandages from the back surgery you had a week ago, ignoring the black blood stains all over the bandages and the white t-shirt that should have been thrown in the laundry? Yes, it mattered that particular day!

A million years from now, who knows? But we were all put on this planet for a reason. So it matters. At this particular moment . . .

And even when someone (who is unknowledgeable for lack of a better word because I don’t like the word “ignorant”) comes up behind me as I’m walking through the mall under their breath calling me a “humpback,” I realize I was created this way for a reason.

Ignorance may or may not be bliss.

They don’t know my story. But then again, I don’t know their story either?
So, yes . . . it matters.

Bryce

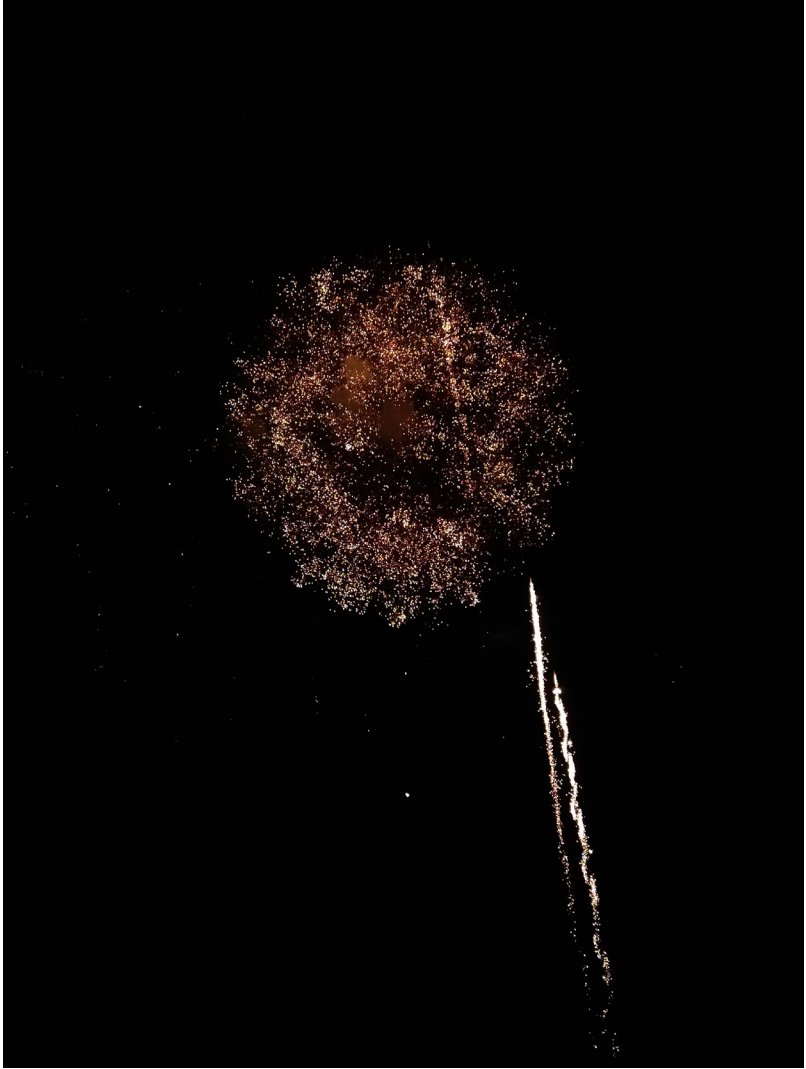
Finn Conner



Photography

Firework Trails

Ashley Streng



Photography

Moonlight

Olivia Cabrera



Photography

Motion Sickness

Kenzie Cregg



Photography

The Dream of Becoming a Nurse

Candice Kops

I am from hand-shredding zucchini and roller-crushing walnuts.
I am from a home of constant yelling.
I am from the smells of a smoked BBQ on a hot summer day.
I am from the colors of leaves in the fall.
I am from a family that loves Shark Week and taking big camping trips.
I am from a close-knit baseball community and a very small circle of friends and family.
I am from immigrants originating from Ireland, and Moonshiners of the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky.
I am from a mother who expected me to wake up at 4:30 in the morning to do chores before getting my little brother and myself ready for school.
I am from a father who wanted to give the world but couldn't because drugs and alcohol were more important.
I am from a little brother who sometimes called me Mom.
I am from a family that loved to fight and constantly bring up the past.
I am from the word "No" and the phrase "Suck it up."
I am from a one-income family of four.
I am from not listening to my gut after talking with my dad the night before he died.
I am from dropping out of college to become a mother and wife.
I am from different textured, colorful ribbons that create personalized items.
I am from a man who has taught me patience, loyalty, and love.
I am from a young man and twin girls.
I am from a successful marriage that doesn't believe in fighting or yelling in front of our kids.
I am from the dream of being a supportive, understanding, and loving mother.
I am from the dream of being a nurse.

I Hate

Cameron McKinnon

I lay in my bed, my head resting on a navy-blue pillow. I didn't want a navy blue bed set, I wanted a light pink one, but my mom insisted that the pink one was "much too girly and faggish." I glance around my room. I scoff at the Star Wars and G.I. Joe posters on my wall. I don't think that I've ever watched a straight five minutes of either of those franchises because, as a kid, I was too busy watching Barbie and Disney Princess movies at my neighbor's house to escape.

I listen to music that would cause my parents to faint if my earbud was taken from my ear and put in one of theirs. One utter of the words "shit" or "bitch," and my parents act as if the world is ending; that's why I need to clear my YouTube search history frequently to prevent my parents from seeing anything that might give them a heart attack. I wish that Doja Cat's singing voice in my ears could block the conversations coming from outside of my door, but it can't. I hear my parents laughing and conversing with their friends during their Bible study. My father asked me and my siblings to join tonight's study, but as far as they know, my stomach hurts like a *bitch*. Tonight's topic is "The Perfect Christian Relationship in God's Eyes," and let's just say, that isn't between two men. My parents are homophobic as hell, which is why they don't know that I'm gay. I've known my sexuality for a while now, like since I was 12; and that was 5 years ago.

I can hear the voices in the living room right outside of my mahogany door:

"All of these gays running around lately are ruining society."

"I saw a teenage boy in a skirt yesterday! How ridiculous?"

"Brenda from the book club said her daughter is going on a date with a girl from her class."

"I went to McDonalds yesterday and I couldn't tell if the cashier was a boy or a girl."

A tear streams down my red-hot cheeks as I try to keep from hearing the *shit* those adults are saying. I thought that Christians were supposed to be the most loving people on Earth, but it's clear that they're nothing but hateful little *bitches* who can't accept people for who they are. Some of my friends say that there are nice, accepting Christians out there, but my parents and their friends are anything but nice and accepting.

I scan my room until I reach my closet. My clothes hang on the tough metal bar, but in some cases, clothes aren't the only thing hanging. So many other gay kids have had to put up with this shit from their family that they choose to end their lives. Maybe those kids are smart. Will I ever be able to come out in this family? Can I live a lie for my entire life and still be happy? Would it be best to just end it all? I stare at my closet a bit longer, contemplating death.

I don't know how much longer I can take this. Listening to my parents and the half of the world that criticizes people that are different destroys me. I *hate* this world. I *hate* my parents. I *hate* that I'm gay, and if there is a God, I *hate* that he made me this way.

A Family's True Love

Margaret Pope

June 30th, 2015 was the best and most memorable day of my life. I officially became a member of the Pope family. Stepping into the courtroom that day, I appreciated the fact that my life was about to change for the better. I no longer had to be afraid of where I would end up or if I would be hurt by the people I loved. Everyone who was a part of my foster case was there to support my new family and me; case workers, counselors, CASAS (stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate which works with children who are victims of abuse cases), and welcoming family members. Our adoption day was the start to a life of freedom.

Three years previous to this wonderful day was one of the worst days of my life. No child should have to experience being ripped from the arms of their parents at the age of six, but I did. "Just let us go! Just let us go!" I screamed at my mother as they ripped us from her arms. It was uncomfortable to have the caseworkers tugging us one way and my mother pulling us another. I felt like the rope in a tug of war tournament. One way or another, we would be taken from our parents, so I knew they wouldn't stop pulling until she let go. For years to follow, I didn't understand what I did to deserve being taken from my parents. I didn't realize at the time how severe the abuse I endured was. It was my second time being taken into foster care, and I knew this time, I wasn't going home.

At six and a half and four, my sister and I went into our second round of foster care. We were placed into a loving home with two other girls around our same ages. I didn't have to worry about being beaten if I made a mistake. Although we were still scared, we knew we were loved and cared for.

A few months into living with them, the woman, Justine, who had fostered my sister and I the first time, found out my younger sister and I were in foster care again and wanted to take us in. We were with her for eight months when we found out that she was pregnant, and one of the rules for foster care at the time was you couldn't have more than 6 children under the age of 10 in the home, and with the baby, it would be 7.

Justine's mother, Lisa, who was our foster grandmother, took us in and gave us a home. Changing homes was hard. I was a frightened child and didn't understand why I was constantly changing homes. I was calmer this time around since I was already familiar with the family. Going into the home, I was told by various family members that they were surprised at how much I had changed since I was last in foster care. The first time around, I was the child no one wanted to be around, because I was difficult to deal with. This time, I was calm and quiet. I kept secrets to myself and

was afraid to tell the truth in fear that I would be punished. With time, I began to open up and realize that I could trust the people that now surrounded me. I loved living with my foster family and prayed and wished every night that I wouldn't leave them. I had become attached to them.

Being in foster care, we had weekly visits with our parents, and I began to notice that I dreaded going. Seeing my parents brought back the bad memories. I began to have terrifying nightmares. I'd relive the moment my mother almost killed my father intentionally by holding a knife to his neck and telling him she would cut his throat. I would be right back in the moment where I was slammed up against the wall and had my shoulders beaten to the point of my skin breaking and bleeding. I would be lying there while my father held me down and my mother put soap in my eyes and pepper down my throat as a punishment. I'd wake up sweating and crying in fear and sometimes even screaming, and Lisa would come hold me and read to me until I fell back to sleep. Even after I was well asleep, she would stay in the chair holding me until morning, making sure if I woke again, she would be there to comfort me.

The dreams only ever got worse. I saw various counselors while I was in foster care, but nothing seemed to work. At the age of eight, I was diagnosed with PTSD and severe anxiety. Despite my diagnosis, I was still loved and cared for by my foster family. They fought for me and made it very obvious that they wanted us to stay. I was offered words of encouragement and warm arms to snuggle up in when I felt like I couldn't do it anymore.

At age eight and a half, my sister and I were told we were no longer allowed to see our parents. Visits ended, and we were deemed adoptable. Relief washed over me as I knew a decision had finally been made. I would be known as Lisa's daughter for the rest of my life.

The adoption process took a year, and finally, at nine and a half, I was brought into the courtroom to be adopted. I felt overjoyed as the judge told us we were declared Popes. My new adoptive mother hugged us and exclaimed, "You're mine! You're mine!" I felt more loved in that moment than I ever had before. I knew right then that I really was cherished by my new family. I knew that someone wanted me and would fight for me no matter the given circumstances.

The Fighter and The Writer,
EPISODE 46: Happy Loman's Bad Day

Abigail Louise Smith

SCENE 5

Setting:

EXT. VICTOR'S NEIGHBORHOOD (SUBURBIA) - DAY

Music score is pleasant and optimistic, anticipating the future.

Alfred sits behind a lemonade-esque stand. On the front is a sign that reads "KISSING BOOTH - \$5". His hands are clasped, and he is smiling blithely.

Enter Victor. He is wearing his BILL MURRAY SWAG outfit from Episode 27.

VICTOR

(Sighs) Doctor said to take walks for stress. I should have clarified that I wanted LESS stress.

ALFRED

Hey, Vinnie! Lovely day, isn't it?

VICTOR

It was.

ALFRED

(Gesturing broadly to his stand) How do you like entrepreneurial idea number 3? A character in one of my books did this once. It was symbolic of his coming into self-assuredness and his discrediting the expectations of others in his mind. Even though it had seemed like he had lost everything, the love interest from the beginning comes back and is attracted to his new self-confidence. It's a message about the rewards of authenticity.

VICTOR

You still trying to raise money for Aunt Josephine?

ALFRED

Of course.

VICTOR

(Dryly) You think that this is doing that?

ALFRED

It's an untapped market, Vinnie.

VICTOR

(More dryly) Your wife knows about it?

ALFRED

Physical intimacy is so distrusted and scandalized by our society, so most people who walk by are touch-starved in some way or another. It's a small price, but over time, the Lincolns add up.

VICTOR

You don't think that five dollars is a little steep? I'd pay more to hit you.

ALFRED

Oh, I couldn't charge you for that. I'm a patron of Apollo, not a plot device – if the master pays to play, it's his own tragedy. *(Sweetening)* But if you'd like to sample the merchandise, I would of course give you a family discount! Four dollars.

VICTOR

Three.

ALFRED

Two and a half?

VICTOR

Pass.

(Alfred presents a tray of chapstick or lipstick.)

ALFRED

Your choice of color and flavor, sir.

VICTOR

You know you're just scaring everyone who walks past. And setting a bad example for the kids.

ALFRED

(Banishing the tray) Speaking of, I've seen three middle-school girls walk by just today. Why haven't I seen a resume from my nephew, yet?

VICTOR

You're not prostituting my boy.

ALFRED

It's not prostitution, it's a family business. Besides, he could use the extra income. I understand that he's college-bound?

(Victor stifles a flash of sudden and intense anger. But he draws a deep,

deliberate sigh and slowly softens his shoulders on the exhale – willing calmness, like he’s been practicing.)

VICTOR

I am leaving before I do something that I will regret.

(Victor turns to leave, but Alfred quickly shoots a hand out after him.)

ALFRED

Wait, Vinnie! Look, I’ll-I’ll be real. Business isn’t too hot right now. I think the soccer moms are a little intimidated by my healthy charm. Deep down they’re insecure and don’t think that they can do any better than someone who’s angry, or ugly, or miserable, or past his prime, or-

VICTOR

Or having somewhere better to be. *(Trying again to turn away.)*

ALFRED

Exactly! I think that you’d be right up their alley. What’d you say you put Victor Cruel back in the ring, huh?

VICTOR

Pass.

(Victor leaves for real. Alfred calls after him.)

ALFRED

Vincent, wait!

(Victor stops at hearing that old name used in full. He looks over his shoulder.)

ALFRED

...TWO dollars?

(Victor quickly keeps walking, shoving all of his anger into his legs. He hustles away before he does something that he will regret.)

STATUS: CUT

COMMENT: The awkward mistletoe scene in Episode 32 was poorly received and dropped holiday ratings by 14%. There is not an “untapped market” for these sorts of jokes. Please revise.

A Significant Day

Natasha DeLonge

A day,
I put way too much weight on,
And a password,
I used on all my accounts growing up
March 7th

A date,
that marks a pivotal point in my childhood,
And a future,
he was unable to be a part of taken by
March 7th

A moment,
that stole too much from a 9-year-old girl,
And a time,
I will NEVER be able to forget
March 7th

A stroke,
that left him just a shell of a man,
And a father,
that died unexpectedly on
March 7th

A forever,
I will always long for
And a memory,
that will live on in my head and in my heart
March 7th

A tragedy,
no one was prepared for,
And a name,
that has rarely been spoken since
March 7th

Who's Afraid of the Big Stick?

Ryan Mixer

“What in God’s name have you brought to my art exhibit?” Mr. Sanitaris yelled so loudly it commanded the attention of all of the other artists working in the “New Age” art exhibit. “The absolute audacity to bring such a vulgar, inappropriate, and meaningless sculpture in this exhibit. Our exhibit is meant to inspire new artists to innovate and push art forward, yet instead, you want to show this folly to the world. You are soiling future art movements by showing perverse, uncouth nonsense. Art is meant to induce feeling, art is meant to elicit critical thought, art is meant to express talent and thought, and yet, I see none of that within this monstrosity. Get this statue out of my exhibit and get yourself out of my exhibit Mr. Darwin. I hope your mother is proud of you and your vomit-inducing statue. Good day to you.”

The statue in question was that of a phallic object that was the size of a school bus. To simplify, it was a sculpture of a penis. It was hyper realistic with the veins and skin looking as if this was broken off from a poor giant who met Medusa. The material appeared to be marble but was squishy in a similar way to the real deal. It was uncircumcised and asymmetrically made. The phallic object didn’t possess a single pubic hair.

Mr. Sanitaris tried to storm off, but Mr. Darwin sternly stated as the man tried to flee, “Sir, this statue was intricately crafted over several days, and the fact that you would like to suggest the idea that I allotted a miniscule amount of thought into this work is quite offensive to me. My contract states that I must create an art piece that is innovative and inspiring to those who see it, and not that there must be any rules for how I achieve this feat.”

“And yet you say this is art? If this is art, Mr. Darwin, I would sooner shoot myself than persist onwards. So tell me Mr. Darwin, what is the meaning of this vile thing?” Mr. Sanitaris asked, his face redder than crimson.

“Art is not simply what the artist states the purpose behind it is. I believe art to be based upon what the individual feels, what the individual sees, what the history of the artwork is, and by making me have to give a short speech on what the individual is supposed to feel while looking at my magnum opus, well, Mr. Sanitaris I feel as if that ruins the art piece more than anything.”

“And dare I ask, Mr. Darwin, what is your purpose behind this ‘masterpiece’? Give me one of your excuses on why I should have even an ounce of respect for this nonsense.”

Mr. Darwin sighed and knowing that saying so was the only way to save his placement in the museum he gave in to his unruly boss, “This piece is meant to be a celebration of masculinity. A harrowing statue that represents and celebrates the male form. A—”

“This is supposed to be a celebration of the male form? This?”

Just a massive dick showcases that? Nonsense, this toppled flesh tower clearly will only amplify the insecurity of men and boys around the world who uphold the masculine standard of perfection that is placed upon us for genetic decisions outside of our realm of control. A true celebration would feature a grotesque member, not the perverse, insecurity causing display here,” he said, aiming for an excuse that would allow for him to gracefully lead the new member of the art community out of the museum.

“I apologize, I hadn’t considered how this piece may have led to such insecurity to be amplified within those of you with flesh sticks you had been left insecure about.”

Ticked off but willing to show a hint of generosity to keep his workers and show his Christ-like gratefulness, he attempted to provide salvation for the youthful painter, “Now, now, Mr. Darwin, I have said nothing regarding my masculinity’s size. I may forgive you for making such a piece if you are to turn around, but I must inform everyone in this exhibit that I had not made such a comment on this piece to insecurity regarding my own phallus object. My own is quite pleasing. My own wife I believe would say as it stands at an impressive eight inches,” he said while fidgeting with a golden ring with a unique engraving that read “God’s King for Humanity.”

“I don’t know about that, Sir Sanitoris,” Mr. Darwin responded.

“Pardon?”

“Eight inches is a mighty load, yes, but such a thing can be quite painful. Trust me, I’ve tried myself up my rear, and the pleasure rod my wife used was quite painful due to its colossal proportion. Such a thing led to tears within my own anal cavity, and I’d imagine may do much worse towards a woman’s own private region. In fact, my piece remains not a celebration of large schlongs, as I believe you may have misinterpreted. It is a celebration of those male forms that are flawed. Those that may have failed for the purpose of pleasant reproduction and fun due to their mammoth-like enormousness or due to their infinitesimal nanoscopic-ness. So, I guess it is still yours, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“Get the fuck out of my museum.”

Mr. Darwin promptly left the museum and took his statue with him, but his ideas remained. For some reason, the absurd pork sword statue struck a chord with the artists in the New Age Exhibit. Maybe it was just a buried desire of rebellion against the rich egotist, maybe it had been the desire to try something new, or maybe it had just been a natural evolution of artistic movements centered around the exploration of what it meant to be masculine.

Regardless of the reason, the people of New Age Exhibit one by one turned their gaze towards this new prospect. This new movement that the artists labeled the “phallicism movement.

The first painting had been one that was an offshoot of The Creation of Adam where God had been handing Adam a variety of willies: some big, some small; some circumcised, some uncircumcised; yet, all beautifully designed creations of the creator. It was a masterpiece.

The painting and the artist were banned by Mr. Sanitaris.

Another painting that was made by a transgender man showcased a nude transgender man changing amongst tons of men in a gym locker room, none of them acknowledging their differences in size or genitals. It was a masterpiece.

The painting was burned. The artist was cursed out.

Another painting was made by a woman who wanted to make a painting less oriented towards masculinity. She made a painting detailing an escort walking down the street with her breasts out, guiding another lady on a leash down the road like a dog.

Mr. Sanitaris told employees to take the painting down towards his office, as he would dispose of it later. He would take the painting home and hang it up on his bathroom wall. The man would take off his ring and masturbate for the next four hours to this painting. He loved the control exhibited by the escort in the painting. Her confident strut down the street, her lack of concern for the stares of those around, her complete control of everything around her. It was what he wanted to be, and it was all he wanted to be. But as he put his ring back on, he was reminded of the sin he had just committed. Men should not lose such control like this. How would he be awarded with the pearly gates if he was to give in to such sinful kinks as petplay? That lapse in reasoning allowed him to realize how harmful the paintings were. It was his sole reasoning for the banning of these paintings. Penile paintings were simply too attractive for the average man to handle.

And so, he disposed of the painting and continued with his bans of the portrait.

One by one, day after day, artists fell to their employer's expectations.

All until just one remained. It was an ordinary realist painting by a somewhat famous artist that showed a man working in a factory. This famous artist had the only painting in the exhibit. With that came the expectations that this must be enough to carry a whole exhibit, and Sanitaris believed it could be a piece worthy of the title of a masterpiece, and one that could be sold for hundreds of millions once it gets remembered as the piece that carried a whole museum of fired disappointments. She had worked on the painting up to the last minute, fine tuning the piece mere hours before the unveiling of the portrait.

Mr. Sanitaris brought in the many critics to see the painting unveiled by ripping off its white cloth covering. They had all made their way to this exhibit in anticipation to see something truly special. What would be so worthwhile that it should be dedicated to a room all to its own? They all had their notepads and cameras ready to spread the word on what made this piece so great.

Mr Sanitaris stood next to the painting behind a podium and gave a speech on the piece. How it expressed beauty in what men should truly be. He unveiled the painting waiting for cheers and photos to be taken and applause for the unprecedented beauty the piece showed.

The painting that laid behind that curtain was unlike anything the audience had ever seen. An object painted with a natural pale ivory, salmon pink, with faint blue lines were all covered up by a dull gray. This object was trapped in a cage—a chastity cage to be specific. Everyone in the audience struggled to identify what the object was at first, but they swiftly grew to understand that this was indeed a painting of male genitalia.

Some of the art fanatics let out a snort, whilst others grew more enamored by this obviously controversial piece. Their eyes tracked down the painting, following the path created by the downward curve created by the main object of the painting. Being pointed to was a hand. A hand that was pulling away from the imprisoned shaft. A hand that was holding onto a key, and a hand that had a golden ring with a unique engraving that said “God’s King for Humanity” on it.

Mr. Sanitoris was furious. He asked for one of his assistants to hand him a sharp object to cut the painting up with. He wished to set an example for the world.

He approached the painting with a cleaver in hand and cut the painting into pieces. Sanitoris walked away from the painting, ready to give a speech to the crowd who were in shock over the immaturity exhibited by the director, but what nobody anticipated was the secret behind the painting. A metal contraption was built behind the wall that extended a large metallic pole straight into Mr. Sanitoris’ skull. It then curved upwards and began to extend, higher and higher. The crowd watched in amazement and the tiny little painting in this exhibit grew larger than the room itself and could no longer remain contained in such a tiny room.

It extended higher and higher and higher. People from around the city watched in awe as the metallic structure grew high into the sky. The world dropped their mouths in shock as they witnessed the phallic metal structure reach for the stars. Aliens from outer space shed tears over the piece of an art movement nearly suppressed. Everyone all at once began to applaud the piece, as they all realized that they had been witnessing a masterpiece. A masterpiece that would long be remembered—far longer than some “King of Humanity” at the very least.

Short story inspired by the painting *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* by Barnett Newman

Why Read?

Ashley Vandenakker

I read because TV couldn't keep my attention.
I can't understand sitting in one spot
and watching episode after episode.
My attention wanders.
I have to do something else:
clean, scroll, daydream, move,
just something, anything.

Then I miss things in the plot.
I'm confused and have to watch again.
Or I grow bored of a show and abandon it.
Even when the plot and characters are cool
and I had every intention of finishing it.

That doesn't happen when I read.
I can sit for hours and hours.
Read page after page and
never get tired of a good book.
Never does my attention roam.

Reading engages me.
My mind can't wander
when I am fully lost in the story.
Creating the world and imaging the characters.
It shows me different points of view and
Makes me think even after I close the book.
Which TV has never been able to do.

(Inspired by "Why Write?" By Abby Govea)

The Forgotten

Amy Ndiaye

Standing at the airport, there I was waiting for the woman who had become a stranger to me. After years of living as a young child in Senegal without her, I began to forget that she was my mother. I froze, unsure of why this smiling woman was approaching me with a sincere look on her face as she began to hug me. After a few moments, she used nicknames that were only known to us. I softened and hugged her back. Every interaction with her now reminds me of that day and how every little girl needs her mother.

The Fool

Emma Marshall

Stumble to the edge of the garden
Wondering what lies beyond
I've seen all there is to explore here
It may just be time to move on

My hands grasp the fence in the garden
And I push myself over the edge
Gazing at new horizons before me
I jump down from the garden wall's ledge

The stars in the sky smile upon me
And the moon grins and shakes her head
Then the trees give way to a figure
And the magician stands in their stead

Who Am I?

Ishorya Kharel

Sometimes life feels like it's going in the wrong direction. Sometimes I sit and wonder how I got here. Which always leads me to a question I never seem to uncover. Who am I? We lived as refugees in Nepal after the Bhutanese King started kicking people out. My parents' families fled to Nepal in order to stay alive. This was the beginning of my story, where my parents met and had my sister and I.

October 1st, 2004 was the day my story began, the day my mom gave birth to me. I was two pounds, but I wasn't this small because I was premature. It was because we lived in poverty, and never really had enough food, clothes, or professional medical care. When I was born, my parents had to take multiple trips to the doctor's office due to sickness and unusual vomiting. The doctors had to hook me up to feeding tubes in order to give me the proper nutrition to stay alive.

December 2nd, 2008, I was four years old when my family decided to move to America. Although my parents didn't know much about the country or how to speak the language, they took the risk anyways in order for my sister and I to have a better life. Here I stand today, eighteen years old having opportunities that most people can only dream about. Coming to America was the greatest gift, but it also came with obstacles that I didn't realize I was facing as a child. Reflecting back, I'm able to connect those dots. Racism was a topic that was never really discussed within our household. Until I started to become aware of my own family's biases. This made me question the world around me and how other people perceived me. From the colorist jokes to the casual racism, it became obvious my family had preconceived notions of beauty based on the color of my skin. The way my mom encouraged me to shower off the melanin from my brown skin. The way people made remarks when I wore my traditional kurtas; this had made me so uncomfortable in my skin. I would wear a sweater and sweats even in warm weather just so I wouldn't get any darker because I knew would get praised. The constant comparison and discrimination made me question my own beauty and worth.

Who was I apart from my trauma? Who was I before other people's beauty standards? Who was I before these racist ideas were introduced to me from childhood? I was a little brown girl wanting to be loved and seen by my family. A little brown girl that wanted to be accepted and heard. A little brown girl that is worth more than just her complexion. I get to create my own reality on what beauty means to me. The experiences in my story are a part of me, but they do not define the totality of me. I am who I choose to be.

Unity

Emma Marshall

Your first thought was of the way the earth felt,
so you cupped it in your hands
and watched the soil spill between your fingers.
And it was joy. For a little while.

When it grew dull
and you grew tired of the same old games
I brought you to the tree where I carved my name,
and I made you a slingshot to fire at the birds on the highest branches.

Alaskan Aurora Borealis

Mason Smutz



Photography

An Endless Night

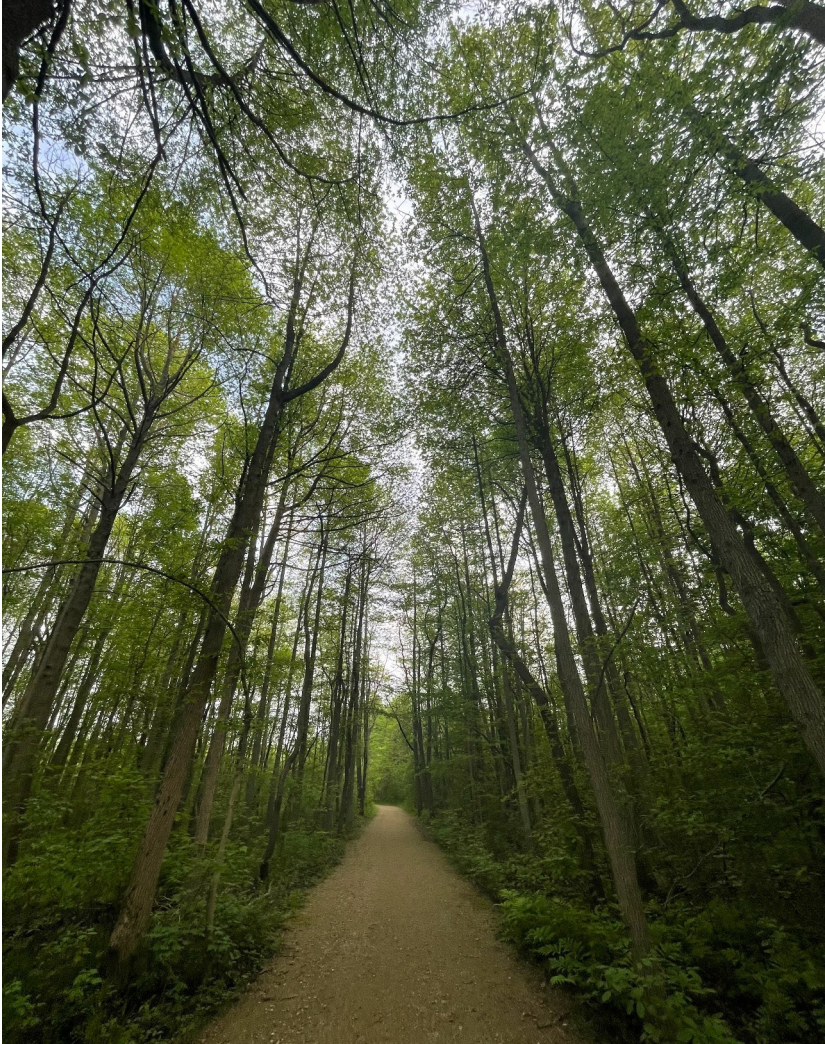
Jessana Sorto Gavarrete



Photography

Spires of Tranquility

Kimhouy Nong



Photography

Mountain Lake

Finn Conner



Photography

Anniversary

Zachary Schnotala

Dameon was ripped harshly from slumber by the hammering of an alarm clock in his ears.

With a half-conscious groan, he laid there a few seconds longer before sweeping his blanket aside and letting his legs slide off of the mattress, groping for the off button on the flashing “4:30 AM” perched on his nightstand. He welcomed the ensuing silence after finding it, but only for a moment before forcing himself to stand with a harsh rub of his eyes.

The bathroom light served as a blistering second assailant to his senses, and a splash of cold water from the sink an unforgiving third, but it never took more than that to ensure Dameon was awake enough for the rest of the morning. With an aggressive yawn, he rubbed his eyes again, switched off the bathroom light, and ambled into the kitchen. The hard floor was cold against his bare feet.

“Good morning.”

Dameon gave a start, and his eyes flew to the adjoining dining room, his body quickly following suit. There were two candles lit at the small oak table that occupied much of the space, and two plates of food were freshly prepared beneath the candlelight.

Dameon gaped at the man sitting in one of the chairs. “Oh, you *sappy* son of a bitch.”

The man leaned back, arms behind his head, and winked. “Told you I wouldn’t forget.”

“Sam...”

Dameon stood there floundering in the doorway for a moment as he struggled to process what was in front of him, prompting Samuel to rise from his seat and make his way over to his partner. He took Dameon’s hands in his and planted a kiss on his cheek, grinning as he guided him to the table.

“I thought I’d make you breakfast for the special occasion.”

Dameon released Sam’s hands and slid his arms around the slightly taller man’s shoulders, sinking into a hug with an affectionate groan. “Oh my god, babe...”

Sam welcomed the embrace, kissing Dameon again on the top of his head.

“I’m gonna melt if you do one more sweet thing for me,” Dameon mumbled. “I’m serious.”

Sam laughed and gave his partner a gentle squeeze. “Look,” he said, “I knew you weren’t happy about having to work today, so I thought I’d make up for not seeing you as much with breakfast.”

“It’s 4:30 in the *morning* though,” Dameon protested. “That’s so early for you.”

“4:45, actually,” Sam grinned. “You’re worth it either way.”

Dameon only offered an incoherent grumble in response, burying his head deeper into Sam’s shoulder. Sam rubbed his back slowly and pulled him in close, sighing comfortably in the dark.

“Happy anniversary, my love.”

A Tribute

For our dear friend and fellow poet, Diana Casey.

You will be missed.

Diana Casey

My formal teaching career comes to an end this year. Yes, I am retiring. This is my family portrait, the only formal photo of us. When my brother and I were in high school, Mother took us to clown class. Isn't this what most mothers do! Dan is seated, his clown name is Tuba. Mother stands on the left, her clown name is Jingles. I am on the right, my clown name is Pickles. Many ask me, "What will you be doing in retirement?" Look at this photo, it answers the question. A multitude of creative activities will fill my days – dancing with my dogs, participating in theater, sewing, writing, clowning around...



Miss Diana Casey

Ronnie Jewell

Yes, we will miss Diana,
classy Lady and the ruler of the geography lab!

That lab will never be the same. Whoever takes over has a lot of shoes to
fill.

She loves Albuquerque, rocks, and creating smoke clouds in her classroom
for her students with her brilliant talent from that closet of artifacts and
treasures that will never be forgotten.

She shares memories of her childhood carrying a large machete in her
hand as her little friends follow behind her making sure they don't get
ahead as she chops the weeds and anything else that gets in her way after
eating candy bar wrappers.

It's a Casey thing!

Oh, the stories she has to share!

Her students, colleagues, and close friends will understand
what a treasure we are losing.

Direction

Diana Casey and Ronnie Jewell

South, North, East or West . . .

Which direction is best?

SOUTH

Beans
Cornbread
Salmon

NORTH

Teaching
Friends
Education

EAST

Cats
Greens
Partridges

WEST

Dogs
Cows
Chili

He Calls Me

Diana Casey

He calls me,
“Can you order the Boost?” I did. It arrives next week.
The Mexican lady, she likes us. Among all these white people of the north.
We look in the closets and the cupboard. No candy.

He calls me crying,
Mother needs socks with the grips. No, not tight. Her legs are swollen.
Mother needs nightgowns. Button or zip front.
They need to easily clean her.

Crying...I'll call you in 30 minutes,
They took her purple crayon. You remember, the one we got at the Crayola
Factory?
Our last trip as we three.
Purple Mountain Majesty! Yes, our mother named a Crayola crayon.

My brother is crying,
I listen. I order from Amazon.
We are the last of us, we three...
The last of one.

My brother and me...

Where I Became Me

Diana Casey

“The edge of the sea is a strange and beautiful place.”
Rachel Carson, 1955

House

The first on stilts, shower water through lattice and below the house
Mother was a good teacher
The government moved us to a cement house, with a bathtub
Weekly our beds were sprayed with DDT

School Bus

The only white kid to and from school
When I fell asleep, the other kids gently touched the blonde hair on my head
and arms
The bus driver tied a chair to the front pole of the bus
My seat, singled-out, alone

School Field Trip

What did you do in fifth grade?
We hiked with our sack lunches to the top of the volcano that made our island
We sang loudly the whole way back to school reveling in our adventure

Emergency School Drills

Bombs from WWII at home and at school
Earthquakes, we have too
Every class had a place to go, to lay out on the playground

Food

Pickled papaya passed around under our desks
School lunch every day of a mound of rice and ...
Weekend feasts of lumpia, keleguin, and always SPAM

USO Day Camp

Three, four, four, two in the front
Each summer our parents took us to USO Day Camp
Every day began with swimming
Coral, jellyfish, baby sharks

The Boy from Majuro

He lived with us as to go to high school and begin at the university
Twice a week he took us to the boonies
We learned to “hunt and gather” our dinner
Wild chicken, crab, citrus, peppers, and tang-a-tang wood for cooking.

Boonie Stomping

The plants were thick and grew so quickly in our jungle
The oldest kid carried the machete
We learned to husk the coconut with a stick
Don't poke the coconut crab, he can hurt you

Vietnam

It was the late 60's, each school day we learned the news
Most all wore the POW bracelets
The soldiers came from the war and lived in our classrooms
We kids sat with them the outdoor theater to watch movies

The Cave

That holiday of coloring eggs in saltwater, not so brilliant
Our giant bunny of sand
We kids swam collecting seaweed to make his shorts
This was our playground, our place to be

“The edge of the sea...”
Where I became me.



A Prince. (I don't want to be.)

Diana Casey

What do I know of this man? This prince.
I think he is trying to talk to me.
I must look through him as his eyes tell me..... of a pain?
Or is it a longing?

Pleading he quietly asks the patrons –

“What choice shall I make?
Duty to myself.
Or a life I do not want.
Is there one of you out there who would please take my place.”

Imprisoned.
A wall of brick.
Not an open window.
No escape.
Decision.

As Socrates, shall he drink the hemlock tea?
Life is now too much to bear.
A Prince. I do not want to be.

Ekphrastic Poem, based on *Self Portrait* by Michael Triegel.

They Said

Diana Casey

Inspired by – Hughie Lee-Smith, Landscape #3

We lived in the mountains. In the village of my family.
Generations all together. They said, we taught each other.
The skills of life. Tending our animals. Cherishing our land.

That woman put the monies from our school in her pocket.
She inhaled something so as not to spend her days in a cell.
Our school will be closed forever, they said.
No more will our children be near. No laughter from the school yard.

The big government wants to close the small post offices.
All our packages, our checks, our communications with the world.
They don't realize the lifeline that our post office was, to, well to everything.
They said, drive the hours to the city.

Tortillas, beans, creamer for coffee are only found in the city.
Or shared from a neighbor. They said we are so kind to one another.
We have become our own store. Our kitchens open as the diner once was.

Communion among all ages in our church. Births, milestones, deaths.
The priest rotates among many villages as ours.
You are invited to faith in the other communities, they said.
So many have moved away, the young to find jobs and experience life.

Pictures to the government agent. Dead cattle on our winter range.
Goat weed taken over our gardens. No water in the ditch for three years now.
Forest fire was the last. Fences burned. No grass. Drought
With our cattle we lived from the bounty of the mountains.
The scientist report, hundreds of years for the land to repair.
They said, it is your grandchildren who will mend your village.
History, in the village cemetery. The stories of our lives.
The gathering of honor is small. It is the passing of our village.
They said.

Hear Me

Diana Casey

whooooosh comes water
by light of yellow we see
life forms exploring, saving
earth wails

half a volcano blast
gentle calm, ocean waves meet land
blanket gases choke life

BANG! particles
life seeds return begin again

Inspired by Chuang Che's
Landscape
Oil on canvas, 1979

Beyond the Classroom

Diana Casey

They come with **knowledge**.
So often they think I am an **expert**.
They comment on my level of **confidence**.
They **recommend** me to their friends, their peers.

They are my **therapy**.
I am not the **owl** with **sage advice** - I am their teacher.
My **wisdom** develops as we, teacher and students, learn together.
What I **prescribe**... we always foster this relationship.

This is the heart of education.
It is all there beyond the classroom door, a magic that needs no **warning**

River Voices

Contributors

Alicia Alvarado is an artist that finds inspiration in her family and friends. She is a mother of three. Her three children give her the motivation to be the best she can be as a mother, as a person, and as a role model.

Anaida Avakova is a Graphic Design student who loves to draw, decorate, study the history of art, and bake for her online store. Soon after moving from Armenia to the United States, she decided to continue her lifelong passion and study art, which brought her to MCC. Oh, and, she is a hockey mom, too!

Maria Basaj loves art in all forms from poetry to dance, and is studying to major in classical violin performance after MCC. Her dream is to add beauty to the world in whatever form she can contribute. She enjoys sewing, baking, and reading in her free time.

Collin Byrd is an imaginative young man who passionately explores fantastical realms, transcending reality through his love for storytelling. Inspired by H.P. Lovecraft's evocative language, J.R.R. Tolkien's intricate, deep world-building, and Stephen King's relentless work ethic and ideas, he seeks to share the awe-inspiring power of the human mind and imagination with others.

Olivia Cabrera is a student with a variety of hobbies but has always had a love for looking behind the lens of a camera. She has an affinity for photographing cars and the world around her.

Skylar Carlisle is a student who hopes to share her own experiences, as well as the experiences of others, and allow them to be seen and heard. She gets inspiration through her emotions.

Candace Cloud is in her last year at MCC and is looking forward to graduating. It is long overdue, and she is just simply proud that she managed school and a full-time job with a smile. She wants you to remember to not listen to the negativity in this world - you are made of particles of this universe and that means you are a star, shine on!

Finn Conner is an Early College student from Grand Haven who enjoys photography.

Kenzie Cregg is an Early College student at MCC who plans to earn her associate's degree and transfer to a university to study Psychology. Aside from school, she loves hiking, photography, and music. She plans on traveling the world to help others and capture the cultural beauty behind a camera lens.

River Voices

Contributors

Natasha DeLonge is in her last semester at MCC. She is a single mother of two and spends most of her time on the beach or on the water. Natasha finds laughter to be the most beautiful thing in the world, and because of this, she loves a good comedy show.

Natalie Dufon is part of the Early College program at MCC. She hopes to go into Marketing and Graphic Design in the future. Her inspiration comes from her everyday experiences.

Ava Garcia is a high school senior who would like to pursue a degree in Neuroscience and would like to one day become a Physician Assistant. She enjoys spending time with her friends and keeping busy with golf, bowling, and soccer.

Jessana Sorto Gavarrete is a Honduran student currently on her second and final year at MCC. Her future plans after graduating are to transfer to Michigan State University and finish her bachelor's degree in Psychology to then move on to medical school. Her ultimate goal is to become a pediatrician. She loves to work out and has found an ultimate daily challenge in CrossFit.

Donna Ginn is a life-long learner who loves writing stories and poetry. Utilizing her education in Human Relations and her experiences as a grandmother, she reflects and creates thoughtful tales of places and people everywhere. She believes in humor, humility, and hope as her holy trinity.

S.K. Gould has been an avid storyteller since the age of nine and has fallen deeply in love with the creativity of writing and the complexities of psychology. Through melding these two pillars of their life, they hope to bring inspiration, imagination, and education back to the diminishing world of readers. They also think pizza with pineapple slaps.

Logan Green is a second-year student at MCC and hopes to transfer to the University of Michigan to study Pre-Med. He finds inspiration through his camera lens and his grandmother's ties to Muskegon.

F.J. Hartland holds an MFA in Playwriting from Carnegie-Mellon University. His work has been seen across the United States and in a record-setting eighteen times in the Pittsburgh New Works Festival, winning "Best Play" four times. In addition to being a playwright, F.J. is a stage director and a professional actor (member of the Actors Equity Association since 1991). F.J. was the winner of MCC's 2023 Ten Minute Play Competition with *What the Puck?*

River Voices

Contributors

August Hawley is a poet studying English at MCC. A lover of stories, ghosts, and cats, he hopes to make writing his career someday.

Jonah Hayes is an Early College student who wants to travel to the United Kingdom and study in London. Jonah uses the camera to communicate her love for nature and share with the world its pure beauty.

Katherine Hedges is a Psychology major who loves to capture the beauty of the world through her camera. She finds her inspiration in the nature surrounding her.

Erin Hoffman is an Art instructor at MCC and studied Printmaking in college. She uses a variety of printmaking techniques along with painting, drawing and collage to make her work. She is inspired by history and current events.

Brooklyn Jebb enjoys photography but will not be pursuing it as a career in the future. She would like to pursue a career in the medical field to help people the way she was helped in so many ways.

Caroline Jeisy likes Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* a normal amount, baking, and taking naps in the afternoons.

Ronnie Jewell has been teaching English and Literature courses at Muskegon Community College since 1993. He was born and raised in Virginia and has semi-lost his southern accent. Although grading papers and prepping for classes take up most of his time, Ronnie enjoys setting time aside for reading, playing piano, writing poetry, and caring for his cats. He likes horror movies and nostalgic TV shows from the 1970s. He is also learning how to cook something other than Hungry Man TV Dinners!

Taylor Johnson is an Art student who is currently planning on pursuing a career as an artist, or really any kind of creative position. They enjoy writing, drawing, painting, music, and really any act of creation. They draw their inspiration from people, feelings, and personal experiences.

Ishorya Kharel is a 19-year-old college student at MCC and an aspiring entrepreneur. She is pursuing her business degree and aesthetician license to eventually open her own skincare line.

River Voices

Contributors

Liam Knisley has been a writer and storyteller since he picked up a pen. What began as an innocent hobby has transformed into a passion and calling. When he's not writing or brainstorming, Liam plays tabletop games with friends, reads fantasy and science fiction, and explores everything nature offers. Liam is constantly excited to push the boundaries of creativity and imagination.

Dan Kong is an artist who hopes to create a small difference in everyone's lives through her art and content. Dan likes to highlight the smaller things in life that not many think or talk about. She finds inspiration through her own struggles as well as others, hoping that someone will relate and not feel alone.

Candice Kops is a mother of three who has returned to college with the goal of becoming a nurse. She has spent the last 15 years growing and raising a family. Candice loves to watch her children play sports, and she enjoys camping during the summer, along with doing arts and crafts.

Rylee Lintz is a dual enrollment student attending Allendale High School. She finds her inspiration whenever she travels with her family, and she thanks her uncle for helping her appreciate the beauty of nature.

Kelli Loughrige is the English and Communications Department Support, a Muskegon native, a proud military family member, and an alumnus of RP, MCC, and WMU. She enjoys spending time with her family and fur kids. Nature is her solace, she can never live without creativity, and Jeep is her ride.

Anna Grace Lubbers is an Economics major and aspiring Marine Biologist that believes that the arts, and especially writing, are one of the most important parts of making life worth living. Why be a nihilist when you can be a romanticist?

Mae Mabrito is a current student at Muskegon Community College who is planning to study Engineering.

Teri Mallos is pursuing a career in Engineering but loves to express her creative side through photography. She hopes to capture the beauty of the world through photos that ignite a sense of awe.

River Voices

Contributors

Emma Marshall is an Early College student completing her final year at MCC. She loves all things classic literature and horror. She especially enjoys cozying up with a cup of tea and watching her favorite scary movies.

Cameron McKinnon is a student who hopes to pursue his dreams of working in the fashion industry in a big city. He loves participating in the arts and finding inspiration for his writing through them.

Cora McGinn is in Early College program at MCC. Throughout her education, she was referred to as a “gifted” kid. She hopes to spread awareness on how this title affects the mindsets of students.

McKenzie Millar is currently working on her Associates in Science and Arts. She is undecided for her major but plans to transfer to a four-year university. McKenzie has a newfound love for writing. She also does photography on the side.

Ryan Mixer is a student at Muskegon Community College. He really wants the “Code Geass - Hangyaku no Lelouch R2 - C.C. - Lelouch Lamperouge - Concept Masterline CMCGR-03 - 1/6 (Prime 1 Studio)” anime figurine from Solaris Japan, but lacks the necessary \$1300 to buy the figure. He also likes video games and TV shows. His favorite food is macaroni and cheese pizza.

Ami Ndiaye is a 19-year-old student who speaks three languages and likes to read and cook.

Berlyn Nickerson is a lover of all things art related. She enjoys all different art forms from musical theater to painting on a canvas. She wants to see the world from every perspective and plans to share her love through her art. Her inspiration stems from her travels and the people she loves most.

Kimhouy Nong is a dynamic college student embarking on a path toward a future in the medical field while also exploring a rich tapestry of artistic pursuits. With a passion for healing and a keen eye for creativity, Kimhouy navigates the academic landscape with unwavering determination, delving into the complexities of biology and medicine.

River Voices

Contributors

Keely Obregon is a passionate individual whose heart beats for the rich tapestry of history, the captivating strokes of art, and the boundless worlds encapsulated within the pages of books. She plans to become a historian in the future and work in museums.

Jillian Parson is completing her ASA here at MCC before transferring to MSU for her bachelor's in Criminal Justice and master's in Psychology and, but this does not stop her from releasing her creative side, as she's been doing so for over 10 years.

Kassity Perrault is an Early College student who loves helping others. She's most commonly seen volunteering, reading, and hanging out with her friends. She finds joy in the little things in life and hopes to learn from every new experience and person she encounters.

Malaina Peterson is a freshman at MCC, majoring in Early Childhood Education. She enjoys spending time with her family and friends. She hopes to become a teacher one day and make a positive impact on little kids, like her teachers did for her.

Ray Phinney is a student attending MCC with the goal of getting into animation. He enjoys science fiction and fantasy, loves drawing aliens and dragons, and drawing inspiration from the natural world.

Margaret Pope is a 17-year-old college student. Her dream is to become a Speech Therapist someday. She finds inspirations by reading books and writing creatively.

Isabel Post is a student who hopes to earn a doctoral degree in Psychology. She has lived in several different states and knows that her experiences will take her far. Her favorite hobbies include reading and trying new foods.

Xaundra Rosales is a student pursuing an education in English, as she hopes to become a future English teacher. She enjoys writing poetry, traveling, making art, and hanging out with her friends. She finds inspiration from daily activity, as she is always paying attention to what people are saying or doing. Anything can be considered art.

Zachary Schnotala is a second-year student pursuing a degree in Fine Arts. He is a filmmaker, storyteller, costume designer, and sound technician, and enjoys drawing and gaming as a pastime. An avid writer, he has created numerous short stories and has a fantasy novel series in the works, as well as several film and show scripts.

River Voices

Contributors

Shelbie Schoenborn is a freshman at Muskegon Community College where she is playing volleyball for two years while getting her Gen. Eds. done before moving on to get her bachelor's in Nursing. She finds inspiration in her teammates and family through sports and through school, as they are alongside of her every step of the way.

Carter Sibson is a Business student and an aspiring songwriter. He has found writing poetry to be a hobby he can easily get lost in and enjoys writing songs for his band Extension Cord. When not playing music, one can find him biking, snoozing in hammocks, or going on adventures with friends.

S.G. Siebert was born in Kathmandu and came to America after being adopted. He enjoys reading and writing, hoping one day to help kids, teens, and young adults find their literary passion (especially in poetry).

Mady Simon an artist and musician who expresses herself through macabre themes. She hopes to one day become a museum curator and adopt a Shiba Inu named Toast.

Abigail Louise Smith is a student at Muskegon Community College. She enjoys drawing pretty pictures for leisure, and she sometimes feels compelled to write any manner of things in a similar vein of unprofessional candor. Although admittedly she spends most of her free time posting about the Dragon Ball series online.

Mason Smutz is a veteran student going into the electrical field. He has traveled all over the U.S. while enlisted in the Air Force. He found inspiration from being an avid outdoorsman and enjoys spending all his time in the woods.

Liam Snipes grew up in central Illinois and moved here to attend Muskegon Community College. He plans to transfer to GVSU after receiving his associate degree to obtain a degree in Physical Therapy. He enjoys writing poetry, doing crafts, and taking care of his pet roaches.

Haylee Spicklemire is a Graphic Design student who is always trying to find ways to explore their creativity and to learn something new.

Ashley Streng is an Early College student who wants to help people feel understood and welcomed. She is undecided about her major but is considering working for some form of social work or mental help agency. She also enjoys photography, silly sketches, humorous writing, building projects, being outdoors, and numerous other hobbies.

River Voices

Contributors

Holly Swain has always had a passion for art since she was a little girl. She aspires to own an all-art business and designing clothes. She is a single mom to the best little three-year-old ever, her October Rose.

Camber Tanis is a Graphic Design student who has always been passionate about art. She loves working with all types of media. She is known for very busy and colorful art. She is a bit undecided when it comes to the future, but she is considering either becoming an Art teacher for grade-school children or would love to work for a design company where she could create fun and unique designs. When she needs inspiration, she spends time outside and experiment with other art styles and media.

Nic Taylor is an Early College student who enjoys drawing in his free time. He plays sports and is going into the videography field, but he still enjoys creating art with traditional art forms.

Madisen Thompson is an 18-year-old trailblazer currently immersed in the Early College program at MCC, while also preparing to embark on her journey in Hospitality Management at Ferris State University this upcoming fall. Madisen has recently discovered a passion for writing, delving into the world of words. Her written expressions echo positivity and encouragement, traits she ardently shares with anyone who engages with her work. When she's not writing, Madisen finds inspiration in the pages of books, leisurely walks, and cherished moments with friends and family.

Ashley Vandenakker is a dual-enrolled student who hopes to major in Law and has a passion for writing fiction and creating stories.

Olivia Ward is obsessed with anything literature, theater, or reading which is why SKD is the perfect spot for her. After MCC, Olivia plans to go to Grand Valley State University to achieve a degree in Special Education and a minor in Literature Education. When she's not doing anything SKD-related, she can typically be found teaching children's theater classes, shopping, and/or sleeping. There is one quote that Olivia finds herself living by and it comes from the one and only, Oscar Wilde, "You can never be overdressed or overeducated."

Hailey Witner is a second-year student at Muskegon Community College who enjoys writing, reading, and missing deadlines. In the future, she hopes to be gainfully employed and to hang out with a hamster.

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