

River Voices

Spring 2021

River Voices Spring 2021

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

This year, the editors chose the theme “Successful Failures” as a way to collaborate with the Liberal Arts Network for Development (LAND). LAND strives to promote the development of the liberal arts in Michigan’s community colleges.

Although 2020-2021 presented new and unforeseen challenges, it is our hope that students and faculty found strength in some of the inevitable “failures.” We have all learned how to adapt, how to demonstrate compassion, and how to look out for one another. That *is* the epitome of success.

We are grateful to all of our contributors and in addition we would like to express special thanks to: Becky Evans, Mary Tyler, Diana Casey, Erin Hoffman, Ronnie Jewell, Jessica Dennis, Hollie Benson, Linda Hood, Kelli Loughrige, and Peter Koryzno for their encouragement, support and contributions.

We encourage submissions of poetry, prose, essays, art, and photography year-round and are currently accepting submissions for the Spring 2022 edition.

If you would like to join the *River Voices* student editing team please visit: muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices for further details.

Cover Art: “Serenity”

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*I walk all alone.
And want to be found.
The Winter's been long.
Time to go home.
The voices are loud.
Those echoes profound!
My life is a song.
The themes are all gone.
It's now time to sleep.
With memories to keep.
. . . until tomorrow!*

- a song by, Ronnie Jewell

In Vain

Aisha Brown

my fingertips drip
hurt and inspiration
as a felt pen writes
effortlessly on a blank page
so soft, and so smooth
does it glide down the notebook
the secrets i swore away
until there is nothing left to write
nothing left to be said
right there
bled from my fingertips

Half Truths

Jessie Jackson

Parents are always nice and supportive, caring and loving, yet they tend to lack the ability to be one thing. Realistic. My parents like many others, always told me that I could be whatever I wanted as long as I worked hard enough. Despite the overly positive remarks of our well-intentioned parents, there comes a time in every adolescent's life where reality hits and we realize that we can't always be *whatever* we want. Whether you wanted to be an astronaut and you suddenly realize you are deathly afraid of heights or you wanted to be president, but you find out you're not a good liar, we all have to find our limitations, and unfortunately, it's usually the hard way.

My awakening came in the form of singing. I was thirteen and my school was hosting a talent show. My family always told me that I could sing very well. Of course, I believed them, so I decided to audition. I wanted to sing "Someone Like You" by Adele and I spent a great amount of time practicing the song and getting tips from my dad (who is a very skilled singer) on how to falsetto and bring out my voice.

Finally, after practicing for so long the big day came. I felt prepared and I knew that I did just what my parents told me to do, I worked hard. I was called into the gymnasium where the audition was held. In front sat three judges with my mom and dad there for support. I started to feel sick. I began sweating, my stomach was hurting, and I wanted to cry. I clasped the microphone with sweaty palms and began to sing, letting out some of the most horrific cracks and belts that a person could imagine. Needless to say, I did not get into the talent show.

So, it turned out that my parents were wrong, but not about my singing. Up until that audition, my singing was great, and I had a pretty advanced voice for a thirteen-year-old going through puberty. What they were wrong about was my courage. Turns out I have crippling anxiety. No matter how long or how hard I worked for that day; it would have yielded the same result. I felt like such a failure after that day and I didn't talk about it, but I thought about it. The more I thought, the more I realized that a day like that was inevitable and it happens to everyone. It was the learning experience that catapulted my self-actualization.

In some fictional world, I would have gotten over my fears of speaking and performing in front of people. I would be on stages with packed crowds living the dream, but we live in the real world. I am still terrified of performances, I stumble over my words in job interviews, I laugh awkwardly in serious conversations because I don't know what to do with my hands, I am that same awkward 13-year-old girl.

Initially, I thought giving up on singing would be the reasonable thing to do, but to do that would mean abandoning a part of myself. Singing genuinely makes me happy and it gives me fulfillment. That experience taught me to take what you love and make it yours. People associate successful singing with fame, crowds, and sold-out concerts. I thought that was what I needed, but that experience taught me that those were never the things that I wanted nor things that I could even bear.

Through understanding my social wants and needs I have gained so much fulfillment in life. I stopped putting myself in uncomfortable situations where I was doomed to fail and began to rethink the way that I looked at success. I now sing and lead songs at my church on Sundays, I sing to calm myself down before large social gatherings, I sing to comfort my nephews when they are trying to sleep, and I sing because it's something I love to do. And for me, every time my nephews stop crying, they look at me and smile, every time I give myself the courage to speak in front of a small group, every time someone tells me that a song resonated with them on a Sunday, that is a huge success.

The Power of Words

Lydia Crocker

Words freckle my skin.
They are exploding stars
that shatter shadows
and swallow my body
until I'm left
with crystallized cheeks
and Hope.

She builds Her home
on the tip of my tongue
and whispers,
“Darling, you're worth
far more
than you thought.”

Dreamscape

Gypsy Bates



Mixed Media

Final Frontier

Gypsy Bates



Mixed Media

Work It Out

Lance Klemple

Is this what it feels like to die?

Friction caused by scraping
Against the heat of the skin
Muscle fibers snap like
A chorus of angry angels

Is this what it feels like to die?

Pushed past the point of exhaustion
Blowing through the caution sign
Blood pulsates around me
I can barely catch my breath

Finally, a second of rest.

Neurons shoot me up with
Endorphins
Feels good but I'm left broken
Battered, raggedy, and tattered

Is this what it feels like to die?

No. I'm still here, alive.

Night comes tenderly
Bliss overcomes me
I know what to do
Rebuild my tissue

I'll build myself up stronger
Like I have before
You can tear me down
But I'll keep rebuilding more

My journey never stops,
Filled with breaks and bends
Throw me back into the fighting box
I'll be with you 'til the bitter end.

A Short Tale of an Eccentric Millionaire

Nick Rossiter

Todd was stuck in his bed. White sheets hugged his thin body, a reminder that he had done this to himself. He had tucked himself in and was now much too comfortable to leave. Years as a personal caretaker had made the movements automatic, even if he was performing them on himself. Despite being a man in what was supposed to be a woman's profession, Todd was the best at what he did. Serving as a personal caretaker for some of the world's brightest and most affluent, Todd had done well for himself.

But, that was all over now. The covers felt heavy, the way they clung to his body was constricting, suffocating. There would be no personal caretaker to hold a mirror to his nose, checking for the faint mist that would signal a soul under the covers. It was just him; an empty house with an empty husk lying within the white-plaster walls. He would have had music to accompany his death rattle, but he had simply forgotten. The short journey to his record player was too far, and he wasn't even certain what he would play. He thought it was odd that something so trivial as music gave such a feeling now, but it couldn't be helped.

His hands crept up to the top of the covers, near his neck. His delicate hands gripped the edge of the sheets, brittle joints cracking and grating against one another to make the movement possible. Despite the pain, his lips crept upwards in a smile; it reminded him of when he was a child. His mother had always hated it when he grabbed the covers like that, looking like a frightened victim from a horror movie. If only he could remember his mother's face. Only her words of disapproval and shea butter lotion accompanied the memories of his hands on the edge.

It wasn't always like this, there would be times when he was lucid, walking around his house, touching things, and *feeling* them. He remembered those memories, but they were fuzzy. Like his vision years before, the memories had faded to sensations, able to remember the smell or taste of something, but not the whole of it. He could never place the actual *thing* that the smell or taste accompanied. They were whispers of memories now, his mind was fading rapidly. Todd could only watch the memories drift from him, the harder he clung to the most important ones, the more quickly they evaporated from his mind.

The world had long grown unfamiliar. It was no longer the place of wonder it had been in years past. All adventures forgotten, the four walls he was surrounded by were the farthest he now cared to venture. His door was a gateway to a place he no longer had a desire to inhabit. The house he had bought decades ago was dear to him, but he no longer remembered why. It was simply the shell around his bed, and his room, by extension. Todd was trapped, but he was also perfectly content with his situation. The world was dangerous and unknown, Todd wanted no part of a world he no longer held memories of.

The bed was the only refuge his mind and vision held. No matter what

happened, his bed was always the comforting place he could return to on the off chance that he had to leave his room. The sheets far outmatched any caress he could remember. The pillow was the perfect height and width, he had searched the world longer than he cared to admit for a pillow that would properly support his head and neck, only to find it from a peddler on a country road, surrounded by desert for miles all around. When he had first learned of the disease that would take his mind away from him, he focused all his efforts on making his body as comfortable as possible.

The floor to his home had been first. To prevent any dangerous falls, his entire floor was covered in a foam-like substance akin to a firm birthday cake. For a few years, it was a fun novelty that even young kids would participate in. Todd was still a happy -if eccentric- millionaire then. Now though, those days were far behind. His eccentricity had quickly turned to insanity from the outside viewer. The floor was just the beginning. Soon, he had slides installed where every stairway used to be, so there would be no risk of falling down the stairs and breaking his aging body. The neighborhood children again delighted in their rich neighbor's funhouse as their parents looked on in concern for the kind old man clearly losing his mind.

For any parents still letting their children play in the old millionaire's home, the antiques were the last straw. Todd used his influence to bring in plenty of relics from all around the world. For the largely orthodox neighborhood, seeing holy objects and artifacts from all around the world frightened it to its core. And thus, began a wordless war between the neighborhood and Todd. The resentment of the neighbors for Todd's monstrosity of a home only grew when the gargoyles entered via moving vans and strange trucks alike.

Todd wanted a different gargoyle for all nineteen continents. In a past life, he would have remembered there were only seven. Regardless of how many continents there were, the gargoyles would keep watch over him from their region's spirits. Getting one from each continent was sure to cover all his bases. Long they watched over him, until the day that he would retire to his room for good, casting off their watchful gazes through the closing of his bedroom door.

Todd would grow lonely long before that moment, but he had his stone guardians to make do. He went about re-purposing the gargoyles into friends that were sharing his home. They were each moved to their separate rooms, with special instructions on what interests the statues had, who their friends were, what music they listened to, even what they preferred to eat before bed. Neighbors would hear hushed rumors about a secret force of stone creatures in Todd's home. Children would imagine that the monoliths were akin to the fantasy creatures they had been acquainted with, while adults would conspire, thinking that the word "gargoyle" was a code for something much more sinister than the government was plotting.

The distrust in the neighborhood only grew as the house did. With every room addition, the neighbors believed it was another government-issued soldier, ready to enforce crude laws onto their god-fearing homes. They invested in guns, and drew the curtains tight over their windows, sparing no expense at keeping the invisible forces of Todd's home at bay.

The gargoyles grew more lifelike as the years grew long. Soon Todd would begin to speak to them, asking how their days had been, how their pasts had affected their presents and would continue to affect their futures. He talked for hours with the monoliths, imploring them for answers that eluded him. Often these questions were matters he had never resolved before his unfortunate existence as a hermit. Whatever sort of coping method he had created for himself, it appeared to work for a time. He was oblivious to the neighborhood's growing suspicions of what was going on in his home, enveloped in the small community he had manufactured for himself.

When the gargoyles asked for birds to accompany them, Todd nearly smacked himself on the forehead at his stupidity. *Obviously*, gargoyles would love for birds to accompany them. So, he went about contracting the builders to switch their expertise to bird-catching. They floundered throughout the neighborhood catching birds, and the neighbors watched with bated breath. How soon before the builders pulled out their military gear and went from house to house, kidnapping kids and parents alike? The builders were oblivious to their concerns, enraptured on their task. They were working off commission, after all. The more birds caught, the better the pay.

When a sufficient number of birds had been secured, the workers let them loose in the home. They immediately flocked to the gargoyles, who complained that their new companions wouldn't have enough space to fly around. The builders reluctantly got to work expanding the ceilings of the amalgamation they had been working on for years now. It seemed that the gargoyles were content, and their protective energy over the home had increased to the pleasure of Todd, who was overjoyed that everything was going smoothly. At this time, he had lost most of his sight and hearing, instead choosing to feel his way around the home, but he was happy to be surrounded by friends.

He had hung ornaments from his bedroom ceiling years ago before he had finally closed the door. He was struck with memories of them now. He could still feel the pins underneath his fingers, pressing the tacks into the ceiling, cautiously releasing the support of his hand and finding delight at the free-hanging ornaments. They were trinkets and baubles taken from all corners of the world, with the express duty of protecting Todd as he slept. While the gargoyles did a sufficient job at protecting his home, he needed more security for his bedroom, and the ornaments granted him this much.

He saw them now, their auras of protection. Each held a different color, the area around them pulsating, swelling, and collapsing with their protective energy. He raised his arms to them, feeling his aching joints soothe themselves within the healing energy. He ran his fingers through their auras, watching the energy ebb and flow around each digit. He did this until his arms grew slack once more, he returned them to the edges of the sheet and closed his eyes, for good this time.

The builders weren't certain when Todd died. The group stood there, awaiting orders. Like lovers do when they don't know if they should kiss one another or not, inaction was the norm. Eventually, one sighed and walked out of the funhouse he had helped create. He waved to a few of his favorite

gargoyles on his way out. He didn't know why, but he felt like they understood. He lightly brushed away the bird that had perched itself on his shoulder. He liked that one, it was named Reginald.

He made his way to his car, considering taking some materials with him. Some of the tools the old man had bought for them were quite expensive, and he knew some pawn shops that would pay a hefty price for the equipment. He didn't know what it was about seeing the tools they had used over the years, but he didn't take any. He now spared a glance at the house. It was truly ugly, all things considered. Countless additions had made the place top-heavy, balconies had been swallowed up and converted into new rooms, there were chimneys that no longer stuck out from the roof, for that had been raised multiple times. It looked like something out of a fantasy novel, but not in an elegant way, it was quite tacky.

As he drove away, he raised his rear view mirror to gaze at the home one last time. Todd had promised all the builders they would receive one last check upon his death, but he couldn't help but wonder about the gargoyles and birds they had left within. What would become of them? Would they fade and crumble like the old man? He slowly turned his car around, unsure of what he was doing. He returned to the neighborhood, driving slowly up Todd's driveway. But there was no house there, not anymore. Just a foundation and a few bags of birdseed. It was as if the old man never lived there at all.

Ceramic, Painted to Look Like Wood

Serena Schultz

The side yard, thick with piles of fall-dampened leaves, and the great pods of
milkweed
open a path to the concrete birdbath where I am often
placed within my dreams.
The plum corners of nights without rest; beneath the eyes
coming into a color not unlike
the dead purple of a dried-up rose kept upon the dashboard
where the prayer beads used to be
before they were tossed against the window
and scattered throughout the car.
The light from the garage is a comfort in the dark of the
room
that smells of aldehydes and bergamot,
and these walls hold the pictures that feel warm when gazed
upon;
an angel pressing its lips to a child; your brother, when
he talked to you,
with his fingers between the neck and the collar of a
sweet-looking dog.
The ceiling is full of stars that glow green in this
particular shade of night,
and the bed is fully stocked with decorative pillows that
will remain
without a head to rest upon them, tossed at the foot of the
bed until morning.
The sweater I took from your closet no longer smells like you,
and it falls limp without your body to round it out. I imagine your
belly,
usually rising with great, deep laughter,
now stilled, cascading over the track of the shower door.
The little black radio that never turned off,
turned off.
I close my eyes, now rimmed in red,
echoing the blood of the numbers on the clock. Jesus, crucified above
the light switch, silent in the shadows.
but here. The vision fades too quickly. The skin shades itself in cool tones.

The familiar slowly undoes itself,
and nobody looks the same after.
The mirror takes everything in,
reflects the black back to me. I sit up,
distance myself from the dark. Put the dream back into the box.
I think of all the faces,
immobile
and separated from their bodies. Doilies
on a dresser. Stiff, pale flowers
on a cold, flat lake. My mind places you everywhere
but here. The vision fades too quickly. The skin shades itself in cool tones.
The familiar slowly undoes itself,
and nobody looks the same after.

Rest

Lillian Barnes

Rest my mortal eyes tonight
for I have seen more dark than light

And as I rest, be gone my mind,
alone in darkness for all of time

Order the flowers and buy the land,
his time has come, lay down his head

Clothes of black and land of white,
now in peace and out of sight

Rest my eyes, but not for long,
for when I wake the day is gone

Is it morning? Is it night?
What time is it? Where's gone my light?

Rest my eyes, return my light
for there it hid in shadowed fright

Then to a snow-swept night I ran,
and my darkened slumbers fell from hand

Now encased in cold and white,
there I may rest for all of night

Moon Window

Hollie Benson



Photography

Cicada Song

Jessica Dennis



Photography

Cicada Song

Jessica Dennis



Photography

I Stand Alone

Jordan Hill



Photography

Final Stop

Taylor Strand

The city at night is a truly wonderful thing.

I hadn't realized this until a couple of years ago when I truly started paying attention to my surroundings. You'd think that at nineteen years old, I'd have already learned to pay attention, and in some ways, I did: I performed tasks with caution, answered questions when called on, and listened when talked to. I was always sort of aware, but I was never attentive. Now, at twenty-two, it's impossible to imagine a world as empty as mine used to be. Of course, those around me say I pay *too* much attention now, but I don't think that's possible.

As a young boy, I was woefully unobservant. I couldn't even tell you the color of our old apartment's walls despite living there for fourteen years. It's a shame, really, thinking about how much I had to have missed while I was too busy being caught up in my own thoughts. Not that I'm *not* caught up in them now. Rather, I've learned to let the racing thoughts coincide with the racing observations. And, in a way, the city is even more pleasing as a backdrop to my thoughts.

There's a beautiful bridge leading out of the city, and it's one of my favorite places to go. You can see nearly all the buildings and gaze out over the water. On the rare occasion that I go out during the day, I watch the boats as they traverse the waves and listen to the rushing sound of cars passing behind me. Tonight, though, as I stand on the walkway of the bridge and look around, everything is still. Like the universe could tell that I didn't want an audience and decided to oblige.

It's relatively cold for an August night, but I'm not surprised. Not only am I used to the large fluctuations between day and night here, but I've also never been a fan of warm weather; so the nightly temperature is preferable to me. Plus, it gives me a chance to wear my favorite sweater: semi-light-weight, peach-colored, comforting. A comfort I need right now.

I'm alone, but that's not surprising either. Nobody else I know likes to take walks in the city at night. Honestly, I don't blame them. If the cool weather doesn't stop them, the fear of crime will. Though I've never had anything happen to me, and I certainly don't look threatening enough to deter criminals. At a mere 5'7 and with decently friendly-looking features, I wouldn't say I'm a very intimidating guy. Either way, I've never been able to convince someone to come with me. Not like I mind; I prefer being alone. Especially tonight.

I will say, being alone wasn't always my first choice. Over the years though, I've grown accustomed to it. You know that saying about how people

with depression could be surrounded by tens of hundreds of others and still feel so insanely isolated they can barely function? That's not an exaggeration. It's a sad reality.

I stick a hand out over the bridge's railing and let the breeze hit my palm. Even an action as small as this leaves me able to hear my own shaky breathing, and I don't like the way the air saws in and out of my lungs. I've felt this before, and I used to think it was doubt. But it isn't. I won't let it be.

It's weird, thinking back. I used to try so hard to fight it. I didn't want to be consumed by that isolating feeling. But the more I was sucked in, the less afraid I became. In a way, I found comfort in it. There was consistency in feeling isolated, which was something I'd never had in my life. It was almost like I could rely on that feeling. Of course, over time, that isolation has turned poisonous, but it's too late to rid myself of it now. It's been a part of me for too long.

The wind finds its way through my fingers and up my loose sleeve, wrapping around my arm before the warmth of my sweater can dismiss the cold it brings. Two or three more gusts come by, then I lower my hand and close my eyes. You have to be sure, a voice, my voice, pipes up from the back of my mind.

"I'm sure," I whisper, then step a foot up onto the bottom of the railing. That first step-up is only a few inches off the ground, but it still leaves me lightheaded. *Are you really sure?* My voice chimes in again. But now my other foot's up on the railing, and I feel like I've passed the point of no return. Just a few inches, but it feels like a million miles difference.

Sometimes, I wish I didn't give in. Sometimes, I find myself wondering where I would be today if I had fought through the heaviness even a little harder. After all, it's my lack of fight that's led me to where I am today. Though, if I'm honest, it seems like all paths in my life probably would have pointed me here anyway. The only difference is that maybe, *maybe*, my doubts would have been enough to hold me back.

But that has long since passed.

My hands are gripping the railing tighter than I've held onto anything in my life, and they tingle as they absorb the cool temperature of the metal.

I'm okay with this.

I push up on the railing and lift one foot to climb over.

"Hey."

The utterance of one word halts me. *Hey.*

I don't dare turn around. I don't speak. I don't do anything but lower my elevated foot back onto the bottom of the railing and open my eyes to look out over the dark water. Why now?

Nobody says anything else for a long while, but just as I begin to think I've imagined it, they speak again.

"Are you alright?"

The voice isn't one I recognize. It's a guy, for sure, but that's all I can place. *Who cares who it is?* I think, *You were so close. Go on.*

I can't, though. For some reason, I just can't.

Are my doubts enough to hold me back?

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to step down and let go of the rail, and all the while, I can hear myself saying the same thing over and over: *I knew you wouldn't do it.*

I don't want to face this person, but nevertheless, I turn around. He's a few feet away, and his head is tilted ever so slightly to the side, eyes locked on me. He's young, probably around my age, and though it's dark, I can make out his messy hair and curious expression. It's also clear that he's got at least a few inches on me, probably standing at around 5'10 or 5'11. Most surprisingly, though, he's wearing only a loose-fitting, black flannel with white stripes over a plain white shirt. It's completely unbuttoned, and both sleeves are rolled up to the elbow.

I analyze him for a while. Study him. "Aren't you cold?" I ask eventually, gesturing to his shirt.

"Not really. I prefer the weather at night," he replies with a shrug, "August heat is too much sometimes." *Agreed.*

I give a small nod, crossing my arms over my chest. I can feel my heartbeat pounding in my ears, and my fingers vibrate with adrenaline. *What do I say?*

"You like the city at night, too?" He offers up a small smile.

I'm a little taken aback at his casual demeanor, but I answer all the same. "Yeah, actually." He looks as if he's waiting for me to say more, but I don't. Honestly, I'm not quite sure what's compelling me to reply at *all*.

"I'm Landen," he says after a few moments, taking a couple steps towards me and leaning against the railing with his shoulder.

"Monroe."

"What're you doing out here, Monroe?" Landen asks, and his voice isn't condescending, exasperated, or laced with pity. It's a tone you'd hear two long-time friends use with each other. A tone that doesn't usually accompany things like this.

"I'm..." My voice trails off without meaning to, and I look away. Do I lie? Make up some half-assed excuse?

"Trying to do something drastic?" Landen finishes, and I can't help but tense up. "Hey, I'm not here to judge," he adds. In the corner of my eye, I see him raise one hand in defense before lowering himself onto the ground, back now against the railing, "I'm just here."

I'm silent for a while. My whole body feels heavy, and my head is spinning. Finally, though, I sit down beside him, but I still say nothing. It isn't until a strong breeze comes by us and Landen draws his knees in a little closer to his chest that I speak. "You don't have to be out here, you know." Somehow, I sound calmer than I've probably ever felt.

"I like the cold," he replies simply. He opens his mouth to say more but hesitates for a moment, then asks, "Did you leave a note?"

A sigh finds its way out of my lungs, and I close my eyes. "No."

There's a long pause.

"Does anyone know about this?"

"No."

And again.

“Is this your first attempt?”

I’m quiet for a long time.

“No.”

I let my head fall back against the railing and run a hand over my face. When I look over, I see Landen looking back at me with an expression that, despite my keen eye for detail, I can’t quite place. *Why does he care? He doesn’t even know me.*

“Why tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. There has to be a reason. Why *tonight*? Why not tomorrow, or a few days from now?”

I don’t want to look at him, but I can’t turn my head away. I can’t move. His question sticks to me like glue and holds me in my place.

“How about this,” Landen begins, “I was just heading back into the city. Come with me, and we can talk more, not on this bridge.”

Sitting next to me is a guy that barely knows me. He doesn’t even know my last name. Yet, somehow, his offer is compelling. “Why are you doing this?” I ask.

“Why are you?”

We sit together for what feels like a lifetime, and I contemplate my options. Eventually, though, I stand, reaching down a hand to help Landen up.

As we walk back across the bridge towards the city, I look out over the water again. Aside from us, everything is still unmoving. There are no cars, no boats, no people. Everything looks exactly the same as it did when I arrived. From an outside perspective, nothing has changed. Maybe nothing has changed.

We’re almost at the end of the bridge when I stop, and after a few steps, Landen notices and turns around. “You alright?”

“What time is it?” I ask, and Landen digs out his phone. He clicks the power button on and turns the screen towards me.

When I left my house, it was 9 P.M. Now, it’s well after midnight.

I look back up at Landen and take a deep breath. “It’s my birthday.”

Landen nods as if the pieces of the puzzle are starting to fit together. Then, he smiles. “Happy birthday, Monroe.” For the first time, I smile too. Still, though, something’s holding me back.

“I came out here with a plan,” I say, turning my head to look behind me at the place where I once stood.

“So what?”

I look back at him.

So what.

Then, I step off the bridge and into the city.

14 Pills

Josie Buckingham

the day was black
most of them were
I was trapped in a house
that never felt like home
and with a woman who
never felt like a mother

the walls were painted
with an emptiness
and the air was never clear
the doors remain shut
and her bedroom always locked
alone I was every day

she built a safe place within her room
but I was never invited in
safety was as nonexistent
as my sense of belonging
inside of that house

until the last black day arrived
when she entered the same
room as me with snot and tears
running away from her

she said to me “fourteen”
fourteen white pills she
took all at once
she came out afraid and desperate
for my acceptance of her
apology that I never received
for so many years of black

ready to say goodbye
before she even said hello

Summer's Dream

Lance Klemple

Stars align in perfect shapes
Earth is safe
cradled among
sweet summer grass
decorated with rainbow pops
of flowers against your
caramel colored hair
The air sighs close against
your ear
Hear thrums of crickets and
peeping frogs play their
midnight sonata
just for you
Soften like a baby in her
mother's arms
side to side
Watch the ocean tide
come and go
Know that our summer love
can last forever
and ever

God's Day

Jordan Hill



Photography

Alone in Bisbee

Cassie Pierce



Photography

Lowell, AZ

Cassie Pierce



Photography

Old Red

Rhonda Mullenau



Photography

Buy a Car and Watch it Rust

Serena Schultz

It wasn't long after a summer when I thought I was closer
to understanding myself, with making peace with myself,
that I called to mind our closed-eye dancing upon a mattress
we had dragged down to the ground. Visual noise
blooms behind the black of my eyelids, and we sway
to the music drifting out from the television.
My feet sink like they're made out of mud, or maybe that's just
my inability to find balance, grace.
I lost her by Spring, telling no one,
but they can hear it in my voice.
Someone else has taken over, and all I want
is to be touched again by the rain.
I saw it in the worm moon,
the one that rose above the street where in October,
or was it September,
he mistook my gaze for desire.
He asks me about my boy, and I think about lips
pressed above my eyes, going a cool 75
in a town where nobody knows who I am.
In a parked car, I want him to leave, but instead
he reads off the titles of books I keep in the backseat.
Back inside his house, he offers me wine.
I take the smallest of sips, but then a fruit fly falls in.
And so, I, pretending to listen, take in his gaze.
He tells me my eyes will get me in trouble.
That is all I can think of when I hear that dreamy,
circular guitar riff,
the disorienting shuffle of drums. *Sister of mine,*
Home again. I pretend not to hear him
over the saxophone, the slinking bass line.
He said I looked at him like it was prom night.
He said he was sorry the hug was "brotherly."
He said my flesh might fill a body bag if I keep it up.
The sound equipment malfunctions. The office chair clicks with each slight
rotation.
I am waiting for the silence between songs so I can switch channels. My
hands, shaking like the autumn colors rushing to get off the trees.
Everything here is secondhand. The party-goers have grown bored with me. I
tried to leave

and he got in my car. *Sister of mine*, I want to go
home again. Your friends, to them,
you're a good man. It feels good to pretend, doesn't it?
Forgive me, it was the warmth from the wine lighting up my eyes. A full set
of seasons, and I am here again. How many times this year will I be made to
question the content of my heart?

Note: The few italicized lines found here, as well as the title, are borrowed
from the song "Sister Europe" by The Psychedelic Furs.

The Perfect Right Stick

Keegan Colcleasure

It's the perfect right stick that I must pick.
It's the perfect right stick that I must find.
And with my perfect right kick to a tree,
that perfect right stick will be mine.
As it falls from the tree with a click and a tick,
I pluck it from the air with a flick,
and now to my perfect right stick
a perfect right name I will assign.
With a little bit of magic
and a little bit of thought from my mind,
there is no perfect right stick left
for anyone to find.
For now, in my hands is a sword
called by the name Patrick Hartford!

Now together towards battle we race.
It is a battle for all of mankind.
Against the vilest of wizards called Chase,
who is a close neighbor and friend of mine.
But before our battle can finish
our sticks must be left behind.
My mother has just called
meaning now
it is dinner time.

I'm Not Australian

Anthony Ocasio

Finally, everyone is in agreement: I also do not believe that my friends, family and co-workers properly wash their hands. You have no idea how much of a relief it is to not be the only one who feels this way.

Now that such a societal revelation prevents me from leaving the house, I can stop pretending like I have so much I must do “out in the world.” All the restaurants and movie theaters I can no longer visit, or can now only do so curb-side. All the people I no longer have to secretly judge the hygiene habits of. All the out-of-stock food I no longer have to pretend I know what to do with, without looking online. Fortunately I, for some reason, do not use much toilet paper. A skill I clearly inherited through a series of now-highly questionable evolutionary circumstances, to be used in this exact moment of human history. I am also great at opening doors without using my hands. This skill I have yet to completely find a use for; though something I at one time said about my sparse toiletry techniques. With nothing to do, my only option is to watch television. But what? I have seen everything. Everything! I know; I will watch Australian television! However, it is noon here, and everyone in Australia is still asleep. I must wait and be quiet. After all, they are sleeping.

It is now 3:30pm. I begin to make my way through the Internet using tactics which must be similar to what Edward Snowden is still in protest of. Eventually, I reach Australian television and their morning news program. I sit back in disbelief and watch as the Australian government is now limiting the amount of alcohol people are able to buy. Though limited through restriction, the allotted amount of alcohol is so sizeable that I, now playing the part of a bar-in-human-form in the philosophical theater of my mind wonders, “*What am I going to do with all that alcohol?*” At some point, I must Google whether or not water works the same way “down under” as it does here. It may be that alcohol is simply some form of “outback nutritional supplement” the rest of the world (minus Russia) is unaware of. In other news, “*The Australian Minister of Health requests that all footballers refrain from having one-night stands.*” Alright, that is it! I am leaving! And it is called soccer!

Turning back to American television, I find everyone is collectively swear-word-which-begins-with-an-“F”-ing losing their swear-word-which-begins-with-an-“S”. Apparently, the divorce rate is now on the rise. I have no idea what to Google in order to understand how that is even possible. Apparently, the last thing people who are married want to do is to spend time together. As if the entire experience of relationships - from courting to ceremony - carries with it an unspoken agreement that, at the end of the day, we want to spend the least amount of time together as possible. Only Mother

Nature was not aware of this. She only heard “...*I promise... blah, blah, blah...for better or worse... blah, blah, blah...*” and is now simply taking everyone up on the offer. I do not know why, but for some reason, I feel the need to cite and also blame the last *Avengers* movie for what is happening to marriages in America. I have heard more people say negative things about spending

excessive amounts of time with their “loved ones” than was ever said about the last *Avengers* movie. That movie was over 3 hours long and half the people who were paid to be in the movie did not like the movie. Marriage and movie-making: it is all a contractual thing, is what I am getting at. How can two people who are married not even like each other? As if time and circumstance are the only antidotes to “true romance.” I cannot think about this any longer; it is making my heart hurt.

I know I should not do this, but for some reason, I want to know what is happening in Australia. “*And there was an Australian in the last Avengers movie,*” is what I said to myself, in order to justify my curiosity. Oh Edward Snowden, I once again apologize for what I am doing with the Internet, all in the name of information. I simply must know what is going on! Now back to Australian television and the last few minutes of their morning news program. It appears that police are breaking up secret house parties. Well, that is not “too Australian”; similar things are happening here. It also appears that the police are having to drive on to the beach and tell people who are sunbathing to go home, and that “...*they are serious. Even though they were social distancing while doing it.*” In other news, “*There have been no new reported cases for the third day in a row.*” I am not exactly sure what it feels like to be racist, but it certainly must be something similar to this upcoming sentiment, perhaps with the addition of a disapproving head shake: “...*Australians.*” Are Australians a race? I must definitely Google that. Before I do, I need to Google one thing; something I have been wanting to Google from the very beginning of this “new normal”. One word: “Zoom”. Or as I call it: The moment the entire world pretended they knew what something was. Honestly, this “Zoom-demic” is so bad, that if one more person says the word “Zoom” to me while acting like it is some colloquialism of modern society, I am going to swear-word-which-begins-with-an-“F”-ing lose my swear-word-which-begins-with-an-“S.” I am not Australian! I was not built for this! And, it is called Skype!

9:25 6/13/20

Olivia Bradin

Burning red skies lying above our heads as the waves crawl repeatedly to the shore near the toes that wiggle beneath the cool white sands

Stringy dark hair tangled in the overgrown grass infecting the shorelines

Hands clawing up the back of the cage containing the heart that beats heavily against my flowing stomach beating in perfect alignment with the rising and falling of the breasts that lay atop my chest exposed for mother nature herself to witness as she pleases

My lover planting their lips softly against my blossoming bosom watering them with growing beads of salivation and perspiration

Breathing out air so hot it could be mistaken as the smoke of a bonfire

Eyes glistening upward at the near dimming skies listening to the humming of a cricket neighboring my ear

Bird Cage

Carter Jones-Hirr

What if I said
this world is just not my world.
There is a bigger and better place for me,
a place of beauty,
Eternal.
Yes, the epitome of love,
Everlasting.
Life.
Born in a cage of bone
Locked away.
Life so pure, my heart soars.
I wish I could grab hold, as it takes flight like a bird.
Fast and noble, the wings,
unfettered;
Diving, Darting, like an osprey
to the place where beauty
is only temporary

Soaring Optimism

Adrianna Espinoza

As I soar across the sky of optimism:

I cannot help but think of how much I stressed over my first failed test.

It happens to us all at one point or another and if it has not happened to you yet, take notes.

As I soar across the sky of optimism:

I realize how microscopic the day that I failed my test was in my life timeline.

And perhaps me being in the sky overlooking the cities and business of life is my sign.

After crying for two days and barely eating due to my failed test, it was brought to my attention.

Perhaps I was taking life a bit too serious than my first intention.

I thought my life was over and that the grade defined who I was as a person.

I felt defeated and useless and couldn't imagine my life could worsen.

So, perhaps you are reading this by coincidence or by pure fate.

Whichever it is, just remember that life can only be taken so serious, mate.

Whatever you are battling at this moment, just remember the big blue above,

This optimism is not there by coincidence but for a life you are incredibly capable of!

Let go. Live free. And love, please do not take things so seriously.

Things might be a blur right now but just know nature works mysteriously.

We must remember to breathe and to not let everything have power over you and I.

For we must acknowledge the clouds, the mountains, the birds, and oceans that show the

Soaring optimism to the human eye.

Soaring Optimism

Adrianna Espinoza



Photography

The Farm

Kelli Loughrige



Photography

Pure Nature

Leah Johnson



Photography

Woodland Mechanics

Jessie Nieboer



Photography

Prey

Keegan Colcleasure

I am an experienced camper; I've known how to pitch a tent and start a fire for as long as I can remember. I can thank my father for that. Growing up with my dad, one of the first things I really came to understand and appreciate about him is his love and affinity for almost anything to do with the outdoors. For me, this meant a childhood with hiking trips most weekends (weather permitting), camping excursions in the summers when my dad was off work, and inheriting my father's love of nature. I have always been thankful for my upbringing and how much it helped me learn to love nature as a child.

To be honest, looking back, I can only imagine how much of a nuisance I must have been for my mother. I was always running around the backwoods behind our house and making her have to come outside and call me back for meals because, lord knows, I would have just stayed outside if she hadn't. When my mother was finally able to drag me back to the house, I would be covered in sap, mud, pine needles, and just about everything else from whatever endeavors I had decided to pursue in those woods. The amount of time I must have made my mother clean me up...let's just say I admire her patience as a parent, and I'm grateful for the minimal number of lectures I received.

Yes, being my father's ideal son made me nothing but trouble for my mother, and I almost wish I could apologize to her for it now. Still, at the end of the day, I had a fantastic childhood and I really feel my parents couldn't have done a better job if they tried. And, I like to think I was a good kid, too. I really wouldn't ever dream of trading my childhood for any other. To me, it was perfect.

As I sit beside my campfire now, I can't help but reflect and let the nostalgia warm me up with the flickering flames. Being by yourself out in the woods is a truly interesting feeling, especially at night when you are left to very little outside of your own thoughts and imagination. Well, that is so long as you are actually there for the nature experience and manage to leave your smartphone at home. No phone, no friends, no family. Just you truly alone out in the woods is what it means to actually become a part of nature.

It is what my father had always talked about, and it's something that I'd always wanted to experience for myself. True solitude. True Nature. And now I am finally here, deep in the woods--no other people for miles--and I think I'm finally starting to understand. I must say it is quite the interesting feeling actually being a part of nature, for we, as humans, have a tendency to forget how truly disconnected most of us are from the natural order of life.

Even those of us who have spent much of our lives in and around nature (like I have) struggle to grasp the true immensity of the concept that is the natural world. The synthetic world we have created has very little that I see being able to truly connect to nature in the way I am experiencing it now.

While it's true there is always some degree of danger in our normal lives, whether it be in the form of accidents or even murderers, living anywhere in any setting comes with some degree of risk. However, in this synthetic society we have built, there is still a sense of safety we have given ourselves compared to something real and natural like the forest. The closest comparison I could attempt to make with this world I am experiencing now would have to be war--though I've never experienced war myself, it is the idea of being a part of something bigger and inherently dangerous. A system that doesn't value life...simply those who can survive and those who cannot. Yet, even war stems from reasoning, and this environment I am in does not. There is no reason here, and maybe that's how things are supposed to be, irrational. After all, we are just some hairless monkeys that happened to gain consciousness on a giant rock, which we call Earth. I can't imagine that as being rational.

I feel myself being pulled out of this train of thought by the crackle of my now dimming campfire. As the fire starts to die, its weakening light is pushed in by the edges of the surrounding woods bringing my night ever closer to perfect darkness. It is as this darkness creeps slowly and gently inwards towards me, a memory strikes me about my father as if in a new light. My father was great to me growing up as I've said being the man who ingrained in me my love of nature and my healthy curiosity. However, my mother was the one who raised me for most of my childhood. When I was about 12 or so, my father just left one day and never came back. Mother said that he'd met another woman and decided to run off with her, but that answer never quite sat right with me. My father was a bit odd by most people's standards, and maybe I'm biased as his son, but I refuse to believe that my father was unfaithful. In this world, as far as I knew, the only things my father truly loved were me, my mother, and nature. He was just sort of simple in that respect as he never really needed much to keep himself content.

So, thinking now about my father, as I once again listen to the ambient sounds around me, the fire charring away farther at what's left of the kindling, the hum of insects doing whatever it is insects do at night, animals rustling through the tall grass and trees, and something making slight bits of noise from the bush every so often, I start to ponder the idea of where my father actually went off to, and I think the best possible answer would have to be something to the degree of when your dog dies as a kid. When your dog dies, your parents just tell you he went off to some distant "farm" to be happy because it's easier to tell you that than it is to tell you that your best friend had

gotten too old and finally had to be put down. A story to sugar coat loss for a child, even if it's not really what's best for them because it's easier for the parents to say and easier for the child to hear. It is an easier tale to tell, just like it is easier to tell your 12-year-old son that his father had moved off with some girl in Minnesota, rather than it is to tell him about the gruesome incident that actually occurred.

I have always loved nature, and so did my father, so for a mother to tell her son that his father was killed by something while off on an impromptu camping trip along with one of his friends must have been too much for my mother. Unfortunately, like all great lies, it came apart when I found the newspaper clippings a few years down the line while cleaning up the house in order to re-purpose my father's old study. But, after reading the truth of the situation and knowing the true horror of the incident, I guess a part of me just decided it was easier to keep believing the story my mom had told me years ago: my father is still alive and in one piece living a happier life without us with some woman in Minnesota. Still knowing the truth of the situation is probably the reason why I never told my mom I was going on this camping trip to the same place where I lost my father all those years back. I guess my father really did give me his natural curiosity as well. After knowing more of the truth, I couldn't leave well enough alone, I had to see and experience what my father had all that time ago. It would be a sort of closure, one last goodbye to the memory of my father in the place where he had made his final goodbyes.

As my fire burns down to little more than hot coals, I hear it start to draw in nearer from out of the bushes. I gaze at the trees and the stars as they seem to stare back with almost haunting and malicious in their indifference. After all, nature is uncaring and irrational.

I love my father and all of the lessons he taught me, and as I have told you, I'm especially grateful for the love of nature that he imparted to me. However, there is one lesson he never learned himself so he could never pass it on to me. The one lesson I wish I could have learned from my father is not about respecting nature but instead about fearing nature. As I finally experience the truth of what it means to be a part of nature, like my father before me, I understand nature is something to be feared and there is a reason why we have removed ourselves from nature. Humans have never been at the top of the natural order of living beings; the only thing that made us different was being smart enough to escape nature rather than trying to confront it. There is no point in humans trying to overcome nature, just as it is pointless for one man to try and stop a tornado. As it finally emerges from the shadows into what light is left from the coals of my fire, and its large yellow eyes loom above my head as I now stand, I finally understand what it truly means to be a part of nature and the fear that comes with it. I turn to run, and I finally realize that humans have never been true predators, as I spend my final moments becoming prey.

A Poet and Her Muse, April 2020

Michalene Collins

We shelter in place,
locked in mandatory intimacy.
You offer me stories you've read online
or jokes from Craigslist.
You laugh so loud my teeth vibrate.
You blow your nose, shattering the air.
*I see the word I want, the word I need, or hear it far off,
reaching for it, I almost have it in my grasp and...*
You're off about some tool you need to buy,
or a car you've seen on Ebay,
or how you took money from the travel envelope
to buy Pepsi which is on sale somewhere.
...my concentration snaps.
*The word goes skipping across the puddle
of my so-called mind like a stone,
getting smaller and lower till it finally disappears into the mud.*
The news reports that cases of domestic violence are on the rise.
Now, you have my attention.
What? You're going out ... again?
You can't go! You are old. You have asthma.
Please stay.
You can hawk and spit and fart all you want.
Don't leave me!

Coronavirus Fight

Diana Casey

Our dreams cannot fade in this time of great struggle for us all.
Now is the time to Fight with bravery and conviction with each evolving day.
Moments will bring us to tears, kindness given and received beget smiles.
I am a dedicated teacher struggling each day in Fight,
to provide quality education with the highest standards possible in this time.

Dear Covid 19

Josie Buckingham

I hate you.
as if taking away fresh air
was not enough, as if
the lonesome of four walls
was not enough, as if
deepening my anxiety
was not enough, as if
ending jobs and shutting down companies
was not enough, as if
demanding headlines and news stories
was not enough, as if
preying on the elderly and sick
was not enough, as if
fusing into my own body
was not enough, as if
taking the last breath of my grandma
was not enough, as if
separating families permanently
was not enough, as if
the poor being poor but now sick
was not enough, as if
human rights being threatened
was not enough, as if
my internalized homophobia
was not enough, as if
police brutality and murder
was not enough, as if
2020 has not been enough
I am saying enough
I have had enough
we have had enough
enough

The Cure

Michalene Collins

Pepsi and pretzels and dip,
three things I should probably skip.
As soon as they land on my lip
they travel straight down to my hips.

“Gimme popcorn with salt and with butter,”
are words that I never should utter,
as much as they make my heart flutter,
and widen my arse and my gut. They’re

like chili on Ore-Ida fries,
making my blood pressure rise.
My stay-at-home diet’s comprised
of foods that could cause my demise.

It’s cheese balls and Funyuns and Pringles,
eaten by handfuls and singles,
donuts and Twinkies and Ho-Hos
and sleeves of Double Stuffed Oreos
all washed down with Sprite and grape Faygo.
It’s how my quarantined day goes.

To hell with the blood sugar readings!
No virus can withstand my eatings.

The Crucible

Justin Rymal

Little pops, like a distant firework rattling off its last cacophonous crump of detonation followed by a hissing death rattle. There were at least a half dozen of them touched off by the latent embers creating a curious dimpled effect across the drab gray basin of the fire pit. It looked a bit like a battlefield of the Great War, pock-marked with craters and barren. I perched there at the iron rim of that pit, six feet deep without ashes with a rough radius of three feet without heat-warped edges. Eyes darting between successive blasts, trotting boat shoes, and a gruff voice from behind startled me. “Kinda’ cool right? Never throw batteries in a fire, kiddo.”

My father’s grin was ripe with warmth as he approached, the epitome of a stocky working man with short brown cropped hair. Almost like a dwarf of ancient mythology with his hands worn to a leathery finish, his arms flecked with heat blisters. “It’s interesting, cool to watch for sure,” I intoned. He offered down a shining metal rod with a worn rubbery grip. Its shaft was fluted like a knight’s armor to fold up on itself, so you could extend it to the desired length or retract it. Situated on the end was a soot-blackened magnet fixed by a spotty weld that looked like melted ice cream. “Can’t have them going off all night, other than the batteries there’s some metal scrap in there if you can dig that out too.” As my eyes rolled over the length of the magnet-rod, his voice dulled as he projected it in a different direction. Already walking away, he said with cruel irony only to be revealed later “Just holler when you’re finished.” Alright, I thought, that’s fair. I called back, “Sure thing!” before getting to work.

As the zenith of afternoon approached, my trove of scrap metal and black scored batteries was admittedly small, but it was no easy task. The magnet was powerful, so the iron rim of the pit needed to be avoided, lest it take hold and must be pried free. Scrap by scrap, battery after battery, I freed from that tomb of ash treasures unearthed in silty black sand. A few more maybe, then I could report my collection. My left hand grasped without any true firm purchase on the dirt and I eased forward and down again reaching and sifting. A little further, bending down into the abyss, the dirt shifted beneath my fingers. My kneeling stance faltered, and my grip on solid ground failed utterly in one indelicate breathless moment.

I don’t think time slows in harrowing moments because the pain was instantaneous. My palms were shooting with hot white pain. My kneecaps now dug into the black ash warmed with a frightening pace. I bolted upright as a soldier would snap to attention, pushing myself to my feet came easy as the ash beneath my palms sweltered against the enormous heat dwelling in the embers below. I dashed back, knowing surely at the edges of the pit cooler cinders resided. My hands were cherry red, blistered and pocked while my shoes drooped and stuck to the ashes as the rubber melted. Hoisting my gaze up to the afternoon sun, I hugged the iron skirt of the pit, which hid no latent

heat. It quickly dawned on me that it was not the heat that would be my prime adversary but instead- the height.

At nine years old my stature was not quite at its peak. How tall was I? No clue, but the pit was certainly taller than me, at least by two heads. The pain subsided momentarily as my mind raced, but only one option formed at the time. I needed help.

The sun inched towards the edge of the pit like a sunset on a black iron horizon. I cried out till my voice was hoarse and my vocal cords were burning true as the cinders inches underneath my shoes. Tears welled up in my eyes and my gut wrenched at the notion that nobody was coming. Nobody would come. Mom would be at least three more hours, and my father- had he forgotten about me? That thought was harder to swallow but not impossible. He was a drinker, and the drink had a boxer's grip on him. Maybe his work was just as intoxicating, so much so that he had nudged aside the thoughts of me skirting the edge of that infernal fire pit. My soot-blackened form sank at the thought. I was alone. In that moment, I came upon the realization that this was now my fight, and my charge was to escape that hole.

Singular determination like that is potent, a caged animal bearing a rictus snarl in defiance of death. These odds were not so terrible. My eyes danced around like sparks searching for a way out. How I hadn't seen the paint can at the edge of the pit before bewildered me. Was I so blinded by a need to be aided that I had not sought to aid myself? Pushing the thought aside, I mustered myself, laying down a foothold on the dilapidated can and grasping the very edge of the pit with outstretched arms. With a heave of adrenaline-fueled strength and a stern constriction of muscles, my feet left the ground. My right leg swung up, catching the outer rim of the pit. One foot yet dangling down I pulled up just enough to overcome the edge then rolled on my right side to the safety of sunbaked dirt. Strength of will settled over with a crease of a smile across my sooty face.

Tension hung in the air above the dinner table that night. My mother was brimming with unspoken fury at my father for letting me doddle by a fire. I was utterly torn. Should I have been just as mad at my father for letting me alone with such a dangerous task? While my mom's eyes were edged with pity and surely a desire to have been there, something else lived in my dad's. I think he was proud of me. Certainly regretful himself, but that was only surface level. Something told me he knew how I felt, in a glimmer of a passing glance over me. He knew that I alone overcame the challenge set before me without his aid. Surely not every burden in life is meant to be shouldered alone, but sometimes you must be enough.

Unexpected Guests

Linda Hood

I opened my front door
And you rushed in on the wind
Like guests excited to see me.
At first you all looked the same
But as I gathered you up
To throw you away as if you were useless things
I began to notice - here an oak
There a quaking aspen, next a sugar maple
Then so many others.
And as I touched you I remembered
How excited I was to see you in the spring
Tiny green promises of warm sunlight and even warmer breezes.
You grew throughout the summer, high up in the sky
And witnessed lightning that would show me your
Swaying silhouette and how you held on tight during storms that sent
Me running inside. All the while you offered sanctuary
To weary feathered things in need of a moment of rest
And homes to chattering squirrels who would forage all day
But always return to your embrace.
Your shade offered a haven when I wished to escape the sun
And your dappling light and gentle whispers
Calmed me and cradled me in a gentle refuge from the
Complexity of a stress-filled day.
You offered me so much and I worshiped your autumn blaze of glory
And mourned when you abandoned the heights and fell to earth.
Now as I gather you, dry and crinkled from
My floor, unwanted remnants, my heart is filled with nostalgia and regret.

Epitaph of a Dying Friend, Nov. 3, 2011

Ronnie Jewell

A wise kid once told me
That death is "For Sure."
When we're old and feeble,
Perhaps it's a cure?
When we're young and suffering,
Who wants anymore?
Sadness is human,
When loved ones do pass.
But suffering has ended,
So take off that mask!
All pain left behind,
They're finally free.
Like a never-ending tide.
To the sea, to the sea.

It is What I Do

Keira Lindstrom

I am a writer
It is what I do
I fail and start anew

I write the stories
I write the truth
I let you see
What I do

I judge and critique
I write and rewrite
I change my stories every night
I write the words and let them come to light
They die and change but I never lose sight
I fail and start anew
It is what I do
I am a writer
Who are you?

Time Heals

Eliza Christopher

no
time won't heal
all these wounds
but someday
i will be healed
and it won't be because
pages flew off the calendar
or hands on the clock got dizzy
but because
i am strong
i am damn strong
and just because
i'm not healed yet
doesn't mean i am less
i am damn strong
but that does not mean
i don't have the courage to be weak
i'll heal my own wounds
and i'm not giving time any of the credit

Leaving to Live

Skylar Springer

Imagine picking up a View-Master, clicking through the photos - there are no words, no sound, just images before you. That is how it felt that day; the day that changed everything.

Click. My back slammed up against the cold stiff door as my feet dangled in the air; weightless. His forceful grip around my neck grew tighter and stronger - like a snake trying to squeeze the last little bit of air out of his prey before devouring it.

Click. A 25-cent bouncy ball is what my head became as it met the ground; bouncing not once, but twice before it lost the buoyancy and came to a stillness.

Click. I tried to take the last bit of air my lungs harbored away for me, but I was too late, the pressure of his body compressed down onto my chest. I laid there and wondered if this is how it felt to have your last breath stolen from you; to feel completely empty.

Click. A shrill cry danced around my ears as I averted my eyes from the monster hovering above me and followed the sound; my baby sat on the ruffled rug trying her best to lean forward and crawl to me, but instead, she fell forward - only causing her to scream louder and harder; I could see the little veins popping out of her neck as she wailed louder and louder. That is when I started to cry with her - not because I was hurt, but because my little one was trying to help me. My six-month-old daughter was trying to help her mother, when in fact it should have been me protecting her. I wept for her, I wept for myself, and I wept for her dad; a monster who could never be saved.

Click. Slithering out of his grasp, I limped my lifeless body over to my little girl - I held her close to me, using my arms as a shield to ensure nothing would happen to her. Time went still at that moment - nothing mattered but her. I didn't know how much time went by, when I managed to look around, I noticed that the front door was wide open.

Click. The screen door was swaying back and forth, trying to find stability against the wind. He left. He ran out without even shutting the door behind him. I calmly stood up with my little one still wrapped in my arms - finding the last little bit of strength in me.

Click. I walked out the door, but unlike him, I shut the door behind me - closing that chapter of my life and walking into an unknown. I left North Carolina that day, there was no plan, no idea what I was going to do - I just knew that I had to leave.

Click. Children's laughs and screams were bouncing off of the walls and echoing into my ears; pink, white, and black balloons bobbed up and down throughout the room, while adults were conversing with one another.

Click. She stood there looking around at all of her presents, her face hinted some confusion, but it didn't take long for her to realize that all of the presents were for her.

Click. A bright sun ray shined through the window and found a resting spot on her already rosy cheek; a surge of happiness hit my heart and soul as I gazed upon my beautiful daughter, a genuine smile started to creep up as I whispered to her, "Happy 2nd birthday my love...we did it."

When They Speak

Keegan Colcleasure

When they speak
You close your eyes
You wish not to see
The message
Of their words

When they speak
You bargain
As to not let them
Break you and what
Hope you have left

When they speak
You smile back
With an unloving face
In an attempt to make
Everything okay

When they speak
You cry knowing
That this will be
The last time
You hear them speak

But when you hear
The silence you realize
Their voice is
What hurt you
From the start

Unvocalized

Dan Kong



Digital Art

Day and Night at Sea

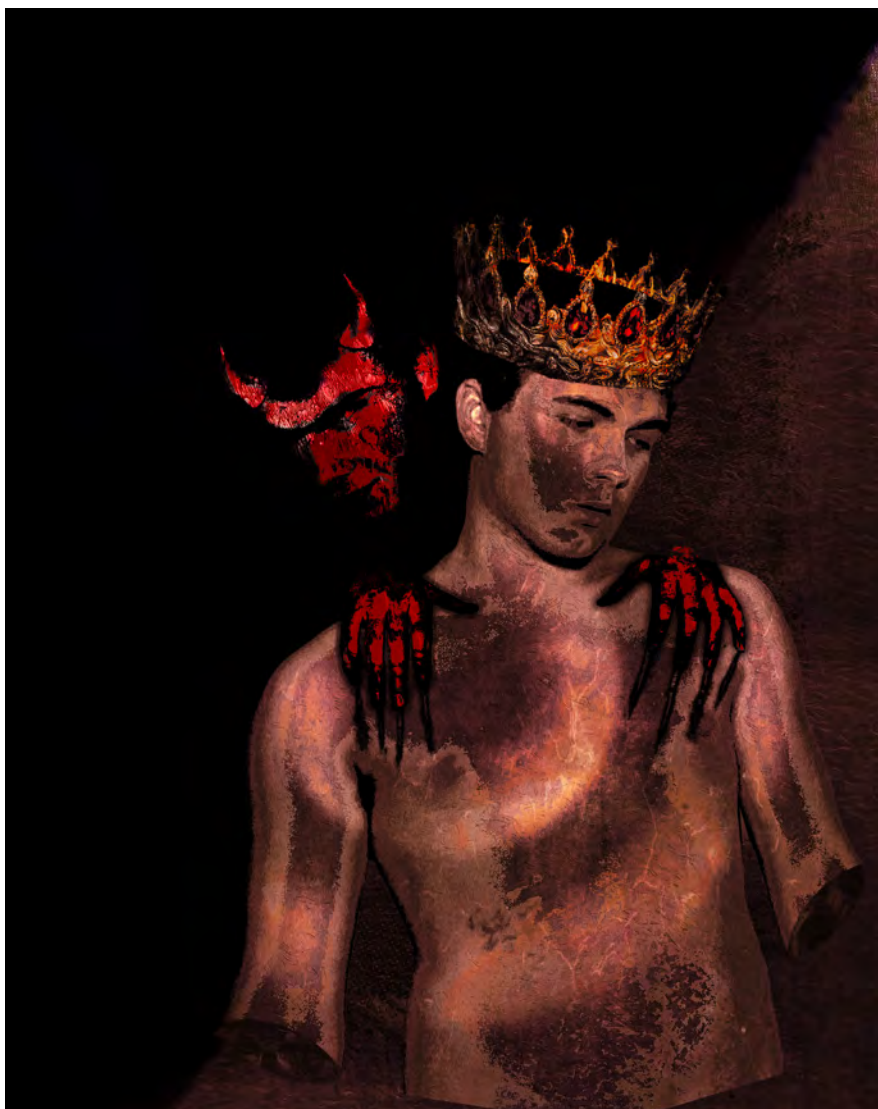
Haile Will



Acrylic

Necessary Evil

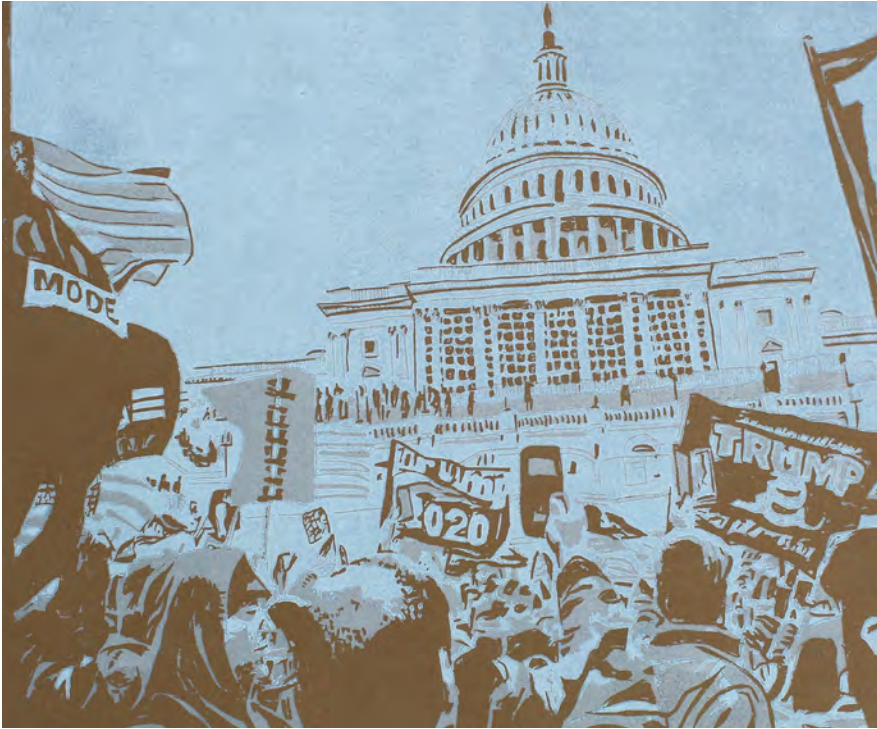
Jeffrey Staub



Digital Art

Some Kind of Precipice

Erin Hoffman



Reductive Woodcut

Muhammad Isaiah

DeJuana Edwards

How do I tell him his skin is a threat? He's so, so young, too young to even know what's happening yet.

How do I tell him the sight of his skin brings fear? I worry sometimes if danger is near.

How do I tell him he's seen as a thug? He's so passionate, my son, loves giving hugs.

How do I tell him he could become a mistaken identity? Followed by a life-time sentence of infinity.

How do I tell him about certain hairstyles? My baby just ten, only a child.

How do I tell him to put his hands on the wheel? Because, if he doesn't, he'll likely be killed.

How do I tell him he isn't liked? If he gets angry, he's automatically ready to fight.

How do I explain to him "Hands Up Don't Shoot?" If it there ever comes a time son, please don't dispute.

How do I tell him to always keep his hands in sight? The situation could escalate, and turn into an accident.

How do I explain the knee on the neck? Could he breathe? They didn't bother to check. Floyd, Castille, Sterling, Garner, Rice, and Brown, I pray for my son from sun- up to sun- down.

Will I ever stop preparing my son? No, I won't!

Do Black Lives Matter or do they not?

Adultism

Tawon Cooper

I wish I was a kid again.

When I was a kid, I wished I was a grown man.

I'm confused.

However, here is the news.

According to American Law, a citizen is an adult at the age of eighteen.

Then what does 21 mean?

As I become an adult, I put away childish things,

And learn/**Know Thyself**.

As I become an adult, I must seek/study the truth, love, morals, values, loyalty, country, cultures, diversity and etcetera.

Quickly! I must learn my surroundings. Fast! I must learn to survive.

In high definition, the animal kingdom has vividly displayed survival under anarchy and

Mother Nature's authority.

GOOD GLORY!

For democracy and which it stands, our nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

With these truths, we sign our State ID.

With these truths, I must honor all the people who suffered and sacrificed for us to be free.

With these truths, I must never forget the wrath of hatred, oppression, injustice and tyranny.

With these truths, I must move about my country as I want my country to move about me.

"Ask not what my country can do for me, but what can I do for my country," urges JFK.

With these truths, I must see and understand why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Lincoln agreed that all people are created equal, and why scientists say human DNA includes all people.

As the liberty bell rings, many celebrate their rite of passage at 18 and 21 years of age, and one must mature and take the U.S. Constitution as a promise to promote the common good and learn how to disagree non-violently. As we celebrate our rite of passage, we welcome

you to Adulthood and as different as it may look or seem; We the People love you as our elders loved us. Once this momentous decree is accomplished, one must begin the pursuit of happiness amongst it all as an American.

One must learn how to apply the Constitution.

Learn how to deal with conflict and the antagonist.

Learn how to deal with depression.

And most of all.... learn how to deal with self; **Know thyself**.

We the People have lost so much, and have overcome so much that the path to adulthood is already blazed by all the cultures that have formed in our land of the free.

All that is left for you to do, is decide if you will stay or leave; mature or remain childish.

To live in America is to accept the rules of adultism and make your mark on this earth like all the great people before you.

We know what our founding fathers did.

We know what oppressed people did.

We know the fate of good and evil.

We know what is at hand.

What will you do?

The Perspective

James Switzer-Moe

A hustling hummingbird hovered over a flower on a Rose of Sharon, hoping not to catch the attention of several bulbous bumblebees buzzing about, busy sipping the sweet dew that puddled in proudly splayed petals. The flowers were a new addition to the backyard this year, and they were making up for lost time. So many blossoms, you would never know Monarch butterflies were going extinct. Where the flowers now bloom, once stood great evergreens, stealing away the sun, and tainting the soil. Due to the free time graciously given to me by the pandemic, I was able to rid my beautiful backyard of the terrible trees, and new life blossomed in their stead.

From my point of view, the great quarantine summer of 2020 had ended up full of favor and joy. Our back yard smelled of barbecue, the family was all home and getting along, and we even had matching hammocks. We were able to get creative to fill up our days while stuck at home. Instead of going to the local water park like we normally would, we went to the shed to gather materials for our own water park out of pipes, hoses, and an old slide that we had laying around. We also planted a garden, something that I never had any interest in before. My wife thought it would be a great project for our sons, and who knows, we might need the food. We were most proud of our cherry tomatoes. We ritualistically watched them grow, from a little bi-leaf Mandragora to nearly reviving the “Attack of the Killer Tomatoes” franchise. My eldest son loved watching the little red fruits grow from a marble to a ping pong ball. The younger child, he loved the tomatoes because they smell of toads. I know that doesn’t make sense, but he’s three, so I guess that’s a good enough excuse.

Containing our gratifying garden was a glorious golden fence, complete with that new fresh cedar scent. The fence was my favorite addition this summer. It took me weeks of hard work and more blood than was necessary, but now I was properly equipped to contain my smaller ray of sunshine. Simply put, I had the ability to ignore my toddler. It wasn’t put there so I could hide from my neighbors, it was there just to contain the beast. I could finally let him run free. My three-year-old was in his glory for he had finally met freedom. He was finally able to spend time in the backyard without me watching him like a hawk, and I could rest easy knowing that the little sneak couldn’t run out into the street. You see, turdlers (you read that right) are attracted to roads, like alcoholics at an open bar. Before the fence, he would drop whatever he was doing and sprint out to the road to get a glimpse of my neighbors driving past so he could chase them like a dog chasing the mailman. Overall, we could not have asked for a better summer. However, the

fellowship, flowers, and fun...The ability to ignore my children...The late-night barbecues... I would trade it all to make fair the sullen summer from my neighbor's perspective.

The wind had started to howl, and the butterflies were all but gone. An ominous wall cloud was rolling in from the west, which meant picking up toys and packing up hammocks in panic mode. As I was finishing up, I caught a glimpse of my neighbor's truck pulling up next door, cued by my toddler trying to climb over to see what he thought was just a giant hot wheel's toy. The couple was coming back from their mother's funeral. She had succumbed to complications due to the Coronavirus just days before. Just a few weeks before that, he was forced to leave his job as a consultant and now works at a local grocery store. He was the happiest man I had ever met, but now shows no emotion. His wife was with him looking absolutely wrecked. She was an educator, and the Coronavirus was the worst thing to happen to her in the 20 years of her career. Her fight was all but gone, but she had to be strong, for her husband was too far gone.

I quickly offered my condolences, as the rain started to fall. I received an empty smile and a soft "thank you" in return. The trees were starting to sway farther down, and the butterflies were all but gone now. I smiled back, overwhelmed with guilt, wishing I could give them a better tomorrow. The summer had been generous to us, but to them, it was filled with contempt and sorrow.

I Stole the Lighter

Keegan Colcleasure

i am the one who stole the lighter

i am an honest person
i defend myself
From insults
And accusations
But i am the one who stole the lighter

i watch
As my character is torn
Down by others
I thought loved me
But i am the one who stole the lighter

i want to retort further
But i know i
Am deserving
Of punishment
For i am the one who stole the lighter

i thought it trivial
i know now
i was wrong
i am sorry
That i am the one who stole the lighter

It was innocent
It wasn't conscious
Or intentional
It didn't have to be
Because i am the one who stole the lighter

It is our smallest mistakes
That shine
The largest light
On others
i am the one who stole the lighter

But you
Are the one
Who stole my time
As well as my trust
Even though i am the one who stole the lighter

Stolen To-Go Box

Hannah Finkler

“Why do you have my pizza?”

Not a very memorable question to most people, yet a question that will be ingrained into Marissa’s mind forever.

Marissa woke up to slobbery kisses from her Golden Retriever and Bernese Mountain Dog, just like any other day. She ate a typical breakfast of frosted flakes and a homemade iced coffee, before going shopping with her friend Kenna, and meeting a few other friends to watch her high school hockey team’s biggest game of the season. So far, Marissa was having a normal Saturday.

Marissa is the type of person who tries to live her best life at all moments and many people would describe her as the “life of the party” in every aspect of her life. At the hockey game, Marissa was her usual outgoing self and cheered on her friend Dylan as if he were in the NHL, and not in high school. When a fight broke out, Marissa was the first one to start yelling “fight, fight, fight” and did not have a care in the world about what other people thought about it. She even accidentally threw a tampon on the ice at a previous game, if that gives an indication about the type of fan she was.

Marissa did care about one thing though in that moment, which was how hungry she was becoming after an insane amount of cheering at the game. All she could think about was how she was going to relinquish her hunger after the game concluded.

When one of Marissa’s friends suggested that they should all go to the local pizzeria for a snack after the game, Marissa was all about it.

“Great idea. Let’s do it!” Marissa exclaimed.

Pizza, tacos, burgers — they all sounded extraordinary, but her friends said they were not very hungry and only wanted dessert.

Marissa was conflicted, she didn’t want to be the only one who ordered “real” food and the peanut butter pie from the local pizzeria they went to was enticing. Crowds raved about this specific peanut butter pie – and Marissa did not want to miss out.

The Oreo crust had an impeccable crunch; the peanut butter filling was the perfect ratio of smooth and crunchy; and the chocolate chips and chocolate drizzle finished the dessert off better than a maraschino cherry can on an ice cream sundae.

Marissa was not the type of person to do things just because everyone else was, yet her pizza cravings just weren’t strong enough to go against the grain, and she ultimately decided to order the peanut butter pie like the rest of her friends.

While the group of about ten friends were waiting for the dessert to come, they laughed and talked about typical high school things – and they ended up being a little louder than they should have been in a public setting. As a result of all the laughter, one of the more reserved friends in the group said, “Guys... we are being WAY too loud and we probably should reduce the

attention on our table just a *little* bit.”

It was the right idea; however, it didn’t happen, and little did the friend know, there was going to be *much* more attention on their table in just a few minutes.

The chatter of the table stopped for a while as they began to devour the scrumptious peanut butter pie that had finally arrived, but the chatter quickly increased again when Marissa piped up with a bold exclamation.

“I think the people at the table next to us forgot their to-go box of pizza.”

“I hate when that happens,” another friend added.

“Do you think they will come back?” Marissa instinctively questioned.

“I don’t know, maybe,” someone casually responded.

Marissa thought otherwise, and asked her friends, “Do you think I can take the pizza since they haven’t come back yet?”

“NO!”

“That is a terrible idea.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Three different friends quickly responded.

Despite the direct apprehension from her friends, Marissa had the seemingly spectacular idea to ask the busboy if she could have the table’s leftover pizza, since they still hadn’t come back yet, and it had been *nearly* ten minutes.

The busboy nervously answered, “Sure. I guess you can have it. I was just going to throw it away.”

Marissa ecstatically shouted much louder than necessary, “OMG, thank you so much! I love pizza!”

The busboy didn’t know how to respond and gave her the pizza before walking away to finish the rest of his previously normal shift.

Marissa was a little uneasy about eating the pizza now that she had it in front of her, but she decided it was now or never, and began to open the to-go box – despite her friends’ discouragement.

“What if the people come back for their pizza?” One friend inquisitively brought up.

“There is no way they will come back. It’s been almost 10 minutes.”

Marissa swiftly brushed off the remark, and finally took a bite of the much anticipated pizza.

“Gross.”

“That is disgusting.”

“I cannot believe you just did that.”

“Is it good at least?”

The friends all boasted their opinions; nevertheless, Marissa was having a life-changing moment.

“This is the best pizza I have ever tasted in my entire life, but it is freezing cold, so I think I will save the rest and warm it up when I get home.”

Marissa then put the piece of pizza (with just one bite out of it) back in the box, and the friends began to chat and laugh once again without any

regard for the stolen pizza.

A few minutes later, Marissa's eyes widened, as if she were a deer in the headlights. One of the friends quickly exclaimed, "Oh no... is that the lady who was sitting at the table next to us?"

It was.

Marissa's mind was racing, and she didn't know what to do. She could just say that it was her pizza, but she knew that if the lady asked where her pizza was, the busboy would spill her secret. As the lady drew nearer to the table, Marissa took a deep breath and barely squeaked, "I think this might be your pizza?"

The question was said as quietly as a mouse and with the speed of a race car driver, which made the question barely comprehensible; yet the lady somehow heard it loud and clear. She was clearly disgusted and rudely remarked, "Why is my pizza on *your* table?"

All the friends were trying to contain their laughter and disbelief, which was as difficult as a preschooler trying to keep a secret, they knew they should not share.

Sweat began to drip down Marissa's face, her hands grew clammy, and her mind drew a blank, but she knew she had to say something. After what seemed like an eternity, but was only a few seconds, Marissa eventually blurted out, "The busboy gave us the pizza in case you came back."

Although it wasn't the complete truth, the busboy did give her the pizza, so she wasn't completely lying.

The lady replied to Marissa, "I doubt that happened," with an added eye-roll to prove her skepticism and anger.

"It did, I swear! Here take it..." Marissa declared as innocently as possible, although the guilt of the lie was bubbling up inside her.

"Whatever." The lady rudely remarked, as she stormed off back to her car with the pizza to-go box in hand.

Once the lady was finally out of earshot, the table of friends erupted in laughter, and Marissa was still in complete shock.

"I cannot believe she came back!"

"That is the craziest thing I have ever seen happen."

The friends all shared their feelings of astonishment, until one of the friends came to a realization and exclaimed, "Imagine what the lady is going to think when she goes home to eat the leftovers and finds one single bite of pizza missing out of the box!"

Like the missing bite of the pizza, the group of friends wouldn't be complete without the crazy antics that Marissa constantly gets herself into – and they will remember the lesson to always assume that people will come back for their accidentally forgotten to-go box.

Chilled Lucidity

Lance Klemple

It's quiet

A cold harkening awakening
Of my mind spills out into
My perception of reality

It's still

I hear the hum of those working
I hear the soft petals of snow
Glistening down my face
I can smell the tobacco
On my breath
The warmth in my heart
After a long, fulfilling day

No footsteps
No people around
Nobody here to tell me anything

The tip of my pen graces the paper
I am writing on
The mind is a delicate
Freak of nature
Ink blots on my left hand from
Writing so much

These delicacies serve me well
Fingertips touch
Hands hold
Bottles fill up again

I can hear my thoughts out loud
But I am more than a collection
Of thoughts mashed and strung together
In a semi-cohesive story,
Right?

We are what we observe
The next line doesn't come so
Easily these days
Stuck in the business of life
It's nice to slow down and
Take a deep breath

Just one more minute
Of undisturbed lucidity
No more saddened eyes
Sulking in the back of my skull
It's time to be alive
Even in the nighttime
But with all things
Of this earth,
It doesn't last forever.

Wildflower

Lydia Crocker

I live for chaos and disorder,
not to be a carbon copy
of your ideal Woman—
weak, meek, malleable—
your next pottery project.
I am not your handcrafted vase
created to comfort
and hold your fragile feelings.
I am my own garden—
sassy, self-sufficient, soft
yet strong enough to break
your bullshit beliefs
of what it means to be
a Woman.

Inward

Kaylin Meyers



Acrylic

Lady with Zentangle Hair

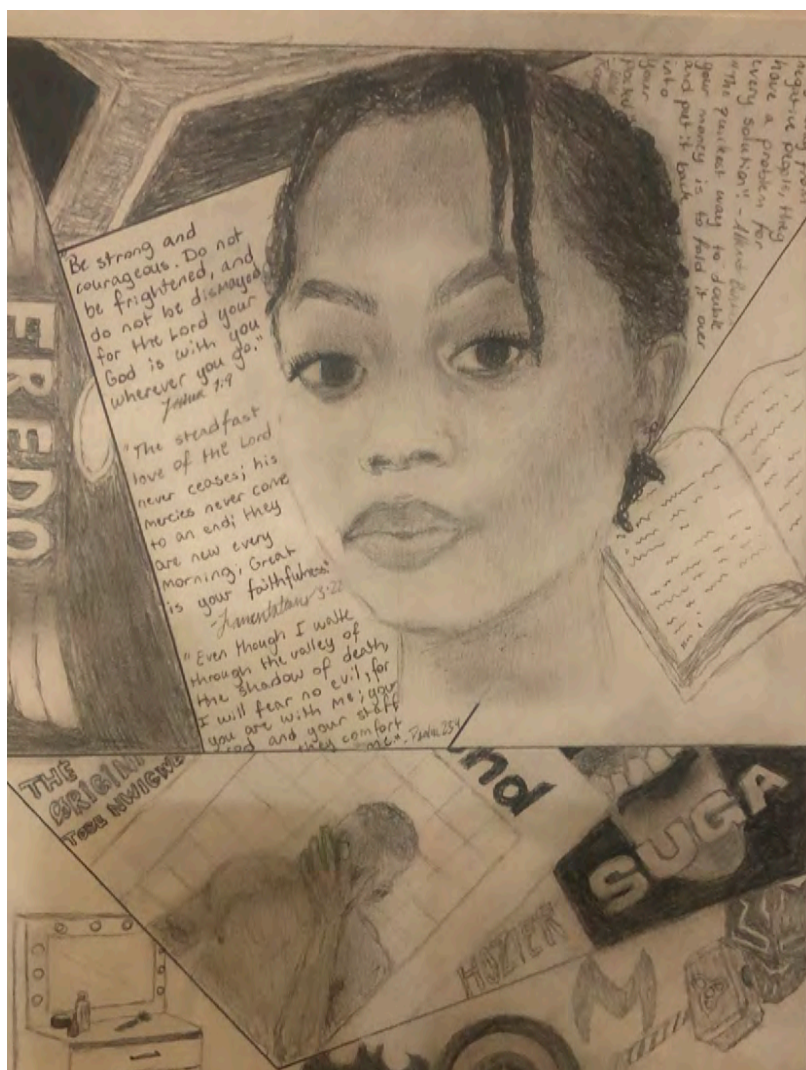
Haile Will



Pen and Ink

Be Strong and Courageous

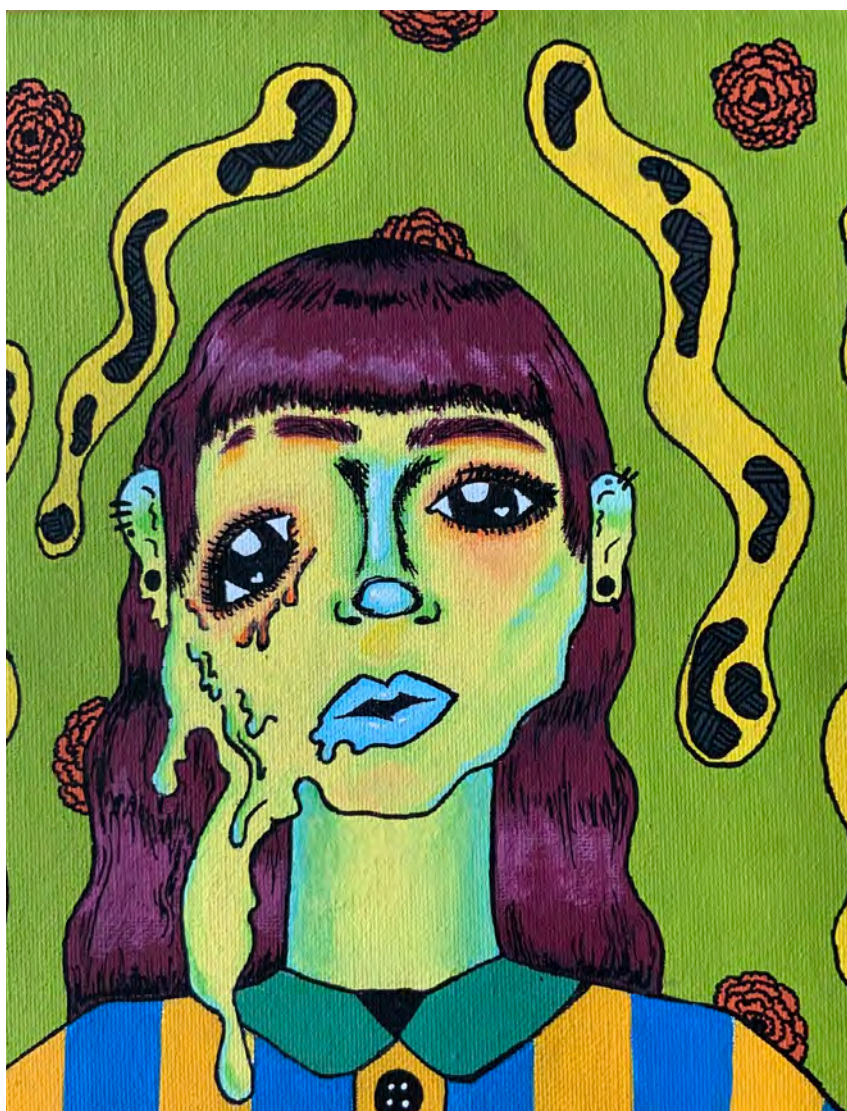
Jessie Jackson



Pencil

Ruined Timer

Angel Wirts



Acrylic and Marker

What Do I Want To Be When I Grow Up?

Hannah Finkler

A common question that I have failed to find the right answer for.
As a child, I had endless possibilities to choose from and infinite answers –
A princess, the president, a movie star...

Those were sufficient answers when I was five,
When anything I could think of was accepted.
Not so much anymore.
There are too many requirements now,
Too many fears lurking around every possible answer.

Why does the answer have to be a future career?
I want to be a good friend.
I want to be kind.
I want to be a leader.
I want to be strong.
I want to be empathetic.
I want to be humble.
I want to be genuinely happy.
These are all things I want to be when I “grow up” –
But somehow, they aren’t the right answer that people want.

I won’t be a princess, the president, or a movie star
Like I thought was once a possibility,
But that’s okay.
I can be a good friend, kind, a leader, strong, empathetic, and humble.
It’s exhausting making a decision that will impact the rest of my life.
There are endless possibilities of what I want to be and who I want to be-
come.
Yet, I don’t have the right answer right now.

Hopefully, I will soon.
But for now, my desired qualities will have to suffice.

I might not like what I deem to be the right answer when I finally find it,
But I will continue to search for it...
Until I am “grown up.”
Until I am genuinely happy.
Until I succeed at answering the question I’ve failed at a
million times.

Me

Lotus Zachar

I didn't dress up for you to stare
I wore a skirt 'cause it's pretty and it makes me feel confident!
And yes, I'm a guy,
And yes, I'm in makeup,
Cause' fuck you
My gender expression
Does not depend on your social expectations!
I'm trans
And I'm feminine
And this does not make me less real.
I'm a boy in my soul
And a preference for pink
Should not automatically change the way I think!
I'm a work in progress
A masterpiece waiting for its big reveal,
I'm still discovering my pieces.
The only thing I know is that I don't fit your mold
And if that's a crime then go ahead and hate me,
It's not gonna change me.
The only person you're poisoning is yourself
Polluting your mind with ignorance and fear.
I know myself better than you could have ever hope too
'Cause I have the courage to explore what's new.
I'm a femme fatal and a man as well.
A story untold
From a generation only growing more bold.
If you can't take the time to see
Why should I care what you think.
Your narrow world view,
Is not mine.
You may have opinions
but that doesn't mean I have to listen!
I have struggled and fought
To finally be real
I will not let you strip away my struggle
And the way I feel.
I've found myself within the mirror
I said goodbye and finally let go of the girl I used to be
And you can't change me.

The Appointment

Taylor Strand

The crowd is overwhelming. The signs, the yelling, the hate, it's a lot. More than a lot; it's suffocating. It's too much.

My mom has to pull into the clinic parking lot at a snail's pace to avoid hitting any protesters. It leaves me able to read every single word on every single sign as I watch from the back seat.

Heathen...

Disgrace...

Sinner...

Baby killer...

There's a group of older individuals standing together in a semi-circle, bowing their heads in prayer. A young woman, younger than me, shouts through a megaphone, her voice drowned out by Tame Impala's "New Person, Same Old Mistakes" on the radio—the universe is mocking me. A line of people hold bibles above their heads, filling the entire sidewalk. What my eyes linger on the longest, however, are the two men holding up a large poster of a bloodied baby with the words, "*Lay your eyes upon your actions*" written underneath.

I let out a shaky breath as I stare at the image, unable to look away until River places her hand on my shoulder so gently, it's as if I'm made out of porcelain. "Ad, it's fake. Just remember that, okay?"

"It still *feels* real," I reply.

"I know."

A woman in a bright, neon yellow vest waves my mom through two police cars, where the crowd of protesters ends. She guides her to a parking spot, a small gathering of women and men in pink clinic shirts standing off to the side. As soon as the car is parked and off, I can hear the roar of the masses even clearer. "Alright," my mom begins, unbuckling her seatbelt and twisting around in her seat. "Are you ready, sweetie?"

I look between her and River, then nod. "Yeah, I think so."

The noise is much louder when I step outside of the car; I can barely hear my door shut. When a woman wearing a clinic shirt walks up to us, she practically has to yell for us to hear her. "Hi there! May I have your name, please?"

"Adelaide Owens," I reply, having to repeat myself twice more before she understands me (I've never been one to speak very loudly, crowd or no crowd). When she finally does, she offers me a friendly smile.

"Oh, just who we've been waiting for! I'm Layla, one of the clinic escorts. Jeremy, Gwen, and I will be escorting you into the building today," she says, gesturing towards a very short man and a very tall woman as they come walking up next to her. The man, Jeremy, gives me a wave, and Gwen reaches a hand out. When I grab her hand to shake it, she smiles warmly at me.

"Do you normally have this many protesters?" My mom asks, eyes searching the sea of people. "I know you gave us a warning, but..."

“Most of the time, we can get by with one or two escorts, but today the crowd’s a little heavier, so we bumped it up to three,” Layla replies. “Of course, you’ll be completely safe! Seeing it first-hand can be quite shocking, but we’re all here to help you.”

“Thank you,” I attempt to say, though nothing comes out at first.

Layla nods. “Did you bring any headphones like we suggested?”

“Yes.” I reach into my back pocket and withdraw my phone, headphones wrapped around it.

“Good, good,” Layla replies with a smile. “Well, you’re here a few minutes early by the looks of it, so if you want to take a second before we go, that’s completely fine. This is all at your pace.”

Kindness basically radiates off of Layla. All of the escorts, actually. It makes me wonder if they’ve always looked like this or if their time working around such harsh people has molded them into who they are. I can’t imagine it hasn’t affected them in *some* way. After all, they’re “baby killers” as much as the rest of us who come here. At least in the protesters’ eyes.

River asked me a few days ago what song I was going to listen to when we made the walk. Up until that point, I hadn’t put much thought into it—the answer seemed obvious. “Cosmic Love” by Florence + The Machine. It’s been my comfort song since I heard it on the radio for the first time six years ago, and it’s never gotten old. She brought up the fact that maybe I shouldn’t bring a song that I love so much into a situation that I most certainly won’t, but I’m hoping the good outweighs the bad and not vice versa.

“Hey,” River says gently, snapping me back to the present. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” I reply, “I’m just... processing.”

“Okay,” she responds. She seems unsure whether she should stay or give me a little space, so I step towards her and wrap my arms around her, pressing my cheek to her shoulder.

“Thank you for coming,” I whisper, and her arms find their way around me too.

“Of course,” she whispers back.

We used to hug each other so tightly that it became a challenge, and we’d wait to see who tapped out first (most of the time, it was me). Sometimes, River would lean back and lift me up an inch or two, and when I’d make a fuss about wanting to be put down, she’d only lift me higher. I liked to pretend that it bothered me, but it didn’t. It never did, not even once. In the three years that we’ve been together, though, we’ve never shared a hug as gentle as we do now.

Part of me wishes that she would just crush me in her arms like she used to. That she would spin me around and make me promise this, that, or the other thing before she’d lower my feet back to the ground and kiss me. Another part of me, though, needs to be able to just close my eyes and take a deep breath with her.

She’s been so good to me. She’s always been good to me. When I first found out that I was pregnant, I was too scared to tell her. I was horrified. I’m finally starting to understand that it wasn’t my fault, but it still felt like a

betrayal. Like I severed our trust. But she's still here. She's with me now. I didn't lose her too, on top of everything else.

We're getting closer and closer to the protesters, and the knot in my chest feels as though it's getting pulled tighter with each step forward. Layla is saying something, but I can't hear her. When I look her way, she gestures to put the headphones in, so I do. Unlocking my phone, I let my thumb hover over the play button.

I can feel the air around me vibrating as we reach the police cars, only a few feet away from the start of the crowd. I look at River. I look at my mom. I look at Layla, Jeremy, and Gwen. They're all looking back at me, waiting.

I take a deep breath.

"We only need to get to the front of the building," Layla says. "One minute, a minute thirty tops."

With a nod, I press play.

"A falling star fell from your heart..."

I hold River's hand in my right and my mom's hand in my left. Layla, Jeremy, and Gwen are all pressed tightly to me, shielding me. I keep my eyes locked on the cement.

"-and landed in my eyes."

The protesters begin to part as we come through, but they move slowly and angrily.

"I screamed aloud as it tore through them..."

River's grip tightens.

"-and now, it's left me blind."

Listen to the lyrics. Follow the lyrics.

"The stars, the moon..."

"Murderer!"

I nearly trip over the word.

"-they have all been blown out."

"That child deserves a life!"

"You've left me in the dark."

"May God have mercy on your baby!"

With each lull, each break in the lyrics, there's a moment where I can hear it all. Even when I scramble to turn up the volume and the song is blasting in my ears, there's a beat or two where every word, every shout, and every slur is clear as day.

"No dawn, no day..."

"This is an execution!"

"-I'm always in this twilight."

"You're all monsters!"

"In the shadow of your heart."

"Your baby is a blessing from God!"

I pause dead in my tracks. Before I can stop myself, I shoot my eyes in the direction of that last shout. Immediately, my gaze falls upon an older

woman, probably in her late 70's, clutching the cross from her necklace tightly in her fist and staring directly back at me.

"Your baby is a blessing from God!" She shouts again as I tug my earbuds out.

"Ad, come on." River tries ushering me forward, but I don't move.

A blessing from God?

Everyone's shouting, but I only hear her.

"Don't punish your child for your reckless decisions, dear!"

"Adelaide," Layla's voice appears from somewhere next to me.

"We're almost inside. Come on."

"I didn't make a reckless decision," I try saying. The words catch in my throat.

"Honey," my mom grabs my elbow.

"I didn't... I..."

Suddenly, River wraps an arm around my shoulders and guides me forward and up the clinic steps. I nearly trip over my own two feet as I watch the woman disappear into the crowd of angry faces. "Don't look at them, Ad," She says, her words cutting through the white noise of everything else as she leans in close to my ear. "Don't look."

I lower my eyes.

As soon as the clinic doors shut behind us, the protesters' noise falls to nothing more than a hum. River turns to face me and places her hands on my upper arms. "Are you okay?"

"That woman..." my words trail off.

Reflection Pond

Kennadi Dykstra



Photography

Ol' Red

Kelli Loughrige



Photography

Nature's Candy

Leah Johnson



Photography

Light of Glory

Carter Jones-Hirr



Photography

Lost in Time

Aisha Brown

icy roads
frosted windows
where it ends
i do not know

spare blanket
charming lights
oh my life
questions tonight

baggy sweater
loose pants
loud winds
what a beautiful dance

burnt fuse
empty sound
location of user
may not be found

Success

Eliza Christopher

i walked along the road
to victory

- to success.

it was made from
the strongest of materials
made from shattered hopes
forgotten dreams
and little more
than memories.

Transformation

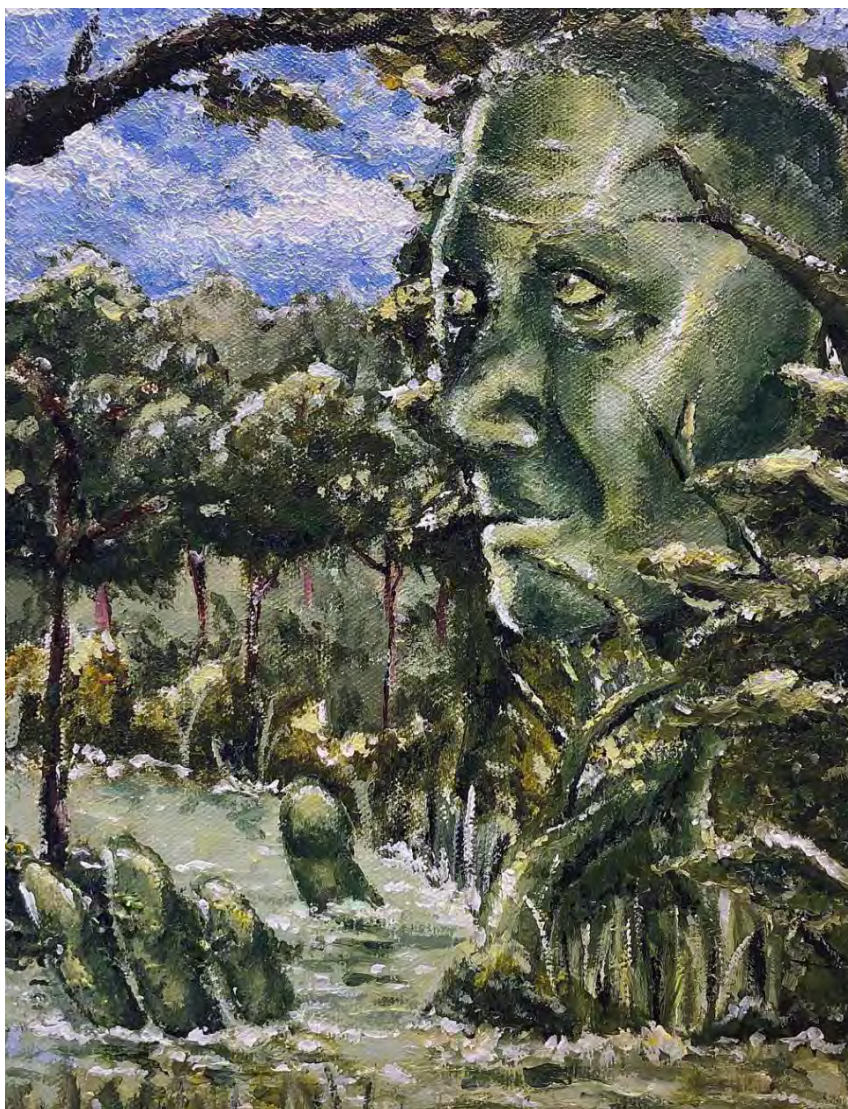
Jessie Nieboer



Digital Painting

One with Nature

Kaylin Meyers



Acrylic

Tricksters

Zoe Francis

I'm at my wit's end
I don't ask for much
Just to sweep and mop
These abandoned halls
But the tricksters
The bloody fools
Keep leaving crimson footprints
All over the damn floor
And moving my broom
There's no time
For ghost stories
The next shift will start soon

Postponed

Raegan Visker

the blame game
I play every night
my head builds patterns on my pillow
connecting hurt and blame as if they were the same
but not everyone who hurts is to blame
I trace heartache back to my mistakes
dance around what I won't admit
as i submit to my role as the victim
helplessly tossed in winds of pain
will my reconciliation come too late?
can I ask for forgiveness on a later date?
can God wait.

Bones

Zoe Francis

My neighbor
Is a sweet woman
Filled with kind words
Creaking bones
Gnarled fingers
And Thin, wrinkly skin

She waters a patch of lawn every day
It must be hard
When she's so clearly in pain

I ask her one day
What's so special
About a single lot of grass

She whispers faintly
My husband's bones
Are buried beneath
If I water them enough
They will grow
And I'll never be alone

The Harbor

Casey Deater

The light comes pouring
In the window

Faint

Soft

And yet, I know its presence.

The sheets wrap around my mind
As I suffocate with last night's war

The bullet holes are bleeding
From your still smoking gun

As I toss and turn with the seas
In my mind, I crash on the
Island of insecurity

That seemed to damage our harbor.

We are laying in the same sea
Bed and yet, our ships never
Seem to cross paths

I'm drowning.

The anchor that kept us grounded
Is rotting with the skeletons
Of our past

Just as the sweet siren call
Of death approaches

I feel you.

The morning light fading in
The window must have
Woke you too.

It reminds you of the cannons
You used during last
Night's war.

You see the holes
Growing bigger and
The girl who once
loved you, grows
Thinner

I feel you wrap your
Body around mine

Your breath

Soft

Faint

Against my skin.

Your lips kiss my neck
As the waves of remorse hit
The shore in a strong tide.

The SOS Signal

was my own
Suicide.

Inhale, Exhale

Nick Rossiter

He didn't know when it happened, but it happened. It came at a shocking speed, and for a moment it left him breathless. The thought washed over him in the way only sudden realizations can, and he had to sit up for a moment to catch his breath. The woman lying beside him rose as well after a time, placing a hand on the small of his back. He tried his best not to jump, but the tiny movement he couldn't suppress was felt beneath her palm.

"Are you okay?" She began to slowly rub up and down the small of his back, doing her best to comfort him as he stared into the dark forest ahead.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Just- something from dinner was coming up." She stopped for a moment, and from the movements in her hand, he could tell she was silently laughing. Composing herself, she responded.

"That certainly wasn't something I expected to hear, are you alright though? You got up so suddenly I didn't know if you wanted me to ask you or not." He placed a hand on her arm, slowly pushing it from his back.

"No, no, I always want you to, I've just got some weirdness going on." He stood and stretched his arms to both edges of the sky. He felt his shirt pressing against his chest, deflating just as quickly as it had expanded. He shook his hands that were quickly growing numb in the cold winter air and noticed his breath had begun to mist. He recalled a memory of when he was a kid waiting in line to go to school. He would tap his friends on the shoulder and ask if they'd watch him 'smoke'.

Back to the present, he didn't ask Sophie if she wanted to watch him 'smoke', he just took a few paces away from the blanket they had spread onto the ground and stood there for a bit, thinking. Sophie was used to this. Sean would often stare off into the distance and think. The first few times were alarming, sure, but learning that there wasn't an existential crisis going on in Sean's head was a nice reassurance.

This time, however, there was an existential crisis happening within the inner workings of Sean's mind. He struggled with thoughts that were familiar now, thoughts of abandonment, of stranding someone with nothing for them to hold onto. The feeling of standing on a wall as somebody did their damndest to climb their way up to you. That feeling of emptiness when you would look down on that person trying to climb their way back up to you, struggling to find some reason to care after so long.

Sean thought back to the two of them lying together in some memory that felt far away now. They had just made love, but Sean was struggling. He had asked himself at the time, "What am I doing here?" But he still hadn't found his answer. Sophie was wonderful, her smile could light up rooms, her

tastes were impeccable in all things from movies to snacks to activities that would waste away time, and her sense of style was rivaled only by Sean's. She had flaws, as all humans do, but they were easy to overlook. She displayed no signs or 'red flags' as other lovers had before. Sophie was as perfect as one could hope to find in a person.

Why then, was he questioning this so strongly? It was interesting, to have someone so easily lovable but feel nothing at all.

Unbeknownst to both Sophie and Sean, he had begun to walk away from their little clearing. His thoughts had taken him to another place entirely. Not only was he on a journey of self-discovery in his head, but he had also begun a journey in the real world. He edged closer to the forest, but his gaze remained far, fixed on some unknown point in the distance. He had begun to focus on his breathing, as the prospect of a panic attack hadn't escaped his mind with these thoughts that were fixing to change his life.

The two had recently moved in together. Seeing the look on Sophie's face when she proposed the idea to him earlier that month had persuaded him. His feelings (or lack thereof) be damned, Sophie couldn't take a no for an answer. She had recently gone through a turbulent season, and who was Sean to pile more on? It was a bad idea to add to her grief, so he had agreed to move in, reasoning that maybe she would see how apathetic he had become, and she would call things off herself.

But that day never came, the two kept living with one another, growing and changing. Sophie only grew closer to Sean, the apathy he had hoped would sprout within her never came. She only grew closer, before finally realizing how he had begun to feel.

It finally hit her when the two were lying in bed one night.

He had rolled over onto his side, facing away from Sophie. He was reaching for a book on his nightstand when he felt a slight tap on his shoulder. He turned back around and looked at Sophie.

"What's up?" He looked at her, and she looked uncertain. She was fidgeting with her hands, twisting the blanket and smoothing it out before her. She slowly sat up and leaned against the headboard. She looked up to the ceiling and inhaled, then she looked down at the covers once more and exhaled. Sophie gripped the blanket again and smoothed it out before Sean gripped her hands. Finally, she looked over at him.

"Are you thinking of ending things?" He wiggled his head a bit, taken aback by the abrupt nature of her question. He looked to both walls, down to the covers, and then back to Sophie.

"What do you mean?" He knew it wasn't the answer Sophie wanted to hear, but it was all he could think to say. The only response he thought would suffice was the one that had just come out of his mouth.

"Like, with me. Are you thinking of ending things with me?" Sean

swallowed tightly, suddenly the answer that had existed so easily in his mind wouldn't come out. He couldn't find the right format, the right assemblage of words that would get the simple phrase across. At the very least he could just say, "yes" in a small voice, he could certainly do that. But nothing came out. Instead, he kept looking around from object to object around the room. Without knowing, he had begun to fidget with the covers on the bed, rubbing the material between his index finger and thumb.

He had never told her his answer. The thoughts that had been overwhelming him for the past months had grown quiet in that instant. Suddenly he felt like a bad person, this villain that had wasted months of Sophie's life, had ruined her financial plans by moving in with her without knowing fully whether he was committed or not. He hugged her instead and returned to grabbing his book from the nightstand. Later that night he would feel the shaking of the bed from Sophie's crying, and he wouldn't know what to do.

~

Sean found himself in the forest now, unsure of how he had arrived at this destination. He looked all around and found himself lost. He began to walk in one direction before a growing uncertainty rose in his chest and he turned right around. He recalled a memory from the survival shows he used to watch as a kid, walking exactly halfway around a tree whenever he would come to it. This way, he knew he wouldn't be walking in circles. The further he walked, though, the more uncertain he became. Sean knew deep down that going in one direction was his best course of action, but there was no way of telling if he was going in the right direction in the dead of night.

He chided himself for not bringing his phone along with him, as the flashlight would be some comfort here, but he couldn't get lost in thought again. He continued to walk before hearing Sophie calling to him in the distance. His stride was fairly quiet, but he was surprised that she hadn't heard him walk into the forest. The calling made his path much easier now. It turned out that he had been walking in the wrong direction. He turned around and began retracing his steps, Sophie's voice coming nearer with every minute he spent walking.

He wasn't certain why, but he never called back to her. He knew that she was most likely scared, all alone in the forest with no light other than her phone's flashlight and the memory of the car's headlights that had long since turned off. But he was basking in the forest night, the cicadas buzzing in his ears, the wind whistling through the trees and rustling the branches. Sean was entranced with every branch displaced under small rodents, every acorn hitting the forest floor, every call from forest animals. He wasn't startled when he heard the red fox call out, remaining entranced by his own two feet, rhythmically stepping over sticks and bumps on the ground.

He wasn't certain when he heard it, the two shots that rang out in the

night, interrupting the forest cacophony he had enjoyed so much. The ground beneath him lit up for milliseconds, and he realized he had left the forest. He picked his head up and began to run toward the sound. He still couldn't see and tripped up the hill he had left minutes ago. He stumbled onto the hill-top, scrambling for whoever was there. He called out and heard no words in response. He heard this wheezing, so faint as if a cat were sleeping, a small animal curled up for bed.

But he knew what it was. He knew who it was. He knew that the calls from Sophie had stopped while he was still in the forest. While he was listening to the forest so intently, he hadn't realized that maybe that red fox wasn't a red fox. Maybe that screech had been the woman he had been living with for a month. That woman wheezing beneath him, her chest rapidly trying to inhale and exhale as she tried her hardest with a punctured lung. The woman lying on a blanket in the dark, believing her boyfriend had abandoned her while someone walked up and shot her twice.

Her hand reached out, grasping at anything. Sean gripped it, slipping at first when the blood extended to his hand. He tightened his grasp around her thumb, promising her over and over that he wouldn't let go. He couldn't even see her face in the dark. That impenetrable, deep darkness that had invited Sean in so easily before. He cursed the dark now, the dark that would take this woman so easy to love. The darkness that would conceal her killer, leaving Sean paranoid, wondering when his time to join her would come.

The two existed there, as two slowly became one. Slowly, Sophie faded into the dark. Her hand grew cold, and Sean tried to let go. But the blood had hardened, a sick joke that the two would be connected in this way after she had died. He pried their hands apart, a cruel crackle accompanying the action. He stifled a sob and walked to his car, attempting to wipe away the blood that had inexplicably covered the entirety of his person. He grabbed his phone to call the police, but the blood on his hands made it unusable. He sat on the hood of his car and considered whether the killer would come back to finish the job.

Successful Failures

Raegan Lockhart

Every choice you make
is able to create
unfortunate inevitable circumstances

A “failure”
one ought to think

An outcome that haunted your mistake
And seemed to serve no good for your sake,

Just a mess.
A “failure,” so it may seem.

But are the unfavored consequences
truly owed to such a hopeless term?

Could your poor decision
Your mistake,
Your big mess-up,
Could it actually serve you good?

When the unexpected circumstances
lead you to your purpose,
no longer can the term “failure” be a fit

Where there is purpose
there is hope.

So instead
Call your “failure” a success.
Open your eyes to the hope up ahead
relinquish your fixation on the past

And to the hope promised in your purpose, do hold fast.

River Voices

Contributors

Lillian Barnes is a current MCC student with a passion for education. She plans to go into the medical field, but holds literature close to her academic heart.

Gypsy Bates is a freshman at MCC with way too much time on her hands. To combat boredom, she spends her time reading, painting, watching way too much TV, and baking everything found in the cookbooks in her kitchen. Along with her many hobbies, Gypsy also spends her time wondering what she is going to do with the rest of her life as an undecided major with endless opportunities. As of right now, she has come up with nothing. Gypsy is a member of MCC English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*. Gypsy's piece "Serenity" won First Place in Artwork for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest. "Serenity" is also featured on the cover of this edition.

Hollie Benson is an MCC faculty member who loves working with students in the reading and college success courses that she teaches. She lives in the country where she enjoys spending time in nature with her husband, daughter, and dogs. In her free time, she can be found reading and talking about books or building structures for the rather large pride of rescue cats that has taken over the family home.

Olivia Braden is a current MCC student with aspirations of showing the world to people through a different perspective, through poetry, art, photography, and special effect make-up.

Aisha Brown is a current MCC student who creates poetry as an outlet to communicate everything locked inside. She is not here to be remembered but to inspire and help those who hurt. She will forever carry her poetry skills wherever she goes, and Aisha hopes others can find their outlet. Aisha's piece "In Vain" won Second Place in the Poetry category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest.

Josie Buckingham is a former MCC student and is currently attending GVSU. Josie enjoys writing poetry, watching movies, catching sunsets, long boarding, and chilling with friends. Josie's piece "14 Pills" won First Place in the Poetry category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest.

River Voices

Contributors

Diana Casey is an MCC faculty member as well as a traveler, who has lived in many places. This last year has brought profound change to life, not just for one life, but for all. Ms. Casey has been at home discovering time in one space with her dogs, Lilli and Paloma. They enjoy caring for their ducks. Each afternoon they watch the ducks bathe and nibble on their treats.

Eliza Christopher is a current MCC Graphic Design student who also loves poetry. She finds inspiration in beautiful art and beautiful word. Eliza is also the Social Media Coordinator for MCC's English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as the cover editor of *River Voices*.

Keegan Colcleasure is a current MCC student, who loves to write and perform music, as well as poetry. He is transferring in the fall to GVSU as an English major. Keegan is also the President of MCC's English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as the Assistant Editor of *River Voices*. Keegan's pieces "I Stole the Lighter" and "Prey" won First Place for Poetry and Second Place (respectively) for Fiction in MCC's Winter 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Michalene Collins is a degree-holding, community guest student, hoping to shake the mental cobwebs loose by taking some college-level writing courses. She enjoys interacting with the bright, committed students of Muskegon Community College. Her fondest wish is to go to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival once we are all safe from the ravages of this pandemic.

Tawon Cooper is a current MCC film student and writer who hopes to share his works with the world.

Lydia Crocker is a Women's & Gender Studies student at MCC who spends a significant portion of her spare time writing poetry. When she's not busy with school or writing poetry, she enjoys creating songs on her cello, watching funny TV, reading mysterious novels, and hanging out with her cat, Ophelia.

Casey Deater is a former MCC Jayhawk. Casey earned her degree after the fall semester and is now attending Northern Michigan University. Casey has been writing poetry since she was young; her poetry is about expressing those thoughts and feelings we keep the most suppressed.

River Voices

Contributors

Jessica Dennis is an MCC faculty member who has been teaching English and the Humanities for 22-years. When she's not grading papers or working on her dissertation (which will, seemingly never be finished), you can find her reading, grading MORE papers, or talking to her English bulldog, Bo.

Kennadi Dykstra is a current MCC aspiring nursing student who loves photographing nature, specifically sunsets. In her free time, she enjoys playing sports and working out, along with spending time with her family and friends. Kennadi is a member of MCC's English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*.

DeJuana Edwards is an MCC student who loves helping people and aspires to influence others to help others as well. She loves cooking, traveling, and spending time with her children. Her poem "Muhammad Isaiah" was written from the heart, and she hopes you find enjoyment in reading it as she did in writing it.

Adrianna Espinoza is an MCC student finishing up her first year and has loved the art of writing and literature for as long as she can remember. After her time here at Muskegon Community College, she plans to transfer to Central Michigan University where she hopes to double major in Journalism and Speech Pathology. Adrianna is a member of MCC's English Honor Student (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*.

Hannah Finkler is an MCC student finishing up her Associates in Arts and Science before transferring to Western Michigan University with the hopes of becoming a high school Spanish teacher. In her free time, she enjoys running, reading, going to the beach, skiing, and spending time with family and friends. Hannah is a member of MCC's English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*.

Zoe Francis is an MCC student and a fan of horror and comedy, which kick started her interest in Psychology. She believes in finding humor in terrifying situations.

River Voices

Contributors

Jordan Hill is an MCC student pursuing an Associates of Science and Arts degree who plans to transfer in quest of a Wildlife Biology Degree specializing in Herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians). At 27 years old, he is a husband to a beautiful wife and father to two boys. His hobbies include hunting, fishing, hiking, photography, and research. Jordan's piece "God's Day" won Third Place in Photography for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Erin Hoffman is a full-time tenured art instructor at MCC teaching Printmaking, Art Appreciation, Drawing, Painting, Figure Drawing, Contemporary Art History and 2-d design. Erin received her BFA from the University of Northern Iowa and MFA from University of Georgia and both degrees are in printmaking. She uses woodcut, lithography, and drawing as her primary media and has exhibited in over 80 exhibitions nationwide including most recently a solo show called "Reflections From the Cradle of Democracy" at the Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio.

Linda Hood is a current MCC faculty member who has been in higher education for over 40 years and has been writing poetry for much longer than that. Her father was in the military, and in her life, she has lived in over 16 places. Poetry has been her companion the whole way. Like many authors, she is often reluctant to share her poetry, much less submit it for publication. So if you don't like her work, don't tell her...she'll probably write a poem about rejection if you do.

Jessie Jackson is a current MCC student who enjoys expressing herself creatively through art. In her spare time, she likes to watch action movies and spend time with family and friends. She plans to further her education in information technology. Jessie is the current Secretary for MCC's English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*. Jessie's piece "Half Truths" won Third Place in the Creative Nonfiction category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest.

Ronnie Jewell is an MCC faculty member. Ronnie Jewell. Simple name. His baby sister always referred to him as ROM ROM. She could not pronounce "Ronnie." So by all accounts, he is really ROM ROM. His love is Edgar Allan Poe and his favorite play ironically is Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Read it if you haven't already done so. Peace and poetry.

River Voices Contributors

Carter Jones-Hirr is a current MCC student who hopes to make a difference in the lives of everyone. He wants to connect to others through his poetry, which has been produced from a culmination of his life events. Carter is an ordinary student who hopes one day to travel to Germany. He enjoys working and is always happy to have a conversation about pizza.

Leah Johnson is a current first-year MCC student. At the moment, she plans on finishing her Associate in Science and Arts degree and later transferring to a four-year university. She doesn't have a set career path as of now, but she would love to travel the world and learn about all different cultures, including how to prepare their cuisines.

Lance Klemple is a current MCC student and Vice President of the English Honors Society (Sigma Zeta). He is a fun-loving, caring individual. He loves to daydream and turn his ideas into poetry, stories, or crafts. When he has downtime, he can be found outside hiking or lounging in a comfy chair listening to his favorite music. Lance is also a student editor for *River Voices*. Lance's pieces "Work It Out" and "Summer's Dream" won Third Place in the Poetry categories for both MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest and 2021 Winter Creative Writing and Arts Contest (respectively).

Dan Kong is a current MCC Early College student who draws as a hobby. She is self-taught and likes to digitally draw humans and animals. She gets inspiration from her life and the world around her. Dan draws using an iPad, apple pencil, and procreate.

Keira Lindstrom is a current MCC student who expresses her thoughts and feelings through her writing. She is a red belt in the martial arts, Taekwondo. She enjoys walking on the beach during winter and spending time with loved ones.

Raegan Lockhart is an MCC student and member of the English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta). She is an enthusiastic gal with big plans to love and care for others through her pursuit of a nursing degree. She also enjoys journaling and just plain writing. She adores her family and loves to run.

River Voices

Contributors

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

Kaylin Meyers is a current MCC student and artist who enjoys turning her imagination into reality. She likes to portray emotions that she cannot explain verbally through creative and innovative means. When she is not drawing, she is either running or juggling. Kaylin's piece "One With Nature" won Second Place in Artwork for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Rhonda Mullenau is a current MCC student who loves all kinds of art. She didn't realize how artistic she was until later in life. She loves mosaics, jewelry making, wood-working, and photography. She lived in Kansas until a few years ago, and now she is back home in Michigan. She works at the hospital as a phlebotomist and is taking classes to learn and grow as a person. Rhonda's piece "Old Red" won Second Place in Photography for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Jessie Nieboer is a current MCC student who is also a machining student with roots in art and music. She has many interests in many areas, including playing guitar on stage. Jessie's piece "Transformation" won Third Place in Artwork for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Anthony Ocasio is an American political leader, military general, statesman, and founding father; who served as the first president of the United States from 1789 to 1797. No, wait; that's George Washington. Well, now I've run out of space. (Haha). Anthony is actually a current MCC student and member of the English Honor Society, Sigma Zeta.

Cassie Pierce is an MCC nursing student. She recently went to Arizona for the first time and was able to capture some great photos—some of which are showcased in this year's magazine. Cassie's piece "Lowell, AZ" won First Place in Photography for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

River Voices

Contributors

Nick Rossiter is a current MCC student and member of MCC English Honor Society (Sigma Zeta) as well as a student editor for *River Voices*. Nick's piece "A Short Tale of an Eccentric Millionaire" won Second Place in the Fiction category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest and First Place for Fiction at the 2021 Michigan Liberal Arts Network for Development (L.A.N.D) conference.

Justin Rymal is a current MCC student working on a general education transfer degree and looking to find a footing in the mire that is deciding what to do as a career. In his free time, Justin is a bladesmith. He is no master, but making knives is a growing passion of his and he hopes to begin selling them soon. Justin's piece "The Crucible" won First Place in the Creative Nonfiction category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest and Second Place for Creative Nonfiction at the 2021 Michigan Liberal Arts Network for Development (LAND) conference.

Serena Schultz is an MCC student who greatly enjoys learning about others. She writes album reviews for various websites, frequents Banana Dog Tea Store in Lakeside to feed her caffeine addiction, and has a tendency to buy more books than she has time to actually read. Serena's piece "Ceramic, Painted to Look Like Wood" won Second Place for Poetry in MCC's Winter 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Skylar Springer is a current MCC student who recently changed her major back to what she is truly passionate about, being a Detective. Since she was a little girl, she wanted to be Olivia Benson from *Law and Order: SVU*. She is a full-time, single mom to a rambunctious 2-year-old as well as working full time as a leasing consultant. In her downtime, she loves playing with her daughter and seeing how magical life is through her little eyes. Searching for shells is her favorite hobby, and if "shelling" could pay the bills - that is where you could find her day in and day out. Skylar's piece "Leaving to Live" won Second Place in the Creative Nonfiction category for MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest.

Jeffrey Staub is a current MCC student.

River Voices

Contributors

Taylor Strand is an MCC student currently working on her Associate in Science and Arts degree, but she has an interest in pursuing an English degree in the future. She often finds inspiration by listening to loud music and laying on her floor, just letting her mind wander. Taylor's pieces "Final Stop" and "The Appointment" won First Place in the Fiction category for both MCC's 2020 Fall Creative Writing Contest and 2021 Winter Creative writing and Art Contest (respectively).

James Switzer-Moe is a current MCC student who lives in Muskegon, with his lovely wife, Ellie, and sons, Maverick and Ollie. James' piece "The Perspective" won Third Place in Fiction for MCC's 2021 Creative Writing and Art Contest.

Raegan Visker is a current dual-enrolled MCC student and high school senior who plans to study pre-law. She finds inspiration in the little things in life. Her favorite pastimes are playing guitar and spending time with her fluffy golden doodle, Oliver.

Haile Will is a current MCC student and a self-taught artist, who loves to create art within many mediums. She sees art as a way to express herself and be creative.

Angel Wirts is a current MCC student who is pursuing a degree in the sciences and art. She hopes to travel around the world, but particularly, anywhere in Europe. In her free time, she loves to roam Grand Rapids with her friends or paint some abstract art piece.

Lotus Zachar is a current MCC student. Lotus, a young trans man, is working towards becoming a high school English teacher. He wishes to share his love of literature and poetry with the younger generation and hopes to inspire his students as his teachers have inspired him.

National English Honor Society Members

Sigma Zeta Chapter

Keegan Colcleasure
President

Lance Klemple
Vice President

Jessie Jackson
Secretary

Eliza Christopher
Social Media Coordinator

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Members

Gypsy Bates
Eric Boehm-White
Kennadi Dykstra
Adrianna Espinoza
Hannah Finkler
Nathan James
Raegan Lockhart
Nick Rossiter

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Faculty Advisors

Sean Colcleasure
Shauna Hayes

