

# River Voices

Spring 2023



# River Voices Spring 2023

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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's theme, *Awkward Pauses*, was chosen by the Liberal Arts Network for Development (LAND). LAND promotes the development of the liberal arts for all Michigan's community colleges, and our students have the privilege of participating in their annual statewide Writing Contest.

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

We encourage submissions of poetry, prose, essays, art, and photography year-round and are currently accepting submissions for the Spring 2024 edition.

If you would like to submit your creative work or join the *River Voices* student editing team, please visit: [muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices](http://muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices) for further details.

Cover Art: *Awkward Pauses*

Cover Artist: Tori Vantamelen

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## *The Man in the Mirror*

~ a poem by Lance Klemple

I forget what I look like  
days and days go by blocking out  
my own face  
hoping humanity has smudged  
my picture out in their yearbook

Ginsberg made me do it  
he spoke like a hippy angel  
in my ear to look in the mirror

*what do you look like to yourself?*

he asked, he  
asked and asked until  
my eyes rolled to the back  
of my head, pen on paper  
drooling grey ink from my  
fingers playing on the page

imagine each word set on display  
for the whole world to see  
I hate this body, this mind, this life  
I push so hard for  
so long, my legs snap like an icicle  
crash on cement but

it's not snowing.  
I don't actually hate myself.

So Ginsberg,  
who is that in the mirror?



***Introduction to Me***  
(Inspired by *PRELUDE: mic test*)

---

Zoey Carty

this book smells like me  
vanilla perfume  
cinnamon  
sugary candies  
lotion, coffee shops  
doubt and forgetfulness  
blue skies by day  
a beautiful sunset by night

this book is drenched  
in anxiety  
of constant worrying  
and yesterday's shaking  
still attached to me

this book is dirty clothes  
covering my bedroom floor  
the laundry machine  
constantly tumbling  
for your curiosity of  
what it's like to be  
in my head

## *The Writing Class*

---

Donna Ginn

A gift given with unexpected pleasure,  
The writing class of composition, prose, and poetry,  
Sprinkled with synonyms, similes, analogies of sorts,  
Stored in folders for tomorrow's start.

Rhyming verse and narratives of epic tales,  
Filled with spins, suspicions, and implications, leaving  
Savvy readers to ferret out detailed plots,  
Saved inside boxes to rediscover later.

Appositives and absolute phrases,  
Lingering language rolling off the tongue,  
As students merge the pen and inked words,  
Filed in dog eared pages, hiding in folders.

Typo openers, prompts and transitions,  
Escaping from keyboards clicking in the night,  
Combinations of sounds and sights coming together,  
Labeled as conclusions of force, humor, or grace divine.

Collisions of characters, dialogues wrestling down ideas,  
Into submissions, a third person's point of view,  
Active and passive voices speaking to students,  
Packed into paragraphs for early morning prompts.

Edited with precision, detailed mapping start to end,  
A teacher reaching into heads and hearts,  
Pulling, coaxing, teasing out participial imposters,  
Collected fragments for files, readily retrievable.

One instructor committed to phrases, married to metaphors,  
Delivering permission to explore, skilled at serving iced delights,  
Cocktails of terror, giddiness, clarity, and confusion, smoothly swirled together,  
Kept chilled inside bold colored chalices for all to drink.

No one would have guessed, that in one short, sizzling summer class,  
One awkward pause, with a mentor, a.k.a. teacher,  
would open doors, crack windows, let loose, leave ajar, and unbind,  
So many ideas from one student's quiet hands.

Amazing.

So why would she retire?  
Perhaps she needs a nap.

## *Good*

---

Taylor Ottinger

Irreplaceable.

Said by those who love someone.

Care for them, want them.

Said by people who want them to know what they mean to them.

But people don't know how you make me feel.

How your words cut and your arrogance burns.

How your gaslight makes me feel like the air I breathe is toxic.

Irreplaceable means you can't be copied. Your actions can't be mimicked.

You say you're irreplaceable?

I say, "Good."

## *Vertically Vivid*

Leah Johnson



*Photography*

# *Pioneer Woman*

---

Erik Nelsen



*Photography*



## *Peonies Not For Sale*

---

Lance Klemple

growing up a young girl ma told me many  
wise words like

*Always go for the eyes  
don't stop until he can't see you*

she urged my sister and I to run  
and scream like psychos so  
we would no longer be victims  
plucked by predators—unless  
we blinded them already, I suppose  
but after growing up to be a teen boy  
I realized she was talking about bad  
boys, boys who looked like me or talked like me, bad boys who steal white  
peonies  
and punish their pretty petals until  
there are no petals. Just the head left  
to think.  
To remember.

My ma never forgot.

And neither did we.

## *Two-Way Mirror*

---

Jane Hoppe

“Sit up, Lu, or you’ll turn into a hunchback.”

Two swift taps on my shoulder jerk me back to the land of the living. Mom bustles past the table, brandishing a knife at a fat pumpkin sat on the kitchen counter.

“It’s almost Halloween, Momma. She’d fit right in anyway.” Asher scribbles on the pumpkin strewn newspaper layered on the table in front of him, violent streaks of blue and orange combining into a brown mush. I wince at how hard he drags the crayons across the brittle page.

“Ash darling, kind words please.” With a thunk the knife plunges into the pumpkin as Mom begins to carve. I go back to staring down my plate, spine stiff and straight as a flagpole. Mom makes that low humming noise in her throat, somewhere between a croon and a growl. I tried to imitate it once; it made my tongue taste like rust. “Communing with your breakfast again, Lucy?”

“Doing my best. French toast has a thick accent.”

“Mm, well, wrap up the conversation or you’ll make us late for church.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, mother.” I lift my fork and swirl the food around my plate, mixing the toast and maple syrup into a mush not unlike Asher’s drawing. I prod my cold eggs into two sections so they resemble eyes over the grinning slice of soggy bread. The face is twisted and beaming. My stomach turns.

Mom hums again, pumpkin guts splatting in the big metal bowl on the counter beside her. I sigh and shovel some French toast mush into my mouth, trying not to gag. Then I expertly pick apart the eggs so it looks like I made an effort and slip the remains to the bin on my way to the sink.

Fifteen minutes later Ash and I are dragging our feet to the crusty old van while Mom honks at us to hurry up, before remembering she left her phone or her chapstick or something and rushing back inside to grab the object she can’t live without. Twenty minutes and we’re finally swerving out of our lazy dead-end street, running a record ten minutes late.

*“With All Hallows’ Eve a mere week away now, we’re looking ahead to some possible storms rolling in from Big Lake. Stock up on rain-wear to keep those trick-or-treaters nice and dry!”* Mom switches the station to K-Love and careens through a red light.

The Katsville radio station made the same ominous prediction for Halloween every year. Every year the skies were empty. I think they just liked to incite a little anxiety to keep things exciting. Not much else going on ‘round this season in a rural Midwest town like Katsville, aside from the odd drunken fight outside the only bar. There weren’t even any spooky legends or ghost stories to tell; just a bland old town with a blander history book and a probably just-as-bland future.

Plenty of pumpkin farms, though.

I look out my window as we pass one, a withering brown field

splattered with orange. Catching my own eye in the reflection, I think about my egg face and try to imitate it. My mouth doesn't stretch quite far enough and my eyes squint like an overexcited preschooler. We pause at an all-way and a grinning pumpkin-headed scarecrow smiles back at me, black paint smeared in a friendly arc under his peg nose as he entices customers to buy his brethren.

I stick out my tongue but we've already left him in the dust.

We get to church only three minutes late, a testament to my mother's skill at breaking road law in the name of Jesus. Sunday School and the service drag by. I watch a dust bunny drift across the pulpit while the pastor does his sermon, a dainty gray dancer caught in the repulsive draft of warm breath and shifting feet. Mom slaps my leg, muttering something about making faces.

The dust bunny drifts to the far end of the sanctuary, landing beneath one of the tall rectangle windows. For a second it's caught in a slant of white autumn light, casting the clump of hair and dirt in an almost angelic sheen before the congregation stands for the benediction and a new wave of disturbance flushes the clump of dust back into shadow.

"Comin' to the Spooky Bash tonight, Lucy?" Luke asks me as the congregation trickles out of the sanctuary, buzzing at each other like insects. The high school youth leader shows me his teeth, perfect and white and welcoming as he leans at the end of my pew. No escape.

An entourage of pretty girls in modest but stylish autumn dresses float in his wake, though they keep a noticeable distance when they see who Luke is talking to. Their families have probably never left the county, sitting on their mounds of land blocking out the view of Big Lake for anyone without private access.

I pick at the edge of my drooping black maxi dress, slouching so they're out of my field of vision. "Dunno," I reply, distracted. Rookie mistake.

"Oh, come on now Lu!" Luke leans in and I can smell the Listerine on his breath. I hate that nickname, though I can't tell if I hate it more when it's not my mother using it. "We miss seeing you around at youth group. It's a shame you've got that Sunday night class."

Right. That totally existent Sunday night class. I'm still not quite sure if he's gullible enough to actually buy that or if he's just being polite enough not to call out my flimsy lie.

"Look, I'm sure you can brush it off for one night. It's almost Halloween! You deserve some time to relax! October's always such a busy month for you kids and it's important to get out for a change, you know? If you just ask I'm sure..."

He rambles on until I sigh and slowly nod my head.

"Perfect!" Luke chirps, then looks over his shoulder. "Abs! Lucy is up for Spooky Bash tonight, mind giving her a ride?"

Abs—not the six pack kind but instead a terrible nickname for Abigail—flounces over to Luke, big gold hoop earrings bouncing against her neck. I swear she adds a little skip to her step to make them do that.

"Sure, Luke!" Abigail hooks an elbow over his shoulder. "What's her number? So she can text me an address."

“Um.” Christ, I’m standing right here. “You could just put your number in my phone.”

“Oh yeah, duhh,” she says, tilting her head like she never would’ve thought of it. I hand her my phone and her bright red nails click against the screen as she types. It reminds me of the way my dead dog Jameson’s nails used to tap across the kitchen floor.

When she hands the phone back, I accidentally return her gaze for a full, awful moment of eye contact. Shit. Those blue-ringed pupils bore into me, expectant, like a predator waiting for me to make the first move before they pounce. Abigail is smiling, all feigned friendliness drained from her face, mouth twisting into a warped indulgent pleasure.

I fumble my phone and it falls, thudding like a gavel on the smooth floorboards. No one moves to pick it up.

“Pick you up at 8,” Abigail says, tone cheery but smile unchanged as she turns to rejoin her posse. No one seems to notice anything out of place, so maybe I’m just going crazy. Or worse, no one thought that mouth was wrong at all. Luke waves after her and shoots me a thumbs up as he’s pulled away by a gaggle of high school boys asking how scary their costumes are allowed to be.

I stand there. The sweaty heat of the sanctuary makes me nauseous. I’m still thinking about Abigail when I feel two sharp taps on my shoulder.

“You make a better door than a window, Lu,” Mom remarks, gesturing for me to move so she can leave the pew and dragging a whining Asher by the wrist behind her. I think about telling her the phrase doesn’t make any sense in this context but she’s already shouldering past me. “I need to get Ash home. You know your phone is on the floor?”

“Yeah,” I mumble, squeezing into my seat so she and Ash can pass by. I pick up my phone and turn it over to check the face isn’t cracked, which, of course, it is. Then I nearly drop it again as in the moment before the screen lights up, I glimpse my face in the black reflection. I’m smiling, too.

~

Abigail pulls into my driveway twelve minutes late and I can hear peppy pop music and high pitched laughter from my front step. She doesn’t get out. The sky is thick with clouds. Against all my better instincts, I shuffle toward the back passenger door of her electric blue minivan and tug on the handle until she remembers to unlock it.

I thought about canceling all day, but after Mom made me send “Abs” my address, I avoided my phone. Every time I reached for it my chest tightened. It was stupid. I had a weird morning is all. Not the first time Mom’s cooking made me loopy. Yet part of me knew with absolute certainty what I would see when I looked down at that screen. It was dumb. It was my social anxiety spiking and playing tricks, making excuses.

Still, the image of my reflection played in my mind, joyful and distorted and cruel beneath the hairline cracks in the screen’s dark surface.

So I distracted myself. Helped Asher carve his grimacing Jack O’ Lantern and impressed Mom with the most thorough dishwashing I’d ever done in my life. She helped me piece together a costume (since I hadn’t been planning on going anywhere and hadn’t bothered to make one), lending me

her makeup and a lacy black shawl that was probably one of the nicest things she owned.

"The only time I wore it was your grandmother's funeral," she said, her voice distant. "She told me she wore it the day she immigrated from Bolivia. Always went on about how it was cursed, made things disappear."

"Spooky," I noted. Mom wasn't Bolivian. Abuela Patricia had sided with her during the divorce. I was never sure why but she was dead a couple years later anyway.

Mom let out a short chuckle. "Yes, she was very proud of her stories. You two would have gotten along too well." She hummed, picking a fuzz off my shoulder. "You should keep it. It's only taking up space in my drawers."

I clutch the lacy shawl close as I squeeze between two faux-blood-stained cheerleaders, praying it doesn't catch on anything. Abigail sits in the driver seat, flipping through a playlist while her two friends throw out song requests, hardly noticing I'm there. Carson, a lumbering senior boy also in youth group, who I almost used to be friends with in junior high, lounges in the passenger seat on his phone.

He's the only one who looks up as I settle myself inelegantly into the middle seat. Carson is dressed as a bloodied football player, a deep purple bruise over his left eye that might not be makeup. "Cool costume," he says over the din of the other girls.

"Banshee," I reply, making an exaggerated face of screeching horror. "Neat."

Abigail finally picks a song and starts backing out of my driveway as the other girls groan over her selection. They start gossiping again but their words sound like radio static as we rocket across the midwestern expanse of corn fields and more pumpkin farms, the latter of which are glowing with string lights and Jack O' Lantern grins. I am acutely aware of an oncoming bout of motion sickness and I wish I could lean on the window to focus on the sky. My phone buzzes in my hand and I realize the screen is facing up. A shiver crawls up my spine and I make a pact with myself to look straight ahead until we get to the church.

Outside is fully dark when we pull into the parking lot, but the windows of the youth ministry room at the corner of the building are flickering with light and silhouettes of the people inside. It's drizzling now, cold and miserable, making the inside lights look that much more welcoming. Everyone jumps out, still chatting away, and the girl whose side I'm getting out on nearly slams the door on me. She throws me an "Oops, sorry!" as I slide out just in time.

I move to follow after them, but someone is grabbing my hand. Someone is pulling my hand back toward the car and they will not let go and I nearly drop my phone again as they yank me backward, nails digging into my skin until I'm sure they'll break it. Then, I turn and find the lacy shawl has tangled around my wrist and caught itself in the car door.

Something in my chest pops, quiet, like a deflating balloon. And I laugh. A big, genuine laugh at how ridiculous the thought was, at every prick of anxiety that's threatened to make me implode today, the same spiral that happens every day.

“Abigail!” I call, and she turns around at the sound of my voice.

“Oh, GOD!” Abigail yelps, a bit over the top, but she unlocks her car again and I rescue my costume. “You okay?!”

“Yeah!” I reply. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Meet us inside, Banshee girl!” Carson calls back with a grin.

I wave, then look at my phone and for a split second I see my face smiling back at him. Then the screen lights up. “Have fun!” reads a text from Mom.

I take a deep breath and walk up to the glass door at the entrance. It’s a shimmering portal leading from the empty night to the mass of lights and food and people on the other side. I focus on my faint reflection in the window and imagine my body is one of them.

Carson is waving at me from the banquet table, and before I can even pull the handle, Lucy walks through the door. She walks over to Carson and she kisses him, long and deep, and he puts his hand to her back, fingers threading through her shawl’s soft black lace. Her lipstick smears across my face. Her teeth bite my cheek. At last she lets go and Abigail laughs, throwing her red-speckled arms over Lucy’s shoulders.

I watch her from the window; I watch her body dance between the others, watch her talking and eating and laughing, watch her kiss again. At some point she looks over her shoulder to where I stand, locked in the glass. Rain patters around me but I do not feel it. I’m cold and I rub my bare arms as Lucy pulls her shawl close and smiles softly. See how it feels?

I look down at my phone and the screen forgets to light up. “Give us a real smile,” I say.

Lucy laughs. “You never did it right!”

She grins and my mouth stretches until it hurts. My cheeks split and the taste of rust spills over my tongue, filling my throat and dripping down my neck. Lucy reaches out and taps my shoulder twice. I know what comes next.

“Oh, Lu. You never deserved them, anyway.”

---

## *Lucifer and Icarus are of the Same Cloth*

---

Kenna LaCount

oh how beautiful it must have been to be Icarus  
the gift of freedom and the ability to see the entire world higher than any  
mortal could dream  
wings fragile as porcelain and delicate as a daisy in the early spring.

a reverent restraint reverberating in his mind  
to keep himself grounded,  
but waging everything he has ever known against all he could know.  
demanding his deliverance as he pushed his way from the earth and found  
himself surrounded  
by a boundless cloud-filled sky.  
uninhibited, untouched by the plagues of the world.  
unrestricted, unrestrained by worry of what was to come.  
did he know what was to come?

there was a moment filled with mourning as Icarus felt the weight of the  
world  
pull him back to transience  
there was a moment filled with regret as Icarus heard the screams of his father  
begging him to listen

*don't fly too close to the sun.*

the delicate damnation as he fell from the sky  
did Icarus know the name Lucifer, and perceive pious pity within himself to  
weep for the devil,  
as he was falling from the stars?  
fingers grasping at faithless fragile feathers as wax blackened his skin,  
and the coolness of the clouds caressed him  
and called him home.

oh how beautiful it must have been to be Icarus  
to have the world at your fingertips and to take your last, grasping, breath  
in the same sky that holds the Gods.

## *Ode to the Child and Crow*

---

Candice Kirkendoll

Harken to the Crow  
whose eyes are carved  
into the bark of every willow,  
and who sings an orphaned bard's  
reprise. The Crow drifts from branch to the breeze,  
unfurling her wings to awaken  
The sun on winter's eve.

O child, whose voice beckons  
the gravel closer to the windowpane;  
who blinks past life in seconds  
tethered with shackle and chain,  
heed to the dusky birds refrain!

Do not seek caricatures in coffins  
during the winter's solstice,  
or burrow into the Earth to fall in  
before one's body sets with rigor mortis.

The Crow witnesses the sorrow grow  
from the seed into the unyielding weed,  
and brings with her the morning glow  
with every plea to be freed.

Her accented pitches and verses  
soar through sky to the ear  
of those who she reveres while she traverses;  
and o child does she croon for you to persevere!



## *Nature in Pairs*

---

Ashley Streng



*Photography*

## *Should We Say Something?*

---

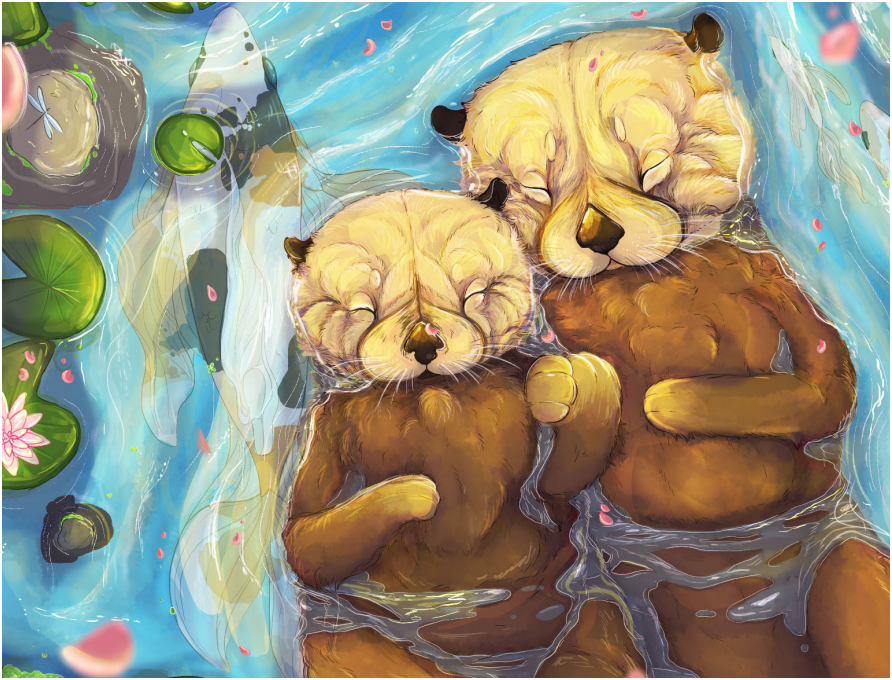
Kelly Torz



*Digital Art*

# *Together*

Kate Erdman



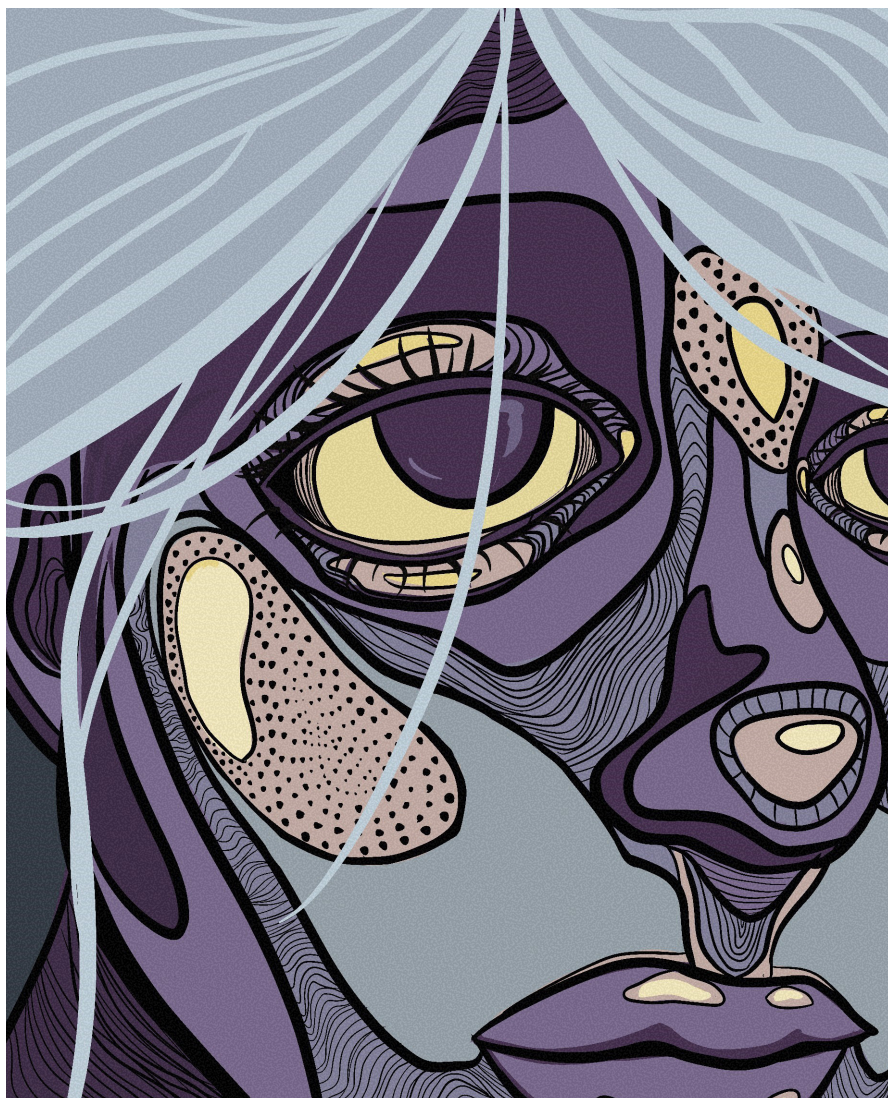
*Digital Art*



## *Delusions*

---

Emma Patulski



*Digital Art*

*disordered habits linger longer*

---

Kenna LaCount

i tell people that i am in a better place now  
that i have overcome my disordered eating.

i leave out the hours i spend picking apart my body in front of the mirror  
stomach too stout, chin too chunky, legs too large, waist too wide.

i leave out how i can still feel clawing in my throat  
as i eat, as i digest, as i nourish my body.

i leave out the tears i shed as i dress in the morning  
the relief i feel as i strip and crawl into bed.

i leave out the frantic tearing, ripping, pulling,  
at my fat, my skin, my bones.

i leave out the guilt that still wracks my conscious.  
the guilt that makes me

tell people that i am in a better place now  
that i have overcome my disordered eating.

## *The Creek*

---

Sidney Gould

The creek was the first place we'd run to after school. Whether it'd be to escape the stress of middle school girls, low grades, or the widespread fear of growing older, it was the one place where time seemed to stop. After years of being forgotten, the streambeds flocked with long stems of wildflowers and unwelcomed branches snatched by the current. Daylight would sneak through the small cracks between the branches, warming our faces with the light of the evening sun. The musty smell from the clogged drainpipe downstream became the emblem of a simpler time—a better time. It was just Teddy and me.

I never knew too much about him; hell, I never even knew his last name, but I always knew he was running from something more than just school. More than just girls and detention. I never wanted to admit it because, after all, we were only twelve. Some days Teddy would show up with a dark bruise around his eye, sometimes around his neck. Sometimes, when I'd race him into the cold fall waters, I'd crack the surface and sink into the murky creek, only to look up and see his reflection staring down at me; there'd be a flash of lifelessness in his eyes before he'd jump in seconds after. The smile would return, but parts of Teddy would not.

He eventually grew more and more distant, to the point where cans of beer seemed to be the only tie between caring for himself and letting go. His eyes grew darker, so dark that I couldn't recognize them anymore, and I became scared. Scared of the person I once called my friend, and scared of who I may turn into if I stayed. After all, I was only fifteen.

So I stopped going.

They found his body three weeks later, washed up like a stick at the end of the creek.

Suicide.

Despite never talking about it, or acknowledging the past childhood I once adored, that guilt never left my conscience; it haunted me, rather. I never wanted to admit it, but God did I miss him. Blinded by ignorance - blinded by age - blinded by the thought that if I cared, if I truly cared, he'd hook me like a fish and we'd drown together. I knew he didn't know how to swim, yet my selfishness left my hand clutched around the rope that would pull him to safety. I was young, but so was he. So why did I let the creek swallow him whole?

I guess that's why, two years later, I find myself at the doorstep of his parent's house with my fist hovering over their door. Not necessarily for forgiveness, but for the truth that I was too blind to care about before. I never knew anything about his family, or even where he lived, but I feel I owe it to him to change that. I take a deep breath, not even knocking twice before the door slightly creaks open.

"I've been waiting for yeh to knock the past five minutes." It was a woman's voice, scratchy like sandpaper.

"O-Oh- sorry miss." I give an awkward laugh as I rub the back of my head. "I uh... I was just wondering if you knew anyone named Teddy?"

The eyes between the crack stare at me for a while longer, then shut the door; rattling is heard from the other side before the door reopens, revealing a small, frail woman, almost like a much older version of Teddy, except for a red scar reaching across her cheek.

"Yer a few years too late, boy."

"Yeah- I know... He uh... He used to be a friend of mine. I never got to say goodbye-"

"Yeh was the drainpipe boy, weren't 'cha?" Her stale lips grow into a bit of an amused smile.

"Drainpipe... boy? You mean the creek?"

"Yeah. The reason Teddy always came home smellin' like shit 'n piss. That you?"

Is that what that smell was?

"Uh- yeah. Yeah, I was." When the woman looks me up and down, her eyes begin to dim and she turns her back away to hobble into the kitchen.

"Never showed up for the funeral." She calls as she makes her way to the stove, flipping the switch on; I slowly step in and shut the door, freezing at that familiar smell. Teddy... "What kind of friend don't show up to a damn funeral?" She's looking directly at me. I guess I forgot to respond.

"Well... The kind of friend who feels guilty, I guess.." My heart feels like a lit candle melting into my stomach. The woman gives a light scoff as she fills a kettle with water, placing it on the stove.

"Why do yeh feel guilty, boy?" I make my way into the kitchen, stopping in the corridor—I feel like if I take another step she might chase me back out of her house.

"I left him... alone... back when he needed me the most... I ran away." My eyes fall to the ground in hopes she won't see them water. I can't cry. Not again. "I was the reason he died."

Only a moment goes past before I hear the woman let out a small chuckle, forcing me to look up at her as she leans her back against the counter.

"We all thought that, boy. A mother's guilt, a sister's guilt, a friend's guilt. We all think we're the reason."

"But I left him-"

"For the first time since yeh were -what? Ten? Friends come 'n go- don't give yerself too much credit." She gives a huff as the teapot starts to whistle, turning to the cupboards to pull out two cups.

"I wasn't there for him." I stare at her in disbelief. How can she not be mad?

"Yeh existed. Ain't that enough?" She reaches up high to grab the sugar. The teapot begins to fume with steam.

"B-But I never asked? I never asked what happened!" I begin to yell over the steam, not only frustrated at its screaming but the fact that this woman seems to have no regard for who her son was.

Without looking, she flips the cap up on the teapot, slowly lifting it up and pouring the hot water into the cups. The room falls silent for a while. "... Life happened, kid." She sighs as she adds a small spoonful of sugar to each, then a teabag, before bringing them over to the table nearby. She sits down,

pointing to the chair in front of her without a word. I reluctantly sit, and for a while there is more silence.

She finally speaks again. "Some kids are born lucky. They got a family that loves 'em, 'n a roof over their heads, while other kids are born with a drunk for an old man 'n a lazy ma who just smokes all day." She reaches over for a cigarette at the end of the table, putting one into her mouth and lighting the tip. "But," she puffs out a cloud of smoke, "we can't change what happen'd. We can't breathe him back to life or ask why he did what he did. We only have the memories with him... and the chance to pick up our own pieces." I slowly lean back in the chair as I listen, raising my eyes to find hers looking right at me. "He never blamed yeh, boy... Even if yeh never really offered any, yeh still helped him through some hard times... I'll always be grateful."

I give a small smile. Grateful? For me? I never thought I did much other than splash around in an old creek with him.

"In the end, it's the small things. The small things that mean the most." She nods, puffing another cloud of smoke as she watches the table. I glance around the house, finally noticing both the emptiness and silence around us.

"Uh... About his dad?" I look back at her. "Where is he?"

She gives a big grin as she puffs out her last cloud of smoke. "Gone." Chuckling, she smothers the butt of the cigarette into the ashtray. "Like I said, we all need to pick up our own pieces."

I slowly nod. What does she mean by picking up the pieces? Fixing what we did wrong? I left the creek. I left Teddy. How can I fix what's already been done?

I carefully pick up the cup of tea and take a drink; the fresh aroma of sweet peppermint bites my tongue as I watch the woman across the table. She too takes a sip of her tea before looking out the window. The evening sun hits her blonde hair just like it did when Teddy stood on the rock just before he was about to jump. Her eyes have the same sadness and wonder that both plagued and blessed him up until the day I left. She then turns her gaze to me, tilting her head a bit.

"What's yer name, drainpipe?" She takes a sip of her tea. I take another sip as well.

"Most of my friends call me Walter."

"Hm... Walter." She slowly nods. "Call me Rosily." I nod and set my empty cup down. She gives it one glance before smiling. "Want some more?"

"Yes please." I smile.



## *The Empty Box?*

---

Ronnie Jewell

There are only so many heartbreaks and hardships one can grasp and tolerate in such a short span of life.

Most of us have had more than our share of both.

Regardless of what Forest Gump may say, "Life is [not] like a box of chocolates."

As my southern mother always says, "Life is more like a box of Cracker Jack . . . you never know what shitty little prize you're going to get."

And the "prizes" keep getting shittier and shittier.

But . . .

Life is more than a box of Anything!

And even an empty box is not really empty.

But please no more coconut cream chocolates.

I've had my share.

## *Alone*

---

Sidney Gould

footprints trudge through thick snow,  
flakes gather in their wake,  
carving a path unknown.

a lonely trail  
do they forge  
in the search of being alone.

yet silence is near,  
dear as a friend,  
a mirror of loneliness,  
a lying reflection.

the snow melts,  
truth pleads from the Earth,  
it is the path that lingers,  
of the footprints in search of being

alone.

## *Winter*

---

Brooke Welch



*Photography*

# *Arnold*

---

Savanna Donahue



*India Ink and Micron Pens*



# *I Almost Escaped*

Logan Kahl



*Digital Art*

# *San Francisco Bay*

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Erik Nelsen



*Photography*

## *And For A Moment, He Lived*

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Gabriel Williams

With the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg in the air, I started to rip open the packages of pale white frosting. James sighed at the growing mess of gingerbread and bowls full of gumdrops and sprinkles littering the top of our kitchen table. He came up behind me and held onto my shoulders, wrinkling my black t-shirt as he rested his head against mine. I could smell his musk of pine and motor oil.

“What are you doing, doll?” He asked, his voice gruff. I didn’t answer him, focusing my sole attention on setting out all of the ingredients. The green sprinkles were set next to the red and the base for the gingerbread house was set in the center of it all.

“Maggie, I asked you a question.” His tone was light as he poked at my side. My response was to stick my tongue out at him. He laughed deeply at this. My movements slowed as I heard it. Every sense he had been back stateside, the sound was more rare than a shooting star. His arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me away from the table, large arms enveloped my petite body.

“Fine, we’re making a gingerbread house.” He sighed tilting his head as if looking at an overexcited puppy. I scrunched up my nose at him and pushed him onto one of our kitchen chairs. He laughed again, straightening himself out until he comfortably rested against the back of the chair.

“You’re going to have to show me how to do this.” He gestured to the frosting bags and gingerbread walls. This would be his first true Christmas, and I was determined to fill it with as much holiday wonder as I could.

“Of course, what am I but a humble gingerbread construction man?” I joked. I took the seat next to him, handing him the bag of frosting. Slowly, but surely, I guided him in preparing the frosting bag.

“First, put some lines of frosting on our plate so the walls have something to stand on. Then a line on the edge of the gingerbread itself. From there we have to carefully place them together until we get a house.” He followed my instructions, hesitant at first. His hands were rough and calloused making it hard to maneuver the fragile piece. I watched as he delicately put a single line of frosting along the edge of the gingerbread. I sat there completely enraptured by him. I stared at his brilliantly blue eyes that held nothing but curiosity and the broken stubble that lined his strong jaw. The way that pieces of his brown hair fell out of the small ponytail he had tied up this morning. I noticed his broad shoulders and how he curled up on himself as he carefully placed the wall down, as if he was afraid he would crumble the delicate architecture.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be helping me?” He asked and, oh god, he turned to face me, with that smile on his face, with that tenderness in his stormy eyes. I couldn’t speak. How could I speak when he was right there in front of me? This man who had held death and seen the worst of humanity was making a gingerbread house with me.

“Maggie?” He asked quizzically.

“I love you,” I whispered. I tried to pour all my love into those words.

He had to know that it came from everything in me. Every dark moment in my life was worth it to be so in love with the man in front of me. He turned fully to me, the gingerbread house forgotten as his hands held my face with the same gentleness he had used on the gingerbread.

“I love you, too.”

In that moment there was nothing but the overwhelming love that we shared.

...

And then I woke up.

The room was bathed in pale moonlight, leaving me to barely make out the shapes of my dresser and open closet door. Still dazed with sleep I reached to the other side of the bed. The sheets were cold against my hand. Only then did my mind catch up to reality. Tears welled up in my eyes as I slowly pulled myself from the heavy covers. It was still dark out, everyone still laid safely in their beds, tucked into their lover’s arms. The freezing floor sent shivers down my spine as my bare feet made contact with the hardwood floors. The house was silent, no longer filled with anything but the whistling wind through a cracked window. I trailed through my open bedroom door. I watched as passing cars sent their headlights through the cracks in the curtains, brightening the dusty blue walls before they faded into the darkness again. Yet another chilly gust of wind made its way into the house prompting me to shut the window with a BANG!

I turned back around in an attempt to go back to my bedroom, but then my eyes caught sight of my kitchen table. My breathing seized painfully in my throat, as if the tears that now trailed my face were collecting there, choking me. Another car passed by and for a moment I could still see him there, sitting in the kitchen chair. But the room no longer smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg, and there was no gingerbread. I shuffled across the room slowly, trying to recall the way his voice sounded, the way his blue eyes sparkled. I dared to touch the table and with a single brush of my finger. He was gone. The sobs racked my body as I collapsed to the floor. I cried out smacking my hands against the white tiles of the kitchen over and over until my hands still stung even after my movements had stopped. Shoving the chair I watched as it crashed to the floor in front of me with a smack. My body was uncomfortably hot as I rested my forehead against the cool linoleum. I desperately grasped at the memory of him.

“Please, don’t go! Don’t leave me!”

In this moment there was nothing but the chilled night air and my begging pleas.



## ***For Gold and Glory***

---

Evan Gergen

Another cannonball whizzed by as my brother managed to turn us away from their barrage. Supplies were low, and it wouldn't be long before our opponents would have us in their broadside again. I launched to a small island in search of resources, but I wasn't expecting to find the rarest treasure in the game: The Box of Wondrous Secrets. Now, we had more than our pride to fight for.

After many hours of naval battle, victory was finally ours.

My brother and I fondly reminisce about our first-time becoming Champions of *Athena's Fortune* as we continue to sail together.

## *A Memory From My Elementary Education*

---

Ashley Streng

I searched the carpet for the “A” that marked my spot and sat down on Mrs. Sigsby’s alphabet rug. It was reading time for the first graders, the most exciting part of our day, except recess perhaps, because Mrs. Sigsby had the best reading voice of all the teachers in the school. Her narrative voice drew the attention of the entire class to her and her book. She was the teacher that made everyone love reading, even if they absolutely despised it before. So, I took my spot on the carpet, the right corner of the rug in the back of the room, and leaned against the bordering brick wall.

Mrs. Sigsby opened her book, and my peers immediately took their cue and stopped their conversations so they did not miss a word. As she read, she changed the speed and volume of her voice with the rhythm of the book, her words like a snake charmer that conducted the students through the story. I was entranced as well, my entire focus on the book that had come to life in front of me. When Mrs. Sigsby read, the book was not just words on a page and there were no still pictures. The characters lived, talked, and moved. I listened to the story, I saw the story, and then, I was in the story. Dropped straight into the narrative. I felt the way the words slid together into a Doctor Seuss rhyme and how the pictures shifted into a motion-picture movie.

And then, the mirage disappeared. I was shot back into the room, felt the rough carpet on my ankles, and then something else: *my tooth. Or not my tooth? A hole where my tooth was? No, wait, what was that? Yes, it is definitely a tooth, just not where it is supposed to be.*

*When did it fall out? I did not even notice.*

*What if I had swallowed it? What if I swallow it now?* I started to panic; my hands twisted the ends of the rough carpet and pulled the fibers apart in frantic movements.

*Should I spit it out? Wait, I can taste something metallic. Is that blood?* My heart rate quickened, I did not like blood. My favorite color was red for three years until someone told me it looked like blood. The sickly substance that oozed out of gashes. Skin torn apart by sharp objects. A red that haunted my nightmares, made me dizzy and confused. I pinched myself in the arm. *Wake up. It is just a tooth, nothing bad. The blood will end, you just have to wipe it up. Yes, I can do that.*

*But wait! If I spit my tooth out will blood come with it? I do not want to get a stain on the carpet.* I did not want to ruin anything. I did not want to disturb anything or anyone with my problem.

*What about when I speak? Will blood come out of my mouth if I talk? How then am I supposed to tell Mrs. Sigsby about my tooth?* My brain

felt frazzled. I had so many questions, yet I could not find a single clear solution. If I tried to speak, blood might come out of my mouth. *Dripping? A mouth dripping blood? Scary, that is so scary. The class would turn to me. They would see my bloody mouth and be terrified. My own terror would be reflected in their horror-stricken faces, their mirroring eyes round with fright. Scary, Scary, Scary! Nonononono.*

*Wait. If I do not tell her, then what? I just stay here?* I thought of the blood in my throat, the taste so strong it had started to overcome my senses. *No. No, I do not want that.*

*Should I tell her?* I looked around, and everyone was still focused on the book, no eyes had noticed my distress. It was so quiet, only Mrs. Sigsby talked, and I did not want to disrupt her. *But I taste blood. I do not like the taste, and what about my tooth?*

A compromise, that is what I decided. *I will spit my tooth out and then swallow the blood, that way I can tell Mrs. Sigsby about my tooth without making a mess. Blood cannot spill if it is swallowed. It will not be seen if it is hidden. Yes, that works.* I unclamped my hands from the rug and nestled them in a bowl under my chin. I began to open my mouth but stopped immediately. *My lips. I must purse my mouth to stop the blood from escaping.* I did as my internal narrator advised and was thankful when a little white tooth popped into my hands with no trace of blood. I worked up a wad of saliva before I swallowed the blood in my mouth, so its pungent tang glided faster down my throat.

“Mrs. Sigsby?” I called out. I stood up. *When had I stood up?* I felt weak and my legs shook. My hands shook too. I was glad that I wore my favorite hoodie today. It was comfortable and black, and most importantly, it had pockets. Pockets to hold stuff. To hide stuff. Like my hands and the way they shook nervously. *Yes, I am so glad I can hide them. I am scared, and they are out of control. But why? Is it because of the blood? The actual blood or the blood in my head? Or is it the class? Their eyes are all trained on me; I ruined their reading time. They probably hate me for that. I am sorry. Should I say sorry?*

“Yes, dear? Do you need something?” Mrs. Sigsby looked over to me, a confused but friendly look on her face. *Yes, that is right. I just interrupted her. I never interrupt. Mrs. Sigsby is nice; she just spoke so sweetly to me. Does that mean she forgives me for interrupting? Or is she just pretending?*

“Um...I am sorry. My tooth fell out and I was wondering if I could maybe go to the office, please? I can wait though; I do not have to go right now—.” I was so nervous I could feel my voice about to crack. *I should stop talking. Yes, that sounds good. Their eyes will look away and I can sit back down. It will be quiet. The voice in my head will be quiet. Wait, this is the voice in my head. It is still speaking. It is never quiet in here, why is it never quiet in my head? I just want it to—.*

“Oh, sweetie. Yes, of course you can! Go, go on! Why did you not mention something sooner?” *Oh, she interrupted me. Well, that is good. I do not think I could have said anything more anyway.*

“Come on, here is the door. Take your time, you will not miss anything.” Mrs. Sigsby let out a soft laugh as she held the door open for me, as if she had found something funny about this. *Was I funny? I do not understand. Why is she laughing?*

I dug my hands deeper into my pockets, gripped my tooth in one of my clenched fists, and trudged to the door. *Wait, she is looking at you. Look up and smile. Say “thank you!” Come on, you do not want to be rude.* I smiled up at Mrs. Sigsby and rasped out a weak “thanks” before I stepped through the doorway.

“Next time though, let me know right away, okay? There is no need to sit there with a bloody mouth!” she called out to me. I turned and saw her chuckle as she closed the door, and the mirror on the back of it reflected my confused face as it shut. *What is funny? She laughed twice, there must be something I am missing. Think.*

*Her face. Her face when I told her about my tooth. She was confused, maybe as confused as I am right now.*

“Why did you not mention something sooner?” *That is what she had said. She wanted me to say something? That was...okay? But I was interrupting her, she should have been mad. This does not make sense. Why was she not mad. Why did she not tell me to wait and sit back down? She wanted me to say something? She wanted that? Am I supposed to do that? Am I supposed to speak up? Interrupt? My other classmates interrupt, why? They do it all the time, why am I not able to? They break the rules, I can too, right? Is it a rule? Mrs. Sigsby told me to break it. Does that mean it is not a rule?*

*I can speak up? I can interrupt? I am supposed to speak?*

*There is no way. That cannot be possible. What about the rule? The rule, the rule! The unspoken rule. What about the rule?*

*It is a bad rule. Yes. My teacher thinks so. My classmates too. Maybe a rule to follow sometimes, but not always.*

*Yes. That makes sense.*

*I can speak up. I can interrupt. I am supposed to speak. I can break the silence when I am in need. No more quiet suffering.*

*I smiled then, a toothless, bloody smile. A small, weak smile, but it was enough. It is okay. Tell the voice it is okay.*

*Wait, this is the voice. Am I the voice?*

*Okay, then I can speak to it.*

*Can I change it?*

*I must try, right? Yes, go on, try. Tell the voice to be quiet.*

*It is okay! IT IS OKAY! You are the voice, and I am the voice, and this is what I say: there is no blood on the carpet, no swallowed tooth. No*

*angry faces, no yelling. I spoke up. I will continue to speak up.*

*YOU HEAR THAT, VOICE? I AM SPEAKING UP! AND I WILL NEVER STOP, NOT FOR YOU OR ANYONE ELSE!!!*

*Being quiet hurts. Listening to the voice in my head hurts.*

*It feels like an impenetrable band wrapped around my forehead that prevents me from thinking about anything else.*

*It covers my mouth and hides the truth my words could reveal.*

*It binds my hands and prevents me from escaping the dark hole my mind traps me in.*

*But the band is mine. The darkness is my own creation, my own fears that my mind brings to life. Bent to distortion, exaggerated and large. A small feat made impossible.*

*A small feat that can be possible. Not easy, but manageable. I just need to change the mindset, switch the pictures so they make sense. There is no blood, no scared faces. No raised voices or conflict.*

*Communication.*

*Assertion.*

*Two solutions to the band that suppresses me, the thoughts my mind puts into my head and heart. The overthinker and doubter need them both. To communicate is to know, and to assert is to challenge and grow.*

*Thank you, Mrs. Sigsby, for that lesson. You will never know how you have changed me. Because of you, I will always question my inner thoughts and choose to speak up.*

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## ***Fists Up***

---

Lance Klemple

*Dedicated to Lindsey Spero,  
the trans-man who injected his testosterone shot  
in front of Florida's Board of Medicine as protest  
to their potential ban on trans youth healthcare.*

we did not spit,  
or mock, maim,  
or murder those men and women  
like they do to us  
on the streets.

We stood our ground  
fists in the air:

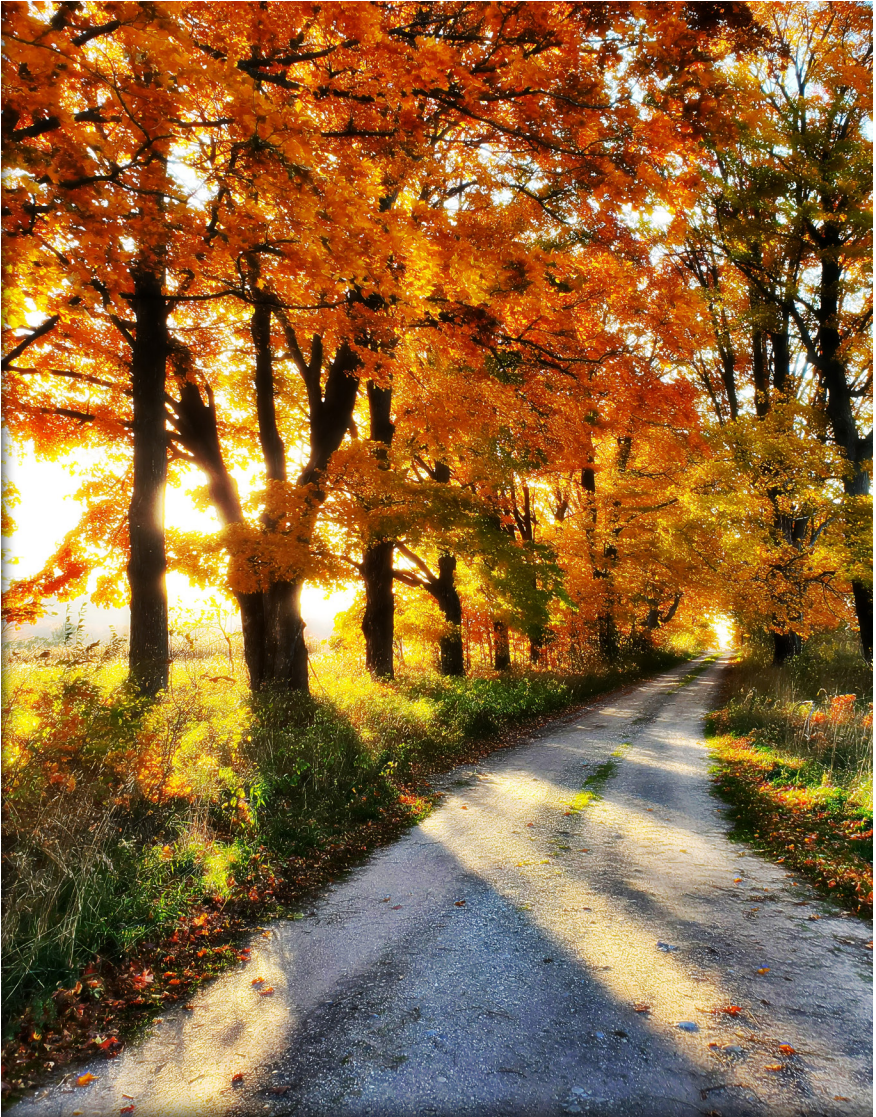
“My medication is lifesaving”  
and so is our healthcare.



# *The Road Less Traveled*

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Kelli Loughrige



*Photography*

## *Clouds*

---

Daisy Dyk



*Photography*



# *Nevada Falls*

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Daisy Dyk



*Photography*

# *Traveling Sunsets*

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Ashley Streng



*Photography*

## *Sea Roots*

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Adrianna Espinoza

Thank you for coming to my beck and call.  
For listening to me when I feel as if my life is about to crumble and fall.  
You yourself have your own waves of fear and emotion. Yet you always come  
to my feet and listen to mine.

You have your own monsters to conquer and battles to fight.  
I look at you and wish that one day I might... just might... be as  
unapologetically powerful as you have always been.

So wide and deep you feel everything that enters your path. You soothe those  
who come to weep yet humble those who question your mighty wrath.

You absorb my pain and ask me to give it to you in whole  
And once I do I feel light as a feather in your great, comforting, and euphoric  
hold.

You hold the tears of generations and generations of us so beautifully,  
Showing us that the highs and lows of your tide parallel with the lives we  
live... reminding us to live gratefully.

My escape, my solemnity, my humbleness, my home... I thank you, Ocean,  
for accepting and freeing me.

So I stand here in my grounding and focus, representing a tree... Showing that  
my roots will always lead back to you... the sea.

# *The Diary of a Fat Girl*

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Kenna LaCount

***Diary Entry, January 14th, 2022:*** *I don't have an eating disorder, I don't want one.*

My alarm goes off. It's 6:30. My family won't be awake for another hour; it's time for the ritual to begin.

***Diary Entry, February 25th, 2022:*** *My mom would be devastated to read the way I speak of myself [on these pages], and how much I hate who I am and how I look. I don't think I could look her in the eyes again.*

I go to the bathroom; I step on the scale. Repulsive red numbers blink back at me. Still too heavy, still too ugly. Spend five minutes dry heaving, no good. I've never been able to throw up. I wish I could.

***Diary Entry, November 5th, 2021:*** *I wish that I could make myself throw up the food I overeat instead of choking it back down like a coward. I wish I were bulimic instead of fat and ugly. I hate my body. I have for a long time.*

I cannot eat breakfast. I don't deserve breakfast. I grab a bowl, set it in the sink, and fill it with water. I pour milk down the drain and give some cereal to the dogs. If I am going to disappear without notice, the food I am not eating must too. I will swallow my tongue. That is all the nourishment I need. I do not need food. What I need is to be healthy. To be pretty. To be thin. I need to be happy.

***Diary Entry, January 14th, 2021:*** *I know that your body doesn't matter, but I just know I'd be happier if I were thin. If I were thin, I'd never think twice about wearing shorts. If I were thin, I wouldn't spend hours in front of the mirror wondering if everyone sees the fat girl I see. If I were thin, I could shop at Brandy Melville and be a part of this 'exclusive thin girl club'. If I were thin, I'd be praised for being a feminist. If I were thin, maybe people would actually notice me. If I were thin, I'd be able to sit in the middle of the back seat with a person on either side. If I were thin, I'd never have to worry about [whether] a thrifted dress will fit. If I were thin, I wouldn't have to wear baggy clothes to hide the lumps all over my body. If I were thin, wearing baggy clothes would be considered a fashion statement instead of insecurity. If I were thin, I could dress the way I wanted without fear of judgment. If I were thin, I'd be able to buy vintage clothes... If I were thin, nobody would judge me for eating, drinking, or just consuming... If I were thin, people would be impressed and transfixed with what intelligence I have. If I were thin, people would like me more. If I were thin, I'd have more friends. If I were thin, those ugly purple stripes wouldn't taint my skin on every inch of me that grew too fast. If I were thin, my doctor wouldn't sigh reading the number labeled*



*weight... If I were thin, I wouldn't have to read the weight limits of products... If I were thin, I could be free. If I were thin, I would be happy.*

I hate lunchtime—thirty minutes of torture, thirty minutes of staring, thirty minutes of deprivation. My friends believe me when I say that I'm nauseous. I wonder how many times I can use that excuse before they suspect anything different. I miss bosco sticks.

***Diary Entry, January 24th, 2021:*** *If I did just stop eating, what would happen? Would anyone even notice? At school, I could just tell everyone I'm not hungry and that I'm eating lunch when I get home instead, but that would be lying. I don't really want to lie to my friends. But I wouldn't want to concern them either, so maybe that lie would be okay. Besides if I got thin they wouldn't worry anyway because they'd be happy that I was finally not obese or finally not the "fat friend." Not that it matters, but it would be nice to not be the biggest one in group pictures. I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb, y'know?*

The final bell sounds at 3:15 PM. I no longer have to play pretend to prevent pity from my friends. I walk home. Just like every day after school, I immediately go to the bathroom. I hope that I have miraculously lost weight in the seven hours since the last time I stared at the cruel red numbers and listened to the vicious voice in my mind. I step on the scale. I cry. Dad is out of town this week and Mom is working overnight. My sister has a date. She told me not to wait up.

***Diary Entry, February 5th, 2021:*** *What would Dad think? I mean he can't even talk about the Carpenters without bringing up that Karen Carpenter was an anorexic and died from it. Just imagine what he might say about me if I had an eating disorder.*

I am on my own for dinner. There will be no food on the table, no food in my stomach. I feel faint as I crawl into bed, I am glad for it: that means I have done well today.

***Diary Entry, January 14th, 2021:*** *If I could just not eat and be magically skinny and perfect, I would. I'd literally starve myself if I knew I would be skinny. I'd rather starve than feel like this. I'd rather feel my body slowly give out from a lack of nutrients than ever feel like I'm not enough ever again. If I knew that skipping meals would help me be beautiful, I would. But I'm smarter than that. Skipping meals and starving yourself just makes people worried. There's nothing pretty about a sick girl. I just so painfully wish people would see me and genuinely think that I am beautiful and not just that I'm pretty for a fat girl.*

I wake up and the stars are shining through my window - mocking me with their beauty... It's 3:06 AM. My stomach is groaning. My abdomen is aching. My mind is weak. I pull myself from my warm bed. I've been so cold lately.

The starving monster pulls me into the kitchen. Mom won't be home for another two hours, my sister sometime tomorrow morning, and my father sometime next week.

***Diary Entry, January 24th, 2021:*** *I really wish that Dad would stop preaching about calories and [to stop] snacking. I also wish he would stop telling me how many calories are in everything I eat... All it does is make me feel bad about myself and guilty for overeating. It kind of makes me just want to stop eating.*

I am so hungry. The monster claws at my throat, begging me to eat. And I do. I eat a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. I finish what is left of the cornflakes. I eat four PB&Js. I eat a can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup. I eat a can of minestrone pulled from the depths of the cupboards. The food fills my stomach, fills my throat, fills my mind: pushing pushing pushing. Guilt. I only have another twenty minutes before Mom will be home. What would she think? The guilt scrapes its way up my throat, bringing with it gasping sobs and shame-filled memories.

***Diary Entry, March 23rd, 2021:*** *Nothing that I tried on fit, everything was far too small. By the end of trying every dress they had on, I was just so embarrassed (not quite the word I'm looking for) that nothing I'd tried on fit and disappointed that I hadn't managed to find anything to wear to prom that I just wanted to go home and hide from the world. I feel really bad that Mom drove so far just so we wouldn't find anything. I don't like feeling guilty.*

I run to the bathroom, anxiety bubbling up my throat and self-loathing coating my tongue, thick and bitter. I step on the scale. Fat. Ugly. Worthless.

***Diary Entry, February 23rd, 2022:*** *I'm still fat and ugly and disgusting and unlovable.*

Dry heave for five minutes, no good. I've never been able to throw up. Not unless I was sick. I wish that I always had the stomach flu.

***Diary Entry, February 23rd, 2022:*** *I miss [how] I felt after getting sick before Christmas. I threw up so much that I lost fifteen pounds! The grotesque fatigue of having thrown up everything in my stomach was washed away by a glorious euphoria. I felt like I was flying after I stepped on that scale and saw the disgusting number fifteen less than it was. I know that I've said I wouldn't be and that I'm not Bulimic, but that [feeling] is tempting. Besides, if I throw up when I'm nauseous due to anxiety, it might make me feel better. I'd fight my anxiety and utter obesity in one [purge]... I just have to do it.*

I stare at myself in the mirror. I hate what I see.

***Diary Entry, February 5th, 2021:*** *Me even pondering the ideas of forcing a*

*literal disorder onto myself is fucking insane, and I'm smart enough to see that. It's just that sometimes when I look in the mirror, I see nothing but a fat, ugly, deluded, unlovable girl trying to perceive herself as something she knows she is not and likely never will be. I am so tired of these cynical staring matches with my reflection.*

Frantic eyes, teary cheeks, and swollen lips. I have always been an ugly crier.

***Diary Entry, November 5th, 2021:*** *I doubt this revelation is much of a surprise to you. We both know what's been scrawled on these pages in bouts of angsty fat-girl rage: "I want to be skinny" and "If I were" and "I hate." "I hate." "I hate." With fat tears rolling down fat cheeks landing on fat thighs.*

I cry on the bathroom floor, alone and unloved. I weep for myself. I weep for my mother.

***Diary Entry, February 25th, 2022:*** *That is part of the problem though. I don't feel guilt for those thoughts, not for myself or my morality. I feel guilty because of how I know it would make my mother feel.*

I weep for the time I have wasted. I weep for the love that I will likely never know.

***Diary Entry, April 3rd, 2021:*** *I'm unlovable. I'm afraid that I'll never find or feel the love that I've been reading about my entire life.*

Fat girls are not romantic leads. A loved fat girl is nothing but a joke. I've been fat long enough to know this.

***Diary Entry, March 19th, 2021:*** *I wish I were thin. If I were thin I could have been the female lead instead of comedic relief in a stupid measly mediocre high school production before they were obligated to give me one my Senior year.*

I pull myself out of the bathroom, into my bedroom, and back into my warm bed. I burn with shame but still cover myself with blankets. I would rather smolder than look at my body any longer.

***Diary Entry, November 7th, 2021:*** *Listen, I know that I need to speak to someone about my body issues. I know. Whoever is reading this is definitely screaming at the pages for me to get help. But I don't want to.*

I will not eat tomorrow. I do not deserve it. I will repeat my ritual. I know that I will not be able to throw up tomorrow morning. I couldn't do it tonight. I wish I could. I wish I could.

***Diary Entry, November 7th, 2021:*** *I probably do have an eating disorder.*

***Sleep Tight***  
*An Elegy for Papaw and Pepper*

---

Ronnie Jewell

When Papaw died at the age of 93,  
his 19-year-old dog Pepper grieved.  
With his whaling noises and crocodile tears,  
Pepper searched long and laborious through the empty house.

Nobody can tell me that a dog doesn't feel sorrow.

Pepper looked for his Master,  
the Love of his life,  
only to find nothing but the scent of Papaw's old pipe,  
and silence . . . silence loud enough to wake the dead.

Pepper's long black and grey fur gave no way to his frantic search  
for the old man I always called Papaw.

Alive, Papaw and Pepper were best friends.

Papaw loved the warming and comfortable embrace of love,  
as Pepper placed his little head and paws  
upon Papaw's chest on cold, stormy nights,  
and sunshine-filled days as well.

Closing his eyes to rest.  
Sleep tight Pepper.

The morning after Papaw's funeral,  
Pepper was granted the greatest gift of Love.

As the sun slowly faded and darkness approached,  
Pepper, at Papaw's freshly-dug mound of dirt,  
slowly walked up to the grave,  
turning his head back only once to look at my family and me  
with those crocodile tears.



Pepper sniffed the grave,  
whimpered, maybe once or twice,  
then laid his little head and paws  
on that mound of dirt.

And closed his eyes forever.

Sleep tight Papaw and Pepper.

## *Women Without Nightgowns*

---

Donna Ginn

Those who work all day, through the night,  
Sweating beneath sticky pleats,  
    circled and steamed and stripped of fight,  
without luxury of silk or softened sheets.

Those who walk for miles, stand for hours,  
scale stairs and stomp on cramps,  
    rubbing and wincing under the shower's  
pelting wetness, dim below hanging lamps.

Those whose safety pins make private  
all the skin that would be bare,  
    all the unseen openings, those  
portals that we purely share.

Those who know a murmur, whimpers  
of small voices in the dark, a last  
    recoil from deepest hurling tempers,  
restrained pain and tethered fast.

Women without nightgowns  
sleep in smothered little spaces,  
    in muffled noises, whispered frowns,  
and pause to find a starting place.

Those who count for number totals on  
Hot line spread sheet and color-coded charts  
    Waiting on the next sheltering cot  
Women without nightgowns.  
Around the next corner.

## *Two Pink Lines*

---

Candice Kirkendoll

The emptied box leans haphazardly near the trash  
while my boyfriend stands outside the door.  
The two plastic tests halfway lay  
on the edge of the sink while I think  
of two pink lines,  
those two pink lines—  
he urges me to leave  
because we should already be at the bar.

My words wither in my throat and I try  
to choke them back down, but  
I suffocate on their ashes that rise  
and burn behind my eyelids.  
Those two pink lines sear  
against my womb.

His voice rakes against the doorframe,  
and those two pink lines blur when I bury them  
at the bottom of the trash bin.  
The breath leaves my lungs and  
hollows in my mouth when I decline:

I'm staying behind.

## *a deadly dull*

---

Brendan Harris

the father's eyes are cloudy, a fine mist working over the whites until they are dull grey voids.

he sees a shadowy figure in front of him, looming over him, watching, waiting. this is the grim reaper, he thinks. he has come for me again.

this isn't his first brush with the paranormal. for months now, ghosts had haunted him, turning his once peaceful home into a circus of spirits and apparitions. it was innocent enough at first; what started as corporeal shades in the corner of his eyes progressed into poltergeists and demons taking the forms of intruders, knocking over glass bottles and breaking furniture. his orderly rooms became mazes of debris as the ghosts made messes faster than he could clean them up. they played with his memory, too. they took forms of loved ones and played with their features, making him question the names and faces of his friends, his family, even his own children. when he told his son of the hauntings, he grew indignant, saying there was no such thing as ghosts. but nothing else could explain what was happening to the father's home.

time and time again, his cries would fall on the deaf ears of his son until he finally ended up here: the nursing home. my son must be getting rid of me, he thought. he never did listen to his father, so his only recourse is placing me here, out of sight and out of mind. but his change of setting didn't stop the supernatural experiences. now, nearly every day, this shadowy figure that he called the reaper would visit him, standing at the foot of his bed, glowering at him, waiting for his time to run out. he would call for help, and each time the reaper would disappear, leaving only him and the bewildered nurse in the room. at least she didn't treat him like a lunatic.

now, as he stares at the figure, its features begin to soften until he can make out his mother, in perfect black and white like she had stepped out of a polaroid. he can make out her colorless features; her striped dress, her wavy hair, her long painted nails. her face, however, is misty and translucent, shimmering and shaking in the dim light. she holds a hand out to him, beckoning him to take a walk with her. he shakes his head violently, knowing to resist the illusion.

then, without warning, it hardens into a masculine form: his own father, rough face, short cropped hair, cotton shirt. his colors are present, but they are subdued, hard blacks and browns smudging his skin like ink blots on paper.

his face, too, is murky, the only exception being two black pits where his eyes should be. they bore into his soul, always judgmental. he remembers how unfeeling and cold his father could be. this form doesn't beckon him, it just stares, all-knowing and all-encompassing.

again, it changes, now into his oldest son at age 17, pimples still dotting his boyish face. he looks happy to see him, waving at him feverishly. he is tempted to wave back, but he keeps his hands down, opening his mouth to shout but saying nothing. it starts to laugh and point at him, opening his mouth wide to mock him.

then, it shrinks down even shorter, now taking the form of his youngest as a child in elementary, still holding the stuffed rabbit he could never part with. he looks at him from under the foot of the bed with concern in his eyes. he hears him utter "Dad?" before becoming out of focus and indiscernible. as much as he wants to believe him, he knows the concern is fake, conjured up in an attempt to make the father feel vulnerable and weak.

the reaper continues to do this rapidly, only staying as one form for enough time to be made out before changing, again and again. he can hear it start to laugh, knowing the torture it is inflicting on him.

**this** is the grim reaper. he has come to take me, he thinks.

he wishes he was dreaming, but this apparition is very real. finally, he lets out a scream, raw and piercing, but he is surprised to find that the voice that escapes his throat isn't his now but the voice of him as a child, weak and afraid. this causes him to scream louder. this existence is hell.

--

the youngest son stands over him, watching him scream with a broken voice. his eyes stare at him but never look at him, any familiarity lost in the deep wells of his pupils. the son shakes his head, wishing that his father would recognize him. it had been like this for weeks now, but he still keeps visiting, hoping for any change but coming up with nothing every time. when his father called him, he would always show up, even when his ranting about "ghosts" was incoherent and childlike. he would watch him rip up furniture like a rabid animal until his hands were raw, collapsing from exhaustion at the end of it. of course, the father would never remember these episodes. he would always blame it on ghosts and the paranormal, but the son knew better. he tried to be there with him, hoping it would pass. but it never did, and now the son is here, still trying to tend to a dying father.

"mr. harris?" a voice calls out.

the nursing home door opens, revealing a tall woman in a white doctor's coat. she looks to the bed, still containing the softly screaming father, then to the son. her face changes to a pitiful look, an apology hanging on her lips. "i'm sorry, mr. harris, but i think it's time for you to go. you can come back tomorrow if you'd like!"

the son looks to her then back to the father. he doesn't want to believe it, but he knows that the cycle will continue to repeat itself. he knows that the father's mind died long ago, but the body still lives on, screaming and crying at the mere sight of his son trying to visit. he has to remind himself that this man – this shell – in front of him isn't the father he knew. however, this doesn't make the sight any easier.

"no. that's fine." the son says.

a tear begins to roll down his cheek. he closes his eyes for a moment, collects himself, then looks at the father once more, still screaming, voice weak.

"goodbye, dad." he says, turning away and pushing past the nurse. he makes it back to his truck without incident, starting up the engine and putting it into gear. the loud rumbles of the engine mask the uncontrollable sobs that escape his lips as he drives away.

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author's note: this piece was inspired by a song called "deadly dull" by the band movements. if you enjoyed this story, please give that song a listen.

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## *Hear Me*

---

Diana Casey

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

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

BANG! particles  
life seeds return begin again

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



## Inky Scar

---

Alex Fuller

Perfection is a difficult word to define. In simple terms, it means something that is done with little to no errors, completely free from mistakes. However, that definition is different for everyone. Some people will spend loads of time on something to insure it is free from any blemishes. To the annoyance of others, others spend mere minutes to achieve what they deem as “good enough.” A memory that will always stay with me relates to this dilemma.

It was during my fifth grade Math class when I experienced failure for the first time. Had I failed outside of school before? Of course. However, this moment is cemented in my mind to the point of infamy. What horrible deed did I commit? Well, it is the most damning thing the human mind can imagine. Prepare to be shocked: I failed a test. **DUN DUN, DUN!** You are probably thinking, “Dude, this was fifth grade. This isn’t something life changing just because you flubbed a few math questions.” I now agree, but to little Alex who had never gotten below an A on anything before, his whole world collapsed.

I vividly remember staring down at the white paper that was scarred with blood red ink. Who would think a simple letter could convey so much emotion in a young boy? Before I knew it, the bright derogatory mark on my page became lighter from the tears cascading down onto it. The remaining drops darkened the oblong gray table beneath.

My anxiety manifested like a malicious parrot who would whisper my inner worries to me endlessly. *Everyone knows what you did, scum of the Earth.* Each word tightened its sharp grip on my confidence. *How could you not understand?* Its talons grasped tightly around my neck, making my already unsteady breathing more erratic. *The resources were given to you, you just didn’t utilize them.* I tried calling out to someone, but they seemed to be in cahoots with my imaginary adversary. Whispers and laughter, which were most likely unrelated, pierced me deeper like arrows, each tip poisoned by their implied words.

I needed to leave. I had no right to be in this classroom since I was too stupid to understand basic division. The irony of the situation was that I wanted to divide myself outside of the equation. However, instead of into perfect halves, I was the odd one out, alone in my own ignorance, stupidity and embarrassment of everyone seeing me cry.

With the upper part of my shirt soaked, I hid my face like a vampire as I quickly walked out of the classroom. The hallway became my dungeon as I crumpled into a fetal position and released the floodgates of stored sadness. Onlookers probably thought that I had been punished for something truly heinous. Robbery? Assault and Battery? When looking back on it now, the few other kids that *did* walk by just looked confused rather than trying to peg me as a delinquent. My vision was too blurred to see anything besides my own assumptions of others.

Centuries passed as I waited out my life sentence. It wasn't until the warden appeared that I realized only a few minutes had passed. My teacher was a gentle giant. Even now, I think he would still be a few inches taller than me. His expression was always calm, despite his shirt being fully buttoned. No words were exchanged at first. The only sound was the faint music of "Where is the Love" by The Black Eyed Peas that he would play for us every morning. As I leaned against the hard brick wall, he kneeled onto the equally uncomfortable ground before he spoke.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

I couldn't bring myself to look at him. The whispers were still in my head: *He's disappointed in you. You are a failure. He just came to tell you to go back to 4th grade.* I was frozen, unable to respond to his question. That was when he put his warm hand on my shivering shoulder.

He spoke in a reassuring tone, "Is there something you want to talk about? I am always here to listen."

Sniffing, I turned to face him. His friendly smile convinced me to give an answer. As I spoke, I could see my reflection in his glasses.

"I-I-I failed," I stuttered as my mouth tried to form words, "I d-d-d didn't get a good grade."

"You got a bad grade?"

"Ye-ye-yeah, didn't you see it?"

He took a moment before he spoke again.

"Does that grade mean anything to you?"

Of *course* it meant something to me. Why would he ask me such a stupid question? Before I could answer, he was already speaking.

"In the grand scheme of things, does that one grade matter?"

I thought about it for a moment. At the current time, it did matter because it was one of the first tests of the year. The nasty number in the gradebook would bother me. However, would it be the same as more grades were added?

"I guess not," I replied confused, "But, I sti-sti-still failed *that* test." I wiped my nose. "If I can't do that on my first try, what does that make me?"

"A learner," he replied. "It makes you a learner."

"A learner?"

"Yes, someone who can make mistakes and learn from them." He gave a short pause for emphasis. "How would you improve if you always got everything correct?"

I gave a slight nod. I knew deep down that it was impossible to be perfect. The negative association with failure had always been gnawing at the back of my mind. It was only then where all that anxiety had burst out and bared its fangs.

"The most important thing is that you tried," my teacher said, "As long as you gave your best shot, that is all that matters. You may continue to stumble over and over again, but-" he balled up his fist and raised it into the air, "you will eventually succeed!"

With his speech over, he stood up and offered his hand, "Let's work on it together, shall we?"

I grabbed his hand, and he began to lift me up. As I left the cold ground, it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. The stress to be perfect was exorcised from my being, left to burn in the light of the early fall day. Even though my battle with anxiety was far from over, I now had at least one win under my belt.

As I followed my teacher into the classroom, one thought did cross my mind. The fated battle for the best swing on the playground was soon to commence. Blood would be shed... after I ate my animal crackers, of course.

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## *Let's Go*

Andrea Figueroa



*Graphite*

# *Panic Attack*

Emma Patulski



*Digital Art*



# *Beautiful Minds*

Emma Patulski



*Digital Art*

## *Post Street*

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Jane Hoppe



*Digital Painting*



## *Slough Creek*

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Cayden Ritchie

It's a cool, summer night, with slight wind providing a cool breeze. At the base of the mountains, the river runs fast and cold. The swift current rips over the rocky bottom. The evening hatch is starting. Caddis. The bugs are everywhere. Trout swim in the current just below the surface, waiting for their meal. Birds fly overtop singing loud and clear. High in the mountains the goats roam, trekking through the rough terrain looking for something to eat. Back down below the trout begin feeding. Sipping caddis flies off the surface, every couple minutes or so.

You stand there, the current flowing past your legs holding a 4-weight fly rod in your hand, and you can't help but think, how could you not romanticize fishing? Everything seems so perfect, and time seems as though it has come to a halt. You reach into your fly vest and find a #16 caddis dry fly and tie it to the end of your line. You spot the trout you first want to target and begin casting.

Your first cast is just short of where you needed it and the fly floats downstream untouched. The next cast is perfect, right on the spot where the fish has been rising over and over; still the fish is not enticed. You then rush your next cast, and the fish you are seeking spooks and swims away. You are frustrated for a second. Mad that you couldn't stay poised enough to attract the fish. Then you see your surroundings and the negative thoughts pass.

You look around and realize it is not the fish that you have come for.

## *Sidewalk Psychic*

---

Dana Hall

### **Characters:**

Ben: (Open age) Wants to know what his future holds. Eager, impulsive, and ready to believe in anything.

Kevin: (Open age) Spends most of the time looking at the ground. Appears distracted. A realist.

### **Setting:**

It is summer in the city during lunch hour.

### **Notes:**

- / indicates an abrupt cut-off of the line.

*(Ben and Kevin are standing outside on the sidewalk.)*

### **BEN**

So how does this work?

### **KEVIN**

How does *what* work?

### **BEN**

Do you just look at someone and “zing” you get some kind of ethereal message? (*Concern*) What if you aren’t paying attention when the message comes in? Is there some kind of voicemail system or something? It must be really overwhelming to just hear everyone’s thoughts all the time/

### **KEVIN**

Stop.

*(They freeze in their tracks.)*

### **BEN**

What? Are you getting something?

### **KEVIN**

No, I thought I forgot my office keys. (*Checks pockets.*) Okay. Got ‘em nevermind.

### **BEN**

If you lose something, do you just like “know where it is”? One time I lost the remote and I was like, “Okay Ben, where was the last place you had it?” and zing, there it was in the kitchen. Okay well, that’s not being psychic, but in my messy apartment it’s pretty damn close.

### **KEVIN**

Do you see that over there?

**BEN**

*(Looking off in the direction Kevin is looking.)* Is it a ghost Kev- are they dressed all old-timey? Do they have chains hanging from their arms to symbolize all the things that they did wrong in life? Have they come to warn us of things to come?

**KEVIN**

No, it looks like a poodle mix.

**BEN**

A dog?

**KEVIN**

So damn cute, aren't they?

*(They start walking again.)*

**BEN**

Yeah, yeah. Super great. I'm more of a cat person. Anyways- so, I'm a Virgo and I'm thinking about dating a Taurus and I'm just wondering if you think we will be compatible.

**KEVIN**

I thought we were grabbing lunch.

**BEN**

We are, but can't we talk shop on the way?

**KEVIN**

Are you talking about someone from the office?

**BEN**

You're good! Yes! I mean sure I haven't actually asked her out or anything but that's where you come in.

**KEVIN**

Your love life is your business.

**BEN**

But you can tell me how it will go before I get involved.

**KEVIN**

I don't want any part of this.

**BEN**

Come on, help a friend out! I need to know if it will work with Sarah.

**KEVIN**

Wait-

*(They stop again.)*

**BEN**

What are you picking up on?

**KEVIN**

Sarah as in “human resources Sarah”?

**BEN**

Yup! So are you seeing us happily married with 2.3 children, a white picket fence/

**KEVIN**

Uhhhh...

**BEN**

Or more like divorce, devastation, and me crying into some Ben and Jerry’s for 6 months?

**KEVIN**

She’s married and/

**BEN**

You see us married? Wow! You really work quickly. You saw that so fast. I knew she was the one.

**KEVIN**

The one? You haven’t even asked her out.

**BEN**

No need. I did some reading-up about our signs and it turns out Virgo and Taurus are highly compatible signs. You know both are earth signs, so they instinctively understand one another. (*His hands indicate intertwining.*)

**KEVIN**

Where are you getting this from?

**BEN**

The internet. I also saw this tarot card reader at the coffee shop.

**KEVIN**

(*Sarcastic*) That sounds very reliable.

**BEN**

She wasn’t! She pulled the Queen of Cups reversed- reversed Kev- she said I was not “in sync with my emotions.” I knew she was full of it.

**KEVIN**

Will you let me finish talking about Sarah!?

**BEN**

There’s more!?! You’re so much better than those hacks! Oh, I bet it’s kids!

You know we're also both born on the 6th, so, you know. (*Indicates he should predict what he is going to say.*)

**KEVIN**

Know what?

**BEN**

Sharing the number 6 means that we are unconditional lovers/

**KEVIN**

You got that from a 6?

**BEN**

Supportive, nurturing... healers, really. I should've put all this together from that numerologist at my cousin's birthday party- of course, we would naturally have kids together.

**KEVIN**

Are you done yet?

**BEN**

You should know. (*Jabs Kevin in the ribs.*)

**KEVIN**

Not sure how much more of this I can take.

**BEN**

That's what my ex said! But she was born on the 4th and a Scorpio—very demanding.

(*Kevin taps four times and pulls his ear when he hears the number 4.*)

**BEN**

You just pulled on your ear. What? What is it? Did you get a bad message about me and Sarah?

**KEVIN**

Bad message?

**BEN**

Just tell me—what is it?

**KEVIN**

Ben, stop. She's married to Kathy in accounting.

**BEN**

Ohhhhhh- damn. A married woman. Kathy sits right next to me and I never knew/

**KEVIN**

They have two kids.

**BEN**

Do you know what their names are? (*Indicates using his “powers” by putting fingers on his temples.*)

**KEVIN**

Why would you even ask that?

**BEN**

Just curious.

**KEVIN**

Stacy and Tracy.

**BEN**

That’s cute.

**KEVIN**

I don’t know what their damn names are! I made that up.

**BEN**

But she is married, right?

**KEVIN**

Yes, Ben. She has a picture of her wife and kids on her desk.

**BEN**

Man- I really read that totally wrong.

**KEVIN**

The whole office was at their wedding a few years ago. How do you not remember this?

**BEN**

(*Confesses*) I wasn’t invited. You know what- I bet Kathy is a Capricorn/

**KEVIN**

Capricorn? What the hell does it matter?

**BEN**

Capricorn and Taurus together share a deep-seated need for security. Capricorns are really loyal- you know what? That’s so good for Sarah, I’m happy for them.

(*Kevin puts his arms up like he just thought of something.*)

**Ben**

Are they in trouble? You look worried. Come to think of it, Capricorns can

also be moody and pessimistic. They are relentless if they feel wronged! That account I lost in March was definitely a Capricorn/

**KEVIN**

You can't possibly know that?

**BEN**

Do you know they weren't? No, seriously, what vibe do you get?

*(Ben gets in Kevin's face as if trying to see with his eyes.)*

**KEVIN**

Get outta here.

**BEN**

I know they were- you know how? They wouldn't stop harping on the numbers being wrong. "You're an accountant. I pay you to account for my margins... blah blah blah." Nitpicking is the calling card of the Capricorn.

*(Kevin is tapping his foot incessantly.)*

**BEN**

Hey, you okay? You're tapping.

**KEVIN**

I think I left the coffee pot on in the breakroom. We should go back and check.

**BEN**

Hey, if you feel that way I ain't questioning it!

**KEVIN**

I'm not that hungry anyway.

**BEN**

That's fine. I'll order myself something to be dropped off.

*(They turn back to where they came from and continue on. Ben takes out his phone and orders lunch to be delivered.)*

**KEVIN**

I wish I could get these things out of my mind.

**BEN**

"With great power comes great responsibility."

**KEVIN**

That's one way to look at it.



**BEN**

Oh good, a perfect opportunity to try it out.

*(Ben starts twisting his neck and rolling his shoulders.)*

**KEVIN**

What's happening?

**BEN**

Might as well use this trip for a little practice.

**KEVIN**

Whatever *this* is can wait. Let's get back. *(To self)* Did I turn the sink in the bathroom off? Geez- the whole place will flood.

**BEN**

Yeah, yeah- then we'll get a half-day and canoe home. You see that person over there?

*(He stops them and points out an audience member.)*

**KEVIN**

Yeah. So?

**BEN**

Well, lately I've been thinking that I too might have special "talents."

**KEVIN**

What the hell are you talking about?

**BEN**

I've been told I am a sensitive person too.

**KEVIN**

Who said that?

**BEN**

My mom... and others... So, I've been meaning to try it out. I bet I can get a feel when I look at people. See that person right there? I'm going to try and get a read on them...

*(Ben looks at a person in the distance (this can be an audience member). He strains his eyes and puts his fingers on his temples, doing other movements to conjure up a "reading.")*

**KEVIN**

Keep giving strangers the side-eye and you're bound to feel something. Let's get back.

*(Kevin starts to walk away.)*

**BEN**  
Stop.

*(Kevin stops walking.)*

Come back here. I'm getting a strong vibe...

*(Kevin is next to Ben.)*

**KEVIN**  
Well- vibe faster.

**BEN**  
Shhhhhh... It's telling me... married, vegan, about to make a big change in their life.

**KEVIN**  
Stop goofing around.

**BEN**  
I'm not goofing, I'm feeling/

**KEVIN**  
Did your "feelers" notice they're not wearing a wedding ring?

**BEN**  
Scratch that... Did I say married? I meant... *(He goes back to straining eyes and fingers on temples.)* "recently divorced."

**KEVIN**  
Looks like they are ordering something at that stand. Is that a hotdog? So much for being vegan.

**BEN**  
*(In a mysterious voice)* We cannot be sure that it is not a veggie dog.

**KEVIN**  
Oh no, look! They're crossing the street! Guess you'll have to retire your talents for some other time- let's get moving/

**BEN**  
See! Making. A. Change!

**KEVIN**  
Wow.

**BEN**  
Yup- wow! I'm gifted! I knew I was special- but I must be humble and not let this power get in the wrong hands.

**KEVIN**

Okay. So, I guess we are going to have to do this.

**BEN**

What?

**KEVIN**

Ben, we need to talk.

**BEN**

Why talk when we can use your gifts with my new gifts to get us free things, success, and fortune- (*just realizes him*) ohh the lottery!

**KEVIN**

Do we really have to have this talk again?

**BEN**

Why do you deny your gifts Kevin?

**KEVIN**

I'm not denying my gifts.

**BEN**

Oh- I get what this about. You don't want me to be "special" too, do you?

**KEVIN**

No.

**BEN**

Oh. Afraid of a little competition, are we?

**KEVIN**

No.

**BEN**

Wow- kinda full of yourself, aren't you?

**KEVIN**

Not like that- I mean... there's no special gifts, Ben. Remember our talk when you joined that multi-level marketing racket?

**BEN**

The Cutting Edge? It's not a scam! You purchase the inventory then reach out to family, acquaintances, and people you went to school with and sell them sets of knives. Then you recruit them as your team members and after your team sells their first 250 knife sets you can become a Sharp Executive and- (*Realizing*) ok- yeah- I hear it now...

**KEVIN**

Yeah. Scam. Fast cash. That is not the way to build a life. What about just

working hard? Is that outta fashion or what?

**BEN**

Don't you talk to me about fashion. (*Pokes fun at Kevin's clothing.*)

**KEVIN**

Ben, are you hearing any of this? No one is going to give you the secret formula to life. That's not how life works. You have to just live it like the rest of us poor saps.

**BEN**

I should just be all Zen and go with the flow! (*Bows namaste.*)

**KEVIN**

YES! I would give anything for that! My mind doesn't work like that- it gets all locked up. But you- you can choose to focus on what you want. You don't need this dribble.

**BEN**

Dribble? I don't make fun of the things you're into.

**KEVIN**

I didn't want to do this, but since we are here. (*Breaks the news*) There's no such thing as magic, professional wrestling is fake, and the Loch Ness monster isn't real/

**BEN**

Nessy? Whoa. What are you saying? I mean I know what you're saying but why are you saying this? Are you trying to hurt me? (*Realizes*) Oh I get it. I know what this is...

**KEVIN**

Ben, Ben don't do the conspiracy thing/

**BEN**

You're pushing me away because you're afraid of *them*. You think people will judge you and your "special talents"/

**KEVIN**

And here we go.

**BEN**

Hey- I don't judge you. I swear. I won't tell anyone either. You don't have to push me away. We can retire to Maui after we hit the jackpot. I'll meditate on the beach. There! It'll be a compromise.

**KEVIN**

113.

**BEN**  
What?

**KEVIN**

There are 113 cracks in the cement from the office to where we stopped on the sidewalk before coming back.

**BEN**

Just throw your gifts in my face why don't you!

**KEVIN**

113- but that's unlucky so I intentionally had us walk to the next portion of the sidewalk to make it an even 114. But 4s (*Kevin does 4 taps on his finger and pulls his ear.*) are my unlucky number, so one more step over to bring it to 115 but... that's not an even number so one more step to good ol' 116.

**BEN**

Here we go with the numbers- this is why they love you at work—you nail everything to the smallest percentage never any errors in your data. Just Amazing Kevin showing us all up!

**KEVIN**

116 is divisible by 4 and 29. 29 is a prime number, so it doesn't factor into any other numbers. 116 is divisible by the following numbers: 1, 2, 4—again my unlucky number—(*Kevin does 4 taps on his finger and pulls his ear.*) 29, 58, and 116.

**BEN**

Show off.

**KEVIN**

(*Confesses*) I have OCD.

(*Ben is processing - he needs clarification.*)

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

**BEN**

You're not psychic?

**KEVIN**

Nope.

**BEN**

But on the work calendar I saw you requested off- under reasons it said "psych"/

**KEVIN**

I see a psychiatrist/

**BEN**

—Oh shit! Damn.

**KEVIN**

Yeah. I had the same reaction when I saw his bill.

**BEN**

This makes a lot more sense now.

**KEVIN**

Everyone is looking for a quick fix. When was the last time you showed any gratitude for what you do have? My mind gets stuck in these endless loops and no matter how I try to pull myself out of them, I can't. But you, you can look up and not be bogged down in the details- you know what I'd give for that?

Hell, you can leave your house without having to check if you left the stove on 12 times. Look at your hands- you haven't scrubbed the skin by washing them so much they crack and bleed, have you? Do you know what it's like having two different people in your head? I have the rational side and the compulsive side and some days it's like they're at war.

But it made me realize the more energy I gave to the negative thoughts the bigger they got. It's like that for OCD but it's also like that for you too. You choose to worry about things that don't matter. Things that are out of your sense of control. If you feed the negative that's what is gonna take root. Before my OCD I took for granted how precious it was to do mundane tasks- go shopping, cook, grab lunch with friends... Listen, I'm not going to sugarcoat it, life with OCD is hard, but it's made me good at my job, it makes me more empathetic and most of all it's made me appreciate moments. That's why I get frustrated with you when you just want to fast forward through life. You have to live in between the hardships, not run away and definitely not try some quick fix.

**BEN**

I thought you were just being humble about being a psychic.

**KEVIN**

What? I don't usually tell people about my OCD because it already takes so much out of my day. Listen Ben, I know you want love- who doesn't? It'll happen when it's meant to happen. Besides, if I were a psychic, would I live in a basement apartment and drive a Kia?

**BEN**

Some might. You have to admit it would be a good cover.

**KEVIN**

Don't start. Let's get back.

**BEN**

Yeah okay. (*Walks a bit, then pauses.*) Hey, what about Lindsey?

**KEVIN**

What about her?

**BEN**

You think it would work?

**KEVIN**

Really?!

**BEN**

Married too, huh?

**KEVIN**

She quit last week.

**BEN**

I knew we were wrong for each other.

**KEVIN**

Oh, who's the psychic now?

**CURTAIN**



## *Standing Room Only*

---

Megan Rachow



*Photography*

# *The Sailboat*

Ellie Dyk



*Digital Art*

## *The Glance*

Haylee Spicklemire

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*Digital Art*

# *Jaylet*

Bright Olaoni



*Photography*

## *Boys in Locker Room*

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Lance Klemple

there's a tv with the sports channel on,  
the view flicking between men  
in nice suits, hair slicked and shiny  
lights on, faces on in the boy's locker room

the boys strip, showing their sharp edges  
down the biceps in stripes  
to the small waist, to their narrow  
hips, boys with smirks talking about  
sex and classes that drag all day

I avoid the boys in the locker room  
duck quietly into the stall,  
throw my shirt and pants on the ground  
my round hips and thighs  
and my scars hidden  
over a black sports shirt,  
baggy shorts hanging straight down,  
no trace of curve found

I walk back out to see the boys  
silence the only sound  
tv black, doors shut  
no more boys around

## *Coattails*

---

Emily Curtis

my whims have coattails.  
they flutter at me in the breeze  
of my impulsivity.  
the aching arms  
the twitching fingers  
of my emotions  
reach out to grab at them--  
but they're satin coattails  
slippery coattails  
and they glance through my fingers  
and slip away.

my thoughts are dancers.  
wily ones.  
they tiptoe and twirl delicately into my brain  
they leap and bound and stomp and generally  
create an intricate flurry of frenzied motion  
dizzying  
impossible to follow  
incredibly difficult to keep up with--  
they dance into my head  
wearing whims  
--the whims displayed with their  
satiny coattails  
fluttered about  
by an impulsivity breeze--  
whereupon the aching, twitching arms  
of my jittering emotions  
reach out desperately  
to take hold of the fabric  
the elusive shiny prize  
those glimmering coattails--  
to no avail.  
my whims have coattails,  
ones I cannot seem to grasp.  
it is ever an elusive  
chase through life.  
pain, desire, sorrow, fear...

my whims have coattails.

but so does Hope.

and hers  
are  
mine  
to  
hold.

## *Leo*

---

Anonymous

I can admit that I'm a curious person - someone with many interests and facets of my being. I am like the vines and leaves of a growing ivy plant; the reaches of my mind can be tracked. It can be followed, but yet, it has no scope as they travel deep into the darkness...

What lies within my eyes worthy enough for me to pry open my soul for all to bear witness? Eraser to pencil marks on the page - at what age will I be happy with myself? As I sit sunbathing in the window at my job - basking in the ethereal light from the heavens - I stretch my vines and withering leaves into an area unbeknownst to me.

I've come to the conclusion that there are two sides to my being: There's me that has grown into the nearly 20 year old lesbian all have come to know. And there's me - the child boy that loves frogs and mud and knick knacks and stories and video games and other boys - the me that just wants to be gay. Just like the ice melting off of the rooftops I slowly begin to write more about a part of me that has always been covered by the snow of my own ignorance. Not anything that's deliberately bad - ignorance - just something that's just gone overlooked for too long.

Overlooked.

Overlooked.

Overlooked for no longer.

My leaves stretch more.

I'm warming up to the fact that I'm a boy.

A boy.

Not a man, per say, just a boy. I have to go through living still -

The joys and triumphs and trials and tribulations of growing. Of puberty. I am just a kid yearning to play on the playground without a care in the world - a kid that wants to eat dino-shaped chicken nuggets and smiley-face fries with chocolate milk...A teen just learning to shave...Still discovering who I am and what I am meant to be...

A teen that has yet to experience his first everything.

The other me has experienced these. Forever those firsts shall be embedded in my brain and associated with the part of me that's dying. Is that part of me dying?



I've been taught to be afraid.

I've been afraid of the world. I'm afraid of other people. I'm afraid of everything.

I've been afraid of myself.

But all that I've ever wanted was to be that little boy that gets to grow into a man. That little boy has been left behind in the past. Memories circulate.

In elementary, I was the tomboy. The one that was "not like other girls." It was true; I wanted to be on par with my male peers. I wanted to prove myself worthy of being in their presence. Lunch was the best of times - recess was not. Denied entry to the soccer field, I would sulk my way back to the girls. I was never a boy. I wasn't like the girls either. I was nothing.

*I wish I could tell myself that I was actually everything.*

My dark brown complexion did not help, but that's something to unpack for another day. I can imagine that if I knew any sooner, or if boys and girls and anyone in between were treated the same, I would have avoided a lot of trouble.

Memories of me in middle school...Middle school...

*There's not much of middle school -*

Memories of me in high school, yet again with the boys. Those boys...they were my boys. They made me feel. They gave me the world. They showed me who I could be. Who I was meant to be.

We only saw each other in the orchestra, but that was enough. Through all of high school, I made memories with the boys.

*I don't see them anymore.*

Memories of just two summers ago.

Fresh out of high school, I was alone and independent. What I looked for in love was evolving ever so quickly. I got into my first relationship with a boy since the beginning of high school - four years prior. It was a good relationship. We could have still been friends today.

*I don't know what I did wrong for you to turn me away.*

I told you I was not a woman, despite my feminine physique. I just liked women's clothing from time to time. You still had yet to see me the other way. The way where I wear whatever, but all adorned with a binder underneath. The me without makeup. The me that practiced a deeper voice. That me was the real me. I would still be me. Just different. Just...more masculine. But it was too masculine. That was my mistake.

*All I've wanted was to be a boy that likes boys. But the boys only liked the girl...*

Memories of my life. I was always in the theater. I wanted to be someone other than me. I guess that should have been the first indication. Now I don't go onstage anymore. I refuse to. The last time I was met with unbelievable amounts of dysphoria. It lasted nonstop for months. It was the worst that I've ever seen, and all because my castmate was the pinnacle of who I wanted to be. Because he was able to wear makeup and feminine things and still be perceived as a man. Because he was everything that I was not. Once the production was done, I was relieved; I still had the dysphoria, but at least I didn't have to see him again. I couldn't bear it. He was always nice to me. I wanted to be like him, but I just wanted to be his friend.

*Is this right? Is this okay? Am I just being too gay?*

I just learned that he always wanted to be my friend too. I guess I will try again. Hopefully, things will work out the way I want them to be.

*Please oh please, jealousy, don't get the best of me.*

Oh to be a teen again. My other half has seen the best and the worst of those days.

*I wonder what it would've been like to play the man in those plays...*

Oh to be a teen. A child. Someone - some age other than me. I look in the mirror. I see a nearly 20 year old woman. A lesbian. A butch. A wannabe. Someone other than.

I look in the mirror. Again. I see a boy - not too young but not very old. 18 is pushing it. Round face and big hips. Clothes too large for him as they engulf his figure. Hasn't hit puberty yet. Hair underarms and legs, but not hairy enough. A struggling hairline already - that's tough! No five o'clock shadow. No fuzziness anywhere to be seen. A...scrawny figure. No muscle. No nothing.

But yet, I am still a boy. That is who I am and who I always wanted to be. Regardless of my appearance, I am me. Me is a boy.

It's as simple as that.

Hello world.  
I am Leo.

*Lucifer's Son*  
*(Happy in Spite by Ivan Seal)*

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Candice Kirkendoll

Upon the sphere of clay protruded  
an unlit matchstick;  
its shadow burned brighter than flame.  
Expanding brick by brick

its pedestal stretched towards Heaven's view  
above the ink blotched sky;  
the sole witness could not reclaim  
the green and once blue eye.

He will never reach radiance,  
for he cannot atone  
the world he once tried to tame;  
he now stands alone.

Shrouded by light, secluded in dark,  
he's still and frigid.  
When the Earth's surface greyed, he became  
eternal, and wicked.

# *Superstition*

---

Daisy Dyk



*Photography*

# *A Michigan Ice Storm*

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Jessie Nieboer



*Photography*

## *Lilacs in the Snow*

---

Alex Fuller

(Inspired by a True Story)

Time is a cruel mistress. In a gown of black and white, she gracefully glides above all. Without warning, her frigid hand will eventually grasp your bare shoulder. Try as you might to shake her off, or pretend she doesn't exist, she never goes away. One day, no matter the weather or season, she will whisper a reminder of your mortality.

For Mori, it happened as she stared at the gravestone. She was alone in the sea of grey and green. Each marker was spread evenly in a line with Mori stuck in between one of the many rows. As she stood there, the greenest grass beneath her feet brushed against her ankle as the wind directed it. The sensation, tingle or possibly happenstance reminded her she was the one standing.

"Hey Mom... hope you are doing well" Mori solemnly said. "I-I was able to move into your ol- your house with no issues." She hesitated a moment before finding her words, "It looks the same as you left it... your newspaper next to your chair, the temperature set to where you like it, and-and-and" Mori collapsed to the ground, her words nothing more than jumbled sobs. "Your shoes... near the door... for when you... you... ready to... go out."

Uncontrollable tears poured from the red and irritated eyes as her knees dug deeper into the disturbed dirt beneath. "Please say something," Mori begged and trembled, "say anything... anything at all."

Her request was selfish, Mori knew that. However, just like the old and weathering stones around her, Mori was stubborn. She remained at the cemetery for a long time before the moon signaled her to go home.

Mori couldn't sleep again. All she could do is stare at the dated popcorn ceiling of her room. Her mom's room. Mori had left it exactly how she did. The purple slippers Mori had gotten her for her birthday resting at the bedside, the half-finished book covered in dust on the nightstand, and the empty record player that had not spun in months; all of them remained frozen in time. Mori did not have the heart to disturb anything that belonged to her mother.

Mori always made sure to sleep on the left side of the bed. In her heart, she hoped she would feel a motherly embrace during the night. The warmth she once knew from childhood sick days or middle school breakups would wake her up from this never-ending nightmare. However, despite her wishes, the right side remained cold and flat, making insomnia Mori's only companion in the suffocating darkness.

With no better options, Mori got out of bed. The old boards groaned with contempt as she groped around for the bedside lamp. Suddenly, Mori tripped over something on the floor. She attempted to catch herself, but gravity already had other plans. Within moments, Mori was sprawled out on the floor.



“What the hell did I trip on?” Mori said aloud as she rubbed her bruised head. Mori turned around and squinted to see the outline of slippers. While one was still neatly in place, the other had been kicked and flipped over.

“Oh god... Mom will be furious with me.” Mori’s lips trembled as she picked up the disturbed slipper. “I’m sorry... so sorry.” Mori sneezed from the newly freed dust in the air. Her arms were shaking as she tried to line the slippers back to where they were originally. “It won’t happen again.” In her frenzy, she slightly shifted the other slipper. “They’ll be right here when you need them.” Mori grasped both slippers tightly as she tried to remember their original spot. “It won’t happen again. It won’t happen again. It won’t happen again.”

Mori kept repeating the phrase in hopes she would be forgiven. The guilt that she had carried for so long continued tunneling through her brain like a moebius strip.

*Move on.*

*Let go.*

*She wouldn’t want this for you.*

People had been telling her that for over a year now. No matter how hard she tried, she could not accept that her mother was gone. If time had been gripping onto her one shoulder, guilt had taken a bite out the other.

As Mori continued moving the slippers around, a small amount of light cast her hunched shadow on the wall. Mori had not turned on any lights in the pitch-black room, so where was it coming from? Her curiosity caused her to stop shuffling the slippers as she stood up to investigate. To her surprise, a door had materialized in the center of the room.

The door was shaped like an upside-down L; thin but wide. Flames clung to the wooden frame with imaginary hands as Mori stared in disbelief. Where did it come from? How did it get in her room? Mori had no idea what was happening. Regardless, Mori felt a weird sort of familiarity emanating from the mysterious door. In fact, it felt as though the door itself was *calling* to her.

Despite her own mind telling her to stay away, Mori began taking small steps towards it. *GROAN*. The floor cried out with each step. *GROAN*. The flames grew larger. *GROAN*. Mori reached out for the shiny gold door-knob. But before she could hold it, the door burst open on its own.

Mori was thrown backwards into the bed as the brightest light flooded the drab bedroom. Mori held her hand to shield her eyes, but, to her surprise, she felt no pain. She continued to stare intently into the pure light when she noticed what was on the other side of the door.

It was a beautiful meadow of lilacs that went far into the horizon. The smell wafted into the bedroom, filling Mori with peace. Mori rubbed her eyes. This had to be a dream, right? As Mori opened her eyes, her heart skipped a beat when she saw her.

In the center of the white and purple lilacs stood her mother. She looked like what Mori remembered from her childhood. Her long brown hair flowed with the wind as she bent down to grab a purple flower. Holding the lilac to her chest, she smiled as she made eye contact with Mori. Mori started to walk towards her, but her mother shook her head. Mori wanted to hug her again. Talk about life again. Be with her again. But to her dismay, she was still out of reach.

Suddenly, her mother let go of the lilac. The wind held it gracefully as it carried it to Mori's outstretched hand. As the lilac landed into her hand, Mori felt the love she had desperately missed for over a year. The tears began to flow once more as she collapsed to her knees. "Thank you... Mom."

When Mori looked back at her mother, she was no longer a young woman. Instead, she was once again wrinkly and with short grey hair. The once green meadow was now covered in white. However, her smile remained the same. The purple lilacs still were peeking through the snow around her. Her mother waved goodbye as the door slowly began to creak shut.

Mori, with tears of happiness, waved back until the door vanished from existence.

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## *Searching*

Emily Curtis

searching for purpose in cobwebby corners  
seeking validation from slippery-fish pursuits  
yearning to gain just a second of glory  
aching for more than another day  
in the same old place of indecision...

where does this winding road go?  
curiosity ignites excitement excitement inspires hope...  
I would run down this road if I knew where it led.  
but I don't.  
and I don't

want to plunge into the future headlong  
if I'm not sure what it holds.  
small steps of carefulness tiptoes of precaution...  
stand here at the side of the road  
slow steady unsure  
lest it drop off into an abyss at the end.  
I'll never know how it ends  
because I'll never dare venture that far lest it ends up  
bad or worse than I thought.  
there are too many forks in the path.  
and sometimes I want to take them all.  
but if I choose one I feel I'll be stuck.

I can't stand being stuck.  
stuck means stuck means out of luck means whoops-oh-well you-  
get-what-you-get and-you-don't-throw-a-fit and-now-you're-stuck.  
yuck.

I want to wander down  
each turn in the trail  
and see what it holds  
and see whether or not  
it's the road for me.  
but I don't have the time. nor the energy.  
and yet how am I to pick a path if I don't know what it holds  
or where it leads? how do I know I'll be pleased?  
do I just take a gamble?

just learn to adapt to whatever sort of environment I find myself in?  
whether or not it's the one I wanted?  
to an extent— yes. but to an extent— no.  
I want to choose the right path. / I want to be on the right road. / I want to  
walk the right trail /  
and shoulder my load / with hope and gusto. / I want to know where to go /  
and know where I'm going / and smile at the prospect / of the journey / and  
the destination.  
but for now — I'm simply searching.

## *Juvie Saved Me*

---

Nadia Bushinski

I love to sleep. I love the feeling of lying down on a freshly cleaned soft and silky bed sheet after a long day of a busy life. I love the stress relieving scent of eucalyptus that flows through the air slowly from my diffuser that lies atop my nightstand. I love the warm, herbal, gentle sips of chamomile tea before bed as I read a novel. Sleep feels so natural. A time dedicated to doing absolutely nothing except resting our busy minds and our tired bodies. No matter how trapped I felt during the worst days of my life, sleep was always a time I felt safety and comfort; an escape from my reality. But during my time in Juvie, where I shared a room with young teenage girls convicted of murder, the thought of falling asleep terrified me.

Let me explain; I was on a wretched path during my early teenage years, going nowhere fast. My priorities included getting inebriated at the biggest parties each weekend, seeking attention from upperclassmen to make myself look “cool,” and skipping classes to go shopping with my friends, using our parents’ stolen money. I never thought of the future. The only thinking I did was deciding what lie I would tell my parents so I could go out and commit petty crimes.

Finally, my actions caught up to me, and I found myself in a heap of trouble: six months of probation, no consuming alcohol, skipping class, staying out past curfew. Basic expectations for a sixteen-year-old girl, seems easy enough, right? You see, the problem was that I saw no problem with myself. I brushed everything off. That’s why I took a few shots of vodka that one chilly fall night. I knew I had rules to obey, and I knew I had a meeting with my probate officer the next morning, but I would be sober by then and she would never know. Perhaps, if my parents hadn’t recorded me slurring my words as I stumbled into the front door at midnight, she never would have. “Rules are rules” my probate officer said to me as I resisted the officers putting me in handcuffs. My heart still aches to remember the look on my mother’s face, which is most often seen painted with a smile, as they dragged me to the police car and sent me away.

During my three-day sentence, I didn’t speak once. I thought the human body could only produce so many tears before they ran out, but mine never did. Just yesterday, I was the life of the party; today, I was a prisoner. I spent every minute full of unbearable regret. I thought of everything, and for the first time in my life, I began to think of my future. Where would I be in five years if I stayed living like this? Who would stick around if I kept hurting them? The answer was simple. I knew this was not who I was. I knew I did not belong there. I knew it was time to change.

My mom picked me up the day before Thanksgiving. I remember it

felt wrong to hug her. I didn't feel I deserved her forgiveness and open arms. I didn't speak the whole car ride, not because I was upset but because I had no idea where to even begin to apologize. I could feel my mom's concerned eyes on me as I stared out the window at a moody Lake Michigan. I turned my gaze over to her with tears in my eyes; she grabbed my shaky hand and broke the silence by saying nothing more than three simple words: "I love you." For the first time in 72 hours, I felt safe. It had only been three days, but coming home felt like the first time I had ever seen my family or felt the warmth of a wood- fire stove or smelled a home cooked meal. This was where I belonged. These were my people. I had to turn my life around for them.

I almost immediately began seeing a therapist. She was a remarkably interesting lady who practiced meditation and could see right through me. She knew what I needed help with before I even asked, and we got straight to work. I began getting my grades up in school and eventually my probation ended. My charges were expunged. My dad took a job downstate, and we moved during the frigid winter of 2019. I had a clean slate and every opportunity to reinvent myself.

Today, five years later, I can confidently say I am a changed person. Today, I am someone who thinks before they speak because I have been someone who spoke out of anger and hurt many people. I am someone who cares so much about their education that they would work two jobs just to be able to take a couple classes because I have been someone who did not turn in a single assignment and failed several classes. I am someone who would rather spend their Friday night at home painting their nails cherry red than go out to bars because I have been someone who got sent to juvie for drinking alcohol. I am someone who holds the door open for others because I have been someone who would slam it shut behind me.

Juvie saved me. It was the wakeup call I did not know I needed. I have spent every single day of my life for the past five years bettering myself because of it. And some nights, when I lay my head to rest on my plush, cheetah print, silk pillow, I think of the time I spent in Juvie as a young, scared girl, lying awake on a stiff metal lined bed wishing I had done everything differently, and suddenly all the "negatives" in my life disappear. I forget about all the things I failed to do that day, and I remember how far I have come, and much further I will go.

## *Secrets*

---

Gracie Sullivan

The secrets we hide.  
The secrets we keep from one another hide who we really are.  
But what if the secrets we hid were written on our skin?  
Burned there, something that cannot be washed,  
Where those you know and those you don't  
Will read what you have done and judge you for it.  
Would you try to cover them with sleeves and pants  
Wearing hats and scarves with sunglasses  
To cover up your history?  
Or would you live free?  
Knowing you do not have to hide anymore.  
That everyone is just as bad as you,  
Even if they are fully dressed.  
Would you run through the streets naked, not caring  
What others may see of your secrets?  
Yet alas our secrets are hidden away, not on the skin of our bodies,  
But the skin of trees, locked away in journals,  
Safe away from the world to see.  
For you can set these ablaze when the time comes,  
Because no matter who you are,  
We all have secrets to hide.

## *Reflection*

---

Dorothy Campbell

I look into the mirror.  
I can see beauty in my age,  
    I smile.  
You are the reason I know,  
But you aren't here to see,  
    And I cry.

## *The Moon*

---

Candace Cloud

Mercury and Venus have none.  
Mars has Phobos and Deimos,  
Fitting names for the sons of a War God.  
Jupiter has almost 79 but we only talk about Io and Ganymede.  
Saturn has eighty-two but only fifty-three are named.  
One named Titan even has its own atmosphere.  
Uranus has Oberon and Titania and many more,  
all named from Shakespeare plays.  
Neptune has one. Its name is Triton.  
Pluto our favorite dwarf, has five.  
Two are named from the Underworld.  
Our moon is named Moon.  
That just feels flat.  
It's like having a cat and naming it Cat.  
Let's start a petition to give our moon a name.  
Then all the aliens will know – Earth has game.

## *Three Roses*

---

Gabriel Williams

The world was too dark as I walked down the street. That was strange. Even as I trekked beneath the streetlights, I couldn't make out what was in front of me. Nervously, I pulled my jacket closer to my body and sped up. I rubbed the sides of my arms, shivering. There was Third Street and Rose Avenue. Relief filled me as I continued my pace, knowing my house was a short distance away.

After a few moments, I squinted back at the street signs Third and Rose. My footsteps trailed to a slow crawl. I must have taken a wrong turn. Nodding, I faced forward urging myself to continue moving. A few moments later, I stared once again at the signs Third and Rose. Maybe I had just misread the signs the first time. I continued on. When the signs came into view I couldn't help but gawk at the words. I hadn't taken any turns, I should be home by now. Someone must have put something into my drink at the... where did I come from this late at night?

I came to a sudden halt at the realization; I didn't remember how I got here. I started to run as panic bubbled up in my chest.

I passed the signs Third and Rose.

There they were again. Third and Rose.

Third and Rose.

NO.

Third and Rose.

I screamed, clenching my fists as I stopped underneath the streetlight once again. Pausing to search my surroundings, my head tilted in confusion. There was something more off than the never ending streets. I cried out slapping my hands over my mouth when it came to me; there was no sound. No echoes, no voices. I couldn't even hear my feet hitting the ground.

"Hello!" I shouted. The sound of my voice seemed to halt prematurely.

I was shaking now, turning in circles as I waited for something to be different. By the time I turned back to the street signs, something had revealed itself. Its blackened face resembled a burn victim as it stepped into the strange flicker of the streetlight I was under. Its teeth were covered in the same soot that emitted from each breath it drew. It leaned forward snarling inches from my face.

"Ahhhhhhh!" My eyes forced themselves open, revealing my moonlit bedroom. There was an open window to my left, and my vanity to my right. My heart raced thumping in my chest cavity even as I gazed at the familiar room... I attempted to sit up, but my body remained frozen against the bed. There wasn't even a twitch from my finger. I tried to settle my breathing in an effort to calm myself down. Movement from the corner of my eye hindered

this as I watched as a black figure crawled out from behind my footboard.

Its face was burned severely with black dusted fangs. My mouth opened, but there was no scream as the creature moved over me. It crawled up the bed, disfigured claws grasping at my legs as it moved closer to my face. I urged myself to move, to do anything, to push myself away. As it inched forward, I could see the bent angle of its spine as it twisted up and then sharply down as if broken.

Nausea built up in my throat as I made out another set of arms and hands. The disfigured hands traveled up my body, brushing past my stomach and collarbone before his entire body finally settled directly in front of me. The worst part about him was his eyes. Milky white hooded against blackened, burnt flesh. My fingers twitched against my covers. All I needed was a second more. The creature got closer still. The hole where a nose should be brushed against my cheek. I shuddered once again before throwing myself off the bed and away from it.

My voice finally crawled out of my throat as I screamed, half-stumbling, half-crawling toward the door. I turned back for a moment before I reached for the door knob. But to my surprise there was no creature in sight. All that remained of the interaction was the tangled up covers on the floor. I hesitated, crouching slightly down as I peeked under the bed and around the corners of the room. There was nothing, just a bad dream that left tear streaks on my face.

I clenched my chest as I plopped down in front of my vanity, trying to chase away the image of the disfigured creature. After my heart finally settled, I rested my warmed forehead against the cool table glancing up to look at the mirror.

I fumbled out of the chair as I caught a glimpse of something next to me. To my horror, there was an object placed on my vanity. One that had not been there before.

Three burnt roses rested within a clear glass vase.

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## *Bildungsroman*

---

Emma Marshall

I tell myself not to let this happen anymore  
because, in the end, I always end up hurt  
My heart is far too big for just one man  
and in my desperation to share  
I hastily give it away to those who don't want it

Brown moths resting on logs  
Flitting away at the slightest disturbance  
Gentle wings beat hard  
As they flee from the clearing  
On a fall afternoon

And yet, though I've been hurt so many times,  
I continue to seek out the pain of loss  
and I've begun to wonder:  
"Is it because I want to love,  
or is it that I want to be hurt?"

Easy steps along the path  
Trample mushrooms underfoot  
Where they grow out of place  
Having not yet learned  
To keep a distance

I have begun to learn things  
which can only be learned  
Through the experience of tragedy  
That is, the personal tragedy  
Of a heart trampled by every love one has ever known

Pebbles thrown make ripples  
In the brook that flows  
Through these quiet woods  
Kicking up sediment beneath  
Forcing giant water bugs to flee

Sitting on the bench beside the trail  
You said you only liked me as a friend  
And thought it would be over then  
And in a way, it was  
Because I never spoke to you of it again

Never let it be said that I was not willing to try  
Water lilies along the river  
Stars in a sea of green  
of moss and lichen and algae.  
I do not grow.

# *The Hindu Monastery of Kauai*

Alanna Davidson



*Photography*

# *Across the Water*

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Katherine Weesies



*Photography*



# *Downtown Overlook*

Rachel Springer



*Photography*

## *Midday Italy*

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Leah Johnson



*Photography*

## *Kalopsia*

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Ryan Mixer

I used to love dissecting moths. I'd wait for the sun to go down and for the darkness to consume the land beneath it, and with a lamp in hand I would sit down and wait for the moths to move towards the light and capture them in my hands. Occasionally, I would crush them to make the process easier. After I finished playing around with the dead moth, I'd dispose of the leftover pieces by feeding them to my now dead pet tarantula. They made a nice delicacy for the little guy, or I'd at least assume because I never had the desire to try a dead moth.

Was I heartless as a kid? Certainly, however, I didn't even know the bugs had brains. Size-wise moths aren't super big, and I thought all brains had to be large, larger than a bug at the very least. At the end of the day, I was just a kid who was wondering why they stupidly chose to chase after this one light. Empathy for the moths never really came until my mother saw what I was doing.

She hurled the instant she saw what I was doing. My mother called me every name under the sun: psychopath, sociopath, future serial killer, and so forth. She treated me as if I were a devil. I was no longer her sweet little boy, and she no longer wanted to play the role of mother.

Why? What did I do wrong?

She divorced my father, and he didn't take the divorce well either. His parents were strict. Ground you for the entirety of your teenage years level of strictness. Perfection wasn't a goal, it was the expectation. When he had to explain the divorce to his parents, they said, "You are a traitor to what our family stands for. Never refer to yourself under our last name ever again."

He had nothing. No purpose. Just a kid, himself, and the same old apartment that reminded him of a gleeful past. He felt that he needed more. He felt that he needed more to be whole again.

If there is demand for something, there will be someone supplying it. Online, there were millions of ideologues looking to sell their ideologies to get a quick buck. My father bought all of them. All the popular ones, and all the fringe ones. At the time, I would've told you the most outrageous one he believed was that the wealthy global elite were working on a cure for mortality, and that we needed to become rich in order to protect ourselves from the ruthless elite. Due to recent events, it seems more plausible.

How would we get rich? Me, of course! Despite his grudges he had over his parents' treatment of him, he repeated the cycle for me. Being a savior of me and him would be worth it in the end. Just focus on work and school, and don't fall in love! I'd get to sleep with any girl I wanted once I was rich anyway, so who needs love?

Thus, I began to work. Elementary school blew by and my teachers thought I was a genius. Middle school blew by and my teachers thought I was a genius. Freshman year blew by and all of my grades were stuck at 99%. It wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough. How would I be rich if I couldn't even get a 100%?

What purpose would I serve to anyone if my grades weren't perfect?

School was my everything, and I had no time to waste on meaningless hobbies and entertainment. Once studying was out of the way, I'd go around the city looking for work so I could get paid. I spent all of that time and despite everything I was still unable to climb higher than some of my other classmates. I was useless, and I would never be able to do anything properly.

Death was what I deserved.

If I hadn't met her, that was where my story would've ended. I needed my own savior, and I met mine at the beginning of sophomore year: Elaina. She was the one who started talking to me first. People scared me too much due to how unpredictable they were, so I typically avoided people. During lunch, I'd escape to a nearby park to eat. I'd always be sitting right next to the tire swing. One day she approached me and asked if she could sit next to me. Before I was able to force out a response, she was already sitting down and asking why I was always sitting alone by myself out here. That was just how she was. You could be a criminal with multiple felonies, and she would always optimistically approach you and try to have a nice conversation with you. I guess that's what made her so endearing to me.

I told Elaina that I was feeling tired and down. I don't remember why I was depressed. She offered to go and spin on the tire swing with me in order to "brighten my spirits." I obliged and we both stuffed our legs into the tiny tire that was clearly meant for young kids. One of Elaina's friends spun the two of us around on the swing. While the world was blurred from the two of us spinning around on the swing, all I could focus on was Elaina's smile that was brighter than the sun. Before that day I never tried to look another person in the eye, but I finally looked at her face while spinning around.

I fell in love instantly.

Eventually, I found myself orbiting around her and becoming closer with her. All my problems disappeared once I was with her. Nothing else, not my mother, my father, or any dumbass conspiracy theory, mattered except for my lovely Elaina. She was everything I wasn't: sociable, optimistic, and charming.

A year later we went out to the theaters to see a movie about a zombie apocalypse. I didn't remember the details of the movie or the plot because I was more focused on what I wanted to ask her afterwards. We left the theater and I managed to muster a few words that would forever change my life, "Elaina, would you be fine with dating me?"

She said yes.

For the next six months, I was on cloud nine. Love made me feel higher than any drug could. While doing things over and over like kissing led to diminishing returns on that high feeling, everything new I did in the relationship felt great. I wanted to gush about her to anyone and everyone as another way to push the envelope further, and I planned on telling my father about our relationship the day before Valentine's Day. When that day came, however, I never got the chance.

I sat on the couch waiting for him to arrive home that fateful day. The clock turned its hand from one to two to three to four and so forth. Light that pierced through the window slowly dissipated as darkness consumed the land. Once the clock struck one again, my father entered the household.



An alcoholic stench flowed through the room. My father was barely standing because of how drunk he was and had very red, puffy eyes. While fighting his tears, he punched a hole into the wall of the apartment near an old family photo with my mother and screamed, "I hate this goddamn prison cell!"

I tried to pull him away and stop him before he could do anymore damage, but he continued his confused, drunken ramblings while fighting me, "Everyday. Every damn day, I'm forced to think of you! My family used to love me, I used to be fine, but now I'm forced to deal with this."

He sagged down to the floor and let the tears pour out, "I just wish I wasn't so fucking miserable."

I guided him to the bathroom and he began chuckling to himself and muttered something about the end of the world. I dismissed it as nonsense and went to sleep immediately. After I woke up, however, I knew something was off immediately.

I turned on the TV, and my father was right for once.

There was a zombie apocalypse.

Whether or not it was due to the rich elite as he had previously claimed didn't matter to me though. My life was flipped upside down for seemingly no reason and my father had vanished from the apartment, but Elaina's safety was my bigger concern at the end of the day.

Ding-dong. It was the doorbell. It was Elaina.

Thank God, she was still with me.

We hugged, and I wanted to lean in for a kiss, but she pushed my mouth away and said she had bad news for me. A zombie had bitten her. Elaina and I only had a little amount of time left together. She only had one request, "Can we watch some zombie movies together before I'm gone?"

And so, we watched a few movies. Even though I was uncertain as to whether I would be alive tomorrow, I wanted to give this one last Valentine's gift to her, but it still felt wrong. I never wanted this feeling to go.

It was nighttime by this point, and the screaming and chaos outside had subsided. My girlfriend was starting to clearly lose herself, as she began to speak worse, and she couldn't stop drooling.

"I thank it'sh time for me ta leave," Elaina said as she got up and went towards the door.

"Don't," I said as I grabbed her hand. "I'll be here with you until I die. I want to be with you until I die."

"Wha if I turn you into zombie?" she said.

"I would rather die a painful death than lose you," I responded.

With that she agreed that she would stay the night out in the living room while I slept in my bedroom. As she predicted, the next morning the Elaina I knew was gone. Now, it was just an empty husk of what she was. Whenever she heard me speak to her, she would bang as hard as she could on my bedroom door. Not strong enough to break into the room, but enough to make her presence clear. Maybe, just maybe, she would transform back to her normal self I hoped, or maybe my dad would come home.

Nothing of the sort happened. Food, at least what little of it I had, ran dry quickly. I knew that I had a choice to make. The part of me that hoped

that this would all end as quickly as it started was gone, and I knew that if I wanted to live on I would need to leave the apartment. Still now, I think that would be the wrong choice. I spent sixteen years on this planet only to enjoy six months of it. Maybe the hunger drove me insane, but I knew that I would have nothing without her, and I could tell she was getting hungry like me.

I was sick of being hung up on the past.

I was sick of being like my father.

I wanted to go back.

And so, I left my bedroom. I left it, and, like the moths, I went to my love, my guiding light, and leaned in for a final kiss.

She ripped off my lips and continued to satiate her boundless hunger with the rest of my body. Even as my body got devoured, I didn't feel a single regret.

I would have been satisfied with a life outside this apartment. Outside of Elaina. What could've been doesn't matter to me anymore though. All that matters to me is that I was loved. Even if I'm just a final meal for her, Elaina and I had one more unforgettable moment where we loved each other.

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Short story inspired from the songs "Zombies" by DECO\*27 and "Kalopsia" by Queens of the Stone Age

## *Flight Through the Snow*

---

Malachi Graves

The snow beneath my feet,  
Soothing crunch, meditative music,  
Marking my path in nature's canvas,  
Each step greeted with bitter cold,

No time to waste,  
Faster legs, longer strides,

My breath creating wondrous smoke,  
Disappearing in air, no trace to be found,  
Trees covered in ice and snow,  
Still standing tall, shimmering in sun,

Keep positive, don't slow the pace  
Through this winter wonderland,

The silence of the woods, peace and tranquil,  
Wind's brisk breeze numbs the soreness of muscles,

My dash halted by a hidden root  
Fallen down, the snow a blanket,  
Body still, the cold my inhibitor,

Snowflakes carelessly fall,  
Like sparkling ornaments in the sky.

## *I Write Myself Pretentious Poems*

---

Caitlyn Spoelman

I write myself pretentious poems  
As if fanciful words  
And flowery lines  
Will somehow purge from me  
The very feelings they aim to evoke from others.

My notes are filled with lines  
From stories I will never write,  
Texts I will never send,  
Unfinished poems and  
Remnants of my past self,  
Desperately trying to invent  
New, pretty ways to explain  
All the hurt, hopes, and dreams  
That fluttered through her mind.

I wonder why my poems only sound good  
When they are written at 2 a.m. on a school night.  
Why the words only come together  
While staring at my ceiling,  
Picking apart my life,  
Hoping for any insight hanging in the darkness above,  
Instead of any other sensible time,  
Where I can properly pick them apart, record them,  
And work up the courage to share them  
With anyone else.

Maybe it is my selfish wish to be the one called to mind  
With the "What's that quote?"  
To be the one to put into words  
A great unexplainable part  
Of the human experience of life.  
Because if I cannot explain that,  
How am I to explain my own?  
With menial words and phrases that have  
No depth, no catharsis, no release?

Maybe one day  
I will be able to step away from the keyboard  
And feel the separation between the words and my own conscious being  
And it will be enough.  
To be satisfied, fulfilled.  
Yes. I will say. This is how I feel.  
And I will know that others will understand.

Instead, I keep adding new notes:  
Random bits of dialogue,  
A stanza here and there,  
Or starting new artwork that will never come to fruition,  
Trying to lay claim to something both specific and abstract  
And just past my ability to draw or write,  
Unable to be pinned down  
Yet forever lurking, just out of reach  
In the back of my mind.

## *I Am an American Student*

---

Nex Wilson

Do you know me? I awake in the morning to my alarms. The first goes off at 6 am, the next at 6:10, 6:30, and the final one at 6:55 giving me an extra five minutes to get out the door to school. When the first alarm goes off, I either sleep an extra thirty minutes or lay in the dark wondering if I should let depression consume my thoughts and let it trap me in my room until I am able to sleep again. Today, I chose to sit up, pushing the depression out of my head. I shower, wear the baggiest masculine clothing I own, and lather myself in Ax deodorant and Polo cologne. I look into the mirror and tell myself I am a boy no matter what other people think or see. I analyze myself for any trace of femininity. I practice my “boy smile” as my final alarm goes off. It’s 6:55, time for school.

The next battle is with my anxiety. As I get out of my car, I am aware that I am going to be walking into a smelly, loud, public high school that can change into a shooting ground where students are targets within seconds. My mind fills with thoughts of what to do if there was an active shooter, a fire, if someone collapses, or if my friends all turn on me and start calling me a liar. I put in my earbuds and try to push the anxiety away with music. I eat the bland non-iced chocolate-pop tart served by the school as I walk to my first hour. *Keep your head low. Don’t look anyone in the eyes. Walk behind people who are larger and taller than you. Watch for anyone walking behind you. Straight to your class. Do not lag.*

My third battle is with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I see the senior boy who reminds me of my abuser. Memories come flooding back and my body begins to ache. I walk a little too fast and bump into the person in front of me and I get mad. *You know that guy walks this hall in the morning. Why do you always look at him? You’re pathetic. You do this to yourself. You are nothing.* I turn the corner and sit in my first hour class. My friend, Taylor, sits down next to me.

“Hey, how was your weekend?”

I think. I think and think and think until my brain feels as if it’s going to explode.

I smile and say, “Oh you know, the regular.” *You can’t remember shit, can you? You’re worthless. Ha! You’re less than worthless! How are you supposed to talk to your friends and family if you can’t remember anything? This is all because you fucked up four years ago. You fucked up, you little girl.*

I walk to my second hour. *Keep your head low. Don’t look anyone in the eyes. Walk behind people who are larger and taller than you. Watch for anyone walking behind you. Straight to your class. Do not lag.* I sit down and the teacher starts his lecture. I rest my eyes, unable to actually sleep. I am unsure if it is the thought that my school could become a warzone or the public humiliation of my photo getting posted on the internet where I am drooling all over my books, finally getting the best sleep I’ve gotten in years that keeps me awake.

I walk to my third hour. *Keep your head low. Don't look anyone in the eyes. Walk behind people who are larger and taller than you. Watch for anyone walking behind you. Straight to your class. Do not lag.* I try to learn how to factor and memorize the square roots. But don't ask me how to do any of this—I have no clue.

I walk to my fourth hour. *Keep your head low. Don't look anyone in the eyes. Walk behind people who are larger and taller than you. Watch for anyone walking behind you. Straight to your class. Do not lag.* I doodle in my economy book as I get told crazy stories of salad goblins and two FBI agents in a van. I carry myself to my car where I drive to college. I write about zoos and how to be a better student. I get lost on campus finding something new to look at and study.

I go home. As I make dinner, I clean. The depression comes back for more. *Why try? You know your parents are going to give you an insincere "good job" and not look at you at all. They can't see that you're drowning in schoolwork. They don't know that you haven't talked to your friends in weeks. You get nothing. You don't get to eat tonight. You should be doing something productive.* I sit on the bathroom floor. No one is home so I cry. I don't remember how the scissors got into my hands. I grab a new sweatshirt before mom and dad get home. I smile and ask how their day was when they get home. They rant to me about stupid coworkers and projects being pushed back. I go into my room and cringe as I change into my pajamas. I lay on my bed and try to sleep. I awake in the night, sweat beating down my head, my fingers tingling, and my face sticky from tears. I try to sleep again but end up watching YouTube, scared of the dreams that lurk in my subconscious.

My alarm goes off. It's 6 am.

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***Born to Fish, Forced to Do Algebra***  
***Or, A Star Child's First Voyage into the Interstellar Sea***

---

B.A. Martin

Hoshiko Fisher-Inoue lived with her parents on the frontier planet Hydria, located within the Aquamanile (formerly known as TRAPPIST-1) system.

Hydria was an Earth-like planet in that it was in the Goldilocks-zone of temperature and had the right atmosphere composition for humans. It differed from Earth in many ways: it had black vegetation in order to best collect the low light of Aquamanile's red dwarf star, it was 90% water, and it was tidally-locked. Most of Hydria's settlements were located on islands on the light side or close to the "ring" where the light side and dark side of the planet met; the ice there was thick enough to create lasting buildings, but with enough starlight to power the solar panels.

Hoshiko was 19 and uncertain of her life's trajectory, but she was absolutely certain she didn't want to do anything with mathematics. Her online pre-calculus course made her head spin on the best of days.

She stared at the online textbook, feeling like her brain was imploding, and gave up for the day. Deciding to do something both fun and immediately useful for survival on Hydria, she sent a text to her parents explaining where she would be fishing, and set off in the medium-sized boat from her family's dock. The boat was white with its name written in both romaji and katakana in Earth-sky blue: Tsurion and :-;~//.

The sky was clear and the winds were calm. It was a perfect day to spend out on a boat, and the green water, typical of Hydria, glinted softly under the yellow sky.

She reached a suitable spot and turned off the electric motor; solar panels would recharge the engine while it was off.

Hoshiko started her electronic music playlist on shuffle, and then got out her fishing supplies.

Hours passed as she caught fish, tossing the smallest back, and keeping the largest.

The song she was listening to stopped suddenly, and she glanced over at her small PC-and-phone device, sighing at the errant Wi-Fi symbol. What had happened to the internet satellites?

"Guess it's about time to head back, anyway" she said to herself. She would use the downloaded map data to return home safely. But then, her boat began to rock, and the winds picked up like a storm had suddenly been born.

A criss-crossed shadow loomed over her, beginning small and rapidly increasing in size within seconds and she was thrown against the deck of her boat when the net slammed against her.

Her head throbbed and her vision blurred, and for a moment, she was insensate. When she came back to herself seconds later, she struggled against the netting. It didn't seem to be made of just plant fibers, judging by its strength, and no matter how she strained and struggled, the net seemed weighted to the floor.

Fear began to set in. She had pepper spray, but that was in the cabin; Hoshiko had never actually needed it. Not until now.

Then there was a thud, and the boat rocked heavily to one side. The sound was soon followed by another impact and another near-capsize. She managed to look around, and saw two beings out of science-fiction media: quadrupedal lifeforms, dog-like and cat-like but with no visible ears, and bizarrely, shorts on their hindquarters. Both had short tan fur on their bodies and white hair on their heads.

Even after having spread into the sea of stars, and after 500 years of the first step outside Earth, no-one had seen an actual alien.

Hoshiko wished she wasn't humanity's first (un)lucky winner.

"Let me go!" Hoshiko cried.

Ignoring her, the alien in her vision began to speak to the other. It sounded like dogs barking and snakes hissing.

Then the netting was being moved—and her with it. She was rolled like a burrito by the aliens pushing her with their snouts, and soon was only able to wriggle. Then, remarkably, they both stood on two legs and carefully lifted her.

The aliens carefully placed her into a hovering container of some kind. It seemed to be some kind of animal crate, and at this indignity, she began to scream for help in the vain hope that other humans were around. But Hoshiko knew it would be fruitless, and moreover, she knew that any search parties would not come for at least three more hours when her parents realized she wasn't back and hadn't contacted them.

Something latched onto the top of the crate, and the aliens, still standing, grabbed scissors—they had thumbs!—and, reaching through the metal bars of the cage, cut the netting and then her clothes. Hoshiko dared not move with those sharp scissors so close to her chest and then her femoral artery. After that, they pulled the destroyed netting and ruined clothes out of the crate and threw them onto the boat.

When the aliens brought her inside the nearby starship, she knew that she would not be returning home for a long time, if ever; and it was then that she stopped screaming and started to cry.

-

Time passed uncertainly, and Hoshiko eventually fell asleep.

She was woken when the door to the room opened, sliding with a grating sound. The same kind of non-human lifeforms appeared. However, they weren't the same individuals that had captured her. Their hair was black instead of white, and one had gray body fur.

Hoshiko shrank back in her cage, cold and hungry and thirsty, and watched the lifeforms warily. Like the ones before, they were wearing pants on their hindquarters, and Hoshiko cringed at her nakedness; never before had she felt so much like a wild animal.

But they made no move to hurt her. Instead, they brought in a small wheeled crane that picked her cage up and placed it on its bed. Then two of the lifeforms grabbed rope with their mouth and tied it around themselves. She was reminded of Huskies pulling sleds.

Just outside the ship were the two who had abducted her—but they were being held down by others of their species.

Then they passed through a bustling area that was filled with many different lifeforms of varying species, some of whom paused to stare at her. Hoshiko sat down with her legs pulled against her chest and arms circling her ankles. She did not want to watch the aliens watch her.

She looked up again when she heard strange sounds, all alien and all animalistic, and different from the sounds of before.

As soon as she had processed that, they brought the crane inside a strange enclosure, where it placed her cage on the ground. The lifeforms undid their leashes and left the enclosure, locking the gate behind them. Then the cage she was in fell apart, releasing her.

The enclosure was more like an enormous cage, so Hoshiko couldn't climb out. She swiveled her head and body, taking in her surroundings, and realized there were multiple alien biomes: savannah, rainforest, temperate forest, and tundra.

Hoping the temperate forest would have a lake or pond, she moved into that area. As she did, she noticed small drones begin to follow her. Each had a visible camera and no obvious weapons.

She found a pond and sat down on a boulder. A drone followed her, but hovered above her head. Homesickness swelled in her heart, and she sat there

for an hour, switching between crying from her situation and numb dissociation. Then a thought occurred to her: math.

Math was universal, right? These aliens had spaceships, so they had to know math; and they also had to know that anyone who could do advanced math was not a wild animal.

She stood up as fast as she could and rushed to the muddy sand. There, she began to draw dots:

$$\begin{aligned} \bullet + \bullet &= \bullet\bullet \\ \bullet\bullet + \bullet\bullet\bullet &= \bullet\bullet\bullet\bullet\bullet \\ \bullet\bullet \times \bullet\bullet\bullet &= \bullet\bullet\bullet\bullet\bullet\bullet \end{aligned}$$

Then, she drew out primes:

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A drone took interest in what she was doing and flew in close. She ignored it and wrote out more math, desperate to prove her sapience. She then drew dots near Arabic numerals up to 21—because it was a lot of effort drawing out all those dots—and wrote out addition, subtraction, division, multiplication, and even some linear algebraic equations using those numerals until she heard a twig breaking behind her.

She whirled; one of the caniform-like lifeforms was nearby. This one had short gray fur around most of its body and had both a mop of white hair on its head and white hair around its neck. And, like all the others, it was wearing pants. This close, she could see more details: their paws had one thumb, each on the inside of their forelegs.

Hoshiko dared to hope. “Hoshiko,” she said, a hand over her chest.

“Hoshiko,” they repeated, voice clear and human-like. Their long-as-they-were-tall, tail curved around the side of their body, and the tip pointed toward their own chest.

Then they opened their mouth, but the sounds that came out this time were not human-like.

Hoshiko copied the sounds: low bark, two high barks, and a hiss.

Almost overwhelmed by relief, she was caught off-guard when Three-barks-one-hiss began barking again, and then flicked their tail in the direction of the gate. “Hoshiko,” they said, prompting her to follow their slow steps.

They led her to what turned out to be an apartment complex and into a room. She cautiously followed. Then they began to point at objects. It took Hoshiko a moment, but she realized they wanted to create a translation program, and she then eagerly set to work.

Progress with the translator was slow, but Hoshiko always looked forward to meeting with her tentative friend, Three-barks-one-hiss (she still had no idea what their name meant).

By her estimate, she had been living with the [Bark hiss yowl] species for a month now. Privately, she thought of them as “canixen” (a combination of “caniform”, the dog and cat common ancestor, and “xeno”).

But while she had managed to explain her needs (water, food, pants, a shirt), she was still baffled by the math Three-bark-one-hiss would have her do every day. (It was written in the Arabic numerals she could understand.) The translator hadn’t managed to convey her dislike of math at all to them, so she gave up within the first week and decided to try again later. The math wasn’t too bad; it was just solving linear algebra equations, but she was worried they would move on to harder math soon.

Mostly, though, she spent a lot of time missing her family and planet.

“Hello,” her canixen friend said to her. Actually, they barked the canixen greeting, and her own recorded voice came out afterward. They had their own translator ear-piece in one of their ear-holes. “Good information now. Bad two [Bark hiss yowl] tell planet location. You go home soon. Humanity misses best math-person.”

She blinked, bemused at being called “Humanity’s best [mathematician].” “I’m not good at math, actually. I only did it to prove...” — here she paused and made sure to use words the translator knew, “... I’m like you.”

Three-barks-one-hiss drooped visibly. “You dislike math?”

“Yes, I’m not the best at math. Other humans are much better.”

There was a moment of silence before Three-barks-one-hiss turned around, activated what she knew to be a phone of some sort, and began barking furiously. The translator worked to spit out what it could.

“She doesn’t like math! Humans are not stuck at [hiss hiss] level!”

Three-barks-one-hiss turned back to her, and even through their species and language barrier, she had seen them enough to know they were embarrassed. There was a long, awkward pause.

“Let’s just forget that. You go home soon.”

## *A New Form of Serotonin*

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Zoey Carty

I sleep because I enjoy the muffled sound of the world  
much more than the chaos. I used to  
spend my time involving myself  
but the echoing, profane arguments turned from  
nails on a chalkboard to an  
ordinary Sunday night.

My emotions torrentially drowning my conscious,  
eating my mind alive. I say none of it affected me,  
but I suppose neither did the fast-food last night.  
So, I turned to something that gave me more peace.

Serotonin released in my lucid-dreaming body.  
endless fantasies  
endless identities I could portray as.  
I wanted to be teleported anywhere but here—  
and I could.

Dozing off,  
counting sheep as they leaped over the same  
picketed fence. The loud fighting squeezed its  
way into my dreams so the story could have a better plot.

It's no joke that sleeping is the best way to escape reality.

## *A Jest Rivalry*

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Ashley Streng

It all started the day my dad hung our worn window-sized Navy flag on the siding of our 1870s house. It was the Friday of Coast Guard week in downtown Grand Haven, the day before the Grand Parade, and my dad was 20 feet in the air, the old, rickety ladder shaking slightly under him as it struggled to stay upright. He was determined that Mr. Smith, our neighbor who was a former Coast Guard member, would see the flag tomorrow from the parade route perpendicular to our house. My dad and Mr. Smith already followed a ritual of shouting “GO NAVY!” and “GO COAST GUARD!” whenever they saw each other, but this year, my dad wanted to take it a bit further. And when our neighbor spotted the strategically placed Navy flag on Saturday, he decided to do the same.

A formal letter, with an official Coast Guard stamp on its front, was sent to our house the day after the parade.

*Dear, Chris and Kristi Streng.*

*I write to inform you of the flag fraternization you expressed this Coast Guard. You seem to have mistakenly hung the wrong flag yesterday, however, there is no need to worry. With this letter, you should find a more suitable flag, and it is my wish that you put it to good use and hang it up on that lovely house of yours.*

*Best regards, Mr. Smith, former Coast Guard Member.*

My dad knew the letter and Coast Guard flag were meant as a joke; however, he was less amused by the Coast Guard bumper stickers slapped onto the back of his minivan. It was time to continue this jest rivalry and beat our pranking neighbor at his own game.

It was nine o'clock the night after the Grand Parade, just a few hours after Mr. Smith had bombarded us with his letter, flag, and bumper stickers, when I heard excited voices coming from the hallway outside my room.

“I am so excited! The decorations look so cool!” I heard my sister, Lauren, say.

“They do! I call doing the banner by the way because I have a good idea for it,” my other sister, Maddy, responded. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was curious, so I decided to keep listening.

“No fair! How about we do it together? You write, and I will draw.”

“Fine, just come on! We need to get Ashley and go!”

Out of nowhere, my older sister, Maddy, burst into my room, pushing the door so hard with her hands that it swung wildly backward on its creaky hinges and hit its familiar dent in the wall with a bang. I turned my head so fast towards the noise that I soon felt a burning pain in my neck as the effects of whiplash started to sink in. My other sister, Lauren, entered cautiously behind Maddy after having jumped at the door crashing into the wall, her body vibrating slightly as she struggled to hold in her excitement.

“Ashley, get your shoes on!” Maddy ordered. Her face was dotted pink, and her words spilled out of her mouth, blending together as her lips scrambled to catch up to her whirring brain. “We are going on a secret mission! No time to explain!”



“Umm, okay!” I responded. I had no clue what could be stirring up such a commotion from them, but I decided the details did not matter as long as I got to join in on the secret mission too.

A short five minutes later, I was walking down the street with my red, white, and blue striped flip-flops on. Earlier, I had attempted to put my tennis shoes on instead as they were better for walking on the city’s uneven, broken sidewalk in the dark, but I gave up after two minutes of struggling with the laces and decided that I would just walk in the grass to avoid tripping.

My parents were walking just ten feet ahead of me, their arms fighting to hold a wide array of Navy decorations they had purchased from the store earlier. I listened as their loud voices combined with the crickets’ racket to create an odd vocal assembly of sorts. Luckily, most of our neighbors were no younger than seventy-five, so the havoc happening outside did not disturb them much because it was drowned out by their snoring.

Unlike my parents, my sisters were attempting to be sneaky by speaking in hushed tones and zigzagging on the sidewalk to avoid sticks. I started to speed up to bridge the five-foot gap between us so we could all be spies together, but I stopped when a bright light caught my eye. At first, I thought the moon somehow slipped past the dark, looming clouds in the sky, but when I looked up, I found that the light belonged to the first streetlamp on our block. The lamp’s artificial light cast a yellow-tinted spotlight on the ground in front of me, and when I walked through the glowing ring of light, my pajamas illuminated so I could just make out the outline of my two-piece Dora and Boots pajamas. I immediately felt much too exposed for a spy, so I quickly stepped out of the light and continued walking, now making sure to give a wide berth around every streetlamp until, seven streetlamps later, we finally made it to Mr. Smith’s house.

“Let the fun begin,” my dad said. He dropped the decorations on the sidewalk and started giving orders. “Alright, Maddy and Lauren, you two take the streamers and the banner, Ashley, you take the flags and bumper stickers, and mom and I will have the balloons.” Immediately, Maddy and Lauren seized their decorations and ran up the driveway for the house, the echo of their excited footsteps bouncing off the surrounding houses in the deserted street. My parents handed me the letter-sized flags and stickers and followed my sisters to the front of the house, tearing apart the plastic encasing the balloons as they walked. The balloons seemed to have soaked up the humidity of the hot August night, as my parents were having a difficult time tearing them apart from each other.

I began tiptoeing to the front of the house, searching for a spot to put the Navy flags, but soon stopped to admire the Smith’s property. They had a wide driveway, with a red stripe in the middle that was perfectly sized to fit between their car’s wheels when they parked, and there were small cracks where the Michigan snow had expanded the concrete. Their yard had impossibly green grass that was always well maintained and was closed off from the sidewalk with a 3-foot-tall white picket fence. The fence opened at a stone walkway that curved a path from the side of the driveway to the front of the house, where it stopped at a small front porch with an overhang and bright yellow door. I had always loved that door and thought it contrasted very well with the house’s navy-blue siding, black shingles, and white trim. Besides the yellow door, the house was similar to many of the other houses on the block

with its three-story build and underground basement. Due to its clear-cut design and well-maintained “everything,” the Smith’s house looked like it was pulled straight out of a magazine.

I was so excited to mess up that perfect, just-like-every-other-house-look with our Navy decorations. My parents had already started on the balloon arch, their faces a deep red as they struggled to blow up the stiff balloons, and my sisters had already put streamers over the windows and the fence and were just finishing up their “GO NAVY!” poster. Jumping back at the realization that I had been staring at the Smith’s property for the past five minutes, I quickly wandered over to the stone pathway and got to work setting the flags on either side of it, making a space of two steps between each flag. I was almost halfway through when my sisters walked up to me, having already finished their two jobs.

“Hey, can we take some flags, Ashley? We want to put some over there,” Lauren asked, pointing toward the flower baskets hanging from the front porch.

“Sure!”

“Okay, cool. How about we separate the flags by age then, so it gets done faster.”

“Okay!” I was excited about doing the flags, but I was most eager about the bumper stickers, so I was glad to share the flags. I gave eight flags to Maddy, seven to Lauren, and kept five for myself. And then, because I was so excited about the stickers, I gave the remaining three flags to the both of them.

Two minutes later, we had made real progress. My parents were tying up the finished balloon arch, my sisters had finished with the streamers, banner, and flags, and were now sword fighting with long sticks they found lying around on the sidewalk, and I had just pressed the last bumper sticker onto the Smith’s red Jeep.

That is when we heard the sound. A small creak, sounding like weight being placed on an old floorboard, broke through the sound of crickets, piercing the otherwise silent night. A second later, the front porch headlight flickered on, its dim lighting blinding in the pitch-black darkness. Mr. Smith had heard us! Our cover was about to be blown!

“Run!” my dad hissed, trying but failing to be subtle. And so we did. We scrambled out of the Smith’s yard and started racing down the driveway and its adjoining sidewalk. As we ran, I could feel a giggle bubbling up inside all of us, but we managed to stifle it for three lamp posts, a distance we hoped was out of our neighbor’s earshot. And then we stopped running and turned to each other, taking in all the tousled hair, sweaty faces, and tangled leftover decorations. And then we just laughed, and laughed, and laughed! We created a loud, breathless chorus of laughter that was bound to wake up even our most deafened neighbors.

“We are definitely doing this again,” my dad said.

“YES!” My sisters and I responded in unison.

“As long as we get better balloons next time, I am in,” my mom said. My sisters and I cheered in response, our parents laughing as we began jumping up and down and twirling in circles in excitement. We would do this again; we would continue this jest rivalry.

# *Unreal*

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Olivia Clark



## *Photography*



## *Concealed Living*

Ashley Streng

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*Photography*

# *Jelly*

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Daisy Dyk



*Photography*



## *Love Story*

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Beverly Kerr



*Photography*

## *The Lion, the Witch, and the Crystal Shop*

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Brendan Harris

I don't know why I remember our trip to the crystal shop. Looking back on it, a visit to a curio shop devoted to a hobby I could have cared less about really shouldn't have stuck with me the way it does now. Yet, I can still picture every detail of it with remarkable clarity, despite my measured hostility towards spirituality that had been passed down to me by my close-minded father, who would always laugh at anyone who dared to find meaning outside themselves. I would have followed in his footsteps, too, if it hadn't been for you.

I had just met you the week prior, though we had shared the same classes for a couple of months. It's funny really, how somebody you only ever exchange occasional pleasantries with can grow to become an integral, necessary part of your life. Our initial plans to hit up the college gym were quickly foiled by both my realization that I didn't need to impress you with the traditional masculine ritual of "getting swole" and your eagerness to introduce me to your friend, Adrian, who just so happened to be working at a burger place nearby. However, the dimly buzzing lights and the fading American diner aesthetic of the burger joint did nothing to quell the nervousness that had been building in me ever since the prospect of a first date had been proposed. We had just sat down at a table for two, with the only physical thing between us being a gourmet platter of chicken nuggets and fries that we opted to share on this high-class first date. Despite us foregoing anything classy, I still felt those spaces between our icebreaker questions of "Where did you go to school?" and "What did you think of last night's film class?" and especially "How'd you find me on Bumble?". While I can't particularly remember my responses, I can distinctly recall just how measured they were, as I tried my hardest to bend my insecure personality into one that came off as cool and collected, as if my shy awkwardness could somehow be mistaken for intentional withholding. Nonetheless, those chicken nuggets went down one by one, leaving only the space of the table separating us. In this space was a tense silence, the unspoken uncertainty of the continuation of the date. Had my responses measured up? Would we continue today's date? Or would it die in the half-truth of an excuse to get going? In this moment, as I took in the contrast of the fierce scarlet in your hair and the pale blues in your eyes, I saw those thin lips curl into a familiar smirk as you answered my questions with one of your own: "Want to go check out the crystal shop across the street? It's one of my favorites."

This question, as innocent as it may seem, left me mortified. I had known about your witchy qualities before, but this offer made these qualities tangible as my perverted memories of ended friendships and heartbreak with those who identified with the same practice came flooding to mind. However, something inside me still left me uttering "Yes." Maybe it was simply out of polite courtesy. Or maybe it was genuine curiosity, wanting to see what made a bubbly soul like yours find solace in what I could only see as rocks. Either way, we walked across the street that day. It was almost as if you knew my reservation, too, as you clasped my hand for the first time as we walked across the cracking concrete and overgrown asphalt. I know that everyone



remembers their firsts, even if in this case it was as simple as your hand intertwining with mine, causing butterflies to flutter through my insides, but that gesture was enough to ward off that anxiety that tried to fill my head. Having crossed the street, I faced my first culture shock as the shop came into view. This den of witchcraft and wizardry wasn't dark and intimidating, but reserved and unassuming, with uneven white brick walls and forest green windows. Despite this, I couldn't help feeling that tall glass door looming over me like a spirit, almost daring me to leave our world and step into the realm of mysticism. As the door opened and a light chime greeted my ears, we stood for a moment, taking in the rows and rows of various minerals and crafts, most of them boasting pearlescent varieties of pastel pinks, baby blues, and every other selection available from Roy G Biv. The welcoming aroma of sage and lemon incense clashed with my deeply founded fears, almost making my worry about the subject matter of the store seem ridiculous in nature. In that moment, I turned to you, and saw what I can only describe as a blissful trance. Your interest in the place plainly showed on your face, and even though I couldn't see reason in the stars, I still wanted to explore the constellations that lit up in your eyes as you began describing the store in so much detail that I could've sworn that you ran the place. You had an explanation for everything, from the intricately woven dreamcatchers to the most mundane of granites and onyx, yet you still had me hanging on every word. As we explored the shelves of mysticism and astrology, I felt my predispositions melt away as I was able to view this previously outlandish hobby with new perspective and light, and I found it equally entrancing and mystifying.

As we paced the small confines of the shop, we found our way to the incense section. You were eager to have me smell them, giggling and shoving them up to my nose while chanting, "Smell it! Smell it!" It would be wrong of me not to admit that this got me laughing, too, as the cool smells of honey, hibiscus, and various herbs all separately found their way into my nostrils. Not long after this, my eyes fell upon the first familiar section in the store: candles. The comfort this familiarity gave me showed on my face, as you turned to me and said, "Oh, you like candles? These ones smell good!" Seeing an opportunity to make my room smell, well, tolerable, I quickly started going through them. All of the candles had star signs on them, ranging from the fierce Gemini to the bold Sagittarius. However, one caught my gaze for a little longer: the sign of my own birth, Pisces. In that moment, I don't know what drew me to that candle. It could have been a peace offering, an attempt to show that I was trying to show interest in this strange hobby of yours. Or perhaps it was the smell of relaxing chamomile and lavender that greeted me upon lifting it to my nose. Or, more bluntly, maybe it was just that I like candles. Either way, I did the one thing I didn't expect to do that day: buy something from the crystal shop of horrors.

That candle quickly found its way to my desk, with the star sign jar fitting comfortably on my cluttered top shelf. Even though the candle burned up all its wax long ago, that jar still waits to be reused, sitting on my desk as both a reminder to go back to the shop and as a symbol of that day of firsts. As much space as it takes up, I still let it sit there, at least until I can get that last bit of wax out of it. Not only does it remind me of that date, it also serves to remind me to challenge my stances on things from time to time, as someone may come around at any moment to help me see the world differently.

## *Acid Rain*

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Alex Fuller

(Inspired by a selfless teacher)

I am alone on the peak of progression  
picturing what could have been.  
I imagine a beautiful garden  
that touches the infinite horizon.  
If just given time, they could blossom.  
But as I open my eyes, I am greeted with  
the dark and lonely skies of preventable problems.

Liquefied hatred pours from stubborn clouds  
running their mouths without reason.  
My young flowers weaken from placebo promises  
that continue to sour every season.

Of course, I want to protect them.  
Nurture them.  
Help them when no one else can.  
But my umbrella is too small to save them all  
from the acidic and parasitic rainfall.

I hold all the keys, but they are covered with rust  
from those I can no longer trust.  
They don't care about my beautiful flowers  
that take effort to prosper.  
Because every hour they rather hunger and yearn  
for more money and power  
than to help them learn.

Even so, I know there is still beauty  
somewhere deep in this never-ending rain and fog.  
The few that do bloom in this gloom come back to me.  
Saying kind words that subside the pain and suffering:

I have grown beyond the clouds  
that tried to block my light  
thanks to your care and dedication  
that helped me inspire  
to go ever higher.

# River Voices

## Contributors

**Anonymous, or Leo**, is a music student planning to change the world with his artistry and his friends. He enjoys creating stories and using his voice to uplift the communities he is a part of. He has yet to come out to his family. His piece “Leo” won 3rd Place for Creative Nonfiction in MCC’s 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Nadia Bushinski** is a first-year college student at MCC pursuing an ASA/transfer program to Ferris State University. Since she was young, Nadia has always enjoyed sharing her thoughts and experiences through writing. She believes writing is a form of therapy and believes that it has helped her to work through difficult emotions and times. In her free time, Nadia enjoys weightlifting, shopping, and spending quality time with friends and family. Her best piece of advice to anyone who is going through challenging times is “Never give up. Every day is another chance to create the life you want; you just have to start.” Her piece “Juvie Saved Me” won 2nd Place for Creative Nonfiction in MCC’s 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Dorothy Campbell** is a mom trying to set a good example for her three teenagers. Dorothy is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Zoey Carty** has been writing since the age of six. She was handed a notebook and a box of colored pencils. Since then, she keeps a notebook on her bedside table. When there are hard days, or she has an idea that sparks her interest, she writes these concepts down and slowly revises them over time in hopes that others can relate.

**Diana Casey** has been exploring behind-the-scenes in theater productions sewing and serving in the wings as part of the wardrobe crew. In art, she is exploring abstract visuals that led to the composition of her ekphrastic, abstract poetry submission for *River Voices*. The current project on her worktable is an ekphrastic art presentation based on a poem. These forms of creative adventures feed her soul. “The tip of the iceberg,” one of her colleagues said about art, theater, music, costume design, and poetry. The product of artistic endeavors is often the result of many hours of manipulating and practicing a particular art form. The observer in the study of the final presentation can only imagine the time and resources behind the final product.

**Olivia Clark** plans on transferring to Grand Valley after Muskegon Community College in order to receive a degree in Business. During her free time, she loves to hang out with her friends or work on anything art related.

# River Voices

## Contributors

**Candace Cloud** is on her second attempt obtaining an associate's degree at MCC. While going through her mid-life crisis, she decided self-improvement was the way to evolve, and she now enjoys learning and expanding her brain to the brim. She works full-time at Trinity Health of Muskegon in the Registration Department. She enjoys crafting, wood working, writing, creating anything with glitter, and she knows life is short and precious and just wants to enjoy her time on this planet exploring and laughing as much as possible. "Don't believe everything you think unless it's the good stuff." Candace is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Emily Curtis** is a 19-year-old writer and poet. She acknowledges her writing abilities as gifts from God and finds much of her inspiration from nature, personal experiences, and her Christian faith. When she's not writing or doing homework, she enjoys running, driving down backroads with some good CDs, serving at her church, and spending time with her beloved grandpa, her family, and her overly-excitable dog. Her pieces "Searching" and "Coattails" won 2nd and 3rd Places for Poetry in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Alanna Davidson** is a psychology student who enjoys traveling anywhere she can find and seeing the world's mind through others' eyes. She finds inspiration by starting new adventures and meeting new people.

**Savanna Donahue** is a current MCC student. Their piece "Arnold" won 2nd Place for Art in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Daisy Dyk** is an Early College student looking to pursue a career in Biochemistry. She loves to travel and take pictures of all the places she goes. Her piece "Nevada Falls" won 2nd Place for Photography in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Ellie Dyk** is a graphic design artist who specializes in character design. She loves to gain inspiration by traveling.

**Kate Erdman** is a self-taught digital artist who uses art and bright colors as a form of therapy. She aspires to become a psychologist and practice art therapy to share this with others.

**Adrianna Espinoza** is a current MCC student and a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Andrea Figueroa** is an art student who is planning on majoring in Art Education at GVSU. She loves drawing and, hopefully, will sell her artwork as her business one day. Her piece "Let's Go" won 1st Place for Art in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

# River Voices

## Contributors

**Alex Fuller** is a future English major who loves writing and telling stories. He believes that storytelling, either through short stories or poetry, has the power to make an impact on someone's life. He hopes to one day be able to touch people's hearts with words the same way his favorite writers have done for him. His piece "Inky Scar" won 3rd Place for Creative Nonfiction in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest, and his piece "Lilacs in the Snow" won 2nd Place for Fiction in the 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest. Alex is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Evan Gergen** is a student at MCC in the Associates of Science and Arts program. Evan spends his free time playing video games with his brother and friends.

**Donna Ginn** is a lifelong learner at MCC. She is a student exploring new possibilities every day. Donna loves the cello and art fabric hobbies. Her piece "Women Without Nightgowns" won 1st Place for Poetry in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Sidney Gould** is a student, like many, navigating the chaotic experiences of the world through poetry and fiction, using writing to bridge the gap between reality and the wonders of imagination. Her piece "The Creek" won 2nd Place for Fiction in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest. Sid is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Malachi Graves** is a dual-enrolled student who attends White Cloud High School. He plans to go to college and join the military.

**Dana Hall** is a playwright, actor, and mental health therapist. Dana has had dozens of plays produced across the US and internationally. Her play "Sidewalk Psychic" won MCC's 2022 10-Minute Play Contest—*Brains and Beauty*.

**Brendan Harris** is an English major who is currently pursuing a degree in teaching. He hopes to transfer to Central Michigan after graduating this year. He spends his free time practicing music with his band and writing stories and song lyrics. His piece "a deadly dull" won 1st Place for Fiction in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing Contest and 3rd place at the statewide LAND competition. Brendan is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Jane Hoppe** is a graphic design student and prospective illustrator currently living in Holland. She is an avid enjoyer of petting cats, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and bingeing queer horror fiction podcasts. Her best ideas usually come during the long drive home from class while daydreaming to the indie folk band The Crane Wives. Her piece "Post Street" won 3rd Place for Art in the 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest, and her piece "Two-Way Mirror" won 1st Place for Fiction.

# River Voices

## Contributors

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

**Leah Johnson** is a student who plans to graduate in 2023 with her Associate Degree in Science and Arts and hopes to work after graduation and continue photography as a hobby or professionally in the future.

**Logan Kahl** is currently going to MCC for Graphic Design and wants to go into UI design. He is also an aspiring comic book writer and artist. His piece “I Almost Escaped” won 3rd Place for Art in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Beverly Kerr** loves to take pictures and make people happy with how they turn out. She is a Graphic Design major and loves to create and design.

**Candice Kirkendoll** loves to write and plans to get a degree in English to further pursue her love of words. She one day hopes to publish a book of poetry.

**Lance Klemple** is truly the embodiment of a poet running on coffee and the stamina of his pen on the page. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community and an advocate for mental health, he strives for his readers to feel the sunlight, so they no longer feel stuck in the shadows of society. Driven mad by creativity, he has found himself in language. Lance dreams of a world filled with love, light, and even more poetry. His piece “The Man in the Mirror” won 2nd Place for Poetry in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest. Lance is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Kenna LaCount** is an English major with a knack for procrastination, self-pity, and sleeping in. She aspires to be a professional bookworm in the form of an English professor and will be pursuing this dream at Central Michigan University. As much as she would like to believe she is unique, Kenna is your typical Taylor Swift-listening, book-reading, circle glasses-wearing, rain-loving, lowercase-typing, wannabe manic pixie dream girl. Her piece “The Diary of a Fat Girl” won 1st Place for Creative Nonfiction, and her piece “Lucifer and Icarus are of the Same Cloth” won 3rd place for Poetry in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest. Kenna is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

# River Voices

## Contributors

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

**B. A. Martin** likes reading, writing, drawing, and playing video games. Their favorite genres are fantasy and science fiction. Growing up, they wanted to be an astronaut, but now, they want to be a lab tech.

**Emma Marshall** is an early college student from Spring Lake. She enjoys classic literature and likes to spend her free time with a cup of tea, a tray of pastries, and BBC One.

**Ryan Mixer** is a college student who spent the last sixteen hours panicking to finish this story and went through a lot of self-doubt while creating it. He originally wasn't planning on submitting but decided to in the hopes that it would connect with or help someone. He also really likes mac and cheese pizza. His piece "Kalopsia" won 3rd Place for Fiction in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Erik Nelsen** is majoring in English and wants to be a teacher. He has a Bachelor's degree in Filmmaking and wants to teach film classes along with English. His favorite film directors include Hitchcock, Kubrick, Keaton, Truffaut, and De Palma. He loves cooking, cocktails, history, old cars, pizza, theme parks, Halloween, and audio equipment. His piece "San Francisco Bay" won 1st Place for Photography in MCC's 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest. Erik is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Jessie Nieboer** is going to school for Machining and has a passion for most things creative. Within the past couple of years, he has started exploring photography, drawing, building vehicles, and playing music.

**Bright Olaoni** is a newcomer in the sports photography world. He hopes to capture great pictures that can also show a deeper meaning to athletes. His piece "Jaylet" won 3rd Place for Photography in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Taylor Ottinger** is a very active student-athlete who hopes to one day move to Florida. In the meantime, she enjoys capturing pictures of her Australian Shepard in the snow. She also enjoys expressing her feelings through different types of writing, especially poems. Her piece "Good" won 1st Place for Poetry in MCC's 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.



# River Voices

## Contributors

**Emma Patulski** is a Graphic Design student who aspires to see her art worn as a fashion statement. She loves digital art and takes inspiration from nature. Her piece “Panic Attack” won 2nd Place for Art in MCC’s 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Megan Rachow** is a Pre-Med student who loves to spend money on great experiences and books. She spends her time chasing life and making the most of her days. She finds inspiration in the people around her and takes it one day at a time. Megan is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Cayden Ritchie** loves being outdoors and doing things like fishing and hiking. He is currently working toward getting a degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Management and enjoys writing because it allows him to express himself and gives him a voice.

**Haylee Spicklemire** is an MCC student as well as a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Caitlyn Spoelman** is an Early College student in her last semester at MCC. She loves finding expression and connecting with others through dancing, writing, and many other artistic means.

**Rachel Springer** is a senior in high school who will study Environmental Science and hopes to capture the beauty of nature. She gets inspiration from the world around her and being outdoors

**Ashley Streng** is a junior in high school and a part of the Muskegon Community College Early College program. She enjoys the outdoors and exploring the people and nature that surround her. She is very passionate about adventure and learning new skills and hopes to inspire curiosity in the people she meets. Her piece “Nature in Pairs” won 2nd Place for Photography in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest. Her piece “Traveling Sunsets” won 1st Place for Photography in MCC’s 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest, and her piece “A Memory From My Elementary Education” won 1st Place for Creative Nonfiction in MCC’s 2023 Winter Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Gracie Sullivan** is a future Law student and wants to help those whose voices cannot be heard and those who don’t have the power to make change. She enjoys baking, walking along the beach, and watching the stars. She finds inspiration up where the stardust flies and the moon shines. Gracie is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

# River Voices

## Contributors

**Kelly Torz** is working to get into the Dental Hygiene program but loves art and frogs. Kelly draws in her free time and does have a degree in Art from another school. Her piece “Should We Say Something?” won 1st Place for Art in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Tori Vantamelen** is a Graphic Design student at MCC. Tori’s cover art design won 1st place in the Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Katherine Weesies** is a Business major who likes to take photos on her phone at random moments in her life. She thinks it’s important to capture not only the fun moments in life but also the calm and funny ones. Katie is also a member of Sigma Kappa Delta.

**Brooke Welch** is a food processing student who enjoys taking the time to capture minutes in her life that bring her joy and sharing them with others. Her piece “Winter” won 3rd Place for Photography in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

**Nex Wilson** is a student who wants to become a playwright. They enjoy being in shows and watching different productions. They enjoy playing video games, crocheting, and listening to music in their free time.

**Gabriel Williams** is an Engineering student who hopes to collect as many experiences in life as she can. She loves to people-watch and talk to strangers. She is inspired by classical artwork and the interesting dynamics between people. Her piece “And for a Moment, He Lived” won 2nd Place for Creative Nonfiction, and her piece “Three Roses” won 3rd place for Fiction in MCC’s 2022 Fall Creative Writing and Art Contest.

# **National English Honor Society Members**

## **Sigma Zeta Chapter**

Lance Klemple  
*President*

Adrianna Espinoza  
*Vice President*

Jennafer Lavette  
*Secretary*

Haylee Spicklemire  
*Social Media Coordinator*

### **Members**

Dorothy Campbell	Kenna LaCount
Candace Cloud	Jennafer Lavette
Adrianna Espinoza	Griffin Michelli
Alex Fuller	Mia Munding
Murphy Goins	Erik Nelsen
Sidney Gould	Megan Rachow
Brendan Harris	Haylee Spicklemire
Garrett Hook	Gracie Sullivan
Laurn Jackson	Zachary VanBuren
Lance Klemple	Katherine Weesies
Megan Kraley	

### **Faculty Advisors**

Sean Colcleasure  
Shauna Hayes

