

River Voices

Spring 2025

River Voices Spring 2025

Editors

Shauna Hayes
Sean Colcleasure

Assistant Editor

Kelli Loughrige

Student Editor

Jonah Lyn Hayes

River Voices is an annual literary magazine published by the English Department at Muskegon Community College. The 2025 Special Edition of the magazine showcases and celebrates work from the past sixty-six years as a way to commemorate and participate in the Centennial Celebration of Muskegon Community College. Works are included from current students as well as alumni, faculty, retired faculty, and staff.

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

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

If you would like to submit your creative work, we encourage submissions of poetry, prose, essays, art, and photography. Please visit: <https://www.muskegoncc.edu/departments/english-communications/> for further details.

Cover Artist: Anaida Avakova

Cover Artist Statement:

It was a privilege to illustrate the cover of the special edition of *River Voices*. My goal was to capture the rich and profound poetic history that has been cherished within the college and handed down through generations.

River Voices

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A Foreword for Looking Forward

Mary Tyler

I The Artist and You

I wrote a line in a poem once, years ago, that I still loathe-love: I wrote, “poetry will never save us,” and, even though that line still works in that poem from that time and that place, it dawns on me now that it is also a fat and odious lie. Sorry-not-sorry.

Poetry *does* save us.

All art saves us, or at least it *can* - when we pay attention; when we invite our senses; when we open our hearts and minds; when we let art *in*.

When we *participate*.

So, dear reader, thank you mightily! Because what you are doing right here and right now (with a copy of this special edition of ***River Voices*** in your hands) might feel small and quiet, and maybe even insignificant, I assure you that your participation in this is of the utmost importance.

As humans, as witnesses of art, and, more specifically, as *readers* of art, we can find a sort of literary balm, a salve that heals and then sometimes saves us. Art often heals us better than doctors and proctors, chiropractors and clergy. (Just think, for example, what those favorite songs do for you. And almost instantly. Art is transformative.)

While the politicians and talking heads, and the leaders and deceivers talk *at* us, art communes *with* us and asks that we take part.

The performer needs the spectator, the musician needs the listener, the painter needs the witness, the chef needs the foodie, the lead dancer needs the partner, and the writer needs the reader. When we write, sing, play the guitar, dance, paint, and make cool stuff out of other cool stuff, we deliberate, participate, and communicate. We interact with our time and place. We owe it to ourselves to make art, and we owe it to our audience, even when that audience is “just you”: one dear reader, right here and right now.

(The tree that falls in the woods does not make even a whisper of a sound if no living thing is there to hear it. Let us then answer our own Koan Question about literary art: the book is **not** written until it is read. No reader, no writer. I won’t budge on that one. That’s how necessary you are.)

Ask any live performer how important the audience is to their performance.

You are our audience, and we are thankful you are here.

Because of you, old writing will be new again.

Because of you, inspiration can work its magic again.

That's how it works.

That's *why* it works.

So, when you leaf through these leaves that we call pages, and you stumble upon a poem or story you want to read, a photograph you want to contemplate, you hold up your end of the bargain: you ignite the written word again, you breathe life into words that, left alone and unattended while this anthology is closed, will deflate or dissolve or die.

Because of you, an artistic communion takes place.

Well done, dear reader! It turns out we need each other after all. Thank you.

II

A Brief History of This Collection

We should all be proud of Muskegon Community College for supporting and heralding the liberal arts in ways that not every public school/college/university does. As the poster reads, “**EARTH** without **ART** is just *eh*” - lower case and anemic.

We human creators know at our core, viscerally, that creating purposeful art is what separates humans from sky and sand, pasta and pinto beans. We make art because we can.

For over 60 years, MCC has had a literary and visual arts magazine. Go, Jayhawks!

So, if you pay attention, you will hear some history in this collection. Writers young and old will tell stories of their world during their time and place, will tell of a world in crisis and a world in love.

You might hear of Watergate and Kent State. L.A. Riots and L.A. Fires, Missile Crisis and fearing ISIS, school shootings and protesters looting. Roe vs. Wade done and undone, leaders born and leaders killed, hostages taken and hostages returned, walls erected and others rejected, plagues of the flesh and plagues of the mind.

Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da! (Look it up, Young(er) Ones.)

There is no way to total it all, and of course, *the past is prologue*, but the folks in this anthology did their part too. They played the witness and then the writer. And through it all, what you'll read most is how we humans loved. We loved and lost and loved and lost again. We loved and won and loved some more and harder and fiercer and better than ever. And then we loved and loved again. How lovely is that.

Poetry saves us. All art saves us. You're welcome.

III

Finish This Foreword and Perhaps Pay it Forward

So, here's what is also truer than dirt: bridges will break again, planes will fall from the sky, politicians will mislead and lovers will lie, and breaking news will break a lot of stuff, and the voices will be loud and rude and sometimes wrong but always insisting.

But there are other voices too – these artistic and intrinsic and honest and kind and caring and creative voices. ***River Voices.***

What I mean to say is this: we're thrilled you're going to listen to some of these voices: past and present, but we also hope you invest in the voices of the future.

I heard there's this trend happening where we pay it forward – where we do some small gesture to help someone else (maybe a complete stranger), maybe we buy the coffee for the car behind us. (I have a Sister-Girlfriend who paints cute rocks cutely, and then she drops them all over the place for others to find. Park bench, curb, library, bike path, shoreline, bookstore, weed shop, gas station, spa. I love that. This world isn't going to come undone anytime soon because too many people are considerate to others.)

I'm just saying; I heard it's a thing!

So instead of buying just *one* copy of this very special issue, I'm going to buy at least two, maybe three copies if I'm feeling cash-forward, and I'm going to, literally, spread the word. Park bench, curb, library, bike path.

That's how it works.

That's why it works.

Read on!

Mary Tyler

P. S. A ginormous thanks to Shauna Hayes and Sean Colcleasure – editors and champions of the written and spoken word. You make MCC, the community, and the world a better place.
English teachers – am I right? Simply the best.

Note:

This magazine has gone by three different names:

Chanticleer (1959-1983) – named after the proud and sexy mythological rooster that summons the morning with his song.

Stark Naked (1991-1993) – certainly a rebellious reference to *Naked Lunch*, the 1959 antinovel by William S. Burroughs.

River Voices (1994-present) My very first staff and I came up with this name, pretending that what meanders through campus is an actual river, not a creek or a brook, a stream or a mere “habitat.”
Artists are such dreamers, and such liars.

The Beat Generation

Richard Rice

The Beat Generation we are called,
Our little minds and egos malled,
But you just wait awhile and see,
How much more Beat our children will be.

(Chanticleer, 1959)

Philosophy

Don Fries

He died!
I die
Thou diest
He, she, or it dies
We die
You die
We all die
I have the urge, You have the urge
All God's children have the urge The Jung urge
The Adler urge
The Freud urge

Got to go back
Got to get back
Got to get back
Where I came from.
Where's that?
Ask Freud.
Now Sigmund,
Why do I find It hard
To get out of
Bed in the morning?
Religion has the urge
The priest has the urge
What urge?

Ask Jung.
That which works is True
What is true is
Good
What is good is
God
I work - then
I'm true

I'm true - then
I'm good
I'm good - then
I'm God.
Who's God?
Ask William.

What is known is only in the mind.

See that tree
That's no tree
That's nothing
That's in my mind.
See me
I see nothing
Except what's in my mind.
If I turn around you'll be gone Who'll be gone?
Ask Davy?

I have a cause

You have a cause
All God's children have a cause.

Adam is the cause

Of Eve
of Cain
of Abel
of Sin
of Me

God caused Adam

Apples Serpents Floods
Warriors
Me
Who caused God?
Ask Plato.
What the Hell is this
An insane asylum?
Ask Ezra.

(Chanticleer, 1959)

In Agreement with Frost

Richard Rice

The white bright sand of the beach was searing and the sun's reflection from the water cramped the muscles around their eyes. The beach was broken only by the black hulks of several logs and three boys lying on a blanket. It was kept secluded by its remoteness and by the ridge of sand dunes that back-dropped the scene. From a portable radio on a corner of the boys' blanket flowed the hypnotic drone of a ball game on a hot day. The burning sun, the ball game and the rhythmic sloshing of the mild waves on the beach dulled the young restlessness of the boys to a quiet, subdued, content to do nothing but lie on the beach.

One of the boys rolled over onto his back and put his towel over his face to keep out the glare of the sun.

"Cripe Len," said a muffled voice through the towel, "Why da ya gotta go home before five?"

Len had the only car. The boys lived too far to walk.

"Aw, my old man wants me to help him build a fence after supper."

"Build a fence? Why does he want to do a silly thing like that?"

"I don't know, can't stand to see me layin' around all summer doing nothing, I guess. Says good fences make good neighbors or something."

"Couldn't you talk him out of it?"

"Naw," grunted Len. They lay for several minutes thinking of this and the many other burdens in life.

Now the other boy rolled onto his back and put a towel over his eyes. "My grandfather thought that once."

"Thought what?" mumbled Len.

"That good fences make good neighbors."

"Yeh? What da he do, build one?"

"Yeh, built one last summer."

"What's the matter didn't he have good neighbors?"

"Only had one neighbor I guess, Grandpa always got along pretty good with him."

"Why'd he build a fence then?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wanted him to be a better neighbor - just something that got into him - wanted to build a fence. Built it while his neighbor was on vacation. Big white picket fence - 'bout six foot high."

"Huh!" grunted Len. "That's what my old man is going to build - big white picket fence."

The boys said nothing for a while; the ball game droned on.

"What happened to your grandfather's fence?"

"Well, when the neighbor got back the first thing he did was to get a surveyor to survey it."

"Yeh," interrupted Len, "when my old man built a garage 'couple of years

ago the neighbors had it surveyed - wasn't over the line though. Was your grandfather's fence over the line?"

"Yeh, three foot. Neighbors raised hell about it." Why da your grandfather's neighbor have it surveyed?"

"I don't know. Anyway, it was over the line and he wanted Grandpa to move it back to the line or tear it down. My grandfather had put a lot of work into that fence, and he didn't want to move it back or tear it down. They argued about it for weeks."

The first boy rolled over on his side; the radio gained volume as the Gillette Blue Blade advertisement came on. They listened until the game resumed.

"What happened then?"

Well, my grandfather is a big man, big Hollander, stubborn as one too, and he isn't very old for a grandfather, only about fifty. So, when his neighbor told him he was going to take it to court if Grandpa didn't do something about that fence----my grandfather slugged him---- broke his jaw. Neighbor moved a while after that."

"What happened to the fence?"

"Grandpa tore it down."

"Yeh," murmured Len, "bet that's what'll happen to my old man, only trouble is my old man is smaller than our neighbor."

"Cripe, then why does he want to build a fence?"

"I don't know," grumbled Len, "just feels like building a fence I guess."

(Chanticleer, 1959)

Bravery

Pat Knop

Don't be afraid
said the world
to the boy
as he went
off to war
Don't be afraid
 Don't be afraid
cried the world

So he fought
without fear
this boy in the war
he fought without fear
 this boy

Then the world
cried to him
Be kind to mankind
 Be kind to the man
 Be kind...
 Be kind

but kill
 unselfish
but grab
 care
but shoot

So he killed
with kindness
this boy in the war
he shot in
a caring sort of way
He was kind
to mankind
for the world
told him so,
the world told
him so with a medal
on his chest
and a pat
on the back
and a word:
 Be Brave

So he faced the world
in a brave sort of way
He faced the world
 unafraid
and he killed himself
in a kind sort of way
and left a note -
 I was Brave.

(Chanticleer, 1959)

Memories

Berta Jane Janda

Since you passed on,
My fields have grown
Wilted, dim with decay,
For I remember the days
When we walked hand
In hand. The fields
Were greener then,
And fresh with dew.
The sun warmed our
Faces, and the brook
Laughed with our
Laughter. Once daffodils
Adorned the path
We walked together...
But all too soon
The fields faded, and
The dew was gone.
The brook no longer
Laughed, and the sun
Hid its face behind
A cloud -- after
God claimed you.
The daffodils died too,
And I was left alone.
Now brown leaves cover
The path where once
We walked. The wind
Howls mournfully over
The place where the
Flowers grew. Your hand
So warm in mine
Is no longer within
My reach.
But even in my grief
I know there is a
Tomorrow when the
Sun will shine again,
And once again we
Will stroll together
Hand in hand, along
An unending path,
In another Land.

(Chanticleer, 1960)

Silence

Robert Munro

In Webster's dictionary, silence is defined as being the absence of sound or noise. Clifford Morgan's book, "Introduction to Psychology," states that lack of awareness may induce a feeling of silence. Elements of both of these may partially account for a unique experience which happened to me; however, these definitions omit something which almost defies explanation, an eerie feeling which accompanies soundlessness. This sensation was heightened by the fact that it occurred on a bright, sunny day, whereas deep silence is ordinarily associated with the night or the early morning hours before dawn.

My friend Jerry and I were taking a trip to California. We had driven constantly for three days, stopping only to eat. The strain of long hours behind the wheel were taking their toll; we were both hollow-eyed and irritable. We decided to use a few hours for sight-seeing and taking pictures. Soon after making this decision we saw a sign which read "INSCRIPTION ROCK-Four Miles."

We turned off the highway on a narrow two-track road which led straight into the desert and seemed to disappear over the distant horizon. Three miles we drove and still nothing was in sight; the largest rocks to be seen were small pebbles lying along the road. Suddenly, the road ended, the flat desert disappeared; about fifty yards below us lay a range of huge rocks. This wasn't a canyon or a gorge; it looked as if the desert had actually sunk, and the sand and clumps of desert grass had changed to rocks of tremendous proportions. We left the car, walked to the edge of the abyss and peered down. Rocks, some as large as a small house, cluttered the ground; some were so close together as to make walking between them impossible. The walls were very steep, but steps carved in the side allowed passage to the bottom.

As soon as I began to descend, I was struck by the absolute silence of the place; it was like closing the front door and suddenly cutting off the street noise, only much more profound. My feet touched the rocky bottom. I stepped away from the wall and looked around. The rocks, which had looked large above, now loomed menacingly over me. I had the queer sensation that I was underwater. The bright Arizona sun, which had beaten so fiercely on the car, was reduced to a murky pall. The silence was so complete that pressure could be felt against the ear drums. When walking, our footsteps were inaudible, and our voices sounded muffled and strange. I had a desire to shout and break the silence but felt my voice would come out in an unnatural tone.

One of the largest rocks at the base of the steps proved to be "Inscription Rock." It was nearly twenty feet high and fifteen feet in diameter. About five feet from the ground a row of pictures and characters encircled the rock, like marking found in ancient caves, the meaning known only to the artist

and his contemporaries. As I stood there a cold chill ran up my back; had we stepped into a pre-historic cavern, with the monumental rocks standing as lonely sentinels to protect the sanctity of this place from intruders?

I know others felt the same strange, almost supernatural atmosphere of this place. A family who had followed us down were walking slowly and talking only occasionally in low tones. The two children, who normally would have been shouting and clambering over the rocks, stayed very close to their parents, strangely subdued. As though our minds were in accord, Jerry and I turned toward the steps and climbed back to the top.

When I again stood on the desert, I felt I had returned to civilization, as though for a short space of time we had turned the calendar back two thousand years. The desert, which had seemed silent before, was now noisy by comparison, although the only sounds were the rustling of the grey-brown desert grass and a distant airplane carving a silver trail across the sky. We climbed into the car and drove back to the highway, each of us silent with his own thoughts.

(Chanticleer, 1960)

Reflections

Joni Gregory

My harried spirit has no strength
To gaze upon this scene of arrogant
 raptures of my past.
The inflicted pangs and wanton happiness
 are lost in this archaic monument.
My home, the essence of my youth, is a
 visioned memory.
I am tortured by innocent days too tenuous
 to relive.
An omission, alive in a meaningless victory
 of pain is shadowing my heart.

(Chanticleer, 1961)

Nostalgia

Darlene DeVries

Instead of playing in the hayloft with my cousins, I would play on the front porch of a city house. No longer would I be able to pick the pears off the trees behind the back porch. Never again would I walk through the fields with my grandmother as she gathered asparagus for our dinner. How I would remember drawing cool water at the windmill. Sometimes we were allowed to ride on the back of the tractor or to help collect the eggs if we were there in the morning.

I remember every corner of the farm even though the auction took place ten years ago. I recall almost every piece of furniture in the old, weather-beaten farmhouse. I can picture the chickens parading all day across the front yard. Now that my grandparents have died, I long more than ever to return to those happy childhood days on the farm. I'd almost be glad to have the mean rooster peck me again. I long to see my grandfather's beehives that always frightened me so much.

Ten years ago I hadn't realized that the farm had seen her day, that it was time for her to retire. Perhaps someday I will forget the farm, my father's home for twenty-five years, but it will take a long time for the nostalgia which I suffer now to leave forever.

(Chanticleer, 1961)

Chanticleer of the Sea

Eva Steltzer

The stars were still shining in the dark cap above us. It had been a beautiful, soft night, and as we swiftly crossed the waters of the Equator, I could hear the impact of a few rebel waves playing upon the sides of our ship. Gradually, a gray veil began to spread across the skies and to dim the l, brightness of the stars.

That was my clue. Quietly I slid down from my watch-post and slipped into my blue shorts and heavy gray sweater, stuffed my bed with pillows to give the impression I was still there, and then tiptoed to the door carrying my shoes in my left hand. Holding my breath, I slowly opened the heavy door, expecting to hear at any moment a treacherous squeak, but my luck was still holding out. Throwing a last glimpse at the still room, I carefully closed the door behind me. Now I found myself in complete darkness as there were no windows in the hall and all the lights had been turned off. But I had gone through that corridor so many times that I encountered no difficulties in finding the door which led to the deck.

As I looked out, a cool, salty breeze wrapped itself around me and gently led me onto the deck and up to the rail. The fresh air which I had so profusely inhaled made me feel part of that calm world, and for no apparent reason I stood there, motionless, awaiting reverently for the announcement of Dawn. The gray of the sky was of a lighter tone now, and I could barely distinguish a few clouds scattered above us. I was becoming impatient and worried... Was I too late?... Had I missed it?...

But then...far off on the horizon, just above the water level, I saw what I had been waiting for - Venus, the Chanticleer of the Sea. Her presence in this flowing world was just as significant as the image of a cock outlined by an early sunrise, her faint yet captivating smile was as powerful as any cockcrow on land, and the first rays of sun surrounding her were just as colorful and beautiful as the rich plumage of the bird. Her reign, though short, was impressive, and as the sun pulled itself upwards, spreading over the glazing waters, my eyes were still fixed on the spot where minutes before I had for the first time seen the Queen of Dawn.

(Chanticleer, 1962)

Junior Collegiate Primer

Brian Mattson

See the professor?
He has many degrees. See him wander about.
He wishes he were not so smart.
Then he could ask someone which
room is his.

See the new teacher? This is her first class. She is very nervous.
Watch her begin writing her name
on the board.
Now she will need a new piece of
chalk.

See the beautiful girl?
She is parking her car.
Her car has just hit another.
It is lucky she is beautiful.

See the boy standing over there?
He is an English student.
His term paper is due today.
You cannot tell this?
He looks so rested?
He is asleep.

See the girl?
She is very pretty.
She sits next to me in class.
Going to school is fun.

See the fellow with the pipe in his mouth?
He is a freshman.
How does one tell?
He looks so sophisticated?
Take another look.
Perhaps next year he'll use tobacco.

See the bright-eyed student?
His notebook is full of completed assignments.
His mind teems with information.
He is early to all his classes.
You cannot see him?
He does not exist.

(Chanticleer, 1963)

Insight

Terry Burnham

From my familiar table at the Raj Tahi Hotel in Old Delhi I could see the river waters of the Jumna passing. My good friend and loyal audience, Edmund Randolph, was sitting across from me, and his fidgeting with his empty brandy glass annoyed me.

“Damn it, Edmund, will you either fill that thing, or else put it down! Can’t you see I’m concentrating?”

“Oh, sir, I’m sorry! Do forgive me? It is just that, well, you haven’t said a word for so long now that I am getting a little nervous just sitting here. Couldn’t we go for a walk, or do something? How about a game at Roldo’s? He’s a jolly good pool table you know!” Edmund pleaded.

“Leave? Here? Now? Edmund sir, what do you mean?” I snapped at him, somewhat scaring the poor old boy.

“Oh, no, not if you don’t want to sir! Pardon me, sir, I am sorry!”
“Edmund!” I growled and hit the table with my fist. That really made him leap for the sky.

“Sir?” He looked at me wide eyed and erect, clinging desperately to his glass.

“Edmund, what the devil do you suppose I do here on Sundays anyway? Do you think I loaf? That I get drunk? That I dream? I size up the ladies? I throw away my money on vanity in a bottle?”

“Oh, no, sir, not you!”

“The hell, Edmund! I do! I do! And never forget that man, not on your life. My fist came down again. “Waiter!”

After the boy had brought another bottle, I looked again at the poor dirty Jumna.

“But not for vanity, Edmund, not for vanity, do you hear?” I slowly spoke as I watched the river. “I drink to forget, Edmund, to forget! I know, I know! Some men say the hard stuff only adds to the misery that will still be waiting like a hungry demon when the bloody booze wears off, but let me tell you, Edmund, I’m never going to stop drinking! Never!”

“Rudy, old boy, I know. Please don’t put yourself through it again!”

“For vanity, no, not for vanity, Edmund. Fools drink for drink alone, drink away their sorrows when hard and good work can abolish their sorrows forever. But I, oh I am unique! Mine is not the kind of thing that can be gone in time! Time! What the hell is time? Time is torture from here to the grave, Edmund, the meanest, most hellish type of torture God can inflict me and you and the whole ruddy human race with . . . from here to the grave!”

“Don’t you think ...?”

“... I’ve had enough? No! No, never enough, Edmund! Never, never, never enough! It’s only the second bottle! There’s a whole tavern full of the good remedy in this hotel, and I am going to set my goal upon its consumption!” My face fell into the table so hard that I thought I must have relocated my brain. I wanted so bad to be far from sober, but I was too good a drinker for that.

“Sir, about that pool game, wouldn’t you please?”

“No! No, run along, Edmund! Run along like a good chap now. You go and play your bloody pool. As for me, I am staying home tonight.”

“Then let me take you there, Rudy.”

“You son of a dog! Can’t you see? I am home! This is my home, and this is my bed!” I said pounding on the table. “Now get out! get out of my home!”

“Rudy, I ...”

“You pipsqueak! Out! Out, or I’ll break you in half!” I stood up roaring words at him. I could twist him into a pretzel drunk or sober, and he knew it.

“Rudy, now Rudy, I ...I will. I’ll leave! Good-bye, R-Rudy, I-I’m going.” He backed toward the door, nearly falling over a chair. I watched him go out the door. It swung in and out, in and out, for a minute, and then it quit. I watched in the silence and glanced up at the circulator humming through the hot-heavy, heavy Indian air, I watched silently. It was then that I broke into laughter.

“The little...,” said I, “He really left me.” I looked at the walls for a moment and sank down again into my private chair. The river was still there. It made no noise. but passed in humble silence I listened, but there was no noise from the river. “Bartender! Waiter! What the hell’s the matter with your lousy river?” I shouted across the room. The waiter quickly answered my call. My money was good here; I always got quick answers.

“I beg your pardon. Mr. Kipling?” said the wide-eyed Indian lad.

“Eh? Oh, never you mind boy. Just never you mind. But bring me another, eh!” I waved my half-full bottle at him.

“Very good, sir.”

Now I was alone. Just me and the river, alone. The river kept on keeping on, and I, I kept on drinking. “Fight!” I said quietly aloud. “Fight!” I echoed across the brown room. I raised my glass to the river. ‘To you, oh symbol of endless time! To you, you dirty sewer!’ It didn’t answer. I waited, but it didn’t answer. It was not speaking. I could see it further than it was here. I could see the very beginning of it, way, way up on some Himalayan peak where the first drop of snow melted and fell into its icy beginning among the fresh virginity and purity of a place yet untouched by man’s greedy hand. And then it would begin to flow down the mountain, slow and frozen at first, but faster and faster down the narrows and slopes of the mighty mountains, gaining momentum, faster and faster, wider and wider, until it crashed with a mighty roar to the bottom of a great falls at the foot of the mountain from which it was born. Then, un-hesitantly at first, it would leave the misty falls. but after a few yards, as if it had realized that this was something new, something unknown, it would swirl in pools of sucking force, and soon would begin the long run to the Indian Ocean, collecting junk and garbage and dead, decaying matter along the way to its unalterable, unavoidable, loss of identity in the ocean...in the ocean.

I looked at my watch. I was not drunk. I stood up from my table and straightened my cravat. My clothing was a little wrinkled; it had been through a bit since the last dry cleaning. It must be cleaned again. I must go now. Where did Edmund say he was headed? Oh, yes, that’s right, at Roldo’s. Good fellow, that Edmund! Good chap! I must apologize.

(Chanticleer, 1963)

Uncharted Territory

Stephanie Ewalt



Photography

(River Voices, 2018)

The Persistence of Homosexuality

Kaytee Walker



Digital Art

(*River Voices*, 2018)

Tyler

Sadie Brown



Digital Art

(*River Voices*, 2018)

Lunaire

Kathryn Gillard



Oil Painting

(*River Voices*, 2018)

The Intimate Relationship

Julian Peter Wenck

I didn't mean to hurt her feelings. Now I realize that my harshness was unwarranted and unjust. It was really such a little thing to start with; but, as circumstances often promote, anger mounts into fury. Now the deed is done. I know I must make amends, but how can I do this without lowering her opinion of me or humiliating myself? After all, even in humbleness I must retain my image. Oh please, don't take me wrong, I don't feel I am any more vain than the next person.

In the beginning maybe our relationship started off on the wrong foot. You see, we were both rather young. I was only seventeen when it first started, but I have vastly matured in this last year. After many hours together walking, talking, and enjoying the things in life which at the time seemed so insignificant, there is now a firm bond between us.

I remember one day in particular last spring. We were lying side by side on a small hill in the worm grass, watching two men fishing in the stream below. We were very close together. I was strongly aware of the warmth of her body and the strong beat of her heart. As we watched the men, they moved down the stream out of our sight. For a long time, we could hear them as the leaves rustled and small branches were broken under heavy feet. Soon all was quiet; we just lay there smelling the new life around us and marveling at nature's best work, the resurrection of old life and the giving of new life. I stroked her soft neck intimately as we rose to leave. By the look in her eyes I could tell her thoughts were the same as mine. Just an overall love of life-the simple things that are really the big things. We understood each other many times with a meaning glance like this.

Not many females are really this way. They want more material things to bolster their ego. But not this one; we have an understanding of all things. An unspoken understanding, which is usually the best kind of understanding for a man to have with any female. (Anyway, I am trying to impress on you just how close we are, always together and having a wonderful time. You know, walking home from school together, and all the little things.)

This isn't the first time this same situation has arisen. I have been very gentle and understanding three or four times before this crisis; but now it's done. I said harsh words, and, because of this, I am miserable and alone. Can you advise me? I feel so alone now, so utterly lost. I must win her back-but how? How do you tell your dog not to sit on Dad's favorite armchair when she's shedding?

(*Chanticleer*, 1964)

Achilles At His Analyst

Judith A. Ruzicka

The doctor stood gazing through the window. Then, his interest in the view seemingly satisfied, he turned abruptly and faced the figure reclining on the couch.

The vibrant, yet petulant voice continued as the doctor moved back to his recently vacated chair. He settled himself once again, letting his shoulders droop, trying once more to arrange his legs in a comfortable manner. A slight sigh escaped him.

The speaker, not noticing anything except his own voice, continued his oration. "Doctor, I know I was justified in withdrawing from the battle, after all, who had a better reason? She had been given to me. Agamemnon had Chryseis and I had Briseis and just because he had to give up Chryseis is no reason to take my woman from me. Now don't think it was just my id, Doctor. I really did care for the girl. Of course, I had been allowed ten or twenty others as prizes, but I liked her best of all.

Just because he commanded the army, he thought he could do anything he pleased. He's the one with trouble with his ego if you ask me.

Of course that wasn't the start of it. It goes back much further. From the day I came from Greece as a young man just beginning my career, he's looked down on me. Always that superior attitude. Thinking he could offer me one of his daughters and that I would be so overcome with the honor I would do anything he wanted. That I should feel so honored to be allowed to enter his family. THAT family he can keep. I had enough problems as it was.

"Doctor, you have no ideas of the problems of a half god. People expect so much of you. And as the greatest Greek warrior I didn't disappoint them in that respect. That isn't my ego talking, Doctor because everyone knows that I was the greatest Greek warrior. Even the Trojans said so. Why even the gods admitted it. Isn't that right, Doctor? They couldn't help but see my excellence, and some were jealous. Some of those gods weren't content if they saw anyone else receive any glory. If Apollo hadn't been envious of me, I might not have died when I did. I feel Apollo's ego was out of proportion even for a god.

But I will admit that it was hard for me to withdraw from the fight. I only feel truly happy when I am engaged in a conflict. My libido seems to demand it; I can't seem to help myself. To turn away from my fight with Hector and the Trojans pained me. (It pained Agamemnon even more.) Of course, they deserved to lose my presence for letting Agamemnon have his way: When they

came and begged me to fight and save the battle for them, I did find it hard to turn them down. I knew that someday I would have to defeat Hector.

Yes, I was hostile to Hector. He was a Trojan and I a Greek. It was purely a matter of being on different sides in a conflict. But he did find out who was the better warrior. Of course he knew it even before I was forced to dispose of him. Even the gods couldn't save him from my spear. Yes, even the Trojans recognized talent when they saw it. Every last man of them sought me as a prize. Hector thought himself the victor when he killed Patroclus. It must have been quite a shock to him when he stripped off the armor but couldn't find no Achilles.

Then he had the effrontery to wear my armor. It was spoils of war but it was still my armor, made for me, a half god. No mere mortal-and Trojan at that-should have dared to wear it. Of course Mother got me some new armor. She is always thoughtful, always sensitive to my needs. And the new armor was more splendid than my old. But I deserved it.

Doctor, I'm sure you have never seen finer armor. Not even the gods themselves have any so magnificent. It is a little uncomfortable wearing it while lying down, but people always admire it so. And they seem to expect to see it.

So, I wear it. I hate to disappoint people. My super-ego just must have its way, Doctor.

I suppose you think I am tied to my mother. Well, that isn't so, Doctor. It is true my mother has often helped me. Why shouldn't she? She is my mother. I am her only child. But I'm not dependent on her. Of course I admire her; she is the wisest and most perceptive woman I know. As I said before, she always knows when I am troubled and comes to comfort me and help me.

The fact that she intercedes on my behalf with the gods is of no consequence. If that is what she wants to do, how can I stop her?

And you see it really made no difference. Apollo had his way eventually. But I can tell you this, if Apollo hadn't intervened Paris would never have succeeded.

I am not questioning my fate you understand, Doctor. I know that what is ordained by fate must be, whether for mortals or the gods. So being half-god does not entitle me to any preferential treatment. It is just that I was such a superior warrior to Paris that in order to destroy me, of course, he needed the help of the gods. He couldn't have done it alone.

I am not blaming fate. I had a choice, and I chose a short, violent life. It might have been nice to have a wife and children. But where would I have found a suitable wife? She wouldn't necessarily have had to have been a goddess

or a half-goddess. Just someone who would compare favorably with Mother.

I know you are thinking I have developed an Oedipus complex Doctor, but it isn't true.

But I question if I made the right decision, Doctor.

Was it just my libido taking control, unchecked by my super-ego? Did I really want to make this decision?

Sometimes, Doctor, I feel as if I might have even developed a personality problem. Not a superiority complex or anything like that. Of course, Doctor, you know I am not inferior to anyone.

It is just that I need to reduce tensions caused by my libido. Don't you think so Doctor? Doctor?

Of course, we all have our little problems and complexes, Doctor, and you know mine are minor. Right Doctor?

But here I am diagnosing myself. I should leave that little problem to you Doctor. Doctor? Doctor?

(Chanticleer, 1964)

Perspective

Ann Bolthouse

Stand Away;
See the circle centers
all in neat white rows.
See the jazz notes
beat the air to shreds.
See the falling tears
help a flower to grow.

Look Back;
See the big things
all in neat white rows.
See the silent face
chipped with dusty shadows.
See the secret hideaway
tumble down the tree.
See the cellar door
slam and lock once more.

Stand High
Look Far-
See Man's steel mountains
tower above Earth's dusty floor.
See summer utopias
spring from midnight's snow.
See the passing minutes
all in neat white rows.

(Chanticleer, 1965)

The Way of Sudden Friendships

Carol Wiley

The splinter meets the steel, a spark ignites
The flame; and darkness draws a breath of cheer. Its glow reveals the cherished, welcomed sights. Its warmth and light pervade the atmosphere.

The flame advancing taxes nearby air;
It spreads and peaks, a smooth, consistent flame.
A mild disturbance rustles past the flare,
And it declines and dies; a breeze to blome.

How changed in shape the charred-black splinter stands.
Too fragile now; to touch it may destroy
The remnant of rebellion to demands.
Variety has singed the guardless toy.

Abruptly kindled love needs but a slight
To crush the passion and erase the light.

(Chanticleer, 1965)

Vagabond

E. A. West

I am looking
for a real message
for a real people.
I am waiting
for the one great hour of sharing
to pass by
and leave the taxpayer in peace.
I am seeking
a new Washington
to reestablish the old
American Dream.

I am listening
to the sounds that go unheard,
for they tell the whole story.

I am perpetually waiting
for psychology to become a science,
so it can validate my subconscious.
And I am daring
religion
to vindicate my soul.

(Chanticleer, 1966)

Retreat

Jean Pataky

Blithe clusterings of birch in spring disguise,
Trunks sheathed in pewter, stroked by artist's brush,
Try on a cloak of moonlight just for size
And whisper invitations to a thrush.
Brave beeches guard an autumn yellow lane
Strong grey garbed soldiers form a stalwart grove
Until that master camofleur, the rain,
Issues uniforms of palest mauve.
Snow-laden pines moored to a snow-bound berth;
Unworthy clippers bowed by force of years,
Their raking masts now anchored close to earth
Beneath their bale of crystal, frozen tears.
The changing woods that mark each season's span
Are yet more constant than the moods of man.

(Chanticleer, 1966)

The Agony of Analysis

Tom Drinan

I tried it-
the whole bit-
beard and sandals, sweatshirts, the works-
and it was fun
being free and uninhibited
but still it
wasn't getting me anywhere,
and so

yeah, i tried it
the whole bit-
one angry young man
in a hurry,
doing my homework on
civil rights, vietnam
power structures, the works
but then people
began stepping
on my toes...ouch

oh yeah, i tried it
the whole bit-
alienation and artistry,
the search for truth
(i didn't find it)
i tuned in
and dropped out
it was fun--really
and so i'm wondering
why

i'm trying it-
the whole bit
haircut, shirts, ties
it turns me on.

I've found that people
aren't so bad
(they're only human)
but now i'm
really wondering
and weighing
values:

integration
compromise

(Chanticleer, 1967)

And He Walked Away

Thomas Huber

I, while on my search for fortune, stumbled upon the art of tearing tickets in half. This art actually produced no fortune, nor did it come to me by stumbling.

The job was given to me in payment for a debt of gratitude owed my parents by a near friend. It paid five dollars and required little work. I was fresh out of school and very much in need of means, thus any work showing pay was ideal. I tore tickets in half at a football game. I was sixteen at the time.

I would bundle up every week, leave early, and most of all think how I could stretch the five dollars. I soon became acquainted with the others working with me and could remember many of the weekly faces at the game. Several things bothered me though; the worst were the uncared-for children. No, they weren't orphans nor wayward; they were just monsters on the loose. They would run about behind the stands, the older ones smoking, the younger ones idolizing the older. They were rude and sarcastic, often cussing. This is nothing new. Yes, I know it is really very ancient. However, they were there, and I had to watch them.

Occasionally they would light a smoke bomb. Or they would throw firecrackers at each other. Some of them, especially the younger ones, had the filthy habit of spitting at each other. Dirty? Yes, I agree.

They sometimes came around trying to annoy us, but all we had to do was threaten to shove them outside and not allow them back in. This always worked. They would trouble us no more.

We were no more than Friday night babysitters. The children should have been in bed long before the game would end. We were being paid to work mindlessly. Even if we would have told the school how to run the attendance concession, we would have been laughed at for turning away customers.

The children occasionally would do some odd things, like one week a boy lost a shoe. It took him most of the game to find it. Another week a girl came barefoot, when it was next to freezing. She wasn't a little girl either. I'd say she must have been, oh, in her mid-to-late teens.

The most meaningless incident involved a rabbit. One game early in the season, when attendance was still quite high, some boys flushed out a rabbit that had been hiding near the outside fence of the football stadium. This in itself was quite odd for the stadium is almost downtown. They were having quite a bit of fun chasing the rabbit back and forth between them, watching him

dodge in and out of their legs. Finally, he escaped under the bleachers. I thought he was gone for good. They were persistent, however, and rushed under the bleachers determined to find him. After a while they outran the rabbit and their cat and mouse game began again - the rabbit dodging in and out of the children's legs, the children bent on catching the rabbit. He was far too fast for them though. I found myself running out to meet him as he ran past me. The children kept multiplying in number. With more and more of them trying to catch the rabbit, it appeared as though he was cornered. He made one last attempt at freedom and ran beneath the bleachers again. However, this time he did not stop, and he ran onto the playing field. We could hear the crowd roar with laughter.

The rabbit made a semi-circle, returning to his original hiding place. And, as the first time, he was soon discovered. Again, the mob of children pounced upon him. He dodged in and out of feet turning about-faces here and there. He was very much crowded in and unable to build up any speed. He did manage though to find an open space and make a final dash.

One boy kicked at him and from then on, he met kicks all along his path. Finally, someone connected, and the rabbit went down in a roll. He rose again running at a much slower pace and ran to meet more kicks.

We saw a mob form about him, with legs kicking both outward and inward. Then as quickly as the mob formed, it dispersed. One boy bent down, picked the rabbit up, walked over to a trash can, lifted the lid, deposited the rabbit, and forced the lid down again. We saw him smile and heard him say, "The poor dumb rabbit." And then he walked away.

(Chanticleer, 1967)

If the Lady Were Free to Choose

Chuck Cochran

As the fog settles down around her ankles
and dampens her cement
and steel, structure,
the glow of her torch spreads its
welcoming light to those beyond.
She stands erect, uncomplaining,
opening the doors
to the land of opportunity.
Millions of new faces passed under her arm
in search of freedom,
taking her word of protection.
But if this lady of liberty and justice for all,
could turn about and cast her light
over this land of freedom;
this land where all people were created equal
and given such equal opportunity, -
this land where all people rule,
rather than an elite few,
this land
which blindly asks the cream of its youth to die
for no reason other than because they are told to do so, -
she might pick up her skirts,
blow out her light and walk off.

(Chanticleer, 1968)

My War

Louis J. Dudek

It's January 6, 1966; the dawn is clear and warm and peaceful, in a land that knows no peace. The night had been dark and foreboding, but blessedly quiet except for the occasional rumble of artillery zeroing in on some distant target. Nevertheless, everyone is glad to see the first rays of morning streak the horizon. It's the start of a new day, and time to get down to the business at hand, the business of making war.

After a breakfast of c-ration ham and lima beans heated lukewarm over a candle, my machine gun crew and I head for the company command post to join the two dozen men already assembled. Nobody says much; we just stand around smoking and dabbing at the rust that is ever present on our weapons. We are going on patrol, our third one in twenty-four hours.

At six o'clock the captain comes out and briefs us on the patrol. We are to move out a mile from camp, make a circle, and come back. The purpose is to probe enemy strength in the area. The last half dozen patrols have made contact, and we know we will do the same. We are surrounded. Just a few days before, one of my men had been wounded in the very same area we are going into today.

As we move single file out of camp and through the barbed wire, a sudden fear claws at my insides; and I know I am not coming back with the patrol. I've heard it said that a guy knows when he's going to get hit before it happens, but I never believed it till a few days ago when my gunner was wounded. He told me just hours before it happened that his time had run out, and it had. Now here I am, in the same position, with the same fears chewing away at me.

Within minutes we are hidden from camp by huge stands of bamboo and thick undergrowth. It's as though the jungle has swallowed us alive. We move silently along the trail, our eyes straining to pick up any sign of the elusive enemy. We halt to listen and give our scouts a chance to check out likely ambush sites. We see nothing, we hear nothing, except the cries of birds and the hum of insects. An hour out from camp and approaching a river, the jungle silence is suddenly broken. The enemy is passing the news of our presence until the whole jungle seems to be vibrating with the sound of their drums.

Just as suddenly as they started, the drums stop. We move forward again, even more cautiously than before, because we know they're watching and waiting somewhere ahead. We're following a river now, as it flows out toward the South China Sea. Up ahead the scouts report a clearing where the trail breaks away to the river on one side and a ten-foot bank on the other. No one has to tell us what this means; we know it's a perfect ambush site.

The danger will come from across the river, so the squad leader has decided to send us across the clearing one at a time while the others provide cover fire if needed. The scout is the first one across; he sprints the twenty yards and disappears in the bush on the other side. I hold my breath as each man goes across, hoping the silence will last. It's time to get my gun crew over there now, first one of the ammunition bearers, then myself, with the rest of the crew to follow.

My clothes are soaked with sweat, and it's getting in my eyes as I take my position for the dash. God, it's hot! A thousand thoughts are racing through my brain as I jump up; but they all disappear in an explosion of sound and pain as a crushing, hammerlike blow spins me around and slams me to the ground. I can see my rifle flying through the air and hear a hundred bees buzzing over my head. Now I realize they're not bees, but bullets; and they're not going over my head but hitting all around me. I'm trying to get up, but I can't; my whole left side is paralyzed. I can see a big rock nearby, so I start pushing for it with my feet and pulling with my right arm. The Viet Cong are trying to zero in on me as I move slowly toward cover. They're doing a good job, because the bullets are kicking dirt into my mouth and eyes so I can hardly see. Once in the cover of the rock I grab my left arm which I realize isn't working at all and lay it on my chest. I can see a big jagged piece of bone sticking out of the back of my elbow where the bullet tore through, so I pull it out and throw it away. My gunner is with me now and putting a field dressing on the wound, but already my shirt is soaked with blood, and I can feel it trickle down my belly.

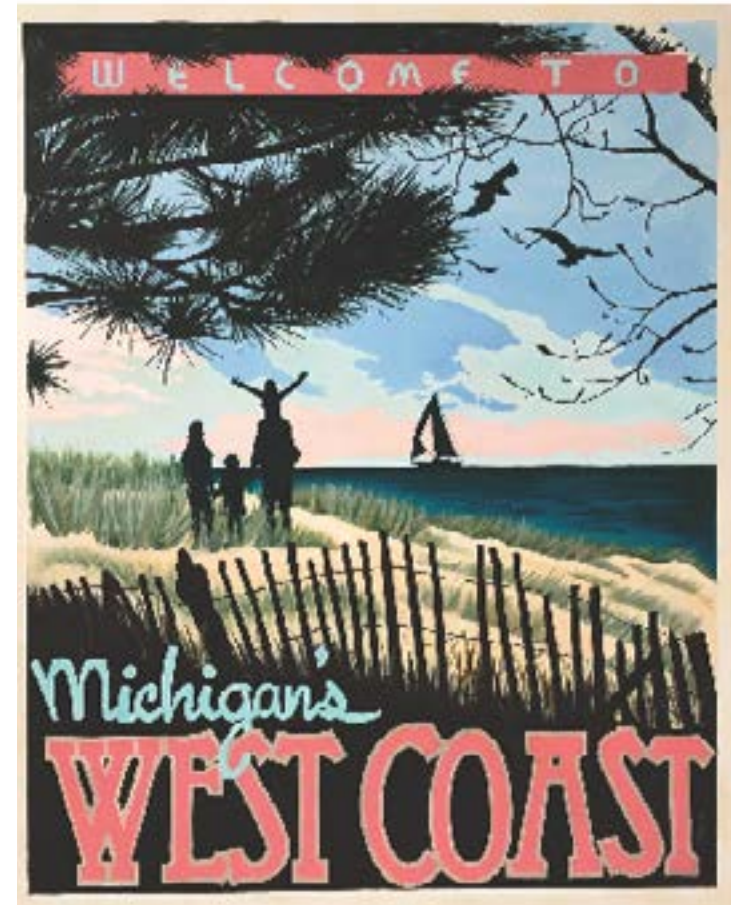
I'm behind a rice paddy dike now, waiting for a medical evacuation helicopter. There is another wounded man here. Dave was coming out to help me when a bullet smashed his thigh bone. Everything is getting rather foggy now; the morphine is taking hold. The pain is still there, but I don't care about it anymore; I'm thirsty. The mortars are still blasting the Reds across the river as I see the helicopter come skimming over the treetops. He's coming right in with his guns blazing. In an instant I'm on my feet, being pushed and pulled toward the helicopter. Dave goes in first, with me right behind him.

The doctor is looking after Dave first; he's hurt pretty bad. In a few minutes he looks at my arm and puts a new dressing on it. Then, with a little smile on his face, he looks me in the eye and says: "The war is over, Marine; you're going home." I grin back.

(Chanticleer, 1969)

Welcome to Michigan's West Coast

Kevin Kyser



Digital Art

(River Voices, 2019)

Chapel Rock

Kyle Meyer



Photography

(River Voices, 2019)

Belize Student Trip

Ismael Enriquez



Photography

(River Voices, 2019)

Power Congress

Erin Hoffman



Graphite, Ink, Woodcut

(River Voices, 2019)

Sonnet

Judy Alms

Thoughts shatter-slip, run singing round my head
And laugh in raucous silence cross the page
I try recording days of time gone dead
But only fragments follow through my sage.

I sit and-survey next my pane of glass
And stare into a past life will not shield
My view encloses woods in Autumn's cast
Between us lies an early frosted field.

The world too soon chilled to my questing glance
Too late I read my cryptograms for me
I lived in summer long past her last dance
Yet dread to light my view, fearing I'd see.

Thus, as I vision past out sight-of-mind,
My memory recalls dreams no hope can find.

(Chanticleer, 1970)

The Plunge

Karen Mangione

The languid lake and spotless sky blended into a friendly harmony of blues. Gently stirring pines, rustling dune grass, and sun-bleached sand completed the peaceful setting. Once again seeking the refuge of the beach, he hurried to his favorite spot, a small indentation in the side of a large dune. With hands clasped around bent knees, he nestled into the warm, yielding sand. Soothed by the cardiac rhythm of the waves, he inhaled deeply until he could hold no more, then reluctantly released his breath, while the wind fondly tousled his hair. The sudden warmth of the sun and the boundless sky enveloped him like a blanket. He sighed contentedly.

He often sought the comfort of the beach. Here even a creature such as he, no longer boy, not yet man, could relax and feel at ease. Problems dared not mar the untainted scene. Occasionally he wandered to the shore to let the waves wash across his toes, but soon returned to his sanctum, cradled in the belly of the dune. Today, especially, he welcomed the consolation of the beach. All he had to do was sit and soak up all the pleasantness around him.

Suddenly sand stung his cheeks, and the sky was muted by a slow-moving shadow of gray clouds. Gradually, determinedly it replaced the blue, while the water churned in protest. The pines groaned, grass whipped in the wind, and the sand scurried frantically. He shuddered, pulling his shirt tightly around him and dug his toes into the sand. He slid back to feel the wall of the dune on his back, but could not remove his eyes from the strange drama of the beach. Now thundering waves, whirling wind, and perilous gray sky commanded the attention of his reluctant senses. It was an odd, beckoning drama, compelling, yet frightful. He hurried slowly to the water's edge, needing to go and still afraid.

Why should he be drawn to the water now? Why, of all days? He had always been afraid to swim in the big lake alone. But today he had to go in. There was no turning back.

Deliberately he waded into the now violent water until he was deafened by the crashing, pounding water, and submerged by the swirling waves. Isolated by the screen of gray, he was tossed like a twig in the clutches of the lake. He rode with the waves, feeling exhilaration of complete release. Exuberant with a mixture of pain and pleasure, he drifted, indifferent to the will of the water.

But soon water filled his nostrils, breathing became harder and harder, and the current pushed and pulled him ferociously, threatening to swallow him in an instant. The deserted shore receded in the distance while in front of him there loomed an endless expanse of treacherous barren blue. In a sudden spurt

of energy, he grabbed at the disappearing shore, only to be tossed back by the powerful waves. Very slowly hand over hand his fledgling arms fell into rhythm, pulling him against the grasp of the lake. Frantically he kicked the water out of his path. After searching in vain for a sign of, help, he desperately concentrated on the movement of his arms and legs. Exhausted from the struggle, and numb from the icy water, he was filled with a desperate need - not so much to win as to fight.

He battled until all his senses were water-logged and the lake seemed to have absorbed him rather than mercifully gulped him. The gray sky hovered dreadful and dreary, obliterating all efforts of the sun to filter through. The water churned with infinite energy, while the dunes dissolved into a blur of nothingness.

The pines whispered softly and the grass barely moved. The blazing sun had burned out the gray and glowed victoriously. The only sound was the screaming silence of the sand. Motionless, he lay on the beach, not far from the now still water. Very slowly, as if with infantile anticipation but at the same time mature fulfillment, he lifted his head far enough to study the quiet lake and the still, deserted beach. Then with painful deliberation, bending first one leg and then another, he raised the drained body up out of the sand. He sat for a long time as if letting the flame on the horizon rekindle him. He saw the pines and understood; he saw the dune grass and knew their story; he let the sand trickle through his fingers and felt it in his soul. He looked out over the water and felt the pain and joy of knowing and belonging.

Then with painstaking effort he stood, and placing one foot and then the other, foot after foot, leg after leg, mind after body, he walked down the beach, following the path where countless footprints showed the way.

(Chanticleer, 1970)

Huck Finn: On Conscience

Darrell Adams

You know, it seems like if your conscience don't ride a body and make him feel mean and low down for doing a wrong thing that the Almighty arranges things so as to prod that neglectful conscience by having someone compliment it for doing the wrong, and then the conscience gets to working extra hard through shame to make up for the time it was sluffin' off on the job and the result is a body winds up feeling like the lowest critter in God's Creation. If that don't seem to clear, let me tell you what happened to me one time while I was living with the Widow and mebbe you'll understand then. I always seem to need examples to et my point across anyway.

The Widow, she was a powerful kind of old lady. She was always doin' good deeds for poor folks and dumb animals and niggers and such but animals was her favorite. She had a couple dozen clucky old hens in a chicken coop out back and she was always pettin' 'um and worryin' that they had good clean water, especially on hot days and plenty of food and a big pen full of sunshine and fresh straw on the floor and she even kept a rooster around even though he warn't no good for nothing except to worry a body when he went to pick the eggs but the Widow she said a rooster kept 'em happy and laying good.

She was forever asking me to check the water and I'd always seem to be too busy and I'd tell her that I'd see to it in a few minutes. Then I'd get to playing again and I'd clean forget, but she was such a nice old lady she'd never ask twice but would just do it herself and later I'd see her trudging through the dusk toting water to those chickens but she'd be almost there already so it would be too late to do anything except mebbe feel mean and small.

Well, one day me and Tom was out back playing and Tom decides to make a fire and let on to burn a witch. I knowed full well we oughtn't be a playing with fire but my conscience seemed to be asleep or pestering some other wicked soul or something cause it just seemed to be the most sensible, logical thing in the world and I figured as long as we was careful no one would get hurt.

So I snitched a few matches and we got some old straw together but the wind was sort of gusty-like so we went behind the chicken coop where we were out of sight and built the fire up against the coop wall so the wind wouldn't blow it out.

Well, after a while we got tired of being witch burners so we let on to be Indians doing a war dance before going out to scalp some settlers. Tom said that Indians were always dancing before scalping. Anyways we're a whooping and stomping around the fire when Tom says, "Hey Huck, does that fire smell a little different to you?"

Well it sure 'nuff did, cause the back of the chicken coop was afire, and the pine smoke was just a rolling off it. We kicked the ashes away and Tom yelled, "I'll work on throwing sand on it and you hurry and get some water."

Hurry I did. I lit out for the pump like the devil hisself was chasing me, got a pail and started pumping my arm off. I filled it up and started ripping back for the coop when I saw the Widow coming from the barn. I slowed down so she wouldn't suspect nothing, but when she spotted me lugging that pail of water toward the chicken coop she thought that I'd finally remembered her beloved chickens and so she comes up and starts in to complimenting and thanking me for being so thoughtful and considerate and such. It seemed real strange to me that she hadn't noticed the smoke from the fire but thank goodness she hadn't.

"Laws Amighty, Huck, it sure is nice of you to remember those poor chickens on a hot day like this here. They really need good fresh water when it's this hot out. I'm so proud of..."

I could of died from the shame of it. While this nice kind old lady was going on, I'm standing there nodding my head, grinning like a Mongolian idiot, and feeling like Jesse James cause, I'm burning down her chickens and coop and here she is practically hugging me for it and I'm thieving full credit for the durn thing. I felt miserable. That bucket burned in my hand like it was thirty pieces of silver and I felt like finding a mule's halter I was so ashamed of myself.

Well, I finally tore myself away muttering some about how the sooner I got the water out there the better off those thirsty old chickens would be. By the time I got around the corner of the coop, Tom had a hole dug halfway to China and the dust was almost as high as the smoke from the fire from where he was pitching dirt on it. It was still smouldering away but the water did finally put it out. We needed a few more buckets but I told the Widow I was filling up a tub so I wouldn't have to haul the water so far in the future. And I did too.

I learned my lesson pretty good and I hauled so much water to those old chickens they practically turned into ducks. I would do my best to see that I wouldn't feel so shamed agin' and I didn't nuther.

(Chanticleer, 1971)

The Poet

Brian Iverson

Like the molecules of the air
a motionless shadow,
we pass him unaware.
So important yet rarely seen.
He tells us of life, of death,
talks to us with words few ever hear,
form images and ideas in the mind.
He takes us on trips
and we return
to our world remembering his.

(Chanticleer, 1971)

A Rainy Morning at Muskegon Community College

Gayle Podein

Walking to school is never fun,
After it's rained all night;
The worms-retreating on the run
All hope to ease their plight.

They slowly crawl into the street,
Grudgingly I walk near;
Crunching-popping beneath my feet,
Oh, what horrid sounds to hear!

The sun is bright when I return,
To see that some have died.
I see the stains and quickly learn,
The ones I missed have fried!

(Chanticleer, 1972)

The Awakening

Paul Reeths

Though I had awakened from my catnap, my head still rested upon my folded arms. I didn't recall when I had dozed off, but my left foot had sure gone to sleep. Wiggling my toes, I was about to raise my head and stretch when a perplexing thought hit me. Where was I? My eyelids had kept dropping shut in my ten o'clock class, but I didn't think I had fallen asleep. Without raising my head, I managed to read my watch. The time was 11:20, and since there was a fair amount of noise around me, I concluded I had slept myself right into the middle of an eleven o'clock class. If I got up right then, probably twenty pairs of eyeballs would be staring at me. But why wasn't the teacher talking, I wondered. Perhaps a psychology class was meeting, and I was being observed as part of an experiment. I didn't know if I should just leave them or not, but I didn't care, all I wanted was out.

I knew what I had to do. I would get up, apologize to the instructor, and then turn and leave. I tried to recall if I had brought my lunch with me, for I would hate to have to return to the class to retrieve my dried beef sandwiches.

I checked my watch again. It read 11:21. I got up rather bleary-eyed, apologized loudly; and then realized I was standing in the middle of the library. I was being scrutinized by perhaps fifty pairs of eyes. As unobtrusively as possible I returned to my chair and quietly covered up my head.

(Chanticleer, 1972)

What Price Mushrooms?

Pat Amersdorfer

I didn't want to be an old maid so I got married at seventeen to the second man that asked me. The first was a real dummy. He was nineteen and didn't even know who Glen Miller was; not to mention Van Johnson who was the idol of most bobby-soxers in 1948 and 1949. I married an older man who was twenty-two. He didn't know much about Van Johnson either but at least he was different. He liked Wagner, Verdi and the Lone Ranger's song. I settled down to the stimulating life of a housewife in the 1950's. Our small town didn't have television then so you listened to soap operas on the radio. "Can a woman after forty find romance? Tune in tomorrow at the same time." Poor Helen Trent, my troubles seemed like nothing after all she was suffering.

We couldn't afford to go out much, so we relied upon home entertainment and eventually two sons were born to us. Now my reading changed from Pearl Buck and Zane Gray to the United States Government booklet on "How to Take Care of Baby." If Dr. Spock wrote books, then I wasn't aware of it; the government booklet was free. My intellectual discussions progressed from, "Did you know that Dara's husband is drinking again and didn't come home the other night?" to "I toilet trained my Lynn at only nine months." Then as the children grew older there were P.T.A. meetings and the inevitable Cub Scouts. Yes, I was a three-time loser as a den mother. My projects never panned out. The toothpick trivets cracked, the paint chipped on the flowerpots and the Cub Scouts showed me how to tie knots.

I was often on the other end of passive criticism and ended up babysitting several hyper-active boys one year. "You don't mind having an extra two boys do you, Pat? Most of the other mothers are busy with smaller children or working." I know one mother who didn't work but was certainly busy. One time her son Scott fell off the table while engaged in off-limits throwing of popcorn at the other boys. I was almost tempted to put him out the door crying but he lived quite a few blocks away and my conscience got ahold of me, and I drove him home. I rang and rang the bell. Scott knew his mom was home because "Uncle Johnnie" was there. "He always comes on Cub Scout day," Scott offered. Mom finally came to the door, dressed in a robe. As I noted before, there wasn't any television in our small town yet.

Obviously, my brain didn't get much exposure those days. I was on the lazy side and didn't exert myself beyond the woman's page and the sports section; the funnies were in there. I was sunk in a morass of domesticity and self-importance.

Gradually things began to bother me. Some years later I was at Thrifty Acres one day trying to figure the most economical can of mushrooms based on unit prices. There were the sliced type, the whole ones, stems and pieces. Not even to mention the large, medium and small size cans. I finally gave up and decided we didn't need mushrooms. Then a few days later I had to tell my

son I couldn't help him with his homework. I hadn't even had math since the eighth grade. I lost every political argument I had with my husband, in fact in any subject he could top me. I could only answer about one third of the questions on the quiz show *Jeopardy*.

My decision was made. As soon as the youngest child was in kindergarten, I would start college. My husband was surprised but came up with my tuition money. I was lucky my first experience at college wasn't my last. It had been twenty years since I had gone to high school, and I had been a C student in everything but English, so I was asked to take the entrance exam. There I sat, the day of the tests, with 120 students, not one looked over twenty. When they gave me those funny looking sheets to write my answers on, I panicked. I didn't have the faintest idea how to use them and I was too embarrassed to ask. I missed the first two tests completely before I finally calmed down enough to figure out how to answer. How simple the I.B.M. sheets are after you've caught on.

Once I finally began school my plan was to be as inconspicuous as possible. That turned out to be a little difficult. I kept feeling that "What are you doing here look?" My first teacher, Mr. Ribesky, sensed my inclination to withdraw like a turtle in its shell and kept calling on me; before long I would find myself raising my hand without even thinking about myself. A few days after school started, I went to sit down in my usual spot for class and my chair went crashing into the desk of the boy across from me.

Now how did I know they had both right- and left-handed desks? I had gone to a very old and very small school and we only had one kind. After Psychology one day I took a wrong turn and wandered around for what seemed an interminable time. In desperation I finally stopped a boy and asked him how to get out. He told me I was in the "tech wing" and started to give me directions but after a look at my blank face said, "Come on, I'm going that way and you can follow me." And that long-haired kid guided me all the way to the reception desk.

A year has passed and I'm more at ease now. The students and teachers are helpful and friendly. I still get lost but at least I stay in the same wing. The Business Math I took has helped me out at Thrifty Acres and I can balance my own checkbook now. I'm not sure what I'll use the psychology course for, but it certainly was fascinating. I've taken more English than anything (it's one of my favorites) and I've discovered many old and new authors that have enriched my leisure reading immensely. I still have Biology, Spanish, Sociology and Political Science to go and being only a part-time student, I'll probably be around for a few years. My average is about fifty percent on *Jeopardy* now when I am home to watch it. I may not sound more intelligent now but at least I'm more confident. As our Psychology teacher might say, my mind is growing; as long as it's just my mind I'm all right - if my body grows anymore I'll never be able to fit into those small desks.

(*Chanticleer*, 1973)

August, 1971

Marsha Vanlente

My chores are done. In the evening's soft sleep the sun blinks easy into the eyelid of the sea. Like a long lover the dunes arch away from the shore in silent mystery. And the hungry beach stretches away and away in casual yearning.

This time there is a turning inward-
The quiet closing of a day lily at night's end. I see you with new eyes peeled clean like green grapes. My ear has strained against the silence of a thin song escaping its own frail echo in pale suffering. And now, against a greater silence, you put forth green shoots, grow green in pain and arch beyond us. In my mouth the taste of pain lies like sand.

I have eaten a fool's rock.
I have no appetite for stones.

(*Chanticleer*, 1974)

The Pigeon and I

Tom Cwynar

It was during my twelfth summer on a spiritless, gray afternoon when I first saw him. I was in the yard alone. A detective that day, beating up and cleaning up the yard of all criminals, thieves and murderers. During my fantasies, I happened to glance skyward and observed a huge gray-white pigeon landing on our television antenna. Though large, he alighted with the bearing of a prince. He slowly surveyed around him, and confident that all was well, he settled into a relaxed posture which indicated an intent to remain.

It may have been an identification with comic characters that made me act. I remembered Mutt and Jeff who, when faced with a similar situation, found it necessary to devise methods to rid themselves of the bird.

I too, wanted to get rid of the bird. But how? I couldn't throw a stone that high. I tried yelling at him, but he didn't rustle his feathers, and I certainly wasn't allowed on the sharply inclined roof. I then thought of the gun.

The pellet gun, which my father had given me two Christmases ago, had been lying in the garage for over six months. It was no longer shiny and new. Its stock was pitted, the barrel was rusted, and the sights were broken off. I had used it on targets before my abuse of it rendered it ineffective. It still had power, but an unguided power which was little better than no power at all.

I fetched the gun, loaded it, and opened the small door of the garage which faced the roof. I didn't step outside lest the neighbors see me, but from where I stood, I could see the bird still perched in his original position. With reflex action, acquired through many years of playing with toy guns, I raised the gun and, without aiming, fired. I silently muttered a "pow" as the gun discharged. With satisfaction I watched the bird arise in flight from the antenna. He swung in a wide circle around the yard. Stunned, I watched him falter. His wings were beating erratically. He made a short effort to climb, and then plummeted to the ground fifteen feet away.

I quickly closed the garage door, even turning the lock to further guarantee my security. I hid the gun in the rafters and then moved the ladder to the window. I inched up to where I could see the bird. He was alive. He was screeching as he tried again and again to get to his feet, only to topple again. Finally, he succumbed to fatigue just lying there, his breast beating unrhythmically with the labor of his breathing.

In awe, I watched his efforts. Tears of sympathy and regret welled in my eyes. Feeling responsible, I went slowly to the door, not knowing what my

actions would be. I opened the door and looked at the helpless bird. Other noises made me look around the yard. I quickly slammed the door to ponder a new element in the situation.

The yard was full of different kinds of birds. They sat on the ground, on the fence, on the clothes pole, on the garage and in the bushes. They didn't act like normal birds. As they stood in their spot and chirped, they all seemed to be looking toward the wounded pigeon. "God," I thought, "I've shot their king."

I was desperately afraid. This had to be the last senseless act by man that they would tolerate. Birds may make war on man, start attacking man as a way of life, and they would start with me. Why are we so cruel? The bird didn't hurt me. Even if I just wanted to scare it, that in itself is wrong.

I wallowed in my fear and self-pity for a long, long time.

Something brought me back to myself. It was a sound. No, a lack of sound. It was deathly quiet. I hurried to the window to look. The birds were still there, but the pigeon didn't move anymore. He was quiet and so were they. Then slowly, quietly, singly, and in pairs, the birds began to leave. The far away ones went first. The closer ones stayed longer, but they soon left too.

Finally, just the pigeon was there.

The pigeon and I.

I grabbed a shovel and ran out the opposite door. I dug a hole deep and square. I went back into the garage and fetched a piece of cardboard. Reverently I approached the bird. Carefully, so as not to touch him, I scooped him up on the cardboard. I carried him out to my hole. I - stopped. This was my first good look at him. Gently he slid into the hole. Gently the cardboard covered him. Gently the shovels full of dirt slid over him. His end and my beginning.

(Chanticleer, 1974)

One Woman's Criticism

Deborah DeBruyn

Listening to a poetry reading
Is not for the women
One row forward,
With tweed skirts and matching earrings,
Who use their energy wiping muck from their shoes before coming in-
side...
Not for people who use
An extra spoon in their coffee.
Poetry is an Indian
Song to his broken tribe,
A dissertation by a sheep herder,
The wanderings of a chronic driver,
The pain of a lame red fox.
Poetry is for hanging by the heels
From the stairway, screaming,
Or being shot at in the woods.
Poets have the circled eyes of being
Too close to their own fatality.

You See?

Those women have just
Folded their programs into bed linen.

(Chanticleer, 1975)

Autumn Jay

Shelby Wright



Acrylic on Canvas

(River Voices, 2020)

Tea Kettle

Diana Casey



Photography

(River Voices, 2020)

On Top of the World

Kelli Loughrige



Photography

(River Voices, 2020)

Church

Madison Boone



Photography

(River Voices, 2020)

September One

Matt Anderson

seems there's no way of knowin'
which way the winds are gonna blow
seems there's no way of showin' you
somethin' you don't want to know

me and lady saw a movie
about two lovers on the run
why'd it have to end so sadly
tryin' to reach through to someone

Oh, the summer's not yet over
and already, just today
outside, it's growing colder
and the sky is rainin' grey

seems there's no way of knowin'
which way the winds are gonna blow
seems there's no way of showin' you
somethin' you don't want to know

it's so hard to find an answer
it's so hard, sometimes, to cope
if just tonight i could know you.
i could take what's coming on

Oh, the summer's not yet over
and already, just today
outside, it's growing colder
and the sky is rainin' grey

(Chanticleer, 1975)

Afternoon Tea

Susan Hendrick

“A very pleasant day,” said the waiter.
“But of course.”
French wine in fine crystal.

Whalebone corset laced too tight,
a puppet tied with string.
Abigail dared not speak –
she had scarcely enough air
to breathe.

“Harold, don’t you tag along.”
Half frown on his brow, “Stifle
that giggle.” “Yes, dear.”

Dreams of charging horses, black whips
and spurs. “David, tell them about
the butterflies you’ve collected.”

“George, what fine cloth you wear.
Imported. I might have known.
You should be proud.”

Henrietta, christened for the
brother never born,
hides in lace and silk,
wishing,
for the title long ago
pinned.

Porcelain pretty
false and marble hard.
“Mary, oh Mary? Did you
hear what we were talking about?”

“Such pleasant sounds the birds make.”
Strolling ladies with parasols
to shield their lily skins,
wrapped, protected,
cocoons.

(Chanticleer, 1976)

English 221: Decompose

Keith Johnson

The world drips by outside,
cars awash in the street,
the day feels like wet gravel,
clings to my chest
like a wet shirt
my ears clogged with wet leaves
falling words in droplets.

My mind walks in rain
washed like falling water,
mists swill and spit
the skulls of small animals
at my aching head.
Bones are now forever,
they crumble, rot,
small mammals chew and suck
my sweet marrow
in dank fields
and I enjoy,
decompose.

(Chanticleer, 1977)

... But You Can't Get It On Paper

Dennis Morgan

He was almost never home, he sat there and thought. There was work to be done; he couldn't go home yet. Over and over, the same words came to him, "Her life passed between her legs." The words repeated so many times he thought they spoke to him: "Are there such things as recurring thoughts?" Was he overdosed on empty space, he wondered. Where in the mind do words come from? What makes them form images? If I can't clear my mind, I can't work. He had been drinking and he really didn't care about getting any work done. Whatever it was that he did!

"The whole world is out there and here I sit." He spoke out to an unseen audience. "But if they want me, they'll know where I am." He laughed and began to shout, "Bartender ... the jukebox, why doesn't someone play something like 'Cupid Draw Back Your Bow'?" He didn't find this particularly amusing, so he didn't laugh. "Here in a shabby rundown building sits the next Jesus Christ and they're all running around down there like they don't know it." He said this as he looked out of the window. "Snowflakes desperate to maintain themselves frantically dash themselves against the windowpane. They can't survive the warmth of the window, so they melt. One group, then another." With that he put his coat on. At 6:30 the heat of the building had been turned low; he returned to the desk and sat in his chair. He couldn't return home; the woman in his bed was a stranger to him. His legs were foreign objects, and he was too drunk to drive.

In the morning, he lifted himself from his stupor and crossed the room to the window once more. He pressed his face to the window. He'd finally pulled it off; he'd slept here. No one had bothered him; no one had seen him do it. He'd done it. She'd be furious. "I can't go home and change; I'd better clean up in the men's room." He tiptoed out of the room and into the hallway, each footstep rang and alerted his fears. Once they had wakened, he nearly changed his mind and returned to his desk. The squeak of the door nearly drove him mad, but he was there, and no one had seen him.

Once inside he looked at his face in the mirror. His eyes were wild; his face had creases from his coat. He was glad he'd come here; he couldn't be seen like this. He couldn't completely cleanse yesterday from his face and mouth, though he really tried. He did manage to find a stick of gum to chew. It was now eight o'clock and he felt very old although he was very young.

Back at the window an idea occurred to him and caused him to tug violently at the window. At first it didn't budge. Infuriated, he wanted to strike it to put the fear of God into it. Instead, he tried again. He pulled for all he was worth; it moved an inch. Returning once again to his desk, he picked up his coffee mug, lifted it to his mouth, showed repugnance at its contents and put it

back down. At length his eyes returned to the blank piece of paper before him. He stared at it, then scanned the room's walls. The old movie poster, the poster "The Day the Earth Stood Still" showed a beautiful woman being ravaged by a robot, an idea which must have appealed to him because he laughed whenever he saw it.

He didn't laugh just then, though. He needed to concentrate. He looked at the typewriter and a song came to him, so instead he hummed.

No ideas, no new ones anyway. Dragons or demons, they're always good for a page or two anyway, he thought. How could he write anything when he could find no part of himself willing to let go? Science fiction was becoming a bore, old hat, he thought, so he hummed.

At 5:30 he went home. He burned out of the parking lot thinking he looked like Sterling Moss on his way home. He found a small theatre showing three John Ford films, "The Informer," "My Darling Clementine" and "How Green Was My Valley." When he left, he was in a good mood. He thought he could write the stories tomorrow. And then it was night.

(Chanticleer, 1977)

Father's Day

Diane Jones

Michael was twelve the summer before he and his mother moved from Harlem to Queens when Aunt Verna, frowning from behind goggle-thick glasses in the sparkle and clutter of her sitting room, told him his father was in town. She would not tell him until she made him swear secrecy, then, hesitating, peered at him long and hard and thrust her Bible at him again---"Swear!" Before he could complete the vow, she had snatched the Bible back. "A boy should know his own father," she said, her jaw clamped tight.

Quietly, Michael opened the top drawer of his dresser and pocketed the small hoard of coins he had been saving for a new catcher's mitt. Except for shoes clutched to himself, he was completely dressed. What had begun as a dream was now a nauseating, sinking and tugging in the pit of his stomach developing into a dizzying weightlessness that made his head seem hollow. At each step the dream advanced to reality, and it seemed forever before he had crept down the hall past his mother's bedroom, then on to the door.

Outside, it was so early the August air was like a cool liquid on his skin. He checked his pants pocket for the instructions his Aunt Verna had given him. Suddenly he noticed the streets were barely alive. The freshness, the quiet, the stillness felt strange. Michael wanted at that moment to turn back, but he didn't have a key.

On the downtown bus there were few people and no children at all. Every few stops the bus driver, a grey haired man with well-muscled arms, adjusted his rear-view mirror, and in it, although not visible, Michael felt the stern, piercing, appraising eyes. Finally, the driver turned around. "Where're you headed, Sonny?"

"To see my father," Michael's voice sounded surer than he felt.

When Michael got off the bus, he stood on the corner, thinking that perhaps he was in the wrong place. He checked and re-checked the wrinkled sheet of notebook paper, then waited until an ample-bosomed woman with a pleasant face approached.

"Scuse me, Ma'am, I'm looking for Benton Street." The woman confirmed that he was only two blocks from his destination. Michael's pace was uneven; he was torn between his desire to meet his father and his worry that his father might not approve. It never occurred to him his father might not be home.

The house was one of a row, distinguished only by its number, the letters painted a flat green like the door beneath them. Michael knocked, startled when his rather timidly applied knuckles produced the sound of firm steps beyond the solid wood door. A tall dark man nearly filled the opening.

"I'm Michael," the words hung for a moment as the man looked down at him.

"Well, now, Michael, I'll bet you're here because your mother finally decided we should meet." Michael wasn't sure whether this was, by his father's point of view, good or bad. He hastily corrected his father's error, "Aunt Verna said I should come."

Like the bus driver, Michael's father found Michael curious and stared at him thoughtfully.

They went all the way downtown by taxi; then they were out and walking in a place called Central Park. They said little, confining conversation to the day's events. Michael was especially pleased by the zoo. By late afternoon they stood in a department store where Michael's father bought him a green corduroy coat.

Out on the street they were met with a blast of heat, like opening the door to a steam room. They paused on the sidewalk, jostled by waves of people. Amidst the confusion and noise of car horns, shouting street vendors and the oppressive heat, Michael clutched the coat-box so tightly the deep grey dye from the cardboard melted in streaks onto his sweat-soaked tee shirt. All around them feet scraped and tapped in a rhythm that leaned toward hysteria.

"Supper time. We'd better get you home." Michael's father was matter of fact. "I've got business this evening." It was a final statement.

In the taxi, Michael twisted around on the seat, got on his knees and peered through the back window. Hands stuffed in his hip pockets, his father stood at the curb, watching, until Michael couldn't see him anymore.

Michael bought an apple at the fruit stand two blocks from his house and went home to meet his punishment. Michael's mother was sitting quietly by the window in the tiny front room, the yellowed curtains curving slightly, then sucked flat against the screen as the sporadic breeze sent its warm breath into the even warmer room. Her voice was unusually soft and strange as she asked whether he was hungry and to go wash for supper.

The trip was never mentioned, and Michael never had the courage to wear the coat. He occasionally opened the closet door and stared at it amongst his clothes. On days when he felt brave, he would drape the coat on the bed, rubbing his hand over the rough-smooth corduroy and wonder about the man he knew as his father, the man who had stood with his hands in his hip pockets and watched until the taxi had disappeared.

That winter Michael and his mother moved from Aunt Verna's to Queens. As many things do when families move, the coat disappeared.

(Chanticleer, 1983)

Sweet Memories

Julie Barker

As I lick my lips I can still taste
the sweet wine of yesterday
We drank to each other
As the sun went to sleep
Soft, tender words,
Your hand gently touched
my cheek
The wine's fragrance still lingers
And I'm reminded-
of you and yesterday

(Chanticleer, 1983)

Now

Jack Clark

“Every action of theirs (mankind), that seems to them
an act of free will, is in an historical sense not free will at all,
but in bondage to the whole course of previous history, and
predestined from all eternity.” -Leo Tolstoy (from *War and Peace*)

Tolstoy, being the Christian he supposedly was,
Should know, as well as you, that man
must choose between good and evil,
right and wrong--freedom. Adam and Eve had
freedom to choose from any tree, man
possesses this same privilege. I am going
to walk in the bright summer sunshine, blue jeans
and no shirt, deeply inhale my Camel Lights,
sip my Cognac. Hell, I just might gulp
the whole bottle down. Oh yes,
and I will curse now, damn it.
“Now”- a significant word. I am going
to listen to the sullen existentialism
of New Order, or maybe the romantic jazz of
Harry Connick, Jr. Whatever I feel is right
for now. Perhaps I'll go to Mr. Steak,
though I've never been there before,
and indulge in a filet mignon wrapped
in juicy bacon strips and an ice cold
Diet Coke. I don't even remember the last time
I've had steak. I'm going to walk down Woodside,
or maybe McCracken, possibly Bonneville, I've
never been down that road. Shoot, maybe I'll
ride my bike. I don't know. Nothing from my past
is telling me what to do,
only my now offering desires.
History has not set me in bondage to my now,
rather an infinite number of nows made me
who I am. I will continue to freely choose
what I do with my nows without bondage to the past,
previous nows, or who won last night's game
between the White Sox and the Tigers.

(Stark Naked, 1991)

And a D+ in Sax Education

Donald Goodman

One of the little-known stories of the 1940's tells how I gave up a musical career and helped win the Battle of Guadalcanal. I was ten at the time.

My father had a dance band that played the Chicago nightclubs and honky-tonks in the 1920's and 30's and was finally broken up by the draft of 1941. Skilled with both saxophone and clarinet he was sure that his children had inherited his talent, but he was only half right. My sister Marilyn, four years my senior, dutifully took up the saxophone and made recognizable sounds with it: My Wild Irish Apse, K-K-K-Katy, Merry Widow Waltz. They all sounded like music when she played them but like alley cats in heat when I took up the horn.

Marilyn's saxophone was a tiny thing that held only about a cup-and-a-half of notes, but the contraption my father hooked me up to (It had a cord that went around your neck in a loop and snapped onto the saxophone with a silver snap so you couldn't get away) had a fifty gallon capacity and a thousand little push-buttons you couldn't see when you were pushing, along with an enormous bell-mouth where a giant python could hide. For some reason I always suspected it might be used for that purpose, and whenever I picked it up I checked it for snakes. This brass mammoth required the leather lungs of a Swiss yodeler to make any noise with it, and I was frail and of limited breath.

Music was work, I wanted none of it. What, after all, was wrong with listening to Tom Mix or just watching clouds? But my father, you see, had never been a child. Like most fathers of that time he was born old. Moreover, in contrast to my world which I kept in a shambles, he liked order and logical progression: We spent hours clamping the bamboo reed properly into the mouthpiece, a week learning to go "Ta...Ta...Ta..." tapping my tongue correctly against my front teeth. Thumping my Boy Scout shoe on the floor musically took months, and I never did get it right. It had something to do with counting. We didn't see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, my father and I. Scales, for instance. He believed in them, I didn't. I figured if you were lucky enough to hit the right note at the right time there was no sense in dwelling on it. It was time to move on with your life: find another note. America wasn't built by people who spent their day running up and down the same old notes. We never settled that dispute.

I learned to love that saxophone not through my father's perseverance but because I found it a superb weapon of vengeance. The people next door had a red chow dog with a purple mouth, and I had a white rabbit with pink eyes. I kept the rabbit in a cage in the garage. One day their chow dog used his purple mouth to kill my rabbit with the pink eyes. Got right into the cage somehow and tore him to bloody tatters.

Hell hath no fury like a ten-year-old whose pet has been murdered. I owned a short, powerful Indian bow which my grandfather had given me; a Potawatomi chief had made it for him and decorated it with berry paint. I snatched it off my wall along with two warped and frazzled arrows and stalked that red killer with the bloody fangs, but my mother interceded on the dog's behalf and locked up my weapons. The dog's owner offered no sympathy, something about a dog-eat-dog world, and I fell into despondency after burying the rabbit pieces behind the garage.

Next day I was scabbling out my scales--I compromised by playing certain favorite notes which I'd crayoned in in orange-when I heard the chow in the house next door howl along with me. It sounded as if he were in pain, and I was fiendishly delighted. Oh, did I practice after that! With all the windows wide open.

I concentrated on high-volume octaves and squeals, and the dog responded wholeheartedly. I played him like an anguished bagpipe, two hours a day, and he never tired of it, never grew bored. My music didn't get any better, but I drove sounds out of that saxophone that this planet had not heard since the days of the dinosaurs. Abandoning my mangled scales I went after "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton" with a passion, battering the melody and strangling the tune. I played it forward and then from the bottom line up, and finally crayoned in selected notes in orange and played that; the dog sang every chorus. I heard an occasional shriek from the lady of the house, and there were rumors of domestic strain over there, but I never believed that story of them going after each other with knives.

Eventually it ended: the husband left for the navy, the wife joined the WACs, and the dog went into the K-9 Corps where he promptly ate the first trainer that stepped into his pen. My father came home early one day, listened for a moment, then silently unhooked me from the saxophone and took it down to the Scrap Metal for Defense drive. I don't know what the War Department did with it, but shortly after that Japan withdrew its forces from Guadalcanal. Apparently they'd suffered enough.

(Stark Naked, 1991)

The Criminal

J. Edward Justian

The story you are about to read is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent. And a couple of the place names, too, in order to protect the integrity of the organizations in question. And some of the events have been altered from the actual event or have been deleted to fit into unreasonable space constraints enforced by the editor. Many of the premises are apocryphal and based on bogus pretense. As a matter of fact, I made this story up. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Old Mrs. Cransworth answered the door--she heard some knocking- and was greeted by two uniformed and armed men, one of whom was holding an official-looking (with state seals and stuff) piece of paper to his side. "Mrs. Margaret Cransworth?" said the one with the paper.

"Yes," said the elderly lady after the perfect amount of hesitation. She held the door open only a crack and it was chained so she was peering out over the side of the door in traditional elderly lady style.

"I am Officer Brentwood, and this is Officer Smith. We have a warrant to search the premises for illegal activity." Officer Brentwood handed the official-looking (signed by a judge, no less) paper through the slightly open door.

Mrs. Cransworth took the paper. She pretended to read a while before putting on her bifocals. After examination she said she would have to call her lawyer. "Oh, Mrs. Cransworth, may I call you Margaret? – I'm afraid that won't do." Officer Smith handed Brentwood a pair of clipper-like things and Brentwood clipped the chain on the door. Brentwood and Smith entered the old lady's house.

Officer Brentwood said to his partner in an official tone, "You check the bedroom, Charles. I'll get the freezer." Mrs. Cransworth ran to her phone but could think of no one to call.

After two minutes, Brentwood said to Mrs. Cransworth, "I'm sorry, you'll have to come with us. Our investigation was fruitful, Margaret- if that is your real name. You closed the wrong flap first on your ice cream box, and your mattress lacks the proper tag." Then he added with more than a hint of disgust, "Cuff her, Charles."

And so they dragged Mrs. Cransworth from her home, leaving a doomed pint of butter pecan ice cream to melt alone on the kitchen counter.

(Stark Naked, 1991)

Black Hole

Donald Goodman

Somewhere a star blinked out,
And sucked in worlds across the sky,
Wing-shot down a flight of planets,
Pan-fried up their three-toed creatures,
Melted all their snowcapped mountains.
I saw all it happen just a
Hundred thousand
Years too late
To help.

(Stark Naked, 1992)

A Poem IS...

Paula Doctor

a small parade
stopping for
the grandstand
and rearranging.

The Brownies fall out
and commandeer
the Model-T's.
The Apple Queen
grows a bright red
nose and throws a
bucket of confetti
on the demure clown.
his cupped hand waving
sweetly to applause.
The horses throw batons
so high the judges'
"ah's" drown out the
fire truck's fractured syntax.

(Stark Naked, 1992)

Moon Window

Hollie Benson



Photography

(River Voices, 2021)

Lowell, AZ

Cassie Pierce



Photography

(River Voices, 2021)

Old Red

Rhonda Mullenau



Photography

(River Voices, 2021)

Some Kind of Precipice

Erin Hoffman



Reductive Woodcut

(*River Voices*, 2021)

Ismene of the Valley

Katherine Gould

OK, so like, you're saying
my dad's my brother?
Oh yeah right! Fer sure!
And I'm the Pallas Athena.
That would make my mom my grandmother
and my sister and brothers my cousins.
Oh god! You're like serious!?
EEEEWWWW! That's really sick!

Oh wow, I get it now.
So that's what Dad-brother meant
when he said people would whisper and stare
and that we would never marry.
Oh, but wait a minute, Antigone fell in love
and was to marry Haemon.
Oh, but he's like our cousin too, huh?

Bummer, this fate stuff really sucks!
I mean, so far I've lost my
Father-brother, Mother-grandmother,
two brother-cousins, a sister-cousin,
and one plain cousin-cousin.
Well, with this track record,
what's suppose to happen to me?
I have no family left; well except for Creon.
Woah now, don't even think about it.
If the big dudes up on Mt. Olympus have decided this,
then I'll both blind and hang myself.
(Family traditions, you know.)

OK, so like, what am I suppose to do
with the rest of my stain-infested life?
I know one thing for sure:
I'm staying away from Teiresias
for the rest of my life.
That dude's bad luck!
Hey, wait a minute.
I could move to Corinth!
Yeah! Dad-brother had another mother
he hasn't ruined yet.
Maybe she'll take me in. Hmmm....

(*Stark Naked*, 1993)

How To Count an Orange

Mary Tyler

“If I have two oranges and I give you one...”

I hate math.
It is the sickness of hoboes,
scavenges in alleys,
pushes a waning man's eyes into
the yellowing of his sockets.
You approach and do
or do not give.
Either way, it is math.
You are guilty.
Selfish hobo mathmen suck you dry,
and zero waits around the corner,
explodes in wild hunger.

Spoiled, blind math gives up on oranges,
doesn't know that
If I have two oranges and I give you one,
we have two oranges,
two pregnant globes of bumpy ripeness,
skins so thick they rip aloud
their ten plump, celebrating chunks.
We learn to make baskets of our t-shirts
and hold them all.

Ripe new lover,
in the heap somewhere,
you can find two dry, tight navels
ready to be pressed into moist earth
where they will be the umbilical cords
to something new and uncountable.

Why, with two opened oranges,
we have twenty-four perfect units of eager,
bulging fruit,
pressed together by thin, webbed membranes.
You snap into those tight moon slices and
make enough sticky juice to fill
four cupped palms,
two gaping mouths,
six receptive navels,
or

three expectant hours of a cool March afternoon.
Add that!
Now shirtless,
we gather bits of rind to rub into
calloused elbows,
to moisten bellies into iridescence,
to dry in cracking pots for future lace sashes
that we will tuck under my silk camisoles,
and drive some hoboes wild.

Fat-bellied math hoboes give up too quickly
on oranges,
don't even know how to throw a good party.

(Stark Naked, 1993)

Why I Assign Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

Richard Doctor

Picking which books to read isn't easy. You need a system. When I was eight or nine, I went every Friday night to Hackley Library and pulled books from the shelves, opened them, and when no one was looking, smelled the pages. Open your grandma's photo album; take a whiff: I picked the books that had that smell.

When Thomas Wolfe, the early one with the enormous appetites, went to Harvard, legend says he tried to read through the library alphabetically, which means he read Alcott's *Little Men* before *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle. The system was flawed: if he majored in business, he'd never reach Zig Ziglar before graduating.

My father had a different technique: he chose whatever books would most likely end up at 10 cents apiece on a garage sale table: *The Bridge Over the City* by Peter Gray North and *Dwelling of the Heart* by Ernest Greeling, books that would never have Cliffs Notes. But he died before I learned the trick of his uncanny system.

When I turned ten, dog stories were my steady diet: *Lassie Come Home*, *Lad: a Dog*, and *White Fang*. After reading London's *Call of the Wild* I almost ran away from home. Instead, I found my brother's ninth grade *The American Literary Tradition* with a photo of a statue of the Minute Men on the cover and "To Build a Fire" on page 1,027. With some authors, like Hemingway, if you've read one we-drunk-we-hunted-we-got-depressed story, you've read them all. I thought London would be safe: the dog would live, the man would get wet feet, but he would build a fire using the same techniques found on my Straight Arrow cards from the Shredded Wheat boxes. If rubbing sticks failed, he could check his *Junior Woodchuck's Guide Book* like Huey, Dewey and Louie. I was shocked when he lay down in the snow.

So now, you may suppose, I may be aiming for some kind of perverted revenge in assigning the story to my students, some parental we-never-had-Coke-in-the-house-when-I-was-a-kid-drink-your-milk sadism: "Stories didn't have a happy ending when I was a kid and by gosh . . ." It's more complicated. I do want them to know the race is not always to the swift, and the express lane is not always the fastest route out of Plumb's, and we teachers may not know what a world-class education really is, so be prepared for the worst.

But that's too hopeless, and I'm not without hope, though I can't talk about it in class; I can talk about condoms but not Jesus. One thing I'm hoping is that students can see that some things are better than others: freedom is better than jail, Rembrandt is better than Warhol, *King Lear* is better than *Bridge Over*

the City. Unfortunately, most literature anthologies on the market pick authors and stories by an odd system: skin pigmentation and the absence or presence of male sex organs (white is bad, Lorena Bobbit was innocent, Rich is poor, four-legs-good-two-legs-bad, arbeit macht frei). I knew a girl in grade school who read only books with red covers; she should apply for an editorial position at Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.

I still prefer smelling. I like a book that has the aroma of real life, not political theory; the ethnicity of the author doesn't matter if his or her characters breathe, eat, work, love, think, worship, create, and act as real people, even if, like the ones in Grandma's photo album, they all end up dead in the end.

(*River Voices*, 1994)

U.S.S. Silversides

Angela Maloy

Red tulips edge a booth
where for two bucks
you begin the tour.
A college student
takes you down.
She had memorized its story,
how the youngest seaman
slept near the torpedo
as a kind of joke.
Examining the old submarine,
you duck through metal arches,
think of navigation films-
sonar beeps like tiny knives
threatening the sailor's ribs
but stopped short.
You see the cinematic silence
hanging like a sunset;
then Clark Gable
twirls a periscope.
Boy Scouts, the tour guide says,
for seven dollars each
can stay here overnight.
They sink into their pillows,
order Coke and pizza,
watch underwater flicks,
earn a yellow badge.
Once for Troop 400
lake storms rocked the vessel
all night long, she says.
Sirens went off.
The boys climbed out
at sunrise,
elbows first,
like broken snorkels.
One had wet his bed;
three were crying
for their mothers.
All of them babbled
of shattered mirrors,
shining jaws,
the sweet and silver
man in the moon.

(River Voices, 1994)

Growing Pains

Jerry DePoy

kick the covers off me
roll out of bed
step by step fighting my way down the stairs
the time on the microwave says that it's
too late to be awake
knock gently on the unpredictable door-
"Mommy?"
Listening patiently for the assurance that
she is coming. The door opens slowly.
Mamma is standing in a dark green nightgown
wrinkled brow, "What's wrong, honey?"
she feels my head.
I frown.
"I can't sleep. I'm sick or something."
Mamma closes the door behind her
as she makes her way to the kitchen
she reaches for some aspirin in the grown-ups'
cupboard. I look at my bare feet.
"Here, Jerry, take two of these," she whispers
and hands me a glass of water to wash down
the medicine.
"I don't have a headache, Mommy," I say.
"What's wrong then?"
I shrug my shoulders. she waits. confused.
"Where does it hurt, J?"
I tap my hands against my heart.

(River Voices, 1995)

Just Big Kids

David Dudgeon

Life is just too complicated today. The fast-paced style of living in our society, coupled with high levels of stress, inhibit our progress in the pursuit of happiness. So, come with me, if you will, and discover the different phases of a “New Wave Adulthood.” This term can be defined as the lifestyle of adult children, a label I’m proud to display. Our philosophy is to recapture the magic and fantasy of childhood and incorporate it into daily life as an adult. For those of us who have reached this plateau of carefree bliss, we can relate ourselves to one or more of the following categories: just big kids, adults who play with toys, and adult children with children.

The phrase *just big kids*, the beginning phase, refers to those of us who still haven’t totally grown up yet. We tend to live life one day at a time, or should I say, one cartoon at a time. We still enjoy such things as using our imagination, playing games, viewing Saturday morning animation, and building tree forts. This realm of childhood flashbacks can be a refreshing break from the stress of everyday life. As adults, we maintain our responsibilities and find the time to kick off our shoes and run barefoot in the grass or jump in puddles after a hard rain... until the streetlights come on. The natural high of youth engulfs our spirit and excites our being into a blinding addiction for everlasting fun. Our creative limits are those set by the imagination, and, in my mind, all things are possible. Maybe Mr. Rogers was on to something with that land of make believe. WARNING: Prolonged exposure to this phase could lead to further exploration of this concept.

Our next phase is the *adult who plays with toys*. Slot cars, trains, and a host of other pastime favorites can be found in the closets and basements of these die-hard adult kids. Come join the ranks of Nerf ball commandos, Legomaniacs, and remote-control car junkies. Let’s face it, what fun is being a kid if you don’t have any toys? We tend to have the same smiling faces on Christmas Day as in our youth. In our hearts, the Christmas spirit is alive and well. This year I’ll be asking Santa for a Virtual Reality machine, but I may have to wait until they show up at Toys-R-Us first.

Some of our toys may be a little more expensive today, but we also manage to take care of them better than before. At this stage of the game, unless we’re super wealthy, we can’t afford to leave our toys outside when it rains. However, there are those of us who are quite reckless at times and manage to pay a heavy toll in repairs. At times, a small percentage of participants go broke from the purchase and maintenance of their toys. Some things will never change: kids will always be breaking their toys.

The third phase on our journey is the *adult child with children*. This, to me, is the most fun. We need someone to share our toys with. Plus, who

better to teach us about being a kid than another kid? At times, it’s hard to keep up with their seemingly endless energy supply. I combat this by treating it as a good workout, and at the same time I manage to stay physically fit. Coloring is one of my latest forms of interaction in this elementary- school precinct of play. It’s not easy to stay between the lines. Sidewalk chalk art is another one of our endeavors in the ongoing quest for merriment. I look forward to a lifetime of fun and play with my daughter by my side. Perhaps a personal tour of this juvenile world will shed new light on other phases of adult childhood in the future, such as *adult children with grandchildren*. I can hardly wait...or maybe I can... I’m in no rush to play the diaper changing game!

The simple pleasures of life are not lost; they just have to be reintroduced. Adult childhood is one process of doing so. We refuse to let life get us down. Ponce de Leon spent many years engaged in the search for the “Fountain of Youth.” Like so many other aspects of life we desire, most are found right under our noses. Youth is a state of mind and heart. Smiles and laughter are the only requirements to engage in this new-age pleasure principle. Don’t forget: we are all children of God, here to promote peace, love, and happiness. This New Wave Adulthood is a way of life for those of us who believe.

It’s never too late, and we’re never too old, to see the world through the eyes of a child. Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional.

(River Voices, 1995)

River Voices

Mark Lewis

How can we
do what we do?

The stifled stench of
your boss's breath
make your 40 hours
seem like forever.

But those hours in between
when the stars
are climbing home,
I bum the candle at both ends
and I stare into the void (sky home)

or at the illusions of life.

Oh, you must do the same
when you look up
from
your TV.

See, river voices flow,
from
mind to pen.

(River Voices, 1996)

*ex nihilo nihil fit**

Richard Doctor

The nineteenth generation McDonalds** customer,
TeeVeed, eyes blinking blankly, bewildered at three dimension's
after narrowly netscaping (Golden Arches cast a real shadow)-
Don't laugh! Before boldly told, sold, how could you behold
Breakfast-wrapped-in-Styrofoam?
Oh! Blessed the feet of us messengers:
the image-makers creating need ex nihilo,
luring young families (the eighth generation of customers)
the social security scroungers (eleventh)
ice cream lickers (fourteenth)
Oh, you know them all! You're one of them!
One McBuilding for every 25,162 McMericans.
Mr. and Mrs. 19 will soon understand garbled metal language-
But think of this: who's twenty? Where yet lives a McVirgin?
If only I knew! I'd entice them, nicely, once, twice, or thrice would
suffice.
Then, McSess! McVeep! Picture me:
easing my Lexus toward the Drive-Thru, Disney map on lap.
Meanwhile, the nineteenth McDonald's customer
Stares stupefied at Super-sized suppers, at what will soon seem
as natural as Tupperware.

*Latin for "nothing is created from nothing"

** The author wishes to express his deep, deep, deep gratitude to the
McDonald's Corporation for permission to use the following registered
trademark words: McDonalds, Golden Arches, McBuilding, Drive-Thru,
Tupperware. Responses to my resume may be sent to www.advertease.com

(River Voices, 1996)

Late-Night Drive

Mark Lewis

Three long hairs,
sit and think and smoke.

A Black cat

comes to our table

His hands tremble;

he's got blood on his pants.

A crackhead? Smells like it.

A crackhead ready to kill,

to find someone to listen

We listen,

we can't help it.

Uncomfortable, small talk, "I've got girls."

Sure you do.

I think,"Let's not push this guy. He could pull a gun."

For a while, I thought he'd pull a badge.

Late-night dive,

this is where the revolution begins.

I live to breathe, but

sometimes it prevents me from living.

(Just the thought)

And that is the easy part.

(It's really about...) the search for complete understanding;

A total, before the flood, antiquated mess.

A visceral stage,

in which,

stars are the stage lights.

And, the crowds,

the sea.

As the funeral procession progresses,

I stand in the back

and scope the scene

I mean,

the scheme.

Sunday morning,

front porch,

anywhere

(River Voices, 1997)

Bend an Ear, the Topsy Wind is - Poetry

Nathan Kingsley

Allows my white-hulled galleons, my sinking teeth,

To drown in oceans of gravies, of blooded meat.

A fingered cutlass in the fisted pirates,

Frothing, Cussing, Canonizing,

cherished whores and treasured treats.

Dueling contradiction - mind the mutiny of Captain's Hands,

Having slugged in half the sea to bay symposium's demands.

Gnawing sanity into famished rats,

Kneeling, Twitching, Hoping,

To hear blessings of tattered-wood-swishing into the foreign sands.

(River Voices, 1998)

The Future

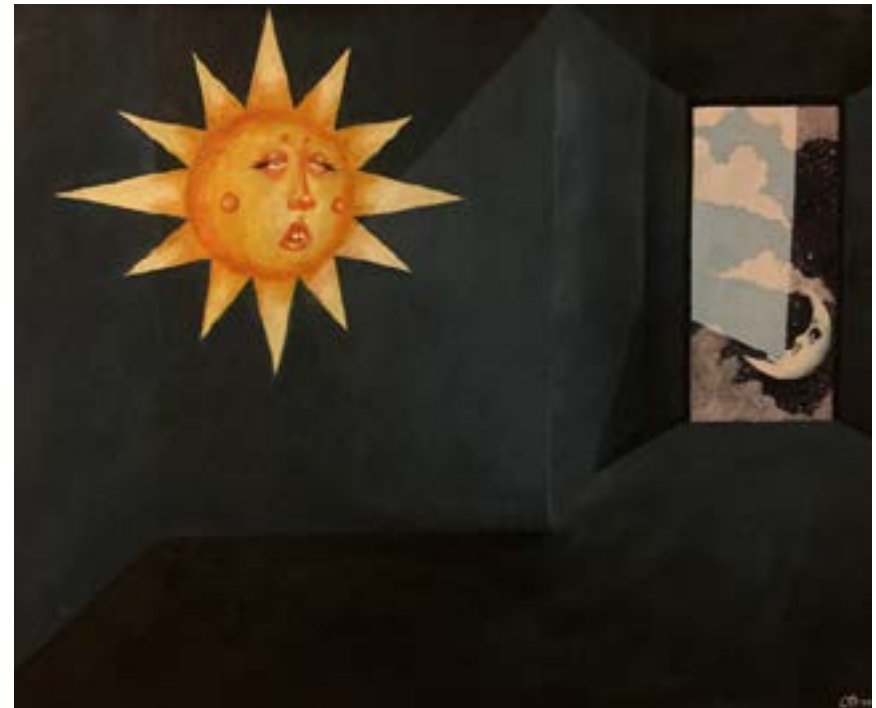
Ryan Millet

If you seek as sultry soul to savior
mine is not the one.
Though scenes of death and sorrow
have witnessed the fading sun.
My only pain is the desperate
whose song has yet to be sung.
Words are yet to be written
whose lines are deserted and unread.
The mind is yet to be opened
whose wisdom is left unfed.
Wishful passions will seek you
after you dream the day ahead.
When a person be not careful
they yet may wake up alone: Dead.

(River Voices, 1998)

Calamitous Night

Calandra Bungart



Acrylic on Canvas

(River Voices, 2022)

All in a Row

Sandra Stoner



Photography
(River Voices, 2022)

Cold Waves

Leah Johnson



Photography
(River Voices, 2022)

Black and White

Gypsy Bates



Mixed Media

(*River Voices*, 2022)

Memento mori

Paula Doctor

Always there is some remembrance of the Fall,
despite the heady blue sky
and orange poppies inflaming the heart.

Though NBC helps ("Sudan famine at 11:00")
this is enough: the miserable pup in the
median while four lanes of traffic zoom by.
We are on the way to an art fair and
want to think on beauty, not truth,
But what can we do?

We damn peripheral vision, stop,
back up, grope under seats to find
a rope, a chain, or belt as leash,
and leave the car.
We zig-zag the traffic, drawing near
the dog. But he scorns rescue and
sees our helpful forms as hulking threats.
Our pleading "Here boy" frenzies him
back into the traffic.
Horns blast, brakes squeal, we brace
ourselves for nothing:
He makes the other side.

What can we do?
We tell ourselves, "Instincts."
He is better left to them.
We want the fair.

In the shady park, fat toddlers grip
blue balloon. Their doting grandparent
walk poodle with polished orange nails,
and we buy handpainted tile.
Some mother wipe flies
from her baby's glazed eyes.

What we do is
take the Dairy Queen route home
so as not to see
what crow peck on the highway.

(*River Voices*, 1999)

Reciprocity

Gretchen Cline

Your eyes, wide at the corners, smiling from your heart
speak to the flutter in my fingers,
calming me, comforting me.

Thick brows like clouds,
envelop
the horizon of my pain.

Stronger, I extend a still hand
and massage your soul,
like the tender blue touch of the sea
washing your hurt away.

(River Voices, 1999)

Mercury Winds

Quinn Villanueva

(Inspired by the sculpture “YINYANG” created by Lee Collet)

I take a walk on a silvery horizon where mercury winds polish
abraded stone, and I come to rest at the base
of a mountain which tapers into infinity.
While metallic breezes seep through an air colored sky,
I become one with a work of art.

Beyond my shining periphery is a shaded world
where she sits across the gallery from me.
She can't possibly imagine how beautiful she is
resting under a gallery light set to play only on her,
and the distance between us mocks me:
Close enough for me to appreciate
she poses.

Her organic shape drifts with lightweight, contoured curves
while her gestured lines highlight a glazed surface which attracts,
nearly absorbs, the glow from throughout the room,
and every day of the week she is brown.

I ebb.
I flow over that steely shore where minutes pass
like days, and then I stand.
Her beauty seduces me into the gallery light.
I enter her.

One of us leaves,

and I miss her before the lights dim.

(River Voices, 1999)

Smoking in the Girls' Room

Mary Tyler

The way to escape algebra
and angry nuns
was beyond the custodian's closet
to the Girls' Room
tucked, it seems
by accident,
near the gymnasium.

Who would not
use it instead?
Through a cracked window
we spied the angular boys
bouncing like cigarettes.

Nicotine smeared the mirrors.
We smoothed our mouths with lip gloss
confessed the names inked beneath
our sleeves, and inhaled
the pleasure our
muted reflections.

So when Sister Mary Agnus
saw our Virginia Slims clog the toilets,
she marched us to the office,
her habit one we never understood.
We rolled our skirts higher
and were of one mind:
*I cannot tell a lie, Father,
I was not smoking, but I'm on fire.*

(River Voices, 1999)

Paper, Scissors, Rocks

Mary Tyler

By noon, the shirtless boys, their skin
smooth as damp clay, their shoulder blades
tight as boomerangs,
huddle. They burn
a leaf under glass,
pleat the corners of lined paper
into tight F-15s. They are already engineers
like their fathers. Then one child
remembers the power his height gives him
and opens an attack of spit wads.

After dinner and undiscovered,
the boys dissect ants,
use their Swiss Army knives like scalpels
to dislodge the thorax from the head.
Or behind the clumped maple, they cut out
pictures of women
in lingerie where legs open
like scissors. Boys cut
to the rhythm
of their own loins.

At dusk, a rock three days
from the cold stream is launched
from a slingshot. The sudden cut
creates a cry; the smaller boy cups
his head in bloody hands
to testify. But it will be mere hours
until they are nestled in green sleeping bags,
until their eyes close like linnet wings,
until one last whispered insult: *So what if
I was bleeding, you throw like a girl.*

(River Voices, 1999)

Whistle

Mike Gerard

“Daddy, can I buy that shiny whistle?” the child asked her dad. She tapped on his massive, gnarled hands to get his attention. “Oh, what did you say babycakes?” he asked as he bent to hear his child. “You know ole dad doesn’t hear so good.” “The whistle, Daddy, can I buy the whistle? You could hear that!” she teasingly replied. “Damn straight I could,” thought the line-backer sized old man.

How many times has he heard whistles? The screeching, piercing whistles. That staccato trill like a deranged metal headed woodpecker on an aluminum light pole. Hundreds? No, thousands of times. Each whistle burned into his mind like lines burnt into the sides of a grilled steak.

He could remember that first whistle at football practice. Just ten years old, mangling bodies and having a ball! Coach pulled out his shiny metallic whistle and demanded, “When I blow the whistle you stop!” Of course, the boy had to test this order. A play was run and he headed for the frail sissy running back. He closed in on his victim, a noose closing in on a hung man. He heard that shriek, trilling whistle. Just steps away and filled with blood-lust, he pretended not to hear. He launched his body like a lion pouncing on prey and mauled his prey down. Standing over his victim with a wild carnivorous look, he stood ready for his next meal.

Suddenly, he heard that damn whistle. Again and again it blew, rattling him back and forth like a four mile long freight train. He realized now it was the Coach shaking him and blowing that whistle. “I told you to stop when I blew the whistle!” the Coach screamed at him while spit flew from his lips. “Now,” he snarled, “you find out what happens when you disobey my orders!!”

“Boy, when I blow this whistle, you will run. When I blow again, you will stop, drop and give me 10. Another whistle-run. Another, stop and drop. You understand me, boy?” the Coach snapped at him with that whistle stuck to his lips like boogers stuck on a wall. You shake your head automatically, like a bobbing head dog in the back window of a car. Whistle! Run! Whistle! Stop and drop! Whistle! Run! Whistle! Stop and drop! Screech! Run! Screech! Stop and drop! Scream! Run! Scream! Stop!

Finally, the damn whistle quit. The boy’s adrenaline and pride lay in an oozing puddle below him. He would now obey the whistle, but only because obeying meant he could still be a lion when the whistles didn’t blow.

Lounging on the beach, his chiseled, taut body proudly displayed, he spied his quarry. Numbnuts from that other school, and they were harassing his girl. Like a rutting bull moose, he slammed into them. His rhythmic fists pummeling them like a drumbeat delivered a clear message while their faces turned to crimson pulp. As the orgasmic rush of adrenaline satiated his body, he became aware of another rhythm which pierced his ears. It was a policeman’s whistle. He knew he couldn’t run. The whistle demanded his obedience.

Just like the pounding of fists or the trill of the whistle, the Judge’s gavel pounded a rhythmic beat into his mind. “Son, if you enter military service, I will have your record cleared. If not, you will be incarcerated for a period of 24 months, to be served forthwith.”

The recruit bus pulled up to the barracks. Suddenly the battle hardened D.I. burst through the bus door! “Doors can’t hold me, bullets can’t kill me!” he screamed, all the while blowing on his shiny metallic whistle. “You maggots know why? Because I learned to follow orders and you will too! When I say shit, you squat and ask how much. You pukes disgust me! You look like cattle going to the slaughter house,” he roared. “Some of you will end up the same way, pieces of entrails, brains and severed limbs lying on the ground. Only the ones that follow orders ever make it home. Now get your asses off this bus and put your toes on the white lines,” he barked like a deranged pit bull.

“One things for damn sure” the last chance recruit thought to himself. “I’m doing whatever that whistle-blowing bastard tells me to do.”

Whistles, damn whistles. He lay on the damp, soft earth of the steamy jungle. The hot nightmarish night seemed to go on forever, like a dentist drilling your sensitive teeth. Each second ticked by like another incremental turn of the drill. All night long he heard the enemy signaling to each other with those damn whistles. Then... Bam, Bam, Bam! The staccato demands of AK-47’s. “Keep your head down!” “Fire Back!” “They’re close!” “Shit! Hang on buddy, I’ll get you out of here.” Then a grenade plopped on the soft earth like cow guts splatting on a slaughter house floor. Showers of fiery, sparkling lightning are extinguished by a thunderous roar. Finally the picture memory of a feather floating to the bottom of a dank deep well.

The medics said his hearing would never be the same. “Fine,” he thought, “as long as I don’t have to hear those damn whistles.”

“Please Daddy,” the soft voice tapped him back to the here and now. “No, baby,” he sighed, “no whistles.”

(River Voices, 2000)

The Old Tapestry

Jordan Mundt

The pupil is as in a posh palace
a smoke-darkened tapestry.
The shadows of sundown
swallow the tainted textile.

A sooty black veil
masks the bloody battles
of a line of English elite.
The victories lie in gritty camouflage
to stun an occasional onlooker.
Passing patrons, blind to this sullied splendor,
amble onward.

(River Voices, 2000)

Daybreak

Emily Nieboer

The rain pours down
cleansing our earth.
The sun breaks through
in a spectacular birth.
It withers and fades
with the coming of night,
-the numbing darkness
comes in sight.
The pale moon
hovers above
sending down
its message of love.
Sparkling stars
dance in the sky,
questioning the day
when all must die.
The shadows fade
with the breaking of dawn,
the birds chant out
their lasting song.
The sun is reborn
and again will die,
the lightning will moan
and the thunder
will cry.

(River Voices, 2000)

Machismo

Jason Whitman

I could feel excitement and anticipation in the air as we got on the bus that day. I had been sent to Saudi Arabia in support of Desert Storm over a month ago and had grown tired of life on the military compound. Although the compound boasted such creative entertainment as rock bingo, dominoes, card games, and a seemingly endless supply of last year's best-selling novels, my free time was less than refreshing. On this particular day, the group I had joined had planned an exciting adventure into downtown Riyadh. We felt as exclusive as people with tickets to a sold out Broadway musical. There had not been a public execution for over nine months, and none of the troops that had preceded us on rotation had had the rare opportunity of witnessing such an extreme difference in culture.

The banter on the bus was especially lighthearted. Everyone seemed happy with our destination. Although it seems morbid now, everyone in our group seemed to look forward to seeing a decapitation. Some shared their personal feelings on the subject of capital punishment; while others expressed hope that we would arrive early enough to get a good position in the crowd. Playful ribbings about masculinity and fortitude were frequent.

When we arrived at the place affectionately known as chop-chop square, some in our group were disappointed by the size of the crowd. Their disappointment was replaced with wonder as the crowd parted and we were pushed quickly to the front. Later, I learned that the Saudis are very proud of their judicial system and are quick to expose western visitors to its graphic conclusions.

When we arrived at the front of the crowd, I could see several of the religious police known as Mataua (Ma Tow-Wa), patrolling the edge of chop chop square, keeping the crowds out of the execution area with their riding crop-like whips. The crowd behind us continued to push and I stumbled across the imaginary line the Mataua was enforcing. One of the Mataua quickly corrected me with a swift strike to my thighs with his whip. After I regained my position (and my composure), I saw two well-dressed Arabians lying down a huge plastic tarp where I had just stood.

My eyes scanned the scene before me, and I was able to locate the accused. I knew nothing of the charges against this man. I had learned a little about this custom and had learned that his drugged appearance was more than just shock over his impending demise. He had been subdued with tranquilizers to ease his handling.

The execution party was comprised of four men excluding the condemned. Two Matauan guards held their prisoner while a swordsman stood nearby. The fourth man's task was to read what, I assumed, were the crimes this man had committed. When he had finished speaking, the swordsman stepped forward.

A dull cry arose from the crowd as the Scimitar was unsheathed and displayed for our inspection. The guards forced the man to his stomach on the

plastic tarp. I was surprised by my ability to watch as the skilled executioner slowly raised his sword then quickly brought it down through the base of the condemned man's skull. The quiet hush that had come over the crowd with the raise of the sword broke into football fan-like cheering. As the crowd of Arabian nationals cheered, our small group of American soldiers watched in quiet awe of the horror transpiring before us. Later, I learned that the wealth of the condemned man's family determines the sharpness of the sword. This man must have been a pauper. By the third stroke of the human butcher's cleaver, many of the soldiers' eyes were closed. At that moment, I felt as much a foreigner to the human race as I did being an American overseas.

After what seemed an eternity in darkness, I opened my eyes to a new obscenity. I had lost count of the number of the hacking noises I had heard with my eyes clenched shut, but any reasonable person would have assumed it was over. It was not. When I opened my eyes, the guards had stepped forward and, using their booted feet, were rolling the semi-decapitated man unto his back. Whatever faults this man may have had, weak physical constitution was not one of his lacking areas. I watched the executioner rejoin his prey and sever the last remaining bit of flesh between the chin and chest.

Once the objective was achieved, the crowd began to mill about murmuring to themselves. They were probably exchanging critical commentary on this public execution in contrast to the last. I don't know for sure. My group neither moved nor spoke for several minutes as the crowd dispersed. By the time we had collected ourselves and decided to head for the bus, the clean-up crew had already removed the cadaver and the tarp. I had been looking down at the ground a lot since the beheading, and was the first to notice the water flowing over the ground at our feet. The tarp had failed to catch all the remains of the corpse and the clean-up crew was hosing off the soiled concrete. As the splattered remains rolled past my feet, I felt my stomach practicing numerous gymnastic maneuvers.

As we headed for the bus, there was none of the light-hearted banter that had filled the morning. Each man chose to process this new experience in quiet solitude. The energy I had felt in the air that morning was replaced by an undisturbed solemnness. The toughest machismo was sequestered somewhere deep beneath the realization of man's fragile mortality.

(River Voices, 2001)

Used Cars For Sale

Melissa Martin

degrade my white '89 towncar as we soar
down apple avenue like a graceful
trapeze artist.

i don't like thinking my car is used;
i'm using her. we're together
today.

just like the man who
bought the prostitute. he doesn't think.
of her as used while he's using her.
she's all his.

and when we, on the july night,
made love in the backseat of her,
i didn't picture the previous owner's
jolly gut slappin' against the blue leather.
no.

you were mine. the car is mine.
there was no one before me.

(River Voices, 2001)

Sommesso Sonetto

Quinn Villanueva

I am not a friend who will fade with grace.
I am one who'll always, for you, be there
wanting to put a smile upon your face,
so don't, my friend, dismiss me 'cause I care.
The days are gone when we would speak for hours.
And now we share mere looks, smiles, pleasantries,
waves, gestures, platitudes sweet past days soured
by times my eyes seek yours yet your eyes flee.
And when I see you walking down the hall
like many times before sorrows amass
wondering if this time your stride will stall.
You're often missed before you even pass.
We depart with everything left to say,
but know it's not with grace I fade this way.

(River Voices, 2001)

Memories in the Snow

Jim Huckabee

It's quiet now, the river is at rest.
The willows are bare.
Morgan's hollow is snuggled in a snowy cape.
The fishermen are hibernating by the fires spark.
The silence of the blue sky and snowy fields are broken only by the gulls in the sky.
Many see this as the end; they do not see the swelling rebirth underneath winter's vale.
No more warm breezes or summer rays.
As I look over the silence of this winter day, I see the coming days as clearly as those having pasted.
Look over there, the swans with their brood and the red winged birds.
Over there is the picnic in celebration of Jill and Tom coming home.
There is the tree that we swung on when we were but kids.
See it over there behind where Sue and Dave meet running from the sudden storm.
There were those picnics that lasted all day.
Oh look, there's Hoby landing that trophy Pike.
As I sit on this old bench I can see that it is but the beginning, not the end.

(River Voices, 2003)

Traveling Sunsets

Ashley Streng



Photography

(River Voices, 2023)

Should We Say Something?

Kelly Torz



Digital Art

(River Voices, 2023)

Let's Go

Andrea Figueroa



Graphite

(River Voices, 2023)

San Francisco Bay

Erik Nelsen



Photography

(River Voices, 2023)

She's a Peony

Karin Neils

Pink preponderance of petals
Perfuming the air, commanding the breeze
Full and round, her heavy
Fragrance filling the garden, the yard, the hall with her.
Fairest, oh yes,
Filled and glowing her presence--see...
Elegant--unto herself gracious, graceful
Endlessly drawing all eyes to fall upon her.
Each perfect curving petal a heretofore unthought thought
Each are of color an ideal idea
Ever a source of--so much for so many who will be forever grateful.
Her large head leads her fall into the storm-muddied pool at her feet.

(River Voices, 2003)

Stages of a Sleepless Student

John Townsend

Jewish American Princess

"I just don't think that's a good idea."

My mother is the type of person who will do almost anything for you, but when it comes to what's best for me, I don't know a goddamn thing.

I once fell off my skateboard and caught my arm underneath it. I told her I was in pain and that maybe we should get it looked at. She nodded, but never looked up from her phone. "You'll be fine, Kyle. Now hurry up or I'll be late for my book club." The next morning my arm was twice its normal size. Broken ulna and radius. She did buy me Super Mario Brothers and give me a month break from temple. That's her way.

"But Ma, that doc is even more useless than these pills. Effexor, Valium, Ambien, Serequel. What's next, lithium? I don't sleep regardless. I'm not taking any more pills, and that's fucking that."

I know better than to think this is over. It's never over with a J.A.P. My sister wanted to go to Europe after graduation, Mother wanted Kel's nose scaled down. Before she went to Italy, her face was Aryanified; could've fooled Hitler. Mother always says, "Attractive people get ahead in life, not Jewish people."

"If Dr. Ashley..."

-no respectable psychiatrist goes by her first name-

"thinks the medication will work, then so do your father and me."

-what does dad's new girlfriend think-

"Now, isn't tuition due soon?"

-fuck

"Yeah." (243)

Fuck.

He has It. Those two have It. Even the professor has It. Does everyone recognize that smell or just those chosen few who can't seem to elude insomnia's vacant touch? What was once mountain spring is now Spot or Whiskers decaying by the side of the road. It fills my head with soiled hospital sheets, Xanax, and endless hours of useless instruction.

Look at them; they flaunt their mastery over It with dramatized yawns. I can see them whispering, "Only six hours last night, I simply can't function on anything less than eight." Hmm. Just three comes with a lofty price, long-sleeves for the rest of my life.

Maybe if I sit in the back corner It won't find me.

Safety.

What did she say? I thought we were talking about the Surrealists.

Hemingway? I can't seem to keep track of that time between times. The solution must be hidden among those lost segues. The doctors never tell me to look there because they don't trust me with the classified information.

Oh shit. It found me. Oedipus Complexes, free falling, wet dreams, public nudity, penis envy. Nightmares. Its smell surrounds me. I think I'm going to puke.

Fuck. Not again. (203)

Late Night Television

"Somebody should do a study on the correlation between Roger Corman films, bad eighties sitcoms, and insomnia. Maybe the reason we can't reach REM is directly related to the amount of times we've had to process Attack of the Crab Monsters, or the endless barrage of Three's Company episodes at o'dark thirty."

"Have you practiced the isolated sleep techniques we've been working on our last few appointments?"

"I mean seriously. A hundred variations on mistaken identity followed by a poorly placed slapstick shtick could disrupt anyone's circadian cycle. Blue screen with God Bless America looped over top would be better, at least then I could muster the courage to turn it off."

"Why are you avoiding my question?"

"Teenage cavemen, killer crabs, and wasp women don't really offer a better alternative. Why doesn't PBS broadcast 'round the clock? If I'm not sleeping, I might as well brush up on my Superstring Theory."

"Kyle. Please, answer the question."

"I watch PBS, but I've never made a donation."

"Was that a 'No,' you won't answer the question, or a 'No,' you aren't practicing the isolated sleep techniques?"

"Just write me a prescription for Neurontin or Ativan and we can put an end to this trite dialogue."

"With your past, you know, ethically, I can't do that."

"Seems absurd to call it 'abuse' if my goal was accomplished."

"That wasn't sleep. That was a coma."

"Semantics." (248)

(River Voices, 2004)

Saturday Morning Ritual

Natalie Johnson

Saturday morning at Trafalgar Square
young and old gather.
Gale force winds with drizzle
often prevail, yet rarely keep birds or
beasts from their perch.
Pigeons have been fed and fondled
in this London coop since before
most everyone can remember.
Pigeons, who flutter and coo
eye the weathered hands
and gravitate toward them,
knowing enveloped inside
are enticing morsels,
Rayner's seeds, a favorite
enjoyed by the flock since WWII
Today, the tiniest palms
turn skyward
nourishing some of the 38,000 feathered
creatures who visit daily
This morning, Chloe was one of the chosen
her fleece overcoat
an ideal roost

(River Voices, 2004)

The Harvest

Jim Huckabee

Old feed bags heavy and bulging with green and black treasure. The
treasure resembling eggs of some prehistoric creature long extinct, even in
size and shape filled the bags. Oozing thick blood staining the dark bur-
lap. Sack after sack awkwardly hoisted with bent knees onto the wooden
bed of the dark green truck; staining the tongue-and-groove with perma-
nent memory of the event taking place. Slowly backing the truck heavily
laden with its oozing cargo into the belly of the old building, its windows
painted over, the heavy door is pulled into place as the truck passes its
threshold. A single bulb casts a black shadow across the cargo, as it is set
onto the already stained floor reveling past rituals. As the dim cascade
of light attempts to chase away the darkness of the night a heavy plank
table stands as a testament to the last time and the time before. Large rusty
hinges as long as the night are mounted there. Mended baskets of willow
limbs stand ready below to catch the bleeding skins from the corpse as
they are split from a heavy blow of the rusty hinges. Leaving what resem-
bles the brain of that prehistoric creature. Then spread onto the black print
of old Tribunes and Gazettes reveling obituaries and stories of their death.
The freshly hulled remains cast onto the darkened print in the dim comers,
left to cure in the coolness behind the painted windows. Latching the door
behind I see the dark heavy stains that cover my hands and wrists, they
remind me of blood stained hands in the moonlight. Then thoughts of the
tasty delight beneath the curing shells relieve the aching of the muscles
from the labors of the day.

(River Voices, 2004)

The Meaning of Life

Randi Whipple

These bodies all lined up neatly in a row.
Inanimate,
 unborn.
All their potential hidden beneath prepackaged identities.
 And I, I rule over them.
The god of their universe,
 They worship me in silent admiration.
I take Moses, alone;
separate from the crowd.
He will learn what the heifer learns before
 The slaughter.
It is his purpose, he will satisfy my lust.
He will understand when I take him from
his family, his friends, his natural place and order.
 I take them all,
I am death with my sickle.
And with my command, I give light in the darkness.
He quivers in front of me, squirming and shouting
his *danse macabre*
spinning and shouting, popping and crackling.
“Not here, not now! Not like this! Surely someone better.”
I pull him away, and he silences, staring up at me
 and I down at him
in wonder.
I tell him the story with my breath of life; my exhale of death.
 He tells me his too. I see his whole life stretched out before me.
The group shuffles and flits.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
 I am the fates, telling him when time is up.
His last breath is small, not like his lively first. He pants
and see the end. He ends with a punctuated mark.
 Only his body is left behind.
I have pity and manners for the dead. I bury him in his glass coffin.
All the world to see the great marvel,
 along with all the countless, nameless others.
I grope for the next messiah, forgetting the last ever came to me.

(River Voices, 2005)

It's Been

Jim Huckabee

Another cup of coffee.
The smoke curls
Across the booth.
As a tornado
In my brain.
“More coffee?”
Another cup, another cigarette.
The coffee reflects life.
Life here where time is
Forgotten.
As all here, huddled are.
“More coffee?”
Everyone is talking.
No one is listening.
Another cup, another cigarette.
It's been three hours.
Should I wait?
The clocks hands point
To the foggy window.
Through the fog a world
Unclear.
Unclear to the eye.
Unclear to the mind.
Is that her in the fog?
The hands of the clock remind me.
It's been five hours.
Same smiles, different faces.
“More coffee?”
Should I wait?
Should I go?
Another cup, another cigarette.
It's been six hours!

(River Voices, 2005)

A Conversation with God

Mitchell Rowland

Me – “I don’t believe in you, you know; you haven’t given me any reason to.”

God - “Yeah, I can understand that.”

M - “Why though? If you are so infinitely powerful, why not give people a sign?”

G - “They’re getting along without any signs.”

M - “Humans worship you; devote their lives to you; blindly follow you. Doesn’t that bother you, or excite you? How does it feel to have such devotion without proof you even exist?”

G - “It’s nice.”

M - “But they’re wasting their lives following a lie.”

G - “People can believe whatever they want.”

M - “What if they try to force their beliefs onto others?”

G - “Well, that’s not cool.”

M - “What about the people who go to church because they feel obligated?”

G - “They make the obligation, not me.”

M - “So it isn’t a requirement to go to church to get into heaven?”

G - “That depends on what you believe heaven is.”

M - “Well, what if I believe heaven is a giant ball of gas somewhere deep in the universe?”

G - “Then heaven is a giant ball of gas somewhere deep in the universe.”

M - “So, it’s whatever we want it to be?”

G - “No, it is whatever you believe it to be.”

M - “I believe we all go into eternal sleep in death; that there’s nothing more. Does that make it true?”

G - “It makes you believe it’s true.”

G - “Maybe.”

M - “Is there any way I could avoid it and get into a utopia heaven?”

G - “Not if you don’t believe in a utopia heaven.”

M - “You’re just arguing in circles.”

G - “So are you.”

M - “Forget it, I’ll ask something else ... Did you create the universe?”

G - “I had help.”

M - “Help from whom?”

G - “It’s complicated.”

M - “Well, is there a universal set of laws and morals?”

G - “Some of them are universal, but not all.”

M - “Can you be more specific?”

G - “I could, but that would take a long time.”

M - “Well, what do you think of science and the studies of the universe?”

G - “I think it’s awesome.”

M - “Were the stars and planets created by you, or was that your ‘help’?”

G - “I really didn’t need to do much; it just sort of happened.”

M - “So you really haven’t done anything?”

G - “I wouldn’t say that.”

M - “Well, I have seen no evidence of you doing anything.”

G - “Good, I’m glad.”

M - “Glad that there is no evidence?”

G - “No, glad that you care enough to look.”

M - “But that still doesn’t answer the question.”

G - “Does the question have an answer?”

M - “If anyone would know, it would be you.”

G - “I guess, though even your best scientists don’t have all the answers, so why should I?”

M - “You are the ultimate being.”

G - “I am?”

M - “According to every religious person I’ve ever met, yes.”

G - “Well, isn’t that sweet.”

M - “What about Jesus, what’s the real story about him?”

G - “He was a very nice boy ... always wanted to help.”

M - “Is it all true? Son of god, resurrection and whatnot?”

G - “I remember him being very religious and doing a whole lot of preaching. Though to be honest, that whole era is a bit sketchy.”

M - “So he was forcing his beliefs onto people?”

G - “Not really, I think he just presented his material.”

M - “Unlike the crusades, huh?”

G - “Those weren’t cool either.”

M - “So why didn’t you stop them? And in that regard, why is there so much evil in the world?”

G - “Would you know what good is if there weren’t any evil?”

M - “Probably not. But why so much evil?”

G - “Don’t look at me; your race is the one creating all the evil.”

M - “Don’t tell me god is pointing fingers.”

G - “*You’re* pointing fingers. But I think you’re missing the point; you guys are capable of some really great stuff. Just stop blaming all the evil on me.”

M - “Oh, and just give you credit for all the good stuff then?”

G - “I didn’t ask for that either; you have all done the good and the bad by yourselves; I just watch.”

M - “Well, how can you stand by with your infinite power and just watch all the horrible things like murder, rape, lies, greed, and manipulation?”

G - “If I did everything for you, no one would learn anything.”

M - “Again; but there is so much, surely saving a few cases wouldn’t be that bad.”

G - “If I save one person, I have to save them all; God can’t play favorites.”

M - "So instead there are no favorites."
 G - "I love humans; you never cease to amaze me."
 M - "What about Satan; is there really a devil and a hell?"
 G - "None that I know of."
 M - "So you don't hold infinite wisdom?"
 G - "Even an immortal being is always learning."
 M - "So essentially you have turned all my words around and given me no answers whatsoever."
 G - "Maybe, or maybe I just gave you all the answers."
 M - "Well, at least tell me the meaning of life."
 G - "Would it make you feel better if you knew?"
 M - "Yes."
 G - "Would it change your daily life if you knew?"
 M - "Well, that depends on what the answer is."
 G - "So if I told you the meaning of life was to be eaten by aliens, would you accept it?"
 M - "No, I'd try to fight it."
 G - "Me too; no way I'm letting those alien bastards eat my brain."
 M - "But that can't be the meaning of life."
 G - "What if I told you the meaning of life was to find a penny, heads up on the sidewalk for good luck?"
 M - "Those are just mundane things; I want to know the all encompassing answer to life."
 G - "What do you think the meaning of life is?"
 M - "I don't know. Honestly, I don't think there is one. I think we are all just part of a cosmic coincidence and are lucky to be alive at all."
 G - "That's a good answer."
 M - "Is it a right answer?"
 G - "It might be."
 M - "You don't know?"
 G - "Should I?"
 M - "Yes."
 G - "Well, then I guess I do."
 M - "And?"
 G - "And what?"

(River Voices, 2006)

Indian Woman

Leigha Golden

sits rigid on the ground
 staring at you. Her eyes pierce
 seeing your darkest thoughts. She is a wife and mother,
 but at this moment in time she is simply
 a woman. She has taken time from her busy day
 to make herself beautiful. Never mind that her dress is a little
 dusty, no one notices. Her eyes tell you
 she knows your secret. Within years, life as she knows it will
 cease to exist. No longer will she put on her best dress and take part
 in traditional dances. She will attend church and worship
 a god she doesn't know. Her dress will be made of calico,
 not the soft animal fur. Her food will be grown, not gathered. Her meat
 will be bought in a store. Children will go to schools and be taught by nuns,
 her husband will learn to farm. Her people
 will be looked down upon just as the buffalo look down on the grass.

At this moment, in the year 1910, she is simply a woman.
 She is beautiful and proud, like the buffalo that her people depend upon
 for life. Her people will be caged
 and their way of life will become almost
 extinct.

(River Voices, 2006)

Ride Poet

R.S. Tripp II

When the remnants of my body lie in wooden coat,
Shall the poet I have writ continue his mad ride,
Shall they remember the things I wrote
Long after the day my body died?

Ride poet, ride poem, and ride dreamer.

Ride upon the Pookah's shoulders
Through the evergreen of the ages,
Long after my remains lie in smolders.
Shall my work be fussed at by scholars and sages?

Ride spirit, ride vision, and ride schemer.

I wonder if my ponderous pieces and soul-given
stories
Shall rot to nothingness and never be read?
Will it be timeless and hailed with glories?
I shall not care when they love it or leave it,
for what are the cares of a man who is dead?

Ride poet, ride poem, ride on!

Ride poet, through the mist-draped forests of
eternity,
Scatter my poems until a hundred thousand cities,
As seed on summer breeze,
Ride poet, through the trees.

Sing our song, sing it loud
Sing it long and sing it proud.

Poetry is our spirit rider,
When the body is long dead,
As a web is to the spider,
As Arachne's endless thread,
An eternal angry verse,
Shall they remember what I said?
My strange eccentric curse,
Long after Atropos snips my thread.

(River Voices, 2006)

the good book

Kit Solowy

it says, "judge not, and ye shall not be judged."
but you do all you can
to drive the Homosexual out
of your neighborhood.
and you're not
too fond of that Jew teaching
second grade.

watch out for men
with dark hair
in turbans, on planes
and anywhere.

your morality is skin
deep
because even though you don't say it
you hope
johnny stops playing
with the Black kid down the street.

you'll get in, you know it.
because you believe in him
so sleep easy my friend
and make sure the Devil doesn't get your children.

(River Voices, 2007)

One Night at Carnival

Adam Mixter

“Step right up, suh! Step right up and see the amazing LOBSTER BOY!” Joseph was often referred to in this way. Since Joe had joined the traveling freak show that was Bailey’s Carnival, routine laughing, mocking and disgust from paying clientele had become daily life. He looked across at Julia. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, even if skin had completely enveloped where her eyes should be. Avoiding a foul gentleman claiming she was a creature of the devil, she ran to her trailer.

Later that evening after the show had closed, Joe heard muffled screaming. Following his ears, he came upon Julia whose tattered clothing revealed all. Hovering over her, panting like a wild dog was the man from the show earlier. “Shut the hell up you little freak!” Before he could push her legs apart, Joe was upon him. He thought he would change his name from “lobster boy” to “nutcracker.”

He carried Julia back to her trailer, where she put on new clothes. Their conversation lasted for hours. She touched him that night like no one else ever had, handling his claws with dignity and grace. When he said good night and she turned around, the eyes in the back of her head winked at him. They were the most beautiful eyes he would ever see.

(River Voices, 2007)

Garbage Painting #2

Camber Tanis



Acrylic

(River Voices, 2024)

City Shortcuts

Ashley Streng



Photography

(River Voices, 2024)

Ingredients for a Painting

Kenzie Cregg



Photography

(River Voices, 2024)

Outside at the Shelter

Canber Tanis



Digital Art

(*River Voices*, 2024)

Procedure

Donald Goodman

Okay, so this is about as undesirable a position as you can find yourself: inside an examining room, naked except for a pair of heavy socks and a quarter of a thin bed sheet covered with tiny flowers, on your back on this cold, abbreviated stainless steel table with knees spread wide like a pair of rabbit ears, your feet flat on the table, and, unseen behind your blossom-draped knees, a pretty young nurse is apparently arranging your personal equipment for insertion.

Not for inserting it in anything but readying it to be inserted into by this long, shiny speedometer cable coiled in a plastic bag on the counter. And that will be guided in its journey not by the pretty young nurse but by the doctor who is no doubt at his desk studying a topographic map of your innards planning his route. Admittedly the bed sheet with the flowers has been contrived into a half-gown for modesty, although what it could possibly hide that you need hidden and from whom is beyond imagination. The gown is really there covering your knees to keep you from watching the “procedure.”

The PYN lubes up one part of your anatomy, adjusting the other parts to keep them out of the way. Any prior fears you might have had about male arousal are fleeting. This is a long way from *Debbie Does Dallas*. Still, her competent, warm hands are reassuring and even pretty nice. (Actually the PYN has a daughter in college.) She explains the lube antiseptic and describes the aerosol chill-spray the doctor will use. His plan in mind, he sweeps in, and with snap-gloved efficiency the pair of professionals hang a bag of solution on a steel crane rip open the cable sack, fasten the bag tube to the speedometer cable, line things up, and in we go.

“Some discomfort” means he’s busting through walls of delicate fleshy constriction and shoving 18 yards of bright-eyed serpent up-up-up.

Apparently it wears its own headlamp like a Chessie locomotive. I realize I am so damned tense I am digging trenches in the steel table with my fingernails and Bobbi, the PYN, is holding my hand, massaging it. If this ain’t pain, it’s a long haul from pleasure. I can feel the barriers tearing open, corners turned, valvular tunnels discovered, and deep inside someplace my lopsided prostate pried apart. Is this like first sex for a girl, I wonder. You poor girls. In the back seat of a Chevrolet? When they have finally run out of speedometer cable they twist the valve on the bag of clear liquid and fill you to the brim. The doctor, following the action on a screen, is describing bladder and adjoining burrows. Looks good; that looks good. Okay ... Hmmm.

What do you mean, Hmmm? What’s with Hmmm? I don’t want Hmmms! Then, “We’re coming out.”

Oh, good. Visions of miners trapped for weeks underground coming out waving and grinning. They all come out. Everyone is out. Cheers? Over now? I lift my gown. My God, they've killed it! The poor pummeled appendage is flopped on its side, shrunken beyond recognition and has more folds than an orchestra of accordions. A single bead of red blood pokes out and looks around like something just hatched.

"Now we'll do the biopsy."

Okay, yeah. The service entrance. At first it is digital exploration by condom. "That's my finger."

"Okay."

Now the power probe. I'm on my left side, hanging my hind end out over the edge of this toy table and something curious and medical is slugging its way into my back hallway, working around comers. Not that bad, though. No real pain. The probe looks around at my asymmetrical prostate, my bladder, kidneys, tonsils; whatever else it chooses. Once you've let them in the service entrance, they go anyplace they want. However, I have to pee.

"I have to pee."

Bobbi hustles me a plastic pitcher marked in cc's. I unload a lot of cc's through my battered coupling and they at the service entrance are watching a TV screen like crowds used to do in the 1950's when they'd collect on the sidewalk in front of appliance stores to watch Uncle Milty.

"Look at that! Look at that bladder shrink!"

They are delighted watching my bladder emptying on a 20-inch screen. I am a natural showman. The next event will sound like a mousetrap-SNAP! -and will bite like one. They are taking samples of flesh with a mousetrap needle. SNAP. Ouch! Again. SNAP. Again. Six? Eight? Ten? I lose count. But we're done and I'm very tired.

"You did fine. Just fine." I feel like a third grader who struck out for the third time to a girl pitcher and knows what "just fine" really means. I dress, read my sheaf of instructions and cautions. Blood may be noted (oh great, the passive even here) in the stool and urine, etc. Infection can occur even with ... Should I develop fever, chills, difficulty urinating, sever pain, etc. etc.

I can hardly wait.

(River Voices, 2007)

breakfast with abuela

Tomas Paez

as simple as a face
where tiny hands reached
with curbing enthusiasm

one such time, at half-past nine
i awoke to the familiar cacophony in the air
the scent of mango marmalade meandering to my nose
pots and pans causing dissonance in the distance

routinely and rapidly, i ran
up from the bed and through the hallway
the all-familiar scene replaying; the start
of another beautiful Saturday morning

but something was different about this day
the halls, today they greeted me
with the chill of an arctic wind
on that otherwise sunny April morning

the further i strode, the more those walls
seemed to narrow ever more so
as if they were ripping me from all that i knew
and that place i once knew, i knew no longer

the kitchen seemed like a faraway land on that day
oceans apart, it seemed
until finally i reached the shores
of my mother's tears

i remember a time where a last good-bye
seemed to be miles away

(River Voices, 2010)

Splinters

Shelby Cadwell

Piercing the sky between verdant hills
there stands Two Towers amongst
swaying oaks - a man named
Clayton Howard Grossman died
while building Tower Number One.

It was midsummer in Michigan,
1928, and he had a heart attack while laying
foundation - fell face first into wet concrete
and was left there -
found too late to pry him loose.
The Tower cannot be blamed for this.

A small plaque on its east wall commemorates
Clayton Howard with sixteen words and
a cross engraved into bronze.
Tower Number Two (being
46 inches taller and a whole month newer)
scoffs at Tower Number One.

“How morbid,” It says,
“How macabre.”
“Do you feel no guilt?”
With stern countenance Tower Number Two
stands in constant rebuke, glowering downward.

“Why should I feel guilt?”
Tower Number One harbors no remorse.
Clayton Howard Grossman would have died
one way or another - the heat and his heart and
red meat and vodka are what killed him.

Forty-three years pass and then
one sweltering midsummer evening in Michigan,
- in the midst of a black-sky storm -
thin fingers of lightning reached down from the sky
and strangled the bone-white spire of Tower Number One –
sparking heavy and strong against its wood.

The fire spread and consumed, slowly devouring
the Tower - the bones, the flesh, the meat,
the wood and glass and everything,
everything right down to the concrete foundation.

Tower Number Two stood on and watched,
helpless to put out the flames -
aware of a heat, a prickling against its left side,
a danger flaring twenty feet away.

Tower Number Two stood on and watched
as the last monument to Clayton Howard Grossman
burnt to the ground,
leaving but splinters and ash,
a gray skeleton trapped in cement,
and billows of smoke that blotted out
the red, red moon of late July.

(River Voices, 2010)

Consign to Oblivion

Ken Porter

The worn, steel, metallic titans clashed in the ashes of the burnt city. Shell casings crashed through buildings and cracked concrete below. The clashing of metal scraped the crests on their bodies, logos of corporations that had once been countries. Clockwork cogs and pistons cried, and blades and mortars clashed on shields of iron.

The two remaining monsters charged each other through smoldering wood and girders below. The heat of battle blew their gaskets, the cogs and pistons slowing to a soundless stop.

The torsos opened, and out crept soft creatures of flesh, hair, hands, and eyes; eyes that looked to one another with astonishment at a similar pair. Eyes that said more than any ammunition or clanging metal. The soft beings climbed down their titan's legs and sat, eyes locked, five feet from each other. After a silence, one of them lifted his hand, reaching out to touch the other.

"I forgot," he said.

"We forgot," said the other.

(River Voices, 2011)

My Mother Nature Brought Me Up

Holly Carlson

My mother nature brought me up
during childhood's lonely vigil,
in a place caught between
two city-light sunsets,
I found no peace in people.

I ran to her
when reprimanded
by a hard-handed stepfather.
Cried to her
when mama
was working, always working.
I searched for siblings
in trees,
found friends
in flowers.

When home suffocated me
she brought fresh air,
let me breathe.
She never spoke,
just listened,
and when I wept
the sky opened up
and mother wept with me.

(River Voices, 2011)

Red River

Nikki Foster

I need to get this out... I grab that blank, boring canvas sitting in the corner. Setting it on the easel, I stare at it. I grab the tube of cadmium red acrylic paint. I snatch my fan brush up, run it through the red on my pallet. Raising my arm up and bringing it down, slash it with red. The paint runs down the canvas like a river snaking through it. I soak the brush thoroughly with blue, then I finish the undertones in the red river, filling the gaps the fan brush left, in the blue with a fine tip brush. I smear the borders in with glass bead gel, then paint in it with blue, grey, and white. I can hear the water rushing, see the foam building. I've created this world. I reach for the gold. Mix it with water, then add highlights to the river. It just starts to flow, becoming its own. I go back for the fan brush, water down some silver paint, throw some blue in it and streak it through the blue water. The red with gold and the blue with silver start dancing in the sun light coming in my studio window. The warm and cold colors spin and tangle each other up, fighting one another like two cats in a burning sack. I suck in a deep breath, hold it until my world spins. Exhale. It's all out, out in water of fire and ice.

(River Voices, 2011)

Trenches

Jennifer Lance

The men saw the guns,
 "Huns."
Ruben said and smoked his cigarette,
 With long steady ease,
 As if it were his last,
 And he didn't care,
Johnny sat in front with chipped teeth,
His hat was like a tin plate half on his head,
And I knew he was thinking, as I was, about,
Shells flying wild like caged birds, dirt rupturing up through and in,
 To take us down until we cried for Mother,
 And felt no shame for doing so.
Our graves we dug were cold and miserable,
 I couldn't get my cigarette lit,
So the Huns came and Johnny stood right up in the trench to watch them
 come;
They had strong guns and infinite fields to cross but they came,
 Iron youth.
Boys mostly, I thought, sitting there loading my gun with one hand;
Frank was shaking and spitting mud and someone had to sit on him,
 "Hold on, hold on, hold on,"
Johnny yelled and jumped back down and a hiss whine bang,
 Light, and the war was on again.

(River Voices, 2012)

Night Lights

Bonny Lownds

When she finally came home, opening the door quietly and slipping inside the darkened single-wide, she only just remembered to relight the fire in the tiny woodstove. Then she exhaustedly felt her way in the dark to her room and fell into bed, sleeping in smoky clothes with soot coating her fingers like an ancient secret.

The next morning when her father made his painful journey to the kitchen, she was already at the table. He turned up his nose at the bowl of Cheerios she offered, almost pouting. "Do you want me to fry you an egg instead?" she asked, searching his haggard and disappointed face for answers.

"No, that's okay," he answered, removing the cap from one of his numerous pill bottles. "I'm afraid nothing's going to sound good to me today anyway." He flipped on the small television and sat down at the table to watch a news anchor in flaming pink lipstick inform them they were scheduled for more snow. "Did you remember to light a fire last night?" he inquired.

"Why? Are you cold?"

"I'm always cold now. So, did you remember?"

"Yes. I lit a fire last night."

"Is it still going then?"

"I suppose so."

"Good girl," he admonished and returned his gaze vacantly to the television screen. Flames now filled the 8" by 12" frame as the news anchor began to discuss a story about recent arson activity. The girl moved to change the channel; but her father stopped her, his hand leaping to close over hers. His eyes filled with the glorious chaos of the blaze as he sat with now rapt attention, forgetting to release her hand. She observed him out of the corner of her eye as he ravenously stared. When it was over, he let her go and stood to turn off the TV. "You would think those people would learn to do something better with all their money than build mansions that burn to the ground," he mused with hollow satisfaction as he shuffled out of the kitchen. "Don't forget to light a fire tonight," he intoned over his shoulder before continuing away.

Hours later she stepped out into the dark, letting the night embrace her as she walked. Absentmindedly she stretched one leg, then the other; she had a long way to go before she came to the part of town with Escalades in the driveways. She let the backpack, slung casually over one shoulder, thump into her with every quickening step, enjoying the sloshing sound of the can of gasoline. She held the box of matches tight in one hand and let a smile flicker over her face. Later, after she'd watched her handiwork for a while, she would go home. She would remember to light a fire.

(River Voices, 2012)

Boundless

Nicholas Kanaar

I can catch stars
without the use of my arms.
Or conquer kingdoms
without concern for the crown.

I can break bread
with the best of men.
Or scour back alleys
for the smallest of crumbs.

Alone I float,
but with others, I fly.

I can cause chaos
with both of my eyes closed.
Or help a blind man
see the season's first snow.

All of this can be done
when I become the horizon.
Which, my friend, I can erase.

You see me now, calloused
and brittle, but tonight

I'll catch stars
without the use of my arms.

(River Voices, 2012)

Life Inside the Rusty Garden

Hannah Forner

I drink up the whiskey breath
that you send barreling towards me
after an angry day of smashing liquor bottles
against the ceiling and falling asleep
with our tongues sticking out of our mouths
like we were catching snowflakes
inside our damp little world.
Next to me on the bedside table
there are ripped out pages of your bible
where you went searching for the god
you left there as a child.
I will remind you in the morning
of how you thumbed through the pages
searching for the story of the prodigal son,
but settled half way into Psalms
to recite something your father once read you.
I told you that “you are not like him”
but even when you’re sober
you still have trouble remembering that.
Before I close my eyes to drink in the last swig
of you, I say a prayer to the water spot on the ceiling.
I tell it “do not get involved with us” as you have
prayed many times before.
I say, “the bread is molding on the counter and we
have traded our pure water
for holy holy wine.”

(River Voices, 2013)

Mending

Jennifer Lance

Your heart undoes its jacket,
It sheds itself from your sleeves.
You fought so hard to keep it protected
And not allow it to wander into traffic.

So tell me,

Was it worth the bedsores it developed
From staying perfectly still?
That heart didn’t move a beat,
Straightjacket still.
Was it worth the cage wounds it had marked
Along its lining and up and down the collar
From living in a vase of steel
To keep it safe?

Your heart is busting zippers,
Ripping buttons,
Unstitching itself
To plow into busy streets
Of love,
That you kept it from.

You should have known it would fracture your fabric fist,
You sought to muffle it,
Wrapping it inside your shirt.
Nevertheless it heard and wanted loose,
It tore seams,
Mangled lacing,
It unstitched itself,

And went free.

(River Voices, 2013)

Sacred Space

Tracie Hutson

“Deep inside your head;” That’s what I’ve been told,
and after much thought, I know this to be true.

The place where I live, away from the critics and all who judge.
The untouchable place where it’s safe to be me.

It’s decorated with all of my favorite things.
Oh, what impeccable taste I have...
what stories I could tell if only, I could let you in.

Fears of critical contamination take center stage.
Fears of exposure to my sacred space,
created for survival long ago might not exist anymore.

How I long to leave this place.
Oh God! Why is it so hard for me to leave my home?
What’s the point of my existence If
I can’t express what I know, what I feel?

I stare out the open windows and
I wonder if there are wonderful things waiting for me out there.
The breeze feels of freedom but, prying eyes passing by carry weight.
Why do I care?

Opinion is life and everybody has one.
The time for change has come.

The door is open...

(River Voices, 2013)

The Road Home

Jonah Lyn Hayes



Photography

(River Voices, 2024)

Woman Statue

Alicia Alvarado

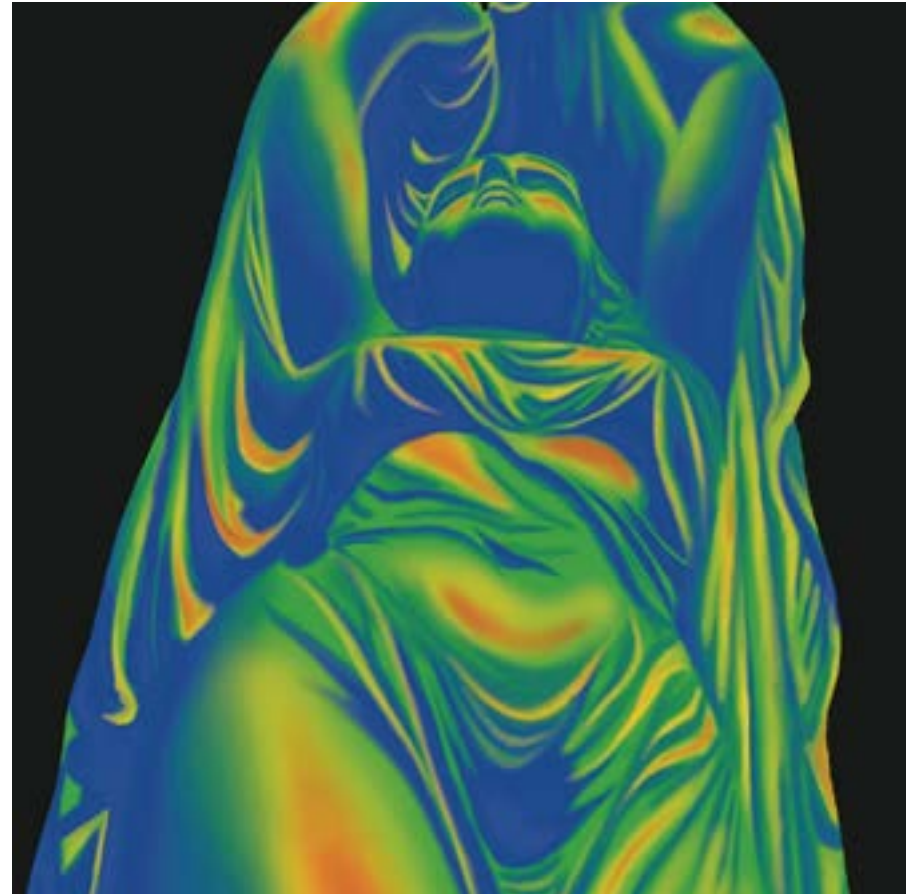


Charcoal

(River Voices, 2024)

Thermal Rising From Waters

Haylee Spicklemire



Digital Art

(River Voices, 2024)

Buoy Shack

Finn Conner



Photography

(River Voices, 2024)

I Dance in Circles, My Careless Arms Fly

Sarah Olivas

I dance in circles, my careless arms fly-
He whispers sweetly in my eager ear-
My head thrown back, I laugh the darkened sky.

He beckons me in the night; offers lie-
I close my eyes and sing my song; My dear
I dance in circles - My careless arms fly.

He watches frost slowly spread beneath my
dancing feet atop this bridge - I don't fear
my head thrown back; I laugh the darkened sky.

He reaches jealously to tear at my
hair and dress demanding that I come near-
I dance in circles - My careless arms fly.

He screams as thunder and lightning strike - Cry
my untamed eyes deny his try to tear
my head thrown back - I laugh the darkened sky!

I press my hand to my lips and kiss. Nigh
he waits calm - Counts the stroke of midnight near-
I dance in circles, my careless arms, fly-
My head thrown back, I laugh the darkened sky.

(River Voices, 2017)

I Hate Riding in the Car With You

Michael Dietz

I hate riding in the car with you sometimes.
Not because I don't enjoy your company,
or because you are a terrible driver,
but because it can never just be silent

enough for me to make another connection
between myself and the moon, stationary
behind the blur of the seventy-mile-an-hour landscape,
or to consider the detail missed

in the grass and gravel on the shoulder at this speed.
But this, I think, must be
how watercolors are painted, or how —
what are those called? — impressionists!
see the world, with no definitive lines,

just swooshes and smears of color. So,
I suppose there's beauty in every perspective,
fast or slow, and even in the refrain
of the song that is distracting me on the radio now,

dancing toward the climax with its new partner,
the sunrise, who just spilled over the dark tree tops
across the lovely, haze-filled field where
those deer are having their breakfast.

(River Voices, 2017)

Blueberries or Creamsicles

Anna Dunnigan

The old lady store is empty except for me and Dad. We are picking out paints for the dollhouse, even though it's only half done. He decided letting me show him how good of an artist I was would work better than handing him packets of 46C's. The aisle we are in has every shade of every color ever imagined and I don't know where to start.

"How about this one?" He points to a color that looks like celery.

"No, I want my house to be sweet like cotton candy," and I grab a pink tube.

"So like this?" He hands me grape soda.

"Exactly!" Together we grab all of the mints and chocolates and bubble-gums and marshmallows and fill our blue basket that he let me carry. "I want the bedroom to be the same color as my house's bedroom." Dad nods and reaches for an orange creamsicle. "No, not the bedroom in your house. The bedroom in *my* house."

His hand drops and he looks like he shrunk three inches. "What color is that?"

"Blueberry!" I smile at him but he must not see it because he looks angry. He throws the tube of paint that is more purple than blue in the basket but I don't tell him that's wrong, and then he takes the basket out of my hands and walks me to the front so we can pay. He must really hate the color blue is all I think on the silent ride home.

(River Voices, 2017)

(little) words

Michael Dietz

I am laying in bed with a swollen throat
that feels as though I have swallowed
a broken bulb, and with a body
as heavy as a shivering sack of white

flour, and Poetry comes in the memory of a friend
who recently said to me that she liked
my poems. Although my head is pounding,
I have the tea boiling, and the fire inside is blazing

because all I want to do now is write
more poems. Words are
like that, you know; like rain drops, or little
atomic bombs that drop into deserts.

I am so glad I told the stranger
yesterday that her eyes
were beautiful. They sparkled just
like September Sapphires, where I found myself

drowning and burning
at the same time (and now
that I think of it, having been the last
day of September, I am really glad I said it).

She nearly cried and said she hadn't
heard that in so long, that I made
her day. When I left I wondered,
given her reaction, if she'd ever heard it at all.

I took part of her load
with me. Here it is, sculpted
first from the kind words of a dear friend,
and then from two peppermints

through which another sees the world.

(River Voices, 2017)

Sleazeball Citizens Sonnet

Ethan Epplert

I reside in the bicameral house,
Am a mistaken political mouse;
I try to represent my constituents,
but only satisfy my interests.
Am quite the pillar of society;
Even though I'm not viewed very highly.
We set the code used to take your money;
Or crafting contracts with foreign dummies.

Absolute governors of the masses,
representative for bunch of ass-ess..
Conservatives stuck in their tradition,
always fighting a war of attrition.
Liberals trying to force transition,
always being the face of progression.
Whether you lean left or right a little..
You are supposed to meet in the middle.
It is called compromise my dear fellow.

Oh, by the way, name's Jon Screwafellow.
I wear a suit and tie, very formal;
Don't worry government shutdown is normal.
Next campaign shouldn't be insurmountable,
the public doesn't hold us accountable.
It'll all be blamed on the el comandante,
even though we control the sovereignty.
Who's at fault if you hate me? Yours only.
Go back to your sandwich, cheese-baloney.

(River Voices, 2018)

Dragon Girl

Taylor Hewitt

you only look at me
to undress me with your mind.
silly boy,
you don't know.
I am a dragon,
blowing fire with every exhale.
my body is a sanctuary
for the lonely.
but there is no way in hell I'm opening the
doors for you.

(River Voices, 2018)

Concentration

Michael Dietz

I am in a forest
stitched with spider's silk. The threads,
glued to the branches
and bark of so many trees, knit
hollow, geometric prisms in silver
constellations above
my head and around
my body. I breathe,
and they break, inaudible snaps

suspended by their own
buoyancy in the stillness
of this wood between worlds.

Until one,
adorned with a dew drop, glints
in the Grey, and I
reach to pinch the thin
string between index and thumb
and follow it all the way
back to my desk where its end
is fixed to the pink rubber
on the end of my pencil. Silver

thoughts flow
with a hum through the string
from the wood
to the lead and scratch
in granite dust across the page
a poem, channeled from another
Universe, while the Spider watches

from the shadows on the ceiling
behind me, the flames
of eight candles flickering
in her fervent, black eyes.

(River Voices, 2018)

The English-Teacher's Monster

Mary Tyler

He is all
ivory-chiseled and bone, the finest
flesh and blood, a slight-and-perfectly living
cameo, bolt upright at his desk. The light
on for months now. He wears a scarf and vest,
carries an honest-to-Wordsworth leather
notebook, unlined pages, the kind with a leather
strap that wraps twice around the journal's waist
and then tightens into a knotted acorn at the front.
His secrets are safe and organic now. He writes
with a cartridge pen, a pen *with an actual changeable
cartridge, folks* (in case you can't hear
my awe), and when he isn't scribing with pen
in his classic cursive, that none of his peers can read,
he scrawls in lead, a fat wooden pencil,
whittled by his own hand
to a fine point.

For the love of Shakespeare, who does this?
It's the twenty-first century! But now

he's in my office, twenty minutes after
class, and he asks about the inane
usage of past participles, he laments
that so many of his peer-less peers are always
*sitting, smoking a cigarette, and running,
hoping to get there, and talking, wanting
to be heard.*

It's driving him mad.

No, no. It *drives* him mad.

What he doesn't know is that these dunces
haven't learned how tightly one can stitch
words: Noun. Verb. That's mostly all you need, just
as Shelley showed when her Frankenstein
awoke: *it breathed ... and a convulsive motion
agitated its limbs.*

What are we to do with those of our own
making? This immaculate, unbound man, all
animated art now, reading and writing like
the formalists, funneling poems from the deepest
chambers of his heart. This monster,
who enunciates like Yates, uses slant rhyme,
plans his caesuras, and, in the rare moments
when he's feeling full of fun and frisk at the foot
of it all, he gets hyperbolic with alliteration. What are we
to do? His fellow community college villagers
are not his community, they only grunt, their heads
bent (but never in prayer) over the phone in their hands,
scrolling and scrolling, *hoping* to get there, *wanting* to be
heard, *running*...

Run, Michael. You are the new thing
under the sun. Grab your Underwood typewriter
from 1962 that *click click pings* in Times
New Roman, tuck it under your arm and
throw your caution to the wind

mill. They won't chase you down. They're not
paying attention. To hell
with this mob of mumbling morons.

And, if real truth be told, I had forgotten
What a past participle is. I was just eating
lunch, filling my slice of a 30-minute
office hour, hoping you'd be the new light
thief, wanting you to snatch these flames,
shake the torches underneath their countless
double chins, scare the piss of them when
you lumbar through the halls, unbent arms
straight ahead of you, and rant in full-on rage
about the *neglect of the Oxford comma, you motherfuckers!*

And when they don't hear the Oedipal connection
really steal the flame, Michael, and set
this world ablaze.

(River Voices, 2018)

Skinny Dipping in Paradise

Mia McDermott

A girl swathed in moonlight
perched on the edge
 jumped
the water rushed in and
the sand hugged her feet
her ears heard her tongue tasted her nose smelled her eyes saw
her body felt
the water was her earthen womb
the umbilical sand her link
Maternal waves washed virgin planes
as flesh was forged and minds awoke
She floated in the fluid light
just ounces heavy in the dark
And just as the moon pulls on the tides
so too was she tugged alongside
but gestation came too early
the surface water breaking
birthing from the earth a woman
who was anything but dainty
She stood rooted in her birthplace
twining flowing streaming growing
crashing thrashing undergoing
like our capricious mother does
Plates beneath her skin collided
shaping softly rolling hills
Plates beneath her skin divided
leaving yawning rifts to fill
She was the earth the earth was she
and time scarred both irreparably
We chopped off her limbs
poisoned her breath
turned her tears to acid
and infected her skin
Our reward comes from this:

Skinny dipping changes a girl.

(River Voices, 2019)

Being a Coconut

Steve Wieschowski

At first it was wonderful, being a coconut. The weather, favorable;
the company, pleasant.

Coconuts never call each other by names in our manner, but as every
story needs a hero we shall call our coconut, Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald, the
coconut perched in a contented bunch with his coconut friends atop the tallest
tree growing on the sunniest beach sitting on the golden-sand coast bordering
the happiest island in the South Sea.

The coconuts wiled pristine days above the beach away chatting and
watching life go by down below (coconuts are an *idle* bunch!). They watched
far over the water and saw ivory gulls dive and pluck quicksilver fishes from
sand-kissing waves. They watched closer, in the seafoam, and saw sneaky
crabs scuttle after flotsam. But mostly they watched closest, on the beach, as
bronzed people leaped in and out of waves, played, laughed, and loved.

“How I would love to meet the humans!” exclaimed Fitzgerald to his
friends, “and learn to leap and laugh and love!”

Everyone agreed. How delightful the humans must be.

One day, a stiff wind blew. The tall tree shook. Fitzgerald fell from
his perch – plop! – into the soft golden sand.

Trod, trod, trod. Bare feet shuffled toward Fitzgerald.

“Hello, human!” called Fitzgerald. “Be my friend! Teach me to...”

But humans can’t hear coconuts. The human lifted Fitzgerald up,
split him open with a rock, drank his fluids, and ate his flesh. Fitzgerald died
slowly, in horrible pain.

At the end, it sucked, being a coconut.

(River Voices, 2019)

The Intervention

Morgyn Weinert

It was spring, the sun was shining and my thoughts were clear as I was pulling into the long, darkly paved driveway. I was due to meet at my grandparent's house at noon for lunch. This was all the information I was given but, I was excited. Who doesn't love grandma's cooking? The genuine feeling of peace quickly disappeared when I saw the 2017 white, Jeep Cherokee parked in the driveway. This was the car of my other grandparents. Now, if I wouldn't have come out as gay to my family a couple days prior, this wouldn't have been so weird.

I felt my legs shaking as I walked up the cemented path to the giant wooden door, my breath getting shorter with every step. I walked in, shutting the door very cautiously, listening to everything around me before I dared to take another step. I could hear their voices disappearing into the air as I stepped in. Slowly making my way over to the kitchen, dragging my fingers along the gray marble counter tops, I looked at the dining table and saw all four grandparents sitting, their eyes were blank staring into mine. It was as if I was in a house full of strangers. At the center of the dark, wooden dining table was a platter of sandwiches cut into tiny triangles with Lay's potato chips on the sides. Another red flag, because when grandma invited you over for lunch, it was never just a simple sandwich with chips. There was a seat being saved for me dead center between the four of them.

"Come have a seat Moe," were the words from my Grandpa Larry that shot through me.

I walked over and pulled out my chair, still silent. I knew what I was in store for.

"Moe, we wanted to talk to you about some of your recent choices," again coming from my Grandpa Larry's demanding voice.

The wrinkles in his forehead just above his glasses were deeper than usual. Disappointment was written all over his face. I felt three inches tall.

"You know we love you more than anything, don't you?" Grandma Sue said, trying to get my hopes up.

She was so small, it looked as if the dark, wooden chair was consuming her.

"Oh, of course she does," Grandma Shari stuttered, with tears in her eyes and a lump stuck in her throat.

She was wearing her old white spring jacket and little orange knitted scarf. I knew she felt bad for trapping me like that. She always made me feel so safe and loved.

I blacked out, not physically, but definitely mentally. I stared off into the distance, focusing on anything other than their tear-filled eyes. Around me was the magnificent home my grandpa had built for his family, and here, I was destroying it. Not for stealing, lying, using drugs, or getting drunk, but for loving someone they didn't agree with. *How could they have hated me for this?*

I came back to my unfortunate reality somehow and was hearing everything at full force again.

"You're just going through a phase," assumed by Grandma Sue.

Maybe I wish the chair would've swallowed her.

"The devil has you, but The Lord will save you." Grandpa Larry was always bringing God into something.

His voice was less harsh now and more broken. I could tell he had no hope.

"We need you in heaven with us, Moe," cried my Grandma Shari.

Well, I wanted to be with them, too. How could they think that this would change anything?

"You only think you like girls because you've never had a good father figure in your life" was the second great assumption from Grandma Sue that afternoon.

"It breaks our hearts to see you like this," Grandma Shari whispered, after seeing me face-in-lap sobbing.

Their conversation, my "intervention" maybe lasted an hour. Nobody ate lunch that day. Nobody was feeling loved or wanted, especially not me. Sitting there, after their "argument" was over, I remember how very low I felt. Still crying, barely able to speak, I sat there and whimpered my apology to them. I was a wounded dog, kicked around by some teenage boys in an alley. I was the unwanted family Christmas present. I was sorry, so sorry.

From there, I stood with the very last amount of energy I had stored within my bones and walked myself out of that toxic home. I sat in my guilt as I drove away. Following the gruesome intervention, it was all a blur. I'm not sure where I went, who I talked to, or what I did.

All I'm sure of, is from that moment on, I have never stopped being myself. I refused to be somebody that I wasn't, that I'm still not, and I will never be that person for them.

But, I'm finally okay with that.

(River Voices, 2019)

Losing Everything

James O'Banion

The lives of my grandparents sang freely,
memories created a constant flow.
Love poured from their hearts to our souls
as the family ranch brought us together.
The ranch made us a family,
with signatures on a wall with every visit to prove it.
There was no better welcome than
Grandpa's signature wave.

Who stole the soul?

Age took over all of us
as the mountain of signatures reached its peak.
Grandma grew too small for the ranch
while Grandpa's age stayed the same.
A sacrifice had to be made, and for Grandpa,
it was *hell or high water*.

The ranch was no more,
and the old souls found their new living space.
The new space was not enough for the whole family.
Memories left behind on that open field,
a thought still lingers while looking back:

Who signed the wall last?

Where's the soul now?

(River Voices, 2019)

Belonging

Keenan Johnson



Graphite and Colored Pencil

(River Voices, 2025)

Breath of the Koi

Alex Near



Digital Art

(River Voices, 2025)

The Working Bumblebee

Suzy Joslin



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Utah Kaleidoscope

Ellie Dyk



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

They Said

Diana Casey

Inspired by – *Hughie Lee-Smith, Landscape #3*

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

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

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2019)

Five Minutes is All I Ask

Sean Colcleasure

Characters:

Flora, in her 40s with a blue head band on her head

Jake, in his 30s wearing khakis

DJ, age unimportant. Voice only

Lights come up on Jake walking across the stage, a drink in his hand.

Jake

I'll be right back. I just want to hit the head. (*Yelling*) Don't announce the king and queen before I get back.

Flora

(*Coming out from the shadows*) Hi Jake, I heard you were back in town. How have you been?

Jake

(*Surprised and noticeably uneasy.*) Flora? Hey. Umm, what are you doing here?

Flora

Looking for you. I ran into your parents the other day and they sort of mentioned you'd be here. (*Moving closer*) I really think we need to talk.

Jake

(*Hurriedly finishing off his drink*) Uhh, I don't think we should be doing this right now.

Flora

Why? What is wrong with now?

Jake

For starters, Karen is over there...you know, my wife. Plus, this is my reunion. So, I don't really have time for this right now.

Flora

Just give me five minutes. It's all I ask.

Jake

I can't.

Flora

Why not?

Jake

Uhh, I think I just told you. My wife's here, plus I don't think my high school reunion is the time or place for this. (*Pause*) And speaking of my reunion, how did you get in here?

Flora

(*Dismissive*) Jake, please, does that really matter? I'm here, and I really need to talk about what went wrong, why you left me. (*Getting emotional*) I always thought we were good together. Weren't we? (*Silence*) You know that I was always on your side, right? That I was always there for you when you needed me?

Jake

(*Taking her arm and moving her into the shadows*) Yes, that is true, but that was a long time ago. I'm a different person now.

Flora

I know, I can see that. For Heaven's Sake, you're wearing khakis and a tie. Khakis! What's become of you? (*Taking something out of her purse*) Just look at your snapshot I carry with me. (*Showing him her phone*) You used to be a bit more reckless, a bit more dangerous...cool and now...now, you just look hideous.

DJ

Alright Ladies and Gentlemen, it's almost time to announce the king and queen of this year's reunion. So please start making your way back toward the dance floor.

Jake

Ummm...I've really gotta go. (*Motions his head toward the restroom*) And then I need to get back to my wife and friends.

Flora

(*Getting noticeably louder*) But what about me? What about us? Weren't we good together? Didn't I always keep my promises to you?

Jake

(*Trying to calm her down*) Yes, yes, of course you did. You always...wait...what promises?

Flora

Oh Jake, like you don't know...giving you peace of mind, a better way of life, ensuring our future...I mean your future.

DJ

Okay, are you ready? Let's start with the ladies...

Jake

He's getting ready to call the queen's name. I really gotta go. I'm sorry.

Flora

Don't you walk out on me again, Jake. I couldn't handle it if you did. We had something, something special. Don't you remember your first car and all that time we spent together? (*Daydreaming*) That first car looked so good on you. What ever happened to it?

Jake

I sold it to buy our minivan.

Flora

A minivan? You? I can't believe it. I could never picture you that way.

Jake

Flora, I'm sorry. The guy you remember existed a long time ago. My life has changed. I've graduated college, gotten married, had a son. I own a house now, two cars and I'm working as a police officer. I've grown up, matured and...

Flora

That's why I'm here. It's time that you came back to me, Jake. I can do things to make your life better. (*Stepping in closer and taking his hand*) Let's get you back where you belong. You do know you're in good hands with me, don't you?

Jake

(*Pulling his hand away and stepping back into the light*) I don't know what you're getting at. I mean, do you do this with all of your ex...

Flora

(*Cutting him off*) No. It's you. Everything that has happened to me...all of my problems are because of you, Jake.

Jake

What are you talking about?

Flora

You were the first to leave me.

Jake

First to leave you...well, I'm sorry, but maybe it was because of this (*Motions to her*). It was always hard to be around you. You always wanted too much. You were always asking for more.

Flora

It's because I wanted you to have the best of everything. And now where

are you? Who knows how you're being treated.

DJ

Congratulations Karen. I think we all know why you're wearing that crown tonight. Don't we guys? No, I'm just joking. It's a joke. (Pause) Wow. Tough crowd. Okay, now, fellas it's time to announce her king for the night.

Jake

I couldn't ask for anything better. My life is good, and everything is how it should be. (*Pause*) Look, I've got it all covered, just like I always have.

Flora

But...

Jake

I've moved on, Flora, and so should you.

Flora

But Jake, you know that being in the right hands makes all the difference, and I want to be those hands. Just give us one more shot, please.

DJ

Jake Farmer, who's definitely drunk himself into a better state, come on up here and claim your crown.

Jake

Hey, that's me. I won. Did you hear that (*awkwardly hugging Flora*), I won. I've really gotta go now. Sorry.

Flora

But Jake, what about me? What about us?

Jake

You'll be fine, just like you were with me. You're an insurance agent, Flo. There will always be another guy like me, looking for car insurance. I just needed someone who could wrap all my coverages together at a lower rate. (*Walking away*) It was never personal.

Flora

(*To herself*) That's what they always say. It's never personal. (*Taking notice of somebody off stage*) Hey, hey you, how's your insurance coverage?

Curtain.

From Sunrise to Sunset

Josie Buckingham

Cancer: A pink burden.
This salmon chair a witness
to the dreaded news of no more
bubblegum and cotton candy
in the spring. No more asking
for strawberry laffy taffy or
laughing at your pink toned
cheeks when your glass of
Rose' warms your skin.
Still alive, still alive
we are for
a moment or two,

so I pull the car over, step
out and memorize the way
the pink ribbon pinned on your
shirt dances in the wind
alongside the wild pink tulips.
I watch your wig that fits
perfectly sway atop
your pink scalp almost asking
me to remember it too.

Remember our pink sunset
adventures eating sugar cookies while
we sit on our coral kissed blanket
listening to the waves ask us
for one more visit.
Just one more goodbye before
the sunset fades and
the night sky settles in.

(River Voices, 2020)

Her

Taylor Strand

I shouldn't have worn this dress. I mean, it's a great dress, and God knows it wasn't cheap, but *I* specifically shouldn't have chosen it for tonight. Or ever, really.

It's sequined. *And* pink. And short. *AND* tight. All of the things that never flatter me. Some people can pull off sequins, but I am definitely not one of those people. Honestly, I don't know anyone personally who can pull them off; they're such a specific fashion statement.

The bathroom door rasps as someone pushes it open. I reach down to act as if I'm washing my hands and not staring at myself amongst the ambience of flickering, harsh yellow lights, and the creaking of rusty plumbing overhead. I do have *some* dignity left, at least. I expect the typical parade of drunk girls to waltz in, linked arm-in-arm, and theatrically wheezing about something probably as funny as a knock-knock joke. When only one girl finds herself rounding the corner, however, I let my eyes slowly drift to catch her reflection in the mirror. She seems bored and doesn't say a word as she makes her way into the first stall amongst the completely empty bathroom. When her door is securely locked, I raise my eyes back up to the dress, leaving the water running in the sink before me.

It really isn't a bad dress, I think, letting one of my damp hands run down the front. The texture is rough, and I internally cringe as my fingers follow the curvature of my stomach. Too tight; this dress is too tight. At least, too tight for me. I never wear things of this cut: short enough to show a substantial amount of thigh, constricting enough to make it look like I have *some* essence of a figure. My eyes fall to my hand, the dress back-dropping my skin. Normally this rosy shade flattered my milky dark complexion, but something is just not working with this ensemble tonight. Maybe it has something to do with the girl standing across the bar which I can't seem to get off my mind, but I want to pretend I'm not that person-- the person who hides out in the bathroom, staring at herself because her game is terrible and her self-esteem is as wishy-washy as a trophy wife who knows her husband is having an affair.

But I am *that* girl. I have always been *that* girl. I've also always been the girl who does nothing more than swoon. Who does nothing more than watch from across the bar and swoon hopelessly. I wanted tonight to be different, but as I stare back at my reflection, I'm unsure. Unsure of myself.

When the woman in the stall emerges, I move my hands back to the water, pretending to vigorously scrub them as if something has stained me. Quietly, she walks over and washes her own hands, and as she pulls out a few rolls of paper towel, she turns to me, stating, "Nice dress," before exiting. The words bounce back and forth, echoing in my brain. It is a nice dress. And, I don't want to swoon anymore.

With one deep inhale, I turn off the faucet and look at myself one more time, nodding.

No more hiding.

It's so much louder on the bar floor than it is in the bathroom. I mean, it makes sense, but I've been stowed away in there for so long I became accustomed to the altered sound, it seems. Some weird, up-and-coming techno music with barely any lyrics or vocals of any kind. Though I don't think many of us come to gay bars for the music. At least, I know I don't.

In this area, it's pretty tricky to find someone who you can relate to. Someone in the community. And it's risky; you get the wrong idea, start barking up the wrong tree, and things could go south fast. I always find a sense of community when I'm here. It's one of the only places I can openly talk without fear of people being judgmental. So, I'll deal with the obscure techno if it means I can keep this sense of community.

I glance across the floor of sweaty bodies and glittery feather boas, and for a moment, I'm worried she's left. She's not in the spot that she was the last time I saw her, right before I retreated to the bathroom. Then, however, I briefly spot her silvery-white hair disappear behind a group of guys dancing. That was the first thing I noticed when I saw her. Her hair was unlike anyone else's here. Short, very short, ending only one or two inches, maybe, from below her ears. It looked beautiful with her dress.

I continuously mutter "sorry" and "excuse me," as I make my way through the crowd. It's packed in here, everyone jumping in time to the music and taking shots left and right. Aside from a few elbows to the chest and a couple stray hands grazing specific parts of my body I make it through relatively unscathed. The crowd is significantly thinner around the edges, and when I surface, I feel momentarily accomplished before stopping dead in my tracks when I realize that I'm now standing directly behind her.

Her dress is open in the back, something I didn't notice before but am surely not complaining about now. She has pale skin, paler than the average person, and it contrasts nicely with the dark navy blue of the lace that crosses just over her shoulder blades. With the high collar to make her look that much taller and the belted waist to make her look that much more statuesque, it's evident that, unlike me, she knows how to pick a dress.

Now what?

She turns.

"Oh, hi."

I guess that.

"Hey," I reply, dragging out the word as I scavenge through my mind for something, *anything*, to say. Not like I have even the slightest chance of formulating a sentence now that I'm close enough to see the intricate details of her face. "I, um—"

"Nori, right?" she asks, and my stomach drops. Multiple ways as to how she could possibly know me come to mind, none of them particularly admirable with my history of being a complete embarrassment.

"Yeah, how...?"

She chuckles, flashing a stunning smile, "I was here a couple of weeks ago when you did that trivia night. Your team won."

Relief cascades through me. "Oh, yeah, that." She seems a bit puzzled as to why that was such a relief, so quickly, I inquire, "And, you are?" "Theo."

So far, so good.

I had seen her with a couple of others earlier, but now it seems as if she's alone. "Here with anyone?"

"I was. A couple of friends forced me to come out," she begins, then gestures out to the crowded floor, "now I think they're lost in there somewhere."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"Well, I'm not normally into this kind of scene. I only ever really come to clubs when they drag me along. Plus," Theo throws a thumb over her shoulder, and I realize now that we're standing right before the bar, "I have a drink waiting to be nursed. I'd rather do that than dance, I think." She has a small grin on her face. I'm trying not to stare, but she has these dimples. These little but distinct dimples that could quite possibly be the thing that's making me light-headed.

What am I thinking?

I open my mouth to reply, but Theo turns when the bartender taps her shoulder, and she takes the glass into hand, giving a single nod of thanks before turning back to me. Her smile hasn't wavered. "So, what about you, you here with anyone?"

"I, uh... no," I shake my head, "I'm not."

"That's a shame. You seem fun."

I nearly choke on my own tongue. "What makes you say that?" Cue nervous laughter.

"I don't know," she cocks her head slightly to the side, and her hair dangles just above her shoulder. It leads my eyes to the floral tattoo I can't fully make out in the dim, pink and purple lighting, "but I'd like to find out. Wanna sit? My friends will be out there for a while, and I'd much rather nurse my drink with company."

I'm in the deep end now. I'm thrashing around in the deep end with no knowledge of how to swim and nothing to help me keep my head above water. Stupidly, I say, "sure," because isn't this what I wanted? That's what I came over here for, to talk to her. And when she asks if she can buy me a drink, I say "sure" again, because this... gorgeous girl is talking to *me*. Talking to me, and who wouldn't accept a drink from her?

For a second... no, more than a second... I fight off the urge to sprint back into that bathroom with the harsh yellow lights and the creaky plumbing. I'm used to the hiding spots. I've grown accustomed to the hiding spots. I grew up and found comfort in the hiding spots. And I can't hide here, standing face to face with someone like her. I can't hide in this dress, in all it's pink, sequined, tight glory. I'm exposed. But for *once*, I'd like to be the person who met someone in a bar and flirted. Talked for hours. Stared at them from across the room and felt something.

So, I *will* be that person. If only for tonight, I'm going to make myself that person.

Theo's fingers graze mine as she hands me my glass (her hands are soft), then leads us through the energized crowd to a corner of the bar where there are mostly unoccupied tables. I watch as she sits down across from me, then swiftly tosses her hair back. My breath catches slightly. She's so beautiful, and I want to tell her. I'm going to tell her. I open my mouth, though pause with the words at my lips.

"Yeah?"

I let out a slight laugh, "I just, I wanted to say that um, you're... very pretty. You're stunning. I-I'm sorry if that's too forward, I just--"

"No, no, not at all. Thank you. I would say the same about you." There's that smile again. The smile that makes my chest hurt. "And you look spectacular in that dress, by the way." Theo locks eyes with me as she says this, and at that moment, I'm enchanted. The music's loud and the crowd's alive, and everything is just as you'd see it in a movie.

They're brown, her eyes. A dark, glossy brown. Glossy. Her eyes are glossy. They pull around the edges. They look startled. Why is she startled? Is she... crying?

She takes in a shuddering breath, and I realize she's no longer looking at me. She's looking *past* me. "Oh my God," she whimpers.

I don't even have the chance to turn before the shots ring out over my head. There's screaming, there's shouting, there's more gunshots.

Time stops for me at that point. I'm paralyzed in my chair. Shooting. This is a shooting, I repeat over and over in my head. This is a shooting. You're unsafe. Hide. Now. Hide under the table. Move! I'm screaming in my head, but I can't feel anything.

Move. Move. Move now! Mo-

(River Voices, 2020)

Lonely Words

Keegan Colcleasure

We must find meaning in life so we write.
Yet often solemn are the words we lay.
It's the loneliest words that do burn bright.

By their minds the poets try to do right.
Their thoughts of hope shine like the rays of day.
We must find meaning in life so we write.

It is the most broken hearts gifted sight,
And with their broken God's they always pray.
It's the loneliest words that do burn bright.

Left unchecked festering woes turn to blight
So to fix them our pains we must convey
We must find meaning in life so we write

Sending gay dreams adrift like paper kites.
We have hope like children who laugh and play
It's the loneliest words that do burn bright.

But bound together in harsh winter's night
A sad heart still sings songs callooh callay!
We must find meaning in life so we write
It's the loneliest words that do burn bright.

(River Voices, 2020)

By the Threshold

James O'Banion

Someday we will break the ice that forms a wall between
who we are and what we see.
Do you think it's not too far out of reach?
Yes, it seems only yesterday we were ripples upon the stream,
dancing so harmoniously,
and the water would always sing in the most inviting key

Someday we will bridge the great abyss that stands between
our dreams and memories.
Can we breach the surface of the sea?
'Cause I am weak from treading through the troughs and toward the peaks;
all I need
is to finally break free.

Is it safe to be outside with you, my friend?
'Cause all the trees have scars upon their rings
Can you meet me halfway, by the threshold?
I will take your hand; we can brave the cold together and take a chance

Someday I want to watch with you as the weeping clouds retire
to a far and foreign sky
as we find a meadow to call our shrine,
and in time, we can seal the wounds that speak of sleeping fires
while they feed the coals of white
left behind by a dim and fading fire

But in spite of the darkness, we both know a guiding light
still breathes beyond our sight
Hear it cry as it waits for our reply
to rectify the wonder we've denied through calloused eyes
Oh, how they used to shine,
burn so bright, and illuminate the night

Would you say these nerves have finally recovered from their fray?
'Cause I know the friction wears them thin
Can you meet me halfway, amidst the tempest?
We will rise, 'cause I'm tired of counting broken dreams.

When this ends, will we know where
to turn our cheeks and rest our heads?
For now, we dream of better days to come
and stay...

I feel safe to be inside with you
Tonight, I'm convinced
that all I ever longed for...
was love.

(River Voices, 2020)

The Strange Things We Want

Jessica Jackson

I want to be a couch
I want to be soft and delicate
Sculpted and unique
I want to feel the gentle human skin
Rely on the dignity of my craftsmanship
Supportive and strong
I want to carry the scent of my company
Sweet, bitter, sharp, stink,
Cigarettes, roses, outdoors, whiskey
To hear the hour-long conversations
About the late nights and early mornings
Love stories and quests
To hear the laughs of joy and the shivers of cold
To know that I am human enough
To want to be something as silly as a couch

(River Voices, 2020)

Water Dragon Head Puppet (OceanBlast)

Graceann Barlow



Acrylic Markers and Posterboard

(River Voices, 2025)

Dinner Time

Ashley Streng

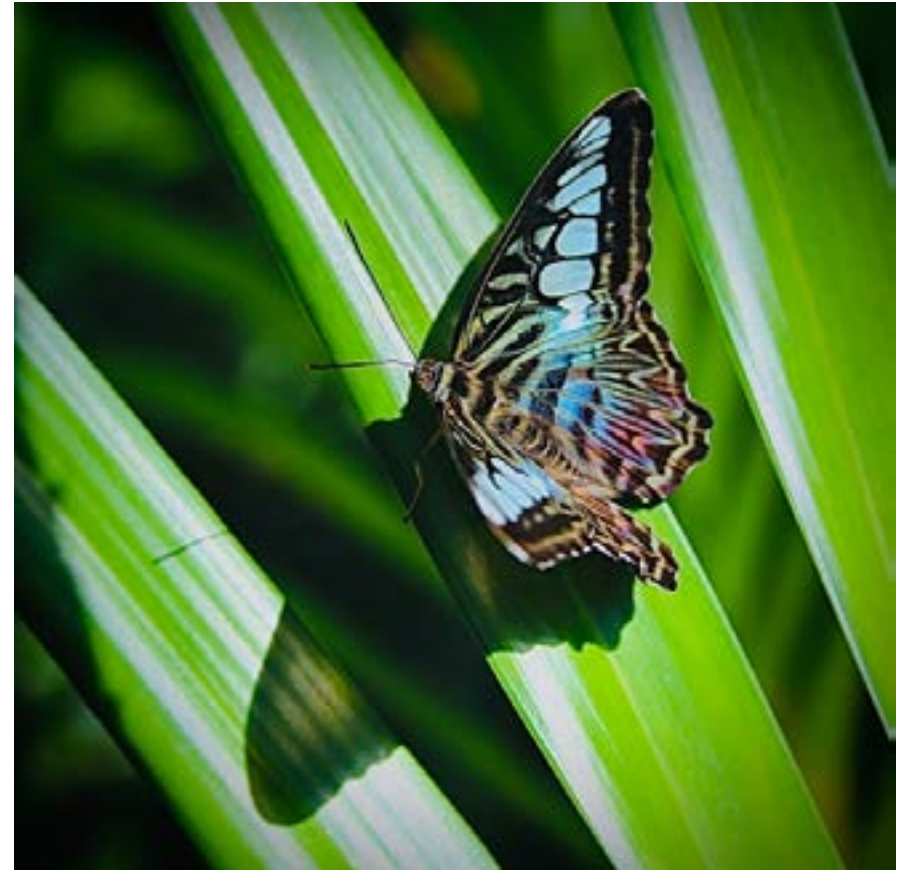


Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

The Rainbow Butterfly

Suzy Joslin



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Artificial Intelligence

Ellie Dyk



Digital Art

(River Voices, 2025)

An Outhouse on Washington

Lauren Streng

The dry grass and warmly painted leaves crumble beneath our feet, the soft crinkling loud against the silent buzz of the night. We creep forward, unable to see anything except for what we can feel. I reach out, my fingers wandering along the rough exterior of the house, feeling my way toward the backyard. My balance is lost to the uneven ground and I stumble forward, my feet sliding through the frictionless leaves. Ed swiftly grabs the back of my jacket, pulling me up.

“Geez, Tom! Did you trip over a log or something?” Ed whispers jokingly. I roll my eyes, an action he cannot see in the dark. My hands fumble around in my pockets, searching for a small flashlight.

“Ed! Did you grab the flashlight?”

“What? No, I thought you did.”

“Alright,” I sigh. “Let’s keep moving. It’s not worth going back to the truck for.” We continue forward, entering the backyard. Without my fingers to guide me, every step is completely blind.

“Do you know where it is?” Ed asks. I can feel him next to me as his sleeve brushes against my arm.

“Last time I was here it was 40 steps from the edge of the house.”

“Well, that’s great!” Ed says sarcastically. “Were your steps blind, were they giant, was it a straight path, did you --”

“It’s 40 steps!” I snap. “Right now we’re about 16.”

“How do you know?”

“Huh,” I ponder mockingly. “I really don’t know, but maybe it’s because I counted!”

“Well, yeah, but ...”

“Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen,” I mumble under my breath, leaving Ed to catch up.

“Forty-five, twenty-six, thirty, seventy-two, ninety-one --”

“Ed! What are you doing?” He laughs heartily and I hush him, trying to stifle my own laughter. I shake my head and continue moving. “Thanks to you I lost count of my steps. So if you run into it, don’t blame me.” Ed extends his arms, walking around like a mummy.

“Found it!” he shouts, loud enough to send a few birds flying.

“Quiet!” I hiss. We move around the structure, feeling it out and trying to get an image of it in our minds. It’s tall, about six and a half feet in height, and only three feet wide. The old wood is splintered and rough, the direction of the grains evident under my palms. My hands continue to fumble around until they land on a rusty hinge, and a bit further over, I find a handle.

“I found the door!” I yank it open and the hinges squeal, sending a shiver through my spine.

“Did they fill in the hole?” Ed asks, peering over my shoulder.

“I don’t know! I can’t see anything, remember?” I bend down and feel the ground for a stick. My fingers wrap around one, the peeling bark scratching into my hand. Like a blind man using a walking stick, I slowly rake the

surface inside the structure, feeling for any uneven ground.

“Well, I don’t feel a hole, so I guess they filled it in,” I say as I stand up.

“That makes sense. Robert did say that they haven’t used it for years.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, “and I think we would’ve smelled it if there was still a hole.”

“Good point. Now, how are we going to move this thing?” Ed asks, walking around the outhouse another time. Half of the shingles on the roof are missing and the whole thing rocks when gently pushed on. Every now and then we get a surprise when we feel a rusty old nail poking out of a splintered board.

“Okay, so I think our best bet is for me to take this side and for you to go opposite me. If we hold it by the roof supports we can just lift straight up. Ready?” I do as Ed suggests, positioning myself opposite of him. I raise my arms to the roof, feeling around until I find a decent place to put my hands.

“Ready,” I call back and we lift the outhouse. I can feel wood pieces prickling my palms like little needles, but there isn’t much I can do about it. The weight of the structure has already made my wrists sore and I can feel the blood inside my arms rushing downward, making my fingers even more tingly. We are barely out of the backyard, but I need to stop. “Ed! I’m going to set it down in three, two, one.”

The outhouse bumps roughly down and I’m afraid someone heard us, but no lights flicker on. I shake out my arms and massage my palms. “Alright, ready to go?” I ask. Ed gets into position and I once again feel the wood dig into my hands as my wrists bend back to support the weight of the structure.

It takes us two minutes to get back to the truck, and at that point my hands and arms feel numb and tingly. Ed props open the bed of the truck and jumps in, leaving me to hold the outhouse steady. I start leaning it toward him, the side resting against the end of the truck. He grabs the roof and pulls it further toward him as I push from the bottom and soon enough it is in the truck, laying on its side. I run to the front of my 1940 Ford Pickup and yank the faded green door open. The truck shakes softly as the engine falls into a rhythmic putt-putt-putt. I turn onto the street and take off, a little faster than normal, but not enough to attract attention. As I drive, my right leg bounces nervously and my fingers tap the steering wheel. The headlights outline the trees and the branches swaying in the wind casts shadows over the road. Everything seems too quiet and I find myself jumping when the wind scatters some leaves across the street. I turn left a little too sharp and I can hear Ed in the bed behind me trying to regain his balance.

“Slow down, Tom!” he calls. I do, but every street light we pass feels like a searchlight trying to expose our little prank. I turn one last time onto Washington Street, my eyes darting around in search of people, but the street

is deserted. I come to a stop in the middle of an empty intersection and shut off the truck. I look up and see the Grand Theatre’s lights flicker, the sign advertising the newest movie craze, but the doors stand unmanned.

“Alright, this is it.” I climb out of the driver’s seat and swing the door shut behind me. My footsteps sound oddly loud as I walk to the back of the truck, or maybe that’s just me being paranoid. Regardless, I lighten the pressure of each step. “Ready?” I ask Ed, and I see him nod. I begin pulling at the end of the outhouse, directing it to the ground. The first side bumps down rather noisily and our bodies tense up, but it seems no one heard us. Ed pushes the roof and the weight of the outhouse shifts from his hands to mine. He swiftly jumps out of the truck and helps me lower the structure. The pressure on our hands is released as the last side comes down silently, the tips of my feet almost disappearing beneath it. We hesitantly remove our palms from the scratchy surface and back away, holding our breath.

“We did it,” I whisper. Now, I can’t control my laughter and neither can Ed. We run to the truck and climb in, not bothering to be quiet anymore.

(River Voices, 2020)

14 Pills

Josie Buckingham

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

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

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

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

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

ready to say goodbye
before she even said hello

(River Voices, 2021)

I Stole the Lighter

Keegan Colcleasure

i am the one who stole the lighter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2021)

The Crucible

Justin Rymal

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

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

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

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

adversary but instead- the height.

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2021)

Final Stop

Taylor Strand

The city at night is a truly wonderful thing.

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

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

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

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

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

I will say, being alone wasn't always my first choice. Over the years though, I've grown accustomed to it. You know that saying about how people with depression could be surrounded by tens of hundreds of others and still feel so insanely isolated they can barely function? That's not an exaggeration. It's a sad reality.

I stick a hand out over the bridge's railing and let the breeze hit my

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

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

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

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

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

But that has long since passed.

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

I'm okay with this.

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

"Hey."

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

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

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

"Are you alright?"

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

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

Are my doubts enough to hold me back?

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

I don't want to face this person, but nevertheless, I turn around. He's

a few feet away, and his head is tilted ever so slightly to the side, eyes locked on me. He's young, probably around my age, and though it's dark, I can make out his messy hair and curious expression. It's also clear that he's got at least a few inches on me, probably standing at around 5'10 or 5'11. Most surprisingly, though, he's wearing only a loose-fitting, black flannel with white stripes over a plain white shirt. It's completely unbuttoned, and both sleeves are rolled up to the elbow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Monroe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's a long pause.

"Does anyone know about this?"

"No."

And again.

"Is this your first attempt?"

I'm quiet for a long time.

"No."

I let my head fall back against the railing and run a hand over my

face. When I look over, I see Landen looking back at me with an expression that, despite my keen eye for detail, I can't quite place. *Why does he care? He doesn't even know me.*

"Why tonight?"

"I don't know."

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

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

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

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

"Why are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

I look back up at Landen and take a deep breath. "It's my birthday."

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

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

"So what?"

I look back at him.

So what.

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

(River Voices, 2021)

Unexpected Guests

Linda Hood

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

(River Voices, 2021)

Beyond the Classroom Door

Diana Casey

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2022)

Forecast of Thoughts

Gypsy Bates

I find myself longing for a brighter day
Watching the fronts come and go
Cloud formations in my brain
Blocking the sun of tomorrow
Thoughts freeze over
Eyes become misty
Emotions accumulate
And my ideas become
unstable
I begin to fight the frost
of forgetting
who
I
am
The cold comes
My fingers numb
I find myself lost to the season of sorrow
Life
a whirlwind of pressures
Is it whether the weather will pass
Or whether to bring an umbrella

(River Voices, 2022)

Evening Summer Sky

Cole DeRuiter



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

The Climb

Sophia Morse



Silhouette

Sophia Morse



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Night at the Fair

Suzy Joslin



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Reflections on Commencement

Nicholas Palmer

The college crowned the year in the pandemic way:
Cars processed through a tunnel of black robes,
Litters carrying the future's royalty,
Uniform shiny black trucks deferring to the imagination seated inside,
More than one Lincoln delivering the newly freed,
un coche del Cinco de Mayo, red, white, and green, bearing dreamers,
a red Mustang filled with rap and dancing, bling on masks, caps, and upheld
phones,
a trolley of revelers,
a massive, converted touring bus tagged with "Princess inside" like the Intel
logo,
a green, well-maintained 1980 Suburban carrying farming genius, I imagined,
 or maybe it was an actor
 or a philosopher
 or a biologist
 who discovered new soil to cultivate.
Unmasked joy, shy or bold, framed in black,
faces replacing faces, smooth, bearded, clean, soft, hard, old, young,
multi-generational families enjoying the 15-minute rite
no doubt grateful to be spared an hours-long ceremonial rack.
It was the solitary graduate driving himself, solemn,
who embodied this strange time,
the grit of those coming of age in it,
and the reason we teach.

(River Voices, 2022)

Family Resemblances and a Couch

Anna Grace Lubbers

my dad asked me to help him move a couch into the basement
it was heavy on both ends
we were both out of breath by the time we were down the stairs
when i moved it free from the doorframe after it got stuck he laughed
he was smiling, when it was over he thanked me
i love feeling strong, i felt a wildfire of pride that he asked me to help him
when he smiled i felt solid
we moved chairs aside to make room for the couch
there was a gap near the wall because the chair was angled to make room
a little triangle of space
i'm too big to hide inside that space now, it feels wrong
i could try but my arms would stick out of the sides and my legs wouldn't
bend all the way
my head would peek out of the top
i feel small enough to play hide and seek and hide in that space
unseen from the other players, i would win
i feel big enough to be depended on by my dad to move a heavy couch
my arms ache from its weight
i never had to think about if i liked my dad or not before
he was a symbol more than a person
more of a goal than anything else, he meant safety
i don't think my sister likes him
my nana always told me i was so much like my dad, i have his eyes she
said
i don't think my sister likes me either
i never had to think about if my sister liked me or not before
i think i like my dad, and myself
my nana always told me that i have my mother's face
i cut my hair short, my mother's hair is long
my nana always told me that i should have longer hair, it's more ladylike
i look back at old photos, my mother has short hair in them, and i do have
her face
i think it has to be my face, not hers, because my voice comes out of it
i have a deep voice, i talked low in grade school because i wanted a deep
voice
it stuck, but my mother's is deep too, though she forces it to come out in a
higher pitch
if i were a firstborn son, would the resemblance to my mother not be as
striking?

i hope my dad sees my face, not hers
the basement has a couch and soft chairs now
i noticed that a whole family could sit there, when i stepped back to see
them
they would drape over plush cushions facing the tv
they would watch movies and sit close enough to touch, not thinking of it
my dad sits there alone, and i'm upstairs
i picture myself in that imagined scene, and my chest hurts
i don't remember ever having that, but i miss it
I curl up in my chair and try not to cry, i don't want my dad to hear

(River Voices, 2022)

My Asthmatic Lungs

Kelli Loughrige

heredity
environmental
secondhand smoke
don't smoke

it's just a cold
bronchitis
pneumonia
exacerbation

appointments
doctors
specialists
tests

meds
nebs
steroids
bed

atelectasis
scar tissue
collapse
never coming back

hate
frustration
need

...just breathe.

(River Voices, 2022)

The Kool-Aid

Donald Moinet

The first light of the sun crept above the gray waters to the east, an old hospital sat on the coast on the outskirts of a once populous town. Jagged rocks churned the water beneath, sending a faint mist into the side of the building.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Just looking out the window at the sunrise. Not much to see in this room anymore."

"I can understand that. Hopefully the test results will come back soon and we can have you on your way."

The man looked out the window for a second more before sliding the blind closed.

"May I ask you a question, dear?"

"Of course, sir, what can I help you with?"

"What are my chances?"

The nurse looked at the man and took a breath before responding.

"Um...I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not sure I can give you a good answer.

You are more than welcome to ask the doctors about your condition when they get here."

The man smiled. He lowered himself into a chair on the opposite side of his bed.

"Is there something bothering you sir? Do you think your condition has worsened?"

"The ringing in my ears has stopped."

"That's wonderful, sir, I know the tinnitus had made it quite difficult to sleep. Must mean the new medication is working."

"It has been replaced by whispers."

"Okay, so the ringing has changed a little bit to sound like whispers. As people get older, symptoms of tinnitus can change. How are you doing with the whispers? Have you been able to sleep?"

"No more than they have."

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't follow. Who are they?"

"It's strange, how different we view those who jump from those who fall."

"Sir, I don't understand what you're talking about. Did somebody fall? Is that who's whispering?"

"What's it like - spending so much time on the edge? On the precipice, watching so many fall?"

"I don't understand, what edge?"

"How many cling to the edge before they fall? How many don't?"

"Sir, I think you might need to lie down. I'll go get you something that will help you sleep."

The nurse brought the man a pill with a small cup of water.

“Let me help you into bed, sir.”

The nurse helped the man over to his bed, he laid down on his back with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Thank you, dear.”

“Here is the medicine, sir. It should help you sleep. The doctor will come by in a few hours and then you can talk to him about what’s been going on.”

The man nodded his head and closed his eyes. He sipped the water before resting the cup between his hands on his chest.

“Okay, sir, just let me know if you need anything. I’ll give you some time to rest.”

The nurse turned and walked towards the door.

“You know, you never answered the question.”

“What question is that, sir?”

“Do you ever feel yourself being pulled towards that edge? The one you watch so many fall into.”

The nurse was silent.

“My wife was pulled. She worked at a hospital just like this one. She was a midwife.”

The man took a deep, jagged breath. He took another sip from the cup.

“She sat on the edge just like you. Watching new souls crawl out of that void. She always asked why they screamed so loud. She believed it was much nicer over there. What do you think, dear?”

“I...I don’t know, sir.”

“I believe it’s nicer over there. So calm are the waters once you pierce the surface. Then there is nowhere to go but down, down away from the light, away from the sounds of your own cries. Such quiet. Do you agree, dear?”

“I think you should rest, sir.”

“Soon enough, dear. I have a bit more to say first.”

The man took a breath.

“I asked about those who fall and those who jump already, right dear?”

The nurse nodded slowly.

“That leaves only one type doesn’t it. What type are those, dear?”

There was a long pause.

“What type are those?”

“Th...those who are pushed.”

“Exactly, dear. Now back to my wife. She had developed quite the fascination with the other side. She said it never got old watching those new souls come into this world. She loved her job as much as anyone could.”

“That’s very nice, sir. I think it’s time for you to get some rest, I will be back with the doctor in a few hours.”

“Just a little longer, dear. My wife grew so fascinated with death it began to haunt her, it grew to the point that she told the doctor on her floor. She was prescribed medication to help stave away such negative thoughts. Or so I thought. Three weeks later, do you know what happened to my wife?”

The nurse shook her head.

“She jumped. Alcohol mixed with her medication and a few others; she was found dead in one of the empty rooms.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, sir.”

“That means a lot, dear. But there was always something about that time that had bothered me. My wife had seen something strange at that hospital before she died. Nothing crazy, but some medicine had gone missing. Now in a place as large as a hospital, there are many reasons a bottle of medication could go missing. It could be an error on the part of the pharmacist, maybe a filling error on the part of one of the doctors. But my wife was convinced that those pills had been taken. With how much she loved her job she just couldn’t bear the idea that someone had stolen a bottle of pills. I tried and tried to convince her to let it go but she wouldn’t have it. So, she reached out to one of her friends, a young nurse who had started a few months earlier.”

The nurse’s shoulders tensed as a shiver could be seen running down her back.

“Two days later my wife was found rotting on the floor of a room not so different from this one. That nurse she had told left that hospital a few weeks later and moved to small town. At the time I was too distraught to ask any questions, but now I have one last one.”

The old man took a deep breath and took a final sip from the cup.

“Now, let me ask you dear, in your professional opinion, did my wife jump? or was she pushed?”

Between choked back sobs the nurse spoke.

“I’m sorry.”

As the words left the nurse’s mouth the paper cup dropped onto the floor, the old man’s arm dangling over it.

(River Voices, 2022)

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.

(River Voices, 2023)

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

(River Voices, 2023)

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.

--

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.

(River Voices, 2023)

The Man in the Mirror

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?

(River Voices, 2023)

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.

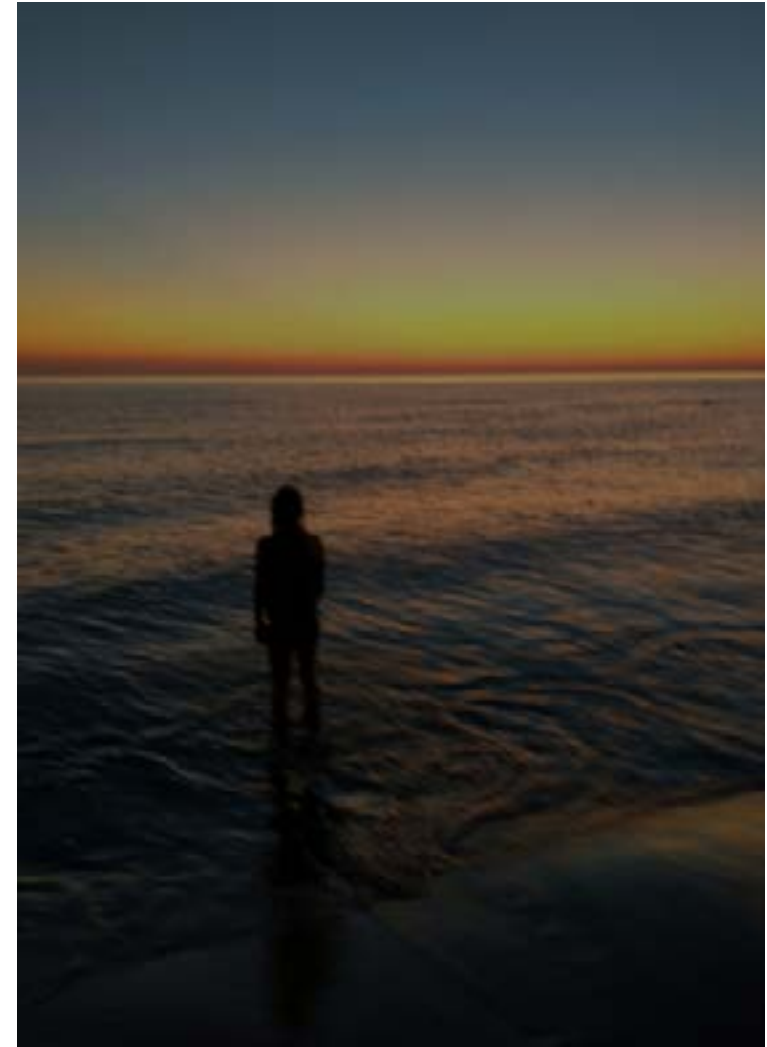
the snow melts,
truth pleads from the Earth,
it is the path that lingers,
of the footprints in search of being

alone.

(River Voices, 2023)

Blurred

Ellie Dyk



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Collateral Thoughts

Alyssa Munson



Wood, Wire, and Medical Supplies

(River Voices, 2025)

Face Mug

Lola Cronk



Ceramics

(River Voices, 2025)

Dancers

Kelli Loughrige



Acrylic

(River Voices, 2025)

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."

(River Voices, 2023)

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.”

(River Voices, 2023)

The Diary of a Fat Girl

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.*

(River Voices, 2023)

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.

(River Voices, 2023)

The Flower

Maria Basaj

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

(River Voices, 2024)

Flourish

Monica Mullens



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

The Majestic Falls

Suzy Joslin



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Serenity

Aracely Garcia



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Beau

Richard Vanderputte-McPherson



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Clawed Monet

Emma Marshall

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2024)

Bigger Dreams

August Hawley

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

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

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2024)

Outside Hospital Room #243

Hailey Witner

I don't want to write this.

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

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

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

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

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

I'm outside because I know Grandma too well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2024)

I Want to be a Storyteller

Liam Knisley

College Application #42

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2024)

Bikini Girl

Taylor Johnson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My gaze lingered.

I examined myself in the mirror.

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

It still looked as good as it did in the Target fitting room. Of course it did. I was thin and tall. My relatives made sure I knew how grateful I was supposed to feel about that. I had the body that girls my age were skipping meals for. Although I had never exactly been showered in praise and compliments concerning my appearance as a whole, people made it known to me that at the very least my body was something to cherish and be proud of, though I really had done nothing to "earn" it in the first place. So allegedly, I was meeting at least some sort of beauty standard, and thus the bikini wasn't "unflattering" on me in any conceivable way.

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

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

But, the girl in the mirror was me.

This body was mine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, nice. Looks good on you. I like it."

I mumbled a thanks and turned back into my room.

Fuck.

(River Voices, 2024)

A Waking Fire

Jessana Sorto Gavarrete

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am a river, flowing through challenges vast, carving a path, refusing to be
held fast.
I adapt and evolve, embracing each test, growing stronger proving my spirit's
quest.
I am a light, shining bright in the dark, illuminating my journey, leaving a
spark.
A beacon of hope, guiding me through the night,
A promise to myself, a radiant, victorious light.
I am a warrior, armed with resilience true,
Fighting for my dreams,
standing tall, anew.
I conquer fears, doubts, and uncertainty too, for success is my aim, and I know
it's within my view.

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

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

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

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

(River Voices, 2024)

Apollo

Liam Snipes

Wine dribbles down my chin
Staining the hem of my shirt
As I gaze at the light shining
Through dew on sleepy blades of grass
For the sun is rising, lord
He is rising

Knees pulled close to my chest
I've been sitting here on my splintered porch steps
In the still, breathless, impatient night
Since his descent under rolling hills and out of sight
For how can I be safe enough to sleep without daylight

Mere crescent presence in the moon
Will not do
Without the glow through my eyelids
And the heat burning my cheeks
There's a reason the birds sing at sunrise
And why painters and poets gather at dawn

If it weren't for the promise of tomorrow's light
My shaky legs would fold,
Tumble, and fall
Rolling down the hill until
I reach the feet of Sisyphus
But sure as sun, here you are again
Like you, I'll rise
For us, I'll join the ranks of Icarus

(River Voices, 2025)

fault lines

Dylan Hock

of the sun, the light
where it has been and
where
it is going
sensed beyond yet
all
around us

hard days
crest like turtle backs
expecting logs
ripple our vapid ponds
pooled desire
submerged longer
than breath

this swamp
aims only
to swallow
your moss eyes
in order to
blind you from
your selves

yet there is still
honey to curl across your tongue, the
tampering scurried steps through the underbrush
soft breezes kissing your thighs as
lovers lost afield in the dawning of
their passion, filled with lungs of
damp earth, wet still with

this desire, this
faint notion that
given enough time
such light comes
each day
through
the breaking

(River Voices, 2025)

A Hymn of Light and Shadow

Julian Barnes

In the heart of the twilight where shadows play,
I stand between worlds, neither night nor day.
An ember, a flicker, a whisper of fire,
Caught in a tempest of quiet desire.

In these still waters of my mind,
The blood of the meek, left far behind—
They say they shall inherit the world in a week,
But what remains for the strong, the silent, the bleak?

A single second of clarity,
To wash my hands of this sordid tragedy.
How will I make it through my darkest days,
Without you beside me to light my way?

You were the spark in a moonless night,
A guide when my vision fell to fright.
But now the path is cold, bare, and long,
An empty echo of a forgotten song.

Light breaks, then fades, a cruel joke it seems,
Glittering illusions that slip from dreams.
With every star that rises, another falls,
Leaving only shadows on empty walls.

I hold the memory of your innocent laugh,
A life disregarded, a broken path.
The echoes linger, both kind and cruel,
A fractured dance, the wise and the fool.

In the silence, the darkness knows my name,
It speaks of sin, of sorrow, of blame.
Yet even here, in the midnight's womb,
A whisper of dawn cuts through the gloom.

So here I stand, on this trembling line,
Between light's promise and shadow's design.
What's left but to walk, one step at a time,
Through the ebb and flow of death and rhyme?

When all is dim, yet hope remains,
In whispers soft as autumn rains.
For in the dark, the soul learns to see—
A hymn of light and shadow... an ode to me.

(River Voices, 2025)

Summer Shadows

Natalee Taylor



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Winter Wonderland

Suzy Joslin



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Christmas Cat

Stephanie DiPiazza



Photography

(River Voices, 2025)

Sandhill

Daisy Dyk



Photography

(*River Voices*, 2025)

Just a Toggle

Iris May Benson Replogle

There is a zipper pull on a table in a dead house. A dusty table in a discarded kitchen. A zipper pull not attached to a zipper. It's just a toggle. A toggle on a dusty table in a discarded kitchen in a dead house.

Then there is the '*tap tap tap*' of a lightly clenched fist on a hard wood door. That's all, just three taps. Then silence. Then a sigh. Then a voice. A voice that would be familiar to the house and all that's inside of it if these things had not all been inanimate. Except the plants, they are not inanimate. They cling to life. Barely. Maybe the plants know the voice: "I guess I don't have to knock anymore, do I?"

There is the click of a key; the heavy dark door swings in, pushing aside the already rumpled carpet and retracing a scrape carved away into the floor.

There is a human standing there. On the welcome mat. A melancholy human with thick hair falling out of a messy braid and several scars showing on their bare arms.

The toggle stays where it is, not moving, not breathing. Not because it doesn't want to be seen but because it cannot want anything at all. For no matter how many stories it has carried, the toggle is dead if not in a hand.

The person steps into the house. They have a name. A lovely name. One that they chose for themselves. But nothing here has the ability to know what it is.

Time passes; the human walks around, looks at things. The toggle doesn't know. The human puts the plants on the porch, waters them from an old peanut butter jar, then loads them into the back of their car.

"I'll take care of you. You can be well again. Don't you give up." Maybe the plants know.

At last, the melancholy human goes to the dusty table. Sees the zipper pull. Not connected to anything. Just a toggle. They pick it up in their hand. And then they start to cry. Just a little.

"I guess it's you and me again then, isn't it?" They are talking to the toggle. "She had you 'til the end. That's so fitting. I think I know who should have you next. Only they don't know the story. Now you're my responsibility. Don't you worry. I'll tell your story."

They are talking to the toggle. The toggle does not know this, has no way of knowing. But the toggle is in their hand, and it is alive in their hand, so maybe, somehow, possibly just for the sake of the story they are about to tell, maybe the toggle does know.

There was a little girl. Her name was Rose. It was her first day of preschool and she could not open her bag properly. This was a problem because her snack was in there and she was hungry. The zipper pull had

come off, it was on the floor somewhere. Abandoned in her distress.

The teacher replaced the zipper pull with a safety pin and soon Rose was happy yet again.

But someone else wasn't. Her friend was homesick. He hid under the table and looked very very sad.

Rose didn't want him to feel sad. That made her sad too. She sat down to talk to him and saw her zipper pull on the tile beside her. Just a toggle. She picked it up. She held it out to her friend.

"Look. It's a home charm."

"A what?"

"It makes you not feel homesick."

Her friend shook his head, "It's just a zipper pull."

"No, it makes you not homesick anymore. If you don't believe me, just try it for yourself."

~

Rose had been right, the boy discovered. The boy's name was Kelp, and he kept it that whole day. And then he kept on keeping it all the way until he was fifteen and his older brother was leaving for college.

It was late at night. Kelp could hear clattering and banging coming from his brother's room. He got up quietly and walked down the hall until he stood in the doorway.

His older brother was yanking things from his closet.

Kelp made a throat clearing noise.

His brother looked up, "Excuse me. Privacy."

"You left the door open so it's your fault."

His brother glanced at the open door, then back at Kelp, "What do you want?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm... having second thoughts..."

"About going to college?"

"I guess so."

"Why?"

"Because it's new. And it's different. And I'm worried I won't be able to look after myself as well as I think I can..."

"Oh."

The brothers stared at each other for a long time. It was probably the longest silence that there ever had been between them.

Kelp pushed off from the door frame, "I'll be right back."

He returned with the zipper pull. He held it out.

"What's that?"

"It's a toggle."

"Just a toggle? Why?"

"It makes you feel better."

"No it doesn't."

"Yes, it does. You take it and see."

~

Kelp had been right, his older brother discovered. Mars, that was his name, and he kept the toggle for three years. Until one of his closest

friends confided in him that they were struggling.

"I thought I'd beat depression. You know? But now it's back and I feel... so helpless and alone... Sorry. I didn't mean to off load all that on to you."

Mars shook his head, "Don't be sorry, I'm glad you told me. I um... I don't really know what to say... but you can come to me any time."

His friend smiled at their hands, "Thank you. Likewise."

"Oh wait!" Mars got up, "I do have something that might help just a little!"

He returned with the toggle. Set it into his friend's hands.

"What's this?" they asked a little confused but still smiling.

"It makes you feel less alone."

~

Mars had been right. His friend's name was Echo, and they kept the toggle until one day they saw someone quietly crying at a table in the cafe where they worked.

Not quite sure what to do, or if they should do something, Echo discreetly walked over.

"Excuse me?"

The customer jumped, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. Embarrassed. "Sorry," he murmured.

"No, I'm sorry. I just wanted to see if you were, okay?"

"Oh," he laughed, in a way that could have meant he was actually amused or maybe he wasn't. Echo wasn't sure.

"Not really," said the customer, "It's just... a very bad day..."

He looked so forlorn Echo felt the need to do something.

"Here," they pulled the toggle from their pocket and held it out.

The customer looked confused, "Sorry?"

"It improves very bad days."

"Even if they are absolutely horrible?"

"It doesn't fix it, but it improves it just a bit."

"Um... okay..." he took the toggle with just the quirk of a smile, "Thank you?"

"Yeah."

~

Echo had been right. The customer's name was Astrid. He kept the toggle for ten years. Until his niece started getting bullied at school.

She came home in tears one afternoon saying that she didn't know why people were so mean, and that she wished she was better at standing up for herself.

Astrid got the toggle from his ring dish and held it out.

His niece looked at him.

"I know what you're thinking," Astrid said, "It's just a zipper pull."

His niece shook her head, "I was thinking that you probably don't want to give that up."

Astrid swallowed, "Why do you think that?"

"Because you've had it for so long, it's almost always near you."

“Very observant.” Astrid pressed the toggle into his niece’s hands, “It is hard to give it up, but I want it to be yours now. You mean the world to me. Take it, it will make you just a bit less miserable. And we can talk about ways to deal with the bullying.”

His niece took it.

~

Astrid was right. His niece’s name was Sage, and she kept the toggle until one day it slipped from her grasp and fell through a grate in the road. She was devastated. So devastated.

She called her uncle and told him immediately, saying how sorry she was. Astrid tried to pretend it was fine, but it wasn’t fine in the least.

A parent who was passing by with their kids overheard a snippet of the conversation and wheeled themselves over to see what was going on.

“Excuse me, Ma’am?”

Sage looked at the parent.

“Is everything okay?”

“No,” Sage admitted, near tears, “There’s this very special zipper pull. It was given to my uncle by a kind stranger in a cafe on a bad day, and then he gave it to me ten years later. I’ve had it for five, and now it’s *down there!*” Sage pointed at the grate.

The parent clapped her hands, “Welp, let’s not waste any time then!” And they didn’t!

They called in a road crew and soon a large crowd of passersby were gathered to help in any way they could to retrieve the lost toggle.

Astrid rode over on his bike and stood with Sage as the toggle was wiped off and put back into Sage’s outstretched hand.

The crowd cheered!

A few months after this, Sage ran into the parent in a bookstore. They talked for a few minutes catching up, and the parent admitted that they were not doing so well. Things in the family were turbulent. ‘But not to worry’.

Sage handed her the toggle, and the parent gasped.

“Oh darling!”

“It will help you feel a bit better.”

~

Sage was correct, the parent discovered when they finally accepted the toggle. The parent’s name was Clove, and they kept the toggle until they passed it on to their child. Their child was struggling with anxiety.

“This will help you feel calmer, safer.”

~

And Clove was right. The child’s name was Aster, and they kept the toggle for eight years.

Their friend had just lost a pet.

“This will help the way a hug helps.”

~

And Aster was right. Their friend’s name was Emerald, and he kept the toggle for 10 years, passing it on to his boyfriend’s sister when she felt like giving up on art.

“This will remind you to be kinder to yourself.”

~

Emerald was right. His boyfriend’s sister’s name was Posie, and she kept it until she opened her own art studio. Then she gave it to one of her students.

“Don’t give up. This will remind you.”

~

Posie was right. The art student’s name was Celeste, and they kept it for a year before giving it to their partner.

“This will make you feel a little better.”

~

Celeste was right. Their partner’s name was Opal, and Opal kept it for eleven years...

Then they gave it to me... and then...

I gave it to my grandmother when she was dying.

Her name... was Rose.

They are sitting at a table in an empty cafe. The person that took the zipper pull from the dusty table, and their acquaintance, soon to be friend.

“This is yours now, Crow.”

Crow blinks, “But- but it’s so...” they choke on air for a moment. “It’s so wonderfully important! Why did you choose me?”

“Why choose any of those people? Open your hand.”

Crow opens their hand.

“It will make you feel a bit better.”

And they are right.

It’s just a toggle. But not really.

(River Voices, 2025)

Sick Kid Syndrome

Alyssa Munson

I mourn for the normal childhood I could never have
For the laughter trapped in green walls
And for cries caught in fluorescent hospital halls
I was birthed into uncertainty
Live or die, die or live
Neither was my choice when it was one breath in, heart bared out on a table
Just seconds into my infancy
Given only half a heart
But twice the work
Four times the fight
And six times the struggle
Eight times the stress
And ten times the pressure
Stereotypical “sick kid” syndrome
Don’t look different
Just treated
Disabled wrapped in a bow
Make it sound better
Shipped out
Vials of blood gone, poked, prodded, pushed
Experiments and tests
My time, my story, my life
All for a hundred bucks
Is this all I am, all I’m worth
That’s enough
Now listen
Don’t tell me I’m ordinary without this defect
I’m worth more than that
It’s time for me to stand up and speak up and say
That I’ve got more to offer than a pity party, a sob story
Take me for me
Live with the scars
Live with the burns
Chest and neck with raised pale white flesh
One huge gash ripped straight true the middle
The trophy of what I’ve been through, forever etched
Now let’s see you try it

(River Voices, 2025)

Schizophrenic Butterflies

Ellen Liddle

In my mind, there are three butterflies. All with their own voice and needs. One butterfly is always happy. A shade of bright yellow. Another butterfly is creative and fun, young and free. A pretty pastel pink. The other butterfly is bipolar depression, dark green. Along with bipolar depression is also the schizophrenia system that flies with that butterfly. Usually all three fly at the same time. Sometimes one is louder than the rest. Each butterfly seems to be on their own agenda. This can lead to three times the thought processes.

My butterflies like to flutter around. Constantly busy. I prefer them to be busy and happy. Fluttering freely. It is like when the sun shines and you feel its warmth. Feeling all the butterflies is a sense of warmth and comfort. It may be labeled as mania, but it feels the best. At Least each butterfly is happy and sadness can barely last.

Sometimes the butterflies cause mischief and bring about trouble. It is like having a really loud noise going on all over in my brain. Loud and scary. My mind races and blurs in those moments. It seems impossible to silence the noise. It consumes me from inside. The way to silence the loud butterflies is to catch them. However, they aren’t just loud. They are really fast too. They fly fast and seem to be out of reach. I wait for them to tire themselves out. Which is quite tiring to my own body.

Now, I’m waiting for the butterflies to wind down. Coming down closer to my reach. The only way that makes sense is to form jitters. The jitters shake the butterflies’ energy downward; it tires them easily. Anxiety exhausting them. My heart races and just wants to breathe. Sucking the air from the butterflies to try and calm my heart. Now I can grasp onto the butterflies. Their fragile bodies, each need something to heal and feel the warmth of normalcy again.

The first butterfly just wants to sleep. Restful and refreshing sleep. The second butterfly needs lights on and easy child-like shows to laugh with. The third butterfly is toxic. We try not to feed that one’s hunger of pain.

Sometimes, the world has many triggers. These triggers pull the wings off my butterflies. The butterflies can’t even respond. Not to light, laughter, or love. They hurt and spiral down... down. The spiral down, dragging me with them into a low manic. Now, I am in a dark pit just trying to find any roots to help me climb out. The roots are not anchored deep enough to help me. No balance. No safety. Trapped. Darkness consumes. Scary noises whispering to the darkness. Nothing makes sense.

My butterflies feel trapped in a cage. They try their hardest to ‘bonk’ their way out. Battering their wings, trying to escape. Tattered and worn, the butterflies feel defeated. The other voices of insanity are loud, mean, and unescapable. The butterflies are harmed. Usually I am too. Turning to a blade to be my saving. Is the madness behind it all, saving

though? Or am I just slowly dying? Cut by cut, blood drips. As my mind keeps sinking. The darkness kills any joy around me. Not allowing any light in.

My butterflies have always been used to protecting me too. They have built walls and barriers to keep almost anybody out. Now though? We have worked hard to let some walls down. We have opened ourselves up for love. Thankfully, because those are the people who help me try to stay safe. It is only when the love from my sun, moon, or stars brings light to the butterflies to guide them to safety. That is when we see a glimmer of hope to climb towards. The sun is my husband. My sun gives me energy and love and laughter. Nourishing my butterflies back to full health. My moon is my best friend. The moon shines for me in all the darkest moments. Giving me oxygen again to continue flying. The stars are my dog and cat. They always guide me back to smiles and happy fluttering butterflies.

We return back to the busy but happy butterflies. Flying wild and free.

(River Voices, 2025)

To Be Beautiful, To Exist

Emilia Matuz

I want to curl up, sit on the floor and
Not move
Not speak
Not think
Not think
Not think
Only think
Never feel
Exist everywhere and nowhere
All at once
Become part of the world and pause being part of me

But my room is too small to fit the universe
Not even a corner left empty for me to crowd

The comforting solitude of darkness's corner dies when the sun resurrects
A life for a life
The beauty of being for the price of surviving
The moon is a button I can never reach, and I want

to hit

pause

(River Voices, 2025)

Can We All Stop Using Adjectives When Describing Rape and Sexual Assault?

Racheal Blackmore

It's not violent rape.
All rape is violent.

It's not especially heinous rape.
All rape is especially heinous.

It's not brutally horrific rape.
All rape is brutally horrific.

So why do the news, law enforcement, and even casual conversations attach adjectives to rape as if some instances deserve more outrage than others?

As if a victim's suffering is only valid if it fits a particular narrative of excessive force, struggle, or visible wounds.

As if sexual violence needs a modifier to make it real. To make it matter.

But let's be clear: Rape is not an action that exists on a sliding scale of acceptability.

There is no need to dress it up with adjectives to make it more palatable or shocking.

To do so suggests that there are lesser forms of rape, as though a person violated in one way suffers any less than another.

It implies that unless an assault meets some unspoken threshold of savagery, it is unworthy of outrage.

When headlines read "Woman Brutally Raped in Alley" or "Teen Violently Assaulted at Party," they shape public perception.

They create a hierarchy of suffering, a subconscious belief that unless the word *brutally* or *violently* is included, it somehow wasn't *that bad*.

What happens, then, to survivors whose trauma didn't leave bruises?

Those who were coerced, manipulated, intoxicated, or simply too afraid to fight back?

The language we use tells them their pain is lesser, their experience less valid.

I know this because I lived it.

For years, my husband raped me. Over and over again, I believed what the world had taught me - that my body belonged to him.

I'd cry the next morning and say, *I feel like you raped me*, but I'd quickly add in fear, *I know you didn't because you're my husband*.

Because that's what I had been told. That it was my duty, that my saying no and fighting him off didn't apply inside marriage.

It wasn't until I finally broke and told my sister that I realized the truth.

And even then, I fully expected her to say, *it's just a guy thing*. But she didn't. She looked me in the eye and said: *That's rape*.

Marital rape wasn't even considered a crime in all 50 states until 1993.

In Michigan, it wasn't until 1974 that any legal protections were introduced for women assaulted by their husbands.

And yet, even with laws on the books, justice was never served for me. The world would still tell me *it wasn't that bad*.

And it doesn't stop there.

Defense attorneys latch onto language like "*only touched*" or "*allegedly assaulted*" to cast doubt, while prosecutors fight to make sure a jury understands the severity of an already heinous crime.

But should we really need extra words to convince people that violating another human being is, by definition, severe?

Rape is rape.

It is always violent, always heinous, always devastating.

We don't say "*especially egregious kidnapping*" as if there is a version of abduction that isn't terrifying.

Yet, when it comes to sexual violence, we feel the need to qualify it - to add weight to a crime that is already unbearable.

This habit of modifying the word rape does more than distort the truth.

It erases the lived experiences of countless survivors who don't fit the dramatic, media-friendly mold.

It feeds into rape culture by allowing society to subconsciously categorize some cases as "not as bad" as others.

And worst of all, it gives perpetrators room to justify their actions.

It's time to stop using adjectives to describe something that is already absolute in its horror.

It's time to stop making it sound as though some rapes deserve more outrage, more sympathy, or more belief than others.

It's time to stop letting language soften, skew, or sensationalize an act that should need no elaboration.

Rape is violent.

Rape is heinous.

Rape is brutal.

Period.

So next time - because, tragically, there will be a next time, as every 68 seconds, another woman is sexually assaulted - can we all just agree that when using the word "rape," all adjectives are implied?

And this time, let's do more than agree.

Let's demand better.

Let's change the conversation.

Let's refuse to let language minimize the crime, erase the survivor, or excuse the perpetrator.

Because every time we do, we fail the next woman who will whisper, *me too*.

(River Voices, 2025)

Marketplace

August Hawley

Marketplace

Sell For you **Local** More ☐

Suggested near you

\$15 FREE used statue, OOAK

Description

I'm learning to let go of the things I don't want anymore. The socks with no heels left, the laptop that hasn't turned on in two years, this statue. it's got some wear to it, some cracks and stains and this look in the eyes like it wanted to go a long time ago. But it's sturdy, stood the test of time even when I wished it would turn to dust; it sure can take a punch. It does what it's supposed to, you can look at it touch it and leave it out in the cold, it'll be just fine. I can't hang onto it anymore is all, it takes up so much space in my home, my life. Sometimes when I'm out with friends or washing dishes I'm thinking about statues. My statue. It's made for somebody younger, staying still in hopes of going unseen. I'm older now, and braver too, I like to think. And I want to pass it on to somebody who needs it the way I did, once. Sometimes you need to be stone-cold, stone-still, and stone-solid to survive. But once you don't, you shouldn't hang onto this anymore. It's easy to keep things you can hide behind; it's easy to stay in the house even after the storm if you're not ready to see the damage.

I'm still not sure I'm ready, but I guess there's only one way to find out. You can reach me via DM if you'd like to take a look at it. It might cost your life, but then you'll have to let it go.

(River Voices, 2025)

Ashes to Ashes

Emily McClain

CHARACTERS

Byron, Late 30's, successful engineer.

Charlie, Early 30's, unemployed line cook.

SETTING

Charlie's apartment.

TIME

The Present

SYNOPSIS

Half-siblings Byron and Charlie attempt to complete their mother's wishes as laid out in her will, but their complicated feelings about their mother make fulfilling her last request more challenging than either expects.

"I've never done good things. I've never done bad things. I've never done anything out of the blue."

-David Bowie, *Ashes to Ashes* 1980.

(Lights up on the messy bachelor pad of CHARLIE DAWKINS. A shapeless sofa at center, a decrepit coffee table. A box of half-eaten Thai take out sits on the coffee table, a few crumpled beer cans accompany it. Not enough to indicate a party had recently happened but more like the solo drinking of a total slob. It is midmorning in June. Knocking offstage. Pause. More knocking. There is no movement from anywhere. A louder, more persistent knocking and a voice calls "Charlie! Let's go!") Still no movement. Finally, the buzzing of a cell phone and the tinny-ringtone version of the Imperial March from Star Wars plays from the opposite side of the stage. There is life in this apartment after all as CHARLIE groans offstage, answering the phone. He starts talking and enters, wearing a pair of ratty pajama pants.)

CHARLIE

(On the phone) I thought we said 9. *(Pause, we hear a muffled answer from offstage.)* Okay. Well. When you weren't here I went back to sleep. *(He pauses at the coffee table, considers straightening up, checks to see if there is any beer left in the bottom of a random can, takes a sip.)* What's your hurry? She's not going to be less dead if we get there early. *(The response to this is louder and frustrated. CHARLIE crosses off and opens the door, allowing BYRON to enter, still on the phone. Both men glare at each other on their respective cell phones.)*

BYRON

(Starting offstage, continuing as he enters) That kind of attitude is not helpful or productive in this situation. We said we would meet the boat guy at 10:30 and with traffic it's going to be closer to 11 when we get there. And you're not even dressed!

CHARLIE

Oops. Caught me.

(CHARLIE salvages a crumpled T-shirt from the depths of the sofa cushions and throws it on)

BYRON

What are you doing?

CHARLIE

I don't know- getting dressed. What's it look like?

BYRON

We have an appointment. We're already going to be late and you're not even dressed. Unbelievable.

CHARLIE

Okay. If we're already late, what's the big deal?

BYRON

Don't be like this.

CHARLIE

Like what? I have no idea what you're talking about.

BYRON

Like this! This *(Gestures to pajamas)* or this! *(Gestures to messy coffee table)* This wasn't funny at 19 and it's not funny now.

CHARLIE

Your sense of humor isn't exactly the gold standard.

BYRON

So... what? You're going to wear your pajamas to do this?

CHARLIE

I don't know. What's the dress code for ash-spreading?

BYRON

Not pajamas.

CHARLIE

I've never seen that in Emily Post. You don't know-

BYRON (*Sudden explosive anger*) Put on some pants! Real pants! And a shirt with a collar! It's our mother's ashes for chrissake!

CHARLIE
Whoa. Okay. Jesus.

BYRON
I shouldn't have to explain this to you. You're a grown-ass man.

CHARLIE (*As he exits*) I mean... I guess technically?

BYRON Just hurry up.

(While he is waiting for CHARLIE to change offstage, BYRON pulls out his cellphone and searches for a number that he has called recently. He calls and after a moment, someone picks up on the other end. His whole demeanor shifts to friendly and charming.)

Hey! Is this Martin? Hey Martin, this is Byron Halloway. How are you doing? (*Pause*) Right, no, I know, we said 10:30- sure. Yes? (*Pause, he tenses up*) Wait, I don't- I mean, when we spoke last week you gave me the impression- (*Pause*) Okay, look man, I don't know what you think is going to happen but we aren't interested in anything other than... I know it's not exactly a normal request but this is really- was really important to my mom and we're just trying to honor her-

(CHARLIE reenters, wearing jeans. He has not changed shirts. BYRON turns away, very frustrated seeing him back so quickly.)

We're willing to pay for the full day of the charter! I don't understand why that matters! (*Pause*) You've taken the deposit already! So whether we fish or drink all day or hold a short ceremony for our mom or shoot heroin, what difference does it make to you? (*Pause*) Fine! That's just great! Goodbye!

CHARLIE
Wait a second, I'm not dressed to shoot heroin.

BYRON
Shut up, Charlie.

CHARLIE
But it sounds like I could have slept in some more.

BYRON
Shut up Charlie!

CHARLIE
Boat guy get cold feet?

BYRON
He says that it's against the law.

CHARLIE
To spread ashes in the ocean?

BYRON
The bay is a protected area, apparently. So we'd have to go further away from shore- like seven miles out or something- and he doesn't want to do that. Weather is really iffy today, he says.

CHARLIE
Huh. So... What do we do?

BYRON
We have to reschedule. Or find another charter that's willing to look the other way while we do this.

CHARLIE
Or... maybe... hear me out here... we just... don't.

BYRON
This was what she wanted. To have her ashes spread in the bay, by the both of us, together. She was very clear in the will.

CHARLIE
Yeah, okay, I hear you. But she's dead. So we don't have to do things exactly as she wanted- you know? Like, what difference does it make if we spread the ashes in the bay or the beach or in a parking lot or-

BYRON
Don't. You're not funny.

CHARLIE
Okay, so what's the plan? With... I mean, since we can't go today, are you just gonna rebook with another boat guy?

BYRON
I don't know.

CHARLIE
Why is this so important to you? It's kinda creepy.

BYRON
Because it was her last request. I'm trying to do the right thing.

CHARLIE
I guess. What's so special about this bay? Why couldn't it just be in the ocean? It's all the same water anyways.

(Long pause. BYRON considers lying.)

BYRON

...It's where she met my dad. He was a dockhand.

CHARLIE

For real? Gordon was a dock worker? Union?

BYRON

I guess? Anyway, that's where they met.

CHARLIE

That's cool. Those guys are intense.

BYRON

Yeah.

(There is an awkward pause. BYRON does not want to talk about his father. CHARLIE is oblivious to the reason why but he proceeds to fill the silence)

CHARLIE

I've always wondered what your pops was like- like as a person, you know? Because Mom was so down on him with us, like, when we were growing up. And yet, here she is, asking for her ashes to be spread at the place where they met! You don't see her requesting a ceremony at the Nissan dealership do you? Her final resting place is going to be close to your dad!

BYRON

Maybe he can bring his new trophy wife and their kids out to visit her.

CHARLIE

Dude it's been twelve years. Let it go.

BYRON

I am letting it go! I'm trying to fulfill this stupid request so I can let it go! Look at me letting things go!

CHARLIE

Huh. Could have fooled me.

BYRON

I don't want to talk about it anymore. I want to do this today so we need to come up with a new plan.

CHARLIE

Why does it have to be today? I'm not doing anything the whole rest of this week-

BYRON

It has to be today! And you're not even working right now so it's no big shock that you're free the rest of the week.

CHARLIE

Man, what is with you?

BYRON

It has to be today because I need this box out of my house! I need to not have it around me any more! I need to be able to close this chapter of my life and not have any reason to think about it again!

CHARLIE

Okay okay, christ, calm down. Do you want-- I mean, I guess I can hold onto it... her... whatever- until we determine what the next step is. If it's freaking you out?

BYRON

It's not freaking me out.

CHARLIE

You seem a little on edge about it. Byron?

BYRON

This is important to me. Okay?

CHARLIE

Okay. Okay. I mean... I don't get it but-

BYRON

What's not to get? I should want to do this last thing that she asked of me. Who else is gonna do this- one of her boyfriends? That surf shop owner?

CHARLIE

I mean... he was in better shape than both of us anyway...

BYRON

Gross. Can you not talk about him? Please.

CHARLIE

Well he's not here now.

BYRON

No. He's not. He left her just like Daryl did.

CHARLIE

Yeah well he was a dick-

BYRON

I never said he wasn't!

CHARLIE

(Overlapping) -And I think Mom was ultimately better off without him.

BYRON

Yeah. Maybe. Who could say, knowing her?

CHARLIE

Wow. Okay.

BYRON

What do you want me to say? She cheated on my dad with your dad, got knocked up, left him and married Daryl and we all had to move into that crappy apartment complex and-

CHARLIE

(Overlapping) Why are you still bitter about this?

BYRON

And I got to take care of you while she ran around with guys half her age!

CHARLIE

Byron! Get a grip!

(BYRON storms offstage, returning a few moments later with a large container which he sets on the coffee table, knocking the take-out containers unceremoniously onto the floor.)

BYRON

I've been driving around with this in my backseat for six months.

CHARLIE

What? You just called me about this last week! You've known for six months this is what was in the will?

BYRON

Yes.

CHARLIE

You didn't- why didn't you say something earlier?

BYRON

I didn't want to do it. I was... I guess I am angry at her. Still.

CHARLIE

Okay.

BYRON

Charlie, when I think about going through with this, all I can think about is the last conversation I had with her.

CHARLIE

Yeah?

BYRON

It wasn't... it wasn't exactly what I wanted to end on. And I'm not proud of myself. I said a lot of really- I said a lot of really cruel stuff to her. Stuff I wish I could take back.

CHARLIE

Man, you've gotta let that stuff go. There's nothing you can do about it now.

BYRON

She just kept harping on me about how I never wanted her to be happy- like that was my responsibility! I don't know how to make myself happy, much less my depressed mother!

CHARLIE

She was just trying to- god, man, life is complicated. People aren't perfect, even mothers. Especially mothers.

BYRON

Look at us! Neither one of us has any decent relationship to speak of! We can't commit, can't have an authentic and emotionally vulnerable connection!

CHARLIE

Whoa, wait a second. I've had the same landlady for a year now and I think we're almost ready to use first names. It's getting serious.

BYRON

Seriously! You don't think those things are connected?

CHARLIE

Our mom's endless string of boyfriends? Connected with... what?

BYRON

Your inability to have a significant romantic relationship? My inability to open up and trust anyone? I don't know.

CHARLIE

Dude. I'm a line cook, not a psychologist. I'm not digging into all this right now. Do you- okay, so is this Rubbermaid full of mom my problem now?

BYRON

No. No. I've got it under control.

CHARLIE

... Huh. If you say so.

BYRON

You aren't mad at her? Not even a little?

CHARLIE

I don't know, dude. Maybe? But what would be the point of that?

BYRON

Why couldn't she just be like... a normal mom?

CHARLIE

I couldn't say. I don't know that it matters, honestly. She did the best she could.

BYRON

I don't think that she did. She didn't have to be like...

CHARLIE

Like what?

BYRON

Caring more about her happiness in the moment than providing stability. She wasn't a good mom.

CHARLIE

Hey! Look, I get you're dealing with a lot but you need to watch it. She loved us! I'm not letting you rewrite everything to make her out to be this horrible person! This whole conversation is bumming me out and I don't want to fight about it but... Jesus Christ! This is not what I wanted to do today either!

BYRON

Yeah! Welcome to my life for the past six months! Driving around with her in the backseat, wishing she would answer me back when I ask her why she did all the shit she did!

CHARLIE

Okay, you are definitely leaving this box with me. I think you're close to having some kind of episode or something. You're talking to her?

BYRON

Not like, talk-talk. Like I don't expect an answer or anything. But... I don't know. Sometimes saying it out loud makes me feel like I can let it go.

CHARLIE

(Sarcastically) Yeah you totally seem like you've been letting some things go.

BYRON

Shut up, Charlie.

CHARLIE

It's hard to see her as a person, outside of our mom. I get that. It's hard for me too. But she was. She had a full life that extended beyond her role in our lives. You can't, like, begrudge her that. It's weird.

BYRON

Why couldn't she just be happy with one person? Would that have been so hard? Everyone else manages to make it work! Why is she any different?

CHARLIE

No clue. But she was. And you can either spend your time and energy wishing she was someone she wasn't and be miserable, or try to see her as this person who tried, imperfectly most of the time, to live and be happy.

BYRON

You really think that's the answer? Just tacit acceptance that she lived this way and no judgement or questions on our part?

CHARLIE

She's gone and those questions can't ever truly be answered.

BYRON

I can't do it. That's not me. I need her to answer for it.

(CHARLIE looks at BYRON for a long time, neither brother speaking. BYRON sits on the sofa, staring at the box. CHARLIE crosses and sits down next to him. Both brothers stare at the box for a long silent moment.)

CHARLIE

Okay. Hear me out.

BYRON

What?

CHARLIE

What if we split the... contents... of the box into two smaller boxes and put them in backpacks? Then we could rent one of those paddle boat things they have at the boardwalk-

BYRON

The swan boats?

CHARLIE

Yeah, the swan boats! We rent one of those and go with our backpacks and paddle out past the dock and then just... take care of things... and paddle back in. That's technically the bay! And we're technically together when it happens! We fulfilled our son-ly duties to our mother's wishes! Pretty sure the teenager manning the swan boat rentals on a Tuesday afternoon is probably not going to do a thorough security check prior to launch, you know?

BYRON

I don't think the paddle boat rental has that level of security in the first place, but sure. I get what you're saying.

CHARLIE

We can say goodbye in our way. We can say whatever we need to say to her, free from judgement or feeling like we have to explain ourselves. We can ask her for... forgiveness? I guess?

BYRON

You think that would be enough?

CHARLIE

It's all we've got.

BYRON

Okay. Yeah. I guess that will have to do.

CHARLIE

Okay. Okay, great. (*Holding up two takeout containers*) Do you think these are big enough?

BYRON

We're not putting our mom's ashes in Chinese takeout boxes, what the hell is wrong with you?

CHARLIE

It's Thai.

BYRON

Shut up, Charlie.

(*Lights fade. End of play*)

(*River Voices, 2025*)

Winters Last

Mia Valderrama

This barren landscape,
Cold and arid.
Winter has come,
and its frost has reached every surface.
Warm has come and gone,
Replaced by frigidness.
When will spring come
In this everlasting winter.
Can the scars of frostbite heal in time.
How can I imagine it being warmer,
When it has never been colder.
Any heat I produce is taken with each breath I take.
I hold it so it will remain mine.
When will this winter end.

(*River Voices, 2025*)

Chasm

Mary McCauley

I remember when you were seventeen.
A familiar stranger living at home, a face I could spot in a crowd.
Someone I knew, but before I knew it.

You were gone.

Off to live your life like a
cat wandering the countryside looking for its next meal.

Summers bled off into autumn.

Autumn dies with winter emerging from the corpse of what once was.
Only for winter to blossom into spring.
It's a never-ending cycle.

You came back with summer's blazing heat.
I barely knew you or recognized you.
Like a cat that had lived and learned.

You had become a stranger.

The distance sits between us like a chasm.
Where time has eroded away what once was.

Only you and I remain.

(River Voices, 2025)

Generation Z

Fernando Montenegro

A world of dreams and aspirations that turned out to beautiful
developments and creations.
Our world is full of disturbing images, full of dystopian illusion and rid of
small villages, a world that pillages everything positive.
A world filled with metaphorical carcinogens, and an absence of overall
diligence.
It's a world of adventurers and those who seek knowledge so much that
even debt is not enough to keep them from college.
Our world is ruled not by laws, but buy greed.
A place where one has to purchase the education they need.
And those who can't afford to be educated.
Join gangs commit crimes, and end up incarcerated.
We're an addicted generation, and a generation that's overflowing with
temptation, a place where one cannot step a mere yard without getting an
unclean sensation.
A generation of illness and lockdown.
A place and time where we can cure almost every disease we can find.
Except the most important ones, the diseases of the mind.
I'm from a world where anything can be possible through a screen.
Even though some of these possibilities are better left unseen.
I'm from a generation where intelligence is fleeting, where small insults
and roadblocks are considered defeating.
A world where the presence of in person socialization is retreating.
Our happiness, joy and things that we've seen, are not stored in our mind
but under a screen.
A world where the media surrounds us with lies.
A world where apples store our memories because we live through our
cameras, not through our eyes.
A world no longer separated by oceans and seas
but instead divided by judgment and hate that won't cease.

This is the world we live in the technologic generation of screens,
amazing yet despicable by all means.

(River Voices, 2025)

River Voices: A Tribute

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

What a grand literary, art, photography,
everything-and-all piece of history
Muskegon Community has provided
for everyone all these years!

Thanks to ALL, but most importantly MCC
students, who have contributed to such a
grand collection!

We ALL have different voices in so many ways.
And I continue to be inspired by the
Creative Voices who have contributed to this
Brilliant Publication!
I consider this publication in as high esteem
as any Shakespearean work of art.
River Voices has been MCC's very own
publication over the years.
Poetry, songs, stories, artwork, photography,
(and so much more) will continue to inspire
future generations.

I feel blessed to have been a small part of
this grand collection, along with the others
who have contributed.

River Voices will continue to flow like a
never-ending river.
And it will continue to inspire.

(*River Voices*, 2025)

A Tribute

For our dear friend and fellow poet, Ronnie Jewell.

You will be missed.

~

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

- a song by, Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

Ronnie Jewell has been teaching for 30 years at Muskegon Community College, and is very proud of it. He will be retiring at the end of the winter semester and plans to move back to his hometown Pembroke, Virginia.

He has proudly taught freshman composition classes as well as American literature. He will miss his MCC family: students, faculty, colleagues, and close friends. But he also misses his family back home, primarily his mother and sister.

He's ready for this next adventure and new chapter. But he will miss those he leaves behind.



GEM in the Rough

Diana Casey

Genuine in the classroom, as a colleague, a friend
You oughta see his corrections and comments on student work
On a committee, he has done more than his share
How many of us have received a Partridge Family treasure?

Engaged in all that is our profession
Co-teaching with Geography
Composing music for a theater dog dance
A voice in our profession

My first glimpse was when he carried a small table for his teaching of "Death of a Salesman"
He gave students symbolism to learn his teachings
Ooooh, the epigrams and poetry

Jewell, he's a **GEM**!
Ronnie Jewell has been a rock of learning at this place
He is a 'Diamond in the Rough'
Let us celebrate the GEM that he is, and has been for decades

Ronnie Jewell, we will treasure you in the now and in the future

My Friend Pete

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

I saw a young boy yesterday
Beside an old oak tree;
It seemed that he had lost his way
And was reaching out to me.

I noticed his small suit was white-
His blonde hair was combed neat;
I asked him to tell me his name;
He said, "Friends call me Pete."

"Pete," I said, "How old are you;
Why do you walk alone?"
"I'm ten years old," my young friend sighed,
"I'm trying to find my home."

What happened next I can't believe-
I turned my head away;
And when I looked at my pale friend,
It seemed he'd gone astray.

He was not there, no sign of him;
Where did my friend run to?
"Oh Pete," I cried, "Where did you come-
Come back, I'll help you find your home."

I searched and searched for my friend Pete;
I asked the folks in town--
An old man said he knew a Pete
Who'd died in '69.

"A young hoy, ten years old was he-
Run over by a truck--
Died instantly, he felt no pain;
We held his funeral in the rain."

"A handsome lad, blonde hair had he-
Dressed in his small white suit;
His mother grieved in agony;
His father remained mute."

"How can this be?" I asked myself,
How can he be deceased?
Why does he walk this ghostly earth?
Can he not rest in peace?"

I've never seen Pete since that day-
I wonder where he roams;
I hope that he flies to the light-
I pray he finds his home.

The Last Words of a Dying Friend

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

A wise friend once told me
that death is for sure.
When we're old and feeble,
perhaps it's a cure.
Sadness is natural
 when loved ones do pass.
But always remember
 they are in God's hands.
Their suffering has ended;
 there's no need for grief.
All pain left behind them,
 they're finally free.
And they will be waiting
 outside a gold gate.
And one day we'll see them;
 it's part of our fate.

Table Three

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

The crowd at table three
allows no rest for the waitress,
who must work a double shift
to pay for Sally's new shoes.

Little do they realize, or care,
how hard she works to avoid living
out of the back of her station wagon
parked in front of her one-room apartment.

She dreamed of living the life
of a queen married to a handsome king
never wanting for money, clothes
that fit, toys for her children-
the American Dream!

But there's no time
to dwell on what could have been
no time for what ifs.
Table three wants another round
of drinks and the bathroom still need cleaning.

My Children

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

My children are angels,
most of the time.
They never ignore me,
or treat me unkind.

With a love unconditional,
they speak no words.
They're a cure for all loneliness
and fill a huge void.

Lizzie, the oldest, she rules the whole nest.

Gaby, the fattest, he loves to eat best.

Annie, the sweetest, she just loves to play.

RJ, the meanest, he gets his own way.

They love to watch dogs
through the windows
at noon: Roxie and Curly,
and Smoky Girl too!

Their barks are amusing;
the fence keeps them safe.
No intimidation my children must face!

They never need bathing,
by my hands at least.
They love to eat tuna
and canned Fancy Feast.

Scooping the litter may be a small chore,
But they curl up beside me . . .

And they purr . . . and they purr.



His Name Was Jeremy

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

I went to church this morning,
for the first time in years.
And the Minster preached a sermon
on Forgiveness . . . and how
a prostitute came to Jesus
and wept, and bathed his feet
with her tears.

She was forgiven.

As I sat there . . .
my mind drifting to far-away places,
I thought of a kid . . .

His name was Jeremy.

And like a burst of bright light
on a snowy day,
I realized . . .
I had never forgiven that kid.

That kid, whose pictures I keep hidden
in my closet, as a constant reminder of
what used to be.

That kid who made me realize the power of
a glass of wine
to make the pain go away.

That kid who made me ashamed
to tell others who he really was
and how he really died.

That kid who helped me to understand
compassion and the power of words.

I forgave that kid today.

And though my heart still aches,
I am ready to move on
and set his ashes free
Because I know it is the right thing to do
And that my grandmother
 God rest her soul
 would be proud.
 And now I, too, am free.

The Other Side
(a poem from the heart)

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

I was just thinking about how grand it will be on the other side.
I picture a rainbow.
Clouds.
A little bit of light mist.
Some snow.
An autumn-colored leaf delicately floating . . .
 from above and landing in the palm of my hand.
And a little bit of sunshine . . .
 and music.
Lots of MUSIC.
And of course, Reese's peanut butter cups.
 Calorie-free.
But no unhappiness.
No sorrow.
No pain from cancer.
Just eternal love . . . And acceptance.
I hope to see you on the other side . . .
 some day.

The Empty Box?

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

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.

Sleep Tight
An Elegy for Papaw and Pepper

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

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.

A Mother's Love

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

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

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

I'm glad the window opened.

Does It Matter?

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ignorance may or may not be bliss.

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

He Was 16

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

I wrote I poem a few years ago
about my children (aka my kitty cats).
It went something like this:
My children are angels most of the time.
They never ignore me or treat me unkind.
With a love unconditional, they speak no words.
They’re a cure for my loneliness and fill a huge void.
Lizzie, the oldest, she rules the whole nest.
Gaby, the fattest, he loves to eat best.
Annie, the sweetest, she just loves to play.
RJ, the meanest, he gets his own way.

They never need bathing,
By my hands at least.
They love to eat tuna and
Canned Fancy Feast.
Though scooping the litter may be a small chore . . .
They curl up beside me,
And they purr and they purr.
Enough of the sentimental flashback poem!
I often referred to my children as the
“Fabulous Four!”
Today, I lost the last of those original four.
Gaby Baby (aka Gabriel—he was 16).

Grabbing a hefty Amazon box,
I placed his favorite blanket inside,
And laid Gaby Baby on his right side,
the side he always rested by.
His favorite little stuffed kitty toy I placed in his left paw.
Along with a can of Fancy Feast (for after-life chaw).
Both edges of the blanket I folded over his lifeless frame.
And secured the box lid with no shame.

Thank you, my friend Brian, for burying him with the other Fabulous Three.
Not sure if animals have souls.
But I plan to meet the Fabulous Four
on the other side Someday!
“God created all creatures great and small.”

It’s part of our fate.
And my Fabulous Kitty Angels will be waiting for me
at those Golden Gates.

Eulogy for Daddy

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

If there's one thing Daddy and I had in common,
(besides our bad posture), it would be our sense of humor.
Daddy could always make you laugh and put a smile on your face.
He could crack a good joke and be a little sarcastic at times,
but in a loving way.

I remember the first time I ever had to speak in public.
It was when Daddy was the head Cub Scout Master for various cub
scout packs. A recruitment ceremony was held at Claremont Elementary
School in Pulaski, Virginia. All I remember is a big stage and huge room of
around one-hundred people: current cub scouts, potential cub scouts, and all
their parents.

Daddy wanted me to read a speech in front of everyone as a way
of starting the ceremony, and I did NOT want to read it! When it was
time to stand on the stage to read my speech, Daddy pointed to where
I was supposed to stand. So, I stood.

While Daddy was adjusting the stand to the microphone on the right of me,
the cord got all tangled. And as he tried to untangle the cord,
I read my speech really fast! But Daddy did not know that I had read it.
As he untangled the cord and adjusted the microphone in front of me,
he said, "Okay, Ronnie read your speech." I turned my head to his right and
said, "I ALREADY DID!" And everybody laughed.

Then he MADE me read the speech again.
But I am glad he did because he gave me the courage
to speak in front of people. And had he not given me that courage,
I may have chosen a different profession. I'm a teacher. It runs in the family.

Daddy was also very generous. We grew up in a financially poor family
in the early 1970's: lots of pinto beans, fried potatoes, and cornbread.
However, I didn't know we were poor because we had a very loving fami-
ly. But every time a new Partridge Family record came out, Daddy always
made sure I got a copy, even though my sister Kathy tried to steal them from
me. And when my brother Scotty needed braces, Daddy went out and got a
second job.

He was very compassionate and I will miss him.

Goodbye Daddy. I love you! I will see you on the other side.

(In loving memory of Ronnie D. Jewell, Sr. 1943-2024)

Fare-Thee Well MCC

Ronnie D. Jewell, Jr.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow" (Shakespeare).

Wow! Such an understatement.

No!

No sorrows, so sadness, no regrets, no what ifs or maybes.
Just appreciation, happiness, and humble recognition for 30 great years at
MCC.

Thanks to all my fellow teachers, administrators, secretaries,
students, and close friends!

MCC has been my home with a second Family.

Home?
Virginia is technically my home, my childhood home.

But for 30 years, MCC has been my home away from home.

Retirement is not an ending.
It's a new beginning, a new chapter, a new adventure.

River Voices has been MCC's very own publication over the years!
Poetry, songs, stories, artwork, photography,
and so much more will continue to inspire so many people.
I feel blessed to have been a small part of this grand collection!

Although I am departing the halls of MCC, *River Voices* will continue
to flow and inspire.

So . . .
I bid a fare-thee-well!

The old adage "You can't go home again" has a new meaning for me.
Virginia, here I come like it or not!

But part of my MCC Family will be following me right by my side, along
with my collection of *River Voices* as a reminder of who I once was . . . and
who I am now.

Contest Winners

CREATIVE WRITING AND ART CONTESTS

First Place Winners

ARTWORK

Fall 2024- “Breath of the Koi” by Alex Near

Winter 2025- “Collateral Thoughts” by Alyssa Munson

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Fall 2024- “Schizophrenic Butterflies” by Ellen Liddle

Winter 2025- “Can We Stop Using Adjectives...” by Racheal Blackmore

FICTION

Fall 2024- “Just a Toggle” by Iris May Benson Replogle

PHOTOGRAPHY

Fall 2024- “Utah Kaleidoscope” by Ellie Dyk

Winter 2025- “Dinner Time” by Ashley Streng

POETRY

Fall 2024- “Apollo” by Liam Snipes

Winter 2025- “Sick Kid Syndrome” by Alyssa Munson

10-MINUTE PLAY CONTEST 2024

Ashes to Ashes by Emily McClain

English Honor Society Members

Sigma Zeta Chapter

Teddy Crawford
President

Kenzie Cregg
Vice President

Emilia Matuz & Maria Basaj
Secretary

Ellie Dyk
Social Media Coordinator

Members

Maria Basaj
Hope Beaune
Racheal Blackmore
Teddy Crawford
Kenzie Cregg
Ellie Dyk
Lark Eslick
Aracely Garcia
Casey Gould
Brogan Hayes
Jonah Lyn Hayes
Ellen Liddle
Emilia Matuz
Mary McCauley
Cameron McKinnon
McKenna Miller
Willow Robinson
Mia Valderrama
Delanie Wydeck

Faculty Advisors

Sean Colcleasure
Shauna Hayes

