

2026

*Litmag*  
*Refractions*



## *Refraction:*

A ray of light distorting as it passes from one medium to another.

*Litmag*: Refractions

**The Department of English  
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# About

## Mission Statement

*Litmag*'s mission is to nurture the creativity of the students, staff, and alumni of UMSL by providing a space to showcase the diverse literary and artistic talent on our campus. We aim to provide an inclusive, professional and high-quality publication free of charge to UMSL and the local community.

## Review Process

Submissions are open to all UMSL students, faculty, staff and alumni. All submissions are reviewed anonymously, and selections are determined after thorough discussion by the editorial staff and faculty advisor.

## Eamonn Wall Awards

*Litmag* sponsors three awards for best student poetry, prose, and artwork. Winners were determined by the lead editors using editorial staff voting scores.  
2026 Winners:

Art: "The Dying Neon" by Anna Tisdale

Poetry: "Hypervigilance" by Jessica Wojcik

Prose: "What We Asked For" by Jordan Kaddouri

## Sponsorship

Publication of *Litmag* is supported and sponsored by the UMSL English Department, University Advancement and Development, UMSL Office of Admissions and readers like you. Thank you.

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# Acknowledgments

The staff of *Litmag* would like to offer sincere gratitude to Dr. Lynn Staley, English Department Chair, for the department's support in producing this journal.

Extra special thanks to: Reggie Hill, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Strategy & Career Advancement and Megan Green Simonds, Executive Director for Enrollment Management in the Admissions office for their financial support in printing.

And last but most certainly not least, thank you to all the authors and artists who contributed to this publication, as well as readers like you!



## THIS EDITION OF UMSL'S LITMAG IS DEDICATED TO

**EAMONN WALL  
EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH**

Dr. Wall is an internationally-renowned poet who has mentored UMSL's undergraduate and graduate writers for more than 25 years. In honor of his longstanding support of our students and this publication, our LitMag Writing Awards will now be known as the Eamonn Wall LitMag Awards.

## *In Memoriam*

Professor Pierre Davis (1950-2025)

Pierre Davis was an essayist, a fiction writer, a poet, and a friend. He taught technical and business writing at UMSL for many years before retiring.

Professor Jane Williamson (1935 - 2025)

I first met Jane Williamson when I was interviewing to become her successor as a professor of Shakespeare Studies in UMSL's English Department. Her participation on the hiring committee was typical of Jane's unflagging loyalty and generous collegiality, for she had officially retired not recently but many years earlier. Having joined the UMSL faculty in 1967, she later served as Department Chair on two separate occasions. Jane's students were also the beneficiaries of her dedication, and her pedagogy was recognized with an Amoco Foundation Award. Her scholarly reputation spanned the globe. Russell Jackson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, called Jane's 1970 book, *Charles Kemble, Man of the Theatre*, "among the finest theatrical biographies published," and it remains a frequently cited, authoritative source. Premier scholar, devoted teacher, generous colleague: "Jove shield thee well for this," dear Jane.

-Kurt Schreyer, Associate Professor

## *Editor-in-Chief's Note*

Dear Reader,

Welcome to UMSL's 2026 issue of *Litmag*, Refractions! It has been an honor to serve as this edition's Editor-in-Chief, especially with the staff that produced this issue. Each phase of this issue, from conception to actualization, provided our small team of editors many, many... many trials to overcome, and I am proud to say that each and all of them met these challenges with stride. Ashley, who diligently held down the social media fort and aided with all communications. Myles, who worked tirelessly on copyediting and spoke passionately at each and every blind selection discussion. Mia, who opened all of the editors' minds up to the raw emotion present in every piece. And last but certainly not least, Lauren, who championed the layout of the book from start to finish. Without even a single one of these editors, this issue wouldn't have happened. I am grateful for each and every one of them.

This issue's theme, Refractions, is based on a rather simple truth of life: it's messy. It will break you down into little pieces and try to stomp on the shards. We welcome you, however, to take another look at these broken pieces to **reflect** on the past and see where the **fractures** began. To understand that while we may end up **shattered** from our experiences, that does not mean we will not **mend** from them. To understand that the bad times will eventually pass, and that we may very well be forever changed because of them, but that we can find beauty in our broken lives and become **restored**.

Our vision for *Litmag* was to put this aspect of life on full display, front and center, and shine a light on it. You will find in the stories we're presenting that life is beautiful, gentle, terrible, and harsh. I nonetheless ask that you do not turn your head away from it, but rather accept this year's *Litmag* with open arms, jagged edges and all.

Sincerely,  
Aiden Peterson

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# *Reflections*

*where are you, moon river?*

*By Lea'cher Kennedy*

*where are you, moon river?* —

i see my reflection underneath the kitchen sink  
faucet and gag. pick at my skin until it is swiss  
cheese and toss it down the drain. rotting food.

where have you gone, moon river?

i cannot cry you into the tide pool. the rocks and  
crystal sand do not care about me when they sail  
upon you, moon river. hear my wistful pleas.

where should we meet?

i found you once in the rain-soaked sidewalk.  
gray and mucky with puddles galore. it lit me  
almost like a new york city light. beauty was  
never in the eye of the beholder.

my precious moon river.

i want you in a midnight glass of water.  
drink down my obscurities and show the old me, moon  
river. to be blessed is to be chosen. do anything  
but let me be.

where could you be?

## *something in the orange*

By *Lea'cher Kennedy*

*something in the orange*—

on a quiet and coy evening, i want to run into you in the kitchen, where unbeknownst to the singing cicadas, i am peeling an orange for you.

asking me late-night only questions as i battle with successfully dry hands. you giggle and i suppress laughs that only the loitering ladybugs can hear. take down a glass of water to quench my thirst for this patient intimacy.

we're perched up on the counter like two crooning bluebirds; your head on my shoulder; tired thoughts spilling from your lips; clementine riding on your breath and in the steady air. the peels planted just underneath the windowsill (let me grow a thousand saffron oranges anew to relive this moment with you).

and the buzzing bees will signal for warm sunlight to creep through white curtains almost as transparent as the expression on my face: ***this is the place where i'd like to spend the rest of my life.***

## *Creekbed Interlude*

By *Chloe Nicole Hayes*

Bland, Missouri, is a place that exists in extremes. Wet or dry, hot or cold, have or have-not—it has never seemed to me that Bland has a sense of homeostasis. There does not seem to be a natural state to which it returns. There is always too much or not enough of something. Dirt roads so dry they crack like knuckles in a fist fight. Hot concrete parking pads burning holes through the soles of your shoes on Easter; the wiffle ball bat slipping in your sweaty fist as you run after a brother, a cousin. Produce, procured from the Walmart a town over, too ripe too fast or watery and flavorless for weeks on end. Ice storms in the winter pulling down your power lines. Droughts, floods, droughts again. Bland, despite its name, is not a very boring place.

The creekbed behind our old trailer is no exception to Bland's general rules. It, too, exists in extremes—rushing with water or bone dry. A gash cut through the trees, underlined by the ruts worn by years of driving across the bed, serves as its only entrance. Sometimes deer tracks sink into the softness of the mud and dry there, becoming the fossils we delighted in as children, left for us to study for days or weeks until the next big rain. The bed is probably made of more washed-down driveway gravel than any native sand or stone. Orange, slippery pebbles peek up through deep brown Missouri mud and powder-white limestone gravel.

When the bed dries (as it invariably, inevitably does), it reeks of dead things—of rotting plants and whatever waste bugs leave behind. When it's full, it

teems with tadpoles and water striders, crawdads dancing their frantic waltz in the deeper holes. Trees piercing through the briar roses creak in the wind, their ancient limbs weary with age and the burden of squirrels' nests. Life and death are in that creekbed at all times. The spindly carcasses of sunbleached spiders. Green buds pushing tenaciously through glittering silt, despite their tender newness. My favorite, the frogs and toads, from the size of my thumbnail to a softball; each belching their summer song until you scare them silent. There can be beauty in the dirt. I've learned that in Bland, over and over and over.

Back in our trailer, I spend long, lonely hours making sense of the water stains on the ceiling. The springs beneath my back have made a home there, fitting neatly into the notches of my spine. Breathing in this heat feels like an impossible task, but one I manage clumsily; the air is heavy and sticky, unmoving but for the occasional half-hearted wheeze of an oscillating fan, sweeping slowly across the living room. I am inside of a tin can. The walls get closer day after day. Fat, shining flies buzz in lazy circles above the kitchen trash; if I tune out the television during the day, I can hear them. My skin feels dirty. No matter how often I shower, my skin feels dirty. There is always a layer of grime encrusted onto me here. This place I call home, burying me alive, one day at a time. In two weeks I'll be back in the city. For now, I track the water stains. At night, the yellow glow of the porch light keeps me company. I have never had

a bedroom here; the living room couches have been my resting place for as long as I can remember. A reminder that my existence is temporary and unimportant, especially in this place. My brothers have beds. I wonder what it is like to have the freedom of a space of your own, to leave your things out on your bed instead of packing away evidence of your existence every time someone wants to watch TV. I wonder if this is what it's like to be a ghost. My limbs are leaden. I blink. The stain is a contorted face. I blink. The stain is a cherub. I blink. The stain is a reminder. The headlights of a passing car distort the mildewed ceiling and I see God there. I wonder why I can't hear him.

A creekbed is almost always a gathering place for wild things. Coyotes, feral cats, turkeys, deer, children-wildness is attracted to the freedom of the water. It seems that everything wild leaves its own indelible mark on my creek in Bland. Sometimes we find bones, the half-eaten, rotted-out carcasses of small animals left behind by predators. That rot smells different, seeps into the air like heavy cologne, so thick it chokes. There is a sort of primal recognition in experiencing the balm of that death. A knowledge that exists before you know you have it, like flinching away from flame. The decay of flesh, of the bodies that house souls- it is much more than the decay of twigs and leaves and corn husks. So, there are times when the creek does not smell of green things and the promise of life. Sometimes, the air is heavy with a visceral reminder of oblivion. The banks of the creek are thick with brambles and briar roses. My step-brothers, who had grown up squeezing between rows of barbed wire to run through pastures of alfalfa, have no problem

dipping and dodging through the brush.

I leave the stench of death behind, but the perfume of chewing tobacco, Scent-Away laundry detergent, and cheap air fresheners follows me away from here, back to the city. Every breath of it leaves me with an ache for my mother, for my brothers; for the hickory nuts that crack under my rubber-booted feet, two sizes too big and heavier than bricks. The hand-me-downs from the brothers who taught me the sound of a wiffle ball bat against my back. Aside from the frogs, the boys are my only friends here. I'm the only girl in a game of violent make-believe. We run through the woods with our swords; "enemy" an arbitrary concept now, attacking comrades and adversaries alike. The ringing echo of wood striking wood louder than my heartbeat in my ears. There are my brothers, kings among the trees. There are my cousins, born with meth in their systems and hanging onto every word from my eldest brother's mouth. There are my brothers' wild friends, the ones who get beat on by their mom's boyfriends. We are alive here, and I am vigilant, hiding among the brush. I do not worry. I do not think about sleeping on the couch tonight.

My time alone is from 10 pm to 6 am, roughly. I try to take advantage of it. The television is blessedly silent, and I don't have to think about how much space I take up. My things, tucked into a duffel bag behind the couch during the day, are spread out around me now. I can draw if I want. I can read- or write, even. The threat of imminent interruption has ceased, and the tension in my body unwinds. We have no internet here, and cell reception is always a gamble- I feel like I'm in a dream, cut off from the real world. The journals I

used to carry disappeared long ago; privacy is only available behind the password protection of a cell phone notes app. I wonder if my brothers know what it is like. The water stains wink at me, the porch light hums. Down the hall, I can hear the sleep-apnea snores of my stepfather, resting peacefully beside my mother. I wonder if she knows what it is like.

I pretend that I am a bride to the dirt. That I've given myself willingly, enthusiastically, to the grit between my fingers and toes. Sweet, sticky sweat pools in my belly button; I tell myself this is a symptom of hard work, but in reality, I haven't moved from the couch in hours. The hard work line is a lie. There are many things I tell myself here, things that walk the line between reality and fantasy. There's a ghost in the trailer; that's why the refrigerator freezes up, why the AC squeals. The hole in the floor isn't a hazard, it's a feature; my stepfather covered it with plywood, so it is safe. Sleeping on this couch is fun, like a sleepover that never ends; my back hurts because of poor posture, not because of the lack of a bed. The water stains on the ceiling are evidence of a world beyond these walls.

I struggle to separate the pains of my childhood from the pleasures of it. They are inextricably connected, one seemingly impossible without the other. Perhaps the creek was a place of refuge for me. It was home when the air in the trailer got too heavy. Where the trailer was loud, the creek was a gentle whisper. Where the trailer was chaotic, the creek was purposeful. The electric hum of a TV could not overwhelm me there. The bees that hummed frantically against our ceiling in the spring and summer were free to fly away at the creek. Perhaps that's

what it was to me, too; a place to fly away.

## ***Saludo a la sartén***

*By María T. Balogh*

Los alimentos deslizan  
tropezan o chocan  
en tu rostro de hierro ennegrecido  
Verduras para revolver o sofreír  
en aceite o mantequilla  
para ayudarlas a danzar

Celebro tu afán de servir de base  
para la creación culinaria en caso  
de que otras ollas y calderos fallen  
Incluso considerarías un glaseado  
cocido a fuego lento

Todos los beneficios que traes  
a través de la experiencia  
Tu voluptuosa cama de metal  
extrae sabores que alimentos exhalan  
todo en perfecta armonía

Das la bienvenida aún al pan simple  
y después de todo lo dicho  
sigues siendo la reina de la cocina  
mezclando verdes y rojos  
amarillos y naranjas para esparcir  
sobre otros colores mientras conservas  
tu propio tinte de caña quemada  
para hacer más sabrosos los ingredientes  
una y otra vez

## ***Salute to the Frying Pan***

Foods slip and slide  
They stumble or collide  
on your nonstick face  
Veggies to be stirred or fried  
oil or butter to help them glide

Your eagerness to serve as base  
for the cook's creation in case  
other pots and pans fail  
You will even consider a glaze  
simmered at a slow pace

All the benefits you nail  
through experience you unveil  
Your voluptuous metal bed  
extracting flavors foods exhale  
everything in perfect detail

You welcome even plain bread  
and after all has been said  
you remain the kitchen king  
blending green and red  
yellow and orange to spread

over other colors while you retain  
your own tint of burnt sugar cane  
making ingredients tastier again and again



## ***Creative Flow***

*By Sami Brennan*

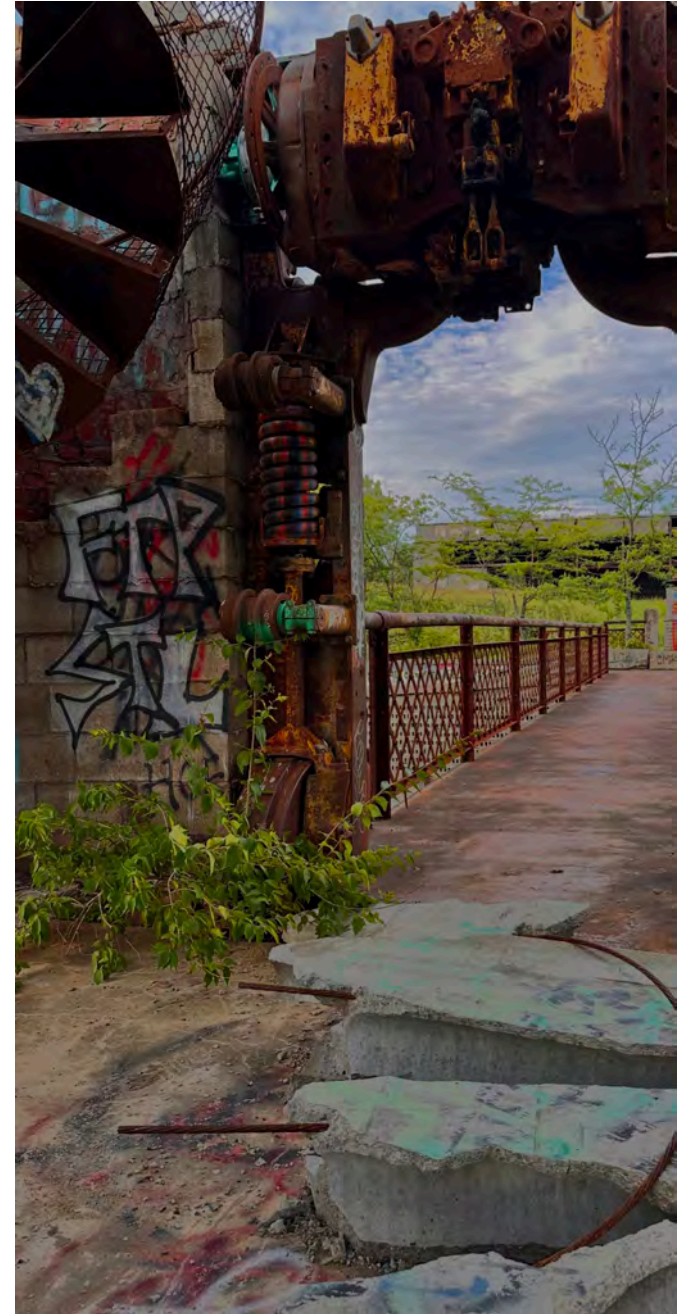
(Oil Paints)



***Aunt\_1***  
By Stella Zdrnja  
(Digital)

## ***Cementland***

By Anna Tisdale  
(Photography)



## *Cradle Underwater*

*By Isabelle Herman*

(Photography)



## *“aquarium”*

*By Abby Foust*

if i could draw  
i would draw an aquarium

the glass is too thick for bullets,  
much less the pounding of  
my small hands, balled into fists

jellyfish, clownfish, pufferfish—  
my pounding only scares them deeper into the blue  
when i just want them free; i want to see

the foot-thick glass cracking  
the water gushing out  
in a torrent of fake-ocean tears,

and the fish, every creature of the sea  
riding free

if i could draw

well, i suppose it's easier to learn art than  
aquarium sabotage

## ***2:32 on a Thursday Afternoon***

*By Elizabeth Hurlbert*

The sun is beating down on me  
There is a slight stink to the air  
My eyes are slitted to combat the rays from the sun

I could fall asleep  
I could listen to the distant sounds of cars  
I could listen to the distant sounds of people  
I could fall asleep

There is a breeze in the air  
It makes the heat cozy, warm

There are crickets chirping, cicadas singing, and frogs croaking  
They are singing me a lullaby  
My eyes drift closed  
My mind goes quiet

Then a student walks by, blaring his music  
He has been walking back and forth across the courtyard  
I wonder if he is trying to not fall asleep too

## ***His Walls Are a Soft Silver***

*By Caleb Delos-Santos*

His walls are a soft silver

In other words, they are colorless—  
tainted with disinterested pigment,  
as if specks of pastel— baby blue,  
faint pink— would blotch the thing,  
his muted hideaway. His walls

are a breathless cave in which a man  
ought to perch like a scruffy vulture, only  
buckling his talons to shovel carrion, to do  
his rough job, which he ought to do,

as if his form of scavenging, groveling,  
could justify the holes this man wallops  
into his own walls— the gashes he leaves  
on ashen plasterboard, or along the skin  
of those he loves, busted marks of a man.

## ***What We Asked For***

*By Jordan Kaddouri*

God made man immortal. He was able to see every corner of our world, name ten thousand stars, and—ten thousand times—he fell in love.. Though, he also cried ten thousand tears, broke ten thousand bones, and his heart as well.

“When will it end?” the man cried up to God, in a voice only someone who had heard ten thousand birds sing could use.

How evil it was to force man to walk the world for eternity. So, God gave the man an end. **He** slipped death under his pillow one night, and man has been given an expiration date ever since.

God made man with no constraints, no need for sleep. He strolled under every moon and became intimate with the changing of its face. He lost no time to the clock, working all hours of the day and night. He built works of art and ventured without delay or need for breaks. However, he was never given a break from himself, from his thoughts. The thoughts caught momentum on a great hill with no end in sight, slowly snowballing into obsession. His limbs and heart ached, but all he could do was lie there in the turmoil.

“When will it end?” The man croaked up to God, with a voice tuned to nighttime owls and evening crickets. him from it.

How cruel was God to burden man with constant consciousness. So, God let man sleep—God made man sleep. The moon

that tormented him became what charmed him into darkness; the sun became what broke him from it.

God made man with a perfect memory. No face would ever be forgotten; no sunset, nor landscape would ever leave his mind. His life became a great monument, with incredibly solid bricks of past moments as its foundation. Nothing ever faded.

The feeling of his first kiss, his first breath, his victories—seared into his mind like a brand. Still, nothing ever faded. Not the feeling of loss when his parents died, nor the ache of his heart when a woman did not love him back. Not the nightmares that taunted his sleep, or the heartbreak that haunted his days.

“When will it end?” the man howled, with a voice rounded by every melody he could never forget.

How wicked of God to strap man’s mind with chains made of the strongest metals to memories that he had to forever lug around. So, God made man forget. He put a time limit on all the faces. He restricted the feelings, the places, the sounds, and the tastes. All could only last so long, and then they would burden him no longer.

God gave man the gift of premonition. He had the ability to see the future. He knew where the deer migrated, where the fish gathered. Man knew where to find the love of his life; he knew what tomorrow would bring.

But man knew exactly what was coming and when—surprise was a word stricken from his vocabulary, and along with it,

excitement. Man knew when he would die, and there was nothing to stop it. Man saw the inevitable fall of those around him. He could not change anything.

“When will it end?” he droned to God, with a voice so monotone, only a man who had never been caught off guard could have produced it.

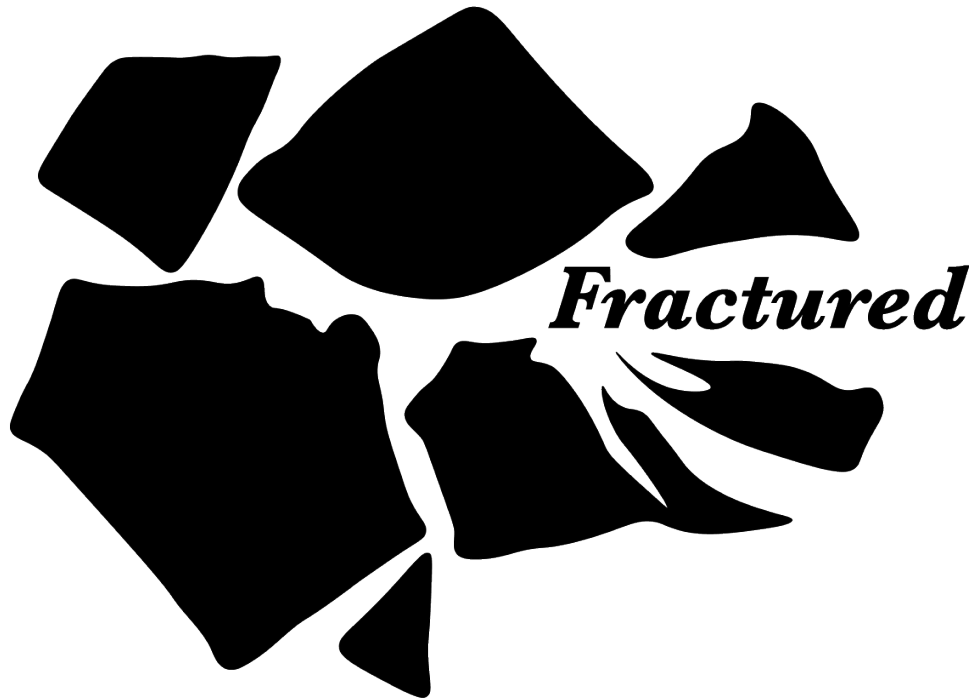
How horrible of God to not only take away man’s gift of the excitement of the unknown, but to not even let him change what is to come. So, God made man shortsighted. His vision only reached as far as he could throw, and time became a mystery along with what it would bring.

God gave man everything, a being of arguable perfection, and man pleaded for the removal of such a heavy burden. So, God made man small again, a pebble in the unpredictable waves of life, a finite being placed in a box of limited years and hours.

Yet man shouts with vehemence, “When will it end?” in a voice littered with resentment and rage.

How horrible of God to give man exactly what he asked for—

**God learned that man did not know what he needed in the first place.**



## *On Mariners' Maps*

*By Matt Kimbrell*

A man trying to harpoon a whale  
or sink himself into oblivion  
or think himself into absolution  
once marked: "true places" aren't found  
on "any map."

A career in cartography has taught me  
to be wary of mariners' maps,  
but still I haul around  
a chest full of Cartesian coordinates,  
whereby I have sought to moor my self  
to a bedrock of granite  
containing a molten sea.

All morning  
I have been living on words alone,  
prying apart sacred syntax,  
trying to release light and warmth enough  
to outlast the night, haunted by Murakami's,  
"When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling the cold."

Far too often  
I fear  
all I have assembled  
is a pile of declensions,  
scribblings and erasures—  
prismatic fractures  
I look at rather than through.

## ***Womanhood***

*By Soul Flower*

I confess.

Tomorrow, you will become a lady.  
You and the other girls will wake up in a room.  
The area will feature four corners:  
three are walls, while the fourth is a floor-to-ceiling window.  
Allow the four walls to soothe you.  
Each day, you all must remain inside.  
Sit silently while they approach the glass to observe.  
I am no mother, but I must advise you to only move when they are sleeping.  
Freedom may tempt you beyond the birdcage  
But, don't let opportunity distort the window hinges.  
Be still, resist your urge to tap the glass.

On the first night, slip into the forest and pick a snow-covered rose.  
Before sunrise, place the rose on your lap.  
When your body aches, wipe your fingertips.  
On the dropping petals and be thankful they are not bleeding.  
Above all, child, don't be angry.  
If you can't control your rage, let it spill out on walls and trigger memories  
from before you were chosen to carry the burden of  
*Womanhood*.

## ***The breath I know I'm holding***

*By Abby Foust*

Nothing will ever be the same:  
All the horror, the pain,  
will never be the same.  
All the pleasure, the joy,  
will never be the same.

I think I am letting go,  
but I feel the present slip through my fingers  
and they tighten by instinct—  
sending spirals of panic as  
the moments tumble ever faster  
from my frantic hands.

Joy is sweeter for its impermanence, I think;  
when you know it is leaving,  
you love it all the more.  
Pain is less harsh for its impermanence, I think;  
when you know it is leaving,  
you await the moment you can breathe again.

But I am holding my breath still,  
tightening my fingers still,  
waiting—  
for everything to change;  
knowing—  
nothing will ever be the same.

## *Beyond the Vivid*

By *Myles Thurman*

The backseat of my mother's car is the most uncomfortable safe haven on this Earth. The seats smell like old cigarettes and beer that had spilled once when I was little and my hands were too small to hold the can properly. Crumpled food wrappers littered the floor, a collage of meals eaten when there was nothing left to cook. When I was younger, I taught myself to read with the help of a Happy Meal box and a CVS receipt.

I stare at the receipts on the floor, creating word searches out of the orders. If I could find three more that contained the word big, I would beat my personal record.

There wasn't many ways to pass the time, alone in a car, sticky from the broken air conditioner that blew nothing but hot air through the ashy vents. At least this time, she left the car running, wasting precious gas I know we can't afford to replace. I check the clock on the dash, noting the time like an unsolved math problem that rattled around in my head. If two plus two equals four, how long is too long for a scandalous meetup for cash that would only make a dent the size of a pebble in the bills that seemed to pile? Would the amount be enough that I could finally get new school supplies? Or replace the broken air conditioning? If X equals the amount of debt we are in, and Y is the dollar amount made each day, how much of my life would I waste away in the back seat of this car?

I fiddle with my pen as I stare at my blank

homework assignment, due tomorrow. Write about your family, it says. Tell us about yourself, what makes you special. Tell the class what you want to be when you grow up.

I could write that I am the daughter of a single mother who is just trying to make it in this town, a place where everyone had turned their back on her— where everyone shaped her into who she had become before she could even speak her own thoughts properly. I could write that I am a writer. That I spend each night testing words in my mouth, forming the syllables and tasting them on my tongue. That I can taste the bitterness in their words like one can taste the citrus in a lemon. I could write that I am going to do something great one day, the generic 'I want to be' that every child my age writes down for this assignment so they can finally leave their house and go play in the roads 'til the sun is dipping beyond the trees and their mothers call them home with the promise of a warm dinner and a cool glass of lemonade. I could pretend that I don't see the look my teachers give me when I arrive, or the way the town preacher knows me by sight and not by name. He has been to my house enough times now, I think he should learn it.

I set my pen down, careful to not let it fall to the floor and be lost amongst the paper that surrounds my life. Each bag has a story, each uneaten fry has a memory attached. The McDonald's bag to my right was bought after one of my mother's customers had gotten a little too eager, stumbling out of the hotel only ten minutes after he had sauntered in. She had been so pleased her work was done quickly, she let me order

whatever I wanted off of the menu. I even got to have a McFlurry for the first time, choking down the sugary sweetness in careful bites so I would never forget the way it melted on my tongue. The crumpled bag on the seat next to me held dozens of tiny bottles, their orange caps shining through the opaque plastic. I had counted them once, wondering how many I would need to make an art piece that no one would actually understand. On really bad days, another few of those bottles would make their way into that bag, and I would be one step closer to my masterpiece.

I wonder what kind of day today will be. Mom has been gone long enough, I know there is no chance of another McFlurry, but maybe she will let me get a cheeseburger off the dollar menu. Maybe she won't need to run to the gas station, putting the money towards something other than our almost empty tank. Maybe my masterpiece can be put off by one more day.

I look out my window, seeing the sheriff's car parked not too far from me. I duck down, hiding myself amongst the bags, hoping he won't see me in here again. One more call to Social Services, and I will have to spend another week in some home with adults who fancy themselves my saviors. Mom will have to prove herself sober again, or scramble together enough cash that the sheriff conveniently forgets to show up to court. Most likely, it will be the latter. He is one of the reasons mom has so many of those little bottles. Maybe I should thank him for contributing to my art.

Time moves slower on the floor, the sun pointed just right so that I have to squeeze my eyes shut to prevent them burning. It is a beautiful orange behind my eyelids,

a swirl of red and yellow dancing across my vision as I squeeze them even tighter. If I do it hard enough, black spots will appear, flickering in and out with random precision.

If I open my eyes now, all the colors will seem so much brighter. That might be the key to my future, opening my eyes and seeing the bright side. If I open my eyes right as my mother gets in the car, maybe she will tell me that her last client paid her enough that we can stop all this. That we can move out of our single-wide, into an apartment away from the judging looks. If I let the colors bleed into reality, maybe I can be more than fast food bags and art pieces made of discarded caps.

My pen had fallen with me, landing somewhere on the floor. I reach around blindly, searching for its smooth surface, hoping I haven't lost it forever. I could open my eyes, search for its purple exterior amongst the sea of brown and plastic, but, if I do, I may never get to see life beyond the orange. I may never get to see the blue of my mother's eyes undulled.

I sweep my hand through the mess, each movement growing more and more frantic as the pen escapes my hold. If I lose it, then I will never get to have another. If I lose this pen, then the rest of my life I will be stuck using the boring black ones my teacher passes out when someone forgets one. No, I need to find my pen.

I am just about to open my eyes to search when the car door opens. I hold my breath and wait, wait to hear if I have been found out, or if my mother is finally back. "Hi, honey. Thanks for waiting for me." Her voice is all I need. My eyes fly open, letting

the vivids swarm my vision and nearly send me into a fit of nausea from the brightness. I sit myself up straight in my seat, waiting to see if my prayers worked. Waiting to see if her blue eyes will fade once again. My mother has beautiful eyes, a deep sea blue that you could get lost in. The rims are darker than the inside, and there are specks of green that seem to sparkle gold right now. Maybe my plan worked. Maybe the sun had bled through my eyelids and permanently altered my reality into vivids.

“Do you want McDonald’s again? I need to run to the gas station.” The dullness returned rapidly, the blues turning muddy and dark again. I no longer had the orange glow the sun provided. I nodded slowly, buckling myself into my seat as my mom sped off into the evening, in search of more art supplies and stories.

I look out the window and watch the sun as it stares back at me. It’s empty promises heat up my skin, sweat slinking out of my pores and onto my clothes. I turn away, I don’t need to listen to the sun anymore. I can’t live on maybe.

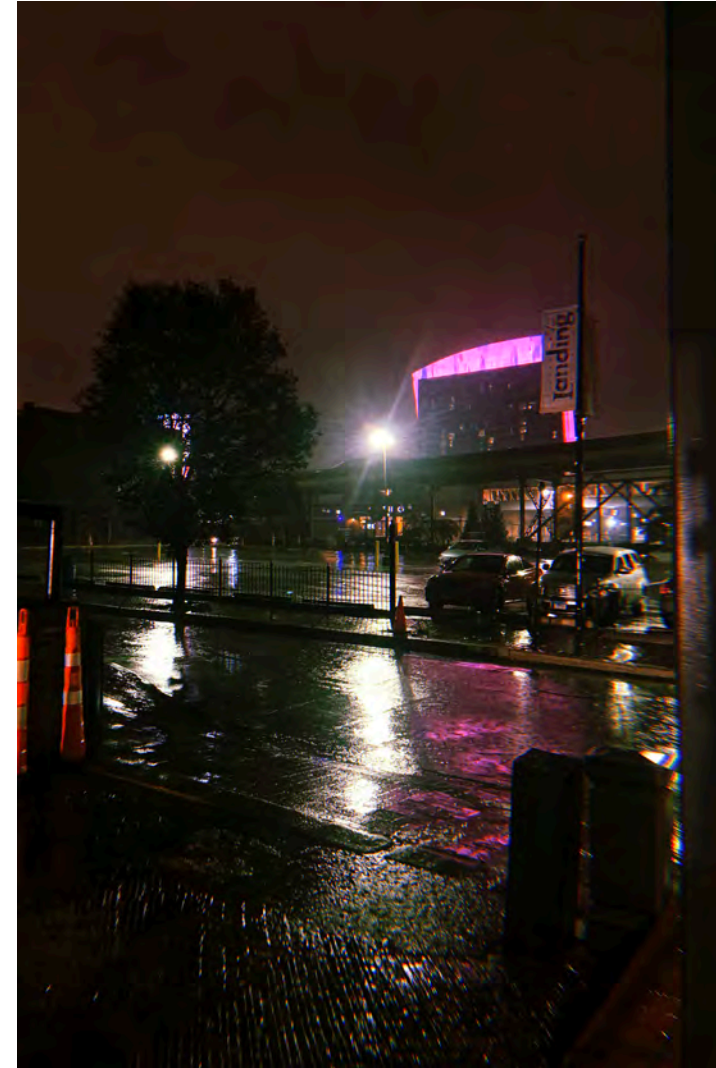
I look down at the floor, staring at the bags of my life, staring at the seat I will spend the rest of my life in. If X and Y are the same, I will waste the rest of my life in the backseat of this car.

Under the corner of one of the bags, I see my pen. Its purple shines through the brown like a beacon of hope, and I reach down grabbing it in one swift motion. My hand tore a small hole in the McFlurry bag, but I couldn’t care less. I hold it close to myself, holding onto the last ray of color in my life.

I let myself cling to one last maybe as my mother pulls into the gas station parking lot. Maybe I don’t need her bottles to make my own art.

I put the pen to the paper, and I start to write. Not about what I could be, and not about what they see. Instead, I write down the only words that I think can truly describe my life, the purple ink giving me solace.

*The backseat of my mother’s car is the most uncomfortable safe haven on this Earth.*



## *The Dying Neon*

*By Anna Tisdale*

(Photography)



## ***Columns***

*By Stella Zdrnja*

(Multi-Media Collage)

## ***Revolution Deferred***

*By Jessica Wojcik*

yes,  
 I would like to hear  
 about the roses in your garden,  
 the honors award  
 your teenage son  
 just won in school  
 and I would very much like to see  
 pictures from the latest vacation  
 you took to Italy—  
 or maybe Spain.

lately, I have seen babies  
 with limbs torn off  
 from bombs,  
 dropped by people  
 who make the laws  
 in my country  
 in the last few years  
 I have learned about atrocities  
 my child mind  
 could not have fathomed  
 even if you asked it to conjure  
 the worst cruelty that could ever exist

and over and over  
 it's man on man—  
 history tells us,  
 as recent as history is,  
 that we are unforgiving

yes,  
 I would like to hear  
 about the flowers your husband got you  
 on a random Tuesday  
 I would like to taste  
 the cake you brought into work  
 for all of us  
 and I am sorry that we are all pretending  
 that everything doesn't hurt  
 I am sorry that we are not revolutionaries

## ***An Encounter With Boots***

*By Julie Thomas*

Cleaning closets, I found your old combat boots,  
tucked away, covered in a thin layer of whitish dust.  
Wiping them clean with a soft rag, I feel  
the contours of your foot, a few wrinkles  
next to the slight bulges around the ball of the foot,  
defining the unique shape of you,  
as if you still wore them,  
as if you were here—  
a ghostly presence with real feet.

Though some black finish remains on the eyelets,  
they are mottled with silver where it wore off,  
showing their age already, long before  
you yourself hid them away on that shelf.  
The surface of the shoes' toes,  
shiny with a deep, rich gloss from years of spit shines,  
still bear a few small scars from flightline work,  
and later— after retirement— from yard mowing.

It was the peacetime military when you wore them to work,  
but it meant something to you— it meant serving others,  
a skill and a drive at the heart of who you were.  
So, you kept them, and so will I,  
A plaster cast of my memories of you.

## ***No Returns***

*By Haneen Ghannam*

أخبرني أن الهدايا لا يمكن إرجاعها.  
إذا كان هذا صحيحا،  
أعطاني قلبه و فرحه،  
ثم استعادها.  
لماذا ؟

He told me that gifts cannot be returned.  
If this is true,  
he gave me his heart and joy,  
then took them back.  
Why?

## **Boxes**

**By Noah Bennet**

“Would you like one? I think I’ll have another,” I asked, standing.

“Of course.”

He set his cards face-down and leaned back, resting a hand at his waistband. I took his glass, then weaved through the mess of boxes and bedding into the kitchen. Rain tapped at the window over our sink. The bottle was nearly empty and filled only my glass, so I opened our last to fill his. Our goal was to finish what we had before leaving and we were on track to.

He was sitting back when I returned. I gave a sideways smile.

“You didn’t cheat while I was away, did you?”

Bill put on a look of mock offence and said, “I certainly did not. Though it wouldn’t matter much with that hand of yours.”

“Well now you won’t get to make any use of it.” I smiled and began shuffling.

We were sat across from each other, under the ceiling fan that squeaked and shook as it spun. Yesterday we stripped down the living room, leaving only a table and two folding chairs, which would be the last things to go. Our lives, to that point, sat boxed and piled around us.

I dealt and he drew from the stack.

“I forgot to tell you about last night,” he said.

“Well tell me. You were with Vincent?”

“Yeah, it was really something.” He chuckled, like he was there again. “I’ll miss him, but last night was a good last night.”

I rolled my eyes, but laughed.

I’d met Vincent only once, though that had been enough to decide he was someone I’d rather avoid.

Bill and I rented a lakehouse in Michigan with him and his girlfriend last summer. On our last day, we thought of taking one last trip on the pontoon, where we’d have drinks and refuel. At the station a young attendant ran over to tie us in, then jogged off to grab the pump. He went to hand it to Vincent and the boy slipped. The nozzle scraped against the hull on his way down, leaving a black streak on the paint.

Vincent raised his voice at this boy, who couldn’t have been older than sixteen. He helped him up, then made like he was going to slap him. He didn’t, and laughed like it was a joke, but that was enough for me.

“What was so eventful about last night,” I urged.

Bill took a sip from his glass, drew a card, then began.

“We thought it’d be fitting to go to Hannigans, so after a couple at his place we drove over. It was real crowded and I lost him soon as we got in. I was sitting there, wondering where he’s at, and he taps me on the shoulder, with some girl hanging on his arm.”

“On your last night here he’s running off like that,” I said.

Bill laughed and waved a hand like that was to be expected. “So, he’s introducing me and we’re all talking. I haven’t even finished my first drink, when I see this big guy come through the door. The girl tries hiding behind Vince, but he’s already headed our way. He comes up and gets in Vincent’s face.”

I frowned and Bill could see what I thought.

“No, no, just listen. Vince’s being polite and saying how he’s so sorry, so the big guy backs down. Him and the girl go sit at the other end of the bar, and me and Vince just laugh about it. I think that’s the end.”

“Later on we decide to have one last drink, so Vince waves over the bartender and he orders a bottle of Busch. I’ve never seen him order a bottle in my life, but he does. We finish talking about what now might be the “good old days” and stand to leave. Vince has still got this bottle in his hand. I think he’s taking it for the road, but when we pass that big guy he reaches back and smashes him on the head.

“The bottle didn’t break like you’d think it would, it just bounced off. He dropped it and it didn’t even break then. We book it to the car and back to his place; he’s laughing like a maniac the whole way.”

Bill looked up at me and his smile flattened. He took a drink.

“Was the man alright?” I asked.

“I’m not sure; we didn’t want to linger. But either way I didn’t make him hit the guy.”

“You might have killed him.”

I put down my cards, though we’d stopped playing a while ago. Bill looked like he wanted to say more, but I went to the kitchen, not waiting to hear. The rain was falling harder and I looked out at it from the sink as I emptied my glass. I heard steps as he came up behind me, then tensed, feeling his arms slide around my waist.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was a bad story. Why don’t we just get some sleep for tomorrow.”

Bill slept on his side with his arm resting across my stomach. He had always snored lightly, but it never bothered me until that night. As I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the rain, I was brought back each time by his breathing. I lifted his arm and left the room, shutting the door carefully behind, like a child sneaking out.

In the living room, we had folded the chairs and propped them against the wall. The boxes we moved next to the door, ready to be packed in the van. I looked for the day’s newspaper between them, opening some to see if it’d been thrown in by accident. Moving to the kitchen, I found it on the counter.

I took it back to the living room and spread it out on the table. The headlines had nothing to say about Bill’s story, but I flipped to the crime log to be sure. Nothing again; but maybe in tomorrow’s.

Nothing again; but maybe in tomorrow's.

It seemed there still wouldn't be any chance at sleep so I tried to relax with tea and a book. After putting the water on, I unfolded the box and looked through the titles. The top layer was all his. I lifted a couple and found the next was his too. I had to dig deeper and pull them up at random just to find one of my own. I shut the flaps on the jumbled mess I'd created and sat back in the folding chair.

The book lay open in my lap. I looked at the boxes — all my things and his together.



*If we let it, life will leave us...*



*Shattered*

## *Zombies*

*By Lauren Johns*

Running through the hazy streets.  
Mind as clear as the mud that coats my legs like splatter paint.  
Restless I'll be,  
until my end comes for me.

Bleak and vast is my new silhouette,  
dilapidated streets are my home.

An icy dread pumps through my veins.  
Something is coming,  
lurking in wait.

As a murder of crows flies overhead,  
I fear my own murder is near.

Cemetery stone crumbles behind me.  
The closer it gets, the less I have to fear.  
Only myself,  
and what will become of me here.

## *19 Children Dream of Summer Break*

*By Keith A. Eldridge*

*Yesterday we dreamt of summer break—  
Staying up late, getting up late,  
riding our bicycles with our friends,  
shooting hoops, hitting home runs,  
anxiously awaiting the next Marvel movie,  
playing Xbox with our friends,  
sleepovers with late-night pizza and soda and scary movies.*

*Summer with juicy afternoon watermelon and ice-cold lemonade,  
prepared with a grandmother's love;  
camping, fishing, swimming and BBQs with family.*

*No homework!*

*Freedom!*


But today we run from the chaos, the fear, and the hatred sewn  
into the very fabric of our society.

Who says Rhetoric does not matter?

Who says little words on social media  
created and shared by our so-called leaders do not matter?

These words of division dig deep and bury themselves silently,  
yet compound exponentially into  
lost young men's hearts and souls, day after day,

rendering them malcontent devils of hatred.  
Well, I tell you it does matter today  
as we scatter for our lives,  
trying to dodge the bullets of sewn hatred  
that rip into our arms, our legs,  
our torsos, our lungs, our hearts,  
our very souls.



It matters today as our blood drains  
from our bodies and our breathes slow  
and our hearts stop.

Mom, Dad—how can this be?

Just yesterday we dreamt of summer break.

## ***Breathe***

*By Anna Tisdale*

breathe, breathe, breathe

Breathe, in and out  
Count 1, 2, 3, 3, 2, 1, again  
For I can't breathe, it's like a drought

It just needs to stop, I need it to shut out  
It's taking my name in vain,

Breathe, in and out  
Please, please make this change route  
I can't withstand this never ending chain

For I can't breathe, it's like a drought  
Have I been drugged out?  
These tears have turned to acid rain

Breathe, in and out  
These voices, please, these voices need to be locked out This flight needs to  
deplane  
For I can't breathe, it's like a drought

My brain is weaving around, blackout  
This all just feels so inane  
Breathe, in and out

## *Eulogy for a Bird I'll Never See Fly*

*By Chloe Nicole Hayes*

Hit the window, fall to the ground  
Land on your back  
face up, skull crushed,  
beak pushed back into  
the lace of your little brain

Your wings still spread wide,  
an angel on the grate  
rotting through the bars.  
Reaching out, fading fast  
beneath the unforgiving sun.

I watch you melt and  
think of your impossible, frail heart  
stopping behind your  
fragile ribs.

I think of the sky,  
missing one of her children.  
I think of your nest  
empty now, and cold.

And I wish I was a saint  
I wish miracles were real  
so I could lift you back to life.

But you're so dead,  
and I'm so ordinary,  
and there's nothing I can do about it.

I wish I could have held you.  
I wish you weren't all alone.  
I wish your red belly would  
flash against the clouds again,  
that I wasn't watching it  
disintegrate into nothing.

I think of your feathers stuck to the glass.

## *Tiger-Striped Confessional*

*By Chloe Nicole Hayes*

Wanting is a wilderness,  
A stand of trees without a center,  
Unmapped and untamed and  
As pure and sharp as the bite of a wolf.  
When I stand in the clearing  
And bathe in the howling,  
Some part of me aches to join.

But instead I flee like a fawn  
At the first sign of life  
Among the thorns.  
Wait, bleating at the brush, for the  
Jaws of the copperhead  
To close around my calf  
And poison me again, and again, and again.

The thing they call  
Love is a thing that raises the hackles,  
Cracks like chicken bones  
Beneath uncaring boots.  
It shouts. It startles. I jump,  
My skin a farce, more  
Myth than reality

And I am off like a rocket,  
A bat out of hell.  
Gone in the night,  
Faster than you  
Can say fuck me.  
Because desire feels  
Like buckshot, like  
A hole in my gut—  
And I would rather  
Avoid the click of the trigger than  
Know what comes after it.

So I see the serpent flash  
beneath the shimmering  
light of the moon  
I watch warily as it skirts my path.  
But when it strikes—  
boy, am I gone,  
running before wanting can  
sink its teeth into the  
terrible, vulnerable,  
sick and miserable parts of me.

I want to be seen,  
don't I? Don't I want  
don't I need someone  
to know me? To see the  
sickness and step into  
the dark with me?  
Perhaps that is why I  
wear my wounds like  
warning signs, like the  
furiously pacing stripes of  
a tiger in a cage.

Perhaps it is to dissolve the  
possibility of true knowing.  
Perhaps it is to prevent the  
sun from reaching my skin  
and the stars from searching  
my eyes. The why—  
the why doesn't matter though, does it?  
It's the what that burns,  
that chases the visitors from my side.

I snap. I bite and I lunge  
at each hand that  
reaches for my bars,  
and I pour my fear  
and my rage, and my indelible  
fucking brokenness  
into each and every interaction.  
Hoping that somehow,  
somehow,  
someone will see  
the stripes are painted on.



## *Well Fed*

*By Matt Altis*

(Digital)



***Guy 3***

*By Stella Zdrnja*  
(Digital)



***Abyssense***

*By Cai Tolliver*  
(Acrylic Paint)



## Getting Ready

By Stella Zdrnja

(Digital)

## Lost Time

By Chloe Nicole Hayes

The first heartbreak came  
When I was young again  
Marvelling at the strength  
Of the Mississippi,  
And mourning the palisades I could not touch

Next came the sharpness  
Of loss, the metallic, silty  
Press of river water  
Against my teeth  
And in my lungs

These are memories that do not belong to me:  
Cliff jumping, breathless  
Laughter in the dark,  
Painted toenails and sneaking sips of wine  
On a Wednesday afternoon

Instead, I am left with these:  
White walls, white sheets, white bracelet  
White pill in a white paper cup  
How I wish to be young again, to live  
Those years that I lost

On the trail I turn my back  
To the palisades I will not touch,  
Feeding the reservoir of melancholy  
And looking behind to the girl  
I could have been.

I could have been her. I should  
Have been her. But  
I am me, left with this  
Man-made lake, this flooded ghost town, vacant  
but for the dark water that lives in my lungs.

## *Hypervigilance*

*By Jessica Wojcik*

the sun sets  
earlier and earlier  
every evening  
and you don't notice  
the light slipping away  
until December clamps  
a freezing hand on your  
unwilling shoulder  
and forces you to witness  
how the bliss of sunkissed romance  
and days of play  
become stretches of  
glacial monotony

it starts with flurries,  
your mood brightens when you consider  
the beauty of a glittering, white landscape  
and the hearth, your lovers arms,  
but eventually when the piles  
keep you inside for too long  
and you've lost the day  
you decide you'd like to brave the cold  
away from him

you can't find your car keys.  
winter inches by  
your doors are barricaded  
your streets are unwalkable  
you snap well before  
the ice does  
on the lakes  
at the first whispers  
of spring  
you wonder if you'll mend strong enough  
to do it again  
every year  
for the rest of your life

## *I am but a Whisper*

*By Mia Music*

I have lived like air no one breathes;  
a ghost pressed into the corners of rooms.  
My voice has broken itself against silence  
so many times,  
I no longer know what it sounds like.

The world keeps moving,  
and I keep dissolving—  
a smear of shadow against the walls of others.  
I reach for myself and clutch nothing.  
I reach for joy and feel the cold bite  
of absence.

Happiness taunts me.  
It leans in close,  
brushes its mouth against my ear,  
and whispers my name  
before vanishing into smoke.

I want it so badly it hurts.  
I want to feel alive,  
to know I am more than dust  
drifting in the wake of everyone else's footsteps.  
But every time I touch the edges of light,  
it pulls away—  
leaving me alone again,  
cradling emptiness,  
trembling with hunger  
that will not end.

## *Untitled*

*By Joseph Sulier*

Clutching you  
for warmth and comfort  
in the cold terror  
of my nightmare bed

The seasonal observation  
of the ebb and flow  
of the note

The timely preparation  
of the bird  
the waning appeal  
of the leftovers

Adorning the corpse  
of a tree  
and wondering  
why I feel it suffer

Should auld acquaintance  
be forgot  
and never brought to mind  
that's just fine

## *Attention Deficit*

*By Sophie*

Haunted by an incessant need to seek and to do. Searching for something formless and unnamed. Always, an itch in your bones, a fog in your mind, and a pit in your stomach.

Never satiated, never freed of a desire unknown, of searching, of itching. Longing to be punched, to be burned, to be crushed. A force to match that inside.

Churning, racing, constant pain of the mind and body. Never enough. Never enough sleep. Never enough drink. Never enough food. Never enough pleasure.

Consumed by feeling. Eaten alive.

Raw. Like a nerve ending. Like a fuse. Ignition imminent. Tears fighting to fall. Nothing sticks. Nothing holds. Thoughts flit like gnats. In and out. In and out. In and out.

Emptiness eternal.

## *The Hermit*

By Carter Morgan

I clutched my worn, unopened locket tightly with shallow breath as I crept through the shadowy forest and into a small gorge. I was greeted with the pungent stench of rotten meat. I covered my nose, but the gorge's scent forced its way in. In its heart stood a small, dilapidated shack, its silhouette barely visible against the all-consuming black of the night. A freezing wind rushed over the gray building, and its shattered windows screamed as the shutters rattled violently against them. The shingles convulsed as if to escape, and the entire structure groaned in a deep tumult. The impossibly tall trees and ashy foliage surrounding it shivered at the sound. My lantern, my only light source, cast black beasts around every corner and crevice. The ground spat cold, viscous fluid on my trousers with each step, though no rain had fallen in weeks. In fear, no blades of grass dared to grow in the radius of the building, yet the dark earth seemed to smile at its company.

"It's been so long. He'd better be here..." I whispered.

I faintly heard the walls whisper back.

As I walked up the stairs to the door, peculiar details in its wood caught my attention. Along with its peephole, scratches on the black wood twisted the door into a welcoming, one-eyed sneer. Thump thump. No response, only the splintering of wood. As I moved my shaking hand to knock again, the door

creaked open, and an inky blackness drooled out. I squeezed my locket to feel its weight, and despite every nerve screaming in protest, I stepped into the mouth. "Impossible..." I muttered, my pupils dilating to take it all in.

The interior of the shack was monstrous. A single, dim chandelier illuminated gargantuan rooms, colossal corridors, and slithering staircases at every desolate corner. My own lantern had gone out at the sight. I felt as though I would melt into the floor of the building. It expanded endlessly, continuously, constantly, infinitely, interminably—BAM! I whipped my head around to see the door slam behind me. When I faced forward again, a pair of milky, light blue eyes faced me back.

"AHH!" I shouted, jumping away.

Getting a closer look only elevated my fear. Long, stringy, white hair hung over pale, parchment skin that failed to conceal icy, blue veins. I was staring at a loose sack of aged meat attached to two unblinking eyes. Although visibly blind, the gaze of those milky eyes pierced me as though it were peeling away my skin, tissue by tissue.

"Archibald, is that you?" his chapped lips smacked.

I gripped my silver locket before responding, "No, Archibald is my father; I'm just Henry... but if you know him, then you must be—"

"Yes! Yes!" he proclaimed, pale eyes glowing, "I am Aamon..."

He grinned, the name hanging in the air like a foul breath, before continuing, "But much, much more importantly—to what do I owe my most pressing residence in the skull of Archibald's son?" He let each word drag and slur as if to savor their cadence.

I reached for my locket. He couldn't see it, but his eyes were omniscient. His malformed mouth twisted into such a rotten smile that every single yolk-yellow tooth came into sight, and he laughed a cacophonous, revolting laugh. It seemed to echo inexorably, and his heaving breath reeked of sweet vomit.

Vitriol bubbled up inside me, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand what's so funny. This locket was given to me by--"

"Archibald," he interjected.

"My father, yes, before he disappeared," I paused to give it a squeeze, "It's the only clue I have as to where he went. It's been beckoni--"

"Beckoning you to come here," he interjected again.

I continued to clutch my locket and begged, "Yes, but if you know all this, then can you please help me find him?"

"I'm afraid not," he stated.

"That can't be--"

"Because you don't really care, do you?" he hissed.

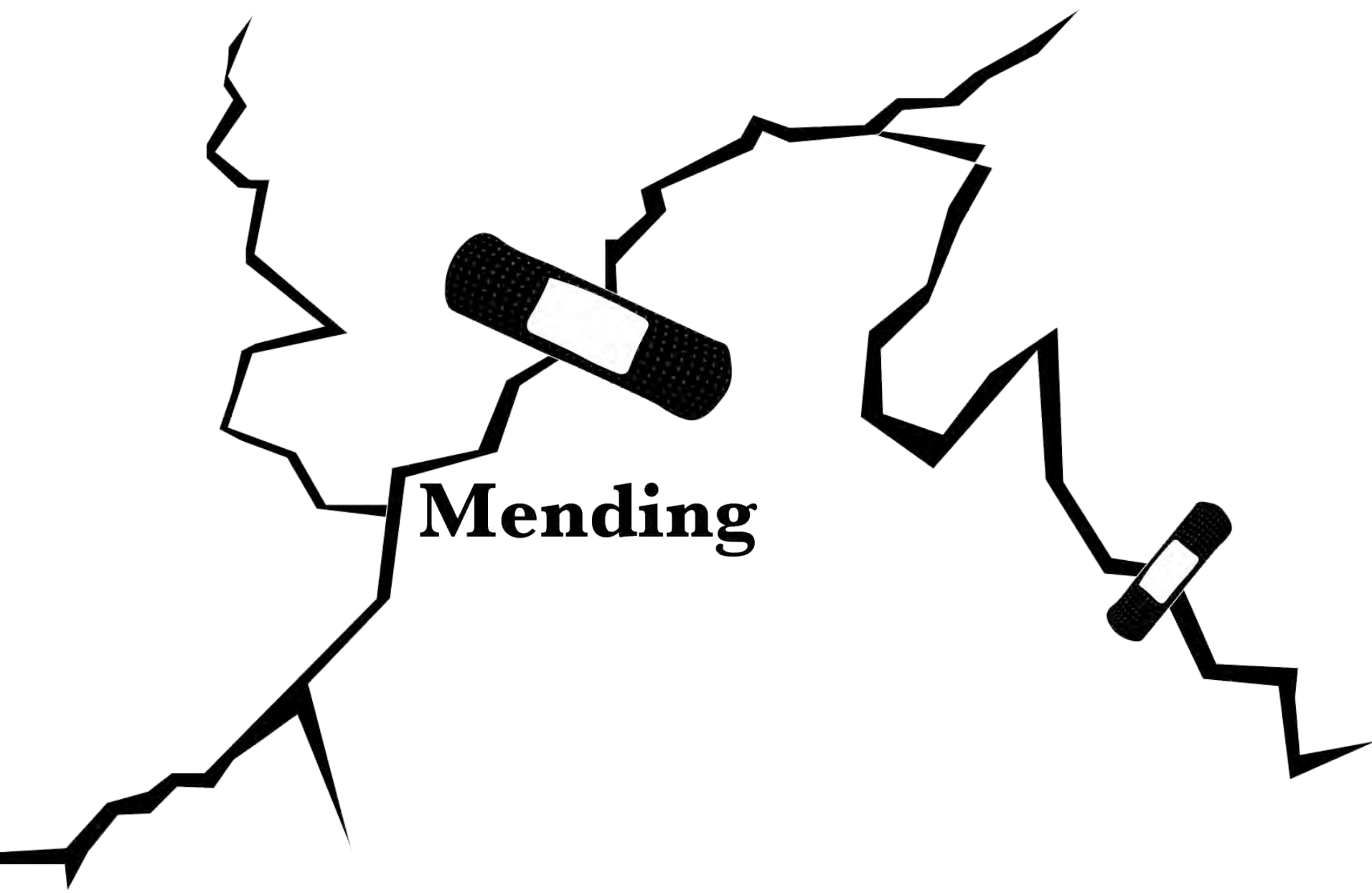
My eyes twitched, "How dare you? Of course I care!"

He smiled, "About that metal, boy, you care more about that silver albatross around your neck than Archibald. After all, if your inclination is more to the man than the mystery, why have you not yet opened it?"

"I won't stand for this! What do you know about me?" I shouted, turning for the door. A bony hand caught my shoulder before I could leave, each finger digging in like a pick. Slowly, silently, Aamon reached his other hand into his robes and rooted through the tattered cloth. As his arm resurfaced, a worn metal object came with it: a worn silver locket.

My eyes twitched, my mouth opened and closed, and my muscles tensed. The air in the room was still. As I looked down to my own locket, I could feel Aamon's eyes bore into me. Slowly, silently, I reached for it. I felt for each detail, each scratch, and each shallow dent as it came into my grip. Then, I slid my small, trembling thumbs into a groove at the bottom, and I opened the locket.

Its singular possession was a crystal clear mirror. As I gazed at my reflection, a guttural terror crept into me. Two milky, light blue eyes gazed back.



**Mending**

## *Self Portrait as a Goblet*

*By Julie Thomas*

The partygoers vie to grab your slender stem.  
You – the different one, the glittering jewel in the China cabinet.  
Crafted by a burly Ozarks glassblower,  
your pale blue translucent glass,  
perfectly shaped, utterly beautiful,  
glimmers with reflections of the victor.

He clasps your thin column of glass,  
removes a cork, pours the merlot,  
the cabernet, the port, the champagne,  
fills your bowl to the top,  
dampens your rim with sweet or bitter juice  
of success, of loss, of love, of everyday chores,  
of evenings by the campfire,  
of unexpected lightning strikes.

Your foot is a steady foundation that sometimes he manages  
to set down sideways, spills your contents  
on the rug, the tablecloth, the soft campsite dirt, his shirt.  
Your utter emptiness cries out  
for a gentle hand, another fill to the top,  
another splash, another drop— something at least.

He could shatter you against the fireplace in triumph  
or hold you up to the lamplight, turning you  
this way and that to catch the highlights.  
Instead, he sets you on the coffee table  
used— but not used up— and leaves forever.

Persistent, you wait for the next pour  
from another bottle, from another hand,  
another reflection of another soul, a reason to be.

You must not be fazed. You are you, not what he pours in,  
not a hazy reflection of glowing dawn or setting sun,  
but a real thing in the world,  
in the home, in his life— in your life.

Fragile as a newborn child  
but enduring through more trials than he knew.  
You keep your graceful shape,  
carrying on for whatever comes next.

## *The Weight of Your Certainty*

*By Abi Alexander*

You told me your opinions on the universe,  
and you said them  
like facts.  
You wore your beliefs like armor,  
and I mistook it for truth.

You believed in the stars but not the moon landing.  
Believed in God but not the Bible.

But me?  
I've never been sure of anything.  
Not where we come from,  
not where we go.  
Not whether love lasts,  
or if anything does.

I live in the in-betweens.  
In the what-ifs.  
In the maybes,  
in the could-be's,

But your certainty.  
Your certainty was comforting.  
Like a lighthouse  
for a ship that never had a map.

It wrapped tightly around my chaos like a child clinging for life—  
quieted my curiosities  
softened my restless need to know.

You answered my questions  
before I could ask them.  
You filled in the blanks  
before I even found the page.

You left a girl full of questions—  
questionless.  
And for a moment,  
that felt like peace.  
But peace turned  
into silence.

Your certainty spoke so loud  
there was no room for my voice.  
No space to doubt.  
No air to ponder.  
No breath for me.  
Your certainty came with walls so high,  
It left no space for doubt,  
No room for my own wandering thoughts.

You said things like:  
“This is how it is.”  
“This is what matters.”  
“This is what’s real.”  
And I listened.  
I listened too well.  
I traded my maybe’s for your absolutes.

Over time,  
your truths felt more suffocating than my questions.  
They pulled at me and anchored me in waters I didn’t choose.

They drowned me.  
Not in rage—  
not in cruelty—  
but in conviction.

In oceans filled with only your truths.  
Your values.  
Your rules.  
Your sky.  
Your god.

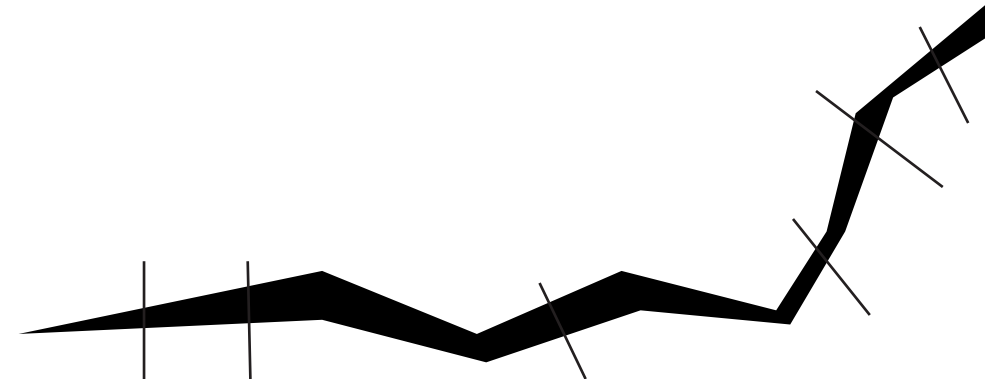
And I forgot.  
I forgot what it felt like  
to ask,  
to challenge,  
to wonder out loud.

Maybe the not-knowing  
isn’t weakness.  
Maybe curiosity  
isn’t chaos.  
Maybe my questions  
are worthy too.

I am learning to speak again.  
To ask again.  
To be unsure,  
and unashamed.

Now I’m remembering.  
Now, I’m surfacing.  
Kicking toward the light.  
Coming out of the water and breathing in my own uncertainties like fresh air.

It is my doubt that will set me free.  
And I am still learning,  
to swim back to mine.



## *Love in Two Lights*

*By Mia Music*

Love arrives like sunlight through a broken window—  
dust dancing golden in the air—  
every shadow softened, every wound quieted.  
It teaches us how to believe in beauty again.

But beauty has claws.  
Love can twist,  
turning the warmth in our chest into ash,  
turning a gentle hand into a fist of silence.

We are lifted, yes—  
but only so the fall feels sharper,  
only so the ground remembers us longer.

Still, we return to it, trembling,  
because even in its ugliest form  
love feels like the closest thing to being alive.

## *Spiritual Lily Pads*

*By Lisa Del Mare*

### **From Tragedy to Transformation: My Journey Across the Lily Pads of Faith and Self-Care**

On August 26, 2025, just over six years into a profound journey of spiritual recovery, something extraordinary happened.

While walking my dogs, a surge of divine energy washed over me, weaving together every experience of the past years into a tapestry of undeniable purpose. The world sharpened, colors vibrated with new intensity, and tears streamed down my face as I recognized the undeniable hand of God/Higher Power/Universe guiding my every step.

This spiritual awakening recalled a favorite quote from Anne Lamott:

“My coming to Faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way, I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.”

For the past six years, I have indeed been following spiritual breadcrumbs, jumping from one spiritual lily pad to another, each one a testament to resilience and divine guidance.

My journey into a deeply spiritual way of living began in April 2019, through the Al-Anon program. This discipline, designed for those affected by others' alcohol or drug use, has utterly transformed me. While

many of the external circumstances that once troubled me remained unchanged, I changed. This transformation didn't happen overnight; it was a series of profound shifts, each triggered by life-altering events.

### **The Catalysts for Change**

The first major catalyst arrived in December 2018 with the death of my now ex-husband's mother. Her long battle with leukemia, I now realize, fueled his escalating addiction, culminating in him passing out on Thanksgiving Day in front of our family. I knew then that things were spiraling.

Just a month later, on New Year's Day 2019, an unimaginable tragedy struck: my 25-year-old son, Nic, died by suicide. Despite his many wonderful qualities, he battled an eating disorder and depression, and despite all our family's efforts, he took his own life. The horror of that day, when my ex-husband and brother-in-law found him, is indescribable.

In the immediate aftermath, I took 90 days off work for my mental health. Diagnosed with depression and anxiety, I needed quiet, unstructured time. This period became my first spiritual lily pad. I advocated for myself in ways I never had before, trusting that I was supported and that prioritizing my well-being was essential. I remember telling my therapist then that I would live the rest of my life as authentically as possible. I didn't know where those words came from, but I now believe it was God

leading me to understand the necessity of living with integrity. As I often say now, "Be careful what you put out into the universe, because you will open up a whole new dimension in your life with intention and purpose."

### **A New Path and Unraveling Old Ties**

April 2019 brought another devastating blow. My husband of 23 years, in a blackout drunk state, picked up a woman who then robbed him. As the story unraveled, the word "Alcoholic" flashed in my mind, red and undeniable. I finally trusted my intuition: something was profoundly wrong, something I could not fix. I felt God doing for me what I could not do for myself.

This was the turning point. I bought my own house and moved out with my daughters – my next spiritual lily pad. I meticulously unraveled my mind and finances from my ex-husband, creating a sanctuary for healing. The week after this incident, following what felt like divine leading, I attended my first Al-Anon meeting. It was magic, a clear sign of being placed in God's care. Looking back, I know I would never have divorced my husband and embraced this healing journey had my son not died. While I would never wish for his death, it was a catalyst for monumental change, a spiritual breadcrumb forcing me to examine my life intently. I had clung to the belief that I needed to stay for my son, sacrificing myself unnecessarily. Now, I live a future rooted in self-care and God's will, free from self-will and the fear of managing outcomes.

### **Navigating Grief and Setting Boundaries**

December 2020 brought another profound loss: my sister died from Covid. This tragedy was another difficult time for me and my remaining two sisters, but equipped with Al-Anon and therapy tools, I navigated the complexities. I felt God working through me, allowing me to prioritize daily walks—a non-negotiable act of self-care that kept me grounded in my grief. I intuitively knew what I needed, trusting myself in a way I never would have before Al-Anon and therapy.

In April 2022, a seemingly random event became another spiritual breadcrumb. While searching for a pushpin, I discovered bottles of vodka stashed in a basement dresser. It wasn't mine. It was my 14-year-old daughter's, "stored for friends". Given our family history of alcoholism, mental illness, and suicide, I knew this had to be addressed. With strength beyond my own, bolstered by Al-Anon and therapy, I held a firm boundary: she needed Intensive Outpatient Therapy to live with me. In a heart wrenching decision, my daughter chose to go live with her dad. However, I protected my serenity as a non-negotiable.

### **New Beginnings and Divine Redirection**

My next lily pad was a move in December 2022, closer to my sisters. Battling another bout of depression and anxiety due to my daughter's issues, I craved support and belonging. Through prayer and meditation, I made the move, deepening my relationships with my sisters. Inspired by one sister pursuing a degree in Clinical

Mental Health Counseling and a colleague doing the same, I followed those spiritual breadcrumbs. In January 2025, I enrolled in school, pursuing a long-held dream.

Early 2023 brought the recommendation for EMDR therapy to address trauma. My initial attempt to find a therapist was met with an unexpected redirection: the therapist, having recently lost her own son, couldn't treat me. I was devastated, but my sister's words, "You are being directed to something different and better," proved prophetic. That therapist referred me to another EMDR specialist, within walking distance, who took my insurance. We clicked instantly, and the work, though exhausting, is profoundly fulfilling. Being redirected, I learned, can be a good thing, if you trust and go with the flow of life rather than resisting in anger.

February 2025 found me in physical and mental distress. A chiropractor proposed a costly treatment plan. Calling my sponsor from his office, her simple question, "Have you talked to your primary care?" was a lifeline. It led me to establish care with a primary care physician near my home, another spiritual breadcrumb guiding me to the "next right thing."

### **The Ultimate Lesson: Prioritizing Self**

In April 2025, deeply attuned to myself, I recognized my current job of 30 years was unsustainable. Despite fear, I interviewed for a manager position, driven by a desire for change and loyalty to my team. Yet, it conflicted with my long-term goal of becoming a therapist. During the interview, I had a panic attack, spiraling into my third major depression/PTSD/Anxiety episode

in recent years. While horrible, I now see it clearly: that job was not my path. It was pulling me away from my true purpose. I was willing to sacrifice myself for others, a pattern I needed to break. This breakdown forced me to take time off, confront my fear of losing my corporate "golden handcuffs," and finally self-advocate. God, I realized, will move you away from what isn't right, in whatever way is needed.

During this breakdown, the primary care physician I'd established through my sponsor's simple question became my fiercest advocate, managing my short-term disability when my psychiatrist wouldn't. Had I not followed that breadcrumb, I don't know what I would have done.

Now, in August 2025, I am back at work but profoundly changed. I will not sacrifice myself for the company. I have learned my lesson, finally. I told my boss I could not return to my previous role, nor would I take the new one they offered. I believe we receive the same lesson repeatedly until we learn it. For me, a core lesson has been to never sacrifice my Self for anything or anyone.

As I reflect on this journey, I see lessons learned, spiritual lily pads, God's care, self-care, character defects whittled down, and an unwavering faith and trust. I see God's "coincidences" constantly guiding me, giving me just enough to do the next right thing. I am surrounded by people who have helped me along the way and friends I never thought I'd have. I can see the blessings in my life, and I know that I can not only survive tragedy but thrive despite it.

*Put the pieces back together*



***Out of Sight, Out of Mind***

*By Cai Tolliver*

(Acrylic Paint)



## *A Safe Space*

*By Matt Altis*

(Digital)

## *April*

*By Kyle Walsh*

Someday, my pain  
will take his first steps  
on to the dead grass  
outside of a house  
with cracks on the doorsteps.  
He'll love each to death.  
He'll pull your splinters from  
outside the door.  
He knows I don't need them anymore.  
His bare feet wet  
from standing outside;  
he hums along with the rain,  
the ends of his toes turning green.

## ***Vitality***

*By Lauren Johns*

Winter takes its toll.  
Frozen.  
Dull.  
Closing in.  
Barren streets and bitter nights.

Light flickers,  
softly,  
gently,  
bittersweetly.  
The snowscape dissipates.

A lush canopy blooms overhead.  
Once hollow.  
Once desolate.  
Razor sharp and unforgiving.  
Now, bursting with vitality.

## ***Self Flagellation***

*By Jessica Wojcik*

there is no such thing  
as an apology  
that will reach  
across years of wrongdoing  
and futures  
that never came to pass  
that were promised  
that were dreamed of

maybe we both move on  
maybe our lives are happier  
eventually—  
more than we could have ever imagined  
maybe we see each other  
in five years  
and hug  
have a coffee

and the whole time I will be burning,  
I will be tied to the stake

I imagine a world in which  
you never spoke to me  
and it seems kinder  
it seems like there is mercy

## ***For Them***

*By Mia Music*

The world would break her,  
if not for them.  
It has tried—  
with its endless cruelties,  
its hollow promises and,  
its storms that leave nothing standing.  
But children are the unbroken thread,  
the reason she breathes  
when breathing feels impossible.

When they laugh,  
the sound is a cathedral.  
Walls rise around her,  
arches of light shelter her body,  
and in that moment,  
the world cannot touch her.  
Their joy is armor—  
thin but impenetrable—  
woven from innocence  
the world has not yet stolen.

When they sleep,  
she watches the rise and fall of their chests,  
small and steady as the tide.  
It reminds her  
that life can be simple,  
that existence can be quiet.  
that love can be enough.  
She whispers promises into their dreams—  
that no matter how jagged this earth becomes,  
she will stand between them and the fire.

When they reach for her hand—tiny fingers curling around her own—  
the weight she carries  
becomes lighter.  
Grief does not vanish—  
it bends—  
reshaped by love.  
In their grasp,  
she remembers who she is:  
not broken,  
not lost,  
but a mother who still belongs to the living.

Every sacrifice is made of their names.  
Every tear that falls  
waters the roots of their tomorrow.  
Every breath she takes,  
though torn and trembling,  
is a prayer pressed into the future.

The world may be merciless,  
but for them  
she endures.  
For them,  
she rises from the rubble  
again and again.

And if love is ever asked to prove itself—  
if it is ever questioned,  
ever doubted—  
let it be measured here:  
in the way she stays,  
in the way she fights,  
in the way she lives,  
for them.

## *St. Charlene of Meagher, Missouri*

*By Stephen Lemley*

It was after midnight, more than two hours past what his mother thought was an appropriate Saturday night curfew for a fourteen-year-old. Russell crept to where she was lying prone on the living room recliner to see whether she was asleep, and whether he had successfully gotten away with getting home late. He and two of his friends had pitched a tent by the creek where they waited for three girls who had promised to play spin the bottle. One of the boys had fished an empty Miller High Life bottle out of the garbage can at his parents' house. They finally gave up when the girls were still no-shows at eleven-thirty. His mother seemed asleep, and he smiled in satisfaction. But in the dim moonlight, he saw white foam coming out of her mouth and pooling on the pillow, and his sense of relief was replaced with one of panic. He shook her, despite knowing that there would be hell to pay when she awakened. But she didn't wake up, and her body was limp.

"Damn it. What the hell, Mom?" Russell gasped. He picked her up and carried her over his shoulder out of the trailer and down the loosely stacked concrete block steps. A miserable early March mist had ended just a few minutes earlier. The air was chilly and dank. His cowboy boots slipped in the mud, and he almost dropped her. He opened the door of the truck, plopped her into the seat, and buckled her in. She slumped forward. He got in the truck, slammed the driver's side door shut, and stared at the steering wheel.

His mom kept the key in the ignition. He turned the key, and the engine wheezed to life, then it began a click-clack death rattle. He put the truck in drive and stepped on the accelerator. A black cloud of exhaust blasted from the tailpipe. As the truck bolted forward, his mother's body shot upright. Gravel flew from beneath the back tires. Russell let up on the accelerator and pulled out of the driveway toward the highway, swerving back and forth between the lanes until he got a feel for the steering wheel. He hit the brake pedal hard when he saw a stop sign, putting the truck into a skid and causing his mother to fall forward. He glanced both ways and gently pressed down on the accelerator, creeping through the intersection until the truck reached 30 miles per hour. That speed seemed about right.

The truck that his mother, Charlene Richard, owned was a bit of an institution in the small, southeast Missouri town of Meagher. It was a 21-year-old Ford F-150. The bark-brown paint had dulled from years of exposure, and the rusted-out wheel wells were patched with gray putty. On the hood was a faded three-by-three-foot sticker of the American flag, with its edges beginning to peel up. The original tailgate was replaced with a pumpkin-colored one from a Chevy. The rear bumper had lost its chrome and appeared to be held together by bumper stickers. One that read "Abortion Stops A Beating Heart," underlined with a red, wavy line from a heart monitor, and on the right

with one that read "Drive Like Hell, You'll Get There," with a devil's pitchfork as an exclamation mark.

"What the hell, Mom?" Russell repeated. He didn't look at her, keeping his eyes on the road instead. He was gripping the steering wheel so hard he began to lose feeling in his hands. He pulled onto the highway and sped up, careening around slower-moving vehicles. Taillights reflected off the wet pavement. Suddenly, he saw flashing red lights in the rearview mirror and heard a police car siren behind him. He pulled over, jumped out of the truck, and began running toward the state police cruiser. The trooper opened his door, crouched behind it, and pointed his gun at Russell.

"Stop!" the trooper shouted. "Hands up! On the ground!"

Russell put his hands over his head and fell to his knees.

"It's my mom! She's sick!" he yelled.

In the headlights, the officer saw that he was just a skinny boy, crying, with a flushed face and mussed-up, curly, red hair.

The trooper walked around the patrol car door and toward Russell, keeping his gun pointed at Russell's chest.

"How old are you, boy?" shouted the trooper.

"Fourteen!" Russell shouted back. "I've got to get my mom to the emergency room!"

The trooper stepped around Russell and walked backward to the truck, keeping his gun on the boy. He looked through the driver's side window and saw Charlene, her body leaning slack into the car door.

"Shit," said the officer, putting his gun back in its holster. "Get up," he motioned to Russell.

"Help me get her in the car," said the officer, pulling Charlene out of the truck by her shoulders. Russell grabbed her feet. She was light and droopy.

"Dispatch, this is Officer Jenkins," the trooper spoke into the radio as he began speeding down the highway. "I've got an apparent overdose. Alert St. Francis emergency room. ETA 20 minutes." He put the microphone back in its cradle.

"What's your name?" the trooper asked.

Russell was in the back seat with his mother. "Russell Richard."

"What's your mom's name?"

"Charlene Richard."

"Any idea what drugs your mother took?" asked the trooper. "It will help if we can give the ER a heads-up."

"Didn't know she took any drugs." His mother's head was on his shoulder. He cried and sniffed as he stroked her forehead. "Don't die, Mom. Please, don't die."

The brakes squealed in front of the emergency room's automatic doors. Two orderlies and a nurse were waiting with

a gurney. The trooper whisked Charlene out of the back seat and carried her to the gurney. The four of them jogged the gurney through to the emergency room as Russell stood outside alone. The trooper had turned off the police car and silenced the siren, but the red lights still were flashing and reflected off the hospital's smooth, limestone façade. It was eerily quiet, and Russell felt a pang of loneliness in his chest. He thought it must be about one-thirty in the morning, and it had begun drizzling again. He heard the faint swoosh of a car passing by in the distance and turned around in the direction of the noise.

"You with the woman they just brought in?" A nurse in pink scrubs asked as she came up behind him and put a powder-blue hospital blanket around his shoulders.

"My mom."

"What's your name?" she asked quietly.

"Russell." He was still shaking. "Russell Richard."

"Whom in your family should we call?"

"No family," he paused. "Mom said to call Maybelle if anything bad happened. Mom's best friend, Maybelle Williams. Lives in Meagher. That's where we're from." He was now rocking nervously back and forth.

"You OK if I call her?"

He nodded. She left to make the call, and loneliness surrounded him again as he walked inside.

Charlene could hear the frenzy in the emergency room and wondered whether this was what hell sounded like—the hiss of the oxygen mask, the bleating of the heart monitor, the wail of the IV drip signaling that the tubes had crimped shut, and the nurse shouting Code Blue! over and over in a shrill voice.

"Blood pressure is 80 over 40 and dropping, Doctor."

"Hand me the naloxone. There we go." She could hear the doctor give a long exhale as he pushed down the plunger.

"Blood pressure is still dropping."

"Another naloxone."

The heart monitor's bleats were slowing down.

"Come on, Charlene." She could feel compressions on her chest.

"Clear!" the doctor shouted, followed by a loud thump, but Charlene didn't feel her body move. She felt like she was floating.

There was a light—a white light so bright she could see it through her eyelids.

Maybelle pulled on the emergency room's automatic doors in an attempt to make them open faster. She was wearing a purple sleeping cap and had pulled on navy sweatpants under her purple flannel nightgown. She shuffled over to Russell in her white, thick-soled shoes.

"Russell, what happened?"

"Overdose, the officer said." He began rocking faster. She bent down, wrapped her heavy frame around him, and let out a long sigh.

The emergency room doctor and the state trooper came through the double doors. The doctor was a tall man, and the trooper was a bald, stocky man with broad shoulders who, when he stopped, assumed an at-attention pose, holding his brown Mountie hat in front of his stomach with both hands. Their expressions told Russell and Maybelle that the news wasn't good.

"Your name is Russell?" the doctor asked, and Russell nodded.

"I'm sorry, son. She didn't make it," he said. He looked down, then up into Russell's eyes.

Crippling grief gripped Russell and he began sobbing again. His legs went weak, and he reached out to Maybelle to avoid collapsing.

"Do you need to sit?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir," he said, steadying himself and wiping his eyes with his right shirt sleeve. His mother had started referring him as the man of the house when he turned ten, and he knew she would have expected him to remain stoic.

"Tried naloxone. Twice. Heart CPR. Defibrillator. We couldn't get a sustained heartbeat. She was too far gone," said Dr. Wright. The trooper's eyes became red and watery.

"Was it an overdose?" said Russell. "Mom didn't do drugs."

"Russell, your mother took pain meds after the accident," Maybelle said, avoiding Russell's eyes.

"But she wouldn't overdose," said Russell.

"Has all the signs of an overdose," said the doctor. "Won't know for sure until we get the tox screen back."

A long, uncomfortable silence followed.

"Can we see her?" said Maybelle in a hush.

"Yes, I'll take you back," the doctor said, putting his arm on Russell's shoulder as the three walked slowly and with heavy steps into the emergency room. It smelled of antiseptic and the faint ammonia scent of tears. The doctor gently pulled open the white plastic curtain to the treatment bay, and Russell and Maybelle stepped in.

"Take as much time as you need," said the doctor, closing the curtain.

Charlene Richard was a small, wiry woman—age 35, five feet tall, and barely 100 pounds. She usually wore her coarse, coppery hair pulled back in a neat, tight bun. Now her reddish locks were in disarray. She was sunken slightly down into the gurney, with a pure white sheet covering her tightly up to her head. Under the harsh, fluorescent lights, she looked vulnerable. Vulnerable was a word no one would've used to describe Charlene.

Maybelle looked at Charlene's face. Charlene's lips had turned slightly blue. Never the same after the accident, Maybelle thought. And now I'm the reason she's dead. Maybelle reached out and touched

Charlene on the scar across her forehead with the back of her hand and recoiled as Charlene's body was already going cold. She stepped back.

"Should we call Father Riggle?" she asked. "You know, last rites?" Maybelle was a devout Baptist.

"Can't get last rites after you die," said Russell. "But we should probably let Father Riggle know."

"I'll call him," said Maybelle, looking for a reason to step away from her best friend's corpse.

Russell stood beside his mom and touched her softly on the cheek.

"Mom, what happened?" He stepped back, closed his eyes, made the sign of the cross, then mouthed, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." He stopped and opened his eyes. He didn't know what to pray for. He bent down. A heavy tear fell onto the sheet. He decided to kiss her on the cheek as a goodbye. Then he felt it on his face. A wisp of breath. He jumped back.

"She's breathing!" he shouted.

The curtain flew open. The doctor saw that life was returning to Charlene's face.

"Get the crash cart in here again!" he yelled.

Maybelle came running back to the treatment bay. "What's happening?"

"She's breathing," said Russell. He was

panting and shifting his weight quickly from one foot to the other. Maybelle gave him a puzzled look, then guided him back to the waiting room. Back in the ER, the doctor and two nurses resumed working on Charlene.

Russell paced and chewed on the fingers of his right hand. Maybelle sat with her eyes closed, her hands clasped tightly on her lap, and her lips moving in prayer. After 45 minutes, Dr. Wright came through the emergency room doors.

"Have never seen anything like this," he said, shaking his head. "Already talking. Should make a complete recovery. Nothing short of a miracle."

"Hallelujah!" shouted Maybelle as she stood and gave Russell a bear hug.

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On Monday night, her first day back at the trailer, Charlene finally fell into a fitful sleep on the living room lounge chair—reupholstered in light blue denim sometime in the late '70s. She hazily awakened the next morning to the nervous tapping of fingernails. *Tap, tap* (pause). *Tap, tap, tap, tap* (pause). *Tap, tap* (pause). It compounded the throbbing in her head. Before she was discharged from the hospital, a nurse had reviewed a list of opioid withdrawal symptoms with her. She had handed Charlene a copy once she was settled in the backseat of Maybelle's sunshine-yellow Ford Fiesta. Insomnia and headaches were at the top of the list.

She slowly opened her eyes. Looking down the length of the trailer, she saw someone sitting at the kitchen table. "Russell," she said, coughing. "You should be at school."

Her vision then came into better focus, and she jumped off the recliner in terror.

"Remember me, Charlene?" said a figure shrouded in a hooded, black sackcloth robe. Black, bat-like folded wings formed an arch above its head. It was seated at the dining booth, on fire-engine-red vinyl cushions that had gray duct tape covering little rips. Its boney fingers—with long, jagged, black fingernails—were making the rapping sounds on the yellow, Formica-topped kitchen table. The trailer smelled like decaying leaves and freshly brewed coffee.

Charlene backed into a corner as far away from the creature as she could get.

"What are you?" she said, shaking violently.

"Please, who am I?" the creature said in a surprisingly soothing voice, almost a purr. "I have many names—the destroyer, the killer of the first-born sons of Egypt, Azrael the Archangel of Death in the Abrahamic faiths, and more recently, the Grim Reaper. But you may just call me," it paused, "Death." It wiggled its wings for effect.

Charlene grabbed her thick, rimless glasses from the aluminum folding tray next to the recliner. When she put them on, she saw that its eyes were glowing dim white. A dull black scythe was propped up by the door. She thought that if the creature stood up, it would be at least eight feet tall.

"God created me to do what he's unwilling to do," it said. "Take and deliver the souls of his creations. It's really just too hard on him to do it himself, and humans are his favorite," it said, with a hint of sadness in its voice.

"Come, sit with me," Death added more lightly. "I made coffee."

She took a step closer and saw two beige coffee cups on the table. "Are you here to take me? My soul?" Her voice cracked.

"No, I botched that. I'm here to apologize," Death said, then took a long sip of coffee, its large bony hands dwarfing the mug.

"I saw you in the emergency room," she said, taking another step closer. "You swooped in. You were hovering over me." She noticed the creature had the forked tongue of a serpent. This and its white eyes were its only distinguishable facial features. Otherwise, its visage was matte black. She was now next to the table. "Then you..."

"Then I sneezed," it said, looking away in embarrassment. Charlene sat on the edge of the dining booth. Death handed her one of the mugs.

"You sneezed?" she said, with a puzzled look.

"Here's how it's supposed to work," it said, putting the mug down on the table. "I hover over the dying and use my tongue to remove their soul." It slithered its tongue at her. "My eyes are the light people see when they die, when the soul is being removed." It looked at her, and its eyes became brighter. "Sometimes mistakes happen. I almost had your soul removed when I sneezed, and it went back in. That's only happened once before."

She took a sip from her mug and smiled. "I usually add sugar," she said. "Would you like some?" She stood and stepped over to the small cupboard and pulled out a pink plastic sugar bowl, placed it on the table,

sat back down, and put a spoonful of the glistening white crystals into her coffee. She looked at the creature and gestured with an outstretched hand to see if it wanted any.

“You seem rather calm for someone quite literally staring Death in the eyes,” it said.

“That’s because I just realized you’re a symptom,” she said.

“A symptom?”

“Of opioid withdrawal. I’m sure hallucinations are on the list they gave me at the hospital. I’m not really sitting here having coffee with you.”

“You’re correct,” it said. “You’re still sleeping on the La-Z-Boy over there.” Death then pointed a gnarled and spare index finger behind her. She turned and saw herself still sleeping, twitching on the recliner.

“Or maybe you’re a nightmare,” she said.

“Whatever you choose to believe,” it said. “If you don’t think I’m real, I’d like to point out that I’ve been featured in New Yorker cartoons 104 times.” Death then paused and curved its fingers inward, examining its nails.

“Anyway, I’m here to say I’m sorry that I goofed removing your soul, and that as a result of my bungling, God has given you a gift in reparation.”

“A gift?” she said. “What kind of gift?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” it said, scooting out of the booth and standing up. Indeed, it was more than eight feet tall, and it had

to hunch over as it moved toward the door. Its robe was held closed by a thick, wrought-iron chain. “But you’ll find out soon enough.” Death then walked to the door and grabbed its scythe.

“One last question,” Charlene said. “Where were you going to take my soul?”

“I’m not at liberty to tell you that either,” it said, opening the door and taking flight in a strong gust of wind.

She woke up an hour later with nausea added to her other withdrawal symptoms. As she rushed to the bathroom, she noticed two mugs of cold coffee and the pink sugar bowl on the kitchen table.

On Wednesday morning, Charlene awakened on the recliner to the sound of Russell taking a shower. Although she was certain that the prior morning’s events weren’t real, she put on her glasses and scanned the trailer to make sure nothing else was there. The recliner was in the small living room at the front of the trailer. Facing it on the opposite wall was a small couch Maybelle had recovered after she took a class in upholstery at the trade school in Cape Girardeau, the nearest city, more than 30 miles away. Locals just called it Cape. Maybelle had selected a plaid fabric of punch pink and forest green. A small TV was on a folding tray at the front of the trailer. The tray was the mate to the one beside the recliner. The tops were spray-painted royal blue with gold fleur-de-lis stenciled in the centers. A well-worn oval braided rug of alternating camel and cream cords was laid between the recliner and the couch.

In the middle of the trailer was the front

door that opened into the kitchen. There was no back door. To the right was a small cabinet made of soft pine stained a deep orange and topped with a butcher block counter, the surface of which was dotted with shallow knife cuts, with a small cupboard above it. A small stainless-steel sink, scrubbed so hard with Brillo pads that a swirling pattern was worn into the bottom, sank into the left side of the butcher block counter. Next was a narrow, white, electric oven and stove with two cooking coils. Charlene could bake a sheet cake in the oven if she put it in with the thinner side facing out. A white refrigerator with a freezer on top, the same width as the stove, rounded out the kitchen. It was covered with pictures that Russell had colored, painted, or sketched in grade school. Every so often, he’d insist she remove them. She’d just smile at him and say, *You’ll understand when you have a child of your own.*

Facing the sink, stove, and refrigerator was the dining booth. It converted into a bed where Russell used to sleep. Charlene had decided a teenage boy needed more privacy than a 35-year-old woman, so she had given him the bedroom and started sleeping on the recliner. Next to the bedroom was a small bathroom, with a sink, shower, and toilet, made private by a beige vinyl accordion door. The walls were covered in white contact paper. A medicine cabinet with a mirrored door hung above the sink. Charlene taped inspirational quotes to it, mostly for Russell’s benefit. The one currently posted read, *To be a servant of Christ is to be truly free. –St. Agatha.*

The flooring throughout the trailer was goldenrod-colored press-on vinyl tiles. No matter how often Charlene mopped—and she was a fastidious housekeeper—

they looked dirty. The trailer always had the pleasant, stringent smell of Pine-Sol. Maybe after she got Russell through college, she could save up enough to cover the tiles with a more cheerful rolled linoleum.

Charlene looked at the glowing red numbers on the digital alarm clock on the TV tray next to her. The alarm function had stopped working years ago, but Russell usually woke himself up in time to get ready for school.

“You need to hurry up!” she shouted. “It’s 7:30! The bus will be here any minute!”

She heard the water shut off, and Russell stepped out of the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around his waist. In one step, he dove behind the sliding door into the bedroom.

Charlene was thinking about getting up from the recliner and wrapping a dish towel around some ice cubes to put on her pounding forehead when she heard the bus pull up. The bus driver honked the horn.

“Russell!” she shouted, covering her eyes with her hands as the morning light made her head hurt even more. “He’ll leave after three honks!”

Russell stumbled out of the bedroom, pulling on a cowboy boot. “Where’s my backpack?” he said. “I know I left it on the table.”

The bus driver honked a second time.

“Can’t go to school without my backpack,” said Russell, quickly looking back and forth

as he darted around the trailer.

“Pray to St. Anthony,” said Charlene.

“No time,” Russell said.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” said Charlene, crossing herself. “St. Anthony! St. Anthony! Please come around! Something is lost and cannot be found!” It was a prayer she had learned as a child in catechism.

“Russell,” she said. “You left it on the bus.”

Russell stopped and gave her a puzzled look.

“Look out the door. Mr. Cramer is waving it outside the bus door.”

Russell opened the door and saw that the bus driver was, indeed, waving the backpack at him.

“How did you...?” asked Russell. The bus driver honked a third time and Russell dashed out the door.



## ***Boy's Night: A Haiku***

*By Austin McClanahan*

Boys night is cancelled

My easy bake oven broke

I'm so sorry bros

## ***Haiku 2***

*By M.H. Stamatakis*

Duplicitous dove

Flying over the wedding

Shat upon the bride

## *Needless to Say (The Tale of a Self-Professed Brilliant Genius)*

By Abby Foust

Needless to say, I was perturbed. Also needless to say, the reason for my perturbedness (is that a word? most likely not, but I don't care) was the lack of a reasonably-sized flathead screwdriver. Equally needless to say, I required the screwdriver in order to fix my toaster, so I could make toast, so I could eat the toast, so I wouldn't be completely starved by the time I got to work, so I wouldn't devour all the office furniture. Again. (I jest. Mostly. There was at least one couch left by the time I was through.)

"Needless to say," I began, waving an improperly-sized screwdriver in the air like an oddly-sized windshield wiper.

"Would you please stop beginning every sentence with 'needless to say'?" the hardware store man groaned. How perfectly rude of—what was his name? Albert, his name tag said.

I crossed my arms. "As I was saying before someone cut me off: I'm quite disappointed in your store." Having made my point, I quickly uncrossed my arms so I wouldn't be stabbing my armpit with a screwdriver anymore.

"It's not my store," Albert responded wearily, rubbing his hair. It was the color of dead leaves. Wet dead leaves, to be specific. "It actually belongs to my uncle."

I scrunched up my nose (like a bunny rabbit, but a fierce one). It was time to take

matters into my own hands. "Fine, then. I'm very disappointed in your uncle. Tell me, Albert."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah?"

"Does your uncle value you?"

"...Yes?"

"Excellent." I removed my industrial strength duct tape and designer-brand leopard print gag from the backpack slung over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Albert asked nervously. I could tell he was nervous because he drew out the *a* in what. Also, because his face looked like a bunny rabbit (not a fierce one).

"Hold still."

"Wha—"

Good thing for me that Albert (apparently) freezes when confused; it was quite easy to duct tape his hands to the counter.

"Let me go!" he exclaimed, finally having gathered his wits. Not quickly enough, haha! Unfortunately, his wit-gathering made it much more difficult to stick the gag in his mouth.

"Albert, stop struggling," I chided. "I need this to go fast, you know. Work starts in seven hours, and I can't be late. Again."

"Mmmphrrrr," Albert answered through the gag that I had just stuck in his mouth.

I sighed. "Albert, please don't talk with that in your mouth. It was very expensive, so I don't need you poking little bitty holes in it with your teeth."

"MMTHWRL," Albert complained. I assumed he was complaining, anyway. Who knows, really?

"Don't be such a baby," I scolded. "I only need to kidnap you for ten minutes, so I can ransom you to your uncle in exchange for a reasonably-sized flathead screwdriver, so I can fix my toaster, so that I can make toast, so that I can eat the toast, so that the office furniture will be safe from me. Needless to say—" here he glared at me "—I would have preferred to get the screwdriver in a less violent way, but some things can't be helped."

I looked him up and down, and quickly realized a small error. "Hm. I guess it's not kidnapping if you're still right where you started." Needless to say, I was initially disgruntled to have my plan thrown off in such a way. I wasn't off track for long, however.

"I know!" I exclaimed. "I'll get a knife, so I can cut off the piece of this counter that your hands are taped to, so that I can stick you in the back of my truck, so that I can properly kidnap you, so that I can demand a reasonably-sized flathead screwdriver from your uncle, so that I can fix my toaster, so that I can make toast, so that I can eat the toast, so that I won't be completely starved by the time I get to work, so that I won't devour all the office furniture." I chuckled to myself. "I'm too good."

Albert gave me a confused look.

"It's all right, Albert," I assured him. "Not everyone can understand genius."

"Hmmp," Albert said. He jerked his head towards the racks of beef jerky.

"Beef jerky is no help in this—wait!" I exclaimed. Perhaps Albert wasn't quite so dull as I supposed.

"Wait right here." I chuckled at my joke (since Albert had no choice but to wait right there), and grabbed a package of beef jerky off the rack. "This should solve my little problem."

I jogged out of the hardware store and began searching high and low for someone who appeared to be in possession of a knife. Fortunately for me, I quickly spotted a fellow in a crisp blue suit, who seemed to have several weapons on hand.

"Ho ho, good sir! Might I offer you a trade?" I waved the beef jerky in the air.

The fellow frowned, his brows creasing beneath his blue cap. "I'm rather busy at the m—"

"Oh, it'll only take a second! I just need to trade you this beef jerky for a knife, so that I can cut off a chunk of a counter to which I've taped a cashier, so that I can demand a reasonably-sized flathead screwdriver in exchange for his safety, so that I can fix my toaster, so that I can make toast, so that I can eat the toast, so that I won't eat every bit of office furniture once I arrive at work."

The man stared at me. "I—I'm sorry, could

you repeat the part about the cashier?”

This fellow was ridiculously slow. I'd already explained everything. But I obligingly replied, “Ah yes, a rather stubborn fellow named Albert. I've taped him to a counter, so that I can kidnap him, so that I can—”

“Stop right there, sir,” the man ordered. He slapped a peculiar silver bracelet onto my wrist. “You're under arrest for attempted kidnapping.”

“What! Arrest? But I was only doing it so that I could acquire a reasonably—”

Needless to say, the man-who-was-apparently-a-police-officer was not amused. But never fear! All my problems have been solved, as I now reside in a metal cage wherein no office furniture appears to tempt my palate, no toasters break, no reasonably-sized flathead screwdrivers are needed, and no ridiculously stubborn cashiers attempt to chew holes in my designer gags. And I got a free orange jumpsuit, to boot!

Needless to say, this was definitely my plan all along, and it couldn't possibly have worked out better. I really am a genius.



## ***Pumpkin Patch***

*By Sami Brennan*

(Digital)



## ***A Girl and Her Cat***

*By Isabella Herman*

(Digital)

## ***The Eyes***

**العيون:**

*By Hahneen Ghannam*

**بعر فش اسبح، فبغرق.**

I can't swim, so I drown.

If you were to ask someone the color of his eyes, they'd tell you brown.  
But if you ask me, I'd tell you how  
in the mornings they remind me of fresh pancakes and tea.  
The softness in the sparkle of his tiredness while each eyelash still lays low and  
free.

The way his gaze seeps into my heart—  
the same way syrup seeps into the dough so effortlessly.  
The warmth his stare brings when his eyes look into mine;  
I become a volcano about to erupt.  
It almost ignites a fire in me as I forget my hand is burning on my tea cup.  
It feels like I'm swimming in a pool of honey glaze;  
and I never want to get out.

By the night they pierce at me like chocolate diamonds glistening from the sockets  
of his eyes.  
As if I had just mined a fortune in the depths of his beautiful skin and scars that  
I've memorized.  
His stare brings goosebumps up and down my spine and suddenly my skin feels  
cold as ice.

The hairs that touch his eyelids fall individually aligned.  
Almost as if intentionally perfect and defined.  
I sip dark coffee to warm the breeze his glance brings across my chest. Yet,  
even inside my mug I find myself sinking into his pupils' nest. It's as if I'm  
stuck in this dark underground mine, his eyes are my flashlight, and I never want to stop  
digging.

When they cry, I die a little bit inside.  
Although they do gleam a little more when filled with tears and tides. His  
lashes fall droopy whilst they drown in the waves of his pain. His sad eyes  
become a glossy violin playing melancholic melodies in vain.

The pancakes mold as he aches.  
The chocolate diamonds break.  
Everything becomes a whirlpool of chaos.  
Like a broken pipe leaking from his eyes into a lake.  
Yet he's even more beautiful than I've ever seen.  
I swim the dark caramel ocean with him,  
As we fight every flood of misery in-between.

When they're happy they glimmer and beam.  
So bright that even while fully awake,  
you will dream.

Almond shaped so when he smiles they squeeze.  
Bringing his eyes to a calm and still stance like the sea.  
Almost shutting, yet in the cracks of his lids is a glowing ray so extreme. Like the  
ring around a solar eclipse that shines bright enough to blind as it bleeds. You'll  
understand why you don't need a light at the time of night. When he smiles and  
they crease, something flows out so bright. Pouring from between his lashes like  
liquid light.

His eyes become the moon in the dark.  
His sight itself becomes enough for you to see.

How can the same eyes that bring me warmth,  
Also make me shiver internally?

I never want to learn to swim,  
So that in his eyes I can drown for eternity.

Now if you ask me about the color of his eyes,  
I won't tell you brown.  
I'd tell you;  
I can't swim so I drown.

## ***Becoming Me***

*By Abi Alexander*

I am the quiet echo  
of all the storms I survived.  
The girl who learned to hold grief  
like a fragile bird,  
and let it rest in her hands  
without breaking.

I am the fire that burns  
beneath soft skin.  
A light that flickers in the dark,  
not because I'm fearless,  
but because I choose to stand  
even when shaking.

I have loved in shadows,  
held hands that ran,  
and fought battles no one saw.  
I have worn my pain like armor,  
and sometimes like chains.  
But I am more than scars.  
I am more than silence.

I am the voice  
that learned to speak  
after years of quiet.  
The song of a woman  
who found herself  
not in someone else's reflection,  
but in the mirror of her own truth.

I carry the weight  
of loss, love, and hope.  
Each step forward, a promise.  
To honor the girl I was,  
to hold the woman I am becoming,  
to never stop  
believing in the light  
that lives inside me.

I am Me.

A story still unfolding,  
a poem still being written,  
a soul learning how to fly  
on wings forged  
from pain and grace.

## ***I Am From***

***By S.O.S. Ransom***

I am from basement parties with J-Rock on the 1s and 2s.  
I'm from too sweet Kool aid and fried chicken wings.  
I am from Tha Bud.  
I'm from Grandma Dorothy's crowded house.  
I am from Mr. Scales' plum tree and strawberry patch, whose fruit nourished and gave something to throw to all the neighborhood kids in the '80s.  
I'm from floor model tv's and high-water Lee jeans.  
I am from the Grimes and the Whites  
I'm from drunken cussing sessions. From GET THE FUCK OUT to where yo ass been?  
I am from crippin on 44 BUD.  
I'm from being bullied for the sole purpose of making sure no one else could do it.  
I am from praising the Lawd and submitting to Allah intermittingly.  
I'm from Popeye and Sophie.  
From chicken & (from scratch) dumplings and pig & the blankets.  
From Grandpa Criswell being killed for his land in Hot Springs Arkansas and cousin Minnijean and the Little Rock 9 desegregation Central High School.  
I am from cowboy boots and cap guns.  
I'm from Super Soakers and the Vernon Dance. From Morries Candy house and stuff like that.

# Unfinished

By Robin Sandroni

“Memory is a funny thing. It’s not like putting oil on canvas. No, my girl, memory is more like a watercolor. It smears and blurs, not just with the passing of time, but with the slightest push from the mind that paints it. In the end, the details are lost, if they were ever there to begin with. It’s inevitable. If you think you remember something perfectly, you’re always wrong—even if it’s something that seems impossible to forget.”

She does not look at me as she speaks. Her eyes are instead locked on the canvas in front of her. A woman stares out of it, nearly complete. Her expression is a haunting combination of lonely and inviting. She appears to be smiling, but something subtly unnerving hides in it. My mother is an excellent painter.

I remain silent, waiting on Mother. It is not uncommon for her to turn to strange topics unprompted when she paints these portraits. At this point, I know better than to rush or interrupt her. She will continue speaking when she is ready. Eventually, she puts her brush down, content that this portrait is finished. It will likely end up with the others. I’ve always found it a shame that such beautiful paintings will go unappreciated, but she has always been certain that this is not a face meant to be seen by anyone other than the two of us. She turns to me, and her lips curl down into a nearly invisible frown.

“And, of course,” she says, “the canvas can do nought but reflect our own impurities. No matter how many times I try, the details

are lost. Lost in that mire we call memory.”

The woman on the canvas does not appear to be missing any details. I say as much, and Mother lets out a hollow laugh and shakes her head.

“No,” she says. “She’s perfect, just like every other time. Just like I remember her. That’s just the thing. She wasn’t perfect. And all those little imperfections have been brushed away in my mind. This isn’t that woman. This is the idea of her. That’s all I have now. It’s all she left me.”

I hesitate. I’ve asked the question before, and never gotten much of an answer. However, she is more talkative today than usual. Not to mention, I am older now. I simply have to know. I had seen the woman’s face enough that I could probably paint it myself. Or, I could if I were any good at painting. The point remains. So, tentatively, I ask.

She regards me for a long moment. I consider taking back the request, as little good as it would do, but I do not. Instead, I simply withstand her gaze, keeping as still as I can. Practice has made me better than most at doing so. Finally, she speaks.

“I suppose you do deserve to know,” she says.

She sits down on a stool, suddenly seeming older and heavier than usual. She digs through her pockets with paint-splattered fingers and eventually procures a single cigarette. After another moment of

searching, she lets out a frustrated sigh.

“You don’t happen to have a match, do you?” she asks.

I nod and procure one for her. I don’t smoke, but I make a habit of carrying both matches and Mother’s favorite cigarettes on my person. She tends towards forgetfulness, and I do what I can to help. She takes it from me with a grateful smile.

“Merci, ma fleur.” She lights it in a smooth motion and then asks me, “Do I have any appointments today?”

I remind her that the man from the gallery will be visiting soon. She waves her hand dismissively. It is a well-practiced gesture.

“Cancel it,” she says. “Tell him he’ll get what he wants, and more, on Sunday. Provided I don’t see his face before then.”

I can’t tell him, of course, but I still arrange to cancel the appointment. I will admit it pleases me somewhat to do so. I have never liked the man from the gallery, with his beady eyes always so full of avarice. He looks at Mother the same way he looks at her paintings. Like he’s gauging how much ‘value’ he can get out of them. I let her know I’ve done it.

“Good,” she says. “That man shouldn’t worry so much. What he wants is all too easy to produce.” She takes a long, weary drag from her cigarette. “Might as well get this underway before I start. It’s not a short story.”

She removes the canvas she finished minutes ago and places it on the stack of identical pieces behind her. It is nearly up

to her head at this point. I have already produced a second match for her before she asks. She takes it, lights it, and tosses it on the pile. The canvas catches instantly.

“Nor a particularly happy one,” she says, turning back to me. The flames start leaping up behind her.

I have to admit, it seems strange to me. If the memory hurts her so much, why so many portraits? I don’t say anything, but something in my expression must give me away. She gives me a small smile.

“You’re wondering why I paint.” It isn’t a question, but I nod anyway. “Well, it’s like I said earlier. This isn’t really her. Just that pleasant, perfect version. This version could never bring me pain.” There’s a long pause as she takes another drag. “It’s how I know she isn’t real,” she adds in a quiet voice. The words are barely audible over the crackling of the fire, like the sounds her bones make when she stands from a long session.

I nod again. I suppose that answer makes sense. I don’t know much about these sorts of memories, or the pain that’s so clear in her eyes and voice. There are still so many things I do not know, but there is a logic I can understand. She motions to me, and I sit at her feet—a motion I have so many times over the years.

“So,” she says. “This woman.” She does not name her. “I suppose... she would have been your mom.”

I am sure my eyes go wide at the thought. I have never considered the thought that I might have family outside of Mother. For all my existence, it had simply been the two

of us. Hesitantly, I ask if we would have been a family. The word feels strange in my head.

“I’m... not sure,” she says. Her voice is distant and sad, but the edges of her lips curl up into the slightest of smiles. “I like to believe so, though.” Her smile widened. “And of all the things she could have left behind, I’m so happy it was you.”

I frown, not understanding. How could I have been left behind? Wasn’t I Mother’s? She actually laughs a little at my confusion. It’s a wonderful sound, and one I hear far too little.

“Non, ma fleur, I didn’t make you,” she says. “Lord, can you imagine? You’d probably be so glum and sour. No, she gave you your curiosity and joy. Your desire to grow. All those wonderful traits of hers. Yours now.”

The praise makes me feel warm inside. An unfamiliar feeling, and one I can’t exactly name. A smile comes to my face unbidden, and my cheeks grow warm. I’m not used to involuntary reactions from my body, but today is an unusual day. Mother regards me with an inscrutable smile. Pride? Bemusement? I am skilled at noticing Mother’s whims and needs, but— even after all these years— emotions still elude me.

“You’re her legacy,” she says. Her words carry meaning, even I can see that. “Her only legacy, now.” She shakes her head and lets out a dry, humorless laugh. The sound seems to disappear into the noises of the burning canvases behind her. “She was always so obsessed with it, with leaving her mark. For good and for ill.”

The smoke has reached me now, carrying the mix of smells that I have never grown used to. Acrid, sweet, leathery. Oil and canvas being reduced and vaporized. The smell of paintings dying. I wrinkle my nose. I think the contortion of my face might mask the emotions her words have elicited in me, but Mother knows me better than that.

Her hand reaches out to stroke my cheek, leaving a swirl of color behind when she lifts it. The paint on her hand is still wet. Nonetheless, the gesture is comforting.

“Non,” she says. “Do not fear, ma fleur. You’re the greatest legacy she or anybody else could have asked for. You’ve even drawn love out of my cold, dark heart.” She lets out a chuckle, soft but real. “It is hard for me to admit, but she failed in many ways. She was headstrong, driven, independent, and it brought her as much failure as it did success. In the end, it cost her everything. But not you. She would never have traded you for any of it.” She pauses, looks down, like she’s remembering something. Her head turns, and she gazes into the growing fire for a long time. She looks like she’s trying to find some meaning in the flames. Then her eyes return to mine, and they are wet with tears. “And neither would I,” she says. “Perhaps she did not fail after all.”

Her words assuage some of my concerns, but my lips still turn down in a frown as a new one crosses my mind. I try to imagine this woman. This woman, whom Mother loved, who left me behind— along with, it seems, the entire world. I try to remember her, but there’s nothing. Try as I might, I’m left only with one image— Mother’s portrait, that beautiful face. It’s like I can’t

conceive of anything else. Haltingly, I try to explain my distress to Mother. She sighs.

“She always wanted to leave her mark on the world. To be someone. And while I am a perfectly competent paintress, she—” Mother pauses here and shakes her head with a hint of a smile. “She was something else. She didn’t just paint. She created. I know no other way to put it.” She pauses, takes another drag from her cigarette. Her face is contorted, trying to grasp at memory. It almost looks painful. Behind her, the flames leap higher. Every piece is consumed now. This is the point where I used to fear the fire spreading, but I know better. It only ever takes the paintings.

“We lived together in this very house for several years. Met here, even. Just two artists looking for someone to help pay the bills. A tale as old as time, no?” She flashes one of her wry smiles that I’ve learned means she’s telling a joke that she doesn’t really expect me to get. It is accompanied by a wave of her diminishing cigarette, sending its smoke to join that of the blaze of paintings. I realize that for as long as I’ve been aware, Mother has certainly been successful enough to afford a nicer house— or at least a house in a nicer part of town— but the subject was never even broached.

“We were both nobodies when we moved in; it wasn’t long before her star began to rise. It never could have been. Her skill was obvious even to the most untrained eye. And for every canvas she displayed, there were dozens more, left around the atelier, or consigned to the fires. Unfinished, not good enough, or simply something she never had a desire to share with anyone else. My eyes only, she would say, like we were sharing some great secret. I suppose

we were, in a way.” She releases a breath of smoke, which instantly joins with the smoke of the paintings, whisked up, away, and out of the house. She then drops what remains of her cigarette into a tray, joining a handful of other butts. They are disposed of twice daily as a matter of necessity. She shakes her head.

“I never did fully understand her,” she continues. “The galleries loved her. Every piece she gave them was a hit. But they always wanted more. They’re hungry bastards, but I suppose we all are. Most of us, anyway.” A pause. The fire crackles like it wants to join the conversation. She does not let it. “Not her. At least not in the same way, and certainly not for the same things. She could have given them any of those pieces she would stack up or burn. Sure, they weren’t as good. Lacked a certain vital something. But most of those fools wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference. She cared about money even less than I do. There was very little she cared about, to tell the truth. More than once, I had to remind her to eat when she was absorbed in her work. All she wanted was recognition, and no matter how much she got, it wasn’t enough. She refused to be remembered by anything other than her most perfect works. Letting me see everything else was, I think, the greatest sign of her affection I ever received.”

She pauses, reflecting. Tentatively, I push. I ask what happened and how I came to be.

“Patience, cheri,” she says. Her voice is gentle and holds no reproach. “We’ll get to that soon enough. The memories can be... hard to work through. Those times were some of my happiest, though. I found modest success of my own, barely enough

to contribute to the household, really. But she was like a star. I was more than happy to bask in the radiance of her success as she reached ever greater heights. We stayed in this little place because she wanted to stay with me, and I was too prideful to move someplace I'd have to rely on her. Foolish, really. I relied on her for so much I didn't realize." She sighs heavily. Behind, the fire sighs with her as it begins to drop from its apex.

"But it was never enough. She had secured her legacy a hundred times over. The whole city knew her name, and it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world did as well. If things carried on as they were, I'm certain her name would be spoken in the same breath as Monet, Van Gogh, and Renoir. But still, she had to push further. I don't know what drove her. I could never tell if she simply needed more or if she believed it would all fall away the moment she stopped pushing. But push she did—nearly every hour of every day. I could pull her away briefly, but it never lasted. She barely slept. More pieces were consigned to the fire, often without even myself laying eyes on them. She ate only when reminded. With each passing day, she seemed less and less fully herself, even when I could get an hour or two with her. She was distracted and frustrated. She would talk about being stuck against a glass wall. She could see the other side, but couldn't possibly reach it. She didn't explain further, no matter how many times I asked."

Another long pause. I do not interrupt this time. For what feels like minutes, the only noise is the shifting of the last few crumbling canvases within the flames.

"You are wondering why I did not interfere,

try to pull her from this obviously self-destructive path. I ask myself every day. She scared me. But even through all of this, she was still... her. I compared her to a star earlier. Well, think of the sun. It is warm, and beautiful, and life-giving, but—if you stare at it too long—it will blind you. She blinded me.

I was woken in the middle of the night by a shout. I scrambled out of bed and to the door of her workroom, and made it all the way there before I registered the sound for what it was. Not fear or panic, but joy. It was victory. As I burst through the door, I saw it. She stood in front of her canvas, ragged, exhausted, and terribly pale. But I hardly noticed, because upon the canvas was the most exquisite thing I had ever laid eyes on. Probably the greatest I ever will. It seemed to swim before my eyes, like the canvas struggled to contain it. I can't remember what it looked like now. That's been taken, like so much else. But the feelings are still there, preserved as well as any memory can be. Every time I paint, some part of me chases those feelings."

The fire is almost entirely gone now. It never quite ceases to surprise me how quickly it goes from blazing inferno to final fading embers. Now, only a handful of stubborn paintings still burn.

"After a moment of staring entranced at the painting, I actually noticed the state she was in. I... may have panicked somewhat, but she told me to calm down." I try to imagine Mother panicking. It doesn't come easily. "She said she figured out how to break the barrier. That it was only a matter of blood, sweat, and tears." She pauses, then quietly adds, "Of how much of yourself you were willing to give." She stops for a moment.

"I celebrated with her initially. She had created a work of genius that surpassed anything I had ever seen; how could I do anything else? I thought that might be the end of it. This was the fruit of all her labors. She slept better and ate more regularly. We went out together every night for a week. But... every time I asked when she would show the piece, she got evasive. Eventually, she told me it wasn't the right one. I was stunned. I said it would have secured her a place in history, but she shook her head. She insisted she could do better, could reach greater heights still. When I asked why she couldn't just show this to the world and then reach those greater heights, she said she needed it. That it would be necessary to go further beyond. That very night, she entered the atelier after dinner, for the first time since creating the masterpiece. Said she just had to put more of herself into the next one. I could have stopped her before she created the first one. Perhaps I should have stopped her this time. But every time I considered it, my mind would go to the painting, and I would be paralyzed by its beauty all over again. As much as she worried me, I wanted to see what she was capable of. I had to."

Mother stops again, almost mid-sentence. I realize it is because she is beginning to cry. I produce a handkerchief for her. She takes it gratefully in one of her paint-splattered hands. When she is through, the tears are gone, replaced by splotches of color. She offers me a weak smile before continuing.

"I stayed up that night. I was torn between my fear of what she might do to herself and a desire to see what she might create. Afraid to go in, afraid not to go in. So I sat outside the door and waited. No sound came from her room that night. Nor the next morning.

When it had been 12 hours, I tentatively knocked on the door. Whatever she was doing, she needed to eat and sleep. There was no response. Thinking that maybe she fell asleep while working, I opened the door and stepped in to check on her. But she was just... gone." Gone? I echo her, incredulous. She simply nods. "Vanished. And not just her. All of her things, all the stacks of discarded canvases, every trace of her in that room was gone. Like it had never been there to begin with. The effects reached much further than that room. I had already forgotten the previous week's masterpiece, and outside her paintings were vanishing from galleries just as her name was vanishing from people's lips. Soon, I was the only one who even remembered her face, poor as that memory is. I don't know how she did it. I don't know if it was a miscalculation, or if she really thought that the contents of that canvas were a worthy trade for every single bit of what she was. She was gone, as if she had never been at all. Outside of my memory, the only trace that she ever existed was one canvas, in the center of the room." The final embers of the fire fade along with her words, leaving nothing more than ashes. The room is dark now, the fire having masked the fading of the sunlight.

I had so many questions, all bubbling out of me before I could stop them. She just smiled at me before answering the most pressing one.

"It wasn't finished," she says. "It was a beautiful portrait; it held that same mystical shimmering quality as the thing she had made before, any trained eye could see. Parts of it were rough, unpolished. And it was all I had left of her. I fell into a deep despair for a time. I hardly spoke to

anyone, I barely ate.” Her words are heavy in the dark. “You have to understand, fleur. I could not grieve her without sounding mad. It drove me away from society. And the portrait, it taunted me. After everything she put into it...” She trails off, not quite able to finish the sentence. She takes a deep breath before continuing.

“But it was all she left me. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from it. I do not know how long I wallowed in my despair, but one night I was gripped with a notion that would not leave me. I am not half the painter she was. Not now, and certainly not then. But I saw the gaps. I saw what was missing. I grew obsessed with completing it. Day after day, I would spend hours perfecting mere inches of canvas. I had no idea how to reach whatever state she had created it in, but I certainly put all of myself I was able to into it. My hope, my desperation, my love. After what must have been weeks of this, though, a pattern began to emerge.” She pauses, and I can make out a thoughtful frown in the dim light. “Or maybe a revelation,” she says. “The piece, it started to seem less like something that couldn’t be completed, and more like something that had been left intentionally. Like she knew the gaps I would be best at filling. I worked on it for months. Close to a year, probably.”

I ask what happened when she finished it. She replies with as heartfelt a smile as I’ve ever seen on her.

“Finished? Non, I did not finish it.” She strokes my cheek, and I see the streaks of that line her fingers. “Something finished cannot be so beautiful. Eventually, I did enough. When I set my brush down, weary and exhausted, I saw something I did not initially believe. The painting moved. It

shifted, it shuddered, and then it fell off the canvas, into my arms. Her true last gift to me, ma petite fleur. Our beautiful, perfect, unfinished child.”



## ***A Shaded Moth***

*By Cai Tolliver*

*(Acrylic Paint)*



## ***Dream Butterfly***

*By Namita Patel*  
(Collage)

## ***Author & Artist Biographies***

**Abi Alexander** did not provide a biography.

**Matthew Altis** is a Midwest-based artist who works in many different mediums and subject matters. He takes the process of creativity seriously and tries to push himself to understand the process of visual communication and expression. The need to create and express is something that many, if not all, people share, and it's through this common ground that he finds a strong basis of relation. Matt is honored to share his art with others.

**Maria T. Balogh** is a multilingual, bicultural poet and fiction writer. She has published a book of poetry in Spanish and a collection of poetry and fiction in English. She retired recently from the University of MO St. Louis, where she taught Spanish for 21 years. She has done a bit of everything, including a couple of tours in the Peace Corps.

**Noah Bennett** did not provide a biography.

**Sami Brennan** is an illustrator, artist, and designer in her Senior Seminar—getting her BFA in studio art. She is aiming to further pursue her artistic talents and earn her masters in illustration. Her goal is to improve her craft and eventually teach college level art-based classes while also freelancing and selling her own work. She takes pride in her different artistic abilities and range of mediums she works in.

**Lisa Dal Mare** recently decided to start her second career and move out of corporate America. She is currently enrolled in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Masters Program at UMSL. She is committed to being the change in the world that she wants to see. She feels that even if she helps just one person improve their mental health and learn new coping strategies, she has fulfilled her purpose in the world.

**Caleb Delos-Santos** (he/him/his) is a grad student and TA in the poetry MFA program at UMSL. He has published poetry in over twenty literary magazines and won the 2022 Esselstrom Prize and the 2024 William Carlin Slattery Memorial Award for his poetry. Last spring, Caleb earned his English MA from SIUE. When not reading or writing, Caleb plays video games, watches TV with his wife, Mikayla, and messes with his cat, Cookie.

**Keith A. Eldridge** graduated from the University of Missouri—St. Louis (UMSL) in 1984 with a B.S. in Applied Mathematics/Computer Science. He has worked as a Computer Programmer for UMSL at the Missouri Institute of Mental Health for 40 years. He loves reading classic literature and considers Rick Bass, Ray Bradbury, Raymond Carver, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King, and Jack London among his favorite writers.

**Soul Flower** is a St. Louis native and proud first-generation college student, currently a senior majoring in Social Work at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Serving both as a Policy Fellow and practicum student. She has emerged as a thoughtful leader and powerful advocate, moving audiences with her clarity, compassion, and truth-telling. Her commitment to community was further enhanced abroad in Europe’s international studies tour, where she learned the significance of business, governance, and public engagement.

**Abby Foust** is now an UMSL alum, which is a little bit crazy. Having graduated with her bachelor’s degree in 2025, she is now pursuing a law degree at WashU. She hopes that her life and writing bring glory to God above all else.

**Haneen Ghannam** is a Palestinian poet and writer. Her work lingers in the unspoken, in the spaces between grief and tenderness, silence and inheritance, drawing inspiration from the moments most people overlook. She studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where she continues to develop her voice across genres.

**Chloe Nicole Hayes** graduated from UMSL in May 2025 with her BA in Philosophy. She enjoys spending time with her cat, hanging out in nature, and pretending to be in the circus. If you’re lucky, you can find her in her local cemetery, making friends with the ghosts. Buyer beware, she has been known to bite.

**Isabelle Herman** is an UMSL Alumni working on her AR/Children’s book. You might see her around campus carrying a fishing pole with a sign attached to the end of it. She is known to be a rambunctious person that is full of stories, ideas, and a lot of jokes. She enjoys her time with her cat Maisel, watching shows, and drawing her webtoon comic series called “GuBert Comics”.

**Elizabeth Hurlbert** is in her last semester at UMSL, majoring in Applied Psychology of Child Advocacy. She is thrilled to be included in the 2026 edition of Litmag and is excited to keep pursuing her writing. After graduating, Elizabeth hopes to someday continue her education in an MA program to become a licensed therapist. Her other hobbies and interests also include reading, crocheting, sewing, and singing.

**Lauren Johns** graduated with a graphic design degree from Missouri State University in 2022 and obtained a Digital Marketing and Social Media certificate from UMSL in 2024. She is an avid singer, doing paid gigs at churches and participating in various choirs and selling fancy chocolate at the mall. She also dabbles in guitar and digital art and is training for a full marathon in April 2026. She’s currently working towards a Professional Writing Certificate.

**Jordan Kaddouri** did not provide a biography.

**Lea’cher Kennedy** is an undergraduate student at UMSL, pursuing an English degree with a personal emphasis in creative writing. She is also an active member in the university’s choirs, with multiple of her poems having been featured on the choral stage. Currently, she hopes to find an everyday career in writing for a popular newspaper, magazine, or creative publication. Lea’cher aspires to be an author, a fictional novel or poetry collection being her first personal published work.

Chronically restless, **Matt Kimbrell** declared an English major during his final year of college. The final line of his poem “On Mariners’ Maps” refracts Marilyn Chandler MacEntyre’s observation “that it is hard to get people to look at words instead of through them.” And he is not sure where he first encountered the phrase “prismatic fractures,” but he loves what it suggests.

**Stephen Lemley** is earning his teaching certification and Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree while working as a full-time sophomore English teacher at Hazelwood West High School. He is honored to have the first chapter of his novel, *St. Charlene of Meagher*, Missouri, published by Litmag.

**Austin McClanahan** is majoring in Data Science and Analysis and minoring in Computer Science at UMSL. He enjoys long walks on the beach, using the Oxford comma, and protesting a 75-word maximum word count for writing a biography. He wonders how he could even begin to elaborate on the intricacies of his creative writing process in 75 words or fewer. At that few word count, he wouldn’t be able to finish his sentences. And another thing,

**Carter Morgan** did not provide a biography.

**Mia Music** is a writer and mother of three, currently pursuing a law degree. She loves creating worlds to escape into, and her work often blends emotional depth with darker undertones. She writes about growth, love, and the complexity of everyday life, finding meaning in the shadows as much as the light.

**Namita Patel** is a lifelong explorer of creativity; she combines watercolor and collage to create works that are both delicate and dimensional. Her fluid washes and layered textures add a relief-like depth, inviting viewers to feel the emotion within each piece. With a Fine Arts background and over two decades of experience, she continues to experiment fearlessly, seeing art as a journey where imagination, color, and texture tell quiet, soulful stories.

**S.O.S. Ransom** is an emerging scholar, a dedicated advocate, and the founder of Systematic Freedom, a freelance paralegal agency specializing in prison litigation and prisoner advocacy. A graduate of St. Louis Community College, he is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English with plans to attend law school. As a proud native of North St. Louis and a veteran of the Ferguson Uprising, His intellectual work is profoundly rooted in the history and struggles of his community.

**Robin Sandroni** is an aspiring biochemist studying at UMSL. She is a St. Louis native and attended high school at Chaminade. She spends most of her free time playing T.T.R.P.Gs, or thinking about T.T.R.P.Gs.

**Sophie** graduated from UMKC in 2024 with a major in Psychology and a minor in English Literature. She is now working at the UMSL Center for Behavioral Health as a patient navigator and wants to pursue a graduate degree. In what? She has no idea. Her life is in a state of limbo right now, enjoyably so. She is learning to treasure the unknowing of getting older.

**M.H. Stamatakis** works as a Respiratory Therapist at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in all Intensive Care Units and Emergency Department. She lives on a small farm with a flock of chickens and three dogs. When not studying classes pursuant to her degree in Psychology, she enjoys spending her time with family and friends. Her hobbies include photography, music, painting, and writing.

**Joseph Sulier** was born and raised in the simple poverty of Fenton, Missouri, and currently resides in the city of St. Louis. Sulier has been published in several literary journals, including 52nd City, The U. City Review, The Curator Magazine, and RINE, and has had several collections of poetry published.

**Anna Tisdale** is a current junior double majoring in English and secondary education with an English emphasis. She also is working towards Honors and Professional Writing Certificates. She loves to create or capture works that unapologetically dives into truth and gives a voice to unspoken realities. Though she swears her sarcasm is just a literary device.

**Myles Thurman** (they/them) graduated in December 2025 with a major in English. They have been writing since they can remember, mostly poetry and speculative fiction. They recently started expanding their piece Beyond the Vivid and are planning to have it be a full-fledged novel by the end of 2026.

**Julie Thomas**, an UMSL student, discovered writing when her fifth-grade teacher assigned a report project and added those magical words, "And you don't have to tell the truth." Since then, Julie has enjoyed writing fiction, poetry, and eventually, business content. A few years after the death of her longtime partner, she had the audacity to return to college to complete a BLS through UMSL Online. Julie lives in Cameron, Missouri.

**Cai Tolliver** is just a guy from St. Louis that tries. It may be a short greeting, an entire civil engineering degree program, or a blank summer schedule, but trust, he just wants to put good time out and take good time in. That could be blasting some of his favorite music, taking time to listen, or joining paint to coalesce on a canvas. It just makes life worth it.

**Kyle Walsh** is a writer based in St. Louis; he has been published several times for his poetry in the past. He hopes everything will start to make sense soon.

**Jessica Wojcik** is a St. Louis, Missouri-based poet and educator, originally from Utica, New York. She has a passion for literature and for humanity, in whatever shape it takes. She is currently working on creating her own collection of poetry and can be found online on Instagram at @woundwriter.

**Stella Zdrnja** is a finance major with a love for skeletons, zombies, and cyborgs. She is a digital illustrator and figure artist, whose talents do not extend to writing good biographies. You can find her on instagram @Linter.stellar.

## *Get Involved*

English 4895: Editing *Litmag* is offered every fall as part of the English Department's Writing Certificate Program. For students interested in creative writing, professional editing, and publishing, this class provides an internship-like experience that can also be used as a capstone for the certificates. Supervised by a faculty advisor, students in these courses are able to take charge and experience the full scope of creating *Litmag*, from fundraising, solicitation, marketing and promotions, copy editing, document and graphic design, distribution, and publicity. Spring internships may also be available by contacting Kate Watt at [katewatt@umsl.edu](mailto:katewatt@umsl.edu) or Jeanne Allison at [allisonjea@umsl.edu](mailto:allisonjea@umsl.edu).

We welcome you to become part of the next group of editors to continue exploring the creation and publication of our campus' artistic expression!

## *Get Published*

**poetry \* fiction \* creative \* nonfiction \* art \* multilingual**

- Submissions open to all UMSL students, faculty, staff, and alumni.
- Submit up to 5 works in each category listed above.
- Multiple category submissions welcomed.
- Only original works will be considered; no previously published works accepted.
- Prose (Short stories and personal essays) must be 4,000 words or less
- Images of artwork are required to be in jpeg format with 300 dpi or greater.
- Submitters' names are not disclosed during review



## *Colophon*

Proudly presented and bound by Graphic Connections Group. *Litmag* was designed with Adobe InDesign and set in Baskerville, and Helvetica for the content, headlines, and subtitle lines. The Cover and Back Cover art were co-designed by Editor-in-Chief, Aiden Peterson and Lead Designer, Lauren Johns. The section dividers, cracks, and other internal graphics were also made by Lauren Johns in Adobe Illustrator.



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*Beauty lies in the fragments*