

Mountain Brook High School
Literary and Arts Magazine
2019



The Muse

Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers –

Every writer I know can point to one person – a mentor, a teacher, a friend – whose advice and guidance directly correlates to their success as a writer. For me, it was my fifth grade writing teacher Miss Jennifer Hendrix. Ms. Hendrix saw the writer within me and helped me to develop my skill and love for writing, but moreover, Ms. Hendrix sought to see the writer in everyone. As an elementary school teacher, she believed in the value of writing and used her extraordinary talents as a teacher to try to convince every student that all was possible if you were a good writer first.

It broke my heart to hear of Miss Hendrix's unexpected passing earlier this fall. She had moved to another school district and I had lost touch with her, and when I heard she had passed away, I immediately felt guilty for not trying to reach out to her as I got older. I felt helpless, too. In a world with not enough great writing teachers – and I mean great in every sense of the word, surpassing good, elevating beyond extraordinary – we had lost the very best. It was then I decided to use my newly achieved position of co-editor in chief of *The Muse* to try to inspire others to write, just like Ms. Hendrix did for me.

The 2019 edition of *The Muse* is quite possibly the longest edition of the magazine ever, and we are extremely proud to have identified and highlighted over 100 high school students' talents. As you peruse through the magazine, think about not only how much work each of the students put into their writing and artwork, but also the dedication of the mentors in their lives. Please enjoy the magazine, and when you are finished, take the time to let the important people in your life know how important they are to you.

Enjoy *The Muse*!

Kimsey Stewart, co-editor in chief

Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers –

The Muse is not only a collection of the ideas and creativity of the student body, it is also the final product of a team whose passions lie in the literary arts. *The Muse* is more than just a magazine, it's a class of truly amazing individuals whose desire to create is something to marvel at. I am beyond honored to have worked with a group of people who were dedicated to not only sharing their voice but giving others the chance to shine as well.

When you read this magazine, I hope you not only enjoy the stories and poems we have put together, but I hope you also appreciate just how much this staff worked to make this a reality.

Sincerely,

Izzy Narducci, co-editor

The Muse Staff

Kimsey Stewart : Co-Editor-in-chief

Izzy Narducci : Co-Editor-in-chief

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Lena Pelham : Staff Member

Arden Tapp : Staff Member

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Cover Picture by Lena Pelham

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Staff Bios

Kimsey Stewart is co-editor in chief of *The Muse*, and has thoroughly enjoyed her three years as part of the staff of the magazine. She plans to use her talents of putting the fear of God in other people and color-coordination to aid her in her studies at Louisiana State University next year.

Izzy Narducci always had a passion for writing and art; she literally couldn't imagine herself doing anything else with her life. Writing has always been something that she's always been good at and most importantly something she's always enjoyed. Following her studies at Hollins University, she hopes to become an accomplished author and creator one day and she's so happy that *The Muse* has gotten her this far in her journey.

Emily Bebenek has always loved writing and appreciates how *The Muse* provides her with a safe and structured time to develop that passion. When she writes, she is able to delve into her imagination to create new worlds and wonders. A junior, Emily enjoys every second that she spends turning her dreams into adventures.

Lena Pelham is one of the seniors on staff for *The Muse*. She enjoys using any media she can to express her ideas and creations; writing just happens to be one of the two primary ways she uses to get her machinations out into the world :).

Arden Tapp is a sophomore who escapes into endless worlds using her imagination. She uses *The Muse* as a place to connect with others and explore her imagination. She doesn't know what she would do without *The Muse* or the people in it.

Special Thanks To:

Mr. Weatherly, for being the backbone of *The Muse*. Without his hard work, this magazine would not be possible. Without his dedication, this magazine would be a Word Document hastily put together by the staff, instead of the deliberate and professional appearance that Mr. Weatherly creates for us. We are forever indebted to him.

Mr. Holley, our principal, for thoroughly reading and approving every piece seen in this magazine. The kindness Mr. Holley has shown us by always responding within two hours, no matter how much material we have sent him, no matter how busy his work and personal life must be, and for always remarking how much he enjoys reading what we send him. Mr. Holley has truly been a dream for *The Muse* staff.

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Short Poem

by Kimsey Stewart

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

And there was something in the water that day –
the glistening river
caressing rocks as steadily and gently
as you hold my hand.

And there was something in the water
that day that we sat on the bench swing
your arms wrapped around me in the cold
your green eyes trained on mine.

Moms and Movies

by Reaves Gardner

I lie in bed, trying my best to focus on the movie I'm watching, but I'm only three minutes in and the plot is already feeling predictable. I'm trying to make the most of the last night of winter break and take my mind off of going back to school tomorrow, but I've already started and stopped four movies and none seem to hold my attention longer than a few minutes.

Just as I decide to look for something else rather than find out whether or not Sarah ended up with Chad, my mom knocks on my door.

"What are you up to?" she pries, stepping into my room.

"Just trying to find something to watch," I answer shortly.

"Oh, well I was just going to find a movie. Would you want to watch something together?" she asks. I contemplate. Typically, I would rather find something on my own, but my search has proved unsuccessful and it doesn't look like that is going to change anytime soon.

"What were you thinking?"

"I'm not sure, but I know we can find something."

I join my mom on the old couch in the living room, the first piece of furniture she ever bought. It's dirty and stained, but comfortable. We look through Netflix for a while, but soon decide we would rather watch something we know we like rather than waste the night searching.

"What about *Pride and Prejudice*?" I suggest.

"That's what I was thinking."

She easily finds the three year-old recording and presses play. The last scene of the movie appears on the screen first from the overlap when it had first been recorded. By now, this is irrelevant. Neither of us is watching the movie to see how it ends.

Mom gets up to make popcorn and instinctively brings me a bowl and a Diet Coke, knowing I would need something to drink with the buttery snack.

Reaves Gardner

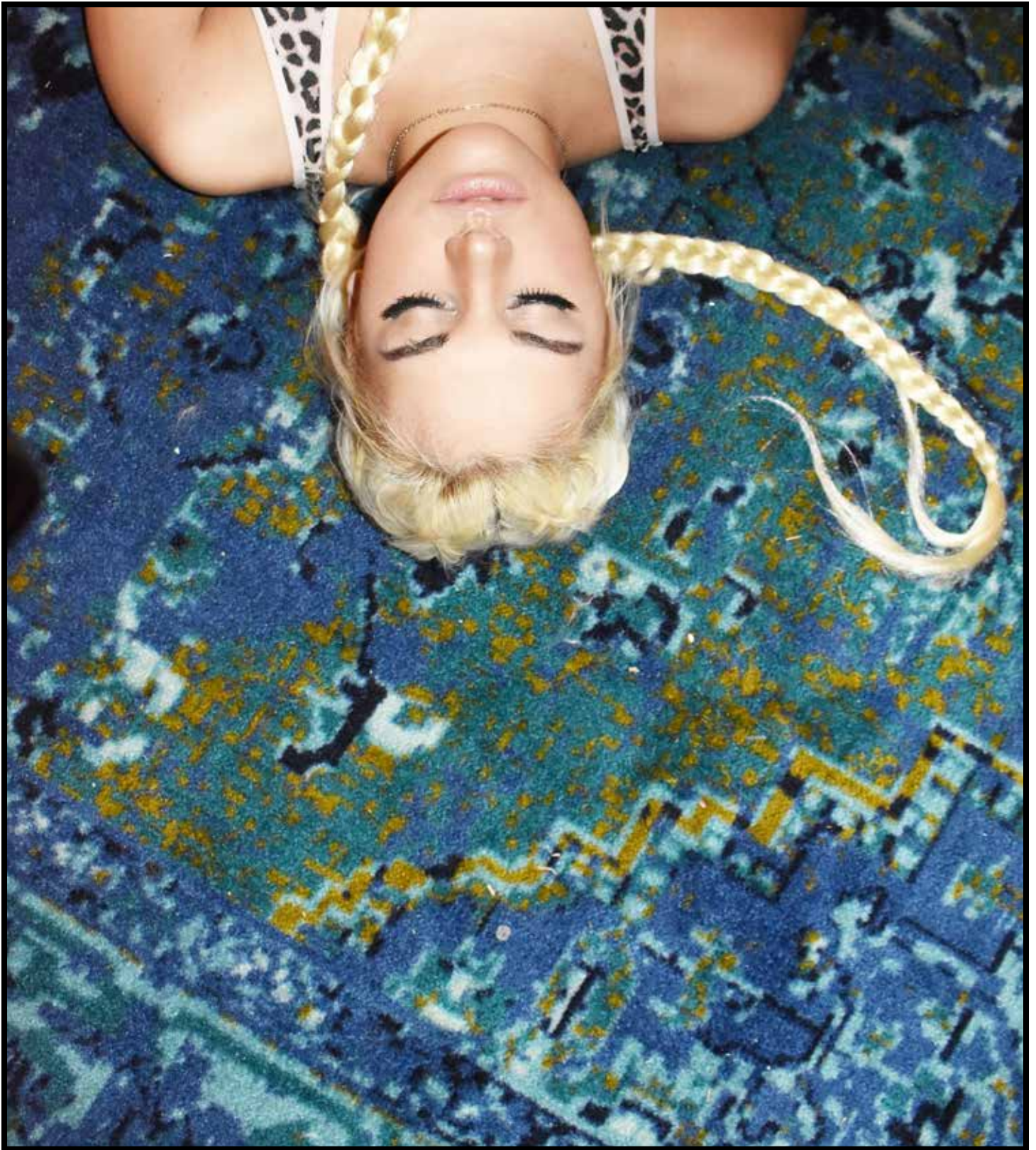
Lawson, my brother, comes in to watch with us, and we attempt to identify the subtle witticisms and translate the 18th century English for him and are then baffled when he decides he is no longer interested and returns to his video games. How could anyone find this boring?

The movie begins with a picturesque shot of a grassy field, the sun rising over the tops of the trees at the far end. Elizabeth Bennet makes her way through the field to the house, reading a book as she goes, the well-known piano notes in the background. As the movie continues, we laugh at Mrs. Bennet's hysteria, Mr. Bingley's awkwardness, and Mr. Collin's eccentricity. My mom always points out Elizabeth's clever retorts. We simultaneously quote Mr. Darcy's prideful first proposal in the rain, Jane's response to Mr. Bingley's proposal, and Lady Catherine's late night threat to Elizabeth. I quickly forget about school tomorrow.

Between scenes, the familiar *World of Dance* and over dramatic reality show commercials play, interrupting the peaceful tone of the film, but in a way creating a comedic effect. The recording has been watched so many times, eventually, these became part of the movie and easier to embrace.

Occasionally, the movie is paused so newly discovered details can be pointed out and discussed. Even after the twentieth viewing, revelations may be made or an extra with an especially ridiculous hairdo spotted.

Eventually, the final scene of Darcy and Elizabeth sitting happily outside Pemberley Estate plays, and the movie comes to an end. We continue to discuss the scenes with a feeling of nostalgia. Instead of returning to my room, I continue sitting on the couch and turn my attention to the *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, a favorite of my mom's. I don't usually like watching these shows, but tonight I don't really mind.



Girl with Braids
by Alice Adams-Nice

Sea of Blue and Green

by Sara Frances Berte

“Hey, Berte, look at me, you’ve got this. Base hit, one run wins game. What are you going to do?” Coach Miller said to me as we waited on the Spain Park coach to leave the pitching circle.

“Extend through,” I respond, smiling through the nerves.

“Right. We’ve worked on it. Trust your swing.”

Nodding my head to her, I took a deep breath and ran through my routine stepping into the batter’s box. During the few seconds before the pitcher prepared to throw the pitch, I looked around the field and saw the bases loaded, my heart beat increased furiously.

As time seemed to freeze, I heard the Spain Park coach yell to the pitcher, “Hey, Widra! Two outs, one more. Get her. Let’s go!”

Taking one last deep breath, I planted my feet and stared into Widra’s eyes. *This is the moment everyone wants, I thought to myself, a walk off hit against the number one team in the state.*

Snapping out of my moment, I watched her step up to the mound and swing back. The drop ball rushed past me, barely touching the outside corner.

“Strike,” the umpire called.

I looked back at Coach Miller who gave me the clap and nod towards the field: get a base hit. Swinging the bat through the air, I prepared myself for another pitch. Widra stepped up to the mound and wrestled the ball in her glove. She separated her hands and began her pitch. This time, reading the ball out of her hand, I swang my bat around making contact with the ball, though only enough to foul it off.

Stepping out of the box, I took a couple of cuts and looked back over my shoulder towards my teammates, who were up on the fence with nervous voices that said, “Hey, all you Berte, all you.”

Well that’s obvious.

Sara Frances Berte

I stepped back into the box and gave the pitcher the most determined look I could as she looked me straight back in the eyes and began her pitch.

Find ball. Snap out. Extend through. Base hit.

The pitch flew through the air like a feather falling. When it finally reached me I snapped towards the rising ball, using all techniques that could come to mind. As soon as I reached the end of my swing, my heart sank.

I missed the ball. Widra's rise ball just beat me.

I tucked my head down and walked to shake their hands, hearing the Spain Park team going crazy. I looked up through heavy eyes, and saw the shortstop giving Widra a bear hug wearing the most excited face ever. After walking across the field, our team spread across the infield preparing to pitch the ball to Lindsay Davis, our team manager with Down Syndrome, who hits a home run after every game.

Why do I have to deal with her home run? Why do we do this every single game?

Hearing the crowd go crazy, I zoned back in from my frustration and saw Lindsay running as fast as her little legs could go toward first base. My teammates picked up the ball and threw it around, playfully missing Lindsay as she pumped her arms in an attempt to outrun them. I stood still and took in the moment as Lindsay rounded third and my team and the Spain Park team ran home to cheer on Lindsay. I watched the sea of blue and green come together as Lindsay jumped across home plate. As I approached the group, I watched our pitcher and the Spain park shortstop lift Lindsay up into the air. I listened to both teams chant her name and observed her overjoyed expression. There was something about that smile that made me smile.

Maggie Mae

by Mary Winston Hendry

If Maggie Mae, my dog, were told to stay
She'd sit right down and want for you to play
Her tail she wags her very special way
My heart she fills with love most everyday.

She likes to gobble up her favorite meal
To Maggie Mae this is a great big deal
She likes to go on car rides and long walks
When you say the magic word she starts to talk

She is a social dog that is for sure
Strangers stop to pet her pretty white fur
My dog is a retriever, she's really smart
I love Maggie Mae with my whole loving heart

Yellow Dreams, Blue Nights

by Lena Pelham

The color yellow filled his vision as Jason laid beneath a canopy of sunflowers. Thousands of radiant petals towered high above him.

“Jason,” a soft voice cooed his name, “Jason, you poor thing.” He could feel something stroke his hair, but he couldn’t turn around to look at it. In fact, Jason found that he couldn’t move at all. “Oh, you sweet little thing, there is no need to worry anymore.” Jason was faintly alarmed; he wanted to move and see who was petting him, but the lady’s voice was so soothing. He was warm and comfortable, and any tension or fear he once held was slipping away. “I can make all your troubles disappear.” He was relaxed, the most relaxed he had felt in a while. “You won’t feel fear,” but something troubled him, “you won’t feel pain,” something called to him, “you won’t need to feel anything.” Then he remembered. He remembered the pond and the ring and the wyrm. He tried again to move, only forcing so much as a finger twitch. “Here you will stay with me. I promise I will take good care of you.”

“No,” he managed to grunt.

“What?” The lady’s voice was harsh and abrasive.

“No,” he said as he slowly sat up, “I have to—”

“Lay down!” The lady shoved Jason back down, “Do not move, you cannot leave me!” She pinned Jason to the ground by his shoulders. He could see now that what had been stroking his head was a gnarled hag. “Don’t you want to stay?” The beautiful voice contradicted the wrinkled face Jason saw above him.

“Get off of me!” Jason pushed the hag’s arms away and forced himself up. He rushed through the sunflowers, knocking stalks over in his wake. He looked back at the hag. Her form changed to that of younger woman.

“Please, come back!” She whirled into a ball of yellow smoke and chased him. “I didn’t mean to scare you, little thing. Stop running and I will forgive you.” Her muffled voice rang from within the smoke.

“Leave me alone!” Jason yelled. He looked around and saw the edge of the field to his right. He sharply turned and sprinted to the edge. An ungodly screech

Lena Pelham

came from the smoke. “Don’t leave me–” The wailing stopped abruptly as Jason crossed out of the flowers. He stood, panting and staring into space as he reflected upon his encounter. When his eyes came back into focus, they rested on an old door.

It was out of place to say the least. Its bleached birch wood stuck out against the dark-brown tree it rested against. A silver knob, so polished it reflected white light where the sunbeams broke through the leaves, rested gently on its side. After another infernal yowl echoed through the open space. Jason, ready to get away, opened the door and walked through.

A navy blue armchair sat before him in an empty corner. Jason stood, addled, in the doorway of a small room, light from the street lamps illuminating its familiar furniture. A small, circular rug was placed at the feet of a dresser. Jumbled bed sheets hung messily off the side of his bed. Jason stood, addled, in the doorway of his bedroom. He looked over his shoulder to the sunny field behind him, but a dark hallway, strewn with portraits and photos, met him instead.



Potions and Uncertainty
by Julia Baddley

Tears on the Court

by William Wood

I paced back and forth as Coldplay filled the air, draining out the noise of campers playing capture the flag. Being a counselor-in-training, I was responsible for the logistics of the fourth graders. Camp Mac had only been in session for two days, and I barely knew this group of kids. Yet, out of these twenty-two children, one stood out from the rest. This boy, who went by the name of Murphy, was one of the most gentle-hearted and loving people I have ever met. He was kind to everyone, used manners, participated in activities, and most importantly, did not get into trouble.

The boys were running around on the prospective fields belonging to each of the two teams. The counselors in charge of Team Sports were goofing off, as usual, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the campers. Murphy had managed to capture his opposing team's flag. There he was, swinging the flag in the air, running back to his field for dear life. Out of nowhere another camper by the name of Buddy ran up to Murphy and tackled him. Buddy was one of the boys who stood out, but not in a good way. He had the essence of a troublemaker: vicious, menacing, and quite haughty. One good look could tell you his desire to assert the dominance he believed he held over the other boys. Buddy did not just push Murphy down, but proceeded to kick him. Repeatedly. Immediately noticing the situation that looked like the bloodbath from the cornucopia in *The Hunger Games*, I ran over yelling, "Stop! Stop kicking Murphy!" My outcries were of no consequence to Buddy. He wouldn't stop beating Murphy, who was on the ground with tears streaming down his precious face. I remember ripping Buddy off of Murphy, the look of menace in his eyes, yelling for the other staff come assist me. Murphy eventually stood up, throwing his arms around me, sobbing. He planted his face in my chest whispering "thank you" over and over again.

With my arm around him, as if he was genuinely my child, we walked over to the volleyball courts by the water fountain, and sat down. Murphy seemed relatively calm as we got water. I asked him if he wanted to take a break, and he told me he did. Murphy sat down, giving me the most pitiful look, bursting into tears once again. He told me I was the only person at camp who had ever taken up for him and how much it meant to him. With arms around me, he proceeded to tell me how Buddy was from his school. He told me how Buddy

William Wood

not only terrorized Murphy at camp but also at school. Buddy was a bully that continually got away with his brutal actions. Camp was a safe space for sweet Murphy until Buddy came that summer. To have a child literally cry in your arms, pouring out their heart, is one of the most awakening experiences you will ever have. I sat there with Murphy, now crying myself, on those courts.



The World is Changing

by Kimsey Stewart

What Makes an Owl Wise?

by Arden Tapp

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

What makes an owl wise?
Perhaps not much,
They do not have our technology,
They do not have our brains,
They do not have our heart,

So,

What makes an owl wise?

The owl stared intently into the distance,
watching its prey with wide eyes,
swooping down with intention.

The man looked blankly into the distance,
perusing the frozen aisle with bored eyes,
reaching for the TV dinner with no concern.

What makes an owl wise?

The owl flew home with dinner in its clutches,
perching on the tree branch and enjoying its earnings,

Arden Tapp

eating it all and leaving no waste behind.

The man drove home with groceries in the back of his truck,
smoking a casual cigarette and relaxing with his dinner,
leaving half and throwing the plastic away.

What makes an owl wise?

Perhaps not much,

They do not have our technology,

They do not have our brains,

They do not have our heart,

But what gives man the right to judge?



Leaves

by Catherine Corley

Beads

by Carly Cole

Long ago, in a small tribe, there was a young girl named Aditi. Aditi was a vibrant, rambunctious girl who loved to play in the forest instead of learning the tribal dances her older sister loved so much. However, one day, she began to pray to the spirits every night to be beautiful like her older sister and stopped playing in the forest. This was because young Aditi had fallen in love with a boy named Parth, and she believed that he would only notice her if she were as beautiful as her sister. However, Parth was very distant and always obeyed the demands of Chief Bikram. As time went on, Aditi was frustrated that she had not yet gotten the attention of Parth. So, she went to meet with her sister, Lavanya, in her teepee.

Aditi asked her sister, “Lavanya, I have done all that I know, but he still does not notice me! You are always admired for your beauty, so do you know how I could get Parth to see me as beautiful?” Lavanya hesitated to reply. She did not understand her sister’s predicament, for Lavanya had always been jealous of Aditi’s beauty. However, Aditi was not aware of this, so when Lavanya gave her advice, Aditi did not know its cruel intentions.

“Well, I am not sure what would get his attention,” Lavanya said, “but I think that a beautiful piece of jewelry may catch his eye. Maybe you could wear a beaded necklace like the one Chief Bikram’s wife, Garima, wears.” Lavanya paused to see if Aditi was following. She was.

“Although,” Lavanya sighed tragically, “I do not know how you can acquire a necklace quite like that. I heard it was nearly an impossible barter that Chief Bikram made with another tribe just to get the beads alone. However, I am sure there are other ways you can get Parth’s affection.”

Aditi’s face fell with Lavanya’s advice. Lavanya was right. It was impossible to find something more beautiful than Garima’s necklace. Hopeless, Aditi collected her thoughts and thanked her sister for the advice. Suddenly, they heard the full, pounding sound of drums ringing through their teepee. Then, the pounding of feet on dirt and the mixture of merry voices had begun outside.

Carly Cole

“Oh, is it so late already?” Aditi asked, surprised. She was so lost in her worries that she had forgotten that night was a story night. This was when all of the tribe members would gather together around the bonfire to hear one of the elders tell a story of the great spirits. Before the two girls could exit their tepee, an old woman pulled open the flaps of the tepee and scolded them.

“Don’t you ladies know the elders’ times are sacred? Their souls are touched by the spirits, and you are honored to be able to hear what the spirits tell them,” the woman said.

“We are deeply sorry, Elder Zoya,” Lavanya said. “We just got caught up in something, but we are on our way now.”

Zoya nodded. “Well, good. Since you ladies are heading that way, I shall accompany you.” So, the sisters and the woman walked together down the dirt path. When they reached the bonfire, people were already dancing and singing. The trio made their way through the crowd, and Lavanya broke away to join her friends. As Aditi and Zoya made their way toward a log to sit on, Aditi saw Parth across the bonfire. A smile immediately lit up her face, but as usual, he did not look her way. A deep sadness formed over Aditi but she continued to walk. Finally, they sat down and Zoya started talking about the story for the night. As she droned on, Aditi looked around the bonfire. The fire lit up everyone’s face with a warm glow, but only one person stood out. Directly across from Aditi, was the wife of the Chief, Garima. She appeared distant but beautiful like a goddess. However, one thing was missing: her beaded necklace. In that moment, Aditi got a dangerous idea.

“Child, are you okay?” Zoya interrupted. She must have noticed Aditi was lost in her thoughts.

“Oh, oh yes. I am just feeling ill. It will do me well to take leave from the gathering for a moment. I will be back shortly,” Aditi stuttered as she stood up.

“Are you sure you are fine? You seem distressed. Is something wrong?” Zoya asked.

Aditi put her hands soothingly onto Zoya’s shoulders and replied, “No, nothing is wrong. I am just feeling a little queasy, and I would hate to ruin the night.”

Carly Cole

I will return shortly.” Aditi smiled innocently at the old woman and then she quickly walked away from the fire. Her feet pounded alone in the darkness as she walked further away from the bonfire. Before she knew it, she stood in front of the Chief’s tepee. Aditi took a moment to look behind her, and then she entered.

She searched the hut as fast as she could with her hands fumbling around in the darkness. Being as careful as possible, she felt for the beaded necklace and in the far corner of the tepee, she found it. Aditi picked it up preciously and stashed it in her clothes. Then, she poked her head out of the hut and returned quietly to her place beside Zoya at the bonfire.

The rest of the night went by with no problem, but it was the day after when Aditi’s crime was discovered. The next morning, Aditi woke to the frantic voice of a lady amongst the voices of others. She soon realized it was Garima and Aditi quickly feared that she had been discovered. Frantically, she stashed the beaded necklace under her bedding and exited the tepee. She quickly found her sister and asked what happened.

“What happened? Well, it seems someone stole Garima’s necklace. I cannot believe someone was stupid enough to steal the Chief’s wife’s necklace. How terrible and how foolish,” Lavanya replied with a knowing look in her eyes. Aditi paused, and Lavanya watched her sister, knowing that her plan had worked.

“How foolish,” Aditi muttered back. She was still frozen in complete terror. As the two sisters talked, Zoya had started to walk towards them. Zoya was accompanied by the Chief.

“How are you ladies today?” Zoya asked. The chief stood a few feet behind her.

“Oh, we are fine, but how is Garima?” Lavanya asked with false worry.

“Distraught, but we have people out looking for her necklace, so it is bound to appear. Speaking of which, you ladies should join the search with us. We could use the help. These old eyes do not see like they used to,” Zoya laughed. The chief shifted on his feet.

Carly Cole

“Of course we will help!” Lavanya replied. Zoya grabbed Aditi by the arm and began to walk with her down the path. The chief walked on the opposite side next to Lavanya and the four of them walked in silence. That was until Zoya asked how Aditi was feeling.

“Oh, I am feeling much better. Thank you,” Aditi replied meekly.

“When were you not feeling well?” Lavanya asked curiously.

“Well, last night Aditi had to leave before the story because she said she was feeling nauseous.” Zoya interrupted. Then she looked to Aditi and said, “You came back a little while after, dear, but I still was not sure you were feeling okay.”

“Yes, I had to collect myself, but I am completely fine now,” Aditi said in an attempt to end the conversation. She glanced at the chief and she clearly saw the suspicion in his eyes. Aditi looked quickly away, but she began to panic. She started to question if she should just tell the chief she made a mistake and that she was deeply sorry, but it was too late. The tepees were already being checked. Aditi felt a sense of doom as the chief went over to look inside a tepee other men were searching. It seemed the old woman had sensed Aditi’s anxiety as she looked sternly at the young girl.

“Girl, if you have something to say, say it now. I have an idea of what you did last night, but I believe one should own up to their mistakes themselves rather than being forced by others,” Zoya said.

“I know what you accuse me of, but I did no such thing. I was ill last night from eating some berries I picked out in the forest. Please believe me when I say I am no thief,” Aditi replied.

“Very well,” Zoya said and walked away. Aditi’s shoulders sagged with the weight of her lies, and she sighed. Turning around, Aditi walked back towards her tepee but stopped when she spotted Parth searching it. The blood drained from her face and suddenly she could not breathe. Everything happened slowly around her. She heard Parth call out to the chief that he had found the necklace. She watched the chief turn around and look at her. Suddenly, she was being pulled to where the bonfire was lit last night. However, there was no

Carly Cole

fire in the pit and there was certainly no fire left in her. Aditi came back to her senses when Zoya asked her why she lied.

“I was scared,” Aditi muttered. She cast her eyes down to the ground.

“Well, you certainly were not scared of what the spirits would think of your actions,” Zoya replied with disappointment in her eyes. She turned to the Chief. “What now?” she asked.

“The girl will be punished,” he said, turning around. Then, he gestured towards Parth who stepped forward with something shiny in his hand. He passed it to the Chief.

“No, you shall do it,” the chief said to Parth. His eyes went wide as he wrapped his hand around the weapon’s handle. The men moved Aditi over to a tree stump where she laid her hand down.

“Aditi, you have shamefully stolen something precious to my wife and you have lied to your tribe. If you had returned the necklace and told the truth, one could still have faith in your virtues. However, you have lied in the face of your crime, and no one can trust a liar and a thief,” the Chief said as he looked down upon her where she knelt at the tree stump. Aditi’s head raised to meet the judgment of the Chief.

“As punishment to your crime, you shall lose your left hand,” he said as Parth raised the weapon over Aditi’s hand. “May you never steal again.”

Parth let his arms drop.



Yes
by Louise Knight

Traffic

by Charles Nicrosi

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "The Garden"

Creeks cross and turn, left to right, on and on.
Spring showers come,
The creek's path changes its way,
Instead of right it's left today.

Summer heat comes, the creek dries up, for the water is
gone and the creek is a slump.

Fall leaves come, the creek clogs up, leaves pile up and
cause a ruck.

Winter weather comes.

The creek is cold,
But the leaves are gone for a new year to come.

Every year the creeks grows,
Expanding its borders and trying not to intrude,
The new path of life changes the mood.

Daymond's Punishment

by Ellie Adams

Everything in existence today is a gift from Sky Land. Many years ago, the wise nobility of Sky Land strategically planned the start of natural phenomena that humans now take for granted. Legends from the Sky Land helped the inhabitants of the world justify these puzzling, natural events.

The Sky Land contained few mischievous people because of the wise nature of the god-like humans that lived there. Daymond, child of a wise and respected Sky Land couple, was one of these mischievous people up in the clouds. Like all mischievous people, Daymond liked to bend the rules to make tasks easier for him. He thought the strict instructions of the elders were inferior and unnecessary.

Daymond's mother, Mary, told him to transport water across Sky Land for the Creation Ceremony, which celebrated the creation of the world below them. His mother gave him specific instructions concerning how to transport the water: "You will need to take multiple trips and only fill the pail up halfway each time," she said.

Daymond knew he could get the task done in less time if he filled the pail up all of the way. So he went, grabbed the pail and began to scoop water from the well. Because of the voice of his mother in the back of his head, Daymond filled the first pail halfway full. On the way back from his lengthy walk across Sky Land, Daymond realized he would never get this job done in a decent amount of time without filling the pail up to the very top. He made the second scoop of water larger and filled the pail just below the rim. As Daymond walked, the water splashed back and forth with a few drops going over the edge of the metal pail. Spills were a major deal in Sky Land because everything that hit the clouds came through the other side and landed on the earth.

On the third trip, Daymond's friend Oliver saw him. "Daymond! Daymond! Come watch the pigs fly with me!" Oliver said.

Daymond knew he needed to get his chore completed, but he also really wanted to watch the pigs fly with Oliver. He loved watching the pigs fly and their pink bellies glisten in the sunlight. He decided he could do both if he

Ellie Adams

finished the task quickly. Daymond began filling the pails to the very rim, practically overflowing. With every trip he took, an abundance of water spilled down to the earth. Daymond knew he was spilling but was determined to finish so he could watch the pigs fly. He guiltily finished his job and ran off with Oliver, knowing he might be punished later on.

Mary, one of the wisest of the Sky Land residents, made frequent trips to Earth. Unfortunately for Daymond, his mother happened to be on Earth when he spilled all of the water. Mary witnessed the water falling from the sky kill the harvest because of the abundance of water that spilled from Daymond's pail. His mother came back to the Sky Land, knowing exactly who the culprit was. She was very calm for someone as angry as she was; she found Daymond watching the pigs fly and took him by the ear, dragging him away.

Mary gave Daymond one of the most unbearable punishments: immobility. Daymond was to not move for 500 years over the region of the earth he spilled the water over, so he could see the misery he caused by taking the easy way out in his chores.

Daymond is still looking over this region today, although the region is just as moist as before. Every time Daymond thinks of how much he disappointed his mother, he begins to cry and his salty tears fall towards the earth. The region under Daymond has since been covered with a large expansion of salt lakes, known today as the Great Salt Lakes.



Mountains
by Kimsey Stewart

Baby Sister

by Grace Carr

Inspired by Claude McKay's "America"

Although this girl just drives me up a wall
With her uppity teenage attitude.
I cannot even start to think of all
The moments I must view with gratitude.
On the day that she came into the earth
With a loud cry which filled the tiny room
That showed what we should expect from this birth
Another phase of dolls and play perfume.

Memories of dreadful, rainy car rides
Now tainted with nostalgia and humor.
The day will come when her tears flow like tides
As I depart for a new adventure.
From the low valley to the highest peak
When time bears down, the bond never turns weak.



Squirrel
by Emily Henderson

Her Brave Hero

by Izzy Narducci

Everyone knew the tales of the beautiful Princess Illisha. No man on the Earth had not already been charmed by the mere stories told of her beauty. Her eyes held pastures green as the summer air inside them. Her long dark hair was smooth to the touch, making silkworms and weavers alike weep in shame. Her skin always smelled of sweets and of a kind home. The perfect wife. She was to be the most sought-after bride the world would ever know and the world held its breath for her womanly day. So you can imagine the terror that consumed everyone's hearts when their dear Princess had been stolen.

In the night the terror came. The winds, rushing like flood water through the forest, breaking their weakest parts to rubble. He flew all the way to her tall tower and stole her right from her bed, and then away he went into the night and took her back to his lowly cave, beneath the volcanic horror it called home.

The world's greatest and most renowned heroes gathered together at the King's castle, promising to return the Princess safely home, in exchange for her hand, of course. Off they went, one by one to rescue the Princess, and none of them ever returned. Hope was fading for the kingdom and all seemed lost until a boy came to the kingdom's call. Not even a man, no titles or a coin to his name, not even a sword to bare, he pledged to return the Princess safely home.

Through the endless, burnt remains of the forest, through the raging rivers that split the dragon's lands from the humans, he had finally made it to the volcano. He saw a cave the size of a large house, darkness encasing everything around it except a small bit of light at the very end, a golden glow that almost felt comforting to the small boy, whose knees felt like they were going to collapse to the ground. But with a deep breath and a nod of his head, his senses returned back to him and he made his way into the cave.

Forgotten swords and armor lined his pathway toward the light and a horrid stench came off each one, reminding him just how dire his situation was. He soon came upon the end of the tunnel and that's when he saw her. Princess Illisha, more beautiful than all the stories could have ever described her. There she was sitting upon the largest pile of gold and jewels he would ever see.

Izzy Narducci

“Princess Illisha,” he called out foolishly, forgetting in that moment just what creature had put her in this situation in the first place. The girl turned to face him, a look of disappointment clear in her expression.

“You’re another hero, I suppose?” she asked callously. “You don’t look like a hero.”

“I’m not one, your Highness.”

“What makes you think you can defeat a dragon? You don’t even have a sword.”

“I intend to sneak you away before the beast ever knows I am here. You best come quickly now before he returns.”

The Princess thought for a moment looking down at the boy with a bit of curiosity, not sure how to feel. Whether to be impressed that he had made it this far or to laugh at what an idiot he must have been to even think of daring to face against the beast.

“What did my father promise you for my safe return?” she asked. The boy quirked his eyebrow, confused on why she wasn’t coming with him. “You aren’t a knight or a lord so he definitely did not offer you my hand. So what did he give you instead? A nice position in the Crown Guard? A lovely estate by the sea? A treasure trove of gold? All the above? Tell me what has my father promised you that equates my life?”

“He has offered me none of those things.”

“Really?” she snapped. “Then what did he offer you?”

“Nothing. I came here on my own.”

“So you wish to surprise the kingdom with your grand conquest?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just wish... to see you home safely.” The air in the cave grew still. “It must

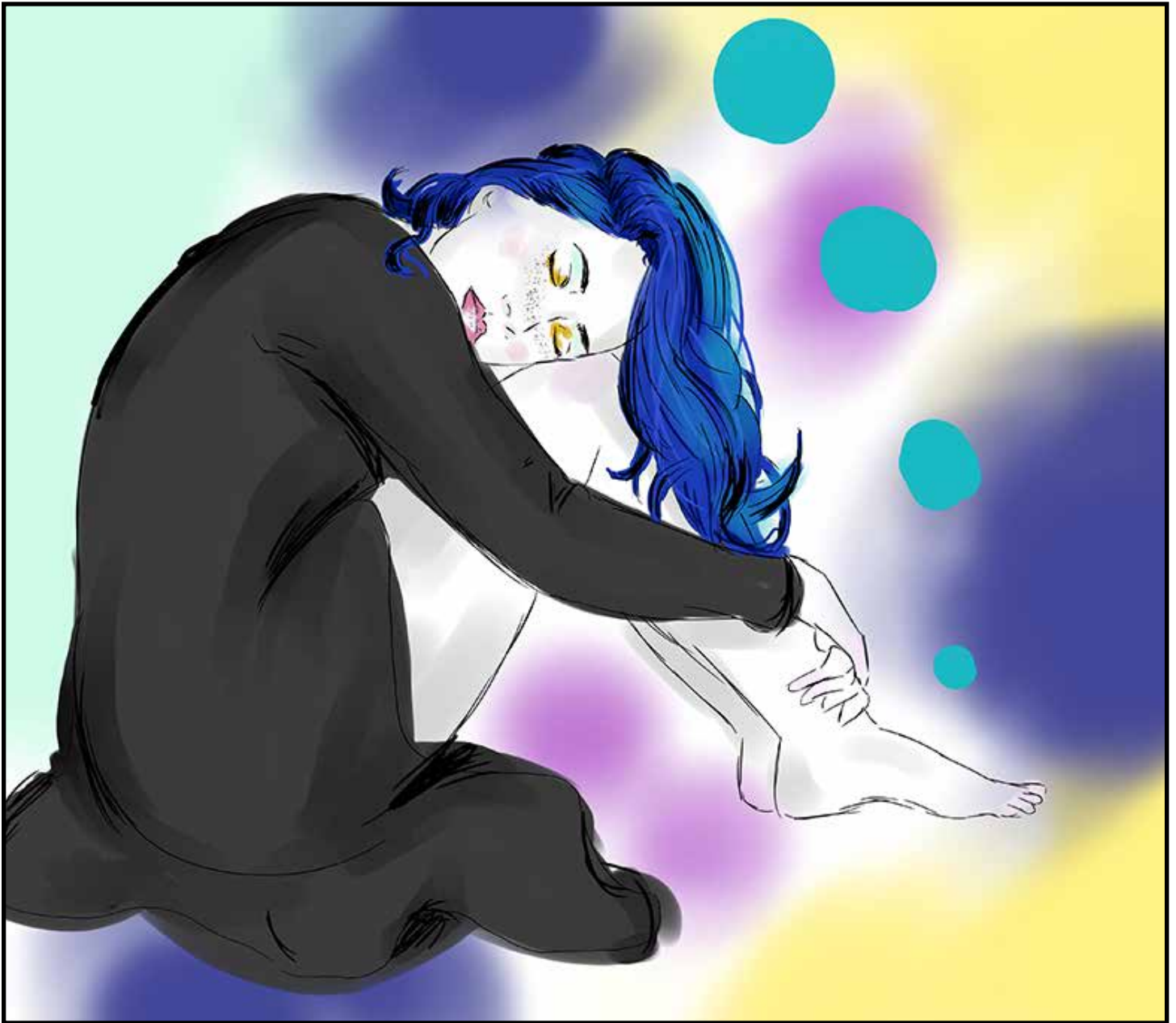
Izzy Narducci

have been awfully scary. A dragon taking you away like that. I'm glad your not hurt, but from what I know about drago--"

"You know nothing," she spat. Illisha huffed, sliding down the gold hill getting eye level with the boy. "Did you know that when a Princess becomes a woman she gets to wish for a creature to come to her aid. Most wish for a fairy. They will come to you and make you to be the most perfect bride in all the kingdom and have your true love at your doorstep by sunrise... or you can wish for a dragon, to take you away from your castle. He will protect you from all that come to seek you and he will be your guardian, your friend, until the day you wish to leave or the day you die."

"You wished to be taken?"

"I begged to be taken. It didn't matter if a fairy came to my aid-I'm beautiful enough, and it didn't matter if my Prince Charming arrived to sweep me away. Unless he was the highest bidder we could never be together," tears began to well up in her eyes, "I'm just a girl. I don't want to be married right now. Eventually, yes to someone whom I love very much and can see past," she grabbed her hair and throat violently as tears rained down mercilessly, "All this nonsense." The ground began to rumble as her tears began to fall more and more. "You best leave soon. I admire your bravery, I really do, but you're not the hero in this story. There is never going to be a knight in shining armor to save the day. All their wicked wishes can die with them," she cried out. A shrieking howl rang through the cave, knocking the boy to his back. "My knight is full of fire and brimstone. His armor is stronger than any steel a human can forge. His teeth and claws can cut through any weapon they try to pierce him with." The boy scrambled to his feet hesitant to leave her in this state. "You'll be the only one allowed to leave. The only one who came here with no wishes in his heart. No swords, no armor, no false honor." With a thunderous thud the grand dragon erupted from the back part of the cave, sending a few stalactites crashing down against the treasure. An orange glow built up in his throat, ready to take aim at the shivering boy. Illisha held up her hand, motioning for him to keep back. She stepped closer, her lips inches from the boys ear. "You can be a hero, you know." she pushed him back and pointed to the cave entrances, shaking her head. "Just not in my story."



Our Dreams
by Liam Aberle

Just a Name

by Bebe Holloway

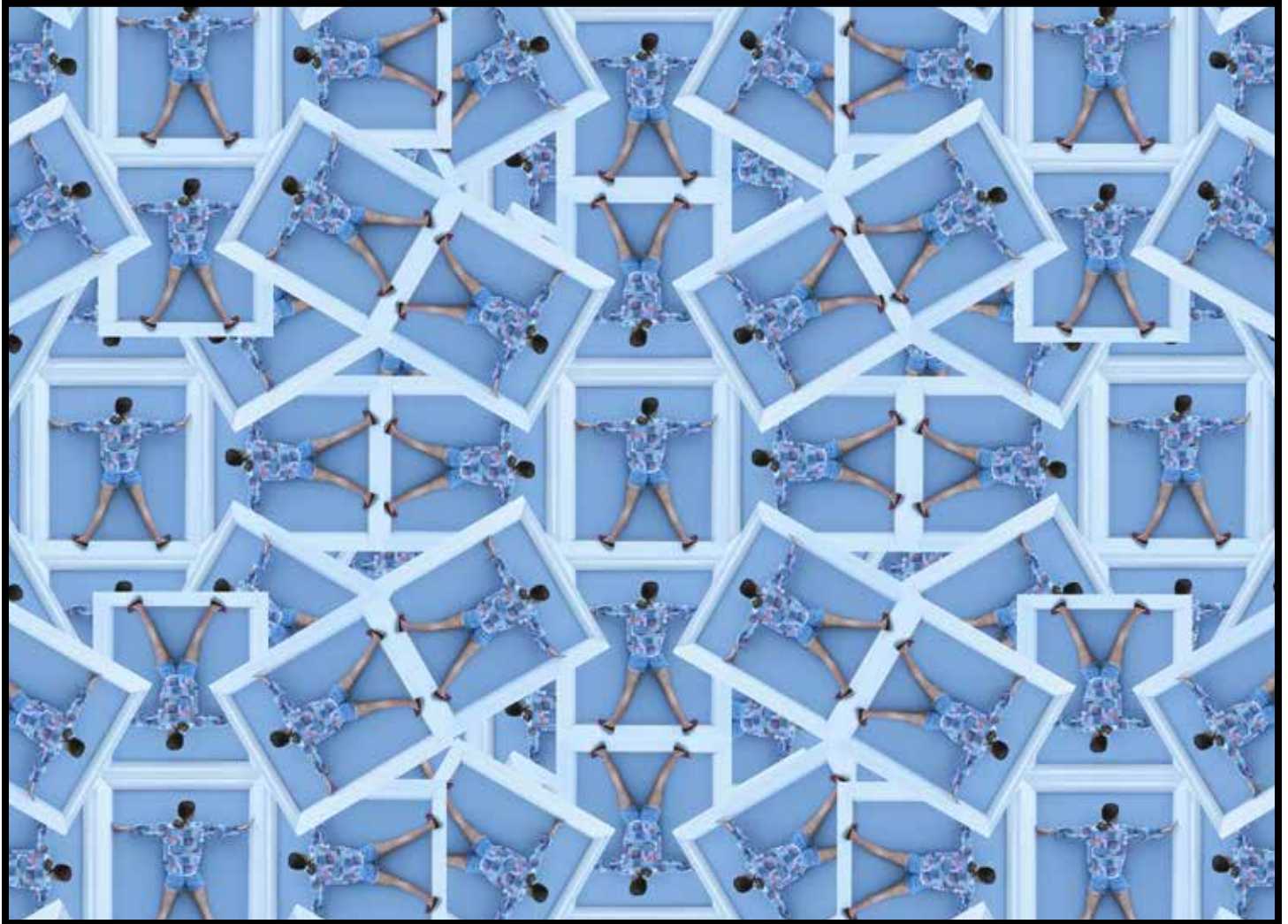
I sat in my car, overwhelmed by fatigue from the stressful school day and making a mental list of all the tasks I had ahead of me. I drove to the Exceptional Foundation, just as I did every other Wednesday. As I arrived, I pulled into a parking spot and sat there for a minute, trying to gather my energy from the tiring week to play with Nicolas. Of course, I always enjoyed going there, yet I was especially tired on this Wednesday.

I walked into the building, signed my name, and got a volunteer tag. The lady behind the tinted window of the front desk asked me why I was there because she did not know me at the time. I simply told her that I was there to teach the dance class, and she opened the doors for me to walk through. I smelled the distinct mix of air freshener and gym equipment and heard the commotion of a swirl of voices as I opened the gym doors. I walked through the gym and greeted all the volunteers and dancers I passed. I noticed Nicolas running around chasing Bennet, an especially small six-year-old boy. Nicolas nearly tackled him, but thankfully I managed to get his attention before he did. Even though he was only thirteen, he nearly doubled my weight and approached 6 feet, which he did not realize when he innocently played with the other kids.

This was only our third week as volunteers, so most of the helpers did not yet know Nicolas. As they walked around, they asked Nicolas what his name was. Every time, he would respond in a high pitched tone saying, "My name is Bebe." Most of the volunteers walked away laughing to themselves because of the way he mimicked me, but I always wanted him to say his own name. As more people greeted us, Nicolas grabbed my hand and dragged me to the center of the gym. He kept repeating "my name is Bebe," and I reminded him that his name was Nicolas.

He suddenly looked up at me and smiled, grabbing both of my hands. It was simply just a name, but it meant much more than that. I knew in that moment that he was not repeating "my name is Bebe" because he did not understand, but rather in an attempt to emulate me because of how I had treated him. I did not realize how strong our relationship was until then, for I had thought that my time there had not truly affected Nicolas.

In my return to the Exceptional Foundation week after week, I never stopped hearing the words "my name is Bebe" in that loud, sweaty gym. More importantly, I began to feel the joy I brought Nicolas and the joy he brought me.



Geometric People
by Charlotte Winn

A Beloved Friend

by Mason Berger

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

When my dreams were filled with Legos and cartoons,
I played in the backyard, having sword fights with ninjas and dragons.
You arrived in the arms of my father, cozily sleeping against his smooth,
granite-shaded coat.
You walked about my leg, slowly taking in your new home.
You went on living in the house of the Berger family:
a small dog and a young boy, with innocence and love.

At ten we ran together in the park, faster than anyone else.
When we trained, you never failed to impress,
always causing me to smile when it was you who performed best.
Called to you a thousand times, you always came back.

At eleven you had grown tenfold,
always there to greet me when I got home.
You flew with great leaps off the deck,
catching air and zooming through the sky.

At twelve you tore your ACL,
and our fun adventures in the yard existed no more.

Mason Berger

You lay in your bed with sorrow, staring blankly into the distance.
What brought you joy now brings you pain.

At fourteen I longed to rebuild our bond,
taking you on runs and strolls all throughout the neighborhood.
You no longer dragged your limp leg to greet me at the door,
you began to smile and wag your tail when I would come home.

Spring has come early this year, flowers bright and vibrant.
Time goes by, but our bond remains stronger than ever.
As winter approaches, and time pulls us apart, you will always be my friend.
You bring joy to my life when I am down; you are my friend.
We will always be friends.

The Negotiation

by Caroline Mauro

The only things remaining on the park bench table was the last sliver of pink polka-dotted cake and eleven burnt candles. A day full of great celebration was coming to an end. The once clear, blue skies were starting to turn to a cloudy gray, giving off a gloomy sentiment. Maggie had had the most wonderful day, but she pondered on one last wish that would make her special day even better. Maggie could see her dad cleaning up the fallen streamers and confetti, and in an attempt to make her wish come true, she hurried over to help out. Her father, Mr. Scott, never came around too easily. He was a stern man. He loved Maggie, but he would not stray from his conservative views and strong opinions. Three years had gone by and still, every birthday, holiday, every cause for celebration, the same troublesome conversation would come up. It was all Maggie had wanted for the last couple of years now. She was determined to get what she wanted, and wouldn't stop until she succeeded. If that meant waiting years, then she would wait.

“Dad, I have a question, I —”

“I already know where this is going. It's a no.” Still picking up the leftover trash, Mr. Scott irritably walked away from Maggie.

“What will it take, Dad?” Maggie ran back up to her father. “I'll do anything!”

“It is too much responsibility for someone who does not even complete their everyday chores,” Mr. Scott responded. “I have said it before, and I will say it again. No.”

Maggie, trying to conceal her tears, pleaded, “What can I do to prove to you I can handle it?”

“Not much,” said Mr. Scott. “I have made up my mind.”

“But, Da—”

“No buts.”

Maggie now had held her tears back for as long as she could, but finally gave in. Tears streamed down each cheek as she turned her head and silently walked away from her father. A melancholy look came across Mr. Scott's face.

Caroline Mauro

He sympathized with Maggie, but was just not certain that she was ready for such a big commitment yet. All he wanted was to make his little girl happy, but he was unsure of her commitment to such a long-term responsibility. He tossed and turned that night in his bed, thinking about how sad he had made Maggie feel. He wanted to fix it while staying true to his word. After contemplating for awhile, Mr. Scott was able to put his mind at ease with a solution to their disagreement.

The next morning, after waking his daughter up, Mr. Scott stated, “Maggie, I am proud of you for being patient and fighting for yourself.” As he sat Maggie in his lap, he said, “I have a surprise for you when you come home.”

Maggie started to squeal, “NO WAY?!”

“No, no, don’t get your hopes up. However, I think you will like this,” Mr. Scott said.

Maggie ran home from school later that afternoon and swung the door open. She could feel a new energy through the house instantly. Suddenly, she could hear the pitter-patter of tiny prints prancing down the hall.

“Oh my goodness!” she screamed, “Thank you, Dad!”

“I figured you wanted a new friend, and think this one might be a little easier to care for!” Mr. Scott said to Maggie, for he was just as excited as she was.

He looked down at Maggie. “You will be solely responsible for her. I am trusting you.”

“I promise! I can handle it!” Maggie yelled as she ran off to play with her new best friend.

The Pet Owner: A Letter

by Leigh Block

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

When my hair was still curly and a bright white,
I only yearned for one thing at night.
I tossed and turned, unable to sleep.
Underneath the Christmas tree was the only thing on my mind.
Smiling from ear to ear, I ran down the stairs.
You were waiting for me, wagging your tail.

At nine my parents decided it was time.
They handed me you, telling me it was my turn.
Enthusiastically, I accepted you into my arms.
I would bathe, feed, and walk with glee.

At ten I learned why it was my turn.
I attempted to do all my tasks with time.
But you decided you did not like that idea.
What could I have done differently?

At twelve I had won.
You were a great competitor,
But I was able to grow
And learn the rights and the wrongs.

You loved me and I loved you.
The warm spring days walking through the park,

Leigh Block

The trees continuously growing bigger and bigger,
Buying new collars to fit you;
I always think of those days.
I knew you despised me other times.
Shaking as I carried you over to the bath,
Upset when you didn't wait until you were outside.
There were ups and downs,
But I wouldn't have traded it for anything.
I miss you.

Choose Carefully

by Amelia Winston

My grandfather's easily identifiable and forceful knock echoed through the door. We often pretended there was no one home if we heard a knock. He usually left after a few seconds of waiting, but this time he kept knocking; he must have known I was in the rickety, bug-infested house. Donning sweatpants and the least bleach-stained t-shirt in my mom's closet, I walked to the door and opened it. I knew he wanted me to do something for him, but I didn't want to do anything at that moment, seeing how enervated I was from eating the remnants of my mom's plate of food she made herself for the week. He told me to meet him at the barn. Being the obedient granddaughter, I followed his directions respectfully.

I put on my shoes, which would soon be stained with red mud, and began the long journey to the barn at the summit of his property. When I arrived, I was disappointed and aggravated that I had seemingly ventured up there for no reason; there was nothing different about the barn. My grandfather then opened the doors, and in the middle of the huge space sat an old, red truck, the bed filled with aged books. He never told me how they got there or where they came from, he only said, "You can pick one book," and left me alone with the truck and the quiet wooden walls. It was a beautiful and lonely sight.

I looked down at the books. They were covered in dust, some with dirt, and it irked me to feel grime on my hands for the next few hours as I rummaged through the sharp heap. Almost all of them caught my eye. I tried reading a bit of each one in the span of a couple of hours, like a person in a library would. Gradually, the sun sank lower and lower, and I began to hear the frogs in the withered trees. It was getting darker and colder, and so were my thoughts. I knew I could only pick one, yet I didn't understand why. I was urging myself to pick already so I wouldn't have to walk back to the house through the dark woods without a light.

I had it down to two choices. One was a book on aviation during World War II. The other: a short, vintage comic book. I finally chose the comic book because I thought it would be worth some money, and I walked back to the house slower than usual. I could hear the crunch of the wet sticks and the squish sound of my shoes in the red puddles. When I heard an animal howl, I sped up a little then returned to my normal pace. It was pitch black until I reached

Amelia Winston

the steps to the house and the light above the front door. I turned the knob, but the door was now locked. I rang the doorbell, but no one answered. I knew the person or people inside were doing the same thing to me as I had to my grandfather many times before. Neglected by my family inside, I sat on the top step and opened the book using the single light above me. Knowing I would wake up with mosquito bites all over my body in the morning, I read my new book cover to cover.

When I eventually found myself back in my bed that night, unwashed and musty, I leaned over and turned out my lamp. I got to thinking about the odd and alluring situation I had just been in. I didn't want to pick just one book. It left me uneasy knowing that I only left the barn with one, not knowing why, but following directions blindly. It evoked fear from within my mind that I could never read every book or know all things, and this was the disappointing reality.

My final realization was that I should've picked the other book, then I went to sleep.



Haunted
by Kimsey Stewart

Cailleach

by Kimsey Stewart

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

It is winter now;
clearly it is winter now.
The crone has awakened,
blue in the face she grins.
The beaver moon has passed the cold moon
teases us on the horizon.

And she grins.

Her bare feet leave snow-tipped mountains;
she washes her great kilt in the sea,
leaves the land blanketed in snow.
She returns to her mountain throne,
watches the men fight the wheat to harvest it.
Not a one of them wants to take her in.
And as she watches she grins.

But though she grins, she knows.
The deer will soon begin to dwindle,
and in two moons or so, she will have to go out. Gather firewood.

Kimsey Stewart

The task looms over her, for she knows
if she finds it, she goes on long live the Queen of Winter.
If she doesn't,
she will turn to stone –
a moist rock to hold in her life force.

What once was an old hag,
will be merely a stone.
And still.

She grins.

Destruction of a Tree

by Emily Grace Lemak

This piece and writer were recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

As I walked into the living room, I could feel a sense of awkwardness between my parents. I sat down and began to watch a documentary about the Great Depression that was playing on the TV.

“We need to cut down that old tree in the front yard,” my father said to my mother as she looked in the opposite direction of him.

“I love that tree. It is getting old, but it is still full of life. It has been there as long as I can remember,” my mom responded, confused.

My mom continued to stare in the other direction and began to twist the ends of her hair, something she does when she gets anxious. I ignored their conversation and continued to watch the documentary as the show explained the pain the people went through during the Great Depression.

“The tree is lifeless and unnecessary; all it does is take up space.”

“Our kids have climbed that tree and swung on its branches since they were toddlers.”

“The kids haven’t touched that tree in years; they couldn’t care less about that old thing. I think it needs to be cut down.”

I began to have an interest in the conversation between my parents when my mother finally looked at him in the eyes, this time not with a look of sadness but of anger.

“After all these years of watching the tree grow, you just want to cut it down? What would we do with all the wood?”

“Burn it.”

“That tree has always been here. It has withstood many rainfalls, snowstorms, and even a tornado. You just want to kill it? After everything it has withstood?”

“The kids are about to go off to college. There is no reason to keep the tree

Emily Grace Lemak

anymore. We are cutting it down.”

My mother got up and left the room. I watched as she stormed up the stairs and around the corner. As my dad turned to look at me, I heard a door slam.



Pensive

by Kimsey Stewart

Chilling Truth

by Mason Campbell

Like a weed poisoned by pesticides
He droops through his halls
An empty vessel
built from psychological agony

And there is imprisoned waste
Of the complex, unstable, distraught mind of his own
That thrive in a cheated life

In the beginning of his prolonged existence
The aspirations cease to be

He would like to release these feelings
And is sure that no one but himself
Is capable of such a journey



Holes
by Augusta Yearout

Sunflower

by Kimsey Stewart

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

With shaking hands, he pulls a cigarette from his jacket pocket. The ends of his fingerless gloves are frayed and burnt from lighter misfires. He lights the cigarette after one, two, three tries. "Sorry," he mutters as he places the cigarette between his lips.

The cold air stings his face and he can see her shivering across from him. She's got a ratty old jacket on and his blanket covering her legs. Her black hair is tied back with a yellow ribbon. She'd come straight from church. He'd parked his truck under an abandoned overpass and her beautiful features really stand out from the grey behind her.

The bed of his truck is cold, too. He sees her lips quivering and her eyes watering up as she diverts her gaze from him.

"Do you remember that time you promised me you'd quit smoking for me?" she asks. Her voice is quieter than usual. She wraps her arms around her body and stares off into the distant horizon.

She wore a yellow sundress with little white flowers on it. It was his sixteenth birthday. He had dressed up all nice to have dinner with her family. His mom had skipped town again, promising to return with a stable job and some money. His dad hadn't been home in weeks. His sister was fourteen years old and passed out on the couch at his house.

"I'm nervous," he whispered to her as she took his jacket and hung it up for him. The smell of a warm, fresh, home-cooked meal wafted through the air into his nostrils and he felt like he was floating.

"Don't be," she whispered back as she smoothed out the wrinkles in his dad's old button up shirt. "At least you don't smell like smoke."

Kimsey Stewart

He winced a bit. Only a couple hours before, they'd argued because he was smoking not long before he was supposed to have dinner with her whole family. Her family was very close, and she'd invited him to their house for his birthday.

She led him into her living room, where he was greeted with hugs from virtually all of her family members. They all laughed and smiled so much. No one was unhappy.

After the dinner, she sat out on the swing set in her backyard with him. It was quiet. He spotted a nice flower in the grass, so he leaned over and picked it for her. She smiled and looked down at it. "I hate the smell of smoke," she said quietly.

"What?" he said.

She sighed and looked up at him. "I hate the smell of smoke," she whispered to him. "I love you. You know I do. I just don't know if I can do this. I can't watch you do this to yourself."

He reached over and put his hand on hers. "Then I'll quit," he said after some time. "I'll quit. For you." He kissed the back of her hand and walked her back inside. Just before he left, he saw her put the flower in a book to press it and preserve it.

Of course he remembers. He remembers every single moment with her. But right now, looking into her eyes, he can't tell her that. It's better, he thinks, for her to think he's just a jerk, rather than know the truth. That he loves her. That he's just too weak of a man to quit smoking.

"No," he says. "I don't."

She sighs and looks off into the distance. "Y'know," she whispers. "I don't think a flower is going to fix this."



Concrete Jungle
by Kimsey Stewart

The Deep Blue Ocean: A Letter

by ER Gray

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

While my mind was still pure and unaware of your power
I played carelessly on your shore.

You came towards me, falling forward and backward,

You grazed my toes, enticing me towards you.

I gradually joined you in a dance, controlled only by you:

Together we frolicked; you seemed gentle and kind.

At ten I visited you again.

I never experienced pure bliss, the fascinating scenery.

Creeping towards your edge, I dipped in my toe.

Suddenly committed, I leaped forward.

At thirteen I stopped hesitating.

I begged to come visit you

To feel the coolness surround me.

Why did you feel so safe?

At sixteen I realized

The truth and your capabilities.

You were not what you portrayed to me,

Your waves pounding and swallowing the helpless boats.

You saw me once more.

My changed mind, now aware and different,

Too furious at your betrayal!

ER Gray

The sun begins to shine this summer morning,
The breeze begins to speed your movement
Close to where I stand;
You hurt me. I turn my back.
Salty tears soak my face,
As if a part of you is with me.
I will remember you.
Forever.



Boats

by Carly Cole

The Ocean and the Moon

by Emily Bebenek

The ocean and the moon are sisters. Grieved by their eternal separation, the ocean allows the moon to shape her tides. In turn, the sorrowed moon gently pulls her towards the shore, hoping that the beings blessed to walk the earth can feel intimacy with the sister that she herself covets. Some days, the moon will take her pain and create waves of destruction and chaos, unleashing her suffering upon the world that has trapped her precious sibling. But eventually the ocean will soothe her and the sisters will be at peace again, tortured and loved at the same time.

When the ocean and the moon are no longer able to bear the agony of being apart, the sisters will each take a piece of their soul and place it inside a mortal being. These mortals, driven by the yearning of the divine siblings, venture far and wide until they find each other and, completed, live and love in place of their keepers. Many of the ocean- and moon-blessed have found and lost each other over the endless years, but none have loved as fiercely as the mermaid born of the sea and the sailor who reached for the stars.

The storm above was almost over. If she could just wait out another cycle of the devastating waves, she would be safe.

Narissa sighed and let herself slump against the bottom of the hull, her silver tail flicking intermittently. Her surroundings, darkened by the shadow of the ship above her, were a gloomy ghost of her vivid blue home. The walls of the ridge towered around her on all sides, eerily quiet amidst the distant roaring of the sea. The water was still, lacking all but the smallest of vibrations. This place was cut off from the vibrancy of the ocean, the laughter and playfulness that filled her life, but it was also cut off from the destruction of the tempest. The rust-covered ship had served as her shelter through almost every storm, much to her pod's discontent. They preferred to hide under rocky outcroppings and in deep caves, unsure if the waves would reach them but utterly terrified of anything remotely human. She, however, was willing to risk the outside world if it meant that she could live to see another day.

Emily Bebenek

Of course, that wasn't the only reason. Secretly, the young mermaid hoped that she might catch a glimpse of the humans living above the ocean. The stories about them had fascinated her for as long as she could remember, but it was forbidden for the merfolk to reveal themselves. Too many mermaids had been ensnared by the promises of land and locked away for the spectacle of their captors; the Elders hadn't allowed anyone above the water for centuries.

A sudden series of thuds echoed above her on the deck of the ship. Startled, Narissa quickly swam for the hole that she always entered through, but found it blocked by wreckage from the recently-abated storm. She shoved frantically, but it remained stuck. Heart pounding, she flattened herself against the debris and looked up towards the deck, praying desperately for the intruder to leave. Yes, she wanted to see a human, but not at the cost of her freedom!

After a few minutes of silence, she cautiously peeled herself from the wall and drifted slowly towards the ceiling, unwillingly intrigued by the lack of blundering around. Wasn't that all humans were good for? She had to see what this one was doing.

Narissa glided smoothly through the bowels of the ship, twisting sharply to avoid the awkward human contraptions crowding the passageways. When she finally reached the door leading to the deck, she hesitated. The deck was the only part of the ship that was above water. If she did this, she would be at a huge disadvantage with her tail, not to mention the discomfort that always came with breathing air instead of water. But if she didn't open this door, she would never know anything of the world above her. Besides, she had heard that humans were terrible swimmers; if it threatened her, she could always dive right back in and drown it.

Slowly, carefully, she opened the hatch door, wincing with every squeal and creak. The noise sounded like another round of thunder to her ears, but the deck above her remained quiet. Was it dead? Only one way to find out.

Breaching the surface of the water, Narissa inhaled sharply, coughing and squinting in the brightness above the sea. She waited impatiently as her eyes adjusted and her gills closed, fading back into her neck. Oh, she hated the air, painfully hollow in her unused lungs. Shaking off the discomfort, she scanned the deck, panting. It was empty except for a human device near the railing,

Emily Bebenek

a long diagonal tube mounted on top of a three-legged stand. Blinking in confusion, she hoisted herself further out of the water to get a closer look. Her tail dangled on the edge of the hatch as she scooted towards the mystery invention. It appeared to be tapered metal with little pieces of glass at either end. Was it a fishing tool?

Behind her, a sudden gasp of awe sent her scrambling for escape, barely looking at the human who had tricked her. In her haste, her thrashing tail knocked the door of the hatch off-balance. The heavy door wavered mid-air before slamming onto her tail, trapping her. She cried out in pain, tugging hysterically on it, but to no avail.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Nearly blinded by tears, Narissa looked up to see a young human male holding out his hands as he slowly approached her. He looked nicer than she had imagined, with dulled teeth and brown hair as messy as hers. “You’re going to be okay. I didn’t mean to scare you. Can I help you?”

She snarled, still pulling at her tail. “No.”

His eyes widened. Apparently, humans thought they were the only ones who could talk. “You’re getting pretty cut up there,” he said soothingly, taking another step forward despite her bared teeth. Narissa looked down to see fat red droplets of blood pooling on the deck where the door had sliced her scales. “About to pull your . . . tail right off. Let me help you. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

She eyed him warily, snarl faltering in the wake of her helplessness. “I don’t believe you.”

Giving her a sad smile, the human crouched beside her. “Do you really have a choice?”

Eyes brimming with fresh tears of frustration, she slowly released her grip on her tail. Taking that as consent, the human gently placed his hands under the hatch before hesitating. “Uh, when I take this off, it’s going to gush pretty bad. Should I get some seaweed, or . . .?”

“The water will heal me,” she said reluctantly, feeling vulnerable. Was this the part when he snagged her in his nets? “Just . . . promise me that you’ll let me go.”

Emily Bebenek

“I promise,” he said instantly. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He locked eyes with her for a minute before she dropped her gaze to the floor. She had no way to tell, but he seemed sincere. It wasn’t like she had another option at this point anyways. “Go ahead.”

Groaning, the human hauled the door open. As soon as her tail was clear, Narissa slipped through the opening and into the water below, submerging up to her chest. She sighed in relief as the seawater rushed through her wound, cleansing it instantly. The gash in her tail slowly receded, giving way to shiny new scales. In a matter of seconds, the injury and the pain that went with it were nothing more than a memory.

She smiled, flicking her tail back and forth in enthusiastic relief. A chuckle from above snapped her out of her delight as she remembered the presence of her unexpected ally. Looking up at the human, whose face was lit with as much innocent joy as her own, she hesitated, freshly healed tail stirring the water uncertainly. He had actually kept his promise. Maybe the Elders were wrong. “Narissa,” she offered him after a brief pause. “My name is Narissa. Thank you for helping me.”

He froze, shocked, then gave her a blinding smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Narissa. I’m James Clark.”

He opened his mouth, probably to ask her about life under the sea, but with barely more than a ripple she slid into the water and swam to where he couldn’t follow. He may have let her go, but that didn’t mean she trusted him. Because if he ever knew about what lay under the water, the humans would descend upon her home in droves and wipe it out of existence. Humans could be looked at, maybe even talked to, but they could never, ever be trusted.



Reflection
by Eleanor Kerr

Underwater

by Arden Tapp

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

I am underwater

Beneath the strong
salty waves

I cannot hear
the wind howl

I cannot see
the trees dance

I cannot feel
the world go on
and on
and on
around me

The water pushes against me
on all sides

Underneath the waves
your shouting voice
sounds more like
a wailing ghost
preparing for a new friend

My tears disappear into the sea

Arden Tapp

I am crying

The awkward rhythm
of the uneven waves
pulls
me
down

My lungs give way
the water tastes like sickness
and it burns like an oncoming cold
perhaps I will die

I am underwater
I am drowning

Just Keep Swimming

by Lauren Walston

Breathing was far more difficult eighty feet below the ocean's surface. My scuba regulator was just a smidge too big for my mouth and my burdensome oxygen tank weighed down my buoyant body, which restrained my efforts swimming against Caribbean Sea's strong currents. I was full of nervous energy, a natural reaction I'm told, to one's first night dive. An 80 foot deep shipwreck in the pitch black of night seemed more than just daunting; it was downright terrifying.

My entire family followed the dive master (an experienced local to the British Virgin Islands) down the thick, mossy rope leading us to the Rhone, a 300-foot vessel that sank in the 19th century. During the swift descent, the lambent moonlight began to vanish and soon the only visible lights were those on our safety vests. An ominous feeling crept over me and a shiver swam up my spine as the cold ocean floor grasped at my flippers. The descent was complete.

After I saw the first flashlight illuminate the surrounding coral and the Rhone's mast, a massive wooden baton teeming with life, I flipped on my light, along with the rest of the group. Although my vision was not entirely clear due to the foggy goggles compressed to my face, the entire ocean floor seemed to erupt with radiating colors as our lustrous lights scoured over the dive site. The once chaotic mass of people, oxygen tanks, flippers, and flightlights began to disperse as divers and their safety partners began their own explorations, eager to snap pictures and see the wreck's many inhabitants.

My brother, also my safety partner, and I raced each other inside one of the wreck's gaping holes, nearly colliding into my two cousins who had the same idea. Time seemed to slow down as the four of us became entranced by the scintillating crustaceans and diverse fish throughout the wreck site. This trance immediately dissipated, though, as my brother spontaneously became hysterical. I couldn't comprehend his panicked arm motions, so he swam to find our dive master with me in concerned pursuit. It wasn't until everyone once again frantically united and began an emergency ascent— with my brother holding onto the dive master's back with a new regulator— that I realized the problem. His oxygen tank had plummeted to zero while inside the wreck, leaving him with no air to breathe.

Lauren Walston

A sense of nausea immediately overcame me, I couldn't help but feel wholly responsible for the group's emergency ascension and my brother's hysteria. I should have been constantly checking his oxygen levels and given him my second regulator before he reached such a frantic point. Everyone had practiced for emergencies like this — it's how we all became scuba certified—but obviously, I had failed my brother. Running out of oxygen 80 feet below the ocean's surface was only a distant nightmare for most, but now it had become reality for my brother. The gradual climb seemed to last hours as the nitrogen diffused from our bloodstreams and the oxygen returned. I kept thinking about the “what ifs”: what if the dive master hadn't helped in time, what if I had seen the depleting oxygen levels sooner, what if I had become an only child who couldn't look their parents in the eyes. Part of me knew I was overthinking the situation, but another part of me couldn't shake my guilt.

It wasn't until we were at our final safety stop, fifteen feet below the surface, that my brother, still using the dive master's second regulator, motioned me over to him using his dive light. I slowly maneuvered myself between the hefty oxygen tanks and kicking flippers until we were face to face with shining bubbles from our scuba regulators dancing around us. He kept waving the hand signal for “I'm ok” and patted my shoulder, knowing how guilty I felt. My once tense muscles seemed to finally relax after this reassuring message, and I grabbed my brother's cold, clammy hand, showing him I understood his message, and together we inflated our safety vests and floated up to the surface where my brother immediately spit out his borrowed regulator and drank up all the oxygen around him.



Diver's School
by Lena Pelham

The Sailboat and the Aegean Sea

by William Wood

The couple, standing on the balcony of their hotel room, were watching the sunset over the Aegean Sea. The soothing and crisp sounds of distant waves lapping back and forward mesmerized the two. Their two hands slowly gravitated apart. As they sat on the balcony, a storm could be heard brewing overhead. Tomorrow they would fly back to London, returning to the normal chaos of their lives. A small sailboat could be seen out in the distance. The waves were picking up as the storm moved in. The woman turned around, leaving the man on the balcony alone.

“Why must it end?” asked the woman. She sat down in a plush chair and poured herself a glass of wine.

“There is no such thing as a happy ending,” replied the man, still staring out into what had become a choppy sea. He said to the woman, “Why do you do this to me?”

“I am not yours. What did this trip accomplish?” replied the woman.

“We were so happy and now we are not. Ask yourself woman, why are you like this?”

Clutching her glass of wine, trembling, she stated, “Am I not a free being? Are we bound by wed and band? No sir, no we are not.”

The storm was moving in at an unprecedented speed. The sailboat had made no progress moving inland. The strong waves of the sea rocked the boat back and forward vigorously. A sailor could be seen out on the boat dropping the sail, in an failed attempt to hinder the swaying. Lightning struck the ocean, and the man on the balcony turned around exclaiming, “Dammit woman, I love you!”

The woman, still sitting in the chair, stood up. Struggling to hold her glass, she said calmly into the mans face, “And I do not.” She grabbed her things and left the room, leaving the man alone. He turned around, staring at the raging sea. The boat had capsized, leaving the sailor alone out in the sea.



Morning Dew
by Kimsey Stewart

A Nightmare in Salt Lake City

by Jessica Brouillette

Snow flurries filled the Utah air when the airplane touched down on the runway, welcoming this Brouillette family to the state capital. We went straight into activities: tubing and skiing down winding mountain slopes during the icy, frigid days. My handicapped brother Jacob had been fussing occasionally, but we continued on with the festivities, assuming he was exhausted from the busy day. However, on New Years Eve, I slowly dragged myself out of bed in the morning and realized an ominous silence, which was unusual for the daily chaotic household I had grown up in my entire life, had overtaken the small rental house. I wandered up to the main floor to find my older brother, Justin, who explained that my parents had frantically driven Jacob to Children's Hospital in the middle of the night because he had repeatedly seized and stopped breathing.

Following that night, a family friend drove my brothers and me through the busy city traffic in the dark gloomy night to the hospital where our sick brother fought for his life. Clouds covered the sky, casting shadows onto the highway and making bright lights beam through the darkness. I felt an uneasiness in the car ride, unsure of how dire the situation was, unsure of how our once-smiling brother would look, unsure of how long this sickness would consume my family's every move. My two other brothers and I worried in the waiting room, trying unsuccessfully to distract ourselves with our phones and books, waiting to finally talk to our parents. We sat silently together, consumed in our own thoughts concerning Jacob's health.

My mom and dad stumbled through the waiting room doors and told us only three visitors at a time in Jacob's room, so we knew we would have to be separated from each other once again. Before we left this isolated, stuffy room, my dad pulled Justin and me aside and cautioned us of how our brother would look hooked up to the machines. Justin and I followed our slouched, tearful-eyed father back to Jacob's room. What we saw in Room 2323 that night shattered our perception of Jacob forever. He had an oxygen mask covering his face with a tube snaking back to a machine helping him breathe, a feeding tube connecting his nose to his stomach because he could no longer feed himself, a heating blanket swaddling his whole body due to his hypothermia, and worst of all, a lethargic feeble response to the presence of his own brother

Jessica Brouillette

and sister. Our once strong faces broke when seeing him in the hospital bed, and tears started to fall down our faces as we grasped how serious the situation was. No words were needed, and we simply laid our hands on his body to pray together, united, in hopes of trying to relieve some of his pain and give him a respite from the nameless disease he was fighting against.

Walking out of that room made me realize that life would never be the same for our family. Justin would leave for college next fall, Jacob won't be able to feed himself anymore, and now my parents will be more stressed than ever. I knew these responsibilities would stretch our family to an unknown level of fatigue with the absence of Justin. I knew that my full-time working parents could not keep Jacob alive alone, and someone had to step up to alleviate all of this stress to take care of an even more dependent handicapped child.

The following month, Jacob's health improved enough to fly home with the addition of drastic differences. The level of attention Jacob would now require, with his feeding tube and constant changes, went far beyond anything two loving parents could provide for their son. I knew I would have to make countless sacrifices with school, friends, and trips to prioritize family, because even though Jacob would require more help, I would be with him every step of the way to ensure he got the best chance to enjoy his life, since no one should have to endure these difficulties in their life alone.

Music

by Emma Fooshee

Pour out your iron, steel–lock your pardons,
Swallow your guns with your sand–covered pills.
Wash sinned hands ‘til they’re considered holy,
Drag your body on ever so slowly.

Wear your black dirtied pit as a trophy.
Cry to Mother, “If only, if only.”
Strip down your paintings, cover them with sheep,
As never were you brave enough to sleep.

Scream “Valkyrie,” grief in turn dies between
All of the companies, their prodigies.
Willingly she says, “Talk to me, to me.”
All of nothingness is turned unto thee.

Demons

by Emily Bebenek

On the list of things I never want to
write about
talk about
think about
ever again –
this is number one.

It's been one year
four months
17 days.

The dress I wore that night still hangs
in a musty
dark corner of my closet.
I do my best not to think about it.
Not to look at it.

The backseat of your truck that night
smelled like wet cement
sweet tea
and fear.
I can still feel every grain of the upholstered seat
prickling against my bare
sensitive skin.

I don't remember seeing your face.
Maybe I've just

Emily Bebenek

blocked that part from my memory.

I wish I could block the whole thing from my memory.

And as much as I don't want to,
I still remember my purple dress against your floorboard.
My grandmother helped me pick out that dress.
We went to three different stores to find that dress.
I remember my hands shaking.
I remember the sound of your breath –
as much as I try to rid myself of it.
I remember the sound of your voice.

The worst part is
I remember the screaming.
I remember hearing a voice
not my voice
couldn't possibly be my voice
begging for you to stop.
I remember the screaming.
I remember my stomach tearing,
dropping into my hips
when I realized the screams were mine.

And I remember thinking how you loved me
as you held my hand and
told me that it was okay
that
I didn't need to cry

Emily Bebenek

because

you weren't upset at me.

Instead, you were upset at yourself
for making me cry.

I remember the drive back to your house,
feeling myself bleed in my dress
in my good underwear.

I remember crying myself to sleep,
my face buried in the giant teddy bear you gave me.

It didn't occur to me for almost a year that if you loved me,
you wouldn't have made me

beg

and scream

and cry

and bleed

in the first place.



Fence
by Cole Tangye

Huldra

by Arden Tapp

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

She may be empty on the inside, but she swears she can still feel the exhilarating beat of her missing heart when she successfully lures her prey. She absolutely adores hearing their soft whisper of a scream when it comes out of their crushed windpipes, or even better, the look of betrayal on their pitiful faces when they discover that she isn't just an easy lay, but instead is a dominating predator relishing her next meal. And good lord, she might not have a stomach, but there is nothing more filling and satisfying than the first chunk of soft flesh she takes out of her unsuspecting prey.



Shadow
by Lily Cochrane

Cleopatra

by Kate Amberson

Inspired by T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

The words are cut by knives,
When my lips utter their sounds
The night is carved in stone . . .
To look into his eyes
And plant the little white lies
But to question, "What have I done?"
Like looking into the scorching hot sun.

On the irregularly bare fingers of the women
Lingers the nights their men have forgiven.

A green ring that slithers off of my finger,
A green wedding band that slithers and scales towards his back off of my finger,
Tightened its grip until the darkness had come,
Touched its fangs upon the creases of his neck to linger,
Retracted its jaw,
And realizing his pain
Snuck back to where it came from.

There is plenty of time
To forget the crime,
To forget the night,
To forget the web that has been done,
And to undo the web that was once spun
Yet the mass that takes the breath from my lips

Kate Amberson

It moves closer . . .
But to ponder, "Do they know?"
But what have they to judge
For fingers of women strip their clothes.

On the irregularly bare fingers of the women
Lingers the nights their men have forgiven.

I weep . . . I weep . . .
For in a crystal reflection
Stares Cleopatra through a clear glass,
With a tear falling down her face
And two red marks on her back.

The green ring slips off my finger
And onto the table.

Just a Little While Longer

by Anna Jane Brittain

The day was dark and rainy, usual for the autumn in my country, and Gabriel held the clouds low as they cried. I pitied the tailor and his apprentice as they carefully pinned my gown, for there was little light in the parlor to see by, though it was nearly half-past noon. I flinched as the tailor's young apprentice accidentally stuck my arm with a pin.

"Deepest apologies, Your Grace."

"Foolish boy," Lady Anne Perry scolded, sitting on her velvet couch. She furiously rang a bell, and a maid came rushing in. "Fetch more candles, and bring in a bandage to dress Victoria's wound."

"'Tis hardly a wound, Mama," I replied. "No one ever died from a silly little pinprick."

"Perhaps," she rebutted, "but you are a beautiful and delicate flower. Besides, we wouldn't wish to stain your beautiful new gown." I held back my cringe, instead, admiring the artisanship of the gown in the mirror--the delicate designs, ribbons, and intricate lace that adorned it. I tried to imagine what Mr. Grenville's reaction would be: *Would he think me beautiful as Lady Anne did in my new dress, or would he think me simply adequate, pretty enough to be tolerated but not enough to be coveted by other men? Would he think me sweet like a the flower Lady Anne always calls me or pompous like a peacock?* My thoughts were interrupted as the maid came back into the poorly lit parlor and replaced the dying candles with fresh ones. She walked towards me, and the tailor lifted the lace around where he had accidentally pricked me so that she could "dress my wound." After placing a few more pins in the dress, the tailor had his apprentice begin to pack up their supplies.

"Your Grace," he began, "I estimate that I shall have the gown altered and delivered back to you before the week is out." The apprentice helped me down off of the platform upon which I stood, and I walked behind a changing wall where the maid helped me dress out of the gown and into my dress, my mother's favorite.

"Thank you," Lady Anne replied. "My husband, the Duke," I hate how Lady Anne

Anna Jane Brittain

refers to Papa as ‘The Duke,’ “shall have your due payment delivered to you by Friday.” The maid returned the gown to the tailor, who packed it away in a large parcel. The tailor and his apprentice gave a slight bow, turned, and left the parlor.

“You looked absolutely stunning as usual, Victoria. I can only imagine how angelic you shall look when the gown is finished,” my mother said. I hate it when she dotes upon me so. She has done so every minute of every day for all seventeen years of my miserable life. She noticed the irritated look on my face and asked me what was the matter.

“Nothing Mother,” I replied, lying.

She quickly responded with, “Well, cheer up then, and brighten your face. I too was hesitant when my day arrived. I understand that this all seems to be moving very quickly, what with the hasty arrangements and all; my day seemed to come quicker than it was arranged, and it was quite overwhelming. Nonetheless, I kept a good face.” The doors of the parlor opened again, and my little sister came in running, followed by my younger brother chasing after her; the image made me smile.

“Lotty!” Bobby cried after her, frustrated and out of breath.

“Is the dress here and ready, Victoria? May I see it, please?” Lotty asked me as she jumped up and down by my skirt, her arms anxiously held behind her back.

“Robert, you must learn to control Charlotte!” the Lady Anne cried. “You are fifteen years old now! How are you to control a dukedom one day if you are overwhelmed by a seven year old?”

“Mother—” he tried to plea, but she cut him off.

“Don’t talk back, Robert—” A loud thunderclap cut off the Lady Anne, and Lotty began to cry. “Wonderful, Robert! You’ve upset Gabriel with your foolish disrespect!” I held my frightened little sister and told my mother that Bobby meant well. “He must learn to be a brother before he can even consider becoming the next Sir Robert.” She stormed out of the parlor as Papa entered

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with a letter in his hand. "Control your son, Robert," she commanded on her way out.

"What's wrong with your mother, children?" Papa asked.

"What isn't wrong with the Lady Anne?" Robert grumbled under his breath. Another deafening clap of thunder sounded, and Lotty buried herself in my shoulder as I tried to calm her.

"Bobby, you know how it upsets the Heavens and your mother and me when you talk about her so disrespectfully." I looked at my father and knew he lied; I had heard him gossip and complain about his insufferable wife at dinner parties for years. Papa turned to me and took the wailing child from my arms. "Don't be frightened of the thunder, little one," he said. "It can't hurt you." Charlotte wiped away her tears and quieted her sobs. Papa had a way with Lotty; there was a special bond between them. Perhaps their bond was unique, or, perhaps, a father has one with each of his children, and they simply grow out of it. Papa set Lotty down on the floor and looked at my brother as if to say that he and our sister must leave. Robert took Charlotte's hand and led her out of the parlor. Papa held out the letter in his hand; it had the seal of the House of Grenville. As soon as I saw the seal, I knew whom it was from. I took the letter from Papa's hand and broke the seal as I sat down on one of the couches. "What did he write you?" Papa asked, looking over my shoulder.

"Nothing but a silly little poem, Papa," I replied, grinning.

"He must truly feel something for you; this must be the hundredth poem he's written for you this month alone," he said, almost exasperatedly.

"Only the seventeenth, Papa; one for every year of my life so far, and now the collection is complete. Silly how he lets his infatuation run wild like this, don't you think?"

"Infatuation? This is no mere case of infatuation, my dear. This is bordering on obsession." I giggled at Papa's joke. A humorous man, my father. "Well, I suppose I shall leave you to read your collection of poems" he continued, as he began to exit the parlor, giving me privacy. I looked back down at the parchment and read the poem:

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Thou art the sun, so full of light.
Thou art the moon, such beauty bright.

Though thou art not yet my loved wife,
I, now, vow to praise you all of my life.

Thou art the rose which bloometh in the Spring
To thee, I shall give mine ev'rything.

In Heaven, they sing of thy beauty glorius,
And, in mine heart, they strike the chorus

Which sings of thy beauty and of mine euphoria
For thou, thou art mine own Victoria.

Just a little while longer.

Affectionately,
Albert”

Sure enough, quicker than the day was arranged, it came. I was woken by the Lady Anne accompanied by a team of servants early in the autumn morning. I was ordered to quickly bathe and report immediately back to my mother to be prettied and moderately dressed. Lady Anne walked me to my carriage, parked in the flooded courtyard; the rains had continued from Mr. Grenville's last correspondence all the way to today. She also chaperoned me on my way to the church, where I saw the dress again, this time with no pins in it. When the sight reached my eyes, the weight of the situation seemed to fall on me as if out of the sky. My breath began to quicken and become shallow. I stumbled as I sat down on the nearest chair. My mother noticed me and knew the exact protocol for such events when my breath decided to malfunction; I was to

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be fetched a glass of water with a small amount of wine mixed in. Then, my mother would hold my wrist to monitor my heart rate and coach my breathing through the demonstration of deep breaths in and out... in and... and out. I developed a respiratory condition as a small child, and the physicians gave strict instructions to my parents and nannies of what to do when I had an attack. My guardians were also told that if I were to have more than two attacks within a single day, I could be in serious danger. Once I managed to catch my breath, I was sat down at a table littered with various powders, brushes, and wool puffs to be used on my complexion. After the work was done on my face, new work was to be done on my head. I had to be assisted in rising from my seat because my hair was so heavy. I slowly walked behind the, thankfully nearby, changing wall where I was dressed in the satin slippers and the now pinless gown.

“Ah!” the Lady Anne exclaimed when she saw me. “If she were any more radiant, she would outweigh the angels in beauty!” I found this repulsive, as did the Heavens; a loud crack of thunder sounded after she spoke. I was escorted by the Lady Anne through the weaving and winding corridors of the church until we reached the doors to the sanctuary where Papa awaited us. Bobby took the arm of Lady Anne, and the doors were opened so that they might join the procession. Papa gently took my arm, and I counted the fractions of the seconds that passed as we waited for the doors to open for us to be the final couple in the parade. My breath began to quicken and shallow, and Papa’s hand moved to my wrist, calming my nerves. The doors opened slower than the passage of time, and I froze. Papa began to lead me to the back of the sanctuary and, unlike the opening of the doors, my journey seemed to be as quick as lightning. Before I knew it, Papa had let me go and made his way to the pew.

He took my hand and looked into my eyes with a kind and excited smile as he said, “Ms. Perry.”

As usual, this made me grin, and I replied with, “Mr. Grenville.”

We turned to the priest, who initiated the ceremony, and Albert whispered into my ear, “Just a little while longer.”

We made our vows and pledged ourselves to one another, and the priest

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declared us man and wife. I was free at last! Free from the pain of being the favorite of my intolerable mother, from the misery that comes along with constants doting, free from the constant attention and monitoring that ensured my beauty was not compromised. I had made my escape into a new life with my Albert!

What a husband Albert made! I had known him for five years prior to our marriage. We met first at a dinner party arranged as an informal political meeting for our parents, who had been close friends for many years. I had thought him silly and just another annoying thirteen-year-old boy when I met him, for he only enjoyed and spoke of typical boyish activities such as sports--which he had a knack for, especially in running sports--and hunting, activities that I could not take part in nor did I care to in the first place. We met for the second time at the opening for a comedic theatre play three years later--he was aged sixteen, and I had turned fifteen three months prior. He had developed a refinement about himself; this new savoir-faire enticed me to not protest when I was seated by him at the dinner after the play ended. We began corresponding to each other through letters for the next several weeks, and not long after I confessed that I had developed feelings for Albert, his father arrived at my home to discuss a contract between our two families. I was not told what this contract was until a week later, when it was announced to me, as a surprise, that I was to be married to Albert of House Grenville within the next year. However, the wedding was postponed because of the death of Albert's father due to complications of the heart. The family grieved for quite a while, especially Albert and his mother, and I grieved with them, though I surely did not feel the same intensity of loss as they did. As eldest son and heir, Albert was passed down the title of Earl and the lands and privileges that come with it from his father.

As a man of many sports, Albert particularly enjoyed foot races with other gents, typically the husbands, fiancés, or brothers of my fellow noblewomen, and he especially enjoyed it when we made wagers on our men. "Ah-ha!" I would shout with glee when the gents made their way back to their ladies from the field at our manor on which they ran. "Good game, ladies, but as usual it seems that my horse has won!" Though Albert was a man of sports, he enjoyed, or at least pretended to enjoy, the reading of poems and old literature with me in our library. We were quite the happy couple with quite a happy

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marriage. We were made even happier when we discovered, four months after our wedding, that we were to become parents. The child was due in autumn; we were overjoyed, as was the Lady Anne, who made her way to our manor to help us prepare as soon as I was told that I was an estimated three months pregnant. Lady Anne's presence in my new home distressed me very much.

"Only a little while longer," Albert would tell me, "until we can have our freedom again, and then we will have a child to look after and distract us. Just a little while longer, my Victoria." As the day grew nearer and my belly grew larger, I grew more excited and the Lady Anne grew more impatient. As most expecting grandmothers do, Lady Anne complained that she wanted to see her new grandchild, and she constantly had me monitored to "keep the new child safe." As most expectant mothers do, I longed for my own mother to leave me be. She even insisted that she sleep in the same room as me and my husband in case of emergency. To appease her, we had a separate bed brought into our room.

As most expectant mothers also do, I had very vivid dreams at night. Some were silly and amusing, others disturbing. One night, though, I dreamt that I woke in my bed next to my Albert. I felt a compulsion to walk to the wardrobe and look at the mirror inside. When I did, I saw myself in the mirror, and a man—nay, an angel!—standing behind me, looking at me with a serious expression. Then he shifted his glance to where my mother lay sleeping. I turned to look at the angel instead of his reflection, but as soon as I did, he was gone. I felt a pain in my belly, a wrenching, and I heard something fluid hit the wooden floor. I awoke to discover that I was experiencing the pain in real life, and I immediately woke my husband, who panicked and violently rang a bell for a servant. The noise awoke my mother, who lit a candle, came over to my bedside, and pulled back the covers to thankfully find no sign of blood.

"My dear, don't panic. You are going into labor. Just breathe."

Finally, a servant came in, and Albert shouted at him, "Fetch the doctor and the midwife! Lady Victoria is in labor." The servant, presumably frozen in panic, stood in the doorway with wide eyes. "Now! Damn you, boy!" Albert exclaimed in frustration.

The midwife had been staying in the manor for the past several weeks in

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anticipation, and she was at my side quicker than I could have imagined. After about twenty minutes, the doctor arrived and immediately set to work, laying out his tools and requesting more candles. Albert and my mother were taken out of the room, and I was left alone with my midwife, my doctor, and a handful of chambermaids. The pain was unbearable, and only twenty minutes after he was removed, I began to call out for him to be brought to my side. "Albert!" I cried. "Albert!" I cried again, louder this time. I turned to the midwife and asked, "Where is my Albert?" She signaled one of the maids to bring him in, and as soon as the doors were opened, he came rushing to my side. For the next several painful hours, Albert stayed by my side, comforted me, and monitored my heart and breath as I cried out in pain. I could see in his eyes that it hurt him to see me in such pain; I appreciated the sentiment but knew that he could never understand the pain I was experiencing.

Many hours passed, and the sun was beginning to rise. The room had grown humid and smelled of body odor and blood. I was so tired. "I can't do this. I can't do this anymore. It hurts so much," I said to Albert, crying.

"Yes, you can. You can do this, my love. Just a little while longer for a lifetime of happiness," Albert said, trying to comfort me. I tried to use his words to encourage myself, but my breath grew quicker and shallower, and I knew what was happening. Albert must have noticed the change in my heart rate or in my breath because he began to look panicked. I started to fade into a sort of fatigue, almost as if I were falling asleep. The doctor said something to the midwife that I couldn't quite hear, and then I felt a great release in my body. My tired mind did not quite comprehend what the release was until I looked at my husband's devastated expression and realized that I did not hear a baby's cry. My breath quickened even more as I began to cry. Albert tried to calm me, but I was fading. The darkness that I saw as I closed my eyes turned into an image of the angel cradling an infant in his arms. I heard the doors to the bedroom open and a great cry from my mother. I realized that she must have seen the horrific sight. Then everything went black and silent.

I awoke from a deep, deep sleep in one of the guest bedrooms of our manor. I recognized the room by the mural on the ceiling of little painted cherubs. I was lying down, propped up slightly by a collection of pillows, but I felt arms around my waist and a head resting on my ribs. I looked down at the figure

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to whom the arms and head belonged to and saw my husband, still in his nightshirt. He heard my head shift to look at him and sat up, his face red and still wet with tears. He simply leaned over and gave me a kiss on my forehead before he resumed his position next to me.

“Just a little while longer.”

Tiny Kingdom

by Helen Carson

Inspired by Claude McKay's 'America'

This a town composing a web of lies
Burns in my brain an idea to uphold,
I can barely keep up with all my tries
Still, this place is my home, I cannot scold.

The power of community lifts her
Support flows through her branches, O she reigns,
We stand in hand without hardly a blur
The tiny kingdom will subdue the strain!

This place is my home that I will not leave
This life is amazing and shows the tale
For this is my place and I stand with thee
With wonder and spirit she will prevail.

We watch as others leave without a trace,
Wondering what next this kingdom will face.

The Life of the Moon

by Jane Ryland Elliot

Out in the middle of Italy, on the top of their apartment building, stood a couple. Cuddled with their arms around one another, they were looking up at the stars and the moon hoping the night would never end.

“Look at how bright the moon shines,” Ashley ecstatically said with a huge smile on her face.

“Isn’t this something!” Edward replied.

“It’s so tranquil, Edward. Oh! Just look at it!”

“Isn't it weird how the moon shines at night while the sun shines in the daylight.”

“They each get their own chance to shine,” Ashley said in awe.

“It’s like the night has a different life.”

“They travel all across the world, daily.”

Edward turned and looked at Ashley, rolling his eyes.

“And it always comes back,” Edward exclaimed.

“Maybe the moon and sun want to stay in the same spot forever, without traveling around?” Ashley questioned.

“Or maybe they like to travel around and see all the different parts of the world,” Edward tried to calmly slip in.

Ashley unwrapped her arms from around Edward and sat up, looking the other way.

“Why do this?” Ashley’s voice broke.

“I can’t stay here forever Ash, you know that,” Edward softly and guiltfully said.

Ashley’s eyes filled with tears as she turned slowly back to Edward.

Jane Ryland Elliot

“But why not? Why can’t this be your – our forever home?”

Edward didn’t answer, but looked at the bright moon.

“Just like the moon comes and goes, so do I. But you know I will be back again, for the moon comes back too.”

“I am tired of you coming and going. Don’t you want to be with me?”

“Of course I do, don’t say that again. I love you,” Edward said while heaving out a deep breath.

“Then stay! Here, with me! Please....” Ashley quietly begged.

Edward didn’t respond. He laid down looking at the bright moon they both loved, hoping and wanting the conversation to end; they have argued about this for a while now. Ashley, who had given up, laid next to Edward and silently cried, for she knew there was nothing she could do to stop Edward from leaving the next morning. They both looked at the moon and wished for something different.



Angel
by Kimsey Stewart

Hoping for the Future: A Letter

by Jackson Allison

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

I had always known something was wrong,
But, in my youth, I never knew what.
You would sometimes act different,
But, in my youth, I never knew why.
There would be yelling and arguments fueled by anger,
But, in my youth, I never knew when they would end.

At twelve I learned of the disease that plagued you.
I talked of it openly with the ones I trusted,
Easing the pain that came from knowledge.
The death of your father hurt us both,
I experienced my first funeral, weeping during the service,
While you lost the man you loved most.

At fourteen you went away, unsure of when you'd return.
With my sisters having moved out,
My father and I were the only ones who remained.
Life was different without you, but we made it work.
When we came to visit your smile grew large
And your embrace made me melt away into a soft peace.

At seventeen you got in an accident.
I had come home to an empty house,

Jackson Allison

Unsure of where you were.

My dad called, letting me know what happened.

I wasn't as concerned or distraught as I thought I would be,

Instead I was unfazed, merely thankful you weren't dead.

I hope that one day you will become normal,

Or as normal as one can get living with the disease.

I hope that one day you can come to family functions,

And see all the faces that love you, through better or worse.

I hope that one day my children will be able to meet their grandmother

And see her for the loving woman she is.

Yellow Daffodils

by Melissa Stein

The hospital room wasn't unlike most hospital rooms. It was small, clean, and quiet. The bed was small, the chairs were made of a plastic material that squeaked when you sat down on them, and the overall color scheme of the room was overwhelmingly blue. The room had countless machines monitoring the woman's heart rate, pulse, blood pressure, breathing patterns, brain waves, and many other seemingly trivial things. The only thing different about this room in particular had to be the small pot of yellow daffodils sitting on the windowsill.

"The flowers are dying..." she said, pointing across the hospital bed. The room was lit only by a window that was letting in small amounts of sunlight through the diaphanous curtains, making the room appear a soft blue as the light reflected across the walls.

He gave her a look and crossed the small room, looking down at his feet as he walked. "They are."

She looked at the small pot of pale yellow daffodils that he was leaning over in their little brown pot. "I'd really appreciate it if you'd give them a little water."

"What does it matter?" he sighed, poking the dry dirt with his finger. "They'll be dead in a few days either way."

"I'd just appreciate it, Tom," she said, exasperated. "You're here everyday anyway, I'm not even awake most of the time, and I'd just like—"

"Fine, I'll water them. Just, please stop." An uncomfortable hush fell over the room as he avoided her gaze.

"Avoiding this won't make it go away," she whispered, looking down at the diamond engagement ring on her hand as she felt soft tears roll down her cheeks.

"And talking about it won't make me feel any better," he said harshly, crossing his arms and sitting down in one of the awkward hospital chairs, eyeing the ring on her finger. The room was quiet for a while, as if even the daffodils were

Melissa Stein

holding their breath. The machines beeped softly, waiting, waiting, waiting.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” he admitted, standing up and coming to sit down at the end of the small hospital bed. “It’s just really hard for me.”

She looked up and scoffed at him, trying to get him to meet her eyes, “Look at me.”

The room fell quiet again as, for the first time in months, he really saw her. Her skin was paler than he remembered, and her hair no longer looked like silk. She looked... fragile, like if you tipped her over she would shatter onto the floor. His skin turned cold as he finally tore his eyes away from her.

“You’re being selfish,” she said softly, trying to hold power in her voice.

The room fell quiet again, until the hospital bed creaked. “You’re right,” he said.

Soon after, the door shut softly behind him, leaving her alone ... again. She cried quietly as she slowly slipped the ring off her finger and set it down on the table next to the bed. Her eyes shut softly as the machines humming around her slowly faded into white noise and she felt nothing.

White Curtains

by David Graves

The corridor is crowded with praying families in disbelief of the inevitable. It is a gloomy, dark building with sunken-faced workers. Many of the visitors have a mask of happiness on, but no one there is truly joyful. The father and son are sitting with each other on a cold winter day. The son goes to open the white curtains to let the sun enter the room.

“Son, what are you doing?”

“Just letting some light in.”

“You know I do not want to be around the light.”

The son grabs a cold beer out of the almost broken mini refrigerator for himself, while his father lay back down on the bed.

The son asks his father, “How are you holding up?” as he offers him the drink.

“Just take a look at me, and you know I can’t drink.”

The young man stops for a second. “It is beautiful outside today. Are you sure you want the curtains closed?”

“I am not ready to see the light yet. I need more time.”

The white curtains are heavy in width, emitting no light into the dark room.

“No problem Dad. Take your time; it is no rush.”

The son goes next to his teary-eyed father. The older man gets up, walks around the bed, and sits down away from his son. He tries to move further away, but his cords are tangled from the years of twisting and turning.

“Dad, you cannot get away from me. I will always be here for you.”

“I am waiting for summer to open them.”

“I only want to see you better. I want nothing more than for you to come join

David Graves

me.”

The old man lies back down, pondering what he should do. He asks, “How is your day going?”

“It’s fine.”

“You can talk to me about it. I would love to hear about it.”

“No, it is really fine. I am offering you something great, and you have refused to accept it for three years now.”

“You know I love you.”

“I’m sure.”

The young man vanishes from his father’s sight. The day draws to a close as the old man struggles to rest, as usual. He feels the inevitable urge to agree with his son but refuses to accept it. He thinks about it all night because he can not find rest. As the sun rises, the son appears in his vision on the front of his bed to tell him it is morning.

“Hey father, how did you sle...”

The father interjects suddenly, “I am coming today; I have thought about it, and I am ready.”

“If you wish. You know you will be happier, correct?”

“That is what I am hoping for.”

The son goes over to open the curtains. Abruptly, the old man sees himself by the window, taking in all of the beauty of winter, disconnected from his cords.



Reading Nook
by Kimsey Stewart

Cheesecake

by Katie Ramsbacher

“This is my favorite restaurant purely because of the variety of cheesecake flavors,” Sarah said as she sat back down in the checkered chair. She placed her plate of coconut cheesecake on the table and slowly started to eat. She knew this meeting would take a lot of her patience, so she made sure to savor every bite.

Across the table sat a worried looking man named William. Although he had been doing his job for a long time, and this was not the first time he was meeting with Sarah, he was always nervous in public. William felt exposed sitting in front of the large window that framed the front of the small restaurant. He concentrated on the raindrops slowly falling down the glass as he tried to block out every thought that was going through his mind.

“Can we move to a more secluded part of this place?” William asked as he looked towards Sarah. He knew talking to anyone about his line of work would get them both killed once they stepped out of the restaurant’s tiny red door.

“Don’t be so paranoid, William,” Sarah said as she took a bite of her cheesecake. “You have done this before and you are still alive. I promise this is the last time we will meet face to face. After this, I will only call if it is extremely important to the investigation. You will no longer have to live in fear. The FBI will have your friends in custody and because you have cooperated, we trust you will find a new, less murderous field of employment. ”

“There will always be more of us, you know that,” William responded swiftly. He turned to watch the rain on the window again. “What do you want from me? I thought we were done last time,” he added.

Sarah reached into her bright red purse and pulled out a shiny black ballpoint pen.

“I need you to write down all of your contacts in other countries that could potentially become a threat to the United States,” she said while handing him the pen.

“What? Why?” William questioned. “You said only the state-side contacts would

Katie Ramsbacher

be used.” He looked around the small restaurant that was shoved on a corner of a busy street in New York.

He was hesitant to reveal such information, as Sarah knew he would be. William had a reputation for being the best in the business. He knew the most about his job and who was involved in this particular line of work, but his extensive knowledge also came with more precautions than most.

“Just do it,” Sarah said. She was growing more impatient with William, and she was running out of cheesecake. Of course he was nervous, he was putting his life on the line to help millions of people that could be targeted by the people he knew. Sarah appreciated his willingness to give the information he knew, but she had places to be and terrible people to stop. There was no time for William to be second guessing life-changing decisions. Becoming angrier by the second, Sarah resorted to threatening William to do what she needed.

“This is the last piece of my favorite coconut cheesecake,” she said, gesturing to the piece with her fork. “By the time I finish eating it, you will have done the one thing I have asked of you. Understood?”

“You’ve got me, isn’t that enough?” William asked. “Just take me in, you never know what I might do if you let me go. Business will be booming once your boys get everyone except me.” He was starting to beg, worried for his life and sanity. Sarah did not reply. She only looked at William sitting across the table. He did not notice his leg that was bouncing up and down underneath the circular table until Sarah eyed it and chuckled.

“You know for a man with such a dangerous job, you sure are nervous about talking to a little woman like me,” she commented with a smile.

Understanding there was no way out of the situation, William sighed. “Okay, obviously turning myself in is not good enough.” He grabbed the pen and started writing all of the international employers and colleagues he could remember.

After a few minutes, he slowly put down the pen. “There. That’s all of them.”

William started to look around the small restaurant, analyzing everyone that

Katie Ramsbacher

walked in or out. He constantly listened to the little bell attached to the door, his head turning every time it rang.

“We are done here. Thank you for your help,” Sarah said. She smiled, knowing that she was one step closer to completing her assignment.

“You know if they find out about this, they will kill us both without hesitation,” William warned Sarah. Her emotionless face told William that his warning did not faze her.

Sarah started packing her things into her purse. “We will send a US marshal to protect you. You are to never leave his sight.” She turned and looked at William, still sitting in his checkered chair across from her now empty one.

“I suppose the FBI will be in touch, William, but honestly, I hope we never have to meet again. For both of our sanities. Anyways, thank you so much; you really do not know how much you have helped. Good luck in whatever you decide to do next.”

“Thank you,” William replied. He did not make eye contact with her, instead looking at the small and empty plate that once held coconut cheesecake.

He heard the fading clicks of Sarah’s heels as she walked away. This was the last time they were meeting and he could not take back what he had said to Sarah. William was so lost in his thoughts he didn’t hear the bell chime to indicate Sarah leaving the restaurant. He sat there for a few minutes looking out of the window as Sarah got into her black SUV. William’s thoughts were interrupted by a waiter asking if he wanted anything. He just shook his head. Finally, William stood up and walked out of the door still unsure of what his future will hold.



Restaurant
by Carly Cole

Ennui

by Elaine Russell

inspired by Claude McKay's "America"

the monotony of the world increases.
we sit in our chilled, metal classrooms
doing work and waiting to be released
we stare out windows, but we remain entombed.
slowly, our passions deteriorate
as we complete assignments each day.
it's this crave for freedom we radiate
but, creativity won't fill your resume.
everyday perpetually cycles on
the wheel continues to drearily spin
crushing us and all that we dream upon:
fragmented dreams show us what could've been
it's all that we can do to not sellout
our once radiant flames slowly burn out.

The Monster of the Canyon

by Madison Jenkins

The summer before ninth grade, my family took a trip to the Grand Canyon. I wanted to see what I had heard described as one of the most amazing places to visit in nature, but as I got closer and closer to the park, the ever-present voice in the back of my head put in its opinion.

“You know how many people die here per year?” it asked.

“Nope, and I would rather not know,” I responded.

“Twelve. Twelve deaths per year and that’s just from people falling over the edge. Don’t forget dehydration and getting lost.”

Always good to start a life changing trip on a happy note.

As we got to the Canyon, I found myself staring at an infinitely vast chasm of death. Everyone surrounding me stood eyes wide and mouths open looking at the awesome grandeur of the Canyon; however, I could only see it as one of the most terrifying places I have ever been.

“Wow. This may be the prettiest place I’ve ever seen,” remarked my sister, Morgan.

What? This place definitely was not pretty. Pretty things are fragile and weak. Pretty conjures up images of flowers and breakable vases.

No, this place was beautiful. Beautiful things do not break. Beautiful things are what break others.

I could feel the dark cloud of anxiety rushing up to greet me as I stared in the mouth of the Grand Canyon – with its sheer cliff drops and jagged rocks with sharp edges glaring back at me like teeth ready to eat me alive.

“Told ya,” it mocked, “this is the end for you. I mean, they need twelve people to die here to maintain their average. It’s gotta happen sometime.”

The idea consumed me. My heart felt as though a tight cage had formed around it, but as the cage tightened, my heart kept growing larger and beating

Madison Jenkins

faster and faster.

I definitely stood alone in this idea, but I felt as though someone else must be thinking the same things as me.

“Morgan,” I said as I turned towards my sister. “Do you know how many people die here per year?”

“Why in the world would I want to know that?” she responded.

“Twelve people per year. That’s kind of scary right?”

“Yeah, but that’s twelve stupid people, and that’s twelve out of the millions of people that visit here every year. That means that you have less than a .0001% chance of dying here, so I think you’re probably okay.”

“True,” I said back, trying to act like I was completely okay.

The ever-rational voice of my sister calmed me for about one second until my internal voice gained prominence in the discussion again, forcing me to lose my grip on my thoughts. It responded with, “What makes you think you’re not in that .0001% of people?”

Awesome, I’m still going to die.

Later, we hiked down into the canyon to the edge of a cliff where my family, along with other tourists, sat peacefully.

“Madison, come sit with us,” my sister said.

“How about no?” I snarkily responded.

“Come on. The view is amazing.”

“Tempting, but I enjoy life.”

If that cliff crumbled, there was no way that I could survive that fall, and if I did I would probably wish I had not. I could vividly imagine falling off of it and seeing the wide jaws of the Canyon open wide and swallow me whole.

Madison Jenkins

I need to get out of this place.

By the time the rest of my family finally decided that we should go back to the top of the rim of the Canyon, I was practically halfway up the cliff side.

There was nothing worse than the feeling of being trapped in this beast's mouth. I was caged by it on all sides. I felt like I was drowning in a river that allowed me to surface for just enough oxygen for me to keep going with a calm face for the world, and then joyfully dragged me back down into its depths.

As soon as we were out of the Canyon and in the car, I felt the weight of the monster's waiting, watchful eyes release me. Not only that, but the constant, nervous voice in my head had also decided to leave me to peacefully ride back to the hotel.

I knew that the voice would be back, though. It was always prepared to join me for any other near-death experiences that came my way.

"That was amazing," Morgan commented.

"I mean the fact that you couldn't even see where it ended, and then it went down so far, and then..." my brother continued.

Had we even been to the same place? I wondered. Where everyone else had seen beautiful cliffs, I saw sharp teeth waiting for me to take some sort of misstep and fall into its waiting jaws. Where they saw glittering, diamond rivers, I saw the raging water ready to take me under.

As I had the opportunity to reflect and reexamine my Grand Canyon experience, I realized that what I had the privilege of seeing was an amazing feat of nature, not a death trap. I wished that I could go back in time and try to look at the Canyon again through the lens utilized by the rest of family, but sadly, I am forever stuck with the memory of a monster.

The Sweeping River

by William Wood

The sun was out and it felt hotter than ever before. The boy had been playing in the backyard. Mama always instructed them to never swim in the river back there. But children are children, and some don't listen; Sissy once paid the consequences for a little mistake.

The boy came inside to play with his Legos.

"Mama, can I have some lemonade?" the boy said. His wet, muddy footprints were all over the floor.

"It's very hot outside. Of course," the mother said.

"Can I have some cookies too?"

"I just made some," the mother replied as she walked in with a tray of cookies. She paused. "What have you been up to?"

"Playing," the boy quipped. "Mama, don't you like this spaceship I built?"

"Of course, sweetie," she replied.

"Can it fly to heaven?" the boy asked. There was a pause.

"Honey, it can do anything your imagination tells you," the mother said as she looked to the floor. She noticed the wet footprints. Tears came to her eyes. She asked to the boy, "Have you been in the river?"

"Mama, it was hot."

"I'm going to ask you again, were you in the river?"

The boy looked to the floor and poked out his lip. "Yes, Mama."

A look of great sorrow came to Mama's face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She threw her hands around the boy, exclaiming, "Why? Why would you go down there? You know what happened last time you and Sissy played in the river."

"I was only on the bank," he said.

William Wood

“Baby, that doesn’t matter. You went to the river. After last time I told you to never go down there again.”

“It was too hot not to, Mama. You told me I stay inside too much.”

“Never did I say go to the river, love. Never. Never again.”

“Why?”

“What if you were swept away? I would have nothing left.”

“But Mama, I am a stronger swimmer. No river can sweep me away.”

The mother, still clutching her child, replied, “No, sweetie, no you aren’t.”



Park

by Mary Cameron McLean

Lonely

by Arden Tapp

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

Beams of light fly through the blind slats, catching dust in their rays. The house is silent except for the steady rhythm of her breaths and the imaginary white noise that her mind conjures up every time the oppressive air is too thick. She cannot remember the last time the wooden floors creaked and shuddered under the weight of another, nor the last time that the notes of joyful conversation fluttered through the stale air. She drags her spindly fingers along the rough, brick walls that isolate her heart and create an impenetrable boundary between her and the outside world. She is trapped. Her hand plummets back to her blanketed lap, and she sinks further into the crevice of her brown, corduroy couch.



Cracked
by Julia Rouleau

Negligence of the Homeless

by Andrew Fleming

Friday night could not have come any sooner for Tony Dawkins as he had finished his first demanding week as a busboy. Tony was fired from his last job as a cashier at McDonald's just one week prior. The McDonald's restaurant manager could not take Tony's complaining any more and told him to leave. Tony and his best friend since grade school, Mike Turner, decided it would be fun to go to watch a movie with a portion of each of their paychecks.

"Wow, Tony! Hit the brakes a little harder next time," Mike exclaimed.

"Mike, you know this stop light takes ages to turn green. I thought I could make it," said Tony.

"Well, try not to get us killed because Lord knows neither of us could pay for the others funeral," responded Mike. They both considered what had been said and smiled, shared a knowing look.

"Look over there," said Mike.

"Don't mind him. He comes up to my car every day on the way to work. He will go away. He always does," responded Tony.

Mike reflected for a brief moment and interrupted the silence. "Do you think he has eaten dinner?"

"Not my problem."

"Then whose problem is it?" blurted Mike.

"Look man. I have been through a great deal of stress the past few weeks. It's nearly all I can do to keep up with myself these days," proclaimed Tony.

"What movie are we going to see anyways," retorted Mike. "I don't know how you dragged me into this."

"We are going to see the new Star Wars. Let's put our problems behind us for the night and enjoy the movie. We both could use something to ease our minds."

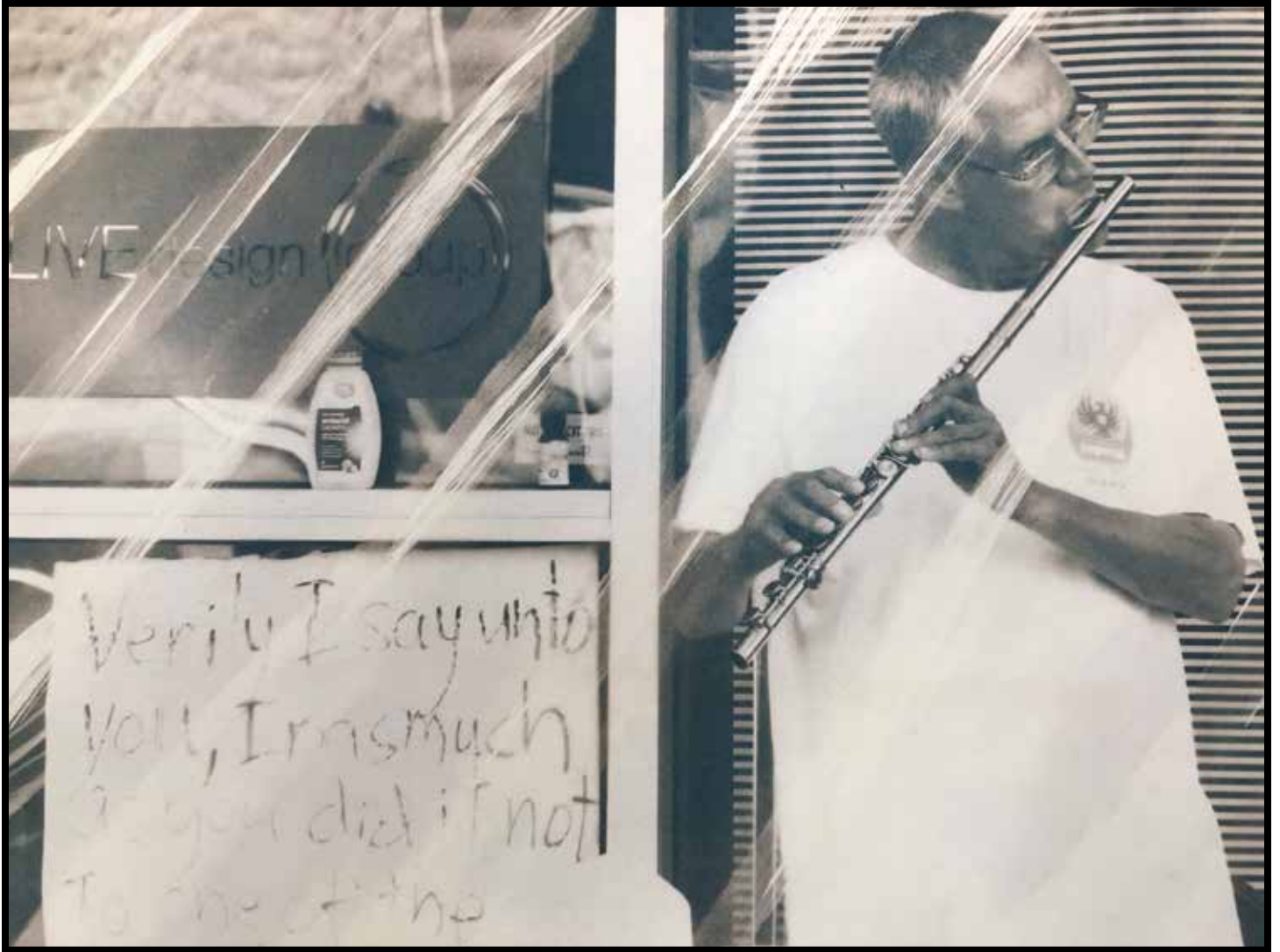
Andrew Fleming

“You’re right. I have been too uptight lately, and I’m sorry.”

The homeless man rattled his meager change bucket as he walked back to the other side of the road. Then, the light turned green for Tony and Mike.

As Tony drove through the intersection Mike coldly asked, “What if everyone ignored him just like us?”

Tony snapped back, “Drop it.”



Cyanotype
by Louise Knight

All That Glitters is Not Gold

by Yuvika Harsh

The city was beautiful. I walked down the streets of Paris, admiring the elegance of a city settling down for the starlit evening. As I grazed my hand along the walls, my eyes wandered over the multitude of boutiques and salons that Champs-Élysées offered. I smiled, allowing the setting sun to caress my face. Contentment washed over me as I strolled down the avenue, trailing behind my family as they meandered ahead.

Yet as I looked around the radiant city, my vision caught on the plethora of rag-tag families mingling with the Parisians. They leaned against the walls of the avenue, their malnourished bodies clothed in mere blankets and ragged remnants of once-colorful attire. Their empty plastic bowls sat beside their bony feet as they beseeched anyone who walked by for money, or scraps of food to feed their hunger-stricken babies. They understood no English and no French. Some spoke in Arabic, emphasizing their desperation with hand gestures. Some prayed to Allah for mercy, their words murmured under their breath. Still, no tourist or native paused to offer money or help. They gave the refugees a wide berth, as if walking beside them would tarnish their status.

I caught up to my parents, asking to help some of the families with newborns, to offer warmer clothing to stave off the chill of the approaching night. They denied, refusing to condone any form of begging. So we walked away, and those bowls remained empty for another night.

We went back to our hotel as the sun dipped, and I silently entered the warm bedroom, laying my bags on the silk sheets. My mind kept wandering back to those families huddled together to fight the cold as I swaddled myself in the warm blankets. I stared out the window towards the glittering Eiffel Tower, visible even from so far away.

The city was beautiful, but tainted. Tainted from the ignorance and indifference of a people too invested in themselves, too disgusted at the lower class, too far removed from the realities of war. I closed the curtains and went to bed. I didn't sleep well that night.



Powerline Cords
by Louise Knight

A Dying Seed

by Mason Campbell

This piece and writer were recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

Raymond was a small farming town on the southern half of Tennessee. A dark green river cut through right in front of town hall, providing the town with fertile soil. Nick and Susan were new to the farming town and bought a piece of land on the outskirts of the town. Nick would wake up every morning and tend to his plants, while Susan stayed inside and made him breakfast, occasionally walking out back with him to help him out. They walked around back and examined their garden after being away for a while.

"Looks like all our plants died while visiting your mother," Mark said. Susan said nothing.

"I'll go grab the shovels and we can dig them up. While I go to the shed, can you grab the seeds? There's a bin-full in the cellar."

"Yes," she mumbled, then went for the seeds.

Mark stared at her in pain, knowing there was nothing else he could do to make her feel better. She was lost in her mind and felt betrayed.

Susan walked down into the darkness of the cellar and searched for the seeds. She found three large bins of seeds, grabbed a bucket, and filled it all the way up. She maneuvered through the darkness and made her way to the stairs, using the cracks of light squeezing through the door for guidance. Before she made it back outside, she slipped and dropped the bucket, spilling the seeds into the darkness.

Mark was back in the garden and began digging up the dead plants. He threw the dead plants off to the side and began forming holes for the seeds to be placed in.

"Here are the seeds," Susan said.

"Ah thank you. What happened to your leg?" Mark exclaimed in concern.

Mason Campbell

“Must've cut it when I slipped. It's fine it doesn't hurt,” she said softly.

“Susan, I know you're in pain. You can't keep doing this. I know you feel guilty for it, but there is nothing you could have done. It happens to plenty of people, we aren't the only ones.” Mark said.

“I know, I know. You're right, I'm sorry. It's just hard to believe this happened. I always knew it was a possibility, but I still thought we'd be fine,” she said.

Mark looked at her with a smile on his face and continued to consult her, “We're going to be fine, I promise. We'll try again.”



Smoke and Foliage
by Lena Pelham

A Farewell: A Letter

by Cade Holmes

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "A River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

You were there for my arrival,
But I was not there for your departure.
You tried to show me your statutes,
But I let it fall between the cracks.
For I did not realize you were the statue
That my life had ignorantly lacked.

At thirteen you took pride in my name.
Hopes and aspirations you thought I would certainly gain.
I bowed my head to you, my superior.
Why would I ever doubt you?

At fourteen you forgot my name.
You loved me, but you knew I had I lost my way.
You lowered your head to me, your lesser.
Why would you ever not doubt me?

At fifteen you departed from me.
Far into the clouds, with the angels you did meet.
The trees grew taller, yet I was small,
But with green in my eyes I stood up tall.

You left unexpectedly with a quick stroke,
Like a hammer striking a nail into the dead oak.
Thump, thump, and thump,
Your sarcophagus is complete.

Cade Holmes

You have been gone almost four years now,
But with a new look on life, I made a promise, a vow.
I said, "I will achieve greatness and make you proud."
Though little did I know,
You've always been watching from the crowd.
So give me a sign when you're back in town.
So on the Friday night lights,
I can make you proud.



Leaf
by Riley Brown

Hamburger Heaven

by Megan Sumrall

Often we become oblivious to how much we depend on things or people in our everyday life until they are no longer there. For me this ended up being my mom. In late 2016 my mother, who had been in remission for ten years, was re-diagnosed with breast Cancer, and it was soon easy to tell that my mom wasn't going to be strong enough to put up the same fight like she had the first time she had battled cancer. As 2016 faded into 2017, it became clear to me that she wasn't going to be around for much longer. However, as a fourteen year old girl, I pushed these thoughts away and typically tried to ignore them. The strain of this situation and the symptoms that followed wormed their way into my life on a pretty regular basis. I slacked in school, started caring less and less about my extracurriculars, and even stopped caring for myself physically. I learned that you can only keep on a brave face for a limited amount of time, and that nights of crying and solitude were unavoidable. As days, weeks, and months passed, my fifteenth birthday loomed and my mom's condition got worse. My birthday is the twenty fifth of March and is notoriously known for things going wrong. In 2017, I only hoped that I wouldn't add the anniversary of my mother passing to the same day.

My fifteenth birthday arrived and I was leaving for Rosemary Beach for my first spring break traveling with friends. My father made me a birthday breakfast and before I left my house, and I had the last exchange of actual words with my mom that I can remember. She weakly mumbled something along the lines of happy birthday and I love you, and I gave her a hug while returning the I love you before I walked out the door. Looking back, I don't remember being worried or scared that my mom wouldn't be around when I returned home. I only remember being excited to see my friends and to get to the beach, but sadly the excitement didn't last long. About a day and a half later, my father called and said my aunt was coming to pick me up and that my mom had been moved to hospice care. Over the next couple of days, my family was going in and out of the hospice center as my mom's old friends and some of our relatives came to say their goodbyes. That Wednesday, March 29th, in the late afternoon, my dad asked me and my sister to step into the hallway. I remember his next words vividly.

“We're each going to go in and say our goodbyes. We're going to be okay with

Megan Sumrall

what we say last and we aren't going to worry about it when she passes.”

After our goodbyes, my father suggested we go to a nearby Hamburger Heaven to grab some food. He offered my sister and me the opportunity to go with him or to stay at the hospice center. My older sister stayed with my mom's best friend at the hospice center and I went with my dad. My dad and I drove down the road, ordered our food, and sat inside to eat. We reminisced on old times, and I found myself feeling joy in a time that should have been difficult. After this short trip, my dad and I returned to the hospice center and the nurses told us my mom had passed away since we had been gone. I remember having a feeling of relief knowing my mom's suffering was over, yet also feeling guilty for not being absolutely crushed. Over the course of what has almost been two years, I've realized how much all of this taught me. It taught me simple life skills like how to do laundry and schedule doctor appointments and it also taught me larger life lessons. I learned that life is too short to spend it being selfish, spiteful, or simply mean spirited. Finally, I learned that when you lose things you gain other things. Although the things you gain may not fully replace the things you lost, you can learn to live your life while appreciating both what you've gained and lost for a better quality of life.



Etiquette
by Kimsey Stewart

The Voice We Have

by Lil Balogh

I looked at my phone again to see how much time had passed. I kept thinking about worksheets I needed to finish and tests I had to review for. The traffic sat still and crept forward only about a foot every few minutes. My babysitter noticed how stressed I seemed about schoolwork I had to do that afternoon and said, “Lil, you really need to just take a breath. If you don’t finish one worksheet or don’t make an A on one of your tests, life isn’t going to stop. It would be ok.” I turned my head to look at her, annoyed she would say that to me.

“Ok, well, you just don’t understand. It does matter if I don’t do a worksheet or do bad on a test,” I retorted with a slight eye roll.

The rest of the car ride home, I sat fidgeting with my thumbs, a nervous habit of mine, and the only noise was the radio playing in the background. Once the car pulled up to the bottom of my driveway, I practically raced out of the car to get to my room to start my homework. I was in such a hurry and so focused on myself and the problems I believed to be so major that I didn’t even notice my mom’s black Honda Pilot parked at the top of the driveway. I shoved open the back door of the house and was walking straight to my room to start my homework when my mom’s voice called, “Lil? Is that you?”

Never home before five o’clock, my mom walked around the corner into the kitchen. I paused, turned around, and looked at her. Her eyes were glazed over with tears, swollen, and red. Black mascara was smeared all over her under eyes, and her nose was runny with tears and snot. Selfishly, my mind immediately jumped to anything that I could be getting in trouble for.

“Uhh...yeah? What’s wrong? Are you okay? Am I in trouble?” I cautiously questioned from the opposite side of the room. I felt my backpack, heavy on my back, full with worksheets and notes I needed to go over. I took one step backward to try and hint to my mom that I was in a hurry.

“Oh no honey, you are not in trouble. It’s just that... I love you so much and need to talk to you about something really hard.” I slowly walked towards my mom. With every step I felt my brain thinking of the possibilities of what she was about to tell me. I saw her attempting to produce some sort of a smile

Lil Balogh

through the tears running down her cheeks; her lips were pursed together and quivering upward. She looked at me as if I was the greatest treasure in the world. Then she wrapped her arms around me in a hug, pulled away, and continued to tell me the greatest shock of my life.

“He...he had SIDS disease; there was nothing they could have done; there was no way anyone could have known what was coming,” she paused her robot-like speech, sniffled in, took a deep breath, and continued, “Lil, James died this afternoon.”

In that instant my heart seemed to start beating in slow motion, and my brain refused to comprehend what she said to me.

“James? My cousin James? What?” A lump formed in my throat and caused my voice to crack.

“Yes, sweetie--”

“But...but he was healthy; he was only three months old. What happened? What are you talking about?” I asked accusingly.

“He had SIDS, Sudden Infant Death--”

“That’s not what I mean. How’s he gone when he had only lived for three months? He was supposed to have a whole life ahead of him.”

I felt my face become red with heat, and my vision went blurry with the tears that had already formed. A tear fell out of my eye, onto my cheek, and down my face. I heard my mom talking to me, but her words became meaningless background noise. All I could think about was the blue onesie with the smocked, green tractor on the front that we had sent to Montana just a few days before. The onesie that James would never get to wear; the voice he had that no one ever got to hear; the lifetime of memories he had ahead of him: all just gone. My tears covered my face, and in that moment my heart felt like it had an anchor tied to it. My whole body ached, and my tears became unstoppable. My shoulders quaked back and forth, and my hands rested motionless on either side of my body. The sudden, loud thud of my backpack falling to the floor caused me to snap back into reality.

Lil Balogh

I slowly looked up at my mom who stood in front of me with the same confusion, anger, and anguish written into her face. I locked eyes with her; in that moment, for the first time, I experienced the heartbreaking fear that she too would slip away from me without warning. I wrapped my arms around her, thinking that the only way to get rid of that feeling was to hold onto her. When I let go, I looked down at my backpack laying on the ground with a useless binder open next to it and trivial papers spilling out.

A River Runs Through It

by Jack Norris

Here I stand mighty and tall.
Here I stand new and neat.
Raised over a village, representing hope.
Raised on a platform, copper it was.
But I only stood watching the village:
and a river runs through it, smooth and clear.

I stood and watched the village grow.
Village to town, over the years.
There I watched, while the river glistened.
I was raised higher on the platform, iron it was.

Over the town I took my watch.
I yearned to see it grow
never ending or growing old.
Why should I wish it ever end?

I stood and watched the town grow.
Town to city, I grew weathered,
and a river runs through it, brown and milky.
I was raised higher on the platform, steel it was.

Here I lay withered and broken.
Here I lay old and cluttered.
I stood and watched the city fall.

Jack Norris

Waiting and waiting to be raised up
on my new platform, dirt it was.
The people left without looking back.
I laid and watched the city,
abandoned now with no one listening.
I'll be laying here,
watching the sun set,
and a river runs through it, pink and gold.

Forgotten

by Emily Bebenek

I blinked and I was somewhere else.

Where a grand golden palace had been, gleaming in the beauty of the sunset, there was suddenly an ancient courtyard. The stone walls towered far above where I could see, disappearing into wispy white clouds. Grey stones marred by the passage of time remained impregnable, countless scratches bearing testimony to their strength. A thin chain barred entry to the fortress; despite its fragility, I knew with absolute certainty that I would not be able break it.

The courtyard itself was rather lovely, despite the negligence of its caretaker. Vines of ivy decorated the stones, weaving in and around themselves in an indecipherable pattern. Chipped statues were placed at regular intervals among the serpentine paths. Worn benches nestled in alcoves, surrounded by flowers surprisingly devoid of weeds. In the middle of the courtyard, a pristine sundial bearing a misty orb gleamed with an inner light, the only thing untouched by time.

I hesitantly took a step forward, suspicious. Where was I? Where were my lands, my offerings? Why was I here?

I tensed as an elderly man came into view, standing up from among the bushes. He popped his back, sighing, and turned to face me. He appeared kind and trustworthy, with an open face, but I had learned long ago that trust should never be given freely.

“Oh, hello there.” I eyed him warily as he strode toward me, strides long and healthy despite his age. “You must be new. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to know that I am not where I should be,” I said, an edge in my voice.

He gave me a wistful smile. “If you still think that, then you haven’t been here long at all.”

“Why am I here?” I demanded. “Who are you to imprison me? Do you know who

Emily Bebenek

I am?”

Still smiling, the man extended his hand. “I am Tezran, First of the Forgotten. And you must be my newest companion. Welcome to the Court of the Lost.”

Enraged, I glowered down at him. “Speak clearly, old man. What is this place?”

He dropped his hand, a serious expression on his face. “If you want the woeful truth, then here it is; this is where our kind go to die.”

“Our kind?” I looked him up and down, finally recognizing his kinship. “You must be mistaken. Gods cannot die.”

“No?” Tezran gestured to the forlorn beauty around us. “What else could this place symbolize but the final defeat of the invincible?”

“We are not allowed to die. The mortals need us.”

“Aha!” I flinched slightly as he raised his finger and pointed at me. “And that is the secret of our so-called ‘immortality.’ We are infinite, until our worshippers no longer need us. It is their devotion that sustains us through the years; when they forget us, we are lost, and we end up here.”

“They love me!” I protested. “They would never forget me; not my worshippers, and certainly not my children!”

“Wouldn’t they?” He stared at me, eyes gleaming with solemn righteousness. “When did they last sacrifice to you, sing your name in praise? Which devoted follower lit a torch for you on the Night of the Blessed?”

I opened my mouth, ready to argue, but paused as the memories surfaced. This year had been the emptiest in my long life; my altar was dusty from disuse, and it had been centuries since any of my children visited.

“See?” Tezran appeared serene now, calmed from his fervor. “You are lost. But lost things come together here.”

“If that is true, where are the others?” I asked. “Surely you and I cannot be the first to be forgotten.”

Emily Bebenek

“Well, I was the first,” Tezran chuckled, “but you’re right; others have come and gone.”

“Gone?”

Face bending in grief, Tezran gestured to the orb atop the sundial, now glittering with the tiny white lights of a thousand stars. “That seeing stone allows us to gaze upon our old world. Sometimes we can even whisper through it. But the reminder of what we have lost eventually drives every forgotten soul to madness. They fade, choosing blackness over this torturous observance, and then they are lost forever.”

I felt a bolt of fear lance through me. “How many have been forgotten?”

“See for yourself.” He rested a gentle hand on the nearest statue, a dancing woman with the slightest tinge of sorrow upon her face. “Every statue here memorializes one of the Forgotten. If you look closely, you might even find yours.”

I hesitantly touched the woman, afraid that she might crumble. “All of these gods have faded?”

“All except you and I.”

I swallowed heavily. Was this what the mortals called death? “What do I do now?”

“Well, you can garden with me if you wish. It’s a peaceful existence; every now and then I watch over the world we left behind. Or, if you so choose, I suppose you could fade away.” He sighed. “Although I’d really rather you didn’t. It’s been a while since I had some company.”

“What happens if I fade?”

Tezran scratched his chin. “I don’t technically know, but from what I’ve seen and learned in this place, your essence goes back into the spirit of creation and you simply . . . cease to exist. Not a pretty end, but just as decent as the Court of the Lost.”

Emily Bebenek

I looked around the courtyard one more time. It seemed even sadder than when I first arrived, weathered by millenia of tragedy and despair. All of these gods had chosen to surrender to their fate; all except Tezran.

“What is different about you?” I said abruptly. “Why do you remain when others pass on?”

He smiled at me, and there was something knowing in it. “Oh, that. Well, I am a special case. The god of gods can’t exactly leave his children, after all.”

The Gilded Cage

by Emily Bebenek

the gilded cage stood open wide
nowhere for the bird to hide
and if he thought to run outside
there would be no going back

but outside was drenched in black
his only dwelling was a shack
fending off every attack
there was never more than pain

but surely when the moon would wane
the gorgeous fury of the rain
the freedom captured by the chain
was worth more to him than gold

the cage itself was very cold
there were no marvels to behold
but here at least he would grow old
so the smug little bird never tried

the gilded cage stood open wide
the gilded cage was where he died

Fashioning the Future

by Chloe Sheffield

“Well... I don’t know,” I said, going through the options for what felt like the millionth time. I turned and stared through the window of the coffee shop where we were seated. The room was bright and clean. In this place, everything was in order and functioned as it should. The well-tailored baristas were busy taking orders.

“What are you deciding between?” Lily asked. The light shined on her face highlighting her paleness. Dark circles under her eyes were not concealed by makeup of any kind.

“I mean, I really like the University of Georgia.” I shifted my gaze towards her with the hope that she could help direct me. She was wearing a University of Alabama hoodie, pajama pants with polka dots, and house slippers, an unusual ensemble.

“Why don’t you just go there?”

“It’s really hard to get in to, especially out of state. I doubt that I would even be considered.”

“Don’t say that. You’re smart!”

“Oh, please!” I rolled my eyes, then directed my attention towards the couple walking through the door. They were dressed well in recognizable brands, but poorly fitted, his shirt being too large, sleeves too long, and her dress too tight for her torso. “I don’t even know if that’s where I want to go, but I have pictured myself going there since I was little, having grown up in a Georgia family.”

“Sounds to me like that would be a great fit!” She maintained eye contact despite the constant flow of people and chatter around us and slurped the slushy she had purchased at the gas station across the street.

“I am not sure if Georgia is the best college for the job I want though.” I redirected my attention back to the topic at hand but did not look at her. Instead, I stared at my cafe americano, now cold in the white ceramic mug. The

Chloe Sheffield

coffee had been strong and dark with the scent of the rich soil from where it was grown. At least the coffee fit in the mug properly.

“Well, what do you want to be?” The smell of her blue raspberry frozen drink thawing in the warmth of the coffee shop disturbed the comfortably pleasant odor of the room.

“That’s the thing. I just don’t know. I would like to do something creative, but that’s so broad, it doesn’t help much.” The ill-fitted couple had ordered frappuccinos and were now seated at a table on the opposite side of the room. He rolled up his sleeves, she tugged at her dress.

“That’s not necessarily true. You could look at colleges with good liberal arts programs.” The blue concoction had stained her teeth.

“I actually asked Annie, my cousin in graduate school at Auburn, about it. She said that Auburn has a lot of different majors to choose from in its College of Liberal Arts and she knows many people in the multiple programs there. She said she would be happy to set me up with any one of them depending on what I want to do.” Although sweet, Annie, was always cloaked in orange and blue apparel oblivious to current styles, trends, or fashion.

“That sounds good. Why don’t you do that?” She continued to stare and began to twist the strings of her hoodie.

“Well, there are several other colleges that offer similar programs. What if that’s not the best one?” I fidgeted. I picked up my cup then put it down again remembering that the heat had left it, hoping to catch a whiff of a blueberry muffin, croissant, or biscotti.

“It doesn’t have to be the best one. You can learn a lot anywhere you go,” she remarked. “How about one of those art schools, or of course, you could always go to the best college of them all: the University of Alabama! Roll Tide!” People continued to crowd the coffee shop and the noise of their conversations filled the room, making it seem smaller. An older man came in, wearing a brown suit. I wondered who would ever wear a suit of that color and why his wife would ever have let him buy it. Perhaps he was color blind or not married. Lily was staring at him too.

Chloe Sheffield

“I don’t know. They both sound fine, I guess.”

“So now do you have a better idea of where you want to go?” She pressed on but did not make eye contact, now focused on the pastries placed in perfect order under the glass display case, smelling buttery and sweet.

“I’m still just very confused,” I replied, irritated. Despite the fact that she was trying to help, she only made my thoughts more jumbled.

“Why are you still so confused?” She continued to look away.

“Well, I feel like you have broadened my options rather than narrowed them.” The grinding of the coffee beans, the steam from the machines making espressos and cappuccinos, and the calls of the neatly dressed baristas filling orders increased my anxiousness.

“I have helped narrow them.” She returned her attention to the table, but only slightly.

“Have you? You told me to look at colleges with liberal arts programs, but there are a lot of colleges with liberal arts programs, so I don’t know. I feel like there are still an overwhelmingly large amount of choices.”

“You are the one who has to decide on where you want to go. I’m just trying to help refine your options.” She was now tapping her slipper against her heel with increasing ferocity. Her drink was completely empty. The straw she had been chewing on was twisted in a knot on the table.

“There are still too many.” I knew she was trying to help, but I was becoming increasingly frustrated.

“Why don’t you look at the options, then come back and we can work through it from there?”

“I guess,” I said, quite annoyed by the whole conversation, her outfit, and the general lack of tailoring and style amongst the general population. It had done nothing but confuse me. Maybe I should forget college and just be a barista.



Church Street
by Julia Baddley

Pressure

by Elaine Russell

As I sat, patiently waiting for Sophia, the 11 year-old I babysit, to exit, I observed the decorations in the counseling office. The chairs, couch, dull paintings, and even the cold air followed a pale blue and gray theme. But it wasn't the poignancy of the office making me sad, it was Sophia's purpose in going to therapy: to work through her parents' divorce and her narcissist father. So I put in my headphones, blocking out the anguish the office conveyed. After roughly an hour and a half, Sophia finally walked out of the office, her eyes puffy and her nose pink and runny. She clenched a tissue in her hand as Dr. Laura, her counselor, guided her out.

"Hey, girlfriend," I sympathetically greeted her, removing my headphones.

"Hey, Elaine," Sophia quietly responded, looking down at the ground.

I embraced her, tightly squeezing her until she groaned. We thanked Dr. Laura for her time and walked out of the office. As soon as we stepped into the sun, I immediately felt relief from the heaviness of the office. In an attempt to cheer Sophia up, I asked her what was next on the agenda for the day, granting her the liberty to choose something fun. She just sighed in response. So, I suggested we grab some cookies to munch, have a jam session, and head home. She excitedly nodded.

We hopped into my car and took a quick pit stop at Winn Dixie, grabbing our favorite chocolate chip cookies, which oozed chocolate as we slowly bit into them. When we got back in the car, Sophia rolled down all the windows while I plugged in my music. As we drove, we stuck our hands up through the sunroof into the warm air, allowing the wind to tie our hair in knots. As we passed the cookies back and forth, we turned our music up and performed each song, busting moves and yelling the words. We cruised through the forested roads, basking in the pleasant, fulfilling sun peeking through the trees.

We pulled onto her street and parked in front of her alluring almost-mansion. I shut off the car and the music, but we continued to dance and sing all the way into the house. Before we could plop down onto the couch and watch some TV, Sophia immediately went to work on her homework. I admired her work ethic; however, I knew she needed a break from the stress she burdened. As she

Elaine Russell

began her math assignment, she suddenly stopped with a gasp.

“I have to do my science project!” she exclaimed.

“Okay. We can work on that next.” I said, trying to calm her down.

“No, I need to do it now. And my English essay. I have so much to do.”

I paused. I couldn’t imagine how a sixth grader could be so stressed about school. Nevertheless, I attempted to comfort her.

“That’s okay. You are absolutely capable of getting all of it done. Let’s compartmentalize. First task: finish math.”

“I can’t do it all,” she said, her voice breaking as she turned away.

“What are you talking about? Out of all people, you are the person who can get this done.”

She stood up and raised her voice at me.

“My mom said that if I can’t handle the workload at Altamont, then I have to go back to Vestavia! Elaine, you know how miserable Vestavia was. Those girls were awful. I hate it there!” she yelled at me, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. You can absolutely get all this done, and I’ll help you.”

“My dad said that if I can’t do this then he’s going to pull me out of Altamont.”

I knew her father was unsupportive of her outstanding academic success, but I did not know how to comfort her.

“Well then, let’s focus on getting this done. Think of all the other things you’ve already achieved. You can definitely handle some homework assignments. There’s no doubt in my mind that you can do this. Come here.” I waved her over and embraced her.

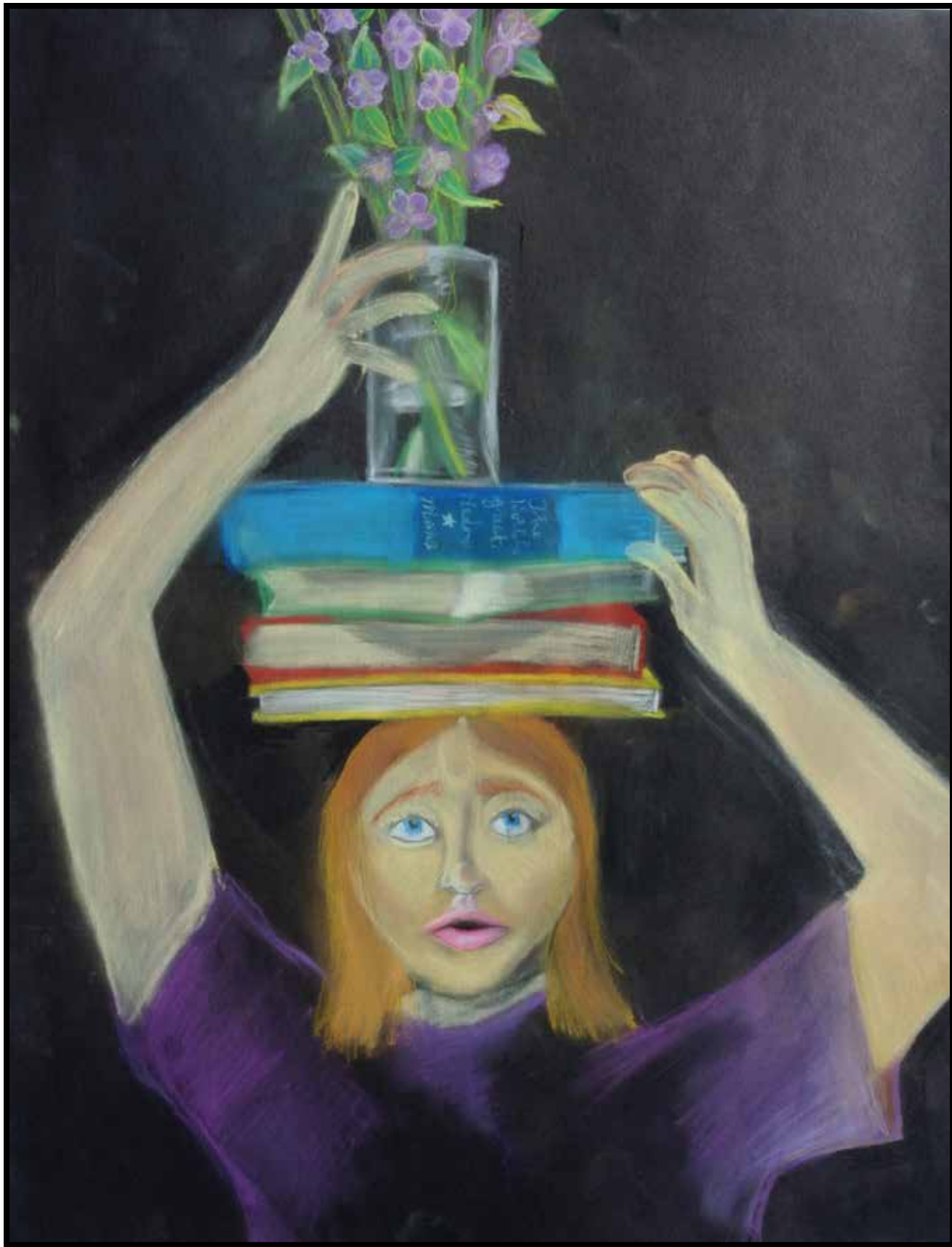
“Look, I know your parents are hard on you. But, just remember that I think

Elaine Russell

you're awesome, and I know you can do anything you set your mind to. Plus, you always have me for dance parties and desserts." I watched her face soften and her tears slow. It broke my heart watching her put such pressure on herself at only 11 years old.

"Thanks, Elaine. I really need you here for me."

"Of course," I said, "I'm here for you, girlfriend."



Balance
by Julia Baddley

My Pop

by Georgia Stewart

Like the worn-out tire swing swaying beneath the mighty oak branch,
His resonate voice carries the Elvis tune in my childish subconscious.
The deep sincerity of his eyes I know I can trust,
 my inherent King Solomon.

The faint outline of an old cinnamon Altoid box,
Traced on his Sunday pants pocket.
He stands confidently,
Poised to bestow his intellectual art amongst the kingdom.
Yet the small quiver of his hands reveal nerves.
Across the sanctuary, everyone anticipates his sound.

Impeccable pitch swallows the congregation.
The meager people of Oak Ridge, Louisiana
Applaud the steady melody in awe.
A courteous bow a bashful smile,
Humbly accepting the praise.
He is my grandfather;
He is my inspiration.

Four Days a Week

by Will Hecker

This piece and writer were recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

The majority of the students at my high school anticipate the final school bell so they can close out the structured and begin the recreational portion of their day. I'm not like the majority of teenagers. As the ring of the bell echoes through the white tiled halls of Mountain Brook High School, students rush out of class to the parking lot to escape. I join them there but have a different destination in mind. My destination is my job as a karate instructor at Cherokee Bend Elementary School.

I hear the bells chime and I know it's my time. I fly from the classroom, weaving through the mass exodus as students rush the back door. As I emerge, I am rejuvenated by the cool fresh air. Crushing and crackling the leaves on the broken sidewalk, I swiftly walk to my faithful companion. As I mount my red Honda Rebel motorcycle, I gear up and prepare for the roadway ahead. I fire up the engine and maneuver out of the parking area. As I ride to the the back entrance of the school, I feel the pressures of the day swept away as I stand and endure all the speed bumps to come. At the second to last left turn, I swerve into a dusty cracked alleyway parallel to the baseball fields. Merging into the after school gridlock, I turn left and pull up to the minuscule guard station to speak with the welcoming guard.

"How are you doing today sir?"

"I'm doing fine, where are you off to today?"

"My job, sir, I teach karate."

"Golly, you must work hard, I remember you leaving every day last year as well."

"Yes, sir I taught karate last year also. This is my sixth year teaching and I recently saw my first student mature from the first day experience to earning a black belt. I am so proud, but I feel really old when I think about it."

"I bet you do. Keep up the good work; it'll help later in life to know discipline

Will Hecker

and respect.”

“Yes, sir, you gotta tell me more about your riding in Germany as well.”

“Another time, have a good one.”

The guard waves as I pull away. The journey to Cherokee Bend takes approximately fifteen minutes, and I visualize a map of the route in my mind. I ride across the overpass to round right into the curve heading towards the River Run intersection. Through construction, I ride up the massive hill and past the gridlocked high school. I continue until I make my way to Old Leeds Road. Today is Wednesday, so I turn right to head towards the traffic ridden Cherokee Bend Elementary School. I use my motorcycle to my advantage, squeezing through the line of cars to arrive on time. I ride into the full parking lot and squeeze into a narrow parking space. As I dismount, I hear a familiar voice.

“Mr. Hecker!” Wallace yells.

“Wallace what are you doing out here?” I asked questioningly.

“I’m in safety patrol, sir.”

“That is great, Wallace. Come to class as soon as you are finished.”

“Yes, sir.” he replied. I flew up the incline and open the doors. I step into the familiar towering entrance room to the auditorium to be welcomed by a flood of parents.

“Mr. Hecker, how are you?” one mom asked.

“I’m super excited. It is testing day!” I reply.

I walk into the large square-shaped auditorium filled to the brim with 60 excited children. It was testing time. I went immediately to work. I corrected stances and led forms and weapons katas. My students demonstrated their knowledge and showed their karate portfolio to their admiring parents. All 60 students passed due to their focus and dedication. I stroll out of the auditorium and reflect on why I work so hard for so little. I realize that it is not

Will Hecker

the time or money that matters, but the lessons I teach my kids and the joy of watching them grow. I try my best to set a positive influence for them and show them valuable skills that will guide them through their lives. In my job I have taught my students respect, discipline, the value of friendship, and so much more. As I pondered my purpose in life, I realized that my kids were also instructing me. They were teaching me that assisting others enriches my life and forces me to grow as I learn how to supervise and guide them. As I walked to my motorcycle and said my goodbyes to my co-workers, I understood why I work four days a week and why I work so hard.

Summertime Freedom

by Parker Jones

Through the respectful silence,
I talked out of habit,
asking with gumption to be free.
Mother spoke her mighty words
full of power like Abraham Lincoln.

I stood deliberately by the porch
under the big tree away from the hot brick.
Hand in my pocket, I waited.
A grin arose on my face
as my friend approached
to seize the summer day.

How to Conquer a Mountain

by Cooper Cashio

Looking out the window at the snow capped mountains in Utah, Jacob dreamed every day in class about climbing them and reaching the top. On this particular winter day, the sky was blue and the snow was shining brightly. The mountains were practically calling his name.

“Jacob,” said the teacher, “Are you still with the class?”

Jacob sat up, shook his head to wake himself up, replied: “Uh, uh y-y-yes ma’am.”

After the class was dismissed, Jacob was daydreaming once again about the mountains when suddenly, he felt a tug on his ears and he lost his sight. He heard boys around him saying:

“Hey Jacob, how are you going to climb those mountains with your eagle eyes!?” With Jacob’s small body and features, he searched blindly for his glasses that had fallen from his face.

The bell rang to go to class and students began trampling him, but with his petite body and quiet voice, no one cared that he was there.

When he arrived home from school, Jacob’s mom looked at him and sighed.

“Again mom, it happened again.” Jacob said, sounding defeated and hopeless.

“How was school? Want a snack or a drink?” his mom said.

“I’m fine... I’m not really hungry or thirsty. All I want to do is to climb that mountain.”

“Jacob, if you want to climb the mountain you need to put forth the effort and stop thinking about it and act on it.”

Jacob’s bruises and scratches were getting worse

“Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat or drink?”

Cooper Cashio

“No mom, I’m fine. What if I fail?”

“Fail, what? The mountain? You never know unless you put forth the effort, son.”

While speaking to him, Jacob’s mom is rubbing her thumb over her knuckles.

“Son, in order to accomplish something, you have to approach the situation, don’t run away from it.” Jacob’s swollen eyes began to open and his mom’s fists begin to unclench as she saw hope growing in his eyes.

“Mom, I’ll be right back.” Jacob walked out his back door and sat on the steps of his porch. He silently stared up at the mountain. This time was different: the sky was not blue, but because of the sunset, it was red. He had never seen the mountain look so inferior. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to find his mom.

“You got an idea to conquer it son?” Jacob slowly looks up with his swollen eyes, lip, and bruised body and confidently said:

“Yes mom, I got an idea.”



Oasis on the Mountain
by Kimsey Stewart

The Final Sunset on the Neuse River

by Will McCowan

“Day is done, Gone the sun, From the lake, From the hill, From the sky.

All is well, Safely rest, God is nigh.”

The final bugle echoed throughout the camp site as all campers, counselors, and staff sang along while the flags were retired. Taps was recited every night after dinner, however, there was something different about tonight. It was as if the song really made sense for the first time in 3 weeks.

The silence was broken by Captain Henry, “I would like to take this time to recognize everyone that made this Summer possible: campers, counselors, staff, and everyone involved in bringing this wonderful place to life. I want to wish you all a great rest of your Summer, and we hope to see you again next year.”

This was the last time Chris would hear from Captain Henry. As he made his way back to his cabin, he did not talk to anyone. No one spoke. No one said a word. The air he breathed had changed, and it was evident that everyone could feel it.

After quite a long walk back, Chris finally arrived to his cabin. He took his sandals off, wiped his feet on the doormat, opened the screen door, and stepped inside. He sat down on his bed, just as the rest of his cabin mates had done. There were twelve others that lived in his cabin. Some of the he liked. Some of them he did not. However, they made it work.

“Hey Chris! Do you promise you will text me as soon as you get your phone back?” George said.

“Of course I will,” said Chris

“Before we go to bed I want to thank you for being my friend. You did not have to take time out of your day to hang out with me, but you did and I really appreciate it.”

While he sat in his bed, Chris began to think. There was a particular vibe he was feeling right then, and he recognized it from only one other time in his life. It was this same time, same place, one year ago. It was almost as if the air he was breathing was a different air than he usually breathed. Chris likes the

Will McCowan

air, he lives for it, and he wonders what brings this odd, but cleansing breath to his body.

He had felt it multiple times in the past weeks. Just a few days ago, Chris had to say goodbye to his camp girlfriend he had met at the beginning of the session.

Susie gave Chris a huge hug. “Goodbye Chris, you are such a great guy and I am going to miss you so incredibly much. I hope we can keep in touch in the upcoming years.”

“Goo-Goodbye Susie,” Chris responded, almost choking on his words.

“I promise to continue to write you as our lives progress if that is ok with you.”

“Of course I am okay with it. Maybe we can find a time to visit each other!”

“Yes!”

Chris began to realize what this feeling was. He felt complete. He felt as if he had actually succeeded in something. First his friendship with George, next his friendship with Susie. As he sat in his bed thinking, he remembered enduring the same feeling when given the leadership award for his age group. Only one person out of about 200 received this award, and this year it was him. He recalled the words said to him prior to receiving this award.

Captain Henry, the head counselor for Chris’ age division, presented his award with a very encouraging opening statement, “This award goes to a man who has shown his leadership ability since the day he arrived at camp. This man is always making sure no one is left out. He is checking on anyone who looks as if they need someone to talk to. He is very competitive, but has great sportsmanship. This is what we look for in campers here at Camp Sea Gull, and it is my honor to give this award to Mr. Chris Harmon!”

Everyone in Chris’ cabin had fallen asleep by now. He sat there in his bed, alone, reflecting on his time spent at camp this summer. He had no trouble going to sleep tonight. For he felt complete as he sat in his bed. He knew he had accomplished the sense of success that many people will never feel in their entire life. What Chris had accomplished would be with him for the rest of his life, as motivation, whenever Chris needed it.



Sunset on the Mountain

by Kimsey Stewart

Piper

by Jane Ryland Elliot

Piper runs fast across the field.
She is a dog that needs no shield.
She lives with me in Mountain Brook.
She likes to jump and bite fish hooks.

A car she jumped out of to play.
She broke her leg and sleeps all day.
Her bed is light blue like the sky.
The doctors had to shave her thigh.

She likes to eat and chase ice cubes.
Sometimes she eats the toothpaste tube.
She likes to bite but does not fight.
Her hair is bright black like the night.

She is part terrier with hair so long.
Piper is a small dachshund dog.



Happiness
by Kimsey Stewart

Six of Seven

by Ann Inskeep

“I didn't make it.”

“What?”

“I completely failed the test. I don't know what I did wrong.” She choked back the tears, trying to hide that she was upset. I didn't know what to do. Marian became very quiet. I knew I couldn't give her my spot, but there was no way I was going to back out of the rappelling trip. Not knowing what to do, I came up with a distraction.

“Hey, you know, if you're not going to the rappelling trip, you need to go for Expert Woodsman. It will be super fun, and we can do it together!”

“Are you sure? I'm fine. I don't want to have to worry about studying for another test.” I knew she wouldn't want to try out, but I couldn't bear to watch her sit out again.

“Nope, we are both going to try. I'm going to make you. If we don't make it, so what?” I tried to reassure her.

The first part of the eliminations consisted of correctly capturing and identifying five bugs. We both walked around camp with our Mason jars full of nail polish remover, trying to catch the insects. After we finished collecting, the stench of the sour remover filled the cabin. The other girls kicked us out to the porch to finish the bug board. We both sat outside, trying to pin down the small bugs to the thin, flimsy piece of cardboard. As we were on the porch, we could hear the other girls shrieking across the camp. I knew that sound. The bug they thought was dead crawled off the board.

We turned the bug boards in that Monday and waited a week to find out who passed.

You could hear the anticipation in the dining hall for the posted results. Some ate lunch as fast as they could, while others wanted lunch to last forever.

Ann Inskeep

I didn't make it, but Marian did.

After passing bug boards, the next task was to go to a “board meeting.” We call it boards. This is when three counselors pepper and intimidate us with questions about Indian tribes, tree identification, knots, and snakes. I had made it a few years back, but could never pass the bug challenge beforehand.

All week, Marian stayed in the cabin with her journal, asking me if I could help her study. The studying mostly consisted of Marian walking around her bed with me asking her about Indian tribes. She knew practically all of them, but her nerves were getting to the best of her.

The day finally came. We could see Marian pacing around the pavilion while she waited for her turn. Knowing her, I knew she would do great. After a few minutes, I saw her walk straight back to the cabin. Once boards were over, we had to wait until the last day to find out who passed.

The last night of camp was rough. All thirty last year campers were in tears about our last night at camp. Once one started to cry, we all followed. All the campers knew we wouldn't see each other for a long time, but that was part of going to camp.

Everyone was in an unstable state that night, but we all put ourselves back together for the last night, Awards Night.

Awards were given out, names were called, and we cheered. It was like every year. All the campers sat and waited till the very end for the “big” awards to be presented. The counselor for Wilderness Skills came onto the stage and presented six awards for the seven who tried out. Marian was not one. She sank into her seat almost back in tears. The counselor spun back around to realize he had “forgotten” a certificate and walks back to the podium.

I jumped up with the other thirteen girls in unison to congratulate her. I realized once I was out of my seat, the tears suddenly came back to my face. I was going to congratulate her, but I didn't know what to say. The girl next to me was confused why I was crying again. To some extent, I told her I was happy for Marian, but I could never find the words to tell her why.



Web
by Louise Knight

by Mary Grace Lorino

I eagerly found my way to Cabin Five – the place I would lay my head each night for the next month. As I struggled to stretch my fitted sheet over my tired mattress, my newly acquainted counselors told me who else would be in our cabin. They began to list girls’ names, most of whom I knew from years before, and as they said, “Bella Loretto,” I mentioned, “I haven’t met her but have heard she’s quite the comedian.” Little did I know these presumptions were completely true and then some.

As girls began to arrive, I reconnected with old friends as we shared our excitement for the upcoming term. I had the chance to speak to almost everyone who had arrived and continued to make my way around the cabin until I reached a girl about a foot taller than me. I looked up at her and shyly murmured, “Hey, I’m Mary Grace.” The brunette kindly smiled back and mentioned that her name was Bella. For the next few days, camp proceeded as usual; Bella and I spoke occasionally but spent the majority of our time with friends we’d known in years past. However, this static routine would soon be broken as I desperately needed a partner for the ropes course. Everyone else in the cabin had paired up, so I nervously approached Bella and asked if she would go with me. Not only was I apprehensive to ask a girl I barely knew to go what seemed like 651 feet in the air with me, but I was, and always will be, deathly afraid of heights and needed the security of a trustworthy partner. Despite this, I had no choice, so there we were climbing up the wobbly ladder to begin not only a lengthy ropes course but a new friendship.

I was sweating from the get-go. Fearful of every next step, I progressed through the course careful not to make any wrong move. Once Bella and I began talking, we clicked instantly. I was looking into the eyes of someone who was just like me but so different from me at the same time. Up in the trees, we laughed, shared stories, and wondered why we hadn’t talked more before. This newfound friendship distracted me from my fear of the course, and I was able to move through with ease, as I had someone to encourage me every step of the way.

I give credit to Bella that we finished that ropes course successfully. I truly believe with anyone else I would’ve been shaking like a leaf with every move.

Mary Grace Lorino

After that day, Bella and I were inseparable for the rest of the term as she filled the role of a true best friend that would stick with me far beyond Kanakuk's gates. She not only got me through that ropes course, but she gets me through trials on a daily basis. The fact that we live 651 miles away does not stop the fact that she is there for me no matter the circumstance. I call at two in the morning and she answers, I text "need advice" and she responds within seconds, I feel lost and she redirects my focus on something greater.

In the bible, Isaiah 65:1 says, "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me. I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that was not called by my name." Maybe it's a coincidence the verse number is the same amount of miles it takes to get to her house, or maybe God knew Bella would embody Isaiah 65:1. I did not ask for the beautiful friendship of Bella Loretto; she unassumingly became an essential part of my life. But that's just the kind of person Bella is. Like the prophet, she shows up where not expected, fulfills when no more is needed, and remains steadfast when nothing else is. She will undoubtedly meet me right where I am to lift me up, encourage me, and be a representation of Jesus in my life.

I am thankful for the two and a half hours I spent on the ropes course with Bella. Without it, I am not sure we would've ever had the courage to actually start a conversation with one another. She is a friend like no other, and one that cannot be matched. She has a passion for life, loves well, seeks truth, and I only hope to be a tiny bit like her. Whether it's 651 feet in the air, 65:1 in Zion, or 651 miles apart, this girl remains an unwavering manifestation of joy and transparent representation of love. I am truly blessed by my best friend Bella Loretto and sometimes wish that Plano, Texas was a little closer than 651 miles away.



Directions
by Kimsey Stewart

JH Ranch

by Emily Grace Lemak

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

Page 145 from "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston

A glimpse of paradise
built as an altar,
to create an undistracted relationship with God.
Accepting the inevitable life in Heaven.

Forgiving all cruelty,
overcoming all suffering,
letting go of the stones you have held as a burden.

Faith which is no longer a mystery,
purpose which is no longer a question,
impossibilities accomplished beyond the horizon.

Freedom shown by the light through the trees.
Flowers, which show divine emotion.
Laughing distracts from pain,
as you experience the army of angels on your side,
never to be forsaken.

Then to emerge from God's reality,
into our reality.

No longer afraid of the inconsistency, called fear.



Horse

by Alice Adams-Nice

A Good Heart in a Big City

by Jane Gresham

This writer was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

“Thank you so much, sir,” my grandmother said. I smiled at the foreign man, who looked sleep deprived. He gave my grandmother a nod as we exited his black Kia. As we stood outside of the Broadway Theatre in New York City, my hands were freezing cold as if they had frostbite. The chilled wind made my hair sway. I put my face into my jacket in an attempt to gain some warmth and peace. People of all different types bumped into each other and cars honked while people screamed frantically to get a taxi.

After a grueling day of shopping with my 74 year-old grandmother and my eleven year old sister, the only thing I wanted to do was take off my tight shoes and go back to a warm, cozy hotel room to drink hot chocolate. Unfortunately, that was the last thing on our agenda for the day. My grandmother had planned for us to see the musical Matilda. As we waited in the long line that was wrapped around the side of the building, I pondered about our day and all of the cool places we had been. I began to think about how much I had bought and became nervous about how much I had spent on clothes. After our Uber driver dropped us off at the gorgeous Broadway theatre, I screamed out frantically, “Oh my gosh, where is my purse? G.G. do you have it?” My grandmother looked at me puzzled.

“No I have not seen it. Julia, do you have it?” G.G asked.

My little sister looked desperate and had no clue what to say. She knew she didn't have the purse, and I think we both realized that I left the purse in the Uber driver's car. After a few minutes of having a nervous breakdown, I decided I was going to do my best to get my purse back. Since we left for our trip the day after Christmas, I had an abundance of gift cards along with cash. I remember thinking to myself either another passenger is going to have a special treat in the backseat, or the Uber driver might steal my belongings. I mean, how tempting! In the midst of feeling so vulnerable in such a big city, my grandmother seemed more concerned about getting into the show Matilda.

I frantically asked her for her phone to see if I could get the number of our

Jane Gresham

Uber driver. I didn't expect him to have my purse and began to think about how pointless it really was to even call him.

We entered the Broadway theatre. I grasped my ticket in one hand and a cell phone in the other. My fingers were sore from typing so desperately to find our Uber driver. As we sat down in our seats to watch the play, I finally found the driver's profile with his name and contact information. I felt a hint of relief, but not quite a full rush. I could not get up out of my seat. A man over a loudspeaker began to say, "We are about to begin the show. Please silence all cell phones or electronic devices." My grandmother took her phone away from me.

I sat through the two hour play thinking about nothing other than getting the cell phone back. I could only focus on calling the Uber driver immediately once the play was finished.

Finally, after the play concluded, I was able to get back on the phone again. As we walked out into the frigid, noisy city, I felt a sense of hopelessness. We entered another Uber and I called the number listed on his profile. No answer. Great, I thought. As time went by, I sat in my hotel room watching the boring news channel with my sister. I wanted the man to call me back, but I just didn't think he would ever answer. To my surprise, I suddenly saw an unknown number pop up on my phone with an area code I didn't recognize. I answered right away.

A foreign man whose voice I could barely understand said, "Hello?"

I quickly replied, "Hi, this is Jane Gresham. I was a passenger in your Uber earlier. I left my black purse in your car. Do you happen to have it?" There was a long, agonizing pause.

The man replied, "Yes, yes, yes I do."

I could not believe it! A wave of relief rolled over me. "Awesome! Thank you so much. I have been worried all day."

The man then told me that he would be off work late, possibly around eleven thirty, which was very late for me, but I was willing to stay up. He told me that

Jane Gresham

he would bring my purse to my hotel lobby when he was done with work. I thanked him profusely. After hanging up the phone, I was so overjoyed and surprised. I began to think about how stereotypical it was of me to not have faith in the honesty of that man. Eleven thirty rolled around and I got a text saying that he was in the lobby of our hotel. My grandfather and I walked down and retrieved the purse from him. He was smiling. I was so moved by the honesty and compassion this man had. We hugged, and my grandfather slipped him some cash. This man and trip will forever have a mark on my heart.



Driver
by Kimsey Stewart

The Beehive

by Chloe Kinderman

Plastic wrappers, gauze squares, iodine swabs, bandage backings – the material aftermath of urgent medical care covers every surface in the small patient room in the Emergency Department. I quickly begin my volunteer duties, slipping on a pair of fluorescent blue gloves. In theory, cleaning is simple: pick up the trash, place the sheets in the hamper, wipe everything down, and remake the bed. But tonight, the extreme disarray of the room diminishes my usual efficiency. The trash can under the sink is past overflowing; it's clear that the doctors and nurses abandoned accuracy in favor of hurling debris in the general direction of the metal cylinder. A smattering of crimson droplets stain the coarse, white sheet, and extra equipment stands silent by the bed, an echo of the events that had transpired. I methodically clean and return each piece to its proper place. My efforts complete, I neatly tuck the last corner of the bed sheet, peel off my gloves, and step into the hallway.

The quiet solitude of the patient room gives way to commotion as health professionals of all kinds buzz about the department. A green scrubbed resident rushes past into the procedure room at the end of the hall.

“Can you grab a suture kit? Room eleven,” he calls behind him. I quickly turn to the nearest utility closet and enter the code. I leaf through the neatly arranged rows of supplies and select the proper plastic package. From the doorway of room eleven, I place the sutures in the waiting hand of one of the many nurses in the room, but I linger for a moment more. I've been a hospital volunteer for two months now, but I've never stood in this spot before with one foot in and one foot out. In fact, few people have ever stood in this spot. I have no medical training, and I'm not a patient or a family member. Yet, standing here with everything laid out in front of me, I'm part of it.

The Emergency Room isn't just a single room like the creators of *Grey's Anatomy* will have you believe. It's segmented into medical rooms of all sorts that the cynical might describe as cells— like honeycomb, and like any hive, each bee has their task; every movement is purposeful and important. The queens bark orders, calling for medications and procedures, and their faithful workers answer seamlessly in a flurry of activity that is carefully

Chloe Kinderman

choreographed, an insectile dance. From doctors to nurses to respiratory techs to clinical assistants to even me, the lowly volunteer, each person is essential to the task at hand. Each part ensures the success of the whole. We all have our role to play.

In a moment of respite, a nurse turns to address me, “Thank you for helping us out. It’s been busy tonight, so we really appreciate it.”

I answer with a smile, “you’re welcome. I’m happy to help.”

Return to Normality

by Lauren Sklar

“Alright, we need to head to the airport now. We are going to meet your dad and pick your mom up,” my grandfather said.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” I squealed as I rushed to the door.

About an hour later, we arrived at the airport. The two of us walked through the dimly lit hall toward my dad.

“I just got off the phone with Mom,” my dad said as we approached him. “She said her flight to Birmingham should only take about 30 minutes.”

“Yay! Gran Gran and I just picked out a welcome home gift for her,” I said as we walked to her gate through noisy clusters of people.

“What did you guys get for her?” he said.

“We got a stuffed animal that looks just like one of the birds in California. I remember how they always seemed to be watching you no matter how far up in the sky they were,” I explained as I held up a box with a yellow ribbon around it.

“She is going to love it,” my dad said with a smile. “I know how excited you are to see her.”

“I am, but I’m also nervous. It’s just... we haven’t seen her in so long. What if she is different than before?” I replied as we sat on the airport’s worn out chairs.

“I’m sure she’s worried about the same thing. However, no one can change that much in a single summer,” he said reassuringly.

The three of us sat in silence, anxiously awaiting her arrival. Light from the sunset was peering through the windows, illuminating the entire room. A few minutes passed before we heard the plane come roaring down outside the airport.

My dad put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You’ve been a really good

Lauren Sklar

sport. It couldn't have been easy to deal with all of the chaos this summer."

"Thanks dad, but the truth is what mom has been dealing with has got to be even harder," I replied.

"You're right. It must've been so difficult for her having to see her mom like that. She is going to need lots of love and support from us," my dad said.

When the gates finally opened, I scanned the crowd of exiting passengers until I spotted my mom.

I jumped to my feet and said, "I see her! I see her!"

Once she got close enough, I rushed to give my mom the biggest hug.

"My sweet girl! I missed you so much!" she said, squeezing me tight.

I tilted my head up at her and said, "I know you had to be there for Grandma, but I am so glad to have you home!"

"And you have no idea how happy I am things are returning to normal," she said, still clutching me in her arms.

The Breathing Room

by Sydney Hannon

Inspired by T.S. Elliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock"

Suddenly,
I'm part of and yet separate,
alone in the room.
Hidden under the blanket stuffing
its way down the throat
and up the nose.

But I still breath.
Inhaling cheap perfumes,
the reek of the old
and young.
Dinner is being cooked,
something sickly sweet.

Meatloaf.

I'm still here,
but unnoticed and
overlooked,
however briefly.
Should I get out while I can?

No,
I can manage,

Sydney Hannon

but I wish someone would turn on the fan.

It's pleasant out there.

Some sun and a cool breeze.

Plenty of space to roam.

No deceptive grass

but moss

a

green yellow-green emerald-green yellow mustard-yellow

bordered by browning leaves

and a clear, clean stream.

All overseen by

towering trees.

It's pleasant to be in a forest so alive.

There

in a patch of sunlight.

It's a squirrel.

Fluffy tail twitching

with its nose to the ground.

Bounding once

twice;

he doesn't land on the third leap.

I can't see anything now but my uncle's sagging jeans.

The room hasn't changed much.

Some people have come in,

others were free to go.

Sydney Hannon

They chat freely, and
one cousin squeals.
They get louder, anticipating
the laughter that follows.
The noise thickens until
it is as the air.
If I get up to turn on the fan

I hate meatloaf.
We'll probably eat that tomorrow too.
Grandma's cooking.
Mama will warn me
if anything is undercooked
or was left to sit at room temperature.

Adults whisper of troubles,
hoping children don't overhear.
Dutifully, I tune them out.
It would be rude to disturb The Hush.

Jonah is cheating at cards.
I don't say anything
--it's the polite thing to do--
but I won't play a game with him
and expect to win.
Mama calls this antisocial, yet

Sydney Hannon

it is not my fault that
I have no taste for
words flavoured like honey
that turn the stomach bitter.
Like meatloaf
(as if meatloaf could taste like honey).

The meatloaf is thick in the air now.
Mingled with the perfume, the smog
I'm still breathing,
but the noise is densening and
the cousins are arguing and
the pans are clattering and
the jeans are sagging and
the fan isn't running and

And then it's over.
"Why don't you go play with your cousins
instead of just sit there and stare into space, huh?"
Not a question
I plop down on the patterned rug

"Deal me in."
I fix my eyes on his hands and
wait.

Odor to Meatloaf

by Sydney Hannon

Meatloaf is meat pulverized
until it becomes unrecognizable.
Shaped into a loaf of bread
and then baked as such,
the only way you can swallow
is by smothering it in ketchup.
I never really liked ketchup either.

The Day

by Clark Griffin

“Hurry up,” his mom shouted, tapping her fingers against the banister, “we are going to be late.”

It felt like this day was never going to end, and it was only 8:15. For the past eighteen years, May 25th had been as insignificant as May 24th or May 26th. But this year, this day would change everything.

“I’m almost ready, five more minutes,” he yelled towards the door. “I just have to grab one more thing.” He began to search his room in a panic.

“Son, we really don’t have time for–”

“I got it, I got it. Let’s go,” said the boy.

It was foggier than usual, and his mom used this as an excuse to drive even slower than usual. When they finally arrived to the arena, the boy looked to his mom and realized that she was crying. He had always dreamed of this day, but now that it was here and he had tears in his eyes as he thought back on the past eighteen years.

“Okay, here we are. Are you ready?” his mom asked.

“I can’t believe it’s really here. It’s all about to be over,” he said with disbelief.

His mom could see him playing with something in his pocket, but she didn’t ask him about it. He started to take it out, but slipped it back into his pocket when he realized it was raining.

As he opened the door she said, “I wanted to tell you how proud you make me.” When they walked into the arena it was hard not to notice the families laughing and taking pictures. The boy couldn’t help but think about him.

He turned to his mom, “Mom, I–”

She knew what he wanted to say but she interrupted him with a quick hug before walking to her seat.

Clark Griffin

The counselor began to silence the audience, “Parents, teachers, alumni, welcome.”

“Can you believe it? In twenty minutes we’ll be done with this forever,” he said to the girl next to him.

She began to talk about her plans for college, but he couldn’t hear her. His mind was spinning with thoughts about his own future. He knew his mom needed him. She was the obvious choice. As he looked to the stage he promised himself that as soon as he walked down those stairs he would start working.

After the ceremony they drove to the coffee shop to have some coffee and chat. “Mom, we have to talk about this. I’m eighteen now, we both know we have to decide,” he said.

“Son, I know the past four years have been hard, trust me. Sometimes I feel like I can’t keep doing this, but then I look at you. You’re just like him, you know?” her voice began to shake. “You and him are so alike it seems like it would make this harder, but it doesn’t. When I look at you I’m reminded of the best man I ever knew, and I know that whatever you decide it’s going to be right.”

He looked to the ground and felt something in his pocket, “Mom, look.” He pulled it out and twisted the knobs, hoping that somehow one of them would tell him what to do. He laid it across his leg and noticed something he hadn’t seen before. The back of the watch had a tiny word on it, he had to squint to read it, Dream. He remembered one of their last conversations.

“He made me promise that I would never stop dreaming. He was the biggest dreamer I’ll ever know. He told me that if I ever let go of my dreams, I’d lose part of myself that I could never get back,” he said.

“I just want you to be as happy as he made me. I’ll be fine, I promise. So go dream, live your life, I will be just fine,” said mom.



Vulcan Light
by Louise Knight

Early Christmas Time: A Letter

by Parker Jones

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

When I still wanted toys to play with,
I browsed catalogs morning and night.
I made a list and waited for you to come.
You brought me joy, bringing gifts to me.
You showed me love, enjoying time with family.
My favorite holiday, I had no other motivation.

At twelve I asked for an Xbox from you.
I spent all of my time playing
Alongside my friends we made memories.
Parents calling, I never listened.

At fourteen you gave me an iPhone.
I talked and texted with friends new and old.
The new focus was being social.
Why should I waste my time playing?

At sixteen you taught me a valuable lesson.
I learned your true importance.
Not that of gifts or toys,
but of love and family, sharing memories.

You made me realize what I had been missing.

Parker Jones

I had taken for granted who cared for me most.
Too busy with other things to take the time
To be with my family and show them
I appreciate their love and support
Through the bountiful Eve dinner
And the early morning rise.
If the leaves have completely fallen,
I will check the calendar.
And I will come out to meet you
As far as the first of December.

Baited for Pop-Tarts

by Amy Taliaferro

At six years-old, there were very few things I didn't like, but fishing was one of those few things. I could never understand what drove my parents to wake up at 5 a.m., lug fishing poles and impossibly heavy buckets two houses down to where our unsuspecting boat bobbed in the dock, before we drove the blinding white beast half an hour into the gulf to some illustrious fishing hole that was somehow superior to the other miles of ocean surrounding us. The worst part of this entire agonizing journey, though, was the waiting. Waiting in the sun, besieged by the smell of fish blood and bombarded by waves that refused to reach a satisfying rhythm, was simply excruciating to my six-year-old self.

However, I always held out for my shining savior on these expeditions: Pop-Tarts. The forbidden fruit of our annoyingly healthy pantry was only available as compensation for enduring through the family fishing trips. When my tiny hands crinkled the silver wrapper of the commercialized pastry, I would be whisked away to a world of complete bliss. The ceaseless thrashing of waves became a peaceful sway that lulled the world into contentment. The sweet and delectable scent of strawberry jam between crispy iced pastry was so delightful that even the snapper and mackerel surrendered themselves to its sweet perfume. Suddenly, the horizons of perfectly blue gulf presented its intimidating vastness instead as a beautiful and rich opportunity. With each sugary mouthful, the outing became more and more promising. Encapsulated by the treat as I stared across the water, I was transported from the mundane deck of fish carcasses to the possibilities of what mermaid villages and other sweet fantasies lived beneath us. All it took was a small strudel to transform my entire mindset. Through the power of the Pop-Tart, waiting for fish to bite aboard a putrid-smelling motorboat became an exciting and sweet adventure to my six-year-old self.

Today, although the agony of our fishing trips is no longer my worst enemy, my PopTart-inspired optimism lives on. Now, as I unwrap my strawberry-flavored Pop-Tart in the cafeteria before starting on my long-procrastinated history assignments, I see the joy in getting to read the stories of worlds past while the PDF loads yet another page of short answer questions. Life always delivers choppy seas and smelly fish, but if you can focus on the Pop-Tart, then you decide your happiness on whatever fishing trip awaits you.



Fishing
by Kimsey Stewart

Deer Down

by Andrew Fleming

“The stand is just up there. Listen though, I’ll take the lead, and when I signal for you to come, follow my footsteps slowly. If some deer are in the field, do not let them see you, smell you, or hear you. We can take a shot at them from the ground, but I don’t think any will be out there this early.”

I set the barbellate strap of the rifle across my chest while my dad hoists me up to the first rung of the tall stand. As I go up each step, the ice cold rungs, still wet with dew, numb my fingers. Once we both get settled and have our guns propped up beside us, we sit on old wooden stools and stare at the horizon, waiting for the sun to rise.

After what seemed like an eternity passed by, my dad nudges my shoulder and points. At first, I cannot see what he is pointing to because of the dense fog. After scanning through my binoculars, I spot four figures standing in the distance. My dad tells me they are whitetail doe. It would be a long and difficult shot in the fog.

I whisper into my dad’s ear, “I don’t want to kill one of those. I know how good they are to eat, but I really want to kill a buck for my first deer. I know it is risky, and I probably won’t see a buck today, but I want to give it a try.”

I see my dad’s face cringe, but he solemnly agrees. My dad starts to put his stool up along with our sets of binoculars when we hear a rustle and a soft breath. The foliage in front of us begins to dance. I see a shadowy figure breaking through the thick layer of brush and coming right in front of us to feast on some fresh milo grass. It is the biggest eight-point buck I have ever seen. I glance over at my dad, and he is grinning. We both share a knowing look.

Since the buck catches us so off-guard, we decide to wait for him to make his second trip around the field so we can prepare. As I embrace the cool, tingly gun, I try to hoist it up to the small and squeaky sliding window. My hands feel frozen and I cannot find the strength to lift my gun. That is when my dad’s steady arms grab the gun, and he places it down slowly. Once the gun is in position, I take over and push the barrel of my rifle out the window. I close my right eye so I can see down the long stretch of grass and have a clear view of

Andrew Fleming

my target on the deer. I aim and balance the foggy sight of my gun onto the buck. I think through the steps my dad has taught me. First, loosen your grip on the gun. Then, take long and steady breaths as you pull it to your shoulder. Lastly, slowly blow out as you ease the trigger back. I slowly pull the trigger to shoot the gun.

It seems to be in slow motion to me, and I barely hear the shot. Right then, I realize that if I missed him, all the deer will be scared away, and my last hunting day of the trip will be over. It does not make sense. I know I shot him just right, but why did he run into the woods? Tears are nearly running down my cheeks, but my dad is grinning ear to ear. Since our cover is blown, he announces out loud to me, "Lots of times when you shoot a deer, it will run into the woods nearby for cover and protection before it dies. We need to wait about ten minutes before going out to get him."

I am so relieved that I lean over and hugged my dad's shoulder and whisper right into his ear, "Thank you."

We both ease down the tall ladder and gently lay our guns down on the damp ground. I embrace my dad around the waist as we walk and turn every which way, hoping to find my prize. We scan the ground until I see a line of red and trace it all the way to my big buck. My dad and I hoist the massive deer on our backs and trudge it all the way back to where we left our four-wheelers. When we ride away back to camp, I think about the thrill I had when my dad told me I shot the buck and I remember that we have the rest of deer season ahead of us.



Fun and Games
by Kimsey Stewart

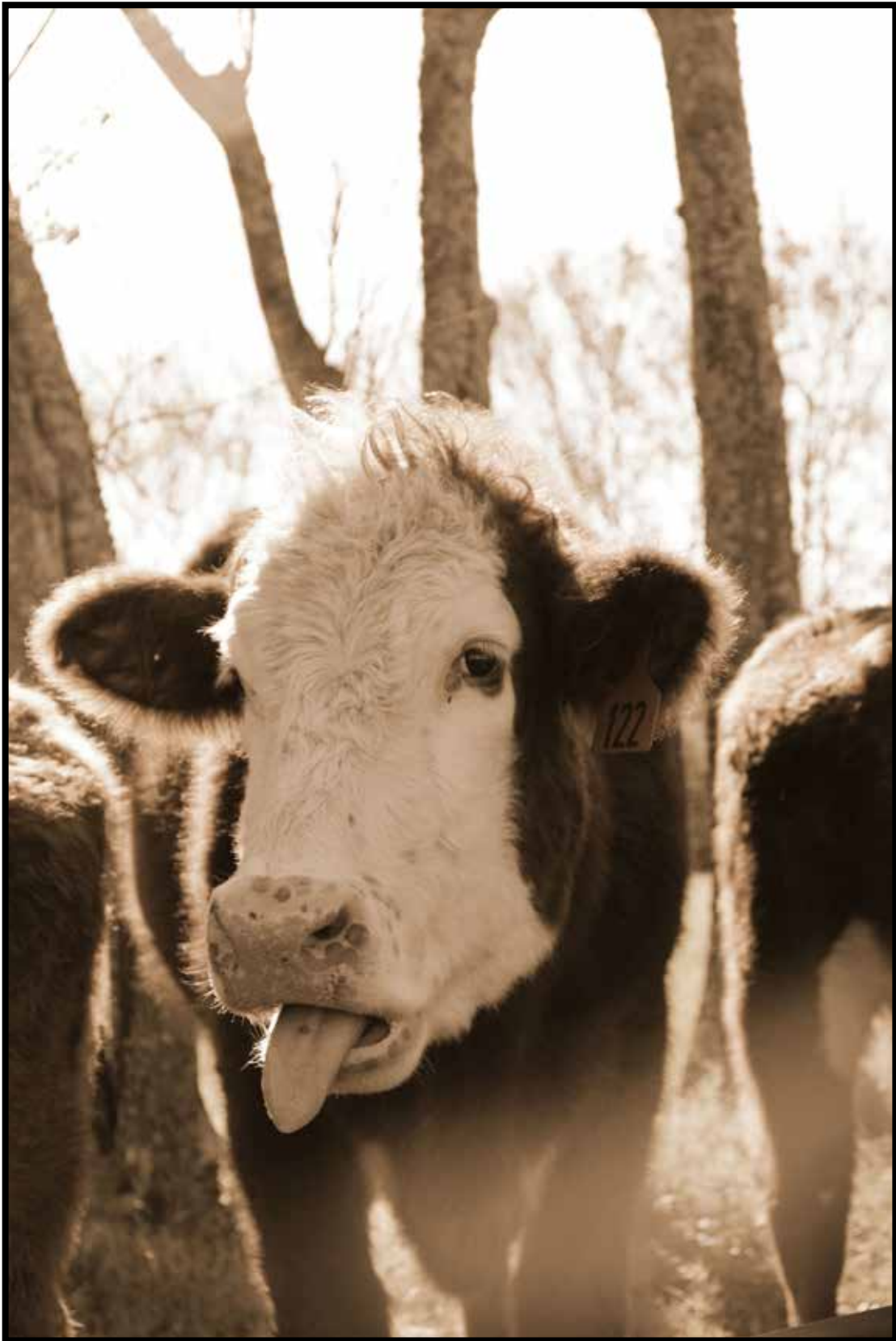
American Soldiers

by Adam Williamson

America, land of the free.
The soldiers fight across the sea.
A price they pay as they push through,
All for the great red, white, and blue.

Back home united as we stand,
For we salute with our right hand.
We sleep at peace all through the night,
When miles away there is a fight.

We pray and hope they will return,
A special suit that they have worn.
A great 'ol place they fight and save,
Land of the free, home of the brave.



Blep

by Riley Brown

Useless

by Logan Brewer

The abandoned warehouse is located in the suburbs of Boston. There is a large steel windmill on the northwest side of the building. It spins each day as wind gusts strike it. However, the windmill generates no power and therefore serves no purpose. The only thing keeping the windmill upright and steady is the strong iron frame of the building directly next to it. Whenever the wind blows hard enough on the mill, the building emits a deep roaring noise as if it were about to collapse. Inside, the mixture of dust and old metal creates an unpleasant stench that not many can withstand.

“Are we all set for tomorrow?” asks Gregory.

“Yes, the guns are loaded. We are good to go,” responded Jim. He points to the pistols laying on the floor. The two matte black guns are exactly alike; however, Jim’s gun has a red dot on the handle, making it easy to recognize.

“Do you have the masks? It is crucial that we do not reveal our identities.”

“They are, um, lying on the table next to the blueprints of the building.” As Jim turns to indicate the direction of the masks, Gregory bends over and reaches for Jim’s gun. He unloads the magazine with his small yet swift hands and slips it into his pocket.

Gregory stands back up and says, “Very good. We will depart at 9:00 AM tomorrow. Our rides will be waiting outside to bring us to our destination. Remember, Jim, nobody can exit the building once we enter. We need as many hostages as possible to keep the police outside,” explained Gregory. The two partners walk to the table where the blueprints are located. The old wooden table, covered with dents and scratches, has papers scattered across it that include details of the building, including security camera locations.

Logan Brewer

Jim examines drawings and says, “How are we going to get past the g-guards at the doorway?”

Setting two large needles on the table, Gregory replies, “These tranquilizers will disable the guards for two hours. We must do this quietly and not alert anyone else in the building. In the two hours the poison gives us, we will secure the building and bind the guards using these zip ties. Do you understand?” He places four heavy duty zip ties on the table, two for each guard.

Acting as though he was daydreaming, Jim unexpectedly asks, “Yes, but I have another question. Gregory, what are you going to spend your money on?”

“Jim, the mission is our number one priority at the moment. You should be solely focused on your part of the plan. But to answer your question, I plan on buying a house on the beach, where the fishing is good and there’s no one else for miles. A house that Mom would have liked. How ‘bout you?”

“I think I’m gonna b-buy myself a really nice car. You know, one of those ones that can go from zero to sixty in three seconds. That way if the cops find me, they will never be able to catch me.”

Making final revisions to the plan, Gregory looks at his watch; it reads 1:30 AM. “Jim, we both need to get some rest so we can think clearly in the morning.” Both men walk towards the two beds located in the small room inside the warehouse. Jim lies down on his bed, and Gregory takes a seat in the wooden chair in the corner of the dark room. Each night, he begins to read and patiently waits for Jim to fall asleep, making sure he is okay for the night.

The Dangling Christmas Ornament

by Will Bellande

I awoke to find myself in an ambulance, accelerating down highway 280, with paramedics surrounding me, as if I was an animal at the zoo. The red and blue lights burst out in the grey sky. I recall staring blankly at the reflective ambulance roof, as I whispered to myself “Why me?”

“Why me?” I repeated, as I slowly remembered that I was on pace to be one of the state’s best wrestlers for my weight class. I was brimming with excitement at the thought of an opportunity at the Alabama Super Sectionals Tournament.

It was a cool, December afternoon, and I was taking my daily stroll outside. I was walking from my history class to the wrestling room, ready to begin practice. It was just another average day, everyone was anxious about exams, and excited about the long break that was approaching. As practice began, our coach gave us a speech about hard work and determination.

“Adapt and overcome,” shouted my coach. He repeated this same phrase, over and over again.

I took this to heart, as I perceived this season as being a possible breakout year for me. I completed every drill with extreme intensity and courage. About twenty minutes into the practice, our coach called out, “low leg singles.”

With this information I set up my partner, lowered my level, drove my head through his knee, and ran my feet through him. My partner and I repeated this, like we were machines in a factory, until I took a bad shot, in which I collided my jaw into my partner’s knee at full speed.

I instantly was down on all fours, holding my jaw, and screaming with violence in my voice.

Will Bellande

“Ahhhhh!” I screamed, trying to say help, but I could not say anything, for my jaw was dangling like a Christmas ornament.

My coach sprinted over to me and shouted, “What happened?”

My practice partner filled him in on what had just happened. As they were talking, I carried myself to our locker room, looked at myself in the mirror, and thought to myself.

“My face resembles something out of a horror movie.” I repeated in my head.

My face was frightfully disfigured, and I failed to keep my tongue in my mouth. I started to hyperventilate, as coaches, paramedics, and trainers rushed into the locker room to diagnose and help me.

The pain I felt that day can only be described as hell on earth. I tried holding my jaw back into place, but I was being held down. I fought with all my strength, in fact I got a ruthless sucker punch on one of the trainers, but in the end, they took me off in a stretcher with my hands and feet bound. After that, I faded in and out of consciousness from either lack of oxygen or exhaustion.

I now realize why I got injured, I realized that in anything you do, a problem will reveal itself. Your responsibility is to adapt and overcome that problem. I was injured to test my mental strength and prove that I can overcome adversity.

The words my coach always said, “adapt and overcome,” will always stick with me. I plan to come back next year, both mentally and physically tougher, build the program, and make a legacy.

Where Darkness Descends

by Mason Berger

The light of the world shines through the abyss,
Extinguishing the feelings of coldness.
Life has existed here before, but not in this way.
New happiness has formed in my soul.
You had to carry masks to disguise,
Now you hold confidence that flows like the wind.
You swam all alone in the pool of darkness,
Unable to find those familiar strangers.
Now you see the light,
Shining with beams of comfort.
Your soul was like a stump in the middle of the woods,
Empty and alone.
You are on your journey towards the light.
You ride on a glorious chariot, flowing through the wind.
The light now feels like amber fluid, drenching the earth with hope.
In a moment it was all gone.
Not the light, but the darkness...
Light shines all around you,
You feel joy and happiness flowing through your veins.
Hope is everywhere, helping to lift you up in times of need.
The light ended the cosmic loneliness of the unmated.

Confused and Alone

by Morgan Cohn

Every bump the ambulance goes over brings a screeching pain to my leg. I endure a sharp pain that starts in my leg and runs through my entire body. I am trying not to think of what this might lead to, but the chance of my greatest fear becoming a reality haunts me. At the moment, what concerns me most is the fact that I am over five hundred miles away from my parents, alone in an ambulance, full of discomfort and pain, and only ten years old. I reach out and grab the nurse's hand because she is the next best thing to my mom, and I repeatedly whisper, "I just want my mom; please let me talk to my mom."

"Let me get your mom on the phone, sweetie," says the nurse gently.

"Mom," I say as I grab the phone out of the nurse's hand, "I know the camp called you and explained what happened, but I cannot describe how much pain I am in. I feel so alone without you and Dad here."

"I know, Abigail, it will be alright. Just keep breathing," Mom says, trying to comfort me.

"Why is this happening, Mom? I don't understand. I am so scared. I need—"

"Do not look down at your leg, and just breathe. I know you are fearing the worst, but we do not know how severe your injury is, so try your hardest to not think about it."

"Mom, I can—"

"Abigail," the nurse interrupts, "I am so sorry, but we are arriving at the hospital, so I need you to hang up with your mom now."

My stomach drops even more. "No! I have to talk to my mom. Please let me talk to her."

"Abigail, I have to go now. Let the nice nurses and doctors help you. I am catching the first flight out of Atlanta, and I will be at the hospital in three hours," Mom says in a nervous tone.

"No, Mom. You cannot leave me. Please don't go. I feel so alone."

Morgan Cohn

“I am so sorry, Abigail. I am right here, and I love you so much.”

“Wait, Mom, please.”

Suddenly, she hangs up. As I clench the phone in my hand, all I want to say is one final sentence to my mom.

All of a sudden, I open my eyes and see two men and a woman. I think, Wait, maybe I fainted. The people are blurry and everything is happening in slow motion. A bald African American man who seems to be the doctor walks up.

“Lift her on three. One, two, three.” In this moment, all of the pain I have been enduring sparks back, starting at the top of my leg, and spreading to my toes. Fear overcomes me. I can’t breathe. I cannot not stop thinking about what’s about to happen to me. I have heard too many stories, stories where some even die. As I rub my eyes to wake myself up more, I try to listen to what my mom said and not think of the worst. I look up and slowly follow each white tile on the ceiling going behind me as the two male doctors are rushing me into a sign labeled, “Intensive Care Unit: Authorized Only Beyond This Point.”

As I am being carried on the stretcher to some room, I turn my head to the right and see my biggest fear coming to a reality. I see a girl: probably in her early twenties if I have to guess. She has long blonde hair and she is crying hysterically. I’m trying to listen to the conversation she is having with her doctor, but all I can hear is the scariest words that I have been fearing with all my life. “I am really sorry Rachel, but I am afraid you are going to have to have...”

Even though, I have no idea who this girl is, my heart sinks for her. The nerves, the anticipation, the possibility of even death. All of it scares me. I turn my head back up to the ceiling as we enter the operating room. I look up at the doctor with an anxious look on my face and ask, “Do you think I will be okay?” Before I am able to hear his response, the face mask is placed over my nose and mouth, and my eyes slowly close as I wonder what the answer to my question is.

Please Wake Up

by Shannon Donahue

“Oh my god. Call 911 now!” my grandmother yelled.

“What’s going on?!” I heard my twin sister, Molly, holler as she dashed down the stairs. My grandmother ran out of the kitchen holding Mary’s limp body in her arms. She cuddled her, stroked her hair, and begged her to wake up.

“C’mon Mary! Wake up!” My grandma tried to gently shake her. “Someone call 911!” I was nine years old when I had to call the police and tell them my sister was not moving or breathing.

“911, what’s your emergency?” the dispatcher said.

“My sister can’t move. She’s not breathing,” I responded frantically.

“How old is she?”

“She’s four. Why isn’t she waking up? What’s wrong with her?”

“Help is on the way; they are coming as fast as they can.”

“What’s going on?” I hung up on the dispatcher before she could even give me an answer. I started sobbing. I turned around and saw my grandmother rocking back and forth holding Mary’s body.

“C’mon, baby! Wake up, Mary, please!” my grandmother said in between her sobs.

“I need to call Mom and Dad. They’ll know what to do,” Molly uttered.

Shannon Donahue

“Molly, stop! They are on a cruise!” I yelled.

“The one time they go out of town, something terrible happens!”

“She’s fine. She just passed out!”

“Claire, she’s dead!”

My heart dropped. I thought to myself: No, no, no. She can’t be dead. We heard the sirens of the ambulance getting very close. Through the misty, humid, and rainy April weather, the ambulance pulled up in front of our house and five paramedics came running out. I can’t even remember what happened. Everything was a blur.

“Clear!” one of the paramedics yelled. Seeing the defibrillator shock my sister was frightening. The shock and power made Mary’s tiny body jolt.

“Clear!” the paramedic yelled a second time. This time, she coughed. A sigh of relief came over me, Molly, and my grandmother. To us, that was a sign that she was okay. However, the paramedics put her on a stretcher and wheeled her out of the house. They started to run out the door with Mary on the stretcher.

“You should follow us to the hospital.” one of the other paramedics said as he turned to look at us. “You should be with her until we know what is going to happen.”

The light spring breeze blew through her hair, gently twirling it around. I could smell the sweet scent of the tulips and daisies that Mary helped my mom

Shannon Donahue

plant the week before. They still stood perfectly upright as if everything was normal. My only hope was that they would still be standing just as tall when we returned from the hospital, with or without Mary.

“Why?” I said out loud to no one in particular.

“Why what?” Molly asked me as she was putting her shoes on.

“Why is Mary going to die?”

“She is not going to die. You heard her cough when they shocked her. She will be fine.”

“No she won’t.”

“Do not say that! You are always so pessimistic. Please be positive just for once!”

“I am being realistic. You just told me she is dead. If she is not dead already, Mary is going to die and there is nothing we can do about it.”

“Claire, stop saying that!”

“I just don’t understand. Why Mary? Why did this happen to her? She’s four!”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Molly muttered as tears streamed down her face. My grandma opened the back door and motioned for us to run to the car. While following the ambulance, we drove past our school, the park, and the library. We drove across a bridge and the Chicago city skyscrapers, just a few

Shannon Donahue

miles away, were visible through the foggy air. The whole drive was silent.

Thoughts were racing through my mind: it's weird. Everything else seems normal, but my family's lives will probably change forever. We pulled into West Suburban Hospital Medical Center, the same hospital my sisters and I were born in. The paramedics opened the doors of the ambulance and started to wheel Mary into the hospital. We were not allowed to follow them into the ER. In a moment, we were brought to a waiting room. For three hours we sat there in total silence. I stared at the flowerpot of pink tulips that sat on a table – the same kind of flowers we had at our house. A nurse walked into the waiting room with a clipboard.

“Family of Mary Burns?” she asked while looking around the room. Without saying anything, all three of us quickly hopped out of our chairs to look at the nurse.

“We are Mary's family!” Molly said quickly. The nurse frowned when she saw us stand up. I knew she would not be frowning if she had something good to tell us about how Mary is doing.

“Follow me. We have some news,” the tall, pretty, blonde-haired nurse said.



Psych Space
by Julia Baddley

Jagged Edges

by Jules Campbell

Laughter, joy, excitement, and blood filled my summer going into eighth grade. While my friends enjoyed laying out on the beach, my brother, Davis, and I found ourselves stranded at home. Hence, Davis and I decided to get our hammocks out and set them up. While we diligently assembled the hammocks, I realized that I misplaced a carabiner needed to attach one hammock to the tree.

I looked through all of the cabinets nervously trying to find the carabiner. After fifteen grueling minutes of looking, I completed my search without finding the carabiner. With no success in finding the Eno's carabiner, the sight of a flimsy keychain carabiner in my room kept reappearing in my mind. The keychain carabiner seemed sturdy enough to hold me, so I ran to my room where the cheap carabiner sat in my desk and sprinted to my front yard where the hammocks sat waiting to be set up with the carabiner in my right hand. With the poorly made carabiner, I finally set up the hammocks.

Davis and I admired the two hammocks swaying in the wind. The hammocks hung over a pile of jagged rocks; however, neither of us actually recognized the rocks as a threat.

I jumped into the hammock and flipped myself upside down. The thrill of swaying with the hammock captivated my thoughts rather than the keychain carabiner that kept me in the air. After a while of playing in the hammocks, I begged my brother to push me.

“Davis, will you please push me in the hammock? It will be so much fun.”

Jules Campbell

“I mean, I guess... you have to push me after I push you though. You can’t have all of the fun,” he yelled from across the yard.

“Ok, you can push me for five minutes, and then I will push you for five minutes.”

My brother slung my eighty-pound body around as he pushed the hammock. Suddenly, the cheap keychain carabiner broke. I plummeted to the ground and hit my temple on the jagged edge of a rock.

Everything went black for at least one minute, then I opened my eyes.

Upon opening my eyes, I saw a crooked view of my front yard and driveway. Immediately, my head seemed as if it were about to burst and fluid filled my ears. Then, I realized that blood covered my face and neck.

“Davis, go get mom and dad!” I yelled.

As my brother ran inside, I struggled to stand up. I felt as if I had been hit by a truck. I finally stood up and arrived at my front door disoriented. My parents opened the door and got me a towel for my head. While avoiding the fact that I used a cheap carabiner, I recounted the dramatic event to my parents. The fear of embarrassment caused me to omit the fact that I had messed up.

With my head hung low as I struggled to stay awake in the back seat of the car as my father drove me to the nearest hospital. Why didn’t I consider the possibility of the carabiner snapping? I thought. Coincidentally, the hospital ended up being only for illnesses and not trauma. However, my concerned

Jules Campbell

father convinced the doctors to stitch me up at the unconventional hospital.

Finally, after what seemed like many exhausting hours, the doctor called me back to the room.

The young doctor, around the age of twenty–six, sutured my head together with three stitches. I felt a weight lift off of my shoulders once the doctor took the suture materials away from my face and placed a bandage on my forehead. There was no need to hold the bloody rag to my head anymore, and I could let my arm finally rest. I then wondered if I had a concussion.

“So, I have had a couple of concussions before this, do you think I have one now?” I asked the doctor.

“Probably, I mean you’re fine though. Just don’t take any standardized tests.”

“Oh... okay, thank you” I unconfidently murmured as I thought, well, that gives me a lot of information...

Within four hours of being home, I found the unused Eno carabiner in my cluttered closet where my hammock had been placed and the broken keychain carabiner on the ground next to bloody rocks and hammocks outside. With my pounding headache, I looked at the unused carabiner. If only I had used the carabiner made for the hammock... If only I had waited to find the small clip...

Into the Dark Storm

by Frances Lyon

I looked out the plane window with fear in my eyes. Raindrops rolled down the window. The sky was dark and stormy. How could this possibly be happening? Why is our plane about to take off while it is storming? I knew something was not right, but I did not want to draw attention to myself or cause a scene. I looked at the woman next to me and asked her,

“Don’t you think it’s weird how our flight didn’t get delayed because of the storm?”

She looked at me and responded, “I am terrified.”

Those three words hit me in the gut; I was not the only one frightened. I knew something had to be done, but what? I saw a man walking down the aisle.

“Um, excuse me sir?”

“The name’s Hameed. What do you want?”

“Isn’t it a safety hazard to take off during a storm?”

“Stop asking questions, everything is fine.”

“Where is the flight attendant?”

“Oh um, I am the flight attendant.”

“Where is your uniform?”

“Umm, since it’s night time, we are not required to wear them,” he said nervously.

Frances Lyon

Something was just not right. In all my years of flying, I have never experienced a flight like this.

“Can I please get off the plane? I do not feel well. Please get me off this plane.”

“Sorry ma’am, we are already on the runway, you’re gonna have to wait until we land.”

“Please ask the pilot to turn around, I feel like I’m gonna faint.”

The man pushed my shoulders back towards my seat and I slammed against the window. The woman next to me gazed at the man with shock. Everyone in the first class section was staring at me with fear in their eyes. There was mysterious and frightful tension in the air.

The plane took off into the dark sky, while people’s heavy breathing filled my ears. My heart has never beaten so fast. A million questions swarmed my mind. *Why are we flying in this storm? Why are there no flight attendants? Why did they not announce the safety rules? Why did no one do anything after I got shoved by that man?* My heart beat seemed to be louder than the engine of the plane. I noticed everyone was looking around, trying to find an answer. An answer to all this chaos. No one wanted to admit it. No one ever thought they would be in this situation. No one ever thought their lives could be in jeopardy, and no one was brave enough to take action. There was a sense of stillness in the air. Everyone just sat there looking terrified. I looked out the window and saw the dark night. The sky was filled with dark shadows from the clouds and I could see raindrops on the window. I felt the plane start to shake due to

Frances Lyon

the heavy rain. I closed my eyes and prayed. God was my one and only hope. I prayed for my family, friends, and this evil world. An extremely evil world it is.

I developed a plan to fight. I then rose slowly from my seat. People immediately shot their eyes to me. I walked slowly down the aisle. The man, Hameed, started running towards me. About to shove me again, a large man stood up and punched him right in the face. Hameed was knocked out cold. I stood there in shock and then all of a sudden three men, similar looking to Hameed, came running in our direction. I ripped the fire extinguisher from the wall and swung it straight towards one of their heads. I knocked him to the floor and then swung at the other. The large man started swinging his fists. We took all three of them out.

“What is your name?” I asked the man in shock.

“Craig,” he answered.

“Thank you for helping me fight them.”

“Of course. We aren’t done yet though. We gotta check out who’s driving this plane.”

I nodded my head.

“Let’s roll,” he said.

We approached the door and Craig cautiously looked through the window. He motioned me to look through as well. I saw one man flying the plane.

Frances Lyon

“The plane could go down in minutes, we are almost halfway through the flight. We gotta make a move.”

“Let’s do this.”

Craig swung open the door and the man leaped from his seat.



Enlightened
by Julia Baddley

Pops and Me

by Sally Cooper

While my teeth were missing and Band-aids covered my legs,

I swung open the wooden door, waving goodbye to my mom's grey Suburban outside.

You ran to greet me, kissed me on the cheek, and swung me onto your broad shoulders.

And carried me to the case, my legs swinging on your chest,

And let me place the quarter in the last missing spot.

Two best friends, with a now complete collection.

At ten I quietly opened the door.

I feared to wake you from your nap.

With a brand new book, you strolled over to me.

You kissed my head and sat me down in your brown leather chair to read.

At twelve I rang the doorbell.

I heard the clicking of your cain approach the door.

You opened the door and patted my back.

Why had I not received a kiss?

At sixteen I stopped coming.

I saw you at birthdays and holidays,

And we made small talk about school.

My heart began to long for the quarter-collection days.

You then moved to the nearby hospital.

Sally Cooper

Not too far, just down the road, just like the end of your days.
Too far gone to reignite our old friendship!
The bats fly low on this cold October night.
The crickets no longer chirp.
Over the tenseness in our relationship;
It hurts me. I grow older.
If you ever long to read a book,
Please let me know before you pass,
And I will stand right beside you
Just to read with you one more time.

Orange Death

by Alex Stokes

“I’m sorry honey, you are going to have to let go,” said the mother, gently hovering above her son. “We will buy you a new one, or something bigger if you want.”

The storm continued to develop as lightning occasionally lit the grey sky.

After a long pause, the boy responded, “I don’t want another one.”

“I know she was your first, but it’s okay to move on,” said the mother, sliding her soft arm around the child’s shoulders.

“But she made me happy,” the boy said with tears running down the sides of his face.

“I know honey, I know.”

“I only got to know her for a week before she left me,” sniffled the child, sitting down on the polished, white tile floor.

“She didn’t want to leave you sweetheart; she had no other choice.”

“I thought she would have loved to be part of the family.”

“She did, and now she is swimming with your grandma Hope. They will be waiting for us when we go there someday,” said the mother as she slowly opened her son’s small hands.

The storm continued to roar louder as the boy’s knees grew cold. One of

Alex Stokes

their cats emerged at the doorway. He eyed the boy's small hand, but the cat became disinterested and slinked down the unlit hallway as its black skin disappeared into the shadows.

"Does she really have to go?" pleaded the boy.

"Yes, unfortunately so."

"But she was great. She did not do anything wrong; she just laid there all day. She did not hurt anybody, just laid there at the bottom."

"I know, son."

Only the rain tapping the glass from outside could be heard; it was slowly letting up. Silence had overcome the sterile room. The three were stiff.

The mother spoke, "Johnny."

"Yes, mama," the boy hushly responded.

"Are you ready?"

"No, mama."

She paused for a moment and kindly responded, "Let's do it together then."

She softly took grasp of her son's hand and lowered it. When it was right above the water, the boy tilted his shaking hand. The limp body sliced the still water in sync with the fierce lightning strike outside; it sunk to the depths and immediately rose to the surface. The lights flickered, yet the golden orange

Alex Stokes

was amplified in the shining white bowl.

“Love you, Buddy!” said the boy, sobbing in his mother’s arms while his mother dragged down the shiny silver handle.

The storm had intensified with multiple brief flashes of extreme light in the black sky, followed by a deafening roar that echoed in the shower. The mother sensed the son’s pain and embraced him with her arms as her knees crashed into the cold tile. With time, the storm slowly dwindled to a steady stop. The son looked up at the vivid dove painting above the toilet and his tears dried. The sky began to clear. The two lingered for a second. Then, the boy broke his mother’s embrace and headed for the door.

“I wish goldfish could live longer,” said Johnny, trudging out of the bathroom into the lighted hall.

“I know,” said the mother, silently setting the unopened fish food container in the black trash bin.

Running Toward Safety

by Virginia Webb

We were only half a mile away from the high school on the homestretch of a run. As we began the gradual hill next to Dairy Queen, our group of ten runners started to separate. Some pushed the pace while others struggled to catch enough air and fell behind. I turned my head to notice a compact, grey BMW revving its engine as it passed us. The car was brimming with teenage boys, with two of them sticking out of the sunroof and the others hanging out the right-side windows. I rolled my eyes as they cat-called us and shouted provocative language, trying to grab our attention. We ignored them and continued our run, but something didn't feel right. I was used to occasionally hearing a whistle as we passed a group of boys, but when the car pulled into a nearby parking lot and waited for us to pass, my stomach felt uneasy.

Of course, I happened to not be wearing my contacts. In the right back seat window, I spotted a figure wearing a tie dye T-shirt with long, grown-out blonde hair. Without my contacts, I couldn't make out specific details or a license plate number, but I vividly remember seeing what at first glance, I thought was his cell phone. Was he taking pictures of us? Incidentally, the small, black object was anything but a phone. The car slowed down almost to a dead stop, and I saw the boy tilt the black object upwards, and I heard a clicking sound. Immediately I realized what he was doing. He had just cocked a gun.

Quickly, the BMW drove off with raging laughter ringing in the background. We stood there for a moment in awe, trying to process the trauma. Wanting to get out of harm's way, we sprinted back to inform a coach and alert the authorities. However, I knew it was useless. Without a plate number, we had nothing but a basic description. They were going to get away with it. I couldn't stop the tears as they rushed down my face as I explained to the student resource officer what had just occurred. Since when had gun violence become humorous? If only those boys understood the bigger picture, or knew how many had lost their lives because of gun violence. Before the incident, I thought I was somehow immune to the recent shootings I had heard on the news. I thought I was safe because of my community. I had been ignorant enough to believe I would never be the victim. However, guns don't discriminate against color, religion, or social status. I realized I couldn't always be protected from everything, but if anyone is susceptible, when could I actually feel safe?



Me Too
by Julia Baddley

Summer Days

by Leigh Block

Late one summertime night
I felt as if my mind was absent
My brain racing from thought to thought
Unable to think
I believed it was just the heat
Sitting in my bed watching episode to episode
I looked to my window hoping to see someone come to the door
I sat back down as I realized a shadow deceived me
My belly was tied in knots
It almost felt as it was being suspended by a piece of thread
Able to break at any moment
The Earth was quiet
I wondered if I would be able to find someone else with me
Outside my window was only blowing leaves in the shade
Leaves always seemed to be so cunning
Tending to trick me
Maybe they were trying to intimidate me
I caved and let them
This feeling was a drug to me
The wind ceases and so do the leaves' movement
I thrust myself back onto my bed
Pugnaciously
Finally feeling able to relax the muscles in my body
Only back to being up again
I hear a knock on the door
I don't know whether to be fearing or indifferent
I started walking towards the door slowly and then darted towards the sound



Window
by Anna Langley

A Dying Memory

by Genevieve Wilson

It was the night of the Wilson family Thanksgiving dinner where my father and I knelt in our nice clothes, away from the festivities, hunched in the dirt, peering under my grandmother's dilapidated shed. In the crevice below the structure, we squinted our eyes in the darkness trying to make out the form of our dog Stella, hiding away from all forms of human contact. As we reached beneath the wooden shelter, we caressed her matted fur and looked at her despondent eyes, both warning signs of the impending death of a beloved but sickly pet. My grandmother told us that Stella had been under there for two days straight, refusing to come out. And although all deaths bring about immense sadness, the thought of Stella's death conjured a deeper sense of mournful nostalgia in me and opened a floodgate of emotions that quickly brought my parent's distant divorce into full focus once again.

My dad and I adopted Stella not long after he and my mother split up. At the time, he was living in a small house that did not have the large yard and open space needed to keep the Golden retriever-German shepherd mix occupied and fulfilled. However, in the wake of sadness left after the divorce, the rash decision to get a puppy made an unfortunate situation a little more bearable. Stella embodied the idea of closure of one chapter of my life, and at the same time opened the doors to a new life of separate houses with separate parents. Her adoption solidified a new family unit between myself, my father, and Stella, which helped to lessen the blow of my new reality, where I was constantly shuffled around from parent to parent. My dad and my third-grade-self began making new memories, including cleaning up poop in the park and sitting

Genevieve Wilson

on the couch that constantly smelled of Stella's gas. As we watched Stella grow from a small and quiet puppy with a significant stench to a massive one hundred pound adult with the same atrocious smell, Stella observed the relationship between my father and I grow stronger than ever as we faced one of the most difficult times in both of our lives. Stella's precarious predicament that day under the shed reminded me of the delicate period I shared with my dad. Although she was not a part of it all, her innocent eyes that day caused me to reflect on the life we had built together. Whether that was moving from apartment to apartment, pulling my front teeth in the tiny bathroom of a duplex basement, or crying about being forced to play soccer at the kitchen table that had been passed down from my mother's old college apartment, Stella was a constant presence in an often unstable world.

Stella's inevitable death was not just a moment of reminiscing on the times shared with her, but the times I shared with my dad. Stella was a living symbol of those memories; a representation that those days still held some meaning almost eight years later. Eventually life moved on from those Tuesdays and weekends in the apartments, and the memories seemed to drift farther and farther away. My father met and married my stepmother, and while that relationship brought many new facets to our family dynamic, including a little sister, I still reflect on the times where it was just simply my dad, Stella, and me. Years later, Stella was brought to my grandparents farm to live, an ideal place for a dog to grow old, removing the tangible reminder of the past from my life in Birmingham. Though every time I visited my grandparents and played with Stella, I felt more and more disconnected and still wondered if she remembered me as her life began to dim. I always wondered how different my

Genevieve Wilson

life would have been had Stella stayed in Birmingham and continued to remain a loyal companion throughout my childhood.

As my father and I crouched on all fours that Thanksgiving night, flashlight in one hand and the other aimlessly reaching into the darkness for Stella's pathetic figure, I mourned the life I had once known and held so dear to my heart. After a long period of goodbyes with her, my father and I got in the car and rode back to the festivities taking place at my great-grandmother's. With tears in our eyes, we silently played back the memories in our heads along with sprinkles of my father attempting to defend the decision we had made so long ago. We both knew sending her away had been the reasonable choice, but we quietly regretted so flippantly casting off the companion that was a part of some of our greatest memories. Stella's eminent death felt like not only the conclusion of her own life, but a finality on the difficult time everyone so desperately wanted to move away from.

As it were, Stella did not die that day. A couple days after we returned home from the holiday, my grandmother called to tell me that Stella had come out from under the shed and was doing much better. I do not know how long she will be with us, but I am thankful that she gave me one last moment that day to recognize and embrace the difficult and wonderful times with my dad that came as a result of a dark circumstance.



Shadows
by Louise Knight

The Eyes and Their Lies

by Kenneth Casey

Wandering down the long corridor
Wondering, "Can I do much more?"
With a personality so dry because I am shy.
Her lamenting eyes wander away from my gaze,
So must I say goodbye to those lamenting eyes.

Must I watch her pass me by
Without even saying hi?
Stuck in a trap I can't escape,
Tortured by those inescapable eyes
Wondering, "Can I try?"

Rushing down the corridor,
Trying to find those incredible eyes.
I am high when I see her magnificent eye.
I try to say hi but my tongue has tied,
Paralyzed by those deceptive eyes.

Must I die in front of those judgmental eyes?
How could I be so blind?
Crumbling under the heavy sky
Why did I try for those lying eyes?
Now I have to face the guys
And their pitying eyes.

Kenneth Casey

How will I even survive?

Being suffocated by all these dreadful eyes

Drowning in all of their lies

Why was I crucified?

By the people where my trust did lie.

Why are there so many eyes that lie?

A True Friend Always

by Sydney Hannon

My first encounter with the terrors of the school rumor machine occurred in the fourth grade.

One wintry afternoon, my mother walked in to where I sat on my bed reading. "Do you know anyone by the name of Mary?" My heart skipped a beat as I jerked my head up, my eyes immediately fastening on the phone in her hand. None of my friends ever called me, unless they wanted homework help. I grinned. We didn't have homework this weekend. Someone called me. Someone wanted to talk to me, maybe even hang out. I wiped the grin off my face and tried for an air of nonchalance, as if such calls happened at least every other day.

"Yes, she goes to my school. She called?"

"She's on the phone right now," she replied, a knowing smile on her face.

Abandoning all pretense, I jumped to my feet. "Let me see." Mama gave me a reprimanding look. "Please," I amended. She handed me the phone, and I immediately pressed it to my ear. "Hello?" I squeaked. Silence. I waited, trying to stop myself from bouncing. More silence, and then the phone's shrill tone sounded right in my ear. I yelped, and nearly dropped the phone, but managed to click the answer call button before my mother could steal the phone back.

"Hello?" I whispered with bated breath, barely daring to hope. My mother leaned against the doorframe, her smile taut.

"Sydney!" the sing-song voice on the other end exclaimed.

Sydney Hannon

"Hi—"

"Hey Sydney," the voice --it certainly could not belong to my friend-- sneered. "This is John calling to say hey." A chorus of giggles and shrieks of predatory delight followed. I blinked. Did I hear that right? I had just opened my mouth to respond when the phone disappeared from my hand. My mother was definitely not smiling now.

"Who is this, and why have you called us?" she said quietly. She was met with a cacophony of shrieks and "oh craps" before the caller --or callers, apparently-- hung up. She turned to me and opened her mouth, but shut it again when she got a look at whatever was on my face. I ignored her as a certain numbness overwhelmed me. My mind grappled with the fact that the girls on the phone had been people I knew. Or had known.

"Well... " she crossed her arms. "What was that about?"

"I... don't know," I admitted, as the numbness began to seep away in order to make room for the reality. Why would she call herself John, and why do it with a large group of people around?

"Do you know anyone named John?" She knelt beside me.

"Yeah, he's a friend of mine." Why did Mary sound so spiteful?

"Did something happen at school that you want to tell me about?" But wait, could they really have...? Like in books?

"No. Nothing has happened." It was the only explanation, but would they really

Sydney Hannon

pull something like this? My stomach curdled at the offense of their ridicule.

"Well, I will be calling the school, and their parents." She looked at me. "Don't let their words bother you. You have other friends." Maybe. Or maybe they all were there, laughing at my confusion. "Just wait until your father hears about this," she muttered as she gave me a tight hug and stalked away briskly. Long after the last foot fall faded, my heart echoed their beat. Echoed and echoed, until I finally shrugged, plopped down with a sigh, and continued reading.

The very next day, I can't call myself surprised when my two closest friends, Hannah and Janae, made a beeline to where I sat in the cafeteria, their expressions starved. As they came within a respectable distance, their countenance shifted to something more concerned.

Hannah wasted no time. "So, have you heard the rumors?"

"No," I played dumb, "about who?" She shifted uncomfortably, and shot a glance at Janae, who suddenly found her brick of grits to be very interesting.

"They are saying that you kissed John." Oh, ouch.

"I would never kiss him! He's gross!" Really, he was always grungy. Janae, apparently deciding the grits were a lost cause, broke in.

"So, you don't even like him?"

I wrinkled my nose as I shook my head, praying that my disgust with the idea

Sydney Hannon

was explicitly clear.

"Who started the lie?" I thought aloud. Hannah and Janae proceeded to launch into all the appropriate expressions of outrage, but I tuned them out, too preoccupied by the question that had haunted me since the night before. Ask them. But I couldn't do it. Ask them if they were there. I would offend them if I asked. Ask. Ask and find out. Hypothetically speaking of course, would they even tell me if it were true? Just ask. But, what if... Ask! What if I was right? Ask ask ask. What if I really had heard Hannah scream "oh crap" last night? And where Hannah went, Janae went, so... Ask ask ask ask. But that would mean... ask ask ask... I really was... Alo--

"Sydney!" I jerked out of my thoughts and blinked at Hannah's hand that was waving frantically in my face. She laughed. "Were you even listening?"

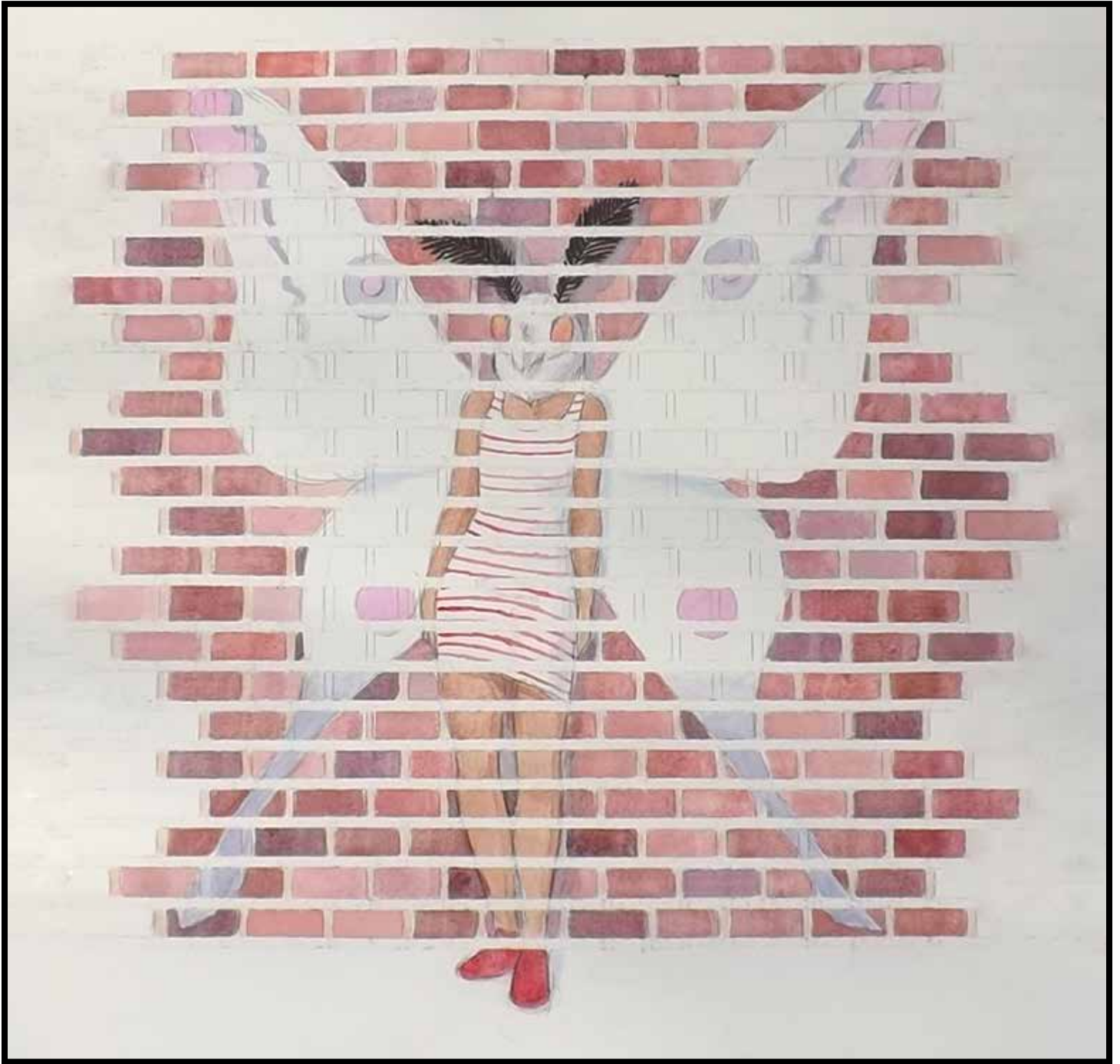
No. "Yes."

"Liar." Janae grinned, but it morphed into something more forced. "So, you don't really care do you?"

Of course I do. "No, of course not." I thought for a moment. "Do you guys know anything about..." I stopped as another inner voice drowned out the one demanding clarity. Alone. Then you'd really be alone. "Ah," I smiled, "never mind. What did you guys do this weekend?" Besides, they're your friends.

"Nothing much, just hung out with some friends." They have your back.

Hannah grinned. "Yeah it was really fun!" Right?



Moth Girl
by Lena Pelham

Falling

by Madison Jenkins

Inspired by T.S. Elliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

She stands on the edge.
Earthly wind pushing her away from its great chasm,
As the wind of her mind pushes her closer.
The spirit has met a wall that it cannot pass.
The wall blocks the wind from reaching further.
From seeing.

There is no time.
It cannot break the wall.
There is no time.
It wrestles and pushes to no avail.

A frantic, far-away voice appears behind,
"Please get off that rail."

What is beyond the wall?
Her hands, cut and bruised, reach up to it.
Trying to claw their way through.
Nothing happens.
The wall still stands powerful and never-ending,
But it did not stretch behind.
And so she fell back
Back.

Madison Jenkins

Someone was screaming.

Someone was yelling.

She was falling.

Wind rushed up to greet her, bringing with it her life.

Her knowing that other children would stare and mock

And wonder at her thin frame

And the deep black circles that cut under her eyes.

Her mother had said they would not,

But she knew better.

They never said a word to her,

But she could see their shark teeth smiling at her.

Waiting,

Watching.

She kept falling.

The Earth reached its arms up to reach her.

Its hands peeling away the walls

Until the sun appeared,

Friendly and smiling.

The world accepted her body,

And she accepted the world.



Swing
by Melissa Stein

You Know Nothing

by Lindsay Jane Drummond

The room is always so peaceful. Complete darkness covers me like a blanket from the outside world. I exist and nothing else matters. The red sun barely shines through the crack in the curtains. It's finally setting. One day gone. Another day to come and go. What was that? Probably nothing, I thought as I prepared to close my eyes.

I heard it again, "Paige!" Mom yelled up from the kitchen. I slightly rolled over in my warm bed. "Your magazine just came in the mail!"

"Coming!" I yelled back. I kicked up the covers. I felt the stairs rumble as I ran down. "Finally!" I said as I flipped through the glossy pages.

"You really are excited about that, huh?" Mom said. I nodded my head quickly as I sat on the soft pleated leather chairs. I made mental notes of all of the brands that were in for the season and all of the products that the models were wearing.

"Here," she said as she handed me a turkey sandwich. "I figured you might be hungry. You've been in your room all day."

"Thanks," I said sarcastically. "I told you that Julie and I decided that we are going to go vegan and gluten free, Mom."

"Sorry," she said, "it's hard to keep up. You change your diet every other week."

"Julie texted me," I said. "We're going to go to the mall. Everyone has this new

Lindsay Jane Drummond

bag and we are going to look at all of the colors and possibly buy one.” I heard my mom sigh as I kept reading. She doesn’t like when I shop for what she calls “unnecessary” items.

“I try to understand. I promise that I do try. It is just hard for me not to notice that the last thing that was popular is still up in your room gathering dust.”

“That’s because it’s not in right now, Mom,” I said. Under my breath I whispered, “Not that you would know.” I thought that she might have heard me because she started walking towards where I was sitting.

“You know,” she said as she read the magazine from over my shoulder, “you have several items in your closet right now that you may have only worn once and some that you have never worn at all. All of which you have bought with Julie.”

“Yeah... so?” I asked while still reading the magazine.

“Nevermind,” she said as she picked up the sandwich and started doing the dishes.

“OMG, this is the perfume that Selena Gomez wore on the red carpet,” I said as I tore out the sample. My phone chimed as the blue light flashed with a text from Julie reading “Here.” I frantically texted back that I would be out in a minute and I sprinted up the stairs. I couldn’t let her see me like this. I checked my phone and it’s 6:00. Tearing through my drawers, I pulled out the outfit that I bought with her the last time we went shopping. I tore the tags off and with one last look in the mirror and extra coat of mascara and lipgloss,

Lindsay Jane Drummond

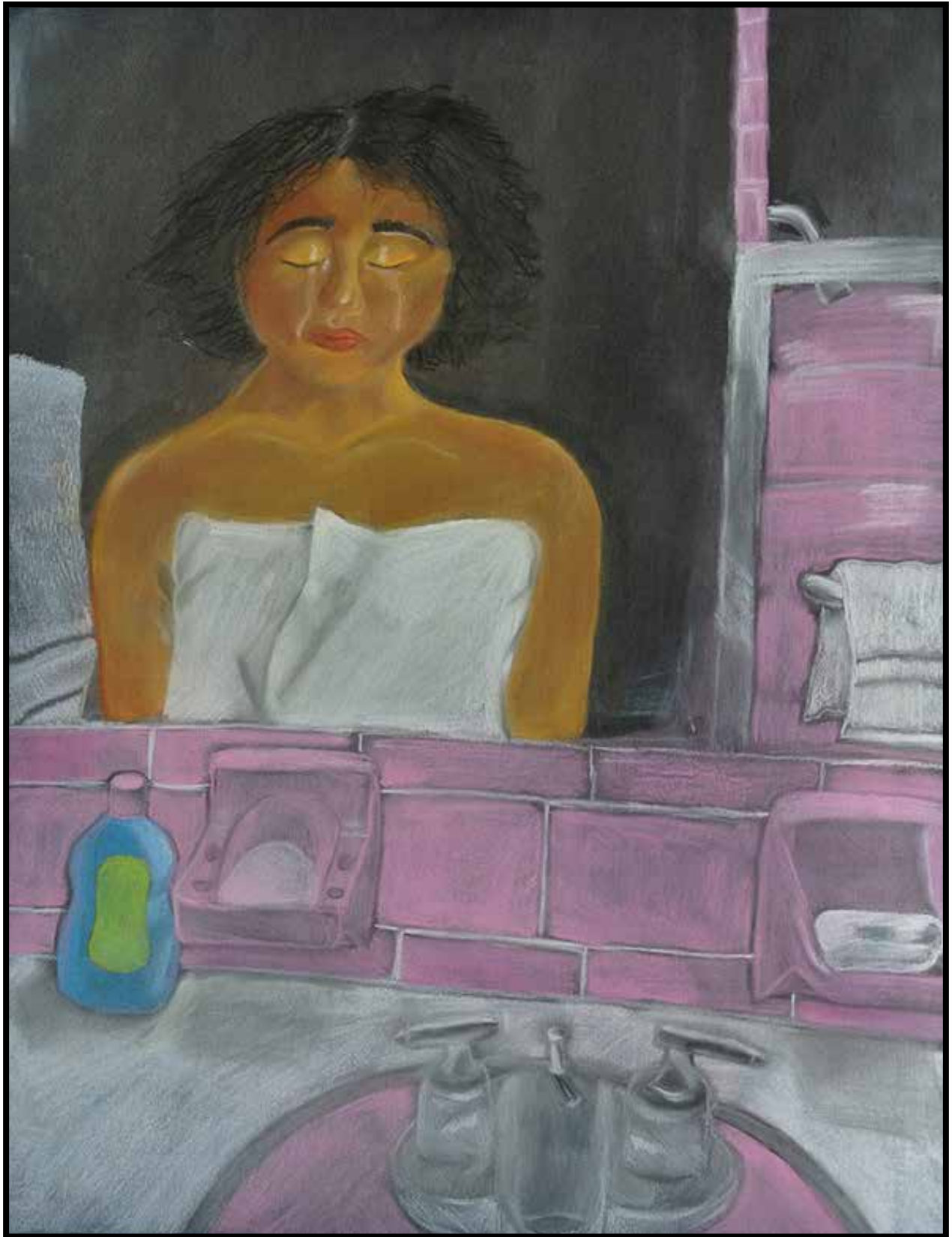
I grabbed my purse. Before I left, one last hair check. The girl in the mirror looked back at me with a face that I didn't remember. Who is she? I don't recognize her anymore. She's you. She has always been you. I brushed the thoughts off and hurried out of the door and into Julie's car.

Before I could say a word, Julie asked, "Bright pink or taupe? Taupe would definitely go with more, of course, but the color pink is so in right now. I don't have anything pink, I need something pink. Yep, bright pink it is." I caught the eye of the girl in the rearview mirror and quickly looked away.

"Yes," I quickly answered, "pink is totally you."

"Now we just have to decide what color you can get. Pink is not an option for you, of course, maybe... a light blue. Yes, light blue. It would totally look great with your hair color."

"I do like the color blue," I lied. I don't like blue but there was no way I was going to tell her that. The person looking back from the mirror was happy, I wish... I wish. I silently yearn for my room. The darkness and the comfort. Mirrors don't work in the dark.



Bathroom Mirror

by Julia Baddley

The Thought of the End

by Jane Nichols

Inspired by T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

I look towards the door of reflection
And glare at the sight of my figure.
Like a wilted petal on a rose, I see imperfection
And failure of expectations.
The door mocks me and eats at my mind,
Screaming quietly, "Hide that and put her to rest,"
And so I turn away until the thought leaves.

I look down the hall of judgment
And watch as eyes tear me apart.
The way they attack secretly and compare intentionally
Yanks on my heart.
The feeling returns
Long enough for my tears to escape.
I stand in fear of cameras snapping
And whispers growing, spreading like a wildfire.
And so I run to hide.

I look across the place of gossip
And notice how my name is jumping from table to table.
I cannot face the fury and challenge the able.
This is where I am defeated.
I look into the eye of the beast
And surrender my emotions to its pleasure.

Jane Nichols

What do I do now?

Should I leave to grant everyone's wishes, put myself away?

Or do I stay?

If I stay, my life brings me pain,

But only for now.

To refrain and be strong takes courage,

Courage I know is somewhere.

The demons that now point poison will leave and have no one,

Whereas I can take the heat

And turn it into glory.

But can I?

Seaside

by Mary Katherine Fowlkes

Inspired by Claude McKay's "America"

Her sirens sing their captivating tunes,
But am I just another Eve to fall?
"Come out, come swim, come frolic in my dunes!"
But would she still pursue me if she saw
My white, my bulging belly undisguised?
Would her sand be as soft? Waves be as calm?
No, she would turn me away, horrified!
My flabs turn heads, they screech through intercoms.
Hindsight through nostalgic lenses reveal
All the chocolate sundaes I downed
Would fail to authorize my dress to seal,
And transformed me to a ghost because now,
Her waves are mirrors whose harsh reflections
Only amplify my imperfections.

Cheap Plastic Medal

by Kenneth Casey

“Guitar,” said Miss Stinnett.

G – U – T – A – R wait that’s not right ... I forgot the ‘i’. My pencil moved to scribble an I between the U and the T.

“Spelling,” she stated.

Why is this so hard to spell? I thought. I looked back at all of the parents, looking like giants in the elementary school desks, watching over us like a council of judges. A bead of sweat slithered down my forehead as my gaze perused the room, trying to find my parents. I spot them in a dimly lit corner. I locked eyes with my mom. Please, Mom, don't, I thought, hoping she would hear me. Uh–oh. Two loud cracks rang through the room; my mom had all of her teeth showing and both of her thumbs up, shaking her arms for emphasis. A sudden heat washed over my face, and I could feel the red running down my cheeks. My body shrunk. I hate when she does that; it's so embarrassing. I gazed back at the paper that is the color of a nice front yard filled with dew in the morning. The pencil’s lead marked the paper with the loopy curves of the word all linked, or there would be repercussions.

“Check your answers. I will be coming around shortly to gather the papers,” Miss Stinnett ordered.

She marched like a drill sergeant from desk to desk, waiting for each paper and swiftly lifting each of the colorful leaflets into a neat stack. When she reached her desk, she gracefully fell into her chair and it hissed while it

Kenneth Casey

bounced to adjust to the sudden strain of weight.

She announced, “You may go to your parents while I grade these.”

She adjusted her readers on the bridge of her nose like a 1950s librarian. I trudged over to the drab corner with the flickering lights my parents were in. I glanced at my parents. They both had smiles across their comforting faces, giving me a feeling of warmth. My dad’s clothes were professional, yet rakish. He was wearing a tie, button down, pants, and shoes, all skillfully put together to show the power and dominance of a leader. My mom’s silent control over the room was clear by her confidence and the elegant way she dressed, her hair perfectly done with a subtle curl at the bottom. They were in control over every situation and all of the students were envious of their obvious superiority, understood by everyone in the room. I struggled to reach their gaze. Although I had an itch for approval, I could not read their true emotions. The room rumbled as all of the parents spoke to each other and their children. My parents were glued to my side like we were conjoined. They held their tongues, waiting patiently for my mind to stop racing. My dad’s hand enveloped the top of my head and rustled my hair as if he was trying to clear my head like an Etch-A-Sketch.

“How are you doing, Sport Dog?” my dad inquired.

“Nervous; you know how I am,” I responded.

“Yes, trust me, we do,” my mother said with a chuckle.

My dad breathed deeply and tapped my mother’s side lightly and shook

Kenneth Casey

his head slightly. She rolled her eyes, and our eyes connected as if we were sending messages between each other.

“I know you do, Mom,” I said.

“How do you think you did?” my mom said.

“I have no idea I am worried I misspelled ‘spelling;’ I don’t get why that word is so hard for me.”

“You did great; I just know it.”

Ms. Stinnett’s chair gave a hiss of air as it rose. She sauntered to a cabinet that creaked open and reached in to retrieve some circular objects. The voices in the room began to die like the embers of a fire, and silence swept over the room. The clock ticked like a bomb and the teacher’s clothes rubbed together. As she strolled to the center of the room, the hanging plastic that dangled off of her hands clashed together, making dull clicks and clanks as it moved. Her eyes grazed the crowd, looking for her pupils. Her normal stern mug was no longer there; she had a small smile and a glint of pride in her eyes. She took a short moment to collect herself and proclaimed,

“I am very proud of you all. I have made these medals to show my appreciation for your progress in my class. I am proud of each and everyone of you. I hope that you are proud of yourself too, and parents, you should be very proud of your children and how hard they have worked in spite of their struggles. I will be giving out these medals. Each of them has a different color corresponding to how many the student missed. First, I will be handing out the blue medals,

Kenneth Casey

which means the student missed none. Kenny made no spelling errors, so he will be receiving a blue medal.”

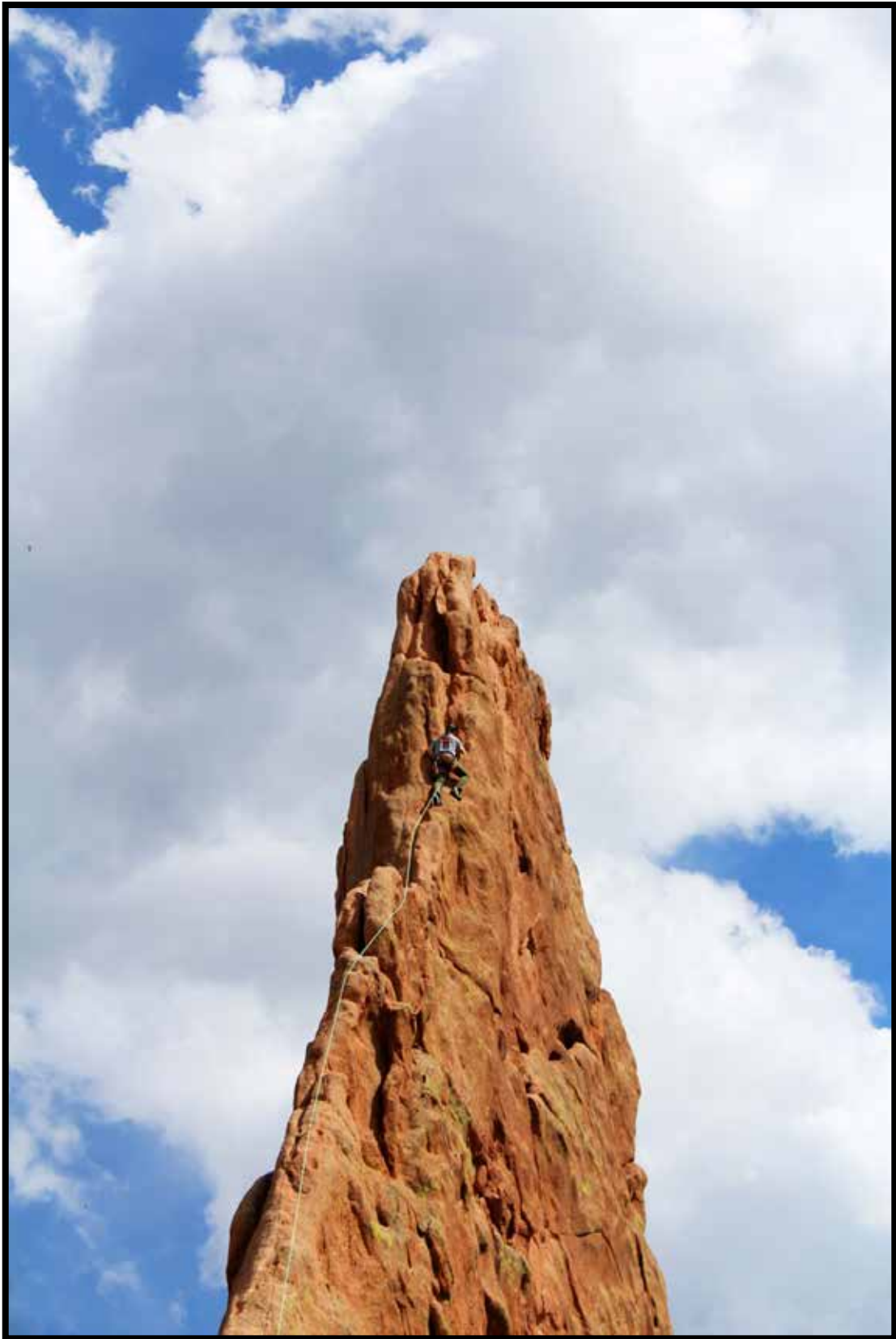
She pointed at me and bent her finger a few times with a smile slowly blooming across her face. I strutted to the front of the room and she lowered the loop with the plastic circle on the end around my neck. There was a smattering of applause, but my mom’s quick, loud, and excited clapping trampled over them all. Ms. Stinnett reached her arms out waiting for a hug, so I obliged and wrapped my arms around her as if to say thank you. I walked to my parents and they give me hugs with very large smiles across their faces and a strong look of pride in their eyes. I looked at the medal. It was a piece of blue felt with a yellow cartoon bee in the middle, surrounded by a plastic casing on a red, white, and blue ribbon. Both my parents and I examined it with the biggest smile I have ever had with my heart swelling. This will go on the corkboard forever, I thought.

“Go talk to Ms. Stinnett and thank her for all of the help,” my mom said.

I traveled across the room until she was directly in front of me.

“Thank you so much; I could not have done this without the support,” I said to Ms. Stinnett.

“You’re welcome, but I could not have done it without the effort you put into my class,” she responded.



Rock Climbing
by Laura Catherine Goodson

Staged

by Hays Edmunds

Inspired by Claude McKay's "America"

I've waited long enough for my big shot,
But I still feel the pounding of my heart.
My stomach tied itself up in a knot;
I wait, restless, for my big shot to start.
My mom just called to tell me I'll do great.
My fam'ly sits awaiting back at home,
But my meal still sits untouched on its plate
While chants of our names fill the giant dome.
I grip my instrument to meet the crowd
And greet them with a faint "good evening."
The screams and music both get way too loud
Until the whole night ends with just one ring.
I don't know why I felt troubled before
'Cause now all that I want in life is more.

A Brief Hiatus

by Emily Grace Lemak

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

While my doll was still being dragged behind me
I ran into your room, singing Jonas Brothers.
We rode by on princess bikes, racing again.
We walked about the park, hiding in bamboo.
Two young sisters, without fear of separation.

At fifteen I became more than a sister to you.
We never looked back, becoming inseparable.
Cruising passenger side in the jeep, I look towards the sun.
Tempted to, by hundreds of fights, we never looked back.

At sixteen I stopped being dependent on you,
We desired our own paths to be united
Laughing and laughing and laughing
Why would we end our friendship?

At seventeen you will leave,
You will go into far Tuscaloosa, by the roaring stadium
And you will be gone without me a full year.
The house filled with misery.

I will hold on to you when you leave me.

Emily Grace Lemak

In the car now, the boxes will be packed,
new inseparable sisters to find.
The August skies will release rain and tears.
The distant highways leaving holes in my heart.
In your room our pictures,
They will sorrow me to look at,
If you are ever coming down by the highways through Tuscaloosa,
Please let me know before,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as T-Town.

Los Ojos Poderosos

by Anne Carlton Clegg

I leapt off of the plane in the Dominican Republic, ready to get some action. As I sweat in the back of the long, white van, all I could think about was the cute pictures I was going to take with the Dominican children and my inspiring post on Instagram. I could not wait to spend time with the senior girls, and I could only hope to form lasting friendships for the upcoming school year. In the villages we were serving, I envisioned small houses, families living with ample food but overall, living a substandard lifestyle. Poverty was the word that kept crossing my mind, but I did not really know what poor looked like. As we pulled into the small, dated hotel, I could not wait to go to Hole of the Pigs, the village we were ministering to, that afternoon.

As we skipped down the long, steep hill that reeked of urine and the steamy sweat of unbathed children, all of the missionaries began to slowly turn their heads with a solemn look on their faces. When we finally made it to the bottom of the hill, a multitude of young children were waiting for us, wearing tattered clothing and walking around on their dirty feet. Bare bottomed babies sat alone in the dark red dirt, playing with the rocks around them. As I sat by myself, dripping in sweat under the one palm tree on the withered grass field, I glanced behind me, and in the fringe, there was a small boy staring at the large group of teenage girls with his glowing brown eyes. He looked to be about four years old, wearing a blue, orange, and gray fleece pullover, long khaki pants, and a pair of blue girls flip flops. I immediately raced over to him with a huge smile on my face.

Anne Calton Clegg

“Hola” I yelled cheerfully at the young boy. He did not reply. “*Hola hola. Como estás?*” Again, no response. I assumed he did not want to talk to me, but as I began to slowly back away, he reached out for my hands and gazed into my eyes. As I looked into his dark, round eyes, surrounded by a musty yellow layer of film, he held his beaten, bloody hands up towards my shoulders. His eyes were more powerful than any word that he could have possibly spoken. As I carried him in my arms, tears began to slowly roll down his face but stopped again when I squeezed him a little harder. I spent the day trying to tickle him, make faces, or play games, but he would consistently end up with his head laying on my shoulder and his arms around my neck. When the time to leave approached, I slowly bent down, trying to detach his legs from around my waist. As I set him on the ground, tears began to roll down his face and he ducked his head. I bent over, looked into his eyes, and said, “*Hasta mañana.*” He wrapped his small fingers around my legs, looking me in the eyes, but I had to peel him off of and walk away. As the group made the treacherous hike up the dusty mud hill, nobody spoke a word. Everyone dragged themselves up the hill in silence with a glazed look over our faces.

As the week progressed, we would run down the long dirt hill each day, and Caleb would be standing isolated from the group, staring into the crowd of teenage girls. He held my hand as I led a Bible study with the adults of the village, and he happily sat in silence in my lap as we attended church service. He played games if I played games, he laughed if I laughed, and he hugged me always. We never spent a moment apart. As the week continued, an ominous feeling welled up in the bottom of all of our hearts. We were leaving soon

Anne Carlton Clegg

and the kids could not come with us. I repeatedly said, “I won’t cry, Amelia, I promise. I don’t cry over these type of things.”

“AC, just wait. You can’t explain the feeling until you experience it.”

As we walked down the steep hill for the last time, Pastor Brad gave each of us one small stick figure doll. Each doll had the colors of salvation and a pamphlet explaining how God saves all the children of the world. He told us to think long and hard about who we wanted to give it to, but I didn’t even have to think about it. As we sat down to give the dolls to our children, Caleb was sitting in my lap as usual, and as I quickly grabbed the doll out of my backpack I said, “I have a gift for you.” He began to grin, his full round cheeks creased with dimples on either side. When he saw the doll his face lit up, and he began to jump around, clutching the doll to his chest.

“Is this really for me?”

“Yes, it is really for you.” As the rest of the day went on, he carried that doll around everywhere, tightly clenched with both fists. When he would drop it, his smile would be wiped from his face, and he would begin to point at the ground for it. When another boy tried to take his doll away, he tightened his grip and held the doll firmly to his chest. When the leaders said it was time to say goodbye, I stared into his piercing eyes and said, “*Adios, Caleb.*”

As tears began to run down his face, he said, “*Gracias. Te amo mucho.*”

“*Caleb, te amo mucho y gracias.*”



Pappy's Tubing
by Kimsey Stewart

The Shirt off Her Back

by Lillie Young

The girls slowly trickled into the restaurant, each one dressed head to toe in their finest dresses and skirts. Their hair was styled rather elaborately--a far cry from the tangled knots on display earlier in the day during kickball and impromptu dancing in the village. Some had even applied lipgloss, an embellishment they used only for special occasions. The smell of freshly baked empanadas and nail polish filled the room where "spa night" for the women and girls from the village would take place.

One girl in the crowded room caught my eye. She looked about my age and was sitting in the corner by herself. I walked over to her.

"*Hola!* What is your *nombre?*" I asked her.

"Mishaina," she responded.

"That's a beautiful nombre. How old are you?"

"*Tengo 15 años.*"

She was my same age, and yet our lives could not be more different.

"I love your *camiseta rosada!* It's very pretty," I said.

"*Gracias. Tú quieres?*" she responded.

A little confused, I asked her what she meant.

"*Quieres mi camiseta?*" she asked again.

Lillie Young

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

I called our translator over to decipher what she was saying to me. “She said you told her that her shirt was pretty, and now she is asking would you like to have it.”

I was speechless and overcome with emotion. It was her best outfit, her only nice outfit. She wore it proudly even though she was perhaps overdressed. I looked at her with her tangled, knotted hair, tamed with braids and beads. Her recently polished, yet still stained sandals, dangled just above the ground. Her beautiful smile beamed, revealing semi-crooked teeth.

I considered what I must look like to her. My hair, though a bit sweaty from the sweltering heat, was recently washed and brushed neatly into a ponytail. My shoes, bought specifically for the trip were barely dusty from the dirt roads in the village. I wore one of many outfits I had packed for the trip. I smiled back at her with teeth straight from braces and retainers. Their daily schedules and living conditions revealed how selfish I had been. I thought about the times my sister and I fought over whose sock was whose or who would wear a favorite dress to church. I thought about her selfless actions and how willing she was to give to me, a girl from a different country who spoke a different language than her, her only nice outfit. She had known me for four days, yet I felt an everlasting bond form between us.

I replied, “*Muchas gracias*, but I think that you should keep it. It looks much better on you.”

Lillie Young

She nodded and smiled even though I knew she did not understand everything I said.

“You can have a seat in this chair and pick out a nail polish color,” I offered, excited to continue our conversation.

Her face lit up as she told me how excited she was for her first manicure. She put her hands on the table, and I started washing the dirt and grime away. This was not only the first but, most likely, the only manicure she would ever receive. I wanted to make sure it would be a lasting memory, kept long after the polish had chipped and faded away. She studied all the nail stickers we had brought and, after five minutes, finally decided which ones she wanted. I reminded her to choose a nail polish color. She carefully considered her options and finally chose one.

She selected a pink nail polish color, a color that perfectly matched her *camiseta rosada*.



Star Girl
by Jessie Holt

Friday

by Lewis Fischer

Inspired by T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Thud, thud, thud, comes the sound
From underneath my rigid feet.
I shift in my seat as if being watched,
Fingers aching and hands trembling.
Uncomfortable with such a task,
I am at odds with my thoughts.
How must I ask?

Voices call, demanding a response
For what I plan to do on this troubled night.

The cursor hovers and impatiently blinks,
Awaiting a message to deliver.
The names and numbers differ
And the keys, so many of them,
Begging for a well-crafted scheme,
Stare back up at my tired eyes
As if they were laser beams.

Perhaps they would be more interested
If I chose a place of more allure.

The theatres seem too old and dull
And the restaurants so boring and banal.

Lewis Fischer

One could only imagine their dismay
After discovering my message.
I can paint a picture of their scowl;
With a sneer so nasty it compels me
To omit a painful howl.

My mind wanders and fingers tremble
At the thought of my last venture.

Seconds, minutes, hours passed
In the revealing of their truths.
Many gave an apathetic, lame excuse,
So simple could it be deduced.
Not a one wanted to attend
My sad attempt at a social;
I had truly failed to befriend.

Why should I make an effort at all
When I need not open Pandora's Box?

It is my own home and comfort that calls.

Fruition

by Nate Fulmer

The small home-studio was untidy and unkempt. Broken guitar strings littered the floor while sheets of paper, with song ideas scribbled over them, covered each amplifier. Through the small square windows could be seen a heavy storm. The thunder shook the house in an almost rhythmic pattern. In a way that he could not quite reason, it reminded the man of his father. After another night without sleep, the man sat down with his guitar. He blindly plucked around on various chords and attempted to construct a few riffs. He could not come up with anything. In frustration, the man set down the guitar and sat there thinking about his father. The man's son walked in and asked him, "When is Papa gonna leave the hospital, Dad?"

"Well Bud, Papa's real sick you know. He's been through a lot with this whole Parkinson's ordeal, and it really takes a toll on his body. There's really no telling how much longer he could stay there," said his dad. "You know, I always regretted that you boys never saw what 'ol Papa was like when he was younger and more lively."

"What was he like then?" wondered the boy.

"He was really great, the kind of man that everyone who came across couldn't help but love. I know I sure do love him a bunch. Nowadays he just doesn't have as much time." said his dad.

"I always hear older people say they wish they had more time," responded Buddy as he sat down on one of the old amplifiers.

"Well, that's really not too far off for most elderly people. They truly don't have as much time to do the things they enjoy like they did when they were younger," said his dad. "In Papa's case, all his time is taken up by Parkinson's. It makes him take longer to move, get ready for the day, eat, even to think."

"I wish I could see what Papa was like when he wasn't as old."

"I do too, Bud. I really do. I know you would have loved to see all the hunting and fishing he did, he had such a passion for it," replied his dad, beginning to choke up.

Nate Fulmer

“Does he still have a passion for it?” asked Bud.

“He sure does, but nowadays there’s not much he can do with it.”

“That makes me sad.”

“There’s no shame in that, Bud.” His dad reminded him, “The best thing you can do for him is be there for him and tell him how much you love him. As you get older you’ll realize how important it is to love your family because you’ll get to know that they won’t be around forever, and after so many years together you’ll finally lose one.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the boy as he stepped out of the room with nothing left to say.

After the boy was gone, the man began to sob for the first time in years. He did not want his boy to see him like that so he softly shut the door. The sobbing ceased after a few minutes had passed. The man decided he had one more thing to tell his boy. He stepped out of the studio and walked down the hall to the boy’s room. The man told him, “Don’t let it get to you if he passes. We all go sometime and there’s no sense in spending too much time grieving over that one moment. It’s better to reflect on and appreciate the joyful things he experienced in his life; and the experiences we shared with him in our own lives. I think Papa would rather it be that way as well.”

“Thanks Dad, I think that makes me feel better,” said the boy.

“You bet.”

The man returned to the studio and sat down. Feeling a new urge, he once again picked up his guitar. Something in him had changed. The man began to play a purely new song effortlessly; almost as if he had practiced it a million times. His emotions seemed to flow directly from his fingers and out of the guitar. When he strummed those chords he could feel them resonate deep within him and it made his body feel rich with sound. It was sentimental, it was tender, and it was sincere. Finally, the song had come to fruition.



Ukelele
by Brooke Smith

The Universal Language

by Logan Maxwell

Catholic Mass isn't typically where you fall in love for the first time; however, I remember the scene exactly. The dark wooden risers on the right of the altar that smelled of roses and reverence seemed so familiar. The stained glass panels each represented a different biblical image, and they littered the pews with their pale greens and pinks and blues seemingly brought to life. But my first love wasn't just a "first grade crush"—it was a lifelong obsession with music.

Come sixth grade, I had the opportunity to try a real instrument. The school didn't have that much of a band program, and since there weren't many options, I started looking at saxophone and percussion. I was a much better saxophone player than I was a percussionist, so I stuck with saxophone until around 9th grade, when I started messing with trumpet. Something about the simplicity, yet also complexity, of the instrument captivated me.

I love how music shows emotion in a way that no other art can. While you can see a painting, it doesn't change. It captures one moment in time. Music changes. There is no "right way" or specific way one piece must be played. Music isn't just one dynamic either; the harmonies grow and die away. Music makes people feel emotions by having emotions itself.

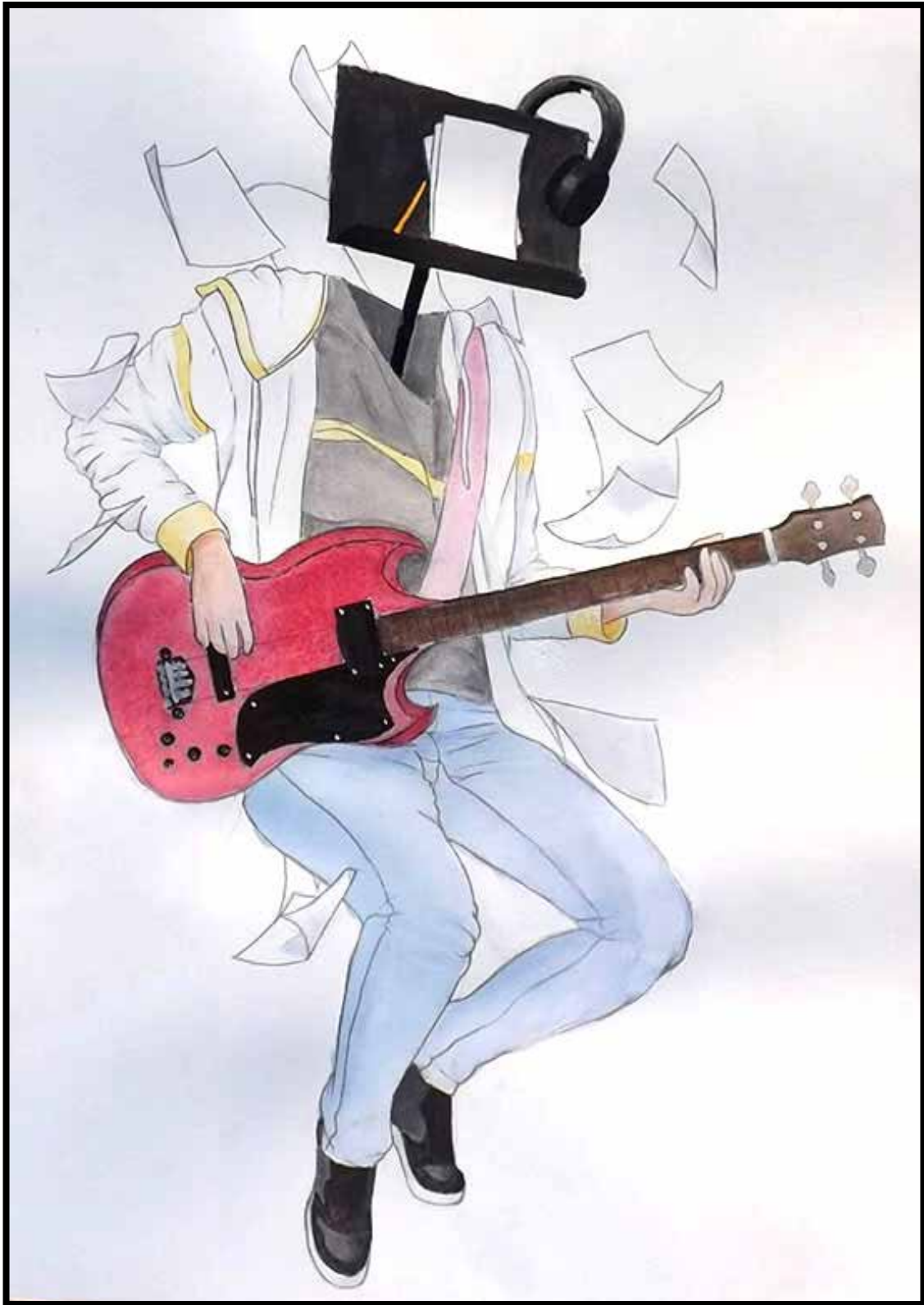
I also love how it is the one universal language. No matter where you come from or where you are, you will always understand music. This is something else I love about it. Everyone understands it, but not in the exact same way. It means different things to different people. Some overplayed pop song on

Logan Maxwell

the radio might be obnoxious and an instant change of radio station for one person. But for somebody else, it could be the last song they listened to with a loved one. Music is the one reliable form of communication among humanity.

I envy how music connects people in ways they could have never imagined, as if it's the perfect matchmaker. It takes people on journeys, not only mentally, but also physically. Travelling to over 10 states, including Hawaii, would never have been something I could say about myself had I not become a musician. I've met some of my closest friends by journeying across the country with a drum corps. Some of them are companions and teachers that I can never repay.

Music, I feel like, has raised me. It has further developed character in me. Now I'm fairly certain that nobody would describe hearing "Nope, do it again," or "Let's run that just one more time," well over a thousand times is not character building. Yet it seems that it's taught me to appreciate the world. Teaching one of the most valuable lessons of life is the one of most admirable qualities of music. It has taught me that your next day or performance or rep of your music is never guaranteed. What really brings this fact to fruition for me is that it doesn't only apply to music. Think about everything you say to someone. You don't know when the last time you're going to talk to them is.



Primary Rock
by Lena Pelham

A New Walk in Life

by Liz Vandavelde

Inspired by Ezra Pound's "The Garden"

Like a bird set free, she begins to soar away into the sky
with the intention of heading west to embark on a new journey.
And she has that gut feeling before taking a test,
Prepared but nervous to see the outcome.

And surrounded by fresh people with smiles smeared across their faces,
She walks through the shady campus with her hair blowing behind her.
She soaks in the moment with the taste of adventure lingering on her lips.

She was an independent flower, letting her petals fall into place,
And her confidence breathed life into everyone she left behind.

She promised to return to Sweet Home Alabama,
But the look in her eyes expressed a secret joy of staying forever.
A tear fell from her momma's eye as she squeezed tight,
Never wanting to let her go.

Moving On

by Anna Lauren Summers

This writer was awarded 2nd place by the Alabama Writers' Forum as a part of their annual statewide Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards competition.

I was stunned. I did not know how to react. A tsunami of emotions washed over me.

I asked myself *should I be sad, happy, angry, relieved?* Confusion consumed me and I did not know how to respond to the news. I could not believe this was happening. I knew I was no longer important to him, but I still wondered how he could do this. I felt like a toy nobody wanted.

Just a few minutes earlier, I was peacefully perched in bed in the guest room at my grandmother's house. It was a warm sunny day in June, and I was getting ready to take a swim in the pool. I felt the warm sunlight flooding through the window. Bored but restless, I was watching yet another episode on Netflix. I was unalert, enjoying a relaxing summer day. Then, I heard a light tapping on the wood door across the room. Slouching against the antique headboard, I was unaware of what was going to happen next.

"Anna Lauren?" my mom calmly questioned.

Without looking up from my phone I lazily responded, "Yes?"

My mom opened the door and stood upright and tense. I saw shock in her eyes, as she seemed to be staring at something on her phone. Her mouth agape and eyes wide, she called for my grandmother without emotion. Annoyed from being interrupted from my peaceful Netflix episode, I realized something was terribly wrong. It was as if a storm cloud was hovering over my head. I heard the slow steps of my grandmother coming down the hallway.

"You will not believe this," said my mom in a monotone voice.

"What is it?" I inquired as I perked up and put my phone down.

"I just got a text from your dad."

"Oh no, what is it?" my grandmother asked curiously.

Anna Lauren Summers

My grandmother and I stared at my mom in suspense. I tilted my head and furrowed my eyebrows, puzzled about what it would be about, considering I had not encountered him in a year. I recalled the last time I heard from him: He had told my mom that he would not help pay for my knee surgery. Annoyed at what the text might say, my eyes went back to my mom and I quasi-listened to see what was happening this time. My mom's mouth opened slightly, getting ready to spill out this major news.

"Your dad is moving to Utah," she said in a shocked, emotionless voice.

Her eyes went immediately to me, seeing what my reaction might be. I could tell that she was relieved, that a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"Oh my gosh," I responded, in an emotionless voice.

I did not know how to react. Part of me was still surprised that he would leave me a thousand miles away to be with his other family, but part of me expected this from him. Even when he lived close, I could not have felt more distant from him. I exhaled slowly trying to take in the news, trembling in surprise. My eyes turned to my grandmother. I could tell that she was happy that he was out of our community and our lives for good. I knew that she wanted to know, how I was feeling. She slightly tilted her head and concentrated on my face.

"Are you going to visit him," she asked me, leaning against the doorframe.

"No," I responded quickly.

"I just cannot believe this," she said.

"I know," I shortly said, in a quiet voice.

"I never thought this would happen," added my mom.

My mom and grandmother still in shock said, "Are you okay?"

I responded that I was fine, but really I did not know what to feel. After a few more minutes, they left me with my Netflix. It was a bittersweet feeling. I felt relieved that I would never have to see his other family at community events. I was happy that I would not have to worry about the gruesome visits

Anna Lauren Summers

to his house every other weekend that I had to endure throughout my early childhood. I knew that I never fit into his new family and did not really care to.

Another part of me was angry. *How can he leave his daughter without so much as a text? I wondered if I will ever see him again?* I asked myself a million questions about his departure.

With all of these emotions, a piece of me felt a tinge of sadness. I wondered why he would do this to me. How he could do this to me. It hit me that I would most likely never see my father again. I had wished all my life that he would accept me and put me before his other family. But—I soon learned to give up that hope.

A maelstrom of emotions tumbled around in my mind as I tried to continue watching my phone. Time started to stand still, and I reflected about all of the memories I had with him. I pondered about my future without a father and what I was losing, but then asked myself if he really was ever a good father to me.

A few more minutes ticked by as I continued to contemplate how my life would change. While staring at the wall, I had come to realize that I felt free. I no longer had to answer to him. After growing up with him in my life, I recognized that I did not need a father. I was successful without him and would continue my life as I always had. I pushed these thoughts out of my head, just like he had always pushed me out of his life. I nonchalantly grabbed my sunglasses off the dresser and slowly walked out to the pool. I knew it was time for me to move on, just as he had done.

A Forgotten Story

by Jane Margaret Turner

My mind is jumping from one thought to another as I sit staring at the formidable pile of unassembled brown boxes that have haunted the corner of my room for weeks. There's so much to do and so little time before my family must move out of my childhood home. This move is no surprise for me. For months, I have assumed the now familiar routine of visiting the construction of our new house while strangers examine the place we currently inhabit, opening our kitchen cabinets and looking at our Christmas pictures. Now that we have sold it, I should be excited to move. No more hiding all evidence that I was there before showings or watching the wrinkles form on my parents' faces when our contractor calls with the latest construction problem. But instead, the feeling is bittersweet, and I can't seem to begin the long task of packing.

My mom disrupts my daydreaming when she deposits a Sharpie and a roll of tape by my side. "How about you start with shoes?" she gently coaxes me, a sign that I am taking far too long. So I begin robotically assembling boxes and throwing shoes inside, trying them on every once in a while to see if they still fit. In the "yes" pile are most of my sandals, boots, and wedges, still new from my eighth grade back-to-school shopping. In the "no" pile go my dance shoes, worn from years of practice, and my dusty old flats given to me by an older cousin who outgrew them. Soon enough, that part of the packing is done, and I move on to the next category. Boxes and boxes pile up in stacks taller than I am, encasing the items that I wish to take to my new house. Trash bags line the hall, full of clothing I have grown out of or knick-knacks that no longer hold any sentimental value.

Jane Margaret Turner

A couple of days later, the movers finally arrive. For hours I help my parents load vases and picture frames into their cars, taking breaks in between to marvel at how quickly the contents of the house are being carted away. My sister, much more easy going than I, has gone to elementary school for the day, but I stay home. I can't bear to let my room be deconstructed without me there. Right before the last of my things are to be loaded into the moving van, I take a last look to make sure that I don't forget anything. Cabinets empty? Check. Anything behind the bed? Nope. Once I am assured that I have left no trace behind, I make my way to the door, but something on my bookshelf catches my eye.

It's a child's book made of worn notebook paper, crudely fastened together with staples. On the cover is a colored pencil drawing of a princess with brown, curly hair and green eyes just like mine. Suddenly, I am transported back to that day spent scribbling the princess's adventures that I would excitedly present to my parents later that night. The book had blended in with my white bookshelf for years, just waiting for me to uncover it today. Although I am in a rush to leave and begin setting up my new house, something possesses me, and I sit for a few minutes to read the story I had written so long ago.

When it is over, instead of throwing it away like I had already done with so many of my old things, I carefully place it in my bag. It rides with me down my old street, through Mountain Brook, and then up my new driveway. At my new house, frantic stress and the sound of scissors gliding through packaging tape fills the air. My room is a maze of boxes and furniture with no place, and I don't even know where a blanket is to sleep with that night. But despite the

Jane Margaret Turner

disorder, I have managed to unpack one thing. My handmade book now sits on my bookshelf, exactly where it belongs.



Blurred Motion by Fraley Williams