

2022

New River Anthology

2022 New River Anthology

A Collection of Student Art & Writing

Volume 26

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Jacksonville, North Carolina

The Right to Write Award is sponsored by George and Lora Cole of Jacksonville, given in memory and in honor of their daughter. George earned an Associate in Fine Arts from Coastal; he is an accomplished artist with awards received from many campuses and local art exhibitions. The Coles are passionate about recognizing the academic achievements of successful students, and we are pleased to present this award to three writers in particular:

"A Letter to Time" by Megan Eesley (Poetry)

"When the Water Recedes" by Dana Ayers (Nonfiction)

"The Accident" by Chasity Mumper (Fiction)

Publication Note

The New River Anthology is comprised of writing and artwork created by Coastal Carolina Community College students during the 2021-2022 Academic Year. The various works within this publication represent ideas expressed or artwork designed by students; in addition, the works may incorporate words or phrases, as well as explore themes, that some may find potentially disturbing or distressing. Therefore, any ideas expressed or artwork designed by students within this publication are not purported to be reflective of any views or positions of Coastal Carolina Community College.

Coastal Carolina Community College is committed to not only educational excellence—by fostering an engaging teaching and learning environment that embraces inclusivity as well as promotes personal and cultural enrichment in order to enhance the student experience—but also student success.

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**Artwork pieces are bolded.*

A Letter to Time

By Megan Eesley

Time, you foul thing.
What I would do to be your master,
To have again what once was,
Every smile, every teardrop, every laugh, every scream.

You weave memories for me,
Fragments I can see and hear of moments that passed me by.
But I have no need of remembering what was said, what I saw,
I need to *be* there again, I need to *feel*.
I need my past because this world is offering me no future.

Time, you thief,
Return to me to who I was, and the people around me to who they were,
Give us our golden hours again, when the sun sets in the sky but not in our lives,
Give us back the feeling of ice cream sticking to our fingers and the wet grass clinging to our
toes as we ran through our gardens and sprinklers that made the forests and hurricanes of our
youthful adventures.
Time, oh wonderful, torturous time,
For just one moment, let me be who I once was before my faith in this world slipped from my
growing hands.

*"I need to be there again, I need to feel.
I need my past because this world is offering me no future."*

When the Water Recedes

By Dana Ayers

The smell of mold is very particular. Once you've smelled it, it imprints in your memory and is forever negatively associated with whatever memory it's attached to. It's suffocating and even if you don't touch it, it snakes into your pores and leaves a film on your skin. It does not bring good news. And after it reaches a certain point, it stops being fuzzy and just resembles skin, leathery skin covering everything that it shouldn't be.

Mold and I are not friends.

I still can't pinpoint exactly when I became concerned about Hurricane Florence. I had been through Bertha and Fran as a child and I remembered the power outages, the damage, and the near back-to-back mess of my parents' house after both came through. But I had never felt the need to evacuate until Florence. My youngest of our four kids, a month old on the day Florence would end up hitting the coast, was the determining factor for us leaving. Being stuck without power or water was just something we couldn't deal with while he was a newborn, so we made the decision to evacuate. I mowed our lawn and cleaned the house, put away everything outside that could be a hazard, and started to pack. I felt silly as I packed up baby books, birth certificates, and insurance papers, like I was overreacting. But still, I sorted through what was most important, told my kids to bring any stuffed animals or toys that were their favorites, and we closed the door behind us. Two cars, four dogs, six people, and almost 13 hours later we arrived at my parents' house in Maryland, tired, stressed, and feeling in limbo about the upcoming days.

News coverage was instant and incessant. I bounced between multiple news channels and internet sites trying to catch a glimpse or a word about our town back home. A quick message from the in-laws on the first day showed a picture of our house sitting resolutely in the dark, soldiering through the wind and rain, but whole. Then came the reports of Wilmington flooding. *Well, they're south of us*, I thought. Then came the images of parts of New Bern washing away. *Well, they're north of us*. By the time I saw the report of water rescues from the apartment complex down the street from where we lived, a painful ache had taken hold of my body from the tense position I had been in for days. *That river flows behind our house*.

The call we had been waiting for came on day five to my husband's cell phone. I could hear my father-in-law greet him through the line. He left the room, and I sat on the edge of the blow-up mattress my two daughters had been sharing. *What if we flooded? What do we do? The girls have to go to school. The boys are so little. Where will we stay? Do we even go back?*

He was hard to read as he entered the room again. He tossed his phone beside me and let the air escape from his mouth slowly. I went to stand up then decided halfway maybe sitting down was the better idea.

"Are you ready for this?"
Hell no. "Yup."

“He said it was about 18 inches above the door handle. He can’t see inside the house because we closed it all up. The back yard still has some standing water, but the water line stops about 18 inches above –”

It was here I stopped hearing what he was saying. Heaving sobs took over my whole body, and he held me until they calmed. When I was done, I composed myself the best I could and we broke the news to our daughters who, at the time, didn’t quite grasp the severity of what “The house flooded” meant. From that point on, I started tracking my days by hours. In the first 24 hours I called insurance, banks, credit cards, and utilities to cancel and get extensions on what I could. By 30 hours, I was researching what shelters also took dogs for when we went back home. By 36, I had applied with FEMA. In 48 hours, I had spoken with our flood insurance and our homeowner’s insurance. We had our first inspection appointment that Friday at 8 a.m. After 72 hours, we were packed into our cars again for the longest, most devastating drive of our lives.

It was already hot and humid when we pulled up at 8:00 that Friday. The house sat there, still locked up, innocent. Like that time you came home to find your puppy sitting at the front door, tail wagging and ready to drown you in stinky-breath kisses because he’s trying to distract you from the trail of destruction he’s hidden on the other side of the house. I braced myself which felt odd because it had been just over a week, my house shouldn’t feel strange. I took a breath and opened the door.

I should have breathed in deeper.

That first step is the hardest. I knew what the house was supposed to look like, but it didn’t look like that anymore so for a few seconds, I was extremely confused. Then the smell hit, and I gagged. The closet door to the HVAC system had a layer of mold five feet high. The dining room is adjacent to that and before I completely stepped inside, I saw our table upside down, chairs on their sides. My computer was face-down on the floor, but the desk it was sitting on when we left was missing. In the kitchen, our fridge was on its back in the middle of the floor, there’s no room to get around it. I’m shocked at this because of how heavy you think a fridge is. What’s painfully funny is the little magnets I noticed still stuck to the front of it, even after sitting in flood water for days.

Beyond that is the living room. Couches were sideways, shelves had been knocked to the floor, and the TV was sideways and still plugged into the wall. The paint had peeled away in what looked like a melted piece of wax, stretched away from the wall but still attached though the drywall behind it that had broken and come apart. Little things were scattered across the floor: DVD’s, baby toys, lists from the refrigerator, one of my daughter’s bookbags. She had just started kindergarten two weeks before and I could feel the tears start to push against the barrier I tried putting up before we entered at the sight of it.

The mat from the front door was down the hall and resting in the doorway of the kid’s bathroom. *I didn’t leave that here*, I thought. I chuckled through my tears, almost surprised at the sound. What was funny about any of this? Throughout the house the floor was beginning to dry out and pull up. If we aren’t careful, we’ll catch our feet on what was once-flat floor. Bedrooms are what’s left and the state of all of them is pretty much the same, but it’s the kids’ rooms that hit hardest. My youngest son, then just over a month old, hadn’t even gotten the chance to sleep in his room yet. Diapers and wipes were laying across the floor, humorously swelled from the water that had invaded the room. My other son’s room had his crib sideways and his changing table was sagging under the weight of the wet clothes.

It made me think of Eeyore; this poor, drenched piece of furniture slumped in the corner. My girls' room sent me over the edge. The door was swollen shut, and it took the full weight of my husband running into it to get it open. I couldn't help but gasp and shakily grab the door frame to steady myself. Inside it resembled a tornado more than flooding – every piece of furniture was upside down, all the drawers ripped out of the dressers and piled into the middle of the room. It's like we were being taunted, "Here, see what I did while you were gone?"

Without realizing it, I had made my way back outside. One step, then two, and I bent over as it all bellowed out. At first, I covered my mouth, embarrassed to let my sobs be heard. But it was too much. I stood up and yelled and screamed and swore, hearing my echo bounce off the other houses in the cul-de-sac. There were so many emotions in that sound, anger and despair and grief, that it felt like I was physically coming apart and I curled my arms around my body to keep everything in place.

When you become "those people" after a natural disaster, no one ever tells you exactly what you'll go through being one of "those people." The aftermath is even worse than the storm. I cried then, not only for what we had lost but for the enormity of what we would now have to deal with – recovering. It was within the next few hours that the overwhelming weight of what we now faced really became apparent and we began to deal with the emptying of our house. How do you do that? What took a lifetime to join together, this storm had now torn apart; every journal, first Christmas ornaments, baby blankets, 15 years of "us" was held within those walls. Now we were told to bring it to the curb to be piled up, collected, and hauled away, like we were never here. Our lives turned upside down and into the back of a debris truck.

There is a quote from Mr. Rogers: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" I wasn't looking anywhere but the tops of my waterlogged shoes, but they found us, the helpers.

I learned my neighbor's name for the first time as he brought us face masks to work through the house with. "If you need help, we got a couple people from church coming back tomorrow. I can send them over." *Sure, thanks, that will help, goodbye.* I was numb at first so a lot of it didn't register. But still, they came. My husband's co-worker came with his wife. They lost their house 6 years prior to a tornado, so they were very familiar with the pile of belongings now left in our yard. His wife, who I was only just friendly with and not at all close, hugged me tightly as I sobbed in our front yard again after she asked me how we were holding up. My daughters' elementary school randomly saw a reply of mine about insurance, and less than 24 hours later we met up with three of their teachers in the parking lot of the school. The backs of their vans were full of donated toddler clothes. "Just take whatever you need, take it all if you have to. We have plenty more." I went to thank them as we left and couldn't get through the words before crying. Our neighbor across the street had family members mail clothes for our girls, a woman driving around randomly in her truck dropped off two cases of water as we worked through all our houses, and FEMA volunteers were going door-to-door with resources for survivors.

The largest and most unexpected gift was from our neighbor's church disaster relief group. Our family isn't religious, so I was hesitant having them there, but they took no notice. They descended upon our house as I imagined angels would; focused and determined, but graceful and empathetic.

They stepped into and around our lives and helped us empty the house into the yard, pulled the drywall from the studs, tore down kitchen cabinets and countertops, and ripped up flooring by the wheel barrel full. What would have taken my husband and I weeks to get done, they had completed in days. During the lighter moments, they joked with me when I mentioned how much stuff you don't know you have until you have to gut your house and throw it on your lawn. In the darker ones, they held my hand while I cried at what we lost and said silent prayers over our house.

In the following days, standing in the stillness and the dust of the bones of our home, it was hard to see how the pieces were ever going to fall back into place again. How were we to keep going when it felt like the world had already forgotten about us? How do you see the end of the tunnel when it's so damn hard to simply put one foot in front of the other now?

But they would, and they did, just not in the same way they were before the storm. I found a rageful determination that had never been tested before, a breaking point that I never want to see again, and an outpouring of gratitude that helped carry me above the piles of rubble and past the screaming in my head of how unfair this whole thing was.

So, when you are standing in that spot where everything seems impossible; where the rage is too thick to see through; where you scream into the wind just so no one else can hear your devastation, remember:

There is beauty in destruction. There will be life beyond the rubble.

"Look for the helpers."

Lean on others when your legs can carry you no more and hold on because, eventually, the water will recede.

"In the following days, standing in the stillness and the dust of the bones of our home, it was hard to see how the pieces were ever going to fall back into place again. How were we to keep going when it felt like the world had already forgotten about us?"

The Accident

By Chastity Mumper

My vision clouds into the focus of a bare room shrouded in white pure light. I feel like I have just been beaten in the head, but I can't remember why. My eyes fall onto a dark figure across the room as they lie on their side away from me.

Who is that? I wonder. I manage to staggeringly put my feet beneath me and walk toward it. As I come closer, I find the figure and form of the person to be recognizable, and I gasp in surprise. I look around the room to scan for another figure, but there is just one other person in the room. He stirs and rolls over to look at me.

"What's going on? Where am I?" I ask the man. The man chuckles lightly in response and gives me a crooked smile with a canine peeking out.

"We," he emphasizes, "are dead."

Flying. That's what it felt like. The three of us were unbound by society's chains of the road and my, did we fly. Every turn in the road we came upon was a teasing kiss upon Death's lips. Every shift in gear was another skipped heartbeat that was sold to the afterlife. Every second was a miracle; every minute was borrowed time. Maybe, in my gut, I knew what was going to happen, or rather, anticipated the inevitable.

In retrospect, we were stupid. High on good spirits and still touched by drunken ignorance. If we would have had our heads on straight, any one of us would have known what would happen.

I felt a hand on my shoulder as we shrieked to a stop. I felt a firm grip, proportionate to the abruptness of the halt. I knew it was Cruz in the backseat and I relaxed, slightly comforted, and remembered I wasn't the only one on this ride. I could hear every raspy intake of breath from him, and I felt him lean forward. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him open his mouth as if to say something, but with another abrupt braking endeavor, his words were ripped from him and lost. I heard his body slam into the seat behind him as gravity demanded to be acknowledged. I didn't dare look away from what was in front of me, this whirlpool of green and black. I had to see every moment.

My own breaths came out ragged. The windows were up, but we were going so fast that it felt like the air didn't quite make it all the way down to my lungs. Yet, the air might not have made it down, but nervous laughter found its way out. I couldn't believe what was happening. This was probably one of the most exhilarating things I had ever done.

"This is fucking amazing," Cruz managed to get out. When we hit a straight-away, we picked up even more speed. My eyes flashed at the speedometer; we were going 130mph and still pushing. My heart was pulsing so hard that I thought my heart would stop. I think the fastest I had ever gotten to was 90mph and that was me on the highway during daylight hours and fully alert trying to keep up with the flow of traffic. If I went back to the moment, I am certain my heart was pounding in sync with the speed we were going. The straightaway came to an end, and Jesse let up on the gas and changed gear. After he managed the turn, he said in such a lighthearted tone, "You guys are awesome."

"Hell yea we are! Let's see how fast we can go, baby!" Cruz managed to yell with life.

I looked and found Vazquez's eyes full of life. Hell, the fire that burned in his eyes was undeniable. I never considered him quite reckless. He was one known as quiet, solitary, and very intelligent, but in the last few months, I was slowly piecing together who he was behind his barrier.

I snapped out of this reverie and my eyes found the road that only flew under us. There were more shifting and sharp turns. Every time, I had to bite back a scream. I may have been intoxicated when I got into this car, but every mile we drove was sobering me up like a shot of charcoal. The awareness of the situation was settling, and as Jesse pushed the vehicle to climb even more in speed, I struggled to say, "Jess, we gotta' slow down." Then I began to realize the road we were on, and the images of my everyday commute flooded my mind. "There's a turn up here," "V you gotta slow down," and "You're not gonna' make it," were all things I had said once I became more awake. We had no reason to be on this road. Not this late, nor this intoxicated, and I think I was the only one who understood this.

"Woohoo! Keep it up, brother!" Cruz yelled as he leaned forward in between me and Vazquez.

The car jerked again while he shifted, and this one was harder than the last. My heart started to pound, and my first drop of fear had fallen. We kept going down this endless road, and all the while, I desperately wanted to get home. He shifted, and I silenced another scream as my hand found his wrist and held on for dear life. He regained control of the car and steadied on the road again. A few seconds had gone by, and I realized I still had the death grip on his wrist. I let go and took a breath. I didn't know what to think. All I saw was darkness and smelled gas.

Another straight-away, we had maybe a mile and a half worth and I let Jesse know. He took this as the stamp of approval to hit the gas. I sat back in my seat and stared at the front window. I could see everything, yet nothing, all at once. He shifted up in gear, and the engine roared under more work. My eyes found the speedometer again; we had reached 150mph and we were only going faster. My mind flashed the image of the next quarter mile ahead of us; there was a turn. A turn that we weren't going to make at roughly 160mph.

I thought for sure I was going to die. I saw the turn illuminated in the headlights, and I felt the wheels try to change direction. I felt the bare tap of the brakes as I stared at green rushing at me. And I thought with certainty, I was going to die.

"What do you mean we're dead?" I said to the figure who began to slowly dissolve into the figure of Vazquez.

"I mean what I said, Trinity. There's nothing else to say."

"What of Cruz then? Why isn't he here?" I said slowly piercing V's words together.

We swerved right, and it was as if I was thrown into a tornado and getting eaten by a black hole. I screamed upon impact, but nothing rivaled the sound that surrounded me of angry thunder and cackling lightning. It didn't feel like it would end. And again, I thought my life was done.

Sometime during the crash, my eyes were squeezed shut, and when I opened them or awoke, the thing that caught my senses first was the smell of blood mixed with the smell of the woods. The picture in front of me didn't make sense at first. I became aware of grass on my face, or was it my face on the grass? I was so disoriented. Once more sense hit me, I was upside-down strapped to my seat. My sight was focused, and all I could see was blood. It was everywhere. I could feel it leaking down my neck, I could taste it on my lips, and I could see it splattered over my right hand. Can I move? I moved my free hand, and the first thing I tried to do was unbuckle myself. All I wanted was to get out and run away from this, but I couldn't. Moving burned. I tried to reach for my pocket to see if I could call for help, and I couldn't do that even. It was at this point that I realized it wasn't blood on my lips; the reality of the situation had tears streaming, and my throat choked up with blood and disbelief. I started crying. I felt so lost, broken, and helpless.

There was movement behind me. It was slight, but nevertheless movement, and the thought dawned on me that I wasn't alone. I remembered. Cruz. Vazquez.

"Cruz?" I asked in between sobs.

"It's ok. I'm ok," he responded.

"Ok," I tried to say, but he continued to talk.

"I'm stuck. I can't get out. I'm stuck. I can't get out...." He kept saying over and over while I heard him still shuffling around back there.

The tears overtook me again, and I was becoming lost again. My vision was fading, and I wanted all of this to end. As my vision was dissipating, I heard a shrill voice of a lady...Maybe it was two. I can't remember. Her high pitch brought me back to earth.

"Hello? Anyone?" the voice was asking.

My brain kicked in, and I responded, "Hello?! Help?! Please, ma'am." I don't recall what was done to her or their end after that exchange, but the tears continued to fall. My head was throbbing, and the thought of Vasquez popped back into my mind.

"Vazquez? V? V?! Oh, please no! Wake up! Jesse, please wake up..." My voice trailed off into more choking tears. I craned my head as best as I could to look in his direction, but all I could see were the uncertain shadows and angles that were silhouetted by the amber color of streetlights. One thing I could discern on his side was his hand. I had a momentary thought to reach for it, but I couldn't. Something mentally blocked me, and I froze with more tears pouring out of me.

I was scared. Terrified. My mind was racing, and my body wanted to keep up, but I remained stuck. I thought I was surely dreaming and kept wishing to wake up. For how many times I felt my heart pounding in my chest, I thought I was there for eternity. I could feel my body weakening, and the shadowed vision was returning. To escape the tears, pain, burning, and most importantly reality, I let myself fade...The shock of the final realization hit me, and a knowing face framed Vazquez's feature. He completely remembered what had happened and said, "You're not dead yet at least."

My mind was in utter confusion. Did I really die? I asked myself numerously. I wasn't in any pain; I looked at my hands and saw the same dissolving distortion that was on Vazquez.

"We don't have much time left," he said with calculating eyes.

My eyebrows furrow together. I shook my head to clear my thoughts, but then I heard Vazquez's voice, but this time, more distant.

"Cruz. Stop moving. Help is coming. You're going to be ok. You have to stop moving. Cruz!" And the shuffling in the back ceased just like that. My mind pulls itself back to life at the sound of his voice. The voice of certainty and eternal calm before the storm.

Jesse. The relief that flooded through me raked more tears and sobs from my body. He was alive. I started coughing up the blood that had dripped into my mouth. The action hurt so much that I gripped the earth beneath my hand so fiercely, it began to feel like a soda freshly shaken. I had no shame at that moment for how much I had cried. I was truly scared. Never had I been this scared until this point. I didn't know what I needed; I just wanted this blackness inside of me to disappear.

I felt it before I saw it. A hand taking mine and squeezing reassuringly. A symbol of hope. A squeeze full of concern. My eyes focused on the pair of blood-splattered hands, and I knew it was Jesse's. My sobs quelled at his touch, and I began to get a hold of myself.

"Ray...Trinity..." He had never used my first name before. We were friends, one could even say good friends. He still had never used my first name. Even while we would talk about our aspirations, love lives, or supernatural stories, he had never said my first name. "You have to make it." The emphasis on "you" didn't make sense to me. *We're all going to make it Jess. What are you talking about?*

"Just know you're special. You're worthwhile. You're going to be ok, and you're going to get through this." Tears began to form again. I didn't understand why he was saying all of this. None of it made sense. He continued to talk, "You're going to make a man very happy one day because you're you..." If he said anything else, I couldn't make sense of it. My hand was still intertwined with his, and I couldn't make sense of anything else. I squeezed to be my response to him, and I felt his hand reciprocate.

With the memory of the crash in full, I fell to my knees and began to shake. "So, I'm really dead?" I choked out.

"Not quite," he mused. "Do you see how your form is building itself? And mine is slowly dissolving? I figure this is this world's way of letting us know we are in limbo currently. But I won't be going back," he said with a faint smile.

"If my heart hadn't stopped by now, it definitely did now," I said with despair. "You can't die, V! Just come back with me!" I scream as I try to grasp his hand, but it faded through. I couldn't grasp him...

I heard sirens closing. And it felt as if I was coming back from a dream. I gripped V's hand, not wanting to let go. Before I know it, my vision is blinded by whiteness, and all those shadows and angles reveal themselves in their true forms. A flurry of voices is heard all around me. Dimly, I'm aware these people are here to help, but it doesn't comfort me. The sound of a saw-like tool pierces the night, and I'm being moved. I lose contact with Jesse as they move me away from the scene. White light and the night sky. That's what I could make out amongst all the ever-changing faces. Questions were bombarded on me, and stern instructions of what and what not to do fell on my ears. I heard and saw it all. I just didn't fully comprehend it.

I don't recall moving much. Even if they let me, I don't think I personally could have. They moved me multiple times. I heard the sirens of the ambulance car, then I heard the chopping of blades that was unmistakably a rotor arc. There were whiter and more unknown faces. More lost words. At this point in time, blackness began to creep in again. I had no reason to stick around this time. I was away from my friends. I wanted to get away from this world. Unconsciousness swept in, and I was free.

Tears ripped my body apart as I saw myself die and let go in that ambulance. I couldn't fathom it. This is what happens in a book or a movie. Vazquez and I can't be dead. To answer my own disbelief, Vazquez says, "We are Trinity. And I honestly don't have much time, but I've wanted to tell you..." He pauses, and I find myself at eye level with him.

Before he could finish, I burst out loud with "I love you!"

It was his turn to be in shock. Tears began to stream down his face and mine began to match. So, it was true; he had loved me. Now, he was about to drift away from me forever.

"This isn't fair," I say, as I leaned onto his shoulder.

"The world isn't fair, but we still have to live by some of their rules." He grabs me by both shoulders and holds me to eye level again. "And you. Trinity, will be given the chance to live or die by their rules." I wasn't just having a normal episode of syncope in that helicopter. Because I had woken up to the medic pumping my chest with all his might and the struggling intake of breath when I woke. It wouldn't be until the next day that the doctors told me they had to shock my heart back into rhythm. That my lips turned blue. That they performed CPR on me for a minute before I came back.

It also wouldn't be until the next day that Cruz managed to hobble in on crutches and answered the question that had been ailing me.

When he told me about Jesse, the silence in the room hurt my ears. The despair I felt in my heart couldn't be ignored. The arrow that was keeping me together broke into two. Cruz told me Jesse was pronounced dead at the scene. Tears began to fall down his stubbly face. Then the thought hit me; his last words had been to validate my life and existence.

Jesse Vasquez is and will always be my Hero. He saved me. Now I have to make sure it wasn't for nothing.



“Shy Sunflower”

By Hannah Lowman

A Dawn Like Any Other: Part I

By Amanda Maccherone

They say there is a dawn unlike any other
That it will come
As others do
And although some are as beautiful as ever
They cannot compare to the blissful sky you once gave me

A dawn unlike any other, I thought
For you are nothing but a flameless candle
Only capable of creating a false light

*"And although some are as beautiful as ever
They cannot compare to the blissful sky you once gave me"*

A Dawn Like Any Other: Part II

By Amanda Maccherone

You didn't give me the sky

Much like flowers

You grow

But withering away is one thing you are far from

So water yourself in due time

For you are in bloom

Pressed are the flowers of my soul

Whether they be roses or lavender

They've become withered

Unafraid of what's to come

Still they hold their sweetness

Oftentimes I forget that I am not made of the delicateness of a rose

Even if I try to be that softness in the world

I do not have lightly rouged cheeks

I do not have skin as white as snow

Instead I have eyes the color of tea stains and hair as brown as cinnamon

I am not a summer daydream

I am the embodiment of autumn

Spring Appears

By Donna Brown

Water drips from winter icicles, warming under the sun,
Blooming flowers appear, greeting the world with their colors,
Tiny buds appear on the apple tree, ready to spring forth,
Leaves appear, all dressed in vibrant green,
Bees and butterflies flittering around, visiting flowers,
The sweet scent of honeysuckle, daffodils, and morning glories,
Floats through the air, tickling my nose,
Birds sing their cheerful songs, celebrating the appearance of Spring,
Gentle breezes blow and touch my face, carrying away winter's cold and gloom,
Life springs forth all around, breaking free of winter's grip,
Rising in splendor, Spring appears in wondrous glory,
Triumphantly marching in glorious jubilation, Oh taste and see Spring in all its majesty!
Soak in its brilliance and grandeur,
Spring is here, oh Spring is here, winter's chill is gone,
Proclaim its goodness, wrap yourself in its warmth,
No longer cold and chill, a new day has appeared!

"The sweet scent of honeysuckle, daffodils, and morning glories/Floats through the air, tickling my nose..."

Novaturient for Love

By Julia Eileen Moots-Hotaling

Before I tell my story, I'd like to say thank you to my husband Anthoni, my mom Dawn, my friend Janet, Coach Bee, Ms. Lowe, and all those who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Browsing the web the other day, I saw the word *novaturient*. It means, "a powerful desire to seek change in one's life." Before that moment, I didn't have a word to describe the way I had felt all those years before.

It was October of 2013. I had just been fired from my position as a beverage server at a casino near Rancho Cordova, California where I lived. I had been struggling with my mental health, and the work environment only worsened my condition; for this reason, I was ultimately let go. I had never been terminated before, and it only added to my weakening health. It didn't matter to me that the job wasn't a good fit; I was completely devastated. The only thing that steadied me during this time was Anthoni, my boyfriend. However, California had grown to be an unhappy place for him, despite having moved here for me and for love. This time, I felt it was my turn to follow: for him and for love.

In December of 2013, Anthoni and I packed our entire lives into my tiny two-door car so tightly that we could barely see out the windows. I could hear the click, click, click-ing of a roller coaster as it climbs to the crest before making its descent. There was a feeling of panic and excitement bubbling inside of me as I prepared to embark on a long, emotional journey. The scenery matched my insides as we traveled across the state, weaving in and out of the chaotic traffic. Though this drive was familiar, everything looked a little different this time: we were leaving California.

The sunset was approaching, casting vibrant colors across the clouds, and I felt a piece of myself stay with the final dusk. I was leaving my family and everything I had ever known and loved behind. I had never lived anywhere other than Rancho Cordova, California.

A fast-approaching surge of excitement surfaced as we arrived at Grand Canyon National Park. I was running on nerves, high emotions, and energy drinks, but the view stopped me in my tracks. It was overwhelming, and I was awestruck. Standing at the edge, I realized just how small I was and how vulnerable life is. The Grand Canyon started to put my feelings into perspective: I was scared to leave everyone and everything, but I was also feeling uplifted, expecting spiritual and magical things to manifest from this trip. As we drove away from The Grand Canyon, I had a greater sense of reverence for nature and life. This was true until we arrived in Oklahoma and met a major ice storm!

My stomach felt like it was in a never-ending freefall. I was certain we would end up on the side of the road, upside-down, like the many other vehicles we saw. I buried my head in my pillow and cried. I was powerless and could only hope that Anthoni would get us through it. He continued to reassure me that we would be safe. Still, I was terrified: the car's tires were bald, we were driving in an unfamiliar state on an unfamiliar road, and a state of emergency had just been declared. I apologized to him numerous times after I realized we had survived the storm. It was the first time we had experienced an extremely stressful event together, and it left me feeling confident that our new life together would be a good one.

Halfway through our trip, everything became vibrant despite the harshness of winter. The grass and other vegetation were a rich green. I was captivated by the lush landscapes, various terrains, and naturalness of it all. To me, it was symbolic of my new life. As we approached the end of our thrill ride, I was settling into the realization that this was our new home: Jacksonville, North Carolina. An entire country was between me and the only life I knew.

I never thought that I would live anywhere except California, and now I can't imagine ever going back. I also came to realize that this wasn't a trip that had a return ticket. Instead, it was a major transition in my life: for the first time, I left my home, and I left my family. I was also beginning a new step in my relationship with my now-husband Anthoni. The move also gave me a chance to focus on my health and start fresh.

As we settled into our new home, and I was nearing my 24th birthday, I realized that my journey was a numinous one, full of magic and meaning, rather than a simple road trip or even a terrifying roller coaster. In retrospect, I was *Unconsciously Novaturient*: my wishes were to find a sense of peace, an impactful alteration in my life, and a way to express it. What better way than to travel for love?

"I was settling into the realization that this was our new home: Jacksonville, North Carolina. An entire country was between me and the only life I knew."

Dance of the Seasons

By Kendra English

Upon midwinter's night you arrived,
To live and grow with my undying flame.
Then you were not but a new babe,
Mine you were though we are not the same.

Handsomely you blossomed in the spring
And thus, began our courtship grand.
Though why I loved you I cannot say,
For I knew you were doomed to age and die with the land.

Though frail you grew in autumn,
Ardently you pursued me still.
A secret I do keep in winter...
As I watch your grave be filled.

Your babe, the secret that I keep
And so, the cycle shall repeat.

*"Though why I loved you I cannot say,
For I knew you were doomed to age and die with the land."*

The Tree

By Evelyn Arnold

The moon had risen to the center of the sky, bright and full in all her glory. The night was clear, and billions of stars shone above. The nocturnal animals came out of their slumbers and stalked amongst the dark ferns and bushes. The forest was alive, not only in the day but at night as well. A young owl flew branch to branch, turning its head in curiosity and observing the creatures' activities below.

He then flew to a large oak tree sitting atop a small slope, overshadowing all the smaller oaks. It was unusually big, and its branches hung out as a wide canopy across the forest floor below. The owl inspected the tree as it landed on one. The wood of the tree seemed to glow like a faded light seeping from the wood. It grew brighter as the owl carefully made his way down the branch until he reached the enormous tree trunk. The owl climbed up the branches, wishing to see the very top. Yet, as he landed atop it and looked down at the base, it was only wood. Normal and completely wood, through and through. Yet, the light glowed ever so strongly. He spied a little hole in the wood where a beam of soft, warm light seeped out. The tree was hollow. The owl placed one of his eyes up to the hole and looked down.

The inside was hollow down to the bottom. Specks of light floated in the air. The sides of the tree split off in four directions, and smaller branches created platforms of some kind. Upon these platforms lay bodies of human-like form. They much resembled that of human children. They were not dead, the owl observed. Their chests rose slowly up and down. One child was not asleep, however; he was a small boy with black hair and dark eyes. He sat upon his branches, looking down tiredly. The other children were much different in appearance from this boy. Two girls and another boy. The girl closest to the black-haired boy had hair as red as fire, and the branches surrounding her were abundant in leaves and flowers of all kinds. Odd, that such flowers would bloom when the forest was still in winter. The other boy and girl were different as well; the other boy was surrounded by bright green leaves of many colors and had a warm glow about him. Many leaves also surrounded the girl, but they were of different browns, oranges, and reds. Her hair curled around her face, similar in color to the leaves themselves. Only the awakened boy had no leaves around him. Instead, his branches were dusted white and reflected as if covered in ice.

The boy looked up then, gazing over at the girl amongst flowers. His mouth was downturned, and the skin around his eyes was dark. He sat there for a while, then slowly slid off the frozen branches. He walked over to the red-haired girl. He grabbed her arm and lifted it. She did not stir. He moved it around then. She still did not awaken. The boy grew bolder and gave her side a quick poke. Nothing. Frustrated now, the boy gave her a mighty shove. The leaves and flowers held her in place. She did not stir. The boy let out a frustrated huff.

"You said you would not do this again," he said softly.

The red-haired girl did not reply, nor did she stir. She lay amongst her flowers, with a content look upon her face. While the boy stared down at her in dismay.

"It's not fair." The boy huffed again, frustration building up now. "They are all waiting for you. What are you waiting for? What have you to fear? You get nothing but their praise."

The girl did not stir, and the boy's lips trembled; he looked as if he were about to cry. Then, a tremendous light appeared on the other side of the hollow tree. The boy quickly wiped away any tears that had a chance to fall and ran over to the new light. As the bright light faded, it revealed a tall woman. She had a faint glow around her, and waves of warmth and comfort rippled through the air around her. The Woman opened her arms to catch the young boy and hugged him tightly.

"My dear child, what makes you this way?" Her voice was low and smooth.

The boy detached himself from her arms and pointed to the girl amongst the flowers. "She's doing it again, mother."

"What has she done to bother you so?"

"Spring should have begun days ago mother! She promised me she would not be late again, yet she delays so."

The Woman thoughtfully gazed across at the sleeping girl, then looked back at the boy. A soft smile graced her lips, and she reached out to the boy again. He shifted away from her hands and crossed his arms across his chest. The Woman sighed and lifted her hand into the air. A group of branches stretched out from the trunk to the Woman and twisted into a seat of sorts. She gracefully sat down and motioned for the boy to sit beside her. The boy hesitated at first, but then reluctantly shuffled over to sit beside The Woman.

"My dear child," the Woman began, "Is it so wrong to let Spring rest a little longer? Managing your season does take great energy." The boy only looked down. "You are impatient. Yet, I suspect it is not because you are merely tired and ready for your rest." The Woman touched the boy's shoulder comfortingly. "You are having those thoughts again, my dear Winter?" The boy sighed and nodded.

"We have talked about this before; you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"But I do!" The boy looked up at the Woman now. "How can you keep saying that? You know the people adore Spring. They love Summer's warmth and even admire Autumn's beauty. And yet..." The boy looked down again, "They fear me. They hate me. They dread me."

The Woman clasped the boy's hand with her own now. "You know not what you speak of, my child." The boy did not remove his hand, yet shook his head.

"What good does my season bring? It only brings death, cold, and pain." He looked over at Spring. "Her season brings beauty, warmth, and life."

The Woman made the boy face her now. Her face was serious, yet not all its original warmth had disappeared.

"My dear child, there is much you do not realize. You are very much an important part of the cycle of seasons. Your season plays a very important role." The boy looked up curiously at her.

"You bring so many things, dear Winter; your snows illuminate the sky with their brilliant white. Your snowflakes rival the beauty of Spring's flowers and Autumn's leaves. You give rest for the plants and flowers, so that they may muster their strength for the coming Spring." The Woman smiled at the young boy. "People marvel at your white snows, and the landscapes they create. All this and so much more." The boy seemed almost convinced, but still had a thread of doubt on his face.

"Do not be sad that your season brings unhappy things; your dismay at your own season's faults leads you to ignore the faults of the others as well." The boy looked puzzled.

"What faults could Spring possibly have? Or Summer?"

"Plenty, despite all their glories. They bring death just like you, in the form of destructive storms. They bring discomfort, in the form of the heat and pollen."

The boy seemed more comforted now and pondered for a moment, before jumping into the Woman's arms. She hugged him tightly back, stroking his hair gently. When the boy pulled back, he seemed to glow now as well, despite all his coldness.

"Thank you, mother."

The Woman smiled warmly at him. "No need to thank me, my child. You knew this all along."

She stood up then and pulled the boy up off the branches as well. "Let me help you to bed now. I feel that Spring is soon waking."

The Woman led the boy to his branches of ice and snow, helping him lay down and get comfortable. The boy briefly struggled to get comfortable, then slowly fell asleep, his breathing slowing to the gentle rise and fall of slumber. The Woman watched him for a moment, smiling a mother's smile. Then she kissed his forehead and a brilliant light showed, just as when she had first appeared. Then she was gone again.

The owl could not understand much of what he had just witnessed through the hole in the tree. Yet he felt comfort and warmth even as the winds of winter still ran through the branches of the tree. Just then, the winds stopped, and the owl felt something new. It was a breeze, a soft, warm breeze in the air. It was subtle, but the owl knew that it was a sign of the coming Spring. The owl pulled away from the hole in the tree just as Spring lifted one of her arms and yawned. He flew away from the tree and into the night sky toward his home. His heart warmed at the idea of the coming Spring and all her glory. Yet, he also felt a twinge of sadness. For he would miss the glimmering white snows and the glittering snowflakes of Winter. The tree had revealed much to him that night.

Rainfall

By Kendra English

Light as a feather's touch
Or heavy as iron,
Your embrace soothes
Through every ache and burn.

The scent of wet grass
In a raging downpour
Cuts through every stress
Like a balm not known before.

Let the rain wash away my heartache,
Let it cleanse me of my pain

A song among the trees you sing.
At once barely a whisper,
And yet great as a beating drum
As you cleanse her

Let the rain wash away my heartache,
As I dance barefoot in the mud.
Let it take away my misery
As swiftly as a flood!

*"Let the rain wash away my heartache,
Let it cleanse me of my pain..."*



“Strength”

By Sadie Amaya

Help Me Pick Up the Pieces

By Lawanda Ruiz

It constantly abandons me. When I need it the most, it flees from my grasp. It dissipates and no trace can be found. It was as if it never existed. My heartbeat slows and becomes faint. I feel the tears welling up in the corners of my eyes. My blurry vision sets the stage for the physical appearance of desperation. The stomach pains I feel send me curling into the familiar fetal position. The crouched position is perfect to pick up the pieces of my shattered confidence. Courage only returns when my Anxiety takes its leave. The gripping pain was finally releasing.

Instead of being with my father on his deathbed, I was standing in front of my boss awaiting his approval to leave. I knew my father's condition was grave, but Alabama was 600 miles away and my boss's demeaning glare was fixated on me.

"You've already used all your leave and you have an important assignment due. You can't leave until this weekend; I need you here," he coldly stated.

"I don't believe he will make it to the weekend," I whimpered. He then informed me that he would talk to the command to see what could be done. I returned to my desk in tears and patiently awaited their answer. Every fiber in my body told me to stand up and say, "Screw this job, I'm leaving." The crushing successful reputation I built over the years told me not to toe the line of disrespect or disobedience. I decided to put my failing and falling trust in the hands of my leadership to tell me what to do.

I tried to reason with myself.

"You've done amazing work over the years."

"The office will be fine if you are gone for a couple of days."

"Of course, they will understand how important this is to you. Your father was, no is the most important person in your life. They will understand and let you go."

These are the mantras I repeated attempting to reassure myself I would be taken care of. The minutes began to speed up, the hours flew by, and before I knew it closing time was here. I quietly tiptoed towards my boss's door.

"Have you heard any updates on the command's decision," I squeaked out like a timid mouse? One single word is all I received: No. No explanation followed; no directions came. I turned and walked out of the office. I sat in my car and began to sob into the phone to my husband. I screamed and shouted. I questioned how they could be so cold. My job knew my father was at home on hospice after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. The man who raised me and gave me everything was losing his battle and I was nowhere near him. Anxiety began to grip my neck. The words were no longer intelligible. The only thing I could send through the phone were desperate sobs my husband was somehow able to decipher. He reassured me and told me to stay there. My husband knew I was not in any condition to drive.

He arrived quickly to me, but to my surprise, he walked to the door of my office. My boss was still inside. I watched from my car and the shadows of two figures glowed from the window. I watched as the two shadows sat down at the same time and after a brief conversation, they both stood and shook hands. My husband walked out of the office entrance and came to me.

“Let’s get you home, we can pack quickly, and we can be on the road in less than an hour.” His voice was so soft yet so strong. His words gave me the courage to finally take a breath of air. My love for my husband grew exponentially in this moment. I felt a flood of emotions for him: appreciation, unconditional love, happiness, pride, and relief. For the first time in a very long time, I smiled. I knew everything was going to work out. Hope returned and anxiety briefly left. I began to play in my mind how great it would feel to walk through my father’s door and see him light up like he does every time. I began to imagine how my presence would be the missing link to his recovery.

The long drive began, and silence overtook the entire car. Playing in the background was the smooth voice of Smokey Robinson singing “Crusin.” Our road trip had just begun when I started to finally speak. The only thing I could talk about was the most important person in my life, my father. The quiet car ride now began filled with stories from when I was growing up. It felt important to tell my children and husband all the great moments I experienced with my father growing up. I told them every funny moment I cherished. The car would erupt with laughter followed by silence. My family would always watch my reactions. It told them how to react. They only laughed when I laughed and comforted me when I sobbed. They were reassuring when I would panic. My husband and children kept my anxiety at bay. I was so thankful that we were making this trip together. I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to be alone with my thoughts and anxiety. My mind wouldn’t allow me to enjoy the beautiful scenery of our journey. The mountains and lush greenery were breathtaking, but silence was all I could give. My energy was completely drained by forcing myself to remain positive; my heartbeat would randomly quicken and become faint in the next moment. Tears would flow and fall in the same manner. With every tear, I would attempt to force a smile to follow.

The emotionally exhausting moments finally got the best of me. I can’t remember when, but I dozed off in the passenger seat. My arm clutched my husband’s free arm and hand while he drove. My head rested on his arm. My dreams were pleasant; I was holding on dearly to my previous thoughts. Everything is going to be okay. We were only an hour away. My dream was going to become a reality. Everything always tends to work out for our family. It always falls into place at the last moment. I knew it was going to happen now more than ever. My father was diagnosed with cancer almost a year to the date. The doctors told him he had six months left, but they didn’t consider the fact he was a strong fighter. He was determined to beat the odds and show he was a miracle. Thirty minutes away from running through my childhood home door. I can’t wait. Even while asleep I can still hear the navigation announce our upcoming directions. The announcements sound familiar; I know where I am. My heart begins to beat anxiously. I’m almost home. I startle as my phone rings. I jolt out of sleep and look at my phone. It is my father’s house number. The smile on my face slowly fades away. My husband already knows it from my appearance.

“He’s gone. He passed away.”

My world immediately shattered. What am I supposed to do now? I was so close, but it was too late. I dropped the phone and began to sob uncontrollably. My husband reached for the phone and began to speak. I could hear the conversation through the deafeningly silent car. No one moved or spoke other than my husband and my mother through the phone. "The hospital already came and picked up his body. He's gone." I was too late. Anxiety left and grief settled in. My children stroked my hair, and my husband squeezed my hand while still talking on the phone. My mind immediately went to earlier in the day. I began to interrogate myself.

Why did you sit there all day at work waiting for an answer that wasn't coming? If you would have gotten your clothes together quicker, would you have made it before he left? Why didn't you stand up for yourself and just leave? What kind of daughter are you? Your sisters and mom were with him. Why weren't you?

I battered myself with these questions as quickly as they popped into my mind. Shame came and took its turn painfully gripping me.

We slowly pulled into the long driveway. The beautiful evergreen trees even seemed to lose their perk. The clouds were clear, and the most beautiful night sky welcomed me home. I slowly walked up the steps to the beautiful porch I used to play on in my younger days. The weight increased with each step. The weight of failure continued to crush down on me. I reached the door and grabbed the brass knob. I slowly turned to enter a home filled with gloom and depression. My sisters stopped and looked at me. I could see the concern in their eyes for me. They knew I was taking this especially hard. My best friend was gone. I physically and emotionally broke down. Every glue of hope that held me together this day gave way at the sight of the empty hospital bed in our living room. The sharp shards of pain shredded my heart, and all I could do was hope the people around me would help me to pick up the pieces because I was unable to do it myself.

"My world immediately shattered. What am I supposed to do now? I was so close, but it was too late. I dropped the phone and began to sob uncontrollably."

Immortalized Flowers on Your Frame

By Mariana Orrego Serna

Deadlines dashing
we chase each other
in an endless game of tag.
Sweat slips away.

My cheeks are flushed
from flying non-stop
and frowning,
as I fry up my time.

Doing so much
with such little breath.
It can't last,
unsustainable gasp.

No need to be rushed.
I up my pace,
just like my mother,
Who always seemed to be in a race.

I wipe your portrait with my finest rag.
I curse the dust
accumulating on the glass.
I curse the rust
in the crevices of the frigid frame.

My hand, warm
leaves an imprint in the
Frozen dew
Every day, my memories of you

Warm,
As they threaten to freeze over time
I have no time to rhyme
I wipe off my weariness.

The handspun Merino wool of my mittens
absorbs the steady single tear,
left to cry unveils my fear of forgetting
you, my dear.

A tear and a hand
warmed by handspun Merino wool
is enough to defrost the frozen fractals
covering the picture in the pale portrait.

Unveiling a winter storm of eyes
your placid smile
and everlasting grace
on your fearless face.

A white satin shirt,
Sleeves adorned with lace,
Your undeniable spirit of race
now with no deadlines to embrace.

My lines are dead,
For I can't find words for
a short-notice eulogy
I owe you my sincere apology.

Ma, I'm sorry
for not showering you
with more poems
while you were here.

Since you are gone
My words wither,
stale stanzas
still in creative thought.

Can't find where joy is bought
no showers of spring
only wild winter storms and
a lone wolf's howl.

Mami, I'm sorry
I can't find the perfect portrait
None seem to honor the only
piece of you I have left.

Madrecita, discúlpame
por pedirte perdón,
sé que nunca te gustó
pero hoy lo amerita.

Perdóname por pedirte
que te quedaras
sabiendo que era tu momento
de partir.

Mom, I'm sorry
I can't find the
Fancy flowered frame to bring out
The snapshot in time, when we had it all

Mamma, mi dispiace
non aver trovato il fiore più bello
per adornare il tuo altare, ma
sei la mia bella rosa purpurina.

Nemmeno le orchidee viola
che ti è piaciuto così tanto
sono sufficienti
per renderti giustizia e onorarti.

Weeks on repeat,
Winter unwilling to pass.
I find a frame,
even the finest is just too plain.

For a still snapshot in time is
Never enough to grasp
Decades of decadent daydreams
you inspired me in me.

The breaking into song at the break of dawn
Dancing in your robe,
Dreams of us touring the globe,
Wishes delivered by dandelions.

The dazzle of your dainty smile,
the echo of your dangerous laugh
the dolls we designed denim for,
the dollars we saved up for Disneyworld.

The dance-offs with daddy,
the Dunkin Donut late night chats,
Of dreading dusting desks,
Of the daughter mother bond.

I'm bound to treasure memories
forever,
Irremediably...
in my mind.

Not even the finest silver frame,
Nor the most fragrant flowers,
Can grant me magic powers
and erase unspoken word's blame.

Nor the most valiant villanelle
printed on vintage parchment paper
could ever make your name easier
to recite in past tense.

Footnote: Finished at around 11:57, as I type the last word of this poem the Relaxing guitar music playlist that was playing in Spotify by Florecilla Records was Danny Boy interpreted by Ryohei Shimoyama started playing. It was the only song in the whole playlist I recognized.

Of Memories and the Life I Owe to You

By Candace Adkins

My memory of you is fleeting like childhood crushes

Or the kaleidoscope of colours that flashes when you close your eyes tightly.
Yet, when I think of you, you're as brilliant as ever.
So radiant and alive;
As breathtaking as the astral death of a star.

It's strange really, to think of you at all.
It's hard to picture you smiling and pulling me from the abyss
Without also picturing the things I never saw.
Things like you telling my mother that you'd marry me
Only to be told that I wouldn't be interested.
Or your last moments in that car on Easter
Your thoughts must have been unfathomable.

Maybe I'm just guilty of never seeing you the way you wanted me to
Or the way that you were.
Maybe I'm stuck in the past
Because I never fully accepted such unspeakable tragedies
Could happen to the people who deserve them least.
Or maybe I still feel the weight of you standing on my chest
Because you traded your life for mine without ever knowing it.

I avoided the thought of a room full of your family
Wearing black and crying
Like it was an infectious disease
Like it might expose the crumbling walls of my poorly built sandcastle
To the waves that hungered for its destruction.
So, I lived with impossible standards because of you.
I wanted to make you proud
To live in your stead is a heavy cross to bear.

I picture you wrapping your arm around me
Like you did in the 4th grade
Saving me from the wolves in your embarrassing little way.
I hated you then, just a little bit

For always isolating me from the other boys
I was naïve and arrogant
Thinking that since I had learned a few curse words
I would finally be able to fit in
But of course, there you were
In the background telling the boys to back off
Making the girls be nice with your charms

It's ridiculous how painful a year that was
How close I was to the cliff's edge
That dropped pebbles slowly from under my feet.
I was standing on the last one
When you grabbed my hand during the national anthem.
"You don't sing anymore"
I didn't.
I hadn't even realized it at the time
Nor had I thought anyone would care to notice
That I was on the precipice of extinction.

I had been gone for over a month
Living in hospital waiting rooms
Or in hotels with barred windows and suspicious tenants.
I had lost the spark of resilience and hope
That had just been rekindled when the year had started
I didn't sing anymore

What is a songbird who has no voice?
A feathered body devoid of life.
Something that is simply unremarkable.
But you were listening every morning
Waiting for a song
Hearing the melody that was absent
But rang so loudly inside of me.

I learned to sing again for you
I kept it up until you weren't around to listen anymore.
You weren't making those big promises
Like going to Disney together
Or me singing at your baseball games.
To put it simply, my voice withered away with you.

I skipped class on Monday
To avoid grief counselors who didn't know you
And never would.
Is that Angsty?
Would you have preferred for me to join everyone
Making banners and plastering memorials
On every surface of the school?

Strangers signed their names on blank white paper
Pretending they were your best friends
As my final act of never doing enough for you
I hid in my bathroom and let the shower cover up my sobbing.
Until my body was empty and my face grew tight from the salt.

What can I really say
I wasn't a close friend at the time.
I had grown distant during your axe body spray phase
Mostly due to the smell.
Who was I to know that the people posting on your Facebook wall
Or putting "Stay Strong" hearts on the lockers
Weren't your best friends?
I couldn't.

I realized then that there was a monster living inside of me.
One that was angry
And scared
And sad.
One that wanted to scream and gatekeep mourning.
I still feel it stirring deep inside me when I think about it all.

I felt it again at our graduation
When your name permeated the air more with every speech.
The star of the show
The show specifically designed to satisfy your family.
I wonder if mentioning you
Was listed as a requirement for valedictorian?
But ofcourse, it wasn't

The monster still cries for me to be mad.
It claws into my throat
Forces my mouth closed
And breathes fire into my veins
I lived with the monster for years after you

I found someone I think you'd be proud of.
He smiles at me without any ulterior motive
Supports me even when I'm scared
And he knows about you
But doesn't hold it against me in his heart.
He is happy you existed
That you helped me
That I had someone special.
He doesn't have monsters that gnash their teeth
Or spit poison into his heart like I do.

I think you would like him
I think he'd like you.

*"I found someone I think you'd be proud of.
He smiles at me without any ulterior motive
Supports me even when I'm scared..."*

The Smell of Spring

By Courtney Kendall

Spring has always been my favorite season. The season of new beginnings; an opportunity to start fresh. I was around the age of 13 and in middle school. I didn't really like my school, but my friends were always there to make it better. With the warmer weather, my friends and I were going outside during lunch time more and got to play sports or lay in the shade talking about what we will do for the summer. I innocently thought the rest of my year was set in place; no interruptions and no bump in the road. I thought wrong.

This spring day was the same as the rest—warm, full of laughter, and the beautiful smell of flowers. It was a short bus ride, only thirty minutes, but I appreciated the time to watch all the people mowing their lawns or tending to their gardens. Once the bus pulled down my street, I could see my mom. It caught me off guard because I always get home an hour before she got off of work. Something felt different. I wasn't sure if it was because of the surprise of seeing her or the fact that there was a sudden and unpleasant shift in the smell of the air.

Once I got off the bus, I saw my mom pacing back and forth on the porch. It felt like it took me forever to reach the porch, no doubt because I was dreading to find out what she had to say. When I reached her, I asked if everything was okay, but she didn't answer me. She was on the phone crying, so I didn't know what to do. I remember the smell that seeped out of the house made my nose turn. All the windows were open. I stepped into the house to see where the smell was coming from. I realized that smell was the kitchen, all blackened by what I assumed had been a fire. As I was taking in all the burnt sights and smells, my mom pulled me by the arm out of the house. She didn't say a word to me; just put me in the car, buckled in, and started driving. When we stopped, I recognized where we were. She had driven us to her job: the local doctor's office. Before going inside, she looked back at me, and said, "Courtney, I need you to understand what I'm about to tell you. If you need to cry, do so now because your brother needs you to be strong for him. Your brother is very badly burned." And this is all I remember her saying.

I know she was still telling me what happened, but all I could hear was the radio. Like my body didn't want me to know more. I was in too much shock to cry. We got out of the car and headed in. I didn't want to see him like this. I just wanted to picture my big brother teaching me how to skate and fish at the pond down the road. I never thought I would see this side of my brother: vulnerable and scared. Walking into the room, the first person I saw was my dad, then the doctor, the nurse, and my brother. He was just lying in the chair, so still and quiet. The smell of burnt flesh is forever burned into my nose from the moment I walked into that room. His face was swollen and covered with ointment. My dad told me that the doctor had given him something to help him sleep. The rest of that day was a blur.

It took months before my brother could chew his food without tearing his wounds back open. I helped my mom change his bandages every day. After everything that happened that day, spring looked different. Every year, once the flower blooms and grass grows, I'm reminded of my brother's burnt face and the blackened kitchen. My brother's face, neck, and arms had 2nd and 3rd degree burns. Today, most of his scars are gone, but the fear of fire still remains in all of us.



“Fall”

By Jon Lacis

Wanderlust Winds & Wayfaring Warriors

By Mariana Orrego Serna

Wild Western winds whisper
through cracks of rusting wrought-iron windows.
We watch as they warily walk into our home,
gazing in awe at the faint footprints formed
as they enter.

Gusts wrap the candelabra, racing to its center,
warm flame starts to surrender.
The waning light flickers.
Winds bewildered by their whimsical nature,
swallow us in a wave of their breathy snickers.

When our walnut grandfather clock strikes twelve,
all becomes shadows.
Within the cracks of the aged woodwork, they echo.
In a howling petition to delay the world's hurry
they stir up a swirling snow flurry.

Tears tempted by fears, trickle as cascading waterfalls,
my breathing becomes shallow.
I tighten my beloved's grip.
Come with us on a turbulent trip,
we can sway you towards the currents to follow.

Wandering towards wishing wells.
they whirl up some travelling spells.
We drink the potion
and set our intention as wayfaring warriors into motion.
We walk endlessly along the winding rivers and roads.

My beloved contemplates in silence,
while I wonder if a weeping willow's leaves wilt
when I wandered away from my soul's will.
Would whirling Butterfly's petals weep from wondering
why I have waited so long to return where I belong?

Wild white roses with a golden hue spiral upward,
arranging in a delicately woven wreath of flowers.
When placed on our crowns, charm us with wanderlust powers.
Western Winds whisper wishful vows. Our ceremony ends being
wed to traveling and with the gentle breeze pushing us onward.

*"Would whirling Butterfly's petals weep from
wondering/why I have waited so long to
return where I belong?"*

Let the Wild Take Over

By Kaitlin Rae Sanders

Gneiss was a guardian, created with artistry and magic from distant realms in order to *protect*.

He was not sure who created him, but it was not his job to know. He was not sure who named him because, as far as he knew, guardians were not supposed to have a name. Guardians were not human, yet Gneiss was given a name.

He was made to sit in the humans' Temple and guard the magic inside, allowing visitors to come and go, taking the knowledge and holiness of Euphrates within, but eliminating anyone who would wish to steal or do harm to the sacred ground.

Luckily, Gneiss usually didn't need to do his job, only occasionally needing to take care of deluded thieves. Most of the humans he encountered marveled at the Temple and marveled at him as he stood guard. The humans *loved* him, how he looked so human, and complimented his delicately carved skin and crafted wings, each feather so realistic and soft, yet stone.

He regularly extended his wings, their eyes filling with awe as they reached out to touch his feathers. His favorite part though, was the stories. Humans had so much to tell and so many memories to share. They were filled with a hope and determination that was so unique, and Gneiss was so *fond* of them. He delighted in sharing stories with the visitors.

(Not that he had any of his own; guardians could not physically leave their Temple. No, it was much easier to pass on the stories the humans told, keeping them alive after generations.)

Gneiss overheard many stories whilst the humans prayed at the altar. He heard stories from all over: of mothers and sons, wives and husbands, brothers and sisters; stories of hardship and of loss, of war and death, of healing and tragedy. During those stories, Gneiss heard each one and *felt* for the humans, wishing he could protect them outside of the Temple, and so he would also pray and ask for help from the gods.

At night, once all the stories had been told and all the humans had gone away, Gneiss would be gently returned to the pedestal above the Temple altar, the magic of the Temple cradling his body until the next morning.

Because guardians were useless without humans around, with no one to guard and no one to protect, it was a waste of magic to keep them moving. Guardians were much more sustainable when there was a human worshiping in the Temple, feeding the magic that kept the humans safe and happy.

Gneiss began to wonder if there was a flaw when he was created. *Did all guardians stay awake and aware when they were frozen, their bodies essentially becoming statues when no one else was around?*

However, each night the hours would creep by, each night his thoughts would drift off., and each night would slowly become day, his pedestal allowing him to see the sunrise crest over the hill.

And with the sun came the humans and their stories. Gneiss would sit and listen for as long as the humans could talk, until night came and he was frozen once again, completely alone.

--BREAK--

The next morning, the humans came early, dragging a covered cart behind them. As soon as they got close enough to the entrance of the Temple, they removed the tarp and began carrying a figure inside.

Once they got close enough, they positioned a guardian on a second pedestal to Gneiss' left.

As his body began to unstiffen from the night, the humans' presence allowing him to move slightly, they left, taking the cart with them.

Gneiss could see, from his limited perspective, a stone sculpture of a man, his lower body carved to resemble the hooves of a hog. Like Gneiss, he also had wings that rested on his back. Unlike Gneiss, who froze every night in a relaxed stoic position, head angled low, this guardian was alert, always ready to spot an intruder with his face directed towards the entrance.

It wasn't until later that morning, once the regular visitors came, that Gneiss was allowed to speak to the new guardian. As the first humans came in for their daily worship, Gneiss came down from his pedestal easily. He watched as the new guardian glanced around calculatingly.

If Gneiss was correct, this was his first time waking up properly. He remembered his first time as well, months of staying frozen within his body for him to finally, *finally* be in control.

He also remembered his disappointment of that first night after waking up, his body frozen once more. He also remembered the fear, wondering if he would ever get to move again.

(He couldn't complain. He was a guardian, and this is what guardians were made to do. He wasn't human, and therefore he couldn't expect the luxuries of being one.)

"Hello," he said softly, trying not to catch the attention of the Temple's visitors. "I'm Gneiss. Did they give you a name?"

The guardian looked at him, his eyes filled with questions. "Onyx. She called me Onyx." He looked around, eyes taking in the Temple, a pristine stone building that Gneiss had called home for decades. "I didn't know there were other guardians."

"There are many guardians, for any Temple that needs one. Although, I've never known of a Temple needing more than one before."

Onyx nodded, his attention suddenly shifting to the visitors who had become captivated by a new guardian appearing overnight. Gneiss chuckled.

"These are our humans. They tell many wonderful stories, Onyx. It's an honor to protect them."

--BREAK--

Onyx proved to be quite the addition to the Temple. Before, small-time thieves would try and outsmart Gneiss, but now, with Onyx, most of them seemed too scared.

After all, what kind of Temple would have need of *two* guardians? Onyx himself was an intimidating force, unconsciously adopting a defensive stance, even in casual conversation.

However, even though two guardians present in one Temple seemed to ward off the smaller intruders, lately it only appeared to attract larger invaders, thinking the increased security meant better treasures inside.

As far as Gneiss was concerned, the number of treasures in the Temple had stayed the same, and he had done well keeping them safe thus far.

(Not that Gneiss was complaining. He wasn't. It was so *nice* to have another guardian to talk to, someone who understood him in a way the humans couldn't.)

It didn't take many conversations for him and Onyx to realize they both experienced the terrifying awareness during the nights, both of their minds awake while their stone bodies stayed still. Was it selfish to want someone to stay with him through the night? Selfish to see someone frozen just as he was, and feel comforted? And while, yes, the nights were still quiet, neither of them capable of speaking, Gneiss never felt alone.

One evening, as the last humans were preparing to leave for the night, Gneiss asked Onyx if he remembered who made him, who named him.

"I remember darkness. I think they had my head covered for most of it. But, I remember one voice," Onyx had said. "She told me what I was, what my duties were. Gave me a name, told me it was important. Then I was taken here."

Disappointment arose within Gneiss' mind, both at the answer-- it didn't seem like Onyx remembered anything other than that one woman-- and in Gneiss' own mind, not even he could remember a detail such as that.

The thing about Onyx was that he was not especially interested in the humans' stories. He enjoyed a few of their legends and histories, but overall, he preferred to be a silent protector, staying along the walls of the Temple, watching over them.

That was fine by Gneiss, though. Even though Onyx didn't converse with most of the visitors, Gneiss saw his reaction when one of the humans would bring their child with them. Onyx seemed to soften as much as his stone skin would allow him to, letting the kids use his arms as a swing with only minor complaints.

Many of the kids who visited the Temple started to bypass Gneiss and run over to Onyx, giving him uprooted daisies and childish history lessons, while some of them rode on his back. And just like that,

the humans gave them titles. Gneiss, guardian of stories, and Onyx, guardian of children.

Gneiss thought it was a bit silly, seeing as they were guardians of the Temple and nothing more, but he quite liked the humans and their tendency to name things. Perhaps it also reminded Gneiss of how the humans named things in their stories; perhaps he wanted to be in one of them, a story told to others and passed down through families.

However, he was a guardian, and could not want for things. So, he buried that desire as deep as he could, only to revisit it in the late of night.

--BREAK--

The next time the humans' cart rolled up, it was a new moon, only torches illuminating their surroundings. This time, as the humans pulled off the tarp, it revealed two statues, each obscured under the darkness.

One was placed on the pedestal to the right of Gneiss, the other on the pedestal in the center of the Temple. Just like the other time many years ago, the humans left with their cart before Gneiss could completely awaken in their presence.

As the sun began to rise in the distance, Gneiss was able to make out the guardian to his right. Delicate clothes hung from a relaxed frame, his body contentedly looking towards the floor. Once again, large wings hung from his back.

The first humans visited, and the guardian began to blink in surprise, shaking his head confusedly.

Surprisingly, it was Onyx who greeted him first. "I'm Onyx, that's Gneiss," he said simply.

The guardian nodded, his eyes searching around the Temple until they found the other guardian in the middle of the room, both suddenly locking eyes.

The second guardian walked over, wings flared out behind him in annoyance. He was much younger than Gneiss imagined he would be, looking much like the humans who were finishing up their schooling. He glared at the other two. "What are you lookin' at?"

Gneiss laughed, delighted. The other guardian tensed. "I apologize for his behavior. He's just upset we had to leave our last Temple," he said. "I'm Marble. It's nice to meet you two."

"Last Temple?" Onyx asked. "I thought guardians were assigned to one Temple only."

Marble's wings drooped, a half-hearted laugh escaping him. "That's how it's supposed to be, definitely."

When Marble didn't seem like he was going to continue, Gneiss turned to the young-looking guardian. "What's your name, then? Did you both come from the same Temple?"

"Hematite!" he shouted, the sound echoing in the room. A few humans looked up from their worship, annoyed.

Marble looked nervous at the sight. "Hematite, calm down. Yes, we came from the same Temple."

Gneiss wasn't sure what kind of event would lead to a Temple needing to move two of its guardians out. Multiple scenarios ran through Gneiss' head-- artifacts and treasures stolen, the guardians unable to stop the assailants, the Temple being destroyed, perhaps even the Temple being deserted.

None of them would explain why the humans would think of putting *four* guardians in the same place; no amount of treasure could justify that amount of security.

Guardians were known for being *extremely* good at their job, most humans saying it had to do with their inhumanity. They could not be injured or killed, and therefore could outmatch any intruder.

(Gneiss had a faint memory that told him guardians *could* be killed, simply by removing the magic that animated them in the first place. He imagined that might feel worse than being frozen.)

--BREAK--

It didn't take long to get used to Marble and Hematite. They were both talkative in their own ways.

Hematite didn't act like any guardian Gneiss had met before. He was loud and brash, all sharp edges and quick remarks.

(Sometimes, Gneiss could almost imagine, in another life, Hematite would be made of flesh and blood, his emotions and movements too heightened to be anything other than human.)

Hematite seemed to speak whatever came to mind, allowing no filter and quick topic changes, often-times interrupting his own sentence to begin a new one. Onyx seemed most annoyed by this, and Gneiss imagined he was wishing for the silence that existed before the new additions.

Marble spoke with excitement, talking about all the different things the humans had taught him. According to Hematite, at his last Temple, the humans adored Marble and would bring him books on every subject under the sun. Marble seemed full of passion for every topic he spoke of, Gneiss listening for hours on end with a small smile on his face.

(Sometimes Marble reminded him of the humans, the way their faces would light up with stories of love and joy.)

Hematite spoke often of their previous Temple. Of the visitors who would shower Marble in gifts and appreciation. Hematite said the humans didn't seem to like him as much, saying that they didn't know guardians could behave like he did.

"I think that's stupid, ya know? Like obviously guardians can behave however we want; we're not all the same," he confessed one evening, anger in his face.

Gneiss couldn't help but agree.

(He sometimes believed guardians were more like humans than they were intended to be.)

Hematite also started to tell Gneiss about how he and Marble left the Temple, only for Marble to pull him aside, away from Gneiss' range of hearing.

Onyx also seemed to take a liking to the two, although it maybe took a bit longer than it took Gneiss.

He preferred to let the other two ramble while he silently listened, which many would find rude, but the two seemed to understand that Onyx enjoyed their company.

(Most of the time. Gneiss couldn't begin to count the tiny squabbles he had to break up between the three.)

Eventually, years passed and the three worked together like a well-oiled machine, defending and protecting the Temple. Hematite had practically eliminated most thieves, leaving only the occasional highly-trained invader to take care of.

(Which was simple, as Gneiss said, there were *four* of them.)

At some point, Marble had accidentally said the four of them "were like a family," which resulted in relentless teasing from Hematite and a small chuckle from Onyx.

(Gneiss had smiled and couldn't bring himself to say that guardians were not human, and therefore couldn't have family. Didn't say it, because, well, he could dream that maybe it was true.)

And many nights passed easier than the ones before. The silence was still heavy on Gneiss' frozen form, but he knew it would only be a few hours before he could speak to the other three again.

One of those mornings, Marble pulled him and Onyx aside. The humans he was watching looked curiously at them as Marble told them a story, just as the humans had done for over a century.

A large, esteemed Temple with thousands of humans visiting a day, much larger than their current one, only getting a few dozen or so. Hematite and Marble were rarely frozen, as there would be visitors, even at night occasionally. They had been guardians together since the beginning, ever since their first awakening.

Marble, much like Hematite, had been adored by the humans who visited. They enjoyed his knowledge and ramblings, many of the humans stopping by daily to listen to him. For many years, it went on just the same, until he had noticed their behavior towards Hematite.

"They didn't understand him. He wasn't like any guardian they had met before, and that scared them, I think. Humans can be cruel when scared," Marble said quietly. "Eventually they didn't want Hematite to protect them anymore and convinced enough people to get him removed from the Temple."

Gneiss felt a weight in his chest. "What happened?"

"I didn't want them to take him. They were going to leave me to guard *alone*. I didn't want to be alone,

Gneiss. So, I began to act out as well, until they decided to just remove both of us.” He chuckled darkly. “I guess I’m lucky they didn’t just decide to kill both of us-- remove our magic and just let our bodies erode.”

Marble sighed. “I don’t know why they took us here, though. Either way, I’m glad they picked this Temple.”

--BREAK--

Things were slightly different after that. Marble seemed lighter than he ever had, and Gneiss knew that he had finally felt safe within the Temple. Hematite noticed the difference as well, which made him settle in more too.

And other things were changing as well. For one, it felt like the magic was taking a bit longer to reanimate them in the morning.

And maybe he noticed a slow decrease in visitors.

(Noticed it and yet was scared to acknowledge it, which Gneiss would say is the opposite of what a guardian should do.)

Eventually, Onyx got tired of waiting for answers and asked one of the humans.

“Oh, it’s real upsetting, ain’t it? Many of the others are losing their faith in the Euphrates, moving on to other means of worship. I’m sure y’all will be fine though. They’ll see the lack of visitors and relocate all of you to a different Temple with more foot-traffic.”

And so, they waited.

Less of the humans began to visit, less gifts were given to Marble, less children came to play with Onyx and Hematite, Gneiss began to hear less stories, and the humans that did visit didn’t bother telling him any new ones.

Eventually, the four accepted that they would be relocated. It was a hard acceptance; Gneiss had been in this Temple for centuries and adored the humans who came and visited. But he accepted it.

The first day Gneiss felt doubt was the day that the four of them were frozen in the early afternoon, the Temple beginning to have a lack of visitors even during the day. He felt his body stiffen and be lifted magically back to his pedestal, all the while still being able to hear the sound of birds outside.

(And deep inside, Gneiss felt hate for the first time. Hatred that guardians were dependent on the humans’ worship to be able to have freedom. He shoved it down, feeling guilty. The humans weren’t to blame.)

Some days, they would only be frozen for a few minutes until the next human came in. Other days, it was hours.

And eventually, a full day went by without them waking up.

From his perspective, he could see Marble and Onyx, and he wished he could reach out to them and comfort them, but he was *stuck*.

The next day, a visitor came and the four spent a long while together, holding on to each other and saying nothing.

A few weeks went by just the same. Some days would be dotted with a few humans, and some days Gneiss watched the sun on the horizon, from dawn till dusk, frozen in place.

And Gneiss would hope that the next day was when they would all be taken to a new Temple, with new humans, new stories, and *freedom*.

Then three days went by with no visitors, Gneiss stuck on his pedestal with no way to leave.

And a fourth.

And then a week.

And for the first time, Gneiss wished guardians could cry, could scream, but he could do nothing except watch and be *painfully* aware of their surroundings.

--BREAK--

Years passed, maybe decades, maybe more, he would have no way of knowing for sure. In the beginning he tried to keep track of the days, but once he had passed double digits, it started to feel less like counting down the days until freedom and more a constant reminder of being trapped.

The Temple had started to fall apart around them, the only magic left being contained in dormant guardians. Stones had fallen from the ceiling, letting small rays of light in, and vines had crept in, covering most of the walls and inscriptions.

Flowers and weeds had sprung up in between the cracks in the floor, as nature began to reclaim the Temple.

In that time, Gneiss had *felt* more than he ever had. Felt hatred and anger at his creators, felt anger and hate at the humans who had abandoned them, felt *alone*, so cold and alone while he watched his family have their stone bodies covered in the same moss that had begun to creep up his carved form. He felt sad and desperate, wishing for anyone to walk into the Temple and free them.

(Sometimes he didn't want visitors, because then the visitors would *leave* and then they would be frozen again, and his family would be stuck.)

He wondered how his family was coping. Often, he wondered if they had felt the same anger that he had, or if they still had some amount of hope within them.

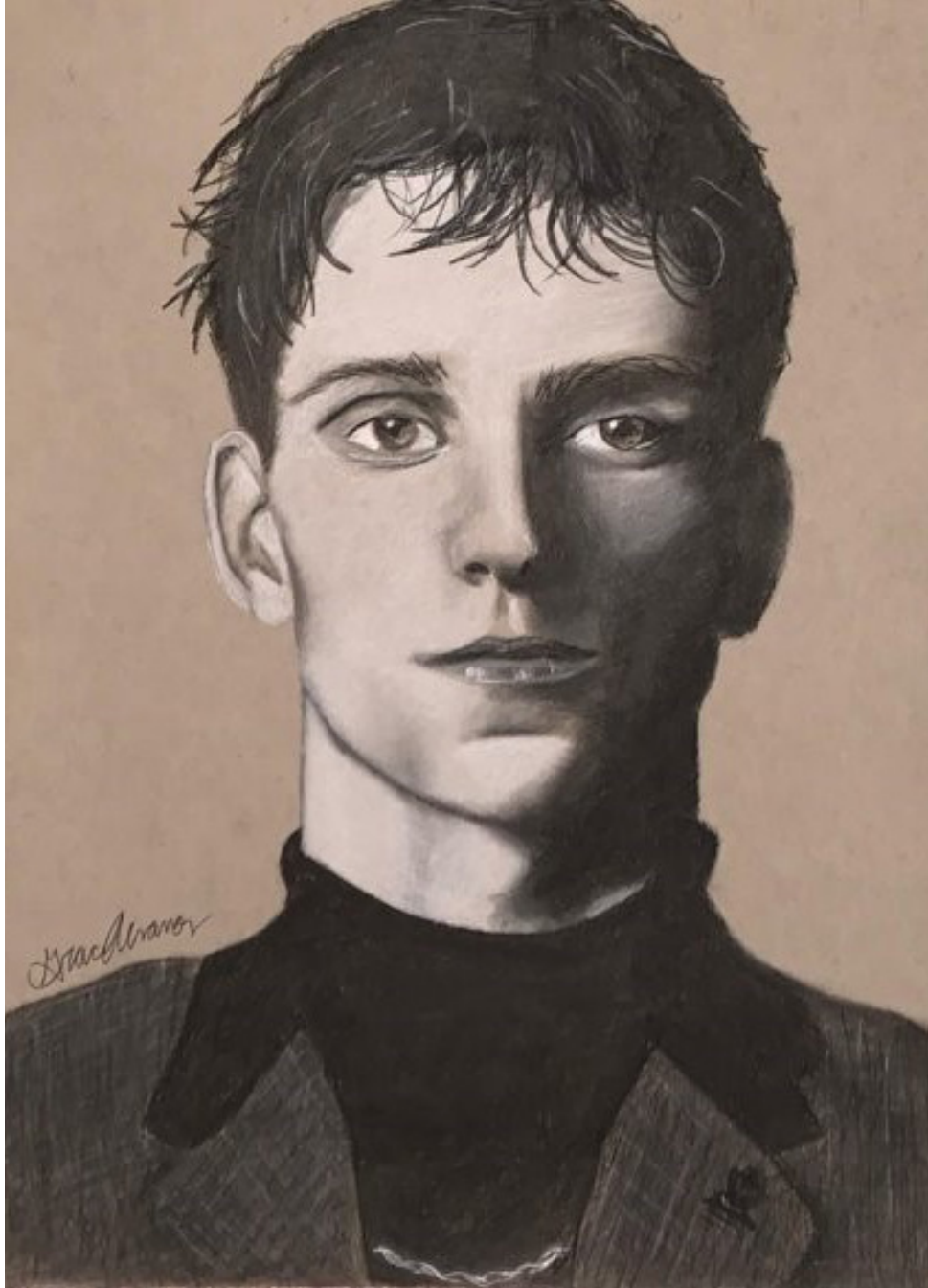
Occasionally, Gneiss tried to imagine he wasn't there; tried to picture the scene in front of him as if he weren't experiencing it; tried to find the beauty of the sun coming in from outside, the plants swaying gently in the breeze.

He imagined it would be quite serene if he was human.

(He didn't know at what point he started being jealous of humans. He assumed it happened around the same time he realized they could do whatever they wanted without limitations.)

And so, Gneiss stood still, like always, and waited.

"Flowers and weeds had sprung up in between the cracks in the floor, as nature began to reclaim the Temple."



“April”

By Grace Alvanos

That's a Strange Language

By Lawanda Ruiz

Does one have a particular look that tells the world they are illiterate? Most of the time, people overlook how important it is to have the ability to read, write, and comprehend the information that they are consuming. Millions of Americans struggle with not being able to read, write, and do mathematics. All three are different, but they are all a part of language. How am I able to speak a language but not know how to read it when the words are laying down flat on a piece of paper? Millions of people in America are faced with this challenge and struggle with this silently. It is often looked at as an unappreciated skill. Many people know how to do it, and most people would probably be surprised that many people are illiterate. Once one knows how to read and write, it is easy to remember how to do it. However, imagine someone going to a doctor's office and being told they need to fill out forms, but they have no clue what the words are. I am writing this because this was a problem for me when I was growing up. I was fortunate to have loving parents who taught me how to read, write, and learn math.

I did go to preschool and kindergarten, but it wasn't discovered that I did not know how to write until I was in first grade. I remember the teacher wanted us to write in our journals about our lives or what we learned in class. It has been such a long time that I do not know what the assignment was about. Everyone around me immediately pulled out their pencils and started making movements on their papers. I did not understand what they were doing. I was puzzled by what the teacher wanted me to do. I felt frozen and confused. I did not understand what writing was, but apparently, everyone else in the classroom did. The teacher thought I was being rebellious.

She spoke to me and said, "Nicola, get your journal and pencil and start writing." She had this intense look on her face as if she hated me or needed to release something bad from inside her. Her facial expressions looked like she would send me to the principal's office without any hesitation or remorse. Every student paused in the classroom and looked at me.

One student said out loud, "Nicole can't read." All the students started laughing at me. I was thinking that the student couldn't read because my name was not spelled with an "e." I was overwhelmed with all kinds of emotions. I looked around desperate for assistance. All I saw were unfriendly faces. I was trying to find a student that would help me. My eyes searched around the class hoping for a welcoming glance from one of my classmates. Unfortunately, I was met with unwelcoming faces, which included the woman who was supposed to be teaching me. She was also supposed to be helpful and supportive. Unfortunately, I couldn't wrap my mind around why not being able to do something was funny. So many thoughts swam around inside of me, and so many emotions were burning inside wanting desperately to escape. It felt like I was in a nightmare, and I was waiting for one of my parents to wake me up and comfort me. However, that nightmare was my reality, and I felt like I was an observer but also present with intense emotions. I was frustrated, embarrassed, confused, stunned, and sad. I wanted to run, but I felt glued to my chair, and I did not understand why at that time. I later learned that what I was feeling was called anxiety.

My teacher's face was stone cold, and her eyes reminded me of a gloomy day with dark grey clouds. She never once asked to help me. I wondered why an adult who didn't even know me had so much anger towards me. Did she have a problem with my skin color? There were only a handful of African Americans in her classroom. The teacher never apologized for not knowing I had not learned what she was requesting me to do. My teacher wasn't heartless. I would see her face light up with other students. However, her approach toward me was cold, and she seemed nonchalant. I do believe she sent me to the principal's office.

I found myself looking at other students' papers and seeing what they were doing. I could not make out the gibberish I saw on their papers. I was even more lost because I spoke English but seeing that language written down on paper looked strange; it had no meaning to me. The letters did not look like words; they looked like scribbles, and all the words looked foreign to me. I began to imitate other students. I looped my pencil in continuous circles on my paper. I was still lost and confused, but I did not know what to do in that situation. I did not want the teacher to think I was misbehaving and send me to the office to speak with the principal. I also did not want my parents to get a call from the school to come to get me. So, I tried to do the best that I could. I felt silly drawing endless loops on my paper. I already knew I was dumbfounded when I compared my work with others by looking at other journals, I knew my "writing" was completely different. I'm not sure how or when the school told my parents I couldn't read or write, but I remember them being shocked.

My life started out difficult, and as I look back and reflect, I wonder if the trauma I went through affected my memory and blocked the information I may have learned in school. I lost my mom to terminal cancer at an early age, and my dad died from cancer before she did. I had the stress of that and living in a new place at my aunt's, who is my mom's sister, place that was hours away. In addition, I had only visited that place a couple of times with my mom. I did go to preschool, and I remember the teachers did not do anything. It seemed more like a daycare than a school. All they did was make sure we ate and told us to go to sleep every day. In addition, I do not recall us learning the alphabet or anything for that matter. However, I do remember learning the alphabet and some math in kindergarten. Unfortunately, my memory cannot retrieve the extent to how far we learned academically. I think my lack of skills went unnoticed longer than someone my age would have because I was able to speak clearly and effectively. In addition, I probably appeared to look like I was capable of reading. However, I am assuming I was memorizing things and would just repeat what I heard whenever I needed something. Neither my parents nor my teachers noticed any delays, so it was a surprise that I was actually behind. They weren't sure if I had a learning disability or if I was even taught. To figure out what was going on, my parents gave me assignments to test where I was academically. They found out I could not write. Furthermore, my aunt decided to test me on my math skills since they knew I was behind in English. My parents knew I could say the alphabet and count numbers. Unfortunately, she saw I did not know how to solve basic math problems either. I had enough knowledge to know that problems needed to be solved and that the numbers had a purpose. However, I could not comprehend how to do it. I would just write down a number I saw and hoped that I was doing it the correct way even though I felt clueless.

Once my parents found out about my struggles, they were quick to fix them. They weren't upset with me. If anything, they were just shocked that I was behind in school. They were probably wondering how they could have missed that since we were around each other every day. My parents were patient with me and made sure I clearly understood what they were teaching me. They were encouraging and reassured me I was capable of learning. They also demonstrated to me that not everyone is uncaring like my first-grade teacher was. They taught me daily, and they each taught me the subject they were the best at. It was also helpful that my aunt's husband was a professor. They tried to make learning interesting by incorporating fun games I could do on the computer. My aunt taught me how to write and helped me figure out what hand was better to use when doing that. My aunt's husband taught me how to do math because he was good at mathematics. They were amazed at how quickly I picked up on reading, writing, and math skills. Before first grade ended, I was at the grade level I needed to be in. However, I think my parents sent me to a different school after that year because of how unsupportive that school was. My parents continued to teach me, I exceeded my grade level in math, and I was told I was a good writer. I do not believe my first-grade teacher ever apologized for not knowing I had not learned what she was requesting me to do. She never showed an ounce of sympathy towards me.

Even though I've been able to write, read, and do math for years, I'll always remember the sting I felt from the past when I couldn't. It allows me to be able to be sympathetic to someone else struggling. There are times when people look like they are being lazy, but that isn't always the case. Sometimes people don't know how to do something and are too embarrassed to speak up and be vulnerable to ask for help. I don't blame them when some kids can't get help in elementary school. An adult may feel that it is best to keep quiet. There are areas where everyone needs help.

That experience taught me that just because someone's title says "teacher" doesn't mean they will do that. It has also made me advocate for myself and speak up in class to state that I do not understand what is being taught. I know just because the students say they get it does not mean they do. It has also made me interested in teaching and being one person who can improve someone's life and meet them where they are at.

"My life started out difficult, and as I look back and reflect, I wonder if the trauma I went through affected my memory and blocked the information I may have learned in school."

Closed Off

By Lawanda Ruiz

I've seen more endings than beginnings. More goodbyes than I would want to count. I've been slammed shut more times than I have experienced welcomings with open arms. I see the sneaky hide-and-peeks through small gaps in space and people cower at the sight of new visitors. They would rather be shut in and closed off than leave their safety net and interact with someone new. Oh, how I wish I could go back to distant times, when carolers came singing so merrily, where tricksters were met with tasty treats. Where a cup of needed sugar opened me to people getting lost in hours of conversations. How do I relocate to the villages that raised their children? Where baggage only comes in once when you're moving in? I could come unhinged when I think of all the missed traditions, the beautiful kisses goodbyes I was so privileged to witness. The Honey-I'm-Homes that echoed through every corner and reverberated back at me. Where being closed off meant standing as the first line of protection while my occupants slept easily and peacefully. The time where you could be vulnerable and let down your guards, when a lock left open didn't send you into a spiraling frenzy. When surprise entrances made glorious grins cross the face of everyone home. I once was an intricate part of wedding celebrations; the marriage wasn't certified until the bride and groom passed by me and I approved. My threshold welcomed the beginning of a new family. I welcomed the new life to the family. When did I become the symbol of rejection, slammed in disrespect? When did we become so far off from where we once were? How did we allow ourselves to become closed off and sheltered?

"Where being closed off meant standing as the first line of protection while my occupants slept easily and peacefully."

Differences Shouldn't Matter

By Malia Deweese

The first time I saw my brother, he looked like any other baby. He was cute, chunky, and had a full head of hair. He had the cutest smile I had ever seen. But, as he grew older, my parents and I started to notice that his speech was delayed. He just seemed to be slightly different from other babies, but I didn't let it change how I saw him. He is my brother, I thought. Of course, I have to love him no matter what. Then, when he was turning five or six, we started to notice his speech still wasn't fully developed. He could say some words, but he couldn't put full sentences together. Then, he started elementary school. His teacher told my parents that he reacted differently than other kids. That worried me and my parents. His teacher explained, "That he would shut down easily, and get overstimulated easily." They moved him to a small class to see if that would help. My parents went and talked to his doctor. They tested him for Autism, and he tested positive. That is when everything made sense. Everything pieced together.

I never thought a disability could affect someone the way it affected my brother. Growing up alongside him has shown me how hateful and judgmental the world really is. I have seen so many people pick on my brother and break him down so many times. There have been several times when someone has bothered him so much that it started affecting his home and school life. He would get in trouble or stay up all night just to get away from people at school and out in public because of the way they treated him. There was one point when a group of girls at his school would pester him and bother him. They would say things like, "What do you eat?" or "Why are you so fat?" He would come home in tears every single day because of the girls bullying him. I feel like people look at people who are different, like me, and they just can't handle the fact that they are different. Even though my brother can't help it. This has shown me how hateful the world has become.

I feel like people should not look at how people look, act, or what they are diagnosed with to decide why they are going to treat people badly. We are all human. We all have different issues and battles we are facing. We should treat everyone with respect no matter what. I feel with me watching my brother grow up with Autism and his being treated the way that he is has made me a better person. It has shown me that we are all different and we all deserve respect no matter what.



“Centered”

By Grace Alvanos

The Witch of Westerlan, Chapter 2: A Line in the Sand

By Michael Kiley

A loud voice bellows out, "Hello there, witches! I must ask that you land here!"

The man gestures down to a patch of grass next to an elegant-looking building. Ara and Lori glide down to the man. Lori looks at Ara with a confused expression saying, "This is a little different. I guess they check anyone who comes in here."

Ara replies while putting her hand on Lori's shoulder, "I am sure it is going to be okay. We have no contraband, right?"

Lori half smiles and says, "I mean, probably. We don't know what they consider contraband here. Just hope they don't search me, or us, for that matter." The two land near the man, dismounting from their brooms. Ara grabs a small bag from her broom and attaches it to her waist, while Lori puts on a large backpack and grabs her broom, holding it like a walking staff.

The man approaches and says while opening his arms and bowing, "I bid thee welcome to the Town of Hazen. My name is Garda, and I will be checking you into the town."

Ara steps forward, broom in hand, and bows saying, "My name is Araphone Petra, Council Woman of the High Wicken Order. I am here with hopes of crossing into Breach. I have some important news I must share."

"Welcome, Council Woman Araphone! I cannot guarantee you passage into Breach as it very rarely opens its gates to outsiders." He turns to Lori and asks, "And who might you be, ma'am?"

Lori jumps as if she were lost in thought. She bows and responds, "My name is Laura Fresa. I am here to escort Ara and do independent research of my own. Oh, but please just call me Lori."

"The same goes for you; passage cannot be guaranteed. However, we have many areas you may wish to visit while you stay here in Hazen. Our library is quite vast, and our scholars are always willing to answer questions," he replies as he motions for the two to walk into the building. "If you would, please follow me." The two follow him inside the building.

The building itself is white with blue and orange accents. As they walk inside, Lori looks around and sees vibrant colors of sea blue, seafoam, and turquoise mixed in with highlights of reds and oranges. Light pours into a courtyard and bathes the surrounding rooms just well enough to warm them.

"This place is beautiful; I'm impressed, I must say. Is this the popular design type and color pattern?" Lori asks while walking through the halls, admiring the unique architecture as she goes.

"Indeed, it is Madame Lori. The vibrant yet light colors help keep some of the heat away while allowing us to have a unique identity out here."

"So, how far past the wall is the nearest city, if I may ask? I don't recall there ever being Breach settlements in the desert," pipes Lori as she follows Garda, careful to keep in front of Ara.

Garda sticks his finger up and replies, "The closest town is two days out, though there are many routes through the desert that will accommodate your travel. They are free of charge as well, sponsored by the government a long time ago as a way to spread our kingdom further." He places his finger down and stops as he walks through a doorway into an office-like room. "Would you have a seat; the process won't take long."

Ara looks over towards Lori and gestures for her to sit. She says to Garda, "Most certainly. As a representative from Gala, it would interest me to learn more about the workings of all levels of government here." She pulls a chair out and sits down with perfect posture. Lori follows suit, sitting down and leaning back into her chair. She looks around the room, noting its light color and many bookshelves. She stares inquisitively at the shelves as Garda begins his questions. Ara sees this in her peripherals and says to herself, *She looks as if she has never seen these books before, though they are written in the common tongue.*

Garda asks the first question, "Council Woman Araphon, what is your purpose for coming to Hazen and by extension Breach?" He holds a pen in hand and waits for a response.

Ara answers quickly, "I am here in order to learn more about how the Gala and Breach Kingdoms came to close themselves off from one another, as well as to speak to Representative Marche in order to discuss how we may mend those past wounds."

Garda writes down her words quickly and states, "Not the usual reason for entry, though there rarely are any to begin with." He coughs and asks, "Madame Lori, what is your reason to visit Hazen and by extension Breach?"

Lori replies as she sits up, "I am here as an independent contractor, employed by Araphon Petra to assist in any research or diplomacy, as well as provide medical assistance if needed to those in need if the occasion arises."

Garda notes down what Lori said and replies, "Very well. That is the first time I have heard that answer." He writes down her response and places down his pen. His hands clasp each other as he says, "Well, let me be the first to officially welcome you to the port town of Hazen. You have been cleared to enter and are allowed to stay for however long you would like." He smiles at the two witches as he bows slightly.

Ara and Lori look at each other with wide smiles, Ara wiggling her knees in excitement. Lori giggles at the wiggling before turning to Garda and saying, "Garda, thank you very much. It means a lot. Do you have a map of the town so we may find our way easily?"

Garda rolls his chair back and leans down, coming back up with a rolled-up map. "Here you go. It's up to date despite its appearance."

Lori takes the map and unrolls it, examining it closely. Ara then speaks up and asks, "This may be a bit of a stretch, but what currencies do you accept here in Hazen and by extent Breach? I ask because I only have Lichen on me."

Garda responds, "We sadly do not accept Lichen here or in Breach as we have our own coinage system. It is called Redsay, but we can exchange your Lichen for it. The ratio for conversion is 2:1."

Ara digs into her satchel and pulls out her wallet, counting her Lichen. "Okay, that seems reasonable." She turns to Lori who is still buried in the map and asks, "Lori, have you seen the bank on there yet?" as she places her wallet back into the satchel.

Lori tilts her head towards Ara and replies, "It looks like there is one in the town square. Though we should take public transit if we want to get there soon. It's about a thirty-minute walk." She tilts her head back towards the map and asks, "Hey Garda, in your honest opinion, where do you think is the best place to get ingredients for brews would be?"

Garda smiles as he says, "Oh, that would be the bazaar in the town square. There are a few stalls that specialize in witchcraft. The market should still be open until three o'clock. I do hope you find what you are looking for there. Though make sure to enjoy our beautiful town, my dear witches." He stands up from behind his desk and bows. "I must show you out now."

Lori rolls up her map, places it across her backpack, and swings the second strap of her bag. "Well, I think this was a pretty good start to our stay here. Thank you for being so welcoming, Garda. It's nice to feel welcome." She smiles and bows her head slightly as she grabs her broom and Ara's as well, which were leaning on the walls.

Ara stands up, placing her wallet back into her satchel. Ara looks up towards Lori as she grabs her broom from her hand saying, "Thanks, Lori. Garda, your hospitality was wonderful, and I thank you very much for that. I do hope you are well, and hopefully we will meet again." She walks out of the office with her broom in hand into the vibrant halls. Lori follows behind her, catching up to her side as they exit the building.

Lori remarks, "You know, Ara, for being a border town this place is really neat. Quite different to the mostly wood and concrete in Westerlan." She pats her hands on her sides excitedly.

"One thing really surprised me: back there you conducted yourself quite formally. I have never seen that side of you, and it was impressive. Though your grammar could have been more concise," Ara says while looking over to Lori. "I do really enjoy that big floppy hat of yours. Makes you look like a witch who lives in the woods and talks to the animals and hugs trees."

Lori looks over and replies, "First off, I'm not a formal person as you know, though that doesn't mean I never learned how to be. It just isn't a part that I am happy to use. Second off missy, I don't talk to animals. I never bothered learning how to communicate with them. Also, people love the hat. It's a part of the whole look." She grabs the brim of her hat and takes it off, allowing her long and disheveled hair to fall to her midsection underneath. "Plus, it means I don't have to do my hair every day."

"You always were lazy, but that is a whole new level, Lori," Ara replies as she grabs the map from Lori. She opens the map and says, "So, you think this market will have anything of actual use?"

Lori shakes and flips her hair back and puts on her hat as she replies, "Well, I believe there will be."

"Knick-knacks are not useful, Lori; they just take up space," replies Ara as she looks around for a street sign.

"Of course, they have use! They hold value to the user, no matter how small. I thought you would know that since you still have a 'Knick-knack.' I know you still have that charm." Lori says with a smirk as she grabs Ara's arm, pulling her towards the right path. "You better just follow me or else you're gonna end up lost here."

"I only have that charm because it has a magical charge. Also..."

Lori interrupts, "Because I gave it to you and that makes it special."

Ara looks at her and continues, "It is very old, making it an artifact."

Lori smiles and replies, "That too. Now come on!"

Ara follows behind with a smile on her face saying, "You never actually answered my question."

Lori turns around, looks at Ara, and replies, "I guess we will just have to find out now, won't we?" She turns back around and skips around a corner, disappearing from Ara's sight. Ara rushes to the corner, but as she approaches, voices begin to fill the air. The air smells of spices and meat as Ara gets closer. She rolls up the map and places it in her satchel while turning the corner. Ara looks up to see the town market. She thinks to herself, *This market is impressive. It actually reminds me of the Bazaar in a small coastal town near Gala. It was always great there.* Ara places her hand over her eyebrows to shut out the sun and looks around for Lori, trying to find where she went.

A voice pops out from the crowd, catching Ara's attention. "Ah, welcome to Olive's Magical Emporium. Your source for everything magical, including a limited selection of ancient texts recently sourced from a grateful donor."

Ara starts walking toward the voice immediately and thinks to herself, *No doubt, Lori is there. But why does that voice sound so familiar?* She looks up to see the market stall made of wood and covered with multicolored fabrics. A slated roof covered in lighter fabrics to keep the place cool from the baking hot sun and multiple racks of magical goods lining the walls. The light revealed a short and tanned woman with green and blue hair. She thinks to herself, *No way. Is that Olive?*

Olive hands off a bracelet to a customer as she spots Ara in the corner of her eye. She immediately looks over, raises her hands, and shouts out, "Ara, my old friend! I never thought I would see you around here. Speaking of which, what brings you here?" She leans forward placing her hands on the table in front of her.

Ara places a hand on her bag and the other in her pocket saying, "Well, technically I am here on vacation. The council is currently on a break back in Gala, so I decided to spend some time with Lori in Westerlan, and we decided to come out here. Though, I have seemed to have lost Lori." She looks around for a second, her eyes darting from one stall to the next.

Olive replies as she gets a little further from Ara, "You know how Lori can be; always getting herself into something new. Speaking of which, how has she been? Any new gossip?" She grabs a small ball and begins to levitate it slowly.

"Nothing new, Olive. I know that breaks your tiny little heart," Ara remarks with a slight laugh.

"Ah come on, there has to be something new. Or are you trying to keep something from me, as usual, Ara?" replies Olive as she leans in close to Ara.

Ara tilts her head and replies, "We rarely kept anything from you, as you know. Your little network of ears was everywhere."

"I know. I just love to tease," Olive states before she sticks out her tongue slightly. She turns around, bending down to grab a bag.

Ara asks, "Well, speaking of new gossip, what has been going on with you? Clearly, quite a bit since you moved out of Gala.

"Hah, surprisingly I haven't been up to a lot of things. Well, new things specifically. This town has quite a few secrets buried, quite literally. I've been, well, doing my own archeological studies under the sand," responds Olive as she grabs a bottle of water out of the bag.

"Still grave-robbing, I see. I am surprised you have yet to be caught, though you always have been tricky to catch. Lori loved that side of you, the adventurous side," Ara says while running her thumb along her pocket nervously.

Olive takes a drink of her water and replies, "I was the best at Hephaestus in the trade. I made plenty of enemies though. I'm glad I had you guys though. Lori was always sweet; I wouldn't worry about her. She can handle herself in a scuffle."

Ara sighs, "We had a scare on the way here: some members of the Wicken Enforcement Agency. They said they wanted to take me back to Gala. The whole scenario was off, Olive. Lori was aggressive from the start, though I doubt that influenced what they were going to do. They tried to take me by force, though Lori was not going to let that happen. We had a big fight, and it got bad." She looks away from Olive for a moment, holding back tears. "I thought I almost lost Lori during it. She was in between those agents and me the entire time, 'til she took a bad hit."

Olive hands her a small, soft towel and her water saying, "It's okay. She's not gone. I haven't seen you like this in a long time. You should sit down for a bit and compose yourself. Lori will eventually make it here. It's one of the few Wicken stalls here."

Ara walks into the back of the stall, noticing it is quite dark. She pulls out her wand and generates a small light, allowing her to see a chair lined with pillows. She sits down and sinks slightly into the chair, finally able to relax after the long journey.

Olive sticks her head through the door, revealing Ara asleep. She sighs, saying quietly, "What happened to you? What did you do in Gala to get those guys after you? I just hope Laura gets here soon." She closes the door and opens a box next to the door, retrieving more artifacts from a mysterious donor.

"You know, I could have sworn that you of all people knew that I didn't like it when people use my real name, Olinedria." Lori remarks as she stands in front of the stall.

Olive turns around with a gleeful expression. "Lori! Oh my stars, you're here!"

Lori replies quickly, "That I am. Have you seen Ara?"

"Yeah, she's in the back room resting up. She started freaking out a bit after she got here, was talking about how you and she got into a bad scuffle with the Wicken Enforcement Agency," replies Olive, flustered she was cut off.

Lori tilts her head down slightly and puts a hand behind her, placing it over the point in which she was stuck. "Yeah, it was quite the scuffle. I knew we were going to make it out of there. I just don't know why they went after her. It seemed as if she had done something pretty bad, but she never mentioned it to me, if that was the case."

Olive reaches out her hand saying softly, "She told me you got hit pretty bad. Are you okay?"

Lori looks at Olive's hand and takes it for a moment saying, "It still hurts, but I'm okay. First time getting hit like that wasn't pleasant. It felt like a fire while I was out...like I was in a furnace, but when I woke up nothing hurt, and I felt so strong. I was able to levitate slightly even."

Olive looks confused at her and remarks, "I thought you couldn't do that? That was one of the things you struggled with at Hephaestus?"

Lori pulls her hand away slowly saying, "Yeah, I had given up afterward. That was the first time I tried it since, and it felt effortless. But enough about that. Is Ara okay?"

Olive nods her head saying, "Yeah, I think she just needed a mental break. I hope you two stay a bit, as it would be nice to catch up." She chuckles slightly, stating, "Though, knowing you, I doubt that you'll stay long. Always on the move, as usual."

Lori sighs replying, "Yeah, we don't plan on staying long as we have some business to attend to in Breach. Since we are on the topic, have you found any ruins?"

Olive leans in close, motioning for Lori to do the same when she says, "I found what I think to be a city buried in the sand. It's about a two-day broom ride from here. That's where I found some of my most prized books. They cover a strange topic, something about seasons of magic."

Lori's face lights up and she hops over the table, grabbing Olive by the shoulders and saying, "You're telling me you found books that talk about magical seasons?"

Olive looks shocked before saying, "Yeah, we never learned about it, so I assumed it was nonsense. Though since you are so intrigued, it may have some merit. Do remember, no touching unless you buy me dinner first, Laura." Olive snorts as she starts laughing.

Lori rolls her eyes stating, "You should try thinking with your head more; it'll get you further. Now, little miss swindler, can you show me on a map where the city is?"

Olive grabs a ragged-looking map from a rack next to her. "Sure thing, but can you drop the drape from up top? It lets people know I'm not open for now," she replies as she unrolls the map onto the table.

Lori turns around and pulls a cord, dropping the drape. "Practical. Not expecting any more customers for now?" she says as she turns back around to see the map, held at the corners by stones.

"This map is of the Breach wall network; it was an old map I stole from the guard post here. Now, the city is located near a remote section of the wall around a two-day flight from where we are. Here it is on the map, northwest of the town. There are a few landmarks on the way to the lost city, though they can be fickle, shifting sands, and all that. If you plan to go out there, you'll need me." Olive points to the area that contains the city on the map, marking it with the touch of her finger.

Lori looks at the map and says, "Could you also mark the landmarks? That way I know how we are getting there. I also wanna see more of that imprint spell. I am amazed that you can do it so quickly. It must be something you practice quite frequently."

Olive remarks, "Yeah, all the time actually. It is one of the ways I manage my inventory, such as when I acquired the item, what category it falls under, and even the minimum price!" Her tone brightens as she discusses her spell's progress.

Lori replies, "I noticed you don't use your wand for the spell. Is that a recent development?"

Olive flexes her fingers and looks down at her hand saying, "It is recent, at least in the past few months. It feels natural now, just like Professor Longate said."

"The first sign of mastery in spell craft is the ability to cast the spell without a wand. The magical pathway becomes a permanent part of you," Lori says quietly. "Look at you, on the way to becoming a master of imprinting."

Olive snaps her fingers and says, "Just like I told you guys back then, Ya'll never believed me." She looks to Lori and chuckles before asking, "Why did you come here, to Hazen I mean? Ara gave me a story about how you were here on some vacation. I don't buy it; this place isn't some tourist destination."

Lori leans back and says with mild annoyance in her voice, "She's telling the truth. Sure, this place isn't a tourist trap, but it is different. Impressive architecture and vibrant colors, for one thing, would be impressive to anyone. You should have seen her when we were in sight of the town; she looked so happy." She looks down, a smile on her face.

"Aw, that must have been adorable to see. Lucky you." Olive replies with a hint of giddiness. She levitates a chair behind herself and sits down.

Lori gives Olive a side look before saying, "You always had to tease, didn't ya?"

"Oh, come on, you two were together all the time. You should have heard the rumors." Olive leans in towards Lori.

"Oh, I remember hearing some of it. Never bothered me." Lori crosses her arms and looks at Olive's stock. "So, how much for the wares? Give me a price range."

Olive spreads her arms over the front table saying, "Well, if you insist. Most items are around 30 Redsay. Specialty items can range anywhere from 60 to 1,000. Those are rare cases I will say."

Lori looks across the wares available and spots a peculiar item. She picks it up, "Oh, this looks neat! Another knick-knack for me." Smiling she asks, "Olive, how much will it be?"

Olive looks at the item and says, "I would say it'll be 30 Redsay, standard price, and no tax."

"30 sounds fair to me," Lori replies as she pulls out her wallet and hands over the Redsay. She then grabs the small knick-knack, a small bear pendant made from bone and carved with intricate designs. "Olive, do you have a small string? I want to attach this to my bag."

Olive looks at her with a look of intrigue asking, "Okay, I do, but first what kind of charm did you just swindle me out of?" She grabs a small leather rope, still rough on the edges, and hands it to her."

Lori smirks at Olive and says, "It's probably a charm for protection as it is a bear. That or fertility. This old stuff is hard to read sometimes."

"I wonder why? Maybe because it's rarely studied because of how rare intact artifacts are," Olive replies with sass.

"Yeah, there are only a handful of sites that are possible to excavate from what I've learned. Every report mentions something about ancient magic that is too unstable to excavate. It doesn't make sense to me though. They act as if the magic is separate from our own understanding of it," Lori replies inquisitively.

Olive says to Lori, "You know, it might be some old secret that was lost to time. I mean, we are taught that magic is a fundamental force within the world. What if magic, in its most raw state, is naturally 'unstable'? But as it is released into the world it somehow stabilizes itself?"

Lori places her hand on her face, seemingly thinking, "That could explain it, but how could one draw it out like that? I mean, a technique lost to time could explain it, but that would take an immense amount of power."

Olive replies, "I've never heard of anyone with that much potential ever, but I don't study too much history."

Lori cuts her off saying, "No, you just apply it through 'expedited archeology.'"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," scoffs Olive.

"It's only bad if you sell it without consulting museums first," Lori adds.

"See, now you're sounding like the old bat." Olive rolls her eyes as she starts to close the shop.

"Professor Davis was a good archeologist, though didn't teach all that well." Lori folds her arms. "Are you closing up shop? It's just past noon," she asks inquisitively.

Olive continues closing up the shop as she replies to Lori's question, "Well, yeah, this section of the Bazaar is only open for around five hours. Seven on special events. It isn't long, but it pays. Speaking of which, have you two had lunch yet?"

"We didn't have time since we just arrived," Lori replies as she takes off her backpack, tying the pendant to the bag itself.

"Well, how about we go to lunch? My treat. All three of us like old times," Olive says as she packs her money into her bag, a small satchel similar in design to Ara's, yet with a key distinction. Lori notes in her mind the difference and zones out. "Lori? Terra to Lori! Go wake up Ara. We should get going. Oh, are you guys going to love this place!"

Lori rolls her eyes as she listens to her go on a tangent about food. She then goes inside the back-room, a dimly lit room filled with journals and photos. She thinks to herself, She really kept these photos. It feels like forever ago now. Lori continues towards the chair and smiles, reminiscing about her life at the academy. Her smile falters as she reminds herself as to why she is here now. A deep sigh is let out before she reaches out her hand toward Ara. She places her hand gently on Ara's shoulder.

Ara wakes up in a panic, nearly falling out of the chair she had just been resting upon. Her eyes widen and her pupils tiny. Lori reaches her hand back defensively as Ara breathes heavily. Her breathing relaxes slightly as she realizes who was waking her up.

Before Ara can muster a word, Lori asks with obvious concern in her voice, "Ara, what's wrong?" Her eyes are wide with concern. She feels vulnerable as she feels Ara reading her like a book. Her mind is racing, thinking to herself, *What happened to you? Is this because of the fight?*

Ara quickly tries to compose herself and says, "I just was in the middle of a nightmare, kinda caught me off guard." She runs her fingers through her hair, seemingly attempting to calm herself down more.

Lori leans in slightly, still defensive after the panic episode. She meekly asks, "Was it the fight?"

Ara closes her eyes for a moment saying "Yeah, I guess it's...it has taken more a toll than I thought." She opens her eyes to look into Lori's. She pushes out a smile as she tries to hide something behind it.

Lori reaches out her hand and responds with confidence in her voice, "Well, I'll add that to the list of how not to wake you. That wound will pass. It's still fresh though. Speaking of which, Olive is inviting us to lunch and it's her treat. What do ya say?" Her face lights up with a smirk as if she already knew the answer.

Ara takes the hand, immediately being pulled from the chair faster than expected. "Well, someone seems eager to go," Ara says as she slides her hand out of Lori's. She grabs her satchel from the side of the chair and begins to head out the door. Lori stays back for a moment, checking the room to make sure they left nothing, and follows Ara.

Ara exits the room to see Olive leaning against the side of the stall looking at her watch. "Ah finally, she's awake. You doing okay?" Olive asks Ara with a half-sarcastic tone.

"Yeah, a good little rest did me well. Thanks for letting me sleep," replies Ara as she stretches out her arms and back.

Olive remarks, "Why wouldn't I? We used to be close, so no harm in it. Though I have to say, your hair is messy." Her tone feels playful and alluding.

Lori walks out with a smile on her face saying, "I am so ready for this meal. So, are we going or what?" She looks at both of them, shifting her gaze between the two.

"Wow, what happened to my meek little Laura from the Academy?" Olive jokes, her voice higher than usual.

"She got lonely," Lori says before chuckling. "As if, she liked her privacy. It's still the same old Lori here, Olive. I thought you would have liked that." Lori smirks for a second.

"Oh, your heart was never in it. Just a flirt because you were bored," Olive responds as she crosses her arms.

Ara butts into the conversation, physically standing between them saying, "Enough, both of you. Flirt some other time. I'm hungry and not in the mood to listen to you both going on like this. Can we please just go?" Olive and Lori both look slightly shocked as she says that. She walks out of the stall before the others can say anything to their defense.

Lori rushes out after her, Olive close behind and says, "Hey, we were just joking around. I didn't know it bothered you." She moves to reach her hand out but stops before she can.

Ara turns around, facing Lori and says, "It does not. I just had an outburst, and I do not know where it came from. I am sorry, Lori." A soft smile accompanied her apology. She reaches out her hand and grabs Lori's.

"I'm just glad you're okay. You had me worried for a minute. Now come on, let's eat." Lori squeezed Ara's hand gently, seemingly not noticed by Ara.

"Well, since we are ready now, the hole-in-the-wall is this way." Olive starts walking towards the outskirts of the town, slowing her pace so the other two can keep up. Lori uses her broom as a walking stick as they travel uphill.

--Meanwhile in Westerlan--

Grange and his team make camp in a glade containing small moss-covered ruins, recovering from their previous fight. Aster throws down her sleeping bag and asks, "What happened out there? That was three against two. We should have won that easily. We've taken on worse odds; I didn't know they were combat witches." She places a hand on her head, rubbing her scalp, "You know we need to go back after them, but we need a plan and intel."

Trema rests under a tree, leaning his back against the trunk of the aurora-affected tree. "Look, if we head back to Gala, I can only assume Belon will be displeased. Seeing as he said don't come back if we can't handle her." He closes his eyes and hums to himself as Grange cuts in.

"She had someone with her that we didn't know about. They seem close. If we can separate them, we gain the advantage," he says as he pulls out a small folder from his broom bag. He scans over the folder as he opens it. "This is the only intel we have of Araphone." He looks up to Aster as if to call her over. Aster moves over to Grange quickly to look at the file. "It's her council documentation. Might be helpful," he says as he takes a drink from a bottle next to him.

Aster begins to read the document, saying aloud, "Says here she graduated from Hephaestus Academy, middle of her class. No criminal record, no family listed, but get this: she has someone who can access her medical records and official documents." She looks confused as she reads the rest. "There is nothing here talking about combat. Hephaestus isn't a combat school; it's mostly focused on general magic use, and development through combat was banned a while ago."

"Who is the contact? Maybe that'll give us an idea of who that other chick was," Grange inquires as he begins to write a report. A small notepad with an outline of how the mission went was already present.

"Ah, says it is a Laura Fresea. Does that ring a bell to you?" She looks over to Grange with a raised eyebrow and closes the file.

"I haven't heard that name before, no. Have you? Wait, didn't you just recently graduate from Hephaestus? Did you ever hear of the two?"

"Only in passing. There was always gossip about those two for some reason. I liked to stay above that kind of discussion." Aster tosses the folder back to Grange, landing in front of him. "If you need me, I'll be over by Trema." She turns her back and walks towards Trema with a bag in tow.

Trema looks up at Aster while she walks toward him and says, "Oh boy, you have the bag. Do you think I'm doing *that* bad?" He begins to cough after saying that, covering his mouth with a fist.

"Better safe than sorry, Tea. I'd rather keep you alive. I mean, you did also take a pretty rough hit. You're lucky you're still conscious," she says with a smirk as she crouches down next to him.

"You call *this* lucky?" he says with a hint of concern in his voice.

"Well, yeah. Now you can tell me exactly where it hurts." She opens her bag and pulls out small vials, each a different color from the rest. "Oh, and do be specific. These things cost a fortune, and I'm lacking the ingredients to make the home-brewed stuff."

"So, I can't do it because it hurts all over?" He scoffs. "In all seriousness, that is what it feels like, though it is worse in my gut."

"She probably tore an organ or two with that move. I should have something that will stop the bleeding in those areas, though the whole process is going to hurt." She brings over a vial containing a thick purple liquid.

He looks at it and says, "Wow, for something that is gonna hurt it, sure does look pretty. It looks like the stars at night." He breathes deeply, seemingly knowing what is about to happen, *If this doesn't work, I am screwed. You got this; you have to*, he thinks to himself as Aster uncorks the vial.

Aster takes a deep breath to try and focus herself before the task at hand. "I'm going to need you to stay still during this."

"You got it." Trema raises his thumb before resting it on his side.

Aster pours the vial out onto her hand, placing the vial down and spreading it evenly on her hands before placing them on Trema's stomach. She thinks to herself, *By my power, I guide this potion. I ask it to seek out this injury and stop his bleeding*. Her hands move slowly over him until she stops, her face cracking into a small smile as her hands glow. The potion slowly seeps into Trema's skin as he winces in pain, clenching his jaw and tightening his fist. The potion slowly works its way into him, forming a barrier where he was bleeding stopping it.

"Okay, that should..." Aster opens her mouth in shock, the tree Trema was against started to develop veins of purple shooting up it. The tree itself glows as Trema continues to lean against it. He groans, his face twisting with what seems to be pain. Aster quickly pulls him away from the tree and onto the ground as Grange runs over.

"What's going on?" he says, helping drag Trema away from the tree.

"I have no idea!" Aster exclaims as she puts Trema down on the ground to rest. "I'm going to try and see what it is." Aster slowly approaches the tree, which is glowing brighter as she approaches, her hand outstretched to try and shield her eyes from it.

"Aster, get back here. That's a dumb move."

She shutters for a moment before recomposing herself and thinking, *No, this might be the only thing to save our asses from Belon if he finds out we failed.* She steps forward again, and the tree's glow diminishes greatly. A confused look washes over her before she walks up to the tree, hesitantly raising her hand before stopping. She thinks again to herself, *Would this save us, or would it extend our usefulness? I'll do what I need to.* She presses her palm against the tree, takes a deep breath, and closes her eyes.

The momentary silence is broken by Trema saying, "Aster, you're glowing. What are you doing?" He struggles to sit up as Aster continues.

"Doing what it takes to stop this." Her hand and arm begin to form veins of deep purple extending up to her elbow before she screams.

Grange runs over and tackles her to the ground, cupping her head as they hit the ground hard. The stone dissipates its color after her hand was removed, returning back to a dormant state. He checks her arm to see the coloration fading to a dull purple. *Oh Aster, what did you do? That could have killed you,* he thinks to himself.

Aster holds her arm tightly, still grimacing as her breathing stays rapid. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but nothing comes out.

"Aster, I need you to keep breathing. Try to slow it down though, more controlled." Grange tells her as he grabs a cloth from his coat. He lifts her arm up slightly, causing her to wince. "This might hurt. Deep breaths," he says as he slowly wraps the cloth around her hand and forearm tightly. Her breathing slows as Grange finishes wrapping the cloth.

Aster leans her head towards him and says, "You know, I did not expect that. What happened to my arm?" She looks toward her arm with a look of confusion.

Grange helps her up onto her feet and says, "It started glowing purple, a sinister purple at that, so I tackled you away from the stone." He smirks slightly but returns to a stoic expression.

"How is Trema, is he alright?" she asks, gaining her balance as she walks with Grange.

"I, am fine thank you very much." Trema sits, leaning his back against a tree. "It was only the potion's effect that hurt."

Grange cracks a smile and says, "So, no sinister purple on you?"

"Nope."

"I'm going to check anyways, just in case because we don't know what that was." He walks over to Trema, who is already leaning forward. Grange pulls his shirt up revealing minor bruising and nothing else. "It seems like you are all good."

Aster butts in saying, "As I said, Trem, lucky you. Any chance you know what that was?" She holds her arm, seemingly trying to hide her now dull purple forearm.

He replies quickly by saying, "I have a strange feeling it was a glowing tree, Aster." He smirks and looks at her with no response. He sighs and continues, "In all seriousness, I'm not sure what it was. But from what we do know, it could be a magically imbued tree. They were used by cults of rogue magic users in the early days of our written history."

She looks to Trema and inquires with a shake in her voice, "What... what kind of magic do you think that was? I think I messed up by touching it." She quickly looks back down, now rubbing her arm.

He takes a second to collect his thoughts before he says, "I'm not sure. Purple magic is pretty rare and unfortunately not in a good way. It is usually dangerous and corruptive; it has been known to be associated with transformations. They are not pleasant though and extremely dangerous." He gets up slowly and walks over to her, sitting down next to her and saying, "Though there is plenty of good news. So far you haven't died or had any abnormal changes besides the arm, so I think you are safe from anything dangerous, Aster. You'll be okay. We'll look out for you. That's a promise."

She looks at him with a half-smile on her face, seemingly believing him. "I owe you one for that. Thank you, Trema, and you too old man." She looks to Grange who is deep in reading through their files.

Grange turns around and says, "We are family. We stick together and fight whatever we face together. Always here for you, and I tell you what: next town we visit, food's on me, for both of ya."



“Atomic Pageantry (Self-Portrait)”

By Patricia Hicks

Black-Market

By Rachel M. Cordero

The corridor was filled with an eerie silence

Our freshly wept tears filled the air but our voices lay still

We quavered in our cages, trying to make friends with the shadows so we could turn ourselves invisible, but the shadows do not want us.

There is only space for one.

Today is the day we either welcome freedom with open arms or we say hello to the chains that have bounded us time and time before.

We are canvas made from scars,

Abused, used, and forever broken, we will be paraded across a stage of blisters

To in front of people

Today we die or we live!

Surviving It All: The Places That Shaped Me

By Lorna E. Kaminski

I'm a survivor, I'm not gon' give up, I'm not gon' stop, I'm gon' work harder. These song lyrics remind me that I am a survivor, and it is what I've survived that has shaped me into who I am now. I survived a challenging childhood. I survived a bad marriage and gave birth to two wonderful children. I survived the transition from moving to new places and adapting to new cultures. Throughout my journey, there are three places in particular that have shaped my identity.

I was born in Pangasinan, a province in the west central area of the Island Luzon in the Philippines. I grew up in an area where it is hard to see the end of the farmland because of the endless rice crops. I loved waking up in the morning, looking at the sunrise in between the mountains. I'm a daughter of farmers and grew up having my basic needs met, but growing up, I struggled with not having electricity at night to do my homework. I struggled from all the strong typhoons that we experienced and even lost our house once because of it. Our house was made of bamboo and plywood that can easily be broken from the typhoons, which is why we had to evacuate from our house to a church; the church had a better foundation and structure to give us shelter. I also struggled to finish high school because I had to work at a young age just to earn money to buy my school supplies and new clothes for the next school year. Despite the struggles I faced, I survived, never gave up, and graduated with honors. My hometown represents who I was and made me an independent individual built to meet the challenges that I would encounter next.

I eventually married a man and found myself living in Okinawa, Japan. This island is amazing when it comes to their culture, hospitality, and the kindness of Okinawans. It was such a beautiful place to live, but even beautiful places have their challenges. It all started when I gave birth to my daughter. I wasn't ready to take the responsibility as a mom because I was too young and overwhelmed with the commitment of being a parent. I was married to a man who was serving in the military, which made it difficult raising a newborn child alone. The relationship fell apart, and we ended up divorced. The decision that I made was desperate, but I wanted my daughter to live and grow up in a happy home. I survived and moved on from a bad marriage and met a man who is now my husband. He took the responsibility of being a father to my daughter and gave us what I *call* a home. In addition to my growing family, I gave birth to my son. At this point in time, I was more prepared and adjusted to having a family. I was fortunate enough to get the chance of having a family once again. Okinawa represents who I am today, and it made me a better parent to my family.

Jacksonville, North Carolina is the place I call home today. This place has shaped my identity through all the social trials of life: family, friends, faith, community, and career. I had to adapt to a new environment with my family and make the important decision of where to buy a home. I needed to consider my children's education, their safety, and raising them properly. Being a full-time mom, I needed guidance that could help me physically, mentally, and spiritually; I found a small church where I met some wonderful people who strengthened my faith and at the same time taught my children good morals and values.

I consider myself blessed with my new friends and have embraced them as part of my family. I want to set a good example to my children, so I decided to pursue my higher education and earn a college degree to have a better career in the future. Jacksonville represents what I always wanted to be.

All these places shaped my identity; these are the places that made me a survivor. My hometown has shaped and taught me that having a challenging life is not a hindrance to grow to be a responsible person and be independent at a young age. Okinawa has shaped me to be a strong woman and a responsible mom. Jacksonville was where I fulfilled my duties as a mom, strengthened my faith, and worked harder to pursue my dreams. These places are important to me because they are locations along the journey of my life, the journey that has made me the person I am today. Life is a never-ending journey, and my family is my core. I will never give up, I will never stop, and I'm going to work harder to achieve my dreams because *I'm a survivor*.

"This place has shaped my identity through all the social trials of life: family, friends, faith, community, and career."

Content Warning:

The following piece of non-fiction explores the theme of suicide, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

College Personal Statement

By Sarah Simmons

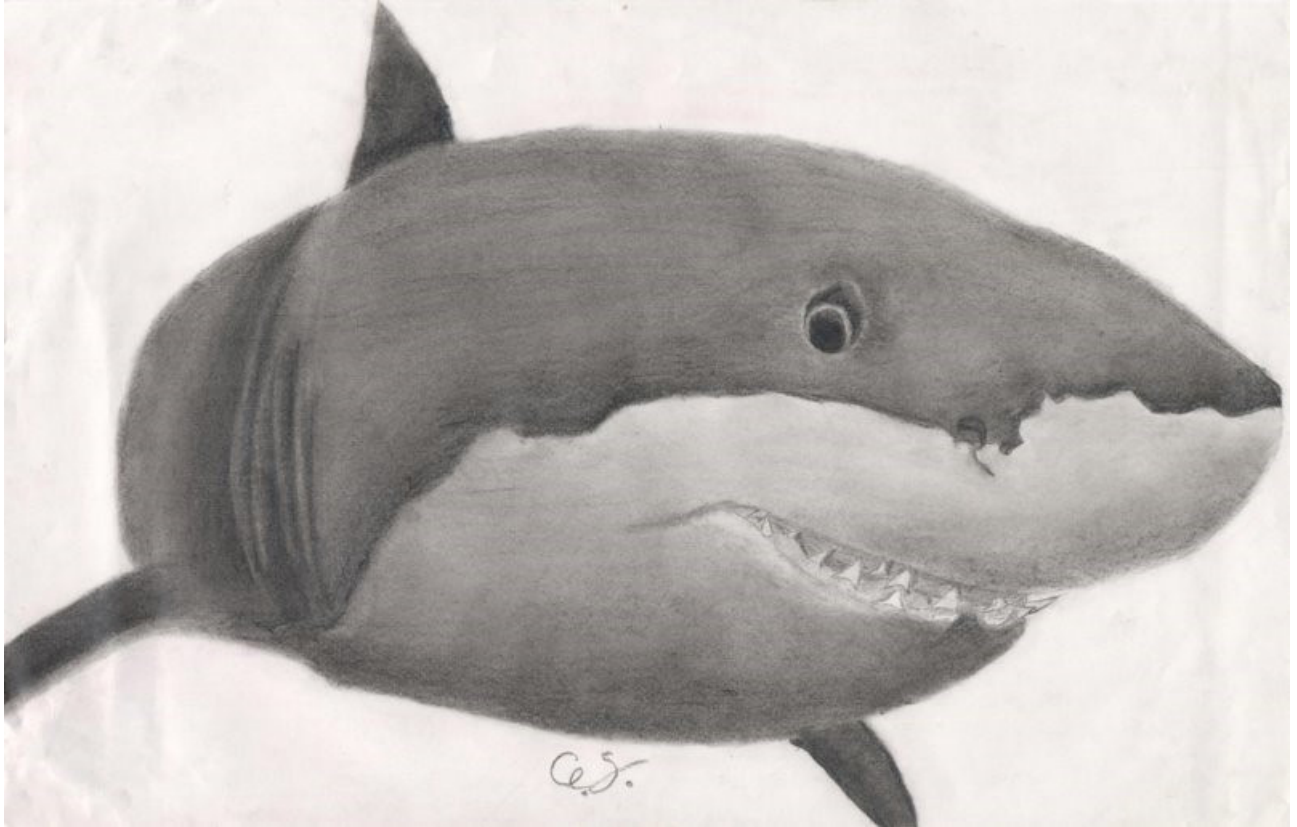
I was sitting in the cafeteria with my friends feeling my heart race like crazy. Two of them were planning how they were going to attempt suicide. I had never felt more scared in my life. As they elaborated, my palms began to sweat. They told my other friend and me that they were kidding around, but I had a feeling there was something deeper happening.

When I got home from school later that day, I told my mom that I was nervous about the situation and that I did not want to lose my friends. She told me that she could tell the school, but I worried that my friends would figure out that I said something. She assured me that she would make the message anonymous. At school the next day, I found out that my friends had been called to the front office. Later, they told me that they talked to the guidance counselor about what they said. I didn't want them to know who spoke up, but I also regretted not feeling comfortable enough to talk to them myself and not feeling confident enough in my decision to let them know that it was me.

Mental health has been a sensitive topic for me since my cousin went through with her actions, leaving her two children behind. As a child raised by a single mother struggling with financial issues, I can relate to my cousin's situation. My mother and father separated when I was five years old. At the age of eleven, he cut off all communication with me and stopped paying my mom child support. I got used to the idea of living with one parent and helped my mom whenever she needed it. I can understand why my cousin may have felt alone since she did not have the same level of support from family or friends after her husband left. On the other hand, I can also relate to my cousin's children. I would be devastated if my mother were also gone.

As experiences with suicide became more frequent in my life, I realized that I did not know how to talk to people struggling with their mental health. However, that all changed when a free class on suicide prevention called Safe Talk was offered in my city. During the presentation, the instructor encouraged us to role play with our tablemate as a suicidal person and a person who wants to help. Our instructor wanted us to get comfortable with the word "suicide." This was difficult for me because experiences with friends and family had conditioned me to feel uncomfortable and helpless when I heard the word. After the class ended, I felt more confident reaching out to people struggling with suicidal thoughts. I was certified and had the knowledge I needed to connect my peers with the resources they needed.

A few months after the class was over, while we were hanging out, my friend told me that he felt like he did not belong in this world and would rather not exist anymore. I felt frozen in place and unable to speak, but I knew I could not sit there and do nothing. Instead, I used the steps I learned in the class to comfort him and let him know that I would be there to listen. This class showed me that the information and resources people need are out there if we feel motivated to look for them. However, mental health is such a stigmatized topic that some people may never feel comfortable seeking out a class like this. In college, I want to be an advocate for mental health by bringing up issues to the student government, being a resident assistant in my dorm building, and joining or starting a mental health club with important resources.



“Sally the White”

By Genesis Sheafer

Content Warning:

The following piece of non-fiction explores the theme of spousal abuse, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

The Day My Life Changed

By Brittany Foster

In our lives we go through many life challenges and hardships. I have been through several, but one in particular changed the course of my life forever.

It was about 10 years ago on my 25th birthday. The day brought both excitement and fears as the day progressed. Being a young mother and a girlfriend to a self-centered narcissist made it difficult to make time for anything else, so it was my mission to finally make this one day about *me*. The thought of it sounded great, but orchestrating it into my reality was a different story. Childcare was covered; I made arrangements with my mom to have my children go spend the night with her just in case my boyfriend, Steve, wanted to make plans himself. It was getting him to agree with me and consider my feelings and decisions for once that was the problem.

As a mother of four, there wasn't much time for a social life, let alone making time for myself. I had a few friends that I would speak to from time to time, but I never got out much. I thought being around some friends of mine for my birthday was just the lift-me-up I needed; I could go out to a fancy bar and enjoy the tasty food and atmosphere. I was indecisive, but I knew I would figure something out eventually.

I continued worrying about Steve. All he cared about was being in the spotlight. He was obsessed with two things: himself and money. He demanded nonstop admiration. Being in his presence most of the time was a nightmare. It was a never-ending time loop, trapped in my own sorrow and anguish, awaiting the next forceful conflict. Being with him was exhausting and draining, but it wasn't always that way. People tend to show you a different version of themselves initially. It's only a matter of time until the truth gets exposed.

My anticipation was growing stronger and stronger. A girls' night out was the perfect remedy I needed! I had finally made my decision. I was ready; I had enough confidence to face my fear! With a boisterous look and a slight grin on my face, I approached Steve with my birthday plans. "Go ahead, you're good," he said in a stern, yet calm voice. Really? A night out? *With my friends?! I was stunned at the answer he had given me. He was always so domineering and controlling; I began to wonder whether he was actually okay with it or if he was furious and outraged on the inside. Perhaps it was because we had dinner together at his favorite restaurant the night before. Nevertheless, I was still happy with his answer. It wasn't until later the next morning that I realized the anxiety in the pit of my stomach was my own intuition nudging at me, telling me there was something wrong. It was just the beginning of a long and gruesome night!*

The night was still young, and the moment I anticipated had finally arrived. My girlfriends and I decided to enjoy the nightlife and went to a local club in town close to where we lived. The night was beautiful. We danced, shared funny moments together, and simply enjoyed each other's company. I could not remember the last time I felt so happy; it almost brought me to tears.

"Last call!" shouted one of the bartenders from across the room. With much regret, I knew the night was about to end. I was having so much fun; I did not want to go. I wanted to hold on to this moment for as long as possible. My girlfriends came up with an idea. They mentioned an after-party spot that we could go to. At the time it sounded great, but I knew I had to let Steve know. They didn't think that was such a good idea.

"He's probably passed out," Sarina said, knowing he had drunk too much.

"Yeah, I wouldn't bother with it. Let's just go," added Sparkle.

"I think that's a great idea," replied Toyna. Yet, I insisted because it was the right thing to do, or so I thought.

"He needs to know where I'm at, God forbid something happens," I replied. In hindsight, I should have taken my girlfriends' advice and left him alone.

Finally, we arrived at Sarina's house where Steve was hanging out with Sarina's boyfriend. As Sarina suspected, he was passed out surrounded by beer bottles. Ignoring my friends' warnings, I gently tried waking him up. He finally rose from his drunken slumber, but before I could even finish explaining myself, I was in his deadly grip. It happened so fast, yet so slow at the same time. I could hear my girlfriends screaming, trying desperately to free me from his strong grasp. Sarina's boyfriend awoke from all the commotion, but by that time my friends had freed me from my boyfriend's diabolical clutch. As I stood there with blood trickling down my face, I felt nothing. My body may have felt sore and weak, but my heart had gone numb. This was not the first time he put his hands on me, but it sure as hell was the last!

By this time, it was around 3am; my friends and I arrived at the Sheriff's department so I could fill out a restraining order. As I slowly glanced up in shame at my girlfriends, it was as though I could hear their thoughts. *She'll go back. He has a hold on her. I won't be a part of this again.* Little did they know that my heart had become cold and lifeless. We arrived at my apartment; thankfully, he was not there. I grabbed what I could and left, never looking back. That same day, I took my children on a drive and my feelings set in. I was scared, confused, disappointed, sad, and angry, but I knew I was on the right track. I knew there was no going back. It is a night I will never, ever forget! Looking back, I realize that God had brought me three angels that night: my girlfriends. They saved my life! Although they may not have known it at the time, the love and care they showed towards me helped me to realize that I was loved, which in turn reminded me how much I loved myself and my children.

Months had gone by, and I was struggling to stay afloat. At the time, my babies and I were staying with my mom. My car broke down, and I was working and going to school. Then something miraculous happened. Out of nowhere, my mom found out that there was money set aside for her and our family from my grandparents: an inheritance that was passed down to all of us. It was a magical moment, a true blessing. In that moment, a huge burden was lifted off my shoulders.

Within six months I bought a car, got an apartment, graduated with a GED, and met my true love, Cornelius, who is my fiancé today. By standing my ground and staying strong, the difficulties and obstacles thrown my way didn't matter. I was able to persevere.

I can only hope and pray that other women like myself who've experienced such horrifying and sad circumstances make it out. It's not your fault! You're not alone! Listen to your intuition and know that there's always someone there to help, encourage, and love you. This was a life lesson well-learned, and although it was painful, I wouldn't take it back. I received so many blessings afterward and built a stronger character from it all. As I like to say, "You must experience the darkness to enjoy and embrace the light!"class like this. In college, I want to be an advocate for mental health by bringing up issues to the student government, being a resident assistant in my dorm building, and joining or starting a mental health club with important resources.

The Shadow Casted

By Lawanda Ruiz

Every day of my childhood I saw it mounted on the wall next to the doorway. Every time I left the house, I would glance in passing by and look at the accomplishments of my father's military career. The shining gold medals placed with perfect precision. The rainbow of ribbons crisply pressed, still carrying your honor. Old glory wrapped for a final time, dressed up to show the now off-white stars. The speckles of dust and grime imprinted on the red oak wood. For twenty years, I've watched the shadows it castled and at the same time it profoundly lit your large footsteps I would once decide to fill on my own. I used to imagine what twenty years of devotion would feel like. I always wondered how so much time could be captured in such a small box. A distant life passed away. I longed for the day I would receive the oak box from you as a memento to commemorate the passing of my 20 years. I wondered if when it landed in my hands if I would feel the insurmountable weight it carried in my mind all these years or would it be the weight off of my shoulders once I completed my time. I didn't get the chance to experience the exchange with you. It would only stand now as your memorial in my home. The shadowbox now holds a greater weight.

"I wondered if when it landed in my hands if I would feel the insurmountable weight it carried in my mind all these years or would it be the weight off of my shoulders once I completed my time."

I Was Robbed Without A Gun!

By Earnest Lemond, Jr.

Earnest, whom I am consequently named after, stood in the doorway and greeted me with a smile. At the time, he seemed seven-feet-tall; in reality, he was a mere five-feet, nine-inches. He was slender with a muscular build, pecan complexion, and an Army-regulated haircut. On this rainy Colorado night, he let me know that Pizza Hut (my favorite!) would be on the menu and arriving shortly. The movie *Ninja Turtles* he rented from Blockbuster was already in the VCR just waiting for me to press play. I quickly hopped out of bed. My curiosity was through the roof. I wondered, *why all this?* That question was quickly replaced with thoughts of seeing Michelangelo beat up Shredder and the buttery crust, gooey mozzarella cheese, and crispy pepperoni I would soon devour. What I did not realize was that in less than 24 hours, my childhood would be swallowed up like that last slice.

The next morning, I was awoken by the bright sunlight piercing through the blinds. I immediately checked my bed for any accidents; I had quite a bit of soda the night before.

I yelled out "Clear!" as I took my morning stretch.

Earnest must have been startled; he came rushing to the bedroom and asked, "Are you okay?"

I responded with a quick "yes." He told me to get up and get dressed for the day. I noticed his voice trembled a bit; he was obviously troubled. I lay there a moment wondering what happened. I thought to myself, *everything was awesome before I fell asleep.* It seemed like overnight a charismatic man was now hunched over and looking defeated. I got up quickly and finished my morning routine.

I came down the hall and sat on the big brown sofa. Suddenly, I heard a commotion, a *Bang!* and a *Crash!* "Is everything okay?" I yelled.

He replied, "Yes, it's fine son." A few seconds later, Earnest walked in with what I perceived as a forced smile. It lacked the inviting feeling. I immediately knew something wasn't right. I would learn in my latter years that the feeling I had is called intuition. He came into the living room and sat down in his brown recliner, ever so gently. He crossed his legs and held his white mug with permanent coffee stains tightly in his right hand. He looked me in the eyes and began to tell me a story.

About four or five years ago, when I was around two, he wanted me to come spend the holidays with him. He told me at the time I was living in North Carolina with my mom. This was the first time I realized I had a mom. She was reluctant to let me go to Colorado. Against her better judgement and his persistent nagging, she succumbed to the pressure and allowed me to go. "It was supposed to be a 3-week trip," he said. Then I learned he made my mom's worst fear a reality; without her consent, he kept me for four years. My heart instantly sank. I felt pressure build in my shoulders and work its way down my back. I begin to sweat profusely. I could not grasp what he was telling me; my mind began to race.

Mom? Who is she? What does she look like? Did she not want me? First, I was sad; then, I became angry. Then paralyzed with fear. My voice trembled and a knot formed in my throat. I was able to ask faintly, "Why are you telling me this?" His response hit me like a blow from Iron Mike.

“Well, son, your mom has been fighting for years, and she won,” he said with a sigh. “You have to go back.”

“Back where?” I asked.

“To North Carolina.”

His response set me on fire. I ran so fast to my now gloomy, dark room, and Earnest followed in close pursuit behind me. He tried to console me but to no avail. My trust for Earnest and life as I knew it were over. I was left in “that” room with my thoughts, tears, and Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry Be Happy” playing in the background.

I was sick to my stomach for what seemed like hours. My six-year-old mind was in shambles. My seven-foot-tall superhero, my “protector,” had single-handedly destroyed my childhood. After sitting for a while, it hit me like a ton of bricks. The privileges I took for granted, the innocence that once kept me shielded from life, were a facade, a lie! My world was forever broken! I was no longer a naïve kid who loved pizza and *Ninja Turtles*. I became Earnest Donell Lemond Jr, a person with issues.

As I reflect on the traumatic event that took place over twenty-five years ago, I realize that this experience still affects me as an adult. I often wonder to myself, *what unknown damage still exists and has gone untreated?* My mixed emotions, feeling of abandonment, and lack of trust are entrenched in my soul. Those feelings were reinforced by Earnest’s lack of accountability and willingness to miss twenty-five plus birthdays. When I was ten years old, my mom married a man name Lamont, and throughout the years he has taught me everything about manhood and unconditional love; for that reason, I will always view him as my father and call him dad. With my parents’ guidance I have learned to accept, understand, and stop blaming myself for Earnest’s actions. This tragedy has become my triumph; it has instilled in me a level of fortitude and ambition to conquer many of life’s obstacles! I live by Sope Agbelusi’s famous quote: “Remember, diamonds are created under pressure. So, HOLD ON, it will be your time to shine soon!”

Moonlight Sonata

By Mariana Orrego Serno

Numbing my pain with herbs,
eucalyptus, lavender and chamomile.
However not even thyme can turn back time
and bring us back together.

Rosemary, ginger, and cloves bring me warmth.
I am unable to produce naturally in this stone-cold era of my life.
Marjoram with its sweet pine and citrus scent calms me
until I remember your presence will cease to bless me.

Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

One day my stars will align!
I will acknowledge and praise their luminosity.
I must be looking on the wrong side of the sky.
All I see is the abyss. Am I the abyss?

Twilight's twinkle
reminds me of the subtle glow
of my mother's smile
in the months of snow.

Not being able to hug her is my void.
My coping mechanism is reminiscing.
The only speck of light are mellifluous memories
of our embrace.

Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

Bittersweet memories linger,
as I scrape my tongue vigorously,
trying to eliminate the aftertaste of losing
what I most cherished in life.

Her voice as soothing as the ocean's rhythm
and her song of ebb and flow,
now brings me to the middle of the ocean.
Capitan missing, sails wrecked,
no way to steer away from the storm.

I feel deserted and trapped.
Must I jump out of the sinking ship?
No life vests available to keep me afloat?
Should I stay inside waiting for the ship to be swallowed
by the ocean and drowned in my cascades of despair?

Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

How should I fight without any tools,
without any armament,
without any will to make it through the battles
of the never-ending waves that threaten
to envelop me in a single gulp.

Fuel that lit my oil lamps runs out, pitch black.
The image of her cradling me, for an instant,
I feel protected and able to withstand
severe conditions of the storm
and the consequent ship wreckage.

Perpetually bound to survive
in the depths of desolate darkness.
Since you left,
nothing feels right.

Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

Up until your last days,
I held hope for your recovery.
Invocations to angels from dusk until dawn,
prayers prancing in my mind without a halt.

I ponder at the infinite possibilities,
recalling with the animosity healing was possible,
despite medical advice,
Most would say hopefulness is my vice.

How else would I show you
how much I believed God to work a miracle
if I had given up hope
even a second before your departure?

Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

There is no natural source of light,
as I am unable to spark it from within.
There is no fuel left to burn to ignite my light.
Lamps, candles, campfires try to make amends,

I wonder if I will ever have access to my inner warmth and light.
For now, I survive with clumps of artificial LED lights.
Their obnoxious fluorescence reminds me
I have lost my shine and eagerness to thrive.

Moonlight brings me to hope
there may be a source of light
amongst grim reality and has robbed me
all my energy to fight.

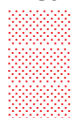
Even a speck of light
amongst the shared darkness of the starless night sky
brings me to my knees to pray.
For Debussy, nuit d'étoiles
for me, night of scars.

*"Moonlight brings me to hope
there may be a source of light
amongst grim reality and has robbed me
all my energy to fight."*

Cigarette

By Thomas Anderson White

I
love
getting
to kiss
you every
hour of every
day to be the
first thing you
want every morn
when you wake up
wanting me even
when you can't have
me you always checked
to make sure I was with
you spent money on me
every day without fail
kept a fire available
for me every day
you wanted me
during every
break you got
and took me
outside of the
office so many
times I could
sooth you with
every breath
you wanted
me after
every
meal

 or snack that you ate we spent a lot of time together with others of the same and we were always together after sex
you thought of me every time you are at a gas station or convenience mart I am the very last thing you wanted right
before you went to sleep every night you want me right now you have loved me all your life you are my addiction

Spirit of Appalachia

By Joshua Levy Adkins

If ever there were a place in America where I truly believe one could experience the feelings and emotions of being there just as much as the sights, sounds, and smells, it would be the Appalachian Mountains. To even begin to describe the experience is to describe those sensations with one's own emotions when being there. From the Great Smokies and Blue Ridge Mountains to the Shenendoah Valley, all the way to the Adirondacks, Catskills, White Mountains, and more, there is nowhere that one cannot feel the spirit of the land connecting with their own.

Perhaps you've experienced the feeling of warmth and welcome when you're driving deep within a holler, the billions of leaves around you are turning a stunning motley array of orange, red, and yellow.

Perhaps instead you've experienced the surprising chill in the air as summer gives way to winter, its icy fingers creeping across the land at night, leaving a breathtaking layer of glossy frost to stun the sleepy waking populous of some small hamlet come sunrise.

Perhaps you've experienced the exhilaration of stepping out onto the edge of a rocky outcropping, leaving the protective comfort of the white pines that stand so tall upon the hillside behind. You look down from your small perch on the edge of the earth to be met by a gale rushing upwards from the world so far below, leaving goosebumps on your skin and taking the breath from your chest for a moment. Your heart beats fast as you watch in amazement as a bald eagle or red-tailed hawk rushes by, flying high, riding thermals in great, ever-widening spirals.

Perhaps you've experienced the child-like wonder of hiking to the bottom of a gorge in a foot of snow and standing by the half-frozen river taking in how pure and serene the world can be when there's a beautiful white blanket covering everything.

Perhaps you've experienced the momentary shock of hitting the clean 40° turquoise water when you jump from a cliff, and the fear when you realize fifty feet of water is a lot deeper and that the current is much stronger than you anticipated before you float back to the top.

Perhaps you've experienced the feeling of loneliness and insignificance after coming upon a clearing or abandoned farm field in some valley, miles from the nearest town; lying down among the tall grass and weeds and gazing at the night sky while a whip-poor-will and owl sing an endless song in chorus an unidentifiable distance away. The clear, crisp air, absent of light pollution can allow you to see the entire hazy expanse of the Milky Way, innumerable stars and planets visible to the naked eye.

Perhaps you've spent a week camping deep within a national park, isolated in acres of untamed wilderness and virginal forest and feeling haunted by the ghosts of the Native Americans that used to call this land their home. The sound of their voices still rises to be heard in the wind when it blows through the hemlock, whispering to you the secrets of the earth in Cherokee, Iroquois, Mohican, if you only stop to listen.

Or perhaps you've experienced a combination of feelings, your heart beating strong from running and the exhilaration of intimacy and laughter after you and the love of your life had to seek shelter from a sudden thunderstorm and hide in a thick grove of mountain rhododendron and wild azalea. You can gaze at each other's elated faces, admiring their crooked smile, the color of their eyes, or the flush in their cheeks. You can take in the way their soaking wet clothes cling to their body holding snugly to all their curves while you both try to catch your breath, knowing you're the only two people in the world that matter in that moment.

I know I have, and there's not a second of it I would trade for all the money in the world because I know I would be a poorer man without these experiences than any amount of money could substitute. Appalachia is where my spirit resides, and my heart aches and my soul yearns to return there. Where home is...

"Perhaps you've experienced the feeling of warmth and welcome when you're driving deep within a holler, the billions of leaves around you are turning a stunning motley array of orange, red, and yellow."



“Hippoing Around”

By Genesis Sheafer

Mighty Max

By She'Vaughn Brown

There is always that one person you will love until the wheels fall off. However, even when the wheels do seem to be falling off, whatever happens just never seems to work out. The worst part about it all is how even though you know they are not healthy for you, you keep them around anyways. That's how it was with my 1994 Mighty Max Mitsubishi, also known as Max. He was my pride and joy, and everyone knew it. Unfortunately, Max was too much of a nuisance for me to cater to him any longer. In the end, I decided to remove him from my life in order to gain back contentment. Now that I am delivered from caring for him, I cannot help but reminisce on the good times we shared together. Although Max and I are no longer together, I will always cherish the relationship that we had.

First laying eyes on him made me ecstatic that he was mine. His green paint overlaid with a shiny coat of chrome made him stand out like a sore thumb. Not to mention the 90's style truck body he had. As I opened the interior, the inside was a complete opposite reflection of the outside. It was disturbingly filthy and broken! Not only was he trashed, but a lot of mechanisms were out of order under the hood. His radiator to cool the hot engine was leaking, the a/c functions were missing, the horn was missing; basically, he needed treatment badly. Yes, I was disturbed, but that just attracted me to it even more. Being able to revive and mend the neglect from his previous owner helped me to appreciate Max for who he was. This was a challenge I gladly accepted. For the next few months, I came home and spent my time taking care of Max by washing, cleaning, and refurbishing him inside and out. His filthy factory tan interior was now transformed into a black and red vanilla-scented hot rod! The key functions under his hood were replaced and he was good to ride. I was so happy to finally get the chance to cruise along with him.

Max and I's connection was more powerful than a spark to an engine. Every day I would wake up smiling to see Max sitting in the driveway waiting to be revved up. Max's simplicity, from the cranking of the windows to the lever for moving the seat, made riding around enjoyable. Everything about him was just super fitting for me. Max was just a match made in heaven for me! I was glad to know that my dad was aware of the sentiment Max added to my life and was a proud supporter of my love for him. With every snap and leak, my father helped shift Max into the truck he was meant to be. My father and I bonded through my relationship with Max. We even installed a light bar overtop of his windshield to not only crown Max for his originality, but to also show how much he means in our hearts. Now it is not every day that you see your Pops being okay with their daughter being in love! It was surely meant to be. With that, everywhere I went people looked and stared. Max was a marvel in this small town of Jacksonville. So many compliments were given by neighbors, teachers, gate guards, and even civilians pumping gas. I'm surprised no fender benders occurred with many strangers doing double takes down Interstate-17! He was truly a sight for sore eyes.

In all relationships, one's true identity is sure to expose itself. It seemed as if the more mileage we drove, the more distant we became. At times we would cruise down the road and he would throw himself into fits by switching from drive to neutral. At first, I was confused as to why Max would ever embarrass us. I would constantly question myself; *Did I neglect to check his oil? Does he need coolant? Are his breaks okay?* It was not until later that I realized I could not blame myself. Max did not want to advance any further with me. Once I opened up to that, the gears of my own heart started to shift. I noticed silly maintenance issues that he had comprised for me to get rid of him. One day, his horn would stop working, and the lights would not come on the next. I knew he was crying out for me to hit the brakes, but he beat me to it. Like a cold heart, Max's spark to his engine went out on me: literally. He would not budge or make a sound, and I admit it hurt me. I was back and forth between my family's vehicles for the next few months. I was constantly tormented by other's innocent questions, "Where's Max?" It was not until the hidden damage within the engine was discovered that Max found himself on Lejeune Yard Sales. I sat inside Max for one more time, letting the seatbelt hold me close. Our most prime moments flashed as I grasped the steering wheel one last time, and then I let go. A man came with a dusty old chain and a dusty old hitch to tow Max out of my life. He journeyed to another caretaker, another life, another love.

I will always cherish Max and I's relationship regardless of if we are together or not. I would be a fool to deny that I miss Max. I am constantly thinking of the many ways our time together could have continued, but we sadly hit a dead end. It just hurt to see him go the way he did. Some relationships are just not meant to last. However, that does not mean all is lost. Sometimes you and I need to take a step back and unselfishly care for ourselves before we worry about one another. If we yield to our heart, we will always do what is best for our future. the hemlock, whispering to you the secrets of the earth in Cherokee, Iroquois, Mohican, if you only stop to listen.

I Like My Mask

By Thomas Anderson White

It covers up ugly and it covers up sad
It covers up frowns and even covers up mad
It covers up old and covers up gray
I can now throw my, *Just for Men* away.

I don't have to talk, and I don't have to smile,
And now I only shave every once in a while.
Acne, blackheads, those sores on your face,
No longer a problem, not even your race.

I wear it in a bank and don't even get shot,
I wear it in school where I go to get taught.
Just hang it on your ears and down around your neck,
Let your nose hang out. Oh, what the heck.

The mask is now fashion, they are everywhere,
Age and wrinkles, no problem, not even nostril hair
They come in different sizes and sometimes they are free,
No need to wear lipstick or even brush your teeth.

But what I like the most, because I'm not a fool,
No cold, no virus, no flu, and nobody spitting on you.
So, what's all the confusion and why all the fuss?
Wearing a mask just might be a plus.

I like my mask.

Ode to Independence Day

By Donna Brown

The struggle began over two hundred years ago,
Between Britain and colonists, no peace could be found;
"No taxation without representation" was the cry heard,
A firm desire for freedom did abound.
No compromise could be made, nothing could appease,
All endeavors were met with rejection from the King;
No more rebuffs, 'tis time to break free
From the bonds of tyranny, to freedom we must cling.
We must declare independence, no matter the cost,
Pledging our lives, fortunes, and sacred honor;
'Tis a high price to pay, but so worth the cost
To hear freedom's sweet song, so raise high the banner.
Sound out the music, fire the cannons, enjoy a parade,
Bring on the fireworks and loudly ring the bells;
'Tis Independence Day, we have proclaimed our freedom;
Within our hearts, the joy of freedom swells.
As the years go by, so grows our love for independence,
Our desire to embrace freedom stays strong;
Hold fast to it with all your might, never let it go,
For a great price was paid, blood was shed for freedom's song.
So unfurl our country's flag, raise it high in the air,
Sing anthems of glory for freedom we hold dear;
Remember the cost of freedom, remember the sacrifices made,
Hold it close to your heart, never throw it away, keep it near.
So bring on the celebrations, parades, and songs,
Light up the sky with fireworks, hooray!
Stand proudly and cheer for freedom,
Happy Independence Day!



“Sunset In the Mountains”

By Michael Kruszewski

Communion

By Daniel Baumgardner

I drove my 2015 Honda Civic down a long twisting road. The sun was high overhead, and I was finally nearing my destination. My best friend, Dr. Paul McLaidlaw, had invited me to witness what was evidently a great scientific breakthrough on his end. We were in unrelated fields, but two weeks ago when he had called me, he spoke with excited breath.

“You’ll never believe what I’ve found here, Mark, but it’s going to change everything we know about science.”

I had tried pressing him for more details, but he had said he couldn’t say anymore over the phone. If I recall, he used the common annoying phrases people use when they won’t describe something: “You’d have to be here to believe it” and “It’s better seen in person.” I recalled this as my car twisted through winding roads and up and down the small hills of a rural region of *-redacted-*.

Paul himself, due to book sales and previous work on weapons technologies for the U.S Military, had a very large mansion and plenty of land that it occupied. I was a psychologist, and while I loved my work, it did not provide the trappings that a physicist who helped to develop technology for the military enjoyed.

My car tires adopted a new sound as I turned from the familiar asphalt to a long but level dirt road. Only about two miles to go according to my GPS. “Jesus. Paul, you don’t hate your guests that much do you,” I exclaimed as my car veered into a deep and dark forest of trees.

My car’s headlights pierced through the night, a sole source of illumination save for the stars and a half-moon. I had been traveling down the road for ten or twenty minutes when I finally neared the Mansion belonging to Dr. McLaidlaw. A large black fence encompassed the estate. As I neared it, I also noticed a speaker box off the road that a driver could pull up to. Pressing the button to open communications, I waited patiently until I heard Paul’s voice come over it.

“Hey, Mark! I’m gonna open the gates and you can pull right up to the front.” Evidently, he knew it was me, assumedly because he didn’t get a lot of guests out here.

I willed the vehicle forward, passing the gate and approaching a roundabout with a fountain at the center. I saw Paul waiting outside his front door atop a set of stairs leading to a luxurious front porch. Stepping out of the vehicle I exclaimed, “Is the reason you called me out here for therapy after living so long in the middle of nowhere? Have you managed to isolate yourself to madness?” I half-smiled.

Paul grinned back and said, “I rather enjoy it out here actually; nice fresh air...and no one to attempt psychoanalysis on me...now come on in I have dinner ready.”

Once inside his house, I was impressed with the true size of it. I entered a large foyer and two sets of staircases led up to a landing, while the area in front of me appeared to head to the living room, kitchen, dining room, and study. "Nice place," I said gazing around at some of the paintings on the walls, noticing most of it was rather pleasant...flowers, sunsets, various styles. Until my eyes wandered to one disturbing piece. It looked like an old withered hot-air balloon, and where the connections would have been to the basket were four sharpened claws instead.

"Do you like it? It's by Zdzisław Beksiński...I think it's called ZE or Painting ZE or something."

Turning away from the painting, I said, "I wouldn't say I'm in love with it."

Dinner that night was pleasant. Apparently, Paul was so well off as to have his own butler and housekeeper. The Butler looked to be a man of 50, and his once brown hair was streaked with gray and receding. He appeared physically fit for his age, more than would be expected of a Butler that is. After dinner, I instinctively went to take my plate to the sink; however, before I could, the Butler gently grasped my plate and withdrew it from my hand. "I'll take that," he said in a British accent, stacking it atop a plate he had already received from Paul.

"All right, now that we have eaten, it's finally time to show you what I brought you out here for," Paul said excitedly. We stood up, and he led me outside. Around 200 meters away from the house was a very large outbuilding that looked like a prefabricated vehicle storage bay. Approaching the building, I noticed a very large steel door with a keypad on it. Paul input the code with his back to me, and we walked inside the large building.

Immediately entering, it was impossible to notice that right in the center of the room was an Icosahedron the size of a small car. It was overall spherical in shape but had countless edges and panels that looked to me made of a material like carbon fiber. Multiple wires entered and exited through the bottom of the device, some leading to monitors to the left of the room, others leading to large electrical outlets, and still more leading to places I could not discern.

"So...you brought me here to show your discovery of a new shape," I said sarcastically.

"No, to show you this," Paul said as he walked to the left of the room where the monitors were located. He picked up an old, stained baseball and threw it at the device. At first, the baseball flew fast toward its target. I was taken aback as my reflexes just started to react to Paul's sudden movement of throwing the ball. However, once the ball got within 6 or so feet of the device, it started to move in slow motion as if it was moving through water or gelatin.

Exasperated, I looked at Paul with my mouth hung open. "Why... How is it doing that?" I exclaimed.

Paul looked at me with a wide grin, raised eyebrows, and stated, "Time distortion."

I looked back at the device, still not believing my eyes. The baseball contacted the device, and as it did, it squeezed ever so slightly, and then was deflected at a different trajectory. After the baseball left what was nearly an invisible 6-foot space around the device, it flew out and made it halfway toward one of the walls of the outbuilding until it lost momentum and rolled on the ground. The ball struck the wall, then stopped.

"What did you make, Paul?" I said, turning my head towards him. "How is it doing that? It shouldn't be possible for it to do that!"

Paul looked at me as if slightly regretting showing me his contraption. "We don't exactly know... The only reason you are here is that I thought you might be able to help me with the work...and I didn't make it."

I stood dumbstruck. I would have believed a host of other things: maybe it was an illusion or hologram. If presented with this at a magic show, it would seem to me an impressive display of the magician's craft, but coming from a renowned physicist like Paul, I had no doubt it was doing what he said it was.

"This device was found in *-redacted-* one year ago. The actual device is inside of the containment shell that you see. We discovered that when a certain voltage and amperage were running through it, this time distortion effect would be generated. Other than that, I can't say. Mostly because I don't know."

Finally starting to get ahold of my bearings I said, "So why do you need me to help with the research? I'm no physicist. I don't see how my profession could possibly help with any sort of these specific scientific findings."

"Oh, but it does. We can talk more about it tomorrow though. For now, let's head in to get some sleep," Paul said glancing at a clock on the wall. It was already 11:58pm. Joining him, we both headed outside, and a storm from the east appeared to be flowing from the distance. We walked in silence; I spent the walk pondering the night's events and wondering what tomorrow's day would bring. Then, I settled myself in an upstairs guest bedroom.

One of the loudest sounds of thunder that I had ever heard clapped above the house, ripping me awake from my sleep. My heart was racing from the jolt; looking around the room, I immediately wondered where I was. Then suddenly, memories came flooding back in: Paul, the mansion, the device. Suddenly, due to thirst, I decided to go to the kitchen to get water.

Walking out of the room, I was greeted with the dark expanse of the mansion's landing. Stepping around lightly, I ran my hand along the wall to find a switch of some sort to turn on the lighting. Coming to the beginning of the staircase (that much I could see in the dark), I finally found a switch and flicked it on.

My blood ran cold immediately as I was confronted with Paul's Butler; he sat at the opposing wall at the bottom of the stairs with his back propped up against the wall. He was slouched and blood ran from his head, covering his clothes and the floor underneath him. Both of his legs were bent at unnatural angles at the knees.

"My god..." I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, approaching the man laid out before me. I called out to him and resisted my urge to shake or move him. It was obvious he may have fallen whilst walking on the stairs, and thus, may have been suffering from a head or brain injury.

Not fully knowing what to do and knowing the man needed help soon, my mind focused on one other task: to find Paul so he could help. Running back up the stairs, it occurred to me that I was unsure which room was the master bedroom. I ran through the hallway and threw open two doors until coming to the last one.

Entering, I immediately knew it was the master bedroom because of the furnishings. I looked around like a wild man and called out for Paul. Resounding silence, except for the sound of hard rain beating against the roof, welcomed me. I was about to turn around when suddenly a lightning bolt lit up the room, and for half a second, I saw a vague shape of something leaning in the corner furthest from me.

Scared out of my wits, I approached it. I could only hear whimpers coming from the corner that looked like darkness was emanating from it. I suddenly became aware of the phone in my right pocket and cursed myself for not using it earlier; I pulled it out, noticing I had no cellphone reception, and shined the light upon the unknown entity.

The source of my terror turned out to be Paul himself. Turned away from me and shirtless, whilst still wearing pajama bottoms. He sat hugging his knees to his chest, whimpering.

"Paul, I need your help! There has been an accident! Your Butler fell and is in rough shape. You have to come give me a hand, buddy!" I said, my voice near shouting.

No response came from him. I approached slowly, rapidly becoming aware that Paul was also not currently well. Standing in the dark with only my phone casting illumination on him, I began to hear him mutter, "*The watcher without eyes...so small...insignificant, time distortion, time distortion mind distortion time distortion mind distortion ti-mind distortion, the void, endless. The fork is a telephone, or telegraph, riiiiiiiiing riiiiiiiiing riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing.*" He ended with a shrill scream.

"Paul!" I screamed and grabbed his shoulder, turning him around whilst he was still sitting and quickly and efficiently slapping him in the face. ciently slapping him in the face."Your Butler is downstairs and might be dying now! You need to come with me so we can help the man!" After I had struck him, he at least had stopped screaming.

"We need to get out of here." Paul said, looking around wildly. His eyes caught onto an opposing window. With the fervor of a mad man, or of an animal trying to escape some hunter, he threw himself out of it. The sound of glass crashing filled the air, and what was the muffled sound of outside rain and wind suddenly became more apparent with the new opening within the window.

"Paul!" I shouted, running to the window to look out. Against the blackness with only periodic flashes from lightning strikes, I could make out his shape. Luckily, he had landed in some bushes that surrounded his house. Then, after composing himself as much as he could, he stood up and started sprinting across his estate, as if to get as far away as he possibly could.

I saw him run toward my vehicle, and then the lights of it flashed as if I had unlocked it. Feeling my pocket for my keys, it suddenly dawned on me: while I was trying to help him get his senses back, he had taken my keys! He hopped into my car and floored it across his long driveway.

Coming to the large black gate, not bothering to stop or to open it, he used my Honda Civic to ram it. The first attempt was not fully successful, nor was the second, but finally on the third he seemed to break the front gate and sped off into the night.

I stood in shock. For a whole minute, I could not believe the events that transpired and seemed to be totally disassociated from reality. Suddenly, a thought floated across my mind. Paul's Butler was still in very rough shape, and the man needed help.

Running to the stairs, as I was rapidly descending, Paul's Butler seemed to stir and open his eyes. His legs were still horribly broken, but his head wound appeared to stop bleeding. He looked around, as if in a daze. His eyes fixed upon me, and he spoke.

"Come...here," he said, grunting through his evident pain. I approached him rapidly and started to shoot words out, promising I would help him or find him medical treatment.

"Just shut up!" he yelled. I was taken aback, but then suddenly something seemed to dawn on me. "Your accent...it's American."

"No kidding...now listen to me. Where is Dr. McLaidlaw?" he said, the pain from his injuries painted onto his facial features.

"Paul took my car and left. He seemed mentally unstable when he did; he was screaming, and he actually rammed the gate open. When he did it, he drove away so I actually have no idea where he is."

"All right, well listen to me. I was sent undercover to operate security for that device. Paul was recruited because he helped design some sort of paneling that prevented radar, radio waves, electromagnetic fields, and various other forms of frequencies and energy transference from occurring. We thought that the paneling would help contain whatever that device was emanating. It evidently didn't," the former Butler said painfully.

"So, what is the device putting off?" I spoke.

"From what we can tell, it seems to match what one would see with Electroencephalography. The device is communicating with something, or if not communicating, it is picking up the thoughts of something, if you can call them thoughts."

"That's why you brought me here as a biopsychologist. To study it, determine what could possibly have strong enough thoughts to..." I trailed off.

"To bend time," the Butler finished.

"Listen, I'm in rough shape. My mission was in the event anything happened that could potentially lead to the device being improperly controlled or grow stronger, I was meant to end the mission and destroy the device. You must do that now."

"I have to go look for Paul and my car though!" I protested.

"No, Dr. McLaidlaw is beyond saving. Last night he decided to go do some late-night studying of the device. From what I could tell, lightning struck the outbuilding, potentially the device itself. I'm no scientist, but I think that surge of electricity allowed for something to happen. Something that melted Paul's mind. When he came back into the house, he was rambling. He tried to run upstairs; I followed him, trying to talk sense into him. For my efforts, I ended up in this condition."

Suddenly more things began to make sense. Something had gone horribly wrong, and who knew what might happen if this device was left unchecked.

"You need to destroy it. The code to the outbuilding is 18900820. Please, we don't know what could happen if it is left unchecked..." and with that, the Butler passed out.

Gritting my teeth, I observed my options. One: I could try to leave. I had no idea where Paul's cars or car keys were. Two: I could run into the storm, which was not very desirable. Or Three: I could at least go and check out the device. Maybe I could just shut it down. Scowling to myself, I went outside into the storm and started walking towards the outbuilding.

When I got to the door of the outbuilding, I put in the code as rain beat against me. I entered and my eyes widened at what I witnessed.

In the center of the room various panels of the icosahedron were missing, revealing that the inside was hollow, or mostly hollow. In the center there was what appeared to be a large tuning fork, and in the center of the fork was a tesseract, a 4-dimensional cube. Large burn marks were on the roof and around the device indicating that the lightning strike did indeed hit the device.

I looked to one of the walls where there appeared to be large electrical disconnects and walked over to them, keeping my eyes fixed on the cube. The device was mesmerizing; it seemed inviting to me.

I turned the levers of the electric disconnects. The power did shut off, but the device continued to glow and levitate, inviting me. Without realizing it, I was walking toward it. My eyes focused on the device; I had to get close to it.

Without realizing it, I had already crossed the 6-foot barrier, and I paused, standing within the time distortion field. I looked around...to me time seemed the same, and out of curiosity, I looked over at the clock on the wall of the outbuilding. The second hand looked like it was moving at 20 times the speed. In the time it took me to look at the clock, 2 full minutes elapsed.

Focusing back onto the tuning fork, I reached out, mesmerized, grabbed the left prong, and blinked.

Suddenly, I was floating and surrounded by blackness. It seemed that there was no floor underneath me or ceiling above me. My eyes began to adjust to the blackness, and I noticed small specks of light all around me. I realized that they were stars.

I realized that I was moving, since in correlation to me, all the stars were moving behind me. I began to look ahead and, for a second, saw something that resembled a small speck.

I began to approach it. The more I moved to the distant thing, the larger it got, growing larger and larger. My sense of scale was distorted, but even without anything to compare it to, I knew it was massive.

What I stared at was a grotesque creation, made up of what seemed to be gray matter. Long tentacles surrounded it, forming twisting loops and knots. The electrical current seemed to flow through it as well, in flashes and throbs resembling a thundercloud. The being appeared to be part organic material, but it also had glass and obsidian-like materials interweaved within it. The tentacles also appeared to lack connection in certain areas, but they moved like one combined unit.

The thing stared at me. I say it stared because I have no doubt that I was the focus of its attention, but it did not have eyes to see me. I could feel thoughts radiating off it, like the feeling of radiant warmth of a fire. Only, this creature radiated coldness and indifference. Some of the emotions it felt I understood; however, most were completely alien to me, and I could not describe them.

I could also feel it, digging around for something in my own head. At first, it seemed like what it was looking for didn't make sense. A memory of a picnic on a sunny day, a trip to a planetarium, looking up at the night sky and tracing out constellations, the big dipper, Taurus, Orion's belt.

Then I realized. It was looking for where I was from. It was looking for Earth. I tried to focus my mind on something else, but it was useless. The being derived all the information it wanted from me. Then suddenly, I was thrown back. The stars sped around me until I felt my eyes snap open. I was in Paul's outbuilding. The tuning fork device broke, and my left hand held one prong of it. I sat paralyzed on the ground for a couple seconds until I lost consciousness.

What I remember from that point on came and went in flashes. Men in black tactical gear and gasmasks, running around and securing the area. Being transported on a stretcher into an ambulance. Nurses monitoring me. Then a long overwhelming blackness.

When I awoke, I turned to see a man in a three-piece suit. He was reading a magazine, but once he saw my movement, he snapped his attention to me. Looking over me, he then asked if I was in good enough condition to have a conversation. I told him I was. He mainly asked me questions. He told me to inform him of all the things that happened during my time at Dr. McLaidlaw's mansion. I told him everything I knew, even telling him about the being I saw. He nodded, silently writing in a notepad. Once he was done, he got up and went to walk out the door.

"Wait, what happened to Paul and his Butler," I said weakly.

The man turned and looked at me. His face appeared to take on as much sympathy as it could. It was a face that looked accustomed to giving bad news. "Paul McLaidlaw died of a heart attack when driving your vehicle. The vehicle crashed, and no one was injured. His housekeeper died of his injuries. I really am sorry," he said and turned away from me, walking out the door.

I laid back in the hospital bed. *It was fine this way*, I thought because I knew the main emotion that I felt from the being I encountered...hunger.

Contributors

Candace Adkins

Candace Adkins is a 22-year-old student at Coastal Carolina Community College. She has always loved reading poetry and writing song lyrics. She has never submitted anything for something like this before, but she is excited to share her work with others.

Joshua Levy Adkins

Joshua Levy Adkins has lived in Jacksonville for his entire life and is currently a student at Coastal Carolina Community College. When not in school or working, his hobbies include writing, art, and almost anything that can be done outdoors. From hiking and camping, to fishing and whitewater rafting in the mountains, he's done a little bit of everything.

Grace Alvanos

Grace Alvanos is a junior at OECHS. She got into art four years ago and naturally had a talent for it. Her skills really improved last December, so she kept going and working to get where she is today.

Sadie Amaya

Sadie Amaya is a 23-year-old woman, who graduated in Spring of 2022 with two associates from Coastal Carolina Community College. She is married to a loving husband who has held her heart for over nine years. They are Colorado-grown and soak in the sun wherever his career as an Active-Duty Marine takes them. She is pursuing a career as an OB/GYN and enjoys the outdoors, making art, and binging TV in her free time: a.k.a procrastinating chores.

Evelyn Arnold

Evelyn Arnold is 19 years old and is in her second year at Coastal Carolina Community College, getting her Associates in Arts degree. She has lived in Onslow County most of her life except for three years spent in Okinawa when she was in elementary school.

Dana C. Ayers

Dana Ayers is a northern transplant and married mom of 4 kids in a house full of too many animals. After an almost 11-year break, she returned to Coastal Carolina Community College to finish her Associates in Science degree. She loves writing and reading good books, crafting and DIY, and goofy times with her family.

Daniel Ray Baumgardner

Daniel Baumgardner is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College. His story is about a biopsychologist going to visit his friend from college and realizes all is not as it seems. The friend, Dr. McLaidlaw, has been experimenting on a device of unknown origin.

Donna Brown

Donna Brown was born in Virginia and spent most of her life there, growing up in a conservative family. She was married in 1986 and went into the ministry with her husband. Along the way, they were blessed with five children. She now spends her time pursuing her love of writing.

She’Vaughn Brown

She’Vaughn Brown is a young lady who enjoys time with family and friends. She is very passionate about her faith and hopes to inspire others with messages of hope. Although she does not write too often, she does hope her words inspire others and leaves an imprint in their hearts.

Rachel M. Cordero

Rachel Cordero wants to take readers on an adventure into the world of her mind, to walk down the path that few choose to walk. She is here to show her pain, laughter, and much more. She wants to show her heart and pour out her emotions with words.

Malia Deweese

Malia Deweese is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Megan Eesley

Megan Eesley is an Early College student at Coastal Carolina Community College. She is thrilled at having the opportunity to be published in The New River Anthology, and she hopes to write many more pieces in the future!

Kendra English

Kendra English is a 27-year-old Associate in Art major at Coastal Carolina Community College, aspiring to transfer to UNCW as a history major. She hopes one day soon to instill her own love of history in the next generation of scholars as a high school teacher.

Brittany Foster

Brittany Foster was born and raised in Jacksonville, North Carolina. She currently attends Coastal Carolina Community College, where she is working towards her Associates degree in Fine Arts. She hopes to accomplish her dream of becoming an interior designer. In her spare time, Brittany enjoys spending time with her four beautiful children, her fiancé, and her dog Tyson. When not pre-occupied with school and caring for her family, Brittany enjoys sitting outside stargazing and relaxing in the night air.

Patricia Hicks

Patricia Hicks was first introduced to art at a young age, but she rarely expressed her artistic side until after serving in the Marine Corps. Art has allowed her to become a better version of herself and aided her in the transition from military to civilian life.

Lorna Erestingcol Kaminski

Lorna Kaminski is a wife and mother of two. Her husband is Thomas, her daughter is Cyra, and her son is Noah. She loves going to places with her family, especially camping.

Courtney Kendall

Courtney Kendall grew up in Pink Hill, North Carolina. She is studying Office Administration at Coastal Carolina Community College, and she has plans to work as an office clerk at a botanical garden. When she isn't at school, Courtney enjoys reading and spending time with her husband.

Michael Kiley

Michael Kiley is a sophomore at Coastal Carolina Community College and is a graduate of White Oak High School. He lives in Jacksonville, North Carolina with his family and holds interests in horticulture, writing, gaming, and caring for their three dogs.

Michael Kruszewski

Michael Kruszewski is a 28-year-old father of three beautiful girls. He has been writing since a young age and has always been very passionate about it. Painting and writing have been bringing him great joy especially since getting out of the Navy in 2019.

Jon Lacis

Jon Lacis is an AFA student at Coastal Carolina Community College. He plans on transferring to ECU to pursue a BFA in Studio Arts and get his teaching licensure to pursue a career in art education.

Earnest Lemond, Jr.

Earnest Lemond is a freshman at Coastal Carolina Community College, but he is originally from Chicago, Illinois. He plans to transfer to a university and earn a degree in Business and Entrepreneurship. His life goal is to expand his food venture, Leo Soul Rolls, to a national franchise.

Hannah Lowman

Hannah is a current student and Summer 2021 graduate of Coastal Carolina Community College. She is the current President of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and is a work-study in the Student Services Division at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Amanda Maccherone

Amanda Maccherone is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Julia Eileen Moots-Hotaling

Julia Eileen Moots-Hotaling is a 32-year-old full-time student at Coastal Carolina Community College. She cannot thank her teachers and success coach enough for supporting her. She also would not be here without the love and support of her husband and mom. She has truly enjoyed getting to know not only the people here at Coastal, but also getting to know herself. She never thought of herself as a good writer. It is amazing what can come out of a person with the appropriate environment and the right people cheering you on. She cannot wait to see what other experiences, places, and people Coastal exposes her to.

Chastity Mumper

Chastity Mumper is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College. She is pursuing a degree in the Visual Fine Arts. In her free time during the day, she does art in all different kinds of mediums, and at night she is a competitive gamer who fills her notebook with random words that end up somehow making sense. Her biggest pride is taking joy in the fact that she has a beautiful daughter.

Lawanda Ruiz

Lawanda Ruiz's work is pulled from personal experiences that helped her grow as a person.

Kaitlin Rae Sanders

Kaitlin Rae Sanders is currently pursuing a degree in Graphic Design and lives in Jacksonville, NC. Her dream is to become a book designer. In her free time, she enjoys writing, video games, and playing with her cat.

Marianne Nguyen

Marianne Nguyen is currently a first year at Coastal Carolina Community College and is 18 years old. In her free time, she likes to play tennis, work out, draw, dance, and occasionally write for fun. She hopes to become an official webtoon creator.

Genesis Sheaffer

Genesis Sheaffer is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Sarah Simmons

Sarah Simmons enjoys writing fanfiction, essays, and poems in her spare time about life events and television shows. Also, she finds pleasure in a multitude of hobbies, such as baking, cooking, dancing, reading, singing, and swimming.

Thomas Anderson White

Thomas White is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College. He is retired and enjoys boating, singing, and playing musical instruments. He recently published his first book, "My Musical Memoirs." He is rediscovering the joy of writing short stories and poetry.

New River Anthology

Coastal's Student Literary Magazine



COASTAL CAROLINA
C O M M U N I T Y C O L L E G E

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Poetry — up to 5 poems

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Artwork — up to 5 scanned files of artwork or photographs at 300 dpi

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