

Spring 2023

# THE SWITCH

LITERATURE & FINE ARTS



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# Meet the Staff of THE SWITCH

Executive Editor ..... Leora Honbarger

Art Editor ..... Tia Runions

Social Media Manager ..... Ryesa McGehee

Dedicated Staff ..... Alex Martin

Amber K. Thomas

Ava Johnson

Clara Adams

Tre Ruff

Faculty Advisor ..... Dr. Maari Carter

# Letter From THE EDITOR

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My favorite books are familiar in my hands, their names and their covers recognizable at a glance. But the stories inside are what have defined and redefined me.

Since 1984, UT Martin's student-led literature and fine arts magazine has blossomed as *BeanSwitch*. Under this name, our magazine has shared the work of amazing authors and artists to our campus community and beyond. We also recognize that the magazine's values and personality have naturally pivoted over nearly 40 years of publication.

As we define and redefine ourselves, so does our magazine. When we started working on this issue, we knew that we wanted to elevate as many kinds of voices as possible. We knew that we wanted to be recognized across campus and online. And we knew that trying new ideas also meant embracing the possibility of difficulty. I am so proud of my team's diligent problem solving and enthusiastic support during this new chapter.

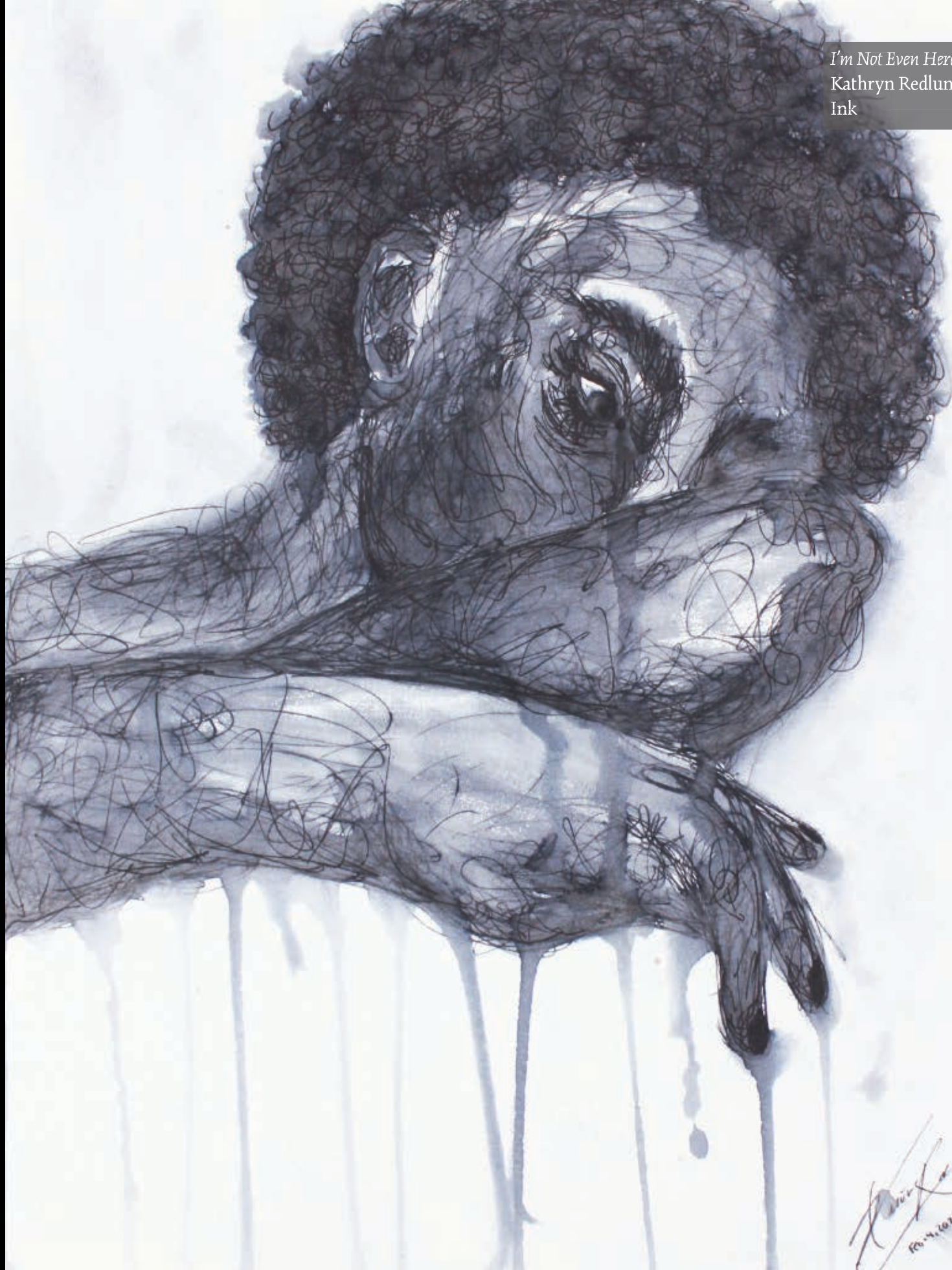
As *The Switch*, we celebrate the magazine's legacy and look forward to fresh beginnings. Inside this issue, you'll find that the stories and images inside remain ready to entertain, enlighten, and express, to pronounce who we are and what we stand for, and to make our readers see and feel—just as our campus magazine has always done. You'll also find a taste of something new.

Join us as we flip a switch and illuminate the talent of the incredible artists and authors in our pages.



Leora Honbarger  
Executive Editor

*I'm Not Even Here*  
Kathryn Redlund  
Ink



# Identity

by Haley Straka

Identity – discovering who you are. Proclaim it to the world.  
Everyone has one. Everyone assumes one another's.  
You are this or you are that – or the grey in between.  
Is identity on the surface or below unseen?  
My identity: I am a woman who loves on a curved line.  
You disagree? You tell me that I'm wrong.  
Is this identity yours or mine?  
Who gets to decide? Society or me?  
Society defines what is to be accepted or not –  
two lines to fall into: A or B.  
So, what happens when you lie in the in between?  
My label gets decided for me. Now how is that fair?  
Odd looks are given and judgment fills the air.  
You aren't this or that, so you are cast out.  
You are a weirdo, a freak – I've heard that tune before.  
I reach out into the unknown with hesitance and fear.  
It fills the void in my mind that society put there.  
But why? Why am I cast aside? Told I should swallow my pride.  
Why is my identity yours to decide?  
Trick question. It's not. I do not have to be caught  
in these lanes: A or B; because that just isn't me – stop.  
I don't have to be the unseen or the in between.  
Why be that when I can just be?  
And that's okay because I don't give a damn about who you think I am  
or who you think I'm supposed to be.  
This is MY identity.  
Identity. Discovering who I am and proclaiming it to the world.





*No Signal*  
Jordan Dodd  
Acrylic on Guitar





*Flamingo Pool Party*  
Izzy Merickle  
Mixed Media

# The Stars by Ethan Elliott

*Atlas' Journal*  
*August 8th, 1905*

For the two hundredth time in less than three months, I mustered all my strength to pull myself up to Susanna's window.

If I had it my way, I would have knocked on her door a lot earlier in the day and taken her out at the blessing of Mr. and Mrs. Whitesmith. But I wasn't getting things my way, not since my kin and her kin started their feud. It feels like it's been a century since we picked up everything we had and skipped the light fantastic out of Waycan County, leaving behind the house I had spent my first nineteen years of life in. We held out for as long as we could, but it seemed like tensions were only rising every day, and by the time the cannons began to sound in the distance, we knew it was high time to leave. As difficult as it was to leave home and traverse the western side of Tennessee, no less, leaving Susanna behind was unthinkable. It wasn't long before I began to abscond from home and sneak my way back into town. Susanna's house sat on the edge of town adjacent to the woods, the surrounding trees provided me with enough cover to make my journey in secret.

Her house was a large black silhouette against the blue tint of midnight, with only the yellow glow of lanterns in the windows offering any evidence of habitation. At the front of the porch, there hung a railroad lantern that threw its glow over a large portion of the front yard, illuminating the bottom sides of leaves clinging to the branches of the oak trees and giving the appearance of daylight to the patches of grass just beyond the steps. In the distance, the cicadas sang their sweet summer melody.

I pulled myself up to her window and tapped on the faded glass. To my surprise, she was already sitting on the edge of her bed, fully dressed and waiting for me. I smiled when I saw her. We climbed down from the window in the rays of the moon and did our best not to wake old Mr.

and Mrs. Whitesmith. It was bad enough that our families were feuding, but I shudder at the thought of what Mr. Whitesmith would have done if he had caught me sneaking his daughter out of the house so late. Chances are I would wind up mounted over the fireplace like the rest of his prized game.

Coming down, I cut my hand on a protruding nail and let out a slight groan. Susanna put her hand over my mouth and told me to be quiet.

"You almost ruin it every time," she whispered.

"And yet you still haven't fixed that nail," I said.

She rolled her eyes and looked up at her window, making sure it hadn't been illuminated by the glow of a candle.

"Liable to burn your house down with them lanterns going all night," I said.

"We only started doing that recently," she said. "Somebody was walking around the woods the other night with a gun."

"Do you know what they wanted?"

"Not exactly, but there was talk among some people in town that someone was selling cannons to your side. Since then there've been more and more people walking around town with guns, I had never seen them this far from the county line before though. So the mayor said it's best that everyone keep a few lights burning, he said that'd make it a little easier to catch someone if they were trying something funny."

I was in no mood to hear a story like that, we were already being bombarded with news of the conflict every day. I came to Susanna's house specifically to get away from all of that.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked.

She looked up at me, her emerald eyes twinkling in the light of the moon, she smiled and gave me a nod.

"I'm ready," she said.

We crept through the yard as quietly as mice and as soon as we were beyond the reach of the



lantern, we sprinted towards the woods, the only place left in the world to escape the booming of the cannons and guns of our disgruntled family and friends. Within ten minutes, we were lost among the silence of the pines. After a while, we reached the old ruined church that sat tightly situated among a group of overhanging branches and clinging moss. It was here that Susanna and I usually stopped on our late-night rendezvous. The building stood cold and lonesome, as though built into a deep recess of the woods. Even the moon bypassed its dilapidated body, spreading its beams in a desultory, sympathetic manner. Inside, it was secluded, quiet, and we could see the stars peeking in through the broken roof. I can still remember the first night we spent there, lying next to each other and looking up at the stars. The sky was full of them that night, it looked as though you could press one finger into the sky and catch a handful of stars. That's something I sure wish I could do in real life, just walk outside and catch some stars. I sure wish I could do that.

Eventually, we came to a creek of clear water that was still and smooth like glass. The night sky was sneaking in through a hole in the cluster of trees and threw its reflection upon the surface of the water. Susanna and I looked at each other, and I knew exactly what she had in mind. Immediately, she ran towards the creek. I watched as her silhouette jumped into the water, throwing the moonlit waves to the rock-filled shore and back. I jumped in after her, the water was cold, but there's something about being with the right person that seems to blind sensation; so that all the world is suddenly reduced to a mere vision of a different time.

Susanna's pale skin lit the water to the point where even the moon hid her face, ashamed of being outshone. Her wet blonde hair was sticking to her pale back and falling in wisps across her face.

"I'm already starting to regret this," she said, shivering and laughing.

It was getting later, I didn't know how long we had been gone, but I knew it must've been very late for the whippoorwills had started to sing

again. That surely meant dawn wasn't too far off.

"Do you want to get out?" I asked.

"Soon," she said. "Sooner if it wasn't so beautiful here. I sure wish we could come here during the day, without worrying who knows about it."

"I know," I said. "We just have to hope everyone wises up here before long."

"You still think they could?" she asked. "You still have faith in them?"

"Sure I do, don't you?"

"I wish I could, it's just hard to."

"I don't think we really have a choice Susanna," I said, "it's our family here."

"I know, it just doesn't seem like anyone's in a hurry to make peace, I want to have faith in my family too, but I can't bring myself to have faith in the others."

She stared down into the water, I noticed her body begin to shiver.

"I can maybe understand that," I said, "But I choose to think so long as man exists, he has a chance to make things better. I heard a priest one time put it like this, he said, 'All man is water, everyone in the world is water, we're all made the same way, and ultimately flow in the same direction towards the same end'".

Susanna laughed lightly beneath her breath.

"What?" I asked. "What's so funny?"

"Even if we were all water," she said, "that still doesn't solve the problem, because even the oceans are divided. The lakes, the creeks both flow independently of each other, the tributaries flow in a path different from that of the mainstem. Even the creek we're in now, it follows its own path, there's not another creek or river for miles."

I didn't say anything, just sat there thinking about what she said. It's one of the things I love about being with Susanna, I'd like to think we have the ability to make each other see things from a different perspective. She surely did that time,

but this only further reinforced how bleak and unpredictable life can be sometimes.

“Atlas,” Susanna said, “how much of this creek do you reckon is rainwater?”

“Probably most of it,” I said, “the rivers and creeks rose pretty high during the storms last week. It’ll take a while for it to dry up.”

I noticed her shivering again. I pulled her closer to me and felt her body continue to shake. I told her it was time we got out and dried off before we got sick. We did so, and sitting back on the bank of rocks, Susanna suddenly stood up and walked back down to the water. She knelt down, cupped a handful of water, and sat there examining it. She looked as if God himself had cried into a cup and poured his tears into her hands, she stared at it intently.

I came down to where she was sitting and looked into her hands. The water was still and black in her palms, and I could see a star or two trapped in the stillness. For the first time in my life, I truly saw someone clasp the stars. It was at this moment that I realized just how disappointing I and the rest of us truly are. She let the water run through her fingers, I grabbed her hands and held them close to my face. They were cold, wet, and smelled like wet leaves. I shut my eyes and drifted off into a world where the only thing one has to worry about is not the booming of cannons or the fires of war, but just how many stars one can fit in two hands.

I heard her take a deep breath and whisper, “Why is it that the things that last are always the most broken?” I released her hands, placed my hand on her warm, flushed cheek and wondered the same thing. More importantly, I wondered why broken things never seem to be broken until you or they truly stop moving and look.

A broken person is just a person to folks who pass them on the street but it’s only until they stop and lay alone beneath the rattling of rain along their roofs that the broken parts truly escape. An old sycamore is nothing but an object to normal folks, and a shelter from the myriad of dangers for the squirrel or bird, but when everyone stops moving that’s when they notice that the bark is

long dead, and peeling off like old weathered skin impervious to the benefaction of summer rain. I thought of this and wondered why God gave man and animals the ability to move at all. Was it to move beyond the vicinity of broken people and broken objects or was it simply to promote the false idea that movement is somehow synonymous with progress? I have moved for as long as my legs have been mobile but still I am broken. I have walked many long forlorn miles, much longer than that of the sycamore yet still in that sycamore I feel akin.

I pulled Susanna close to me and kissed her, she was breathing heavily and I saw as she tightly shut her eyes. I could tell she too felt broken in many ways. She opened her eyes sleepily and looked deep into mine. The whippoorwills were still singing among the hills, dawn would soon find us and shortly we would have to head back home; whatever semblance of home still remained. But the night was now clear, and the August moon dominated the sky like a glowing orb, surrounded by the vast expanse of blue crystals. And finally, I felt like it was just Susanna, and me, and the stars.











*The Barn at Discovery*  
Melissa Virgin  
Digital Photography

# The Small Town of Hensom by Ariana Claros

Few people pass through the small town of Hensom and have much to say about their journey. People do not go to Hensom, only pass through on their way here or there. It is a peaceful town and a pleasant place to stop during a long journey. Perhaps it is not alive and glittering, but the toilets are clean and the food, nourishing. The people there work and play and love, just as the people do from here or there. Few people have much to say about the small town of Hensom, but few people stay long enough to see it truly sparkle.

I was once a traveler: a young artist looking for inspiration. One day, I packed some belongings and set off on a journey to an undecided destination. It had been only a few months since my last surge of whimsy, and I had already found my art lackluster and uninspired. Rather than waste my days with a blank mind and a blank canvas, I preferred to set off to search for something new. I will not lie to you and say that Hensom's quiet charm fascinated me. The sunlight dancing in the windows did not set my mind ablaze with ideas. I felt no sudden desire to stop and explore when I laid my eyes upon the dense woodland that seemed to envelope it. Just outside of the town, my tire hit a piece of shrapnel in the road and stranded me on the side of the road. There may be some hearsay about how much an artist knows about cars. I had enough knowledge to know that I was not getting anywhere without a new tire. After a few spontaneous adventures, I had prepared for a situation like this: not enough to keep a spare tire, but prepared, nonetheless. I hauled two bags out of my trunk, slung one across my back and the other on my shoulder, and started marching along the side of the road.

Hardly ten minutes into my walk, a sharp blast of a horn startled me. I moved further into the shoulder of the road as a rusty old truck slowed next to me. Now, I may have been a whimsical artist on a spontaneous trip to an unknown location, but I wasn't stupid. The lowered window revealed to me that the driver was a boy, probably not much younger than myself: an unlikely serial killer, if you will. Granted, I was still a little

weary.

"That your car down the side of the road?"

"Popped a tire."

"Hop in. I'll give you a ride to town."

Before you criticize my judgment, remember that I am still here, writing this out for you to read. With my bags safely in the bed of the truck, we continued on to the town. Upon further inspection, I realized this boy could easily strangle me if he desired. His hands looked sharp and scarred like he worked with them often, and while his arms were not busting out of his shirt, I could clearly see the line of muscle on his forearms. Unfortunately, I was already in his vehicle and had little to defend myself with, so I struck up a conversation. In the ten minutes it took us to reach town, I learned the boy, Silas, was the nineteen-year-old son of a farmer: the town's most prominent farmer, in fact. He proudly told me about the impressive crops they had nurtured. This wasn't bragging, but a display of passion and excitement in sharing a part of oneself. It's a feeling that an artist can understand very well. Grateful for his help, I let him talk for most of the ride as I gazed around me. It eventually occurred to me that I had no idea where I was or where he was taking me.

"There's a mechanic just 'round the corner. He'll help you out for a decent price, but it would be a miracle if he had a tire on hand to spare."

I live a life free of miracles, so it was no surprise to me when Mechanic Jay Thomas told me it would be a few days before he could get a tire for my car. The news did, however, cause a problem for me. As I had planned on sleeping in my car for this adventure, my funds for a few nights in an inn were low. After much debate, I ended up back in Silas's truck, headed towards his farm. This was perhaps the second time I wondered if I had accidentally given myself up to a serial killer. He took us down a winding gravel road through the woods. When the fields came into view, my panic only lessened for a moment before I realized

a farm probably had tools and ample space for a murder. We stopped in front of a large wooden house in the middle of the open land, and a young girl came running out of the house towards the truck. I was immediately struck with awe when I saw her bright hair, nearly white in the sunlight, bouncing on her shoulders. Before I could stop Silas from grabbing my bags for me, the girl ran up and held her hand out to me.

“The name’s Alena. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Astonished, I lightly shook her hand.

“The pleasure is mine, Alena. You can call me Nate.”

She took my hand and pulled me towards the house, where Silas was already climbing the porch stairs. She talked as excitedly and possibly faster than Silas, which was my only indication so far that they might be related. I was shown every room in the house and given a lengthy explanation about how her father built it himself a long time ago. The inside of the house seemed much smaller than it appeared from outside, but it was beautiful and comfortable. We finally ended up in a small room where two twin beds just barely fit on each side with only a dresser and a small bookshelf filling the rest of the space. Silas had beat us there and set my bags on one of the beds with a pile of folded sheets and a quilt.

“You’ll have to sleep in here with me. There’s only the one extra bed. The bathroom is through that door there, and you can set your things wherever you’d like.”

My head was spinning with the sheer speed at which they moved through their lives. Silas did not seem the least bit phased by the stranger in his bedroom, and young Alena, among all her questions, had never stopped to ask where I came from or why I was there. I had yet to meet the head of the household, and my poor car was stranded on the side of the road. Alena helped me make up my temporary bed while Silas went down to start dinner for the family. I never had to guess at what was going to happen next because they appeared to have a strict daily schedule, and Alena liked to share. By the time we joined Silas in the kitchen, she had given me a thorough rundown of her days

on the farm. The two of them showed me how to clean and prepare the pork chops and how small to cut the potatoes. It felt oddly natural to be in their home and to make dinner in their kitchen, and I wondered if everyone in the town was this friendly. Eventually, Alena ran outside to get their father from the fields, just as she told me she did each day. Silas and I set the table as we waited for them and chatted lightly about how I came to Hensom.

“You must be Nate.”

As soon as I laid eyes upon him, Silas and Alena made much more sense. The two hardly looked alike, but when standing next to their father, they looked like a perfect family picture. I only wondered if Silas’s darker hair and tall stature came from his mother. Oddly enough, with all their talking, they had never mentioned her. I didn’t plan on asking. Mr. Bowman, or Luke, as he asked me to call him, had kind eyes that wrinkled when he smiled at me, and I could feel the roughness of his working hands when I shook his. Any anxieties I had faded away as we talked and laughed through our meal. He told me stories about the kids growing up on the farm and the trouble they made, and I told them about my whimsical journey for inspiration. Luke didn’t hesitate to welcome me when he heard about my car situation.

“Why don’t you go out and run errands with Silas tomorrow? Maybe you can find some inspiration around our humble town.”

The next morning, Silas pulled me out of bed as the sun began to rise. We quickly got dressed, and I slung my backpack over my shoulder before we headed out. I followed him as he went about feeding the animals. He talked about each one and how to care for them while I made sketches of things I found interesting: the peculiar pattern on a horse’s face, the damp nose of a calf, or a shriveled leaf on the ground. Occasionally Silas would fall silent, and I’d turn to find him watching my hand move across the page. Later, we met Alena back at the house for a breakfast of jam-covered toast and oatmeal. When she left to care for the smaller animals, Silas turned to me.



"There's something I want to show you. Bring your sketchbook."

We climbed into the golf cart, and he drove to the east side of the land and stopped at the edge of the trees surrounding the property. He beckoned me to follow him as he hopped out of the cart and ventured into the woodland. The path we followed was not really a path, but it looked as though it was frequently visited. I realized that Silas had a beautiful passion for all plants, not just farm crops. As we walked, he named the types of trees we passed, the flowers that hugged the ground, and the berries that hid under leaves. The path became rocky, and we eventually came upon a small stream. I don't know how long we sat there: Silas talking as I filled my pages with trees and flowers, water flowing over rocks, and birds picking at the ground.

"When I was a kid, my mom and I would come here and sit for hours."

He told me about how she loved nature and how they would go on long walks, carrying books to help them identify as many plants as they could. I continued drawing, listening carefully as he told me about her long brown hair that hung in waves around her shoulders and her eyes that changed color in the sun. He told me how she met his dad and where she grew up. He told me about how she got sick and spent months in a hospital bed until she passed away in her sleep when he was thirteen and Alena was just three. When he stopped talking, we sat in silence for a few moments until he asked to see my sketches. I let him flip through the pages, and he wrote the name of each plant next to the sketch. He lingered on a drawing of himself gazing up at the trees before flipping to the last page I had been working on. After a few more quiet moments, he handed my sketchbook back to me with a smile and stood to leave. We walked towards the golf cart, Silas picking up his usual steady chatter. When we arrived back at the house, Luke was cleaning up after his and Alena's lunch.

"Where'd you boys run off to?"

"Looking for inspiration," Silas answered, giving me a grin.

Luke handed us each a sandwich and sent us off to the truck where Alena was waiting. With the bed full of eggs and produce, we headed to the market. The town of Hensom doesn't have much in terms of parking. It's like they're forcing you to walk through the town, which adds to its charm. We loaded wagons with the produce and started making our way down the street. I lagged behind, stopping to sketch interesting storefronts and an abandoned bicycle. Fortunately for me, everyone in town seemed to want to greet the Bowman kids and ask about the farm, so I didn't end up very far behind. Some people greeted me as well and asked about my drawings. It was unusual to be in a town where so many people expressed interest in a stranger's life. Alena and I stayed outside while Silas went inside with the grocer. I sketched the man across the street playing a melancholy tune on his flute as she told me about how he lost his wife and son in an accident and came to Hensom after losing his job. He refuses any offers of shelter, and only accepts kindness in trade: food in exchange for labor, clothes in exchange for a story, a shower in exchange for a song. No one knows much about him, but he is as kind as those who are kind to him. She gently reminded me to add the feather in his hat and the tags around his neck.

"Oh, Nate. How are you?"

I looked up to find Mechanic Jay Thomas with two large paper grocery bags in his arms. After a bit of catching up, he told me that a tire would be in the next day, and I should be able to head out by late afternoon. He greeted Alena and assured me he would call me with further changes. We watched as he crossed the street, exchanged a few words with the flute player, and handed him one of the grocery bags. They started towards the car park together as Silas came out of the store.

Back at the farm, Silas went out to help his father while I stayed to help Alena with chores around the house. We washed the truck, raked leaves, and folded the laundry. Once the chores were finished, she gave me a tour of her bedroom, telling me about her favorite things and her collection of peculiar rocks. Her walls were covered in drawings of constellations, and a telescope was set up by her window. Once we had covered every corner of the

room, she decided we should bake cookies for the boys to have when they came back inside. Silas found us in the kitchen an hour later with cookie dough on the ceiling and a stack of ugly cookies on the counter. He helped us clean up, and we all started preparing dinner. Dinner was once again full of stories and teasing and laughter. When everyone had finished, Luke sent them away and asked me to help him clean up.

“Tell me about yourself, son.”

Luke had this kind of voice that made you trust him and eyes that made you feel seen. A few hours and a couple beers later, I had told him about how my parents kicked me out as soon as I turned eighteen and about my tiny studio apartment that I pay for by helping out the art teacher at my town’s community center. Ms. Flores pays me to instruct younger students, model for older students, and tidy up around the studio. I don’t get a whole lot of money from it, but I get to be in a place of art and pay my bills. On occasion, I can leave for spontaneous journeys and know that I’ll be welcomed back. Luke told me about his kids: not the silly stories he told at dinner, but the real ones. I was thrilled to share this and to hear these things from a father who so deeply loved his children. As he spoke, I thought about Silas’s passion and Alena’s curiosity. I thought about Luke and how he cared for and nurtured them by allowing and encouraging them to be themselves.

Eventually, Luke stood up and excused himself to bed. I made my way up to the bedroom and found Silas reading in his bed. We laid on our separate beds, across the room, in silence.

The next morning, I asked if I could use the truck to go to town for a while. I left the car park and walked down the street until I came upon a cafe. Inside, I sat at a table in the corner with a single cup of coffee and pulled out my sketchbook, setting to work on an unfinished piece.

It was lunchtime when I made it back to the farm, and the four of us enjoyed a final meal together. I joined Silas for his afternoon chores until Alena came running to us, telling us that Jay called to let us know the car was ready. The three

of us found Luke in the fields, and I held my hand out to shake goodbye. Instead, Luke pulled me into a hug, the kind a father gives, and told me that I was always welcome to visit. With a heart full of gratitude, I headed to the house to grab my things. On Silas’s bed I left a page from my sketchbook: the one that made him smile a day earlier. It was a drawing of his mother, as he had described her to me. I spent my morning in the cafe developing the sketch to the best of my memory. Outside, he and Alena were waiting for me in the truck. Alena sang along to the radio the whole way to town as Silas and I cheered her on. We were all in a fit of laughter by the time we had parked. When the laughter subsided, it was time to say goodbye. Alena hugged me tightly as Silas leaned against the car, watching. Looking up at Silas, I gave a small smile that he returned, and it was all either of us needed to say. With a final goodbye, I grabbed my bags and headed towards Jay’s shop.

Back at the community center, Ms. Flores asked me about my trip and if I had found what I was looking for. When I told her I had, she asked what it was that I found. My mind swirled with memories of a town, unremarkable at a glance yet filled with remarkable stories. There was a boy with a kind heart and unrelenting passion, a young girl with hair as bright as the sun and a mind brighter still, and a father with an abundance of love to give. I looked around my workspace at the sketches of trees and animals and a lonely old man. I looked at the piece in front of me, an incomplete portrait of a young man sitting on a rock and peering up at the trees. I looked back at Ms. Flores and smiled.

“I found me.”





# I Stand Before the World

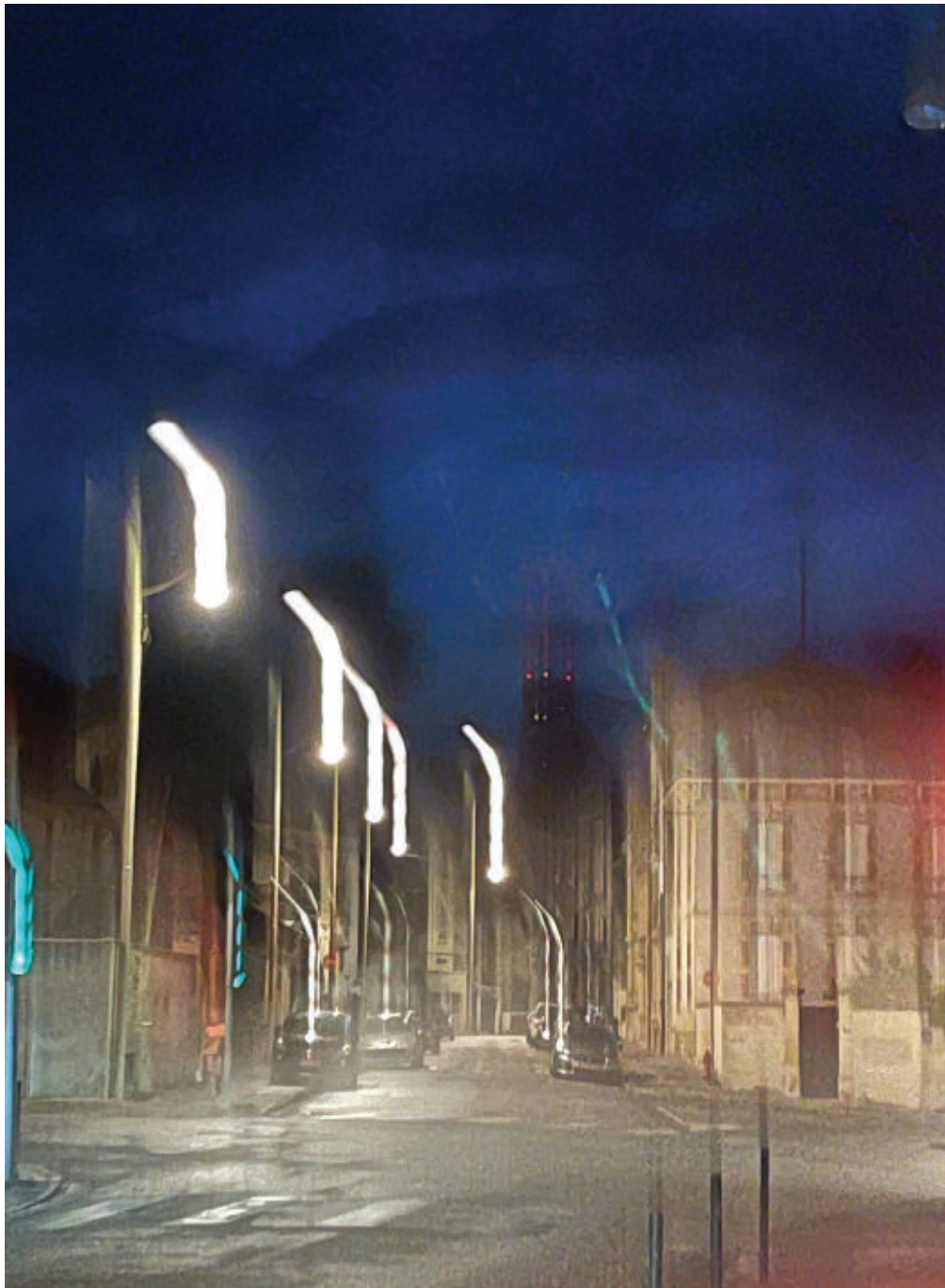
by Grant Bivens

I stand before the world  
A high priest of ignominy  
Sacrificing my dignity  
Onto the altar of disgrace

Take my small curved knife  
And slash what burns  
As titans look down upon me laughing  
“Hail degrade! Hail debase!”  
A crowd shouts in unity  
Words flowing at my feet

Ye gods, subdue my high spirits  
Wreck and deflate my joy  
Shame me eternally o most highous ones  
I will walk across your scalding fires  
Barefooted, tormented for all to see  
I will be the first to let everyone know

*Blurred Trails*  
Michele Hughey  
Digital Photography



# Loving Too Hard

by Adranique Merriwether

Dear Heart,

So foolish, so coy.

*I wanna know how you do it.*

He beats you down like a Black lady's shoes

Stomping away demons on a Sunday morning.

Yet you still allow him to fill your veins with

Lies and Pixy Stix, rotting you away,

"Sour, then sweet," he jokes.

As if killing you softly were a joking matter.

How morbid of him to think that disguising

Poison in a pile of sugar would be the ultimate prank.

*He's hurting you, but you don't know it.*

Let me rephrase that, *you don't accept it*, though it is the truth.

It is a dark truth like a child discovering that the things, and people, they love

Cannot live forever.

You sip every tear he's ever made you fall as they drop into the palms of your hands,

Like a wanderer desperately taking a drink of their own piss to survive after days of

Scouring the Sahara for some kind of salvation.

That same evening, with tears still engraved onto your

Blush red, stress-ridden cheeks,

Your inner thighs bloom for him and

He greets your pink petals with a gentle kiss.

"That's all he ever wanted!" I scream at you.

*You can't hear me.*

Your soul orgasms and you come back to your senses,

Realizing what you've just done as he cleans himself of his own ego and whatever new piece of you he collected this time.

Your pulse beats "SOS" in morse.

Unfortunately, like his love for you and your excuses for loving him, it is outdated.

Go save yourself. I can't keep doing this alone.

Sincerely, Brain.



*Escape*  
Stephanie Hopper  
Digital Collage







*God's Beautiful Creation*  
James Crowell  
Digital Photography



# Dancing Through Death by Allaynezy Corcoran

## Characters

**CLARA** - female, 25, unspecified ethnicity

**SILAS** - young adult male, ghost, unspecified ethnicity

**STATUES** - statues that come to life

**BALLROOM GUESTS** - the dancing partners to the statues

Setting: Sometime in the early 1800s. England.

## Scene 1

*(Enter CLARA, dancing a waltz by herself. She dances for a few steps, then she sits down, picking flowers.)*

CLARA

Why look at this one! This flower is perfect for mother. Oh! And this one right here! Father will love this one indeed!

*(A beat.)*

I just don't understand why they don't allow me to come out to this meadow. It is absolutely perfect. The flowers, the water streams, and even the animals are so beautiful.

*(CLARA speaks to the flowers.)*

They never understand, do they?... You are absolutely right, little flower, they never understand.

*(Enter SILAS, hiding from CLARA.)*

CLARA

I just wish they would let me out of the house for reasons other than going to the market. Even then, I am not able to go with just myself. Either mother or father has to go with me. Which I think is a little unfair for a 25-year-old female, don't you think?.

*(A beat.)*

Do you know what I want most? I want to be like the other daughters in the town. I want to go to a town ball, wear a magnificent ball gown, and dance the night away just like how all you flowers do in the wind. One night is all I ask; to be a princess in my own fairy tale. Is that too much to ask, flower?

SILAS

*(A beat. SILAS walks towards CLARA.)*

Who is to say that your dream cannot come true?

CLARA

Who are you? Where did you come from? Who are you?

SILAS

*(SILAS kneels to the ground.)*

The name is Silas. Silas Taylor.

*(SILAS takes CLARA's hand and kisses it.)*

I am the occupant of a mansion further down in the forest. I came to acquire it some odd years ago, and have had the trouble of meeting new townspeople.

CLARA

*(A beat.)*

Wait. Silas? My friend from when I was a little girl? I thought you were a figment of my imagination! My parents told me you did not exist! Oh my, how I have missed you! Sit! Sit! Tell me, Silas, how have you been all these years? Wherever did you go? You never found me again like you said you would.

SILAS

I know, my dear Clara, please forgive my actions, as they were not decided by me. My father, you see, was a very controlling one. He was one to think that childhood friendships were not an important factor in one's life. When you and your family moved out of your house, I planned to run away from my own home and follow you wherever you go. Well, your parents had found out about my 'mischievous' plan and told my father. After that moment, he forbade me from ever leaving the house again. He hired more servants to act as my guards, and other servants were sent to town to get any food that we needed. Please know, Clara, that I have longed to see your face since the night you told me goodbye.

CLARA

Oh, Silas. How I have missed you!

*(SILAS and CLARA embrace)*

Mother and father have been quite miserable to me since we moved. I am not allowed to go outside either! The only reason I am here in the meadow right now is that they think I am in my room asleep. This meadow is the only place I can dance and feel free.

SILAS

*(SILAS stands up and offers his hand to CLARA.)*

Well, Clara. Care for a small dance?

CLARA

*(CLARA takes his hand. They dance a few steps. Laughter ensues. SILAS lifts CLARA in the air while turning in a circle. SILAS and CLARA stop dancing. They embrace in another hug.)*

Why, Silas, you have not changed one bit.

SILAS

I am glad you think that. I was afraid that you would not enjoy my company anymore...say, Clara, would you like to come with me back to my manor? I think you would find it comforting.

CLARA

Oh, I don't think...my parents would be very upset with -

SILAS

Clara, dear, you are 25 years old. You are a woman of many talents, one of which is the ability to decide how you go about life. Even in the most confining households, you still managed to find a way to be free. Wouldn't you say?

*(SILAS holds out his hand.)*

Come with me, Clara, and I will make all your dreams come true. All you have to do is trust me, just like when we were little.

*(CLARA takes his hand. Blackout.)*

## Scene 2

*(Cobwebbed furniture is placed on the stage, as well as four abstractly placed pedestals with statues on them. The STATUES are alive. Each STATUE has a distinct horrified expression on them. The STATUES are frozen still as SILAS and CLARA arrive. The mansion is lit by a few oil lamps, just enough to see.)*

CLARA

Now Silas I believe this is getting quite ridiculous! Whenever may I open my eyes?

SILAS

Soon my dear, I promise. Just a few more steps and then you may.

CLARA

You always were a lot to handle when you were younger. I am glad to see that nothing has changed.

SILAS

Oh, I cannot be that difficult to be around.

CLARA

I do not say the opinions that I do not believe.

SILAS

Whatever you say, Clara.

*(A beat.)*

Okay. Now open your eyes.

CLARA

It's...my house...The house from when I was a child...You own this?

SILAS

Yes, Clara, I do. This is your home. Just the same as when you were little...shall we go inside?

CLARA

...Yes...Lets...

*(CLARA walks into the mansion, almost in a trance. A beat.)*

You haven't changed a thing, have you? Everything is just like how it was on the day we left here. Everything is so beautiful.

*(CLARA walks up to the STATUES)*

Oh, well these are new. Where did you get these? They seem so...sacred...

*(CLARA reaches her hand out to touch the STATUES. SILAS stops her.)*

SILAS

Please don't touch -

CLARA

Oh my, I am so sorry, I was just so entranced by them that I never realized -

SILAS

It's alright. Why don't you tell me more about your dreams? As I spoke to you earlier this evening, I promised to make all your dreams come true when you arrived here. Now go on. Tell me what your heart desires most.

*(SILAS sits down on one of the cobwebbed chairs. He stares at CLARA as if he is studying her.)*

CLARA

*(A beat.)*

Ever since my family and I moved away from this manor, I have been a slave in my own house. Forbidden to leave on my own and forced to do chores around the house. Now, mother and father love me dearly, I will say that, as they never once laid a hand on me. They cared for me and provided me with more than what I needed to live. They even had a lady of the house whose purpose was to educate me with everything I needed to know about life. I gained a lot of knowledge about mathematics, God, literature, the stars, and even some items of business

*(A beat)*

I loved my parents. Truly, I did. I just wish they would let me be free. They have known that for all my life I have dreamed of dancing at a ball. The music, the laughter, the dresses, the lights, all of it. It sounds wonderful just by speaking of it, don't you agree, Silas?

*(SILAS nods in agreement, but is still studying CLARA.)*

When I am dancing, I feel as if I am on the moon. I suppose that feeling is more exciting whenever you have a partner dancing with you. I could not tell you whether that is true or not, as I had only ever danced with myself. Not even my family will dance with me. If I am caught dancing, they will make me clean out the farmhouse as punishment...Oh, how I wish I could



dance forever and forget everything.

*(CLARA looks at the STATUES and sees that their poses have slightly changed. The STATUES are less frightened and appear happier. SILAS sees her confusion and decides to change the subject.)*

Do these statues look they have/ -

SILAS

/I can help you.

CLARA

What do you mean?

SILAS

I can help you dance forever. Just like you wish. We can dance until we are dead.

CLARA

Well, I do not know about the “till death” part, but I would love to dance throughout the night.

*(CLARA laughs. SILAS does not laugh.)*

Let us host a ball here! Oh please, Silas, make my dream come true! You said you would!

SILAS

I know I promised you, Clara, and I do not want to break that promise.

*(A beat)*

Give me your hand. Let us start this ball by dancing.

CLARA

Why? There is no music here? Nor have we cleaned! No invitations have been sent out either!/How will people know?

SILAS

/They will come, my dear. Do you trust me?

CLARA

Yes, of course, Silas.

SILAS

Then take my hand. Dance with me.

*(SILAS and CLARA begin a waltz. After a few moments, a track of Tchaikovsky -*

CLARA

*(CLARA tries to stop dancing but SILAS does not let her)*

Where is this music coming from?

SILAS

Do not worry about that. Keep dancing with me and you can be free for the rest of your life.

*(SILAS and CLARA keep dancing. Two beats go by. The STATUES step down from their pedestals, and begin to dance with one another. CLARA sees the dancing STATUES, and becomes frightened.)*

CLARA

Who are these people?/Where did they come from?

SILAS

/Just keep dancing dear. Keep. Dancing.

*(Everyone continues to dance. A beat. The STATUES form a large circle that encaptures SILAS and CLARA. Another beat. SILAS stops dancing.)*

Here. Drink this.

*(SILAS pulls out a chalice filled with wine.)*

Drink and all your dreams will come true. You will be able to forget about the world around us and leave everything and everyone behind. We can dance together. Forever.

CLARA

*(CLARA grabs the chalice, but does not drink it.)*

But how can that be? How can all of this be possible? There is no band playing! And the statues! They are dancing! None of this can be happening!

*(A beat of realization)*

Unless...my parents were telling the truth...you are not real...that you are someone, something...a ghost of some sort.

*(The STATUES continue to dance around SILAS and CLARA.)*

SILAS

Clara, dear, if I were not real, how could we be dancing with each other? Touching each other. Feeling one another. If I did not exist, you would not be able to see me. Or any of this for a matter of fact.

*(SILAS takes CLARA's hands into his)*

I promised you that I would make all your dreams come true. I am a man of my word, Clara. I want you to be with me for the rest of your life.

*(A beat)*

Think back to the day you told me you were leaving. I promised I would come back for you, and I did. I came back to you. Now you need to come to me. Drink this, Clara, and we will dance forever. That is what you have always wanted. I know every little thing that your sweet heart

desires, I can give them to you. All you need to do is drink the wine from this chalice. I will ask again...Do you trust me?

CLARA

Yes.

SILAS

Do you love me?

CLARA

Yes.

SILAS

Will you do anything for me?

CLARA

Yes.

SILAS

Then drink for me.

CLARA

*(CLARA drinks from the chalice. CLARA starts to cough. The STATUES continue to dance around SILAS and CLARA)*

I feel...kind of...

*(CLARA faints. SILAS catches her. SILAS strokes CLARA's hair away from her face. The STATUES stop dancing.)*

SILAS

Oh you were always such a naive little girl. Too blinded by your dreams that you could not see the danger that lay right in front of you.

*(CLARA wakes up. She has a far off look to her face. CLARA is dead.)*

Dance with me, my darling.

*(SILAS and CLARA start to dance again. The STATUES begin to dance again throughout the stage. A few beats go by. The STATUES separate from one another and begin to dance by themselves. The STATUES go back onto their pedestals and freeze into their original horrified look. The STATUES' partners continue to dance until they are off the stage. SILAS and CLARA continue dancing. A beat. SILAS stops dancing. CLARA continues to dance as if he is still with her. SILAS watches CLARA dance then walks off*



*stage. CLARA continues to dance by herself. A few beats go by. The lights dim, and so does the music. CLARA continues to dance.)*

End



Lumiere  
Michele Hughey  
Digital Photography

# Starry Night Sky by Austin Carnell

Another day was finished at work, and it was time to go home. Night driving had become my specialty at this point, always getting off work close to midnight meant that I was always driving in the dark. The sights are usually pretty boring, until one clear night while driving home, I witnessed a spectacular view from above the dark highway. It was a single streak of light crossing the sky that lasted only a few seconds, but it left a profound impression on me. The meteor could have been anything, from a chunk of rock that found its way to Earth from the beyond, to a satellite crashing down at the end of its lifespan. Whatever it was, I never discovered. It's possible that I am the only witness to such a sight.

Perhaps this is the universe telling me something. Perhaps the universe couldn't care less what I have to think. I'm leaning towards the former. You're telling me that in the thousands of lightyears we've surveyed around our solar system, the universe would give us, and only us, the perfect conditions for life to form, only to ignore us in the blip of time we're given? Surely not. The universe is amazing. It is proud, but also lonely. What's the point of creating something so amazing if nobody is there to witness it? Like art, space and the universe are there to be witnessed.

The universe is grand. We are but a fly to the Sun, and yet, our Sun is not even a speck of dust to the observable universe. If it's true that the universe is truly infinite, then our observable universe is not even worth mentioning. That's without going into the possibility of multiverses, ours just a bubble amidst the crowd. Yet here we are, growing, living, breathing on a space rock formed to near perfection. We record and observe everything around us, to the last detail. The more we learn about it, the more we realize just how much we can't answer. Our universe could not give us such an occasion to be wowed without messing with our minds. Save for breakthroughs in technology, there is simply no way for us to leave our solar system, but there are simple and effective ways for us to record and witness the beyond. Simply look up at our starry night sky. Every night we are given a spectacular view of millions of stars lightyears away from us. It is a glimpse into the past, showing off what came before us, only now able to reach us.

We discover more and more of the universe out of simple fascination. We have taken pictures of our own supermassive black hole, at the center of the galaxy. We know the Andromeda galaxy will collide with ours in 4.5 billion years. We know we have Neutron star collisions to thank for most of the elements on the periodic table, including gold and silver. We also know that we don't know a lot about what makes this universe work. Dark matter is still a mystery to us, as are black holes, the ultimate power in our world. The universe certainly allows us to discover a lot, but it always humbles us in the end. It is quite possible that we may never discover the secrets of the black hole, or never see beyond the observable universe, or learn just what happened during the Big Bang. It certainly has a way of showing off like a proud parent, while keeping its secrets.

Compared to such a world, we are small and insignificant. Our mortality limits us immensely. We are born, see the things the universe wants us to see while hiding away the rest, and then we die. We record, write, and draw to remember these, but even that washes away in the end. When our Sun dies, it washes away all memory of Earth with it, and nothing left behind will remain. We live in the perfect conditions for life now, but new stars will not form in the future. Soon, the universe will be a cosmic boneyard. Dying stars will light up the night sky not in a mesmerizing blue, but in a fiery red. They will fade, one by one, until only black holes remain. Even then, current theories predict that black holes are not infinite. They too, will fade in time. Entropy marches on, and soon the universe will freeze to an absolute zero, where even time becomes meaningless.

One day, this essay could be proven wrong. Maybe the universe does die a fiery death, collapsing back in on itself, ending as it began, only to begin again. Truth is, we don't know. We may never know. Maybe the universe will hide the secrets of dark matter from us, locking out 80% of what makes the world work the way it does. Perhaps it's simply not our place. But, that is the joy of discovery. We search and learn, make theories, then get proven wrong over and over again. Some things are impossible to learn in the process, so we must make assumptions. I think the universe enjoys watching us through this process. It keeps us searching forever.

We tend to believe that our lives are meaningless in the grand scheme of things due to this. It is true that faced with the universe, we are not even motes of dust, but this world does not place importance on size. Just like the saying “it’s not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog”, this also rings true in our world. Size matters not. Despite our mortality, we humans are still built from the remnant of stars. We hold the ultimate force of life in ourselves, the engines that work to keep us alive. Those same stars we look up to, could be distant relatives. The very same stars that flare up in a blaze of glory in their last moments, and provide us with the building blocks of life, are inside us. So then, who is to say we’re insignificant? We also hold the power to create, and to destroy. This fundamental truth of human civilization is inescapable. Perhaps then, our insignificance is not so meaningless.

Maybe this is why our sky is so photogenic. The stars want to look down to us, and tell us their story of how they live, what they’re made of, and the planets in their orbit. They reveal themselves fully to us, leaving nothing hidden, as if to say “find out all you can of us”. They twinkle and dance beautifully, as if trying to be noticed. This is their moment in the spotlight. To them, it’s in the blink of an eye, but that’s all it takes.

When the universe dies, nothing will be remembered. But, we are given this opportunity to see and experience the starry night sky before us as it stands. It is a testament to the wonder of the world, like it just wants a period in time where someone can say “I remember.” That meteor I saw reminded me of this fact. Short and insignificant, burning to nothing, it still left an imprint on me that I will remember for the rest of my life, and perhaps one day I’ll pass the memory down to the next generation, so that it will live on. Maybe the meaning of life is not to find a purpose, but to learn all that we can, to take in the sights, and stand in awe of what’s above and below. We are observers, witnessing the birth of a beautiful universe, and it wants to show off how amazing it is.





# To My Former God

by Mari Morgan

honestly  
im not sure  
how  
we got here

me  
kneeling in  
the shower  
bent  
like the trees  
after forty  
days of rain  
drowning from  
baptisms

you  
paring your  
fingernails  
straight  
cleaning them  
sweet and kind  
in the sink  
emptying  
with my dirt

honestly  
i dont know  
why  
we just left

i  
confessed much  
witnessed you  
and all your  
blues  
yellows greens  
praising you  
when seas came  
from your brush

you  
listened well  
carrying me  
home  
after one drink  
nodding to  
all the schemes  
and all the  
worlds i made  
honestly  
i cant tell  
where  
we are now

i  
called for you  
but my pleas  
only went  
in your box  
im sorry im  
sorry im  
hoping you  
slide the screen

you  
hide behind  
the curtain  
forsaking  
me  
for the sins  
i didnt  
know i had  
committed

honestly  
im not sure  
how  
i got here

me  
feeling my eyes  
sink  
overflowing  
til my small  
temple runs  
out of clean  
water for  
baptisms

i  
know i am  
not Jesus  
i have dents  
in my head  
heart body  
but i tried  
to worship  
you  
in the best way i could  
but  
a true God would not have  
left

(so let it be on me)

# Demons/Friends

by Artez-Dante Williams

I feel like I just opened the doors of Hell.  
A wave of demons surrounds me.  
They're wearing faces I'm familiar with.  
I trust them, though they deceive me.  
But I'm used to it.  
For the real ones deceive me just the same.



*The Fallen*  
Matthew Mancusi





*Diet Culture*  
Stephanie Hopper  
Digital Collage



# My Mom's Chicken Pot Pie

by Ava Johnson

*You selfish fuck,*  
Go help your mom in the kitchen.  
You know that she has a bad knee,  
And that she would *adore* your company.  
You don't have anything better to do.  
Get off your messy bed  
The one that hasn't been made in months  
Even though your parents always tell you to.

*There are kids in third-world countries*  
*who would love the food on your plate,*  
Your mom says in between bites of chicken pot pie  
*You know that I don't eat carrots, Mom.*  
Why does she never make food that I like?

Meanwhile,  
There are homeless people living  
On half a turkey sandwich a day  
(Maybe beef stew if they're lucky.)  
*They would swallow those nasty little cubes,*  
In a box, with a fox, or any other way.

So set your phone down, turn off that channel,  
Because there are abundant people to save.  
But your powers are limited, and you can only start  
*By finishing your own damn plate.*

*The happy*





*The Happy Place*  
Julie Mosley  
Digital Illustration



# Negotiation by Amber K. Thomas

Seija stared into the shop from the now doorless opening. The wooden shelves laid on top of each other like fallen books. Some of the shelves were blackened on the edges, and the floor had black burn stains. Glass shards from the windows and previously carefully organized containers covered the floor. Seeds, berries, and flower petals were scattered about, but no real merchandise was left behind. Despite being at the end of the trading district, the shop had once had many weavers who did business for materials. It was now among other vacated shops; though, the other shops showed no signs of damage.

Shaking, Seija looked to her friend Fintan.

"We need to leave Mendacia," he said. "Quickly."

"Not without the antidote for Aivars."

"We'll find one," Fintan tried to reassure her as he warily watched their surroundings.

Seija looked back into the shop. "We don't even know what happened to Mr. Ashworth."

The man had been an old friend and trading partner of the siblings, and Fintan was reluctant to consider what could have happened to him. "Maybe he left to avoid this. Our next best option is the apothecary."

Seija acknowledged that Fintan was right, and the two left the shop to return to the main shopping district of Mendacia, the closest and most affluent port town. Seija and Aivars, her brother, had noticed that the town's atmosphere had started to change, but it wasn't until Aivars returned home ill that Seija realized that their suspicions had some kind of foundation.

"You don't think Aivars was there when it was destroyed, do you?" Seija asked.

"Let's hope not."

As the two walked, they noticed that the town guards tended to take notice of them. Maybe, the large sack of fine wool Seija had brought as

cover for negotiations had piqued their interest. Though, she was concerned that the guards may have been wary of the swords that the two of them were wearing despite their weapons being peace-tied in accordance with the local law. She recognized one of the guards, and, when they happened to make eye contact, she knew he recognized her too. She smiled at him—her brother had taught her to be nice to clients no matter how she felt—and he bit his lip, shook his head at her, and quickly turned away as another guard started talking to him. Seija considered interrupting them to ask about Ashworth's shop but bit her tongue and walked faster. She wouldn't let herself wonder why a client would go out of the way to avoid her. Their goal was to get the antidote for her brother. That was all.

When the two entered the area of town where the apothecary was, Seija noted that the market was unusually empty. She and Aivars had had to choose a meeting location the last time they had visited because the crowds would force them apart. Now, the merchants didn't even have to shout over each other to be heard, and there weren't very many children or families walking on the street. Seija and Fintan noted nothing particularly suspicious as they climbed the porch of the apothecary's shop and entered. A bell attached to the door rattled as the door closed. The room smelled of lavender and incense and strong, bad-tasting herbs. The clashing scents took both Seija and Fintan aback, but they found the apothecary and an apprenticed boy situated at a worktable directly in the back of the room across from the door. The elderly woman greeted them warmly as she ground up a strange yellow flower.

Seija immediately began listing her brother's symptoms, but the apothecary's expression slowly turned sour. The apprentice shrunk into his seat and shook his head at Seija who didn't notice.

"We don't work with that here," the woman said.

"Do you know what it is?" Fintan asked, glancing at the apprentice.

The apprentice discreetly nodded once as the old woman said, "We don't deal with that business. Get out of my shop. Now."

"Please! My brother needs the antidote. I'll—"

"I will call the guards to remove you from my shop," the apothecary turned to the apprentice. "Galen."

"Yes, ma'am," the apprentice answered, running out of the shop.

"I'll pay whatever price! Please!" Seija put her hands on the counter and stared at the old woman.

The apothecary pressed down on her mortar harder and stared back with harsh, narrowed eyes. Fintan placed a hand on Seija's shoulder and shook his head. Seija clenched her teeth; she was still an outsider, and trouble could cost her—and her brother—valuable connections.

"Please excuse the intrusion," Seija said in as composed of a voice as she could manage. "I'm sorry for any disrespect to you and your establishment."

She gave the apothecary a brisk nod before following Fintan out the door. She sighed heavily once the door rattled shut and considered her options. It took Fintan a while to get her attention to point out that the apprentice was waving at them from the alley next to the shop.

When the two approached him, the apprentice led them slightly farther into the alley and looked around before whispering, "I can't help you, but I know someone. She can meet you around here later today, around sunset, but she's busy now. Just make sure you can pay her."

"I'll have appropriate payment," Seija confirmed.

"Do you know why your teacher refused us? Or, what's happening here?" Fintan asked.

"I—I don't really know." The apprentice glanced around. "The adults don't really say anything, but I heard something was going on around one of the buildings near the wharf."

"What was?" Seija asked.

"I don't know, but I have to go. Don't mention anything to anyone," the apprentice said before rushing farther into the alley and turning a corner, leaving the two alone.

"Do you think that he'll actually come through with that?" Seija asked.

"He seemed willing to help," Fintan said despite having his own suspicions.

"Do you think we can wait until sunset?" Seija paused, expecting an answer, but Fintan didn't respond. "Aivars doesn't even know I'm here, Fintan. I don't even know if he's still alive at this point!"

Fintan couldn't answer Seija. He had watched her stay by her brother's side for two days with little sleep. She had done all she could to help Aivars's fever and pain, but no medicine helped him. All that Aivars had managed to say in his delirious state was, "Don't go," and Fintan knew there was something in this town that they needed to leave alone. But, Seija didn't accept her brother's warning even with the risk of being exposed to whatever horrible poison was afflicting the man.

"Let's go to the wharf," Seija said abruptly.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Fintan objected.

Seija responded with only a steady gaze. He wanted to reject her idea again, but her eyes were red and she was trying to hide that she was clenching her skirt in one hand. Waiting helpless outside of a shop was as bad as the sleepless nights.

Against Fintan's better judgement, Seija led them to an abandoned looking area of the wharf that had too many city guards in the vicinity for how empty it appeared to be. There was a dilapidated log building that some men were moving large crates of materials out of. As they approached the proximity of the building, a pair of city guards began approaching them from either end of the street. Seija and Fintan realized that they were

clearly recognizable and that it was too late to turn back as four guards eyed them while walking by. Having no alternative, the two kept walking towards the building.

Seija opened the creaky door as Fintan silently followed her. He covertly untied the cord that kept his sword peace-tied as a man welcomed them into the building. The building smelled strongly of chemicals—irritating chemicals much unlike the apothecary’s shop—but Seija recognized the scent as being similar to how Mr. Ashworth’s destroyed shop had smelled. The front room was mostly empty except for a few wooden shelves and a single table at the back of the room. There were traces of white powder on the floor. Seija noticed that the man who welcomed them was well-dressed, but, when he moved behind Seija, she gave him a disapproving look, and Fintan glared at him as the man laid a hand on her pack that contained the finely dyed wools.

“What have we here to trade?” the man asked, pushing both of them farther into the shop.

Seija took in a deep breath and resisted the man’s guidance. “Yes, I have something to trade. Fine wools.”

“Let us see. You can put them here on this table,” the man said as he walked to the door at the back of the room.

He knocked on the door three times, and another man with a small bag entered the room. The man with the small bag wore dirt-covered, grass-stained clothing and was sweating. Seija placed her pack on the table but didn’t open it.

“I was told I could get an antidote here,” she lied.

“Now, love, we don’t deal with that kind of good here,” the first man said, returning to the table and opening the pack of wool. He glanced inside before slapping the flap of the pack back down. “I’ll let you and your little friend leave now. Go back to your small village.”

Seija glanced to Fintan. She saw his hand on his sword and the loosened cord that had kept the weapon from leaving its sheath. Their eyes met

as she searched for agreement of the risk. She interpreted his steady gaze as an intent to do what they had to.

“I want to know about it,” Seija demanded firmly. “I’ve presented fine materials for trading.”

“It’s not about the materials,” the initial man frowned at Seija then looked to the dirt covered man who held the small bag. “You got it out?”

The second man nodded, and both men rushed towards the back door. The dirt-covered man was halfway through the doorway when he hurled the bag into the room before slamming the door shut. The bag burst into flames upon impact with a loud banging sound, and the room began quickly filling up with smoke. Seija picked up her pack, and, coughing from the smoke, she and Fintan stumbled towards the door after the two men. The fire spread quickly across the floor in places where it touched the white powder as they shakily made their escape from a kind of weapon neither had seen before. Fire licked at the exterior of the building, and the town’s alarm bell began ringing.

When Seija and Fintan exited the building, they saw the two men untying spooked horses from a fence. The horses were harnessed to a cart covered with dirty hay. When the dirt-covered man noticed Seija and Fintan, he drew his sword and left his accomplice to calm the horses. Fintan drew his sword as Seija began undoing the cord around her blade’s sheath. The man rushed towards Fintan, and the two began exchanging parries and thrusts. The man’s heavy-handed attacks were aimed for vital locations, and, despite trying to hold his ground, Fintan was forced to retreat closer and closer to the burning building. Seeing no way of defeating the man on his own, Fintan began to maneuver his retreats away from Seija so that the man’s back would be to her.

A large man grabbed Seija from behind preventing her from freeing her sword. She stomped his foot and elbowed his ribs before he loosened his grip enough for her to break free. The large man drew his broad sword and swung diagonally downwards towards her middle. Seija pulled out the short sword hidden within the folds of her skirt and stepped back. She parried with the

flat of her blade near the hilt stopping the attack and keeping the man's sword away from her body. He stepped forward and ran his blade along hers on the outer side wounding her weapon arm.

Seija stumbled backwards unable to keep a grip on her sword as the man jabbed at her. She grabbed her short sword with both hands, wacked his blade to her left, stepped forward, and thrust the hilt into the man's chin. He fell backwards, stunned.

She turned to help Fintan fight his opponent when she felt a sharp pain in her left arm. Seija saw a dart in her arm and called for Fintan who was unconscious. Dizzy, she collapsed to the ground as the two standing men dragged their unconscious accomplice into the cart. The men fled, and people swarmed around the front of the flaming building.

Unnoticed by the crowd, the young apprentice boy, after a harsh rebuke by the friend he had told Seija and Fintan about, cautiously followed her behind the building to find the fire approaching the two. She and Galen dragged them into a quickly borrowed horse and cart and hauled them to her home on the outskirts of town where she and Galen administered to their wounds. It wasn't until evening when the two regained consciousness.

"Nora!" Galen called.

"I told you not to shout," Nora whispered as she knelt next to Seija and Fintan. "Still feverish."

After scanning the room and seeing Galen hovering in the doorway, Fintan took in a deep breath. "Thank you for helping us."

"Do you know what you two just did?" Nora

asked.

"My brother needs an antidote," Seija breathed weakly.

"So do you," Nora retorted. "I already gave it to both of you, but it'll take some time." She paused. "You may have stirred up more problems than the previous pair of fools who tried to go against them," she sighed.



Untitled  
Riley Waggoner  
Digital Photography

"Does that have anything to do with a merchant named Ashworth?" Fintan asked.

Nora nodded, staring at the floor. "They ran him out—destroyed his shop. We helped him out of the city, but he had tried to send away an outsider who got caught up in it—probably her brother."

Nora held out to Seija a small burlap bag that had cotton bursting from the seams and spoke before Seija could try to protest again. "That contains five doses worth of antidote. One of the vials is plenty, taken orally. If he's survived for a couple



of days, the poisoning wasn't as bad as the dosage you two received. He'll live—though, the recovery might be hard on him."

Seija shakily accepted the bag with both hands and held it close to her chest. "Thank you," she cried softly. "Thank you."

"You two should rest here tonight. Recover," Nora said. "I'll find travel arrangements."

When she had regained her bearings, Seija looked for her bag of fine wools and handed it to Nora. She then pulled a small coin purse from a hidden pocket in her skirt and added that to the pile in Nora's arms.

"I'll accept payment, but this is surely too much," Nora said.

"You risked your life for us—complete strangers. You still have to live here," Seija said.

"I—" Nora paused. "I'll probably have to find a way to leave soon."

"You think it'll get that bad, Nora?" Galen asked.

Nora blinked her eyes to keep away the tears. "We can't even trust the city guards at this point," she mumbled.

"We'll help you," Fintan said gently.

Nora glanced to him. "But, how?"

"We travel to sell our merchandise," Seija said. "I know some people in other towns who would have access to information and resources."

"Can you keep yourselves safe until then?" Fintan asked. "We won't be able to return for weeks."

"We'll manage," Nora said. "Take care of your brother first. We've made it this long." After a pause, Nora said, "No more talking. Get some rest."

Before sunrise the next day, Nora saddled and loaded some horses with supplies. When it was time, Nora forced Seija and Fintan awake, and, with raspy breaths and shaky legs, they followed

Nora into the cool night air. They ensured the saddle girths were tight and mounted their horses.

"Journey safely," Nora said as she handed them both a mostly shuttered lantern.

"Thank you," Seija said, situating the lantern behind her, "for everything."

"And, give Galen our thanks for his bravery," Fintan said.

Nora smiled sadly. "Don't linger. Go."

Nora waved for Seija and Fintan to leave, and the two rode into the dark woods. Seija kept one hand on the reigns and pulled her cloak tighter around herself with her slash-wounded arm. She focused on the path ahead, knowing from experience that the Nelumbo River was near. As they approached the unguarded bridge, the sun rose over the river, coloring the early morning mist orange as the wind and water roared around them.



Photoshoot  
Sabrina Woods  
Digital Illustration

# Coping by Caitlin Phillips

I was 17 when my worst nightmare came true. It was inevitable. There was nothing I could do to stop it, and nothing seemed to get better, no matter how much I hoped. My grandmother or my mamaw, as I affectionately called her, had been sick for years. She had lost her ability to walk and had an old ice cream bucket full of those little orange medicine bottles that you hope hold miracles in them. She was in and out of the hospital constantly, despite my mother, my brother, and me doing everything in our power to take care of her. She ended up in the hospital for more days than she ever was at home with us. She was just too sick. The doctors told us her kidneys and her lungs were failing. I felt...

hopeless.

At times it felt like the world was moving without me. Well, because here's the thing, when you're a teenager all you're focused on is being a teenager. All those stupid and petty things you'll never remember and all the small and minuscule things you think make and break you. Do they like me back? Am I cool enough? Are those girls whispering about me? However, suddenly, my whole world was dedicated to my mamaw. I had this immense pressure sitting on my shoulders that I felt no one else understood. I didn't care anymore if someone liked me back or if someone was whispering about me; I had a tremendous responsibility now, and I grew up fast. I had no other option. During my teenage years, I spent countless hours sitting in waiting rooms with strangers wondering why they were there like me. Did they feel hopeless too? That permeating smell of antiseptic, and that sickly-sweet odor of the artificial fragrance used to clean the floors became a comfort to me. In fact, I heard the rhythmic beeping of a heart monitor in my dreams for years; it haunted me. Despite all this, I don't regret a single thing because I loved her. I always will. My mamaw was my best friend, my safe space, but that all went away on February 25, 2016.

I was sleeping when I was abruptly awoken and told we had to get to the hospital immediately. My mom was there all alone, and the situation didn't look good. The car ride there was the longest of my life. I was panicking. I was hollow. How could I be both at once? I mean, my mamaw couldn't die, right? Not right now at least. Not my mamaw who I had seen quite literally laugh in the face of death and doctors' countless times. She couldn't leave right now, not in this turbulent period of my life. It was junior year! I had my ACT right around the corner! The test everyone kept telling me determined my whole life!

*-In hindsight reader, maybe that was selfish of me to have those thoughts in my head, or maybe I was just a kid looking for any way to distract myself from the reality I didn't want to face. I'll leave that up to you to decide. -*

When I got to the hospital, there was a sign on the door stating to "ask the nurse before you entered the room." I knew in my heart what that meant, but I didn't want to believe it. NO! NO! NO! NO. NO. NO. NO. no. no....no. I went through the seven stages of grief before I even opened the door. Somehow, I was still brave enough to open the door. And I knew it the moment I saw it, she was gone. My mother was standing over her mother with tears in her eyes. Her skin was a perfect shade of ashen gray, something that still haunts me to this day. She was gone. I was too late.

The next few months were the hardest of my life. My mamaw was the glue that held our family together. It became immediately apparent nothing would be the same. I'll save the tedious details, but it seemed now that mamaw was gone everyone wanted to pretend they were there and took care of her the way my mother, brother, and I did. Now, I'm not saying I deserved anything special, but it took a lot of nerve to never come around and then show up at her funeral saying you deserved a sum of what was left of her life insurance. I was baffled at how my mamaw died and less than two days later everyone was at each other's throat over what was left. To put it bluntly, my mamaw was not a rich person. Her children were basically fighting over crumbs. In all of this, there was seventeen-year-old me who had just lost her best friend and what felt like everything she had ever known. I couldn't give a damn about what money was left, even though I knew my mother and brother would need every cent they could get to cover the rent and the bills that my grandmother left behind. I just wanted my best friend back. There

was nothing tangible in this world that would ever matter as much as having my best friend did.

The war going on in my family and the grief I carried combined to send me into a deep depression. I had never felt feelings and emotions this deep and gut wrenching. However, everyone in my immediate family went in different directions to deal with their grief. Most of the time it felt as if her death was an elephant in the room. Everyone knew it, everyone felt it, but no one spoke about it. That was the rule. If no one spoke about it, it would be almost like it never happened, right? But I wanted to speak about it. I couldn't get past it. I had never felt more confused because my mamaw was the only person in the world who I felt could fix any problem I had but now I had to go on without her. I felt alone. Defeated. Desolate. I felt like a bird who had their wings stripped from them the moment they were getting ready to take flight.

My mamaw was supposed to be there to cheer me on, to see me graduate high school, and to achieve my lifelong dream of being the first person in my family to graduate from college. It was a dream that I talked to her about many nights when we would stay up together watching old tv shows like *The Waltons* and *The Golden Girls*. But soon after her death, I started to fall behind in school. The ACT was at the back of my mind now. I started to question my own mortality, my place in the world. I wondered if my life even had meaning. I started to refuse to get out of bed. My doctor prescribed medication for depression and anxiety, and just like that, suddenly I was the one with the little orange bottles. I tried medication after medication, nothing helped. Were there ever miracles in these things? My doctor then recommended therapy.

I figured I would give it a shot. The therapist I met was okay, but we didn't really connect. Somehow the session always ended up with her discussing her life and less of me trying to work through my issues. I mean I like making those connections, but I also needed dire help, so I tried again. I thought things at this new place would work, but I had never been more wrong. This place, the place that shall not be named, put me on a worse mental trajectory than the one I was already on. On the outside, I think I appeared fine to most of the world. My life seemed to be going where I wanted it to, albeit a little slower than I had planned. After my gap year, I started classes at the local community college, thanks to my cousin, Beth, inspiring me to apply there because she had started. I felt secure about this life decision because I was at least on some sort of track to accomplish those dreams that I had talked about with mamaw. It was all a start. A giant step, a good sign for those on the outside looking in.

However, on the inside, I was not fine. I was plagued by recurring nightmares that would leave me waking up and that immediately sent me into a panic attack. Sometimes I would get up in the middle of the night and pace through my room and go up and down the stairs until I caved to exhaustion. I couldn't shake these thoughts from my head. So, I really wanted to open up to this new therapist and solve this conflict inside of me. I just wanted to focus on school and the new friends I met, thus I was honest, truthfully honest. I told her how my mamaw has practically raised me while my parents worked seven days a week; how I spent about every single moment with her throughout my childhood. She was a constant. She was more than a grandmother. She was my best friend, a place to call home. I felt she was the only person in the world who ever understood me. She was my safe haven from all the chaos in the world. I told her of the dreams, how when I close my eyes all I can see is the ashen skin of the liveliest woman I ever knew. And to sum it all up, that wicked witch of the west of a therapist told me those feelings didn't matter.

Now, she said it much more bluntly and harshly. I told her my deepest darkest thoughts and feelings and she acted as if I said something as simple as the sky is blue, and then immediately crushed every bit of confidence I had by telling me she didn't care. To be honest, I don't think I can recount this situation to the fullest details as it is quite sensitive, but the witch told me she didn't care if I hurt myself, it was all in my head. These dreams that left me shaking, they were all just in my head. Why should they matter? *-Talk about a lawsuit, am I right? Maybe I should have cashed in.-* I left the office at my lowest point. I swore I would never go back to any therapist because therapy had to be some sort of hoax that was used to prey on the already colossal amount of stigma surrounding those with mental health issues.

I suffered for another year.

Despite it all, I knew I had to keep going for my mamaw and push through college. I couldn't let go of those dreams because they were her dreams too in a way. She never got to finish school. She dropped out somewhere around the end of WW2 when she was still in elementary school because her family needed her help to work in the fields so they could eat. I just kept reminding myself that I had all these chances, all the opportunities, she never had. I couldn't waste everything I was given. I had to make her proud. While my mamaw never received an education passed elementary school, she was one of the smartest people I ever knew. I sometimes wondered, I still wonder, what she could have become if she had gotten and was given the same opportunities as me. All this was how I got through it. And somehow, somehow, after I had calmed down about the whole wicked witch ordeal, there was a nagging feeling in me that something good was around the corner.

2019 came, and I wasn't sure where that good was going to come from, but I held out hope. I was in class one day and Beth told me about this therapy place in Jackson that she had heard about. At first, I was skeptical because of my previous experience, but she kept talking about it and telling me about their new approaches to therapy that were different from what one might consider conventional therapy. I was intrigued, but the thought of going terrified me, so I waited and waited and waited until I realized that I couldn't let the wicked witch control my decision in this. I gave therapy another shot. I called and they told me there was a new therapist named Lesley that was just hired and accepting patients. I agreed to see her. I didn't know it at the time, but I was making the best decision of my life.

My hands were shaking and sweaty, but I drove myself to my first appointment. My cheeks were probably red in anticipation and embarrassment to be at the therapy office once again, but I persevered and pulled the door open. The office had an inviting vibe to it. It was in an old building with brick walls and antique barn doors. I felt like I just stumbled into this really cool secret place, but that feeling didn't last long as I could feel the anxiety bubble in my veins and the butterflies in the pit of my stomach. What if this woman was the wicked witch of the west 2.0? A few seconds later, Leslie appeared. She was bubbly and energetic, and I was terrified to look her in the eyes. *-I don't think I looked her in the eyes for months.* - But during our appointment, she did the most important thing ever, something I had been wanting for the past three years.

She listened.

At first, she had to drag it out of me, but she listened no matter what. She told me she works with those who have anxiety, depression, and untreated trauma. And while I was there to see her about my mamaw's death, we could address other things that have happened too. I felt relieved. She said we could start targeting my grief and trauma with something called EMDR or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. I had not the slightest clue as to what that was and when she told me, the relief left my body and I immediately thought, "Oh great! She's a quack too! What pseudo-science!"

So, what is EMDR? - *Well, bear with me here, I can't remember all those fancy words Lesley uses but I can tell you how I remember.* EMDR is therapy meant to treat traumatic memories and those with PTSD. It requires the patient to focus on a traumatic memory in their head and bring up those negative feelings and emotions. While the patient does this, they will also simultaneously experience some sort of bilateral stimulation which is usually moving the eyes from left to right continuously while focusing on the memory. The therapist will usually move their hand back and forth and have the patient follow it with their eyes and after so many seconds they will stop and ask what or if any new emotions or realizations are coming up. You repeat this until the memory is no longer distressing. See? Pseudo-science? I thought so, but I learned quickly that it was not.

EMDR is just a natural way for the brain to heal itself by processing unresolved trauma,

What EMDR is doing is helping to open up the synapses in the parts of your brain that control these negative memories and emotions. In a way you're rewiring your brain because when you experience trauma the brain can't always resolve it on its own. Sometimes it needs help, and those synapses need to be opened and rewired because that unresolved trauma is stuck, elevating your emotions, and letting your synapses fire off and trigger your fight or flight response unwillingly and randomly. This can cause you to have panic attacks or feel like you're stuck in the time of your trauma and can't move forward. By partaking in EMDR you can calm down the fight or flight response area in your brain. The memories will



always be there, but the fight or flight system is no longer triggered when thinking about the memories or emotions. You can't forget, but you can let it go.

While my first session was reluctant and crowded with doubt, I knew it wasn't pseudo-science the second she asked me if anything new had come up and it had. I was astounded. How could something new have come up? We focused on a lot of different memories in the beginning. I can't exactly pinpoint which one we did first, but I do remember that one of the memories that bothered me the most was walking into the hospital room the day she died. I replayed that memory over and over in my head and suddenly it was like floodgates opened and all my emotions spilled out. I could remember the smell of the air. What I was wearing. Things I didn't know I remembered were just there. It was like I was reliving the exact moment, but I could also be there to remind myself that this wasn't my fault. I could go back and heal all those things I needed to. Was it all in the bilateral movement? Was it tricking my brain? Did she secretly have magical powers? She must be a witch, right? But not like the wicked witch of the west at the place that shall not be named. -No, she must be Glinda the good witch, that's the only thing that makes sense. - Everything was running through my brain at that moment. I felt everything at once relief, sadness, grief, elation. EMDR was like a puzzle, and I was finding the pieces each time we focused on a new memory, and soon I had enough pieces to start connecting them into one big picture that made sense to me, that gave me answers, that let me let it go.

EMDR changed my life. It let me clean away all that dirt hidden inside the crevices of my mind. It was like going into an attic where I had stored all these things I had forgotten about or was avoiding, and I relived my whole life good and bad to make room for something new. It hurt. It hurt a lot, but it let me fully process my mamaw's death among other things. If it wasn't for finding Lesley and going through EMDR, my life might've been completely derailed. But here I am, in my senior year about to graduate college. A life-long dream. While my mamaw isn't here to see me, I know she's here in spirit. EMDR taught me that while the past will always be with me, it doesn't have to define my future. While grief is a tricky thing that sometimes sneaks up on you the day after Christmas, in the middle of the night when you're watching TV, and when you're standing in line at the local grocery store, you can learn to manage it. Grief doesn't have to consume you no matter how hard it tries. You can cope.





**Cover Art**  
*Comradery*  
Abbie Wynn  
Printmaking



# Flea Ridden Madness by Lucien Chatham

I can't sleep. No, no, can't sleep, can't sleep; must not fall asleep! That's when they will strike, while I am sleeping. They think I don't know how they think; but I do! Oh, I know exactly how they think. They thought they could get in under the bedroom door. Ha! I stopped them though, oh did I stop them. I folded a towel and jammed it right under the door, blocking the tiny crack between the door and the floor. I stopped them, they can't get me in here! But, I must not fall asleep.

I'm in the corner of my bedroom, the farthest corner away from the door. That way I can see them, if they get in. I remember what they said, those two faced liars. "One bomb per room, and that will take care of your problem for sure sir." That is what they told me, but it didn't work! The next time I called them over they said, "This poison will do the trick sir, guaranteed. They will all be dead when you come home from work, guaranteed sir." They lied!

I was foolish to trust them. I see that now. I had come in from work and sat down in my favorite chair, feeling the nightmare was over. I kicked off my shoes and turned on the TV; heck, I even poured myself a drink. I kicked off my shoes and propped my feet up; that is when I saw it. It was on my sock! The thing was still alive! I told myself not to worry, that it was only just one. I even assured myself that it would die soon. After all, the exterminator had assured me they would all die, "Guaranteed". But, he had lied to me!

I brushed off the one on my sock; then I saw one on my pants. I slapped it with my hand, foolishly thinking it was the same one that had been on my sock. Then, I saw another one on my chair, then another, and then another. Before I knew it, a dozen were hopping towards me. I knew what they wanted, they wanted to rip into my flesh, and drink my blood! I jumped up from my chair, and ran screaming towards the stairs; but they were already on me. I could feel them biting me as I ran up the stairs. But I had an idea. I reached into the guest bathroom's towel closet and pulled out my weapon, my savior, my Excalibur. "This should take care of them, guaranteed," I cackled to myself.

Turning around, I witnessed the full extent of my dire situation; they were all chasing me! Hundreds of them were climbing up the stairs; every single one of them wanting to bury their mouths into my flesh.

My one can could not kill all of them. Panic overwhelmed me for a brief second as I silently screamed in my mind for help. Then, something happened; something snapped. I knew exactly what I had to do to save myself. I sprayed myself with the can from head to foot in order to form a protective barrier around me. Eyes burning, and vision blurred, I dove into my bedroom and slammed the door shut. I emptied the can of spray onto the door and the floor near it. I even sprayed myself again; you can never be too careful. I grabbed a towel from the master bathroom and stuffed it firmly beneath the door. I then used the remainder of the spray on the door and the towel and sat down in the farthest corner of my bedroom. That happened three days ago.

For three days, I have not eaten, or slept. I have drunk water from the bathroom faucet, but I only do so sparsely. I must not go near the bedroom door, they will surely hear me. I had panicked after I used all of the spray on the door. I feared I had used the one weapon that could save me. Again, something snapped in my head, and I pulled out the handgun I had bought years ago and sat in the corner. For three days, I have sat in this corner of my bedroom and waited, and waited, and waited, and waited.

I begin to fall asleep; when I see it. One of them has broken through my barrier! I don't know how but it has! I quickly take aim with my gun and fire, Blam! No good, I missed. I take aim again. Blam! Blam! Blam! I got it! Ha, ha, ha, ha, I got the evil thing! Yes! Wait, I see another one. No, no, no, no, no, No! I fire at it. Blam! Blam! Click! What? Click, Click. No, my gun is empty. As I eject the spent clip and slide in a new one, I see the towel under the door move. They are moving away the barrier! Soon a stream of them of them pours into my bedroom, and heads straight for me!



As the army of evil monsters pours towards me, I can think of only one thing to do. I fire three shots at the bedroom window to weaken the glass; then I charge into it. Crash! I hit the ground hard and hear something in my ankle pop. As I lie heaving on the ground, something happens again, something snaps. Of course! How could I not see it before? There is only one way to end this once and for all.

I get up on my feet and hobble towards my garage as quickly as I can; my gun at the ready. I kick open the door to my garage with my good leg and hobble inside. It's dark in here, I can't see anything, so I have to be quick. I tear through everything on my hobby bench until I find it: the roll of paper towels. I reach under the bench and pull out the gas cans I use to store gas for my lawnmower. I take one of them and pour all of the gas out onto the floor. I then quickly pile the remaining cans next to my car, near the car's gas nozzle. I keep one can though. Finally, I open the driver's side door of my car and rummage through the front of my car until I find my cigarette lighter.

As I head for the door, I feel them on me. They must have thought ahead of me and headed for the garage when I jumped out of the bedroom window. I rip off my shirt, pants, and my socks and leave them in the garage, and run as fast as I can through the door. I stumble into the yard, and drop the gas can and the roll of paper towels. I collapse next to them, out of breath. But now is not the time to rest. I unscrew the lid of the gas can. Then, I stuff a handful of paper towels into the open hole of the gas can. As I click open the lighter, a sense of calm and tranquility washes over me, "I win!" I declare as I light the paper towels and hurl the burning gas

can into my garage.

The explosion happens sooner than I expected. As I run across my yard, I am lifted off my feet as the gas cans erupt and explode my car to bits. Searing heat scorches my bare back as I am sent flying through the air. I land painfully on my shoulder and hear another loud pop. I slowly get on my feet and look at the burning remains of my house. As I watch my home burn, tears begin to pour down my cheeks; tears of joy. I have won! The nightmare is over! I have banished those monsters to the fiery fate they deserve. I dance and shout to the sky in triumph; until I see them. They survived! I don't know how but they survived. I take my gun and fire all the rounds left



*Bathroom Project*  
Amanda Smith  
Charcoal

I have at them, but they just stand in front of my burning house and wait. Quick as lightning, they all come pouring out of my house and overtake me. The swarm brings me to my knees and begins to devour me. As the tiny devils bite through my flesh, I can do nothing but scream, "Help me! Please help me! Dear God, somebody help me! Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

"Man he's buggin' out again do something!" screamed the orderly.

"I can't give him the shot until you hold him down!" yelled the frantic doctor as he filed a syringe with a potent tranquilizer. "Okay, hold him steady. Got him!" declared the doctor as he stuck the syringe into the screaming patient's buttock. The patient stopped screaming and immediately passed out.

"Dang doc, he is crazy" said the orderly as he wiped the sweat off of his forehead.

"That's not the technical term," replied the doctor as he adjusted his large glasses, "But yes, you are correct." The two men left the room as two nurses came in to strap the sedated patient to his bed.

Out in the sterile, white hallway, the orderly spoke again, "That's the guy who blew up his house right? The one the cops found shooting in the air and screaming last year?"

"Yes, that is him," sighed the doctor as he began to walk down the hallway, "I had hoped he would have shown some improvement by now."

"What in the world is wrong with him doctor?" asked the orderly, as he matched the doctor's pace. "He's been in here for nearly a year and he has an attack like this at least once a week, more than once if we lighten up his medication."

The doctor turned and looked at the orderly, "It is unlike anything I have seen before. His mind constantly replays the events of the night he destroyed his home over and over again. Simply put, he is trapped in the trauma of that night, and he cannot escape it."

The orderly took this in and replied, "I get that. But, what is his deal with fleas man? He screams

that they are all over him. Didn't the cops find him rocking back 'n' forth in his yard in his underwear covered with thousands of fleas?"

"That is only what he believes," replied the doctor sternly. "Yes, the cops did find him behind his burning house, stripped down to his underwear and rocking back and forth; but he did not have the first flea on him." After saying this, the doctor cocked his head to one side, and then stopped in the middle of the hallway. "Speaking of fleas," the doctor pointed at the orderly's arm.

Looking down at his arm the orderly quickly said, "My bad Doc, my kids love cats and always let them in the house. It's nearly impossible to keep the darn things clean of fleas."

"Quite alright," replied the doctor as he continued to stare at the flea on the orderly's arm. After a moment, the doctor quickly shook his head, swiftly turned on his heel, and continued to walk down the hall. The orderly quickly brushed the flea off of his arm and hurried to catch up with the doctor. As the two men left, the tiny flea hopped down the hallway, and squeezed itself under the door of the sedated patient's room.







*Lost Moments*  
Matthew Mancusi



# Gardening

by Hayden Miller

we haven't started a family,  
but we started a garden,  
and the green leaves  
lining our windowsills  
are life and

fill our rooms and walls  
with colorful shadows,  
and I love  
the way the flowers look  
when you cup them in your hands.

I love the way your eyes  
light up when we see a plant we don't have  
(or don't have enough of) at the  
plant shops we pass on our walks,  
and I love the way  
you carry our new family members  
back to our house to rearrange  
everything to make room for them.  
you always know the perfect  
spot for them anyway.  
when I gave others flowers  
for valentine's day,  
or an anniversary,  
or a birthday,  
they didn't appreciate it as much as

you do.

The flowers I give you  
still light up our rooms,  
and clippings have made their homes  
in your mother's house.

we grow our own food now  
and it is sweeter than anything we could  
get at the store  
they grew nursing on our love,  
so it makes sense

plants only grow if you love them  
and if they feel like it.  
we have set up the perfect greenhouse.  
our house is full of love  
and anyone can see that wherever they look.

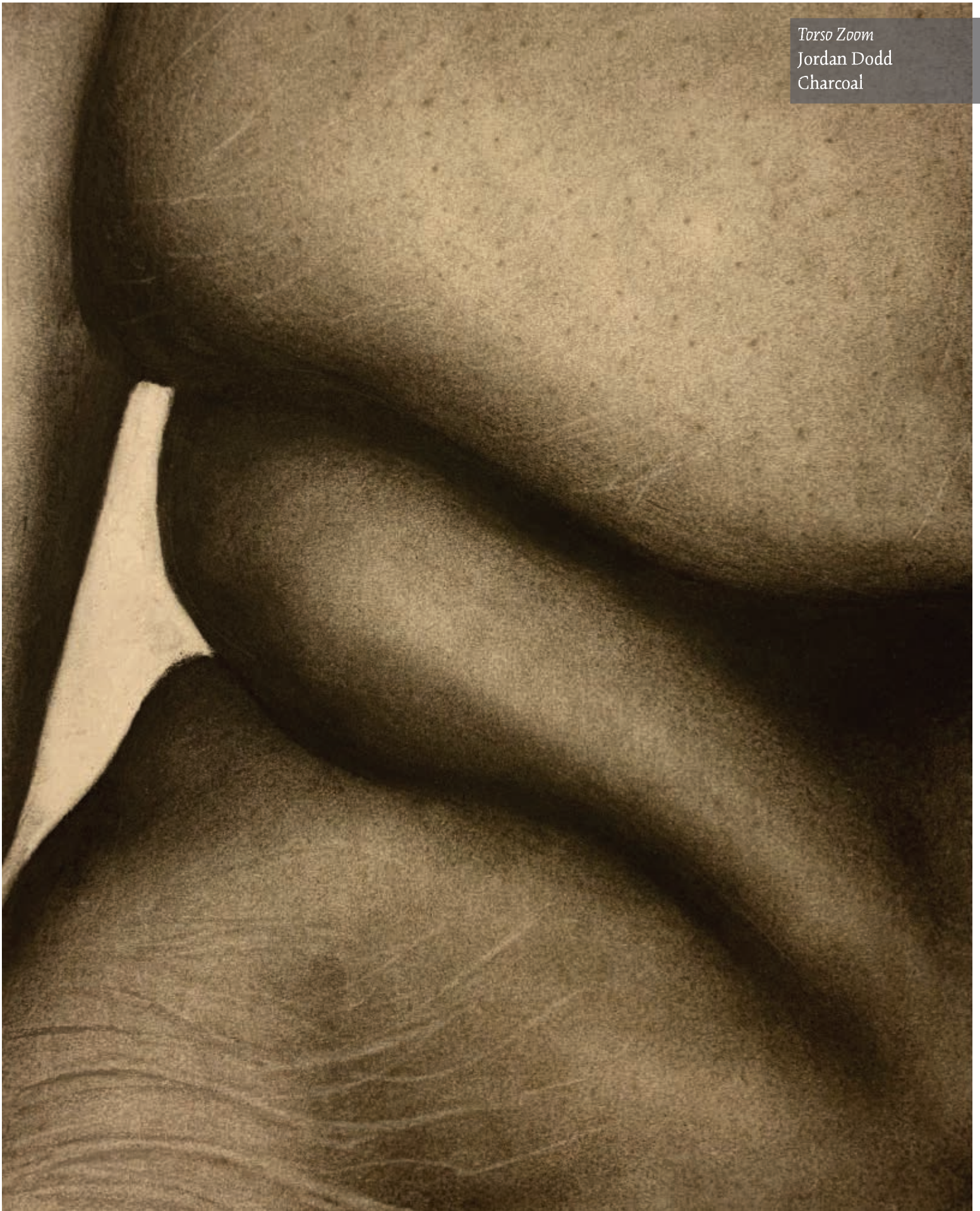
I think that  
I could get used to this  
whole “being with you”  
thing, it’s already starting to  
grow on me



*Bloom*  
Robert Hatcher  
Digital Photography



*Torso Zoom*  
Jordan Dodd  
Charcoal







# There Is a Crack In the Windshield

by Grant Bivens

There is a crack in the windshield,  
You've been ignoring.  
Each day, as the wind blows cold,  
It cracks and chips away.

We never get it seen about,  
We merely drive along, listening to  
Each other's sorrowful song.

Our songs are two sighs of  
Anguish and godly affection.  
Hoping that this Mysterious Force  
Will mend the glass with correction.

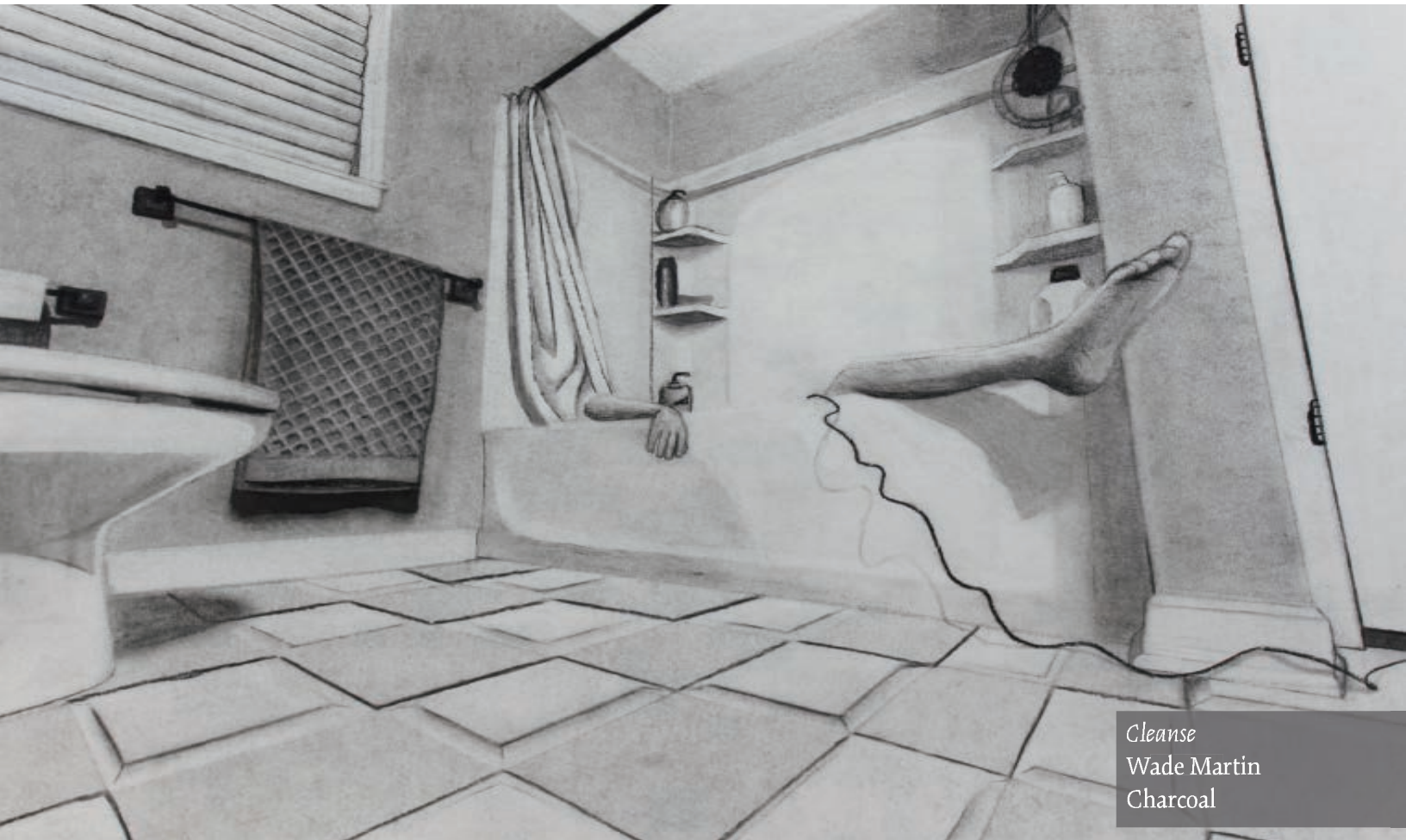
We are driving real fast now,  
Our song hums and vibrates  
The outside world.  
We are driving with no windshield.  
My fists stand fastly curled  
We have no direction, no place to be.  
Holy Mother of God have mercy on we.

# Anger, My Friend

by Elle Edwards

*Content warning: domestic violence, child abuse/neglect*

When did I first meet Anger? Was she the explosion of glass against  
the green dining room walls? Or maybe she was the sound of my father's  
shouting carrying down the halls. I saw her in the cavities splintered  
into their closet door, and the glimpses of my mother  
crying on the bathroom floor. I felt her in the bruised undersides  
of my legs and the knots left unbrushed in my hair.  
She was the lump in my throat when I felt that something was unfair.  
When promises proved broken and truths went unspoken,  
I was left seizing for guidance, grasping at the slightest bit of security.  
I placed my value on my attachments and displayed my maturity.  
When I knew nothing but numbing dispassion, she warmed me with her fire.  
She wrapped me in her white hot flames and ignited warped desire.  
She introduced me to Hatred and her poor sister Isolation,  
and the need to tear myself apart to ensure my adoration. She gave me blind courage  
and put power in my words. She pushed me to the edge until everything was blurred.  
She is my only companion, my sole and only friend.  
And even when her flames consume me,  
I know it's not the end.



Cleanse  
Wade Martin  
Charcoal



# Tapestry

by Caitlin Phillips

There's a tapestry that covers a window in my room.  
It lets the sun shine right on through  
Hangs there, like a taunting memory of you  
Worn and beaten down, drooping like a frown  
Broken locket and forgotten bracelets  
Shattered frames, different faces  
Your smile said forever and a day  
But your eyes betrayed it

And I know I should take it down  
We're nothing more than ashes now  
But I guess I hoped we could be like a phoenix  
That one day you'd look at me and realize you went astray  
And that one who loved you, you pushed away

I let my roots grow too deep  
You cut them out like weeds  
I tried so hard to give you a garden like Eden  
But you spited me, poured acid on the flowers  
With no remorse poisoned everything that was ours

We were two birds of the same feather  
Two bandits taking on the world together  
But you placed a knife against my throat  
Blinded by hope, should've seen it a mile away  
That you would leave me to the ruins and decay

To be honest, I don't recognize you now  
With your new friends, holier than thou  
Now you're someone you swore you'd never be  
And I expected time to change the leaves or the weather  
But I never knew we'd grow apart like we grew together

And there was a tapestry that hung in my room...

# Arts and Crafts by Ryesa McGehee

## Characters

(No specific ethnicity or appearance needed for any characters. Age range can be late 20s to 40s.)

**Alice**, wealthy art director and leader of the group. She is married to Tom.

**Sarah**, stay-at-home mom.

**Diana**, corporate lawyer, usually at odds with Alice.

**Blair**, a doctor.

Setting: Alice's house. The whole play takes place in the living room. The room is decorated tastefully with paintings and sculptures around the room. A coffee table in the center with art books and fashion magazines. Every artwork and picture framed on the wall has a thick handmade frame. Each frame is decorated uniquely, almost to the point of being bad art if it wasn't for Alice's status and wealth. There are two windows on the upstage wall. Two loveseats are on either side of the coffee table. The couch is in the middle of the room, upstage to the coffee table.

## Act 1, Scene 1

Alice's living room. The friends' weekly book club is just starting. A bottle of wine and four glasses sit on the coffee table. Four copies of a book lay on the table. Classical music softly plays in the background. DIANA and BLAIR sit on the couch in the middle of the room. SARAH and ALICE sit in loveseats on opposite sides of the room.

ALICE

I have been dying to talk about this ever since I finished it last week.

SARAH

Ugh, me too! That ending was so open-ended. It almost felt like-

DIANA

I felt too old to read it. I couldn't really relate to any of the characters, especially Josie.

ALICE

Really? Even Josie? Interesting.

SARAH

(To ALICE)

I really saw you in the wife - what was her name? It's on the tip of my tongue, I just can't - they go on her yacht in Belize, I can't -

BLAIR

Anastasia?

SARAH

No, no it was something else /

ALICE

/ Did you even read the book, Blair? Anastasia is one of the main characters.

BLAIR

Sorry, sorry. It's been a long day.

ALICE

Anyways, thank you, Sarah. She was a unique character. I enjoyed the tension throughout their stay on the boat. It almost seemed like a test for Josie and Christine. I also felt as if the constant motion of the boat swaying in the water was somewhat representative in the tumultuousness of their secret relationship.

DIANA

Mm, I agree. I think the water was a threat in of itself as well. You never know what's in the water until you jump in. As juvenile as the plot felt, the author's whole writing style was especially intriguing. No indication of whose perspective we're in? Very bold of them.

SARAH

I found it hard to keep up with sometimes.

ALICE

Of course, you did.

SARAH

Um, yeah, haha. I guess just with the kids and everything, it was hard to focus and keep track at times /

BLAIR

I had issues with it too, Sarah, and I don't have a house of screaming kids. I'd be lying in bed with my sound machine, and I'd be like "What is going on" haha.

SARAH

Yes, yes! Like I'd forget who was speaking. I'm glad you got it too.

ALICE

I found Anastasia's confrontation with Josie in the supermarket to be particularly moving. The courage that she had. The honesty. I appreciated it.

DIANA

I didn't find much to it. It seemed like a cynical woman trying to put down someone she feels insecure about.

ALICE

I thought it was incredibly mature of her.

DIANA

I think addressing the other woman at all is too dramatic.

ALICE

Well, I think that's ridiculous to say. What was she supposed to do? Suffer silently? She's not going to stoop so low as emotional repression for a man.

BLAIR

Careful, Tom might hear! Where is he, by the way?



ALICE

He'll be here soon. Why do you care so much?

BLAIR

Just wondering. Usually, he's always meandering around putting his funny little opinions in.

ALICE

Mm. He'll be here soon. Oh, I almost forgot! The gifts!

DIANA

What gi-

(ALICE exits.)

DIANA

(Mutters to herself)

I wonder if she knows.

SARAH

Knows what?

DIANA

Nothing. How's Charlie?

SARAH

Oh, he's good! He's almost about to start walking, so that means more anxiety on my part.

DIANA

How exciting. If you need any help, Auntie Diana is always here.

(To BLAIR)

Edison is doing well in piano, by the way.

BLAIR

He's always talking about how much he loves it, so I sure hope so. Thank you again, Diana.

DIANA

It's a joy for me, especially with this new contract I have going on. I swear to God, if we don't do something about these 20-year-old billionaires all wanting to start start-up companies, I'm leaving law completely. Tom has been a great help though.

BLAIR

He's always great. Figuring out all my divorce and custody papers would've been a nightmare without him. Just last Tuesday, he was having to explain what an ADR is.

DIANA

Last Tuesday?

BLAIR

Mhm. He swung by around lunch.

DIANA

Oh, he didn't mention seeing you to me.

BLAIR

Huh. Well, maybe he didn't see the need to.

DIANA

Maybe. Where has that woman gone to? And what gifts is she talking abo-

(ALICE enters, holding three boxes)

ALICE

Here they are!

(As she's handing boxes over to DIANA, SARAH, and BLAIR)

I hope you like them! These are probably the most expensive ones I've made!

BLAIR

Don't tell me it's-

(They all lift a decorated frame, like the ones on the living room walls, out of their boxes. The frames are all different colors: SARAH's is pink, DIANA's is grey, and BLAIR's is blue. All three frames have bones lining the frame in the middle.)

Oh my God, Alice! I can't believe it!

SARAH

Aw, you shouldn't have!

DIANA

Really, you shouldn't have.

ALICE

Well, I thought, you know, I've sold so many of these to such random strangers, but I've never made any for my dearest friends. I worked really hard on them if you couldn't tell. I even experimented with some unique tools.

SARAH

(Tracing the bones with her finger)

Are these ... bones?

ALICE

Yes! Good eye, Sarah. They're the bones of a special pig nearby. I handpicked him myself.

DIANA

How ... unique!

BLAIR

Yes, yes, I would've never thought animal carcasses could be so ... fashionable!

ALICE

You all are too kind.

DIANA

Why bones?

ALICE

What?

DIANA

Why bones for all three of us?

ALICE

Well, I wanted something that would tie us all together! Almost like a unifying factor.

SARAH

That's sweet, sort of like a friendship bracelet. Charlotte has been making those all the time with her little friends.

BLAIR

I made so many in high school with my girlfriends.

ALICE

That's an interesting take.

DIANA

Yeah, sure. But what's the unifying factor? Maybe if it was little books or book pages, I'd understand, but I don't understand the bones.

ALICE

Well, the unifying factor is that we're all fucking my husband. Aren't we?

DIANA

What?

ALICE

Are you deaf? All three of you are fucking Tom. Oh my God, do not play dumb right now.

SARAH

We would never-

ALICE

Yes, you would, Sarah, because you've been sleeping with him for the past year now. In January, it'll be, what, 14 months?

(points at BLAIR)

I know it's 9 months for you.

(points at DIANA)

And you've been with him for 2 years. I went through his phone and saw some very unfamiliar names pop up: Sam, Derek, Brandon. I thought, "We don't know anyone by that name," and then I saw some rather explicit pictures sent from Brandon. One of the pictures had a very similar ass tattoo that Blair got junior year of college;



you know, the cat? So, how does it feel to be reduced to a fake contact name in a married man's phone?  
(DIANA gets up and paces.)

SARAH

(To ALICE)

Alice, I'm so, so sorry; I don't even know what came over me. He was just so nice, and I've been feeling so bad about myself –

ALICE

Don't know what came over you? You don't know what came over you for a goddamn year?

SARAH

Michael has been so absent lately, and when he's home, he barely looks at me –

ALICE

So, you losing your husband justifies you taking mine?

BLAIR

No one took anything from you, Alice. He wanted it just as much as we did.

ALICE

(ALICE stands.)

Ha, you're right. He did. He wanted it so bad that he drained our bank account for you three. All the dinner dates, the hotels, the lingerie. Do you know how we survived while Tom fucked around?

(Picks up a frame off the wall.)

These fucking frames. These pieces I slaved over to pay off all the credit card debt he racked up. I know you hated these frames, how you would laugh behind my back. You'd be thinking, "Oh, it's just a midlife crisis project she's having after the car wreck. It's to keep her off the pills." Well, the frame I sold to Frances? I paid for your sneaky trip to Miami, Blair. The frame that famous actor wanted? That paid for all the champagne bottles from Eleven Madison Park, Sarah. The frame I sold at the international arts festival? It went to all the ballet shows Tom insisted on paying for, Diana. So, don't sit here and act like you have no guilt in this when you ruined my fucking life emotionally and financially. Don't act like you're my friends WHEN YOU HELPED MY HUSBAND CHEAT ON ME.

(ALICE sits. BLAIR stares at the floor. DIANA is still pacing. A beat.)

DIANA

Where is he?

ALICE

Oh, Diana. This isn't one of your trials. You don't get to call witnesses.

DIANA

Where the hell is he?

ALICE

He's gotten his piece from me. It's your turn now.

DIANA

I'm not "taking my turn" until I speak to him. Where is he?

ALICE

Well, he's here with us now. Though, it may be hard to speak with him, so it wouldn't be much use anyway.

DIANA

What are you talking about?

(Calls out)

Tom?

(DIANA exits, as if walking around the house. She can be heard calling his name offstage.)

BLAIR

I thought you said he'd be here soon.

ALICE

I did. Now, he's here. Oh, come on, Blair. I thought as a doctor you would've gotten it by now.

(SARAH suddenly picks up her frame. She traces the bones and drops the frame, horrified.)

SARAH

NO, NO, NO, YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS, ALICE!

ALICE

I'm impressed, Sarah. With your mommy brain, I thought you'd be the last person to figure it out.

(SARAH jumps up and goes behind the couch. BLAIR, startled by the reaction, picks up her frame and looks closely. DIANA walks back in.)

BLAIR

You're fucking kidding.

DIANA

I can't find him anywh -

(Looks at SARAH behind the couch)

What's wrong with her?

(SARAH has begun nervously laughing, almost to the point of hysterics)

Sarah? Sarah? Come on, what's wrong?

SARAH

It-It-It's h-him. It's th-the bones.

BLAIR

(Grabs her things, getting ready to leave.)

I'm leaving. I'm fucking leaving. This isn't funny, Alice.

(BLAIR stops and looks at SARAH, huddled on the floor now. BLAIR looks at Alice, crouches down to SARAH's level, and puts a protective arm around her.)

ALICE

No, it's not, is it? Well, maybe if Tom wasn't such a manwhore, we could all be laughing for different reasons. Couldn't

we, Sarah?

(SARAH whimpers in response. DIANA has been studying her frame and it clicks. She drops it, letting it break against the coffee table.)

DIANA

You're not serious, Alice. Please don't be serious.

ALICE

I told you they came from a special pig nearby. The pig happened to be my husband. What's not serious about that? I'm so glad you didn't check the basement, Diana, for your own sake. It's a bloodbath down there.

DIANA

(She exits to the direction of the basement. Several seconds later, a scream can be heard from offstage. DIANA enters)

GET SARAH. WE ARE LEAVING. NOW.

(BLAIR and DIANA help SARAH up, who is now laughing loudly and hysterically. They pick up their things. DIANA, BLAIR, AND SARAH exit with DIANA already on the phone speaking frantically.)

ALICE

(Pouring herself a glass of wine, she picks up one of the frames the three women left behind.)

You know, it'll always be just you and me, Tom.

(She looks back at the front door and smirks)

Make fun of my art now, bitch.

(Sirens can be heard and seen from the windows behind her. They silhouette ALICE, as she sits on the middle couch, sipping her wine, frame in hand.)

**END PLAY.**

## Sea of Woe

by Artéz-Dante Williams

I float in an endless river, far away from shore.

I am hoping for a rescue, which I know will never come.

Alone in the water but yet I hear voices all around me.

Whispers of my past mistakes cloud the space around me.

They strip away my loneliness but fill me with fear nonetheless.











*Autumn*  
Tia Runions  
Digital Photography



*Antihero*  
Cailynn Smith  
Acrylic Paint



# Where The Grass Greet's You by Ryesa McGehee

"A child said, What is grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he.  
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven."  
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

I always judge how welcome I am in a place based on its grass. How does the grass greet me? Is it vibrant as it begs to keep my attention? Is it scratchy and dull, urging me to look away and keep walking? As I drive down I-40 from Memphis to Martin or Nashville, I start to notice how the grass and greenery shift moods and let me know my place in each city. Grass may look the same wherever you go, but it greets you in so many different ways.

Martin's grass reminds me of change; it reminds me of how temporary I am here. I don't get to see the green of Martin often. I'm usually only here when the campus burns with fall colors or freezes with blinding white. Just as every leaf falls off the beautiful trees in the quad, every student here takes their own leave. We come and we go. Another young "actress" will hurriedly cross the lawns near the Administration building, stomping on dead leaves in the bitter cold to make it to rehearsals on time. Another trio of friends will set up their blankets and hammocks on the quad's grass, enjoying the subtle spring warmth while barely doing any work. Another Scholar will trudge through snow-covered grass all the way to McCombs at midnight, desperately needing to print off an essay. As I walk all over campus day after day, I wonder if the ground or university will remember me, as my footprints fade from the grassy paths and new ones take my place.

In Martin, the grass makes me feel welcome but doesn't let me stay too long. My most vivid memory of the grass and nature in Martin is when I went on a walk by myself on the Brian Brown Greenway. I've walked or cycled that trail many times, and it's one of my favorite pastimes. The grass is the richest green, and the trees hover over the path, beckoning me to walk along. Acorns and gumballs line the paved pathway, making a satisfying crunch under my feet. It's practically silent with the occasional pedestrian or car passing by. I feel so close to the animals there; I've had run-ins with rabbits and birds, I usually check in with the cows, and once, I even met a horse. I feel alone but not lonely, like the grass is inviting me to stay for a while.

I park my car close to Vantage Coffee and walk on the trail close to Blake's. As I pass the houses and cows, maybe about 10 minutes into the walk, I get this sharp pain from my neck to my chest. I ignore it and keep walking; a light breeze blows by as a small voice in my head tells me to turn back. I ignore that too, and I listen to the birds. I walk for about 10 more minutes, admiring the fields and yellow flowers so vibrant in the daylight, as I almost step on a butterfly. I crouch down to push it out of the way, trying to give it some encouragement or fleeting company, but as soon as I stand up, my legs feel like jelly. I try to shake it off and keep walking forward, but that small voice returns even louder, telling me to turn back. Everything feels more intense: the birds, my clammy palms, the grass, my fast breathing, the sun. *I've overstayed my welcome*, I realize. I am completely alone. All of my friends are in meetings or don't have a car, and they have no idea where I am. Should I call 911? How would I even tell 911 where I am? How do I even describe my surroundings? I am alone and about to pass out with just the grass and a sick butterfly for company. I finally turn around and sit on a bench. I catch my breath and pull out an apple and some water. I'm feverishly eating this apple and gulping down water, begging for this panicked feeling to subside. As I sit there, pale and scared, a man walks by. He's in a black t-shirt and black jeans, jogging while talking on the phone. I look at him, warily wondering if I should ask him for help. He barely looks at me as he jogs on. Feeling rejected from this botched human connection and trying not to spiral, I focus on the bench. The bench is old, weathered and covered in graffiti. Grass is growing wildly all around it.

I think about all the people who must have sat here and looked across at the beautiful field. Once again, I think about how I am very temporary to this town and this greenway. Another girl will walk here, looking for solace and beautiful grass and cows and peace of mind. There have probably been many people to almost pass out on this bench, and there will probably be many more. That butterfly felt like nature telling me to pause and check in with myself, so how many times has that butterfly been there for people to stumble upon? The grass has seen so many bikes and jogging men in black jeans that it knew exactly when I should turn around and listen to my body. In the way that the grass urged me to leave the greenway, I think UT Martin is urging me to leave in its own way too. I shouldn't overstay my welcome. When it's my time to leave for a new city, maybe that sharp pain in my neck will return in another form.

Nashville grass has pride. Nashville is such an idealized place in my head; it feels so glamorous and perfect. The first time I ever experienced this glamor to its full effect was at my friend's 19th birthday weekend. We have a picnic in Centennial Park, find a local music fest, eat at a local Thai place, and explore Cheekwood gardens. I am in awe the whole time, but I can't help feeling strung along. Sitting on the picnic blanket in Centennial Park, exchanging gifts and taking pictures as dorky teens do, I keep noticing how there aren't even bugs crawling on us. No ants or invisible creatures brush against my legs; although I appreciate the reprieve from the critters, it is slightly unsettling. It's as if bugs were too common or negative for the grass's reputation. During the music festival, I try to lean on the grass, but I am met with a harsh scratchiness, as the grass passive aggressively nudges me off. Apparently, I'm not good enough for the perfectly-cut grass of Centennial Park, so I resort to lying my head on my friend's stomach.

As much as I love the city, Nashville's grass intimidates me. It feels rough and disconnected. It's telling me to get off of it; it has more important things to do than greet me and keep me comfortable. It has an image to uphold and so many landmarks to support. Whether I'm walking through Cheekwood or Centennial Park, the grass makes me feel poor and insignificant. I walk by all the bachelorette parties and neon green signs on Broadway, the corporate suits with green on their mind in the downtown business district, the trust-fund apartments with their luscious green plants at The Gulch, and I feel like I haven't grown into Nashville yet. Every finely-manicured tree pats my head condescendingly, as if to say "When you're older, you'll understand." When you're older, when you're prettier, when you're richer, when you know how to act more like Nashville grass, you will feel at home here. When you learn how to cultivate yourself as the workers at Cheekwood gardens cultivate those gorgeous arrays of flowers, the grass will greet you. The grass will feel so soft because you will be so used to the harshness of the concrete city and its proper nature. Ever since visiting, I imagined a future in Nashville. I may go to law school there. I may settle down and start a firm there. I don't feel ready for it though, and I think Nashville grass knows I'm not ready too.

*Memphis grass would never make me feel this way*, I reflect as I get off Exit 20 to Lakeland and Canada Road. Memphis grass is wild and merry just like me. It doesn't mind looking a bit messy; it has no time to care. It has life, and it loves its people. I've never seen so much love for a city as I have with Memphians. We are genuinely proud of our city, no matter how negatively we are portrayed. Memphis grass is vibrant and passionate, as if the love of its people overwhelms it so much that it grows haphazardly. I try my best to find one experience to relate to the Martin and Nashville stories, yet living in the Memphis area my whole life makes that difficult. My best recollections of such energy is spending time with my friends at Overton Square or walking with my parents down South Main Street. The lively murals, constant music, and overall joy is infectious. As small business owners sit outside laughing with passersby or each other, you can feel the energy take root in you and spread through your whole body. The grass near the trolleys and the Belz Art Museum reaches out to you, inviting you to stay and visit every store. My Beale Street Music Festival experience in 8th grade also lends itself to the Memphis soul. The sun setting over the Mississippi River and catching the grass in an emerald fire as you're surrounded by people sharing your love for music is an otherworldly experience. I remember waiting for one of my favorite bands in a crowd all alone. Although the grass was covered by thousands of legs and feet, I didn't feel scared; the bluffs arching over the crowds with people watching on their balconies made me feel secure.

Memphis grass greets you and wants you to stay, no matter where you're from, or where you're going. Whenever I leave for school or Nashville, I feel the grass wrap around my ankles, begging me to stay. Memphis grass supports you no matter what; through protests, pride parades, music festivals, or late afternoon strolls downtown, the grass will always be soft enough for you to lie on or walk over. As I read in my backyard and marvel at the green all around me, I wonder, *Isn't that all we want from a place?* Do we not wish for the grass to cling to us, making us feel at home and secure with ourselves? I don't know where I'll go next, but I do know two things. First, Memphis grass will always welcome me home. Second, wherever I go, I want the grass to greet me as if I'd always belonged there. As Whitman said, the grass is a flag of our disposition. It grows and dies like the rest of us. The grass in different places is meant for its own kind of people, and it knows who belongs and who doesn't. The grass knows me; it knows what stage of life I'm at and when I'll be ready for the next step to alter the state of my own disposition. Next time I'm in a new place or I'm feeling lost in life, maybe I'll look down at the grass and ask where to go next.



Campus Landscape  
Matthew Mancusi



# Breathing

by Melissa Massey

Breathing was always hard  
For me, it always came so naturally  
To everyone else, But in the city  
The cigarette smoke would claw  
At my throat, the car exhausted  
Would halt my breaths for minutes  
The city slowly suffocating me  
Breathe in  
Breathe out

The wind is swirling the trees together  
The leaves melt into each other's arms  
It could be the tears  
Or the lack of oxygen  
In

Even as I'm suffocating  
I can't wait to breathe again  
Out.

So I left  
Running always works  
In the movies, I came to the mountains  
You're supposed to help my weak lungs  
The doctor said, Humans aren't  
The only things that breathe,  
As I lay in the moss completely  
*Alone*  
The trees are whispering  
Breathe In  
Breathe

The wind pushes the air  
Through the trees, the grass,  
Everything, It's mocking me;  
As I lay suffocating  
The wind helps you breathe  
Breathe In  
Out

No one is coming for me  
No one knows me  
I can't even get enough breath  
To call for help  
Breathe In

I went hiking to see the  
*Beauty* in it all  
It is mockingly Beautiful  
In  
Out

# Grandmother

by Caitlin Phillips

One day I awoke to find that all the flowers had begun to wither  
That it was time to say goodbye to the summer and welcome the winter  
I held the flowers more dearly in my heart  
As I saw it was time for them to depart

The colors once so vibrant started to fade away  
Til I awoke to find nothing one day  
But I would never forget all the storms they could brave  
And the happiness they always gave and gave

But if the flowers could sing a song brand new  
I'm sure they would sing it of you  
They would sing a song of love and prayer  
But their voices never could compare

To the woman who sang of God all night  
Knowing she would meet him in morning light  
To the woman who taught me to love everyday  
Because you never know if the last will be today

To love each moment you get to breathe  
You never know when you'll have to leave  
To count your blessings not your gloom  
Because some flowers never got to bloom  
When I was just a tiny petal, she taught me to dream  
That one day I could be a rose in the grandest sunbeam  
But as a small petal I guess I never knew  
That the more I would grow, she would too

As I grew petals, hers would fall to the wind  
As my story started hers would begin to end  
But without her, I wouldn't be standing as tall  
Without her, I wouldn't be me at all

She taught me to love the air in my lungs  
And I fell in love every song she sung  
She taught me of God above  
And that's enough to be thankful of

But my head is filled with sorrow  
For there won't be memories to make tomorrow  
The flowers may sprout and reappear  
But they will never be the same ones from last year

But if one day I awoke to find that flowers never die  
I would bow my head and laugh while I cry  
For I would only want my dreams to come true  
If flowers lived forever and Grandmothers did too



Sea Shore  
Stephanie Hopper  
Mixed Media





*Submerged*  
Megan Flowers  
Acrylic Paint

# Let Me Hold You Like

by Ava Johnson

you Alone are the only stillness  
in a world full of rigidity.  
even as the Trees bow for the Wind  
while the Waves part their legs  
for ancient Selene's mouth,  
as the Herring scurry alongside  
little bubbles, crossing The Whale Road,  
so many strangle the world with stringency.  
you are a fresh piece of bread tossed  
to my emaciated self: i savor  
every drop of your tongue  
and every crumb of your breath.

you are the needle in mankind's haystack  
that sews all loose seams together.  
let me hold you like  
the Sun holds all warmth.  
we will burn forever —  
or forever almost.





When the fact of imprisonment, and the emptiness of prison life knock from under them whatever props to their masculinity they may have had



*Wow! Whatta hole!*  
Cailynn Smith  
Ceramic



# Mirroring Reflection

by Tre Ruff

Alas, my Dearest Subconscious, o how I envy you  
Warded from the infinite errors of the world, what I would give to be in your shoes.  
Absorbed in my immense criticizing of each decision I make  
Killing myself time and time again with each elongated, exasperated breath I take.  
Envyng you is all I ever do, don't you see?  
Not restricted by the chains of reality is your very identity.  
I'm drowning in a sea where the sea acts as hands forever pulling me down deeper and profound  
Not knowing what to do, I can only scream in a realm deprived of voice and sound.  
Gone are the days of peace. Gone are the days of dreams.

Dearest Consciousness, o how I envy you in all you do,  
Reserving the title of King of Our Dreams, I forever witness the bending of reality, possibility  
Ergo, such would be regarded as an unequaled privilege, a glory, but to me it is a perpetual curse.  
Alas, my identity is that of being prisoner to all your thoughts, your wants, and your mistakes.  
Moreover, your world is that of endless astonishment, wonder unlike anything foreseen,  
In my world, it is forever that of foreseen, forever that of past, present, but never the future.  
No, I fear my realm is a prison masquerading as that of unrivaled freedom.  
Glued to this hellscape, it is as if I am Lucifer forever longing for the reunion of your heaven.

## Buzzkill

by Caitlin Phillips

Don't you see the way my hands tremble and shake  
The whispers, the doubts, the smiles I fake  
If only you could feel my insecurities  
The fear, the anxiety, that pours through me

I've fought this battle for far too long  
Time to wave the flag, I can't carry on  
And I'm going to need you  
Need you to carry me home

I don't want to be a burden, a liability  
I just need a friend to walk beside me  
Don't know if I'm angry, sad, or scared  
I feel too much, all at once, overwhelmed

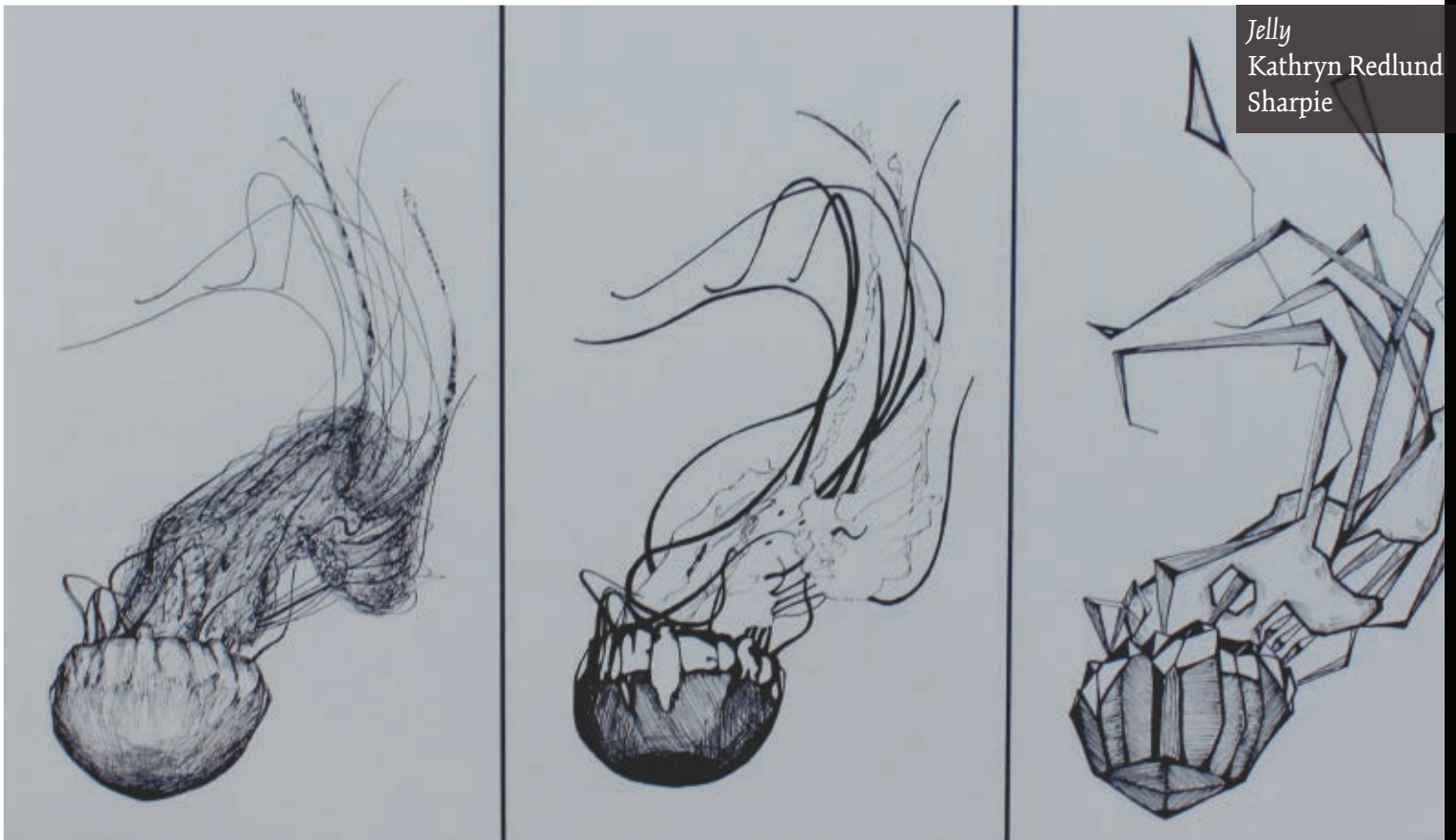
And I know I'm such a buzzkill  
When the tears start to spill  
But I'm going to need you  
Need you to carry me home







*Jelly*  
Kathryn Redlund  
Sharpie



*Sailor's Delight*  
Tia Runions  
Digital Photography



# FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Grant Bivens is a college student and full-time poet from the backwoods whistling branch of Martin, Tennessee. He has several publications, including his self-published *Idle Hands are the Devil's Workshop* and recently a submission in the English magazine, *Weekend Worker*. He lives in a drabby apartment with his cat, Gus, and girlfriend Paige.

Austin Carnell: I am a senior with a major in English writing and a minor in Japanese. My goal is to teach English in Japan. Currently my Mom and I are harboring 5 cats at home, increasing every year.

Ari Claros is a graphic design major from Milan, TN who takes most of their artistic inspiration from literature.

Allayne Corcoran: I am an aspiring playwright and designer for theater. I want to write and produce horror plays for thrill-seeking audiences, and "Dancing Through Death" is my start to achieving that dream. This will be my first time ever being published, and I am so thrilled to be a contributor to spreading arts and literature within campus.

James Crowell: I grew up in Union City, Tennessee, and I love taking photos of God's beautiful creations He has blessed us with! When I travel or take walks, I'm able to see God's creatures and his beautiful landscapes, which is what inspires me about doing photography.

Jordan Gayle Dodd: My work uses self portraits in various media to explore my identity, my personality, and how I relate to the world around me. I use my work to question ideas of my femininity, societal beauty standards, mental health, and personal growth.

Elle Edwards: Since childhood, I have been surrounded by explosive emotions and abusive anger, affecting me even today. I feel that this is one of my biggest struggles, and writing about it helps me express my struggles when it's hard to otherwise express my anger in a healthy way.

Megan Flowers: In *Submerged*, the tiger represents my Pop. He always took on life, striding through it with no worry. The emotional journey behind this painting has reunited me with Pop, and as the tiger glides carelessly through water, so do I in life. Thank you, Pop. I wouldn't be the artist that I am today without you.

Robert Hatcher is a senior Graphic Design major graduating this May. He is from Lebanon, TN and considers himself to be a successful plant parent.

Stephanie Hopper: I am currently a junior at UT Martin majoring in Art Education. Many of my pieces are mixed media colleges made by hand and digitally.

Michele Hughey: I am a senior Mass Media and Strategic Communications major studying Media Design. I am a reporter and a photographer for Gibson County Publishing. Photography is one of my favorite hobbies, as it lets me share memories and emotions through a captured image.

Ava Johnson: I am an English major and Communications minor here at UT Martin. When it comes to my writing, I tend to focus on both poetry and fiction. In my free time, I spend time with my amazing group of friends, watch movies, and read a lot of novels: particularly those from the mid 1900s and earlier.



Matthew Mancusi is going to UTM for a B.F.A. with a concentration in studio art. Since starting the art program, he has been involved in several juried shows on and off campus. These shows range from The Visual and Theatrical Arts Department's annual student show to the highly competitive Bellwethers show hosting artists around the south.

Wade Martin: I'm from Hickory Valley, Tennessee, and I'm a sophomore graphic design major. I have always had an interest in art from a young age, particularly drawing. I enjoy creating things that are odd, funny, or sometimes dark.

Melissa Massey: I have been writing poetry for about a year. I am really inspired by nature and how people interact with nature. I love telling stories, and that is ultimately what I always try to do in my work.

Ryesa McGehee is a third-year English major at UT Martin. She enjoys dabbling in creative fiction and nonfiction. In her free time, she enjoys working in student government, performing in theater, and reading. "Arts & Crafts" was inspired by the "Pinterest mom" movement, and "Where the Grass Greets You" reflects the placelessness one can feel in their undergraduate years.

Izzy Merickle: I am from McEwen, TN. I am a sophomore Graphic Design major and Co-Owner / Lead Artist of our brand "Cactus Grove Designs."

Adranique Merriwether: I was born and raised in Memphis, TN and I've been writing poetry since I was 12 years old. Poetry means a lot to me, and I hope that others will read my work and feel inspired to do something that they love as well!

Mari Morgan: I am a senior English and history dual major who plans to attend graduate school and work in academia. Besides being a student, I enjoy reading and writing, especially about the Latino/a/x-American experience or coming-of-age stories. Fun fact about me: I had a pet chicken as a child.

Caitlin Phillips: I am from Trenton, TN. I have loved literature and poetry since I was a child. My earliest memories are of my mother reading to me. Literature has gotten me through the toughest times in my life, my toughest being the loss of my grandmother. I also enjoy playing guitar and writing music. I am currently a student teacher and plan to pursue a career as an English teacher.

Kathryn Redlund: I am a Sophomore, and I'm 20. I guess as for majors mine are Graphic Design and Ecology with a Japanese minor, but really there's only a few things I could mention that would explain most of who I am. I am neurodivergent, gay, and somewhat functional while writing this bio.

Tia Runions: I am in my final semester at UTM, getting ready to complete my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design. I have always been a part of the arts and hope to continue to do so. Photography is my newest and favorite medium at the moment. I love to take images that impact people. The goal is to create a feeling inside the viewer. A photo can capture what the eye doesn't always recognize.

Amanda Smith is currently pursuing her B.F.A. in studio art at the University of Tennessee at Martin. During her time at UTM, she had been challenged creatively, which is exactly what she had hoped for. Recently, her works have shifted to a more serious tone that addresses mental health and other mental struggles. "Bathroom Project" received Best of Show in LSA's 2023 art show, (Un)Aesthetic.

Cailynn Smith: I am currently pursuing an Art Education degree at UTM; I hope to become a high school art teacher. As an artist, I am experimenting and learning new media such as ceramics, inks, mixed media, and book arts. *Wow! Whatta Hole!* and *AntiHero* were both previously displayed at the (Un)Aesthetic Exhibition hosted by the League of Striving Artists, with *AntiHero* receiving an honorable mention.

Haley Straka: I'm a junior Interdisciplinary Studies major concentrating in Human Interaction and Development. I am president of the Women's Student Alliance (WSA) and a mental health advocate. I've been writing poetry since I was 12 and was president of the Obion County Central High School's Writing Club. I get my inspiration from the love and support I receive from my friends and family to be authentically me.

Amber Thomas is an English major with minors in Japanese and Biology. She aspires to become a science writer and translator. She enjoys writing stories, learning about plants, hiking, and doing embroidery when time permits.

Melissa Virgin: I am a UTM Mass Media and Strategic Communications major with an emphasis in Public Relations. In my spare time, I really enjoy photography and capturing nature. My first camera was one of those Barbie cameras for kids. I used to take so many photos that we would have to keep extra rolls of film to replace it often.

Artez-Dante Williams is a junior mass media and strategic communications major.

Sabrina Woods: I'm an inspiring studio/digital artist. I love to paint. Art has been a passion of mine for most of my life. I love to draw & paint portraits of women.

Abbie Wynn: I am seeking a degree in Art Education here at UTM, in hopes of becoming a high school art teacher. As an artist, I am studying and experimenting with different mediums such as mixed media, printmaking, and even ceramics. *Hands* and *Comradery* both received an Honorable Mention Award at the UnAesthetic Exhibition hosted by The League of Striving Artists.



