Dear Readers, Staff, and Fans of Collage,

I remember living at home during my freshmen year and taking online courses due to the pandemic. It was difficult to feel a sense of belonging on campus because I was not involved with campus life and did not know many people who were going to MTSU. However, I remember encountering Collage due to my love for literacy and art. My honors advisor suggested looking into it after I told her I have a passion for creating digital art and writing poems and want to join an organization that pushes for this creativity. I spent hours looking at the archives of the different issues and being so fascinated with how talented everyone was. I ended up submitting a few pieces of art as well as poems. Unfortunately, my work was rejected in my first semester of submission. However, I still decided to join the staff during the spring semester of my sophomore year because I wanted to be part of the creation of this beautiful magazine.

When I first joined Collage in the Spring of 2022 as the poetry editor, I instantly felt like I belonged. I felt like I had a place where I could share my passion and enthusiasm for creativity. Everyone on the staff has been incredibly kind and supportive, not just of my interests in poetry and art but of all my endeavors throughout my undergraduate journey. I also enjoy staying up late at Starbucks grading works, meeting some lifelong friends, creating and putting together the yard signs for the campus, and debating over colons vs sem dashes. So many fun memories! Collage will always have a special place in my heart, and I am very grateful for my experience at Collage.

I have now officially been part of Collage for five semesters. And it has been a true honor to step up and serve as the Editor-in-Chief this semester. We did encounter a few minor challenges such as having a smaller staff than usual and a week-long snow break that made us start our semester of Collage. But we were able to pull through. I truly cannot express how grateful I am for all the incredible people I have worked with over the past five years of Collage. And I cannot begin to thank everyone who joined the staff this semester. I loved getting to know you all and all the incredible things you do to make this campus such an incredible place to be! I just know you are all going to change the world one day!

Also, I cannot thank enough those members of Collage who continued to encourage me to submit my work after getting rejected. I ended up having a couple of poems and art pieces published in Collage throughout my experience. To everyone who has ever submitted, regardless of whether you were published or not, I am thoroughly impressed with everyone’s submissions. If you did not make it, please keep submitting work! Rejection can be hard. Trust me, been there! Your creativity is a gift! Please, use this gift to make a difference. Take on the world with your creative expression.

To the staff, alumni, faculty members, and longtime fans of Collage, I cannot thank you enough for all the support you have given us over the years. To all my seniors graduating soon, congratulations! I cannot wait to see where life takes you! To all members of Collage this semester, I cannot thank you all enough for the hard work, dedication, and fun we have had on the staff together this semester! Robin, I cannot thank you enough for being such an incredible advisor! Thank you for always keeping us stocked up on snacks, checking in on us, encouraging all of us to keep being the best, and helping all of us grow as leaders!

I wish you all the best of luck next semester! This is Kera signing off!

Warm Regards,
Kera Reynolds
@keralouise01
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We want to get back to our lives but we don’t. For once nothing is expected of us. Except you’re begging me to figure out a way to get to you. Wanting to reconnect with our childhoods through snow angels and snowballs.

Yours forced you to grow up too fast. Mine was constantly overshadowed by eternal damnation. So we end up trekking through the snow, drawing hearts and stars and ignoring our runny noses, talk of childhoods on the cold bench in the dark. My roommate calls us crazy.

But right now we’re snowed in and the world doesn’t care what we do under the blankets keeping us warm in this flashbang Tennessee winter. I know we’ll last like the evergreens we’ll see one day, in all that traveling we talk about. Sometimes my head gets really, really loud, but the voices telling me we can’t last forever submit to the snow’s silencing presence.

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When the Nurse Doesn’t Care for You

Poetry
Sydney Robertson

My mother saved a life tonight. Red, red blood on her light blue scrubs, ribs cracking under the heels of her palms, chaos erupting in the 300 square foot room were nurses wrestle a stranger’s spirit back to earth.

By the time she gets home, dawn sunlight peeking through the blinds, all her compassion has gone into her patients, and all she has for her daughter is leftovers of the humanity she lost faith in.

She’s not a bad mother. She taught me first aid; how to take care of the people around me; how to stay calm and take charge under pressure; but never how to love myself. Never how to heal emotional wounds. Never how to recharge from all the giving of myself I’d do.

I come home needing an IV; she doesn’t listen when I ask for morphine. The alarm doesn’t go off when I code in the middle of the night, bleeding blood she pays no mind to.

She treats my surface injuries, but not the internal bleeding. Her steady, calloused hands wipe away my tears, but when I stop crying she thinks I’m perfectly fine.

So she goes back to work and pours herself into her patients while her daughter sits at home cauterizing her own wounds.

---

Gentle Hands

Sara Leuthen
@smashing_sarahh
Room 4012—I enter with cautious steps,
careful not to wake my loved one lying limply on her bed.
Breathing, but barely, each breath a painful gasp only half filling her lungs' desire.
I take a clammy, wrinkled hand, holding it gently, firmly, never wanting to release it.

Suddenly, time froze.
The heart
monitor
stalls

and sounds of rushed fury were heard amidst the buzz of fluorescent lights.
Doctors yelled at fretful nurses, ordering utensils and equipment to be brought, yet I,
still holding that chilled hand, I knew I was only in their way.
But what did it matter? I knew I had been too late, and so had they.

Her skin paled, her glazing eyes opened one last time and she smiled...a dead smile.
The time announced,
people slowly trickled from the room,
leaving silence and sorrow,
but not mine.
I was not sad.

I walked from that room
with new joy and determination,
tears stinging my dry eyes,
the salty taste sweet on my lips.

Please wait for me there, inside his golden gates,
and I will live as you had never lived before.

My steps echo
down this forlorn hall,
and I hear a cry,
struggling,
grasping
for life
as my
trembling lips
and
heartbeats
synchronize.
Acclimated to air conditioning and pop music, steeped in academia and big city dreams; proponent of public transportation and all kinds of cuisines.

Until wrinkled, wisened fingertips delicately pluck the strings of a banjo. And I'm on the front porch swing, listening to the stories of those who have lived. I've got a shotgun on my shoulder; the trouble guns bring to cities doesn't matter so much out here.

A man silent and smileless tickles the strings of the upright bass. No one cares that he doesn't have much to say.

The bow of the fiddle rips itself to pieces, broken strings tying around hearts and tugging. Placing me amongst some of America's oldest mountains, looking out at that blue smokiness, kudzu crawling across the landscape. There's dirt under my fingernails, and my clothes smell of campfire smoke.

When I worry my roots have been chopped off, the music reminds me how deep they really go, back to sweet tea summers and creek water in my hair crawdads in the bucket and playing cards on the shore.

My heart pumps Tennessee bluegrass.
Everybody who writes at some point wishes they wrote like someone else. They wish they could write as expressive as descriptions as J.R.R. Tolkien or had as vibrant characters as Anne Rice or stories as amazing as Stephen King. This includes myself. We want to write like these people because maybe if we wrote stories like them then we too would have great books. An interview done with playwright and professor at MTSU Claudia Barnett tells us something different. She tells us how the writing process is a reflection of who you are, not who you want to be.

What makes an author tick? That is a question many people find themselves asking, the real question is what makes an author passionate? What interests them? That is what leads to the beginning of a good story. The passion that an author has for a topic bleeds through the words and into the heart of the reader. We worry that our topic will not be interesting enough or good enough, but that should be the least of the writer’s worries because you can have a great topic but not great content. The first thing a writer should worry about is the structure of their story. I was curious as to why Barnett chose playwriting rather than a different writing style. She told me: “I would say my brain thinks in plays... the way that I write is that my characters speak and do things... I don’t really consider their interiority like you would in fiction.” This was fascinating to me and very true. How we think is how we write. So how we write should not feel forced. Do not try to add more descriptions than you would normally, do not try to sound fancier than you are. Every person has a unique way of writing and viewing the world, trying to change that does nothing but hamper your ability to write a story. Don’t try to make the writing process harder than it already is. That is true in life too, don’t make life harder than it already is by trying to be someone else.

When we've been hit with inspiration we have to write the story our way. Not someone else's way.

We would all love for writing (and life) to be easy, where we write words on a page and look at an awesome story that will be on the New York Times bestseller list. If you thought that was how that worked, you are in for a surprise. Writing takes research, sometimes you have an idea, but do not exactly know a lot about the topic. Or you could have the opposite problem, after doing research you do not know what to include or what not to include. This is one of Barnett’s many obstacles in her writing process. For her plays she cannot do a whole life, for her short plays she has to choose what moment she wants to portray of a person. “I really didn’t want them to be the ten most important minutes in her life because I figured those would be the famous minutes.” Is what she told me when I asked her how she decided which parts to include about someone’s life. And she’s right, why should anyone talk about the famous parts in someone’s life, the parts that everyone already knows? Most of those snippets have been exaggerated anyway, we don’t know anymore what’s true or not, and it doesn’t give us an idea of who the person was. The point is, we have to know the topic like we know ourselves or we have to know them better than we even know ourselves. As Barnett so eloquently puts it “To be able to get inside of somebody else’s head or mind, or body even, and figure that person out, because we, especially now, live in a society where people are just so much into their own mindsets. Playwriting lets you be the opposite. So I’d hate to think it’s just write what you know.” What she is saying is that we should be exploring the people and topics that interest us, because what we know, is not a lot in the grand scheme of things. Yet, no matter how much we write about other people, our personalities will still be reflected in our stories.

One of the hardest things to do is to create unique characters. “They need to be interesting. And they need to be different. I don’t want them to be generic. I want them to have their own way of speaking and their own way of thinking and their own things that they would do.” That is, as I pointed out, what everyone wants. They want to be unique and different, but how do we do that in a world where there are literally millions of books with millions of different characters. How could we possibly make them different? Part of how writers do it, is, I think, infusing their characters with either their own personalities and the personalities of those around them. Giving them the character traits and little mannerism of their friends and families.

A story is a lot of things, but what it is not is someone else’s story. When we’ve been hit with inspiration we have to write that story our way. Not someone’s else’s way. Every story has a piece of the author in it, that’s what makes the stories so good. It’s the part of themselves that they give to their audience. Don’t be afraid to be who you are, don’t be afraid to put yourself into the story because that’s half the fun.
It's funny how things happen out of order.

When we needed the money for surgery, for medical bills, for intensive care, for food, it was like a dry well in the hottest season of summer: no one in town has any to spare, and friends and family didn't seem to have the time or resources to come help out.

But here, I sit at home, staring at my hands, remembering how she fit so perfectly in them, while the table in our foyer is littered with sympathy cards, offering money and condolences like a cheap whore whispers she can love you for a night. But these cards and currencies are feeble and transparent attempts to whitewash their guilt.

Even now, I leave them undisturbed. I open them when my sister brings in the mail and then abandon them.

What was I supposed to spend that money on?

She's gone now.

I was supposed to buy her little socks, dresses, diapers.

I was supposed to buy her candy when she said please at the grocery store, to buy her new shoes for church, lessons for sports or dance, or whatever it was that held her fancy.

I was supposed to buy her birthday cakes, and clothes to match her growth. I was supposed to hear how tall she was, and how clever she acts.

I'm supposed to take her by the hand when she can walk, and teach her to check both sides and listen for cars and cyclists before she crosses the street.

Like an ongoing death rattle, each day I move, eat, sleep, but I do not pause to think.

If I do, she's all that I think about. She'll fill my mind so quickly, and every bit of love I invested will start burning me again from the inside out, like a vat of acid was toppled over amid my chest's inner workings.

A touch. My wife. I look at her, the woman I loved, who loved me, who loved her. We lost her equally. I know I am not the only one who grieves, but it feels like if I share in hers, I will crumble apart. I should be strong, but now I am as fragile as a 100-year-old man. My arms shake, my memory seems to resemble shambles.

She too is falling apart, I can see.

Like an old couple, dying together of dementia.

She seems like a stranger to me. I know she is my wife, and there is such throbbing guilt for not recognizing the broken woman before me as she who I wed 3 years ago. Still though, her touch is light, so as not to break me, so as not to shatter herself.

There is no more warmth in her presence than an empty bed.

Even so, I clasp her hand on my shoulder gently, and do not speak, for still, there is nothing to say.

We are both strangers now, I realize. Neither of us are the person we married. Neither of us ever will be again. But we share this grief. We have lived and loved and laughed together in our short marriage. We have cried and fought a little. And now we've died. We've died together, half our hearts each, with our little girl. For now, that is enough. To know that, it keeps us together. It keeps us just barely sane.

---

**Childhood of Summers**

**Poetry**

**Sydney Robertson**

Blaring chorus of cicadas in the leaves,
Bradford pear trees make me sneeze.
The dark green of my front door,
sliding on blankets across the floor.
Red and purple popsicles making fingers sticky,
aggregate driveway making knees gritty.
Gourmet pies made of mud,
waterslide in the yard creating a flood.
No shoes on my feet,
mosquito bite on my cheek,
splashing along in the creek,
we run till we sleep.
Times inside on screens I forget,
but forever remembered are times on the playset.
My grandmother started my love for the pool,
my parents showed me how not to be cruel.
I don't think about my childhood enough,
especially when times get particularly rough.
It was so easy and simple back then,
unlike now when I pick up my pen.

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**Grim Lynn Lines**

**Mixed Media**

**Lynn Solomon**

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**Sidelined**

We are sitting and watching the trucks dump trash out into a big pile. He is kicking his legs—they're dangling off the edge of the bench. His shoes are so small, even my balled up fist can't fit inside

He does it again and again. Everything is so exciting. He asks me what letter comes after H, and I answer. Then he goes back to laughing and pointing and kicking and tugging on me. I am not a person, but rather, a
It's Not About the Mug

Poetry

Bryunlee Wolfe

Trickster

Poetry

Catelyn Woody

Wistful for a feeling
Did it ever really exist?
Or is it trapped in photos
only living in memories

I can only seem to catch it
by the tail or a limb
Back to running up and down
the neurons in my head

Come to the meadow with me
It’s passed through here before
I saw it in a photo of us
The one we both adore

Take your camera with
We’re going hunting in the park
Catch it but don’t kill it
I don’t wanna miss this part

Wait and wait and wait
although it never seems to come
But when we print the photos
I see it dancing by my thumb

Grim Lynn Lines

Poetry

Lynn Solomon

Forget what I knew
about Judas Iscariot
God created me too
and I knew not what
I had to do
I sat
and begged for forgiveness
from you
and I realized
in your eyes
my grief and honesty
The Creek, or Water

Poetry
Elijah Crouch

De La Soul
Medium
Isaac Robichau
@isaacrobichau.art

Short
Poetry
Rachel Booher
rel_che_ru31

A corn chips and pencil shavings
nestle among the lead filtered light,
showered in dusky snow fluff and
creeping into panes of ice.
Gently, kindly, wrinkle by crack
the aluminum tins clang and clack—
an echo of school bells and ring-a-ling clinks
as the chalkboard dust settles.
The calendar sighs...waiting...extending.
Glimmers of orange in a red-apple sunset
carve out the memories and messages left on my desk.
Hearts and arrows,
a 90s smile unwavering
despite the tiny dead pencils.
Whittling away at the last shadows of twilight,
my cellophane vision stretches and distorts.
I taste an afterglow of lead and rubber,
wipe the eraser bits from my mouth,
and remember—
The sound of sheers opening and closing, the steady rhythm of cutting.

"It used to be a strawberry color, not quite red or blonde."”

His voice caught, an oblique blade stuck in its smooth and swift motion. "Is what they said about you true?"

I folded my hands in my lap and watched my thinning ringlets fall like ash. "Do you think it is true, everything they have made me—a bitch, a defict, and a child molester?"

"I don’t believe you raped your son."

The sheers met the table, clacking in metal meeting wood, and a pale bonnet was pulled over my mangled remains, the choppy white tips poking from beneath the material. I threaded my chemise in-between my fingers, the fabric almost transparent, so pale and so plain it might as well have been the rolls of fat set in the curves of my corset, the pouch of childbirth still bouncing in the loose skin against my stomach, the flesh flopping and folding in layers like stretched dough.

I was going to stride through the iron gates and climb into the tumult, the clacking of the horse’s hooves echoing against the stones, the cursing and spitting of the crowds, my name in the sting of their festering sores: Bitch and Widow Capet, stripped of my title in the stripping of the monarchy. The wood scratching and splintering, the still wet paint clinging in goopy blobs of scarlet between my toes, nudging deeper into the folds and crevices with each bare step onto the stage, the riotous crowd in a sea of screeching profanity and murder, nearly foaming—they would push against the beams until they groaned and lurched, and I would hope I would fall. The gathering storm would swallow the Parisian square, the near-final queen of France in a thousand-year-old monarchy, and the scent of rotten orange rimes would overcome the stench of decay, something sweet in something rotting. My wrists bound at the bottom of my spine and my head bowed in almost impassive surrender, my fingers threading the back of my chemise—I could feel my body leaning forward, pressing against the bench and positioning my head in the device’s yoke, the wood scratching the chafing along the nape of my neck.

Louis. I would think I could smell his blood—no, I would surely smell his blood.

And I would wait expectantly and patiently for the fall of the oblique blade.

A harpy to the constitution, they had offered me a priest. I denied him.

Death had already swept through the kingdom. A predator preying upon the weak, he only hunted my children—my sweet Louis Joseph and Sophie, claiming each before their years ticked into double digits—and then my husband, and my friends. My blood was all that remained. I couldn’t imagine Marie and Louis Charles surviving this either, and my chest ached, the kind that twisted into your lungs and your stomach nearly in palpitations like a heart attack.

Death’s coiled body pushing through skin and fat, his black scales catching in the folds of torn flesh in chunks of blood and body, his jaw splitting open and reaching between ribs and arteries to the beating apple—I wondered if the guillotine would feel like his familiar touch.
untitled
Mall Davis

In the cracked frame above the vintage television resides a torn picture, sewn back together with tape. The man's wide, veiny eyes stare in the camera and into my own, his expression stoic. He watches over the young, Black Panther-esque woman beside him. She now sits beside me, her determined face now sagging downwards from old age. Springy, short curls in place of a teased out Afro. He watches over the exuberant young girl in front of my grandmother, my auntie, now restricted to the copious meds that help her see the world as it really is. My grandmother and my aunt's faces both look off into the distance, my grandfather staring straight ahead. I don't feel his eyes on me as my grandmother recounts stories of her golden years; her cheerleading triumphs, her awarded trophies, her high school dances, her life as a woman.
About Collage

Who, What, Where

Collage is a semi-annual publication of the Middle Tennessee State University Honors College. All submissions were reviewed anonymously and selected by a student editorial staff. The materials published by Collage do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Collage staff, Honors College, MTSU student body, staff, or administrators. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form without written permission from the editor or adviser of Collage. Inquiries should be addressed as follows:

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Submit to Collage

Collage accepts submissions year-round. Online submissions may be made through our website, mtsu.edu/collage/submit.php. Creative work, such as art, photography, design, short stories, creative nonfiction, short plays, song lyrics, poetry, videos/films, and audios, may be submitted online or at the Collage office, Honors 224, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Policy Statement

Collage: A Journal of Creative Expression is a creative magazine featuring submitted work chosen by a volunteer staff in a blind grading process. The staff attempts to choose the best work without regard for theme or authorship. Although Collage is sponsored by the University Honors College, staff members and submitters are not required to be Honors students. Staff members are selected each semester from a pool of applicants and must have at least a 3.0 GPA and two references. Go to mtsu.edu/collage/staff.php to complete a staff application.

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