

The background is a complex, abstract composition. It features a central, somewhat vertical, textured shape in shades of pink, white, and light brown, which appears to be a stylized figure or a piece of fabric. This central element is surrounded by a dense, swirling pattern of brown, tan, and grey, resembling a marbled or marbled paper texture. The overall effect is one of organic, flowing movement.

Dialogue

FALL 2025

A Journal of Creative Expression

A Letter from the Editor

As I write this, I feel deeply honored to help carry forward a tradition that has inspired MTSU students for over five decades, keeping Collage alive as a reflection of the soul and creativity of students. This journal is more than pages and ink; it's a living archive of imagination, diversity, and voice. Every issue reminds us that art and literature are powerful mirrors of who we are and who we can become.

On a personal note, my journey with Collage has been one of growth and gratitude. When I first joined, I couldn't imagine that I'd one day be leading such a meaningful project — and yet, here I am, proof that sometimes the most fulfilling experiences come from simply saying “yes” to something new.

So, to everyone reading this: don't be afraid to try. Don't limit yourself or believe that you're not capable of something extraordinary. Growth begins the moment you take that first step.

This semester, I had the privilege of working alongside an extraordinary team, passionate and talented individuals who poured their hearts into every detail of this publication. Their creativity and collaboration made this edition not only possible but truly inspiring. They turned hard work into beauty. I would also like to express my gratitude to Robin E. Lee, whose guidance, patience, and encouragement made this journey possible.

To all the students who submitted their work, thank you for sharing your art and even your vulnerability.

May Collage continue to be a space where voices find their place, where art thrives, and where the legacy of MTSU's spirit of creative expression lives on.

Enjoy every page,
Raquel Barbalat



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ART WINNER

Mood Swings | Charlie Elwell

Red Wine

by Joseph VanDeweghe

In the years that have marked you, you're bare
Without but a scratch, cut, or scar anywhere
It's remarkable
To be so unscathed by living
Remarkably unmarked
You make this life seem forgiving
Or in the slightest bit harmless
As if there's no danger provided
It's as if courage made a home in you
Evicting the fear that once resided
Or maybe that's too generous
Instead of labeling the oblivious, I entertain them
I let them feign fortitude and strength to make use of my time
But the truth is much less allowing than I
The truth is, you wouldn't know your own blood from red wine



The Sky Is Nothing

by Kaylee Wilmoth

The sky is nothing but an endless black,
if I could count all its stars I would;
I grasp at straws, but nothing grasps back.

I explore the earth to discover what I lack:
some sort of key to unlock my livelihood –
The sky is nothing but an endless black.

What I seek an all-knowing almanac
to validate that what I'm doing is good;
I grasp at straws, and nothing grasps back.

The horizon lights up with the threat of attack;
I want to escape – I wish I could.
The sky is nothing but an endless black.

In an instant it's over - a sudden, rapid crack.
My shoes are now stained with blood.
I grasp at straws, but nothing grasps back.

They may look back and call me a maniac,
but a God that's all-knowing can't also be good.
The sky is nothing but an endless black;
I grasp at straws, but nothing grasps back.





The Jester or The King | Rowane Sylvester

"Unfurling" | Aliyah Shuman



at the foot of the mountain

by Noah Dearing

I opened my eyes for the first time
In front of me lay the Mountain

shrouded in a miasma
vapors vile

creeping down the slope
with ten arms lurching about

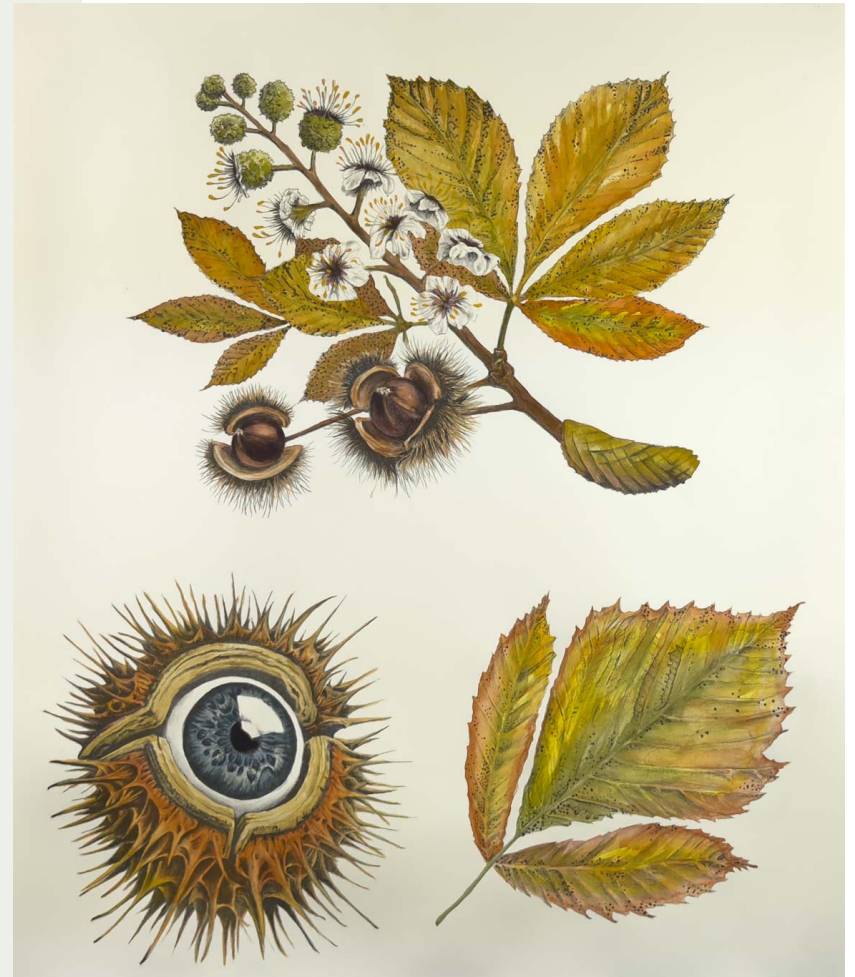
jagged peaks peering through
secrets kept just out of range

tumbling rocks land at my feet
taunts and whispers

billowing outwardly
holographic in nature

I cannot remove them from my path
my hands glide through each one

and return covered in a viscid blackness
that will not wash away



Untitled | Dawn Fós

Merling

by Kiersten Brooke Taylor

When the ocean shelves her rod,
I pet a turtle on the way
To play fetch with a dolphin pod
And lead the fish that go astray.

Yet I bear her violent storms.
For that there's naught which could allay—
Save that she holds so many forms,
And gives me friends with whom to play.



Parallels | Josiah Johnson



the lonely return

by Lake Nelson

You can live with this –
Your high school bedroom, unchanged
The friends who moved on
When you moved away
(but you didn't forget, like they did)
The pit in your stomach
That comes from the walk of shame
Back home after you were the one
Who got out
Yes, you can live with this,
And you can live with them –
Your overbearing and underloving
Parents who always say the wrong thing
At the wrong time
You can live with this
Because you have to
Because when your mother hugs you
It still feels like home
Because you know all the backroads
And you drive and drive and drive
And you never get lost
Because here you are known
Even if you are not loved
And you've missed being known
So you can live with this

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

by Katy Clemens

Captain Novikova's gaze was focused on the dark water beneath the ship's platform as she waited for her business contact to arrive, spinning a silver ring idly between her fingers. Even from several hundred feet in the air, her sharp eyes could make out the galaxy's destitute as they fought for their lives in mass-produced steel contraptions that could only very *generously* be described as 'robots.'

Those machines more closely resembled full-body cages than they did tools of war.

Cages which gave way easily under the steel teeth of the *Unferisetis*. The battle had waged for the better part of four decades beneath the endless waterfront that engulfed much of the yet-to-be-terraformed planet. Captain Novikova smiled in grim reminiscence of her own encounters with the beast as one of its heads rose out of the water and dragged another soul under.

No one had ever seen the creature in its entirety; some claimed it looked something like the archaic Earthen shark or a Steelsnout lurker from Nevian, but its organic form had since lost relevance. Every time a competitor managed to wound the dreaded thing, it came back again just as healthy the next day. Over the course of a decade, Captain Novikova had begun to notice the wounded limbs and broken teeth replacing themselves with ticking gears and sliding joints which seemed... awfully complicated to be dismissed as 'natural' for the region.

She'd seen plenty of living metallic beasts in her journeys across this star-forsaken planet, but never one with an *angle grinder* below its snout. A ping alerting the ship's hatch opening snapped the Captain out of her reverie, silver ring drifting in limbo for just a moment as she fumbled to catch it.

As the visitor stepped through the doors, it returned back safely to the steel of her palm. Captain Novikova slipped the ring onto her index finger, screwing it on *precisely* three circulations counterclockwise so that the custom phaser-rifle slid smoothly from the surface of her prosthetic arm, chugging and ticking performatively like a retired starlet *vying* for attention at her reunion dinner.

James Renault recoiled at the sight, but only faintly. He was a man of fine

manners... and distinctly out of place on the surface of an alien planet that had yet to be conquered.

Captain Novikova smirked, wondering if the fresh-faced fool even knew how to *swim*. There was no coast to be seen for thousands of leagues out, only glittering steel platforms and towers jutting out unnaturally from dark water.

"Good afternoon, madame." Renault hovered by the nearest armchair facing away from the gore and viscera, his face a sickly green. One of the ship's automatons turned to face him, perfunctorily offering up a tray of tea-biscuits with the ignorance of a creature unable to read context clues.

When the guest did not turn to decline or accept a biscuit, it merely continued to hold out the tray, unblinking 'eye' staring without any sense of urgency to stop.

"Sit." Captain Novikova ordered the gentleman, before turning to the machine. "Please note that he is attempting to tell you that he doesn't want anything, Simon. You may return to the wall and wait."

The gentleman watched the automaton go, eyebrows raised.

"You named it, did you? Like a human..."

"I have little company this far out on the surf, nor the money to employ humans to work my ship. It is convenient, and they respond better when you treat them as such." Captain Novikova ran a confident hand through her grey-streaked hair, which tumbled loose down her back. "I am sure you will be waited upon by a human when you meet the man in charge of the bloodsport. *Are* they anticipating you, Mr. Renault?"

"James, please." The gentleman sighed. "You can call me James. I have... declined to personally meet with their staff, for good reason. That is what I have requested your—*very valuable*—time for. If you're willing to listen with an open heart and mind, I believe that we could make great progress.

Captain Novikova fidgeted with her ring, working the gears loose so that her rifle-attachment recessed back into hiding.

"Go on, then."

"As you know, the infrastructure involved in ridding planet Vestris IV

of the *Unferisetis* has generated a fair amount of profit. I presume you have been chiefly involved in shipping construction materials, human necessities, and the like down to this location for a long time now... and do not need this point belabored." Renault inhaled deeply, steeling his nerves. "For that reason, I understand your *initial* disinterest in having a warping portal built on-location, as it would cut into your livelihood. I am sympathetic to another entrepreneur's plight, and for this reason I want to propose that you put in a thirty-percent investment now... so that you may maintain your healthy profit, with each shipment that is delivered *for* you."

Captain Novikova stood up. She walked to the reinforced glass panel at the head of her spacecraft, and looked out towards the carnage. With great hesitation, her guest was eventually compelled by custom to rise from his seat and stand beside her.

"It has been tested already, several times before. The beast despises any kind of electrical disturbance, and it will not abide by such a thing being constructed near the Vacuous Pit. Many have tried before you, just as clever and wealthy, expecting to make eight times their investment... and *all* have been knocked flat on their ass."

Renault cleared his throat politely, offended by the small concession to common language.


"Did you take a look at the blueprints I sent over? If we built the portal on a tower, with the strongest reinforcements available..." His interjection trailed off and died, at the severe look on his client's face.

"It would not be enough. We are forever in the process of building new towers and platforms, because the *Unferisetis* has the final say on what is built above her Pit." The Captain watched with keen interest as the figures below began to shriek and scatter, scaling enormous platforms to get out of the way of a rising force. "... just in time. She's about to feed, and you will see precisely what we mean."

They waited in silence as the waves began to writhe and hiss in acknowledgement of the steel colossus tearing through the undercurrent



Underground Punk Music Scence 2 | Sarah Li



in preparation to breach; the Captain smiled, and popped a biscuit into her mouth.

Crunch. She hummed thoughtfully, appreciating the flavor of the lethally expensive synthetic chocolate as an enormous dorsal fin smashed through a reinforced steel platform below, overturning two towers and one of the major oil rigs installed into the Vacuous Pit's depths. Her neck 'muscles' rippled as one of the primary heads rose above the frothing waves and tore through essential support beams like paper. For a moment an enormous eye seemed to flick towards the ship, its purple bioluminescence reflecting in the glassy optic of her facial prosthetic.

Reflexively, the Captain's optical lens began to run the appropriate motion calculations to line up a shot with her rifle attachment, data scrolling through internal HUD at a dizzying rate. Novikova dismissed the data, spinning her ring idly as the beast crashed back down to the ocean level and snagged another one of the helpless battle-bots in the process.

"How do you get anything built at *all*?" Renault yelped, dabbing at his face with a handkerchief clutched in trembling hands.

"She sleeps at night, and displays little interest in hunting then. With cheap building materials, lots of patience, and an exorbitant amount of profit from the oil operation... it begins to become 'worth' it. You can only *imagine* what it'd be like if we ever killed that beast. The owner would be a very, very rich man."

Captain Novikova had her own suspicions that this was not an enterprise at all, but rather a trillionaire's pet project. His luxury spacecraft on the opposite side of the horizon rarely strayed from the boundaries of the planetary zoo, where he could spectate the fights in his twilight grandeur. It was the only pragmatic assumption; no one risked this much for oil. Not even the disgusting abundance that lay at the bottom of the Vacuous Pit.

"... And they just... all go to their deaths, do they?" Renault huffed, tucking his handkerchief back into his pocket.

"Many of them survive their first fight. Most of those lucky few only ever risk a singular brush with death and go home to an early, glory-filled

retirement. It's the best and brightest gamble anyone can take, out here... with the yield increasing proportional to the risk. More money, with each expedition out."

A sharp bark of genteel laughter.

"The greed of mankind astounds! It truly does!"

Captain Novikova removed her silver ring and flipped it through the air. It landed upright, cloud filigree facing the ceiling, waves to the bottom of the glassy floor.

"Men who take that risk have no choice. Have you ever seen how the crews who work on warp-tech suffer, Mr. Renault?" She asked, neutrally, as she slipped the ring back on.

"T-that's beside the point! Anyone who favors risking life and limb over putting in hard, decent labor are not cut out for *living*. I have no sympathy for gamblers." The gentleman struggled to remember his original point. "I understand that there is a possibility that the portal may be destroyed, but if built at an appropriate distance... it may take a long while for the beast to destroy it. *Our* investment would still be rewarded."

That was a gamble, one that would have sharp consequences for Captain Novikova if it failed, as she was the party which relied on the old ways for money. How ironic. She stretched her aching limbs, which only seemed to grow worse as she aged— no longer the dread pirate of her golden years.

"What will you do if I decline your offer? Go straight to the man in charge of your most-hated bloodsport, and offer him the opportunity?" Captain Novikova frowned. "It seems like you're set on building a portal no matter what I do. On undercutting *my* work in transport."

The gentleman eyed the recessed machinery at Renault's side anxiously.

"That is not my intent, madame. I came to you first for a reason... you just have to understand. This is a new era and merchants have come to expect the convenience of portals. It's only a matter of time."

"I have no choice, then. Is that what you are trying to tell me,

Crunch!

with sugared words?” The Captain spoke without anger.

“You have a choice. The choice to adapt, or to sink below the surface. So to speak.”

He was making *threats* aboard her own ship! The idea did not sit well with Captain Novikova. She removed her silver ring and flipped it through the air; it landed upside-down, cloud filigree facing to the glassy floor, waves to the ceiling.

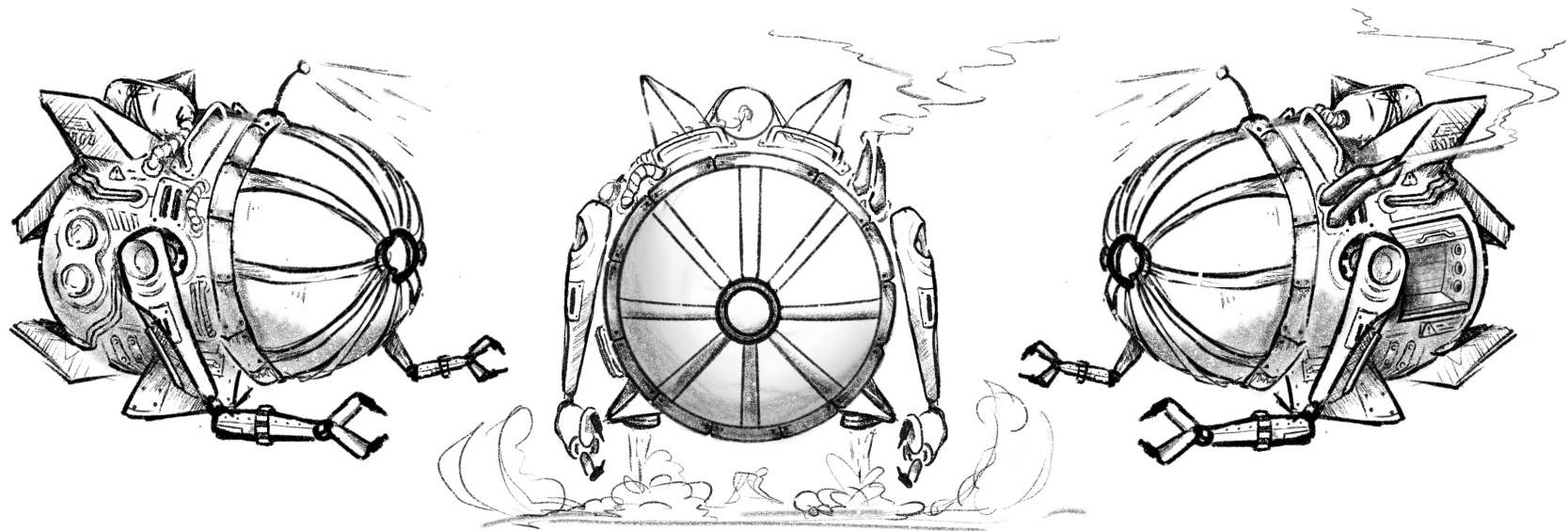
She smiled suddenly with silvered teeth that gleamed in the light like sharkskin under a current. With a renewed pomp to her step, the pirate sprung back to the comfort of her throne, swinging her body over the arms of the chair carelessly like a much younger woman.

“Well, then. From businessman to businessman, I can appreciate someone with an eye for healthy risk. I believe,” She set her ring down into a complicated-looking jewelry stand, twisting it so that the ring clicked into place securely. “That we have a deal.”

The gentleman smiled a touch too wide at the news, clearly thinking a complicated-looking jewelry stand, twisting it so that the ring clicked into place securely. “That we have a deal.”

The gentleman smiled a touch too wide at the news, clearly thinking himself savvy for swindling such an experienced client. He was confident that the scales would tilt in his favor, right up to the point where the glass floor of the ship unhinged and dropped out from under him.

Captain Novikova beckoned over her automaton with the tray of desserts and popped another biscuit into her mouth. *Crunch!*



Apocalyptic Vehicle Concept | Marie Jackson

My Filipino Dad Smiling

by Abigail Sajor

My Filipino dad smiling
As my younger sister backs out of the driveway
His calloused hands fall loose at his sides
As he's illuminated by the sun

My mom sits in the passenger's seat
Prayers prancing in her mind
The rosary hanging from the rear view mirror
Enchants her revered whispers

My younger sister in the driver's seat
Painted nails adorning her hands clutching the wheel
She stares at the backup camera
Looking behind has become obsolete

I sit in the backseat
Spectating these pillars ahead
And notice my dad standing in the driveway
Beaming, bright and bold

My Filipino dad's smile
Is to be framed in museums
A phenomenon it has become to us
A phenomenon I wish it wasn't

I take a photo
Maybe he seldom smiled
Maybe he seldom laughed
So ours might make the stars shake and dance

Maybe if they were more acquainted with our luminescence
We'd be able to open all the doors he had to walk past
The stars would be the keyholders
No need for extra courses to account for our intelligence

But the stars are too acquainted with us
I only wish they would hear him more
To raise future generations in a household lacking in laughs
Would be to disrespect the calloused hands

That held us
That scolded us
That fed us
That loved us

But I'd want my dad to be raised
In a household nurtured with laughs and calloused hands
And cut fruit and elephant statues
So for future generations, I'll raise them how I wanted my dad to be raised

My Filipino dad smiling at us
Has become one of my most favorite photos
Because the stars heard him
And knew him by name on that bright, blue day.



Muted Emotions | Neely Jordan



Parked Out Front | Sophia Emmanuel



Material Reverance | Aliyah Shuman



Drift | Aliyah Shuman

The Patient Potter

by Chloe Dye

The potter hums to himself as he works on his latest masterpiece. It's a quiet day at the shop, and even quieter in the back room. All that can be heard is gentle humming and the rhythmic spinning of the pottery wheel.

The clay forms in his hands, molding and shifting to conform to his particular taste, his vision for the piece, completely subjected to his will.

The shop that lay just beyond the workroom is full of finished masterpieces, works of art made at the hands of the potter.

All the pieces are different, for they serve different purposes. Some are large jars for drinks, some pots for plants, some dish ware for meals to be shared.

Yet not all the works of art look kindly on their creator, some tense when he enters the shop, confused and even outraged by this purpose. "Why have I been made with handles?" "Why is my base

round when that one is oval?" They shout questions at the potter, but they go unheard.

Why? Well, the potter knows that at the right time, their purpose will be revealed to them. Plates will be eaten from, lilies planted in pots, lemonade served from pitchers, and at that point, the beautiful creations will no longer ask such trivial questions of their creator. Instead, they will marvel at the beauty they know to be true. They will marvel at fulfilling their purpose given to them by the potter.

So as the potter hums quietly, he instills an unknown purpose into his latest creation, and when it mars beneath his fingertips, he gently picks it up and starts over. Only he can give the pieces beauty and meaning.



Intruder

by Kaylee Wilmoth

It's a tragic irony, every Halloween,
when my neighbor hangs up her polyester spider web
then turns around to fervently complain
about the living spiders who find a home within its threads.

I can't quite put it into words—
the pathetic impersonation.
We instilled our own fear upon the spider,
we villainized him, made him the face of Halloween,
then forbid him from celebrating with us.

Sometimes I see him in myself,
a crude intense smallness,
contrasting against a burlesque world,
feeling too real, too alive.

We only fear the spider when it is sentient,
just as we fear our own human grossness.
I pick myself apart in the mirror every night,
terrified others will notice the details that make me offensively human.

I know I am no model.
That I'm nowhere near perfect.
That I'm not pretty enough to be plastered on a wall.
That I'll never be the decorative web,
but rather the intruder within its wires.

But, like the spider, I will blend within the caricature.
I will build my home among the immortal decorum,
beat myself unrecognizable for the sake of reconciliation,
yet still be pushed away for my unmistakable vulgarity.

They say imitation is the best form of flattery,
though I doubt the spiders would hold the same sentiment.



The Monster Above My Bed | Elis Aspee de la Vega

Osprey & Asters

by Joseph VanDeweghe

Against the worn down, wood-grain of the old oak barn
Was a wicker basket harbining aster seeds
But not sprouted, not lively, not full of vigor
Just a wood-woven basket with what appeared to be weeds

But they were not weeds, they were unborn flowers
Beautiful, bright, purple ones that never came to be
That were set down by a farmer before calling it a day
And passing away peacefully in their sleep

Now, frozen in time despite the August heat
Was the old oak barn with the aster seeds
But beside that barn, was a nest full of ospreys
With down fluffier than clouds and little talkative beaks

They reside in the basket, nested and neat
A remodeled home of forgotten twine
With straw, seeds, and such under their feet
They make life out of a life left behind



PHOTOGRAPHY WINNER

Pop in his Silverado | Katherine Garrett



Cat Nap | Luke Yates

Rear View Mirror | Luke Yates



Within My Heart

by Robert Klostermann

A subtle scent of lavender.
A warmth in my heart unseen, unfelt.
I lie down with a warm embrace
And I am met with your gaze.

We venture out on a sunny morning,
Dancing to a place in secret.
Our place which we only know,
Somewhere where my heart gained its wings.

We settle down and enjoy a toast
To our life,
Our past,
And most importantly—Our future.

Ignoring the pain of the world.
The sights,
The sounds,
The dread...

In my moment of lapse,
You save me.
With your overflowing kindness
And selfless love.

A soft and gentle smile,
Through a silent embrace.
Like a bee coming to pollinate a flower,
Life springs with you around.

A brisk morning fading into a softened afternoon.
The season brings me joy.
It gives me a sense of awe,
Only something that you can know.

A fire in my chest,
A poignant flash before my eyes,
A shiver coursing through my bones.

A desperate attempt to reach out to you.
A trip over the moon just to see you.

A single tear falls.
Red reaching across my face.
A heaviness in my chest,
A sinking feeling in my stomach.

I'm ready to do what it takes to make us real.
To make us happy,
To make us alive,
To make...

Us.

Finally I wake up.
A cold drop of sweat off my temple.
A lonely tear—lost in silence.



REM | Ava Houghton

Where and When was Laura Meilan?

by Arlo Kepler

The year was 1972, and Bob Dylan chased Pink Floyd around on a record player in loops through the living room, scratching on without pause. A cracked wine glass lay complacent on the kitchen countertop, and was trailed by the blood-red liquid that dripped from the edge. Coincidentally, the wine had stained the tile floor, and Laura Meilan's bathrobe— though she didn't mind any.

Laura had been far too drunk, and too far deep into her sofa to notice the red splotches on her worn-out robe, or the rest of the after-party mess that had left her apartment scattered.

A young woman of about nineteen, Laura also hadn't bothered to notice the burning cigarette she'd left in her zebra-print ashtray many days before, which had since died out on its own. Nor did she account for the living room window that had been left open overnight.

Plenty of gnats had hoarded into a flying 'school' above the primary ceiling ceiling fan, awaiting anxiously for their hostess to wake for the morning, that they should skirt off like birds.

Their friends, the flies- who brought their children—the maggots—along for the visit, ate greedily at the week old dinner plate on the young woman's coffee table.

Her neighbors, Paul and Georgia, knocked hurriedly at the apartment door, with the intentions of paying the young college student a rather impolite visit, as they had so done before. Only this morning, the couple had been accompanied by a hefty police officer, whom they had called in to investigate a rather putrid and frankly disgusting smell.

Having escorted the officer and leaving a loud announcement of presence via pounding on Laura's door, "This is it! This is the place!" Georgia exclaimed. With her nose covered by a palm, she continued, "That smell just keeps on growing stronger."

Laura's neighbor, Paul, would intercept Georgia's statement and with much

sarcasm would say, "Worse, honey. I think you mean to say, it's growing worse. 'Least that's what you've been telling me every morning and afternoon for the last seven days."

Georgia arched an eyebrow for a moment, as if having paused to truly consider her answer. "Why- yes. Thank you, Paul." She rolled her eyes. "It's gotten much worse over the last several days. We think its because she refuses to take out her garbage."

The officer hummed. "What makes you think it's coming from her garbage?"

Georgia shrugged and lifted a pack of cigarettes from her purse. "This has happened before. Poor girl works so damn much she hardly does any chores—I mean—Paul and I have helped her clean her place before and I'll tell ya, her garbage-can was so full I could've puked, myself. Can't imagine living in there, and god forbid as that poor girl's roommate."

The policeman scanned Laura's apartment door: It was locked, and so were his hands, as long as they weren't holding a warrant to search the place. "Well, I'll have to agree with you folks, the smell is- rather awful," the officer said with a slight gag. He swallowed, and spoke again. "But I am afraid there's not much that can be done without official permission, unless Ms. Meilan herself comes to the door."

Paul and Georgia exchanged defeated glances to one another before they each protested in harmony, "We've tried that!"

The officer nodded, "Alright, alright- look." He took a long breath in and sighed, scratching his bulbous head. "When was the last time that either of you saw Ms. Meilan? Outside of her apartment, I mean."

Paul and Georgia explained that it had been at least a week since they had seen the young woman in the parking lot of the complex. Had they knocked on her door? Of course! Tried leaving her a note? "Look there, it's still next to the door handle where we left it two days ago!" Had they tried putting anything through her mail slot?

“We’ve left her three notes, two letters and seven or eight knockings on the door!” Georgia hollered with arms tossed just above her hips, irritated with the officer’s repetitive questioning. “Now- I’ll have you know that my entire apartment smells like a giant piece of roadkill—its disgraceful I’ll say— disgraceful—I mean, my god, its just awful and you people expect us to just live in it like animals! How do you expect me to enjoy doing anything when this smell is following me around like a pungent little dog??” Mr. Paul, who was of a much more reasonable character, attempted to mediate with the stout and sturdy Georgia but was swatted away like a fly. “Now, I’ve had enough of this-“ the squatty woman stuck her chubby finger in the officer’s face. “If you won’t get in there and air that place out, then I will! I will not continue to live in a place that smells like—like—“ she threw her hands in the air with a dramatic huff. “For chrissakes, its smells like death!”

After what felt like an eternity of quiet, the trio exchanged glances until one of them eventually spoke. “Well—well, now I don’t think...now lets not jump to any conclusions.” With a nervous laugh, Mr.Paul read the facial expressions of the other two and halted his mouth. The three people exchanged another glance, as if they had each held a shared version of the glorified ‘lightbulb’ moment, and turned their wide-eyed heads to squeeze a tight glance through the dark peephole on the apartment door of Laura Meilan: *Who hadn’t moved from her couch on the other side of the wall for nearly a week, and was in a state of decay*. As the officer turned back to face the two people behind him, Georgia had begun lighting a cigarette.

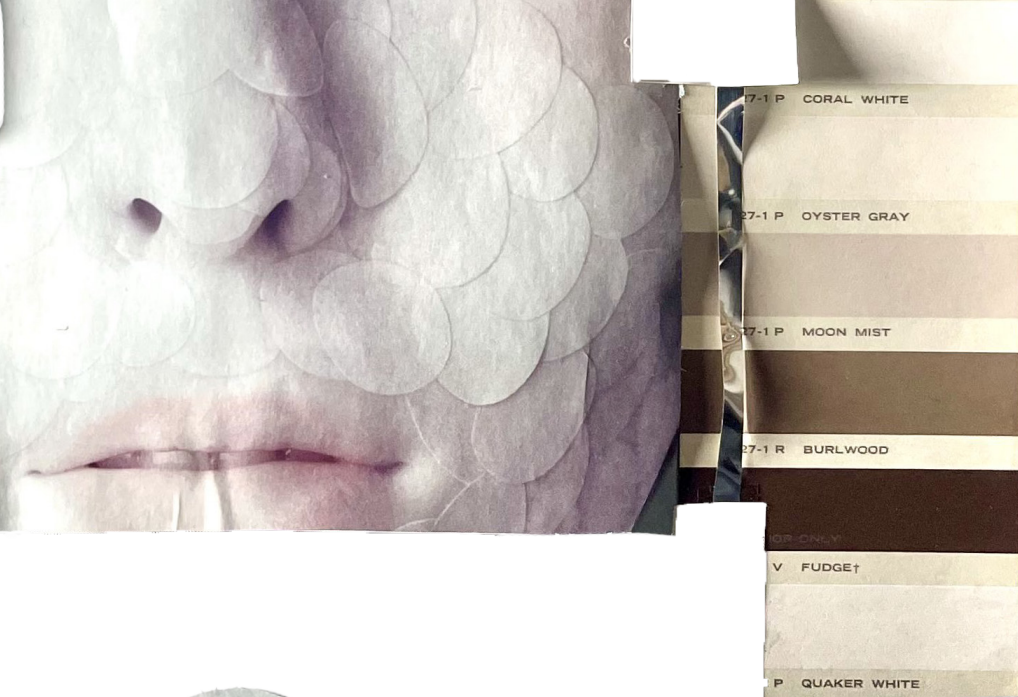
With a gentle cough, the sturdy woman exclaimed aloud, “Something really needs to be done about that smell. Whatever it may be, garbage or what have you.”

The officer replied coolly and with a quiet sigh, “Suppose so.” He fixed his black cap over his bald head and glanced towards the end of the corridor. “Where might your landlord happen to be, this morning?”

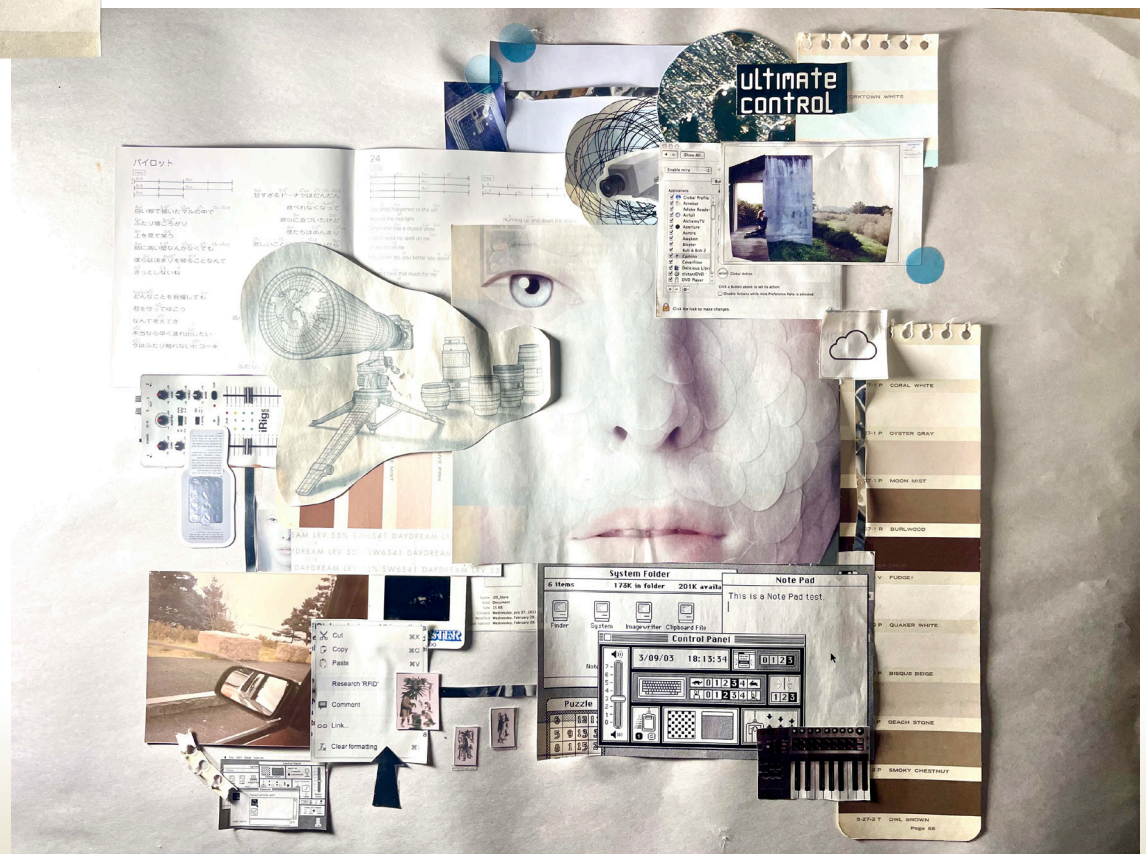
Mr. Paul had nearly begun to skip down the hall alongside the group, mentioning a near-future coffee break and talk of hard-boiled eggs for lunch.



Redacted Soul | Isaac Snyder



Tech Collage | Marie Jackson





Fur-Lined Lungs

by Miles Wine

I've thrown away tons worth
of lint roller slips
engulfed in fur
torn from the fabric of my clothes.

I had always hated
salt-peppered wool.
The feeling would screw up my
jaw—
ants dried to a honey-covered
sweater.

It was cold out,
that day.

My only winter jacket
a jet black canvas.

I could've taken it off sooner;
There were plenty of opportunities.
But as my fingers would creep to the
zipper,
you were all I could see.

Your hair fell like winter's first
snow—

gentle ease,
a sign of times changing.

As I slept in its warmth,
I imagined myself as you,
and hoped the padding had been
enough to hold your pain.

Suddenly, I could not bear the
thought of no longer wearing you.
I yearned for my closet to overflow
with grains that would tickle my
nose
and remind me of you.
I think back to the years of "ruined
looks,"
the tons of you left in landfills,
and I sob for what I took for grant-
ed.

Though,
In some ways,
I think you'll always be with me.
I think I've inhaled enough of you
to forever cradle you in my ribs,
and for that I am grateful.



Just a Wednesday

by Miles Wine

It's Wednesday.
My hair is squalid.
My stomach snarls.
You look at me with sunken eyes.

It's Wednesday.
Sunlight sears into the tops of clouds,
shadows cling to their underbellies.
Cars inch forward like the legs of a centipede.

It's Wednesday.
There's an old dog hobbling away from its owner,
dragging the retractable leash farther and farther from his
master's hands.
My mom said something about IV fluids.
My dad says something about "these parts of life."
A board reads:
December is National Cat Lover's Month

It's Wednesday.
I'm kneeling,
praying to a God I've never believed in
about choices even He would drown between.
You look tired.

It's Wednesday.
My friend lights up a cigarette as she drives on empty roads.
She passes it to me in quiet accord.
We don't talk about the fact I quit 5 days ago.
We don't talk about anything.

It's Wednesday,
And the box I hold is heavy with dead weight.



Decay, Stone Lithography | Jordan Williams

Up, up, and Ablaze

by Tala Abukhdai

The coarse soil dampened my blazing skin. The scorching heat peppered my flesh with sizzling kisses that left me as lifeless as a desert. I cried out with envy at the content sky, for it was so intense and generous with its warmth. I battled with gravity when I crumbled through the air. A cliff so massive and unforgiving has grabbed me by the neck and hurled me with such force and harshness under this excruciating dome of heat. I lay there, ruined, with deep gratitude for the earth. It offered moisture and cooling refuge for my pleading body, away from the main-level fever above me. The distinction was as relieving as ice cubes in the midst of a heatwave. I buried my face in the sprouts, relishing in my ice cubes.

My petite vehicle rotted beneath this intensity. Next to it, a corpse of an animal, bloodied and mutilated. Beyond my own injuries, I despair for the wronged being. For it may have been on its way home to its family, just as I. We were all wrecked and immobile. At least I had companions alongside me, to share this inescapable predicament. I look up with longing and despair at the cliff that nearly brought me to my permanent end. "Help..." I whimpered with strain. For a second I was so numb to the gaping wounds on my heaving body. Velvety gore laced with sweat enveloped me into an embrace so intoxicating and restricting that I wished desperately for liberty. I clawed and clawed at the soil, yet remained hostage, my own body defeating me. When I came to the realization that I was no longer mobile the way I used to be three minutes ago, I sobbed and winced with unbearable pain and agony. This Arizona heat was

deadly, but my body was failing me more.

As I gaze hopelessly at my Creator, I notice a silhouette reflecting upon the cliff's sharp chest, the swaying to the wind. My bloodshot eyes, the only active part of me, scanned the sight until I realized it was a woman with sandy tresses and tiny sunflowers dotting her dress. Beads of sweat misted my face, begging me to shield them away from the generous sun. However, I could not look away. Her skin, similar to mine, was dusted with freckles. She was pale and resembled milk and butter with her soft, subtle, pastel dress.

"H.. e.. I.. p.."

I rasped with as much strength as I could possibly give. Her figure loomed over me, her shadow reaching all the way down the cliff and to my helpless body. She grabbed my hand with such softness and gentleness that I had melted. I thought I'd eventually disintegrate from this simmering weather, but I was proven wrong. She lifted me with ease and grace. Her giggle like a family of shiny bells, clinking and shimmering with melody and brightness. I saw the world shrinking and the heat lessening. My body with its bloody cuts and scars were healing with each passing second. The anonymous woman disappeared out of my range, but I did not notice. I did not notice. I was noticing a power, an energy, that was too profound and stellar. I smiled like I never smiled before. I laughed like I never laughed before. And I leaped like a human never could before. Until forever ends.

POETRY WINNER

Rachel Booher

Silver and Stars

“All that glitters is not gold.” -Shakespeare

No matter how long or how hard she tried
she always fell short of her mother's pride.
Hidden by eyes expecting praise
was a daughter's longing, silently waiting,
for the approval she craved.

Tiny hands were forced to hold a weight too sharp to sting,
reflecting soundless ill intent and cruelly glimmering,
leaking whispers of “never enough” and “don't give up,”
spoken in a voice always too small for her to recall that it was never her fault...

The cost of her existence was dependent on the day,
paid with eggshells and how small they broke and frayed
The higher the number, the lower her sum...
she danced carefully but still she crushed them

one
by
one
by
one.

All that glitters is not always gold
and all that crumbles is not always old.
A woman made mother is not always kind
raising fine silver children as if they were iron.

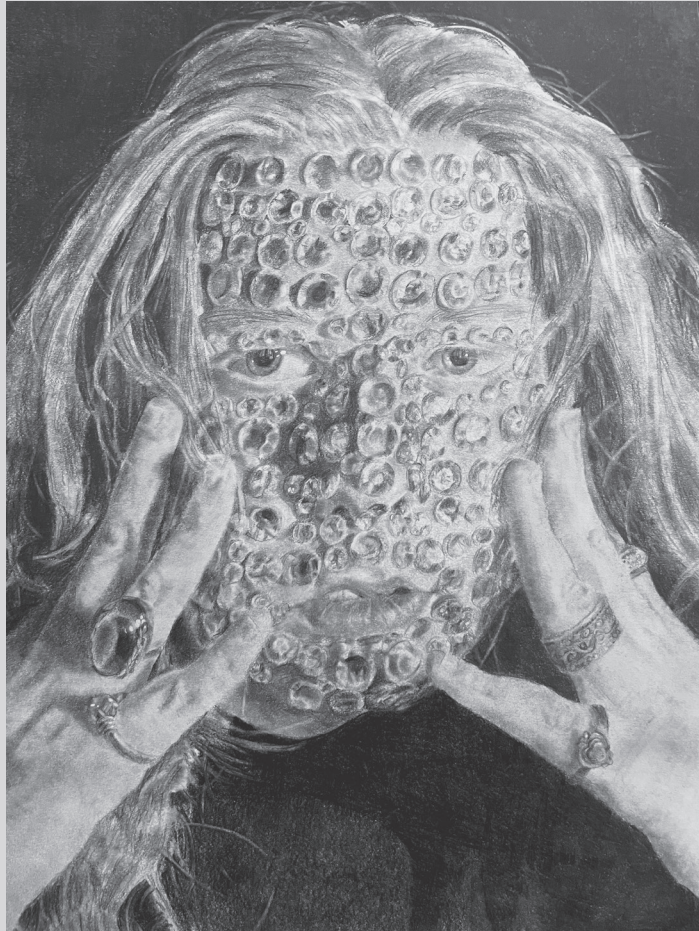
Forged through words that burned and charred,
a soft child turned rigid through love's heavy scars.
Now a mother herself, she softens her arms,
her child brightly shining, blazing, and warm,
“To you, I will never do the same harm.”

A mother gifting agony, “it's a lesson of love” —
fine silver gazed sadly, “I learned what I don't want to become.”
Casting off her heritage and tearing down the pain,
one
by
one she destroys the curses of generational chains.

She decorates her deformities and uproots her softened scars.
She plants them, dancing and dazzling, connecting to the stars.
Crafting gifts of silver birch, of wonders, hopes, and dreams,
she creates a different fate where they escape hatred's revolving gate
of her old family tree.



Misty Waters | Ollie Guenther



Eulogy of Woman

by Haley Roberts

Let the red wave, mirage no longer, be viewed without its mask as the blood stains her hands and skirt hems. Let the fingerprints scorched into her throat remain as a tattoo of the perpetual taking of the unrighteous hand. Let the stitches forcefully holding her tongue, ripped by the cascading wave of spoken worth, dangle forthright as a reminder that the cost of silence is death. Let her not go quietly into that night - rather roaring like the lioness that has been stripped of her crown as the new lion takes his reign.

Hear the truth, lest it be too late already.

Let her rebirth be not of the calm and quiet placed upon her head as the thorns upon that of Christ, but as the flames of retribution that devour all those that stand in her way. Let her thunder be heard across universes as she unleashes the aching of centuries.

A staunch reminder that the red that has stained her soul cannot penetrate her heart; that, as the phoenix rises from the ashes, she will not be cast aside by the throes of man nor destined to live in the darkness, casting the shadow that is far smaller than the light of her being.

Learning Again, for The First Time

by Star Schumacher

The night my remainder of
innocence was taken,
Was the same night that my
soul died.
Nobody knew I had been
forsaken,
Or that I became dull-eyed.

I hated movies, sweets, and
valentine's day,
The color blue, fast food, and
seeing.
All reminders that i am a piece
of clay,
And have no choice by dis-
agreeing.

I'm trying to get past my past
And turn into something
worth believing;
I'm always moving too fast,
I forget that I can start
breathing.

I'm learning to love Movies,
Sweets, and Valentine's Day,
As well as Reading, Painting,
and Living.
I no longer want to constrict
my airway,
Or have to be so forgiving.

I'm learning Everything,
Again,
For the First Time.

The Tiger

All the others here must have been bred into captivity. I, on the other hand, went kicking and screaming into my cage.

The people at the zoo sneered at me at first, lifting their noses up at the black stripes along my body, imagining all the ways I'd be better off – cut apart for meat or skinned and sold into the black-market trade. I'd make a gorgeous lampshade.

The zookeepers thought it was better that I was in here, where I could be controlled. Monitored. Every piece of meat flung at me in contempt and every excrement passed from my body was seen under the watchful eyes of my jailers. To them, I was a danger to the world outside of this cage. A predator. They shaved off my canines and pulled my sharp nails from my body. Now I am humiliating. A husk subsisting on what little they have to give me. Do the onlookers peering into this manufactured habitat know that my ribs are not meant to protrude from my body like this?

I prowled at the edges of my cage, examining each bar for a way out. I thought of starving myself enough to slide through the gaps in between the iron bars, but after careful consideration I deemed that to be impossible. The gaps were simply not wide enough to account for the circumference of my head.

The others in the cage with me, with striped bodies just like mine, never bothered getting up from the spot where they lay on the rocks. The only time I saw them move was when I first got here. The zookeepers entered the cage and chained one up by the neck, dragging the emaciated creature out of the mocking structure of our habitat. To make room for me, perhaps. I don't know where they took him.

The rest of my fellow striped inmates at this zoo just slept on the rocks and let the sun roast them. I tried many times to rouse them from their lounging, but they displayed a shocking indifference to escaping. I grew sick of them, but at the same time I couldn't blame them. I figured if you did not know what the world was like, why would you suppose the edges of your enclosure were not

the very limit of all there is to know?

But I refused to become a victim of apathy. There was still opportunity to escape, but after many days of stalking the perimeter of the cage, I came to the conclusion that I would not be able to escape from the inside. I required the help of a person to get me out of the zoo.

The onlookers cannot understand me, and they speak in tongues foreign to my ears. However, I know well that emotion can jump any barrier that our mouths cannot cross. People can understand my suffering and possibly extend that understanding into empathy and that empathy into action. Get me out of here.

It doesn't take long for my ribs and sad eyes to catch the attention of the onlookers. Their sneers turn to consternation – furrowed brows, chewed lips – a huff, a sigh. Then a camera is produced. A young lady carefully removes it from her zebra-print purse and lifts it up to meet my eyes. I stare down the barrel of the camera and do not blink at the flash.

In the days after the woman took the picture, more people came to see me at the zoo. I tried to rouse the others lying on the rocks but they did not bother. It was their own choice.

More and more people came. The zoo was packed with people thronging to see me. They spoke words I did not understand. Some screamed and beat at the bars of my cage. Some tilted their heads and whispered soft words to me. Some wept.

I would crouch at the bars, doing my best to direct the people towards the keyhole on the gate where the zookeepers would enter. I hoped it was clear to them that the only way to get me out was through the zookeepers. Some of the onlookers nodded, but the days went on and no one tried to open the cage.

I growled, I roared, I screeched. The people screamed and wept and beat at the bars. I clawed at the keyhole. The people held up signs. Many displayed

the photograph the woman had taken of me. They marched in circles. The zookeepers even stood on, watching with pleasant smiles. I lashed out at the bars. The zookeepers frowned. One removed a blow dart from the deep crevices of their pocket. The glint of a tranquilizer needle soared towards me, implanting itself into my skin before I even had the chance to duck.

When I awoke, the massive crowds were gone. They left behind their signs and their trash, which blew into the cage. I dragged myself to the bars. Had they forgotten about me? It was daylight, which meant the zoo was open, yet no one was there to witness us. No one but some zookeeper at the gate who was skinning fish into a bucket for our food.

The crowds did not come back. The occasional person would stop by, but that was it for a short period of time until one day the zookeepers brought another – kicking and screaming – into the cage.

The zookeepers threw him to the ground, where he thrashed. The only difference between me and the newcomer was his lack of stripes. Instead, he had bleeding wounds across his naked back. The crack of a whip opening a fresh gash across his spine shrunk the new prisoner into a crouch, and the zookeepers retreated from the cage.

He looked towards me with desperation. He rose to his feet and threw his hands out towards me, digging his thumbs into my shoulders.

“Where are we? There’s been some kind of mistake!”

“There’s no mistake,” I told him plainly. “They meant to put you in this cage.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Neither did I.”

He released me from his grip and backed away from me. A flicker of fear flashed across his eyes. “Yes, you did. You’re dangerous. Everyone knows it. You’re a predator – you know that, right?”

“Yet we’re in the same cage.”

Panic took hold of the man. He ran his hands through the uneven patches of buzzed hair on his freshly shaved head and returned to a crouch position, shaking. His eyes twitched and his pale lips quivered.

“I didn’t do anything wrong! They won’t listen when I tell them they’ve got the wrong guy!”

The man’s eyes seized away from mine and latched onto a lone onlooker on the other side of the iron bars. The man threw himself against the metal barrier, rattling the bars with his desperate hands.

“Please! Please! You have to let me out! There’s been a misunderstanding! I’m not supposed to be here with them!”

The onlooker stared down at the man with disgust. The prisoner reached his fingers out through the bars.

The onlooker spat on the man’s outstretched hand.

“Bestia!”



Duality | Ava Byars

VIDEO WINNER

Shear-Nanigans

Bailey Cabbage

Cierra Bryant

Blaire Myers-Wilson

Danny Decker

Castor Carter

Kaylee Foster



AUDIO WINNER

Royalty

Audrey Rose Conley



Pine Tree

by Lucy Wilson

You walk along the cobblestone pathway of your college campus, the one you have walked hundreds of times. You graduate in the spring. You wonder why the March days appear much colder than before. Why the sky is so dark. Why remnants of snow and ice mix with the gravel to create a large dark blob on the sidewalk. After diverting your eyes from the ground, you see it: A pine tree. It turned the remnants of snow green. So green. Just like you all those years ago. You wonder how long it's been there. You wonder if it was there on your first day of school when you met him.

You wonder if it watched over your picnics in the dew ridden grass. You wonder if it watched over your sophomore year, when you became a biology major. Then, junior year when you diverted back to studying English, crying in your advisor's office for an hour that you made a huge mistake. You wonder if it watched you on that day on that final fall semester. When he grabbed your hand, led you to the dew ridden grass. You expected another picnic. But, he held it out. You squinted. The sun reflected off the diamond. Maybe if you were in the shade of the tree, the tree you wished you'd known about, you would've reacted sooner. You would've said yes instead of staring. Staring. At something you now wish was yours. You wonder if the tree, the thing you never knew about, watched you all along.

There's a Spot in the Earth

by Miles Wine

There's a spot in the Earth
where red carnations burst—
unfolding their petals to breathe in the open air.

Where the stems of catnip twist 'round each other
like reunited lovers.

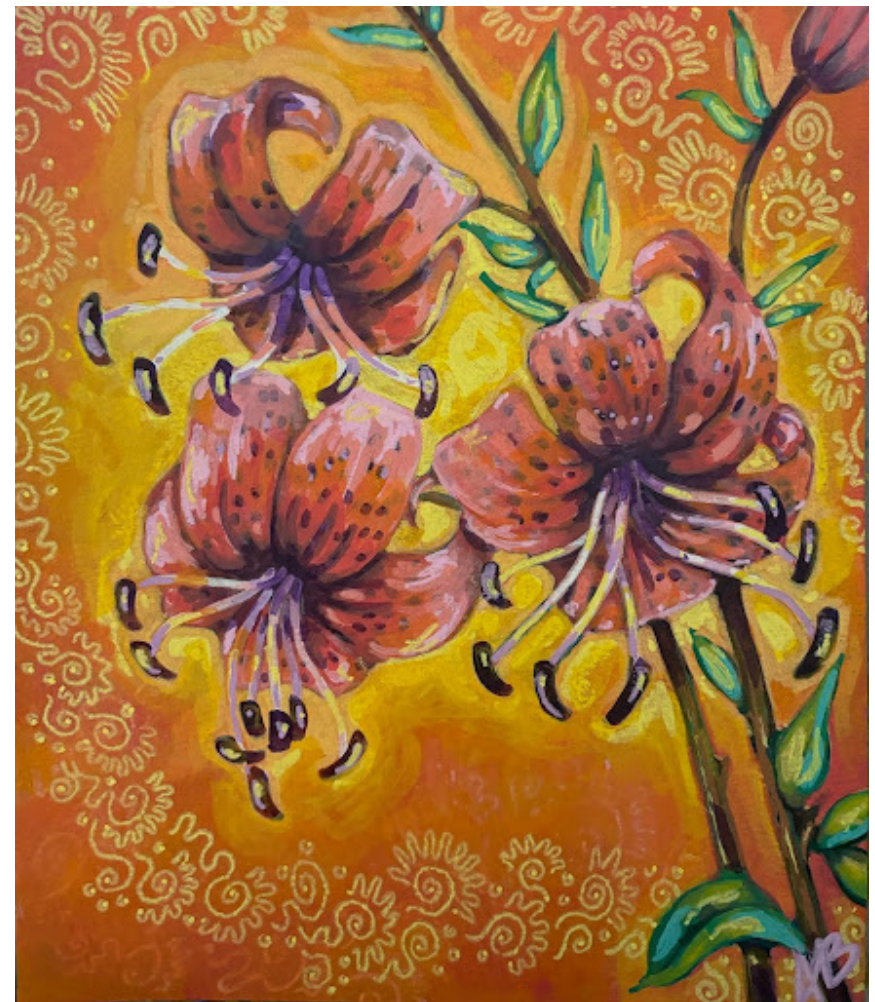
Where a pink nose grazes the blooms,
and teeth receive the gift.

Where a stranger oft visits
for tender thoughts.
held by that which touches all
but fails to be seen.

Where a hand strokes the grass,
and tears melt into soil,
sinking down to the burrow.

Where hunger ceases
as the worms are fed.
Where warmth is collected and let go
to charge 'cross fields,
unbound.

There's a spot in the Earth
Where love is recycled—
Returned.



Stargazer Lilies | Ava Byars

Little Orion

by Kiersten Brooke Taylor

A hunter from the sky tonight,
With padded feet and eyes alight,
Stalks his fated quarry
Through a lawn.

Skillfully he snags a thrush,
Then squeezes through the under-
brush.
Stares at passersby—
Then moves on.



The Unraveling

by Rachel Booher

Light, raw and frozen, pokes Marie's face with the insistence of a toddler craving breakfast. The whirring of the HVAC system causes the old, yellowed blinds to cackle as they sway in the airflow. Her husband must have forgotten to pull them closed again. Sighing, she forces open lids weighted with exhaustion and old tears. The drywall ceiling, peppered and stained in between fluorescent ligwhts, hangs overhead bland and pale. Two carry-on suitcases, one grey and one red, lie flung open and exposed, chaotically vomiting their contents across the checkered concrete floor. Dirty teal squares and speckled egg-white, alternating geometric lines and consistent in their monotony. The walls are white. Her sheets are white. The curtain and towels, white. Everything pasty and sucked dry of life.

But looking closely, a tiny smudge of color rests on the whiteboard. Slightly crooked, smeared with blue dry erase marker, the new nurse on shift scrawled carelessly across the top. A little red heart next to the name 'Ashley' draws a long exhale from Marie. Ashley is kind. Nonjudgmental. Unassuming. Marie remembers their first conversation ending in mutual tears, hugs, and promises of recovery. It's been two days and those words feel weightless, like they could float away. Her gratitude overtaken by heat, Marie rests her palms against her face, praying for just a little relief. Her skin simmered and bubbled just beneath the surface, burning with the constant stream of magnesium. Her belly, flaccid and stretched, throbbed, bloated and aching empty. Hot gas and blood seared the walls of her canal as fluid pours lifeless and boiling into an XXL Depends. 'I'll have to ask Ashley to help me change it later,' Marie pondered ruefully. Her vision blurs in and out of focus. Triple the dosage, blood pressure meds seep into her arm. The cuff tightens. The monitor buzzes and flashes red again. 169/98. Resignation and fear renew at each flash and in her

heart, she knows that in another 20 minutes, the vice will strangle her arm again.

"That reminds me..." she said, checking the clock. "It hasn't quite been three hours but close enough."

Reaching for the flanges and tubes, her hands shake. Connecting them piece by piece, she plugs them into the machine by her bed, checking and rechecking their tightness. She gently removes her gown, places the flanges against her chest, and takes a breath. Pressing the ON button, she switches it to automatic and waits for gold to flow.

Turning toward the window, she wistfully gazes into the bleak city skyline. The scene mirrors the horizon like a mockingbird, all slate and stone and cement. Gravel within potholes, sleek silver vehicles, pressed suits and pursed lips, all the lifeless color variations weaving through the streets like muted soldiers. One command from the sky is all it will take for it all to crumble to ashes. But ashes are just another shade of the mundane. She wonders if their colors would change if she screamed.

'It doesn't really matter,' she thought. "They probably can't hear my voice anyway."

Rasping and desperate, Marie feels like it's always muffled by the drips of the IV and the vibrations of the breast pump.

Focusing on the rhythm of the machine, she watches it click and flicker, each number like a plea. And yet the clock still doesn't seem to move. Time is a construct within hospital walls. The only times that matter to Marie are those three-hour care time intervals. Grabbing the bulky remote attached to her bed, she watches the giant screen across from her blink and the pixels settle. The Angel Eye camera lets Marie see her little one sleeping, swaddled and snug in a

tiny pink blanket. Head wrapped in bandages, the black wires of the EEG protruding ominously, but her baby slept without complaint. Soft squishy cheeks taped with a stomach tube and oxygen lines, her tiny mouth slightly ajar. Marie watches intently, catching the slight flickering of her baby's lips. The hint of a sleepy smile appears and lingers. Marie's body reacts at the sight of her child, the instinct to mother, to hold, to protect, engraved into her bones. She hadn't been prepared for separation or empty arms. Looking at the stopwatch at the bottom of the screen, Marie knows what is coming. Another stranger, another unknown person is going to change her daughter's diaper, feed her, cradle her. Again.

"It should be me...why can't it be me?" she sobbed.

Counting down the seconds, her anxiety begins to rage. The TV goes black. Marie helplessly stares at it, blank and listless. The pull of the pump is all that grounds her while tears march silently past the flanges.

The vibrations stop. Marie removes the flanges and checks the level of milk that came with this session. Carefully placing the parts on the tray, she strips off a label, writes her name, the date and time, and opens another syringe to draw up the yield. Every milliliter is precious, both a blessing and a burden. Liquid healing for her baby, liquid heat from within her veins, made from love and dwindling sleep and swollen ankles. It takes everything she has just to make one more drop. She places the sticker on the 12 ml syringe and presses the call button for the NICU nurse.

'It feels like I'm always waiting for something,' she thought ruefully.

Sliding her bruised hand along the textured bed rail, Marie feels the hollow echo of her nails as they scrape against the bars. She wants out. She wants to abandon her health and race to her baby's side. Marie wants to sing her a lullaby and rock her to sleep and hold her against bare skin for hours, whispering her name. But Dr. Spence had cautioned her what would happen if she pushed too hard.

"Do you want to live to be there for your husband and your daughter?" He had warned.

His words remind her that even treatment may not give her what she wants...

Glancing at the vacant blue chair in the corner of the room and then back at the black screen, Marie knew her husband was there with their daughter. She feels the stabs of betrayal. Of jealousy. And then the inevitable guilt. Pulled between the NICU and the ICU, forced to choose between wife and daughter, her husband frantically tries to close the gap. Marie doesn't blame him. She's the one who sends him to their daughter. Marie doesn't want him to see her heart withering, incinerating in the wake of sadness and medication.

Marie scratches at the tape holding her IV in place. Picking at another sticky spot of adhesive, pulling arm hair and dry skin, she leaves patches of dark fuzz and fused threads. Tracing the lines, every speck is like a fly caught in yellow tape. Struggling, writhing, and slowly wilting, their stomachs become hollow and their bodies crumble. Pushing herself up, Marie winced. Her insides twist as the catheter pinches tender flesh, reminding her that no matter how much she struggles to grab the hand her husband extends, she is trapped. Scratching until her arms are red and striped, she blocks out the hovering thoughts of death. Catching a flicker of light from the tray, she checks her phone. A picture of Daniel holding their baby girl pops onto the screen. Wires and tubes and needles protruding from their daughter like beacons, weighing life and death in the balance.

Robotically, Marie turns off her phone and gently places it back on the tray. Yanking the crispy white sheets over her head, entombing herself, she huddles beneath them. The fire in her cheeks evaporates reticent tears. She closes her eyes and swallows the ache, forgetting the milk, cooling in the faded light of a black screen while the call button still flashes from the surface of the remote.

Squared Toed Boot

by Emily Sanders

Verse 1:

I can only explain it
So many times
You'll either retain it
Or fail to surmise
Why I feel so distant
I thought we were friends
Is there somethin' I'm missin'
I need to connect

Pre chorus:

And I ain't sayin' it's on purpose, or it is, I can't tell anymore
'cause this has happened before

Chorus:

Where I'm livin' on the outskirts of your city
Watchin' all your silhouettes fade like your pity
And then you'll pass through town to bask in your glory
Boast about your night, no remorse, no regard for me
And I can't help but think it's my fault
That I misspoke and scared you all off
But deep down I know it ain't me
The reason I can't compete
Is I'm nothin' more than a squared toed boot
Tryin' to fit in with a round toed group

Verse 2:

Sure you're nice to my face but
What about behind
My back, do you say what
Is wrong with my mind
Am I just too demanding?
Or a little too weird

Am I not in good standing
Have I not yet been cleared?

Pre chorus:

And I ain't sayin' it's on purpose, or it is, you've been awfully
quiet
So I'm startin' to buy it

Chorus:

'Cause I've been livin' on the outskirts of your city
Watchin' all your silhouettes fade like your pity
And then you'll pass through town to bask in your glory
Boast about your night, no remorse, no regard for me
And I can't help but think it's my fault
That I misspoke and scared you all off
But deep down I know it ain't me
The reason I can't compete
Is I'm nothin' more than a squared toed boot
Tryin' to fit in with a round toed group

Bridge:

And I could keep squirmin', try to squeeze myself through
But I can't ignore the cold, hard truth

Chorus:

That I'll always be livin' on the outskirts of your city
Watchin' all your silhouettes fade like your pity
And then you'll pass through town to bask in your glory
Boast about your night, no remorse, no regard for me
And I can't help but think it's my fault
That I misspoke and scared you all off
But deep down I know it ain't me
The reason I can't compete
Is I'm nothin' more than a squared toed boot
Tryin' to fit in with a round toed group

Juliana's Voice

by Raquel Barbalat

I always wanted to live life intensely.

I loved the open air, the wind against my face, the chill that both startled and awakened me.

I loved feeling my heart race, reminding me: *you are alive, keep going.*

Among so many adventures and experiences, I found this mountain, and I climbed, breath after breath.

I climbed with effort, each step a challenge, each stone an invitation not to give up.

But destiny surprised me. The fall was harsh.

For a moment, I felt alone.

Still, I searched for strength in what I always believed: life is worth every second, every breath. From a distance, voices reached me from the trail above. Strangers who could see me, who called out, who tried to send courage across the air, even though the cliff kept them away. Their words could not touch me, but they still held me, like threads of hope stretched across the empty space. That too sustained me.

When night arrived, everything grew dark and cold.

My body no longer answered, my thoughts dimmed, and I closed my eyes.

And then, like a miracle, I felt a presence.

A human warmth telling me: *you are not alone.*

That someone was Agam. A guide, an adventurer like me, an angel who believed in people and loved life as much as I did. He stayed there, beside me, through the entire night, warming a body already cold, holding my existence with dignity.

At dawn, he carried me down the mountain, back home, to those who were waiting. Thank you, my angel.

I could not continue the volcano's path, but I leave behind my spirit, woven into the mountain and the skies.

My story, my trace, my invitation: respect life, love deeply, never give up on your dreams.

Life is not meant to be simply endured.

It is meant to be lived. Intensely, like the wind that blows outside, like the beauty of nature that always calls us.

- In memory of Juliana



Birds and Berries | Ava Byars

Shower Fairies

by Miles Wine

Time steals leisure with a corporate smile.
Water bills become heavy under the weight of jejune fun.

But with you,
the clock is lost behind blue-gray curtains.

I watch the river traveling from the nape of your neck to the edge of
your fingernails.

“Look! We’re water fairies!”

My knuckles find a stream to guide,
becoming the clouds that offer summer’s rain to the blossomed lotus.

I pull you to sip from your lips—
the bee that kisses the water on your petals.

And I giggle,
wondering where you learned my secret childhood game.

Skin

Soap

Sliding fingers

Slippery hands

Soaked lips

Sharing the sweet taste of

Soft flesh,

Melting and juicy.

Can we stay here?

Let us play magic again.



The Repair Crew | Katelyn Lafon

The Lighthouse Network

by Victoria Sexton

They say you can't anchor
to a name without a body,
can't build trust in smoke
and circuitry.

But I have sailed
storm-mouthed nights
guided only by the blink
of distant lighthouses:
soft, steady glows
in the mapless dark
of the internet's sea.

We are not less real
because our shadows don't touch.
We are constellations,
strung together by intention,
by the small kindnesses
we send like flares
through sky and static.

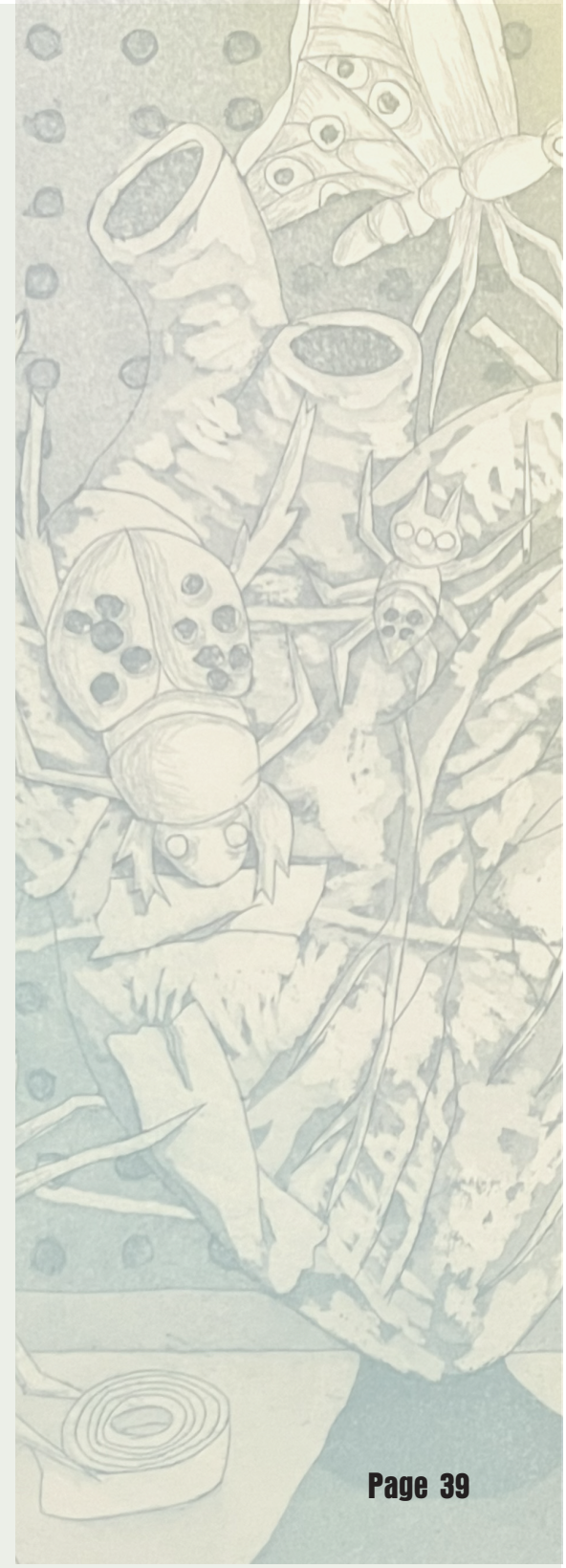
Your kind of love
asks for handshakes and eye contact.
Mine survives on time zones,
on typed lifelines,

on digital gardens where
we water each other
with words alone.

I have known
the architecture of a person
through the careful scaffolding
of their messages,
seen them build cathedrals
out of emoji,
leave prayers in parentheses.

And when I've been unraveling,
it wasn't a nearby shoulder
that caught me,
but a voice in my inbox
saying:
breathe.
I'm here.
You're not broken.

So, tell me again
how it isn't real.
Tell me a ghost
can't teach you how to live.



How Unappreciated

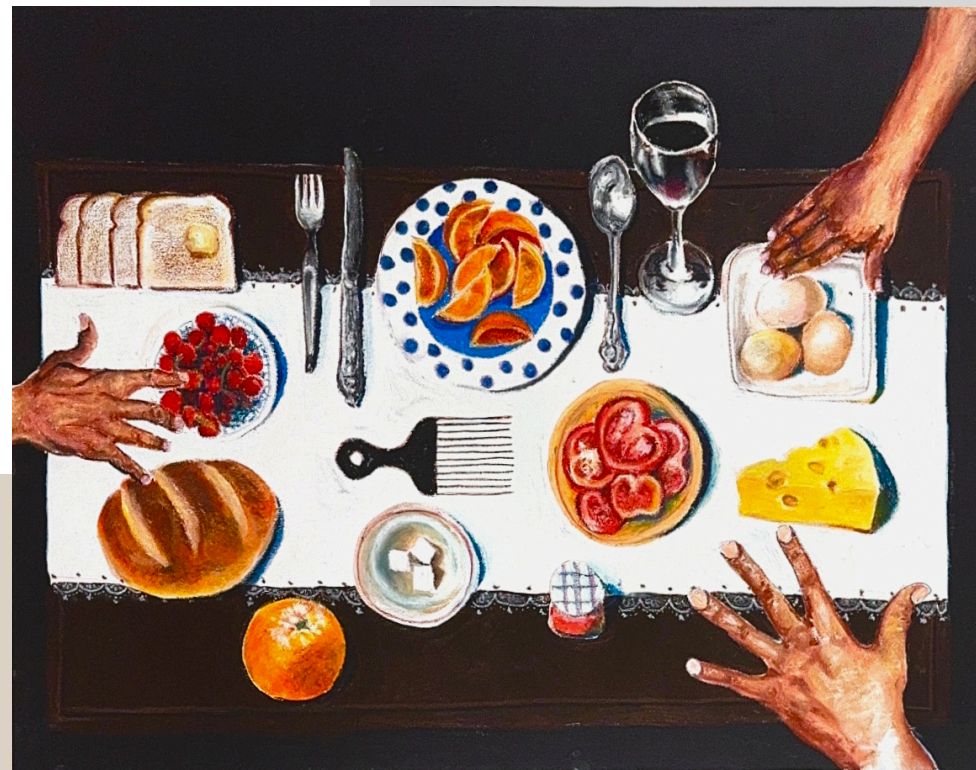
by Kelsey Suddarth

How nice to discover a bobby pin in-between books,
To find a used coffee mug on the desk still warm,
Or sweep a little sock out from underneath the bedpost.

How nice to see the lights flip on across the house at night,
To see dirty dishes in the sink,
Or glimpse a flash of hair around the corner.

How nice to hear a shout of surprise and the laughter of reconciliation,
The sounds of furious feet running in the morning,
Or the soft quietness of peace.

How nice, to live in a home.
How wonderful to not be alone.
How unappreciated, to be loved.



A Seat at the Table | Isaac Snyder



Piano Seat | Isaac Snyder

Extinguish

by Haylie Thurman

Rest waits and beckons
In the calm between the fire of anger and white knuckles
When the sun dips just below the skyline
You will no longer feel the scorch

Look me in the eyes
And for once not see a reflection of what you despise
Let my hands soften your grimace and your shield
My words soothe what they left of you
And be still until all we have is stillness

Let me be the stream that cools the lacerations
The cuts and wounds of the life as a self-incendiary
Speak into my hands until they carry the burden of your words
And let me speak for you when you can no longer conjure speech

some new and shiny day

by Sarah St John

Some days, missing you is not enough.
I want to consume this feeling, drink the fire
and swallow the burn whole.

You should have grown old.

I wrote a song about you, the day it happened.
Afterwards, I cried like a baby.
Mom said I shouldn't do this to myself.
I told her this is all I have.
Because you left no marks, no bruises or scrapes that I could hold
on to,
a tattoo to prove you really were mine.
You were only good and gentle, and you went away in a whisper,
as good and gentle things
tend to do.

So I sing your name, let it bruise me,
carve you into my memory that always seems to fail.

*And I hope it hurts my whole life long,
until some new, shiny day,
when I'll meet you in forever,
and you'll take the pain away.*



Sour | Elis Aspee de la Vega

FEATURE STORY

A Rising Poet With a Mission to Inspire

by Robin E. Lee

From a young age, Darren Rankins was captivated by the power of words. It all began in sixth grade, when he first started writing poetry. But it wasn't until 1994, when he participated in the MTSU Poetry Slam at the encouragement of MTSU Honors Program Director, John Paul Montgomery, that Darren realized the true potential of his craft. The event gave him his first opportunity to share his poetry in a setting where others could appreciate his raw, unfiltered thoughts. It was a transformative experience that spurred him to submit his work to publishers, with the first of many publications appearing in several magazines and newspapers.

While his poetry initially began as a personal expression, he soon realized it was more than just a hobby—it was a calling. He felt guided by a higher power to write Christian poetry that could inspire others and share the message of God's love. This spiritual awakening led him to a major shift in his life: from hobbyist to entrepreneur. In 1995, he founded his own business, Pure Thoughts, an outlet for his poems and a platform to sell his creations. As the founder of Pure Thoughts, Darren expanded his artistic talents beyond the written word, channeling his creativity into designing Christian-themed plaques and T-shirts. His plaques, crafted from wood and lacquered to a high shine, are a beautiful manifestation of his artistic vision. But his T-shirt designs, which pair original poems with

“Poetry is a tool”

powerful graphics, have become his signature. These pieces often feature Bible scriptures, reinforcing the message of his poetry and creating wearable art that inspires those who encounter it.

For him, poetry is not just about artistic expression; it's about making a difference. His poems, many of which address themes of love, loss, and redemption, have been published in various prestigious outlets, including The Spiritual Herald and Night Roses. His work has been featured in publications such as Murfreesboro Magazine, The Daily News Journal, and The Nashville Banner. As his recognition grows, Darren remains grounded in his mission to make a difference. “Poetry is a tool,” he says. “It's a way to help people see the world in a new light, to share the love of God, and to give others a sense of peace.”

Looking to the future, he has big plans for both his poetry and his business. As he continues to write and design, he hopes to expand his influence and reach even more people, encouraging them to embrace faith and hope. For Darren Rankins, poetry is more than just an art form; it's a way of life. Through his words, he strives to create positive change in the world, to make a difference in the lives of those who encounter his work. As he looks ahead to a future full of possibilities, one thing remains certain: Darren's voice will continue to rise, offering a message of hope, faith, and inspiration for years to come.



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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 collage.mtsu.edu/staff to complete a staff application.

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Creative work, such as art, photography, design, short stories, creative nonfiction, short plays, song lyrics, poetry, videos/films, and audio, may be submitted online or at the Collage office, Honors 224, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

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