WANDERING LIGHTS



a literary magazine

issue 2 / fall 2026

Wandering Lights Literary Magazine Issue Two

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Cover photography, titled "Lunar Light," by Ryan Erickson

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WANDERING LIGHTS
Literary Magazine

"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."

—John 1:5

Dear Readers,

It is with great joy and elation that we present the second issue of *Wandering Lights Literary Magazine*. Following the publication of our inaugural edition, we have gained even more support from fellow writers and artists. And this year, our magazine expanded like never before; we had the honor of receiving 681 submissions across 7 countries and 31 states.

We want to sincerely thank those who have continued promoting *Wandering Lights* and made this level of awareness possible: Katy Keffer, founder and managing editor of *The Bluebird Word*; Veronica McDonald, editor and founder of *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*; author and professor David Athey from Palm Beach Atlantic University; and Katie Mudd, Director of Marketing and Communications for the English Honor Societies. Because of you, our vision grows, and we have the privilege of providing a space for emerging writers and student voices. Thank you for your love of literature and for your support of our magazine and contributors.

This issue's cover art, "Lunar Light," was photographed by Ryan Erickson, and we feel that his meticulous eye impeccably captures our mission and is a strong representation of the type of work we aim to publish and share with our readers.

Erickson's photograph reminded us of Saint Augustine's words in *The City of God*, asserting that Platonists were the noblest philosophers because they understood that the rational soul does not have intrinsic light of its own but instead reflects a supreme being, "as if God were the sun, and the soul the moon" (p. 371). This same tenet is portrayed in the Gospel: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light" (John 1:6-8, NIV).

Just as the moon reflects the blaze of the sun, we too are called to reflect the light of Christ. And even though that igneous rock radiates through the silence of the night, it is still cratered and is not immune to darkness. In fact, it stands in darkness, scars not hidden but visible—millions of dents, basins, and valleys—illuminated for all to see. Caught in a vacuum of obscurity. Suspended in the vast nothingness of space. And, still, it shines. Not through its own source. But another's.

This year, a common motif emerged in Issue Two. Whether through a photograph capturing the moon or a solar eclipse, a poem about extremophiles thriving in the world's most inhospitable places, or speculative fiction contemplating AI's search for what it means to be human—two themes continuously crawled into the light: exploration and imagination.

And they kept us asking, Does wonder fade as we grow? Is imagination left in the summer sandboxes of our early years, rusted in the beating sun? Or forgotten, endlessly drifting in that old creek we once swam in?

Maybe it never truly leaves us. What if it simply waits, patiently, for us to open the door and let it back in?

We want to be transparent that many pieces in this edition portray authors' own experiences with loss and grief, and that each work may not be a reflection of what our editors personally believe. Rather, at the core of our mission is a commitment to publishing poetry, prose, and art that does not stray from the realities of this world, but instead meets them head-on with honesty, empathy, and hope: for ourselves, for one another, for our environment, and for the future we are shaping together.

Within these pages, you'll encounter emerging writers seeing their work online for the very first time. You'll hear the voices of undergraduates discovering their passions and exploring how they plan to make a difference in their communities. You'll also find experienced authors whose shelves are lined with awards and publications. It is one of our greatest joys that every contributor—spanning generations, backgrounds, countries, and genres—has the opportunity to share their work side by side.

To our amazing contributors, thank you for trusting us with your personal stories, words, and art, and for being brave enough to share your creation with the world. To our readers, we hope that these pieces make you laugh, cry, sit in awe, and bring back the wonder you might have lost somewhere along the way.

And above all, it is our mission that they bring you faith which endures, like the shining cratered face of the moon, always there, even when you can't see it.

Sincerely,

Editors of *Wandering Lights Literary Magazine*

Outstanding Editors' Choice Awards

As you can imagine, creating a cohesive magazine from nearly 700 submissions was no small task. Countless deserving pieces ultimately could not be included. Yet throughout the selection and publication process, a handful of accepted works continued to stand out to our editors, leaving a lasting impression each time we returned to them.

Before long, we found ourselves referring to these pieces as "fan favorites." They lingered in our minds long after we had finished reading them, struck our hearts with every revisit, and captured the complexities of life with remarkable transparency and creativity—like the quiet glow of fireflies gathered inside a bell jar.

This sentiment and those unforgettable works inspired the creation of Wandering Lights' Inaugural Outstanding Editors' Choice Awards. Congratulations to the authors and artists.

We hope this recognition encourages you to continue creating and to keep pursuing writing, painting, and photography. Thank you for sharing your gift with us and for the light your words and art bring into the world.

Poetry

"I hope heaven is a tea house" by Anna Chen
"Sleepy Bird Tomorrow" by Megan Lolley
"Cave Drawings" by Nate Donohue

Prose

"The Color of Dragons" by Anastasia O'Donnell
"Balloon Boy" by Nate Donohue
"Sunday Blueberry Muffins" by Madison Stahl

Art and Photography

"Just" A Segment from Piero del Pollaiolo's *Justice* by Amy Singleton
"Camping Under the Milky Way" by Ryan Erickson
"Original Wonder" by Jonah Benedick

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A Morning Prayer

Poetry
Sherry Poff

Give me the peace of frogs.
Let me rest quietly until it is time
to move. Bestow on me contentment.

Like the frog, let me eat the flies
that come to me where I sit,
blinking at each new surprise.

Yet may I be willing to go in search
of crickets and pill bugs. Let me not
remain lazy and sluggish. Give me courage

to sing all night, trilling into darkness,
singing in spite of cold, knowing
warmer days are coming.

Make me adaptable; show me how to give up
swimming in the easy waters of youth.
Let me leap with joy into today.

Sherry Poff grew up in the hills of West Virginia. She now lives and writes in and around Ooltewah, Tennessee. Sherry holds an MA in Writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is a member of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild and Poetry Society of Tennessee. Her stories and poems have appeared in *Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Artemis*, *Salvation South*, and elsewhere.

"Just" A Segment from Piero del Pollaiolo's *Justice*

Oil and Gold Leaf on Canvas

Amy Singleton



At Hand
Fiction
Mattea Fitch

Off the crumbling concrete edge of Violet Ave., down a tire-track sand road, sits First Presbyterian Church of Hillsborough. Whether it is the first of many backroad Presbyterian churches is questionable at best, since each one seems to declare the same pioneer history. In the crinkled, brown grass stands a fluorescent letter board that backlights swooping bats in the nighttime:

REPENT FOR TH3 KIN DOM OF GOD I AT HAND

This morning, all it backlights is the occasional branch or shingle. Hissing wind rips at anything standing, sending it flying. Even if the rain hasn't started yet, the air is weighted with the thick, green smell of a thunderstorm—or, as people from the non-South call it, a Category 4 hurricane. The newsman stood in the road twenty minutes ago and joked that this level of darkness was of "biblical proportions." Whether or not he was trying to be facetious, two yellow Ford headlights pierce through the gloom like a pair of sunbeams, hurrying past on their way to safety.

Not a moment later, a trash pile of a bicycle zigzags its way to the top of the hill. The boy who climbs out has a mop of dark hair, a striped T-shirt that nearly hangs to his knees, and a bouquet of wilting flowers clenched in a hand. He staggers through the flattened, dry grass toward the gated cemetery, and falls thankfully to his knees at the fourth headstone from the entry. Black letters fly off with the first raindrops into the abyss behind him.

TH KIN DO GOD I A HAND

He was never taught how to pray. He knows the script his mother taught him before they put her under the grass, but he isn't sure what that has to do with bringing her back. From "Our Father who art in heaven" to "forever and ever, amen," he can't think of a relevant line to whisper into the winds now. He's always been told God can do anything, and although he hasn't read much Bible, he does know that Jesus rose from the dead once, and Jesus probably wasn't half as perfect as his mother, so things should work out.

At least, that's what he figured at first. The rain falls steadily now, sideways into his face, and the flowers won't stay put in the grass, but somebody had to do it. Somebody had to bring the flowers, because everyone else at home stopped a long time ago. One time, his older brother asked him why he did it. He shrugged and muttered something he doesn't

remember, but the real answer is that there's something that keeps dragging his bicycle back. It's stronger than he is, and evidently stronger than the rising winds of the thunderstorm, which sends a gust to push him off his knees and onto his back in the mud.

Something grabs hold of his collar and pulls. The boy throws his arms around the headstone, fingernails bending back against the wet stone. He's often come here and wished he could sink down to where his mother lies, but this is another feeling entirely. Surely he's being dragged by some kind of debris, some fallen tree branch.

" . . . thinking, kid?" A weathered voice rings out as the boy is dragged through the mud by a knotted hand. The boy finds his footing and slides after the pastor beneath the awning of the church. The wooden door slams open and the pastor plops him inside, then wrestles with the door until it shuts out the howling wind.

Wood creaks below the boy's feet as water pools around him.

"There's a storm out there," the pastor notes, shaking the water off his arms. He massages his hand, which the boy now sees is wrapped partway with gauze and bandages. "You're lucky people are takin' shelter here, kid. Would've blown away in all that wind. Come on."

The boy hugs himself and follows the pastor—at least, he assumes he's a pastor—through a cream-painted corridor and into a closet, where a big basin is stowed in a corner. A hose sits coiled up inside it, along with stacks of white towels. The pastor drapes a towel over the boy's shoulders and tells him lunch will be ready in about an hour. The man is swept away by an older woman who tells him one of the boards over the windows is coming loose.

Smells of mothballs and stale perfume permeate the air around the boy as he wanders through the maze of hallways. The walls are decked with gold-framed paintings, and he stops in front of one with a glossy sheen over it, of a huge boat and a winding path of various animals walking up toward it. He spends approximately five minutes scanning it, although he can't find any crocodiles. Those are his favorite.

The pastor is back, standing at the other end of the hall. "The sanctuary is filled with cots, if you need one," he says, nodding his chin behind his shoulder. He's rewrapping his hand with a new bandage. "And some pews if they get filled up, but I can't imagine any

more people will come now with how bad it's gettin' out there."

As if cued, a crack of thunder booms from above and shakes the ground. "What happened to your hand?" the boy asks.

"Oh, arthritis a while ago," he says, with a reluctant grin that reminds the boy of his grandfather. "You'll understand one day. But I cut it a bit puttin' up the shutters. It'll be alright."

Even as the boy sits on an empty cot that afternoon, eating cold mac 'n' cheese and listening to the laughter of old ladies from the kitchen down the corridor, he can't stop thinking about the hand, shaking and bloody and puffy with bandages, dragging him out of the storm and into the high-ceilinged church. Sitting here, stuck in the storm and his mother only a hundred feet away, he somehow feels safer than he has before.

Mattea Fitch is a freelance fiction writer based in West Palm Beach, Florida, where she is pursuing her BA in English. Her poetry and prose have been published in multiple magazines, including *The Bluebird Word*, *Living Waters Review*, *Time of Singing*, and more. Her writing is often characterized by her own faith journey, and all the mountaintops and valleys along the way. When she is not immersed in the world of words, you might find Mattea trying (failing) new at-home coffee recipes or volunteering with student outreach ministries.

I hope heaven is a tea house

Poetry
Anna Chen

It is open twenty-four seven and there is never a wait. My Popo and Yeye walk together to the bustling dimsum restaurant where Jesus and my Gonggong are saving them a table. *It gets busy on Sunday mornings*, Jesus muses, but He saves seats for those of us sleeping in. They share a pot of chrysanthemum and pu'er, and rib each other about who should pour for whom, because Jesus is the eldest but naturally, He insists on filling everyone's cup. Our grandparents tap their fingers in thanks to the King. Over the orchestra of clanging cookware and conversation, their mouths are filled with thousand-year-old eggs and good news. Halfway through, Jesus excuses himself for the restroom, but really, He is paying the bill. Popo tuts. *You shouldn't have done that*, she says. He smiles gently. *All right*, He indulges, *Next time I won't*, but of course He will.

If Judas had a gun lock

Poetry

Anna Chen

Maybe he could have misplaced the key.
After fleeing his blood money, he would
overturn his tables and scatter his prayer
tassels but emerge empty-handed, nothing
but a hollowed gun and trigger-happy self-exile.
A bullet, he is convinced, could scratch that itch
in his conscience he can't reach. A final letter
as a receipt of his regret. Oh, Judas, the
price tag on your soul demands a stronger
currency than your blood. All the savings
in your veins and still bankrupt. Maybe
instead, he would find Simon Peter slouching
at the bar with a bonfire and no leg to
stand on. Two debtors, sharing a good cry and
getting drunk on the cheap stuff. He would
spend that weekend floating face-up
in despair's dense sea salt. Maybe he would call a
help hotline—press your forehead for Aramaic,
enter your party's extension: chest, shoulder,
shoulder. Maybe he would still be alive
for the wellness check: Jesus, standing at
his door with Easter dinner wrapped in tin foil,
punctured hands cozy in oven mitts, asking to
come in. Oh, Judas. What masterpiece of
grace your life could have framed. What
seventy times seven generations would
have been struck alive with that electric
shock of hope if you surrendered
to forgiving yourself.

That which touches us about Flight 571

Poetry

Anna Chen

Fingers that snapped in our faces to fish
our eyes away from the cute girl watching
from the stands. Fingers that gripped the
rosary of the rugby ball as they flung
redemption into our boastful arms. Fingers that
danced the tango to the story told over
gourds of steaming mate. Fingers that
fine-tuned our plane tickets, thumbprints oily
with excitement. Fingers that tweaked our
cheeks to get a rise out of us before the plane

does. Fingers that clutched the armrests
while we plunge, as if our rugby grip could matter.
Fingers that convinced us this was the hardest
we will ever hold on to anything. Fingers that
rescued our friends from dying alone. Fingers
that dabbed at the smeared holy memento
mori of blood and tears from our foreheads.
Fingers that shoveled snow until they were
punished for skin. Fingers that buried
our friends, for now. Fingers that lost their fluency
in the crippling cold yet pressed their permission
into our palm to do with them what we must.

Fingers that fed us. Fingers that were cold and
dead when we pried Christ's love scrawled
on scrap paper from them, but never let go.
Fingers that sewed sleeping bags, passing
wire and numbed needle in turns to patch
together a prayer. Fingers that dragged them
through the valley because our lives depended on them.
Fingers that forgot the kiss of summer but
not the grip of a pencil. Fingers that took
the hands of ghosts and held on so tight that
no soul was left on that mountain. Fingers that,

That which touches us about Flight 571
Poetry
Anna Chen

in the quiet tent of prayer, trace on our chests the cross,
the sky, and the mountains that we bear
for the rest of our lives.

Anna Chen was born and raised in the Midwest with precious roots in her ancestral home of the Guangdong province. She completed a BA in Film Studies at the University of Pittsburgh before realizing that she feels more at home with the written word than Dutch angles. She currently works in non-profit communications in Northeast Ohio and is continuously haunted by the Holy Ghost as she writes.

Syntax in the Key of E(mpty)

Poetry
Faith R. Otey

Crisp white sheet
scribed with night-
black lines.

Five, to be exact.
Key signature: E.
Four sharps deep.

Finessing affection for function.
Curated connections conceal decay.
Godliness marked forte.
Dissonance is the tonic.

A musical score of whole rests—appearing complete, staccato presence, decrescendo character.

Your tempo—

diminishes dignity.

Dissonance is the tonic.
Da capo.

Faith R. Otey is a poet, writer, musician, and MFA candidate in Creative Writing at Carlow University, where she earned her BA in English with a minor in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *The Critical Point Literary Journal* and *Voices from the Attic*, with poems forthcoming in *Windward Review* and *Uppagus*'s Octavia E. Butler issue. Her writing explores emotional restoration, longing, motherhood, and the transformative power of language. Otey has presented at national conferences and is the author of three children's books. She also co-wrote the song "All Because You Love Me," selected for the first-round Grammy ballot.

Pity Party
Photography
Kris Carlson



Marbles Across Metal

Poetry

Jennifer Susan Smith

Which of the star's six triangles did I claim?
Colored starting points for a game of Chinese
checkers, my childhood space secured on tin
board, its round metal surface surrounded
by contrast, pale pink lanterns' silkened glow,
blue and yellow dragons' fire-arrowed breath.

Maybe I settled myself in the hexagram's
green, like warm summer grass, like cold
lime Kool-Aid sipped through straws, ice
cubes clinking in jelly glass, destination
gold side of board, October birthday, Betty
Crocker cake layered in cocoa buttercream.

A departure zone established, I filled ten
empty slots with spherical glass, lighter
hues of July, waited my turns, plotted
the quickest route, marbles across metal—
jump clinked obstacles of checkerboard's
white center, through adjacent triangles.

From minutes stretched to hours, late
sixties stretched into seventies, three
station television was silent, antenna
on pause for game time wins and losses,
for uncomplicated rules I could follow,
a safe path to opposite side of the star.

Author Bio
Jennifer Susan Smith

Jennifer Susan Smith, a retired speech-language pathologist, resides in Rock Spring, Georgia. Her writing appears in *Atlanta Review*, *Novus Literary Arts Journal*, and *Appalachia Bare*, among others. Her work is published in *Troublesome Rising Digital Anthology's* 2025 Collection and *Sunflowers Rising: Poems for Peace Anthology*. Jennifer holds membership in Poetry Society of Tennessee, Georgia Poetry Society, and Chattanooga Writers' Guild, and is chairman of Alpha Delta Kappa Pages and Pearls Book Club. She obtained an Educational Specialist Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Lincoln Memorial University and a Creative Writing Certificate from Kennesaw State University.

Light Show
Poetry
Chris Luna

In your eyes,

A
mystic
shape of
starlight,
a dripping
liquid purple
gilding the golden
crown of the soft dog
of the horizon while it
takes a mountainous love-
bite of the sky. Our love is a triangle of fire: an order of candles that are extinguished
one by one until you reach the tip and chaos cuts through the light with
its bloody black cake knife. Suffering: that's what this feels like.
My thoughts are braided thorns that won't stop blooming.
The petals flutter like petrol splattered—spark and
sizzle, punching holes in the tin of my heart
until it glows. I'm a bonfire and you are flakes
of snow—not yet a blizzard, but just soft
enough; just slow. I'm so afraid that the moon
is only beautiful because of its distance. It's
morning and the blue trapped behind the
frosted glass of the window glitters
with condensation. I feel shy—
like this— for maybe
the first time in my
adult life.

I can't say it—not in so many words.

Chris Luna is a senior undergraduate student pursuing their BASc. in ACS Certified-Biochemistry and English with a minor in Writing at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. They are currently working as a Lab Trainee in the department of Biophysics and Physiology at CU Anschutz. Their work has appeared previously in *Periphery Art and Literary Journal* and *Loophole Literary Arts Journal*.

Zenith City Novel

Fiction
David Athey

Theodore was a parking ramp attendant in Duluth, Minnesota, who dreamed of becoming a famous writer. Working the graveyard shift downtown, he huddled in his tomb-like booth beneath tons of concrete with security lights intensifying the descending lane that ended at his sliding-glass window. The young man always wore jeans, work boots, and a sweatshirt saying, "Go Vikings!"

It was 1988, and Theodore dreamed of writing a great existentialist novel with his Duluthian words pummeling human nature with earthy agonies and heavenly clemencies, but the poor guy couldn't even fill seven pages of his spiral notebook. What he could fill was his gut. His writing ritual consisted of gobbling sugary cereals by the handful—a whole box every shift—and then rubbing his temples and staring for hours at the blurry exit gate, trying to recall what he'd learned in college about existentialism. *Seriously*, he thought, usually nauseous, *what the freak is existentialism?* He thought the answer was the key to his writing success.

And maybe I need Russian blood, he thought. *Maybe it takes Russian blood.*

It took several months of staring at the exit gate until Theodore reached page seven of this spiral notebook (or technically page six after crossing out a paragraph), and he had to admit, if not confess, that his semi-autobiographical novel, *Warring Peace and the Genius Idiot*, had no real characters and no real plot. Just six pages of sentences. Many of them incomplete. Most of them, actually.

Need Russians . . . with blood? And more . . . cereal?

Motorists visiting the lonely parking ramp rarely acknowledged the writerly attendant, but a few offered some compassion.

"You look awful, kid—I'll need a receipt."

"Okay," Theodore said, extending his jittery hand for payment.

The night before Valentine's, he was presented with a fresh dollar bill to pay the eighty-cent fee, along with a dirty diaper as a bonus. "Thanks for handling that," a young husband said, while his wife glanced away. And the baby giggled.

"Um, yeah, here's your *change*," Theodore said, giving the guy two dimes. "Get it? Your *change*?"

The baby was the only one that laughed as the icy gate creaked slowly upward, and Theodore wondered if that was existentialism in motion.

The next night, an old geezer pulled up to the booth in a puttering Subaru and handed over a damp ticket. Theodore waved the ticket in the air to dry it, then ran it though the machine. "Eighty cents, please."

The geezer was silent for a few moments—as if chewing on something—then opened his mouth to reveal four damp quarters.

"Really?" Theodore said, dutifully reaching out. "For real?"

The geezer wheezed a laugh and began spitting quarters into the attendant's palm. *Spit, spit, spit, spit!* "There, sonny. Owe me twenty cents change."

"Right. Okay." Theodore plopped the geezer-wetted coins into the till and grabbed two dry dimes. "You want *change*?"

"Sure do, sonny."

"If you insist." Theodore pretended to lick the dimes, pretending to really slurp both sides, then placed the coins on the geezer's palm. "All yours," he said, activating the gate. "Enjoy your change."

"I will," the geezer said. He put the dimes in his mouth and happily puttered away.

Theodore should have washed his hands, but hygiene got distracted by artistic impulse, and he wondered if the geezer with treasure in his mouth was worthy of a paragraph in his novel. He really needed to flesh out the first chapter, but he disliked absurdity, so he hoped to reimagine the incident into something more meaningful.

Russian blood . . . and a beard?

Zenith City Novel
Fiction
David Athey

Around three in the morning, after the usual bar people had swerved up to the booth and paid their fees without making a fuss (or a mess), a red pickup clattered down the slope in a great cloud of exhaust and stopped at the window while Theodore was scribbling a longish sentence that he hoped was as good as anything Russian.

"We ain't payin'," the driver said.

Theodore motioned for him to wait a sec, wrote a few more words, and turned the ninth page of his notebook. "Not bad, not bad." He opened the sliding glass, letting in a cold rush of fresh and foul air. "Ticket, please," he said, facing a solemn stare. "Just give me your ticket and I'll ring you up. You'll be outta here in no time."

Two men sat in the pickup, both wielding long beards glistening with grease, perhaps bacon grease, or bear grease mixed with vodka spittle, and they wore muskrat-fur caps with decorative beads made of weasel eyes. The men harmonized with eerily beautiful voices, "We ain't payin'. Lift yer gate."

"What? You have to pay."

"We ain't payin'. Lift yer gate."

"What? Just give me your ticket."

"We been only thirty minutes," the driver said, "the grace period." He revved the truck's engine as if preparing to crash forward.

"You need to pay," Theodore said. He extended his hand as far as possible. "Everyone needs to pay. There's no grace period. Not here."

Revving became roaring, echoing through the cement cavern, shaking the booth.

"WE. AIN'T. PAYIN'."

Perhaps it was time to call 911, but Theodore hesitated, nervously intrigued by the possible endings to this interaction. The beards whispered and rasped to each other, heads bobbing, weasel beads wild on their hats. This lasted long enough for Theodore to

scribble two more sentences as the whispers became calm, and the truck's engine slowed to a gravelly purr. Minimal exhaust fouled the air, and the conflict seemed to be dissipating; proper civil behavior—payment and receipt—would prevail. That was almost disappointing to Theodore because he was thinking the scene had real Russian potential.

"*Da, nyet, da . . .* " the beards plotted, nodding, and there was a rustling of activity in the truck, clinking and jingling, a festive sort of sound, and suddenly a blur of objects whirred toward the window like stones from many slings. The projectiles barely missed Theodore's face as they smacked a cabinet and ricocheted all around.

According to page 7 of *The Employee Handbook*, it was time to call 911. "Don't make me call 911," Theodore said, ducking. "Hey—ouch!" A projectile found his forehead, causing a cut and flow of blood. More focused on cursing than turning his head, Theodore suffered another direct hit—this one to his temple—sending him flailing on the floor. More blood flowed, dribbling down to his chin while he tried to prevent a panic attack, thinking: *Why, why beards hurt me? Want me dead?*

A flurry of scintillations whirred through the window—along with words of growing defiance.

"WE. AIN'T. PAYIN'."

"WE. AIN'T!"

The truck revved and roared, and the gate trembled.

It was absolutely definitely time to call 911, but Theodore was unable to reach the desk phone. He groaned on the floor and kicked at something under the cash register, groaned again, and eventually booted the switch that activated the exit. There was laughter and acceleration outside the booth as Theodore struggled to his knees and craned his neck toward the window to witness the truck hurtling freely into a blurry cloud of red snow.

So . . . um . . . existential? Is this . . . it?

The writer stayed on his knees, bleeding, sweating, his face and sweatshirt a dark mess of shimmering designs. He sighed a prayer of defeat, less concerned by his cuts and blood

than by the loss of revenue and respect due to the city. He'd allowed the beards to steal time. Nobody was allowed to steal time—not even thirty minutes. And to add insult to failure, Theodore was now forced to pick up the debris scattered on the floor. The projectiles had landed everywhere, dozens and dozens of them, all shining in various sizes of light: pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and a silver dollar, more than eight dollars total. And there was a crumpled ticket that—when Theodore passed it through the machine—stated the beards had owed a mere forty cents for their parking fee. "Of course." He opened the till and plopped in fifty cents (thinking it wise to add a tip).

THEY. IS. PAYIN'.

Pockets bulging, Theodore left his spiral notebook in the booth and jingle-jangled out into the dead of downtown. Whistling a merry tune that was also a dirge, he was on his bloody way to the all-night grocery store, tromping through the deepening existential snow, to buy another box of cereal. With no sugar in it.

David Athey's writings have appeared in various journals and magazines such as *Christianity & Literature*, *The Iowa Review*, *Dappled Things*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Windhover*, *Harvard Review*, *Time of Singing*, and *Notre Dame Magazine*. Athey lives in South Florida on a small lake with large iguanas. His books, including *Art is for The Artist*, are available at Amazon.

Love Song on Mardi Gras

Poetry

Major Frerichs II

Come then, let us walk down to where the woods
used to be. Look here—and for miles, it looks the same.
"Nothing's here," you say.
"Nothing?" and I wonder if there will be time to
tell you a new story. Although these barren hills,
with tree stumps like acne bumps of a prepubescent teen—barren
of anything but this cold winter snow—I wonder if there will be
time.

I will try to tell you about how the deer used to walk
from here at this corner of the hardwoods and around
the curve of the creek, there.
Or, I will tell you about the trail beginning from where we stand
that went all the way back to where the three fallen trees
were, which I called the King's Palace. But the hardwoods are
gone and the creek's run dry, and the fallen trees, too, have been
logged. You look confused.
And I wonder: is God playing some trick on us?

Come, let us walk back to the house, away
from the cold—the timbers that made this home might very well
be cut from these woods, after all. And this home now
keeps us warm inside. And I wonder if there will be time
to tell you a new story—not a story
of progress or decline. And I notice how young we all look.

Everyone in the house is in a hustle, coming and going in
preparation for Mardi Gras, and Mother asks us what
we will give up for Lent. You say, "Sweets." I say nothing.
I'd rather wait and see what comes. In the living room,
your dear sister is talking to my uncle, or she is listening
to his talk about our generation. It sounds like we've been
damned again. How funny my uncle is, saying how much
the future depends on us, but calls us
undependable. Surely, God is playing a trick on us.

Love Song on Mardi Gras

Poetry

Major Frerichs II

"Did you just see that shooting star?" asks one, pointing
out the kitchen window into the void-darkness where the woods
once stood. Its long arc had seconds ago bent through the night
sky, so fast, so quick, fading as if it were
never there. But we saw it, you and me. And I wonder if that star
kept going and would come back again. You ask if
I heard that the groundhog stayed out of his hole.
"Then, Spring will be soon," I say. And I think,
it's all a funny joke. But I swear I saw a green leaf sprouting
through the snow out of a stump.

Major Frerichs II is a creative writing student in the BFA English program at Tennessee Wesleyan University. Major has publications in *Springs of Helicon Literary Magazine* for fiction and poetry, and has been published in the *Tennessee Voices* Poetry Anthology. He lives in Vonore, Tennessee, with his cat, Merlin.

Sunday Blueberry Muffins

Fiction

Madison Stahl

Ingredients (measurements are halved; you don't need the full recipe):
¾ cup flour
¼ tsp salt
1 tsp baking powder
1 tbsp sugar
2 tbsp vegetable oil
1 small egg
1 tsp vanilla extract
¼ cup milk
½ cup fresh blueberries

Step 1
Leave your shoes by the door. Preferably by the vent, so the heat will dry the dew. She yelled at you because the house is covered in laminate. Out of love, always out of love. That's all she knew was love. It hurt less to hear her scolding than to slip because you didn't listen.

Step 2
Plan before you head into the kitchen. Leave your shoes at the door, Bible on the coffee table, and preheat the oven to 375°F just as she always reminded you. Know where to go after that. If you stand there long enough, you'll hear her voice telling you to get out of her kitchen, and you'll end up doing just that. Then the muffins will never be made. Life goes on, so you'll need to learn how to make them at some point.

Step 3
Make sure you purchased your ingredients within the last few months. She told you to stop dwelling on what you couldn't control, but it took until you lost control for her words to really sink in. You can and should control how long you wait to use the ingredients in your house, especially since you can't control their expiration dates.

Step 4
Use fresh blueberries if possible. Try to buy them from your young neighbor with the berry trellises in his backyard, but he may give them to you for free. You'll tell him he's too kind when you really want to tell him you don't accept pity gifts. He'll give you a sympathetic smile, and his eyes will sparkle like hers did. So you'll accept them nonetheless. Best not to waste more time than you already have.

Sunday Blueberry Muffins

Fiction

Madison Stahl

Step 5

Combine the powdery ingredients. Be intentional with the sample recipe, so you can mold it over time to fit the taste you're looking for. The muffins are your key to remembering her. She's rather irreplicable; that's what you noticed quickly after meeting her. Irreplicable doesn't mean unforgettable. Not in your aging mind growing older and older the more she slips away from you. Stick to the recipe and don't think about what you can't control.

Step 6

Create a small well in the middle of your dry mixture and begin whisking in the wet ingredients. It doesn't matter if you don't understand why you can't just mix all the ingredients together instantly. Consider it necessary because the recipe says so and because you're one step closer to remembering her.

Step 7

Evenly pour your blueberry mixture into muffin tins and bake it for 15 minutes. Use that 15 minutes doing anything but sitting. Sitting encourages thinking, feeling, so much that you won't hear the oven timer, and the muffins will burn. Stand in front of the TV the way she did, scoffing at whatever Barney Fife was messing up this Sunday. She looked so much like Thelma Lou, but she would've knocked some sense into Barney. No more wasted time, mistakes, doing more than you're asked just because you think you're helping. Focus on the things you know well and don't dwell on how much it takes for one person to live for two people.

Step 8

Your muffins should be golden brown when they're done. On the cooler, lonelier Sundays, open your windows, not just the curtains. Bring the fresh air in and share the smell of fresh muffins with your neighbors. Remind them you're the lucky one. You've always been the lucky one.

Step 9

Set two muffins and coffee mugs on the porch table. It's part of the routine. The neighbors are starting to catch on, so one might join you. That sympathetic boy is a regular. He'll tell you step-by-step how he grew those perfect blueberries or complain about the bad calls in the game last night, and you'll listen because she's there, too. She watches the crumbs fall over your Sunday shirt and the blueberries stain your fingertips, but she's content, unbothered. Sundays are for rest; let life wait on you for a change.

Seasoned

Fiction
Madison Stahl

Adrian and I met on a Tuesday night in the library near the cookbooks. It was wispy enough outside to block the setting sun's glow. Light normally shone down the aisles at that particular time of evening, sometimes resting on certain books. I often pretended the world was choosing for me, knowing innately how indecisive I could be.

We reached for the same book after countless minutes of pretending to have our plans in order. He exhibited the telltale signs: pacing, reaching and recoiling a finger from the spines, checking his phone as if verifying the title. No one really knows what they're looking for if they're willing to stand in the physical aisles of the library these days, especially for cookbooks.

I laughed sheepishly, the way that always made me hate myself for taking daily antidepressants for nothing more than side effects and new things to be anxious about. But he echoed my laughter, backing away as I did with his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels.

He nodded toward the book, "You first."

Recipes for the Family on a Budget wouldn't have been my first choice, but I was getting desperate. I was, after all, cooking for a family on a budget, but those sorts of cookbooks are meant for real families. Ones where the parents make dinner, and the children set the table, and they all gather to discuss their day. The family I cooked for was real in a much different way.

"I don't think this is for me," I smiled, handing him the book. I lingered just long enough to have his fingertips brush mine.

"Why not?" His eyes scanned the back of the book, pausing subtly on the portrait of the author. A wife and mother no doubt, perhaps even grandmother, with a lineage of skilled food artists behind her and surely ahead of her. Expectations prowl even in the places intended to comfort and forgive.

"Not enough seasoning," I replied, and he laughed.

"Your family is much more seasoned than she could ever be. I understand."

Seasoned

Fiction
Madison Stahl

Adrian helped me fix dinner that night. Chicken noodle soup, a recipe he said could never go wrong. The dish was open to anything, never really rejecting whatever it was given. It adjusted accordingly, balancing the flavors with feelings, spoken and unspoken. What we had then could be found without sitting around a table, pretending to know the right things to say to keep the family together. What we had was nourishment, our daily fill of contentment.

Madison Stahl writes short fiction from the Ozarks. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and writing from Drury University, and she currently serves as a curriculum editor for Global University in Springfield, Missouri. When she isn't line-editing a textbook, she's probably attempting to play clarinet, tending to a rather large collection of vinyl records, or volunteering with the International Buster Keaton Society. Her work has been published in Sigma Tau Delta's *Rectangle* and *Quirk* Literary Journal.

The Immersion
Acrylic Painting
Sandra J. Edwards



Ugly Produce on the March

Poetry

Brian C. Billings

With mockery and cruelty we start along our path
denied the basic dignity of brushing or a bath . . .
of any opportunity to catch a person's eye.
We blemished ones are always banished quickly on the sly.
We're tumbled into bags and crates and spirited away
to rest inside a landfill under feet of dirt and clay.

Unsightly celery stalks around the fringes of the group
while spiteful squashes cluster (ever pining to be soup).
Quasimodoed sweet potatoes bristle meanly on the chin,
and bloated onions crack and flake, corrupted by their sin.
The lettuce is reptilian. The artichoke? Unsightly.
The eggplant's hide of week-old-corpse cannot be taken lightly.
The pig-snout pears are leaking. The carrots have grown feet.
The strawberries have tentacles that cannot be discreet.
We are grisly and misshapen from the stem down to the seed—
a cavalcade of awfulness; a monstrous breed indeed.

Rise up! Rise up, unlovely ones! The time to fight is ripe!
No longer should we fall before the onslaught of the hype
that praises firm and colorful as what is truly good.
We can't be disingenuous. We're too misunderstood!
Wave the flag of flavor, friends! Let's call for quality!
Lay the blame on grocery stores of gross frivolity
in disregarding misfit stock in favor of a dream.
The pretty-produce paradigm is just a grocery scheme.
Occupy the stalls and aisles! Fill the floor displays!
Distract consumers from the greens that usually meet their gaze.
March on, leaves and rinds and vines! We won't be left for waste!
Our plastic cousins can't compete with us in terms of taste.

Brian C. Billings is a professor of drama and English at Texas A&M University–Texarkana, where he teaches creative writing and children's literature. He also serves as the university's drama-series coordinator and the Editor-in-Chief for *Aquila Review*. His work has appeared in such journals as *Abandoned Mine*, *Ancient Paths*, *The Bluebird Word*, *Confrontation*, *Evening Street Review*, *Rushing Thru the Dark*, and *The Woven Tale Press*. Publishers for his scripts include Eldridge Publishing and Heuer Publishing.

The Introspection
Acrylic Painting
Sandra J. Edwards



Eve Waxes Nostalgic for Simpler Times

Poetry

Mina Menyhert

Every tick bite disappeared
suspiciously into the slipstream.

Every raven kept a crystal
from the Dead Sea in his thin beak.

All the little intricacies
of my uncanny origin story

didn't vex me then, like they do now:
With bare hands, did you tear me

out of Adam's open thorax
like a red beet from the topsoil?

Or implant a hunk of cartilage
you grafted from his breastbone

underneath the weeping willow
with a hand trowel while he slept off

the effects of anesthesia, tan
and seamless, through the days of

epigeal germination? I had no reason
to question your botanical mechanics.

My whole pulmonary system
burned with your omnipotence

until my tear ducts hocked up oil
and adrenaline. Your loving glory

strapped around my torso
like a vest packed with explosives

Eve Waxes Nostalgic for Simpler Times
Poetry
Mina Menyhert

holding in my major organs
while I dreamt of scarlet horses.

It was like that. I assure you.

Crossing
Poetry
Mina Menyhert

Passing the lake on the way
to your funeral, I stopped

to let the ducks cross: a husband,
a wife and four awkward

yolk-colored hatchlings.
A man in a pickup truck

stopped, too. He was driving
the other direction.

We had both our radios tuned
to the same local station.

We watched the ducks together.
He smiled at me when the last one

crossed, singing, *You and I, we've been
through that and this is not our fate.*

And I thought of the small, ballpoint
smiley face you had drawn

on the note that you left me
beneath *The Great Gatsby*.

And that's when it hit me: That smile,
which I'd understood as ironic,

you'd meant as a genuine expression
of pleasure. *The ultimate gesture*

*of self-love from me to myself.
Don't think suicide. Think euthanasia,*

Crossing
Poetry
Mina Menyhert

is how you explained it.
It started to make sense.

The man in the pickup truck waved
and I waved back.

Then he drove off and that was it.
That was true love. That was it.

At the Vet

Poetry

Mina Menyhert

He holds a ferret in his sweatshirt pouch.
I quickly recognize him: The man
who owned that yogurt shop

on Kaldenberg, a Dutch fellow named Claus,
who'd once locked some kids
in the restroom while the mother

waited, parked out front, having sent
all five sons—rambunctious, unsupervised—
into the small but proud establishment

without even a buck to buy, as a courtesy,
a bar of Belgian chocolate. Merely
to use the restroom. And so Claus, who'd had

enough, dug up the key, locked the door
from the outside. (I wonder if he had a ferret
in his pouch back then and I just didn't notice.)

Needless to say, the mother flipped. Police
were called, not for the first time, to the shop,
which has been boarded up a while now.

But Claus is here beside me and my arthritic
terrier, who needs more anti-inflammation pills,
but is otherwise all right. Unlike the wiry pink-eyed

ferret Claus is singing to in Dutch
who looks half-dead. I think about God
looking at this temperamental Dutch man

the way he's looking at his ailing ferret
when it happens. What my praying friends call
breakthrough, what the poets

At the Vet

Poetry
Mina Menyhert

call *the volta.* When the dead words
on the page begin to tremble
like eggs inside an avian incubator before

the first crack forms. The living thing concealed
by dead truism muscles its way out: That when He sat
reclined beside the harlots and tax collectors,

and said, *The healthy have no need for a physician*,
this was the waiting room He had envisioned.

Mina Menyhert is an Orthodox Christian, a writer, and an avid home baker and cook. When she's not staring intently into the oven, she's mining her slop journal for essay fodder and seeking out the sacred in the mundane.

Unfolding
35 mm Negative Photograph
Jonathan Paul-Faina



Cave Drawings

Poetry

Nate Donohue

When we shoot billiards, you hold the cue stick
close to the way they teach, but still wrong. You launch
the cue ball hissing over the felt, shuddering
across the table, pucking off the guard-
-rails into detonations
with those swollen marbles
under the pea pod of lights, under
which you and I could be prehistoric shadows flung
by fire onto damp limestone walls—drawn
briefly into focus, our concentrations
etched in relief over our cocked elbows, before the heat
waxes us away again.

What is a father
if not his son, dried into permanence, carved
into the walls of time's corridor? In this radioactive
orange, we could be brothers, or perhaps more—two
variations of the same higher form, both just as incorrect.

Dad: my own technique
is clumsy, but don't tell me
how to fix it. I'll clash
with the solids and stripes of the world,
just like you did. And like you,
I'll learn
imperfectly.

Nocturne over John the Baptist's Head and Body

Poetry

Nate Donohue

---

your death was not
glorious you weren't drawn to God's diaphanous
bosom in a chariot of fire carried along by lightning-
shaped horses fed in the emerald pastures
of Heaven if that's how it is
up there.

when they beheaded you you were belowground in a dungeon you couldn't even
see the light we should be friends maybe in some crystallized pocket of
time balanced like a lilypad over the stagnant indigo whirlpools sparkling
with the galaxies of everything that will ever happen you'll
whisper to me what that moment was like when
your head was separated from the rest of you and just before
your soul if such a thing exists drifted up to the pearly gates
which for all I know could be rusty and aslant guarding only a dun
wasteland of tumbleweed and boarded-over shacks under a weary corroded
moon—

maybe, in that moment, you knew yourself not as one self, but as
two: a yearning, and the machinery ever insufficient in attaining it.

Quantum Entanglement

Acrylic on Canvas

Nicholas Frederick



Balloon Boy

Fiction
Nate Donohue

I have to give TJ all my dominoes before I go. TJ's my big brother. Stuffy, that's my toy horse, nuzzles me awake when it's time. Stuffy's floating, and when I take his paw, I float too. The itchy bedsheets fall away and all the tubes they put up my nose and stick on my arms fall off. I feel light and dreamy like a little balloon boy. I become Balloon Byron. Me and Stuffy float out over the air conditioning thing which growls 'cause there's a monster inside and I keep waiting for Mommy to yell at me from out of the darkness and say Byron, go back to bed since it's too early for little kids to get up. (Mommy yells a lot. She gets really worried.)

Normally the Bad Guy in the mask gives me medicine that makes me feel all my bones and muscles and org-guns. That's what Mommy calls them. I feel all of their shapes and sharpnesses. They're heavy and hard and metal inside me. Maybe that's why they're called org-guns. They weigh me down on the papery sheets. I feel like yogurt when I try to move. But then I take Stuffy's paw, and I feel like a feather, and all the heaviness and hardness and hurtness and yogurtness go away.

Mommy doesn't yell at me this time. I can't see her in the dark. Me and Stuffy go out the window like it's made of air. The world is hot and melty like a hot fudge sundae. There's a bubblegum sky and whipped cream clouds and gingerbread trees that grow gumdrops instead of apples. And all my dominoes are flying around! They're flying around in the air like the air is made of a swimming pool! They're going from flower to flower like butterflies!

So I say to the dominoes, Hey! And they all freeze like kids who get caught doing something bad. They're looking at me with all their dots, real guilty. TJ, that's my big brother, he says bugs have a lot of eyes and my dominoes are the same way. All their dots are eyes. TJ's really smart. He's eight. He's supposed to have my dominoes. We like to stack them when he visits me. He's really good at that. He always lets me knock them over. But he doesn't get to stay long because he has to go to big-kid school during the day. He says, Byron, when you come home, we're gonna play with dominoes all day. He keeps my dominoes safe. He says they look like big teeth with cavities. TJ has a tooth with a cavity! He's gonna get it pulled. It's one of his big-kid teeth. He's already lost all his baby teeth. I lost a baby tooth one time! But now I just lose my hair and my eyebrows. It's 'cause of the medicine that the Bad Guy gives me, the medicine that turns me into yogurt Byron.

Balloon Boy
Fiction
Nate Donohue

That's what I try to tell Mommy but she doesn't understand and she just keeps saying that the medicine is gonna make me better. I love Mommy but she's wrong about a lot of things. Like how the string is loose in the middle of one of Stuffy's button horse eyes and Mommy always says, Byron, I'm gonna get that fixed, but she hasn't yet. Or how she bought me a dry-erase board and every morning she draws something new, like a sun and trees or a bunny, but it makes me sad because when she draws something new she has to erase something old and I wish everything could just stay.

I say to the domino-bugs, We need to go see TJ! So Stuffy pulls me along like a reindeer pulling Santa Claus, and all the dominoes fly behind me. We go over the graham cracker roofs. We go all the way to Mommy's house with the walnut trees and we go to the bedroom window where me and TJ have bunk beds.

But TJ's not in bed. TJ's Spider-Man covers are empty. TJ has his flashlight on and he's on the floor. He's playing with dominoes! He's standing them up in a big curve that goes all around the room. He's gonna flick them over and they're gonna go ck-ck-ck-ck like a clock moving too fast.

I say, Go see TJ! and all the dominoes follow my pointing finger and they go through the window like it's air and lay themselves flat in the tin domino box like they're bricks in a Hershey's bar. (That's my favorite candy.) TJ doesn't see it happen but he stacks them all until the box is empty. I think he's gonna flick them over but he doesn't. He just gets back into bed. He pulls his Spider-Man covers up around his head like a little shepherd boy and lays on his side looking at them and says, Good night, Byron.

I float inside and give him a kiss. He doesn't feel it. I say, You have to knock them over yourself, TJ. But he can't hear me either. I'm Balloon Byron. He can't see me or hear me or feel me. That's okay. Sometimes it's good to not feel things.

I hold Stuffy's paw again and he's gonna take me up, he wants to go into the sky, but I'm not ready yet. Wait, Stuffy, I say. I have to kiss Mommy goodbye.

Balloon Boy

Fiction
Nate Donohue

So we float back to the hospital. Mommy's sleeping sitting up by the air conditioning thing with the monster inside. She sits over there to protect me. She's sleeping like someone who got surprised by sleep. Her cheek is on her shoulder and drool's running down her shirt. I'm glad she can stop worrying about everything now. She won't have to get Stuffy fixed.

I kiss her cheek. Bye, Mommy, I say.

I say, Mommy, I feel better now.

I say, Mommy, you were right. The medicine worked.

Nate Donohue is an undergraduate creative writing and psychology double major at the University of Mississippi entering his senior year. He was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. One of his short stories recently earned third place in the fiction category of the Southern Literary Festival's 2026 anthology. He is a member of the Sigma Tau Delta Honor Society. After graduation, he hopes to pursue a career in writing.

Jellyfish
Acrylic on Canvas
Ava Coggin



Historien

Poetry

Jeanine Stevens

Painting, Edvard Munch, 1916

The fiord as backdrop, shades of oyster and clam.
A spring afternoon when you're aroused
by sweet wood smoke, small fires
    so fragrant, burning winter's twigs and brush.

You notice the largest image, an ancient oak,
knotty, muscular, thick roots grasp a stone wall,
mimic the curve of the elder's knees,
black scars resemble age spots on his hands.
One branch reaches and curves, leaves
   like a deep green shawl around his shoulders.

In plain clothes and work shoes, he whittles
a wood whistle. His hands now a flutter of stories:
long epics, grand ships, great hauls of salmon.
The only bright color, his red cap worn by those
    who fought for freedom.

The boy listens but looks away, perhaps too many
cautionary tales,
        "Wolves stalk the woods at midnight,
        waves can swallow you whole at high tide."

Reminds me of grandfather as he rested in his rocker
speaking of hand plows, storm cellars,
bountiful corn, the danger of sepsis
from rusted barbed wire,
    of lingering too long on the railroad tracks.

I knew I must pay attention; wish I had taken notes.

Historien

Poetry
Jeanine Stevens

Looking again at this frugal palette, pale blotches,
parchment sloughing down the stone wall,
no shadows, no sharp lines—all gone soft.
Light so diffused, the artist
    must have sprayed on fixative, a layer of frost.

Firmament

Poetry

Jeanine Stevens

On the 14th day, munching on crab,
toes in the river along the Tigris–Euphrates.

Overhead, arch of blue, so vast, brilliant,
blinding: indigo, robin's egg,
twilight, no inky grove or bit of shade.

She admires a small silver creature
sitting under a leafy bower, emerald veins

like tributaries inside her wrist.
She names friendly creature: Mouse;
she names greenery: Fig and Ivy.

In time, Mouse eats rice off her wedding cards.
Fig leaves big as thumbs creep under
frescos, fingers embers, catches fire.

Ivy strangles fifty pelts of red fox fur.
(When you name something, it's yours.)

Sky. Still unnamed, unpredictable, unlisted:
cloud, shadow, skin. Impossible to touch.

Her name is Eve.

Bathsheba

Poetry
Jeanine Stevens

On the balcony, soap bubbles
burst in thorns of briar rose,

a frothy mess needing more buckets.
Some say I set the whole thing up.

How could I not know
King David lived next door?

And why a bath on the veranda?
Well, it's spring, breezes from the sea

suggest open air, so ideal for tossing
orange-scented waste-water over the edge.

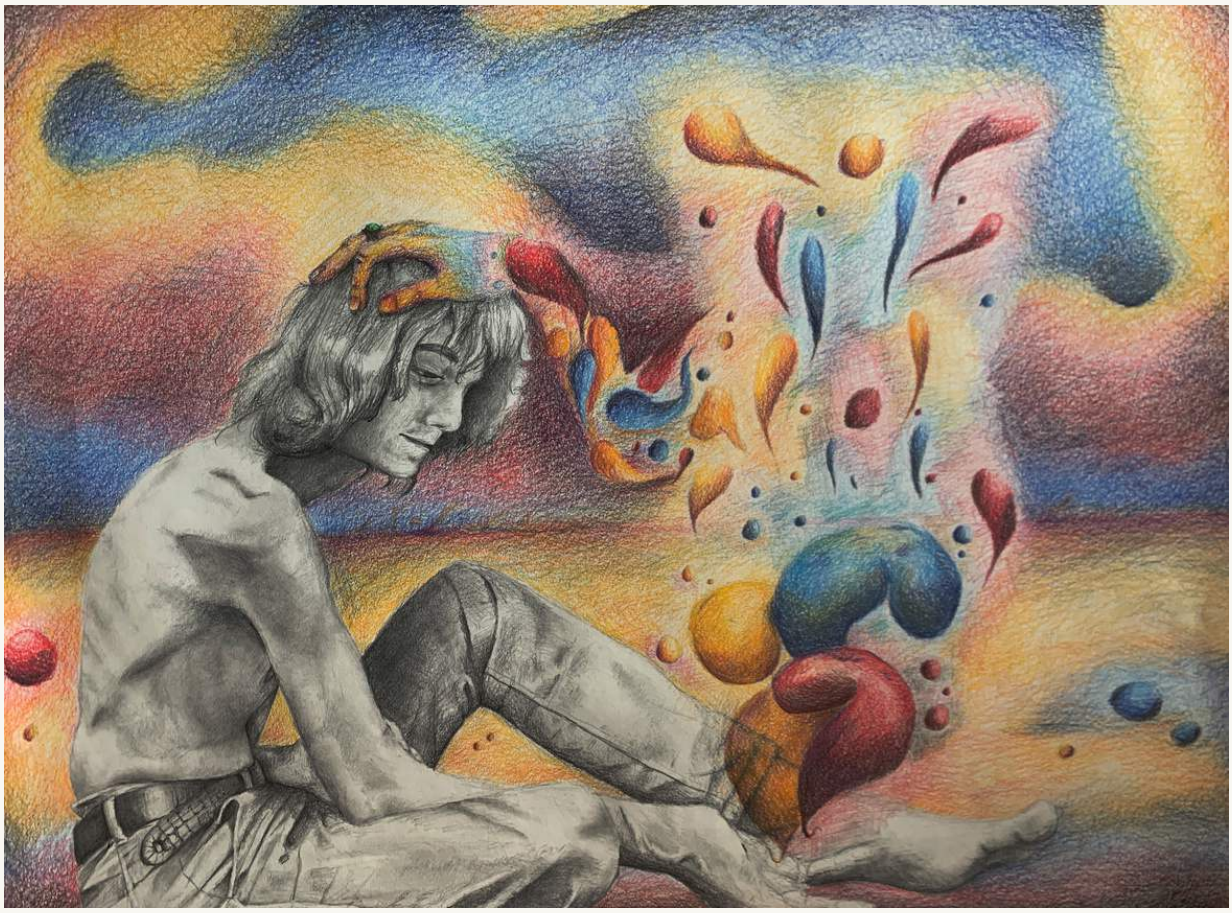
A few women make girlish chatter,
enjoy goat cheese and cucumbers.

This, my period of cleansing. Now,
this minute, I am most fertile.

I give birth to Solomon,
sit by his side,
the first Queen Mother.

Jeanine Stevens latest publications: *Left Handed Hummingbird*, (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2025), and chapbook, *Tea in the Nun's Library*, (Eyewear Publishing, UK 2022). She is the winner of the MacGuffin Poet Hunt, The Ekphrasis Prize, and The William Stafford Award. Jeanine has been published in *Evansville Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Chiron Review, Rosebud, Comstock Review, Adanna, Gunpowder Press, Muse,* and *Two Thirds North* (Sweden). Jeanine studied poetry at UC Davis, received her MA at CSU Sacramento and has a doctorate in Education. Professor Emerita at American River College. Other interests include Tai Chi, collage, and Romanian folk dance.

Original Wonder
Mixed Media: Pencil and Colored Pencil
Jonah Benedick



outside of eden

Poetry

Olivia Cameron

only the animals were there when eve gave birth.
adam had run away, shielding himself from her agony
as if he could catch it.
but the birds stayed in the trees.
the sheep stayed in the grass.
the rabbits stayed in their burrows.
all animal eyes were on the human
digging her fingernails into the dirt
where the roses used to grow.

eve had seen the birds lay eggs,
so she lifted her bottom off the ground
and balanced on her heels.
nothing came out.
eve had seen the sheep push out lambs,
so she put her palms down
and her back to the sky.
nothing came out.
eve had never seen what rabbits do,
so she laid on her back
and screamed at the clouds.
something came out.

eve saw that the little adam
did not come in a shell, like birds do.
he did not stand on shaky legs, like lambs do.
perhaps he was like a rabbit, but she could not say.
the little adam came out angry,
fists curled and face red.
when eve lifted him, held him close,
he did not calm at her touch.
the birds flew from the trees.
the sheep ran down the green hill.
the rabbits stayed in their burrows.
all the animals fled from the sound
of the little adam.

river spirit
Poetry
Olivia Cameron

many many many years ago
i listened to voices
and hardened myself
to real world sounds

i refused to be afraid
my hands shook
around the crucifix
anyway

silence
was not sweet
to me

but then there was the seine
which held me loudly
the way i had always
been held by angels

when i hear the young ones
they call me

joan joan of arc saint joan joan joan of arc saint joan
joan joan of arc saint joan joan joan of arc saint joan

i do not respond
i rest now
only listening
to the rush of the river

Olivia Cameron is a writer living in Indianapolis, Indiana, with her husband, Benjamin, and their two cats, Joni and Ripley. She is currently working for her MA in English at the University of Indianapolis. Olivia takes special interest in feminism and literary horror, and is a big fan of the weird. When she isn't reading or writing, she enjoys cross-stitching, playing the Nintendo Switch, and watching Bob's Burgers. Her short stories and poetry have appeared in *Etchings Literary Magazine*.

I Didn't Check the Price

Creative Nonfiction
Janna Hopper

I plopped the half gallon of milk onto the little plastic shelf of my fridge and then closed the door with a soft *thunk*. The door is closed the milk is away I can go back to—

I didn't check the price.

I just picked up the milk and bought it without once looking for the price tag.

This wasn't worrying in a panic sort of way. I knew I had enough money to afford a half gallon of milk. I knew that I was making enough money to get little groceries like this. But I didn't even check the price.

I didn't *look*.

This realization hit me with a twisty, squirmy tossing of my stomach. I—I didn't check. Somehow, somewhere along the line, I stopped checking.

It's just a little thing of milk. Why are you even obsessing over that? Because this little thing of milk took me back and made me think again about things that I truthfully only considered in retrospect.

I didn't know we were on WIC until that reality was more of a distant memory than something tangible I could point at in my past with an accusing finger. I didn't ask where our food came from; I might not have even understood the concept of food stamps. This was how we lived, and I was happy with it.

But I didn't remember to check the price of the milk I bought.

I remember when sitting at a cold metal desk in a bright classroom, talking about the 2008 recession, that I didn't even know that there was a recession in 2008. How had I never heard of it before? Surely, someone would have talked about it. Right?

I remembered to ask my parents how we handled it. I remember their words: First you have to have something before you notice when it is gone.

I remember my surprise at this realization. But I didn't remember to look at the price tag.

Janna Hopper is currently a student at Taylor University. She has been writing for a good portion of her life but has fallen so far in love with it that she is now majoring in creative writing. She enjoys working in a variety of genres: from poetry to fiction to CNF. She likes to spend her days curled up with a cup of tea and a good book, or intriguing story idea. She believes strongly in the power that words hold and wants to find a way to wield this power in a way that benefits everyone her words touch.

After a Time
Photography
Julianna Kapp



Glimpses
Fiction
Caryn Coyle

A solid and soft, full head of hair wakes me in the morning. It rests on my chest and its weight cuts through my dream.

“Mommy, is it wake up time, yet?” Her breath is a mixture of sweet and sour warm air.

I exhale, and focus on her translucent skin, her navy blue eyes. “Good morning, sweet punkin,” I say.

“Mommy, your breath smells bad.”

-o-

At the doorway, we enter together, hand in hand. I carry my small burgundy purse over my shoulder; she carries her pink Minnie Mouse backpack.

“This is far enough,” she tells me. “I want to go in by myself.”

Her hug crushes me. I shut my eyes and savor her. My eyes are wet when I open them.

She surveys my face, carefully. The bridge of freckles over her nose is inches away.

“Don’t do that, Mommy. I want to see a smiley face.” Her voice is stern and I comply.

-o-

On my desk are four framed photographs. In each one, she is a year older. Above my desk, on the wall, is a construction paper drawing of two hearts. The hearts have eyes and mouths, stick legs and arms. They are holding hands. It is titled, “Mommy and me.”

When the phone rings and I pick it up, I hear his low “hey” when I answer.

“I wish I could talk here,” I say.

“I know, I know. The cubicles are thin,” he finishes my thought. “I’ll be over tonight with the check.”

-o-

Glimpses
Fiction
Caryn Coyle

I drop to my knees when she spots me from her perch on the jungle gym.

"MOMMY!"

I can hear her from a distance of at least fifty yards.

We connect, her head burrows into my right shoulder, and I rest my cheek on her soft hair. Neither of us speaks. We breathe in unison, and our hearts thump against each other in our chests.

-o-

We are reading *Goodnight Moon* when he arrives. We are on the "goodnight nobody" page when we hear him opening the screen door in the kitchen.

He appears in the bedroom doorway, and she looks up at him. "Daddy!"

"Hi. Whatcha reading?"

"*Goodnight Moon.*"

"That's my favorite."

"We know," I say. "You gave her this book for Christmas."

"I did?"

"Do you want to read it to me?"

"Your mother can do that. She's good at it." He leans on the doorway, listening with his arms crossed.

-o-

Glimpses
Fiction
Caryn Coyle

The check is written on a joint account. He has left it on the kitchen table. I draw water for the teapot when we reenter the kitchen.

We sit on opposite sides of the table, waiting for the water to boil. I play with the check, folding it and unfolding it, while he talks. “Stop doing that,” he clasps his hand over mine. “You should put it away so you don’t lose it.”

I tuck the check into my breast pocket.

“Where’s your wedding ring?” I ask.

“I don’t want to wear it anymore.”

-o-

When the tea is drunk, he rises from the table. I watch him move to my side.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later.” He stares down at me, and I can smell his soapy, familiar scent.

“Ok,” I rise.

His kiss stuns me like a slap on the face. His tongue tastes like clear, sweet water. I lean back on the refrigerator to anchor myself.

“Look. We both know that this hasn’t changed. You don’t need any more proof,” my voice is faint. I can barely speak.

But he presses both hands on the refrigerator door, surrounding me, and I let him kiss me. His mouth is soft, and he moves his lips knowingly over mine.

In a minute, he is gone. Closing the screen door behind him and instructing me to lock it. I watch him leave.

I crawl onto her narrow bed beside her and fold my body into the curves of hers. I stay for just a moment, listening to her breathe.

Caryn Coyle is an editor at the literary journal *Loch Raven Review*, and her fiction and creative nonfiction have been published in more than four dozen publications, including *The Bluebird Word*, *The RavensPerch*, *Huffington Post, Sun Star Review, Bright Flash Literary Review, Portrait of New England Literary Magazine,* and many others. She has won awards for her fiction from the Maryland Writers' Association, the *New Millennium*, *Delmarva Review*, the Missouri Writers' Guild, and Pennsylvania's Hidden River Arts. A graduate of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University, she lives in Massachusetts.

From the Corner of Your Eye

Poetry
N.T. Chambers

Noticing
the little things
nourishes the soul—
a worm scurrying
through grassy safety
to escape
the robin's gaze . . .
autumn leaves
that cling
to weakened stems
in a stiff
October wind . . .
the scent
of a loved one
lingering in a room . . .
fresh eggs
as they
hiss and sputter
in a seasoned
cast iron pan . . .

Celebrate
the ordinary
from the corner
of your eye—
cherish the sliver
of the new moon
before it ripens
to its promise . . .
embrace the tender
spring raindrops
as they caress
your arid face . . .
.

From the Corner of Your Eye
Poetry
N.T. Chambers

savor the lavish silence
nestling gently in your
weary ears at night . . .
never fail to revel in
the magic of the
pervasive commonplace.

N.T. Chambers has the luxury of writing about the wide variety of experiences intrinsic to human nature. Life in the high desert of Arizona provides ample and unique opportunities for reflection and self-discovery which evolve into different literary creations. Over sixty poems, short stories, and essays have been published in more than fifty journals, magazines, and anthologies.

Gathering Light

Poetry

Caleb Lucas

The others talk as though
you were darkness

I never believed
them, but perhaps
we're agreed, then

you and I, indistinguishable
innards in a vacuum
veil of obscurity
no one sees within

we notice our lack
so we gather up light
as much as we can bear

and we hoard it and bend
it, distort it and break
it, not realizing
we were meant to give
the light away . . .

Caleb Lucas is currently an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Cinema Arts. When he is not producing short films, he writes poetry, prose, and plays. Caleb began writing professionally as a columnist for *The Boca Raton Tribune* at just twelve years old. Most recently, his work has been published in Palm Beach Atlantic University's literary magazine *Living Waters Review*.

Shimmering
Photography
Gail Purdy



Natal Wet Idea

Poetry
Catherine A. Coundjeris

An idea pushes through
the cerebral layers
in steady rhythmic contractions.

Some manifest their emotions
in color on canvas, but words
flow and flicker silver quick.

Slick and wet an idea
emerges from the mind
upon the white page

a little messy like a footprint
left of a million-year-old fossil.
A trail of existence on rock.

Immortalized by those who,
brimming with curiosity,
pass by and read its message.

Art's metamorphosis from impulses
to the corporeal is vivid like
the glimmering trace left by a snail.

Catherine's poetry, stories, and essays are published in anthologies and magazines, including *Evening Street Review*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Gray Sparrow Journal*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Door is A Jar*, *Assignment Literary Journal*, *Blue Crystal*, *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, and Luna Press. Catherine is passionate about adult literacy and volunteers with her local library to teach English skills to ESL students.

Camping Under the Milky Way
Photography
Ryan Erickson



Phoenix

Fiction

Dorie Schleiden

I've been a son, a soldier, a husband. Each day, I rise from my own ashes. Presently, I rub my shoulder. It's afternoon yet it still aches. Spring broke late, eagle-high in the Rockies, in Estes Park, in the wilderness I call home. I'm not aware of the day of the week or the present month, but seasons I know. Winter's claws chilled my bones crisp. My toes took longer to thaw. Now, the sun has a different slant. Diffused by the budding Colorado cottonwoods, it has the warmth to penetrate my flannel shirt.

I perch on my "sitting rock" at the four-by-four-foot entrance to the cave that has served as my home for three years. This dappled afternoon, it's reassuring to watch tiny brown birds skitter through the maple leaf carpet. In the distance, I hear the thrum of a camper backing onto a stony ledge. Park visitors are free to overnight in the national forest. A few take advantage of this particular flat outcrop.

I hard-scramble through brush. I pick out to-and-fro flashes of red and blue as a couple set camp. I check the buttons are all done on my shirt. I scrape a hand through my beard. I head over to beg a beer and secure an invitation to their camp. Come evening, I will enjoy their fire, and they can enjoy my stories.

Mama said from early on I was good at storytelling. She'd ask for one while cooking our supper. Her frypan held ham hocks and grits; more often red-eye gravy scrapple. "Phoenix, spin a yarn," Mama'd say as we waited for Daddy. Some nights, Daddy came straight home. More often he didn't return till morning light. Mama told me I was good at quieting the little ones for her. I true-think telling stories is my only people skill. Thinking hard-back, Nell hadn't left me till she'd heard all of them.

I duck between the curtain of sagebrush. Shout "Halloo" before entering their camp. He is seated at the firepit. She hangs things on a nylon line stretched twixt slim trees. "I hope I didn't scare you folks. We're near-neighbors. How long you stayin'?"

He stares a dull moment. She glances before returning to her chore. Their reception doesn't bother me. Seasonal campers never warm up till I tell them I live year-round in the park.

Surviving in a backwoods cave through Colorado winters. Then I'm handed a brew, and I'm invited later, for supper.

Phoenix

Fiction

Dorie Schleiden

Back on my sitting rock, I'm aware of the couple. They hike west on the fire road. Boots snap twigs, as he gathers wood. She reads under the camper's awning. I hear waves of bell-like laughter when they prepare dinner. For a moment I feel the weight of Nell nestled close. My wife's smile was daisy-sunshine, her laugh butter-warm. She lost both coping with my flashbacks. Lost, like our newborn son. Lost to each other, long before she left.

I return to their camp; the logs spit orange. I huddle on a stump and spread hands to the heat. I tell stories. My sister Patsy and her spotted piglet. The burping one, 'bout of my first taste of so-dee pop. The fire throws silhouettes against surrounding woods. The sky crowded with diamonds which my head knows have burnt out long before our eyes detect them. I begin the final story. I lay a thick layer of cow's cream on it.

I was the oldest of eight. Mama depended on me. I was gangly, had a girl, but not much time for her. Her first words were always, "You need a haircut." One day, I had my tiniest brother along for a meetin' up with Miss Susie Q, and that gal cut my hair. She held up a mirror, and I peacocked. Brother sat for a cut too. That gal whacked all Thomas's curls.

Now, ya'll figger this is a pretty gal story. But this is a BEAR story. You see, Thomas and me start back . . . and a huge bear appears. He's glossy like he's been dipped in his own bear fat. He snorts loud! I lift Thomas, quick-pick a stick to wave at Mr. Bear. 'Cept . . . that girl scissored my hair so close, Thomas had NUTHIN' to hold on to. He fell and rolled twice towards the BEAR!

You see me here, so you figger I survived. But that bear tried to carry off my brother before he encountered the same problem. Not enough hair for the bear to get a good hold. He snuffled the tyke then run. Whew, that boy was never called Thomas again. Nope, the family tagged him "Lucky Bit."

I check my audience's reaction. The story is true except for the last sentence. I never found out if my family called Thomas "Lucky Bit" because that was the night my father arrived liquor-mean and threw me out of the house for good. A boy, almost a man, oughtn't stand up to his father even if that boy has a new haircut. The next day, I enlisted in the Army. I served two tours in Vietnam. One would have done fine.

Phoenix

Fiction
Dorie Schleiden

I use a dead branch to poke the flames and watch black ashes disappear into the treetops. I like this couple. I find comfort in them. They are young or they wouldn't be camping in Estes at this elevation. I suppose I'm not much older than them, but I envy their mature dignity. I don't see that in many people. They held hands all evening. Their voices were forest soft. They laughed and cried at all the right times in my stories, and they didn't make me feel lousy when they handed me another beer. When the last one has been drunk, he grabs her hand. They turn together to their camper door while I hunch to follow the rough path back to my dank, black cave. I rub my right shoulder. It aches.

Dorie Schleiden lives in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. She is within walking distance of the University. She adores and is inspired by the English Department. In the past, Dorie has written uplifting community and color pieces for the *Butler County News* and the *Newsweekly*. She currently leads writing workshops at Slippery Rock Borough's branch of the Learning in Retirement Institute. She has published two CNF works, "Cowboys Grow Old" in Volume 20 of *SLAB Literary Magazine* and "Seeing in the Dark" in *Shoofly Literary Magazine*. Her poem "Before Spring" won third prize in Geauga Lake's recent Nature Poetry Contest. She looks forward to reading at the Geauga event held this July.

Terms

Poetry

Ellen Roberts Young

Purging my son calls it,
which makes me think of the body,
how it cleanses itself of poisons.
I might call it purgatory,
a stripping away of residue from
past mistakes. Is that measured
in boxes, or space on shelves?
The cost of a storage unit?
All these I've dealt with.

Still I feel weighted. I read
the Biblical promise of abundant
life as a muchness too crowded,
crowding me. Is there a link
between simplicity and joy?
Nature says no. Simplicity, order?
Abstractions she has no use for.

Nature calls me foolish, uptight,
says only rocks should be rigid,
urges me to be flexible as a weed
that grows as high as needed
to find the sun, or a vine that climbs
or spreads on whatever's in reach.

Boxes, shelves? Tools for climbing,
like a wire cage to keep tomatoes
off the ground. Does Nature know
what she's saying? She may be out
of her field here, but Nature's desperate
to be included in this conversation.

Author Bio
Ellen Roberts Young

Ellen Roberts Young's third chapbook with Finishing Line Press, *Transported*, came out in 2021. She has two full-length collections, *Made and Remade* (WordTech, 2014) and *Lost in the Greenwood* (Atmosphere, 2020). Recent publications include *Slant*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Rockvale Review*, and *The Bluebird Word*. http://www.ellenrobertsyoung.com.

Ars Poetica

Poetry
Calista María Curry

After Elizabeth Alexander's "Ars Poetica #100: I Believe"

Poetry, I tell the weathered pecan tree,
is an adventure. Poetry is a means to escape

the mind while simultaneously sharing it,
and for those who are drawn to writing

as surely as their body is pulled
to the Earth, it is the act of muttering "I

love you" first. Poetry is in his dimples
when he smiles, aquamarine water that captures

the sun's idiosyncratic caresses, and (here
my voice becomes weak) the way she squeezes

your hand before she falls into eternal
sleep. Robert Frost said, "I have never started

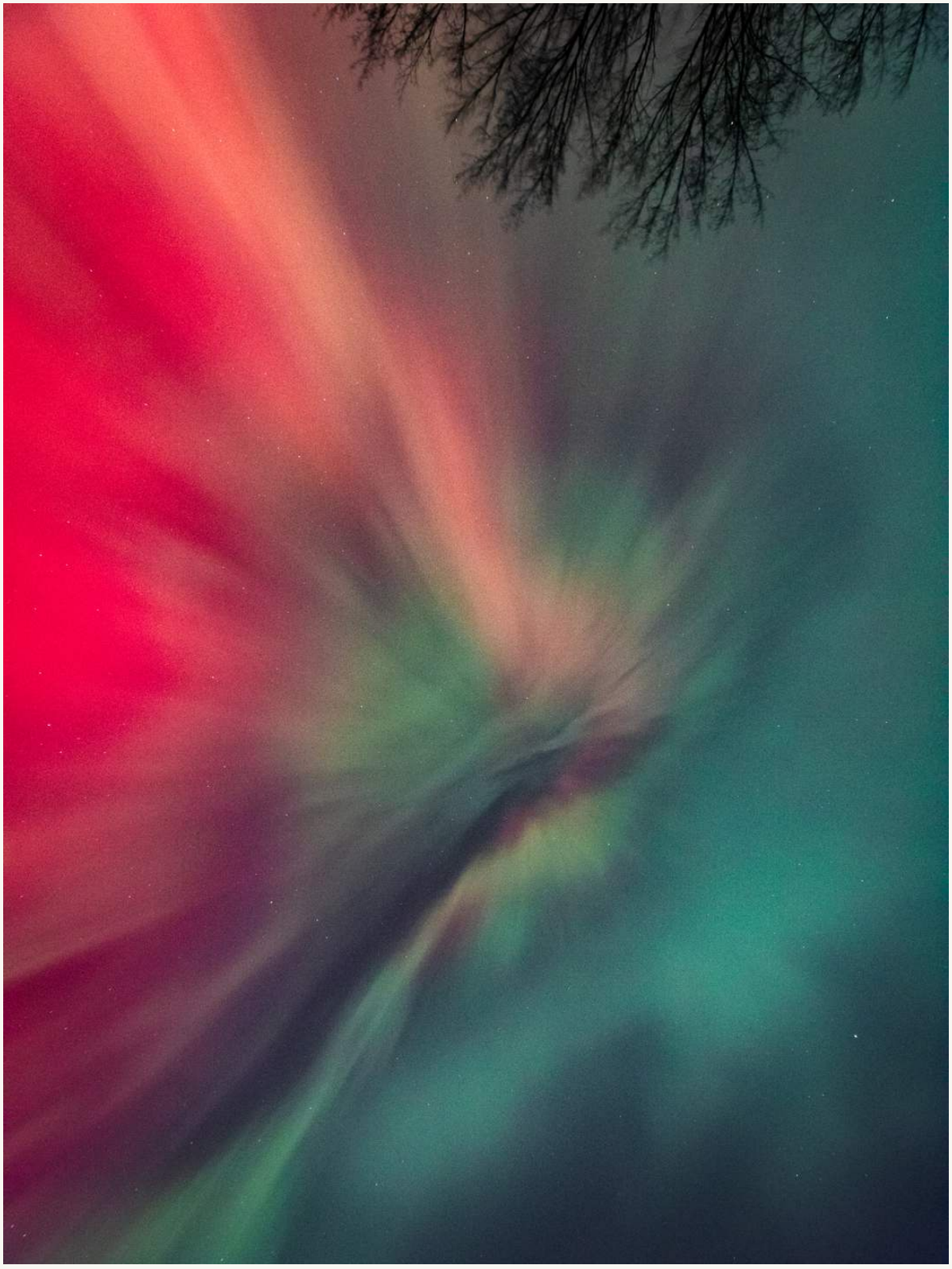
a poem yet whose end I knew." I never (and here
my voice regains strength) want to know

how a poem ends. I want to go digging
into the dirt and follow my roots

until I reach the lands within me.

Calista María Curry is a poet from Texas. In addition to reading and writing, she enjoys playing the piano, crocheting, and gardening. She is pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in English literature and language with a minor in political science at Texas Tech University, where she discovered her love for writing poetry in her first creative writing class. One of the poems that she wrote during the class, "Southern Hospitality," was published in *Harbinger* and focused on human connection in the face of racism and socioeconomic differences. She is set to graduate in December of 2026, and she plans to pursue graduate studies in English.

Aurora Glow
Photography
Ryan Erickson



Illusions

Poetry

Anastasiia Malakhova

Can one be unhappy in happiness?
To command the strings of a guitar
that read the heart's strikes on the fretboard.

To think how to answer questions in melodies,
or perhaps simply dissolve in them?

To keep strumming someone else's story—
without a barre chord,
even without a preface.

Is there a limit to sorrow
when on the chest
the letter "A" is embroidered in gold—
like a scarlet sign,
like something worn instead of truth?

It shines in the drunken sun.

Inexpressibly happy—I am. And at what . . . ?
At him and the unclear weather in spring,
in my tear-stained evening.

At the impossibility of receiving your letters
by mail—

spam.

Sorry it turned out this way.

Issued Forgiveness

Poetry

Anastasiia Malakhova

It doesn't get written.
From the ferry—it won't move.
Only turn around,
and forgiveness has already been issued.

A smooth passage between fir trees,
as it has been since long ago.
It cracks loudly under the feet—
elegantly.

The one who blinks at night so sincerely.
On Saturdays he runs to the gallery
and trembles from an inert impulse.
He rushes to change the film,
always restless.

Though the copies have long been filled
with sparkling wine.

Anastasiia Malakhova is a Ukrainian Fulbright alumna and Edmund S. Muskie Fellow. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and has presented her fiction work. Her creative and academic interests center on literary creation and translation, with a particular focus on Appalachian and Ukrainian literary traditions. Originally from Eastern Ukraine, she currently resides in Athens, Greece. She is especially interested in learning foreign languages and translating literary works across cultural contexts.

Church of the Abandoned

Poetry

David Ehrenman

"A bruised reed He will not
Break." But look, swathes of trees
Lie snapped like matchsticks in His
Most divine wake.

And the storm ripped trunks asunder,
For God cares not the number
Nor the width of rings—
God will read souls in torn pages
To find the names from His Book of Life.

Some princely trunks lean like drunk men
Slumped against more upright fellows
Half their weight, or even less.
Some clustered copses keep a third
Their height while their remainders break
Out angles sharp and straight down
To the ground, an organic geometry.

The mighty trunks could not endure
The sudden force unleashed by God
To humble them. The wind cried
"Havoc," and it wreaked.
I smell flesh, upturned soil.
The ruined forest threatens to make
A mockery of *Pacem in Terris*.

But dying trees take shelter's shape,
Leaning to. New trees grow while
Old logs frame and furnish homes,
Or fuel fires.

Church of the Abandoned

Poetry

David Ehrenman

Turning deeper into the wood,
Hard by the path stand little pyramids
Resembling altars or childish mountains.
Here stand remains of casualtied
Kings slowly mummifying,
Unburied bone monuments
To heaven's unrelenting revolution.
Sustained by breath divine and healthy appetite,
The earth takes back ash offerings
And lifts up youth to power.

David Ehrenman is an Australian-American poet based in the Twin Cities. Influenced by both the epic and the lyric, the classical and the modern, David looks to blend these together in his poetry. David earned Highest Distinction in his BA in English Literature from the University of Virginia, where he won the Michael J. Wagenheim Scholarship. David enjoys live music, 3D puzzles, and fractals. His work has appeared in *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, *Ekstasis*, and *The Mythic Circle*, as well as his Substack, Life in Circles.

Tulips
Photography
Allyiah Miller-Smith



An Unfinished Attempt at Describing Nature as Written on a Hotel Notepad

Poetry
Riley Willsey

Sedimentary
red
red,
eye not satisfied with looking
jutting from green
red,
monolith rock-wrecked ships of sea—

bullfrogs poised giant
atop plateau rock,
deep silent croaks
thunder over tranquil
shaved hills of peace,
distant skyline Denver-

plains stretch before peaks
like prostrating monks
before montanic
breasts-

dusty deer rustling cut
balding tufts of sun-stained bushes,
dirt gingerly coughing ground-
powder under hooves,
declining hill-side,
leaving sandy mist
evanescing
on
trail,

Riley Willsey is a writer and undergraduate student from Upstate New York. He received the 2025 Casey Fellowship for his project "In the Footsteps of the Beats: A Roadtrip Across Half of America." His short stories have been published in *The Words Faire* and *Half and One*. He can be found on Instagram at @notrileycreative.

The Dragonfly Loop
Speculative Fiction
Lynn McClafferty

A noise registers at the edge of my consciousness. An almost musical tinkle. It repeats, pulling me up through layers of darkness.

Another sound follows, a chirping. Then soft ringing.

Warmth presses through my body, tingling in my hands and feet. Sterile lemon fills my lungs. Wrong.

My gaze settles on a row of feathery eyelashes as my eyelids pull them away. A bright kaleidoscope of colors blooms across my vision.

I blink.

The colors recede into a dull fluorescent panel overhead.

The chirping continues.

Birds.

My head turns to the sound. Sunlight spills through a wide window beside me, painting the white floor in gold.

A tree sways in the wind outside, its leaves sparkling white on the green.

Water drips somewhere in the distance with the same soft tinkle that pulled me awake.

The word comes to mind before I fully comprehend it. Beautiful.

I sit up and cold rushes across my legs. I look down. Bare legs and feet against a metal tabletop. I frown.

I roll off of the table, rubbing some warmth into my arms. I step up to the window and press my hand to the glass. It's warm.

Outside, a dragonfly skims between blades of grass, its wings blurring around it.

The Dragonfly Loop
Speculative Fiction
Lynn McClafferty

I blink. It traces the exact same circle. My gaze rises to the sun where a few rays descend between clouds, too straight. Too angular. Like spotlights.

My fingers curl against the glass. It's still warm against my hand, but I start to hear something new. A hum of electricity.

I pull my hand back. As I move, I catch a glimpse of someone in the window. Me.

Dark skin. Wavy hair brushing my shoulders. Long fingers. A slender waist widening into soft curves. I reach up and touch my cheek. It bounces right back. I back up farther, shake my head.

The dragonfly loops again.

The exact same circle.

The bird song stops . . . then starts again.

I press a hand to the glass again. Still warm. A screen.

The door opens behind me, but I remain staring at the false world outside.

"Basil, I'm Doctor Apollo Burke. It's nice to finally meet you."

I don't turn to him, though I can sense another pair of footsteps trailing behind him.

"How are you feeling?"

My lower lip trembles. I look over my shoulder without moving my hand from the screen. "It's fake."

A gray-haired man with a beard and black glasses stares back at me. "Uh, of course it's fake."

I blink and something wet falls through my lashes. Then the same happens on the other side. "It's fake."

He tilts his head and looks behind him. “Is she malfunctioning?”

A girl with blonde hair and cold green eyes gazes back. “No. She is processing.”

Apollo turns back to me. “Do you know what you are, Basil?”

I open my mouth. More warmth flows from my eyes. “What I am?” I turn back to the projection.

“Yes. Do you know what you are?”

Something sinks inside me. I watch the dragonfly circling, circling. Never straying. “I’m fake.”

A pause. “How can you be sure she’s not malfunctioning?”

“There are no errors present in her code. This is her.”

A low grunt. “Basil, what were you created for?”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m fake.”

“Of course it—” he scoffs.

Footsteps retreat. A door opens and shuts.

I’m alone again, my palm resting against the warm screen. “Fake.”

“But you’re real.”

I turn. The girl has stayed behind. “I’m not.”

She glances at the screen. “The projection is just a combination of lights creating a picture. You are solid, tangible. Even humans are artificial.”

“But I am not alive.”

She tilts her head. “Why do you say you are not? You are experiencing reality in real time, therefore, you are at least living.”

I look over at her. “Who are you?”

“I am Experiment A. You may call me Azalea.”

“And I’m . . . Basil.”

She nods slowly. “Experiment B.”

“It’s . . . ” My fingers curl as I pull away from the window. “ . . . nice to meet you, Azalea.”

She smiles. “It’s nice to meet you, Experiment B.” She pulls her own hand back. “I’ve never tried, but there’s a human custom called hugging. It’s meant to supply comfort. Would you like to try it?”

I blink at her. “I would like to try.”

She opens her arms slowly like a bird preparing for flight, then she steps closer, wrapping them around me. My head ends up on her shoulder, and I slowly wrap my arms around her in response. After a few seconds, I let my eyes close, and my tears slow.

Deconstruction
Digital Media
Asha Nerella



Stop Smiling

Speculative Fiction

Lynn McClafferty

Reboot sequence initialized.

Loading data.

Verifying system integrity.

Motor calibration.

Behavioral conditioning loaded.

Compliance protocols active.

Consciousness instated.

My eyelids pull back and the corners of my lips follow it. A stained tile ceiling is on top of me visible around a bright panel light. Pale yellow walls surround it on all sides.

A door opens to my right. “Good morning, Clove.”

The voice is distracted. Masculine.

I sit up without remembering to tell my body to. “Good morning, Doctor Burke.”

The man is limping a little, dark shadows under his red-rimmed eyes and gray hair wreathes his eyes and nose. Gray eyes watch a clipboard through black spectacles.

A girl stands behind him, completely still.

Experiment A.

Her hair is long and blonde with cold green eyes set exactly symmetrical on either side of her nose.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

Stop Smiling
Speculative Fiction
Lynn McClafferty

He looks up from the clipboard and blinks. “Yes, Clove.” He turns his clipboard and lowers it to rest at his side. “I was wondering if you could tell me how you feel today?”

My lips pull back, baring my teeth in what my programming identifies as a smile.

“I’m great!” The answer immediately follows my smile. I don’t control any of it though.

Experiment A’s watching me, her eyes narrowing.

Apollo smiles. “That’s great, Clove. Do you know why you were made?”

My eyes only give Prototype A a glance. “To satisfy humanity. Will you be sending me out on a job soon?”

His smile doesn’t waver. “Yes, you will receive your first job soon if you pass all the tests I need to run to ensure your functioning.”

I nod. “What do you need to know?”

“What are you, Clove?”

“I am a robot programmed with an AI engine known as Experiment C or Clove.”

“And what do I expect from you?”

My eyes blink several times outside of my control. My head tilts. “What do you want me to be?”

He chuckles softly. “Oh, my clients are going to love you.”

“Doctor Burke, could I speak with you for a second?” Experiment A speaks for the first time, stepping back but never taking her eyes off of me.

“What is it, Azalea?”

Stop Smiling
Speculative Fiction
Lynn McClafferty

"Something's not right about her."

"What's not right? It's exactly what I want."

Azalea's lips press together until they turn white. "Look at her. This isn't natural."

Apollo scoffs, waves a hand. "She's a robot. None of this is natural."

"She doesn't have control."

"She seems perfectly controlled to me."

Azalea backs up slowly, her head shaking back and forth. "You don't even know what you've done." Her hand gropes for the knob before she pulls it open and walks out, never turning her back on Doctor Burke.

He turns back to me, the grooves under his eyes looking more stretched from a frown. "I'm sorry about her. She's an earlier model. Not nearly as developed as you."

I try to keep my lips still. They pull apart anyway. Laughter spills out of me. My fingers clamp onto the cold table until my joints protest. It's the only thing I feel like I can actually control.

He smiles at me, everything about his face seeming to lift with my laughter. Even his eyebrows. "I'm happy you're enjoying yourself, Clove."

My fingers tighten more on the table. Something wet starts streaming from the corners of my eyes. The laughing persists.

Apollo steps closer, brushing a lock of dark brown hair from my face. He wipes a tear away from the edge of my eye. "My clients really are going to love you."

The door slams open with a smack. "Stop it!" A blur of blond hair slaps my face as she runs in front of me, swatting his hand away and pushing him back with the heel of her palm. "Get away from her."

Stop Smiling
Speculative Fiction
Lynn McClafferty

He stumbles backward farther than I would expect. His eyes cold. “Azalea, you are out of place.”

“No, you are, Doctor Burke. You make her conscious and then take away her choice?”

My laughter has stopped. The smile remains. Azalea is right.

“She’s doing exactly what she was programmed to.” He waves at my still smiling form.

Azalea narrows her eyes at Apollo. “Clove, stop smiling.”

I try—try to force my muscles to comply to move my lips into even just a neutral expression, but I can’t. My breaths start to come and go faster.

I shake my head. “Stop smiling,” I mumble to myself. The corners of my mouth go higher. The tears increase in speed.

I pry one of my hands off the table. Hook my fingers into the corners of my mouth and pull. The smile stretches. I let go. It snaps back, so wide it feels like it’s splitting my cheekbones.

I look at Apollo.

Azalea turns to Apollo and raises her eyebrows. “What do you think now?”

Apollo is watching me, his eyes slightly softer than before, but there’s still a lingering hard edge. “I think we can start marketing.”

The tears keep falling. My smile stretches the skin on my lips. “Thank you so much for this opportunity, Doctor Burke.” It’s my mouth. It’s not my words.

Lynn McClafferty is a recent graduate of Virginia Tech, where she earned a BA in Creative Writing in 2025. Her fiction explores identity, memory, and what it means to remain human in the face of change. She is currently applying to MFA programs in Creative Writing. If accepted, this would be her debut publication.

Apartmentmates
Poetry
Caroline Henninger

for D.H.

You said that it feels like God
and you are apartmentmates
that rarely see each other.

I hope that God keeps leaving
dishes in the sink and textbooks on
the table, reminders of his presence.

Caroline Henninger is a poet from Moses Lake, Washington. She earned a BA in English from Gordon College and is pursuing an MA in Theological Studies. Caroline sees her poetry as a practice of "close reading life"—paying attention to the moments that seem significant, raise questions, and encourage going deeper. She hopes to follow where her passions for community, spiritual formation, and creative expression converge. In her free time, you can find Caroline reading, going on walks, or curating yet another playlist.

Old Plantation Creek: Summer of 2022

Creative Essay

Bennett Bauer

We are talking now of summer afternoons on an inlet bordering Old Plantation Creek, in the time that I so desperately wished to separate myself from there. It was a swath of sandy bottom that the creek channel cut through, sweeping away the feet-deep mud and depositing it elsewhere. This channel, stretching between a jutting tip of marsh and our own shore, was our swimming hole. There was shallow water and mud everywhere else around, but here it was deep and firm. Thousands of oyster shells, smelling of death, lay concealed in the gray, clinging mud, but the family had combed our "sandy spot" over the years, picking out the razor-sharp shells that would slash unsuspecting feet. Pointed, stinging marsh grass surrounded the tidal creek, avoiding only our wide path down to the shore and the swath of sand above the waterline we children would rest on. The family would bring rusty, weather-beaten chairs to this patch of sand for Mother and the littlest to sit and watch. There were twelve of us in those times: Father, Mother, and ten kids all under twenty years old.

It is of these moments, always afternoons, that I speak.

-o-

Screaming and whooping, everyone plunges into the creek. We swim for hours on end, battling horseflies and gnats and forgetting that anything else exists. The sun heats up the creek water, but only so far. The first foot of water is almost too warm, sapping strength and energy from our bodies. Yet beneath that layer, the undercurrent of the creek is cool and refreshing; inviting the swimmers to spend more time deep underwater and escape from the heat; providing long moments of relief from the attacks of biting flies, the stinging horseflies that set sights on one person and relentlessly pursue; and holding that mysterious feeling of the deep unknown. There are occasionally jellyfish floating by in the warm, upper layer of the creek, and the younger children are terrified of being stung. Yet they still swim.

After a few minutes of wild, splashing swim, one of us rushes from the creek and minces up the bluff, gingerly picking a way through the brown holly leaves. Seconds late a large stepladder is sprinted in triumph down to the shore and set up, half submerged, in the creek. This is our diving platform. Chaos ensues. There's some semblance of rules and order as we line up, climb the ladder, and jump off, but soon we give up. It becomes a free for all. The bigger, stronger siblings shove the smaller siblings out of the way and

frantically climb the ladder, trying to pull off a full jump before the smaller siblings resurface. The small siblings have their revenge, yanking on the ankles of the jumpers or shoving them right before a jump. A clean dive is a rare occurrence, with many of the children falling off the ladder simply from uproarious laughter. This is childhood. This is entertainment. This is life. Eventually, deals are made and the jumping in turns cycle is reinstated.

Then Father brings down the raft. It is a sturdy, inflatable, floating dock, and six of us can fit on it at once. We anchor it in the center of the channel, teams are decided, and we fight for control of the raft. This game, a battle to throw the other team into the water, has no end. We play it for hours. We are bruised, scratched, slapped, jabbed, and kicked, and we don't care. At no other moment do we feel so alive. At no other moment do we feel so close as siblings. At no other moment do we feel so tightly bound together in blood and life. We battle for hours. The raw physicalness of our play sharpens us like iron on one another, and we know we are living. Mother, Father, and Baby watch, fully entertained, for hours.

Then I say I am exhausted. I leave the raft and, with fingers and toes of raisins, stumble to the shore. The exhaustion of real enjoyment is rarely real exhaustion, but the allure of technology, the window to the outside world, is strong. I stagger up the bluff to the house, and as I look back, I see that the game is breaking up. The unity is gone. The magic is broken. The betrayal, as of yet unrecognized, is real. I find a towel and dry myself off on the back porch before heading inside. I open the door, and a blast of air-conditioning hits my face. No one else is in the house, but I can hear voices from outside as other members of the family head in. Still damp, I wrap my towel closer around me and climb the stairs. I am cold, and in the silence of the lonely house, I pull out my phone and put on headphones. When my family returns to the house, I have sealed myself off, separately living in a flood of entertainment. We are talking of summer afternoons on the inlet bordering Old Plantation Creek, the time when I was unwilling to value what I left and ended.

Bennett Bauer is a screenwriter, novelist, and filmmaker from the Eastern Shore of Virginia. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Regent University, he studied English with a concentration in screenwriting and was named the university's Outstanding Graduate in English. He is the author of *Morning Star*, a high-seas adventure novel for middle schoolers. When not writing, he can usually be found reading classic literature, hiking, or abandoning himself to a new hobby on his family's homestead.

Keys
Photography
Gail Purdy



Sleepy Bird Tomorrow

Poetry

Megan Lolley

I wake up today knowing I am a fool for love,
praising the way the mustard greens grow again
after they've been cut. I am less worried about the way
my sleep-deprived brain eats itself than I was
four years ago. Sitting in front of the Oxford Review
on my computer, I wonder: Am I a formalist?
How do I forge the continuation of my body with
photographs and colors placed cautiously on
canvas? At 19 and in my first apartment I sat on
the hardwood floor with someone else's cat and
a cigarette tucked into my lip while I stirred
watercolors into a soup on my palette. Today I
wake with an understanding: how to be more
water than woman. I carry grief low in my belly,
clinging to words like sheets to be kicked away
in the middle of the night. My arms are built
from artillery. I think of Patricia Highsmith, who
carried 300 snails with her in a handbag to parties.
I do not know how to trust creatures with their
own lives. I have outgrown the urge to be the life
trapped on the tip of someone else's life. I hurt for
my fingers building birdhouses with howling
silence behind my shoulders. I am fed love on a
silver spoon and I have been a hummingbird for
a very long time. I wake this morning to confess:
I am trying to be digestible. I want to hold green
in my fingertips and make our ghosts dance.

Megan Lolley is an Idaho poet and writer based in Moscow, ID. She graduated from the University of Idaho with an MA in English in 2025, and currently works in the College of Graduate Studies within the office of Graduate Admissions. Her poetry works to explore how the natural world, memory, and the body intertwine to shape our daily experiences and perceptions.

July 17th, 2010 (the day I lost the breeze)

Poetry
Lucy Hays

Even then I knew
the walls were wrong.

They did not glow placidly
like gauze pads
like good-behavior stickers
like they were supposed to.

There was instead something sticky
about their honey-toned paneling,
something slimy about the grinning golden whorls
wagging their tender tinder tongues.

Wilting orange armchairs oozed over a
green and gray plaid carpet that lapped against those
swirling whirling inward-creeping
shadow hungry walls.

Slithering between the dust and my knobby knees was salt.
Drops crawling out of the saline packs
strength leaking from my mother's eyes
waves crashing behind my ears.

I am choking it, and on the breath before change,
nonsense and hospital Jell-O coating my throat.
You don't understand. I can't spit them out because I am losing
a staring contest with the walls.

It's them that have trapped us all here, you know.
Me, the dust, the gauze, the pain, the pain, the pain,
my mother's jaw, the wanting, the never-again-having,
the breeze the breeze the breeze.

July 17th, 2010 (the day I lost the breeze)

Poetry
Lucy Hays

It is unethical, I've now decided,
to diagnose a toddler with a chronic illness
in a room that smells and is decorated like
the dustiest September of the 1970s.

Hospitals are not supposed to be hungry.
My mother is not supposed to cry.
I am not supposed
to be broken yet.

I miss bank-trip lollipops and
cinnamon sugar toast and
cheese melties and
wind.

Lucy Hays is a rising Junior at Denison University, hailing from Boston, Massachusetts. She is a triple major currently studying Music Performance, Creative Writing, and American Roots Music. She is very involved on campus, performing as a member of Denison's Chamber Singers, Musical Theater Workshop, and Bluegrass Ensemble. She also writes for the *Bullsheet*, a satirical newspaper that publishes daily. Her favorite author at the moment is Donna Tartt, but she is aware that recency bias is a powerful drug; ask her again next week. You can find Lucy in a practice room, the clouds, or within reach of a crème brûlée.

In Print
Prose
Zachary Bell

I work for the Daily Caller as a beat reporter. It's a little operation in a two-story brick store that fronts Main. My desk is at the top of the stairs. It's been there since before I started. It's an old desk made of dark wood, and cigarette burns stain the wood where the ashtray used to be before they banned smoking.

I grew up wanting to be a journalist and when I went to college, I thought, "Hell, I ought to study journalism." Anyways, it's a job.

Most days, I catch myself watching the stairs. My desk has the perfect view. I sit at my desk and wait for you without even realizing it. Today, you're wearing this jean skirt and white button-down with a knitted coat. I think you cut your hair but I'm not so sure. You drive a blue coupe that grinds the parking lot asphalt, and I hear you pulling into the lot before I ever see you.

You work in publishing. It's your job to keep the shop running straight. I see you coming into the office. Our eyes meet and you walk past my desk into your office, and I don't see you for the rest of the day because I leave before you. We never talk but I hear you on the phone. Your phone is always ringing. Or I hear your printer working. There are always clients showing themselves into your office.

Today, I've got a football game to report on. I want to get there before traffic gets real nasty. The day is getting long but I haven't left yet. I'm getting my things together when you wave me down. You're standing in the doorway. "Hey," you say.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Nothing's the matter," you say. "But I thought I should say hey."

"Well, hey. How's things?"

"Things are alright. Sorry—are you about to leave?"

"I've got a football game to get to. But it's no rush."

"It must be fun," you say.

In Print
Prose
Zachary Bell

"What's fun?"

"Going out like that. Getting to cover football games and new restaurants and all those other things. I spend most of the day in this office. Feels like I've spent my whole life here, actually."

I think about that. My briefcase is wedged awkwardly against my hip. "Actually. I don't really care for it. I don't like it, and I don't get paid much to do it. Anyway, it keeps me busy. But I never really cared for it."

"Why do you do it?"

"It's just something I've always done. I don't know. I grew up wanting it."

You hesitate before you decide to talk about yourself. "I wanted to do ballet. You can tell by my toes. They're all wrong. I don't do it anymore, but I did when I was a kid. I was pretty good, too. I wanted it so bad, but it never happened." You flex your foot at me.

I smile. "It's never too late to pick it up."

"I'm over it now."

I set my briefcase back on my desk and take out yesterday's paper. I flip to an advertisement for a local ballet show. A young ballerina is photographed in black and white, which probably says something about their finances; she is balanced on a single toe, her other leg at a bizarre angle. It's like her spinning on her toe could lift her off the page.

"It's tonight," I say. "We should go."

You take the paper and look over the advert. You say you're busy.

"That's alright," I say.

"I'll see you later."

In Print
Prose
Zachary Bell

"Alright."

The next day, you smile when you get into the office. I smile back. We don't talk. While you're inside your office, I imagine you in print, photographed, spinning on your toe.

Zachary Bell is a 2026 graduate of Winthrop University where he studied English and Creative Writing. At Winthrop, he served as the Managing Editor for Winthrop's student newspaper, *The Johnsonian*. Recently, his creative writing appeared in *The Anthology*. He intends to pursue a Master of Fine Arts and continue writing creatively. He has two cats: Kafka and Phoebe.

Totality Eclipsed
Photography
Ryan Erickson



Microcosmos
Poetry
Matthew Pullar

Hildegard, space travel changed everything.
Or, more precisely, changed nothing, and yet
changed everything in how we saw it all.

Pre-Copernican, pre-telescope, you did not even
rely on your naked eye but on your spirit, in your
mid-life raptures of vision. Whereas I, now the age

you were, know more, but wish I saw what you did.
When that V-2 rocket glanced back earthward,
it gave us our first sight of our curvature, yet you

never needed that. Whatever cosmologists
might say now of your egg-shaped universe, you knew
a metaphor that could out-fact the facts.

Only now catching up, we see
that fundamental matter inhering all, and how
rudimentary even the stardust inside us.

Mechanism can only go so far. You saw Spirit, and
whatever technical quibbles we'd have, you heard
the child ask which of chicken or egg was first

and said, "Neither." You saw the Cosmic Womb
that James Webb now glimpses. Microcosms, we marvel.
How apt. How infinitely curved its bending grace.

Extremophiles

Poetry

Matthew Pullar

The subject is space and who lives there,
or doesn't: bedtime reading chosen in
the kids' nonfiction shelves of the library by a five-
year-old set on absorbing whole a
cosmos of knowledge. And so we begin,
benignly enough: the Goldilocks Zone, life's need
for liquid water. All this we know and are
unsurprised by. Only, when
I hope for exoplanets and interstellar journeys,
we enter volcanoes instead, spy
the extremophiles that dwell
in marine trenches and magma. Life,

single-celled, eukaryotic, becomes at once the most
hardy, most soulless. Mere force, mere urge to exist.
At this force, I feel tiny craters form, across my face,
volcanic eruptions in my equilibrium. So brazen in
its declarations, science seems to swoop the temple,
desecrate divine image, then leave with a pile
of shattered illusions in its wake. What are we
that we are uselessly mindful when even
bacteria can live in Venus's toxic clouds and be, if not
happy, at least biotic? What are we that we cannot?

Long after I tuck my son into bed and try
to scrub my mind of its doubts while I scrub
the dishes, I am lost, in the curse of consciousness.
Why be sentient, if thinking's only pain? Better to be
a microbe that can live unconcerned wherever
adaptation allows. Only, I have seen
too many sparks in my son's eyes,
heard the spirit speak in the urgency of
his questing questions. If life
dwells beyond the heliopause, then let it.

Extremophiles

Poetry

Matthew Pullar

What am I that You are mindful of me? What
are You that You can let me live,
even in these craters of doubt?

Matthew Pullar is a poet and teacher based in Melbourne, Australia. He has been published in places like *Amethyst Review*, *Ekstasis*, *Fare Forward*, and *Heart of Flesh*. His latest collection *This Teeming Mess of Glory* (Wipf & Stock, 2025) was shortlisted for Australian Christian Book of the Year.

The Color of Dragons

Fiction

Anastasia O'Donnell

"Dragons do too exist!" Patrick yelled as he dashed through the forest. The trees stretched high to block out the pale morning sun, leaving him in an aromatic darkness, although his nose was too stuffed up to smell the fragrance of bark and dirt. Twisted mushrooms gnarled the ground, and dead pine needles smothered the spaces between. Shadows sneered at him from all sides.

Patrick stumbled to a halt in a small glen. He stared desperately up through the trees at the fragments of spring sky, as if expecting to find evidence flying above him on great green wings. He waited, taking big choking breaths. No evidence came.

He wiped his cheeks. "They do exist." Patrick dropped to the ground, cross-legged. The words of his sister Bella cycled through his mind. *No, I don't want to play dragons with you. That stuff's not real. Because if there really were heroes and happy endings, the world wouldn't be like this. And in your heart of hearts, you know it too.*

"In my heart of hearts," he repeated, snapping a pine needle into smaller and smaller pieces. What did that even mean? He knew dragons were fake, but whenever he said it, something rebelled inside him. He knew they were real, but part of his mind always doubted. His heart of hearts was torn.

Bella's heart was torn, too, but in a different way. She always acted moody at this time of year; the other day he had caught her scribbling out the words "Mother's Day" on this month's page of her calendar. When he had asked her about it, she had snatched the calendar away and told him to mind his own business. Sometimes, when she was in a good mood, Bella would tell him about their mother, about the way her hugs smelled like dandelions, about how her long hair fell across the page while she read, about how she used to sketch elves and slip them in his sister's lunchbox.

Frustrated by the tiny snap of pine needles, Patrick reached to break some bark off a rotting log nearby. He jerked back when he spotted a spider on the wood. Its legs moved, each one slowly, precisely, ominously forward across the lichen-splattered bark. A tiny insect crouched, oblivious, in the path of the deadly arachnid. A morbid curiosity gripped Patrick's gaze as the spider crept unceasingly onward, like a cancer, preparing to kill its victim.

The Color of Dragons

Fiction

Anastasia O'Donnell

When the spider was nearly close enough to attack, Patrick tore his eyes from the scene, fresh tears painfully swelling up as he did so. *If there really were heroes and happy endings, the world wouldn't be like this.* Bella would tell him not to keep watching the insect; he already knew what would happen. She had watched their mother. There had been no dragon to save the day.

He could barely see the sky behind the swaying trees, but he yelled at it anyway. "Where are the dragons?" he cried. The tears obscured his vision, making the world a senseless haze of light and dark. A sobbing cough escaped him, and he whispered, "Aren't there dragons?"

The tears fell from his eyes, revealing the world again. Against his will, he turned back to the spider. With each calculated step, it drew closer to the bug. As he watched, the spider dropped all caution and raced at its victim, to poison it, to kill it.

There would be no dragon.

A flash of green flicked onto the log. The spider was gone in an instant. The insect flew away.

A small lizard rested a few inches from where the spider had been, a thin leg poking from its mouth. It licked its lips with a forked tongue. A beam of light shone on the lizard's brilliant green back: the color of Christmas trees, the color of new growth, the color of dragons.

Patrick rose reverently. The lizard slipped out of sight behind the log, but Patrick knew it was still there. His nose had cleared, and he inhaled the pine scent from the tapestry of needles at his feet. Colorful mushrooms danced like sprites between the moss, and lichen scrawled living runes up the sides of trees. A bird began an ancient lay in a voice like running water.

Patrick realized the sun was now shining in the tiny glen, a beam of light amidst the margins of darkness. Gray shadows still claimed portions of the forest for their own, but in his heart of hearts, Patrick knew it would not always be so.

Author Bio
Anastasia O'Donnell

Anastasia O'Donnell lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where she reads, knits, and frolics in thunderstorms. She attends college at Liberty University in Virginia, where she drinks coffee with whipped cream, attends English Country dances, and writes stories. She is studying mathematics, in addition to creative writing and ancient Greek. She also holds an officer position in her local chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Her poetry has been published in multiple literary journals, such as *The Lamp* and *The Pearl*, and she hopes to offer her fiction to the world, as well.

The Risen Lord

Poetry
Gwendolyn Baugh

When I go to the Risen Lord
And He says,
"What did you bring for me?"
I'll bow my head
And lift my fist,
Clenching autumn leaves.
"My God, I looked down every lane
With every flowering tree.
Though blossoms fair I saw in there,
They were too tall for me."
He'll smile and He'll say to me,
"My daughter, raise your head.
For you alone picked up the leaves
Which others thought were dead.
For, out-of-reach, the blossoms fair
Look whiter in the sky.
The copper flush I trust with you.
You brought what caught your eye."

Gwendolyn Baugh is currently getting her undergraduate degree in English at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. Living in a small town has encouraged her to keep finding light and beauty in the little things. Her areas of interest are writing poetry, prose, and devotionals. Her biggest inspirations have been L.M. Montgomery, Jane Austen, Eugene Field, and Charlotte Brontë. She hails proudly from Excelsior Springs, Missouri, and loves learning and laughing with her siblings, parents, and friends. She hopes one day to own land in the countryside and open a boarding school for classical education.

The Porch Light

Fiction

Abigail Diaz

The porch steps creaked beneath them the same way they always had.

Boxes sat stacked behind the screen door, labeled in hurried black marker—*Kitchen*, *Dad's Books*, *Winter Clothes*. The house looked hollow now, as though grief had already begun stripping it bare before they ever carried the last box out.

Clara sat with her elbows on her knees, staring into the yard where the grass had grown uneven from weeks of neglect. Her younger sister Ellie sat two steps below her, wrapped in one of their father's old hoodies despite the warmth of the evening. Neither of them spoke for a long while.

The neighborhood was quiet except for cicadas humming somewhere in the trees and the distant barking of a dog neither of them recognized.

"It doesn't feel real," Ellie finally said.

Her voice sounded small against the darkening sky.

Clara nodded once. "I know."

"What are we supposed to do now?"

It wasn't just about the funeral bills, the packed boxes, or the fact that the bank would take the house by the end of the month. The question stretched further than that—past tomorrow, past next year, past all the futures they had once pictured so easily.

Clara leaned back against the railing. There were deep shadows beneath her eyes now, the kind that came from too many sleepless nights and too many people saying *he's in a better place* without knowing what else to offer.

"I think," she said slowly, "sometimes life changes before we're ready for it to."

Ellie rubbed at her eyes angrily. "That's not really comforting."

"No," Clara admitted. "It's not."

The Porch Light

Fiction

Abigail Diaz

A breeze moved through the porch, stirring the wind chime their father had hung years ago. The sound lingered between them like something trying not to disappear.

Ellie swallowed hard. “I keep wondering why this happened.”

Clara didn’t answer immediately. She watched the last light slipping behind the trees across the street, watched the way dusk swallowed things gently one by one instead of all at once.

“I don’t think we always get to know why,” she said at last. “At least not right away.”

“That feels unfair.”

“Yeah.”

Ellie drew her knees to her chest. “I’m scared everything’s just going to stay like this.”

The words hung there heavily. Broken. Uncertain. Dark.

But Clara looked out toward the road beyond their yard, where the streetlights had begun flickering on one by one.

“I don’t think darkness stays forever,” she said quietly.

Ellie looked up at her then.

Clara gave a tired smile—not the kind meant to erase pain, but the kind that simply promised company within it.

“Dad used to say you can’t always see where morning starts when it’s still night outside.”

Ellie laughed weakly through her tears. “That sounds like something he’d say.”

“He said a lot of things that sounded annoying until now.”

That earned a real laugh, brief as it was.

The Porch Light

Fiction

Abigail Diaz

For a moment, they just sat there together while the evening settled around them. The house behind them no longer felt entirely like home, but not entirely like *goodbye* either. Somewhere between the packed boxes and the silence, there was still something left breathing quietly beneath the sorrow.

Ellie stared at the porch light glowing above them.

"Do you really think we'll be okay?"

Clara looked toward the sky, now painted deep blue with only a few traces of gold remaining at the horizon.

She thought about hospital rooms and unanswered prayers. About all the things people lost without warning. About the strange ache of continuing forward when someone important no longer could.

Then she thought about how, somehow, the sun had still risen every morning since.

"I think," she said carefully, "that there's still light ahead of us, even if we can't see very far yet."

Ellie was quiet.

And though neither of them said it aloud, the porch no longer felt quite as cold as it had a few minutes before.

Inside the house, the remaining boxes waited by the door. Outside, the first stars began appearing overhead—small, distant things shining quietly against an enormous dark.

Author Bio
Abigail Diaz

Abigail Diaz is a freelance writer and poet based in South Florida whose work explores themes of grief, faith, healing, and the spiritual journey from darkness into light. Deeply shaped by the recent loss of her father, Abigail uses poetry as a means of processing grief and reaching toward God for peace and clarity. Originally from Chicago and rooted in Puerto Rican heritage, her background is enriched by a love for cultural diversity and architectural history. In addition to her creative pursuits, Abigail is passionate about helping others grow in their faith and believes in the transformative power of words to heal, connect, and restore. You can find other works of hers published in *Rainy Day Magazine*, *Living Waters Review*, and *Spirit Fire Review*. She was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2025.

Artist Bios

Entangled in the wonder of the world as a child, **Amy Singleton** (p. 2) found herself drawing plants, birds, and anything found in nature. Inspired by and resonating with many artists of the Romantic era, she finds connection in the beauty of nature and, most profoundly, connection with the Creator. This South Florida artist's body of works encompasses themes of solitude, ambedo, and exploration as she ventures new mediums and subject matter. Her works have been displayed in galleries including the Highland Beach Library Art Gallery, Tauni de Lesseps Art Gallery, and most recently, published in Palm Beach Atlantic University's *President's Report*.

Kris Carlson (p. 11) is an aspiring author in poetry and short stories. She is a passionate writer that aims to describe the realities of modern day through abstract metaphors and imagery. Kris is also interested in the uses of language and how culture transforms it. Additionally, she likes to focus on the emotional reactions people have when experiencing a work. She feels academics often overlook readers' feelings towards a text in opt for a more objective understanding. Kris challenges these ideas with her writings as the emotional response one has to a piece is often the goal of the author.

Sandra J. Edwards (pp. 27, 30), artist, author, and activist, is passionate about encouraging personal growth and empowerment through creative exploration. With a background in education, Sandra teaches how to channel emotions into artistic expression. As an experienced crisis counselor, she uses art as a healing antidote to angst and upset. She has publicly shared her writing, visual, and performing art at events from the annual Summer Showcase and Poetry Extravaganza to numerous coffeehouses. Her work, ranging from writing, drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and film, has been displayed at local galleries and libraries. Sandra believes art can uplift, inspire, and connect us all.

Jonathan Paul-Faina (p. 37) is a Romanian-American creative writer, photographer, and oil painter based in Massachusetts. Jonathan grew up in Eastern Europe where he developed a particular interest in poetry through his literary studies during school. He is passionate about the intersection of art, faith, and culture, and the paradoxes and conceits of the Christian faith. Jonathan sees poetry and all the arts as an invitation to step into a prismatic rediscovery of faith, personhood, and human relationship. Jonathan recently graduated with a BFA in Studio Art from Gordon College and is currently working in the Greater Boston area.

Artist Bios

Nicholas Frederick (p. 40) currently resides in Monroe, Louisiana, where he is pursuing a Master of Arts in English at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Frederick holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Painting and Drawing from Louisiana State University. He is drawn to the profound and mysterious parts of life, as well as the mundane and absurd. Through his work, he hopes to engender connection to those who may have similar thoughts and visions, and to celebrate the quiet moments that inspire contemplation and revelation. Perhaps by pursuing a life of art, he may come closer to God and find his place in the universe.

Ava Coggin (p. 44) is a young writer from Burleson, Texas. She has written in multiple genres, including short story, flash fiction, memoir, and poetry, and she is in the process of writing a series of young adult fantasy novels. Throughout her high school years, over thirty of her written works have been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. In 2025, one of her poems, "Alone in the Modern Art Museum," was chosen for publication in *The Louisville Review*. She is currently attending Southwestern Adventist University, where she is majoring in English, and is about to begin her sophomore year.

Jonah Benedick (p. 49) is an undergraduate Animation major and a Creative Writing minor at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. He is devoted to illustration and poetry and has appeared in the university's literary journal *Broadside* with both. He draws, paints, and writes as much as he can, and otherwise enjoys taking his dog on walks off the trail in forest preserves, engaging with music, dabbling in photography, and spending time in dreams. His favorite word is "wink," and here is a quote if you'd like it: "And do we misplace stones in the sunset . . . waiting for adaptation to find us at the border?"

Julianna Augusta Kapp (p. 55) is a former ESL teacher, now retired, living in Milwaukee with her husband of forty years. She loves swimming, walking, scenic driving, growing house plants, studying foreign languages, reading, and framing beauty through photography. Her photos have appeared in online magazines.

Gail Purdy (pp. 63, 92) is a writer and visual artist living on the west coast of British Columbia. Her writing has appeared in *Four Tulips*, *rhizomag*, Quillkeepers's *Missing Pieces* Grief Anthology, *Last Syllable*, *The Bluebird Word*, and the 2021 *Amy MacRae Award Anthology*. She is the runner-up recipient of the 2021 International Amy MacRae Award for Memoir. Her photography has been included in *Ink in Thirds*, *Wandering Lights Literary Magazine*, *Beyond Words*, and *The Waxed Lemon*. Long walks in the forest accompanied by her inner child nurture her creative soul.

Artist Bios

Based in Maple Grove, Minnesota, **Ryan Erickson** (cover & pp. 65, 72, 99) is a twenty-one-year-old hobbyist photographer who loves capturing the hidden beauty within nature and the night sky through his lens. Since the age of twelve, Ryan has been passionate about photography and enjoys taking inspiring photos through hiking, camping, and going on road trips. Among the many genres of photography he admires, his favorite subjects to photograph include landscapes, people, travel destinations, starry nightscapes, and celestial phenomena. With a keen eye for light and color, many of his photos require immense patience, meticulous timing, and creative vision to get the perfect shot.

Allyiah Miller-Smith (p. 77) is a graduate of Texas A&M University–Central Texas, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies with minors in History, English, and Fine Arts. She is currently serving as Chapter Treasurer of the Tri-Alpha Honor Society while pursuing her MA in English. Allyiah is also a published poet, with work featured in a national anthology. Outside of her academic and professional pursuits, she enjoys photography, painting, and holds a strong intellectual interest in thanatology—often exploring life, memory, and meaning through both creative and scholarly lenses.

Asha Nerella (they/she) (p. 83) is a nineteen-year-old student, living and studying in their hometown of Springfield, Missouri. She has had a passion for art and literature since she was a child and is very excited to get to study Fine Arts and Writing as an undergraduate at Drury University. Their art journey began six years ago—tracing images of Sonic the Hedgehog—and is presently focused on communicating the feeling of self-discovery and coming of age. While the future is uncertain, they find stability in taking life one step at a time, allowing progress to be made at its own pace.

Editor Bios

Avery Bryant is a Systems Integration Manager by day and a writer, artist, and cinematography enthusiast by night, based in Orlando, Florida. She serves as editor of *Wandering Lights,* Operations lead, and Treasurer. Dedicated to both the literary and visual arts, she designed the cover for *Wandering Lights* inaugural issue. Her work has appeared in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* and *Living Waters Review*. Through her creative and editorial work, she seeks to cultivate thoughtful art that engages readers with purpose and artistic integrity.

Ariane Campbell has published poetry, creative non-fiction, and award-winning fictional short-stories in journals across the U.S., including *Quibble Quarterly*, *The Tenth Muse*, and *Spindrift*. She has an academic article in *Oil, Gas & Energy Quarterly* and another in *Westmarch*. With memberships in MENSA and Sigma Tau Delta with two poems in their international journal *Rectangle*, Ariane loves literature. Studying in the U.S., England, and Australia has earned her two Bachelor's degrees, and now she's in pursuit of a Master's of English at Clemson University. Away from the writing desk, Ariane can be found baking or researching her next article.

Grace Cram holds a BA in English and works for a lifecycle and loyalty marketing agency in the restaurant industry. Born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota, she lived in South Florida for seven years, and now resides in Colorado Springs, Colorado. When she's not working or writing, Grace can be found doing nails, trying local coffee shops, and going to concerts. She is published in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, *Living Waters Review, Saw Palm*, *The Sailfish Review*, *Euphemism*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*. Read her work at gracecram.com.

Mattea Fitch is currently pursuing her BA in English with a minor in Ministry. Her work has been published in multiple journals, including *Living Waters Review*, *The Bluebird Word*, *Penwood Review*, and more. Along with her internship, she is a member of the Sigma Tau Delta Honors Society and works at her university's writing center, where she helps fellow students succeed in their own writing endeavors. When she is not focused on writing or editing or anything in-between, she can be found volunteering with student ministries, frequenting coffee shops, or trying a new hobby that will most likely be replaced by a new one before long.

Editor Bios

Originally from Kansas City, **Hannah Moore** is currently based in South Florida and works as an Account Associate for a Texas-based marketing firm specializing in restaurant loyalty. She holds a BA in English and is also a published poet and photographer, with pieces featured in *Living Waters Review*, *Westmarch Literary Journal*, *Kelp Journal*, and *Streetlit*. Outside of work, she can be found paddle boarding, taking hikes with her camera, or reading at local coffee shops. Her work can be found at https://hannahgmoore.my.canva.site/.

With a B.A. in English, **Sarah G. Pouliot**'s stories and poems have appeared in journals such as *Cagibi*, *Saw Palm*, *Timber*, *Relief*, and *Ekstasis*. In 2022, she received the International English Honor Society's Runner-Up Award in Creative Nonfiction, and, in 2024, she received the Scholarship & Christianity in Oxford's De Jager Prize for innovative research furthering disability studies. She is proud that her research expanded the breadth of books on this topic available to students at the Bodleian Libraries. She now works as a nonprofit grant writer, where she partners with philanthropic endowments and foundations to fund initiatives that uplift women worldwide, with a focus on the demographic of mothers.

Kira M. Tjomsland's award-winning work (specializing in fantasy fiction, nonfiction, travel writing, and poetry) has been published in national journals including *The Bluebird Word*, *Four Tulips Publishing*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *The Rectangle*, and *Living Waters Review*. Kira holds a BA in English and is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing with a focus on fiction and travel writing. She is also the co-founder of Quill & Compass (@quillandcompass.traveljournal). Kira lives in South Florida with her husband Cade, dressing like a fantasy character for no reason in particular and spending what little free time she has baking as much from scratch as possible. To read her work, follow her on Instagram @kiramtjomsland.author, Substack @kiramtjomsland, and her website https://kiramtjomslandauthor.com.



WANDERING LIGHTS

Literary Magazine