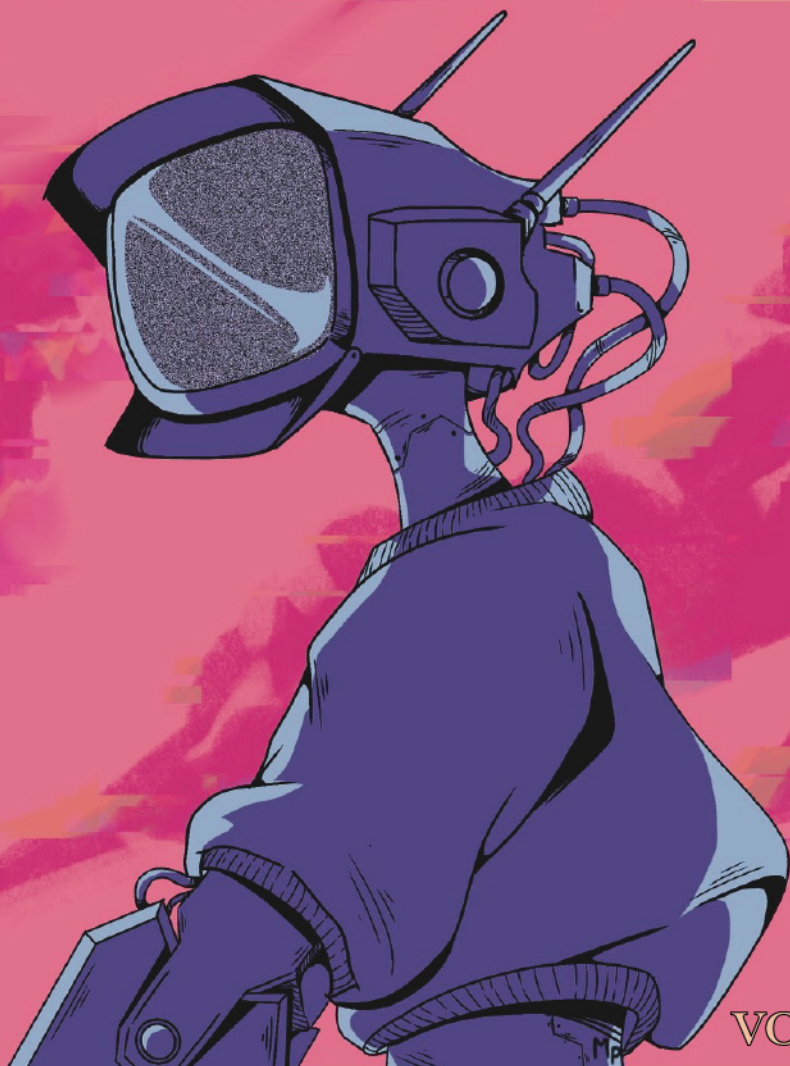


# Impressions



VOL 49



# IMPRESSIONS

Literary and Art Magazine

Maryville College

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*Volume 49*

## ABOUT IMPRESSIONS

In print since 1974, Impressions is an annual publication created by and for the students of Maryville College and members of the surrounding eastern Tennessee community. Impressions aims to present the best of art, poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and other creative works submitted by the the Maryville College community and the appalachian region. Online editions of Impressions can be viewed at [impressionsmc.org](http://impressionsmc.org).



*Staff*

Austin Zettle - Editor in Chief

Lauren Gaines - Prose Editor

Lucy Jones - Poetry Editor

Charlotte Locke - Art Editor

Lucy Reddick - Production Manager

Christina Seymour - Beloved Faculty Advisor

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Impressions has been a prized organization in the Maryville College community that has been active since 1978. Since COVID hit we had to change our ways of doing things. Since then however we have rose from COVID and are starting to see normalcy all around. Impressions has advocated for writers throughout the Maryville College community and with that we have made a wonderful, and amazing magazine for the community to enjoy. Without further ado I give everyone impressions Literacy Magazine Volume 49!

Austin Zettle, Editor-in-Chief

## COVER ARTIST'S NOTE

Katie Orillion  
"White noise Piece"  
(Cover)

The inspiration for this piece began with a song, unsurprisingly titled "White Noise". However, both the song and my intentions with the piece gained a bit of a deeper message, coming to represent both my individual and cultural instinct to use social media as a distraction from difficulties in life and the mind. I wanted to use static to represent the way this constant need for distraction leads to pervasive numbness, which we end up seeking as a refuge in this vicious cycle. I also wanted to represent my tendency to stop listening to anything because I am constantly exposed to everything; unceasingly advertised to, influenced, algorithm-ed, and subconsciously coerced in ways of which I am not even aware, and how difficult it is to continue to contribute when everything seems to be lost in the constant flood of information. Finally, the design of the robotic subject was the first draft for a later character, who's finished design also appears in the magazine.

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# *Part I*



# *Prose*

## Song Jones



### *A Letter*

“You’re just like him,” is a constant phrase I hear.  
How I wish it were true. I could never amount to accomplishing what you’ve accomplished.  
How different would things be?  
Would I have the friends that I have?  
Would I have to worry about hanging out with the wrong people? You would’ve been there for me. You could have been my number one, never leaving me behind. But you left me behind.

I’m merely a shadow of you. Similar, just not quite right.

Every turn I take, I see your face. When I have my doubts, I wonder what you would do. But I shouldn’t follow too closely.

I already hear it everyday. Always told how much like you I am. But how am I supposed to follow my own path when I just find myself looking for footsteps that were set before me?

All I want is your guidance.

I miss your awful advice that would always end up getting me in trouble. But it was still your advice, and it got me further than I ever would have gotten myself.

I don’t know who I am anymore. Because all I want to be is you.

*Prose*

Everything you've left behind has fallen on my shoulders. And I carry it all.

Do I even want to find myself? Or am I completely content in your shadow?

If you didn't leave, I wouldn't have this problem. I still don't understand why you left. Why it had to be you.

I'm not you. But you're what I want to be, more than anything.

To my dead brother.

Love,

your dead sister.

## Denton Cavender



### *Perfecting Life*

To this day, she swears that she barely even touched the trigger—that it just went off.

Me, I got lucky. The barrel of the gun was close to the floor and only a small amount of the shot connected with my foot.

I was 16 years old the night I sat at home late one evening chatting with a friend over the internet, when I got a call from my best friend, Mason, who told me some disturbing news: An escaped rapist was loose in the city.

My family's house was located a single block away from the prison, so, because of the close proximity, the call I received was appreciated. I went in to inform my mother about the situation, only to find her on the phone with Mason's mother about the very same thing. Getting the call from Mrs. V had sent my mother into a panic. She moved about the house, gathering up blankets to cover the windows. Receiving a phone call from both Mason and his mother meant that this was a pretty serious situation. However, with the house locked up I felt comfortable going back to the computer.

Shortly after she finished locking up the windows, I heard the cocking of a gun from mom's bedroom. I quickly went into her room where I saw my brothers sitting on her bed and my mother standing holding her (never before used) shotgun. She looked unnatural holding it. At first she held it by the barrel with both hands as if she was holding a bouquet of flowers—very dangerous and awkward flowers.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It's just for in case.” My mom replied, still

fiddling with the gun as she tried to decide how it was supposed to be to be held.

“That’s crazy! What would you even do if that guy did find us, shoot him?”

“Only in the knees—that won’t kill him.”

“MOM!”

My brothers in the background chimed in with their own exclamations but quickly reverted to their own argument. I moved out of the doorway where she was directing the gun in demonstration. I stood just to the left of her as I leaned against her bed with my legs stretched out in front of me. I watched as she fumbled with the safety—she was switching it off and on trying to remember what the man that sold it to her had said was correct.

“Mom, leave the safety alone...you’re going to hurt someone. Just...give me the gun, please?”

I’ve handled guns before, and if I could just get it away from her then we would all be fine. But she insisted.

“No, I’ve got it! The red dot means the safety is on”

“Mom, No! Red means Dead!”

She placed the butt of the gun against her shoulder with one hand on the barrel and the other moved closer to the trigger as she pointed the barrel to the floor to look down the sights.

“Mom, please just leave it be! Turn the safety back on.”

“It is on...it is fine!”

Then it happened.

**BANG!**

I dug out the small bit of flack that had lodged into my foot and bandaged up the wound. There was no visit to the emergency room, because all gunshot wounds have to be reported to the police—what would I have said? “Well my mom was nervous about a loose criminal, so...” no,

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that wouldn't do. I simply would have to take care of it myself.

Maryn Pope



*The Tapping*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

There it was again. Julia had heard the tapping everyday since the start of school. Right above her head in class, tap tap tap. Sometimes it was fewer taps, sometimes it was more. Sometimes it was faster or slower or in a pattern. But always tap tap tap directly above her head.

Nobody else ever seemed to hear it. As soon as the tapping rained down on her from above, she would sit up in her chair. She would look up at the ceiling, nothing. She would look around the room, nothing. None of her classmates ever reacted to the noise, but every single day *tap tap tap*.

One day, she got up enough courage to ask the boy beside her, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"The tapping."

He gave her an odd look for a moment and then turned his attention back to the professor, staring intently as if the lecture was suddenly interesting. *Tap tap tap*.

Julia snapped her head up, nothing. She never saw anything. Never heard anything more after she looked for it, but once she lowered her head, *tap tap tap*.

The room seemed to grow smaller and emptier by the minute. The incessant tapping, shaping and shrinking the box of a room she was trapped in. Nobody noticing, the room feeling emptier and emptier as if she was surrounded by people who weren't real. *Tap tap tap*.

Everybody was moving now, leaving. It was the end of class. Julia sprung up and snatched her things. She was glad to be able run away from the tapping for another day. She walked briskly out into the *hallway and made her way to*

She walked briskly out into the hallway and made her way to the stairs. There were two sets right next to each other. One that led down, to the ground floor where she always went, and the one that led up, to somewhere she didn't know.

Julia looked around her. Everyone was bustling about, on their way to their next classes or their dorms or the dining hall. She stood still between the staircases, contemplating. She'd never gone up the stairs before. She certainly had never gone investigating the noise before. She'd considered seeking out the source many times, but always knew it was a bad idea.

Eventually, she slid her backpack slowly off her shoulders, the comforting weight leaving her body. Julia sat it down on the floor in between the staircases and let go. It flopped over to the left: the stairs going up.

She was pretty sure students weren't allowed up there. She didn't know what kind of trouble she would get into if she was caught. She didn't know what kind of trouble she would get into being up there. Julia put her foot on the first step. *Tap tap tap.*

She took the next three in a second.

*Tap tap tap.*

She stopped and looked up, but couldn't see anything.

*Tap tap tap.*

She raced up to the landing.

*Tap tap tap.*

One more flight to get up to the top. She could see up there now, even though she couldn't make much out in the dark. The stairs here shifted to unfinished wood. They were dusty and splintered from the years.

*Tap tap tap.*

She still didn't move.



*Tap tap tap.*

It's like it wanted her to go find it.

*Tap tap tap.*

She put a foot on the first step.

*Tap tap tap.*

Then a second foot.

*Tap tap tap.*

Her heart was beating wildly, and she could feel the sweat on her hands. They were shaking, but not as much as her legs.

*Tap tap tap.*

She heard someone open a door downstairs. The squeaking of the hinges echoed throughout the building.

*Tap tap tap.*

She took the last set of stairs. Summoning up her courage and walking up as confidently as she could. She had no need to fear this place. She had no need to fear whatever lurked up here. She could handle it.

*Tap tap tap.*

The courage melted like butter in the sun.

*Tap tap tap.*

She was there now. At the top of the stairs. No door, just an empty threshold, ominous and unsettling. She stepped through.

It was a dark and dusty attic. The floor looked worse here, raw wood with large bumps and holes. A few pipes and cables ran across the floor. There were no lights, save for the little light that streamed in from the few small windows on the opposite wall. Most of the attic was dark, and the corners seemed to fade into the void. Abandoned desks and chairs and old grandmotherly couches sat around at odd angles, remnants of old gatherings with vanished people. Doorways stood open on the far walls to her left and right. They looked like they could be fake, like

mirrors reflecting the same room.

*Tap tap tap.*

The sound seemed to echo all around her. Coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. For a moment, Julia panicked and spun around, only to see the staircase she had just ascended. Then she realized she had turned her back to the attic.

*Tap tap tap.*

It sounded like it had come from directly behind her. Julia froze, unsure if it would be better to turn around or not to. She was facing the stairs, the way out, but somehow she felt that she wouldn't make it down in time.

*Tap.*

*Tap.*

*Tap.*

She could have sworn it was two inches from her ear.

She let out a blood-curdling shriek.

Julia didn't turn to look. She bolted down the stairs, tripping and stumbling and falling and finding herself on the same staircase, as if she was back at the top again. She ran down and she ran in circles. Down and down and down and it never ended, she never reached the landing. She tripped and stumbled some more and screamed some more and still couldn't get out.

Ms. Donovan heard the screams from her class downstairs and ran out into the hallway. She raced toward the staircase and ran halfway up, looking around. The screaming sounded like it was coming from right there, but she didn't see anything. There was nothing there at all.

Laila Thompson



*Dancing In the Moonlight*

Hillary was driving alone along the backroads. She stayed at work a lot longer than anticipated and it was starting to get dark out. Her day at work had been more stressful than usual, especially due to the few students that always caused trouble.

These roads looked much creepier in the dark than in the daylight. This was her first year in this town and her first time seeing the veil of night cover the farmland and old houses that led her back to her home. She felt a little uneasy. It was just human nature to be a little scared of the dark, right? That's what she thought... until she saw floating lights appearing in the distance.

As she approached, something hit her windshield. It wasn't raining and it was too small to be a bird. Upon impact, it temporarily blinded her with a flash of bright light and she had to pull over. All she saw were little spheres radiating orange light that seemed to twinkle. They could have been easily mistaken for fireflies, but the way they gently floated was much more graceful. It was as if they were dancing in the moonlight as it arose from over the mountains. This was something fantastical, yet it felt familiar. By all means, Hillary knew she should've been freaking out, but a feeling of intense ease overcame her and she felt compelled to just watch.

She got out of her car and stood, watching as the spheres danced around her with the grace of ten billion ballet dancers. This phenomenon was something she had never experienced or even heard of. Was this perhaps the work of the supernatural? She had no way of knowing, but that didn't matter.

She was here with them now, at ease in their presence.

She stood outside in the cold night, watching as the spheres swirled around her and bathed her in a dim orange glow. It almost seemed as though they were dancing just for her. Time seemed to slow to a stop as they twinkled across the night sky. Any feelings of residual stress that may have lingered from the stressful work day were long gone, melted away by the dim orange sheen that covered the surrounding area. She never wanted this night to end. She hoped and prayed to stay here forever, feeling the intensely soothing aura these beings were giving off.

But as soon as this thought entered her mind, the spheres lifted upwards and faded away into the night sky. Sadness and dread filled Hillary's mind. It was as if she had lost an old friend. After waiting there for another ten minutes, begging the sky to return these joyous beings to her, she got back into her car. They weren't coming back. This thought troubled her greatly, but something inside her knew that it was true. It was a gut feeling unlike any other she had ever had.

When she got in her car, she rubbed her eyes. Under normal circumstances, she would have been panicking over this. What was different this time? She shrugged. It probably wasn't important. She started her car and looked at the clock. Weird. Only ten minutes had passed since she pulled over. It felt like she was out there for hours. She chuckled. No one would ever believe her, especially not her students. This experience could be for her mind only. It was her own little safe-space of thought that no one could take away from her.

Aja Cofer



*The Man in the Window*

She watched from behind her couch as the man clawed against her window. Blunt nails scraped relentlessly against cold glass, eyes blown wide and focused as he found hers in the dark.

One stared on in terror and the other in tormented hunger.

It happened so fast she couldn't comprehend it. One minute he was there and the next he stood banging at the door. Yet, her eyes stayed focused on the window, unable to look away from the blood that painted the glass or the tiny bits of flesh that decorated the space between. She wouldn't bring herself to look at the frayed door. She couldn't.

The creaking stopped as quickly as it started, but once again she refused to move. And as the silence dragged on her nails dug anxiously into her arm and she helplessly took in her circumstances.

She knew he had gotten in. It was obvious.

In a strange way, the man's behavior reminded her of her nieces. When they're noisy you're able to guess where they are and what they're doing. However, when they're quiet they're up to something that's bound to cause you distress. One wrong move, and suddenly there's a hole in the wall and paint on the carpet.

She was delirious. She had to be.

A crazed man is loose in her apartment doing god knows what, and here she is allowing herself to reminisce about kids she sees less than thrice a year. Kids, she doesn't even think she likes. Kids that always remind her in the worse way possible why she doesn't want to become a mother herself.

“What's taking him so long?” She asks herself as she helplessly sinks deeper and deeper into the stained cushion beneath her.

Despite her actions, she swears she's not suicidal.

Rationally she understands her chances of survival. She understands her inability to fight, her lack of muscle, stature, or coordination. Growing up she was spoiled, lazy, and hated the outdoors. She would really be delusional if she didn't understand what she could and couldn't do.

Swallowing spit, she sighed listlessly, closing her eyes and leaning her head back.

Like dominoes falling into place, the door behind her creaked open. Clumsy footsteps soon followed.

Ambrose Shelton



*EXCERPT FROM JOURNAL  
FOUND ON ALLEIN ISLAND*

***Morning of May 15th-***

This morning I found a letter to Franz on my desk when I awoke. I have only sparse memories of what I wrote from the night before, yet they spark shame in me. I doubt I shall deliver to him. Regardless, the Inn I find myself in upon the road to my next job is far from barren. The cots are plush, the blankets burly, and the bread hearty- granted, it is the closest inn to several noble estates.

On the topic of the Noble Estates, my job is at one such overstuffed and gaudy plot of land. If my boss at the Receive and Deliver office is giving me substantial information, a Lady wishes a package to be delivered to her son on the other side of their garish parcel. I shall depart for the estate after breakfast. May god have mercy on me.

***Night of May 15th-***

Almighty Father in the Heavens of Eternity, today's work was the most excruciating job I have tread yet. Crawling upon hard stone floors using only the razor blades haphazardly pressed beneath my fingernails would be a more jolly time than that wretched journey. I first arrived at the edge estate when the sun was taking its noon post. As I approached, I found before me an audacious manor, towering around the surrounding trees. Instead of wooden planks, the acropolis of a dwelling was constructed out of incredible cuts of marble. If there were any cuts in the stone other than the outline of each wall, I could not tell, for there were no unnatural seams visible to me.

The doors, undoubtedly 12 feet high, were constructed out of a deep ebony. The window frames were held together by a silvery substance, but with how much light of the midday sun they reflected, I could not tell precisely what material. The roof was the only item in the mausoleum that seemed off: It was uniquely practical, long wooden planks extending over the edges of the manor.

I could not tell precisely when the maid with a bottle in her hand stepped out of the house, but I became aware of her as she approached me. Her gait was as steady as a freshly birthed foal, her breath stank of the rancid mixture of sour ale and sickly sweet wine, and her mouth made noises more closely related to the sloshing of decadent liquids than any human language. Her first distinct words to me, after multiple clarifications, were “Who... might you be for...?” followed by an intense burp. I had to wipe the spittle and grime from my face.

“Er, yes, I’m from Receive and Deliver, your Lady sent for my services I believe,” I said, looking in my satchel for my directions from my boss, more of an excuse to avoid eye contact with the wench than anything else.

Then, from a window some 15 feet from the ground, a woman with deep wrinkles upon her face and heavy amounts of powder unsuccessfully applied to conceal them appeared.

“Yes, yes, yes! I did! Ute, darling, please bring the kind gentleman in! Oh sir won’t you please forgive her state, you really can’t blame a damsel for having such needs to indulge.” I was tempted to answer that I could, and that I shall, but a man has to eat and I felt no need to endanger my payment.

The maid brought me into a great hall. The interior walls of the manor were submerged in images of sacrifice.



Here a painting of the binding of Isaac, his father's scythe swinging downward- there a relief of Jephthah thrusting his blade through his daughter's neck. The grandest fixture in the hall was upon the back wall, a golden statue of Jesus of Nazareth screaming in unimaginable pain upon his wooden cross. Whatever artist had crafted such a terrifying visage had taken great pains to display the precise disfigurement of the Christ's hands and feet as the nails were struck within them, the bones contouring and cracking in unholy methods.

Just as I began to ponder the pros and cons of running away from the horrific place, the Lady appeared again from a spiral staircase, a package under her arm. "Now, good sir, I'll give you this and send you on your merry way."

"Thank you Miss, but pardon, I don't know the way."

"Oh, goodness me, I'm so sorry sir! Give me but one moment, and I shall bring you a map!" Once the Lady of the house had procured a map, I mounted my horse and was off to a bright red circle on a very poorly drawn map. I arrived at the marker on the parchment some hours later, when the sun was setting and fiery beams shot through the forest trees. Before me stood a massive tower of old stone, likely the relic of some older time. It rose far above me, and I could not see the top of the tower from my position on the ground. Though there were a few windows peppering the sides of the tower, I could see no signs of life in them, no fire or light at all. I approached the front door and knocked.

The door swung open just a crack. And all I could see was an eye with a dark circle around it. A gruff voice murmured "package." I presented the parcel given to me by the Lady, and a spindly arm reached out and snatched it.

“Now leave” said the voice, and the door slammed shut. I rode back to the manor, collected my sum of money, and arrived promptly at the Inn at nightfall. Heavens, what a horrid day.

***Night of May 16th:***

The Lady from a few days prior has requested my services again. The office received the request this morning. If God has mercy he shall smite me where I stand and allow me a peaceful respite from the hell that awaits me. This family is good for nothing except creating trouble for everyone else. Never in my life have I met such a stinking collection of filth disguised as human.

Apparently I am to direct a small group of individuals from the manor to the tower in which her son lives. Oh god, I hope that thing I saw in the tower wasn't the child of that miserable woman.

***Night of May 18th:***

If the fact that I continue writing could not tip you off, God was not feeling his usual generous self and has forced me to continue living. This trip was infinitely worse than the first. When I first arrived at the horribly gaudy manor, I found a stagecoach and three strangers talking to the Lady of the house from the other day. When I approached them she said “Oh, dear deliverer! Please, let me introduce you to these wonderful folks whom you shall be guiding!” The first was a doctor of sorts, whom I found off putting due to his seemingly overabundance of rosaries on his person. The symbol of the cross seemed to pour out of every pocket of his, not to mention the several around his neck. Next was a woman, whom the lady explained was a suitor of her son. The woman was dressed in robes so revealing even a prostitute would call it far too

revealing. Finally there was a friend of the family, a veteran from some far off war that had fought alongside the Lady of the house's husband. He seemed kind enough, and was dressed in plain and honest clothing, but his eyes seemed to hide dark things behind him. I once saw a man who confessed to committing atrocities to the human body and enjoying them. He had the same eyes.

Once the pleasantries were over, I was escorted into the stagecoach with the others and had my protests to be allowed to ride my horse there and back ignored. The stagecoach itself was cramped due to the number of patrons, and was impractically decorated. The plush seats offered surprisingly little comfort from the hard and bumpy road. Additionally, none of the patrons seemed to understand how small talk worked, and droned on for hours and hours about topics only concerned to them. The 'doctor' talked about how man could infuse god into his spirit and the suitor-woman talked about how lavish she and the son would live. The veteran and I stayed quiet.

When we arrived, we found the son outside attending to removing some vines that choked the outer walls. He met our arrival with a horrified look on his face, and what seemed to be a curse or two under his breath. He did however look at me with a sort of longing despair and sense of companionship, which I found odd considering our circumstances.

"Well then," the son said after we had unpacked the stagecoach, "Mother will most definitely have you all stay here for the evening. I have only some bunks on one of the upper floors, so forgive me for my lack of comfort. I intended to be staying alone, if you understand that I mean no offense." I attempted to try and bribe the driver of the stagecoach to take me back to the Inn, but it was to

no avail.

After the guests and I, which as it turns out were uninvited and the Lady had given to pretense to our arrival, had unpacked our belongings and set our cots, we ate a sickly dinner of roast boar, forest vegetation, and a number of deserts. I ate only a small portion of the boar and vegetables, for the whole affair made me sick to my stomach. The other guests poked and prodded the son, offering their nothings in return for his everything. If he didn't smell like unwashed boots, I would have felt sorry for him. After the meal, I left the guests to discuss this and that while I went off to bed. Truth be told, I simply wanted to journal. I don't like this place, this tower. It reeks of a sense of finality, as if the foundation were made of bones.

***Morning Of May 17th:***

Last Night I dreamt of Franz. I need to visit the priest again, for we were holding each other in it. The day began with a knock on the door of the circular guest room, followed by the gruff voice of the son saying "Breakfast is ready. I will not wait for you." I robed myself quickly, for a man who doesn't eat is a man who doesn't see tomorrow. Breakfast was some meat I could not properly identify, bread, butter, and some wild fruit from the forest. The son and I ate in silence, alone together. None of the other guests had come down at the time, though we could hear noises of small chatter and shuffling. Finally the son spoke: "Are you alone?"

"Depends on your views of loneliness," I replied. "Do you have a lover?" I swallowed a large cut of meat whole. "Perhaps. I must admit, that's a rather personal question for a stranger."

“Forgive me. I have no friends to ask that.”

“Perhaps that’s because you’re in a tower in the woods.”

“What, do you have friends?”

“A few, here and there.”

“Really? Do you pay them for their time?” The bastard smirked

“Well, it’s true that a few of them work in the back rooms of inns, but they can hold a good conversation as long as you don’t ask rather personal questions too soon. Sorry your friends only want your pockets, and keep getting dragged down by your insufferable misery.”

He nodded, eyes wide. “The stagecoach should be here tomorrow morning.”

After breakfast, the suitor-woman requested a private walk to talk to the son, which he immediately rejected. When she questioned his reasons, he called her a whore. I can’t remember if she talked to him. At this point the doctor told the son that his mother had requested a diagnosis of sorts, and the son seemed to smile at this. The son stood, said that they should begin immediately, and guided the doctor to a sitting room a short hallway from the dining room.

The rest of the day was uninteresting, save for a single moment. Some time after the ‘diagnosis’ was finished, I caught a snippet of a conversation between the veteran and the doctor.

“So, I need to spend more time with him?” said the veteran.

“Yes, I believe his condition first arose after the death of his father. Theoretically, if a strong, masculine man like yourself were to become more of a figure in his life, I believe that could cure his sodomous thoughts.” replied the doctor.

I nearly gasped. For all my life I thought I was alone in. . . whatever I have. My mind spiraled. For a moment there was a spark in my mind, perhaps that Franz could be one too, that maybe on this Earth I may finally have a companion. Then I realized that could never be the case. Lepers are put in colonies, not to commune, but to rot. For some reason I felt worse. I will sleep after I finish this entry. Perhaps tomorrow I'll have something worked out in my head.

***Night of May 18th-***

This Morning I awoke to a chilling silence and an even worse feeling of unholy cold, as if all fires in the tower had been choked out forcefully. When I looked around the bunks of the guest room in which we were all supposed to sleep, not a cot had been touched since we arrived, save mine. I crept down the stairs, fearful of any noise that might alert some unnatural devil or wraith that may haunt the tower, or seek vengeance on the living. When I arrived at the hall in which we dined, I nearly fell down the steep steps... I would invoke god, but I refuse to believe that he could simultaneously keep me safe and allow such monstrosities to be committed upon his green earth.

The air swirled with gore. Blood, chunks of torn flesh, eyes ripped from sockets, teeth pulled from their owners' maws, fingers separated yet still twitching, all hung in the air and twirled. They twirled like decorations on the mobile above the crib of the antichrist. Then I saw the bodies. Oh they were terrible beyond imagination. The bodies contorted and twisted and crunched and snapped in godless positions. Pins of light pierced them, passing through and connecting limbs.. All three bodies had their jaws broken open and forced into gaping screams.

I remember thinking their mouths looked like the horrid statue of Jesus in the manor.

In the middle of the floor, surrounded by broken bits of table, sat the son. He sobbed deeply. I do not think it was fear, for his hands were soaked in the only blood not floating, and I do not think in remorse, because he wrapped his coated hands around himself. He muttered to himself. I drew closer to the door, and I heard better what he was rapidly mumbling. "Leave me alone... alone with the men... why won't they leave me ... why won't they go..."

I dashed out the door and ran towards the stagecoach. Ignoring the yells from the driver, I removed one of the two black horses from its harness, and rode it straight into town, past the manor, past the Inn, past the office- right to the home of Franz. I knocked on his door, and he opened the door. Instinctively I gave him my letter. He read it quickly, for it was a short letter, and invited me in for tea. When the door was shut he kissed me.

Steve Wildsmith



*The Ghosts of Mississippi*

The makes and models of the family car changed over the years, but the windshields always resembled an abattoir of insectoid kamikaze strikes as we drove through the Mississippi night.

Dagger moths and hoverflies, mosquitos and midges, skimmers and glyphs and loopers: They descended from the surrounding pines toward our oncoming headlights, chitinous exoskeletons slamming into glass at speeds that vaporized them into bright red and yellow smears. By the time dad pulled into the always-closed Phillips service station at the crossroads near Cairo, the squeegee in the trough hanging from one of the gas pumps was the only saving grace that could provide the clarity needed to make it the last 20 miles to our destination.

My grandmother lived in the last house on a dead-end road named for her husband, a World War II veteran who spent his civilian years raising dairy cows and paving roads throughout Prentiss County, Mississippi. Our regular trips back to my mother's childhood home felt like both an adventure of distance and time, because while the welcome sign to Booneville heralded "Old South hospitality" and "New South progress," the town never seemed to make any progress at all, remaining mostly unchanged year after year.

My mother, I understand now, felt it keenly, and every return to the place she sought so desperately to escape as a restless 18-year-old brought with it something my childhood mind could sense but not name.

Anxiety? Melancholy? Dread?



Mom always held her emotions close to her heart, but the subtle shift in her countenance was something my brother and I always registered. Whatever concern we might have felt, however, faded as soon as we pulled into the carport of my grandmother's brick two-bedroom home, perched atop a hill overlooking a good 10 acres of Mississippi woods and bottomland that seemed like unexplored frontier to a kid who grew up in a suburban neighborhood named after characters from the old TV show "Bonanza."

Spilling out of the back of that old AMC Hornet, the tarp tie-down holding suitcases to the luggage rack coated with a fine mist of pulverized bugs, the only thing that mattered was stumbling into my grandmother's arms. They always felt stronger than battleship chains, chiseled by grief and manual labor, peppered with liver spots, ending in hands as gentle as the calluses upon them were rough.

That embrace was reassurance for a kid who often found himself fearful and uncertain of everything. My folks always hung back, silently acknowledging the bond between an old woman and her grandchildren, and the smell of those moments stays with me today: the rich, cloying decay of fallen leaves and downed trees drifting up from the woods ... the rich earth of her freshly tilled garden through the breezeway ... fabric softener and fried food and the musk of hard work that clung to her shirt. It was the smell of time, of old machines and old ways and old-time folks, and I hold a special place in my heart for it still.

It would take decades of self-improvement and generational awareness to understand just how much those things affected my mother in such a different way.

Nostalgia is a hydra of complexity, I know now, and the affections of a child, her child, were far less nuanced than her own. She loved her mother fiercely, and her younger sister as well, but their relationships were molded by grief and loss. In the years before my arrival, their loved ones fell like dominoes, cut down by life's random cruelties that seemed lifted from the pages of Faulkner. My grandmother's brother, mind shattered by the PTSD of World War II, hit by a train. My great-grandmother, Paralee, a snuff-dipping midwife with the vocabulary of a sailor, felled by a faulty heart. Another heart attack took her son — my grandfather, the family patriarch, the man who should have been at my grandmother's side on that carport — in his prime. My uncle, my grandmother's only boy, withered into the grave by cancer. My older sister, gone before I was born when my mother's appendix and physician malfeasance caused her premature birth.

Returning home reminded my mama of all those things and more, including the upbringing she tried to outrun and the certainty deep within that no matter how far removed from that place she was, it owned a piece of her that could not be denied.

To my brother and I, the old farmhouse way back off Route 4, a narrow strip of pitted and crumbling blacktop that threaded fields on either side as it rolled passed the overgrown yard of a house falling to ruin, was a repository of stories. Conjured images of relatives we never knew loomed large in young and impressionable imaginations, and while my mother recounted those family tales alongside her sister and her mother, the narrowing of her eyes told different ones.

To a boy who had only seen the working of a farm in a children's book, the idea of getting up before the sun

to feed chickens and milk cows was a quaint image from simpler times. For my mother, it was trekking across hard-scrabble ground to the corn crib, where rat snakes stirred in the summer months and fell out the opened door to her feet, jaws occasionally locked around their prey. It was washing dishes and cleaning house and making dinner by the time she was 7, because her parents couldn't afford to hire farmhands and worked the livestock themselves, leaving domestic duties to their eldest daughter.

It was taking care of her baby sister, baking birthday cakes and braiding hair and becoming a mother long before she was ever able to give birth. It was growing up in the shadow of a father whose kindness to strangers was often a skewed counterbalance to the miserly and iron-fisted ways he ruled his home. It was Christmas presents scavenged from the side of the road by grandparents who were even poorer, always bent-necked and staring at the ground on their walk to town to keep an eye out for a frayed doll or a dull pocketknife that could be passed along as a treasure.

It was the classicism that permeated every aspect of life in small-town Mississippi, the sons and daughters of wealthier families expected and encouraged to become the prom queens and the quarterbacks, the spit-shined young jurists fresh from law school at Ole Miss and the Miss Mississippi competitors who seemed to look through a diminutive farmgirl with mousey brown hair like she didn't exist.

It was the unspoken racial divide held together by a tenuous truce, flags bearing stars and bars hung as vigilant sentinels, reminding all that while the Confederacy may have been defeated, long memories and allegiance to ominous traditions kept its spirit alive in this place.

It was the expectation that dutiful daughters grow up to marry young men with promise, raise babies on their own farmsteads, provide casseroles for church suppers and field trip chaperones for the local elementary school.

My mother defied those things, all of them, leaving that town as soon as she turned 18 for business college in Memphis and a life beyond the words on a welcome sign that often seemed like a mockery of reality.

“Old South hospitality. New South progress.”

Progress was something my mother made for herself, and while she was too ... loyal? Proud? All of the above? ... to cut ties completely to her past, she found in herself a well of relief for the escape that she made, as well as the grief she felt for a destiny she never wanted. It sounds bizarre to even write those words, to imagine that the expectation of a life she steadfastly refused could still be something she mourned, but the what-ifs and imaginary regrets of that road not taken still, I believe, held sway.

And so every return to Northeast Mississippi was a quiet battle within the heart of a woman who felt that duality — Old South and New, expectation and free will, family allegiance and individual choice — more viscerally than I ever imagined.

Time, of course, has a way of tempering all things, and in later years, my mother's appreciation for her roots grew. The pleasant memories rose to the surface. The fondness for kinship and friendship deepened. The death of my grandmother set free some of those ghosts and gave Mom greater clarity with which to see herself and her connection to the land that still holds the bones of so many of our ancestors.

Did she see them, I wonder, in her final hours? When the veil between this world and whatever comes next began to thin as COVID and pneumonia crushed her lungs, did the twilight give way to snapshots from those old places that were as much a part of her as the life she built in Tennessee?

Paralee. Gray. My Uncle Robert ... my grandfather, Bobby ... the daughter she never knew, Dawn Michelle ... were they waiting?

I wasn't there when my mother took her last breath, in a COVID isolation room of a Knoxville hospital while a doctor gave me a play-by-play of her final moments over the phone. Standing from my desk ... staggering to my truck ... as I listened to him rattle off heart rate numbers and blood oxygen levels with a maddening calm, every word faded to white noise as my soul seemed to fill with crashing waves of towering grief.

I wasn't there. But I hope they were. All of those men and women, good people filed down to sinewy angles and recessed eyes that stare back from old photos with the weight of labor and tribulation ... I hope they stood tall, lit by the sunlight that so often eluded them in life, those frozen scowls turned to smiles at last.

I thought about that reunion when my brother and I took to the highway a few months after her passing, returning as grown men to the place that held such prominence in our childhood hearts. We went home, in a sense ... as much a part of us as the split-foyer rancher in which we were raised ... and we paid tribute to the place that made the woman who made us.

From the cemetery where our people fill overgrown graves to the old houses that are libraries of memory and now belong to others, we remembered.

## *Impressions*

And along the way, that town ... its people and its places and its hold on my heart ... provided a closure I didn't know I needed. I'll carry my mama with me always, but it felt good to leave a part of her there, in the place where the girl she once was and sought to escape still managed to imprint a part of herself on the family that survives her.

It feels right, just as it does to claim a kinship to a place in which I've never lived, but nevertheless fills me with a love as fierce as the spirit of its people. I hope that somewhere on the other side of this earthly veil, the girl that my mama was and is again smiles in the knowledge that of all the gifts she left in me, that sense of Mississippi belonging is one I'll treasure most.

## Brady Stiff



### *Stray*

*The mouth of a wolf  
is not the end of the path  
nor the end of the mouths*

Her mother said so often not to go to the graveyard at night; strange magics worked there at the witching hours. But Grandmother's grave deserved a visit and some treats on her birthday. So, long after dark, Red Riding Hood took a basket with the day's leftover shortbreads and éclairs and snuck into the woods.

She knew the way so well by now she could walk it eyes-closed, but she brought a torch and a knife just in case. The firelight colored the cobble path and the dry, dead grass around her orange. The tree roots sucked life from the grasses, but Red Riding Hood had long forgotten there was supposed to be danger in the woods. She had survived the stomach of one wolf and drowned a second—with the help of Grandmother. It seemed to her a torch, a knife, and a red hood was enough to keep you safe. It was the same hood she had worn years ago, but much darker from wear and stain. It had become a dirty maroon, like the end of a sunset or warm blood.

The graveyard brooded in the middle of the woods, surrounded by a short iron fence clutched in the claws of charming ivy. Red Riding Hood skipped to the small gate, letting the shadows of torchlight bounce with her. The iron gate swung open for her with a moan and she made a right, then a left, and another right until she was standing at Grandmother's grave.

The ghost of Grandmother was waiting for her there, which was surprising.

Grandmother's ghost had never been there before. "Oh, dear," said Grandmother in that sweet, sardonic way old women put on when they want you to know they pity you.

Grandmother was not quite corporeal. She was wearing the blue shawl she loved to sleep in, and she was trembling on her cane, which was made of a tree branch. Her whole weight was on it, and her white hair was clinging to her scalp; it was rotting away. The woods around Red Riding Hood creaked like Grandmother's bones.

Tonight, there were wispy wolves at the grave as well. One lay on the ground crossed-legged. He was skinned, and his pink body looked smooth to the touch. Red Riding Hood could see where the hunter had gutted him, throat to groin. She could see the blood-red rib cage and the stones he'd put within so the wolf could not run. The ghostly blood puddled in the wolf's lap and his beastly paws paddled in it. It smelled like the weaver's hut. The other wolf loitered, casually, against a nearby tombstone. This was the second wolf, whom she had drowned with the help of Grandmother. His eyes were bloated; his throat was purple and strained, like the veins on his face. His fur was wet and matted, and water flowed from his mouth persistently.

"My, Grandmother," Red Riding Hood said, smiling warily, "what strange company you have."

"I'm sure she wants rid of us," purred the gutted wolf.

"Do they come every night to your grave?"

"They come often enough." Grandmother wobbled towards the gutted wolf and raised her cane. She brought it down to whack his head, but he clawed the cane in his talons sharp as thorns. He looked at Grandmother hungrily. The drowned wolf prowled a wide circle



around Red Riding Hood, licking his chops and muddying the ground.

“Aren’t you hesitant of them?” Red Riding Hood asked.

“A ghost cannot hurt you,” said the grandmother.

The drowned wolf was circling closer. “But a real wolf can,” he said, and he was a hunter toying with trapped prey. The trees were canines in some dark, hideous mouth.

Red Riding Hood steadied herself, her feet firm in the dead grass at the foot of Grandmother’s grave. She still had the burning torch in her hand so she could see. She was thankful for it. “Why do you come to this grave at night? Only to upset my dead grandmother? Have you not had your fill?”

“They’ve not eaten in a very long time.” The grandmother was pitifully trying to pull the cane from the gutted wolf’s grasp.

“Yes, Grandmother, it has been an awful long time.”

“But you are a ghost,” said Red Riding Hood. “You cannot hurt my grandmother anymore.” She had lost sight of the drowned wolf, but now his matted body suddenly felt disturbingly wet against her back. He smelled of wet dog.

“But there will always be more wolves hunting in the woods,” he whispered. She could feel the water drip from his jowls.

“Your wolves have learned not to harm me.” Red Riding Hood’s torch was burning lower.

Grandmother replied, “Oh, the wolves never learn, Little Red Riding Hood. One day you will drop your knife, or you will pick too many flowers, or you’ll forget that little hood at home and the wolves will be upon

you. They will be vengeful because you killed the two of them. Not even the path is safe.”

“Then I’ll hunt every last one of them. I will burn down the wolf den, and it will be a bonfire in this dry and deadly place.”

Grandmother gave that same sad smile. “I have tried for years to be rid of them. Perhaps you will have more luck than I. The den is a hundred paces east into the woods.”

Red Riding Hood turned and stomped, not skipped, away. She stomped right around the drowned wolf, who was still prowling behind her, and marched back to the gate. The gutted wolf lugged himself along beside her as well, dragging along his heavy stomach full of rocks. The drowned wolf followed too.

“Oh, how small and little she still is,” said Grandmother, but Red Riding Hood had already gone.

The woods off the path looked so pretty during the day. White daisies, yellow tulips, and purple chrysanthemum thickened the further off the path you went. But in the night, chrysanthemums became burs. She tramped over the bush now and used her knife to hack away the thicker parts. Around her smelled faintly of fresh cut grass. The dead leaves and grass rustled around her boots and whispered into the night. She heard an owl hoot and a squirrel squeak, but in her island of torchlight she couldn’t see them. She ran into a spiderweb, and it gripped her body. She hacked and spit it from her mouth, but couldn’t shake the feeling of a thousand spiders climbing where the thread clung to her.

“Are you certain of your way, Little Red Riding Hood?” The gutted wolf asked.

“Are you certain you should stray from the path?” asked the other. “There are other things in the woods than

wolves.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“You’ve grown up so much,” said the gutted wolf, teasing her.

“Little Red Riding Hood,” said the drowned wolf.

She could hear the knocking of stones on one side and the sloshing of water on the other. They were staying out of sight, but they were herding her, she could feel it. By now Red Riding Hood could see the saplings of sunrise clawing at the canopy. Around a looming oak and a muddy sinkhole they guided her, until eventually they arrived at the wolf den.

It was a small gray cave at the base of a small hill. In the dawn and the torchlight, which was burning so low now, she saw the tunnel did not appear to go down very far. At the bottom was a grassy pallet where a pack of wolves slept. They lay upon each other, huffing bad breath into the night. Red Riding Hood was revolted by their mangled and matted fur. How could they sleep so peacefully when awake they would shred her without a second thought? She lifted the torch high above her head, prepared to throw it into the dry, deadly den.

“How brave you are to be alone in the woods.”

The gutted wolf was perched on the hill above, licking his paw.

“It’s not safe to leave the path, Little Red Riding Hood.”

The drowned wolf coughed up water as he sat beside the gutted wolf.

“The path was never safe.” Red Riding Hood looked back down at the den and one of the wolves blinked open an eye. Underneath the wolf, there were three pups, each matted and mangled as well. But they were, Red Riding Hood saw, so little. And Red Riding Hood thought about

*Impressions*

what the gutted—or was it the drowned? —wolf had said about other monsters in the woods.

She turned away from the den and didn't quite skip, but didn't quite stomp either, back to the path.

## Brady Stiff



### *Bird Song*

And after all that, it was finally perfect. He'd prepped Stevie Nicks on the record player, lit the candle that smelled like broken pinecones, and turned on the string of lights that wove into the leafy garland stretching across his ceiling. Between these and the salt lamp on his nightstand, the mood was ambient and enchanting: perfect for song writing. Peter Ryan laid his guitar by the green bean bag by the open window. He had half-baked sheet music and he sat it on his short music stand, slumped into the bean bag, but forgot about Stevie Nicks. He sighed loudly and stood up again. He dropped the needle and "Bella Donna" crooned out the record player, and he slumped back down again. Being almost 10, Peter Ryan picked up the guitar with only slight difficulty and chewed a pencil. He was three pages into his original guitar ballad. He penciled in an F sharp, strummed it out a couple times to see if it sounded perfect, and then Maxwell barked.

Maxwell was a German Shepherd because Peter Ryan had insisted he be so when the Ryans adopted him; he had told his mother black and brown were his favorite colors. When Maxwell was a puppy, Peter Ryan let Maxwell sleep in his room because Maxwell matched the colors, but when Maxwell got bigger, Peter Ryan forbade the dog in his room. Maxwell shed and Peter Ryan didn't like the hair getting everywhere.

So Peter Ryan had to get up and sigh again. He walked out of his room, past his grandmother's room, where she was staying for the weekend while his mother was away, past the grandfather clock, past his mother's

Precious Moment's collection in the china cabinet, and out the side door with Maxwell. The Ryans lived in the duplex on the end of the street, so they had a little bit of grass on the side for Maxwell to romp in. Peter Ryan gave Maxwell a bone, told him to shut his trap, and went back to work.

Before hopping back in the bean bag, he reset the needle on Nicks. She had to start at the beginning if he was going to write his song. The pillows on his white bedspread, he noticed, were also flat, so he fluffed them. He folded the comforter twice over, like he always does, and finally, was ready.

He hoisted the guitar back into his lap and plucked the F sharp, then an F natural because his fingers slipped at the sudden slap against his window. He dropped the guitar on his bare big toe and yelped. When he looked, the window now had a dark stain on it, and below the stain was a House Sparrow. Or rather, it was the corpse of a House Sparrow. Its neck was askew from the impact, and Peter Ryan could make out among the white feathers the tiny tip of the bird's neck bone.

Peter Ryan had never seen a bone in real life before. It made him want to cry a little bit, but it also made him want to be a veterinarian so he could put bones back inside of other birds if they ever ran into his window again.

He went timidly to his grandmother's bedroom door and knocked. "Just a moment, dear," she said while dressing herself in a lavender bathrobe and spraying rose perfume on her collarbone. Peter Ryan heard *The Bachelor* playing from the tiny guest TV, and he coughed a little from the essential oils oozing from under the door. Peter Ryan's eyes were wary. "Oh dear, what's happened," she said.

“A bird... I think there is a dead bird on my windowsill.”

Peter Ryan’s grandmother said oh dear again, and she guided him back out the side door.

Maxwell was waiting there obediently and padded along beside the two to discover that indeed a House Sparrow had bludgeoned itself against Peter Ryan’s window. Peter Ryan insisted they have a funeral, like they had had for Grandpa, and Peter Ryan’s grandmother obliged. She even said a few words while Peter Ryan dug a nice spot under their apple tree. He made his grandmother put the carcass in the ground; he refused to touch it.

Now Maxwell came barrelling over to the apple tree, delighted at the idea of digging holes. Maxwell bounded up to Peter Ryan and knocked him over. Before Peter Ryan was up again, his grandmother was shouting “drop that this instant!” and Maxwell was trotting away with the House Sparrow in his mouth.

Peter Ryan’s grandmother chased Maxwell once around the duplex, and Maxwell thought it was some delightful, twisted game. Peter Ryan wondered how Maxwell could be so cruel.

Eventually Maxwell got bored, and Peter Ryan’s grandmother dragged the half-swallowed carcass out of his mouth. She sighed glumly at Peter Ryan, but put the bloody body in the shallow hole anyhow and buried the bird herself. Peter Ryan was crying just a little now, but was doing a swimming job of hiding it; he dutifully watched his grandmother refill the hole. He wanted to be rid of the whole wretched experience, so when she finished, he promptly thanked her and returned to his room.

The candle had burned out, and he had to fetch a new one from the basement. It was not a pinecone, it was campfire, but it would have to do. Stevie Nicks was long

finished, so he flipped the record to the B side, hoping it would bring better luck. He also tried to wipe the dark spot off the window, but it only smudged a little, so he just left it. But in all, the room smelled alright and sounded like Stevie Nicks so it was almost perfect.

He harrumphed back down on his bean bag and managed a whole three chords before Maxwell wandered back into the room and threw up on the carpet. His grandmother must have forgotten the door. Peter Ryan couldn't help but watch in silence. He couldn't help but see in the bile little white spots that looked like bird bones, and Peter Ryan threw up on the beanbag too.

At the sound of retching, Peter Ryan's grandmother oh deared into the room right away. She gagged, scolded Maxwell, tossed him outside, and sprayed Febreze. She also lit some essential oils to help with the smell. Then she grabbed her citrus shampoo and got to work. All the while, Peter Ryan stayed in his bean bag, rather shell-shocked and misty eyed again.

"Why can't I just play my guitar!" he wailed. His grandmother left the carpet shampoo where it was and picked him up out of the beanbag. She cradled him on his bed and the smell of six fragrances on her bathrobe almost made Peter Ryan retch again.

"Oh dear, it's okay, it's okay. Don't worry, it's okay. We'll air out your room and you can come back and play later."

"No, it's NOT okay! I want to play here where it's nice and I want to play now!" Peter Ryan had had enough. He squirmed out of his grandmother's grasp and stomped over to his record player and yanked out Stevie Nicks again to reset it, but in his frustration he scratched the record. He looked at it, horrified, and tried to spin it again. It skipped right away. And that was just the last



straw for Peter Ryan. He jerked the vinyl out again and snapped it over his knee. It came away in two crippled halves. It was no use trying to quell it now; Peter Ryan was crying.

“Oh dear. It’s okay, it’s okay. Here.” Peter Ryan’s grandmother picked up his guitar and music stand and brought it into the kitchen. He was furiously wiping his nose on his sleeve. “Look, look, come sit here in the kitchen, and you can play me a song.”

“I don’t know how it goes yet. It’s not done.” Peter Ryan sniffled and stood his ground in his bedroom doorway.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect just yet, dear. Why don’t you play me what you have?”

All those Precious Moments dolls were staring at him from the cabinet and it was making him nervous. And the wooden chair his grandmother had put out with the guitar and music looked hard and unpleasant to sit in. It certainly was not a bean bag. Now Maxwell was barking at the door again, feeling left out, and the overwhelming mask of lemon carpet shampoo burned his nose.

Peter swayed there a moment. His grandmother looked at him both earnestly and sympathetically, and that made him turn and slam the door, back in his room. The campfire candle wasn’t enough to block the cleaner, and the bean bag was unusable now, thanks to the wet stain. Besides, he’d abandoned the guitar in the kitchen with his grandmother, so all he could do was lay face down in his acutely made bed.

Outside he heard birds chirping. He drearily looked up and out the window, and there was a cluster of House Sparrows in the apple tree, right above the fresh grave. Their birdsong was inconsistent and incessant and had very little beat, but it was birdsong nonetheless. They sang their beautiful, imperfect tune for their lost friend in

the ground.

Shanon Adame



*The Interview*

Dillon clutched his resume in his clammy hand, sweat permeating the thin paper. Staring at the door, he repeated the name in his head, lingering over the pretentious Old English font cheaply adhered to the window – Allen Funeral Home. He pulled the heavy door open and slowly walked into the lobby. For a fraction of a second, he thought he may have been transported back to the 1970s. Everything was that dull, greenish-yellow that was synonymous with the late '70s and early '80s. The walls were wood-paneled, and the lobby was dimly lit. You could almost believe you were in a bar or a seedy backroom where drug deals and illegal poker games are played. The thick carpet squished under his feet as he made his way to a large wooden desk in the middle of the room. An older lady sat behind the desk, engrossed in a magazine. He couldn't tell what she was reading, but he guessed it was Southern Living or some sort of crafting magazine. Her blonde hair was piled up on her head in a style that was as dated as the lobby and looked as though it had been lacquered with at least five cans of hairspray. She had on too much blush...way too much blush for someone working in a funeral home. Her lips were painted with bright red lipstick which bled into the fine wrinkles enveloping her thin lips. She smelled of must and perfume that made him think of his grandmother, maybe Tabu or Poison. Her long, acrylic nails tapped absent-mindedly on the desk as she flipped the page. He cleared his throat, and the woman glanced up from her reading. "What can I do for you, honey?" her voice was gravel on sandpaper.

"I'm here to interview for the Assistant Funeral

Director position.”

“Have a seat over there.” she said as she waved her hand vaguely towards an uncomfortable looking arm-chair.

He sat in the chair, back rigid and unsure where to place his limbs. While he waited, he started to think about how he ended up here. He and his wife were wild in their early twenties. They had no kids, so they had nothing to stabilize them. Their lives had been a series of short-lived jobs, nights out until 3am, traveling the US like nomads. Until his wife became pregnant with their first child. Then things needed to change. He had no schooling beyond a high school diploma, and now there was no time to try to attempt a degree. One anxiety-riddled night, he sat down with his laptop and started searching highest paying jobs without degrees. The usual suspects were on the list, “business owner”, “entrepreneur”, and something he would never have thought of, “Funeral Home Director”. At the high end, you could come close to a six-figure salary; all you needed was a certification in Funeral Home Management from the local community college. While the thought of being around corpses and dealing with weeping families turned his stomach, it all seemed so easy. He had gone down to the community college the next day to enroll. It would only take him four semesters to complete the certification and then he would be ready to go on interviews for an apprenticeship. He would be able to support his wife and child.

Behind the closed door of the director’s office, he could hear a muffled voice, obviously talking to someone on the phone.

“Yes, I need to make an appointment as soon as possible. What is your first opening? No, that’s too late... anything earlier? Yes, I’ll take that. No, this is for a mullet.

Yes, a mullet. YES, I need someone experienced with a mullet. Is it long? No, it's short."

The rest of the conversation became too muffled for Dillon to understand. Had he heard correctly? What type of funeral home director has a mullet? He shifted awkwardly in the chair, a sick feeling starting to bubble up in his stomach. In an instant, he was overwhelmed with the feeling that what he needed to do was stand up, rip his resume' to shreds, and run fast as possible out the door. He chalked this up to first interview nerves and the mounting pressure he felt to provide for his family. The door finally opened. "Come in." called a disembodied voice. Dillon rose from his chair and walked into the office. The man that greeted him did not look like any Funeral Director that Dillon could have imagined. He did, indeed, have a baby mullet. Just short enough to get away with at his job. His hair was curly and red, disheveled and the bottom of the mullet brushed just below his ears.

"Howdy, I'm Roy Allen. Have a seat", the man said. As Roy pulled out the worn leather chair, Dillon caught a glimpse of a large gold watch under the cuff of his button-up and he couldn't miss the gold, ruby ring sitting on the man's pinky finger.

"So, tell me a little about yourself. What's your story?" He stretched his lips widely into a disconcerting Cheshire grin.

His mouth revealed a gold-capped tooth on the left side of his upper teeth when he smiled. Besides the gold tooth, his other teeth were blindingly white. Dillon tried to tear his focus away from the teeth and gave a brief rundown of his journey back to school for his certification, his mouth dry and the knots still pulling at his stomach.

The rest of the interview went by in a blur. On the drive home, Dillon tried to replay it, tried to remem-

ber what the questions were, or how he had replied when asked if the salary was acceptable, but he couldn't recall any of it. It was the same sensation you get when you pull into your driveway and cannot remember how you got there. Did you run any red lights? Did you hit that bicyclist you passed three streets ago?

He sat in the car in a weighted silence. The interview had been short, much shorter than expected. He had also been hired on the spot, which in Dillon's estimations, was a very odd occurrence. After Dillon accepted the offer, Roy insisted on going out for drinks at the local bar down the street. Over cheap whiskey, Dillon had learned that the business was family-run. Pamela Allen, the widowed matriarch, was the owner of the business. According to Roy, she barely showed up to the funeral home and was happy to just have the monthly earnings deposited into her account. Roy Allen, the Funeral Director, was her older son and basically the acting owner as well as the director. Dillon learned there was also a younger son, Ray, who acted as the home's general handyman/janitor. "The wheel is spinning but the hamster's dead, if you know what I mean." Roy had said. Tammy was the bedazzled office assistant who had a love affair with acrylic and magazines. She was not in the family but was a long-time friend of Pamela. Clarence, a cousin of the Allen brothers, was the embalmer. "That man don't have all his dogs on one leash, if you know what I mean." Roy had said. And now Dillon was joining this wildly strange group of people, serving local families in the darkest moments of their lives.

He finally turned the key, and the car quietly shut down, the clicking of various electrical components the only sound in the thick summer air. He walked up the path to their modest house, a trail of pansies and other as-

sorted flowers his wife had planted leading the way to the front door. He slowly opened the door and crept in, careful to keep his weight in the balls of his feet. His wife had been complaining about exhaustion the past few days, and Dillon guessed she would be in bed, in a deep sleep.

He kicked off his shoes and slowly made his way into the kitchen. The whiskey was hitting him a little harder than expected, and he couldn't decide whether he needed water, coffee, or food. All three, he decided. He took a cup down from the cupboard and filled it to the brim with tap water from the sink. The water was lukewarm and tasted like wet rocks. Rummaging through the fridge, he pulled out the left-over casserole from the night before. Thick, gooey clumps of cheese and beef sat over stiffened noodles. He cut off a chunk, placed it on a small plate, and tossed it in the microwave. While the food heated, he ladled tablespoons of cheap, bitter-smelling coffee into the Mr. Coffee machine, filled it with more rocky water from the tap, and set it to brew. The clicking and the hiss of steam filled the stillness of the kitchen. He sat at their small kitchen table, in the terrible fluorescent lighting, spooning forkfuls of scalding hot casserole into his mouth.

It burned his tongue and disintegrated the tiny tastebuds, turning them red, then white and swollen. That didn't stop him; he felt like his stomach was a bottomless pit, full of dread and apprehension. He ate to fill the feelings.

# *Part II*



# *Art*



*Art*



*Poweh* by Anna Price

*Impressions*



*Little Baby Man* by Anna Price



*slurp* by Anna Price

*Impressions*



*Rio* by Anna Price

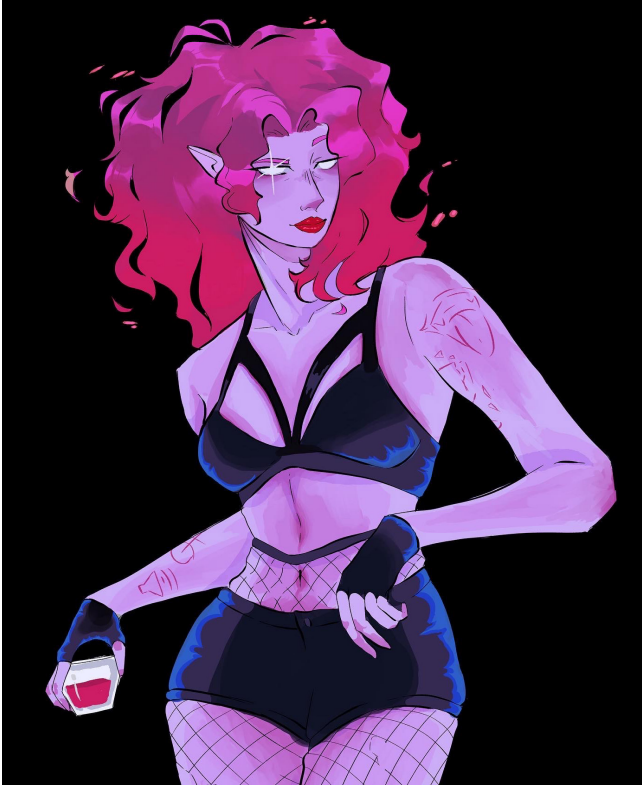


*watuh* by Anna Price

*Impressions*



*ishhh* by Anna Price

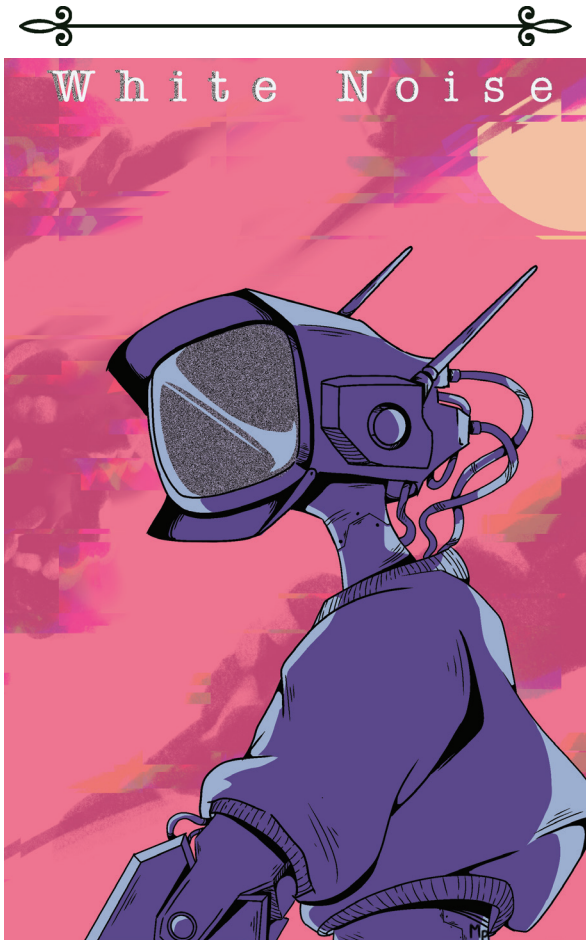


*sherrib* by Katherine Orillion

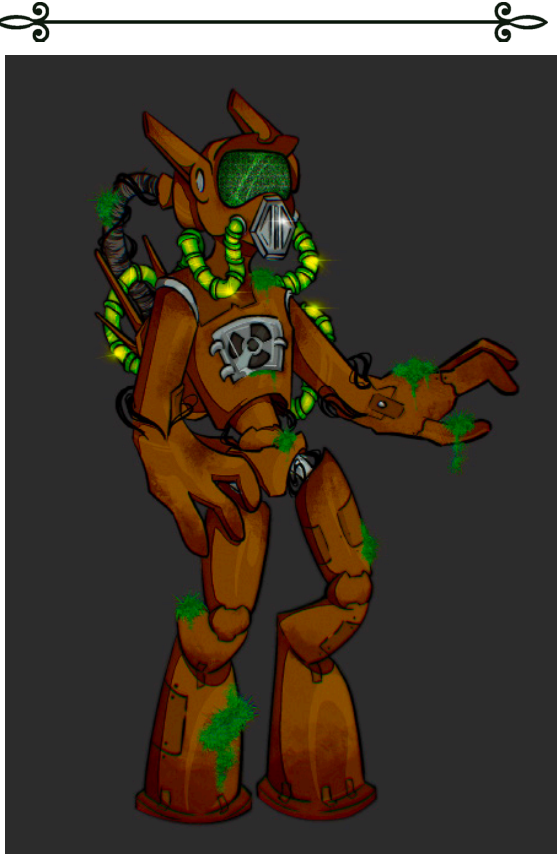


*Untitled* by Katherine Orillion





*White Noise* by Katherine Orillion (Cover Art 2023)



*F!5H* by Katherine Orillion

*Art*



*a gray Maryville morning* by Madison Parris



*a slightly tattered luna moth* by Madison Parris



*a view from above austin, texas* by Madison Parris



*a white woman's Instagram (fall edition) by Madison Parris*



*Possession* by Myka Roberts





*Rose by Myka Roberts*





*Breath of Air* by Myka Roberts



*Blossoming* by Myka Roberts



*Desire* by Myka Roberts



*Mangled* by Myka Roberts



*Tulip Joy* by Joy Starbird



*Daisy Joy* by Joy Starbird





*Nesting Time* by Joy Starbird



*Bunny Eyes* by Joy Starbird





*Eagle Watch* by Joy Starbird



*Church in The Dell* by Joy Starbird



*Barn Among The Trees* by Joy Starbird



*Magic in the Highlands* by Lauren Gaines

*Art*



*Rain Over Toronto* by Lauren Gaines



*The Tiniest Frog* by Lauren Gaines



*The Witchery in Edinburgh* by Lauren Gaines





*Highland Cow* by Lauren Gaines





*Edinburgh Cathedral* by Lauren Gaines



*First Red of Fall* by Briana White



*Rhododendrons in Bloom* by Briana White



*Smokestack Sunset* by Briana White





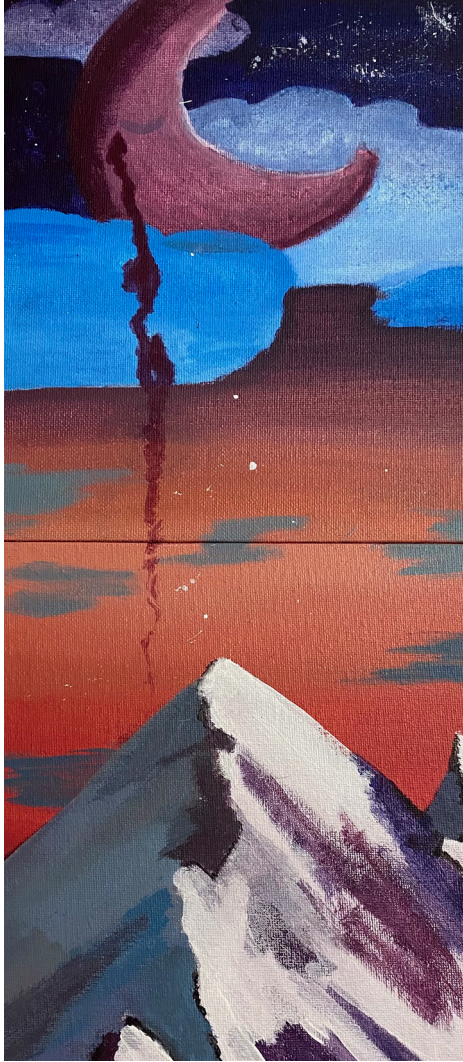
*Stormy Spring* by Briana White



*Fall Sunlight* by Rebecca Raney



*Underbelly* by Rebecca Raney



*Mountains for Momma* by Rebecca Raney





*CCM Visitor* by Rebecca Raney



*Ptolemaea* by Baylee Suit



*Bold & Brash* by Baylee Suit



*That Unwanted Animal* by Lucy Reddick





*Portrait of Youth* by Lucy Reddick



*Excelsior* by Lucy Reddick



*Crier* by Lucy Reddick



*Anzen-Sei* by Avery Shellist





*Hell in Stained Glass* by Avery Shellist



*Mr. Mallard* by Austin Zettle



*Roads Travelled* by Austin Zettle

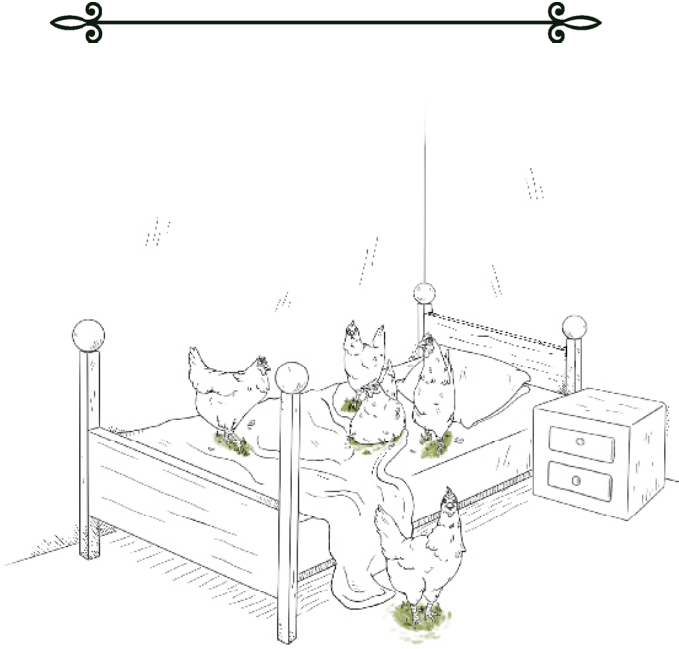
*Impressions*



*Dreamy* by Austin Zettle



*Bentons* by Austin Zettle



*Far Distant Spring* by Trinity Locke



**A Picture of My Limbs**

I stand beneath a haunted sky and watch as soldiers  
lay and die...To see the bloody gloom below I have no choice...

It goes so slow...Count my limbs and you shall see  
a picture of a life in need

-Tammy Krecklow

Picture taken at Prairie Grove National Battlefield Park



*A Picture of My Limbs* by Tammy Krecklow





**A Bridge Too Far**



I see you, throwing shadows in the dark, the sound of silence from afar, you cast a shadow of evil upon my shoulder, you cross my mind with torn thoughts and shed your darkness across my eyes, your demons don't frighten me. If I jump you will win, but I have faith that keeps me strong.

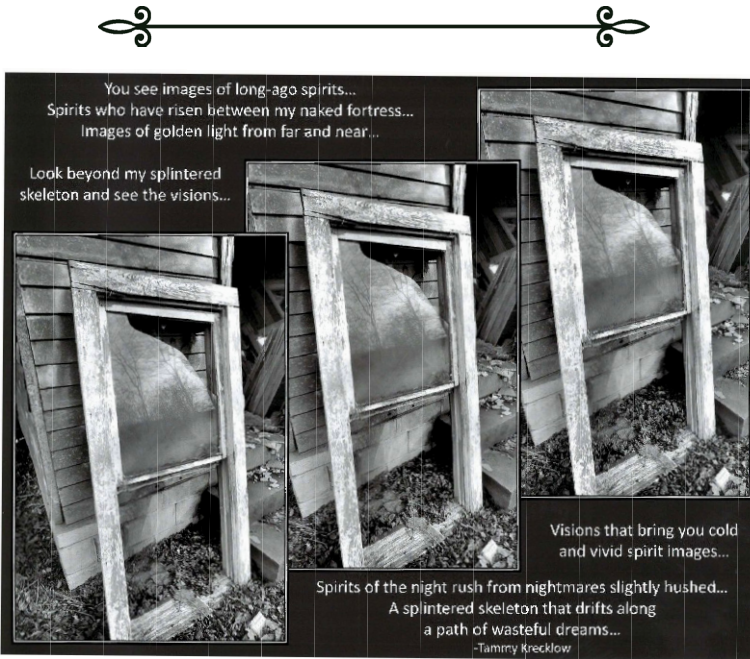
A bridge too far...A journey too long...

-Tammy Krecklow



*A Bridge Too Far* by Tammy Krecklow





*You See Images of Long-Ago Spirits* by Tammy Krecklow

**Part III**  

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*Poetry*

Christina Airington



*Old G*

She took me on a date to steak & shake.

It wasn't my first date,  
but it was my first date with a woman.

Although she wasn't as soft,  
and feminine as most of the girls  
I've dated in the past, it was nice.

She even bought me a flower.

It was fake, but it was cute.

All of this was so new to me.

I was only 17, and  
she was 24.

I've kissed girls before,  
and even messed around a bit,  
but not with a woman.

I went to her place,  
and let her have me.

I didn't know what to expect.

She was garbage,  
But I let her think  
she knew what she was doing.

All in all,  
It felt nice to lay with someone  
so comfortably,  
and her kisses were nice.

*Impressions*

Shortly after that day,  
a switch flipped.  
I found out she was a drunk.  
Drunk dialing,  
and calling me everything but my name  
had become a favorite  
past time of hers.  
she was obsessed.

I was still in high school, so  
sports and friends took up the  
majority of my time.  
She and I rarely spent time together,  
but she would always accuse me of  
fucking around on her.  
We weren't even together.

I can't tell you how many times my phone rang,  
and she would interrupt me while  
making, what should have been  
core memories with my friends.  
But instead, I ended up making traumatic  
core memories of her,  
and her alcohol-soaked insults,  
and I love you's.

I'm not sure I'd take back the experience  
because although her insults made  
room for future red flags to flourish,  
and feel right at home.  
Back then her kisses felt like acceptance.  
Like being comfortable in my own skin.  
It made me feel seen,  
more alive, and like "Me."  
And at that time,  
that's what I needed.

Poetry

Amy Reed



*Autumnal Crescent Moon*

Orange sliver Moon  
Crooked grin hangs in the Sky  
How much have You seen?

Carl Gombert



*Advice Unsolicited*

Please don't talk with your mouth full  
If you can't say something nice.  
You can't always get what you pay for  
Or swim up the same river twice.  
Biting anyone's head off  
Is way more than you can chew.  
Don't play with your food unless  
You want it to play with you, too.  
Don't wear your heart on your sleeve,  
At least not past Labor Day.  
Be careful what you wish for  
'Cause wishes are horses they say.  
Make mountains of your molehill!  
Life's not fair in love and war.  
Enough is enough unless of course,  
It turns out that less is more.

Carl Gombert



*The Unknown Soldier Loses a Leg, Again*

Damaged dudes home from the Army  
Day drinking 'round the rim of Ralph's pool  
After he told them he was moving.  
A lone plastic leg, or really half a leg,  
Made to fit beneath the stump of the remaining thigh  
Soaks up sun beside the pool's deeper end.  
Maybe he could swim, maybe he couldn't  
But he shouldn't be curled up six feet under  
The sparkling chlorinated water.  
We pulled him out and made him breathe.  
The ambulance came. No one knew his name  
But they took him away without the leg.  
I followed in the car, asked in the freezing ER  
About the guy who almost drowned and gave them the leg.  
I figured if he didn't die he'd want it.

Carl Gombert



*Before the First Earth Day*

Folks my age remember  
When the river caught on fire,  
The crooked Cuyahoga  
As it oozed into Lake Erie.  
Of course it was polluted and smelled  
Worse than the burning tires of Akron,  
But it stank as well of money  
And the economy was roaring.  
Locals watched dead dogs and  
Dog-sized rats, bloated and beslimed,  
Floating by beneath unending overcast  
For which the town was famous,  
Knowing that falling in themselves  
Meant a trip to Lutheran Hospital.  
Forty miles upstream we didn't know or  
Didn't care about calamities in Cleveland.  
Believing we were free we wandered with the river  
And the tiny streams that fed her,  
Wetting our feet, seeking turtles and crayfish,  
Pretending to be explorers.  
Dawdling home from school,  
Preferring riverbank to sidewalk.  
At ten years old you don't have to notice  
The metaphors you wade in.  
You are not obligated to picture lifetimes  
As rivers winding to downstream futures,  
Or see upstream adventure  
Meandering towards disaster.



Birdie W.P.



*Dear Dr D.*

You've inspired me tonight.  
Finally I take the time to sit and reflect,  
Air out my dirty laundry  
Instead of letting it fester in my mind.  
I don't want to think about the morbid parts of life no more.  
You are so quick  
To take  
The ones  
I wish I knew  
Sometimes, I wish  
You'd just  
Take me too.  
It's clear days like these when I think most of Bethany.  
And Max. And Jane.  
All my kitties at the end of Rainbow Bridge.  
It seems like I wake up to serve  
You like a master,  
I do everything in my power to stop you,  
Or at least make your arrival late.  
And with no alarm I wish I could do nothing  
But let you come unto me, breathe in my soul  
And just let me be.  
But it's the stormy nights that put me to ease.  
I write to you like a war wife.  
I never want to cry again, it gives me such headaches.

Mackenzie Nicholas



*Him*

He popped my balloon  
Purity gushing to the floor  
Oh don't worry, here's a Band-Aid  
For that gaping wound he tore  
It'll take time to heal  
I'll be fine one day  
But it still sits with me  
Maybe this is why I'm gay?  
I heard you're a police man now,  
I bet everyone is proud  
But do they know what you did then?  
Did your wife know when she vowed?  
It's not your fault, you were young  
But that's not what's written on your page  
I scoured Facebook recently  
Turns out you were twice my age  
I remember what I wore that day  
A frilly shirt in blue  
I didn't really believe you then, but  
That cardboard box was big enough for two  
I think I'm over it now,  
I really do not care!  
But still, why'd they choose your name?  
For the slogans I see everywhere  
I remember my mother crying that night,  
"It's just a sad movie," she said

*Poetry*

I believed her then, of course,  
But she knew what would be ahead  
You did it to me in many places  
All around that town  
A faucet running to mask our sounds  
Please turn that lamp light down  
Why do you give him all that power?  
It's hard to know the truth  
Maybe because I have no options  
He owns my stolen youth

Mackenzie Nicholas



*Both*

I saw you breathe your sigh of relief,  
Once you looked at the man upon my screen  
It's over now, you think  
How stupid you are is obscene.  
It seems like my fight was void  
You stand on your high ground  
My past relationship, destroyed  
At least you were right, you found  
I love a man now  
Yeah it's true  
But I could just as easily love a woman  
You know I like them, too  
Enough you say? Well here's for starters  
Your utter ignorance makes me sick.  
How can you embrace my partner,  
Just because he has a fucking dick?  
Don't judge a book by its cover,  
How about what's in its pants?  
How could you judge my lover?  
When you didn't even give her a chance?  
You ignored her existence for years  
I couldn't even say her name  
My only support came from my peers  
Somehow still, you're never the one to blame  
But how could you be wrong?  
God is on your side!  
The time I spent crying in my room was long,  
How can you still think you're justified?

J.C Rhodes



*Scenes From a Nonanniversary*

On the day I couldn't live,  
I swore I heard her voice in the hall.  
Of course, the one time I leave my bed today  
The sound of her laugh still echoes in my brain  
While I try, try, and try to have a taste of normalcy.

Interior meeting room - day  
The end of a department meeting

ATTENDEES  
(emitting laughter)

PRESIDENT  
Motion to adjourn the meeting

THE GIRL bust through the door orange flowers inhand,  
everyone goes silent

THE GIRL  
Love, I know what I've said,  
and I know what I've started.  
I want to be together. I want to go back.  
I've been unconsolable since we parted.  
We'll recreate that first day. Grab your backpack.

He, the man dearest, heard my gasp,  
Now he knows exactly what to do.  
So, he marches his little march  
Up and down the checkered floor.

*Impressions*

The echo of his shoes confirmed  
My safety. That maybe I was just  
Hearing what I wanted to hear.

He drove, and my sobs caught  
In between the lines of the song.  
He said I could play anything I wanted,  
So we nodded along to the stories I wanted to happen.

Interior car - night  
The road to the Parkway

THE GIRL

I've had to think about it,  
Now that we've had the space.  
I think I'm ready to commit,  
So please let me hold your face.

The trees are still.  
They don't know the world is falling apart.  
But it is. And it has been for a while.  
No one told me the world keeps spinning after the apocalypse.

There are saplings younger than the end  
That are lining the trail he led me down.  
My feet broke every branch,  
Pretending it was all my heart.  
We sat down and looked out,  
No one could hear us but each other.

Exterior mountainside - day  
It's March 2nd it's always March 2nd and there's still hope

THE GIRL

Look! Look! Isn't it beautiful!  
Look at everything that's been created.  
But it will all be destroyed too,  
All in due time, love.

Poetry

He and I sit on a rock in the broken world.  
The brisk March air is poison as we breathe,  
So we spoke everything that happened,

The way our separate lives rhymed.

Someplace - sometime  
What happened to us both

THE BOY/THE GIRL

(spoken in unison)

The meaning of love is pointless.

I know you believed.

I guess I believed at some point too.

I lost my faith a long time ago,

But I appreciate your devotion.

It's now time to burn it all down.  
I thought it was ash when I tore it all  
From my walls, from my heart,  
But I've been protecting what was built for too long.  
He reminds me of that. That I can create the destruction.

Interior mountaintop - as the flames start  
It's the confrontation

THE GIRL

Why are you destroying the offerings to me?  
You created beauty, and it was all freely given;

Why take it now?  
Why break your promises today?

ME

I'm tired. I'm tired. I'm so, so tired.

*Impressions*

My hands have been rendered useless  
Because my grip has been so tight.  
Your promises were the horsemen that razed.

They destroyed and left.  
So I'm giving my oaths the mercy.

I'm putting them to sleep now;  
They'll have my sanctifying grace.

It all goes up;  
I think we used three lighters.  
It goes to the new god,  
The one that must stay.  
Maybe I'll make new life  
Out of the ground and atmosphere  
That's made of brimstone and radiation;  
I guess that's what I have to work with.



J.C Rhodes



*Ghosts*

When we were kids, my cousin, he used to scare me into  
Thinking that the back of Mamaw's house was haunted  
By speaking into the dusty air vents from the other room.  
Now, I say hey to him every time I'm in that house alone  
As if he's still there to speak back to me through the vents.

J.C Rhodes



*Confirmation*

Tell me something of salvation.  
I dare you.

Make Heaven sound appealing,

Rather than a harsh white room

No one can get into.

How lonely.

How stark.

Paint me a picture of salvation

I won't hear from the pulpit.

They tell me only the straight and narrow can arise,  
Which is why I hid and starved myself

when I still did as I was told.

Rebel against heaven and

wind up

in hell.

I didn't want to be a rebellious child.

I wanted to love my neighbor as myself,

But in doing so I guess I asked one too  
many clarifying questions

Or loved too hard

without the dilution of judgment.

This is why I must keep living on this deeply human world,

Knowing that The Church has no salvation made for me.

Corey Randolph



*unlikely predator*

the deer kneels by the river  
hesitates to cross the running rapids  
their rush a discordant piano  
a constant chaos he could be swept away by  
the wind whispers a calmer song.

the deer turns his head  
to see a flash of red hair in the trees  
a fox is waiting there,  
ears twitching as he observes the deer  
the deer leaves the river behind  
descends into the woods beyond  
the rushing river leaves his mind  
and it all goes quiet...

until.

a cry from the woods  
red spurts from his neck  
red flies above them  
red, red, red, everywhere everything red  
red blood in red fur  
red blood in his teeth  
as he tears the deer apart  
red puddles beneath them

the deer, unrecognizable  
the fox, triumphant  
red hair matted with redder blood

no remorse for what he's done.

*foxes are highly unlikely to prey upon deer.*

Corey Randolph



*Heart*

*ba-dump*

*ba-dump*

*ba-dump*

my heart beats  
rapidly, nervously  
in your hands

go ahead and break it, won't you?  
again

and again

and again

go on now, break it again  
like you've done before  
and before that

and before that

squeeze it between your palms  
watch the blood ooze out  
watch it drip,

drip,

drip.

it's always been yours  
and it always will be  
til i'm dead  
til my heart no longer beats



Becca Lesley



*yellow flower sundress*

[for mason, thank you for being a light]  
the yellow flower sundress hangs in the middle of the closet.  
it's one of those dresses that most only wear  
on occasions of going out with friends,  
but she believes everyday is an occasion for the yellow flower  
sundress.  
the yellow flower sundress matches the joy she holds within her  
soul.  
it radiates to those around her,  
even the ones who don't know her can sense it.  
she's willing to let anyone borrow it  
if they simply just ask her,  
even those that she doesn't know,  
she does so with no hesitation.  
the yellow flower sundress reveals  
the courage she has within herself.  
she's not afraid to stand out in the middle of the crowd,  
and she's not scared to remove herself from what no longer  
serves her.  
she's so secure in her own skin that  
she doesn't care about what others think of her yellow flower  
sundress.  
she wears it because it's HER favorite sundress.  
she knows that her true friends are the ones who appreciate  
the yellow flower sundress just the way it is.  
they encourage her to live in the freedom that she always  
has  
as she inspires them to appreciate the flowers in every



situation.

she brings smiles to those who need them the most  
packaging them up in boxes sending them all over the world  
all while beaming with joy in that yellow flower sundress of hers.  
she refuses to compromise her character for the world  
because she knows the morals she holds are what makes  
her walk in the yellow flower sundress so bright.  
most flowers wither and fade with time,  
but the girl in the yellow flower sundress,  
her spirit will never go dull.

Carmela Lewis



*Overstimulated and Overwhelmed*

I'm going to be normal today  
But the fluorescent bulbs are buzzing  
And their light rays shoot straight into my skull

I'm going to be normal today  
But my clothes are melding into my skin  
And their itching sensation increases evermore

I'm going to feel normal today  
But the people are chattering at insatiable volumes  
And the overlapping noises flood into my brain and drown me

I can't feel normal today  
And the fluorescent lights are buzzing  
And my clothes are too heavy  
And the people won't stop *talking*  
And the perfumes and colognes are oppressing  
And I can feel my veins taut within my body and I want to just  
*rip them out*

And - *the sounds*  
And I - *the smells*  
And I just - *the lights*  
And I just want - *the feelings*

SILENCE.

Carmela Lewis



*You've changed my vocabulary*

In the past, I would explain that my bad days left me “in the fuzz.”

In the fuzz like the television static from a poor connection,  
like the lightheadedness from dehydration;  
A fuzz that makes my bones feel semi-translucent

After being with you, I can't help but feel fuzzy.  
Fuzzy like the warmth radiating off the sand at the beach,  
like the tingling sensation of coming inside a house from the cold;  
A fuzziness that fills my entire being with the universe and makes  
me never want to stop laughing

Before I met you, my days were filled with fuzz.  
After meeting you, my days are fuzzy.

I wouldn't want it any other way.

Lucy Reddick



*How come you're crying?*

Past is laid to rest,  
and at the wake,  
I,  
am left to wander.

Stillness is no mercy.  
Silence is no gift.

swift is the sun that steals o'er the sky.  
It is hot, and naught but me  
breathes upon this deserted street.  
Stagnation consumes like fever,  
I shall sweat it out.

It is quiet, and I must keep walking,  
and there is no one who can console  
Me.

The name you've left behind  
is bitter. I stop and spit, and crumble in repose,  
gravel knits in my skin,  
needle to thread, and  
memory rumbles in my periphery;  
I am vomiting you up.  
Bile transposing  
apology upon shifting stone.  
Here is my devotion, here is my hymn,  
curdled, pale as bone.

*Poetry*

Past is laid to rest,  
Yet it cannot leave me well enough alone,  
You have tainted mundanity.  
It is hot. I scrape  
myself off the ground. I bury  
you back  
down.

Stillness is no mercy.  
Silence is no gift.

Blake Pettibone



*Weightless*

I long to be free of responsibility  
But have I earned it?  
Do I deserve it?

Have I suffered enough?  
For I do not know  
If my pain glows  
A deep enough red.

Does it even show  
Through tiny cracks  
Inside my mask  
I lack  
The faith to say  
That I deserve that freedom.

For who's to judge  
This awful fate,  
Who bestows  
Or lifts this weight  
To grant me wings  
That I should fly  
Above the sky  
Outside of just  
In my mind's eye.

Is it just one man,  
An unseen god?  
Or perhaps the fates  
Or to my dismay  
A jury of my peers  
That sears  
This fear  
Deep in my heart  
That I shall never truly be  
Above all else

Weightless.

Blake Pettibone



*Nightmare*

My nightmare is of demons  
Rising up from far below

Writhing black that comes in waves  
Looking for a meal of souls.

My nightmare is of demons  
That from inferno fly

Searching for some human flesh  
On which to feed tonight

My nightmare is of demons  
Coming from the deepest place,

Only to find me  
And then just go to fade away

Because even though all demons  
Lack the smallest speck of soul

They are by no means  
Any form of cannibal.



Charlotte Locke



I

*Arctic Silence*

Virgin white ground glistens with the light of  
a crippled, ever retreating sun that rises above  
the boundless horizon, interrupting the subtle yet  
piercing song of the landscape. The light is quiet.

II

Frozen fractals permeate the atmosphere, all is still.  
No birds are heard for they have already  
completed their journey south.  
Animals and humans lie asleep in their dens,  
undisturbed by the dawn of a new day.  
Naked trees stand tall and proud, barren  
of any other season, whilst the cold  
wind weaves through and around their thin limbs.  
The man made curvatures of the land are blanketed  
indistinguishable under nature's pale cloak;  
Mother Nature has reclaimed her creation. The reflecting sun  
shows the Heavens, creating a golden road on an earthly street.

III

Glistening snowflakes drop slowly, their fall resulting  
in their demise, contributing to the golden glisten  
of the snow. The terrain seems flawless to most  
but if one looks close enough then they can see.  
They can see the beautiful flaws of the land,  
The brushstrokes of this carefully crafted painting,  
They admire the alluring anomalies  
of this chef-d'oeuvre that here graces their eyes.

IV

Whispers of life are heard as the surviving plants  
seem to tremble under the weight of their icy burdens.  
soon, the arctic silence is broken as the door  
to a neighboring house creaks open.

I dream of heroes  
Sailing on the blue seas,  
Led astray by brutal waves and winds;  
Odysseus searching for home,  
Pride leading the way.

I dream of lovers  
Separated by death and a golden helm,  
Angry mourning over a rotting corpse;  
Patroclus crashing to the ground,  
Accepting of his fate.

I dream of bad angels  
Falling from the heavens,

Meredith Howell



*Dreams of Old*

Tumbling, burning on through the fall;  
Icarus plummeting to the earth,  
Laughing all the way down.

All night I dream,  
and, in the morning,  
I wake up crying.

Meredith Howell



*Freedom*

She has been restrained and confined for too long;  
Six months to the day.

She tasted freedom on a Saturday;  
It tasted like smoke and bourbon,

and maybe mango and pink lemonade.

The carbonation stung her nose

and the can cut into her lip

While her friends laughed at jokes

And she flirted a cigarette off a grown man.

Her freedom still tastes like the wind off the lake,

smoke, and sweet barbeque sauce.

And, if she's honest,

a little like bourbon, too.


Meredith Howell



*The Backseat*

In the front seat,  
The steady drone  
Of The Secret Garden.  
Mountains and cliffs  
Rush by through the windshield.  
Three children  
Piled in the backseat;  
The youngest six,  
The oldest eight.  
They listen and sleep,  
Comfortably leaving  
On each other,  
Unaware of  
A palace with  
Gold plated ceilings  
And sprawling grounds.  
Eventually,  
The droning fades,  
Replaced by the sound  
Of three small voices singing  
A catchy little tune  
About hand puppets.

Lauren Gaines



*off the deep end*

you've always liked swimming.  
you've never disliked swimming.  
but if you keep swimming  
sometimes it's too much.

do you want to go swimming?

it starts with a toe dip.  
a test of the water  
to see if today is  
a good day to swim.

then you say yes.

then it's to your ankles.  
just a little more water,  
enough to splash around  
and have a little fun.

then you say yes.

before you know it  
you're in waist deep.  
it's enough to handle.  
you took swimming lessons.

then you say yes.

*Poetry*

it washes over your shoulders  
and you have reached  
the dreaded deep end.  
luckily you can tread water.

then you say yes.

who knew water on your neck  
could feel like a noose?  
you try to breathe but  
water floods your lungs.

then you say yes.

then  
you  
drown.

Lauren Gaines



*To the Little Redheaded Girl*

“My, my, how you’ve grown,” I say to the little redheaded girl in  
the mirror.  
Her hair is frizzed in a curled cirlet around her chubby face and  
rosy cheeks.  
She has to step on a stool just to see past the tall vanity

“We look tired,” she squeaks, tilting her head to the side.  
I chuckle and touch the bags under my eyes. She touches hers  
too,  
Though there is still the glow of innocence in hers.  
“We are. But...”

My voice catches in my throat as I look at the girl who shares  
My same, outrageous dreams. They aren’t that outrageous any-  
more.  
“But..?” she asks.  
I smile. “But we’re doing a pretty damn good job.”



Shanon Adame



*White Sands*

Three women-girls  
Shoved next to each other  
Shoulder to shoulder  
Skin pressed against skin  
All straps and short-shorts and sweet sweat  
Heading for the desert, otherwise known as  
Corinth  
They peeled away pretty, paisley things  
And let the desert heat boil in their bellies  
While being told to turn this way  
Lift this arm  
Spread your legs  
The white sands rolled on  
While hair and hands  
Sun-kissed and afraid  
Moved through the suffocating air  
Immortalizing girlhood in each crystalline grain

Shelby Anderson



*Homesick*

I'm homesick.  
Sick in my mothers house  
Sick in my college apartment  
Sick driving home  
Sick driving to my other home  
It's not that I don't know where home is, no.  
It's that I have two homes,  
Two places to call my own.  
Both feel familiar, both feel certain.  
It's me that isn't certain,  
Certain of which one feels more like home  
Certain that living with my mother is what living at home feels  
like  
Certain that living in my apartment is what being home feels like  
Is being home the same as living at home?  
What is home?  
Who is home?  
Will home be home even if I don't go back?  
When will my mother's house stop being home?  
When I move away from college, will my home here still be true?  
How is that a place we call home can exist for such short periods  
of time?  
Are we, as humans, designed for moving homes?  
Or are we stationary?  
Should I have ever left home?  
Would I be homesick if my other home was 20 minutes  
away from my mom's?  
Is it her that I miss?

Or is it my home?  
I'm homesick.

Julia Jeffress



*Elegy for a Childhood Bedroom*

Memories of messy braids  
and rainbow-striped tights.  
Fairytale books filling the shelves.  
Hand-painted pictures pinned to the walls.  
Constellations covering the ceiling;  
in another life I could have traced  
each one with my eyes closed.  
Twinkling fairy lights and dried flowers  
hang above the bed where I used to sleep soundly.  
Curtains flutter like wings of creatures  
I watched from the windows when  
I believed I had wings of my own.

These walls are covered with fragments of a life  
I cannot live anymore.  
I sit and stare and wonder who is the girl  
in these pictures, the one with the bright  
smile, the one who thinks she knows  
everything?  
Certainly we are not the same, for my smile  
has become dull and I know  
nothing at all.

I cleaned up my braids and took off my tights.  
I heard that self-expression was unprofessional.  
Fairytale and fables became too foolish to believe in.  
I stopped fingerpainting and the stars lost their shine.  
The sparkling lights burned out and the flowers wilted.

*Poetry*

I learned that wishing for wings was a ridiculous flight of fancy,  
so I closed the curtains and tried to sleep dreamlessly.

Nobody speaks of Nostalgia's cold chill  
when she reminds you that one day  
your body will grow old; one day  
you return home to find that  
you no longer fit, and your only  
desire is to make yourself  
small again.

Julia Jeffress



*From before we knew how to love*

I liked the complex constellations of summer skies  
and the misty eyed landscapes of winter.

When we were small,  
I thought the glass beads on our necklaces  
illuminated the depth of our love.  
When we met, my beloved,  
I felt reckless, I clipped our wings and  
filled my hollowed out heart with feathers.  
When our fingertips brushed, finally  
bridging that endless chasm of fear between us,  
I thought it meant we had learned how to love.

We didn't do it right.  
Perhaps we should have known  
we couldn't make it last.  
We were nothing but  
a collection of lucky keychains  
destined to fall off in the street.  
We had no rehearsals, no lessons,  
just forced existence in this screwed up universe  
and the expectation of a constant smile.

I liked the complex constellations of summer skies  
and the misty eyed landscapes of winter.

But so did you.

Julia Jeffress



*A poem on love, which i do not understand*

i do not know why flowers grow  
or why soft petals wilt and fall.  
the classic question, “loves me not?”  
does not make sense to me at all.  
for Love is an unfinished puzzle  
with a growing, gaping hole.  
they cannot know her complex mind,  
it’s unattainable.

i wish i knew why flowers grew,  
why everybody loved them so.  
perhaps one day i’ll comprehend  
why all things always come and go.  
and if i picked flowers for you,  
tell me, would you accept my soul?  
or would the truth of Love remain  
so unattainable?

Julia Jeffress



*The evolution of a storm*

she started crying years ago,  
tears like hurricanes at first.  
they shook the ground as they fell,  
accompanied by howling winds that worried  
everyone around her.

she calmed a bit to become  
a simple summer storm,  
the kind that makes children afraid  
but leaves grown-ups unfazed.  
she wouldn't be ignored,  
but most people stopped bothering  
to check the radar.

she turned to a light drizzle,  
enough to bring along an umbrella  
but not quite enough for anyone  
to feel the need to open it.  
it was acid rain, sure, but the sting was mild.  
besides, hers was the only skin  
it ever seemed to burn.

she slowed down to become a silent stream  
that continues to flow down the street,  
a memory of the downpour that came before.  
the clouds have dispersed, the sun is shining again,  
and everyone's judgment is clouded by relief  
that the storm is over. they are distracted



by the beauty of the blue sky.  
nobody notices that the  
grass surrounding her eyes  
is still wet.

Kaleb Burke



*Night Lights*

Flashing in the night  
A soft green light  
Streaking across the sky  
What is it? A firefly!

Bathing the road in yellow  
Attempting to tame the ghetto  
Breaching the darkness with a permanent stamp  
What is it? A streetlamp!

A boom leaving only its echo  
Ruins a night that was once so mellow  
A heart gripped by an icy clamp  
Who would cry for an old tramp

Strands of soft shimmering white  
Battling darkness, the eternal fight  
Cast upon a lone woman crying  
Turning towards the moon, her tears drying.

Memories of Smoking Exquisite Corpse



Smoke dances through the air tickling my nose until the  
nostrils flare.

The difference between tea and tobacco and cancerous  
smoke evading my thoughts to evaporate through the win-  
dow. Amidst the cultish ring of cigarette smoke rising in a  
chorus louder than any frozen thunder but they always told  
me I must be clean.



*Class Poem* by C. Seymour's ENG 313 Class

Lucy Jones



*Sisyphus*

nagging

At me, go get it go get it, gotta do it gotta do it; tapping  
At my window pane, come out and play! rapping  
At my door, are you done yet? stacking  
On my plate, (am I  
About to break?) crumple  
Like a paper ball, a paper doll, a piece  
Of trash, (I'm not built  
To last?)

stumble

Away

From this stress, (I can't fix my mess), struggle  
To pay for my rent, (I'm burdening, burdening, burning...),  
guzzle guzzle  
Up your space, (I'm sorry I'm a waste), fumble my needs  
At the door, (I'm sorry I couldn't ask for more), reliable timeless  
trend  
Of disappointing ends, (I'm sorry), haven't you heard my dear?

(I can't escape  
From here).

Lucy Jones



*Father can't help me*

Father Can't Help Me

Daddy said the world is my oyster;  
Daddy said I'd go places;  
Daddy said family would always be there;  
Daddy said I'd never be alone.

My toes are numb on this Sunday.  
I don't believe in his God, so  
I didn't go to church.  
I don't know if I'm lonely because  
I'm alone or abandoned.

Like maybe He left me here,  
Or maybe He was never here.  
Maybe I'm not worth braving the cold.

I know,  
If Daddy knew those are my choices,  
I would break his heart.

Lucy Jones

*No Goddess is thin*

No Goddess is Thin  
I was  
Thin.  
Flat as a board;  
“You need a sandwich.”  
I’ve had so many in the past year,  
I don’t wanna buy bread, thanks.  
Now, my weight is in my thighs,  
Curved as the moon.  
A divine curve;  
Worthy of Aphrodite.  
Hips, that glide smooth  
In my jeans to turn your head.  
Arms, so round they don’t fit  
My shirts from yesterday.  
Yet, reflection is a sight I loathe to see,  
Even in my celebration.  
Because, my stomach should be  
Flat as a board.  
I should have stopped the sandwiches,  
Right?  
Forgone all the cakes and sugar sweet loves  
I should work out and run.  
Be, athletic, toned, and  
Thin.  
Flat as a board;  
A carbon copy cut-out cardboard to my core.  
Insubstantial and unworthy  
Of praise.  
You’d rather no one exalted my name,  
But I am divine in making.  
No man will make me bow.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

### Meredith Howell

I am a McGill Fellow and writing communications major. Outside of my studies, I read and write as well as enjoy time outside in nature.

### Trinity Locke

Trinity Locke is an artist and writer from Mississippi and is currently earning her BA in playwriting from Webster University.

### Charlotte Locke

Charlotte Locke is a senior English Literature major at Maryville College and Web/Art Editor for Impressions Literary Magazine. She has a passion for creative writing, specifically the poetry part of things, and looks for inspiration in everything. She loves her three cats, wife, and sunny days.

### Carmela Lewis

Carmela is a science-enthusiast, bookworm, and dog lover. They shake their hands at things that make them happy, talk nonstop about those they love, and put their entire soul into caring for their plants. Her writings are dedicated to her dog and her wife.

### Carl Gombert

Carl Gombert is a small weird man who has taught painting, drawing, and art history at Maryville College since 1993. He is trying to learn how to paint with words.

### **Corey Randolph**

Corey is a sophomore at Maryville College, majoring in sociology with a minor in gender studies. In his spare time he likes spending time with friends, walking, reading and writing (when he can), watching his favorite shows, and collecting trinkets.

### **Brady Stiff**

Brady Stiff (he/him) is a Creative Writing major and Journalism minor at Webster University. He is overly fond of the short story, a hobbyist performer in musical theatre, and quite thankful to the Impressions team for being included in this issue.

### **Julia Jeffress**

Julia Jeffress is a sophomore at Maryville College majoring in English Literature. She is also an assistant editor for the Highland Echo. Since most of her writing these days takes the form of newspaper articles or literature analysis essays, poetry is a great creative outlet and a way that she continues to write for herself.

### **Mackenzie Nicholas**

Mackenzie is a biology major who wants to one day become a podiatrist. She loves cats more than anything and has 3 cats of her own. She loves to crochet and sew in her free time.

### **Amy Reed**

Amy Reed is an alumnus of Maryville College and current staff member in the college's Office of Marketing and Communications.



### **Brianna White**

Brianna White is a 21 year old artist living in Knoxville, TN. She is studying for an Art Major with a focus in painting and drawing at Maryville College. She has enjoyed creating art since childhood, and her passion for it has only grown over time. Her favorite things to draw are cartoons and her favorite things to paint are landscapes. When she isn't making art, she's reading mystery novels, writing, or spending time with her chihuahua Phoebe.

### **Madison Parris**

Maddie Parris (they/them) is a sophomore majoring in Developmental Psych with a focus on Relationships & Sexual Health. In their free time, they like to hang out with campus organizations like the Pride Club and the Counseling Center's Safe Space, hang out with their friends, their partner, and their dogs (and cats and rabbit), and take photos of interesting things they see around campus!

### **Ambrose Shelton**

The veritable king of nothing in particular, Ambrose Shelton is a master of air guitar and is decent at best at Magic the Gathering. His written works have received such high praise as "I mean it's okay?" (his dad) and "Meh" (his mom). He is currently trapped within the pages of this magazine via a curse the editor placed on him after just generally being annoying.

### **J.C Rhodes**

Hi! I'm JC Rhodes a Theatre Performance and ASL/Deaf Studies double major from Hartselle, AL. I have always had a passion for reading and writing poetry, but it

has only gotten stronger in the past year. I hope you enjoy the work!

### Lauren Gaines

Lauren Gaines is a junior double majoring in Writing Communications and Design. Along with being the Prose Editor of *Impressions*, she is also the Historian and Social Media Manager of the Maryville College Chapter of the Alpha Psi Omega Theatre Honors Society. When she's not in school, you can find her writing and reading fantasy novels or making art.

### Joy Starbird

My name is Joy Starbird. I work at the college in Student Outreach. My previous work includes The University of Tennessee, Knoxville for 25 years, and the Department of Correction from where I retired. I am married to Alisha Starbird. He is Native American. We enjoy riding our Harley and raising our dogs "Bouviers Des Flanders. I grew up in a farming community thirty minutes away called New Market. I enjoy drawing but have never had an art class. My mother Clara Roderick, was a wonderful artist that enjoyed dabbling in the arts. I love flowers and wildlife in art work.

### Blake Pettibone

Blake Pettibone is a Sophomore at Maryville College majoring in counseling psychology. He had always enjoyed reading and got into creative writing for prose and poetry in highschool. He always wanted to be an artist, and discovered his form in poetry, able to write the beautiful pieces he could never hope to draw.

### Rebecca Raney

Rebecca Raney is a senior Writing Communications major at Maryville College. She loves to write fantasy-fiction and creative nonfiction when she can peel her cat, Finn, off her laptop! Photography and visual art are hobbies which she picked up this past year

### Christina Airington

Christina Airington is 34. Moved to Tennessee in 2021 from Davenport, Iowa. Lives her life, trying to be a light in a dark place.

### Becca Lesley

Becca Lesley is graduated from Southern New Hampshire University in 2022 with a bachelor's degree in English and Creative Writing. She is currently working on her master's degree in Apologetics at Liberty University. When Becca is not writing poetry, she enjoys traveling, hiking, camping, backpacking, and being outdoors.

### Shanon Adame

I am a non-traditional student majoring in Writing Communication. When I am not in school or working, I enjoy spending time with my 5 rescue dogs, CrossFit, and reading/writing.

### Steve Wildsmith

Steve Wildsmith has worked as a professional journalist, content writer and blogger for 30 years, for publications from Tennessee to South Carolina, with numerous writing awards to his credit. A member of the East Tennessee Writer's Hall of Fame, he currently works as the assistant director for the Maryville College Office of Marketing and Communications.

### Laila Thompson

Laila Thompson is a sophomore Writing Communications major with a minor in religion. She is passionate about opening windows to her imagination through her writing and hopes to someday get some of her work published. Outside of her studies, she enjoys spending time with her friends and taking long naps in her dorm.

### Maryn Pope

My name is Maryn Pope. This is my first year at Maryville College and I am a Business Management major. I love to draw, paint, read, write, walk in the woods, and spend time with animals. I hope to own my own dog kennel and training facility in the future.

### Song Jones

My name is Song Jones. I am currently a sophomore majoring in international studies with a concentration in Asian studies. I enjoy art and literature, and a lot of my inspiration comes from my personal experiences and experiences of those close to me. I plan to travel to other countries and share my experiences with the world and hopefully make an anthropogenic impact with my words.

### Baylee Suit

I'm a senior bachelor's of arts in music major who's hoping to get my masters in applied pedagogy or music education. In my free time, I most enjoy hanging with my fluffly cat, Pigeon.

### Denton Cavender

Freshman at Maryville College  
Human Health and Wellness Promotion Major  
I played football here at MC this past year and have played sports all my life including soccer, baseball, basketball, and football! I enjoy hanging out with friends and family and doing anything involved with sports!

### Aja Cofer

My name is Aja Cofer. I'm a sophomore pursuing a degree in Writing Communications with a minor in Theatre. Hopefully, in the future, I will have a career in young adult literature.

### Lucy Reddick

A senior majoring in Writing Communications and current production manager for Impressions. I enjoy all things macabre, and am a huge Shakespeare nerd. My son, a cat named Russell, is the light of my life.

### Tammy Krecklow

Tammy Krecklow is a transfer student from Northwest Arkansas Community College, Bentonville, Arkansas, where she majored in Creative Writing. Here at Maryville College, she is continuing her major in Writing Communications. Photography is a hobby she has enjoyed since childhood, and this part of the country has opened up a whole new photography world for Tammy to explore and enjoy. Besides taking pictures, Tammy has been a writer since high school. Poetry will always be her No. 1 genre, but after delving into other writing genres at NWACC, she finds magical realism, creative nonfiction, and the “hermit crab” style fun and fascinating. Tammy grew up in Pea Ridge, Arkansas, where a very bloody Civil War battle took place in nearby Lee Town, which is the area surrounding the Pea Ridge Military Park. She has lived in Kansas, Oklahoma, and now Tennessee. Traveling and taking pictures of old architecture, cabins, military museums and monuments, old electrical panel boxes and wiring, rusty vehicles and farm equipment are some of the relics that fascinate her photographic mind. Tammy volunteers for the Friends of the Library here in Maryville and is the eBay assistant media manager.

### Lucy Jones

Lucy Jones is a sophomore writing communications major who loves to write. As poetry editor of *Impressions*, their focus is on their beloved verse, but they dabble in prose as well. If they aren't writing, they're reading and forest-bathing.

### **Katie Orillion**

Katie Orillion has loved art since before she could make it and has been creating since the stacks of colored pencil fairies and dragons began to overrun her childhood bedroom. She began drawing digitally in middle school, then promptly gave up because it was too hard. It wasn't until her second attempt in high school that she fell in love with the freedom it gave her—several of the pieces in this issue were drawn on road trips. She mostly uses her gifts for evil and for drawing her own DND characters. This is the first time she has submitted to Impressions and is honored to be here.

### **Austin Zettle**

Hi friends I'm Austin Zettle I'm the Editor in Chief of Impressions. I am a Design Major and minoring in Art with a focus in Photography. I am a junior this year at Maryville College. I love writing and taking photos in my free time and spending time with me ESA Emerson.

### **Shelby Anderson**

Shelby Grace Anderson is a pre-pharmacy student from Cincinnati, Ohio with plans to attend Lipscomb University's College of Pharmacy. She spends her time leading Young Life in Blount County and waiting tables. Writing poetry is an outlet of emotion for her, and it comes directly from her own experiences and heart.

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Christina Seymour, for her support as our faculty advisor,

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