
Reconciled
THE MOUNTAIN LAUREL
VOLUME 60

EDITORS' NOTE

Reconciled:
As pictured in the Garden of Eden, God's intent is to dwell with His creation in perfect harmony. The metanarrative of Scripture reveals God's desire to bridge the gap between His righteousness and our brokenness. Ephesians 1:9-10 says, "making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth" (ESV). As His image-bearers, we become co-laborers in Christ; we are stewards of His creative mission, guiding others towards His glory through art and literature. We can contribute meaningful work in a broken world that ultimately reveals the mystery of God's plan for reconciliation.

Entropy:
Collapse, chaos, disrepair–it is natural law that our world declines in a continuous spiral. Since man's departure from God's perfect design, "the whole creation has been groaning together" (Rom 8:22, ESV) as it awaits redemption. This section contains works that reveal our desire for order in a disordered world.

Paradox:
Contradiction, mystery, perplexity–within the unknown lies a series of hidden truths. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:9-10, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (ESV). This section contains works that reveal the friction between our fallen nature and our hope for reunification with God.

Epiphany:
Revelation, discovery, enlightenment–understanding restores balance. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, "He has now reconciled [us] in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him" (Colossians 1:22, ESV). This section contains works that rejoice in the assurance of peace, belonging, and repair–the promise of reconciliation.

The Mountain Laurel
Volume 60

Reconciled

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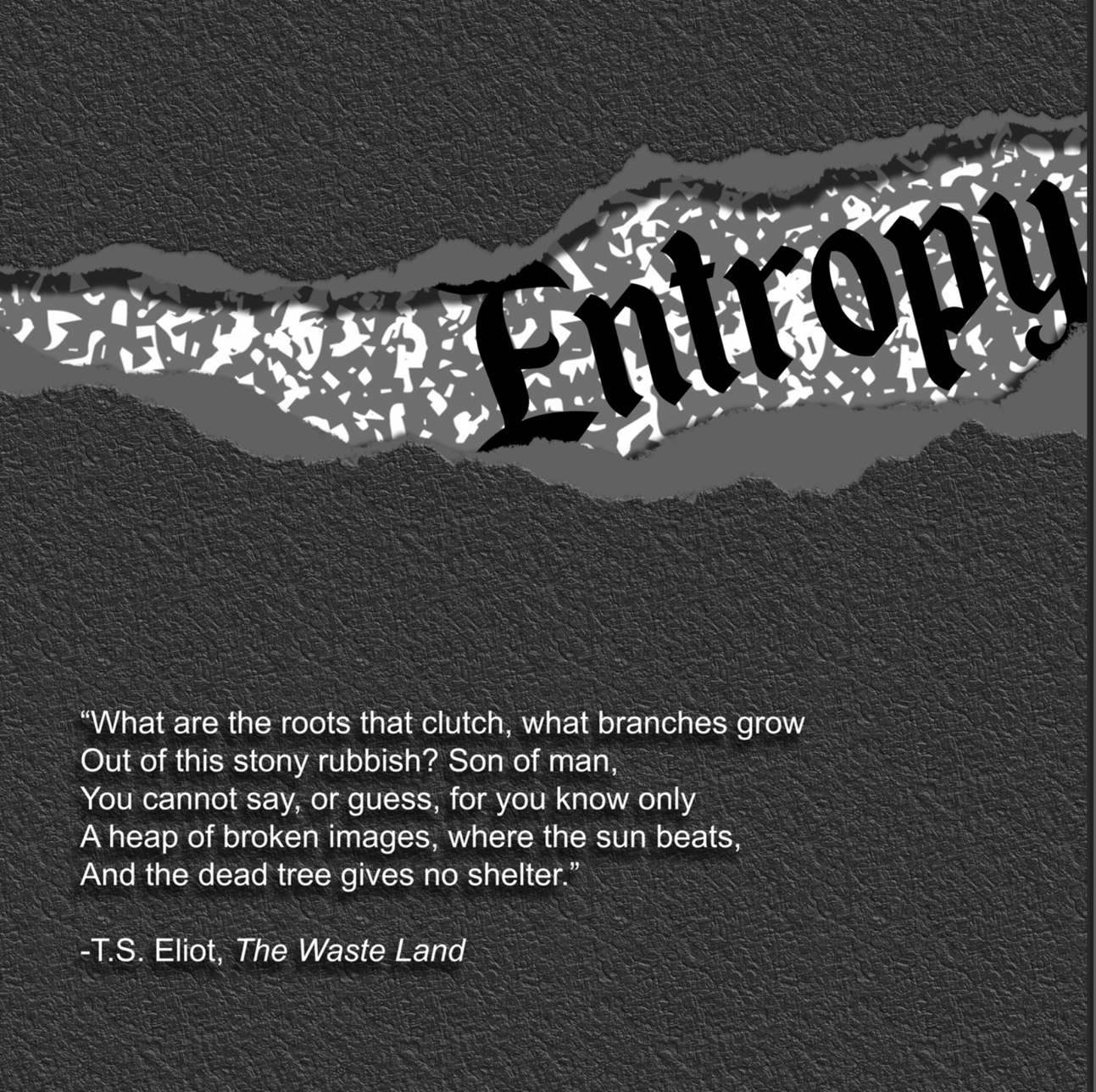


“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter.”

-T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Little Mousy Boy
by Erin Mole

A heart and breath so minuscule
Little mouse, little mouse
A life the palm of your hand could hold
Little mousy boy
From blade of grass to foot of tree
Little mouse, little mouse
He lives in a world much bigger than he
Little mousy boy

A shiver wracks his feeble frame
Cold little mouse, cold little mouse
Seeking warmth and shelter to claim
Cold little mousy boy
He finds both within aged walls
Cold little mouse, cold little mouse
He wonders if he could tread farther
Cold little mousy boy

A pleasant scent comes his way
Starved little mouse, starved little mouse
He approaches it warily
Starved little mousy boy
The morsel seems safe enough to eat
Starved little mouse, starved little mouse
Hunger throws his caution to the wind
Starved little mousy boy

The trap sets off and snaps his neck
Poor little mouse, poor little mouse
He gasps for air never his to share
Poor little mousy boy
He foams at the mouth and chokes
Poor little mouse, poor little mouse
He writhes in pain, and his eyes flood
Poor little mousy boy

The life and breath leave his tiny chest
Free little mouse, free little mouse
And finally, his lungs cave in
Free little mousy boy
Eternal rest, no eternity
Free little mouse, free little mouse
He leaves a world much bigger than he
Free little mousy boy

The Smiling One
by Savannah Cade

He was a dear brother in my summer family who was renowned for his cheesing, wide, electric grin; a painful dichotomy to the reality of suicide, the reality of troubles unknown, struggles unspoken, questions unanswered. A letter to my late friend, Griffin Berend (2001-2023):

Smiling,
Branded, bonded
On the banks of
Our pond-side stories.
Eternal.

Now,
Belly-up trout tell
your cold casket tales.
Chosen gun.
Stiffer
Than the meadow grass
Once bouncing in our teeth.
Teeth now falling,
from your
Closed stone jaw.

Black,
Your brimming hat,
Stolen, silly.
Grinning, we laughed.
Sorrow, sadness
Glimmering eyes past.
If I put on your hat,
Will you come back?

Tears
Of corner confessions
Swirled, splattered
with the dust on the floor.
Tell me why?
Or maybe you did
those times
that you cried.

First
Leather soles to leave,
We cried for you there.
First
Forever soul to grieve,
We wept for you here.

Sing
Rivers and roads,
Rivers and roads.
Griffin, still smiling,
I'll meet you
at home.



Incarceration
by Abigail Wilson

Cutting the Orange Umbilical Cord*
by Abigail Hepner

Two bookbags, a jean jacket, a pair of Converses, two humans, a dog, and a string of dried oranges hanging from the ceiling: the only remaining belongings in the room. Me and my sister sit on the empty floor. This is the last time it will ever be ours.

It was the second cleanest we'd ever seen this room. The first was when we moved in. The paint was still crisp and blinding, the floor slick and shiny. Completely empty, the room was ours to create. We decorated with pictures, magazine clippings, and artwork, until the walls were simply implied behind layers of personality. It once held two beds, two desks, two dressers, too many clothes, dozens of books, and all the small mementos collected over years. Whole worlds of Barbies had formed and fallen in the span of those four walls. We assembled Lego creations cooler than the box. We created stuffed animal soap dramas more interesting than anything on TV. Secrets spilled and lies told. So many nights spent giggling past midnight, only to be interrupted by an angry, tired, and terrifying momma.

Our childhood had faded into our teen years in that room. Pictures of princesses changed to cute celebrity posters. Dried lipstick crusted the mirror from our first experiments with makeup. We learned what style was and finally threw away infinity scarves. For a brief stint, a piece of tape divided each "side" of the room. Epic brawls had occurred over earrings and screaming matches over hand-me-down dresses. So many tears were shed, some still and quiet in the night, some steaming with anger, others, shoulder-rocking, heartbreaking sobs. We learned how to comfort each other and make each other laugh. Our relationship blossomed from children into young adults in that small room.

Now, we sit in it again. Completely empty. The yellowed paint marred by tape and pictures, the floor scratched and creaky. The patterns of the walls resembled fried eggs, something my young brain determined and could never unsee. Light streamed through the windows in golden bars, making the whole scene too cheerful. I would have preferred raining and storming to fit the mood better. Me and my sister had our legs stretched across the scuffed wood. My dog panted in the corner. No words were needed to express how we felt. The anticipation for this moment had been building for months. Some days, it felt an eternity away, others were too real. But now that the moment had come, I felt numb. No tears would come until later, when we would drive away from the house for the last time, and I would lose sight of my beloved home. But in this exact moment, I was still there, and there was still time.

Our string of orange peels hangs daintily from the lightbulb. The dried fruit is the product of my sister's failed experiment to create a natural fragrance but now simply is referred to as the "umbilical cord." Our last connection to the room. She wrestles me into a piggyback, and as I stumble to support her weight, she clips the final remaining object of ours in the room. Indeed, in some ways, it feels like we left the womb of our childhood for college and separation.

We grab the last of our belongings: two bookbags, a jean jacket, a pair of Converses, two humans, a dog, and a string of dried oranges clipped from the ceiling. For the last time, we walk out of the room that holds years of memories. We close the door on that world.

Eyes of Another
by Grace Turner

Snap!
You've taken a picture of me.
Thank you… I'm sorry.
I don't know if you even notice.
Many do… I do, too.
I wish I knew how much you choose to ignore.
Do you notice?
Because I know.
Young minds inquire
Because they don't understand.
They are just observing so it doesn't offend.
I don't understand either.
Unique.
Beautiful.
Consider why you have to tell me.
I didn't intend to be funny,
But I guess I embraced it.
As you can see, I failed to erase it.
Stop. Think. Speak.
Or don't,
Just remember the eyes you see
Are the eyes I see you through.

Jack
by Noah Francisco



The Sailor's Quest
by Blake Petteway

Some greater worlds exist which I have yet to land,
Strung long like wrinkles running past the tide,
Traced wide like waterways across my hand
But gathered always past my line of sight—
Some softer worlds surrounded still by sea
Reside beyond the busy minds of men,
Whose coordinates the ship of death ceased
Sailing to, as compass bearings lost the scent.

In that land, they say, the bobwhite sings
Forever without pause or loss of voice,
Through storm and night and end of spring,
In wintertime, still thinking to rejoice.
On that immortal shore, the nectarines
Were taught not how to perish, how to rot.
All the mainland's promise of decline
And pattern of decay, this island has forgot.
And on its forest floor, the woodland glade
Unfolds with plenty, sprouting up unsparingly.
And there collect the cattle of my youth to graze.
I hope nothing now can find them, except me.

Such far-gone worlds exist to which I yet belong,
And from the stern I offshore wait for them,
For islands to appear as I suspect—
    Emerged beyond the hungry veil of fog,
    Beyond the years of bitter dialogue—
Immortal song for all I love is all I long.
Is that too big an island to dream up?

I know someday they'll too be swallowed down—
A selfish sea submerges every floor;
But there are days I sense the unseen shore—
    Whose swells are beating with my native pulse,
    Whose thumping beckons nigh my vagrant lulls—
Still closer forming far beyond and sending now
For only me since other ships have called the hunt.

Reminders of You*
by Abigail Matson

I think we should sell this house and stow away the clothes.

Maybe then we won't have to comfort the dusty shirts when they miss their body;

they all sound so, so alone.

But if we sell the house, the car will have to go, too.

The wheel misses the grip of calloused hands;

the pedals miss the pressure of a single shoe.

The car is just the start, however, as we see paved side walks everyday.

I declare concrete must go, it offends my feet;
its sadness always gets in the way.

But if concrete ends, then coins must become obsolete.

Nobody else can collect pennies of any kind;

they were only yours to keep.

The beaches must close down for good,

lest someone else bring their curiosity to the sand.

You alone are the inheritor of the hidden treasures of the shore;

you alone deserve to stumble across a watch worth a grand.

Camping must not exist if its expert cannot show others how it's done;

nobody else is allowed to struggle with a tent,

cursing as they nail the wrong pegs in one by one.

But when all that's cleared away, there's this town that needs to go.

We'll have to burn it down and leave ruin in its wake.

The ash will replace the reason we called it home.

You marched in the parade,

and the baristas knew your order by heart.

I'm afraid these things must cease–

No one else must buy produce from the roadside cart.

Yes, when all that is gone, I think I can finally sleep.

When all that is gone,

I can finally count those sheep.

One. Two.

Knock Knock.

Who's there?

Three. Four.

It's me.

Me who?

Five. Six.

It's me. I'm you.

No matter how much is burned,

the mind is the one thing that, as time would have it, cannot be abjured.

You live on in everything thing I do,

and as science would demand,

I am a walking reminder of you.

I'm An Anesthesiologist
by Macy Johnson

I'm an anesthesiologist.
A master, if you will.
I fill a syringe,
Aim for a bruise,
And then I shoot to kill.

If your organs are insufficient,
Upon the bottle, make a wish—
A needle's quite efficient;
Swiftly vanquish with its kiss.

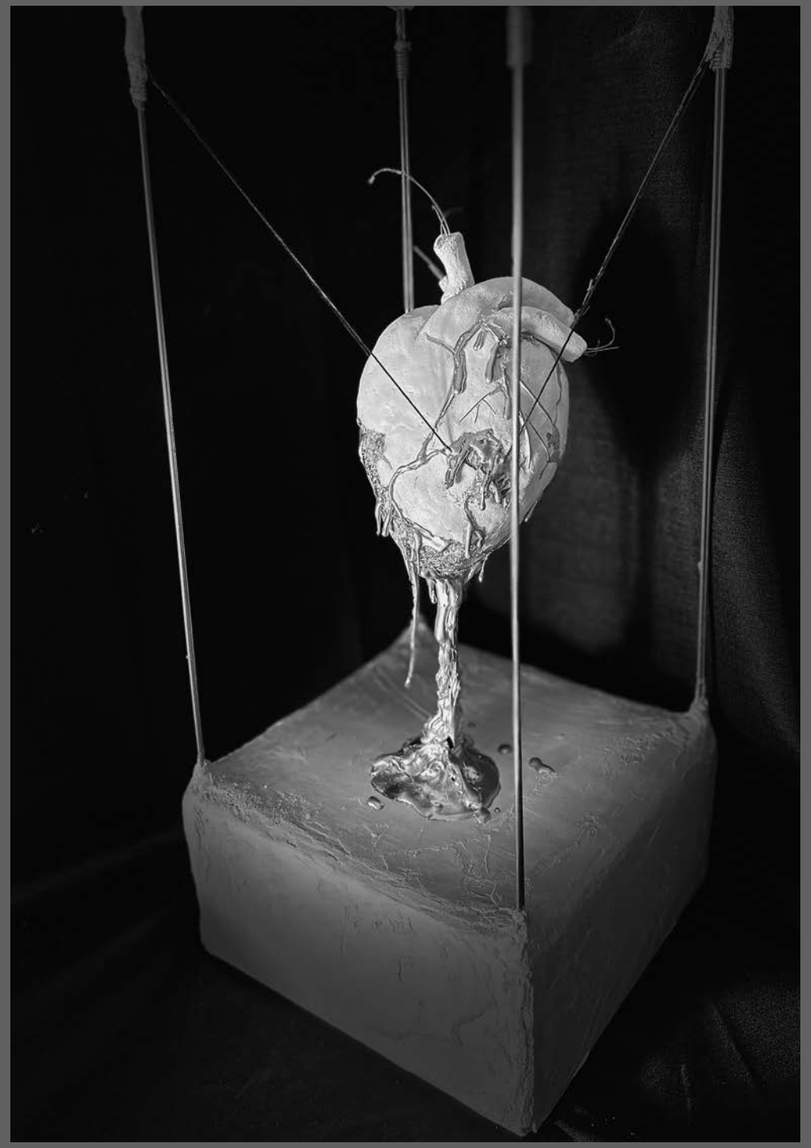
Hide the source
And heal the sore,
They say (or was that me?).
Squeeze your eyes shut—
That'll teach
Invisibility!

I'm an anesthesiologist.
An expert, if you please—
If it doesn't suit
Give it the boot,
And put the past for lease.

So shelve the ache
And you can take
A breath,
At so long last.
I'll leave the x-rays
At the clinic
And keep wearing the cast.

Why feel the flare—
It's barely there—
Take the plunge(r)
And take care
Of all those pesky prickles
That will provoke you to pause.

I'm an anesthesiologist,
Proud of my "sufficiency"—
But wounds overtaped
Won't cease to scrape—
Just bleed internally.



Tethered by a Thought
by Callie Meyerholtz

Slow Griefs, Flow
by Blake Petteway

there's an altar,
grimy and quiet,
where hermits' heads are shaved—
a floor that close cradles my pant
and dams up all other creeks
while run my tears cursive
like faucet water,
gushing
    at once in loops.

there's a lion's den
(surely you've met it)
where prowls the predator
so eager to devour,
whose jaw whets with
easy pain, easy
when bites the tooth and leaves
a scar—so softly
    carving rivers off my cheek.

and though mouths close,
though i bloodless rose up,
still fizzing in my glass
is the growl
of hunger and howl
about leaking lament—
the radio static
awake
    and bluer than lightning.

The Harlot
by Erin Mole

I find her under the shadow of night,
Adorned in blood red and widow's weeds.
From the way to Sheol, she entices me–
Her guests are numerous; her victims are many.

I cut off all means of escape
And approach her as a man lacking sense.
Wisdom, my sister, I ignore
And, understanding, call my intimate friend no more.

Is not this sacrifice my purpose?
Is not my purpose my progeny?
For this reason, I've left my father and mother:
To become one flesh and join to another.

In darkness, I enter the harlot's web,
Not knowing that it will cost me my life.
And what does it matter if I know?
So as an ox to the slaughter, I go.

Humility
by Harper Whaley

Least is greatest, greatest is least.
How could we stoop from our scaffolding thrones
To love the loyal son of dogs?
We refuse to touch their blood,
Yet we fill our goblets with it.
Standing under the cross
With flasks of crystal,
Harvesting and drinking what we should pour out
As the only One who doesn't deserve to stoop
Bows His head to show us what it looks like to love a brother.

Where Are the Magnets?
by Abigail Hepner

The fridge is bare — where are the magnets?
Sunlight through the window; bleached wooden squares scattering the floor.
Mark of green on the ceiling but the culprit missing.
Coffee drips differently, sluggish, grainy.
Do the smells fade or do they linger still?
Unfamiliar creaking under different feet. Pounding? Crawling? Leaping? Or just stepping?
Surely there are traces in the dust.
Is black dog fur still in the rug?
That stain is a secret bond–no one will know.
Do the plants thrive now under a more loving hand? Nurtured, maybe. But are they admired like they once were?
Is it admired as it once was?
Because — where are the magnets?

The Fall of Meaning
by Camden Howell

Group thoughts awakened
The free thinker's dehydration,
Building a never-ending flower
With an artificial hand.

My mind breaks the borders
Only to be conformed.
Demanding meaning
Where none can be found.

A perpetual need to change.
Real reason and action reduced to a clamp.



White Wolf
by Brianna Williamson

Diary of Porphyria's Lover
by Harper Whaley

Author's Note: The following short story is based on Robert Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover," a dramatic monologue of a man who kills his lover for an unknown reason.

November 1, 1835.

It was miserably cold when I got home from the mines tonight, but I managed to scavenge some coal from one of the carts, along with some old scraps of newspaper. The rain has been dreadful lately; I could scarcely see a foot in front of me as I walked home, and the road in front of the cottage has been reduced to a slogging marsh. It was so dreadful, a carriage overturned on the side of the road. I almost didn't see it through the rain, but the young lady it was escorting had such bright yellow hair, it was almost like a ray of sunlight shining through the storm. I invited her inside to clean up as I helped overturn the carriage. As soon as it was upright, her driver scarcely gave me a nod, but the woman . . . I could have sworn her stare lingered as they drove out of sight.

December 24, 1835.

I returned home this evening to the same scene I have returned to for the past month: Porphyria, yellow hair glowing in the firelight, as she laid new wood on the formerly empty grate. I never would have imagined she would return to my home, but she was here the very next night, thanking me for my assistance . . . and then lingering. Ever since, my cottage has transformed from the desolate slum it once was to an almost comfortable living space. Tonight, the light of the fire could not compare to the warmth in her eyes as she rose to greet me. We sat together, quietly, with my arm around her waist and her head resting on my shoulder. I wish I could capture that moment and carry a piece of it with me everywhere I go, even deep into the mines. But for now, I am content spending my days awaiting those precious evenings alone in blazing love for Porphyria.

January 13, 1836.

Again, she did not come. I spent yet another evening looking at the empty grate, listening to the rain tear apart the world outside in its mournful wrath. How long must I wait for her? Perhaps I should have known that she would never be mine. How could she, one so happy and proud, ever consider the vain and sullen love of a coal miner? As I try to hold on to the happy memories of months past, they fade, dying at the sudden thought of my empty cottage, empty grate, and empty heart that somehow still swells at the thought of her. Porphyria! Does your gay feast restrain you once more from setting your passion free? You could have me, but you cannot truly want me. Beautiful Porphyria, will you not give yourself to me? I sit, scribbling notes, furiously asking questions that only stir up the most heated of debates inside my heart.

February 14, 1836.

Beautiful Porphyria, the wretch of a woman, lay by my side. I kissed her rosy face; her cheeks still glowed like a dying ember, and her golden hair had finally dried from the rain. But her eyes, her eyes! They still stared at me in worship, mocking her God who still has yet to accuse me of any crime. I wonder how long it will take for them to discover me, so secretive was perfectly pure and good Porphyria. But surely, she told someone, if her love was truly all she said it was. But who in Porphyria's household would care enough to remember my name without caring enough to silence her passions? Who would see past the long end of their silver spoon to remember a coal miner? No, I believe I shall enjoy this reverie with my sweet Porphyria at my side, quietly sitting together at last. Sleep well, my love.

La Robe De Chagrin*
by Cecelia Sundell

She wasn't ever taught how to buy a funeral dress.

There was no reason to worry about such a purchase because death wasn't a reality to concern her. The time for black lace and tear-stained cheeks would come, but in her own timing. She liked the idea of choosing when to buy a funeral dress. The illusion of control, the falsity of her agenda: no one saves up in hopes of buying an item of such despair.

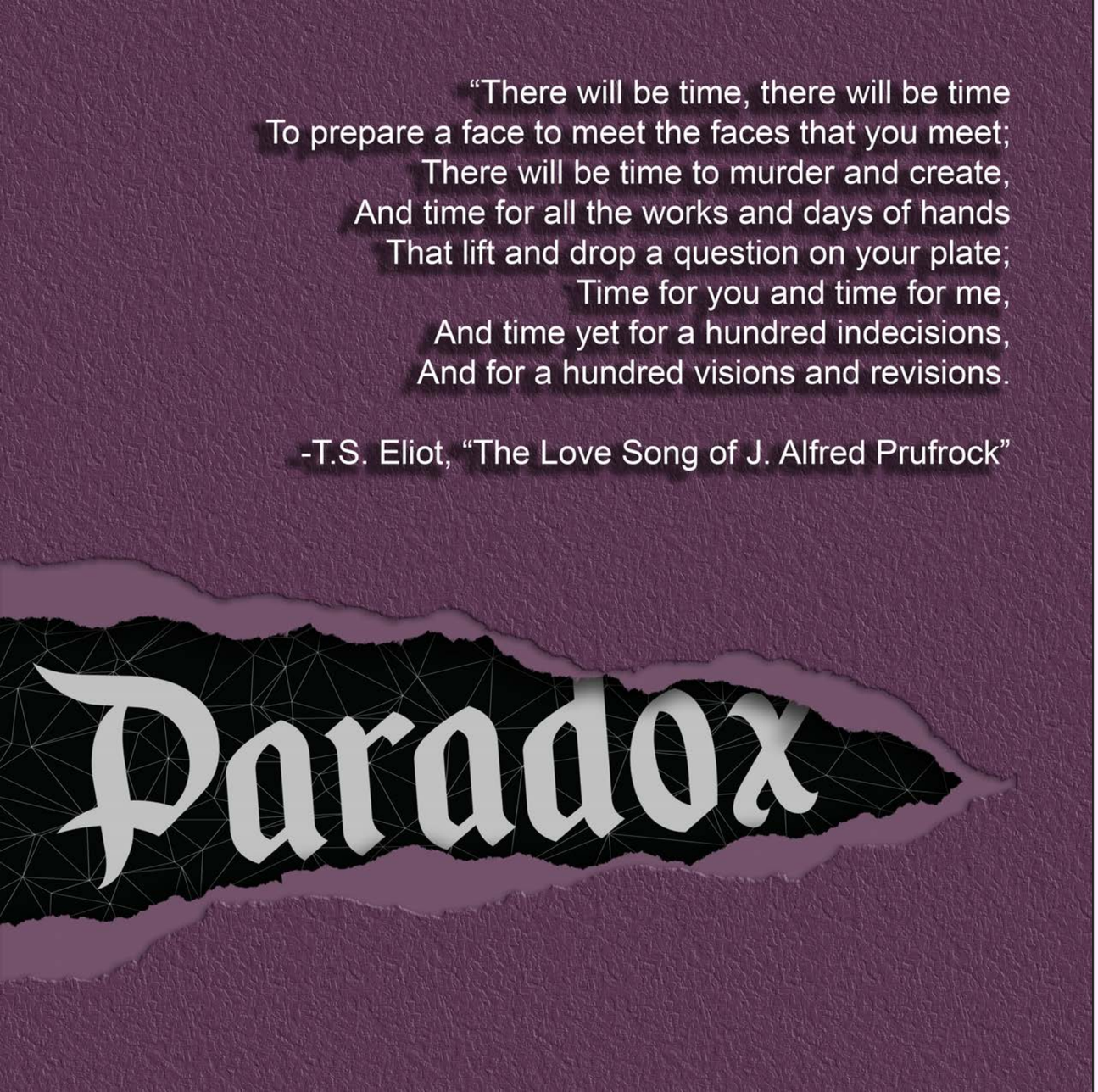
So when the shopping day came, tens of years too early, she numbed any part of herself that felt angry or upset. In her head, if she just pretended like she was buying a church dress or a birthday dress or a party dress, then it wouldn't be that big of a deal. There would be nothing to cry over because nothing had happened. But when she tricked herself like that, when she pretended like everything was okay even though it wasn't, she only pushed her grief deeper down.

Part of herself was okay with burying her grief, with forgetting that pain existed. Deep inside every person lies the desire to ignore hurt. When you ignore it, there is nothing to get over, nothing to cry about. And she really didn't like crying.

She didn't want to say she was shopping for a funeral dress because she knew she would cry. She just knew that she would break down, right there in the department store, in the middle of the hustle and bustle of normalcy. She knew that it would be the end of herself. She knew she wasn't strong enough to handle it. She had never been.

But once you pick out the funeral dress, you have to try on the funeral dress, and you have to buy the funeral dress, and you have to wear the funeral dress. You have to wear the funeral dress to a funeral and talk to your family while you wear the funeral dress and hug your dad while you wear the funeral dress and you have to cry while you wear the funeral dress. You have to cry because, if you don't, you look like a bad daughter who doesn't care.

But she did care, so much. She just didn't want to wear a funeral dress or cry in one.



They Save Give (And I Give)

by Kyle Jackson

They say to give without expectation of return.
So, I give
My time, my money, my love
I give and I give
And I give
And I Give.

They say a man who whittles himself away
Will suit nobody.
But they also say to give.
So, I give
My time (one notch), my money (two notches), my love (three notches)
I give and I give
And I give
And I Give.

But the Giving Tree gave. Gave her branches (time), and her fruit (money), and her body (love?)
And the boy (girl?) took. They took the time (my time), they took the money (my money), they took the love (my love).

But even as a twig, they say to give.
So, I give
My branches, my fruit, my body
I give and I give
And I give
And I Give.

The Barn
by Lydia Scott

I once was filled with life and vibrancy.
Now I sit vacant, leaning slightly.

What if all I've been storing is what causes me to totter?
As each year passes, burdens creep across my frame.
Only growing, never slowing.
Burdens and ivy weigh the same.

Weathered by the storms of life,
what once was vibrant is now dull.
Still, I sit and reflect
the effect disregard has on a soul.

A draft of air sneaks through the broken pane,
a place of shelter unsettled by a stone.
The wind rattles me more than it used to.
The pain resounds, and I groan.

Still, I remain
In stark rebellion to those eagerly awaiting my collapse.

Might life still be heard echoing through these hollow bones?

Perhaps.

The Dark Side of the Mirror
by Andrew Eaton

On the light side of the mirror,
I must face all that I am,
From the image that God gave me
To the image that would damn
Me to the grave.

Oh, the dark side of the mirror,
How I shiver at the thought,
If I could gaze into that chasm,
Would I find there all
That I am not?

Woman, mountain, butterfly,
King of France, the autumn sky,
Everything or nothing, Lucifer or God,
Handsome, gaudy, devilish
Or kind.



Urban Glass
by Mary Young

Young Life*
by Noah Carter



A Prayer for the Gentle of Heart
by Linley Nelson

Child, never break that crown upon your head;
Your inborn innocence, you must maintain.
The harsh world hardens men; be soft instead.

Life brings waves of chaos, contempt, and dread,
Dousing light and burying joy with pain.
Child, never break that crown upon your head.

Pride freezes the vibrant cold as the dead,
Detonation that leaves bystanders slain.
The harsh world hardens men; be soft instead.

Wrath turns sugar-sweet tongues to blazing red,
Burns forests of feelings 'til none remain.
Child, never break that crown upon your head.

Showers of sorrows weigh heavy like lead
With cruel thunder the heart cannot contain.
The harsh world hardens men; be soft instead.

Gentleness this cumbersome life may shred,
But true tenderness of heart will sustain.
Child, never break that crown upon your head.
The harsh world hardens men; be soft instead.

A Strong and Tall Tree
by Isabelle Lutzio

Each vein is symbolic of a growth pain;
I think I finally see how I relate
As parts of the old me fall away.

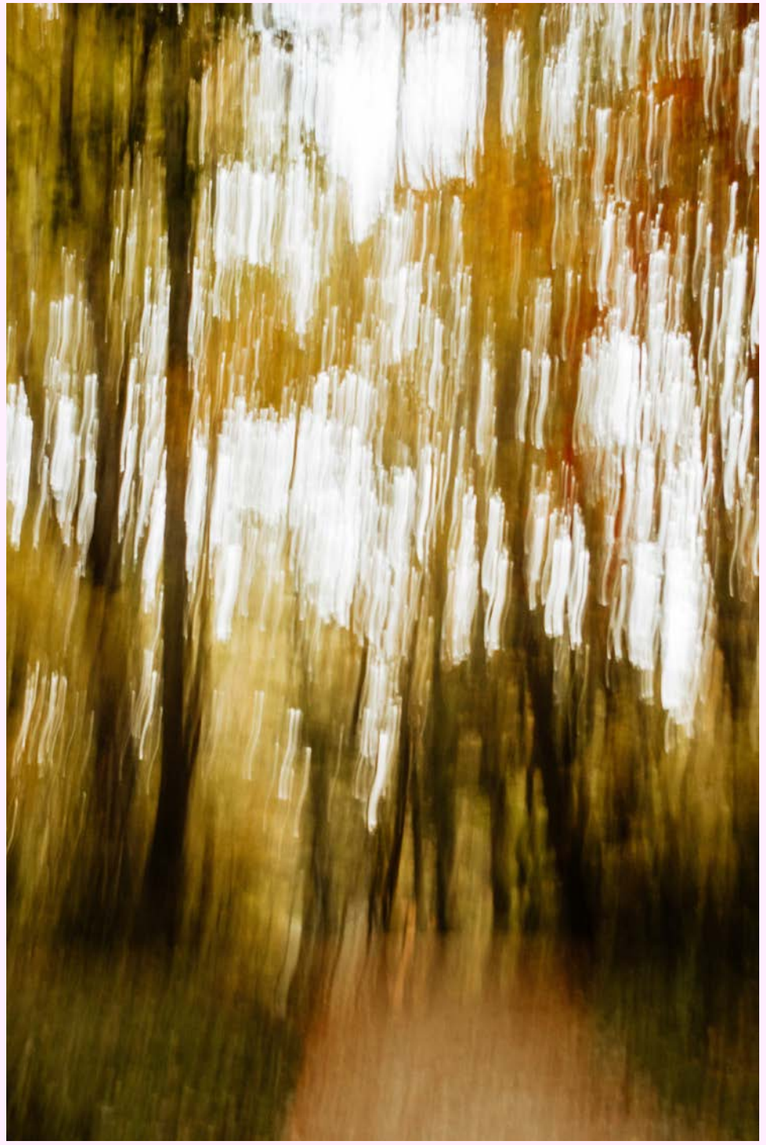
They shrivel and crack and break.
The wind barely moves, and they shake.
The brittle remnants still ache.

Soon, only the strong bones will be
Standing as mighty as a tree
As work continues to redeem.

The barren body at first is shy,
But nakedness is worn with pride
As it stretches still across the sky.

The breeze of beginnings tugs at me;
I feel like I am shedding my leaves.
As one season ends, I release:

A strong and tall tree.



Wandering in the Woods
by Mary Young

Jonathan
by Mary Young





Arise
by Chloe Peden

Picking*

by Blake Petteway

Tuesday afternoons were for berry-picking
When school had let out and the fever
Of day drooped with ordinary leisure.
While perusing the bush, I'd be flicking
Pests from the bulbs—metal pails trickling
With rain from the night before last.
My berries would blot the tin and splash—
Plucking fruit 'til my fingers were sticking.

But those Tuesdays are glued to the past,
No scent to leave, no shadow to cast—
Doomed to elapse when Time has its way,
Condemned to rot and sour and decay.

Yet, I hunt them like a puzzled sleuth—
That common psalm, those sacraments of youth;
The lyric of that life I'm hoping to maintain,
Hoping still to paint my palms a purple stain.

It's easiest to weep for all the left-behind,
Easy now to scorn the rubble and the thief.
But I have found no use for all that grief,
For somewhere deep within my desert mind
Lies an orchard broader than all mansions,
And between its rows are branches
That riddle and branches that teach.
These days, I'm picking a bit from each.



Untitled
by Laura Cervantez



Christmas Candy
by Laura Cervantez

Talking Shadows*

by Natalie Taylor

It was January. I was almost nine and very sick. My sisters and I had just finished watching the film *Nanny McPhee*. I probably would have protested the movie choice as it had always freaked me out, but in my feverish state, I didn't much have an opinion on what we watched.

"Here, take this," Mom had said during the movie. She had held a small, plastic medicine measuring cup, filled with something sweet-smelling and sticky, and I had taken the newly prescribed medicine, grateful to try anything else to make me feel better. I was hopeful that it would work before my birthday so I could still do something fun.

The song from the movie credits reached its end. In the silence that followed, I could hear the water in the pipes in our walls. The blanket I pulled close didn't keep out the chill that saturated my skin and oozed into my muscles and bone marrow. I shivered and thought I should ask my sisters for another quilt, but when I looked up, the room was empty.

The living room's wide wall clock tic-tic-tic-ed. Water gurgled in the walls. Footsteps thumped overhead.

I clutched the blanket as the hairs on my arms stood on end.

Relentless ticking. Droning footfalls. Unseen voices.

My heart's drumming pounded in my ears.

Swishing. Laughter. Echoes. Shadows in the corners of my eyes.

My breath came in quick and panicked.

The next thing I knew, Mom was holding me on her lap in her bedroom. I screamed. Her arms were around me. Her voice was close, afraid, begging me to tell her what was wrong.

But standing in front of me, grinning and jumping, was Mom. She hopped up and down, over and over, higher than I'd ever seen her jump before. Gravity pulled her down too quickly, only for her to spring right back up again and again and again.

Crying and screaming, I pleaded with the grinning Mom to stop jumping while the Mom that held me pulled me closer and desperately tried to assure me that she wasn't.

* * *

The doctors didn't believe it was the medicine that caused my auditory and visual hallucinations. They said I must've had a seizure, like my grandpa or my cousin. They claimed the fault lay with my genetics and not their medicine. Even so, Mom found that word—"hallucinations"—under the list of side effects, along with accounts of others who, after taking the medicine, jumped out windows or ran into busy streets.

After getting off the phone with the doctor, my parents came back to their bedroom where they'd left me and found that I had been having a conversation with them the whole time, talking to myself and the shadows.

* * *

I lay down in a dim room on an unfamiliar bed. Wires with sticky patches on the ends were stuck to my head. Something in the distance was beeping.

"Just relax," the doctor had told me before he left the room. They were trying to make whatever happened a few days before happen again. Why, I didn't know. I hadn't hallucinated again since that first day.

I listened with utmost concentration, not wanting to miss if I heard something unsettling. I closed my eyes, but then figured I should keep them open, in case something strange appeared. I imagined the doctors sitting around a TV screen, watching my thoughts as they developed in my head. I smiled at the thought of them watching themselves as I imagined them, like two mirrors reflecting infinitely into themselves.

I never could make myself see or hear anything as I lay on that bed. Whatever the doctors wanted to find, they never found it.

* * *

I turned nine two days after I had seen the jumping Shadow Mom. My real mom and my sister Anna knocked on the door to my parents' bedroom where I'd been staying in case anything happened again.

"We've got a surprise for you," Mom said with a smile.

Dad had to help me walk downstairs. I was too weak to do it on my own.

A huge smile crept up my face as I saw my kitchen table spread with bowls of chicken gnocchi soup and plates of bread sticks and chicken parmesan. A brown paper "Olive Garden" bag sat in the corner of the room. Mom and Anna confessed to sneaking out and getting food from my favorite restaurant for us to eat. Smiling, I sat down to the smell of cheese and garlic, and my family—my real family—sat down around the table with me.

"Thank you," I said to Real Mom, who sat beside me.

She smiled. "Happy birthday, Natalie."

My Crow of Little Faith
by Camden Howell

The brass call for execution
Upon this crow of little faith.
Has their sight been taken swiftly?
Are you with me?

While many perish of bliss,
Deceived and deprived,
The necessities remain
As they were intended by design.

My crow chirps gladly
While bleeding eternal.
These starry eyes have bled
While my bones decay the heather.

Come to me as you remain
And promise the impossible.
My final moments of despair
Are the best I ever had.



Into the Light*
by Brianna Williamson

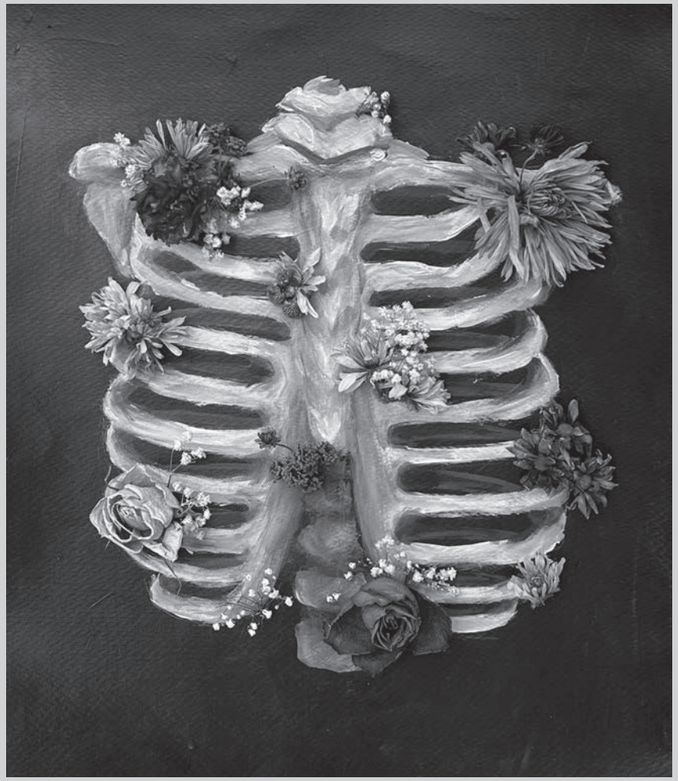
A Flower Graveyard
by Lydia Scott

I.
Bursting out of darkness into light,
We long for sun.
Her warm embrace;
The vigor she provides.

II.
We were made to root our fingers in the earth.
We play, grow, and imagine,
Our minds bursting with color and beauty.
Our aroma sweet and innocent,
Oblivious to life's occasional stench.
Is this folly or defense?

III.
We age, our petals begin to wilt,
And we droop under the heaviness
Of misplaced optimism.
Uprooted, ostracized, and mistreated,
Newly aware of the horrors this world holds.
We still reach for that familiar warmth,
But we're met with only cold.
Soon, we lay discarded on the ground:
A flower graveyard.
Oh, what grace that even in death,
A seed of hope is found.

Skeletons in the Closet
by Bella Kuckel



My Cypress Heart (Adaptation of "Boat of Cypress")
Mistranslated by Andrew Eaton

The Cypress Heart, she drifts along, she shall not be upgraded.
I cannot chart a course because my maps are all outdated.
My restlessness is not for want of drink; I'm satiated.
No lack of mental exercise keeps my soul aggravated.
I think on her in silence, my Cypress Heart.

The heart, it does not catch all winds, they can't be aggregated.
I've learned the hard way, crew and kin, they cannot be conflated.
I pulled aside my brethren and to them my woes related.
No anchor in the storm found I, but swiftly was berated.
I think on her in silence, my Cypress Heart.

Within, a hefty captain's log; it cannot be translated.
Without, the deftest rudder oar; it cannot be rotated.
Below, the waves that always roll and will not be abated.
Above, the sails that never roll and will not be deflated.
I think on her in silence, my Cypress Heart.

I have behaved with dignity, that cannot be debated,
Yet I am lowliest of men, by even vermin hated.
Slights and sorrows multiply, my griefs and woes have mated.
The Ark become Pandora's Box, by liberty enslaved.
I think on her in silence, my Cypress Heart.

I cannot sleep 'til mourning comes, I must be liberated,
But woe! the sun has grown so dim, the moon looks saturated!
My garments all have grown so stained from tearless dirges stated.
I cannot fly, I cannot die…for what was I created?
I cannot bear the silence of my Cypress Heart.

Four White Walls

by Linley Nelson

In my dorm room, scratches and holes—many of them decades old—form a unique tapestry beside my bed. Although I spend most of my time hidden among these four white walls, I can never truly call them my own. Abandoned tacks and hooks haunt the room like the ghosts of someone else's youth. These forgotten clues to a stranger's past are a constant reminder that someone was here before me, and someone before them, and someone before them, and so on. Paint smudges, a battered window screen, and mysterious scuff marks hint that this room has not always been mine, nor will it be forever. For now, though, it is mine, and I listen closely to what these four walls have to say to me.

In the morning and afternoon, when the sun is brightest, the two windows across from my bed stare at me attentively, urging me to embrace the day. The roar of car engines, the blare of music, and the rise and fall of voices creep through thin layers of brick and sheetrock, beckoning to me from the parking lot below. Even when I'd rather stay inside, my room stubbornly argues that life is happening out there, and that I must participate. I must comply. But as I close the creaky door behind me on my way out, I know my room will have more advice to offer when I return.

When I settle down to sleep at night, the room around me is awake. The hum of the air conditioner, the squeaks of my old bedframe, and the sighs of the aged walls all lull me to sleep like the musings of a familiar friend. Outside, laughing strangers and squealing tires often rouse me from my dreams. For just an instant, I am pricked by the sense of missing out. But then exhaustion overcomes my curiosity, and I give myself permission to relax. Unfazed, the reliable darkness tucks me in, protecting me from the day behind and the one ahead. I relish these few precious hours simply to exist. While I am nestled between evening and morning, this room welcomes me with open arms, promising to keep secret both my fears and my dreams. It is a refuge for me—even if only a temporary one—offering respite from the demands of the outside world.

***

I have forged close bonds within these walls over the past few years. A handful of strangers became like sisters to me as we covered the cracks in the paint with pictures, maps, and posters, silently agreeing to share not only our walls and closet space for a year, but also our hearts. With all its might, this tiny space has persistently pushed me toward other people. The narrow five-foot gap between the two beds is not enough to separate my mind from the individuals who have lived in this room with me. The hues of our souls have flowed freely, mingling with each other to create new shades as we laughed and cried and hoped and prayed together. This room has taught me how to share the color palette of my heart, to let others in and to understand that none of us are designed to be isolated.

***

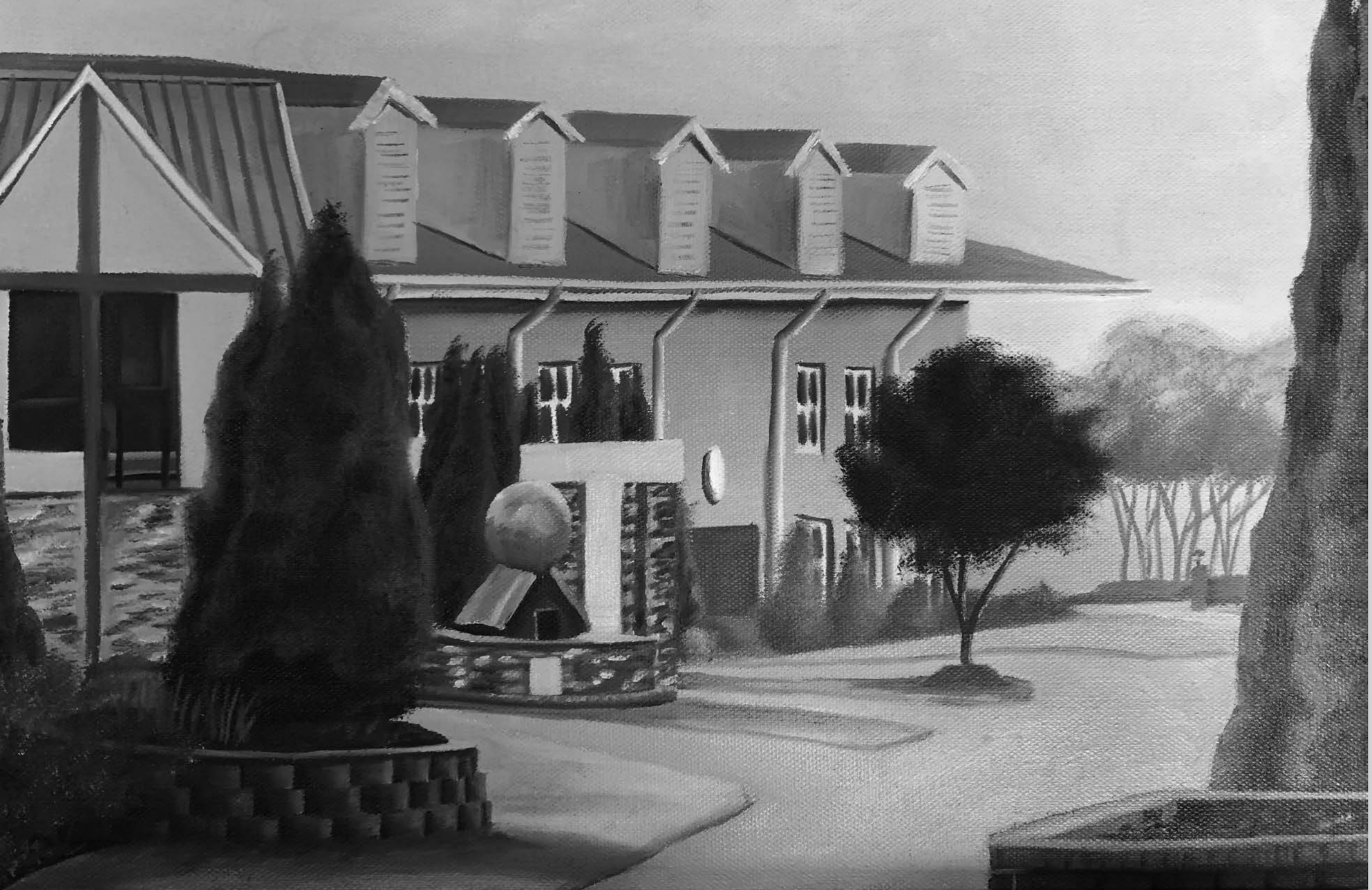
Sometimes, I find myself alone in my dorm room, completely ill at ease. Too exhausted for textbooks and writing or friends and conversation, I lie in bed, letting emptiness weigh me down like a heap of bricks. The laughter streaming in from the parking lot below and the rustlings of other people in the building seem to amplify the silence of my room. In these moments, I can't escape the heaviness of feeling alone, nor can I muster up the energy to go outside and socialize. I find myself paralyzed by the weight of my worries. So I stay in bed, frozen in my thoughts as time keeps passing.

Despite my stagnation, the slant of the setting sun dances in through the windows, giving me its full attention if only I choose to notice. The fading light and the chattering of birds outside pull me back to reality as they seem to whisper, Keep going. So I do. I pick up my Bible and listen closely for the voice of the One who knows me even better than the brick and wood surrounding me. I kneel on the floor next to my bed and talk to Him, letting His love thaw the ice in my mind. His grace seeps into my soul and reminds me that I am His child—fully known and fully loved. I am forever grateful to this room for always turning my attention back to God when my mind strays to faulty paths of doubt and fear.

***

In a few short months, I will take down the tapestries and the string lights. I will clear the shelves, desks, and drawers. I will gather up the rugs, blankets, and books, and close the creaky door behind me for the last time. Everything will be bare again, decorated only by the old holes and scratches—and maybe a few new ones, too. This room won't be mine anymore, and all I will have left are the lessons whispered to me by the walls. But I will fold them up carefully and tuck them away in my heart, striving to live out their wisdom.

Next August, another girl will move into this room and adorn it with her own pictures and books. She will negotiate closet space with a stranger who will hopefully become a friend by the spring. When she wakes up in the morning, the sun will stream through the windows, reminding her to be grateful for a new day, no matter how tired she is. She will come to appreciate the constancy of the creaky bedframe at night. She will spend countless hours studying in this room, but I hope she learns more than what her classes have to offer. I hope she learns about life, about growing and forgiving and standing up for herself and leaning on God. May she open her ears and her heart to the wealth of knowledge these four white walls have to offer.



Quiet Afternoon at North Greenville
by Laura Cervantez



Venice Canal
by Brianna Williamson

Parking Spot
by Blake Petteway

This poem cost me fifty bucks
To write—I parked in an illegal
Spot to linger in a coffee shop.
It seems I always press my luck
When systems try to break my will.
I think that I can break them first—
A test of my immunity, a task
I'm always sure I can fulfill.

For thrill of nakedness and pride,
I've made myself a gambling man.
Feigning confidence with flashy bets,
I fear, becomes a bluff I cannot hide.
I only wanted to enjoy my drink
(It was quite delicious, by the way),
But with quiet dread, my wager waded
Into every thought that I could think.

To write poetry today became a risk—
I'm still unsure which ones make me
Hero and which ones make me villain,
Rebel, irresponsible, or careless.
Am I insubordinate or simply brave?
A defiant and unruly savage?
A foolish free-spirit or a beacon?
A blinded and conniving knave?

Does it even matter if
You would've done the same?

To live within the lines is silhouette;
To live without identifies you wild,
And although I'm tired of being mild,
I'd also hate the house to win my bet.

Moonlight Sonata
by Bella Kuckel



Teapot
by Chloe Peden



Painting of God

by Brianna Williamson



An Ode to Patchwork*
by Savannah Cade

I. Horizon.

With trembling fingers,
I trade my paper planes
For silver steel wings.
Grown little bird,
take flight.
All aboard, steady hum
of my skyward train.
Corners of clouds who curve
like her smile,
just slight.

My storm-cloud eyes twinkle,
eagle heart soars:
“Hi,”
I tip my straw hat
to each pilgrim’s blue face.
My boots, brown and bound
for ’morrow’s old door.
“Why?”
I gaze, and I crave
through window’s blue embrace.

Oh, patchwork fields,
farmer’s labor of thread,
Cropped, woven squares
chosen there.
Spun
In earthbound colors
like brown sugar bread
And dried windowsill herbs,
butterscotch-baked sun.

And when shall we harvest?
What even grows?
What lies on the wild, hazy horizon?

II. Home.

With shivering soul, I crawl
to ancestry’s embrace,
Golden amber memories,
captive and free
As these roaming patterns
stitched now
just for me
(colored cotton comfort).

Sheets wrinkled beneath,
like time’s tattered, bright face.
Like candlelight steam
from home’s hearty dinner,
An old lover’s gift
from grandpapa giver
(a good ghost, grinning).

Corner drape,
draping my dusted old youth.
Edges dance,
dancing with old oaken truth–
Floorboards who hold
my pounding, praying knees.
Floorboards who hold
tears of my sorry heart’s pleas
(drip, drip, dripping from my
chin).

Crafted by callouses,
oh, noble quilt,
Patchwork tucked tight
To quivering child’s chin.
How I long to draw under.

III. Heart.

Oh, my patchwork heart,
quilted young garden
So worn and weary,
so fresh and free.
These shining red stitchings,
stretching to meet me.
Blue and eager,
I sway, I cry,
I bargain:

For a glittering future
(crisp as the creek),
For a pressing past
(sunny, sweet pastries),
But to dance on the plains
of in-between peaks
Is the gift of the present,
wrapped pink for me.



stop and take a deep breath
by Callie Meyerholtz



Antelope Canyon
by Brianna Williamson

Reflections Of Janus, Volume I: An Anthology of The Great Deologues
by Andrew Eaton

Editor's Note:

Janus, most commonly known as the Roman god of thresholds, has found his place among the most prominent philosophers in history, along the lines of Plato and Aristotle. His unique ability to entertain a dialogue with himself sets him apart from the other great thinkers of old.

A rare Roman deity with no distinct Greek equivalent, he nevertheless shows his face(s) throughout history. His image is found spread across various cultures and contexts, and he is often equivocated with the Greek god Hermes. While they are intimately correlated, this assumption is fundamentally flawed. Janus, by his very nature, splits. Hermes, by contrast, joins. Janus sets up thresholds while Hermes crosses them. This makes them complementary, yet opposed in function; thus, Hermes can appear, at times, to be his closest companion, at others, his bitterest foe. Because of his dual nature, these states can occur simultaneously.

Although the majority of the work consists of Janus conversing in dialogue (or perhaps monologue?) with himself, it could be argued the real discourse occurs between Janus and Hermes. Despite the scarcity of verbal encounters between the two, the dialogical (and deological) tension can be felt throughout.

In this volume, I have done my best to clear up any unnecessary confusion while remaining true to the source material. One example of this is the use of alternate spellings of the titular character's name ("Janis" and "Ianus") in order to allow for a smoother reading experience. There is no such distinction in the original texts.

One of the biggest mysteries about the deologues that have puzzled scholars since their discovery is that of the author's identity; due to his split nature, it does not seem likely that Janus would compose such a work detailing his own thoughts. Yet the only probable alternative that presents itself to my mind would be Hermes, and it seems clear that he is not present throughout the entirety of the dialogue. And so, whether Hermes, Janus, or a third, we are left to ask ourselves the following questions: Do the gods divulge their own words? And if so, can we trust them?

— [Andrew Eaton], Psychomythologist

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:
JANUS

SCENE – THE CROSSROADS

BOTH: And so we are again.

IAN: Tell me once more, what is it that you see?

JAN: I see two paths converging into one. There is only one Way, but there is more than one path to get there. Remind me once again, what is revealed to your eyes?

IAN: I see one path diverging into two. They begin from the same point, but they stray from one another, and where they split, it is impossible to follow both. Only one of them can be the Way.

JAN: What is it that gives you such certainty?

IAN: What is a road except a non-place that connects the places of departure and arrival, the origin and the destination? Does one follow a road in order to stay on the road, or in order to reach some defined endpoint? A road holds no value on its own. A path with no destination serves no purpose. It is only the destination that holds intrinsic value. The right road is the one that brings you to the right destination.

JAN: And yet, a destination that cannot be reached is of no use to anyone. Does this not make the road of greater value, in that it is the provider of the destination?

(ENTER TRAVELERS)

JAN: Look at this. There are travelers coming from all different paths, and they will soon reach us. All roads lead here to us. No one makes the decision to come where the roads cross; they all end up here one way or another.

IAN: I do not see what you see. Watch as they make their choice. They can only take one path. Only one will take them to their desired destination.

JAN: I cannot turn to see what you see. While you look, I cannot.

(EXIT TRAVELERS)

IAN: Perhaps we should turn around so that we can both see what the other sees.

JAN: I prefer my current view.

IAN: We cannot see eye-to-eye, but if we could at least swap perspectives, we might gain some insight.

JAN: It is well-said. I comply.

(REFLEXION)

IAN: What is it that you see?

JAN: I still see two paths converging into one. What is revealed to your eyes?

IAN: I still see one path diverging into two. Have we really turned around? Let us turn again.

(REVOLUTION)

BOTH: Nothing changes.

IAN: I do not see what you see.

JAN: I cannot turn to see what you see.

IAN: But who is that man coming up the road?

(ENTER HERMES)

JAN: What does he look like?

IAN: He has the appearance of one who has been traveling for many months, yet he does not look weary. From his crown, his staff, and his feet, there protrude wings. Never before have I seen a traveler's face; always they have their backs to me.

JAN: When will he pass us?

IAN: Any moment now. He is swift, and his face is earnest. I do not know his errand, but he will soon overtake us.

(BEAT)

IAN: There he goes. You shall see him with your own eyes, but his face will be turned away from you.

JAN: You deceive me! I see nothing! Does your traveler bear the helm of Hades? What avails you to speak lies in this way?

IAN: You know I have never told a falsehood of my own will! Perhaps he does possess the helm of Hades, but I saw him clearly. Maybe he is a trickster and is standing beside us.

BOTH: I will turn to see.

(SCISSION)

Horse and Cart*
by Laura Cervantez



Epiphany

“Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee”

-T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday”

A Fish Out Of Water

by Abigail Matson

I was very young when the rain touched my head for the first time.
I had just taken off my new hat when I felt
forceful,
foreign drops -
sick beads of redemption trailing down my temple.
I flailed my arms and kicked my legs.
I shook an angry fist at the sky -
I am not a fish.
I hung my damp head and went about my way.

I was not so small when my gills began to form.
I had just learned about the color gray when I felt
sharp,
poignant knives -
nettling beads of contrition tainting the surface of my skin.
I wore long sweaters so no one saw as
I flailed my arms and kicked my legs.
I shook an angry fist at the sky,
I am not a fish.
I hung my shameful head and went about my way.

I forgot about the rain until it came for my brother.
He was so small -
Was I ever that small?
The water trickled down the side of his face.
He flailed his arms and kicked his legs.
He shook an angry fist at the sky,
Is he a fish?
Am I a fish?
I hung my addled head and went about my way.

I was much older when the drought in my gills made me shudder.
I needed the water from the sky -
freely-chosen,
familiar drops -
sweet beads of sanctification to trail down my temple.
I stood my ground and heeled the dirt.
I opened my cupped hands to the sky,
I am a fish!
When the rain did not fill my hands and crown me an heir,
I hung my desperate head and was greeted by an ev-
er-flowing river.

Seashells

by Linley Nelson

Since I was about three years old, I've collected seashells. My family's garage contains buckets and bags of my treasures from all the beach trips we've taken over the years. Instead of flowers, a large vase in our living room showcases clam, scallop, and mussel shells. A jar filled to the brim with tiny former animal homes sits on my bedroom dresser. In my memories of childhood vacations, I am always standing at the edge of the ocean, scooping up as many shells as I can hold. Often, the shells are broken, but I keep combing the shore because the next one might be perfect.

A couple of years ago, my family took a vacation to Sanibel Island, Florida, because I wanted to experience the beautiful blue water of the Gulf Coast. Sanibel Island is also known as the "seashell capital of the world," so it was no surprise that my love for shell collecting rubbed off on my mom as we took our first steps into the crystal-blue sea. Used to the steep sandbar and battering tides of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, Mom and I were thrilled to find that most of the shells washing up at Sanibel were intact. Every morning, we stood in the surf for hours at a time, scooping up net after net of the ocean's offerings. As each wave brought in a new batch of treasures, we scrambled to secure the brightest and most colorful shells in our nets, shrieking with excitement as we showed each other our finds. In those moments, time stopped, and Mom and I forgot all our worries, content to plunder the ocean's treasure trove like little children.

Humans have loved seashells for hundreds of years. Early Native Americans saw shells as symbols of creation, birth, or renewal (Hinkelman). They are a focal point of ancient Greek and Roman art. In fact, legends say that Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was born from a scallop shell (Allen), and the sea god Triton blew a conch shell like a trumpet to control the tides ("Triton"). Since the 18th and 19th centuries, seashells have been prized for their uniqueness. Enamored with their beauty, English and Chinese merchants began gathering and trading them internationally ("Shell Collecting"). Soon, seashells became a huge resource for human society, as they were used for decorations, tools, musical instruments, and even money (Conniff). New islands were discovered as traders sought productive sources for the industry ("Shell Collecting"). Eventually, they discovered and exploited the most mollusk-friendly locations: muddy, rocky beaches and coral reefs (Rosenberg). Greedy traders began capturing live animals from the beaches and harvesting their shells, decimating coastal invertebrate populations. Once useful, shell collecting became detrimental to the environment. Ultimately, society began to regard shells as more commonplace, and the seashell trade waned ("Shell Collecting"). Today, many people—like my mom and me—still collect seashells as a hobby.

This habit may seem a little morbid, considering how seashells are made. Special cells in soft-bodied animals secrete proteins and minerals that form a hard shell to protect the creatures' otherwise delicate exteriors from the rough water and ocean floor ("How Are Seashells Made?"). When these animals die, their soft bodies decompose, leaving behind the intricate seashells coveted by beachgoers everywhere. To put it simply, seashells are a final trace of existence, a graveyard gift from the spineless sea creatures of the world. Most shell collectors—known as conchologists—are aware of these rather disturbing facts, so why are we still compelled to hold onto every calcified and colorful specimen that tumbles to shore during our walks on the beach?

Interestingly, seashell hunting is proven to have several benefits (Tangella). For some people—including me—collecting shells relieves stress. Paying attention to the treasures that wash ashore reduces anxiety by shifting our attention to the present moment (Tangella). Plus, seashells are educational. They offer insights into the history and lifestyles of the creatures that once lived in them (Tangella). Finally, seashells allow us to connect with nature and appreciate the world around us, which can improve mental health and overall well-being (Tangella). Evidently, the appeal of shell hunting extends far beyond vibrant colors and interesting shapes.

Personally, I am drawn to seashells because they are all different. True, they come in categorized shapes and types, but no two shells are identical. A handful of scallops may be roughly the same size, but they'll usually have distinct textures and shades, ranging from ridge-filled to smooth and snow-white to sunset pink. By the time a load of seashells arrives at my feet in the shallow surf, each one has made its own unique journey through time and space. Beaten by tireless waves and buried by unrelenting sand, these shells have long outlived the organisms they were made to protect. Their colors and cracks and holes and imperfections tell the stories of their existence, and I can't help but feel that—in some ways—seashells are like people.

Each person has their own set of quirks, and we all have a story that shapes us. Like seashells, we sweep in and out of each other's lives with the tides of circumstance. Sometimes —if we're lucky—we pick up a few special individuals to carry with us long after the beach trip is over. Some friends stay close for years to come while others are carried out with the waves. And some are like the treasures filling the buckets in our garages and the jars on our desks: they are constant reminders of how beautiful life can be, no matter how long it's been since we found them.

Despite the uncertain waters of college and adulthood, a handful of my friends from high school have remained as special to me as the seashells I collected on my trip to Sanibel Island. Although we don't see each other very often anymore, these friends are still important to me. A few months back, a chance encounter with two of them led to an hour-long reunion in the local Walmart. Each year, we exchange random Snapchat memories from football games, bus rides, and band class. Some of them still remember to text me at exactly 12:01 a.m. on my birthday to celebrate the moment I was born. We haphazardly plan summer lunch dates around work schedules, frantic to see each other before we all head back to college. Like my shell collection, my circle of friends reminds me that we don't always have to be on exactly the same wavelength to appreciate each other.

Like ocean tides, life can feel turbulent and unreliable. However, as certainly as the waves gift us with seashells, our experiences give us special people who remind us to appreciate the beauty of being alive. These friends manage to encourage us no matter what happens or how much time passes. Just like the one-of-a-kind keepsakes we carry home from the beach, the people we meet throughout life are all valuable in their own distinct ways. The beauty is in noticing their qualities and choosing to appreciate them for who they are. No one's journey through life is the same, but we all get bumped, cracked, buried, or chipped at some point and decide to keep tumbling through the tide. Seashells remind us that we might as well love each other along the way.

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Canyon Sunset
by Brianna Williamson





Black Irises
by Ace Character

Finding Orion

by Abigail Matson

I found Orion on the grainy shores
after what felt like years of
waiting, searching, and praying.
I walked through blood, sweat, and fears
to find the solace of his sword
and the hope of his word.
Each night I looked up, hoping to see
the sign of his belt,
his bow and arrow pointing back towards me.

I traded my truth, my freedom, my wants,
to journey to his domain and realm of renaissance.
My knuckles bled as I
pushed and scraped,
pulled and scratched.
Upwards and onwards I scaled and scaled,
my fingers slipping against the glittering veil.
Propelling on, I strained up the firmament,
my arms heavy with each desperate movement.
I clawed my way upward,
to search Heavens and sky,
telescopically offering the vision of my eyes.

I thought I saw Alnilam, the center of truth,
so I gripped with my might,
Bit with my tooth.
But the enamel of my hands gave way to his false fire,
and I fell from great heights,
from the depths of desire.
Knocked into the blue expanse of the sea below,
I treaded through the currents, the toils, and the snares
onto the grainy beach I left in search of celestial stairs.

The sand scratched my back and aggravated my scars,
reminding me of the sacrifices I had made on his part–
Were they all in vain, made to an impossible cause?
Was the stardust I trusted an intangible facade?
I opened my eyes, frustrated and hurt,
and looked up to the Heavens, vision clouded with dirt.
Up in the sky sat Orion in all his light,
three little stars guiding lost sailors in the night.
I screamed at the sky and begged him to speak,
but the absence of his words brought me to my knees.

* * * * *

But ending the silence after what felt like four hundred years,
a loud noise quieted my fears.
A voice from beyond rang as a shock to the ground;
it shook that slippery firmament
and filled the sea with resound.
The water splashed up, and Orion grew damp,
smiling back to me with the glow of a lamp.
He smiled and guided, not in smug declaration
but in the awe of the voice from whom he was created.
The truth of Alnilam was never his own light,
but the One to whom he directs,
The One I never offered my sight.
I fell to my face, the sand filling my pores–
This rocky terrain has always been Yours.
I found Orion on the grainy shore,
and he pointed me to the Light of the world.

The Warmth of Fire
by Laura Cervantez

I never grew up with a fireplace—
that warm center of the home.
My family never told stories around
a fire on Friday nights.

We had no hearth to hang our stockings,
no crackling fire on Christmas morn.
And we couldn't add a fireplace,
for I can't recall the last house we owned.

But I've roasted s'mores in American backyards
and warmed my hands over a bonfire in Prague.
I've heard fireworks go off in Portugal
and sung Turkish carols with a candle in hand.

I've felt the blazing sun of Dubai in August
and walked the fire-lit streets of Cappadocia's winter.
I've seen birthday candles blown out in England
and gathered with friends 'round a firepit in Greece.

So maybe my home has no fireplace,
maybe the living room was often cold.
But you cannot tell me my life lacks warmth—
I've felt the warmth of fire around the world.



Brickell
by Abigail Wilson

A Man and His Car

by Kyle Jackson

Dramatis Personae

The man: A middle-aged psychiatrist, wearing a crumpled, white button-up shirt and a loose, black tie around his neck. He has a five o'clock shadow, a thin mustache, and a widow's peak.

His car: A 1962 Chevrolet Corvette Roman Red with a black interior and convertible top. The voice is vaguely feminine.

His wife: A middle-aged nurse with deep creases, a serious face, and kind eyes. She is wearing a bonnet and a flowy summer dress adorned with flowers.

Madeline: the daughter.

SETTING: We are in a garage that is completely empty apart from a car. An industrial-sized fluorescent light illuminates the empty room. It flickers occasionally throughout the scene. Something is not quite right here.

AT RISE: THE MAN sits alone in his car, staring ahead blankly. His eyes are dull and dim, and his breathing is uneven. He is slouched slightly in the driver's seat with no seatbelt. There is no sound until HIS CAR's headlights glow and come to life.

THE MAN: (suddenly alert, sits up straight) Who's there? I'm armed!

HIS CAR: (the voice echoes from different places around the garage) Not to worry, it's me.

THE MAN: (relaxes again) Oh, good. I thought my wife had already sold your motor.

HIS CAR: She did, but the deal isn't till tomorrow, which means we can celebrate our special day today.

THE MAN: (looks confused and slightly dazed) Oh, yes. (his voice sounds far away) That's right. How could I forget? It's our anniversary today. Do you remember the first time we met?

HIS CAR: Like it was yesterday. There I was, paint chipped, one of my headlights smashed in, wheels on cinder blocks, my top immodestly slashed—destined for the junkyard. And then you.

THE MAN: Yes, I asked the man how much, and he told me he'd pay me to take you home. (imitating a gruff voice) This piece of junk? Take 'er, she ain't worth the scrapping cost. She's missing a motor, too, so you'll need a tow. Luckily, I offer just the service.

HIS CAR: (also imitating a gruff voice) I'll even make the tow half-priced if you get rid of this trash right now.
(both start to laugh heartily)

HIS CAR: (Cont.) And you were as good as your word. Do you remember how your wife looked when she saw me in the driveway?

THE MAN: Horrified, she couldn't believe I spent even a hundred dollars on the tow for you. But she didn't see you like I see you. Boy, did she light into me that night. I was sleeping on the couch for two weeks. We barely made rent that month because of it.

HIS CAR: (softly) Do you ever regret it?

THE MAN: Regret? I regret many things, but you aren't one of them.

HIS CAR: (sniffling softly) Think of how your life might have turned out if you hadn't spent so much money fixing me up.

THE MAN: Well, I would have been less happy. Think of everything that happened between us. My wife delivered our first child right here in the backseat. That was the happiest moment of my life. Can you imagine if Madeline had been born in a hospital? If her first introduction in life was blinding white light, strange men standing over her, and the smell of antiseptic? No, thank you.

HIS CAR: That's true. It was the happiest day of my life. And all the family trips we took together.

THE MAN: I remember the first time we went to the beach on that surfing trip. I had never seen waves that high. But you were determined to learn to wakeboard.

HIS CAR: (laughing lightly) I should have known better; I'm not exactly the most buoyant thing to exist. I still can't believe how stubborn I am.

THE MAN: (also laughing) You come by it honestly.

(THE MAN begins to cough)

HIS CAR: (concerned) Are you alright?

THE MAN: (between gasping breaths) I'm fine.

HIS CAR: You are? Then why are we here?

THE MAN: What do you mean? Where else would we be?

HIS CAR: Outside, on the road, wind in our hair. Destination unknown—like the old days.

THE MAN: I'm too tired to drive.

HIS CAR: Why not let me drive us somewhere then? I'm pretty good at it, and I had a great teacher.

THE MAN: (firmly) No. (softer now) No, I just want to sit here and relax for a little bit.

HIS CAR: Busy day at the office?

THE MAN: I suppose. I've cut back on clients. Getting too old to listen to people complain about their lives for eight hours a day.

HIS CAR: You've thought about retiring then?

THE MAN: I am retiring.

HIS CAR: Now?

THE MAN: No, later. Or wait. (he pauses) Why not now? I deserve it after twenty years.

HIS CAR: What about everyone else? What do they deserve?

THE MAN: Who cares? It isn't my fault. They need to learn to get over it.

HIS CAR: Who says it's your fault?

THE MAN: I do.

HIS CAR: But you just said it wasn't?

THE MAN: (annoyed) It wasn't or isn't. I don't care.

HIS CAR: Don't care? Or don't know?

THE MAN: Neither or either or whichever. Can we talk about something else?

HIS CAR: What would you like to talk about?

THE MAN: Are you afraid of tomorrow?

THE MAN: (Cont.) Why would I be afraid? Why would you ask me that?

HIS CAR: No need to get upset, you asked me.

THE MAN: I apologize; I suppose we can all be a little irrational when we are angry.

HIS CAR: Are you?

THE MAN: Am I what?

HIS CAR: Mad.

THE MAN: Mad?

HIS CAR: M. A. D. Three down: enraged; greatly provoked or irritated; angry.

THE MAN: No one likes a show-off.

HIS CAR: (laughing) You never could beat me at crosswords.

THE MAN: (laughing) No, no, I never could. But I did enjoy those Saturday mornings with you.

(He begins coughing again)

(There is silence as HIS CAR waits for THE MAN to stop)

HIS CAR: I'm not afraid.

THE MAN: What?

HIS CAR: You asked me if I was afraid of tomorrow. I didn't get a chance to answer it earlier. I'm not afraid.

THE MAN: Why?

HIS CAR: I have all our memories. Not to mention, the money will help you and your wife retire sooner. Why would I be afraid of that? I can't think of a nobler purpose.

THE MAN: Think of what else you could do if we didn't have to sell your motor.

HIS CAR: Think of all the other lives you saved.

THE MAN: (laughs bitterly) Not the one that mattered.

HIS CAR: Think of all the ones you did and can. You should reconsider your retirement.

(Another pause)

THE MAN: I wish I had called you.

HIS CAR: I know. Will I see you tomorrow?

THE MAN: (nodding his head) Yeah.

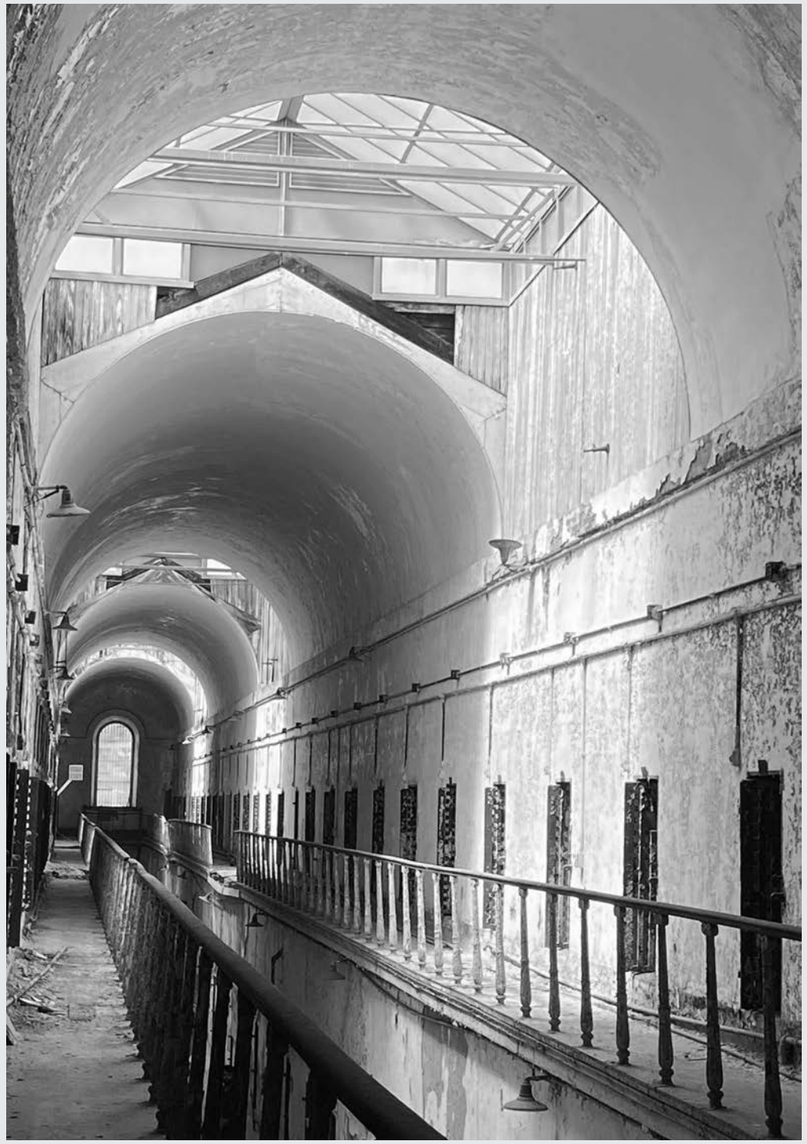
(THE MAN steps out of the car, waving his hand in front of his face, coughing. He stumbles over to a keypad and opens the garage door. A large volume of smoke pours into the audience. Sounds of a car parking can be heard, and HIS WIFE steps to meet him with her arms full of groceries.)

HIS WIFE: (waving her hands in front of her face, coughing) Did you start smoking again? You oughta know better than anyone that it'll kill you. Put out whatever that is and help me with the groceries.

(THE MAN walks off-stage; the curtain remains open as all other lights go out, leaving HIS CAR as the only source of light. The headlights dim, leaving the audience in total darkness for two minutes)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)



Skylight
by Abigail Wilson

Sinkholes
by Blake Petteway

Sometimes at midnight, without warning, a sinkhole
would yawn—a gape, a cave, a mouth beneath

Nearby mainstreet, city park, and—in dreadful dreams,
I often feared—the pine rows embedded behind

Ruptures warping human poise to ruin, craters keeping
the mind awake to danger, scourge—what peril

Then, there was chalk, cucumber seed, a trampoline,
rich flesh of plums, a paper plane, manatees for pets,
pollinators, wooden castle, dragons in the clouds,
wagon wheel, aboveground pool, a sprinkler drinking

And underneath grass clippings in August, was the
earth-face yielding to itself? Were there gutters

Were there sovereign forces slinking between health
and collapse, between sap and choppings, writing

And if the ground gave way, could we reclaim it—with
sport and stringed instrument and festival? With

my hometown:

my own backyard;

could befall me?

up the water table.

and wellsprings?

our history?

remembrance?

The Boat Ramp and All Its Wild Creatures

by Blake Petteway

"Don't forget to grab your nets," Dad said.

My sister, Kaitlyn, and I leapt out the backseat of his Honda Pilot and armed ourselves with the cheap mesh attached to a wooden handle. We raced to the end of the pavers, our water shoes slapping the concrete like fat rain. I could almost feel Dad's soft smile behind us, hiding under his scratchy beard.

Dad had a knack for making normal things abnormally fun. He always muted commercials and scripted the actors' lines, raising or lowering his voice when appropriate. He wrote jokes in my sandwich bag every day for school. He invented games like tickle trivia, which despite the torture of being quizzed breathless, was my favorite challenge. Thus, when he conceived the idea to scoop hand nets at the river by the boat ramp a few minutes from our house, nobody was surprised when it became family ritual.

"I'm gonna catch the most crawdads," I claimed.

"No, you're not!" Kaitlyn very cleverly contested.

"I'm gonna catch infinity amount." A shrewd smile crawled up my flushed cheeks.

"Well, I'm gonna catch infinity times infinity!"

We continued on like that, until there were no infinities left to count. A child's aspirations deal only with intangible figures.

Kaitlyn and I plunged into the still, murky river water—refreshing despite all the natural debris. We investigated any sudden ripple, suspicious of prey. Waterbugs glided across the surface, disrupting its quiet equilibrium. Crawfish peeked from behind long seaweed like curtains. Minnows darted in and out of scope. I stalked them as if their capture was my life's sole purpose. My gaze, my breathing, my pulse, every strand of my attention was immersed into this underwater cityscape, surging with vitality and hustle.

Fishing, even with a net, is an art. Dad was an angler himself, so we trusted his advice.

"They get scared if you make any sudden movements or noises," he said.

As I think back on these suggestions, I wonder if they were more truly the desperate endeavors of a father in search of some peace and quiet. Either way, Dad never threatened to leave us out of a good time, even at the expense of serenity.

But these evenings were beautiful in their own right, in their immortal displays of the glorious Floridian landscape. I was usually busy studying the water, dissecting its functions with my surgical eyes. But sometimes, the scene was just too peaceful to miss, and I'd look up. Look up and watch a white heron gracefully take flight. Notice the light fracture in the limbs of heavy, elderly oaks. Marvel at the delicate coils of Spanish moss swinging on a breeze. Feel the sun crawl across my face as it burrowed into its hole below the waterline. If anything could distract me from my mission, it was that.

"Alright, one more," Dad said. "It's getting dark."

I hovered on the slippery rocks cocooned in algae, ready to lurch. I swiped my net upstream through a cluster of papery grass. Atop the sludge of rocks and shells and mud was a big, ugly crawdad. Caught ya!—you're not going anywhere.

I dropped my crawdad into our white five-gallon bucket, where he thrashed and snapped like he knew he was too wild a creature to be confined for long.

* * *

I was 17 when the world pressed pause. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government issued a nationwide quarantine beginning in March of 2020, a period of social distancing which would linger for the next two years. The effects of such isolation on a uniquely social species can only be so ambitiously represented by statistics, and as a member of the great human network, I would attest that numbers can't adequately speak to the emptiness it spawned—the new permutations of infinity it suggested. We grasp for connection as it is when restaurants and sports arenas and schools are open, and there is no real substitute for the leeway to navigate these social waterways. The quarantine—though absolutely necessary to preserve human life—took a toll on all of us. We are wild creatures, and we can't shuffle around in five-gallon buckets forever.

A few months into the lockdown, after many Facetime calls, my friends and I began plotting a location where we could safely meet up. I suggested the High Springs boat ramp. We began assembling there weekly, sitting in the trunks of our cars and eating leftovers from Tupperware as the sun slithered behind the moss. We reminisced on our mischief at school, told fresh stories from home, and deliberated recent cultural changes—wringing out all that our minds were weary of holding. We were relearning how to be human, having taken some time to observe from a distance all that distinction entails. The boat ramp became our safe haven from a confusing world, a world that kept turning and evolving despite our extraction from it. The world that was leaving us behind.

One evening, we walked down the boat ramp, pebbles cracking like eggshells beneath us, and skipped stones across the river. I had almost forgotten the fishy stench of algae broiling in thick humidity. Even with that stagnant smell, it was a beautiful night. Mingled with the bellowing chorus of frogs and the weak harmonics of lapping currents and the soprano resonance of mosquitos around my face, folded within all of it, were my thoughts—my loud, pervasive thoughts having finally found a stage to perform.

Balancing on the slimy green rocks at the boat ramp's edge, I pondered all the imports and exports of my life—the friends who trailed in and out, the memories that rippled inconsistently, all the times I scooped my net and drew up nothing. I wondered at the fragility of life, how just one big event could splash into quiet waters and disrupt the peace. I feared that something was silently hunting all of us, looming above the water's ceiling, waiting to sweep us all away.

But in my heart, despite all its melancholy thoughts, I was net-fishing again with Dad and Kaitlyn. I was holding up wild creatures, and then learning to let them go. Learning to watch them graft back into their busy, complex network. Learning to breathe and smell and feel and marvel at the beautiful world. Learning to be.

As Stars Burn
by Savannah Cade

“Why love? Why love?” asks the sea otter’s twirl.
“No answer,” sings the tulip’s tight tango,
No firefly’s game gives gleaming pearl.
No hint from icy shimmers, sculptures slow.

Our ghosts are spinning pink, with lips entwined,
Quiet confections of tongue’s affection.
Sugar-glazed eyes, candy hearts breaking mine.
“No answer,” says our hustled connections.

“Here!” In dark red tears of art museums
Our bending, bleeding hearts beg by design.
Because rich stars will strum, desire will come.
Bones who bear love’s bidding mirror divine.

To soften the stench of cupid’s charade,
“Let’s love, let’s love,” like cherry pie, homemade.

And why? Well, because, in the way the Earth orbits and the stars burn, we must.



Nature’s Pathway
by Brianna Williamson

The Evidence of Redemption*
by Linley Nelson

Scared circles she danced to disguise her flaws.
Heart’s heaviness hit her like harsh hailstones.
Worn, weary, worrisome weight on her bones.
No more would she live locked in lies and laws.
Fierce, fervent faith tore her from life’s claws,
Reborn, no further forced to be a clone.
She plants herself sternly, never alone.
Repelled by such freedom, her fear withdraws.

With head held high and heart endowed with hope,
She dances now in light, purposeful lines,
For she knows that grace guides her from the slope.
She trusts in her Creator’s careful designs.
In Him will she rest, for He holds life’s scope,
Giving greatest grace that heals and refines.

"Vienna"
by Linley Nelson

Slow down, you crazy child. You're so ambitious for a juvenile, but then if you're so smart, tell me why are you still so afraid?

I was fourteen the first time I heard these lyrics in Billy Joel's song, "Vienna." It was a Saturday, and I was sitting on the bleachers of a crowded high school gym. I had come with my parents to watch my older brother perform at an indoor percussion competition, and we stayed to watch his girlfriend in the winter guard contest that followed. I remember thinking how absurd it was that so many people were interested in giving up their weekend to watch teenagers pound drums and spin flags for hours on end while sitting in a too-cold gym on too-hard bleachers. Eventually, I gave up trying to understand. Annoyed at my brother for choosing to participate in an extracurricular activity and at my parents for making me come watch, I buried my nose in a book and wished to be anywhere else.

I only looked up again when I heard the hauntingly romantic piano notes that open "Vienna" playing over the speakers. I watched attentively as a group of girls in gold dresses took the floor and began their performance. Looking back, I don't remember any of their choreography, but I do remember how entranced I was by their song choice. As I listened to Billy Joel sing, *Where's the fire, what's the hurry about? You'd better cool it off before you burn it out*, I felt like he was speaking directly to me, asking me why I felt the need to grow up so quickly. Suddenly, I felt a little guilty about the I-don't-need-my-parents-anymore mentality I had developed a couple months earlier and realized I had only a few more years living under their roof, a thought which deeply humbled me. Apart from the emotional connection I felt to the lyrics of "Vienna," the music was beautiful, and I immediately downloaded the song and listened to it on repeat. I had never felt quite so understood.

Admittedly, "Vienna" isn't actually about an eighth grader with an attitude problem. While visiting his father in Austria, Billy Joel noticed that the culture there is slower and more relaxed than in the United States. Afterward, he wrote "Vienna" to point out the unnecessarily fast pace of life in American society. Ultimately, the song is a reminder that we shouldn't pressure ourselves to figure out life so quickly; there is time to relax and to simply be. Joel's message has impacted me significantly over the last several years, and I think "Vienna" will always be one of my favorite songs.

When I started high school, I immediately shed the typical middle-school desire to be grown up and independent. Gone were the days of thinking my parents didn't understand me. I couldn't solve everything by retreating to my bedroom to write in my diary. Wearing my favorite black hoodie and rolling my eyes at everyone no longer made me feel invincible and in charge. Suddenly, I felt small and alone.

Plagued by fears about summer jobs and college applications, I wished more than anything to be back in kindergarten, where my biggest concern was keeping track of my library books. I worried about everything: the way I looked, what other people thought of me, whether my friends actually liked me; getting my driver's license, giving class presentations, passing AP US History—literally everything. But through all the stress I faced, "Vienna" was there. After particularly difficult days at school, I found solace in the soft drum beats and warm piano chords, accompanied by the reassuring lyrics, *Slow down, you're doin' fine. You can't be everything you wanna be before your time.* Whenever I was stressed, I would play these lines over and over again in my head. Since then, Joel's words have become a kind of mantra for me when I feel overwhelmed about the future.

In a few months, I will finish college and face the daunting task of starting a career and learning to navigate the world on my own. The message of "Vienna" feels more important now than ever before. At a time when the pressure of finding my purpose seems to be closing in on me like dark storm clouds, I put in my headphones and focus on Billy Joel's reminder: *you can get what you want, or you can just get old.* To me, this line emphasizes the importance of blazing my own trail. I don't want to be like the girl I was in high school, frozen in fear of other people's judgement. I want to explore and make a mess and fall and scrape my knees and keep climbing mountains until I find the thing that I was made to do. I don't want to be forced into somebody else's mold or timeframe, and I think that's what Billy Joel was thinking about when he wrote "Vienna"—that you can't expect to be happy if you're always trying to please everyone else. You have to take a moment to breathe and appreciate where you are right now—and that's exactly what I do every time I hear those gentle opening piano notes begin to sway.

Coil Pot
by Rebecca Cribb



Versions of Us

by Macy Johnson

So often we
Measure our lives
In grandiosity,
Disregarding what is clothed
In mere simplicity.

But when I look around my kitchen,

There's the cutlery we used
For laughter over spaghetti
And overlapping history,
And the pan of cookies
That I iced sloppily
For my parents' anniversary.

That's where I stood when I realized
My shirt had turned both my arms blue,
And the countertop I slammed into
At 2 AM once, texting you.

This knife slices cheddar
For my sandwich every day,
And in the sink, spoons try desperately
To wash themselves away.

There's probably still glitter
Somewhere on this hardwood floor,
From when we all participated
In a not-so-friendly war.

I remember opening that window
When no one turned off the stove,
And when that table leg almost broke
My little sister's nose.

There's the seat where my mother
Has so often cut my hair,
And the shoes that walked into your life
And left part of me there.

It's staggering to think
About completely normal things—

Like spoons that streamline water
Toward my face above the sink,
Like midnight conversations
And the knife that chops my cheese,
The table leg, the cookie pan,
Countertops that make me bleed,
The window and the wood that tethers
Ever moving feet—

All of this memorializes
Our most unfiltered selves,
Like recipes bound firmly
In cookbooks upon a shelf.

Remembered but uncaptured,
Here lie such versions of us
That linger still
In bits and pieces,
Caught inside life's rush.

Standing by the weathered stairwell,
I almost feel as though
I still hear
Distant echoes
Of all
Who have loved me so.

Epiphany
by Aubrey Winstead

Ideas are not killed
without cost.
In the cool spark,
mind meets pen,
meets paper, then
bludgeoned with eraser's
hurried mark.
But the word!
Ricochets through
tangled webs,
trapped in crevices
of neurons and nerve.
We ensure,
foolishly seeking certainty,
the thought is never
heard.
After the war,
they lay us in earth.
But the word,
once *it* is born,
refuses return to dirt.

Feelings
by Bella Kuckel



The Easter Dress
by Lindsay Evatt

Royal robes, set aside
Then naked, you were born.
Wrapped in strips of cloth
Covering your human form.

Born of a woman, I too arrived
Though royalty I couldn't claim.
Born to sin, soul enslaved,
Clothed in utter shame.

Royal robes, mockingly given
Then naked, you were stripped.
Wrapped with a flesh-tearing whip,
Covering sins with blood that dripped.

Allowing my sins to be my dress
Was very becoming to the world.
But you looked on me with eyes of love,
And a desire for a new dress unfurled.

For blood-drenched robes, they cast their lots
Then naked, your last breath.
Wrapped in strips of cloth again,
Covering the stench of death.

Ah, but death couldn't hold you!
The grave, unable to contain.
You died and rose for all mankind,
Making a way for a wardrobe change.

Royal robes, now regained
Then naked, my soul laid bare.
Wrapped in your love and forgiveness,
Covered in grace, scandalously unfair.

I only brought my robe of filth.
I had nothing else to wear.
But you exchanged your robe for mine
Now righteous, I'm declared.

Royal robes, eternity's attire
Naked, I'll be no more.
Wrapped in splendor beyond compare
Covered in Jesus, completely restored.

Another Vertebrae Breaks
by Macy Johnson

Like the flowers,
I am unsure whether
The rain will come soon enough.
If provision teeters
On a ledge
And sometimes drifts like dust,
Or if it lifts
Like a monarch
Fluttering
On steady wings,
Toward a sight unseen,
Certain of its trajectory.

Is the lengthening of my spine
Something I can urge along?
If I concentrate,
Will the discs align—
Nicely structured, strong?
Jutting out at perfect angles
That suit my specific taste?

Perfectionism's contours
Are not easily erased.

My shovel clangs
An echo in my ears
Sometimes,
When I try to carve tunnels,
Plant fresh crops—
And I grumble:
Puddles
Can't soak
Into sheet rock!

All too easily,
I start to think
That these tendons
Are meant to untangle
At my teasing—
Forgetting the records show
That I snap bone
More often
Than I stretch it
Into something pleasing.

Still,
I regularly blister in the sun
Planting pennies,
Chasing my own ends,
My ramrod spine
Hell-bent.

Then I sulk
When the stones
That fall from the sky
Don't build a foundation
All by themselves,
Or a shelter
Under which I could stand;
Simplistic,
Predictable,
Easy to understand.

Another vertebrae
Breaks
Between my fingers—
It's a relief
That no butterfly
Relies
On these two hands.

Because time and again,
I have been seen
Expecting too much
From a limited thing
With parameters,
And scope, and boundaries—
A word,
A glimpse,
A moment;
Me.

Time and again,
I put my faith
In such a temporal peace.

Blood leaks
Skin tears
Joints dislocate
Fear stares
Dust gathers
Shovels break
And stones continue to fall
From the sky.

Rain,
Rain,
Rain,
I cry.

Yet what shadows
Might still cloud my eye
As I curse
The dry and cracking earth,
As stones keep
Drip-
Dropping,
Plummeting and
Plopping,
Into my lap
My cup
My well
My tap?
Like they belong
In the places where
Water ought to be
(At least,
According to me).

I am resistant to the idea
That patience
Is a part
Of my physiology.

Whatever I try to forecast,
The rain might not come
Soon enough
At all,
Or maybe it will drop deafeningly
Until I'm rising
With the waves
Or sinking
Below them
Ungraciously.

In either case,
I remain the girl
Who grips her spine
In shaking hands
While the butterflies flutter
Northward,
Unworried.

So, really,
Who am I to say
Which outcome
I should be preferring?
Or what
The heavens
Might be stirring,
Whether I'm dripping
Or dry as a bone?

Mission Statement

The purpose of The Mountain Laurel is to produce a collection of prose, poetry, and visual art that is both technically sound in craftsmanship and creative in content. In pursuing this purpose, the goal of The Mountain Laurel is to reflect the creativity of God by exhibiting works that capture universal human experience. The first act of God recorded is the act of creation; The Mountain Laurel strives to demonstrate the creative power with which God has endowed humans.

In creating, the Christian artist faces the difficulty of portraying human experience and conveying the truths of Christianity honestly, whether implicitly or explicitly. To do so, the artist must represent not only beauties, but also consequences of the fallen world, including evil actions and behaviors, because evil is part of reality. In the same way, the artist must be consistent with the moral truths of Scripture, which include concepts of a moral universe, struggle between right and wrong, and the flawed nature of both good and evil characters in need of redemption.

Embedded within these concepts are moments of grace where a character within the work of art can choose to accept redemption offered, delight in truth and beauty, or empathize with those experiencing suffering and pain. By utilizing these concepts, the artist is able to mirror such stories and poetry as the book of Job, The Psalms, and The Song of Solomon. In short, Christian art is not Christian because it refers to the Bible and teaches morality; it is Christian because it faithfully communicates through artistic media the nature of God, His creation, and the experience of humanity in a world it was not made for. It is this art that we offer to readers of The Mountain Laurel, with our prayer that God will use this publication to encourage, inspire, and restore.

Selection Process

The Mountain Laurel student editors and staff evaluated each selection, using a blind judging process in accordance with specific criteria. For literary submissions, staff members looked for creativity, continuity, appropriate use of grammar, prowess in the work's genre (poetry, fiction, nonfiction), and the writer's command of the English language.

For visual art submissions, staff members not only looked for creativity and diversity but also for the artist's expertise in capturing an image, the appealing use of color and design, and inner meaning beyond the viewer's first impression. With all submissions, staff members determined whether the work was suitable according to the standards of North Greenville University. After reading/viewing all submissions, student editors and staff rated each on a scale from 1 to 5. Pieces marked 1 or 2 portrayed the best qualities of each genre, while pieces marked 3 or below exhibited varying degrees of improvement needed. Selections published are those that received the best marks and required few essential changes.

Staff and Credits

Faculty Advisers:
Hayley De Gonzalez - Art
Haley Gambrell - Literature

Editors:
Kyle Jackson
Macy Johnson
Abigail Matson
Blake Petteway

Staff:
Samantha Acker
Savannah Cade
Laura Cervantez
Renee Drake
Andrew Eaton
Haviland Graham
Caylee Hayes
Abigail Hepner
Ayran Lee
Isabelle Lutzio
Erin Mole
Linley Nelson
Chloe Peden
Lydia Scott
Natalie Taylor
Aubrey Winstead

Judging Results

Pieces honored with 1st, 2nd, 3rd place or Honorable Mentions were selected for special recognition by judges knowledgeable in their respective fields (photography, traditional media art, poetry, prose). Judges received coded literary or visual art files devoid of artist names and judged according to their own established standards. Award-winning pieces will be denoted with an asterisk (*) within the book.

Prose Results:

1st Place: “La Robe de Chagrin,” Cecelia Sundell
2nd Place: “Cutting the Orange Umbilical Cord,” Abigail Hepner
3rd Place: “Talking Shadows,” Natalie Taylor

Poetry Results:

1st Place: “Ode to Patchwork,” Savannah Cade
2nd Place: “Picking,” Blake Petteway
3rd Place: “The Dark Side of the Mirror,” Andrew Eaton
Honorable Mentions: “Reminders of You,” by Abby Matson and “Evidence of Redemption,” by Linley Nelson

Art Results:

1st Place: “Into the Light” by Brianna Williamson
2nd Place: “Horse and Cart” by Laura Cervantez
3rd Place: “Young Life” by Noah Carter

Judging Bios

Prose Judge:

Alicia Looper holds her BA in English from North Greenville University, an MA from Clemson University in English Literature, and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Converse University. Her work has appeared in *Dillydoun Review* and *Months to Years*. She currently teaches 8th grade ELA at Pickens Middle School. Before her time in K12 education, she spent 14 years as an instructor in the English Department at NGU. When she isn’t writing lesson plans and trying to learn the latest lingo of her students, she likes to read, take care of her chickens, and watch *Judge Judy*.

Poetry Judge:

Sarah Bailey is the Content Advisor and Lead Writer at Grace Church, a family of local congregations in the Upstate of South Carolina. She is passionate about using storytelling in ministry and the power of sticky words. A native South Carolinian, Bailey lives in Lyman with her husband and two children. In her free time, she can be found listening to audiobooks or planning a family adventure.

Art Judge:

Amber DeLynn Hopla is a professional photographer, hailing from the great state of South Carolina. She received her Bachelor’s Degree, specializing in Photography, from Francis Marion University. She also took courses on web design, graphic design, and ceramics. Amber founded Carolina Moments Photography after graduating college and does a variety of photography work. Her specialties include children, families, and weddings. Her main goal, as a photographer, is relaxation for her clients. Her view is that when clients are relaxed, their best personalities will shine through.

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