



YAWP

bentonville west
vol. 3 - 2021-22

Yawp

Volume 3

2021-22

Bentonville West High School

Centerton, Arkansas

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of
my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself, 52"

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Editor's Notes

Self-expression, the connecting and sharing of emotions and ideas with others, lies at the very core of what it means to be human. The Yawp Literary Magazine offers an outlet for students to express themselves creatively with the world. However, after reading countless written pieces and seeing them impact an audience firsthand, I've come to understand that the true beauty of self-expression lies not only in the opportunity it gives to connect and share with others, but also in the opportunity it gives both author and audience to reflect.

The written word can be anything an author intends: a portal to entirely foreign and intriguing worlds, a looking glass through which one analyzes their own world in a new and thought-provoking way, a silver mirror through which we unmask our truest selves. Creative expression inevitably leads to some form of reflection, whether inward or outward. In order to grow as a person or as a society, this reflection is essential.

While reading through and experiencing this magazine, I ask readers to be completely open to the pieces held inside. Let these pieces wander your mind, let them provoke emotions that stir within you, let them inspire you to reflect. Reader, enjoy.

- Sophie Simmons, Co-Editor, 2021-22

The connection that is formed between an author and their own piece is one comparable to no other. Different from this, but powerful in its own regard, is the connection between a piece of art and the viewer. That's the beauty of art; it can mean whatever the viewer needs it to mean at any particular moment in time. An emotion that the author might be feeling so intensely in the process of creation might be one that is completely different from the one that is clawing at the heart of the viewer as they consume the piece in its entirety, and that is okay.

As you immerse yourself in this publication, reflect on the emotions these pieces evoke and allow yourself to respond in a way you see fit. Whether you submitted a piece, are an enjoyer of art, or maybe both, thank you for making this literary magazine possible. I hope you enjoy the time you spend with this magazine as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

- Paige Weston, Co-Editor, 2021-22

The theme of this year's literary magazine is **reflection**.

Reflection [*ri-flek-shuhn*]: a thought occurring in consideration or meditation.

As you flip through the pages of this book, we ask you to be still, open your mind, and reflect. Look inward and honestly self-reflect. Look outward and reflect on the people, places, and circumstances around you. And pay attention to the moments where the division between the internal and the external gets a bit blurred.

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Poetry

Anonymous

Poetry is beautiful.

It's cutoffs and metaphors and similes.

Soft words on a page that click and roll off your tongue when you read them, it's perfect rhymes and clever phrases.

Poetry is tearing your skin open to let people take a look inside, it's something you hide from out of fear.

It puts the most beautiful things of life on a pedestal to admire. It shows the rawest, most cutting emotions at the feet of the listener.

Poetry is not something to be put under a microscope, to be put in a category, to be seen as an incorrect analogy.

It should not be restrained or interrogated for a rhyme or reasons as to why it is what it is.

Poetry is a river that flows through the earth and reaches the hearts of those who come close enough to listen to what it has to say, to the faint running of water.

It is something to let flow through you.

Poetry is beautiful.

Story On the Walls

Felice Nguyen, Class of '24, 2nd Place in Nonfiction Contest

I still remember when I was sent to the dayroom after I had been evaluated. I couldn't point a finger at what exactly made me so uneasy. It wasn't the holes and scratches on the walls that made the whole room look unkempt, nor was it the other patients that looked straight out of juvie; the source was nothing concrete. Maybe it was the dayroom's apparent effort that went in vain, with its crude drawings that adorned the walls and the light yellow that attempted to color in the room with the cheerfulness that just couldn't be found.

The other patients were too outgoing and extroverted for who I was, and even in my best efforts, I could not muster the social energy to keep up with them. They were all older than me, already used to this place; they'd been in and out of multiple facilities like this one, undergoing several treatments, and in the end they had little to show for it. I gave up that day, and spent the rest of my free time examining the room and the facade that did little to mask the heart of those walls.

For several months that felt like a lifetime, I had surrounded myself in my own darkness, and I would get photophobia when I tried to find the light.

I left behind the academic pressure that dragged me down emotionally and only held me up during the darkest hours of the night, and I walked away from the toxic friends that made me dread checking any of my social media. Yet what truly brought me there bled through everything, reminding me that I could build my walls so high, enough to rival the heavens and the stars above, and I would always find everything I ran from right next

to me.

My problems were stronger than the remnants of the broken spirit that I built my walls out of. My walls, like the planets and the moons in between, were my shield and crude facade against the world I knew. I never let anyone in, no hurt nor betrayal. Utilitarian or placebo, I felt its power, its protection. The guardian angel I built on my own.

The most time I'd spend in one room during my stay would be the one where I was assigned to sleep in, as if they thought I'd actually be able to sleep. The room had no emotion, no attachment to me, which is why I never saw it as my room.

Two of the walls were dark gray, true to their mood, while the other two were a baby blue that felt blank. Scratches and unknown stains were scattered all over the walls, but they didn't stand out as much as the discrepancies on the dayroom walls did. The only source of illumination was the near-opaque window and the lights of the corridor that shone through the doorway. I slept in beds that consisted of a plastic, blocky frame paired with a flimsy mattress that couldn't have been over an inch thick, and a blanket that resembled the texture and material of a burlap sack.

Even with a roommate, the nights felt cold and desolate. I still had my walls up, yet occasionally I would get to know her through her own walls, if she had any.

After morning rounds of medicine, we all went to get "food" in the cafeteria; it was even worse than the 3-4 hours of sleep I got each night. The mystery meat tasted as if the animal had been killed five minutes ago, and the scrambled eggs tasted like they were made from anything but eggs. It was only then that instant ramen and five-day-old pizza looked gourmet.

It wasn't the food, but the walls that bothered me the most,

with their color resembling those of my bedroom walls: a limestone white. The whole cafeteria was mocking me, locking me up in this tiger's cage and rubbing in my face the fragments of my life on the outside. The windows and their crystal-clear display of the garden outside, with its variety of shades of green, and the flowers lining the mahogany gazebo, were the beauty that I knew I couldn't have. I had to watch everything beautiful about the outside through the windows and walls that held me back, as if I hadn't already been watching my own life like a TV show before coming here.

A few days into the psychiatric hospital, I got the chance to call my family for the first time in what felt like my whole life. It was mainly my parents and brother filling me in on everything that I missed, how they waited to put up the Christmas lights until I got home, and how all my friends asked where I went. When I look back at this phone call, though, my mind goes to the soft words that they'd never said to my face before, as far as I could remember. It was a few years ago, and my mind was far from fresh at the time, but I remember the last seconds of the phone call when both of my parents cheerfully said, "we love you," in their heavy yet adorable Vietnamese accent.

Their voices echoed in my mind multiple times as my heartbeat got louder and faster until I could feel the beating in my throat. The whole time I darted my eyes in all directions. After I gave back the phone, I couldn't bear to look into anyone's face for the rest of the night.

Everything since then brought my own eventual fall of the Berlin Wall, though it was all a blur.

I think about the seven days in that prison of a hospital; I think of the nasty medicine and the people I eventually opened up to. I think of my walls, stashed and put away in my memories, and I remember my story written on the walls.

The Opossum

Trinity King, Class of '22

My dogs brought home an opossum
 She died that night, I moved her away that morning
 I remember her so well, like the color of my eyes
 She was young and I swore she was living

That's the best way I can describe mourning
 You're told over and over that they'll get better
 And then all you see is an open casket and dried lungs
 And the shattered reality they were always going to die

"What's on the news?" she asked me
 And I couldn't answer her, I just kept walking
 Did she know? That I couldn't stand to look at her?
 Why must she look like that, with her arms crossed after death?

That opossum knew nothing of me
 And I knew nothing about her
 But I knew her, I know I knew her somewhere, sometime
 Death is elusive

But more clear than grief



"Childhood Haze" - Moira Yabut, Class of '25, 3rd Place in Visual Art/Photography Contest

Contact Lenses

Luciel Ameling, Class of '23

There are spiders on my eyes.
They whisper poems in my ears,
their hairy legs tickle my sockets and get
stuck
in my vision.

I wail
as I feel another prick against my eye.
The spiders crawl away, their legsfingershands appendages
tapping against my face in farewell.

As the spiders leave, the pricking pain against my lens
drips
falls
shows me something on the walls.
There before me, the bloodspittears fluid
on my eye
forms words against the wall's backdrop.

It's beautiful,
something only I can see.
A poem made of screams of the damned,
cries of the wicked,
sweet nothings of an uncaring vortex that awaits them.
The poem laughs in my face
and tells me that it's too late for me to change anything.

That's fine.
I don't want to change it.
I only wish to bask in the beauty of the poem before me.

Lost Memories

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

Content Warning:

Suicide

Arriving after what seemed like an eternity in a haze of constant morning dew, he found himself in a grassy plain with a cleared path leading to a stone pile. Approaching the stones, he saw a figure form beside the pile, one wearing a dark hood and facing away from him. The figure was a little taller than him, face hidden behind the hood and uncut hair. They didn't speak for a while as they stood side by side, until a stone rolled off the pile and to his feet. Before he could pick up the stone, his mind was filled with memories of sadness, a familiar feeling to him.

"What was that?" he asked the figure.

"Memories of another life," the figure responded.

Another stone rolled off the pile and to his feet, accompanied by images of a man and a woman, adorned with sparkling colors and fancy clothes, and a ballroom with a crowd of people watching as they danced the night away. An ache formed in his heart as the images faded to nothingness.

"I don't understand why I am seeing this?" he asked the figure.

"These are from a life you could've had," the figure responded.

A third stone rose from the pile to roll to his feet, and happiness filled him as he fell to the ground, unable to comprehend the sudden, extreme emotion.

"How did I get here?" he asked the figure.

"You came here by yourself. You walked off the line and never finished your journey," the figure responded.

"Can I return to the line?"

"The line does not exist, not anymore."

He watched as all the stones disappeared until there was

only a single stone, larger than the rest. A pain struck the man in the chest, a pain worse than anything he could have imagined. Thoughts of his family and friends filled his mind as he looked at the figure.

“Am I dead?” he asked. The figure did not respond. “If there is any chance to go back, please tell me.”

“You should have thought of that before you killed yourself,” the figure said before disappearing, leaving him alone with the stone.

After looking for the figure in the mist around him, he sat on the stone to think. His eyes welled with tears, and he reached up to wipe them away. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a hospital room. Three people stood around a bed: a tall man, a woman who looked to be his wife, and a young boy with short hair. A gray-skinned man was lying on the bed, motionless, eyes looking at the ceiling blankly. He tried to get the three’s attention, but no one would look at him. The tall man was the only one looking at the man in the bed, holding the woman and the kid’s heads to his chest.

“Mortifying isn’t it?” the figure from before asked. “The pain your death caused those closest to you. Your brother, your sister-in-law, your nephew.”

“Why did I do it?” he asked the figure.

“You were hurting, but you refused to express your feelings before this could be avoided.”

“Why can’t I remember?”

“You lose your memories, the bad you focused on when you were alive and the memories you forgot.”

“What now?”

“You remain here until you are completely forgotten, along with the other lost souls.”

The figure stepped towards the man in the bed and disappeared into him, leaving the lost soul to watch his life fall apart. For what seemed like an eternity, he stayed beside his nephew, the young boy who, despite his sadness, made it through his life. Eventually, he married someone who loved him unconditionally, and even had children of his own. His son ended up dying at a young age due to a car accident. Even with the sadness of another death, the man’s nephew lived on and raised his other children until they were old enough to tell the story of the uncle who killed himself at a young age. Eventually, the children moved away and the nephew remained with his wife. When he turned 70, she died peacefully in her sleep. The family remained with him until he was barely clinging to his life, and he told his son about the uncle who killed himself, robbing his family of his life. Later into the night, the boy died. The lost soul watched, and waited, and hoped he might see his nephew in his world. But he remained alone.

Years went on, and the son told his children about his great uncle who killed himself at a young age, but even so, the man began to fade. When his great nephew succumbed to cancer, despite how many times the grandson told the story about his great uncle’s death, the man faded until he was barely more than a shadow. Every now and then, he would see parts of himself return as he became a passing thought of those around him. But no one shared his story, and after the last grandchild died, so did the memory of the man.

He kept fading until he was in the darkness alone, unknown if he was even himself anymore, until finally a figure resembling his nephew appeared with his hand outstretched. The man tried to speak but his body had long since faded away, and he was barely a distant memory. Despite this, the young, short-haired boy took the man’s faded hand, and pulled him into the light behind him, finally guiding the lost soul across the veil.

The Door In Between

Anna Logan, Class of '22, 3rd Place in Poetry Contest

I stand in the frame between
 What was and what is
 Between the veil of our lost family
 And the tragedy festering in reality

I stand in a painting of what should be
 Against the blue-green backdrop of my history
 Your consistency ahead of me
 Tearing apart my fantasy

I stand with it festering inside of me
 Like an ingrown lie, it starts cutting
 Through the distance, see
 The hole it put in my heart

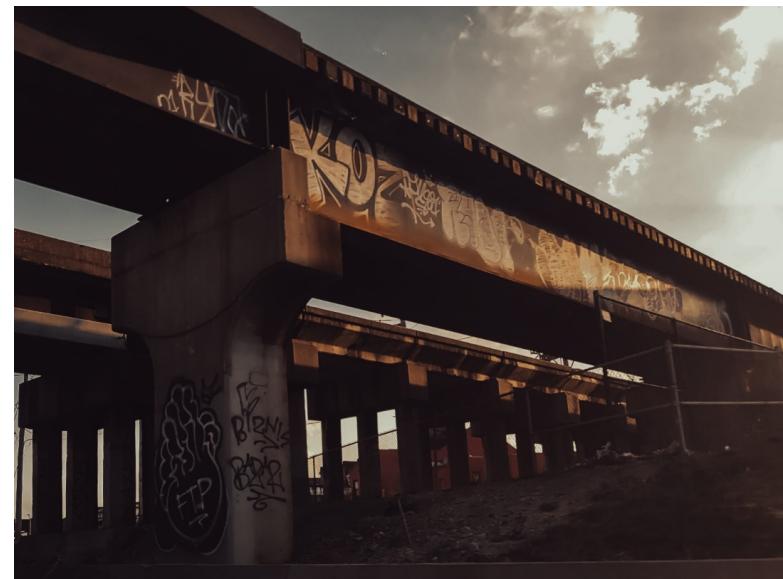
I stand, my defenses useless
 I used to think that you were my knight
 But now the shine in your armor
 Is your defense as to why you harmed her

I stand, confused and cautious
 You glance at me.
 The look in your eyes is nauseous.
 You take the chance and run.

She stands. My eyes follow you
 Our home feels hollow
 'Til she soothes my pain,
 Calls my name. I run to her.

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We stand in each other's arms
 She is out of harms way
 I am out of your reach
 "Stay with me?"



Calvin Lee, Class of '23

When Has This House Ever Been a Home?

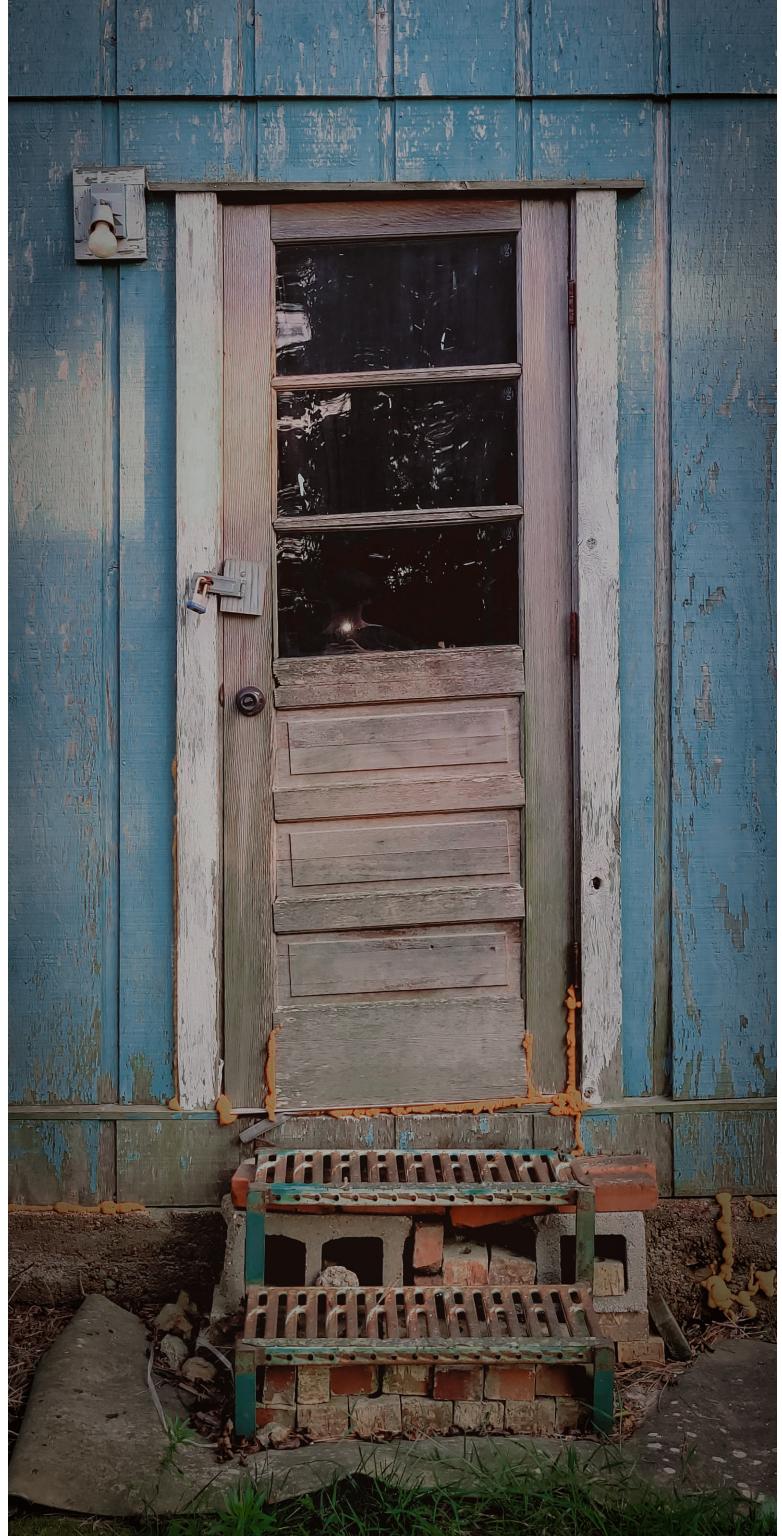
Kassidy Haggard, Class of '22

Here, the floors are blackened with rot. Here,
Splinters bloody my aching feet. Here, the

Windows are spider-webbed with trauma. Here,
Glass finds a home in my hardening skin. Here, the

Walls are crumbling from abandonment. Here,
Hands bruise my shaking shoulders. Here, I

Pray I will be crushed before my nightmares of drowning in my
own tears come to fruition.



Calvin Lee, Class of '23

Infamous Third Legacy

Nicholas Musial, Class of '22

July 21, 2020

Hi, my name is Jay Daughtry. I'm writing this letter to whoever may find it. I know this bloody scene in front of you is stomach churning and mortifying... I know, because that's how I felt when I had to kill them. Their concrete blasts and bullets being hurled my way felt natural, almost as though I've been dealing with it my whole life. Oh wait! I have. I knew that if I didn't take what my father used to call "*the golden opportunity*," then I would be right back at Curdun Cay in a cell with power dampening cuffs. You may be wondering why I would need to be locked up, what I did wrong, why I did it. Well, I can only answer one of those questions.

I'm what I call a "conduit," but most of the public and the D.U.P, the police-like force that's meant to hunt down conduits like me, label me as "scum" or "freak." But the one I hate most is "bioterrorist." To most of society, a bioterrorist is someone who has any kind of supernatural power, whether it be the ability to control electricity, to accelerate the growth of plants, or to control concrete. But my grandpa, father, and I have the ability to control smoke. My earliest memories have always been of me and my father on the run. He was a smart man, book and street, and an even greater father. I never met my grandfather, but my dad always told me stories about him. I remember one time we were walking along the street with our hoods over our heads, although our masks were down.

"Hey daddy," I said in a hushed voice.

"What's up J.J.?"

"I know you really don't like me going to the park, and I

know I'll probably get in trouble for this, but I saw a few adults and kids celebrating and they started singing 'happy birthday.'" There was a momentary pause between us.

"Sorry, the reason I brought this up was, I was wondering... well..." I sighed heavily in fear of being scolded. "Dad, when is my birthday?" There was another pause before my father fell to his knees, his eyes brimming with tears. He was biting his lip, trying to hide his shame and guilt. He then hugged me tightly as he began to sob into my tiny shoulder.

"I'm sorry baby girl, I'm so sorry. Papa's done so many bad things, to the point he couldn't even properly celebrate your birthday." At that point people were slowing down and looking at us; dad's hood had fallen off. As he cried, he subconsciously let smoke release from his body. Some people started recording, some scowling at my dad and me, some even dialing a series of numbers on their phone. I did notice, however, there were some, though very few, that were sympathetic, understanding. But there was fear deep within their eyes.

That was the day I was told what the Daughtry's legacy was, and what "*the golden opportunity*" really means.

That day I realized just how long I had been on the run with my father. Nine whole years.

Nine whole years I had been chased, pursued, hunted.

Nine whole years I had rummaged through trash, stole, cheated, lied, survived.

but never killed

I have hurt people, sure, and I might have broken a few arms, fingers, legs. but never in the eighteen years I've lived, have I ever killed someone. Until today.



"The Face of Fear" - Lauren McGuire, Class of '23

You Aren't Icarus

Sophie Simmons, Class of '23

you soared through the ranks
but it was my hope that flew
made yourself into a Ranger
after 19 years you'd dragged us through

silver medals, black beret
and the clouds were overcome
saw that first genuine smile
and stretched my hands out to the sun

and then you were medically discharged because your legs
were ripped open

Icarus fell
she's still drowning in sea
should never have trusted you
to be my wax wings

you didn't ask to be made to melt, I know, but

i

still

fell.

Hermit

Calvin Lee, Class of '23

This cave, walls of ice.
 I live here, and here I may embrace death.
 Strange noises come from outside, sounds pervasive in my life.
 They mock me, remind me of these chains.
 Inside me, there is a cool blue fire.
 And I will show them my raging heat once I am free.

Once I stoke these embers, and once I am free,
 I will torch these walls and melt the ice.
 I will use my love, excitement, and anger and burn a great fire.
 That is my wish, to do this before my death.
 To show that I can break free, and shatter these chains.
 So that I can finally take control of my life.

But nothing can be that simple, if I know this life.
 You must know pain, anguish, and suffering before you can be truly free.
 You must know what it's like to live these chains.
 You must know what it's like to live the freezing ice.
 You must feel the breath upon your face, the breath of death.
 You must feel the warmth and passion growing, within your fire.

Because the rage and hate that builds within you, is your fire.
 And for me, in this cave, where I have spent my life,
 This frigid, black, and dark cave appears to be my death,
 This dark, black, and frigid cave keeps me from being free.
 All this pit has taught me is to do nothing and embrace the ice.
 All this frost has taught me is to keep hold of these bloody, rusted chains.

But if you know what life is, you know what cannot be death.
 I know what freedom might taste like, because I know the taste of my chain.

And because these chains are the arbiters of my life, I know what it means to not be free.
 So with my blue fire, I transform into rage, and then into a raging, passionate red fire.
 So with my crippling deformities, my feeble bones poking weakly out of my skin, I create a new life.
 And with this fiery life, I melt the walls of this cave, into warm water from ice.

Doing this, I push the face that breathes onto mine away, and take control of my death.
 Obedience has led me into this cave, and I made my nerves as cold as ice.

In taking control of death, I take control of life.
 Then, with my life, my fire, I burn the icy, rigid face of death, shatter these chains, and become free.

Growing Up and Coming Out

Paige Weston, Class of '22

In elementary school, my sister and I loved to play Polly Pockets. One of us was the girl and one of us was the boy because there were only two of us playing, and of course we needed a husband and a wife. I remember always volunteering to play the boy because the thought of having a husband seemed weird to me; I wanted a wife instead. A few years later, it hit me that this thinking was not accepted by everyone. In June of 2015, the summer after fifth grade, I traveled to Washington D.C. with my school. The legalization of same-sex marriage was being voted on while I stood mere minutes from the Capitol Building. When the ruling was announced, I didn't quite understand what was happening. All around me people were yelling and kissing each other and crying tears of joy. It was overwhelming, yet exhilarating at the same time. When I got home from the trip, it was the first thing I told my parents about: how happy everyone was, and how exciting it was to see. I expected them to share my joy, but instead my dad said, "Disgusting homos," and I was left to ponder what "homos" meant and why it was a bad thing.

Starting sixth grade caused a change in a lot of my friends. The talk around me was a lot less about what game we were going to play at recess and more about which boys in class were cute. One night, I confessed to my mom that I did not share the same feelings that all my friends seemed to have, and I asked if there was something wrong with me. She laughed and said I was too young for that sort of thing, so I listened and continued on.

Two years later, I made the basketball team at my junior high. Practice started at 6:30 every morning, and we would have to get ready for school in the locker room afterwards. Of course, there were stalls in the back of the room, but no one seemed to pay those any mind and changed freely in the openness of the

room. None of them seemed to be as interested in the ground at that particular moment as I was, and as far as I could tell, none of them were feeling the same embarrassment I was feeling down to my very core. After that first day of school and practice, I told my mom how uncomfortable I felt changing in front of the other girls and seeing them change in front of me. She laughed and said I was just very modest, so I listened and continued on.

As I grew older, the disconnection between me and the people I loved became unbearable. I felt like I was hiding a major part of myself from them... and I was. Unfortunately, before I could even think about my relationships with other people, I had to heal my relationship with myself. Due to the environment I grew up in, there was a lot of internalized homophobia that I had to get over. During my sophomore year, I began to consume an enormous amount of queer media from books, to movies, to essays, to just about anything else that could help me validate myself. Seeing myself reflected in all of these forms of media really helped me to come to terms with my own sexuality and become confident enough to share that part of myself with my friends. They were all extremely accepting and happy for me. The biggest obstacle between me and ending my feelings of isolation had been myself. Now, with my newfound peace, I decide for myself how I continue on.

Metamorphosis

Summer Gross, Class of '24, 3rd Place in Nonfiction Contest

The butterflies came today,
Just like any other
They filled my tummy with swirling energy,
Like a storm cloud ready to rupture

My body tried to dissipate them,
Spreading them down into my ever-moving legs
Up, into my quickening heartbeat
Even into my throat,
Choking out my breath

As they began to clog my mind and body,
Enclosing me from head to toe,
I felt their flutters in my veins,
I felt their fear in my heart

As more and more seemed to bubble within me
I knew my dam
Could take no longer

Preparing for the fracture,
My body gave its last ditch efforts
To rid my body of the churning wings

They tried to release as tears,
Flowing down my face,
As the hair,
Being pulled out of my scalp
Even as rocking,
A familiar comfort from childhood

As I closed my eyes,
And my body gave up
I remembered my voice

I tried and failed
To open my lips
Struggling to let loose,
But I knew somewhere within me
A change could be made

Finally, my body began to cough them up
First coming out as cries
Turning into semi-coherent words
Before taking flight as the speeches
So cherished by those looking for guidance

The roaring within me came out,
And the rush of electricity
Took form

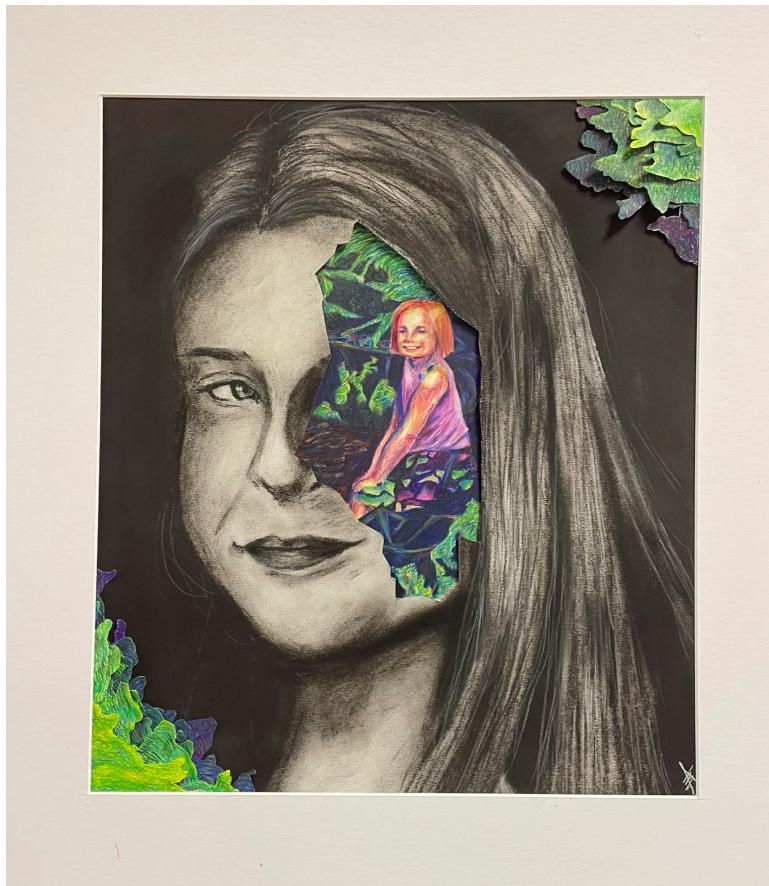
The Thank yous
The I love yous
The We can do its
Even the Your wrongs

The simple words
I speak
That have so much meaning

They came out with the strength
That my body didn't have
Starting much-needed storms
Outside of my body

My butterflies will never disappear
 But my voice
 Can shape them into something else

Maybe even helping the butterflies within others
 To transform into their own words of choice



"Katelyn to Katie" - Emily Byrd, Class of '23

Another Poem About Darkness

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

I've grown accustomed to the dark, once a fear now a friend.
 I used to hide beside a night light, waiting for the dark to go away
 Years went by, the light went out, and I decided take a chance
 She welcomed me with open arms

She held my hand when we were tight on funds,
 no need to say a word to know that she's there.
 Looking back she watched over me
 all the days that I was scared

The darkness is the friend that I need,
 She holds my hand as I trace my house in the dark
 She is a universal villain, the fear that they should run from
 But I know better than to run from a friend

I see through the light, it's great and all,
 but it blinds me and causes me to hide my true self.
 Darkness sees through me, as if when with her nothing matters
 It's why I don't fear death, because then I can be with her forever

Glasshouses

Joseph Jolley, Class of '22, Nonfiction Contest Winner

Walls.

They keep roofs above our heads, protecting us from the sharp winds, rains, and lightning bolts of life.

They keep the weight of that shelter from having to rest on our shoulders: a load impossible for each to carry alone.

They keep our lives structurally sound, so long as they're founded upon a rock.

However, our walls often have unintended side effects.

They keep us trapped, never to know any more than the decorations and pleasantries of their interiors.

They keep us from seeing and understanding our neighbors, perpetually clueless as to what happens beyond the thresholds of the unknown homes outside.

They keep us therefore ignorant, unable to truly love anyone—even ourselves—for we know no friendship, kindness, or passion.

What if there was a better way?

Could we have both the truth

&

the love?

The stability and the sympathy?

Let us, friends, tear down our walls of brick and wood and replace them—with walls of glass.

Walls of crystal-clear honesty that let sunlight shine through to reveal the brilliant, empathetic truth, chasing away all shadows of prejudice. Are we not all beggars?

Walls with doors that open to connected covered pathways that let us freely mingle with our neighbors in the middle without fear.

Walls that still hold up and protect us during the storms that beat, yet let us ultimately learn to love each of the lost souls around us, including our own.

The power is in you. Why not start now?



"Heart is Where Your Treasure Lies" - Gracie Lawhon, Class of '22

A Quiet Café

Luciel Ameling, Class of '23

David was feeling pretty nervous but he did his best to ignore it. Did his shirt have any wrinkles? He was pretty sure he had brushed his teeth. Just in case, he exhaled into his hand and sniffed it. Rad, it wasn't too terrible. Sue him, he didn't have much time to get ready after classes that day. When Filly walked into the café he smiled. They made eye contact and David gestured to the seat opposite him.

She slid into the seat and looked around, then said, "I'm impressed with what they've done with the place! Last time I was here it was pretty bland. The colors really help make that 'spiffy, expensive coffee' feelin', ya know?"

David laughed, looking at the menu. "Yeah, this place totally makes you pay more for the fancy setting, huh? Do you know what you're gonna get?" Filly nodded and he continued, "Cool, I can order for both of us if you'd like. Sound good?"

"That works. I'll just have a frappe with extra foam." Filly waited for a bit, and spoke again when he sat down with their drinks. "What'd you get?" she asked, using the tiny straw to stir her coffee.

David took a sip and replied, "Green tea with a bit of sugar." When Filly's face scrunched up in distaste, he asked, "What's wrong? Bad coffee?"

Filly shook her head, "Nah, I just don't like green tea. So, what's with the shirt?"

He looked down and flushed, "Oh, it's just for the arcade I work at. I've got a shift after this so I just got rid of the middle-man and wore the uniform all day. It's easier than changing in my car or something." He shrugged, taking another drink.

"That's cool! I've never really understood video games,

they're too confusin' for me." Filly frowned.

David shook his head excitedly, "No way! I need to get you to the arcade sometime so I can teach you how to play. It's really fun when you understand it!"

Filly laughed, "If you insist! Maybe it'll be easier if I've got somebody helpin' me. Which one's your favorite?"

David's eyes lit up as he sat up, "Hm, that's a tough decision. Mike Tyson's a classic, who doesn't like boxing? Then there's Golden Eye, it's basically just a fighting, dungeon-crawler, sides-croller game, and- Oh! Maybe you'd like Gauntlet or TMNT. It's one of my favorites, but I can never find anyone to play it with me and it's multiplayer." As he spoke his hands moved dramatically, showing how excited he was about the topic.

The monologue was going in one ear and out another but Filly nodded anyway, "Sure, anythin' works. So what's your job at that place?"

"I usually just clean the machines and get rid of the Cheeto dust that teenagers leave all over the place," he shuddered, "but sometimes I stay after hours and vacuum or something. It's pretty chill; I like it."

Filly groaned, "Oh, I wish my job was like that. Just cleanin' and dealin' with kids all day? That sounds like a breeze!" She took a sip of her coffee and sighed dramatically.

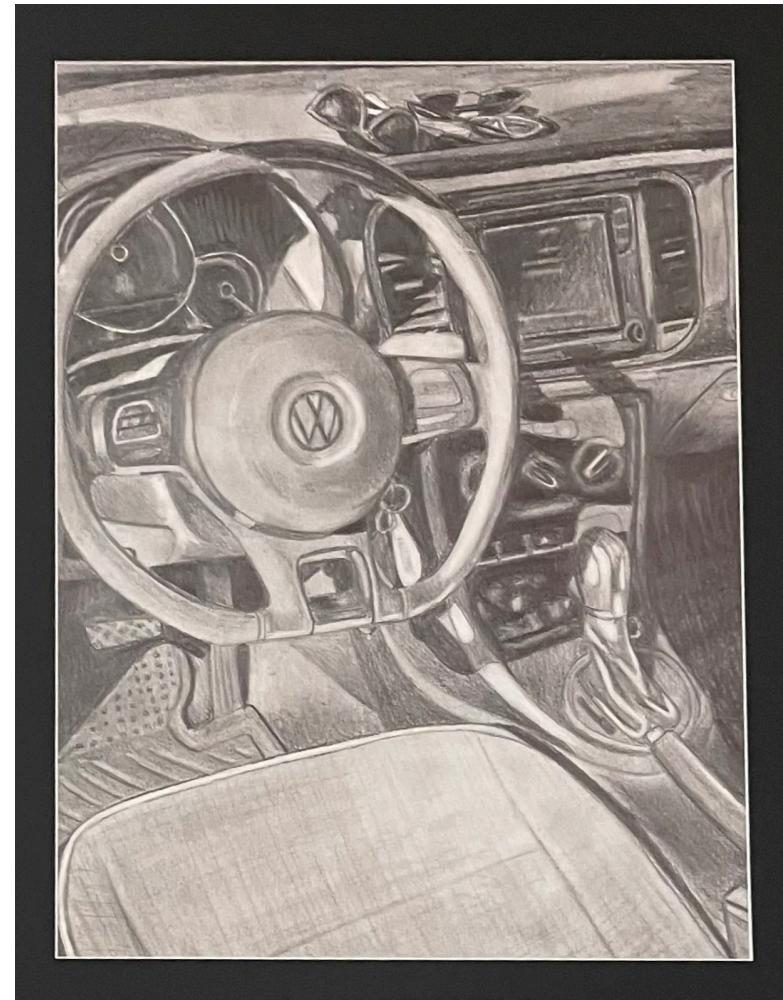
David laughed until he suddenly straightened, looking pained. "I just remembered we have an essay due in three days. Oh no."

"Oh, you're not very organized, are you? Don't worry, I've got some notes you can look at if you wanna," Filly chuckled and dug around in her backpack.

David looked at her as if she were a saint. "I owe you one, Filly. Which topic did you pick?"



Kortni Kelly, Class of '25



"No Destination" - Elisabeth Macy, Class of '23

When I Fell in Love

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

At six I met a girl who was older and had soft hair, a nose piercing, and an earring that scratched my face. She hugged me daily and said we were to marry; that was when I fell in love. It wasn't long until the feeling took flight and she moved on to someone more her age.

At seven I met a girl with blonde hair who would play with my toys. We kept secrets and planned each other's days; that was when I fell in love. When I moved to computer games, she shifted more toward cash and fame, then she was swinging in the trees with someone else.

At eight I met a girl who had red hair and pigtails. She talked big and made promises even bigger; that was then when I fell in love. We shared blankets, held hands, and rolled down the hill, and nothing could stop us. Except for a taller, athletic guy with hair gel and a puffed-out chest.

At nine I met a girl who had short hair, a manga collection, and a mother who cared. She shared her lunch and sat with me on the monkey bars; that was when I fell in love. For weeks we were inseparable and our minds were like an open book because they were always directed toward each other. But new years came and she had a change of heart: by that I mean she started to like women.

At ten I met a girl who had a twin and a soft expression. I was her spy, and for years I was rewarded with a peck on the cheek or a hand held for a while. That was when I fell in love. I moved across the country, promised to keep in touch with her, but she had moved on before I had left.

At twelve I met a girl with bangs and a step sister, both French. She patched up my bloody eye and we sat side by side;

that was when I fell in love. She talked about how she liked pretty boys, and it didn't take long for me to find out she meant tall and not sarcastic.

At thirteen I met a girl with a thing for musicals and literature. We acted out Romeo and Juliet without laughing. That was when I fell in love. On Valentine's I didn't shine, worrying that it wasn't the time. At the end of the year, she left to study abroad.

At fourteen I met a girl with braces and popular friends. She made an effort to know my name and played with my feet under the table; that was when I fell in love. I confessed my love, only to get rejected and publicly humiliated in the worst way.

At fifteen I met a girl who had fake breasts and wore tight clothes to show them off. She wanted me to hold her skirt down so the wind wouldn't show the school what was underneath. That was when I fell in love. I stood by her side until I learned she was seeing another guy.

At sixteen I met a girl who was tall and laughed at my jokes. We were as close as close could be. I didn't want to think of her as a girl, but by winter I fell in love. She kept her hold on me and I held too, until police pulled up to remove the drugs she hid in the backseat.

At seventeen I feel fourteen. Love is still my dream and I fall in love at every corner. I will keep loving until the word loses meaning.

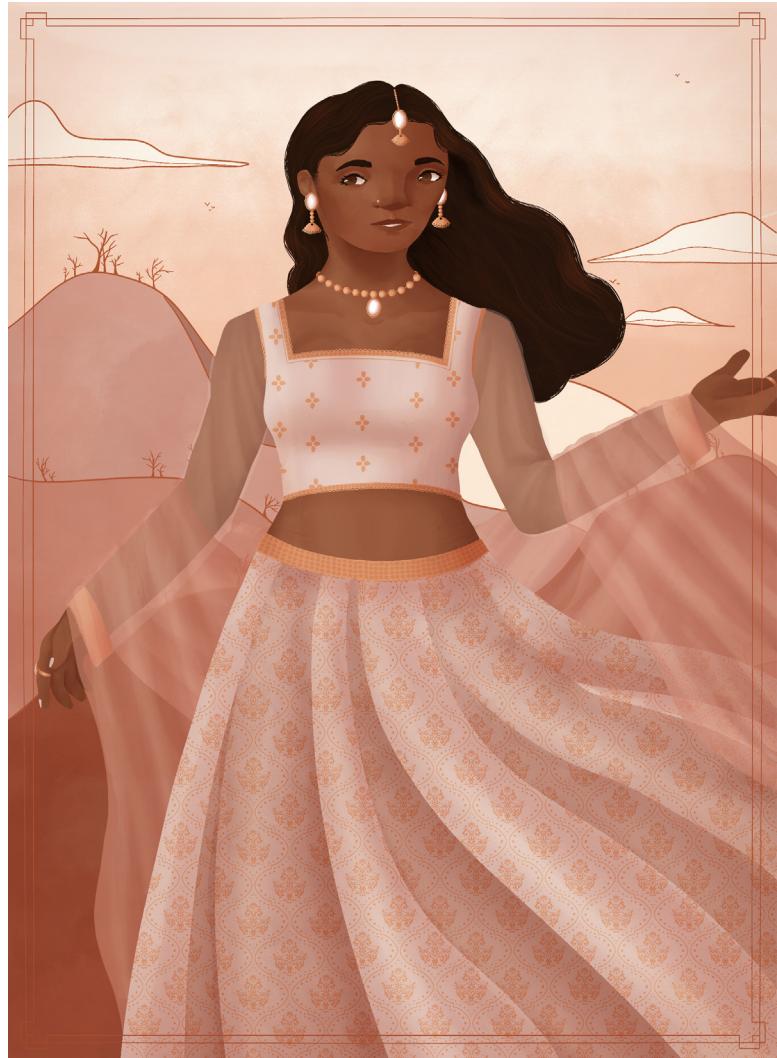
The Sorceress

Isabella Bryan, Class of '25

Look into my crystal ball
 What you see may leave you in awe
 I'll reveal your actions and future deeds
 For an inheritance of just a small fee

You're resolution may be vague
 But fear not!
 'Tis not an act or play
 Everything you see is true
 Undoubtedly
 casted by my gentle woo

You come and pay
 Wowed
 by what I portray
 Another day of illusions
 to trance the bystander I pick
 Another fool
 that believes my simplest of tricks



"Warm Dawn" - Madeline Boss, Class of '23

Playground Politics

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

"I have known you my whole life and you betray me like this?" Simon asks angrily towards Jack while looking at each other across the room. Bailey, Jack's now three-minute girlfriend and Simon's two-day crush, stands behind Jack in silence.

"No need to pout, she likes me and doesn't like you," Jack says in response with a smug grin.

Simon and Jack met in kindergarten five years ago, though it seemed like an eternity ago. With a raised fist, Simon pushes the papers off the desk and stands up.

"I will see you outside," Simon says with a huff, storming across the room and to another table.

The two spend the next hour planning for whatever could happen once those doors opened and they were sent to the yard. Their glares intertwine occasionally and are met with a clenched fist at each other. Their teacher doesn't notice them as they intimidate each other across the room, Bailey stuck in the middle like a stick floating downstream, waiting for the current to decide where she goes.

The bell rings and Jack and Simon leave the building at the front of the line, wasting no time as they climb the playground equipment. The teachers know nothing about what's going to happen in the next five minutes, but peers surround Jack and Simon and watch as the two throw their jackets to the side and let the cold breeze touch their bare arms. Students whisper all around them as Bailey is the first to talk.

"This is stupid, I won't date either of you if you go through with this," Bailey says while standing between them. Neither care for her at the moment, only focusing on each other.

Simon is first to lunge at Jack, pushing him back into the bars, but giving Jack the support to push Simon back on the slide, almost shoving him down and ending the confrontation. Bailey runs from the equipment and towards a teacher who has just taken notice of the ongoing battle. With chanting and cheering from the crowd around them, Simon stands up and grabs Jack's shirt. He pushes him towards the chain bridge, knowing that Jack can't hold his ground on wobbly terrain.

Jack realizes the plan at the last second and swings Simon off of him, causing him to bump his head on the ground. Simon's arms immediately go to his head as he begins crying, his face going pink, as the crowd starts to scatter. The teacher climbs onto the equipment and helps Simon to his feet, pulling both of them to the principal's office where they have to explain themselves.

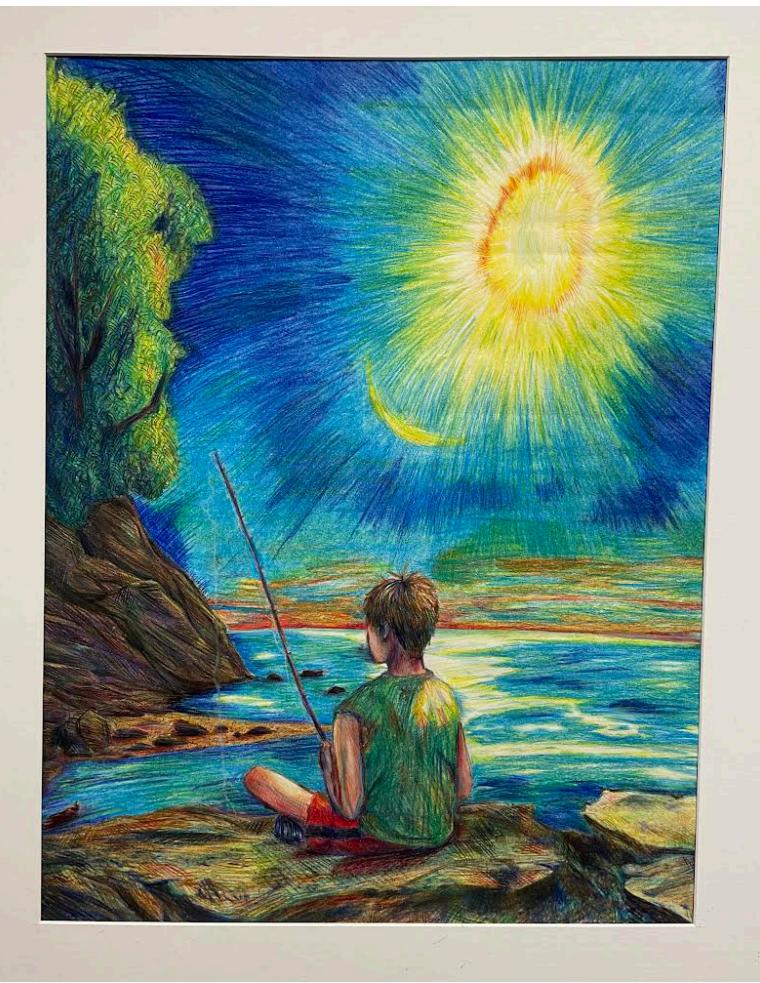
"You're saying that you were just playing rough?" the principal asks, seemingly unconvinced by the story. "If neither of you will fess up to instigating, I will just have to suspend both of you."

Jack sticks to the story, and Simon agrees between sobs, still holding the paper-towel-wrapped ziplock bag with ice in it. With a call to their parents, they sit in the lobby to wait for them to show up.

"This was dumb," Simon is the first to talk, quiet enough that the teachers can't hear. "Bailey isn't worth it."

"I agree, I would much rather give her up than lose you," Jack says back quietly. Simon hugs him. "You are my best friend, Simon."

With the hug, Simon's parents show up and take him away, leaving Jack to his thoughts. He has almost lost his best friend over a girl who he doesn't like that much, a mistake that he swears to never make again. Then again, there's always tomorrow.



"A Brighter View" - Emily Byrd, Class of '23, 2nd Place in Visual Art/Photography Contest

First Day of Senior Year

Corbin Holroyd, Class of '22

Oh great, the first day of my senior year
 It went better than expected I guess
 Stress is high, but tolerable
 It's like the feeling of everything finishing up at once
 There's so much to stress about in this year
 I have to prepare for college
 I've been slacking off these past few years of high school
 I have to change my work ethic for school if I don't want to feel as stressed next year
 On top of being in this stressful environment
 We have to cover our faces with these obnoxious masks
 I just want to see someones face again
 Social skills are kind of rusty
 Why am I so awkward?
 I feel alone in a big school of people
 I'm very behind
 But all I want's a morning to sleep in
 I just want some time with my family and friends
 Or just a day where I can lay back in my bed and collect my thoughts
 I don't know why this year is so stressful
 But they say stress builds character, don't they?
 Whoever "they" are

The Plants I Love

Rain McDonald, Class of '23

I have a cactus, small and crooked in shape, who I joke has scoliosis, but really he faced the sun the wrong way for too long. I named him Prickly for his golden dipped thorns. Thorns that are so very soft to the touch when you pet him but hurt when you touch him without caution. He was the first, a surprise sitting on my windowsill after a shopping trip my sister took. I had a tree, Sprout, who was born and raised from an avocado pit all on my own. He was my little strongman. The next two were a pair. Another cactus, a rounder and meaner one with long, thick thorns and tinier ones, tinier than a splinter, hidden in his hair. His name was Clyde, and he fell on my foot once, cursing me with those blasted thorns. I had affectionately nicknamed him asshole after that—always the one to play pranks. His sister was Bonnie, a bonsai tree. A gift from a drunken family friend who agreed to give me her for twenty dollars. Another cactus, who acted like a toddler who comes home everyday caked in mud, was adopted by me when a family member couldn't keep him anymore. His name is Bob. He used to be small and playful, but now he is older and bitter, angry at the emptiness of my desk. My newest addition to the family was a snake plant named Hiss. He bears his leaves like they're his weapons. Perhaps it is because he was the newest, or because his blades are positioned in a way that looking at him from above gives him the illusion of a rose, but I loved to watch him. I had a coral cactus, and her name was Bella. Her head, full of tiny thorns that couldn't hurt you, curled as if it was a wave in the ocean, and sat upon a long and elegant body. She was incredibly confident. But she is gone now because of past mistakes. I love my plants, my children, with my whole heart. But I am not sure if they love(d) me as much back.

Bonnie had dried and missing leaves from drying out so,

so many times. They fell in tune with my own tears. She used to grow flowers back when things were easier. The first time I saw one it was a surprise and I cried. White like snow and smaller than my finger tip, but its beauty was greater than anything I'd seen before because it was hers. In fact, she used to grow them everyday. Like every time I blinked there would be a new one there saying hello to me. They'd fall just as fast, like the snowflakes they mimicked. I used to vacuum every other day because there would be so many on the ground. I could tell Bonnie was proud of her flowers too. I haven't seen one in forever. I haven't seen her in forever.

Prickly used to be a full cactus with a rounded top like any other. But anxiety can ruin things like that. Flooding your heart, infecting your veins, and soaking into your brain. His spines would get too dry and I would overthink. I thought he might have rotted. On a day when overwhelming emotions, stress, and anxiety were high, hiding behind short lived happiness and calm, I did something rash. I thought I would find rot but instead I found a healthy inside. It was the worst mistake I could have made. Bob sits alone now. His brother broke down in the compost.

Sprout was an avocado tree. I grew him from a pit all on my own. I thought he wouldn't grow but he proved me wrong. He was so strong, my little Sprout. He grew to be eight inches tall, with leaves the size of my hand in length. But avocado trees are extra sensitive to salt, and his leaves started to turn brown and crunchy, and his stem shrunk down to his soil. I didn't have the time or motivation to help him, and I'm mad at myself for it everyday. His dried leaves sit on my desk, forever a reminder of what he could have been.

It didn't take very long for me to mess up with Hiss. Only the first day. Snake plants are very strong plants. They resist most diseases and pests, and can go long periods of time without sunlight or water. But they don't like it when the sunlight they do get

is direct. I didn't listen to Hiss's needs, though, and placed him on my windowsill with the rest of my kids. Because of that, he used to hide from me, burns and mushy spots restricting the view to his green blades. But he recovered quickly, and now he's one of the only ones left.

Bella died a while ago. I left them all out in the rain after watering them to the point of drowning. I was lucky enough to keep the others alive, but Bella didn't make it. I watched with a pained heart as weeks flew by and she never got better. She only turned more brown and rotted, more shriveled and squished. I had dreamed of her turning pink one day; now I feel remorse at any thought of her.

My favorite is Clyde. Was, Clyde. He's my most painful mistake. He was so round and big when I got him. It used to be hard to water him because it merely trickled down his spikes and away from the soil. But motivation always escaped me. Escapes me. He shrank smaller and smaller. Still alive. Still healthy. But small and a fraction of the proud man he had used to be. I got too excited. It was a bright, sunny day and I was feeling just as happy. I thought that a week was long enough and that it was okay to water them again. Clyde had gone from proud, to small, to crumbling under his own weight. His frustrations and stress became too much for him. Eventually I had to dispose of his once proud body. Of his squished, soft corpse.

Bonnie's cries of pain still haunt me at night, reminding me of everything I did wrong, and how I didn't do anything to fix it. Sprout struggled with salt and pain in his system until he passed, Prickly hid from me out of fear and shame towards me. What kind of person hurts their children without talking to them first? Without properly understanding the issue? Clyde's spot remains silent. And it haunts me. Bob and Hiss watch with caution as I try to take care of another plant. I felt them glare as I gave

her to my mother because I wouldn't water her—something so important for a tropical plant like her. They resent me for it, I can tell. They can't see how well she is doing now, or how I go sit with her everyday in my mom's little garden. They can't see how hard I try to do better now, to prevent another devastation. How determined I am to do better now.

Because I love my plants with my whole heart.

But I am not sure they love(d) me the same.



"Eternal Impact" - Shelby Gottula, Class of '22

Edge of Seventeen

Mallory Alcocer, Class of '22

Fourteen.

She told me not to tell dad. Don't tell dad I'm miserable being with him. Don't tell dad I can't do this anymore. Don't tell dad that this family just isn't happy.

That night I came home to my dad sitting on our couch, watching tv like most nights, but now I knew and dad didn't.

Fifteen.

She finally told him. She finally told him she's not happy, but he already knew. She finally told him that she isn't herself anymore, but we already saw that. She finally quit pretending to be ok. That night I stayed in my room. They were arguing like most nights, but now we all knew.

Sixteen.

She wanted him to leave. She wanted him to leave the bed they once shared. She wanted him to leave the room that was filled with memories of marriage. She wanted him to leave the house in which they watched me grow up. She told him to leave her house. That night I slept in my bed like most nights, but now dad was sleeping in the guest room next door.

Seventeen.

He's out of our home. He seemed to move on without hesitation, but I can't blame him. He's out of an unhappy place, but I wish it hadn't been so easy for him to walk away. He's out of our sights, but I still long to see him walk through that door every day. That night I slept in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar house, but now at least they seem happier.

When You Left

Rachel Willett, Class of '23

You left me in riches

I never understood why,

But you left me with the finest jewels anyone could buy

What am I supposed to do?

Am I supposed to be angry?

Should there be glass at my feet from violent furies, with a force stronger than the oceans?

I don't know who to blame

I don't know what went wrong

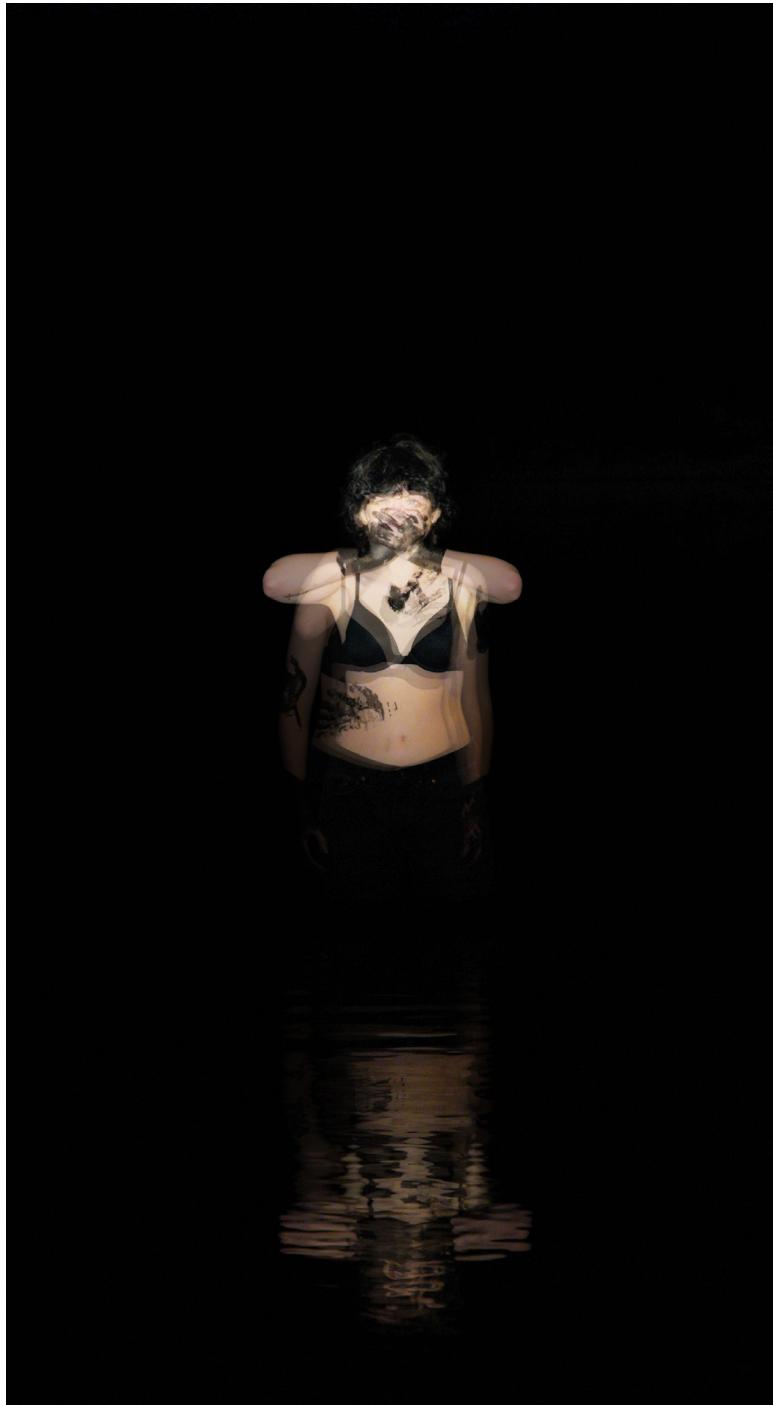
They say "you are strong," like a lion to its cub

There was no glass at my feet, but there was still something broken

There was no anger, yet oceans rose around me, swallowing me whole in deep blue

When you walked away, I was met with an abundance

The most brilliant diamonds below me,
falling from my eyes.



"33%" (left)

Victoria Betancourt, Class of '22, Visual Art/Photography Contest Winner

My work sheds light on the dangerously increasing rate of reported sexual assaults against women. Being influenced by my own experiences, I wanted to create something that would move the viewer and break the stigma of saying "me too."

Using black paint, I was able to create handprints to emphasize unwanted physical contact, as well as having the model place her hands over her mouth to show how some women feel after being assaulted. I chose to put the model in a body of water to make the viewer feel detached from the rest of the photo, as well as limited the colors to create a sense of isolation.

Ambiguous Grief

Kassidy Haggard, Class of '22

My mind presented you as translucent in the light. One could have called you ghostly, if they believed in such a thing—though you were alive and breathing, body still full of power and youth.

Shock stalled my lungs as the door clanged closed behind you, and my next inhale brought goose bumps to my skin.

Subtle triumph made the bones of your stance—each ankle parallel over the adjoining hip, arms crossed with calculated laziness as you basked in the imagined glory of reentering this stage of your life. A god complex I would have laughed at, had you been anyone else.

Your lips parted into a tooth-gapped grin, and my own lips split in tandem, despite the mockery shone in the depths of your eyes.

I had met you those days you showed up unannounced with something almost mirroring complacency. Never uttering a word to you, about you, near you—instead only accepting your presence, there in the place I allowed my soul to be rectified for two grueling hours every day, as finite but absolute.

All the while, the fingers of your silent chides and whispered words tripped down my spine, marring my skin with their touch.

You joked, and busts of laughter sounded in the wake of your voice. Eyes darted towards me, darted faster away. These people would never be my people, would never help close the wounds leaking pain, would never join me in becoming giddy with laughter. These people were yours, and I was wholly unwelcome when you inhabited the space.

Wistfully, I found that, even now, I love you.

Even after I had yet again been subject to the petty wrath you

hold inside you like a heart, guarded by a rib cage of bone chiseled from insecurity and lack of fragility. Even after tears had carved rivers in my cheeks, salty with an agony that wrapped its hands around my own heart. Even after I heard hyena laughs bellowed by our friends at my longing to have your company once again.

Part of me wondered why you still strove to hurt me with your vernacular, words afire in my lungs, with your stares, which bore into my back like reddened metal through ice. The adjacent part wondered why my lips still pulled up at the thought of our shared jokes, at our entwining laughter as we recited punch lines, in spite of the torment.

Still, I wished we could be in love again—because there is a difference between *loving* and being *in love*—though I wished more feverishly you were the man I had thought you to be, the man I thought your mother, with her spark and lyrical laugh, and your father, with his enthusiasm and support, had raised you to be.

My mind presented you as translucent in the light, a ghost of the man you had the potential to be. And though you were alive and breathing, body still full of power and youth, I mourned you.

I mourned who you could have been, and the realization is what finally made tears retrace their paths along my cheeks.

Murder! Romanticized

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

Could you love someone who had taken the life of another?
 Would you be turned away by a crimson stain?
 If it were only once, could you turn a blind eye?
 He claims that she shot first, he wouldn't lie

Could you forgive someone who killed you?
 Hide them away from a permanent crime
 Forgive the sin if it benefits you?
 Maybe it was justified, maybe she got what she deserved

If you could love them, would it be the same?
 Even if the crimson stain rubs off on you
 Would you take the color as your own?
 The red almost matches the pigment in your burning cheeks.

Maybe he is a good person?
 Maybe Bluebeard is Prince Charming still?
 A mistake doesn't make a villain
 But a murder does.

evidence-archive-d1345.pdf

Daniel Parkin, Class of '23

The following is a text recreation of an audio log found at the scene of a murder on Tuesday, February 17th. These are only samples of the original log. For the full transcript, contact The Royal Mounted Police Force.

Head Scientist's Log #13:

It seems that after years of research, with the help of my team, we may have found a plausible way to develop an artificially modified genetic code that could be implemented into the genetic structure of young children. With the implementation of modified versions of autism, various cancers, and other genetic mutations, we could create a subject with enhanced intelligence in the form of improved decision making, inhuman reflexes, and possibly even some form of regeneration. However, we are only just beginning. So far, the most difficult part of the process seems to be the acceptance of the modified genetic code into the subjects' DNA. Subject Zero, my son, has taken the mutation in, and has no visual symptoms or side effects from the combination so far. A few more volunteers also seem to have developed the desired mutations without unwanted side effects. To gather more research, we will raise volunteer compensation in hopes of receiving more volunteers. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #16:

Because we are missing many of the requested genes for testing, we are preparing for the duplication and sample collection of the mutation from certain subjects. My hypothesis is that there will be little difficulty in the duplication of the

gene. We will send volunteers home with handsome compensation and a prescription for double their normal dosage of pain medication. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #22:

We hit a small speed bump. Our volunteers seem to have more issues with the removal of the mutations than expected. Symptoms as of yet have included blood-infused vomit and excrement. With our low casualty rate, we will continue with the duplication and collection until a better solution provides itself. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #29:

As of today, all of our original volunteers have passed away with the exception of Subject Zero. Very few of the mutations are still usable after extraction. We will put a hold on research until a new path presents itself. I will continue to keep a record of our development..

Head Scientist's Log #34:

After another three months of failure, we have made a decision with a unanimous vote of confidence from our benefactors and the rest of the team. Instead of having our subjects withstand slow and painful deaths, they will be injected with our solution, which includes 15% lidocaine, 20% potassium chloride, and 10% midazolam. This should both bring a painless death and cause the desired separation of the gene without issue. I have contacted all nearby mental institutions and requested subjects with the genes we require; modified government papers should prevent any backlash. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #37:

With responses from all contacted institutions, the only mutation we are missing is a type of cancer. I am hoping to modify our extra cancer cells to fit the needed mutations, but we have another issue. Manually implanting cancer into a genetic structure could kill our subjects. We have gotten eggs and sperm cells from each member of our team to test the effects. Over the past few months, a few members of our team have withdrawn for ethical reasons. The existing members remain strong, and will stand by me when the research goes public. Our names will go down in history as we create the next step in human evolution. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #41:

Subject Zero was overcome by heart failure after the injection of our modified cancer cells. Of the artificial subjects, only one accepted the cells as its own. We will continue forward with this subject as it lives isolated in our white room, a room of my own creation to ensure that the subjects receive all natural vitamins but unnaturally. Creation of the perfect creature is more important than the morality of the imperfect. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #53:

It seems I am now alone in the research. After the deaths of Subject A to H, the remaining members of my team left the project. Damn hypocrites. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #54:

The surviving subjects have all taken on the Zaro Mutation, my personal creation, a mix with each beneficial mutation into one, perfect, mutation. These ten will all be raised sep-

arately and monitored by me personally. I will continue to keep a record of our development.

Head Scientist's Log #55:

This will be my final audio log. A former coworker of mine seems to take his views to an extreme; with my research released prematurely to the public, police should be on their way to raid the facility, but they won't be fast enough. All my personal files have been burned and the locations of eight subjects have been erased. The remaining two have been put down to keep from being put into the wrong hands—

a loud bang heard in the background, then static

End log



Abigail Beale, Class of '24

Untitled

Kassidy Haggard, Class of '22

Foretold brute birthed of benign skies,
Martyr of the brined hearts of our virgin girls,
Do you regret sawing off your wings?
God raises the question but you've already renounced him—
Even He anathematizes those as abominable as you.

Shrouded in Mist

Cole Rogers, Class of '24

A knife stuck in my back by a comrade.
 A person shrouded in a haze of mist,
 He took my life when my heart was unclad.
 I screamed and yet nobody would assist.

A rose lay dying in front of my eyes.
 I curl into a ball and slowly weep.
 I lay there and just wait for my demise.
 I shun them, yet a piece of me they keep.

Light slowly illuminates the field,
 Sun had risen beyond the horizon.
 And now, with their face no longer concealed,
 I see him in the soft bed he lies in.

Uncaring, like I never existed.
 It feels as if my heart had been twisted.

Still Nights

Luciel Ameling, Class of '23

February 2, 1925.

Willow walked down the streets of Boston, humming a tune she heard on the radio earlier. This part of the city was a bit sleazier than most people would prefer, but Willow liked it all the same. Sure, it was shady and gross, but that just made it harder for her parents to find her. Any time there was an opportunity to get away from that can of pompous, boujie worms she'd take it. She idled around until she saw a pink light coming from one of the nearby back alleys.

As she walked down the alley, she heard the sound of jazz music and people laughing. At the end of the alley stood a large door with a sign above it: "The Live Wire," it read. Intrigued, she strolled inside. Willow's eyes widened when she stepped through the door. There was a choking smell of cigarettes, and smoke rose up to the ceiling. A bar sat in the corner with lines of alcohol behind it. On the far right was a small stage that a band was playing at, and an instrument case was open at the end, half-filled with spare change. Willow went to plenty of speakeasies, but it was the first she'd seen that looked so clean.

As she sat down at the bar, the band started another song and the chatter continued. The bartender looked at her and asked, "What'll you have?"

"Just some gin and tonic for me, thanks." She replied, fishing the payment out of her wallet. While she waited for her drink, a man sat next to her. He was tall, and couldn't have been older than twenty-five, with tan skin and blonde hair that looked pink from the lights of the bar. He was dressed casually, with the sleeves of his button-down rolled up under a simple vest. After a

few seconds of silence, Willow was starting to get unnerved. Finally, she spoke, “Are you gonna just watch me or are you gonna talk?”

He laughed, “Jeez, doll. You looked like you were lost in thought, so who was I to stop you? If you’re that desperate for small talk, though, I’ll go along with it.” He propped his chin on one hand, the other on his drink, “What brings you here? I haven’t seen you at this joint before.”

Willow scoffed, “What, are you an alcoholic or do you just come here often?”

The man raised his eyebrows with a smile that seemed too wide, “Woah there! I thought I was the one who was supposed to say some cheesy pickup line. To answer your question, though, I guess I fit into the second category. I work here, after all.”

He worked here? A bit strange, but Willow supposed he could just need the money from an underground business. The man turned to the bartender and winked, “Just some whisky, Katey. You know the one?”

“You only ever drink one brand, Victor.” The bartender rolled her eyes, and handed him a glass filled with amber liquid.

The man—Victor, apparently—shrugged, his sleazy grin only spreading further. He replied, “What can I say? It’s good liquor. Anyways, why’d you visit this place? You look a bit too spiffy to be in this part of the city.”

“Sure I do,” Willow said. She continued, “Look, I just came here to check out this new joint, and it has been thoroughly looked at. Thanks for the company, but I think it’s time I leave.” With that, she swept up off the barstool and stood to leave.

Victor stood and held a hand up placatingly, “Hold up there, doll! These streets are dangerous for a girl like you, so how about I walk you home?”

Red flag after red flag was popping up around this guy, and warning bells were ringing over and over in Willow’s head. She needed a second to breathe, since the atmosphere around here was overwhelming. This guy would probably just follow her if she just left, though, so where— Oh! That would work.

“Sure thing, but first I’ll go to the ladies’ room, if you’ll excuse me.” Without waiting for a response, Willow walked away to the bathroom and beelined for the sink.

She took a deep breath, steadyng herself. Honestly, Willow didn’t know why she was so freaked out right now, it was just a normal night in a back-alley bar. After a few seconds of steadyng herself, Willow made a decision. This guy was creepy as hell, but it’s safer to walk the streets at night with a stranger than to do so alone. Plus, he talked too much and seemed easily distracted, so Willow could just ditch him once they got near her neighborhood. That place was plenty safe, considering how loaded everyone who lived there was.

Confident in her new plan, Willow strode out of the bathroom, back to the bar. Before she could tell Victor anything, though, she heard him and Katey talking. Victor was leaning on the bar casually, messing with some of the glasses the bartender was cleaning. Katey snatched one away from him and spoke, “Are you sure about this?”

“Please, that doll’s wearing a silk dress and fancy earrings. In this economy? She’s obviously got more money than she can deal with.” Victor rolled his eyes.

Obviously wary, Katey relented, “Fine. But don’t get caught, we need you to clean the tables when you get back.”

Victor cooed condescendingly, “Is that your way of saying you care? I’m flattered, really.”

“Shut up and get away from my bar, idiot,” Katey snapped, shooing him away.

Victor cackled and looked away, subsequently seeing Willow standing only a few yards away. Willow saw him curse under his breath before he greeted her. "Woah there, doll! I didn't see you. So, made up your mind?"

Willow was suspicious about what she overheard, but ignored it. "Are you sure your boss will let you leave?"

He laughed and replied, "I think it'll be fine. Alright, got your coat?" After confirming that she did, he held out an arm for her and the two walked out onto the streets.

Halfway to her house, Willow was rethinking her suspicions. Sure, he was creepy and strange, but Victor didn't seem to have any devious intentions. The alleys they were walking down were quiet, almost eerily so. There was the sound of a rat scurrying across the shadows every once and a while, or the coo of a pigeon, but aside from that it was silent as the grave. The pale moonlight fell through the cracks between buildings, and the chill of winter made the walk surprisingly mellow.

Victor put his hand in the pocket of his vest, and Willow heard a soft rattle. "What's that?" She asked.

He laughed, and pulled out a tin of candies. "Just some mints. What, you want one?" He held out the tin to her smugly.

"Sure." Willow took the tin and shook out a candy. She popped it into her mouth, and was stunned by how sweet it tasted. She made a face and said, "That's strong."

Victor waved his hand dismissively, but his grin only grew. "Well, it's just sugar and rubber. What would you expect?"

After a few more minutes of silently walking, Willow yawned, "Jeez, it must be later than I thought. What time is it?" Maybe it was the liquor from earlier, but she was starting to feel queasy.

The man grinned and looked at his watch, "Oh, it should be

working any second now."

"What?"

Victor's grin was so wide it could've cut his face in half. He looked at her and murmured, "You're really stupid, huh? You met a guy at some joint in a back alley, let him walk you even further into the shadiest part of town, and thought you'd be fine! It's almost like you want to be ransomed! Jeez, doll, you're stupid."

Willow was hit by a wave of nausea and bent over, trying to keep her head. What did he mean, ransomed? She looked back through whatever she'd done that night, desperately trying to think of what led to this before her blood froze when she realized. Victor never ate any of the mints.

"You son of a—" Willow growled, tackling Victor. She tried to punch his face, but ended up scratching it instead. When that didn't work, she kicked his groin and dug the heel of her shoe into his leg. It was to no avail, though, because at that point she was too sick to her stomach to do anything.

He snickered, "Woah there! You're more stubborn than I thought. No matter, though. Come on, we've got a trip across the city now." He looked at her condescendingly and smirked, "There there, just go to sleep now so that it'll be easier for both of us."

Willow tried to stay awake, tried to hit the stranger, tried to stand up, but nothing worked. Her knees buckled as she finally lost consciousness. Before her head could hit the ground, she heard one last comment: "Thanks for the payday, doll."

Conquest and Damnation

Kassidy Haggard, Class of '22

A single letter addressed to me
In my husband's painful scrawl,
And possibilities waft off the paper,
So much like the scent of ink.

And yet when he returns to me,
Battle-worn and travel-tired,
The words rolling off his tongue
Clash against those solidified in his letter.

Power would be so much easier to hold,
I tell him, if you were more of a man,
And eventually my acidity breaks him—
Eventually his knuckles turn white around the dagger.

When he washes the blood from his hands,
He is unable to wash it from his soul,
Which remains stained a wine-sweet red,
That deepens with every sunrise.

Ghosts haunt my husbands waking moments,
Friends bloodied by his hand are resentful.
Just when I believe madness tightly holds his hand,
I begin to see them too—only they utter accusingly to me.

My sins shine cerise and the light is too bright,
Those ghostly whispers become too loud,
And eventually I am broken—
Eventually my knuckles turn white around the dagger.



"Pay Attention!" - Granger Pearson, Class of '23

Shout at the Wall

Sophie Simmons, Class of '23

Cry out, ring out your injured protests
and Shout at the wall

It seems to me your time isn't any better spent
so Shout at the wall

Isn't it easier to blame a bright, flawed shade of paint
than trying to settle our countless struggles,
sifting through so many stricken issues?

It isn't left or right, you blindly marching wolves
You trod over your neighbor's grave,
lean your troubles on already leaning headstones
Congratulations, your respects don't pass the first coat of forced-on paint

red, shaking fists
grip spears
warped from half-mast flags

and blue, bruised fists
strangle knives
shattered from glass memorials

Go ahead, Shout at the wall
because when you shout at each other,
hope bleeds out in shuttered gutters

Raise up your leaders, lifted high on so many broken shoulders
You don't mind that corruption seeps through their teeth,
not if it's dyed your preferred shade of deceit

Your banners are painted in blood—does it matter whose?
Down it drips—it's covering your hands and hearts

Go ahead, destroy your friendships over the price of rice in China
and Shout at the wall
as hatred slowly morphs into an admirable brand of passion

Our nation may crumble around us, the dust of once noble ideas
dissolving in your forced tears
and still you shout at each other, you Shout—

Can you see my hopeless words, faithless plea, call to peace?
scrolling past your gaze
Or are my words just scrawled across your rigid walls?

The Odd Trio: Part One

Sophie Simmons, Class of '23

Kayla's arms were wrapped around her knees, which she kept tucked against her chest. With her head resting on her arms, she swayed with the gentle rocking motion of the moving bus. By curling into this tight little ball, she had thought that maybe she could escape some of the "what ifs" crawling around inside her head. She was wrong.

It was currently 2 AM, and Kayla had been aboard bus 409 since 9 PM. She had closed her eyes about ten minutes after said bus left Adderville Station, which was how long it took her to scan the rows of seats over and over again to make sure that *he* wasn't on board with her. She had been hoping to sleep for most of the five-hour trip, but instead Kayla had spent the time shredding her soul with her countless regrets.

Kayla regretted meeting Cole, when at the darkest period in her life the shades had been pulled shut. At the time she was just a lonely, hurting eighteen-year-old, and he was a walking nightmare she mistook for a dream.

Kayla regretted the six months they'd spent together. Every moment of it Kayla had felt her life slip away as Cole's need for control crept tighter and tighter around her. She regretted letting her need to please him stretch into a constant nervousness, then fear, before it finally snapped and became an all-consuming, uncontrollable terror.

Kayla regretted trying to end it in person. Instead of listening to the quiet voice of reason and skipping town without a word, she told him in person. She gave him the truth; he gave her two broken fingers and a matching scar.

Kayla regretted leaving her grandmother's house in Adderville, her only safe haven on planet Earth. She'd stayed there for

the last two months, hiding from Cole, and it was the happiest she'd been in years. Her sweet grandma had helped her to recover, albeit slowly. To remember what smiling was like. But every night Kayla stood alone in the middle of Grandma's tiny kitchen, and unbidden tears would slide down her face. Because every night, when the hour was so late and the air so still she could hear her fractured heart trying to beat, she would listen to Cole's messages. Over the course of the past two months, they had shifted from remorseful to impatient, impatient to furious. When the threats began, Kayla knew she couldn't stay, not near anyone she loved. For the safety of her beloved grandma, Kayla had packed her scarce belongings and left only a note. And she regretted it all.

More than all of this, though, Kayla bitterly regretted the fact that her dad wasn't there with her. He was the only one in the world she would have trusted to help her out of the hole she'd dug. He had always known exactly what to do, precisely what to say. In the very worst of times, she had always counted on the comfort of his presence. On a ride filled with "what ifs" and "if onlys," the thing that ached most deeply was his absence. Kayla regretted that he wasn't there to wrap his suit jacket around her shoulders like he always used to, keeping her warm on one of their spontaneous trips to the city. But, like most regrets, there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. All Kayla could do was curl up atop her bus seat and miserably fail to bury her misery.

This was the state Kayla was in when bus 409 finally jolted to a stop at its last destination. She slowly lifted her head, wincing as her stiff neck creaked in protest.

"Final stop, Carter Wood." The bus driver sighed and looked back at the handful of passengers left after a long night of driving. His tone was gentle and his voice soft, yet it came abruptly loudly after hours and hours of silence. "Everyone on your way."

The door squeaked open, and the cold night air of Kayla's hometown flooded in. She grabbed her backpack and waited for the other passengers to file off the bus before making her way towards the door. When she reached it, Kayla stopped in her tracks. She felt her backpack shaking in her hands. Peering out into the near-total darkness, Kayla took a moment to contemplate her predicament. When she left Adderville the general idea had been to get to her apartment and hide out there (hoping no one would notice she was back) until she could come up with a plan. Now, standing by herself in the middle of the night, her plan to come up with a plan later didn't seem so brilliant. Kayla gathered up her regrets and wrapped them around her shoulders.

"Ma'am, you alright?"

Kayla blinked and turned around. She couldn't truthfully reply, so instead she gave the driver the most genuine smile she could manage and thanked him before shuffling down the steps.

Outside it was freezing. Kayla's breath condensed into a small cloud of vapor under her nose. In front of her stood the run-down bus station which was located just outside of town. It consisted of a small overhanging roof, one dim lamppost, and two uneven benches. The few passengers left from bus 409 were dispersing, splitting up and fading from sight in the dark of the night. But Kayla didn't notice any of this.

The only thing that Kayla noticed was that standing under the awning was the most unusual group of people she had ever seen in her life. Possibly the most unusual group anyone had ever seen in their life. The first was an older fellow who seemed to embody the word "gentleman" in every way. He was wearing a trilby hat atop silver hair, and a light brown suit that looked straight from the '60s. A comfortable and courteous smile lit up his face, wrinkling deep smile-lines around eyes filled with warmth. The gentleman was only around 5'6", in sharp contrast with the person he was standing next to. She was a young woman (only a

few years older than Kayla), but she must have been at least 6'2". She had dark brown hair and cobalt blue eyes. A very shy smile crept onto her face, but it kept disappearing until slowly returning a few seconds later. Kayla thought it looked as if she wanted to smile but wasn't quite sure how. Immediately next to her was a broad-shouldered man around 5'11" who looked to be in his late 30s. Most striking about him was the fact that in the bitter cold he was wearing only a T-shirt with cut-off sleeves, and his exposed arms and neck were absolutely covered in tattoos. Most apparent were an ink snake wrapping around his throat, and a repeating phrase written with the cyrillic alphabet. Russian, maybe?

Even more confusing than the striking characters was the fact that all three of them were looking right at Kayla. She quickly looked down, her face flushing red with the embarrassment that she'd been caught staring. Keeping her gaze fixed on her worn-out boots, Kayla turned in the direction of Carter Wood and started walking.

While her boots crunched down an uneven gravel path, a shortcut leading in the direction of her apartment, Kayla contemplated the strange individuals. They were clearly standing together as a group, yet they didn't have one discernible thing in common. And what were they doing at the bus station? Bus 409 had made its last stop and there were no other buses that came at night. Kayla knew that they didn't live in town. So what were three tourists doing at a run-down, closed bus station at 2 AM? Kayla thought it was a delightful mystery. If it weren't for her current situation, she would've introduced herself to the gentleman with the kind smile and asked what brought him and his companions to Carter Wood.

When Kayla turned down the next bend in the pitted path, the already dim light from the bus station was completely cut off by a thicket of trees. The night was pitch black thanks to a cloudy

sky and new moon. Kayla squinted down at the trail. She had her phone in her backpack but was afraid to turn on the flashlight. The dark wasn't quite as frightening to her as the thought of being discovered.

Kayla grew more wary as she approached the edge of town. A twig snapped to her left, and her head whipped in the direction of the noise. While scanning the pitch-black landscape, she cautiously continued forward, testing the stability of each footstep before fully committing her weight. She carried on like this until she was only a few yards away from the closest building.

Suddenly, a jarring noise tore through the silence. Kayla's heart skipped a beat. She reached into her backpack, pushing past the few belongings to grab her buzzing phone. Cole was calling. Kayla stood still, totally frozen except for the heart crashing against her ribs. All her muscles were locked in place, her eyes fixed on Cole's glowing name. Kayla couldn't bring herself to decline the call, though she was worried someone would hear the ringing. It would only take one familiar face to spot her and it would all be over. Her breath hitched in her throat as she imagined it. She would be recognized, word would spread like wildfire, and before the day was over Cole would know. Kayla drew in one shaky breath after another. A minute later, she had one new message.

Why is he calling so late? Kayla thought. Does he know I'm back? How could he? She brought one shaky finger to the screen, opening the new voice message.

"Kay, where are you? I just talked to your grandma, Kay, I know you just left! Are you still in Adderville? Look, I just want to talk, alright? I already told you I was sorry, but *you* won't even let me explain! Why won't you answer my calls? I've been looking for you for two months, Kay, I need to *see* you—"

"Kayla!" The message was interrupted by a shout from behind. Kayla whirled around. She didn't move. She didn't breathe.

She searched for the familiar figure she was dreading to find. Instead, from behind the tree thicket came three figures of comically different size. The soft glow of a dim flashlight illuminated the same odd trio from the bus station. The old gentleman, the tattooed man, and the tall young woman, who was holding the battered, old flashlight. The dim, yellow light showed that, once again, all three were looking right at Kayla.

Kayla was confused. She'd never seen any of them before the station, and now they were following her? How did they know her name? More than confused, though, Kayla was frightened. Three complete strangers were approaching her in the middle of the night, and on a night when being seen by anyone would spell trouble. Kayla spun around and took off.

The same voice called her name again, but Kayla didn't stop. She sprinted past the house she had stopped by and onto a paved road. She ran past house after house, glancing back to see if she was being chased. When she reached an intersecting street, Kayla turned sharply to the right, her boots skidding across the asphalt. The street sign said Porter Road, which meant she was barely more than a mile from her apartment. Kayla slowed down to a jog, her lungs aching in the cold, but she kept going. After she made her third turn, she finally stopped.

Kayla took in her surroundings while she caught her breath. She was in the section of town filled with small shops and businesses. Right next to her was Henry's Pawn Shop. Kayla leaned against the shop's wall, then slid down to the sidewalk. She didn't think the inexplicable group had chased her. She hadn't heard anyone behind her, and besides, they had no reason to. Maybe they weren't following her at all. All she knew for certain was that they knew her name and they weren't from town. Maybe she had met one of them before and just didn't remember, although that was hard to believe. If they weren't from town they had no reason to tell anyone she was back, right? Except...

Kayla groaned quietly. By running away she had caused a scene. The group, whoever they were, would certainly wonder why Kayla had sprinted away from them in such a rush. They would probably even ask around town about it. "Do you know why that girl Kayla was running around in the middle of the night? Oh, why yes, she's back in town." Word would get out. Kayla couldn't stay. She also had nowhere to go. Panic rose in Kayla's chest. She jumped up and started walking at a brisk pace. All she could think to do was get to her apartment. She would gather her important belongings and then figure out where to go. Hopefully, she would be gone again before Cole ever heard anything. Kayla knew he hadn't mentioned Carter Wood in his message, and she hadn't told Grandma where she was going, so there was no reason to think he knew she was back in town. Kayla hoped he thought she was still in Adderville.

After the first few minutes of walking, Kayla's mind wandered back to the odd trio. She knew she would've remembered meeting any one of them, but how else would they know her name? Maybe they were following her, or maybe they just happened to take the same path as her. Though not many people knew about that shortcut... Kayla kept pondering as she walked, step after step. Another few minutes went by. Her teeth began to chatter, and her eyes started to water. Next her fingers started to hurt; they went numb a minute later. She gradually picked up the pace, eager to get inside the warm apartment building. Finally, Kayla approached the street of her building. The safety of her apartment was just around the corner. Kayla rounded the bend.

She froze.

Cole was there.

Not twenty feet from where Kayla was standing, Cole was pacing in front of the door. He was outlined by a streetlight that

was painting the sidewalk in long shadows. He was looking up towards Kayla's window, and Kayla could see he was lifting his phone to his ear. She froze, just like she always did, but it didn't matter much. There was less than a second before it happened. Her phone went off.

"Kay?" Cole's head snapped to the right. He leaned towards the sound of the ringing, peering into the darkness. "Kay is that you?" Kayla hesitated in the silence. She took a deep breath, and then made a decision.

"That's not my name." This was the moment Kayla had been running from for over two months. *He can't control me*, she thought to herself. *I can't let him*. Kayla repeated this in her mind over and over again, gripping it like a shield. She slowly moved into the light of the streetlamp.

"Kay, I'm so glad to see you! I've been trying to talk to you for months." Cole smiled and strode confidently towards Kayla. The grin faltered when she stepped back.

"I said that isn't my name. My name is Kayla." The two were standing about ten feet apart now. Kayla's heart was drumming in her chest. She shifted her left hand slightly behind her back. The scar was hidden by her jacket sleeve, but her pinky finger was still slightly crooked. The doctor had told her it would probably never be completely straight. She didn't think Cole had any right to see.

"Right, Kayla, sorry." Cole looked her up and down. Kayla was racing through emotions she had absolutely no control over. Hatred, love, anger, guilt, betrayal, sorrow, all racing through her for attention. But the winner was always fear. She wanted to run, to flee, to yell, to break down and sob, but everything she needed was inside her apartment. Cole was blocking the door.

"Listen, Kayla, I'm so so sorry about what happened. If you hadn't left I could've told you all this sooner. I've missed you so

much, and I just need to tell you how—" Cole launched into his monologue. He'd had two months to practice this, yet Kayla could hear how forced every single rehearsed word was. She watched, showing no emotion. Cole was a great liar, but Kayla knew all his tells. Now he was talking about the night that it happened.

"I mean, it was an accident Kayla. You understand that right? And anyway—" Kayla wasn't really listening. Images of that night flooded her mind. The yelling, the screaming. A pointed finger, a screamed insult. Cole, grabbing her outstretched hand. Struggling, and then the shove. The weightless feeling of falling backward just before the crunch of glass and bone—

Kayla closed her eyes.

"Are you even listening to me?" Cole had never liked to be ignored. Kayla took a deep breath. It was pointless to stand here wasting time. She had to do this.

"Cole, I'm not here for you. I'm just getting my things and then I'm leaving. For good." Kayla took a step towards the door, but Cole moved to his left, cutting her off.

"What?" Cole moved a step closer. "You're leaving?" His voice grew louder. "Kay, have you just forgotten all our time together?" He was almost yelling now. "I know I messed up Kay, but I love you! You can't just run off and leave!"

Kayla's hands were shaking. Her throat was getting tighter and she felt lightheaded. She took another step back and almost tripped.

"Cole, you *hurt* me, you— Look, I don't want to talk about this right now. I just need to get my things. Please, just let me go inside."

Cole stepped forward again. "I already told you it was an accident! What part of that do you not understand? You always overreact, freak out about nothing! I've been waiting for you to come

back for two months, Kay, *two months*. I was worried about you, you just disappeared! I realized I should call your Grandma to tell her you'd vanished, and she tells me you've been there the whole time! You didn't answer a single one of my calls! Then I find you sneaking through town, and when I finally get to talk to you you tell me you're leaving? What's wrong with you!" He shouted the last words, moving towards her as he did.

Kayla stumbled back, tripping over her feet as she lurched away from him. For the second time that night, Kayla turned and ran.

"Kay! Kay! Kayla! Come back!" Cole yelled after her. Kayla heard his heavy footsteps thudding after her as she sprinted away.

Heart pumping, blood pulsing, Kayla careened down the street. Her fight-or-flight instincts were kicking in, and she leaned into the primal urge to flee. She used the pure terror and surging adrenaline rush to push herself faster and faster.

"Kayla!" Cole shouted again. Kayla stole one quick, backward glance over her shoulder. Cole was closer than she had thought. The sight of the dark, nightmarish figure behind her filled Kayla's vision. She jolted forward, flooded with panic, and sprinted faster still. Lungs burning, legs aching, Cole gaining.

It was when Kayla took a sharp right down a street intersection that she realized she had no idea where she was going. She struggled to force her scattered thoughts to form a plan. *Nowhere to run to, she thought, nowhere to go!* But there was no stopping. The sound of Cole's heavy breathing and pounding footsteps filled her ears, closer by the second.

At the next intersection, Kayla randomly took a left. Cole was right behind her. She had to do something or he would reach her in just a few seconds. Around the corner, the road stopped suddenly at a dead end. Closing in around the unfinished road was

the dense wall of forest that surrounded much of Carter Wood.

Hope exploded in Kayla's chest. She could lose Cole in the trees! If she could pull that off, she could run to the next town which was only a few miles away. Surely Cole would give up looking for her, he couldn't search the whole forest! Just as she was celebrating, Kayla was violently thrown off her feet. Cole had reached out and yanked on her jacket.

Kayla hit the ground hard, landing awkwardly and rolling a few feet away. It took her a moment to absorb the shock, the pain. She laid on the asphalt, stunned, and felt the scrapes and bruises forming along her right side. Then she was scrambling to move away, or to stand up. She wasn't really sure which. But when her head snapped up, it wasn't Cole she saw.

Standing between Cole and Kayla was the tattooed man. His back was to Kayla, but she was sure it was the same man from the group. There was the snake wrapped around his neck, the cut-off shirt. Except this time, he was alone.

"Stop!" He commanded Cole in a thick Russian accent.

"Who are you, what do you want?" Cole hissed. "This is none of your business." Cole took one agitated step toward Kayla, but the Russian just moved to block him. Kayla took this as her cue to leave. While Cole and the Russian began to yell at each other (in different languages), Kayla turned and bolted for the trees.

Kayla limped for the first few strides, right ankle sore from the fall, but as soon as she hit the wall of foliage she had to put all her focus on navigating the dense vegetation. Twigs and branches whipped past her face, hands, and arms. After stumbling over a dip in the ground, Kayla slowed to a jog. She kept pushing through the undergrowth, collecting more scrapes as she did so. There was no time to process what had happened, or to wonder why the Russian had intervened and confronted Cole. Kayla just kept her head down, focusing on pushing through the trees. After

a few minutes, she paused to listen and catch her breath. It was quiet at the moment. She looked around but could see nothing. It was truly pitch black. If only... *My phone's flashlight!* Kayla realized now would be a good time to pull out the flashlight. She reached around for her backpack and—

Her heart dropped. Her backpack wasn't there. She must have dropped it when she'd fallen to the ground. In her panic she hadn't noticed—and now she had nothing. No phone, no wallet, no money, no identity, no clothes aside from the ones on her back. Her journal, her dad's watch, the picture of them together. All gone. Cole had taken *everything*. Tears started to stream down her face, stinging the shallow cuts in her skin. What could she do? Go back to Carter Wood where Cole was waiting? What would she do if she made it to the next town? She had no money. She had nowhere to go anyway. Kayla might have given up and collapsed to the ground if it wasn't for the faint call she heard through the trees.

"Kay!" Immediately she had her answer. Kayla knew that no matter what happened, anything was better than spending one more minute near Cole Anderson. Again, she heard a distant, "Kay!" through the trees. Kayla imagined she could feel the scar on her wrist throbbing, her mending fingers aching. She started jogging again. She had no idea how close Cole was.

After what felt like an eternity of running, Kayla finally emerged in a clearing. How close was she to the neighboring town? Kayla took in her surroundings. She was in a narrow clearing that stretched far to her right and left. It was enclosed on the other two sides by the forest, which she'd just emerged from, and what looked like a tall wall on the other side. Confused, Kayla stepped closer. It wasn't a wall.

In front of Kayla stood a rough rock face. Kayla touched her hand to the cool stone. The steep cliff was only about 15 feet tall, but completely unclimbable. She had miscalculated. She wasn't

anywhere near the other town. Train tracks lined the hill over the top of the cliff. Other than that, there was nothing for miles and miles. Kayla sank to her knees. After all she had been through, this insurmountable obstacle laughed in her face. It didn't matter that she couldn't get past this cliff, because she was nowhere near town. It didn't matter that she was nowhere near town, she had no money to get anywhere. It didn't matter that she had no money, because she had nowhere to go. And worst of all, it didn't matter that Kayla had nowhere to go, because in that moment she felt too broken to even exist. Kayla's last shreds of hope were shattered. She leaned against the cliff, closed her eyes, and sobbed.

Barely a moment later, Kayla felt something warm and familiar wrap around her shoulders. Instantly, Kayla was just a little girl again, wrapped in her dad's warm suit jacket and the comfort of his love. Her tears slowed. She opened her eyes slowly.

Crouched in front of Kayla was a shockingly tall young woman. Next to her was an older fellow who was wearing a white shirt and most of a suit. Around Kayla's shoulders was his jacket. Kayla stared at them. They smiled back. All three of their faces were illuminated by the gentle glow of the dim flashlight, which was resting on the ground.

"Hello Kayla."

Piece of Clay

Mallory Alcocer, Class of '22, 2nd Place in Poetry Contest

The Interpreter.

A woman is only a vision
A mere illusion or mirage of the mind

The body of a woman is something to be admired
The shape and silhouette adheres to my gaze

As I creep upon the object of my desire it only gets more beautiful
As I reach for her figure I am reminded of how empty a woman truly is

If only women were more than a warm corpse
If only a woman was more than an illusion

The Interpreted.

A woman is not something to sit and watch
A woman is more than the gaze a man gives to her

The body of a woman is imperfect and human
The outer casing of a woman is power not sex

As I feel the gaze of a stranger it sends chills through my entire being
As he gets closer I am only reminded of how unclean I am made to feel

If only a girl could be looked at for more than her body
If only a woman was more than an illusion



Calvin Lee, Class of '23

The Four Walls That Stand Before Me

Indigo Clark, Class of '24

I swing from the beautiful, lavish green vines that grow on the old camphor tree, which is as tall as the fluffy pieces of cotton candy in the sky. The vibrant smell of nature dances its way into my nose. The marvelous smell of virginia bluebells, dwarf crested irises, and tree sap remind me of home.

Home, where Mama would make scrumptious pies, flavors ranging from apple to green tomato, Papa would work in his workshop with my brother, and my sister and I would sing songs about nature. I remember the smell of oak, pine, magnolia, and varnish. Papa would make cute animal shapes, furniture, and tiny toys for people to buy. I loved helping him out when he'd need to paint his toy creations.

I jump off the lavish vines and walk towards home, or at least the direction I think home is. The foliage turns me around and I end up in a weird, old-looking town. It's deserted. There are no animals or people living here. The houses look lonely without someone using them, but I'm not the person for them. I hope to find my house, and I hope the ones who lived here find theirs. I look at the straw roofs, stone walls, and open windows of the houses. There are no doors to invite me in, but I ignore the unpleasant welcome. I continue walking, keeping my body moving forward. Since there is no foliage here I might find home.

Maybe my stinky older brother is waiting by the door in hopes of scaring me. I usually hate the pranks he pulls, but somehow I miss them. The whoopee cushions and jump scares are crazy nonetheless, but they remind me of home. I wonder if my sister is reading by the old magnolia tree in our front yard. The smell of old library books always brightened up my day. I wonder if they miss me as much as I miss them. I miss the smell of brown

sugar and cinnamon, the special perfume my grandmother would wear when going out. I wonder if the vibrant lilacs, baby blues, and coral paints are still resting on my little desk in my bright yellow room. I feel a pull on my back, and I turn around in excitement only to see the village. I lower my head like servants would do a king. I'm nowhere near home, so I might as well call this ghost town my own.

I find the smallest house in the town and I walk inside. It's quiet and actually quite enjoyable. Once I settle in, the feeling of loneliness creeps in through every crevice. I sigh to myself, not knowing what to do. I imagine the pies and toys that lined my house. I remember the hustle of the farmer's markets that mom would sell her pies at. The millions of people who sell homemade soap and jewelry. I know the person who would always set up next to us made really yummy spices. They had spices for everything honestly. Ugh, I was so jealous of them because they always had a big line of people unlike Mama's tent. I just think people only liked the "normal" pies.

I'm reminded by the lovely thoughts about food that I haven't eaten in quite some time. My stomach no longer rumbles, but I feel the empty pit in my stomach. I'm supposed to be sleeping, but I don't. I walk outside to see the world crumbling! The stars are falling and smashing like glass on the ground, and I can see giant wires dangling from the sky. The smell of hospital chemicals burns my nose. I huddle down on the once soft and welcoming ground. I sob into my knees and scream for my parents until my throat burns. Before I know it I am truly awake.

I look around to see... people! They're running around me, saying odd words, and hooking me up to different things while readjusting others. The walls are bare and have an odd feeling, almost as if they're telling me to run. I hear wailing from outside the door. It sounds like Mama. Is she okay?! I try to get up but for some reason I can't move. I look down to see nothing. I don't have

legs. Why don't I have legs?! I start to hyperventilate. The sounds of breathing remind me of the drums in a performance I saw during halftime at my brother's football game. The doctors try to calm me down with stuffed animals, but I just can't. I want Mama and Papa. Please let me hold them. I need that calming feeling again. I need them to know that I'm okay! I need... They poke me with something, and as the world leaves my vision I leave the world.

I wake up surrounded by multiple walls. A person with big fluffy wings and a halo approaches me. Maybe I'm dreaming again. It feels so realistic, and I'm freezing cold. The person leads me to different walls and tells me that I have only one coin, so I can see only one thing. I clutch the coin in my hand. The coin isn't cold like a coin should be. It's peculiar because the area is freezing. The coin isn't even heavy like the coins at home that clang against the cup in my room. I had been saving up for a puppy because my friend had one that I adored. I stared at the coin for a bit before looking back up at the four walls in front of me: past, present, future, and death.

I sigh because I'm so indecisive and frustrated. I have no clue what I want to choose. Why did they do this to me! I'm just a child. Just a child. I don't know what to choose, but I definitely don't want the present or future. The present would remind me of the lonely feeling that weighs my sickened heart. The future would make me feel as if I didn't accomplish what I should have. That leaves me with the past and death. The past would probably make me miss the house I lived in and the people who stayed there. It would also make me see embarrassing things like when I peed my bed. Though the past might also remind me that I was never alone. The thing is, I want to know how I died. That's when it hits me. I am dead. I died, the doctors killed me. But now the question is, what led to that? I didn't have legs, so how did I go? Was I shot? Car wreck? I don't know, but whatever it is I better be prepared.

I choose to see my death because the concern of not knowing what happened pains me more than the empty feeling of being away from home. I insert the coin and with a click the wall is gone. The other walls darken and lose their coin slot. I'm guessing so they aren't tricked. I walk through the area slowly because I don't know what might be waiting for me. A feeling of dread overwhelms me. I feel sick and I want to vomit, but I would have nothing to vomit. I keep walking slowly, watching my every step. I'm forced to stop, and when I stop the lights come on.

It's like watching a film, like the films Mama would play; it starts with a click. As it shows the gruesome car accident that we were in, I notice that there were pies. That's when it hits me. We were coming home from a farmer's market one day when the spice lady drove into the road at what looked like a hundred miles an hour. Mama slammed on her breaks, and we crashed into the spice lady's truck. It wasn't the first time the spice lady did this stunt, but it surely was the last. My legs got caught on the passenger seat and I couldn't move. I remember the cherry blood staining everything. I remember Mama and Sister crying for help and sobbing in their seats. I remember the last thing I did was tell them I loved them before falling into a deep sleep. Then the weirdest part starts playing. Firemen cut me out of the seat and I was driven to the nearest hospital, not far from where the market took place. I was put into a room, but I kept twitching and woke up screaming. I don't remember waking up, so it looks outlandish to me. That was when the doctors began talking to my parents about putting me in a simulation. They didn't hesitate once the doctor said it would ease my pain. Everyday they gave me somewhere new, but after a while the simulations were downgraded because all hope was lost. My parents looked like they had realized their child was gone, so I guess they decided to relinquish their child from the prison they'd put them in.

Once the film ends, an angel approaches me and gently takes my hand. I can't help but be in awe by the sight of the magnif-

icent creature. They shine brighter than the sun and have the smell of warm coffee and honey. It's a bittersweet scent but still smells amazing. I can't help but only pay attention to them. The way they look, talk, and just live is so abnormal to me. The giant angel takes me into a room and with a flip of the switch, I'm in a simulation. But it's different.

The simulation isn't a simulation to me at all. It's as if they've teleported me to the afterlife. There are people laughing, children playing, and others simply living. It feels bittersweet. I finally feel at home, but my family and friends aren't here. I raise my head up high and embrace myself for my new adventure. I will always remember Mama's pies, Papa's workshop, Sister's singing, and my brother's pranks, but for now I live with the angels in the sky. I will prepare my new home for the people I called family, and I will watch them from afar, just waiting for them to come home to me. I guess this is a see you soon and not a true goodbye.

Pouwe-38

Ainsley Bean, Class of '23

A sudden earthquake of a jolt woke me up, sending me out of bed and onto the metal floor with a painful splat. I looked up through the darkness, but I couldn't even see my hand waving in front of my face. I fell back down. From my shelves, I heard rubbing like sandpaper followed by pounding on the floor. My belongings began to tumble toward me, clanking and rolling to my fingers and head. Then the earthquake stopped. Everything fell silent, even the beeping machinery in the walls that had filled my head with rhythmic dreams every night. My door swung open and my room became infused with a dim yellow light: an old, battery-run lantern held by Caspian. He stood in my doorway, panting and gripping the doorframe with his free hand. His face glowed with a thin layer of sweat and a flawless grin that showed almost every single tooth.

"We're here," he said through heavy breaths. "Get your suit on and come take a look."

I nodded as he walked away, and put my spacesuit on in record time (I definitely did not time it... It took 37 minutes).

Even with the oxygen tank strapped to my back, I felt a strong urge to hold my breath as I walked out of the ship and down the steep steps. I looked ahead. Huge mountains, larger than anything Earth could attempt to form, covered the landscape in the distance. They were perfect isosceles triangles and were connected at the tips with thin, arched bridges. Countless small craters, about five feet in diameter, separated the mountains and the spaceship. The terrain seemed to be a dull purple and was densely covered in strange, reflective vegetation that was about 2 feet tall and swayed as if the planet was underwater. As it swayed, the reflections sprayed light onto my face and eyes,

forcing me to look away for just a moment.

"Hey Nim, you'll want to see this!" hollered Caspian from afar. I skipped towards him through the tall mirror plants with my arms out like wings, soaking in the breathtaking beauty of this planet called Pouwe-38.

Caspian was lying on the ground, holding up a magnifying glass to the grass. It swayed back and forth at an inconsistent tempo, and Caspian struggled to get a good look because the grass blinded him every few seconds. I crouched beside him, trying not to laugh at his grunts and kicks.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" I asked.

"I'm just trying to see why the vegetation is reflective. A study from over 100 years ago suggests that it has microscopic hairs covering the leaves, so that may be why. But I have a theory," he replied, his left eyebrow raised at an embarrassingly steep angle. "When I walk on this planet, my feet thud against the ground and sound as if I'm stomping in a cave system. I think that these plants are reflective because of the soil that they grow in, which is right above a huge cave. We have to investigate."

I shake my head. "No, Caspian. We're here to observe. Not to drill holes in a planet we've only been on for less than an hour. We can't disrupt anything here. Besides, there may be organisms in that cave."

"Exactly," he said as he stood up and headed back towards the ship. I ran after him.

"Caspian!" I cried. "I don't want to get fired! Come back here!"

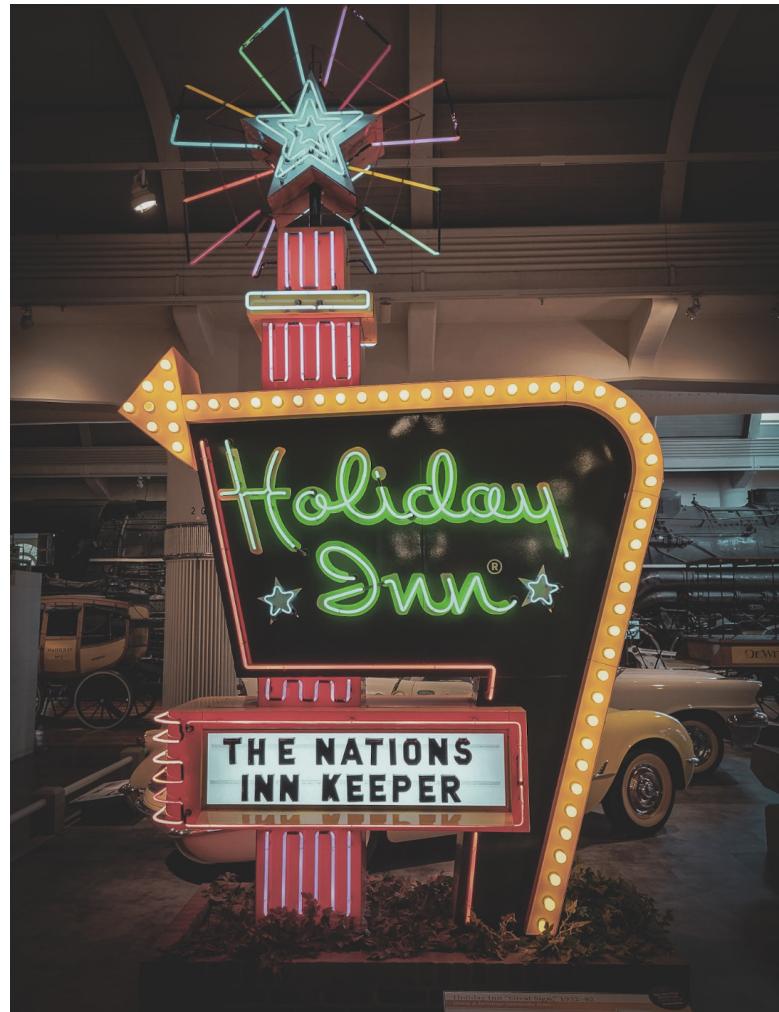
He turned to face me and hollered back, "Nim, it's alright, I already checked—" Caspian was gone. In a blink of an eye, he had melted to the ground like water spilling out of a glass. I stood, unmoving, my jaw dropped. My eyes welled up with tears and my

mind filled with so many confusing questions.

It felt like hours had passed while I was only standing there, motionless and silent, but wanting to scream. The world became slowly dark, hushed, and cold. I moved a foot. Then another. I approached the place where Caspian had once been only recently. But there was no liquid in his place. Only small, reflective plants sticking out of the purple soil, like a stubbly beard, inhabited his footprints. I bent down to get a closer look. As I did so, a strange source of light filled my eyes. I grunted at the small pain. Squinting my eyes, I laid on the ground, the small group of plants less than five inches away from my face.

I saw an ovate shape in the narrow leaves, with a reflection much weaker than the rest of the plant. I touched the backside of the plant, stilling it to see the oval clearer. As my eyes focused, I saw two lighter dots in the shape, separated by a dark mound running vertically. I then saw a thick horizontal crescent below the mound that opened similarly to a human mouth. It was his face.

I cried out, and my hands were trembling. I began to gently stroke the mirror plants with the tips of my glove. Caspian was not dead. He wasn't a liquid, either. I looked closely once more. Whimpering, I laid my head down, careful not to flatten the small plants that held Caspian inside of them.



Calvin Lee, Class of '23

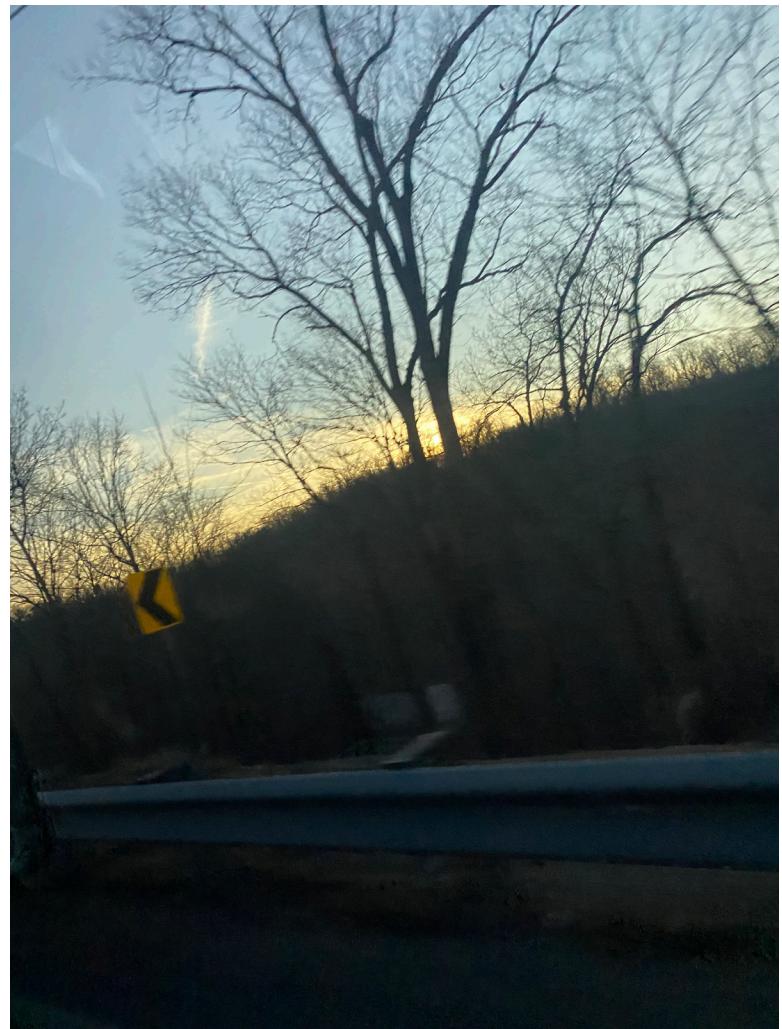
Cheers!

Anonymous, Poetry Contest Winner

Cheers!
 Let's celebrate this,
 A toast to loved ones who can't resist
 Raise your red stained glass
 Drink to your hearts' content
 For your worries are gone in a sip

The night is young and naïve
 Minding her own
 The world sleeps under her glistening eyes
 Enchanting eyes that see all and don't blink
 She hears their laughter and their screams
 Empty red glass
 You cracked and now I see broken pieces of my past

Cheers!
 For your worries are gone
 Raise your red stained glass
 And swallow your troubles
 A toast to loved ones who can never resist another



"The alcohol served its tour" - Perla Ramirez, Class of '24

Murder on Clean Street

Ashton Norman, Class of '23

Looking from far away you would think the city was beautiful. Massive elegant skyscrapers covered the skyline with lights brightening the city in the dark of the night. However, on the ground, the city was dirty, wet, and cold. Trash littered the streets, roads that should have been repaired years ago remained with potholes, and all road markings were faded or gone. Buildings that should have been condemned long ago lay unused. Yet what truly made this city depressing was not the trash or the decay, it was the poor and the homeless. You couldn't walk down the street without passing some poor beggar. Nobody knew this more than Nathan Hayes, a fact he had never managed to drown, no matter how much he drank.

Nathan walked down the street trying to light up a cigarette, despite what seemed like the never-ending mist of rain that fell on the city.

"Dammit," he cursed, eventually giving up as the rain refused to yield.

He approached Clean Street, which despite the name was anything but. Say what you will about the beggars, at least they still had a sense of humor. Walking down Clean Street, trash can fires were all around with the poor huddled around trying desperately to escape the cold. As Nathan walked he saw some sorry bastard being beaten outside his apartment. Apartment, the suggestion that they could be considered homes made Nathan laugh. They were more like shacks of scrap barely holding together. Clean Street was where you went when you had no one else to go.

Nathan had been called by his employer, West, to investigate a murder on Clean Street. West had been suspiciously cryptic about what Nathan had been asked to investigate. He stood out-

side the local "bar," which looked as if it had been through a war zone. The windows were shattered, and bullet holes covered the walls. As Nathan walked through the busted door, he learned why West had been so cryptic. Riddled with holes and lying in a pool of blood was Sammy West, the only son of Adam West, Nathan's employer.

"Jesus," Nathan muttered. "I need a drink."

He walked over, grabbed the only bottle that hadn't been shot to hell, and drank it down. As he guzzled down some liquid courage, a short, balding man walked into the room.

"Hey!" he yelled. "You have to pay for that."

The liquor burned Nathan's throat like gasoline. He tossed the bottle on the ground, shattering it, and turned to the man. "You need to get some better booze; you could dissolve a body in that shit."

"What are you doing here? We're closed."

"Well, I would hope so because this place is a travesty." Nathan turned to look the man in the eyes. "Now you're going to tell me everything that happened here."

"Why should I? I don't see a badge."

"How about this? You tell me everything and you get a nice finders' fee."

The man began to grin. "Alright. I was just opening and this man was waiting outside the door asking for a drink."

"I don't exactly have a right to judge, but you didn't think that was odd?"

"Odd yeah, but have you seen this place? With this many desperate people, I'll always have customers."

"What a samaritan. Did he say anything, or did you see anything?"

"No. He walked in, ordered a drink, and then bullets started flying. I ran, and didn't stop until I was five blocks away."

"So you have nothing that could help at all."

"Well, I have his phone, would that help?"

"It might," Nathan said, his patience wearing thin.

As he grabbed the phone, the man demanded, "What are you going to give me for it?"

Nathan examined the phone. He may not have had the password, but the notifications showed several texts from a woman listed as Stacy, who Nathan could only assume was Sammy's sister, Stacy West.

"Here's your reimbursement," Nathan said with a chuckle as he handed the man a five.

As Nathan walked away, the bar owner yelled back, "You cheap ass!"

Nathan walked out of the broken door, stepped back into the sleet and cold, and called West. Ring... Ring... Ring... Click.

A cold, almost mechanical voice came on. "What did you find?"

"What did I find? I found your son riddled with bullets on the floor, that's what I found. Why the hell didn't you tell me the victim was your son?"

"It wasn't necessary," he said plainly. "Who killed him?"

"Do you even care, because it sure sounds like you don't."

"You have no idea what I have lost!" West said with fury.
"Now do you know or not?"

"I don't, but I have a lead."

With his calculated voice returned, West said, "Mr. Hayes, I must be clear that when you know who killed Sam, you are not to

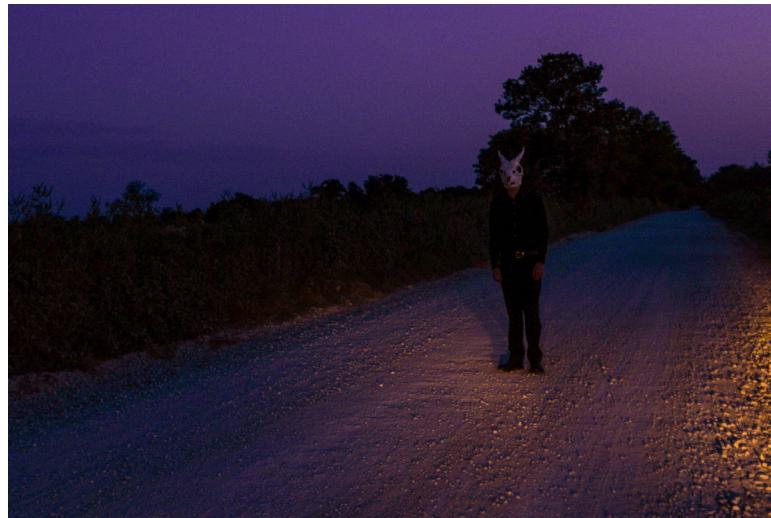
investigate further. You are to call me immediately. Are we clear?"

"You got it, boss."

"Goo—" West was cut off as Nathan hung up.

"Prick."

Nathan had decided it was best he not mention Stacy West was his next lead. Stacy had always been the black sheep of the family, and West had paid a lot of money to make sure her issues, as he described it, stayed private. That was the only thing he had ever mentioned about his daughter. Stacy had been cut off by everyone, including Sammy. To Nathan, however, it seemed like things had changed. Last he had heard, she was working as a maid at some hotel called the Griffin, and that's where he was heading next.



"In the Shadows" (left)

Victoria Betancourt, Class of '22

In the photo to the left, I wanted to depict how once alone, people become their true selves. I only realized the true evils one could hide after meeting the devil for myself. I wanted to put the audience in the same mindset as mine in that experience.

To accentuate the unnerving tone, I put the model off to the right side of the photo by himself. The bright, beautiful sky contrasting with the demon lets the viewer pick which part of the picture they want to focus on: indulge in the beauty or address the evil lurking in the background.

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BWHS English and Fine Arts Departments - Thank you for introducing us to the profound insight beauty in our world expressed through words and art. You have lit a spark and fanned the flame during our time on this campus. Our hope is that this publication will be a small part of the warm, illuminating blaze.

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Editorial Policy

More than 100 pieces were submitted to the BWHS literary magazine staff for consideration in this publication. Those pieces were anonymously reviewed and then either accepted or rejected through staff discussion and democratic process.

Submissions were accepted on merit of literary technique, individual style, and richness of language. Accepted pieces were then sent through another stage of editorial review, during which the staff's co-editors conducted a final review. Pieces were then either rejected or minorly edited for grammatical errors and sent to final publication. All edits were conducted with the highest care to preserve the authenticity of the original work. As much as possible, we showcase one original work per page in an effort to expand and enhance the experience of encountering each piece.

We do not plagiarize.

We value the power of language. As such, we believe that when profane language is not used for gratuitous effect but rather to enrich authentic expression, it has literary merit and therefore belongs in a magazine celebrating artistic endeavors.

The ideas and views published in this magazine do not represent the ideas and views of the Bentonville West High School student body, the BWHS administration, or Bentonville Schools.

“I sound my barbaric yawp
over the roofs of the world.”

- Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself, 52”

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