

2024-2025

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KALEIDOSCOPE

a journal of literature and visual art

Kaleidoscope: A Journal of Literature and Visual Art

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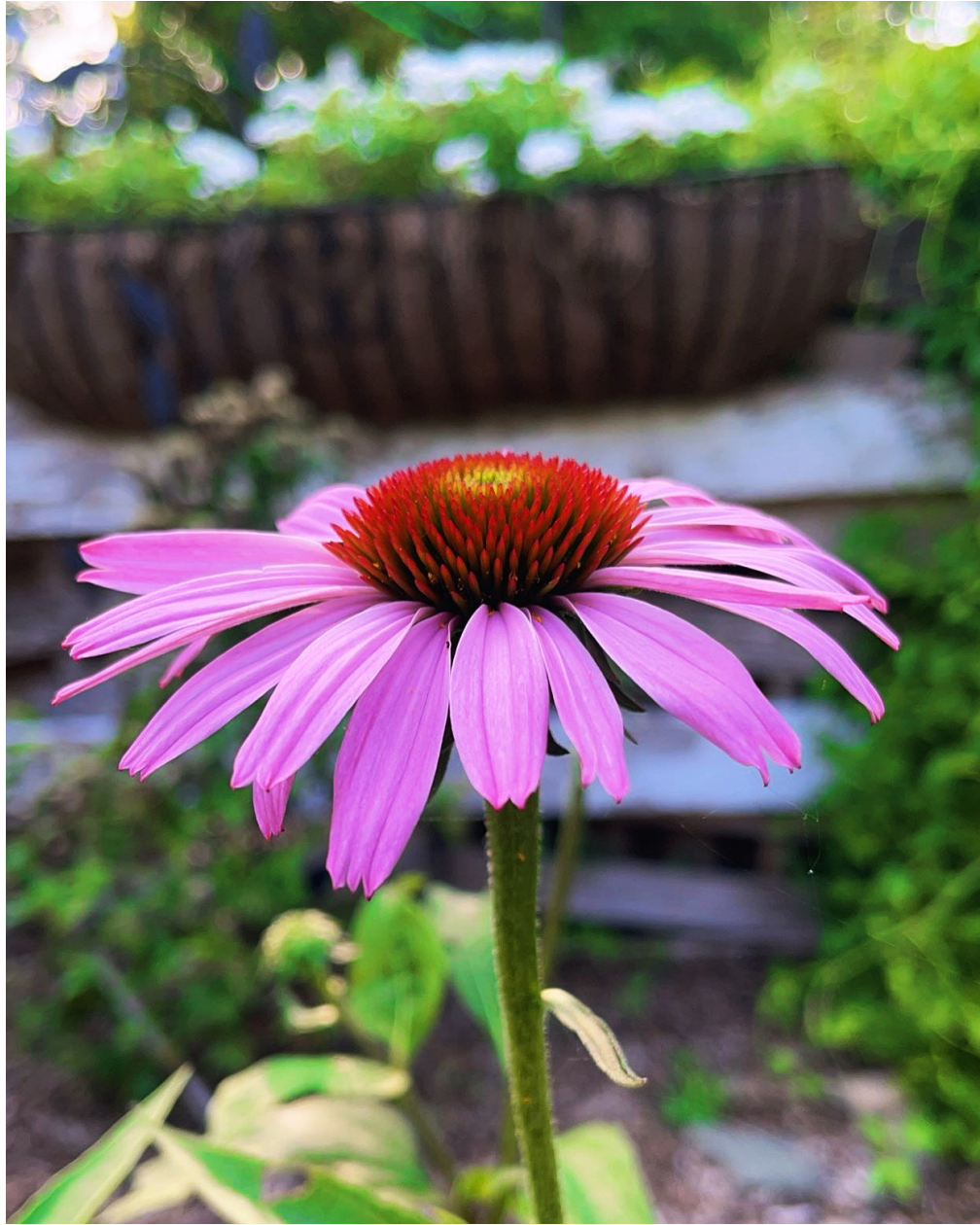
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Pink Among the Green
BY: CARL MORELAND

Ode to Christie

BY: SAMANTHA SENSOR

Christie had a booming laugh. It was the sort of laugh that demanded the attention of the room, as if saying, "Here I am, the life of the party!" It was fitting, because she often was the life of the party, ready with a funny story or a crazy idea. Her smile was wide, filled with big white teeth that reminded me of the Cheshire Cat, flashing a "We're all mad here" mischievous grin. It was unlike mine, which I kept hidden behind firm lips, not yet confident enough to show the world their crookedness. She joked that she could get me out of my own head, and I was there to bring her back down to reality. She wasn't wrong either, unsurprisingly as she was often right. At the time my world was quite small, limited to the streets of our small decaying neighborhood and the boundaries of a day filled with cleaning crumbly messes and wiping sticky little faces.

I met Christie through my daughter, who had quickly become best friends with her daughter, Bobbie. She would beg me to let her go play at Bobbie's house. I was an anxious young mother, unsure of my decisions and always feeling that I was merely acting at being a wife and mother. I would ask myself, "what would a good mother do?" So, it was no surprise that I insisted I meet her parents in-person first. One evening after dinner, I strapped the baby into his stroller, and we walked up the crumbling sidewalk on Arrow Street and made our way on to Teepee Drive to their home.

"Do you like books?" was the first thing Christie ever asked me. Boy, did I ever- I spent many long nights with a baby in one arm and a book in the other. As the girls skipped ahead of us while we walked the uneven streets before us, we bonded over our favorite stories. After that day, our walks became a part of our daily routine. The girls would ride their bikes ahead of us while we traded book recommendations. Soon, our lives became more intertwined. My son would tag along as would her son, Derek. He was an older boy who played football, and my son was more than happy to follow him in awe. Not long after, more neighborhood kids were added to our little crew. It was a bright spot in my exhausting days, for not only did my children make friends, but I did, too.

The conversations grew from books to the mundane details of our lives. I never had much to share, but it didn't matter because she talked enough for the both of us. She would share stories about the old man she cared for, and how she found that preparing his chipped beef and toast he ate for lunch everyday would leave grease stains on her shirt that never came out no matter what she used. I would hear all the details of Derek's football games and the plans she had for Bobbie to join a softball team. She was electric, always excited and on the go. Some nights I would let her talk on and on, finding her energy and hope infectious. I didn't mind that she dominated our conversations, I was happy to have someone to talk to.

At times, our conversations would become less superficial, much deeper and intimate. I told her about my volatile relationship, each fight and hurtful word hissed between clenched teeth, but also the fleeting junctures of joy- a seam of understanding sewing us together. In turn, she told me about the trauma of dating Derek's father, big Derek, a man with a troubled past and even more troubled mind.

"I followed him everywhere; I loved him since I was nineteen. I would even make the drive down to Southern Illinois to visit him in jail. I did that more than once. I depended on him; he made me happy. But he still broke my heart after he got out. He wasn't there for little Derek and me. He went crazy, saying weird stuff, always wandering off. I couldn't keep running after him," she confessed one cool evening as the kids bicycled ahead of us, their jackets billowing out behind them with the wind.

I nodded slowly as I stared ahead, detached from that moment as I thought about my own relationship. I could relate. I had followed my husband all around the state, quietly packing my dreams away as we moved from one town to the next. I always hoped that this time would be the time where things worked out for us and between us. Yes, this time would be a fresh start. For what? To feel loved, I guess. It was an unspoken truth that she had done the same.

"Sam, you good?" Christie looked over at me. I focused my attention back to that moment- my friend, the cool breeze, and the chatter of our children ahead of us.

"Yeah, I was just thinkin'," I said.

"You always are. Girl, you gotta get outta your head sometime," she laughed.

I knew she wasn't wrong. We kept on, letting the chortles ahead of us buoy our sadness and regret.

On weekends when our partners were home, we would have bonfires at my house. My husband would take large boxes from work and paint the outside of them with cheap acrylic paint to look like little cars. The kids would grab blankets and pillows and nestle inside of their cardboard cars while I wheeled out the old tube TV that once sat in the living room of our first apartment. The kids would watch whatever movies we found at Goodwill, delighted to have their own drive-in theater while we adults sat around the fire sipping beer and wine coolers, shooting the shit and enjoying the fellowship we had created. Our partners worked long, backbreaking hours, selling pieces of their strength and youth for the privilege of staying just above water financially. Having friends, a community who understood the everyday rhythms of a blue-collar life, made the weight of our bleak realities a little easier to bear.

Life was humming along, until the day her partner decided to leave. It came as a shock to everyone. Only a few months before, she had been talking nonstop about their plans to get married. Christie put on a brave face and began looking for a higher paying job. Soon, she found herself elevated from her \$11 an hour caregiving job to a “real” job at a mortgage processing company. It paid \$16 and had health insurance, a benefit that she was excited to share would allow her to afford contact lenses. We both knew how much of a privilege that was, as usually contacts were an indulgence, something you might be able to get when your taxes came in, if there was enough after paying the light bill and making sure the kids had clothes to replace the high water pants and pinching sneakers that they had worn through the winter. I was incredibly proud of her. “That’s my friend”, I would think to myself.

Her life continued to improve over the course of the next six months. She would share on our evening walks the new stories of her work and her successes. On the weekends she had her kids, we’d spend all day together, taking them to Dairy Queen and a park.

“Mom, puh-lease let me stay at Bobbie’s. I promise I’ll clean my room!” my daughter would beg on those weekends her friend was home. I rarely said no. I’d come along too. On chilly fall nights, Christie and I would sit under the shelter of her breezeway, cocooned in layers of sweatshirts while cold rain fell around us. Sometimes, other friends would join us, or at times a guy she was seeing. I would sit in an old woven lawn chair, twirling the fraying nylon edges of the chair while I cut my teeth on having conversations and opinions. Sitting in her breezeway, with the warm yellow light from inside painting our faces, I felt a seed of confidence growing within me. I credited it to Christie’s influence, as if her self-assurance had spread to me. It was an intoxicating feeling, to believe that I was worthy of being heard, and I hoped my life could stay just like that forever.

However, nothing in life can stay the same forever. After a few months, the weekends her ex had custody began to show a side of Christie that I didn’t recognize. She’d often lay in bed all day, ignoring my texts, and stay up late into the night, calling me hours after I’d fallen asleep. Despite her changes, I could understand why she was acting strangely. I assumed the stress of being a single working mother must have been enormous. I found the task of raising five children under the age of nine to be daunting, and I marveled at how she seemed to balance it all. I left her alone, respecting her needs for rest and fun, and a little envious of it, too. Rest was a luxury not afforded to women of our class.

Maybe I shouldn’t have left her alone. I sometimes wonder now if there were more signs I should have paid attention to. They were there, but they were so small, and I was buried so deep in my own life that I couldn’t see the changes in her and notice what they were hinting at. First, she began to lose weight, a little at first, and then so much so that her pants were constantly drooping from her waist. The ruddiness of her skin began to grow sallower, and her dishwater blonde hair went from thick to lifeless and thin. Her toothy grin no longer dazzled, as her teeth began to grow yellow with brown decay trimming her gums. She had weird acne, or what I thought was acne– red, angry sores on her face that looked painful.

There were changes beyond her appearance, too. Her once tidy home became filthy, with dishes rotting in the sink. One time, I opened her kitchen cabinet, shocked to see it empty save for a few instant oatmeal packets and an expired hamburger helper box. I didn’t know it then, but she had begun skipping work, which explained why one day I found Bobbie and Derek at my doorstep, asking if they could please use our shower since they didn’t have hot water. While I pulled towels down from the top of my closet, I asked them how long they had gone without hot water. Bobbie just shrugged. Derek looked down at the floor while he admitted it had been two months.

“Two months?!” I exclaimed, astonished that no one had mentioned it before. After all, I thought there were laws about turning off gas service in our state.

"Well, it's been summer. Mom says the LIHEAP people can't help us yet, and Nicor can cut us off since it's not winter," he said.

"I see," I quietly said. What else could I say at that moment? "You guys want dinner? I'm makin' spaghetti," I asked.

"Sure," Derek mumbled.

So, they stayed. Their presence at our dinner table became a regular occurrence, which thrilled my kids and worried my husband and I, as we exchanged glances across the kitchen. I will admit that I was naive, as I didn't know much about drugs beyond the random joints that would sometimes appear at bonfires after the children were fast asleep, their skunky smell fading into the cold night air. I had always seen them as a temporary escape from our stressful lives. My husband was far more knowledgeable, and although he didn't partake himself, it was normal for guys on his crew to each take turns in the porta-potty, coming out wiping their noses and sniffing hard, ready to keep working, finishing the pvc lines and sheet metal work at the reckless speed the foreman demanded. He knew whatever Christie was doing was much worse than that.

Ice, crank, tina, speed- all names for the same drug that cost my friend everything: meth. I didn't know until much later, but she had been using coke for many years off and on. Her ex had been aware and didn't worry too much about it. He didn't think of it as much different than the beers he drank or a blunt shared among friends. It seemed that to him, since it wasn't often, it wasn't a big deal. The breaking point for him though was when he caught her slamming it one night in their bathroom. Was there more to his sudden departure than that? I never figured that out. Either way, what I didn't know until much later was that their breakup was the beginning of her hard spiral into addiction. While I thought she was making headway into starting a successful career, she was sneaking vodka into her coffee tumbler. On the nights that we were sitting outside socializing, she and her guests would run off to the bathroom to get high. Skinny powdery lines, nearly disappearing into the cool porcelain of the toilet's tank, were the real draw to those evenings for them. All the while, our daughters sat in the little room beside it, dolls splayed across the floor, giggling voices drifting out to the rest of the house. They had to have known how risky their actions were with children so close. I suppose they didn't care, or perhaps they were too hungry for the high that would temporarily lift their weariness, so much so that all judgement was lost to them. And I sat outside, just as blissfully unaware as the children.

A few months later, Christie met a new man and was instantly smitten. She invited me over to meet him one late spring night, when the warmth of the air danced with the moisture on the ground, making the night air hazy and thick. I stood outside her garage with them, staring out at the streetlight with its halo of light shining in the mist.

I turned from my gaze and asked him, "Hey, I'm Sam. Nice to meet you. Where did you meet Christie?"

"I'm Cozy," he replied.

I found it odd that he wouldn't answer the rest of my questions.

"Oh, we met on Plenty 'a Fish," Christie hastily replied, as if she was trying to fill in the awkward silence that had grown between us.

Cozy continued to stay silent, looking away from me while he took a long drag of his cigarette. I nodded, as I knew Christie had met several guys from there. They would come and go from her social life, so I rarely paid them much attention. Something felt off to me this time, a palpable frenetic energy between the two of them, and I sensed I had better pay attention to him. Something was different about this new man in her life.

I wasn't wrong: something was indeed different about him. I began seeing less of her, as she spent more of her time with him. I stopped being invited. When I did see Christie, her chattering seemed less exuberant and more disorganized. However, a thread ran through every conversation we had from then on- Cozy. She was like a young girl with a crush, always preoccupied with him. In truth, she was worse than that, it was more like an obsession. "Cozy says... Cozy did..." became the common opening lines for most of what she said to me. I already had begun to recognize that Christie was struggling with substances, from the obvious neglect of her children and general disorder of her life. What I now began to realize was that her new relationship was worsening it, as she spent more of her time and energy on him, and even less on herself and her children. When I looked at my friend, bone-thin and wide eyed, I no longer saw the woman she once was.

Christie's life kept crumbling around her. Her electricity was cut, she eventually had no water, and she ended up evicted. Her house was nearly empty by the time my husband and I came over to get the last of Bobbie and Derek's things, and what little she had left was broken and filthy. Their Dad came and got them after a few weeks. Bobbie is a senior in high school now, and she and my daughter still talk regularly online. Derek is a grown man now, going to college part-time and working as a manager at an Arby's. My husband and I watch them grow up from the glow of a screen, both of us wondering if we could have done more to help.

Christie moved down south, following Cozy from town to town. Random numbers would appear on my phone's screen, announcing a call from her. Her calls were sometimes strange and brief, desperate pleas for help as she cried over the phone, telling me about his habit of disappearing for days. At other times, I felt as if I was talking to my friend again. She'd tell me funny stories of the weird couple they lived with, all crammed into a small blue trailer somewhere in Florida. She'd share how on her days off from her job at a dollar store, she'd spend all day on the beach, letting the heat of the sun's rays comfort her aching back. She would often excitedly share her plans to come home soon, but each plan would fade away, seemingly forgotten. I also learned concerning things, like her unexpected pregnancy, and later, how she quickly lost custody of her newborn son to the state. As always, she could talk for hours, and I would let her. Two years went by like this.

One day, as I was out running errands, my phone rang. I pulled over into the parking lot of a strip mall, unsure if the number was to one of my children's schools or some other pressing matter.

"Sam, do you have Cash App?!", a booming voice rang from the speaker. It was Christie, asking for money. She had hinted at needing money before, and I would always ignore it. This time though, I felt myself go numb. I stared out of my windshield, the grey concrete of the pavement blending into the grey of the buildings, a sea of nothingness before me. I thought about all the things that had happened over the last few years— moves my family had made, and the triumphs and lows I had felt since she had left. This woman knew nothing about me anymore, and in truth, I knew little about her.

"Yeah, no. I don't have that," I replied flatly. "Listen I gotta go, I have shit to do. I've gotta pick up Ev from preschool. I'll talk to ya later." I didn't wait for her to respond and ended the call.

I don't know how long I sat in that parking lot; it felt like an eternity, watching people walk around in the dreary cold while I processed what had just happened. Maybe I was as hard as the concrete, rough and unforgiving. Whatever it was, I knew that I had left the desolation of our old neighborhood, and I had left the unsure girl I was behind as well. In that moment, I realized I wasn't going to be calling her back.

Keeping your distance from an addict doesn't mean you stop caring about them. Far from it. I often keep tabs on her via her family, as she uses social media irregularly. Sometimes at night I go and look at her accounts, searching for some sign of life to ease the gnawing guilt that burns from my stomach. I think about how she used to tell me to get out of my own head and how intuitive she was. I wonder if she would be proud of me for choosing to stop ruminating and start living.

Every now and again, when I doubt myself for being a college student on the wrong side of thirty, I think of how she would've laughed and told me to stop worrying. When I read a good book or an article for a course, I think about how once upon a time I could've told her about it. I dream of walking alongside her again, our eyes squinting as the evening sun shines upon our faces. In those dreams, she tells me of her promotions, and the vacations she has taken. I tell her about all the things I've learned, facts and theories swirling around my head. And then I am awake again, returning to my bittersweet reality.

Sometimes in class, while we discuss poverty and learn about terms like "socioeconomic status" and "equality of outcome," I feel like a sham, an outsider who has wandered into the wrong building. "I'm not supposed to be here," I think to myself. A warped nostalgia washes over me in those moments, contrite and full of longing, but also mad. I think about all of us back in the old neighborhood, and how it feels so far away, as if it were in another lifetime. I think about the unfairness of life, how it could've been me and not her, and about how she could be here in school instead. After all, we had a lot in common. Many women have given up their dreams and changed themselves in a desperate grab for love. Things worked out for me. I was lucky, she was not. Lots of people recreationally use substances to self-medicate or to escape an existence that at times feels hopeless, but not all of them descend into addiction. I contemplate the morality of poverty in a land of plenty, and I'm often left with the white-hot burn of righteous indignation. But mostly, when I hear people complaining about "fuckin' methheads" or politicians blather on about epidemics, I think about my dear Christie, a woman with a laugh that filled the room.

Dogs Don't Pay Taxes

BY: XANDER FIELDS

Buddy is a pit bull. He lives across the road.

I'm not sure he has any problems.

Just dog stuff.

Chasing bunnies and cats and mailmen.

He doesn't usually catch them, though.

Buddy barks at me when I walk past him.

He barks at my dog, too.

I wonder what they're talking about.

Probably just dog stuff.

"You watch the squirrel last night?" or something like that.

Buddy's not all bad.

I've seen him get real sweet on my neighbor.

She pets him behind his stubby ears.

He wags his little tail like a pom-pom.

It must be nice being a dog.

Buddy doesn't have to work a job.

Or go to school.

Or drive a car.

Or pay taxes.

Dogs don't pay taxes.

Buddy lounges around, chasing squirrels without a care. He gets
to do dog stuff with a big, sloppy grin on his face. It's not all good
for Buddy, though.

He has a collar on.

I don't think that's very comfortable.

Buddy will never see the Rhine.

Or climb a tree.

Or go skydiving.

Or eat chocolate cake—

But I don't think that bothers him.

Buddy is running around in the yard right now.

I wonder what he's thinking about.

He sees me staring from my porch.

He starts to bark, and I smile.

It must be nice to do dog stuff.



Opacarophile
BY: AMANDA KOLL

Last Drive

BY: SHAWN ORR

My head pounded as I collapsed into the chair, completely exhausted. It was late in the morning, and my dog was begging to be let out. I sat for a minute before starting my day.

My mom's phone rang. "He..hello? Wait, wait slow down! I can't understand you," she said, wondering what was going on.

"He's dead!" My sister bawled as we could hear her running down a hallway.

"Wait a minute, who's dead?!" my mom yelled as I quickly turned my head, waiting to hear what my sister was going to say next.

"Dad! Cousin Amy called and told me that he died in his sleep!"

Before my sister could even finish the rest of her conversation, I flew out of my chair. I raced through the house and glided down the stairs in seconds. I went into my messy room to grab my hat and blue flannel, snatched my keys, and rushed out the door. I didn't even bother to put shoes on— I was still wearing my ten-year-old black Under Armour sandals.

The cold wasn't an issue, I just knew I had to go see my dad. I had to see if what my sister heard was true. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to believe it. I wasn't ready to lose someone who made a huge impact on my life.

I got in my Jeep and began my last drive to see my dad. I constantly told myself no, but I also told myself this could be it. I aggressively went over the speed limit to get there. The idea of getting a speeding ticket didn't cross my mind. If there was any cops, I think I would have kept driving till I got to my dad's apartment. My adrenaline was high, and I could feel my heart racing as my breaths quickened.

I finally got to his apartment and slammed on the brakes into a parking spot. I ran up to the corner sidewalk of the building and saw the coroner's van as a man took an empty stretcher out along with a black body bag.

"What happened?!" I softly yelled. I breathed heavily, awaiting his answer.

"Your father passed away in his sleep," the coroner said gently, nodding his head. With that little bit of information, he let me know he went peacefully.

In denial and feeling shock, I looked around, then, in the corner of my eye, I saw someone behind me.

"Hi, Shawn..." my oldest sister, Sarah, said slowly. Sobbing, she walked up to me and gave me a hug.

"Would you like to see him before we take him away?" the coroner asked as I tried to process this all.

I nervously walked up the sidewalk with my hand along the railing. This was the last time I was ever going to be walking this way. I stepped into the apartment, and the door was already open. The scent of hamburger grease, bacon grease, and tobacco chew spit from his garbage filled the space, leaving an enduring stench. There were old bills in a calendar piled on the kitchen table and in a basket on the end table beside him. The apartment was covered in dust bunnies, not to mention the baby powder that he managed to get everywhere.

My dad was slumped in his favorite brown leather recliner, his legs locked in, wearing his old grease-stained gray shirt and blue plaid pajama pants. Soon as I saw him sitting there with his purple lips, tears began to run down my cheeks. An older gentleman worked his way into the apartment as he started to shake my hand.

"Hi, I'm the sheriff. I've known your dad for many years. One of the deputies found your dad on a health and wellness check because the bus he rode on hadn't seen him in a while— they called it in."

As I looked down, dad had a corner of an old torn work shirt folded in his hand. He would always rub his index finger and thumb over the folded material to soothe himself. To the left sat a short glass of Canadian whiskey mixed with Coke, "just to ease the pain," as he would always say.

I looked back at my dad, thinking of how he would joke, "Oh hell, I'll worry about it when I'm dead." I stood there with a grin and thought *he went out with his boots on*.



Home

BY: ANNALIES DOWN

It's a Man's World

BY: SARAH DAVIS

My dad's rumbling, ominous voice echoes through the small house and calls my sister and me to the living room. I am 12, and she is 14. He tells us to sit down, and we settle ourselves onto the old gray sofa, both folding our hands into our laps, waiting. My sister turns, her long brown hair falling over her shoulder, and looks at me as my dad walked out of the room. Her green eyes swim with anxiety.

My dad is strict, protective, and quick to anger. He has a powerful presence that fills entire rooms like a poisonous gas if you are on the wrong end of his temper. He is also kind, perceptive to small changes in a person's mood, and swift to offer a comforting word. Today he is angry. I can tell by the way his jaw clinches, and his face is stained a bright shade of red that creeps down his neck. Walking back into the room, he begins to pace in front of us, his lips pressed into a thin line. I worry he might bore a hole right through the shaggy beige carpet as he follows the same path, back and forth, his anger intensifying. Then I secretly wish that he would, that he would fall straight through, that his anger would dissipate on the other side of that hole, and he'd make his way back with a smile.

"What are these?" he asks finally, holding up a thin piece of material, light blue and lacy. I look over at my sister who has her hands clasped so tightly they are pale white. Her face has gone red. I know they belong to her because she showed them to me when she brought them home after a shopping trip with her friends. She told me she liked them because you couldn't see them through her tights.

"Why do you have my underwear?" she asks him, matching his tone. My sister is more like my dad than I am; she is strong, opinionated, and willing to fight for what she believes in. She believes in her right to these underwear, a stance I don't quite understand yet.

They argue for a while: my dad tells her they are inappropriate, my sister tells him she likes them and it's no one's business.

I sink myself into the sofa and try not to be seen, which isn't hard with the two of them in the room.

"The only reason a girl wears something like these," he says, waving the underwear into the air, "is to get a man's attention."

At that, I sit up straighter, and my sister's jaw visibly drops at his words. That is the last thing that is said, a line drawn in the sand, a line I teeter on with cowardly silence. My sister stands up and storms to her room, leaving behind the scent of watermelon as she goes. My dad marches into the kitchen and throws her underwear away, bagging the trash and taking it to the dumpster to ensure she can't pull them back out. I sit on the sofa gazing at the big box TV, its screen black, as their words echo through my head and a teleprompter of the things I've left unsaid scrolls through my mind.

In 2006, a judge in Canada decides an accused rapist doesn't deserve jail time because the woman's tube top, high heels, and makeup made for "inviting conditions."

"They made their intentions publicly known that they wanted to party[...] This is a different case than one where there is no perceived invitation," Justice Robert Dewar said, "This is a case of misunderstood signals and inconsiderate behavior."

In school, girls are to have full sleeves; a half sleeve might distract the boys. A sliver of shoulder and their whole day might be ruined. I wonder if this is more offensive to the boys or the girls, but the boys don't seem offended. My sister and her friends break the dress code often, with shorts that fall above their fingertips and shirts that have no sleeves. Girls that don't adhere to the dress code are made to pull something out of the lost and found and put it on. They are stopped in the hallways or escorted from classes; interrupted learning is the price they pay to ensure they aren't distracting the other students with the parts of their body they chose not to hide that day.

In 9th grade, a boy tells one of my best friends, his girlfriend, that she doesn't have to straighten her hair for him every day.

She has long, curly, golden-brown hair that falls to her waist. My sister had recently taught her how to straighten it on a school trip, and she has worn it like that almost every day since. She's a petite, soft spoken girl who has been raised by a single father for most of her life. While he has given her everything he could, the ability to assist with taking care of her hair was not something he was great at. She danced around the hotel room the first night her hair was straightened, having all the other girls feel how soft it was and raving about how much longer it looked, a bright smile shining on her small face.

"Maybe she just likes it straight," I tell him, not bothering to hide my annoyance. He scoffs, as if he can't imagine that his girlfriend wouldn't want to look her best for him rather than herself.

Michael Sanguinetti, a cop who spoke to a group of 10 female students in 2011, said, "You know, I think we're beating around the bush here. I've been told I'm not supposed to say this — however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized."

At church they talk about the trend of women wearing jeans with holes in them. We've been taught good Christian values and that includes dressing modestly. Jeans with holes are not modest; neither are shorts or skirts above the knee, tank tops, spaghetti straps, short dresses...but that's not what we're talking about today. This topic has been talked about in previous days, days when the church sent a bus around to collect kids who hadn't previously attended our small church or, for some of them, any church. Kids who weren't aware there was a dress code in the church, or maybe didn't think it mattered, or perhaps don't own pretty, flowy Sunday dresses that are reserved for such occasions, generally do not return.

"Why would you want to show those parts of yourself to men?" the pastor's wife asks the small group of girls gathered for Sunday school. The pastor's wife is a kind, short, plump woman with curly hair that is always a mess around her head and large round glasses that sit on the edge of her nose. She actually doesn't believe women should wear pants at all, and I've never seen her in anything but an ankle length jean skirt.

I sit on the stiff bench and watch the clock, counting the seconds in my head instead of saying out loud what I'm thinking.

In 2018 a lawyer holds a pair of underwear up in front of a judge as a defense in a rape case.

"Does the evidence out-rule the possibility that she was attracted to the defendant and was open to meeting someone and being with someone? You have to look at the way she was dressed," the lawyer, Elizabeth O'Connell, tells the jury. "She was wearing a thong with a lace front."

The 17-year-old girl watches as a jury of eight men and four women find the 27-year-old man innocent.

Following the outcome of this trial, my dad says "See?" feeling vindicated in his efforts to protect us. He ignores the protests that follow the trial, the women who cry out in rage, and the social media flood of anger. To this day, I wonder how he would have voted on that jury. I remember the words he spoke long ago, the line he drew in the sand.

"The only reason a girl wears something like these is to get a man's attention."

I am angry at his lack of understanding, sad for the girls who face these obstacles, and mostly, I am left longing for a world in which our clothing choice doesn't dictate whether we have a right to safety.





The Beauty Found in Winter

BY: JESSICA FACKRELL

Blessing

BY: MAKYLA MARVEL

Honeycomb hair
Swooped up in the wind
Fingers pulled from feathers
And dance along my skin

His soft whisper
That tickles my ear
Burns in my core
And starts my prayer

Oh dear, hold me
With such care
Press your lips
Firmly everywhere

A Man's World

BY: BREAUANA RAWLEY

Tick. Tick. Tick.
I watch the hands on the clock move slowly...
Sit still, smile, no frowning.
To be ladylike is all my grandma ever said,
A man won't like *you* if you don't properly make the bed.
The sheets should not have wrinkles,
they should be tucked in tight,
And you should fluff his pillow so that it is just right.
A woman in a man's world,
That's all we will ever be.
Doesn't matter if we fight it, we will always pay a fee.
We weren't made to be strong, physically I mean—
To a man we were made to be quiet,
To submit, to cook, to clean.
Not all men, but enough men.
It's really a sad thought,
While women feel so angered, so outraged, so distraught.
I'm hopeless and I'm tired
I have a bed to make.
I don't have the strength to fight any more, so
I guess I'll learn to bake.
I watch time move forward—the hands on the clock turn.
It's not very ideal,
but in time I've come to learn;
No matter what we do for men, we get nothing in return.

Empathy

BY: TORI SEHR

Empathy. "The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another." I feel my sister's frustration and fear as she vents about the impending closure of the Department of Education. "The action of understanding." I know my actions affect those around me, so I try to behave in a way that reflects that mindfulness. "Being aware." I realize my mom signed my birthday card just "mom" for the first time in 28 years. I tell her I know that can't have been easy, and remind her of her strength. "Being sensitive." I cry every time I see an immigrant family torn apart. "Vicariously experiencing." Empathy. From the Greek "empathia," literally passion for feelings, emotion. Passion. I am passionate about empathy. They are passionate about killing it. Someone told me recently that I needed to remove half my heart, "so you won't care about this sh*t as much." I take it as a compliment. They see my heart for what it is and what everyone's should be; full of love, full of passion, full of understanding for everyone's emotions and experience. My whole heart will continue to pump blood and empathy through my body as the world attempts to bleed it dry.

Daybreak

BY: MATTHEW MCDONALD

On Slumbers' altar we are bound; yet there's no ram-in-thicket.
The Jester sits upon his throne, a servant of the wicked.
His Courtiers sleep with pleasant thoughts, all ignorant of the twilight.
Forgotten names, a century past, once more in the limelight.
In his name across the land, a vanquished evil rises.
Roots of darkness choke the earth, snuffing out the embers.
Morpheus smiles in revelry, the flickers turn to ashes.
Yet, the King of Sleep has failed to heed the resolve of his pawns
For the slaves of the dark shall be the ones to bring the coming dawn.



Pear

BY: SARAH JORDAN



Nichibatsu

BY: AMANDA KOLL

My Sun

BY: TORI SEHR

My Sun

With hair as dark as midnight's sea
and eyes a brilliant blue,
there has never been a brighter sun
than my pretty Mattie Sue.

Her hands, cracked and dry,
yet full of tender love and care;
she puts her babies down to sleep,
a mother's love this strong is rare.

There has never been a friend this true,
I am the lucky one no doubt.
For 20 years of loyalty
is nothing to joke about.

"My Sweetest Bean," I always say,
a nickname we both share.
We remember not how it started,
but neither of us care.

The laugh she laughs is so unique,
it is beyond compare.
Even if we were strangers,
I'd recognize it anywhere.

From the belly, a cackle of sorts,
a laugh that is contagious.
Everything about this Sun
would turn even the cowardly courageous.

So feminine and strong,
like her flowery, patchouli smell.
This sun of mine is someone
who knows me very well.

I'll never find the words to say
to thank you properly,
for the strength it takes to be my sun
and keep me living happily.

Thank you to my tattooed bean,
my pretty Mattie Sue,
for the love you've helped to grow,
my Sun is always you.

Packet

BY: TK BENNETT

Mom?

Let me start a new life in heaven with you.
You can show me all your favorite hiding places
where you peek from behind golden door frames
and marble pillars to watch him work
show me where you're the closest to him
where he lets you touch the hem of the cloth that wraps him
where he guides your hand by the wrist and lets you feel
the hole in his side.

Introduce me to him
please? please?
let me ask him my burning questions
like "why?"

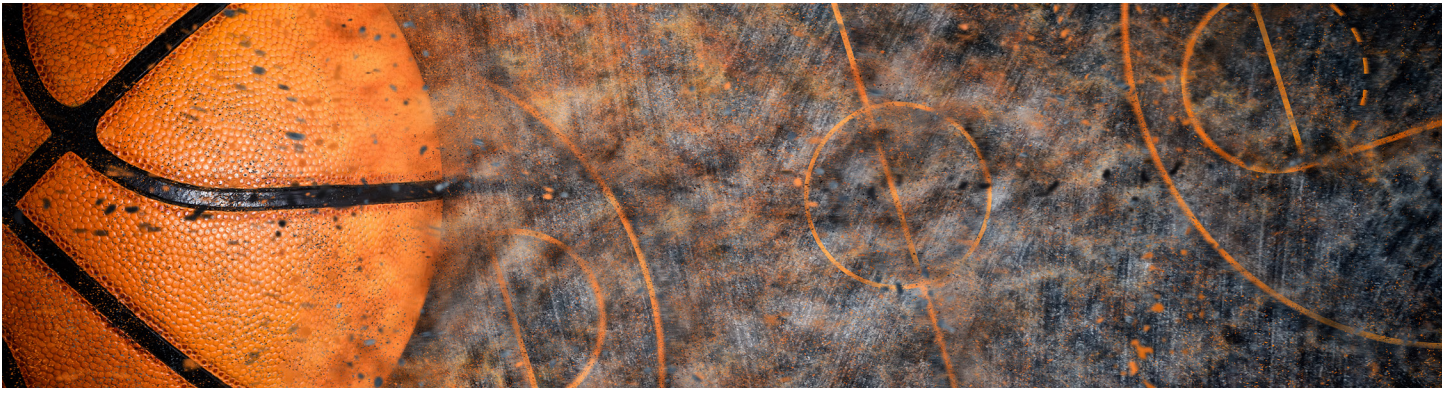
I will fall to my knees and sob into his robe
tired mangled hands grasping and clutching
and clawing at him
leaving bright red streaks of my desperation on his legs
as he lays a hand on the top of my head
he calls me child

I feel childish
I do
between god and you

I beg him to make me miniscule again
and you love me into being for forty weeks
you once told me that the number forty means testing
and trial and new life

I live inside of you and hold fast to your ribs
I rest
finally I am held again

I hope to be birthed a new man
but I will settle for being born at all



Lying

BY: CONNER ABERNATHY

Running past my friend, sneakers squeaking against the polished wood floor, I line up my shot. As soon as I feel the leather start to leave my fingertips, I hear the screeching sound of our teacher's whistle. My shoulders slump with defeat, and I walk back to class with Logan. Logan and I, or, as I used to like to call him, "Tractor Boy," have been friends since we could walk. His short blonde hair is messy and a little sweaty when he turns to me, complaining, "We just started playing. How are we already going back to class?"

"It goes by too fast every day," I grumble. "I wish we could play basketball all day."

Back in class, I plop down in the cold, unyielding chair behind my desk. The metal from the screws rubs against my back, causing me to fidget uncomfortably as I gaze longingly out the window rather than listening to my teacher drone on about our homework. I don't care about stupid homework; I care about playing outside. Finally, the slowest hour of the day ends with my principal's voice announcing over the intercom, "Have a good..."

Before he can finish, I am racing out the door alongside all the other eager nine-year-olds. The warm September sun shines on my face as I walk home, new shoes scraping against the cracked pavement, my book bag weighing heavy on my shoulder, overflowing with the homework I don't want to do. I brush my unruly brown curls out of my eyes and think of how fun playing outside would be. I get excited, only to promptly remember I have homework. Suddenly, thoughts of all the fun things I could get done if I didn't have homework fill my nine-year-old brain. For the rest of the walk home, all I can think about is bouncing my faded red and black basketball in the gravel driveway. I can almost feel the gritty, dry gravel dust on my hands, the sweat dripping down my forehead into my eyes as I imagine making the game-winning shot.

I come back down to reality as I step onto the sidewalk that lines the street my house is on. Even though my daydreaming got rudely interrupted by the reminder of stupid math and English homework, I am renewed with energy as soon as I see my house. Instead of the slow-paced stride of my entire walk home, I quickly switch gears and run the rest of the way. As I step inside, an instant rush of frigid air hits my warm face and body. I take my shoes off and see my mom standing at the stove, making dinner—her pale blonde hair swings over her shoulder when she turns her attention to me. My mom's green eyes reflect a smile so big that it instantly has me smiling in return. I'm always excited to see her when I get home from school.

"Hey, kiddo! How was school?"

I reply, "Good" and quickly hug her and turn to the fridge for an after-school snack. I'm always so hungry when I get home from school. As I search for the most appealing thing, I grudgingly think that I wouldn't be practically dying from starvation if the school had served us something even slightly better than the bland prison food we have every day.

I snatch string cheese as my mom asks, "What homework do you have tonight?"

I hesitate, then answer, "None; I got it all done at school." Fully knowing that I do indeed have homework, I just lied to my

Mom. I lied to the person I cared about the most.

She responds, "Wow, that's nice."

My deceitful words fill me with guilt as quickly as they leave my mouth. I had never lied to my mom before, and it instantly felt weird, but not weird enough to make me take my words back. I devour the cheese and put my shoes back on to play basketball. I was so excited about the thought of playing earlier, but now it didn't seem as fun since I lied to get my way. Bouncing the basketball against the pavement, I feel the sun's heat beating down on me, but not as strongly as the guilt hanging over my head. I can't get the feeling to leave, and it's kind of making my stomach hurt. Why didn't I just tell her? It's too late now; she'll know I lied if I say something. I might as well make the best of it, I think, as the basketball thuds against the rim.

Two days pass, and I still haven't done any homework. It just keeps piling up, overwhelming me. Sitting at the round table in our colorful classroom, I slump in my seat as my teacher asks us to turn our homework in. I don't have any to turn in because I didn't do it. I slouch down even lower; maybe if I'm quiet enough, she won't notice right away. My worst reality is realized when she turns to me and asks, "Where is your homework, Conner?"

Keeping my gaze cast downward, I reply, "I lost it."

I just lied again about homework! Man, this is getting tricky. Unfortunately, I realize she didn't buy my excuse when she responds, "I will be calling your mother to discuss this lost homework of yours."

I begin to get super nervous because I knew they both were going to find out about my lying. How did I get myself into this mess? Better yet, how do I get myself out of it?

The walk home from school is filled with melancholy. I am not overflowing with happy thoughts of playing basketball; instead, I walk with my head hanging down, feet dragging against the pavement, and my backpack feeling extra heavy on my small frame. I walk much slower than normal, trying to avoid the impending confrontation with my mom for as long as possible. Everything looks normal when I first step inside our house, but nothing feels normal. The smell of supper cooking in the crockpot does nothing to ease the pit I feel in my stomach at the thought of the conversation I am about to endure.

My mom calls from the living room, "Hi, Conner. Please come here before you get your snack."

Uh oh, she sounds serious. She definitely knows. Cringing, I shuffle my feet as I enter, "Hey, Mom, what's up?"

She looks at me. "Your teacher called today. Is there something you'd like to share with me?"

I wince and quickly start stumbling over my words, "I didn't mean to Mom. It just, I was just so tired of it. It's always so much." I look down; I can't even meet her eyes with mine.

"Tell me what really happened with your homework," she says.

I hesitantly open my book bag and pull out several crumpled pages with no answers filling in the empty blanks. I not only feel sorry for myself, but I also feel deep shame. I knew what I had done was wrong. I frantically apologize, "It will never happen again, Mom. I felt super bad about lying to you the whole time. I promise, never again."

She shakes her head. "I'm very disappointed, Conner, but I'm still happy you realize what you did was wrong. You know what this means, though, don't you?"

I look up, finally able to meet her eyes. "Yeahhhh," I sigh with a heavy breath.

Even though I end up grounded from basketball for the next week, I start to feel better almost immediately. The truth is out there. No more lies and excuses to come up with. No more worrying about getting caught. No more guilt. I finally realize how much easier it would have been to just do my homework in the first place. Basketball will always be there when I am finished.

The Impossible Shedding

BY: KIERA RAKER

The relief touches my cheek and my eyes,
Though the pain squeezes up into my brain—
And internally, I'm buzzing like flies.
Through the clamorous noise, I will stay sane.

I'd beg for your soft leaves to touch my cheek,
But only your sharp pine needles puncture.
Your kindness once flowed like a soft clean creek;
Nothing is left but the empty structure.

Shedding you could cut me into a stump—
I wish to fly, but I forgot my flight!
My big wings tagged and tied; I cannot jump—
I cannot hide. You are my enemy tonight.

Keep Swimming
BY: JESSICA FACKRELL





Out of My Reach

BY: HAILEY FORD

The Hair

BY: AVA COUPLAND

Sitting on the ledge of the bathtub, I watch carefully as my mom does her makeup, a light dusting of gold and glitter. The cold morning breeze hits me as the screen window whistles with every gust of wind. She puts on a thick layer of mascara, throwing it back in her makeup bag when finished.

I pull at the brand-new sleeves of the shirt my mother just bought me. I'm so excited to show it off at school: long sleeves in a yellow fabric with a purple, glittery owl printed on the shirt's front. I rub my hands on the glitter of the print and imagine all the things I'm going to do today.

When my mom straps me in the car, she pinches my belly-- I yelp, so she kisses my forehead. My new shoes sparkle in the sun. The white rubber kicks the back of the passenger's seat and leaves a trail of lines on the black fabric. I twist my hair in between my fingers and watch the world go by.

The excitement of the first day of school is all I think about until the moment I step into the classroom. Unfamiliar faces stare. My mom holds my hand and pushes me into the door. I feel like throwing up. My mother, a teacher herself, tells me that she is just down the hall. She smiles, placing a kiss on my forehead, then turns to leave.

I drop into the seat with my name tag on it. The chair is cold, and its bumpy plastic scratches my arm as my new shirt sags. The girl across from me stares. I stare back: her red hair is curly and matted, and her glasses shine purple and pink, but the left lens is cracked, and her mouth naturally forms a frown. She looks away, and the teacher begins to talk.

My best friend sits at the table next to me. Her hair is long, blonde, and wavy. Her eyes are narrowed to the teacher. I scan her outfit. She is wearing a denim jacket; the threads are pink and scratchy, and her pants have cheetah print all over. I observe her shoes are cooler than mine, pink and glittery, and they light up as she kicks her feet into the table leg, shaking it. She looks bored. I smile, knowing I won't feel so alone this year.

I turn away briefly as my friend reaches to touch the girl across from me. Her fingers run through the girl's hair and are caught in the knots and kinks. The hairs snap like twigs under the pressure of my friend's fingers.

My friend laughs, "Your hair is dirty, I can see bugs crawling in there!"

Embarrassed and confused, the girl starts to cry.

I am puzzled, but I laugh along with my friend. I knew it was wrong, but the girl was different, her hair was different. The girl stares at me, betrayed. Her eyes gleam, and water flows down her rosy cheeks as she wipes her nose with her sleeve.

My friend and I were relentless to this girl: we would call her names, shove her around, exclude her from trying to play with us, and even threw things at her, until she moved away in the third grade.

My mom never did my hair. She just didn't know how. She didn't style it in the ways she did her hair. I notice this fact the summer before I started fifth grade, the same summer we move out and into a new house in a new town. I grow depressed and anxious. The loss of all my friends is the end of my fifth grade world. So, I try to cope. I grab a hair at the front of my head, a baby hair sitting on my hair line. I pull it out, examining how short it is compared to other hairs on my head. I continue, pulling out other baby hairs. I don't stop; I can't stop. I like the feeling of pulling the hairs out; it feels right.

An obsession begins that day with my hair, and I pull my hair out until my fingers ache and become numb. The crown of my head is almost completely bald, and I don't see a problem with it until I have no hair left but a patch on the back of my head which is the only hair that goes past my chin.

One evening, I decide I am ready to end my suffering. I want it to just be gone, so I decide to cut my hair off. I walk into the kitchen to see my mom waiting for me, a pair of scissors staring back at me. My mom grabs the sleek sharp end, stringing her fingers through the pink plastic handles. She tests the scissors and runs her fingers through a single strand of hair. Gripping the long, thin strand, her fist clenches.

"Are you sure you want to do this? There is no going back once it's gone."

I tell her I have no other choice. I watch as she combs through the thin strands one more time before the cold metal glides through my hair. It is done, over with. I watch my mom take her hand away from my head, holding what she just removed.

I feel relief wash over me. I know this is the end of what I could never hold onto, but it is also a new beginning.

Another first day of school arrives, and I walk into the gymnasium to see my new friends in a circle on the hardwood floor. I met this group of three girls over the summer during soccer camp. We immediately became friends because we were the only four girls in the camp and were all going into the same grade the following school year. But my friends have not yet seen my hair after I cut it off.

I walk slowly through the gym, wondering what they will think of my new look, how they will react. I wait for one of them to turn around and stare at me in horror or laugh and point at me while the entire gym of middle-schoolers joins in. My neck feels cold, unshielded by the hair that previously hung so absently. I sit on the floor next to my friends, and they stare. I watch, analyzing their contorted faces as they look at what is left of my hair, then at each other. They look confused, holding in laughter, but I wonder how they never noticed what I had been going through.

Kylie asks why I cut off my hair, then says, "It's cute. It's sort of spiky."

She reaches to touch the short, blunt ends of my hair. The corpse of everything that once was girlhood, femininity, and attractiveness. I have cut it off.

Kylie stares at my hair as I watch her face. Her own hair is long and wavy, beautiful and a dirty blonde with natural highlights. Her hair frames her face perfectly, and her eyebrows are slightly raised and pointed as her eyes squint and narrow at the fact that my hair is so short.

My other friend, Karen, teases, "You look like a boy, but like in a cute way, I guess."

I am stabbed in the heart and my stomach churns. Just what I was afraid of.

I can't do anything about chopping my hair off; I must now live with the harm I have done to myself by my own hands. Do I like what I look like now? Why should I care anyway? I had no other option. The stress of moving to a new school and a new town made it so I couldn't stop pulling my hair out. From therapist to therapist, they never understood what was wrong with me. My mother did her own research, and I was put through numerous tests and behavioral therapies, but the professionals couldn't get to the root of the problem. I know it broke my mother to see my pain. Seeing my friends be so happy and free, their hair always decorated and done up; I always believed that if I had just had what I wanted, my hair, I would be happy.

Middle school is the worst my "habit" had ever been. I sit on the bathroom counter, staring at my hair in the mirror and glancing at the hairbrushes and straightener on the counter. I pick up the cold plastic handle of the brush and attempt to style the fringe of hair on top of my head. I feel pressure in my throat begin to build until I can't hold it down anymore, and my eyes water. I don't want to let myself cry. I cover my mouth and wipe the tears away, continuing to brush through the blunt strands until I feel like I have achieved styling my hair. Every day of eighth grade, I brush my hair this way, attempting to style it. It continues to get shorter every day. I am put on medication at the end of eighth grade, but all it does is make me more anxious. As I grow and my friends and I distance, I become more confident, and I grow into myself. Although, my mother never teaches me how to style my hair.

Understanding and accepting my pain is the first step I took in my journey to finally accept myself. My mom always encouraged me to be myself and that it was okay if someone did not reciprocate what I believed in myself. Now, I hold two skinny strands in between my fingers and twist them with my fingertips. They poke my fingers and twirl together, and I pull the two hairs together to measure. I like my hair. The way it doesn't get in my face when the wind blows. I don't have to worry about styling it in a special way, although if I really wanted to, I still could.

I sit under a long spiny tree. I feel the earth beneath me, and my mom sits beside me, helping me make a flower crown to put in my hair. My mother never showed me how to style hair, but she showed me why styling my hair was important. The freedom my hair gives me is the reason I am not ashamed anymore. I know who I am, and so does my hair.



The Red String of Fate

BY: MAKYLA MARVEL

When two stars
Dance across the sky
Connected like ours
A red string tied

Burning bright fire
Deep in the core
Will never expire
Always craving more

For when the sun
Covers the moon's glow
Find a way to run
When hope is low

Mountains will move
The earth will groan
No need to prove
My love is known

Mud

BY: TK BENNETT

A thank you card to all those who raised me
long
after this body was grown:
big opinions and thick roots stretching for miles.
Teaching an old dog new tricks
I'm sure
has never looked more like
panning for gold
with a blindfold on.
Quietly hoping that there is something
maybe buried
deep
in the mud
that could be
a fruit of your labor—
a sort of compensation
that I wish
desperately
I could give.



Summer Lake

BY: SARAH JORDAN

These Poverty Hands

BY: JOLIE BOWMAN

Growing up poor was not something I was blissfully unaware of as a child. I saw the looks of wonder and confusion from my peers when that magical bag of delectable treats would mysteriously appear in my locker every Friday: oranges, the big ones! (these were no Cuties), chocolate Teddy Grahams, apples, Lucky Charm cereal bars, and a juice box. This was what rich felt like. I would always share with anyone who asked, and I enjoyed the feeling. It made me feel like I had enough to give. I was the one that got to give because I had an abundance of things and food, and, oh, food. I dreamt of food. The beef ramen and Stove Top was simply never enough to satisfy my flowering body. As my aching belly kept me up through the night, I wondered why I would ever give away such a precious orange. I would often fall asleep with gum in my mouth because it mimicked the chewing of all kinds of food. The imaginary breads and meats had a way of soothing me to sleep.

We weren't the type of poor that was super noticeable. I mean, we had clothes on our backs, and being the youngest out of five siblings, I got a lot of those. We had a home, whether it was a broken one or not, and we did have each other in our own shouting and abusive way. But I remember feeling so isolated and alone as a child. Mothering the ones that were supposed to protect me. I was a child alone in a world that I knew wanted to hurt me. Every night, I would pray that all the hate in the world would be forgiven and that my mother wouldn't hate the fact that I have my dad's face.

I would ride the bus to school every day, fearing the bigger and taller people around me. Rebecca was very tall and lean. Her knuckles and elbows pierced through her skin, like they hated being attached to such a mean girl and were desperate to escape the prison of her flesh. Her finger nails were stubby, and they stopped halfway up where the rest of her nail should've been. Rebecca sat like a boy and would lunge at me if I looked at her. Her younger sister, Summer, had freckles covering her entire face and body. She would trip me every day after school as I got off the bus. They both shared a nasty habit of biting their nails as well as terrorizing an eight-year-old girl despite being in high school. They were at an age where they should've known better, but being the girl I was, I tried to imagine the kind of home they came from. I knew they had a ranch and that their house was very big, but were they hurt on the inside?

It's not like I didn't have friends. I had Katrina. She was thirteen at the time of our friendship, which I didn't find odd despite the six-year age difference between the two of us. All I saw was a friend. Someone who had glasses like I did and intriguing stories about her father sexually abusing her. I would hold her as she cried, and she would hold me as she showed me porn. A friendship.

I was aware of my status among my peers, and I tried desperately to separate myself from where I came from.

"Your hair smells like cigarettes."

No matter what you do, you can't wash the poverty off of your hungry, growing body. You can't fool the ones who really know what it's like to have money. The ones who only wear clothes from Justice and had cold lunch.

In my class, there was a girl named Mahogany. Mahogany wore a bleach blonde ponytail and smelled of fish. She always had some sort of sticky residue on her face, probably chocolate or jam. Her hands were the same in that way. Grubby and unwashed. My mother kept me clean, forced me clean. She would choose my outfits most days, and she dressed me as if I were an American Girl doll, something we could never afford. I wondered why Mahogany's mother didn't do the same. I knew all about water being shut off and not being able to shower, but we had baby wipes for that. Did she have baby wipes? Hand me down clothing? Did she have parents that would put in the effort of hiding their poorness? No one asked these things because I think we all already knew the answer.

On this particular day in my fourth-grade classroom, we were doing some sort of exercise to teach us to be open with our peers. We were separated into groups of five. One person was to remain still like a statue and let the rest of the group touch

and move their limbs, head, hands and fingers in any way they wanted to. I was elected to be the statue in my group. A surge of excitement rushed through me because I knew a boy or two would be touching me. One moved my hand to rest on the top of my head. Another had moved my right foot to rest on the side of my left knee.

I rested in this confused tree pose as Mahogany stepped forward. Her stained blue shirt lifted to show her belly as she reached for my other arm. I pushed her little hand away from me. I could not allow her to touch me with her unwashed, poor hands because I was none of those things, and I needed everyone to know that I was none of those things. I was clean and had enough food to give away, and I did not smell like cigarettes.

As the rest of the group witnessed this, they glanced at Mahogany and me, then at each other, and then back at me with quiet snickers. I just watched Mahogany. I saw how her gummy, beaming grin shrunk into a nervous smile as she faded behind everyone else. Looking at her, raw and hurt, she was unsure where to put her hands. Like they didn't belong anywhere. I saw her, and I saw myself, and I saw how she didn't even bother to tell on me. She didn't notice how what I had done was wrong, she just chose to believe me. To believe that she was dirty and that her hands don't belong anywhere. That she didn't belong anywhere.

Being poor didn't define me, but it defined Mahogany. People couldn't look past her poverty, but they could look past mine. I decided that if I let others know that I also couldn't look past her poor hands, then they would know that I was different from her. My overgrown nails and the smell of nicotine no longer mattered because at least I wasn't as poor as Mahogany.

When I think about Mahogany today, I don't make excuses for what I did because I was a child that knew better. I knew where she came from, and I knew that she had nobody. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself. I was the one that got out. I got away from all of it, but Mahogany didn't. I moved away from that tiny town where people go to rot into nothing. My parents got clean. I don't have to dream of food or play Victorian with lit candles and fake British accents when the lights get shut off. My life is not dark anymore: there is chance, and it is clear to me. There is no more hunger.

Mahogany is still there, isolated, in that hole of a place where people go to rot into nothing. Whenever I'm reminded of my privilege, I feel a call to the void, back to the nest I pecked my way out of. I open the door to my well-decorated room with my full-sized bed, all to myself, and I wonder why. Why was it me that got a chance and not her? What makes me worthy of comfort and belonging? I told her that she was dirty, and she believed me. I should be there with her now, enduring the pain of being poor with her. I know I should. I am forever stained by poverty.





Calm Before the Storm

BY: JESSICA FACKRELL

Grounded

BY: SARAH DAVIS

My hands tremble, and my breath comes in short bursts that don't fill my lungs properly. My chest tightens as an unseen weight settles itself there. My stomach flips, and panic crawls through my body, an unwelcome visitor.

"Five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, one thing you can taste."

I repeat the exercise in my head, trying to calm my racing mind.

5.

The rose bushes sit in front of me, their large green trunks stretch and split into thin thorny branches. The first bud has just begun to bloom; deep green leaves surround pale red petals that look like soft velvet. Under my feet, I look at the light brown wooden planks. The sun's rays shine through the trees, creating little shadows that drift around the porch. Silver screws sit in pairs of two every few feet; they catch the light and shimmer like jewels. To my right sits a white chair with a plump gray cushion. The blue pillow in the corner is bright and cheery; flowers surround its border. Sitting in front of the chair is a tall table made of shiny black metal. In the center of the table, maroon lava rocks are gathered in a small square. To my left sits a pink bike with a gray basket attached to the front. Its gray seat seems to sparkle as it catches the sun.

4.

The wind's light caress brushes my skin. I shiver at the feeling but welcome its coolness. My hair twirls around me, joining the wind for a moment in its playful dance. I reach up and twist a strand around my finger, feeling its smoothness. As my fingers reach the end of the thin strand, the texture becomes rough. I linger there for a moment, rubbing the strand between my fingers before releasing it. I reach down and feel the fake wood of the plastic chair I sit on. Its surface is smooth with patterns of lines and swirls carved into it. I run my feet over the uneven surface of the wood and feel the rough texture of the straight, fine grains.

3.

Birds sing their sweet song in the distance. The chorus of little chirps and whistles float on the breeze around me. I turn my attention to the large black windchimes hung to the right; the soft twinkle of the bells grows louder as the wind picks up its pace. I listen as the musical sound fades to nothing as the wind calms. A car passes on the street to my left. The tires crunch over gravel as the vehicle travels around the small curve in the road.

2.

The smell of freshly mowed grass hovers in the air coming over the fence from the neighbor's house. I inhale the slightly sweet, earthy smell. The sharp smell of chlorine briefly assaults my nostrils. I focus on that for a minute, the smell making me think of swimming pools and summertime.

1.

The hint of coffee remains in my mouth. The sweet vanilla from my creamer still lingers on my tongue mixed with the slight bitterness of the coffee it was mixed with.

Anxiety releases its hold. I take a deep breath, and cool spring air fills my lungs.

The Eyes of Providence: *Annuity Coeptis* BY: XANDER FIELDS

Date: 14 August, 1912

Case File Number: 0029000

Reporting Officer: Lt. Legrasse, John Raymond

Incident Type: Homicide, Double Homicide

Excerpt: Choice entries from "The Diary of Wilbur Kirby."

1 July, 1911 - The river Providence is flooded this night. A thick rain hammers down, pelting the spires and angled roofs of Gaspee. From the jetty where **Haïtae** ebbs on the black tide, I made my way to the Merman to warm my toes and dry my boots. It was loud today. No doubt, the laughter could be heard on the downs, much to the rage of those long-toothed snobs in the villas. Of course, I downed my share, too. Today was a good day for Scup and Striped Bass, and I pulled enough to last the month. In the cloakroom, Sawyer and Nicholas were making a fuss so I went to see what waited for me. I don't doubt I'll remember that decision for the rest of mine life. There, I met Ingo. He was sixty seventy, the color of Arabia with hair white as ash. Ingo was a Turk in from Damascus, plying Ottoman works in the markets of New England. We talked into the night, long after Sawyer fell to the ground and Nicholas left for home. So invested in his tales, I walked him to the townhouse where he stayed. Ingo moved with a limp, courtesy of a Serb in 1877, so it took a long while. By then, a thick fog had taken hegemony over the streets. We reached his domicile, and he invited me to rest awhile. And that— that is when I saw her. To describe her with mortal words would be an insult. Skin like ambrosia. Hair like Poe's raven. But more beautiful, still, her eyes. I see them in my mind's eye, glittering the darkest gold, or vibrant green, or deep blue. The wonder of what they could be has captured my mind. If only. . . Safie is blind. A thick black band keeps her sockets from view. When Ingo retired, she kept me company, talking me further into the night. All the while, her dark hands (darker, still, from the dyes of the pastels she held) skittered back and forth, etching strange shapes on parchment. She would not tell me what they were, and I did not pry. Too taken was I by the wonder of this Turk. I left before the sun rose, the taste of her kiss still fresh on my lips. Even as I write this, the aching of a day at sea pulling me longingly into the embrace of sleep, I think of her. Of her kiss. Of the symbols she scribbles. And above all, her eyes. I wonder their shade, their shape. I see them at the edge of my sightline, just barely peeking out of that black band. When I try to steal a glance, they scurry away, leading me on to speculate once more. I cannot take this. Her eyes. How I long to see her eyes. I must see her eyes.

12 July, 1911 - More storms this week. The Portmaster put out an order against night fishing in the cove. Any skilled fisherman would avoid the area altogether, even in good weather, but three tourists out of Providence have already gone down near Greene Island, so he's cracking down. Of course, if you're fishing the river, the best place is Bullock Point Reach. Otherwise, there's no point in dropping North of the mouth. On evenings such as this one, I like to raise sail there and let the current take me upriver. It gives me time to write and think while the nets fill themselves. It's been that way more and more lately. Whenever possible, I sit aft, and think only of her. I think of her strange symbols. I scratch them in the ledger. I see them in the foam. In the night sky. I think of her eyes, of that pervasive lack of knowing. I asked to see them, once. That didn't go over well. She grew awkward and cold. I shunned myself, then, for that was a fool's inquiry. More receptive, she seemed, at the question of these symbols which have captured my thought nigh as much as the hidden treasure of her irises. From a chest of oak, she pulled a folder; within which were hundreds of yellowed pages. I could not read the words, for they were written in glyphs I'd never seen, but Safie seemed to understand them somehow. She told me of an Arab, Khalid ibn Y~ (?) something or other, but I didn't understand. To her credit, I didn't try. My mind was focused on other things like the gentle movements of her ginger lips. It was when she said the name ~~Abdullah~~ Abd al-Hazred that Ingo came through the door. He had been in Providence for a few days, and had tasked me with looking over my gentle Safie. Woe to me that the name Hazred was the first thing he heard. He grew wroth. My hands clench, now, at the thought of his rage. He forbade me from seeing her again, and nearly threw me from out the door. It has been four days, now, since I've seen her soft face. Since

I've held her gentle hands in mine. I can barely sleep. I find my thoughts leaving me abruptly, replaced with images of her. I'm going to find her— find a way to see her again. **Haïtae** is ready to dock and I to land. I'll try tomorrow.

13 July, 1911 - I seem such a fool. Such a pathetic, frustrated fool. This has gone on too long. This pervasion, this omnipresent obsession. It's destroying me. It's become dangerous. So prevalent are these symbols that I see them wherever I look, festering at the edge of my vision so that I cannot long hold focus. A wave struck me today. **Haïtae** creaked under the stress, and careened leeward onto the rocks. Her hull is intact, but one of my nets released into the depths of the Providence. This will cost me a great deal. And what's worse is I didn't even notice. I was too busy, chasing spirals in the water and obscure, meaningless lettering in the sky. I must put an end to this. I must speak to her, see her. Make all of this go away. Tomorrow.

14 July, 1911 - Friday has found me fatigued, exhausted, and uncomfortable. There has been little time for rest since yesterday. The boat needed a new rig, new paint. Bad luck to any sailor who leaves his vessel bare against the tide. I paid Doyle's girl to piss in the bilge, make her seaworthy again. I ~~should go see her~~. . . No. I can't go to her like this. No time, no time. I'll stay in today. I need respite; rest from Safie's eyes. They follow me everywhere. I see them in my dreams now, among other, darker things. I dream of eyes glittering like rubies beneath the clear, Atlantic water. The eyes hum. They pulsate, filling my head with a rhythmic beat like drums in the deep. It will stop soon. I'll see her again.

15 July, 1911 - Courage came to me today, and with it a pounding ache behind the eyes. My head throbs like a beating heart, almost to the tune of Dagon's drums. The looking glass showed them to be shot with blood and veins, bulging from my sockets. I flinch from the light and from the clatter of distant shutters. But none of that matters to me. I ~~saw her~~ SPOKE with her. She held my hand in hers, and kissed my face through the window. She will meet with me on the second Thursday from now. Then, Ingo will be gone again, and Safie will be mine. Safie, and her truths. Two thursdays. . .

Who's Dagon?

26 July, 1911 - I'll see Safie tomorrow. The suspense is unimaginable. These twelve days have been twelve nightmares of unending nature. I'm not sure I'll sleep tonight. The eyes had lulled in pesterance, but I thought better of taking that risk. I decided to take **Haïtae** out onto the river. Sailing has always calmed me down, kept me from worrying. I had no reason to think it would do otherwise now. I made slow work of the night waves, heading first to Passeonkquis Cove and the site of the Gaspee Affair. Across the Wetlands were the downs. Past that, Pawtuxet, and Providence. Maybe one day, I would take Safie to the city. I'm sure she would love the smells and sounds. That thought triggered a mental flash of her slender form, and I felt a warmth in my chest. From Gaspee, I turned to Bullock Point in Riverside, East Providence. There, I saw a few prospective night-fishers and so quickly changed Southerly to catch the headwinds, leaving a trail of wake behind. The breeze was cold for late July, but I had braved the Greater Atlantic in this schooner. Past the Reach was Greene Island, and Occupessatuxet Cove. **Haïtae** turned starboard, her prow splitting the waves like a fault. The cove was lined with sea stacks and rocky spires, but they posed no threat to us. We'd sailed that bend a thousand times. When close to the southern coast of the cove, you can see Warwick alight with a golden glow. I raised sail, lounging in the estuary. Only when the sun could be seen on the horizon, reaching out with orange fingers, did I return to Gaspee. Only a few hours remained until my meeting with Safie. I shall write more after.

18 August 1911 - What can be said of the things plaguing my mind? Am I still sane? Do I see the world on the same frequency as Doyle or Humphrey or Aunt Delilah? I cannot. I cannot begin to describe such ~~sights~~ horrors. I cannot. I fear. I fear so much. I have not left my room. Delilah brings me my meals, and Briggs' crew have brought **Haïtae** in for caulking. I care not. They can send her to the depths for all I care. None of this matters, this earthen plane. How can man go on, knowing what lies beyond this world?

I met Safie at noon on the second Thursday, like she had promised. We spoke in Ingo's lounge, and talked of the previous weeks. She had missed me just as much, if not more, than I her. We embraced. We kissed. Her body crumpled under my touch, collapsing into my embrace. The taste of her lips sent ripples down my spine. I thought of nothing, then. For one moment, I forgot the allure of her eyes. I forgot her shapes and arab alchemists. I forgot Ingo, I forgot ~~Hiat~~ **Haïtae**. Safie was my world, all I needed. Deep into the night, we lay in each other's presence as man and woman. Hers was Gaia, the

womb of the world, mine Uranus come to spawn the titans of myth. But like a sick perversion, the shrapnels of truth that were Safie's eyes reared again. I began to wonder. What was beneath her band? She had worn it even then. Like a swarm of flies to a carcass, these thoughts came to me, and in spite of myself, I began to reach for it.

I wish I could say that I stopped myself. That I let the wonder be all there ever was, but that would be denying the truth I will never forget. The action was quick. I pulled free the band covering ~~her eye~~ what should have been her eyes. And beneath, a scream. It was agonizing, yet she did not let me look away. I felt my voice falter and crack, and still I roared. This sight, I dare not describe. Unearthed is this, something never meant to be seen. She contained multitudes, more so than I could have ever imagined. To look upon her was to face the inconceivable, the lurking, blind, idiot presence of the true face of god, slumbering beyond the edge of thought. To my squalling, she awoke, and sent a pulse through the room like the pounding in my head, like the beating of the Deep One's drums. The candles dimmed and the very wood that made the walls of this dwelling began to peel. Even now, as I try to remember, my head begins to throb, and my heart darkens. Fear unknown to any alive has replaced me. My very being is this agonizing understanding, forever shielding me from the bliss of ignorance. All I can hear now is her scream at the dying of the light, following me out the door and down the road. I can hear it still. It won't stop. It follows. ~~She follows.~~ It follows.

23 August 1911 - I must take her back. I have to. It's the only way. To the riverbed. To the depths. It's the only way. She can't exist. She can't. She defies all. She spreads this chaos like feed to fowl. Khalid ibn Yazhid wrote of this. Abd al-Hazred. Him. The mad arab. His work was never meant to be found. She can read it. She can translate it. I can't let it spread. It's the only way. To the depths.

26 August 1911 - I stuffed her its mouth so it couldn't scream. The truth was covered again. It would stay that way. No chains could hold this thing for long, but I made do. The half moon illuminated the Providence, and it was by that light that **Haitae** made her way out to the Bullock Point Reach. It was quiet out on the black water. I remember feeling calm. I wiped Igg Ingo's blood from my brow. It was hot, and sticky. The eyes of truth lurked beneath the waves. I could see them now in full. Then gold, and shimmering, green and vibrant, blue and unholy. Now a deep, pools a pulsating red. The body was black and scaly, and on it were the sigils of the Deep, clearer, even, than when they were scribed scribbled out on yellowed parchment. They waited. They waited for me. They waited for the vessel. No anchor was needed that night. ~~Hai-Hae-~~ **Haitae** groaned her last, and stopped on the open water. To the depths.

The beach was cold beneath my feet. Gravely, and harsh. I dropped to my knees, and felt drops of water trickle down my face. ~~The walk~~ The walk was long, but back to my room I went. I wait, now. Wait for my Lord to come. He approves. He approves of my undertaking. Annu it Coeptis. He approves. . .

The eyes are here. I see them. MY eyes. . .

They burn.

[Note: Wilbur Kirby died from wounds of self-mutilation in an asylum for the criminally insane on 4 November, 1911.]



Gloaming
BY: AMANDA KOLL

Contributors

Conner Abernathy

is a business major from Rushville, IL and will graduate from Spoon River College this year.

TK Bennett

likes going to therapy and scheming/brooding. She writes that “the goal of every poem I write is to hurt someone’s feelings, especially if they’re my own. Catch me in just about any health information management course, and maybe, someday, taking your blood. ;)”

Jolie Bowman

is a lover of nature, poetry, animals, fashion, and music. She describes herself as “a highly opinionated woman that loves the whimsical things in life!” Jolie hopes to meet many different people that broaden her views.

Ava Coupland

is majoring in speech and language pathology. She has always loved art and writing stories as a way to express herself.

Sarah Davis

is a second-year student at Spoon River College and plans to transfer to the University of Illinois Springfield next fall.

Annalies Dowell

is from West Central Illinois and has a cat named Simba. Her favorite hobbies are spending time with her best friend or niece, and she likes to be outdoors when it’s not cold. Annalies also enjoys painting and drawing and has always loved photography.

Jessica Fackrell

is a criminal justice major. Creating art is her way of expressing herself and sharing her emotions, ideas, and experiences.

Xander George Fields

is an aspiring actor and musician. He enjoys classic literature (including many works by Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft, and Robert C. W. Chambers) and loves to write Gothic and Lovecraftian Horror stories.

Hailey Ford

has always had a pencil and paper in hand, drawing her heart away, but, as she writes, “never in my 19 years of life did I think it would be part of my career.” She says that she has grown in her art, “first from drawing stick figures and suns in the corner to now making pages from a book a scene full of life.”

Sarah Jordan

likes to paint, draw, and take photographs. She is also involved in student government and looks forward to transferring to a four-year university.

Amanda Koll

enjoys nature and captures its beauty when she can. She is currently studying social work.

Makayla Marvel

is an artist and writer. She makes original artwork as well as fan works. Her writing consists of mostly love poems to her boyfriend or fan fiction of her favorite characters.

Matthew McDonald

is a classics major and member of the Student Government Association, Phi Theta Kappa, and the Gay Straight Alliance. He is currently trying to organize student groups within the Macomb Campus and improve student participation in campus life.

Carl Moreland

lives in Rushville, IL and enjoys photography, writing that "it really helps me ease anxiety."

Shawn Orr

is completing his last semester at Spoon River College towards a degree in general education. Besides going to school, he spends the rest of his time woodworking.

Kiera Raker

is a psych major who loves writing poetry. She hopes to improve her work throughout her life.

Breauna Rawley

is from Canton, Illinois and plans to attend nursing school in Peoria, Illinois. She loves English and writes as a hobby.

Tari Sehr

is 28 years old and lives in Canton, IL. She loves to hike, read, and write poetry in her spare time.

Samantha Sensor

When she is not studying, she enjoys spending time with her family, spending time in nature, and reading. She enjoys learning and challenging herself to grow each day.

**Kaleidoscope is a Spoon River College
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and visual art.**