

Winter/Spring 2026
Volume VI

The Uncommon



GRACKLE







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Cover Art: "Tethered," by Ashleigh Ferguson



The editorial team behind
The Uncommon GRACKle consists of:

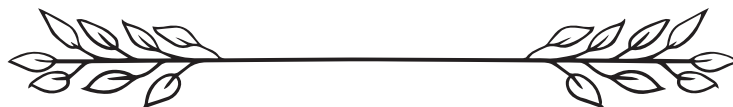
Kelly Ward,
Editor-in-Chief & Prose Editor
and

Ashleigh Ferguson, Poetry & Visual Art Editor;
Jordan Campbell, Editorial Advisor & Publisher.
Issue layout & design by Kelly Ward.

The Uncommon GRACKle is forever grateful
to its original founder:
The kind, compassionate, and talented
artist/writer, Allen Blair.



This issue in particular is dedicated to everyone
who has ever felt “uncommon” at any point in
their lives.



Letter from the Editor



Dear Reader,

The Uncommon GRACKle is a literary magazine that was originally created, designed, and edited by artist/writer Allen Blair. As a local writer in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, Allen wanted to create a body of work rich with authentic, Appalachian experiences from local writers and artists to share with the Mt. Sterling community.

Allen partnered with the Gateway Regional Arts Center—also lovingly known as “GRAC” by all—in Mt. Sterling, and shortly afterwards, *The Uncommon GRACKle* was created. *The Uncommon GRACKle* ran for a few years in the late 2010s and early 2020s, with Allen volunteering his time and energy to tirelessly put out nearly two issues every year. To quote Allen himself, the spirit of *The Uncommon GRACKle* thrived along these parameters: “We want works that mean something, either to you or others, that transport us places, that reveal old or new ideas in deep ways, that entertain and speculate, that challenge and diversify our minds and the minds of readers. If it’s simple, great. If it’s complex, great. If it’s weird, great. Our *GRACKle* is voracious, and guttural, and wants to feed on harsh truths of all kinds...” Indeed, the *GRACKle* was voracious and persistent, as it continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Eventually, Allen’s professional life shifted, and **the *GRACKle* went on hiatus in the winter of 2023**. During its absence, many local writers and artists speculated about the *GRACKle*’s return—**until it resumed its submission call in the Fall of 2025**.

When I took over editorial duties for *The Uncommon GRACKle*, it was at a transformative stage in my own life where I felt caught in a limbo: with one part of me reeling from the burnout of grad school, and the other part of me grappling with moving

back home to Kentucky and settling into my new—yet familiar—life. When I began my year of service at the **Gateway Regional Arts Center** in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, on behalf of the **ArtistYear AmeriCorps** program, and as a lifelong writer and reader, I knew that I wanted to shake the dust off *The Uncommon GRACkle* and let it see the light of day again.

We opened for submissions at the tail end of 2025 to resounding success, and editing this issue has been a true gem for me during my service year at GRAC. My goal for *The Uncommon GRACkle* was to continue Allen's legacy of sharing authentic, local stories with the Mt. Sterling community—and to also expand the *GRACkle's* readership across the globe. **This issue contains stories, essays, poems, and art from writers and artists based in Mt. Sterling, Kentucky—and from all across the world.**

There are **stories** in here that will **unsettle, disturb, and move** you; **essays** of **bravery, loss, and tales of fear**; **poetry** rich with **love** and layered with **loneliness**; and **art** from all mediums that capture **moments both fleeting and neverending**. This particular issue is **a collection rooted in connections**, which is deeply reflected in the beautiful cover art of this issue, titled **"Tethered,"** and designed by Mt. Sterling native, **Ashleigh Ferguson**. You will encounter a deep, fervent love for **Kentucky** and **Appalachia** in this issue—and you will also see **the mirrored experiences of Appalachians** reflected throughout the **international voices** present in this issue. I am also happy to share that this issue features a **Q&A Interview with Kentucky's 2025-2026 Youth Poet Laureate, Esme Morris**, who is an up-and-coming poet of incredible caliber writing about girlhood, familial bonds, and that neverending tug-and-war of wanting to see what exists beyond Kentucky's edges.

Common grackles are popular birds throughout North and South America, often mistaken for black birds due to their black plumage. But upon closer inspection, grackles actually have feathers made up of **iridescent colors**, and **change hues depending on the light**. They can glow like oil-slick rainbows or like **brilliant, bronzed birds of Grecian legend**. Grackles are also

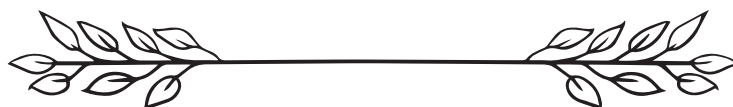
highly intelligent birds, make for quick problem-solvers, and recall human identities and presences with impressive skill. If you've ever seen a grackle, you've probably seen **this particular bird with its head thrown back, pointed at the sky**; bird watchers refer to this behavior as “**sky-pointing**” or “**bill-tilting**,” which is a behavior demonstrated when grackles assert dominance over other males, or when they court potential mates.

For such a “common” bird, what does it mean for a grackle to be “uncommon”? When we are all humans sharing the same earth, it might be hard to pick someone out from the masses—unless the light hits us just right, catching us in a moment as we gaze up at the sky, and suddenly we're glowing, illuminating what has been unique all along.

This issue would not be possible without Allen Blair's good faith in my continuing of the *GRACkle* legacy, or without the support and encouragement from **Jordan Campbell, Executive Director of the Gateway Regional Arts Center**. Thanks are also due to the incredibly impactful and resilient **ArtistYear AmeriCorps** program, an organization dedicated to enriching schools, art centers like GRAC, and communities across the United States with the arts and arts education programs.

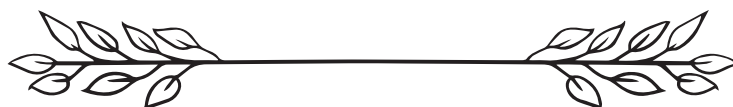
It is my hope that you leave the pages of this issue with the first—or returning—flutters of a familiar movement stirring in your chest.

With best wishes & delights,
Kelly Ward, MFA
Editor-in-Chief
The Uncommon GRACkle



Letter from the Editor Post Script:

While some issues of *The Uncommon GRACkle* have been lost to time, remaining digital issues can be found here: <https://thegrackle.magcloud.com/>. This issue, and future issues of *The Uncommon GRACkle*, will share qualities of the original aesthetic used in previous issues, while also demonstrating new stylistic choices.



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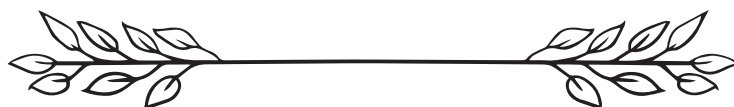
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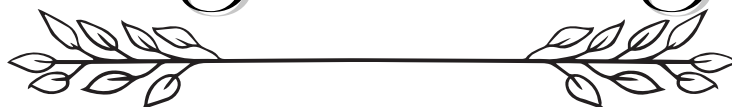


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Ashleigh Ferguson



Cover Artist



Photo by Ashleigh Ferguson

***Ashleigh Ferguson** is a visual artist from Mt. Sterling, KY. She is a self-taught multidisciplinary artist who uses graphite, ink, and digital media to blend realism and illustration to explore themes of grief, connection, and beauty in everyday moments and invites viewers into quiet, emotional spaces that reflect the human experience.*

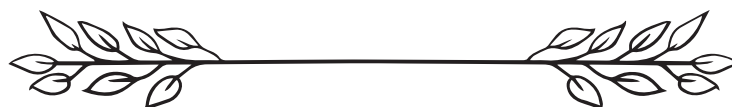


Artist's Statement



“**Tethered**” is a digital art piece that is part of a larger collection of digital & traditional pieces meant to explore **themes of loss, connection, and hope** that commonly accompany navigating adulthood. The piece is meant to explore the idea of **leaving behind something** that is still rooted within you and is an interpretation of the artist's **loss of friendship, family, and self** and the idea that moving towards or away from something **doesn't always mean leaving it behind**. It is about extending the **string** that will always **connect you to those roots.**”

-Ashleigh Ferguson



Tethered



Digital Art by Ashleigh Ferguson

Visual Artists in Volume VI



Allen Blair

37 **"Human," Photography**

118 **"Orchard," Photography**

Allen Blair is a writer, poet, journalist, dad, and dabbler from Mt. Sterling, Kentucky. Still owns a calculator and a typewriter. Find him most places @TheTinpoet.

Shalita Compton

27 **"Tangles With a Teaching Heart," Mixed Media on Paper**

Shalita Compton is a Kentucky based teacher and artist blends creativity, color and wellness into art. Channeling stress in her Teacher Tangle series, while also using SEL activities for students to de-stress, build confidence and regulate. Her abstract maximalism reflects and mirrors the ever shifting demands of today's teachers.

A. Morgan McKendry

59 **"IF YOU WON'T LOVE ME, AI WILL," Digital Art**

123 **"frequency esc. key," Digital Art**

A. Morgan McKendry (they/them) is a New York-based visual artist working with digital collage, video, and time-based media. Their work explores memory, intimacy, and perception through layered imagery shaped by archives, dream logic, and repetition. They hold a BFA from SMFA at Tufts and an MA from Georgetown University.

Shayla Ring

44 **"The Best Friend Tree," Photography**

Shayla was recently reminded that she was, at her core, a writer and storyteller. After spending time at Winter Burrow at Hindman Settlement School, she is on an adventure to reconnect herself and her words.

Michael Roberts

103 **"Stairs on trail in orange grove Cinque Terra Italy," Photography**

Michael C. Roberts (he/him/his) is a retired pediatric psychologist. He has digital and film photographs in Burningword, FERAL, Cholla Needles, Cantos, Cold Moon, Right Hand Pointing, Door is a Jar, Camas, Hindsight, Straylight, Thimble, Ponder, Closed Eye Open, Alchemy Spoon, 3rd Wednesday, The Right Words, Cardinal Sins, and elsewhere.

Sara Vaught

50 **"Misplaced," Drawing**

Sara Vaught (she/her), known as Snottie, is a self-taught artist with a bold, detailed style. Her freehand work blends realism, lowbrow and stylization, exploring emotion and mental health through expressive design.

Bill Wolak

84 **"Seductive As A Wildflower's Perfume," Digital Collage**

Bill Wolak has just published his nineteenth book of poetry entitled *What Love Calms Only With Nakedness* with Expeditions International Publishing House. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

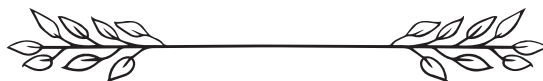






photo by Gateway Regional Arts Center

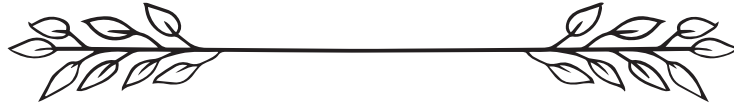
The Gateway Regional Arts Center

"All the Arts for All the People"



Situated at the convergence of the Bluegrass and Appalachian regions in Kentucky, the **Gateway Regional Arts Center (GRAC)** stands as the flagship cultural institution for the area and as a regional artistic hub. **Located in historic downtown Mount Sterling, Kentucky**, GRAC provides a diverse array of creative and cultural programs catering to individuals of all ages and backgrounds. With more than 28,000 annual visitors and participants, our outreach extends across 22 counties in Eastern Kentucky, affirming our role as a significant regional resource.

GRAC's Mission



The Gateway Regional Arts Center leverages the transformative power of art and culture to address critical community challenges by providing extraordinary creative experiences, sharing local and global perspectives, and promoting the arts as an important solution to holistic well-being. The institution serves as a flagship hub of arts & cultural education for Central and Eastern Kentucky, and aims to foster civic dialogue through creative and artistic activities that are accessible to all people, honoring the rich diversity of voices in our rural communities.



photo by Gateway Regional Arts Center

GRAC's Core Values



Just as the four pillars rise above the Mt. Sterling skyline atop our beautifully ornamented belfry tower, so does **GRAC** stand firm on the following core values that drive all aspects of our work:

Creativity: We celebrate and nurture artistic expression and innovative thinking, encouraging exploration and discovery in both local and global contexts.

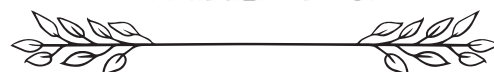
Inclusivity: We embrace diverse perspectives and ensure our programs are accessible to all, fostering a rich, supportive community that empowers individuals through the arts.



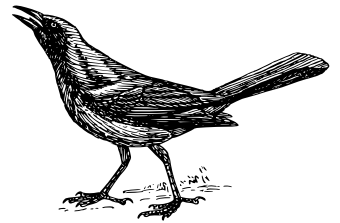
photo by Gateway Regional Arts Center

Transparency: We operate with openness and integrity in our decision-making and financial practices, building trust through clear and honest communication.

Sustainability: We commit to financial and operational sustainability by ensuring the organization's capacity to effectively manage resources and complete projects, while responsibly engaging with the community for long-term impact.
<https://www.grackentucky.org/about>



Q&A with Esme Morris 2025-2026 Kentucky Youth Poet Laureate



ABOUT THE YOUTH POET LAUREATE PROGRAM

The Kentucky Youth Poet Laureate program is a collaborative initiative between GRAC and Urban Word NYC, designed to recognize and uplift young writers and leaders dedicated to civic engagement, community service, diversity and inclusion, and amplifying youth voices across the Bluegrass. This program not only emphasizes the vital role of youth perspectives in shaping civic discourse, but also highlights how young people are uniquely poised to remind us of our responsibility to future generations, to our children, and to the ideals that bind us all.

Q&A with Esme Morris



2025-
2026
Kentucky
Youth
Poet
Laureate



photo by Esme Morris



Interviewed by Kelly Ward
Editor-in-Chief of *The Uncommon GRACKle*

Q: What was your reaction when you learned you were Kentucky's Youth Poet Laureate for the 2025/2026 year?

A: At first, I didn't think it was real! I remember just screenshotting the email and texting it to my mom— I think I just asked “does this look legit?” Then, we doubled checked with my Literary Arts teacher and he confirmed it. I was so shocked, and then all I could feel was excitement. I never called myself a poet up until that point, so it came as such a welcome surprise!

Q: What has your experience been like so far being Kentucky's Youth Poet Laureate?

A: Since I became the Youth Poet Laureate for Kentucky, I feel like I



photo by [Adam Reed Photography LLC](#) | Esme reading at the GRAC 2026 Youth Poetry Slam

have fallen more in love with poetry and my home state. This title gave me an excuse to immerse myself in poetry and to view Kentucky through the eyes of a poet laureate, not just a teenage girl. I have also been able to share my work through readings and publications organized by Gateway Regional Arts Center and my city's local writing center, the Carnegie Center.

Q: What has your experience been like working with the Gateway Regional Arts Center during your year as Kentucky's Youth Poet Laureate?

A: My experience has been amazing! Whenever I'm featured

at a reading, I feel like pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming, because it is just so crazy that I get to share my work among fellow Kentucky writers that I have admired since I started writing in second grade!

Q: When did you first find yourself identifying as a writer?

A: I have always been a Language Arts/English lover since I started school, but I first fell in love with creative writing in Ms. Cook's second grade class. For our end-of-year project, I wrote a narrative about the day my grandpa died. In third grade, I submitted that same piece to the School for the Creative and Performing Arts, and in fourth grade, I was a Literary Arts major. I can't quite remember the exact moment when I first identified as a writer, but I know I have always been one since I started school.



photo by Kelly Ward | Esme with current and former Kentucky Poet Laureates at the 2026 Kentucky Writers' Day event in Frankfort, KY

Q: Tell us about your work! What are you drawn to in your poetry? What inspires you?

A: I actually don't write a lot of poetry just in my daily life. I think its because my best pieces are inspired by one deep emotion that stays with me everywhere I go. It takes a while for an emotion like that to appear, but whenever it does, I feel like I could write poems until my hands bleed. I think I'm most drawn towards my own experiences and emotions in my poetry, and I especially find the most inspiration from relatable, seemingly simple things in everyday life.

Q: What are your plans beyond your tenure as Kentucky's Youth Poet Laureate? What ambitions do you have for yourself and your writing?

A: My main goal is to just keep writing. I'm pretty busy most of the time (that's junior year for you!), so I want to make sure that I don't lose time for writing. Of course, I have ambitions in terms of competitions and various scholarships, but I want to ensure that writing and poetry

continues to be something I love rather than a chore like homework or college applications.

Q: What advice would you give a fellow teen writer?

A: My advice is to never be a perfectionist. All of my best pieces were written out of pure inspiration and emotion, often with tons of spelling and grammar mistakes that I edit later. Every time I've tried to write something to purposefully be a masterpiece, it has left me burntout and losing love for writing. So, I would just say to keep writing, not being you feel like you have to for a prize for school, but because it is something you love.

Q: Can you share some recommended books, poems, or essays for readers of *The Uncommon GRACKle*?

A: I love this question! I have to hype up Kentucky writers, because I feel like only Kentucky poets can fully encapsulate the beauty of our state. **Kathleen Driskell's *Goat-Footed Gods*** is an incredible book of poetry, as well as **Silas House's new book, *All These Ghosts***. Other poets whose work I would recommend include **Ada Limón** and **Natalie Diaz**.



photo by Kelly Ward | Esme with Jordan Campbell (left), Executive Director of GRAC, and Kathleen Driskell (right), 2025-2026 Kentucky Poet Laureate, at a reading at the Carnegie Center in Lexington, KY. in fall 2025

Beyond poetry, I love my classics, so I will always recommend Jane Austen to any reader. In my literary arts class, we are writing 10 minute plays and we read *A Raisin in the Sun*, and I am not lying when I say I have reread that play over three times since we completed it in class. Finally, some of my current reads right now are *Cinder House* by Freya Marske (a dark fantastical Cinderella retelling) and *Joke Farming* by Elliott Kalan (a guide to writing comedy).

Q: Lastly, do you have any social media channels, or a way that our readers can keep up with your work?

A: I don't have any specific writing social media, but to keep up with my work, I would recommend following Gateway Regional Arts Center (@grackentucky), the Carnegie Center (@carnegiecenterlex), and my school's Literary Arts program (@scapa_lit_arts) on FaceBook/Instagram. My personal account is @featesme on Instagram.



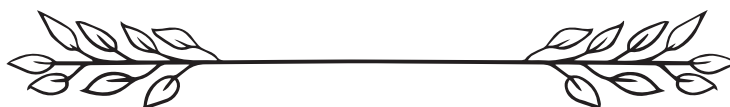
photo by Adam Reed Photography LLC | Esme reading at the GRAC 2026 Youth Poetry Slam



photo by [Adam Reed Photography LLC](#) | Esme with Mady Dinh, the 2026-2027 Kentucky Youth Poet Laureate, and participants from GRAC's 2026 Youth Poetry Slam



*Kentucky's Youth Poet Laureate Program submission cycle runs Feb 1st-28th each year. To stay up to date with this incredible program, go to <https://www.grackentucky.org/ky-ypl>. For more information about the **National Youth Poet Laureate Program**, founded by Urban Word, go to <https://www.youthlaureate.org>*





T a n g l e s w i t h a
T e a c h i n g H e a r t



Mixed Media by Shalita Compton

Creative Non-Fiction



After Surfacing



by J.M. Medeiros

J.M. (John) Medeiros is a part-time writer, poet, and aspiring farmer living near Walters Falls in Grey Highlands, Ontario. His poetry has appeared in *Bulb Culture Collective*, *Feathertale*, *BareBack Magazine*, and *Dead Beats Literary Blog*, and in the anthologies *Hearing Voices* (2014) and *Cantos* (2013).



After Surfacing

Ribbons of sunlight are slow to spill over the spectre of the Kootenay Mountains in the morning. Even at the height of summer, there is an autumnal tinge to the air as the tall hills throw shadows across a valley still veiled in mist. Through the rousing half-light, the Elk River wends, yawning, in a long and slow pitch for Pacific salt. Dawn at the river's edge I now leave to a younger guild, having washed the sleep from my eyes with river water while waiting for the sun's warmth to nuzzle the trout into rising more times than I can count. Mid-morning is a far more civilized hour to fish. The cutthroats seem to agree.

Skirting a side-channel bend that pushes water hard into the brakes, I find a dry rock, sit, and light a cigarette. Within moments of the sun's first caress, trout begin painting the pool spreading wrinkled ripples ever wider across the surface, like the smile of a new bride. It's a sight I never tire of. My eyes drift to the tail-out section, where braided currents, choreographed and woven like stitching on fine lacework, are enlivened by the fanning light. It's a good place to watch.

Countries are defined by borders, but truly great rivers can define an entire country. The Elk River is simply defining. Like the scrawled signature of the artist divine, it is a piercing blue line etched at dizzying depths into the bedrock of my primal geography. The atmospheric country it drains amplifies the experience but distills the act of fishing here into one of worship.

Rivers run in real time. Pressed into valleys, pressed by time, they trumpet life and, like true poetry, defy definition. Cutthroat trout are born of rivers born from ice, nursed at the breast of glaciers. Rivers inherit colours from earth and sky —grey and brown and cerulean; cast crimson by morning sun and brushed faintly by waning indigo shadows at dusk. And on one of those star-choked mountain nights that threatens

to swallow you whole, when a full moon graces the sky and speaks of morning frost, a river—in its ethereal, quicksilver sheen—becomes a pulsing echo of the celestial.

Rivers are not unlike the women I have known. Each possesses the inalienable ability to keep me slightly off focus, off kilter, and offside. They tease with their form and curves, challenging my already limited objectivity and keeping me far from rational thought. Many have been generous. Some have embraced me with forgiveness. I've disappointed a few. The odd one was cold and slick, trimmed with finery and vestments of pleasure, yet yielding nothing to my vainglorious attempts at defrocking her. Bewitched by some, I learned humility in my moments of cocksureness. Still fewer have soaked me. While the kinder ones shaped me, the harshest honed my metal. Most fall in between and in shades of grey, but all have added colour to my palette.

The Elk River is the fly-fisherman's equivalent of a wet dream. It is my *idée fixe*, my riverine mistress, whose music leaves me in a postcoital-like bliss whenever I'm within earshot. And it framed the last trip I would take with her brother.

For a brief and tumultuous, though no less tender, time, I was married to his sister. It was more mirage than marriage — an unfocused, evanescent vision that never fully crystallized, the edges curling to dust with even the slightest whisper of stability. Still dreamy but diaphanous: some days the clouds parted and I could see heaven; on others, a lightning bolt knocked me flat. When time finally wrung the primary colours from the canvas of our union, there were still a few passable places left to brush-in a lasting friendship. We never let the stain of failure become permanent. Still, it's a curious compromise being divorced from the only sister of your best friend — a juggling act where you feel every part the clown whenever a

ball drops.

Together, her brother and I were tuned by the acoustics of rivers while learning the philosophy of trout and the impossibility of knowing either of these very well. The arc of our friendship was nimble and sinuous enough to hold a clear view of the horizon—whether that meant oceans in the offing or mud puddles at our feet. It was movement rather than a static state, requiring the constant curative medicine of the madness that is fly fishing.

Along the way, we also discovered that it's okay to believe rainbows are ancient rivers smiling; that live music is always better even when it isn't the best; that Buddha and brown trout are equally mystical. Retreads are recycled. Not all bartenders are assholes, even if my martini tastes the same shaken as his does stirred. And, like retreads, amity needs renewal. When it all faded to black, we never failed when we fished together.

In Alberta, “colder than a witch's tit” is a bona fide meteorological term. You can still get a ticket for an expired parking meter even when it's thirty below. They told me it was a “dry” cold when I moved there that January. Locals are unvarnished, flinty, fiercely independent—more “Republican” than the rest of Canada, but a Carhartt's crowd rather than Brooks Brothers, with prairie dirt from the homestead days still under their fingernails.

Most are transient, like me. But on the rare chance of meeting a true local, he might call you an Eastern jack-off, tell you to go home and freeze in the dark—though he'll be nice about it. I had moved for monetary rather than esoteric reasons, though I was still jazzed in the same way I once believed being Amish might be interesting—if not for all that religion.

But the true upshot of living there is the rivers. In a single day, I could hit three or four of what many argue are the best fly-fishing waters anywhere. I could—but that would be sacrilegious, bordering on obscene: giving so much sacred water so little attention. With my home in Calgary, the Bow River was virtually in my backyard. What I caught I measured and photographed, making spurious notes while exaggerating my prowess with a fly rod, emailing him weekly—my own unedited version of trout porn. Even if I’ve stopped measuring my dick by how big the fish are and how small the fly is, he was still punked by the pictures. The Chinooks made winter fishing feel less like suicide while all he was catching back East was the train into the city.

What is woven into friendship that allows two people who care deeply and have spent so much time together to be so easily riven? The Zen of rivers and wild trout—or the satori of lipstick and lingerie? The psychology of intimacy is experimental at best, and sometimes you settle for what you can get. It’s a duality that becomes less malleable as one ages. When remaining time is rationed in years rather than decades, it’s easier to be blinded by shiny things of questionable value.

His cup was never half full. He chose to run rather than walk, preferring shortcuts over the long way home. He rarely read anything but magazines. (I once made him buy me a new book after he returned mine with wrinkled pages, even though I didn’t care for the novel.) He didn’t stay up late and took showers instead of baths. In the night sky, he could point out the Big Dipper but knew little of Cassiopeia or mythology. He might come in from a morning’s fishing and find me on a rock with a book in my lap. He’d jibe, saying, “We came here to fish!”

“Well, the fish didn’t feel like being caught,” I’d say, riffling the pages. “At least not during the last three chapters.”

If he was dialed in, I was decidedly off the grid. In short, he was always in a hurry. I sometimes wondered if such an affliction could be treated by prescription.

His caliper was stout enough, but when faced with too much emotional traffic, he became willowy—easily blown over by the faintest whiff of perfume. Whatever black wind carried those ill vapours left him listing and laid fallow, his defense mechanisms celibate. Lust (I could say love, but will not) is often just a tepid reflex that turns jaundiced when left untempered, leaving a trail of questions never part of the original equation.

During my years out West, his sister grew less placative, thinking he had gone to seed, if not fully feral. When she told me his fly-tying room was now a lounge and his basement, I leaned in agreement. When I later learned he had traded his pickup for a BMW, I was floored.

Despite my invitations to fish the mountains, he always had other plans. Over those years, his waistline widened in direct proportion to his narrowing views. He preferred now to count the things in life rather than experience the things that once made him happy. His choices were beyond my ken—though counting was always one of his strengths.

His sister and I spoke often. But she kept news of her first surgery from me, hoping it would prove successful. Trembling, she told me the cancer had spread to her liver—just like her father. A single tear spattered on the grey kitchen countertop she leaned upon, trying to stymie more from falling. Through that shroud, she asked if my western sojourn would soon be over.

Love is utterly feeble in the face of fatal illness. Sitting beside her on the

bed, I held her hand and read a poem I had written the night before. The silence we shared approached the sound of prayer.

When she died, the oxygen was sucked out through the center of the earth. I felt submerged under a great mass of water, breathing through a thin reed — never able to draw a full breath. I didn't surface for some time, preferring not to reinvent myself at the keening of others who misread the hard bark I had grown as melancholy. I craved loneliness, to be shored up in solitude until the world returned to its proper shape. When I did come back to earth, everything I knew was reflected back at me through a broken mirror. An aperture inside was misaligned; my life had delaminated. I was desperately alone.

Now it seems less credible that death is an absolute, since it happens to every living thing. Perhaps we are more like rivers, becoming lighter between periods of critical mass before gravity and density conspire again, returning us to the earthbound agonies of the flesh.

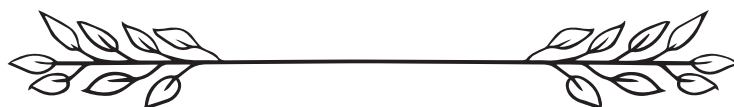
Maybe, in those in-between places, what has passed returns as dreams, filaments of music, tendrils of poems, or other forms of inspiration that exist only fleetingly—floating on the meniscus of temporal thought—yet no less real. Heaven is too far-reaching a concept for my precincts, but if there is a better place than the one of my imaginings, a true heart such as hers must surely be there.

I am remembering her words all these years later and hearing whispers of her voice in the cadence of the Elk River's currents. Under the press of her being in the clouds sweeping above me, I've reclaimed the early mornings, if only to be present.

It is a good place to wait.

The first fish I hooked was an immature male—fooled by a cheap, shiny attractor you can find anywhere.

It was good to let him go.



H u m a n



Forgive Me, For I Have Called 911



by Dena Smith

Dena (she/her) resides with her husband in Cincinnati, OH. She is inspired by observations of her neighborhood and the small, quiet moments in life. Her work has been published in *Humana Obscura*, *FemkuMag*, *Prune Juice*, and *The Humanist*.



Forgive Me, For I Have Called 911

It's my first morning back from spending a week in a small rural village fishing frogs out of a swimming pool and catering to the whims of a dying cat. Though it's a bright, sunny morning, I don't want to get out of bed. I'm not sure I'm ready to face the neighborhood just yet. But laying in bed is a waste of time and we all know that idleness is next to ungodliness. At least for women.

After two detours, I finally make it to Congregation Sinai and make my way past the suburban security officers. For no reason whatsoever, I point out to the greeter the fact that her dress matches the pamphlets on the table in front of her. She laughs politely, humoring my awkward attempt at conversation.

In the sanctuary, the Rabbi says something about repentance. I'm barely listening. My attention goes to the little blond-haired girl playing on the bimah as if she has no idea the eyeballs of a bunch of elderly Jews are centered directly on her. She hasn't yet learned of grown up respectability. Or guilt, probably. She doesn't yet wrestle with the moral and philosophical quagmires that keep the rest of us up at night. Like determining who to throw out of the lifeboat if it starts taking on water (the most annoying person on the boat, obviously). Or, whether it's right to tell an ugly bride she looks beautiful on her wedding day (every woman is beautiful on her wedding day). All she knows is that the railing along the stairs bears strong resemblance to playground equipment.

Stand, sit, pray, sing (but not loud enough for anyone to hear) and then I'm back home again with the faint awareness that I'm supposed to be turning toward my better self this week. My better self would empty the dishwasher rather than procrastinate and though that is probably not what the Rabbi had in mind, I get to it. But first, I open the windows. Autumn air clears the mind. At least when it doesn't smell of weed,

which it often does.

That's when I hear yelling. It's my neighbor, Elias. This screeching means tonight he will pick a fight with his girlfriend and keep the whole neighborhood awake. Why should we all sleep when Melanie is probably cheating on him?

It's still too dark in the kitchen, so I open another window. The yelling grows louder. Surely he is not drunk at 1pm in the afternoon? Apparently he has chosen not to turn towards his better self. I go to see what is making him so angry.

Moving to the big window in the sunroom, I see Elias pounding his fists on the recycle bin sitting out on the street. He rushes at our other neighbor, CeCe, who is probably also drunk at 1pm in the afternoon but she would sooner eat her own cirrhotic liver than cause a scene in public. What is the problem?

Elias paces back and forth manically along the sidewalk like the fennec fox at the zoo who displays a type of psychosis from being housed in captivity. But Elias owns his own 1400 square foot home and as far as I am aware, nobody has forced him to reside there. He pulls something out of his shorts pocket. His phone. He doesn't make a call. He is shouting "I am going to kill that bastard." Then no -that is not his phone. That is a gun. This asshole is running up and down the street in front of my house with a gun.

I make a mad dash for my phone. Fat fingers dial the number and the operator asks for the address. Have I been drinking too? I suddenly can't remember if the house numbers go up or down in that direction. I give her my own address. It doesn't matter. He speeds off, gun in his pocket.

I check on Cece. The gun isn't for her - it's for Juan. Juan is the semi-homeless man who knows and is known by everyone in the neighborhood. Sometimes he stays with Elias at night, sleeping out back in the shed. Today, he chose to take Elias' dog for a walk without permission. Totally reasonable reason to whip out a pistol and start threatening murder. Not finding his dog, or the human skull he seems intent on filling with a bullet, Elias quickly returns. Taking slightly less time than usual, the police arrive. They send 6 squad cars. At least they take guns in public seriously.

Like hopeful teen counselors at summer camp, they try to talk sense into Elias. He isn't having it. Or the six pack he drank earlier isn't having it. One of the two continues to yell, sob, and insist he must kill Juan. He, or the beers, then decide what this situation needs is escalation. He pulls out the gun.

Mathis, the elderly man across the street, has the sense to go inside and close the door. I am not as old and not as wise. I stand in the doorway and watch as Elias continues his tantrum. His girlfriend begs him to calm down. She is used to these emotional outbursts but this one has gotten out of hand. He lunges at a cop. Things are unraveling. The cops follow him but with distance. They are afraid too, I think. Either of Elias or of what the public will say when they watch the body cam footage.

I peek through the apartment door. Should I move away? Probably? Do I?

Absolutely not. Now is not the time to start minding my own business.

The cops draw their weapons. Are those guns or tasers? Not in the habit of getting myself into these situations, I lack experience in discerning

between different types of weaponry but I hope they are not real guns. The police shout. Am I about to get this man shot? I brought the cops here. But this lunatic was running around with a gun. This is not what I wanted. There are people on the street. His children are in the house. This is insane.

The police shout again. Elias drops to his knees. They rush over to pull his arms behind his back and snap the cuffs. It's over. He is still sobbing but he is alive. And I didn't kill anyone on Yom Kippur.



The Best Friend Tree



Photography by Shayla Ring

Fiction

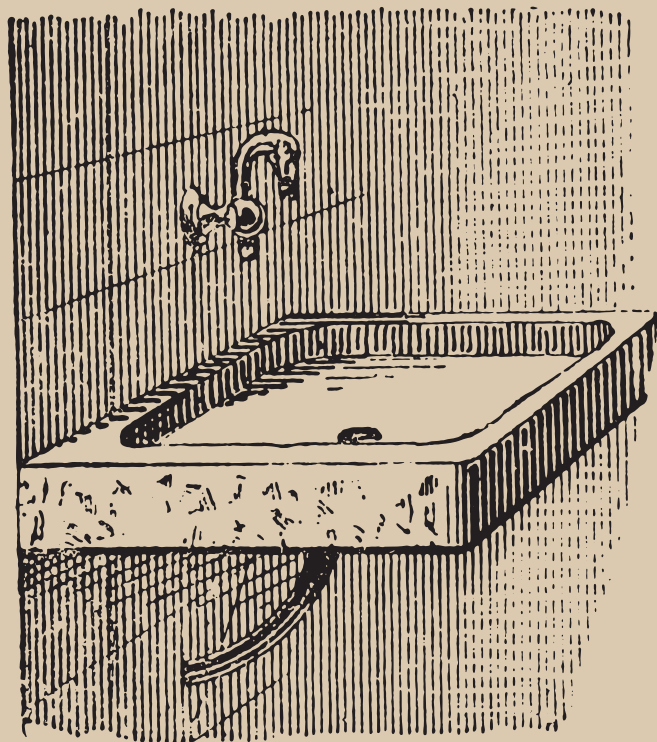


The Cyst



by Maria-Ella-May Hill

Maria-Ella-May Hill is a filmmaker and writer from the East of England. Her poetry and short stories have appeared, among other publications, in *Swim Press*, *Ouch Collective*, *Outlander Zine*, and *Anosmia* magazine. She is currently studying her Masters degree in Creative Writing at The University of Cambridge.



The Cyst

On days like these, I can't stop thinking about the hole running all the way through us. Starting at the mouth, then leading into the throat, through stomach and intestines, and then ending, of course, in those holes that everybody avoids talking about. People are full of holes. I'm aware that's an oxymoron. How can emptiness fill us? Can a void be full with its own absence?

I don't know how long I've been staring down at the sink for. The gutter is flecked with slivers of mushroom and shards of onion caught in the gasket like a hangnail. Perhaps I should bite it off.

This is how holes should be. Discrete. Quiet. Useful.

Behind me, from the playpen in the livingroom, the thing squelches. My gaze is pulled away from the sink to the eyes reflected against the darkness of the kitchen window.

On days like these I list facts about myself. My name is Sophie Miller. 33 years old. Ex geography teacher turned house wife. Lover of long walks and collector of seashells. I hope that these words will fill the new hole in my body, but the words fall right through me.

I pull on the kitchen gloves and snap them against my wrists. The thing behind me ceases its squelching. I rinse out the washing up bowl and turn on the taps. After a moment's hesitation, I turn the tap off again and start to unscrew the water filter nozzle from the tap. It's stubborn, glued together with limescale, and I have to yank at it a few times for it to give. They say the water quality here is awful. When I turn the tap back on, the washing up bowl begins to fill with cloudy, metallic scented liquid.

Then of course there's all the tiny holes people can't see. The pores on

noses. Pupils. Do the gaps between atoms count? If so, everything is filled with holes. All that empty space. I picture what would happen if all these holes closed in at once. Sewers, tube lines, piping, the necks of volcanoes, and then the people, of course, who would fold in on themselves like origami. It would become impossible to hide the holes we hold within us.

I walk into the living room and bend over the playpen, wrapping my hands around the cyst. It struggles in my hands and I squeeze it. Not enough to bruise, of course. It releases a high pitched squelch and stills. Its body is both soft and firm, like a soft-boiled egg, or one of those kids toys you squeeze to make pockets of glitter and air press through black mesh. The greasy sheen covering its raw-chicken-pink body makes me grateful to the inventor of gloves. I drop it into the washing up bowl and turn off the taps.

Immediately the thing starts to splash about. It rolls and ripples, sending shit and e coli infested water across my face.

On days like these, my phantom pain flares up, and the new hole across my abdomen twinges in time to the aching of my uterus. It doesn't compare to the agony of the months leading up to the operation. Dermoid cysts become present at birth and grow alongside their hosts. The thing splashing about before me was waiting for a long time. Feeding, biting, suckling until it grew large enough to turn my fallopian tube upside down.

According to Henry I'd flopped about in a pool of my vomit, right there in the middle of the supermarket, just like a fish in a puddle. I'm glad I wasn't conscious enough to remember.

I begin to scrub at the cyst. Just hard enough for my wrists to start aching. The thing squelches but doesn't struggle this time. The doctors called it a scientific miracle. Dermoid cysts are filled with cells which can turn into other things - teeth, hair, nerves, and sometimes even clumps of brain matter. But never that much. Never enough to demonstrate electromagnetic activity. It's an anomaly. A scientific breakthrough. But it'll never be clean.

It doesn't need a face or a mouth to communicate. I know what it's thinking. The cyst wants to roll into my mouth and squeeze its way down my throat. It wants to travel through my stomach and abdomen and bite through my flesh until it finds the scarring around my fallopian tube. It wants to return to where it came from.

It wants to kill me.

The locks in the front door clicks open. I let go of the cyst. Moments later, Henry is behind me, his stubble itching my skin as he kisses the back of my neck. He smells like cold air and polos. For the first time all day, I take a deep breath.

"How's it going?"

"It's bathtime."

"I can see that," Henry says, not unkindly. He looks down at the cyst. All the muscles in his face relax and his eyes grow soft. The inner corners of his eyebrows flutter. A movement so faint and quick I would have missed it if I didn't love him so dearly, and I hold my breath. "Don't you think the water's a little too high?" Henry says and plunges his bare hands into the bowl. He picks up the cyst and tosses it into the air. "Hello there,

little man!” Henry chuckles. The thing squelches with joy.

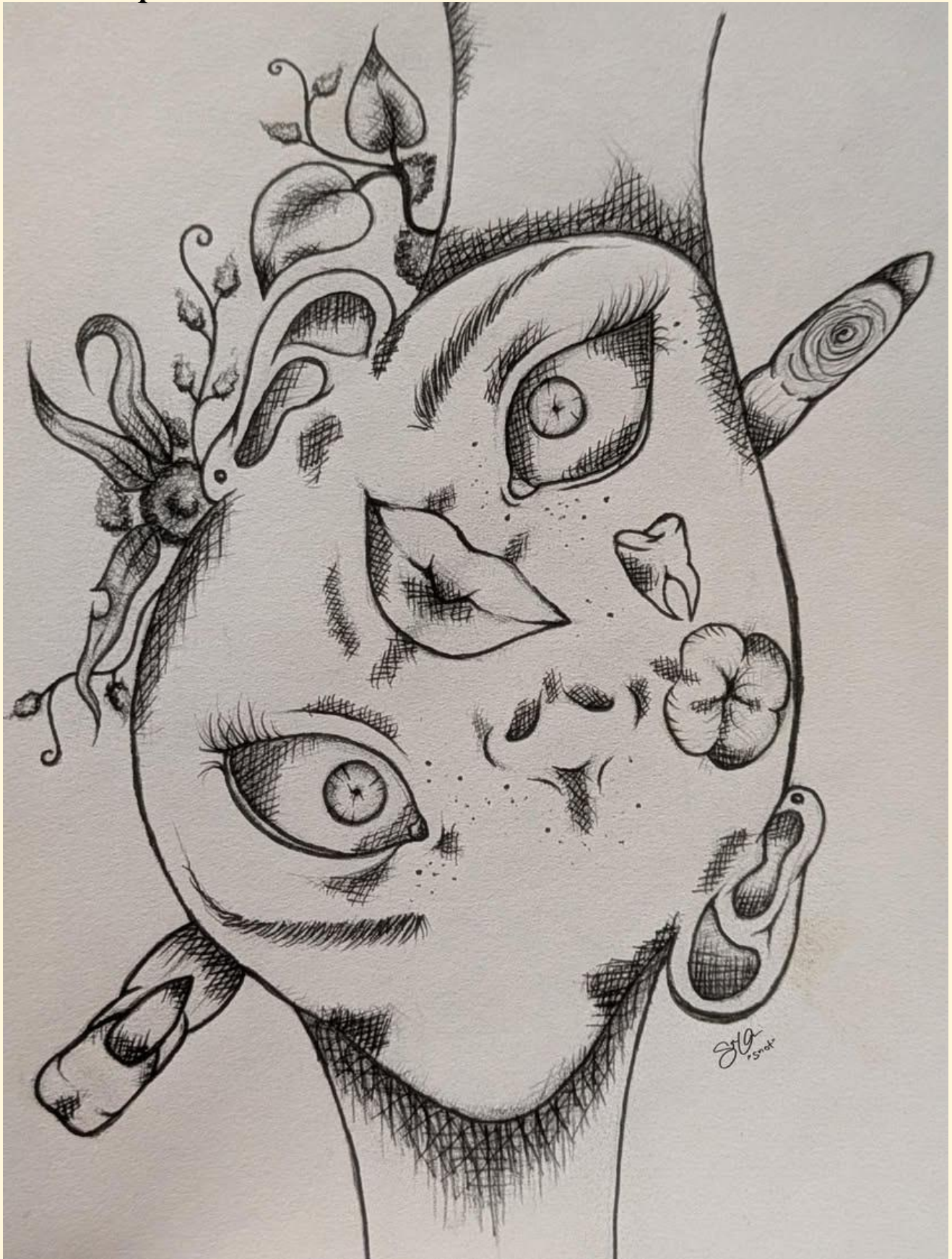
I watch as Henry takes the cyst into the living room and climbs into the playpen. He sits on the floor and together they push a red plastic bouncy ball between them. I turn back to the sink and quietly screw back on the water filter, taking a deep breath.

My name is Sophie Miller. 33 years old. Ex geography teacher turned house wife. Lover of long walks and collector of seashells.

The water swirls around and around, sending the hangnails of onion and slivers of mushroom swirling, around and around and around. The drain begins to gurgle, releasing a smell of rotting vegetation.



Misplaced



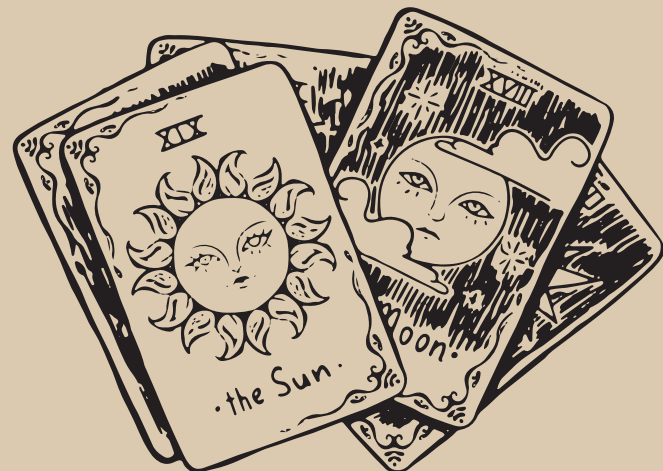
Drawing by Sara Vaught

Absaolon!



by Yuna Kang

Yuna Kang is a queer, half-deaf, Korean-American writer based in Northern California. She loves postcards, crows, and cats. Yuna is also the recipient of the 2024 New Feathers Award.



Absalon!

In cool malice, my love for you had reached biblical proportions. Epochal. In the same kind of way that Gilgamesh and Noah's flight paralleled each other, I found myself repeating the same notions of hate in my head.

You left a cup outside of the sink on Monday morning. You left a dish there on Tuesday.

And even if (when, actually,) you switched to hand-washing it all, or using recycled paper plates only, I hated you still. That was love.

I think I wanted an americana love, and I attempted our little household as such. It was smaller than an RV, that Amazon little-home. Do you remember it? (even in the ground?) So I attempted petunia wallpapers, (peel-and-stick-em), and yellow bright curtains.

Do you remember the muslin tablecloth I had, with its dyed checker pattern? And the chevron-laced apron? The Vitamix? The blenders? It all went to dust, eventually. The cardboard boxes piled up. We made a chore chart, and stuck it on the fridge. You forgot it, of course.

"I'm depressed," you would tell me. Or: "I'm stressed." And what was once a project, collective in its strategies, became a burden. Like an indifferent scale, I shrugged off the weight. And where did it go then?

The floor. I hate to speak obviously, bluntly, but one tends to metaphorize these things. These occurrences. I want to speak plainly to you though, while you're still in the ground. While you're available to listen and comprehend the slow strokes of our misery.

Peel-and-stick tile flooring. Do you remember it? I asked you to wash the

plastic, wash the polyester curtains, and bleach the bathtub just once a month. Nothing stuck in your mind. I don't know if you were taking your meds regularly. I forgot.

When I was younger, (and I don't mean to pry away), my mother and I would idle at thrift stores. Antique Trove. Goodwill. It was in the old days when all those things were inexpensive, not like now. We never bought anything. We had no money.

But it was nice, looking at the Walmart shirts priced at around three dollars, or the bins of little stuffed toys. Vinyl records and highlighted textbooks. Clothes hangers everywhere. The back was reserved for nice furniture, walnut and green satin. I had wanted those badly as a child.

It doesn't seem to matter much now. But I remember that inevitably, I would always trace my steps to those shoebox bins of old photographs. Black and white candids. Faded sepia colors. In one, some Asian woman is squinting, somewhere in Holland. It's old. Tulips are everywhere, and a smudge of a windmill is in the back. In another, a white woman squats in her garden. Tulips again. The bulbs are undone.

Families at the Disney parks, and a grandmother holding a newborn child. Blurs of light. Five consecutive shots of bloody baby teeth, proudly displayed on an almond wood table. How fragile these things were. To be thumbed through like the brief moments they were. Homecoming in the 70s. Done. A third wedding. Done. Twelve people grinning at a graveyard, all clad in black. Done.

And it is cliché, life-and-death-and-youth, and all that drama. But It's what I remember most vividly, when I thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up. Rosy photographs in golden faded glow. Snapshots. Here

is a woman in the garden. Here is a man by the kitchen sink.

So many tulips in these random photograph hauls...I suppose there are so many tulips in the world. Hollow blue and black bulbs. Thousands, I bet, have lived and died. Millions.

I talk about this all, (while you're there! in the ground), because you were the first actualization of that wish. A life in photographs. Series of pristine and warm moments. Our yellow kitchen. Done. A woman in maternal glow. Done. We could have kept going like this, one deliberation after another, in cut-glass imperfections, if it wasn't for you. You.

You let Target bags infiltrate our uncarpeted floors. You wouldn't mop and you wouldn't sweep, even if I would remind you. ADHD, you would say. Executive dysfunction. And it was cute in half-moments, that spontaneity, the projects that would fill you to the brim with severe passion, and then die like an autumn flower. I remember when we were young and I thought the whole world was within you, an erratic globe of a thing.

You didn't feed the cats. Done. You didn't feed the neighbor's dog. Done. It was in reminders, both unchecked and verbalized, that I would try to needle work out of you. Please do the dishes. I will stand here until you do the dishes. Laying on the couch for hours isn't going to help anybody. The phone is a disease, a virus. It can't help you here.

I hated myself when I was with you. Soccer coach, cheerleader mom. Always dragging you along, and hating you. Did you hate me too? For being correct, in an unequivocal sense?

No. I think that's why you went into the ground.

I remember when we used to go on dates, (we used to do that!), and you took me to see a field of meadowfoams beyond Sebastopol. Those glittering, glistening things. They weren't hollow; their entire cups were filled with silver light.

You swept down in navy skirt, (oh- how I remember that), and touched the petals. Softly.

"They're endangered, Maurie," you said. "Don't touch them too long." Don't touch, don't wander, and don't close in the gap. Something was endangered, clustered close to the brink of nervous water, and still the fields were considerable with thousands of them. All little poems in the California noon light. I saw you silhouetted there, like a blotted cut-out in the golden world, and I thought: that was it. In film negatives, you were the hovering dot, the occasional spat of ambiguous glory in vintage cameras. Movement that could not be relayed. A *je ne sais quoi* in visual form.

So later on, when I said I loved you, I wasn't thinking about you at all. But I was thinking about tulips in Holland, that perpetual field-craze. Because even if it has been hundreds of years since that scam, still, tulips are everywhere. Too many for me to comprehend.

I had dreams of those photographs, laced together. Empty bulb graves. No one inside. Eyeballs rising out of dirt sockets, trying to peer into the next frame. Don't confine me, something whispered. Why don't you love me anymore?

And the snapshot shifts to my mother, always my mother. We are in a grocery store, but we're adults, just minding time. Push the cart, I told myself. Push the shopping cart and do not blink, do not really move,

because photography subjects don't move- they are in action. And she is considering celery, and considering asparagus, and asking me: "Phoebe-Marilee, does your friend Laurel want chicken or pasta for dinner tonight?" and the floor falls out from under me, and I'm dead, I'm dead again. I'm in a strange place, where all the mise-en-scene indicates that the last twenty years did not happen, or did not occur in the way I knew it to. My mother knows me, and is not asking: Where is Phoebe-Marilee? (Such a lengthy name. It hurt to shoulder.) Where is your father? Where did the days go by? As if we do not live perpetually in that twelve-year moment, a pickup truck rammed off the rails, a trickle of red leaf-cups leading up to the car. A body twitching and alive. That was another frame, another moment, another life. And in twelve years, I have met many men, many people. Who, clad in black, told me: I will never be alone.

The night you went into the ground, I was doing divination again. Tarot genius. Tarot world. I had a talent for it, once. And you said: read for me, Maurie. Read for me.

So I did and it was painful. Two of cups. A tower in the past. A knight riding on a wet horse, blistering his way to the castle. I wanted the world, or the moon, in upside-down parallax. But I never get what I want.

And that was one of those days when you were alert and bright, when the shiftlessness of depression had not eaten away at the very memory of your step. I was tired. It was nearing 1AM, and I could not see the cards anymore.

"Stay positive, Maurie." Your voice was bright and cheerful, in the way that signalled a manic shift, a title, a premonition. My throat said: take your meds, Laurel. But the words were abstract in the plastic air, and

made no impact, no sound. I saw it parsed out in the Amazon bubble space, like advertising letters, or corporate calligraphy. I saw that you were leaving, shutting our pale door, walking barefoot out into the buttercup-covered lands.

Only in my dreams do I do this: shake off the sleep, (how often have I cursed you for sleeping! For doing nothing, in the semi-critical moments of our time), and run faster than you. Catch up, wrestle you in the mud. Sometimes we laugh and hug and kiss and cry. Other times, I am forcing pale red pills in your mouth, crying, (please-please-please). Please don't leave me Laurel. (I love you). And I have never done that before, only hated you for not having the energy to do it yourself. It's an indication of my love. A change, signified in a single moment. Done.

If the dream goes poorly though, you are a deer, a wendigo, a fae-thing. Wandering the woods with impossibly bright arms. Your ears elongate and then split eyes open. Pits open up on the earth, small ones, like if sores erupted wherever you walked.

I tried once to just stay in the house. Don't follow her, I told myself. Let Laurel do what she must. But then the wallpaper was made of skin, and it was peeling away, and I had to leave the house anyway. Out into the acne-pitted world.

Scarred face and scarred lives. I am glad I found you again, Laurel. In real life. I don't know why you thought it was clever to hide in the ground. In those anti-bulb sutures, sculpted clean out, because in the waking world I hate tulips and you know that. (Why did we plant so many? In our little-house garden?) Your prick eyebulb, looming out of the ground. Exceeding different holes. Some days, if I am lucky, a finger emerges too.

Where are you? Hiding, laying down, sleeping, as you always wanted to do? Forever? We should not have come here, something warm in me says. A lavender heartwork- my mother driving me to dad's funeral, and the sun is moving down. It was before the grief got to her, the dementia. She was still lucid then. And we said nothing, but there was nothing to say, because words are air.

You stay with me, Laurel. Maybe this is an attempt to haunt me, hate me, scare me. I don't care. In sleep I am afraid, but in daylight, you are with me. Appear in our pitted gardens, and be a deer-waif in our collective dreams. I will never be alone.



Digital Art by A. Morgan Mc Kendrick



IF I NO LONGER LOVE ME, WILL I STILL

Red Summer



by Kayli Perkins

Kayli H Perkins (she/her) is a fiction and poetry writer from Eastern Kentucky. She is currently pursuing her MFA with Bluegrass Writer's Studio at Eastern Kentucky University.



Red Summer

My mother was green, so she painted the shutters of our one-bedroom house the color of pine needles. My father was blue – blue sky – blue water – blue glass. The glass littered the floor like dust littered old boxes in the attic. I spent three weeks in the attic once. The walls were green – pine needles – the small window looked out at the pines. Blue skies – blue water – blue collar. Dad's brute dog wore a blue collar. I heard him from my pine attic. He never stopped barking – screaming. So much noise. There was always noise. He was leaving – she was leaving – someone was leaving, and it wasn't me. I'm in the attic. The attic was stuffy but it was quiet except for the buzzing. There was always buzzing – flies – summer flies – I was like a fly; always hidden in corners or tucked against walls – watching – listening. I heard everything – barking – screaming – flies buzzing. But no one pays attention to flies unless they become a nuisance. I was a nuisance – a pest – a thing hiding under their skin until they clawed me out – claws – fingers – pain. I got my fingers slammed in the storm door before I learned to be a secret. He was leaving – she was leaving – little fingers kept the door from shutting forever. I am red – pain – anger – blood smeared on the shutting door. It kept them from leaving. Maybe one day it will be me with a suitcase – luggage – baggage – he says she has too much baggage. She says he's a bastard. He's not. Maybe I am – maybe I'm the love child of a lost love – lust – wayward lust. Wayward child. Wayward life. I wonder if I'll ever truly live, or I'm destined to be a fly on the wall of this pine needle attic – watching – listening. The third week came and went and I slipped into shadows – the dark. The dog is barking. There's a moving van in the driveway. The man sits outside with a cigarette and watches my green mother and blue father stand red face to red face. She clutches the navy lamp a life line – life vest – I fell off his fishing boat when I was six years old. He was drunk – she was crying – I floated there and watched as they disappeared from view – I wonder if the red life jacket looked like storm door blood the farther they got. If they only noticed I was missing when my father was ready for

another beer. I was sitting on the cooler – ice cold. He’s holding a green knitted blanket like it will staunch the blood pouring out of a six year old heart – mind – body – when they finally found me my body was stiff and cold and so out of place against their warm bodies I wanted to tear the skin from my bones and disappear into the mist hanging over the water – it was the only time they ever touched me at the same time – cohesive – united – something so foreign in this house it makes me wonder how they made it to the church – the altar – a sacrifice – she sacrificed everything to be my mother – he sacrificed everything to be her husband – I wonder what gods they worship now – now they’re running towards the van – a lamp and a blanket – light – warmth – silence. The house is silent now. The dog – flies – me – we’re all holding out breaths – the man’s cigarette forgotten – like a child tucked in a pine attic with buzzing flies. The smoke swirls skyward. Nose pressed against a grimy window – sharp edges slicing palms – red blood dripping. Maybe someone will see it as a sacrifice – maybe they’ll actually leave. Condensation streaked across discolored glass – broken – like the navy lamp as it falls from the van – like my mother as she weeps into her hands – his hands already reaching. He grabs her hand – the blanket forgotten as he pulls her towards my pine needle prison. The blue dog barks – the wall flies buzz – the red floors dry.



The One Who Got Away



by Sydney Salter

Sydney Salter is the author of *My Big Nose And Other Natural Disasters*, *Swoon At Your Own Risk* and *Jungle Crossing*. You can read her short stories in *Literary Garage*, *Moss Puppy*, *Marrow Magazine*, *Neon Origami*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Strip Mall Magazine*, *Watershed Review*, and *WayWords*. She lives in Utah.



The One Who Got Away

Girls had never been a problem for Ray. Women though—? A red Jeep, a solid six feet of height, girls love wearing heels, and abs to show off at the pool – that’s all that mattered in high school. Talking was awkward for everyone. Didn’t matter if he were out with Jenny Moore, Emily Lewis, Maya Miller, or cute Christie (that girl was easy to be around), Ray mostly cared about looking hot with a hotter girl. He dated skinny blonds in his twenties – girls who always wore makeup and drank pink cocktails. His sister called them silk flower girls – pretty – but they don’t grow, and you toss them out when they get dull or dusty.

One Sunday, in a trendy coffee shop that sold complicated \$6 coffees, he tried to tell his new girlfriend about an unsettling dream, but she kept fretting about forgetting her makeup bag. “I feel naked,” she said, as if makeup were clothes for her face. “Ugh. So naked,” she repeated. “Even a little mascara—”

Ray thought she looked sort of fresh, open – friendly?

“I’m gonna go fix my face.” She grimaced while taking a selfie. “– ooh, and my hair.”

Ray sighed. “I’ll text you later.”

He pushed away her picked-over muffin, his cold coffee, and watched an old couple sitting outside, sharing a newspaper, a wiry terrier snoozing at their feet.

How would Ray ever get from here to there?

Something had gotten away from him.

A younger couple snuggled on the old sofas reading novels. Ray hadn't finished a book since winning Mrs. Patterson's 5th grade reading challenge. Books weren't cool. Guys who read weren't cool. And Ray needed to be cool. Cool guys got cool girls.

On the way out, Ray grabbed a random book off the freebie shelf. A friendly brunette smiled with her eyes over a big mug of coffee. Ray imagined sitting across the table from those big brown eyes. A rescue dog sleeping at his feet. The book wasn't great. But Ray enjoyed spending time inside the brown-eyed woman's head as she fought to save an old historic mansion. Rooting for her, even though she wasn't real, made Ray feel good, even though it also made him feel sort of dumb. The next Sunday he picked up another freebie called *The Paris Wife*. The woman on the cover had great legs. Turned out the wife had married Hemingway – the ultimate man's man. The next week he bought a Hemingway novel.

The new girlfriend called him a nerd when he tried to talk about the book. He stopped texting her, even with Valentine's Day coming up. Not having a hot date usually made Ray feel like a loser, but something had shifted. He'd started to think about girls he should have dated – like that quiet girl who trained seeing eye dogs back in high school. The woman at work who read thick novels on her lunch break. Girls who, maybe, turned into women like the character in that first book. He kept the woman with the smiling eyes on his bedside table. A friendly expression to see last thing at night, first thing in the morning.

On Valentine's Day, Ray sent flowers to his mom, chocolates to his sister, and that night, instead of overpaying for a steak, he headed into The King's English Bookshop. Reading a couple of Hemingway novels made him curious about Fitzgerald. He'd technically seen the *Gatsby* movie – but he'd mostly focused on messing around with the girl he'd brought.

“Catching up with the books you didn’t read in high school?”

Something about those eyes!

A cute brunette stood before him, holding up a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. She looked familiar. “I’m in a book club, and we actually read the books we were supposed to read in high school.” She shrugged. “It’s pretty great, actually. You’ll love Fitzgerald.”

“Yeah, I got kind of curious after he was mentioned in a book about Hemingway that I read.” He didn’t mention the book’s name – worried that it might seem too girly. Too lame.

“Was it *The Paris Wife*?” Her eyes widened – so familiar. “I loved that one! That’s why we’re reading *The Sun Also Rises* next month. My choice.”

“It’s good.” Ray didn’t know how to talk about books. Books being so – private.

“I figure it’ll make me want to drink heavily.”

He laughed after she laughed. Her laugh wasn’t familiar. Just the eyes. He scanned his memory. Not tall. Not skinny. Not blond. Not recent. High school—? Cute. Brunette?

“Do I look familiar?” The woman raised her eyebrows, teasingly. Adorable.

“Did you go to—?”

“Probably not.” She shook head. Adorable. “Want me to show you?”

Ray followed the woman to the other side of the bookstore. She snagged a book off the shelf, spun around, holding the back of the book in front of her face, leaving only those smiling eyes. “Ready?” She flipped the book over – and it was her. The woman with the smiling eyes! “Is that what you recognized.”

“You’re on my bedside table.”

“I’m not going to comment on that.” A cute giggle. A sweet blush.

Ray nodded, unable to come up with anything clever – or anything, anything – to say.

“I briefly dated a photographer who sold his work on a stock photo website. I’m in a heartburn ad, too. One of those drugs with a zillion syllables. My so-called claim to fame.”

She mimicked the book cover again.

Ray stammered, searching for something good to add – but he couldn’t get past the feeling of being inside a book, living a story, being a character – someone who has things happen to him. “What?” she asked. “You’re staring.”

“Do you want to go get a coffee? Maybe split a piece of cake?”

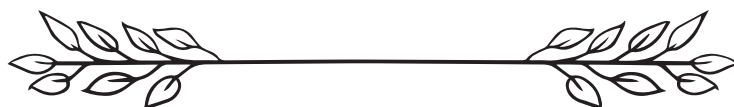
The woman shook her head, no, and Ray felt that feeling, also described so often in books –sinking.

But then she grinned. “I’ll go if I can have my own piece of cake. Don’t worry. I’ll pay.”

“Oh, that’s not—“ Ray protested.

“I’m just teasing you.”

Ray grinned, and maybe he looked like an idiot, but he didn’t care. Maybe he’d just found that thing that had been missing – that something that seemed to have gotten away from him.



Workplace Violets



by Dale Scherfling

Mister Dale Scherfling is a fulltime writer/poet, former newspaper sportswriter retired U.S. Navy photojournalist.



Workplace Violets

She didn't stop for red lights, didn't yield to crosswalks, didn't slow for kids, cats, or common sense. If a soul was foolish enough to be in her way, they got a split-second glimpse of a snarling little Pontiac Bonneville and a flash of lipstick before praying to live another day.

Laura Marley was five foot nothing and all fury, hair jacked up like a blonde halo gone wrong. She was married to Mitch—the city editor's kid—which meant nobody messed with her, but everyone noticed.

I noticed.

I'd been out of the Navy maybe three months. Still snapped hospital corners in the morning. Still folded my underwear into tight little logs, like I was packing for deployment. I'd just landed the night desk job at the Lorain Journal—affectionately known as The Urinal by staff—and I was trying to stay invisible and keep my byline clean.

Laura worked layout. She had that smoky drawl like her tongue always knew a secret, and she wore this ridiculous violet cardigan every Thursday. I joked once that it made her look like an Easter egg.

She laughed. Said I looked like an aging Boy Scout in my brown polyester clip-on tie.

We were both half-right.

It started like most wrong things do—quietly. A gesture so small you almost missed it, like the first hairline crack in a wine glass. She touched my wrist when she handed me copy one night, her fingers lingering just a second too long, like she was reading my pulse.

“You always work this hard when no one's watching?” she asked one

midnight in the morgue, barefoot with her heels in hand, the old press thundering in the next room.

And I, dumb enough to flirt with married chaos, said, “Only when I’m being watched.”

That was it. A spark. One of those moments you could still walk away from—but you don’t.

She was a temp, technically—but already knew too much about everyone. Divorces. Drinking habits. Who took lunch with who. She never asked about me, but she already knew I didn’t smoke, was a vet, had washed out of one marriage already. She smoked like a chimney and smelled like an ashtray and too much perfume.

“I like the quiet ones,” she said once, looking right at me. “They’re better liars.”

That should’ve been a clue.

Three nights later she kissed me behind the vending machines where the soda always got stuck. She tasted like gin and wintergreen gum and bad decisions. Made me feel alive—not patriotic, not useful. Just alive. And for a guy who’d spent four years at sea being part of a machine, that feeling was everything.

Of course, that spelled trouble. With a capital T.

We didn’t fall in love. We collided. Like two storms that didn’t ask permission.

She’d tear out of the parking lot like her ass was on fire—a puff of

gravel, a scream of tires, Joan Jett blasting I Love Rock 'n Roll through open windows. I wouldn't ride with her. By the time I caught up, she was already parked crooked in front of the Hi Ho with a cold beer waiting and a shit-eating sneer on her face.

“What kept you, Pussy. Grow a pair.”

Nothing ever really happened—at least not the way I'd imagined it might when we started. A few cigarettes outside after deadline. A ride home in the rain. Once, she fixed my collar in the parking lot and let her fingers linger too long while Mitch was upstairs closing the front page.

But I could see where it was heading. The way she leaned too close when she handed me galleys. The way Mitch had started watching me cross the newsroom. The way my hands shook a little when I heard her voice.

I'd been in the Navy long enough to recognize when you're steering into rough water. Sometimes the smartest thing you can do is change course before the storm hits.

So I did.

“This has to stop,” I told her one night in the parking lot, rain threatening. She was leaning against my car, smelling like smoke and lilac and something burning.

She looked at me like I'd just told her the sky was falling.

“What has to stop?” Playing dumb. Or maybe genuinely surprised that I was the one calling it.

“This. Us. Whatever this is.” I kept my hands in my pockets so I wouldn't

reach for her. “You’re married. I just got out of one bad situation. This only ends one way.”

“And what way is that?” Still leaning. Still testing.

“Badly,” I said. “For both of us.”

She studied me for a long moment, then pushed off the car. For a second I thought she might slap me. Instead, she smiled—sad, but with something like respect in it too.

“Smart,” she said. “Smarter than I gave you credit for, Sailor.”

She got into that fire-engine red Bonneville and sat there with the engine running, Joan Jett rattling the speakers. Then she rolled down the window.

“You’re probably right,” she called out. “But we could’ve been something.”

“Probably,” I said.

She peeled out, tires screaming, and I stood there in the empty lot watching her taillights disappear.



Two months later I heard through the newsroom grapevine that Mitch’s father—the city editor himself—had hired a private detective. Don’t know what the guy found or didn’t find. Don’t know if my name came up. But by then I was already out of it, just another reporter keeping his

head down and his byline clean.

Laura and Mitch divorced a year later. I heard she moved to Akron, then Cleveland, then I stopped hearing about her at all.

They still talk about her sometimes—usually after two drinks and a lowered voice. Leadfoot Laura, they call her. A local legend wrapped in denim and defiance and violet cardigans on Thursdays.

But I knew her when she was on fire. And I knew when to walk away from the flames.

The newsroom felt emptier after that. The morgue especially. I'd catch myself listening for her voice, her laugh, the click of her heels on linoleum.

But I was still employed. Still married to my work, if not to a person. Still had a career that didn't end in a scandal file in the city editor's office.

Sometimes the story you don't chase is the one that saves you.

And I can still hear those tires.



Animals



by Sydney Thomson

Sydney Claire Thomson (she/her) writes poetry and prose. Her short stories have been published in *Alternate Route* and *Wallstrait*. Her poems have been published in *Boats Against the Current* and *The Champagne Room*. You can follow her work on Instagram (@sclairethomson).



Animals

Maybe it was Gemma Jackson that made me anxious like this, full of bees and television static. Gemma went missing when I was seven. She was a little older than I was then, but younger than I am now. Strange to think that maybe I've outlived her if she's dead now, stuck as she was at the age of nine when she was taken from the Calendar Road parking lot. I remember the hound dogs with their long, russet-velvet ears, sniffing for Gemma, us taking turns pointing them out to one another with swollen, stubby kid fingers. That was four years ago, the May after the April that had a snowfall which came all of a sudden. I don't mention Gemma Jackson much because Mama cries and says the man who took her was 'an animal.'

"You're such a scaredy-cat," Brady says to me now, except he doesn't say scaredy-cat, he says a meaner word that I won't repeat. He says this to me a lot, but he's the only friend I've got 'cause all the other kids think we're weird. Brady might be right about me being scared, but never in twelve billion years would I admit that to him. He always wants to do things like this, things that scare me. 'Cause, see, the train tracks have the river on one side and the field on the other, and just a sliver of gravel on either edge.

"This is a bad idea," I say, for the record. I swallow those bees and pedal through the stoplight and across the tracks, trailing behind his faster bike.

A train comes and blares its horn so loud when it sees us that I have to fight to keep my hands on the handlebars and not clap them over my ears, my heart like a gunshot. I heard once that you shouldn't put pennies on train tracks because the train wheels can shoot 'em out so hard and fast it'll cut through your throat.

We pass a small building that's not much more than walls and a big open archway, graffitied with things that don't even look like words, turquoise and red like rust and black and white. There's an old TV, broken, turned on its side, a couch cushion with no couch.

When we get bored and hungry, we point our bikes back toward the stoplights and put the river to our left. That's when I see it in the switchgrass right at the edge of the track, a pile of bones, big ones, picked clean and dry as dirt. I know what a human spine looks like; I've seen pictures in science books.

"We should tell someone. The cops," Brady says.

"No!" I shout. "We might get in trouble for biking here." There's nothing I'd hate more.

"Fine then. We'll knock on the door of that house by the stoplights on Friendship Street."

Coming down the gravel track from that direction is a white car, low to the ground, tires eating the gravel with no problem. The car pulls into the abandoned building's mouth, the one with the TV and the cushion, and no one gets out to stop us when we bike by as fast as we can.

It's still there when we bring the man from the house on Friendship Street, older than our fathers, back to the bones, saying we found a body. A human body.

He didn't seem to believe us, but followed us all the same, past the white car.

“It’s just an animal. Deer, likely. Probably got hit by the train and died right here.”

“It’s not Gemma?” I ask.

The man looks sad, and much older, then, than he had before. “No, it’s not Gemma.”

Brady says, “I thought maybe that person in the white car drove over here because it’s where they put her, Gemma. You know, to relive it all. The crime.”

“How’d you know about all that, Kid?”

Brady likes watching crime shows, and I know his Mama would scold him if she knew.

He shrugged, “Read about it somewhere.”

“No,” the man says again. “Those kids in the car are just smoking pot. And this is just some animal.”



Poetry



The Letter and In the Time of It



Two Poems by Marilyn Barnett

Marilyn Barnett is a resident of Clay City, Kentucky, where she lives with her husband, Lonnie, and their son, Patrick. Marilyn's creative writing skills emerged during her college years where she was free to journal her life experiences about raising a son with autism into essay assignments. Her emotive prose blends fiction and nonfiction into a style of poetry where readers find truth lies somewhere between the two.

Currently, Marilyn is writing her first nonfiction book chronicling the Barnett family's 2024 journey to let Patrick shoot basketball in each of Kentucky's 120 counties in less than 120 days.



The Letter

Age sits hard in a straight back chair
Looking for dust down an unpaved road
Watching for those who don't come anymore

Three short a hundred, just another long day
Warped pine boards lead down a dark hallway
Move along slowly, there's nothing to gain.

Daily struggle to open an always locked door
Keys, rusted and old, held by weak hands
Need only open enough for her fragile state to walk through

Dark memories, rise fitfully, attempting escape
Momentarily, dancing in mid-air
Settling back down to cry in corners, dusty and dark

Sitting at the desk, near a metal framed bed
Pondering if her words will even be read
Indelible ink waits as it has so many times before

Last rays of sun filter through the stained-glass
Raised slightly, a breeze warms a weary face
Barely touching the top edge of the last image of her

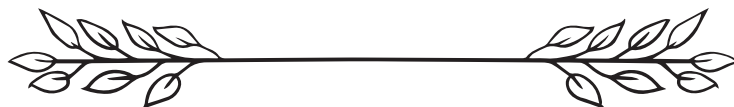
Hands wrinkled and cold, grip the black pen
Thoughts whittle away at a stormy pace
Knowing raindrops soon will pour

Head bowed, prayers whispered
Words, years passed ready to say
A single page written on the saddest of days

A life laid down between two iron rails
Underneath patterns, stitched by a younger hand
Everything left to the dust in the shadows

Black mourning veil—scalloped and torn
Stretched out to drape a weary soul
No witness saw when forever sleep called

The letter lies hidden in the bottom, left-hand drawer



In the Time of It

In the time of it...

I find myself with a little time to remember familiar memories
Running barefoot toward Papa's house on worn out gravel
Picking Queen Anne's Lace alongside the road
Standing on slippery rocks with my feet shriveled up from wading too long in the creek
Hanging upside-down from a tree branch without a care
Looking forward to where I'd travel
Not knowing when it would all unravel

In the time of it...

Unaware that death sat nearby calculating its heavy toll

In the time of it...

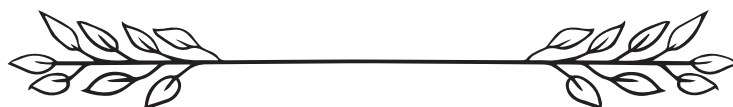
Here lay I—crumpled—down in my bed of dread
Wearing wrinkles drawn by the sharp edges of time
Hearing my worn-out heart beating slow
Taking one last, brief glance at familiar faces
Thru clouded eyes that hardly blink
As heavy lids draw the drapes across all my ages
Every breath I take, a feeble attempt to bind precious memories to my soul

In the time of it...

I know my life's story is nearly told
I have one quiet moment left to think last thoughts
My body longs to return to peaceful sleep
My hands and feet feel icy cold
I imagine my aching bones becoming bleached after I'm gone

So—In the time of it...

I gratefully paid the toll—and let go



S e d u c t i v e A s a
W i l d f l o w e r ' s P e r f u m e



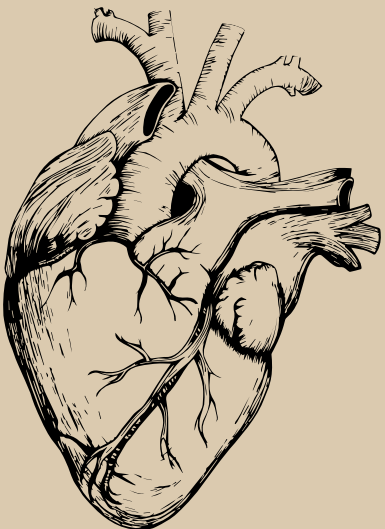
C o l l a g e b y B i l l W o l a k

my Unreliable narrator



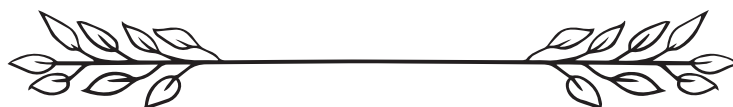
by Allen Blair

Allen Blair is a writer, poet, journalist, dad, and dabbler from Mt. Sterling, Kentucky. Still owns a calculator and a typewriter. Find him most places @TheTinpoet.



my Unreliable narrator

opinions set concrete in my veins
blood born of pathogens
inflicted via screens
and screams
and road ragers
and wannabe leaders
and friends, tho I beg forgiveness
to admit, until
this stream of life
makes it way through heart
to brain
then cools to ice
my breath
with indifference enough
that I learn not to trust
my inner self



I Want Summer Back



by bloodswan

Bloodswan is a musician, artist, and writer, crafting spells from her tiny house tucked into the Appalachian foothills. She's self-produced folk punk albums under pseudonym RAINBOW STAR, and is currently completing a feminist cancer memoir, *The C That Unites Us*.

She lives with her three cats and tiny dog



I Want Summer Back

I want summer back
The way you want a lover to return
after rocking your world and leaving you
in a mess of
dropping dopamine.

I want the hands of time to spin at my beckoning.
I want to know how good I've got it when I do.

And when the sap runs down the trunk
and the leaves are aborted
I want to call it back—
The perfect temp on my skin
The sun telling me it'll be ok.
The juicy garden fruits effortlessly offered.

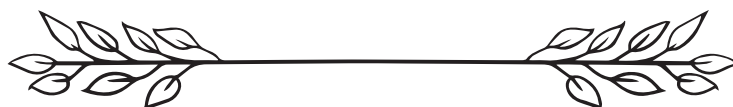
I don't want to learn the hard lessons again,
That fairy offerings break their bowls
When winter grips them by the throat
And hoarsely exhales there.
I don't want friends' ample excuses
to stay in with their kin.

I have none
save the trees, and they're dead
(for now).

I want it all.
Existence warm and gentle and nurturing and kind.
Carefree.

I want it all.

I want it all.

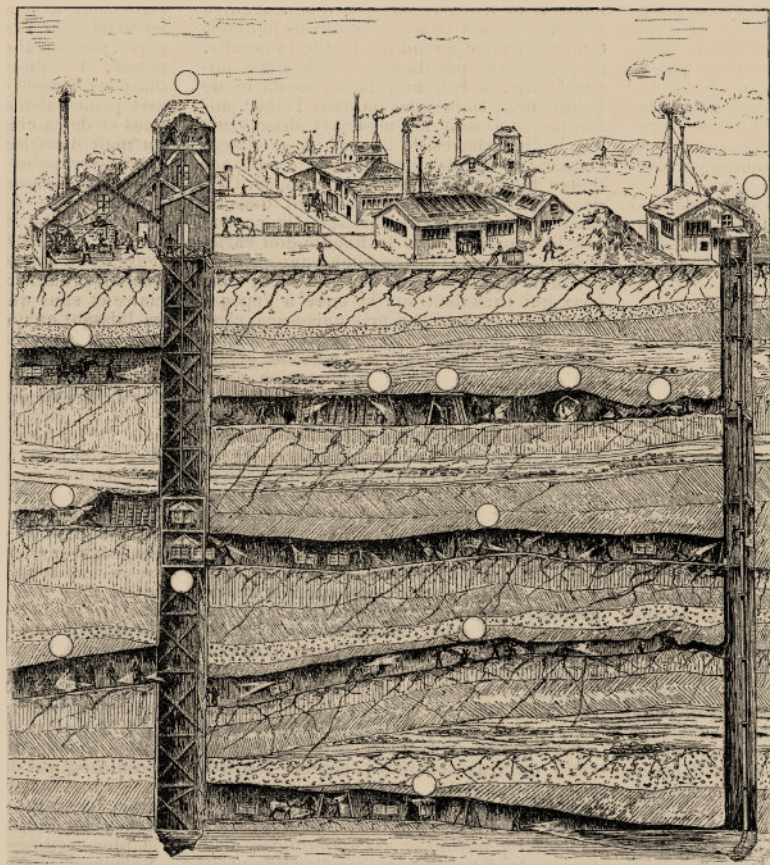


Dear Appalachia



by Jack Clark

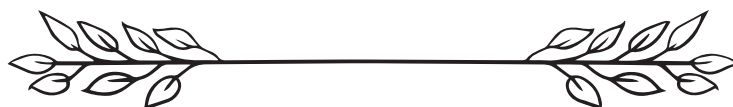
Jack (he/him) is a Junior majoring in English Education and minoring in creative writing. He attends Marshall University. He has two pieces published in the *WILDsound Writing Festival* and the 2024-2025 issue of *30 North*. After college, Jack intends to teach in Appalachia while still writing.



Dear Appalachia

For all twenty years of my life
I've lived among your mountains,
forests, and rivers
in a small town of about 3,000 people
sat just off the Ohio River
called Point Pleasant
and no matter where the next sixty years take me
I don't think I'll ever truly leave.
It's not that I feel a particular fondness
for you, or any meaningful nostalgia
that will draw me back.
It's that my association with you acts like a brand,
imposing itself onto my voice, giving me an accent
only you can love, or in the way I feel guilt for considering the option
cause you've always been a bloody creature,
be it from the miners lost in your veins trying to defend you,
the gashes tore into your flesh when we blow your mountains
to pieces because they failed, or the addicts that cling to you
and die in your emaciated arms cause they've nowhere left to go.
I used to blame you for this. I thought this was just a fact of life here,
I couldn't see that you're just an abused dog, begging for whatever scrap
the politicians promise you, and we're just ticks, all of us. Every miner,
addict, and everyone in between has dug into you.
Some live here all their lives, a good eighty years if lucky,
others tear themselves away, but in the end, we die here.
I could move to the other side of the world,
but I'd still be wearing that brand,
my head would still be dug into your flesh.
I wish I could do better by you,
get you some food of actual substance,

maybe patch your wounds up a bit,
and give you a fighting chance for the first time in a century.
That'd mean I would be from anywhere else though,
cause no one's going to listen to anyone branded an Appalachian,
there's no need to listen when we'll accept scraps.
Some days I wish I could dig up my roots, live anywhere else,
be anyone else, but I can't. I will die among the miners and the addicts,
in your emaciated embrace, all of us just as abused by our collective circumstance
and I am sorry I cannot save you.

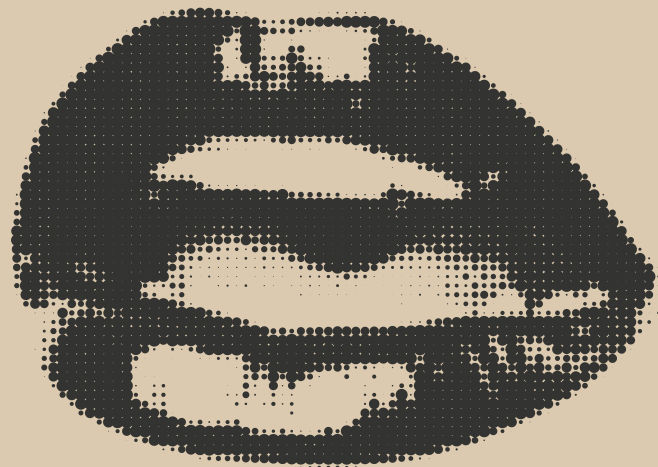


side sleeper



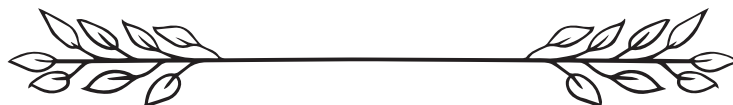
by Torianne Couch

Torianne Crouch (she/her) is a biology major at Morehead State. When not writing or studying, she enjoys spending time with her wife. Her work has been previously published in the 2017 issue of *Inscape* and the April 2019 issue of *The Uncommon GRACkle*.



side sleeper

in the slight downward tug
of my right eye, I see my father's reflection
my mother's laugh leaps from my open mouth
my grandmother lives in the downward draw of my lips
I touch the mirror and hold hands with
my mother's mother's mother



An Angel Appears with a Warning about the Future


by Mary Christine Delea

Mary Christine Delea is the author of *The Skeleton Holding Up the Sky* and three chapbooks. She grew up on Long Island, has lived all over the US, and now lives in Oregon



An Angel Appears with a Warning about the Future

He is still, like a hawk on a streetlight watching a mouse
try to hide under a front yard river fern.

Then, still watching my lazy attempts at weeding the yard,
he creates a wind, blowing the downed cherry blossoms

so that they wind around daffodils and the early tulips.
I have no place to look but down at the earth

beneath me. The angel has secrets he wants to share.
His mouth makes terrible movements, but no noise.

I can tell he knows secrets about the future. How everything
now is creeping along like an injured mouse.

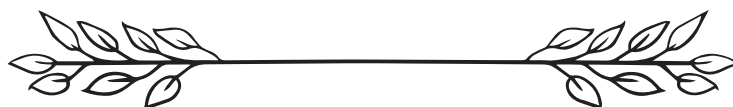
How we poison ourselves. This angel can see
underground, can open gates to other worlds. We cannot.

We exist only here, atop the dirt we have poisoned,
the dirt where we have stashed our secret sins, the dirt

that grows more toxic, no matter how much beauty we plant
in our yards. I cannot do what I know he wants.

His warning is in vain. I cannot chase the evils out of
this dying planet like a hawk chasing a mouse.

I can only weed my own garden, distribute
more dirt. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

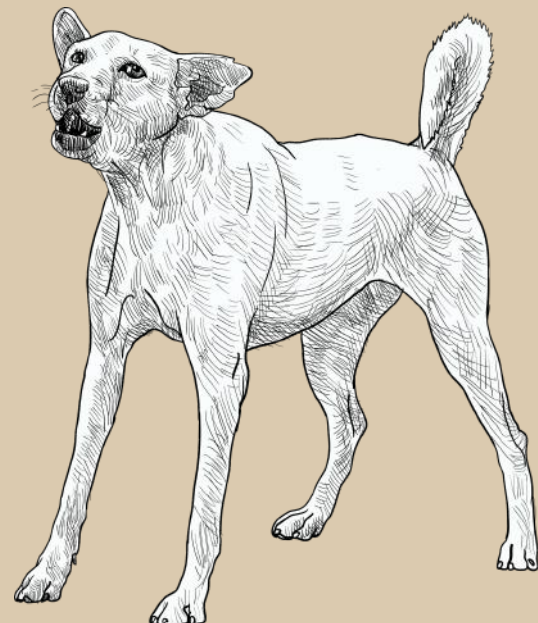


The Ending



by Flossie Hedges

Flossie Hedges (she/her) is a writer, visual artist, and teacher living in the woods of McKee, KY. She works at a small college that serves the Appalachian region. Her most recent writing can be read in *EcoTheo Review*, *The Fourth River*, and *Fruitslice*.



The Ending

The fourteenth hour of this day,
I remember that it ends.

I have just put on my worst pajamas,
and a fingernail of moon has risen

high above our shared thicket.
When I notice it, I tell myself:

I can only be present for the cat,
whose claws scrape wildly at the door;

my bare feet picking up planter rust;
the dogs' echoing bellows

bouncing from hilltop to valley,
from gravel to bramble.

And all I know is that, like me,
the old cherry is growing knobs,

and they will spread with each rain,
a water rot settling on the trees.

It will blacken them.
They will be beaded with blight.

The big ones will sway
with the weight of new knuckles,

and sometime soon, the whole thing
will dusk. I remember.



Night and On the Terrace



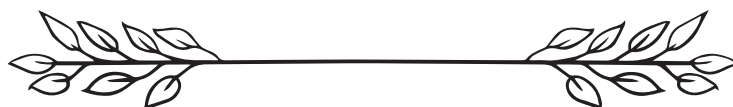
Two Poems
by Peycho Kanev

Peycho Kanev (he/him) is the author of 12 poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the USA, Europe and India. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as: *Rattle*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*.



Night

I feel like a ship in a bottle
of moonlight.
The rain has stopped.
I walk.
With a pleasantly
dizzy head.
Water pours into the gutters,
dragging yellow leaves.
The streets gleam
and smile.
Bats flit by,
scooters clatter.
Yellow taxis and a yellow moon.
I cut through the park.
I pluck a yellow flower and raise it
like a torch in the night—
Oh, hello!

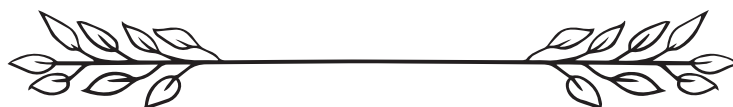


On the Terrace

Children chase each other down the street,
dogs run,
pigeons slice through the sky,
and evening surges in.

I'm thinking of my cat,
who died a week ago,
and she was so beautiful and delicate,
bright ginger like a burning fire,
with cold blue eyes.

There is nothing more irrevocable
than death—
I lower my hand down to stroke something
that is no longer there.

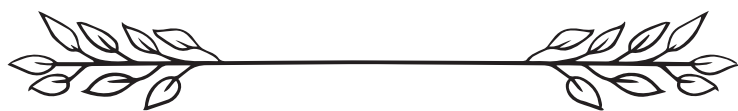


Stairs on trail in orange
grove Cinque Terra Italy



Photography by Michael Roberts

rushda between somewhere



by Kenneth Kesner (肯内思)

Kenneth Kesner (肯内思) splits his time between the Caucasus and South East Asia. His pronouns are he/his.



rushda between somewhere

on a day like tomorrow
she'll tell of everywhere and forever
pressing flowers into pages

must remember a dream not paradise
she's spoken within

and who'll hear

draw her words then realize
nothing disappears
just more or less never lost

taken by the hand i feel numb

can't touch the smile that hurts
unsaid grace at the fingertips

it's a certain reflection we say
scripted in relief
burnt at the edges and alone
like once forgotten again

watch the candles some believe in
but the hues
live in arcs of a yesterday sun

someday shadows that wonder

where our distances will lead us
from here



Blue-Green Ghazal,
Elegy To My Brother's
Side of the Sink,
and
Kentucky is a Teenage Girl



Three Poems

by Esme Morris

2025-2026 Kentucky Youth Poet Laureate

Esme Morris served as Kentucky's 2025-26 Youth Poet Laureate. She is a junior at Lafayette High School in the SCAPA Literary Arts program. She is a proud recipient of multiple awards from the Scholastic competition, including a national silver medal for poetry. Over the summer, Esme attended the Governor's School for the Arts in Creative Writing. Beyond her love for writing, she is a captain of her school's Speech and Debate Team as well as an officer for Lafayette's Thespians Honor Society troupe. Outside of school, Esme has been a competitive Irish dancer for nearly a decade. She is often found around Lexington with a sweet treat, letting the beauty of her home inspire her writing!



Blue-Green Ghazal

I wet my fingertips, push back my cow licks, close my two eyes.
The same way I did during first grade, back when I had blue eyes.

We visit my brother in Sweden. Now he's floating along Paris and Prague.
Max never stays in one place for long. Foreign to the Appalachian-hued eyes.

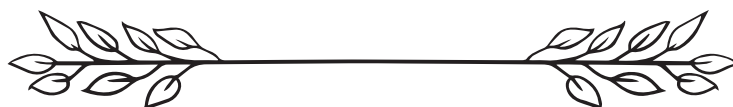
Bluegrass hymns (want to dance with me)? But the mountains haven't sung since May.
Maybe I'll stitch them back together. Pin the needle through 75—Bird-view's eye.

We're all half-assing it at dance, and my feet stick to the floor—gum in between my toes.
Chasing the rhythms we once understood. Competition sparkles under the judge's cruel eye.

If a Carolina or Chicago calls my name, will I flee from Kentucky?
I dread the day I'll clean out my childhood room, a new "I."

My hair grows curlier. I'm looking more like Dad. "You'll still text us?"
They ask. I'm five again. A pirate. Halloween soon. "Aye."

There's a family picture: Mom, Dad, Max, and me. Soon, I realize
I look the same as I used to, but only when I close my two green eyes.



Elegy to My Brother's Side of the Sink

House Cleaning Day was always the terror
Awaiting us every month
Mom awakes at six sharp
With her league of clean pop music
And “back in the day” Sturgill Simpson

My curled fist always lost to my brother's flat hand
In tense rounds of rock-paper-scissors
So, I was stuck scrubbing the toilet,
And peeling hair out of the shower
Cleaning out the grime inevitably collected
In a bathroom shared by two teenagers

But I refused
To touch my brother's side of the sink

I didn't want to see what horrors lay beneath the shaving cream he's had since seventh grade
Or clear up his drain that makes used-car noises similar to dad's twelve-year-old Honda

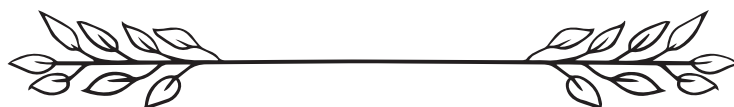
I longed for the day
He would pack up all that crap into a suitcase
And give me a perfect, boy-free bathroom
All to myself

The curious thing, however, is that when he moved out of the house
I couldn't find myself spreading my hair products and facial cleansers across the sink
Like I always said I would once he started college
I kept them crammed on my side,
Leaving the counter half-empty

Gone were the array of acne treatments,
Or a men's razor propped up against the faucet
I didn't think I would miss something so annoying
And I never thought I'd be whining over half of a fake marble countertop

But here I am

Holding back tears every time I glance at his now-empty side of the sink
And wishing
He never left at all



Kentucky is a Teenage Girl

Green eyes stained bourbon brown
Curly hair buried between each blade of bluegrass
She accepts mascara-lined judgment.
A girl I could only hope to be.

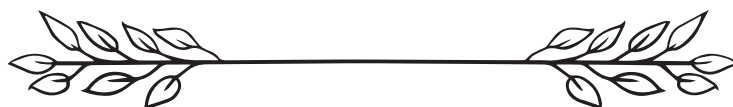
Whenever I feel my “you”s and “all”s blend together
I sneer at Kentucky from across the cafeteria.
For a few days, I leave all her texts on Read
But I always, eventually, respond.

Her depth hides within mountain ranges,
While I still point and laugh

Because every teenage girl learns contradiction
Tangled between buckeyes and butternuts;
She is caught between warring cliques
In a melodramatic bid for homecoming court.

Divided and layered
Looked down upon and talked over
Geeky and gossipy
Open-mouthed and free:
Maybe we are all teenage girls.

Kentucky, why don't you come over tonight?
We could put on a movie and just talk.



Red or White, D?



by Kayli Perkins

Kayli H Perkins (she/her) is a fiction and poetry writer from Eastern Kentucky. She is currently pursuing her MFA with Bluegrass Writer's Studio at Eastern Kentucky University.



Red or White, D?

I met Dionysus at a dive bar off Route 66.

He sat alone before a glass of ambrosia,
shoulders stooped and heavy.

Lost in his thoughts or lost in his drink,
he didn't hear me approach.

Vinyl sticking to my legs,
a glass of red appeared before me.

We didn't talk, just sat in silence
and listened to the revelry around us.

It was someone's birthday,
someone's promotion
someone's celebration.

But never his.

Oh, god of wine and debauchery,
god of ecstasy and insanity,
who celebrates for you?

Who pours your glass of favored red?
Or do you prefer white?

Come away with me, Dionysus,
we'll have a celebration of our own.



Exodus



by Lilly Purdy

Lilly Purdy (she/her) is a Boston native pursuing a BFA in creative writing at UNC Wilmington in North Carolina. Though interested in many genres, she primarily works in poetry and her writing focuses on combining experimental forms with themes of nature, femininity, and spirituality.



Exodus

We have become like the shrines: abandoned,
carrying echoes in our trembling chests.

We followed maps that we have long outgrown
and now our compasses spin to no end.

Some days, the sky feels heavier than light.
Some days, we wish to return to dust but

we walk still towards a nameless horizon.

There's holy water coating our foreheads,
scripture stitched beneath the ink in our skin;
we'll call it purpose as it trickles out.

Fierce and soft, it will draw each of us in—
canon law, made by the thump of our pulse.

We'll rise again, devout only to ourselves,
marked not by love but by its holy ghost.



Sour



by Samantha Ratcliffe

Samantha Renee Ratcliffe (she/they) is a queer Appalachian poet and songwriter from Kentucky working on her MFA at the University of Kentucky. Her work appears in *Yearling*, *Pegasus*, *White Wall Review*, *Untelling*, among others. Find out more about her writing community and reading series Hill Writers Collective at SamanthaRatcliffe.com



Sour

All of what I've left rotting
cold in my fridge, pushed aside in my mind.
The month old pasta
The pizza I baked and ate only the one slice
The milk, the eggs, the bread and cheese
Somehow I'm always practicing forgetting.

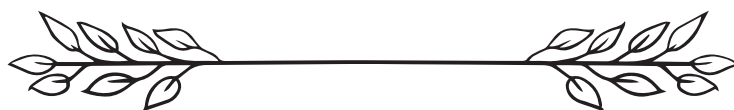
The crying salad's wilt, the open mouth
of an abandoned can. All the unclaimed
half water bottles waiting on me,
waning like kitchen staff for my arrival.
One hot bulb illuminates
the ground on which I stand, points
me out as the one deserving of this
shame. I've stood here

when I could have acted.
I've tossed around the days
of my little life while
the world waited with need
for me.

Little hands prayed to eat.
I came back again and again
to this church kitchen.
Catalog of spices. Choir of half
empty cereal boxes.

This colorful hollow worship, full
of sin. This poison valley of syrup
and heavy metals.

The aspartame American dream.
Even this poem, a waste of verbs.
Even this poet, souring.



O r c h a r d



P h o t o g r a p h y b y A l l e n B l a i r

Magic Ink



by Shayla Ring

Shayla was recently reminded that she was, at her core, a writer and storyteller. After spending time at Winter Burrow at Hindman Settlement School, she is on an adventure to reconnect herself and her words.



Magic Ink

Two umbilical cords
Two sets of ultrasound pictures
Three positive pregnancy tests

Tucked into a cardboard butterfly box my mom gave me for mother's day
Your tiny hands have opened that box over and over
Laid out the treasures of motherhood when it was just your mementos

Now you look at your baby sisters treasures and try to determine which belly button is yours

Two umbilical cords
Two sets of ultrasound pictures
Three positive pregnancy tests

"This one was mine
This one was my sister
What about this one?"

It catches in my throat that this is all I have of the baby that will never be
Magic Ink to remind me that you were here, our baby that slipped away like a pearl in the ocean

Your soft pink hands fold into mine as we tuck everything back into its safe place
Protects your tender heart from the sinking that will come when you read this and see the white roses by our lamp post

Two umbilical cords
Two sets of ultrasound pictures
Three positive pregnancy tests

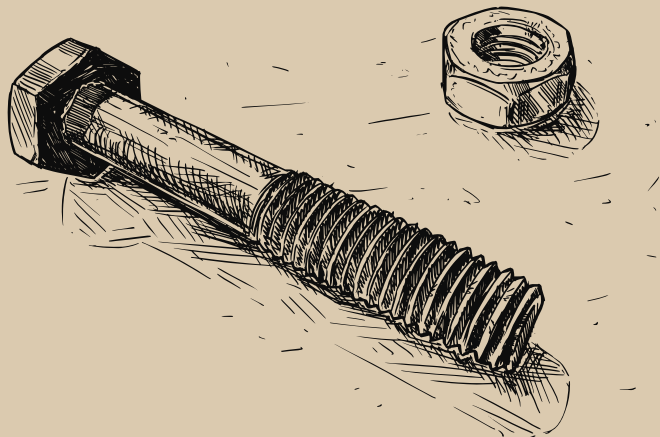


Made



by S. Gayle

S.Gayle is a debut author and poet who has been afflicted with writing from a young age. While their work is mostly known currently just by their partner, S.Gayle won a National Speech and Debate silver medal in Original Spoken Word Poetry for their piece “Religion of Humanity” in 2022.



Made

Someone took my batteries out and put them back in wrong,
stuffed them in an empty tin can,
shaking and shaking the lemon-lime remnants to hear the hollow sound it makes.
Like, the parts are all there,
metal and acid and chemicals and whatever else makes me human,
makes me work right,
but it's missing the connection,
There's no voltage, no flow.
Someone forgot the wires—
where are the wires?
The wires that light up my eyes,
make my fingers move right,
the wires that power the sensors,
the sensors that say "full" and "more" and "hungry" and "kiss me" and "I love you" and
"somethings wrong" and "nothing feels real right now"
This machine
this, thing you've stuffed me in.
It doesn't work right.
Something's wrong with it.
I want a refund.
I want my trust back, my heart back.
my lungs, my eyes, and my hands
I want to feel again
I want to be real.



frequency esc. key



Digital Art by A. Morgan McKendry

Night's Spine



by Erica Royse

Erica Royse is a single mother of two wonderful teenage men who are her world. She resides in Mount Sterling along with her children.



Night's Spine

I keep slipping a slow slide down
the spine of night,
where my thoughts are knives,
and my name is only an echo
bounced off the cathedral
stones of a skull.

There is a hunger in me that
learned to call itself truth,
whispering that I am a room with
every light gone,
that the mirrors inside me only
show what's been eaten.

I press my palms to my ribs and
feel the hollow there,
an old cathedral bell whose toll
forgot what welcomes sound
like.

Once, maybe, a hand carved a
promise into me; now the chisel
is blunt,
and every vow I loved has turned
to the cold iron of a latch.
I want the brain to speak a
different gospel—
to say I am loved and mean it,
not as a rumor but as weather,
a rain that does not pass without
leaving the world softer.

Instead, my mind rehearses a
litany of nots: not good enough,
not worthy, not wanted—
syllables that grow teeth.
Sometimes I imagine slicing off
the bright places—the small,
tender maps—
and setting them loose like
offerings into the dark,
feeding the shadows because
they are the only congregation
that stays.
The shadows do not argue. They
do not leave.
They take, cold and solemn, and
in return they give me silence.

But even silence can be a mirror
if you hold it carefully;
it throws back the shape of a
hand and a pulse and the
stubborn fact of breath.
There is a stubborn, ridiculous
thing inside me—a moth or a
joke—
that keeps circling the candle
even when the wind is a verdict.
I will keep writing these barbed
prayers in the margins of my
nights,

naming the bruise, naming the
hunger, naming the small fierce
hope:
that some kind voice will say my
name so often it becomes true.

So let the shadows have their
yearnings; let them take what
they will.

I will keep the ache and the
wanting and the ridiculous
candle,
and I will learn—slowly, with the
clumsy patience of ruined things—
that being loved can be
something a mind is taught, not
a verdict.

Tonight I fold my broken vows
like paper boats and set them on
black water,
and I whisper to whatever listens
that I will not be unmade entirely—
that even the night, for all its
teeth, cannot swallow the whole
of me.

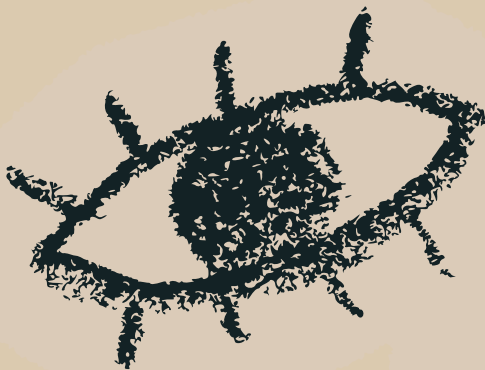


My Eyes Are Scalpels



by Elle J. Snyder

Elle J. Snyder (she/her) is a trans woman, poet, and part-time phantom from Staten Island. She's done a buncha stuff, who cares? She is also aggressively seeking a sponsorship from Mountain Dew. Pixelfed: [ourladyofpoetics](#) Instagram: [@ourladyofpoetics](#)



My Eyes Are Scalpels

a cure for my body,
a cold slab in every reflection,

I'm curing death.
But people look at you funny
when you're midway between
rotten
and divine.

My monstrous face,
my monstrous everything,
is wet
and dead still
in the hands of
the peasant mob.

Their eyes are pitchforks—
in a way,
they want to cure my body too



Upon Learning That Mushrooms Use a Fungal Network to Sustain the Trees



by Danielle Valenilla

Danielle Valenilla is a Latine poet and memoirist in Kentucky whose work explores healing, memory, and identity. Her writing was recently featured at the BLEND 2025 exhibit at The Lyric Theatre and Cultural Arts Center as a finalist in the HISTORIAS LATINAS DE LEXINGTON Concurso de Arte.



Upon Learning That Mushrooms Use a Fungal Network to Sustain the Trees

The problem was that I was a fungus amongst generational giants.
I was intended to work underground and not in the sunlight.
My spirit yearns to turn tragedy into mycelium and rot into rebirth,
but disconnected from the fungal network I felt only like a tree being siphoned for sap,
violated and purging with thick, dripping sweetness against my will.
Yet when I understood that I was not put here to be a tree,
to withstand and weather the years with a sturdy bark and unmovable roots,
I embraced my vibrant pulse instead, listening to the asks
and consenting to their sustainability, moving to and away from the calls for help.
I was never meant to do fungal work while trying to create oxygen for others standing still.
I am umami and psychedelic ego death and the umbrella for fairies.
I may not be pretty or last for too long in one place,
but I am a good mushroom and the world needs me to be who I am.

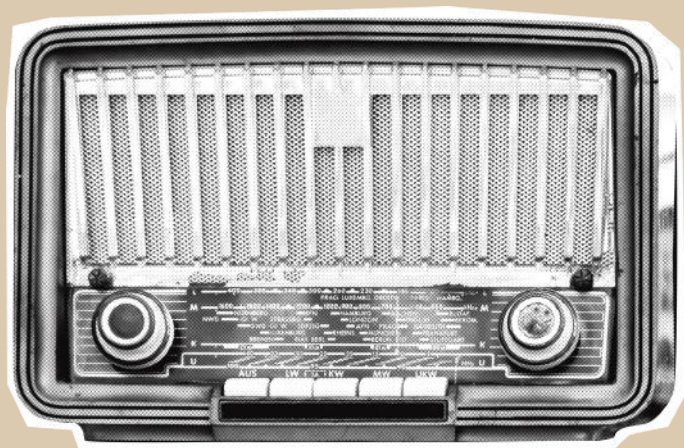


Cistern in the woods and Tradio (and other childhood artifacts)



Two Poems
by Sarah Watkins

An Arkansas native, **Sarah Watkins** is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has recently been featured in many publications, including *Menagerie*, *Pine Hills Review*, and *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Instagram: @sarahwatkinspoetry



Cistern in the woods

I am still trying to figure out how to write about the bloated armadillo floating in the stagnant-water cistern. That was the same day I found that caramel-colored Mrs. Buttersworth just down the hill, mold-stained grandmother's face like a wave hello from the naked woods while they trudged in front of me laughing with their heads tilted back to the gray mud-water sky. I clutched old Buttersworth like a security blanket and kept stumbling into briars. They speculated Mrs. Buttersworth was worth some money—this old place had been a train station, didn't I know, back before the war made it an air base—and then I saw the cistern emerging from the ridge like a rotting horn, orange gears hanging from its sides, haggard and half-gone. They thought it might have been for manufacturing before the forest had made soup out of some man's livelihood. But he took something back: I saw it—like a man's crooked greening finger pointing at me, little face down, skin bleached human pink—then Mrs. Buttersworth's warm face, in four large pieces on the dark concrete.



Tradio (and other childhood artifacts)

My grandmother read our horoscopes as we listened to tradio and the ten o'clock news: a search for a lost mutt named Bo, a shooting downtown, the need for a hay-baler and a twin-size mattress, a suspect at large, all delivered straight through the man's nasal cavity. From the same newspaper, I gathered from Abby what pornographic meant—dreams of larger chests and wider loins, needy hands and wanting eyes, all the goings and comings falling wide-grinned in my eight-year-old lap and forming the faces of the men and women with sharp fettling knives. I took clippings for construction paper collages, sun-bleached ads of deer staring straight ahead into rifle scopes and the aftermath on the third page: young gap-toothed boys holding yearlings by fresh spikes. I think we were all carrying on our fathers' traditions, with hushed voices and hunched shoulders, trying on the dusty pelts they'd told us not to touch yet, quieted when the weight dropped us to the floor, even quieter when we found we did not want to get up.

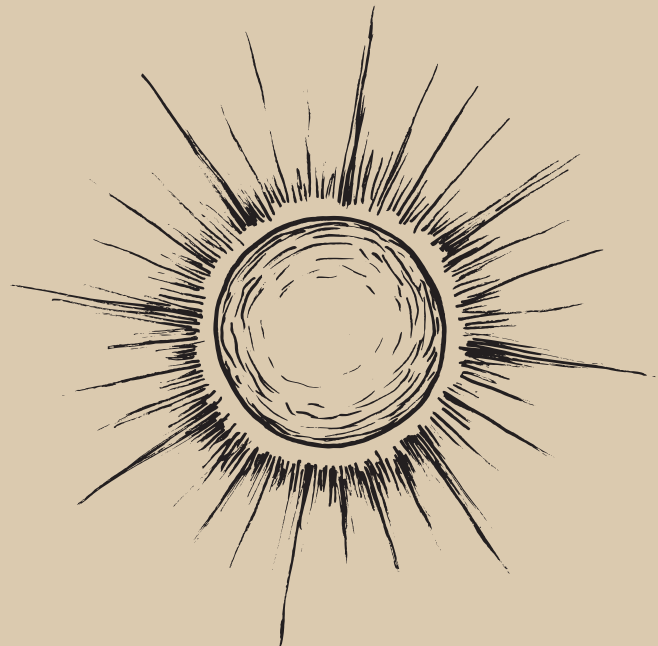


The New Species



by david woodward

david woodward aka un-known lives just south of Montreal with his wife and son. he was once a field biologist. he has banded thousands of birds, including The Common Grackle. Their penetrating, yellow eyes always freaked him out, in a good way. Yes, common is a crappy name.



before you absorbed realized understood completed

ate sun

coloured the contours

once gray.



Sentimental animosity



by Kamil Zaskowski

Kamil Zaskowski was born in Poland and currently resides in the United Kingdom. He has published three collections of poetry and a book of prose in his native language, as well as in English-language magazine *Chainmail Poetry*.



Sentimental animosity

It is a pity the year cannot begin in spring
when it edges winter's river-mouth

and gathers sunbeams from morning mists,
when cold shifts hue,

leaves warm footprints in melting clouds.
When winter's silver frost gives way

to swirling shoots,
gilded and serpentine with pollen-gold.

When the sun slips past the windows frames'
tight symmetry,

and paints bright islands across the floor map.
It is a pity the year cannot begin in spring.





Poetry

Barnett

Blair

Bloodswan

Clark

Crouch

Delea

Hedges

Kanev

Kesner

Morris

Perkins

Purdy

Ratcliffe

Ring

Romero

Royse

Snyder

Vilanella

Watkins

woodward

Zaszkowski

Creative Nonfiction

Medeiros

Smith

Fiction

Hill

Kang

Perkins

Salter

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Thomson

Visual Art

Blair

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Ferguson

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Published by
Gateway Regional Arts Center
101 East Main Street
Mt. Sterling, Kentucky
grackentucky.org

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