



YWVA

**The Oklahoma Council of
Teachers of English
Young Writers Anthology
2024
Grades 9-12**



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

2024

**Young Writers Anthology
Grades 9-12**

By Students of Oklahoma



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

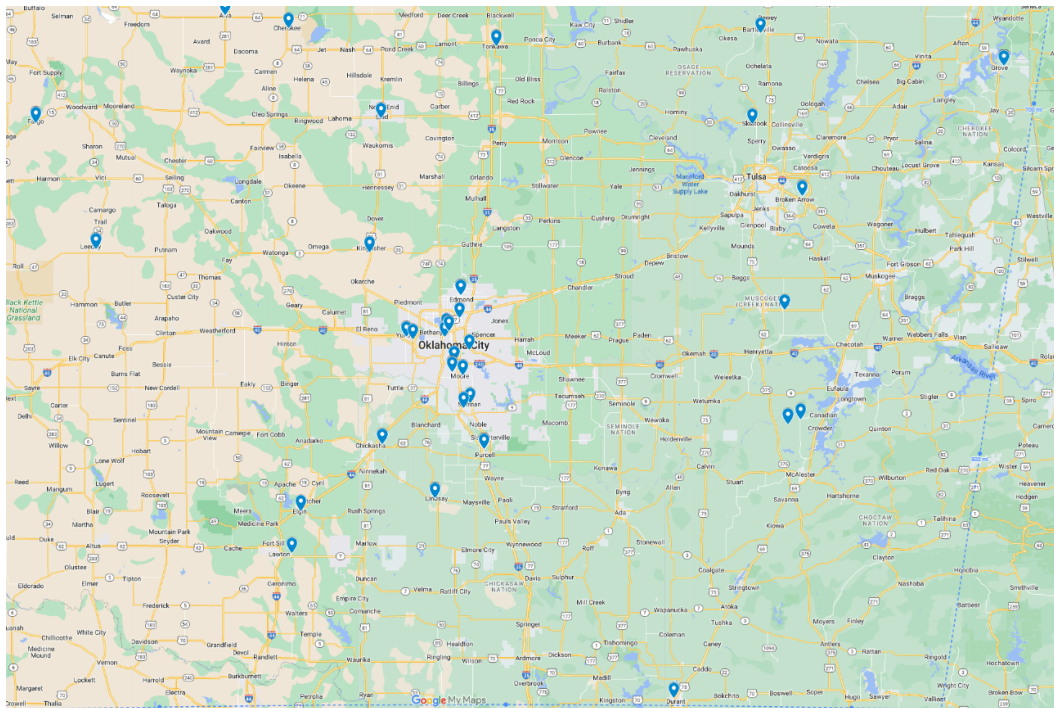
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The Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

About the Anthology

This anthology contains the winning works submitted for the annual Oklahoma Young Writers Contest, sponsored by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English.

We received nearly 500 entries with the support of nearly 60 educators across the state of Oklahoma.



The winners, ranging from grades 9-12, submitted works for short story, personal narrative, comic, poetry, descriptive paragraph, and expository essay. To the writers included in this year's anthology, *Congratulations on this prestigious achievement!*

Submission Policy & Review Process

The Young Writers Anthology welcomes submissions from any student grades 9-12 in Oklahoma between November and January via online submission form. Teachers submit work on behalf of the students

verifying they have read the work, have parent permission to enter the work for publication, and that the work is original. What is submitted must be a "final" copy as we will not make requests for revisions. From January to March, the review board judges each entry using the same rubric developed by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English. Each piece is reviewed by multiple members of the review boards. During March, the editorial and layout teamwork to copy edit and create the anthology. All writers are notified in late March through teacher contact as to the status of their entry. Anthology writers will receive a certificate of congratulations at the OKCTE April gathering.

Editorial Policy

The Young Writers Anthology editorial staff reserves the right to edit minor errors such as grammatical and spelling issues.

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DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH

River Burn

Abbygail Howard

I stepped closer to the edge of the cliff, the harsh, chilling wind encouraging me forward. I could hear the waves crashing against the face of the bluff, the water slowly eroding it piece by piece. Looking down at the inky black water, the only thing I could make out was the movement of the waves and swiftness of the current. I leapt away from the cliff, gravity immediately took its hold and threw me toward the earth. I looked around and saw as the sky seemed to melt into the trees and the world seemed to crumble. I crashed into the water, the waves rushed to submerge me under its obsidian surface. I felt the gentle sway of the water take my limbs and move them as it pleased. I opened my eyes and looked up at a kaleidoscope version of the world I had once been a part of. The air fought its way out of my lungs, eager to leave the watery hell I had brought it to. With every breath I sank farther and farther away from the surface, a burn emerged in my chest. The heat grew as intense as a wildfire. I screamed into the water, attempting to douse the growing flame. The water, sensing a new crevice to hide in, quickly found its place in my lungs. My eyelids grew heavy...

My Old Home

Isabelle Schindler

I remember the home I used to live in a long time ago. The brick walls were covered with dirt and grass from my father mowing the other day. The living room always smelled of honey and vanilla from my mother always baking. Our old leather couch on the right side was my favorite piece of furniture. It had rips in it from the cat scratching on it. I would always make a fort with cushions and pretend I was in my fantasy world. The gray carpet where I would eat my breakfast and watch TV. The feel of the carpet always gave me shivers that would travel down my spine. The kitchen is where I would always get a glass of orange juice or beg my mom to let me have ice cream. In our other living room, I would play on my Wii with my older sister, who would make sure I was the second player and not the first player. The old box TV where I would put my arm near and my arm hair would rise from the static. My room was always a mess and I would refuse to clean it. It was just the way I liked it. I had a pink doll house and my box TV as well. My sister's room was also a mess, but I always wanted her room. We had a large backyard where I would play tag with my friends. I miss my old home.

Freedom

Elijah Smith

When I stepped up on the mountain top I could feel the breeze through my hair. I could feel it floating in the wind. The smell was clear and refreshing, somewhat resembling the ocean. And as I stretched my arms out I could feel the breeze warping around my arms to give me the space I needed. No place has ever felt so free. No place has ever felt so blue as when the sky meets the glistening water you can see the shades of blue shifting together, as the clouds are forming different shapes. Some I can make stuff from and others are just like abstract art. I see dolphins jumping out of the water, pelicans diving for food, and the ripples on the water as all the fish swim right under the surface of the water. I see birds migrating across the sky in dozens of different formations. As the sun is going down I see the orange from the sunset as the sky turns purple and black like many different colors were melted together. The cliffside was so high it felt as if I was almost flying. But most of all this mountain makes me feel like a bird out of its cage. I felt free.

The Duck Blind

Avery Petty

As I walk out the door early in the morning, I feel the cold air hit my face and the crunch of snow underneath my boots. The snow covers the ground, the earth is blanketed white, there isn't a sound -- not a car passing on the highway, not a dog barking. The only sound is the truck running. As we get out and unload all the stuff, the snow falls off the decoys. We begin the short walk that seems like we will never get there because all you can see is the white powdery snow that no one has touched. We get to the pond bank. With every splash of the mallard decoys it gets closer to Go Time. As the beautiful morning sunrise comes up with all the different colors purple, pink and even an orange, everything is so perfect as I close my eyes and listen to the sound of the train horn in the distance, the sound of the jet going by hundreds of miles up, the sound of cows mooing, the sound of gunshots in the distance. All of the sudden wing beats and a splash and then the sound of a mallard drake feed chuckling and then a click of the safety turning off, the sound of blind doors opening. It's time: BOOM!!! The first shot rings out, one mallard, on to the next: BOOM!!! The sound of ducks hitting the water with a splash is oh so satisfying.

The Shell

Addyson Harmon

From sea water comes a severed piece of the ocean's ecosystem—a shell steals the sunlight, drawing all the absent attention upon itself. An immense grey twists around its broken body, which is cracked and chiseled and battered in its beauty. The serrated sides of asymmetrical oddity could slice open a pinky finger. The body of the shell is a wave, so organic that it puts geometric shapes to shame. Lines parallel the inner pillar of the shell, a model for the spiral that is the exterior. This unique display captivates one's attention with a curious seaweed scent and senseless holes that form a language of their own, a language of intense love and passionate artistry from the Creator's hand. No matter how carefully one inspects the shell, no linguist could possibly make sense of it, but perhaps the fantasticness of it is the ambiguity. It seems rather impossible to imagine such a treasure could have ever been home to a living creature—the shell seems too individual to hold another more important being. There is a chance that it never did, which seems easier to think about than there being some homeless crustation roaming about because of human interest in the pretty, damaged shell. Simple is not the word for this glorious artwork—it is complex and riveting in its coarseness and design. One could take it home and write about it.

Red Hills

Tara Lee

Pushing through the door, stepping out into the night, the crickets chirped their melancholic tunes as his walk quickened down the dirt road.

Run.

He wore all white, the dirt kicking up painted onto his trousers. ‘*Mom will be mad*’ he thought. The boys’s laughter erupted as they followed– he knew what was going to happen, damning himself for it. *Run!*

He tried to lose them, cutting down another path that led into the brush. The animals behind him quickened, *starving*.

He led them near the Red hills, the place where nobody bid to go. Fencing of an old barn house lined before him, *unexpected*.

He tried jumping over, his pant leg getting caught on the barbed wire. He cursed and quickly bent down to pull away, *no use*.

By the time he would have ripped away he knew the boys would already be there. He unbuttoned his pants to slip out but only fell backwards where their grips joined him on the ground, *savagely*.

They cackled, their howls roaring into the night, suffocating the cries of the boy beneath them. The animals ravished their hands to the flesh of his–painting the canvas of his clothes *red*.

The seven men, content of dogs, enjoyed their turns, stomping their mudded shoes to his bruise riddled body. They all suddenly stopped in unison.

The boy groaned, finally getting what he thought—*relief*.

That wasn’t the case.

The screech of metal against metal altered his head towards a boy with a rusted pipe. *Fence*.

Death's Door

Ian William Walker

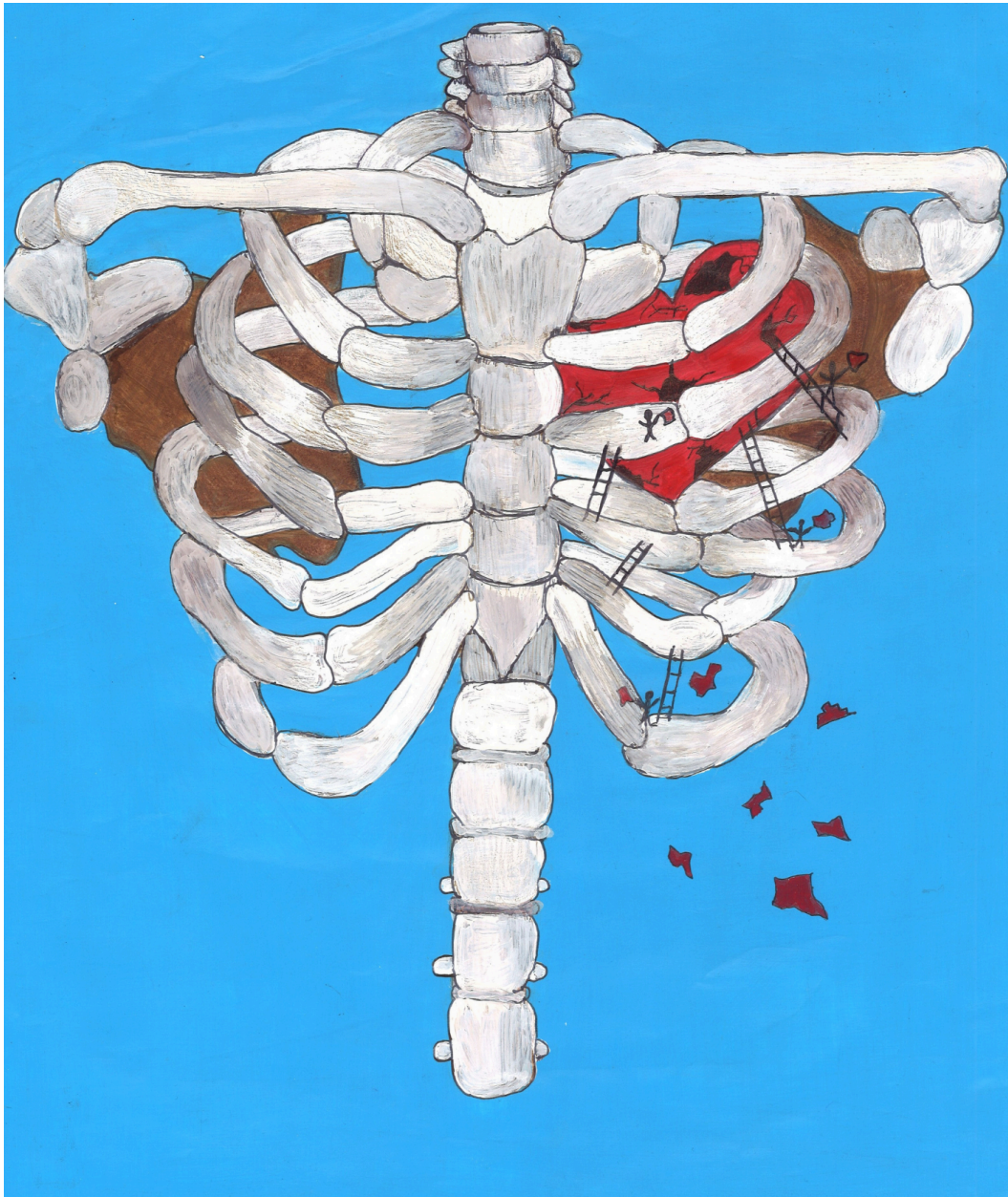
You open your eyes, and a blinding light fills your vision. A glowing swirl of cosmic everything lays ahead, it's monotonous and hypnotic motion beckoning you towards it like there's an invisible string tugging on your heart. Behind you, a void that can only be described as beyond black extends forever -- Its murky uncertainty contrasted by the absolute finality of the celestial tunnel. The silence surrounds you and the overwhelming nothing roars and pounds against your ears until a soft velvety blanket is cast over your soul as the flowing radiance ahead fully catches you in its stream and tells you everything is ok. All trepidation is drawn from you and every muscle relaxes as the heat is sapped from your skin.

Suddenly, electricity surges from every tip of your body. It rages through you, from your feet to your heart. Almost as an act of defiance, every feeling, emotion, and memory floods back into your brain. You grow hot in the face as your frantic heartbeat fills the silence and the overwhelming nothing speaks to you. As you stare into the murky void, you realize your vision has never been clearer. You tug on the string bound to your heart, defying the natural flow around you as you heave your body towards the darkness from which you emerged. The darkness that is your home.

Family Basketball

Gracie Santine

The cool autumn breeze blows through the window moving the curtains swiftly. Kool-aid was on the counter and pizza was in the oven. It made the house smell like heaven . Five kids run outside, one parent sits inside. The second parent is outside, too, playing with the kids under the brightly lit moon. The corner house light switches on, as soon as the sun goes down. Although the moon's bright light was plenty, this light made it easy to see almost everything. Basketballs bouncing and the sound of the net swooshing; these were all sounds of that autumn night. Laughing and crying; this moment seemed almost euphoric. We made each other stronger and these moments only made us grow closer. Family basketball felt complete, with the graveled dirt beneath our feet. The cool, thin air pierced our lungs but all the hurt was worth the fun. Skinned knees from the gravel only left us with cool battle scars to show. Pizza was done and the table was set, the chairs just weren't filled yet. We begged to stay out longer, disregarding that school was in fact tomorrow. Instead we were shut down by the phrase, "There's always tomorrow." More of these days would come, but eventually come to an end. Family basketball was now a vivid memory, one that would sit on our hearts heavily. Every time I hear these noises, it reminds me of autumn nights and how family basketball was joyous.



INFORMATIONAL ESSAY

The Epidemic Known as Social Media

Simardeep Singh

As a teenager who is immersed in the digital age, I have closely witnessed the widespread incorporation of social media into the daily lives of adolescents. I have seen the negative effects of social media on my peers, such as self-harm, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and depression. These distressing effects are intricately connected to the challenges of social comparison and addiction to screens that teenagers frequently face through the use of social media.

The intense pressure that teenagers experience to look ideal online eventually leads to severe problems that impact their mental health. Two clinical therapists at Loma Linda University of Health stated that “comparing oneself to these distorted representations can lead to feelings of inadequacy, lowered self-esteem, and even body dysmorphia” (“The Impacts of Social Media on Youth Self-Image”). Influencers edit their bodies to fit the beauty standard which negatively impacts the way that adolescents view themselves, eventually leading to the development of body dysmorphia (“Social Media Use and Body Image Disorders”). Teens that struggle with body dysmorphia could eventually develop eating disorders (“Social Media Use and Body Image Disorders”). The intertwining influence of social media and pursuing a ‘perfect’ online image has significant effects on the well-being of teenagers.

Cyberbullying has detrimental effects on the mental health of many teenagers. A National Center for a Biotechnology Information study states that victims of cyberbullying struggle with depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and intentions, and low self-esteem (“Anxiety, Depression, Self-Esteem, Internet Addiction and Predictors of Cyberbullying and Cybervictimization Among Female Nursing University Students: A Cross Sectional Study”). Social behavior is impacted by cyberbullying because adolescents begin to stop socializing with others due to trust issues and the anxiety caused by online bullying (“Effects of cyberbullying”). Young victims that struggle with their feelings face suicidal thoughts and engage in self-harm (“Effects of Cyberbullying”).

Cyberbullying can have negative consequences on the mental health of many adolescents.

Additionally, addiction to screen time and social media usage significantly affects the mental health of adolescents. A National Center for Biotechnology Information study states that “SMA (social media addiction) may affect users’ mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance” (“Risk Factors Associated with Social Media Addiction: An Exploratory Study”). Many teens also prioritize social media over their sleep which eventually impacts their mental health by causing depression, stress, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating (“Effects of Social Media Addiction”). A study proved that two-thirds of adolescents don’t get the recommended amount of sleep which can create insomnia and poor academic performance (“The Association Between Self-Reported Screen Time, Social Media Addiction, and Sleep Among Norwegian University Students”). The common problem of teenagers overusing social media has detrimental effects on their well-being.

The connection between social media influence on adolescent mental health highlights the critical need to address the issues of social comparison, cyberbullying, and screen time addiction that teenagers face online frequently. As a teenager who has witnessed others experience the dreadful effects of these challenges, it is crucial for social media to transform into a space that prioritizes the mental health and well-being of adolescents.

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Autistic Women Have Always Been Here

Ella Inman

While there is no real way to know, it is estimated that one out of every four autistic children is never diagnosed. Since the official discovery of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) in 1943, that statistic has been worse for women and girls like myself. Whether the inequality presented is the lack of representation or incorrect diagnoses, the fact remains that we have had to fight to be acknowledged like our male autistic counterparts. It took me years to get diagnosed, and I am considered lucky. The gaps afforded by those biases lead to serious problems: the differences in autism presentation between sexes is severely understudied and women with ASD are underrepresented.

There are vast differences between how autism presents in people of different ages, backgrounds, and especially sexes. The estimated gender diagnosis gap is over four to one (Rivet and Matson). According to a study published in *Biological Psychiatry*, an equal number of boys and girls showed symptoms of ASD ("Research Brief: Researchers Discover Solutions to Gender Bias in Autism Diagnoses"). Throughout the history of autism, the criteria for diagnosis have been formed by little boys, making it more difficult for anyone outside that subsection to get the resources they need. Many researchers are postulating as to why such a large sex diagnosis disparity exists. "[Developmental disorder researchers] Koenig and Tsatsanis pointed out that gender differences in presentation have not been sufficiently addressed in studies of key instruments used in the field such as the ADI (Autism Diagnostic Interview), ADI-Revised (ADI-R) and ADOS (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule)." (Rivet and Matson). Not only were boys more likely to be properly diagnosed when autism was first recognized, but the problem persists today. Not enough of those studying ASD take into account the differences between the ways boys and girls display their traits. Autism presentation varies from individual to individual and is even greater between sexes; it is important to include larger and more diverse samples for studies.

Contrary to popular belief, the ratio of girls and boys with autism is almost one to one. Even though some studies might suggest a larger gap between the number of men and women that have autism, research shows they are flawed “‘Conventional wisdom has been that more boys than girls have ASD,’ said study lead author Casey Burrows, Ph.D., L.P., an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota Medical School and a psychologist with M Health Fairview. ‘Our research shows that girls and boys show similar rates of concerns for ASD.’” (“Research Brief: Researchers Discover Solutions to Gender Bias in Autism Diagnoses”). Even though some studies might suggest that autism is less common in girls and women, the reality is there is a lack of knowledge and understanding. Women and girls function differently from their male peers; the same is true for their autistic counterparts. Some frequent problems that many women who are aspiring to get diagnosed are autism assessment and diagnostic tools are less sensitive to autistic traits more commonly found in women and girls, autism started as an ‘extreme male brain’ theory, and women are more likely to mask and are typically better at it (“Autistic Women and Girls”). Autism in women is much harder to detect for a multitude of reasons, many of which include behavioral traits. Women are typically better at handling social situations, and the same can be said about autistic women. Many women and girls diagnosed with autism mask, or hide and repress, their feelings or traits, typically because of outside and or social pressures. Boys have been studied more thoroughly than girls in terms of autism, and the varying traits between both further reinforce the commonly seen ratio of 4:1 diagnosis rate.

Autism presents quite differently between men and women, and contrary to popular belief, the ratio of autistic men to women is almost 1:1. It is important to recognize and understand the differences of autism in men and women to get those who need it the most accurate care possible. Autism is something that affects a lot of people, including myself. Even though autism is fairly common, the amount and quality of research on it suggests otherwise.

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Why Can't Superman be Black?

Mason Prince

As a young boy, filmmaking has always been a dream of mine. As one of the greatest art forms of modern society, film has a tremendous impact across several cultures and facets of society. From superhero epics to poignant dramas, the beauty of film has made a lasting impression on our world. Much like all great art, viewers wish to relate their experiences to it. However, this is not as easy for everyone, especially for minorities like myself. While watching some of my favorite films, it has become apparent that I cannot see myself in any of them.

When I was a child, I remember wearing a Superman t-shirt, running around the house saying I wanted to be Superman. My dad pulled me aside and said, "You can't be Superman, because he's not Black." *Well why not?* I thought. Why do famous superheroes like Spider-Man and Superman *have* to be white?

As an aspiring filmmaker, it is also quite discouraging to not see very many people like myself in the industry. White males make up around 73 percent of film producers and directors in the industry, while only 7.34 percent are Black. Even if a Black film is produced, the likelihood of it being successful among the general population is slim. Filmmaker, Rod Lurie, a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science stated that the vast majority of Academy members--which are mainly elder white males--"will watch movies that deal with the heroism of the African American community or the history of Blacks" (Harwell and Pizzello). However, they have no interest in films that deal with modern Black issues or films that merely contain a Black person, even though we too, very well exist in the world. Black people should not merely be characterized for the purpose of their skin tone. Our history and our struggle are not cash-grabs for filmmaking moguls. Black creators should be allowed the opportunity to create stories that contain Black people because we're people too.

The modern film industry struggles with diversity in their films in the first place, and when Black characters are present, they are often

portrayed in dehumanizing, stereotypical ways. Additionally, racial inequity continues to be fed by the way minorities only appear in films about race. Black people are often only seen on film in race-specific films (“Why We Need to Tackle Racial Inequality in TV and Film”). Films that require Black people to be present, such as pictures like *Selma* or *12 Years a Slave*, are undoubtedly going to feature them. These films reinforce the notion that Black people are only necessary because of their race, further dehumanizing African Americans. Why can Blacks not be featured in leading roles in films such as *Top Gun*? Is that so implausible?

Furthermore, many Black actors do not get the opportunity to express their talents unless one of the producers is Black (Dunn). “Unless at least one senior member of production is Black, Black talent is largely shut out of those critical roles, offering fewer opportunities for Black people to be represented (Dunn). A strikingly low 8% of US-produced films have a Black director (Dunn). The lack of directors willing to cast minority actors in pivotal roles is a serious problem and a major contributor to the lack of representation in movies (Dunn). Another factor contributing to the underrepresentation of Black artists is the small number of Black professionals in executive positions (Dunn). “87 percent of TV executives are white and 92 percent of film executives are white” (Dunn). The lack of Black people in executive positions in the industry leads to the lack of Black actors and directors represented in film.

As Hollywood continues to perpetuate racism and social prejudice in their films, the margin of representation continues to decrease. Black artists are dehumanized when represented in films that welcome stereotypes or belittle culture. People of color will forever seek to see themselves on the silver screen, and as an aspiring filmmaker, I am a firm believer that Superman CAN be Black.

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Online vs. In-Person Learning

Leah Thompson

When it comes to current education, there are two main options: online/homeschool and in-person learning. An USCB data study showed that of all school-age children in 2022, 86.58% were public schooled and 5.22% participated in online or homeschooling. Although they are similar in lots of ways, online/homeschool learning allows for more flexible schedules, parental involvement, and personal programming. These things are increasingly important to a student's social and educational journey.

First of all, online students can plan study time around the rest of their day, instead of the other way around. In public schools, your schedule is based on what classes are available at what time. It can be difficult to get all of your desired courses into your busy day. Online students, however, can work at their convenience, making more time for extracurricular activities, and sports. You don't have to rearrange your schedules based on school and school activities. "You can complete your coursework at a rate of time most convenient for you. This also benefits more for people with full time jobs or other commitments that would prevent them from going to the classroom during the day" (Bartleby).

Online learning also allows for more parental involvement. Parents can be motivators for their children to work hard. It can help develop a certain respect and relationship with their parents. Learning with parents ensures a supportive environment at home for the child to work to their full potential. In contrast, in public schools, parents often miss out on important information or activities because of a lack of communication from child to parent. "For many, it is a conscious choice not to become involved for many reasons. Their attitude towards the school and staff, staff attitudes towards parents, lack of awareness, parent cliques, or an absence of effective communication," says Liz Lampkin. Parents also have less of an opportunity to help with schoolwork or homework.

Lastly, online learning can be personalized to each child's needs or strengths. It allows learners to receive material tailored to their needs. It can be self-paced making a more comfortable learning environment. Students study based on how they learn, and what their skills and interests are. In public schools it is harder to get all of the classes you want or need. Teachers don't have enough time to work with all students individually, so many students don't receive the help that they need. Curriculums should be personalized to suit the individual needs of each student. Only then can students receive the best possible education and be prepared for college and/or future successes.

In conclusion, online schooling may be a better option for students needing personalized work and parental involvement. It is also great for kids with busy schedules, who need flexibility and have extracurricular activities or sports. It is harder to get personalized education, and one-on-one help from teachers in the public school classrooms.

Dogs for the Better

Kirah Ramey

Which of these dog breeds help mental health the most? Is it Dachshunds, Blue Heelers, or Bullmastiffs? Dachshunds are lazy, blue heelers are energetic, and bull mastiffs are both lazy and energetic. Does how energetic a dog is affect how much it can help with mental health issues?

Out of the 26% of people in Oklahoma with mental illnesses, 13% of them have dogs. The National Institution of Health states, “Positive effects of pets include reduced stress reactions, anxiety and perceptions of threat, and improved social interaction and mood. Based on this evidence, pets may plausibly benefit people whose mental health problems are accompanied by such difficulties as anxiety and mood disturbances.” So with this information, we can conclude it is better to have a dog when you have mental health issues than to have no dog or pet at all.

Dachshunds are small, affectionate, and lazy dogs, but how do they affect your mental health? Dachshunds are lazier dogs so they are harder to train. Since dachshunds are small, they are easier to snuggle, relieving stress and anxiety. Because they release oxytocin (a type of hormone in your body that promotes positive feelings). Which is known as “the cuddle hormone”. Their propensity for affection makes them brilliant emotional support animals and great service animals for those with psychiatric disabilities like anxiety and depression.

Blue Heelers are medium, energetic, and brilliant dogs, but are they good for your mental health? Blue Heelers are great emotional support animals because they are focused and highly attentive animals, which helps with mental illnesses. They are also good dogs for helping people get exercise which also helps with mental illnesses. The Blue Heeler’s intelligence, unwavering loyalty, strong work ethic, and need for mental stimulation make them an exceptional choice as an emotional support animal.

Bullmastiffs are large with calm and nurturing presence, but how do they affect your mental health? They are effective in providing support for individuals with Mental health conditions. Also, Bullmastiffs are hard to train because they are independent thinkers. And Bullmastiffs are known for having their mental health issues. Dogs make great companions, guards, and emotional support animals and this makes them the number one choice for nearly everyone who is looking to bring an animal home.

Mental Health Foundation states “Physical activity is not only good for your body, but it's also great for your mind. Being active makes you feel good - boosting your self-esteem and helping you concentrate and sleep well.” Healthdirect also states “Exercise causes your brain to release chemicals like endorphins and serotonin that help improve your mood. It also improves your fitness. Doing physical activity can also distract you from negative thought patterns.” So with all of this information, we can conclude that having an active dog can boost your mental health because they can help you stay active.

Which dog breed helps mental health the most? Is it Dachshunds, Blue Heelers, or Bullmastiffs? In conclusion, the dog breed that helps mental health the most are Blue Heelers, because they are easily trainable, loyal, and can help people stay active which is proven to help with mental health. So how energetic a dog is does affect people's mental illnesses because they need to stay active.

To Prove the Impossible, Possible: How Tetris Was Beaten After 34 Years

Aubrey Terry

Impossible: What defines the word impossible? Merriam-Webster claims, “Impossible: incapable of being or of occurring,” but what authority does the expression truly hold? For a term that is supposed to signify concrete illogic, just about anyone can deem anything “impossible” as long as they have proof, or moreover, lack of proof. Ultimately, such a damning descriptor is left to be placed upon whatever may lack a conventional or clear answer when finding said answer becomes tough. Fortunately, not all choose to take that route, working towards disproving the claim instead of feeling hindered by it. Which is how, after thirty-four years, Tetris, a supposedly infinite game, was defeated.

In its conception, Tetris was not intended to be beatable. A player’s goal was to get the highest score possible while keeping up with the game’s increasing speed up unto Level 29 where the game would purposely become too fast to keep up with average button input. The key word is average. In 2011, twenty-two years after the game’s release, Thor Aackerlund used his new method, Hyper-Tapping, to complete the infamous Level 29. Despite this victory, the game continued straight into Level 30. With no foreseeable “end” to Tetris, there was no subsequent effort to find one. Now that it was presumed to be endless, it didn’t matter how far one could surpass Level 29; the game would simply continue. Then StackRabbit came along.

In 2021, developer Greg Canon released a new AI, named StackRabbit. StackRabbit is an AI that solely exists to be the most efficient Tetris player. As an optimized computer program, it was assumed that StackRabbit could hypothetically play forever, but that idea was premature. The game would always crash at Level 237, because of Level 138 and its glitched colors. When StackRabbit initially hit Level 138, viewers were shocked to witness a new color scheme foreign to the game. This is because Tetris was programmed with a special formula meant to cycle through the level’s themes, but since it was never intended for a player to pass Level 29, the formula was never tested past that threshold. It turns out that at Level 138, Tetris is unable to recall its regular color palettes and instead opts to use colors assigned to unrelated

code. Once that code is used, it is unable to be used again. This meant that the game's body was effectively losing pieces of itself with each new level, and by Level 237, was gone. Players would begin calling this phenomenon "The True Killscreen."

Now that Tetris had a proven conclusion, all that was left to do was reach it, which was easier said than done. When the True Killscreen was initially discovered, Hyper-Tapping was still the primary technique used among players and was not consistent at passing Level 29; even if it were, Level 237 was too large of a difficulty jump for anyone to realistically attempt the challenge. That was until streamer Cheez_fish began using a new technique coined "Rolling". This method has proven to be the fastest and most efficient way of play, and allows players to consistently shatter Level 29 and those that antecede it. To sweeten the pot even more, a group of coders had discovered that one could incite the True Killscreen as soon as Level 157 when following certain criteria. The race to the end had begun, and all eyes were on Blue Scuti.

Having only started his Tetris journey in 2021, Blue Scuti was rapidly rising in the ranks, and after proving his skill by finishing in the semi-finals of the 2023 Tetris World Championship, the thirteen-year-old seemed to be the prime candidate to bring an end to the eternal title. On December 21st, 2023, the prodigy had made it to Level 157, but by then his nerves had set in, causing him to miss the early crash criteria. Nevertheless, he continued to play. Since he had yet to beat the level, he still had the chance to try again. Then suddenly, it was over. Blue Scuti had done it. Blue Scuti had won Tetris.

Impossible: What defines the word impossible? Clearly, people do. There are those whose definition of impossible comes from the dictionary, and there are those whose definition of the word means "a challenge." Which is how, after thirty-four years, the help of a tenacious community, and the masterful skill of a thirteen-year-old boy, Tetris, the impossible game, was proven to be possible.



The Would-Be King

Ian William Walker

I was lying on my bed. It was just like any other dull summer day; The video on my laptop droned on and the sound of my dad peeing echoed throughout the house. He always forgets to close the door.

A few minutes slipped by. Suddenly, I heard my dad hurriedly calling my name. He came into my room, a lump in his hands. I asked what was in his hands, but he hid it from me. The tone of his voice scared me, what happened to his normal jaunty tune? The next few minutes are a blur in my mind, but a few things stick out to me in my memory. The rush to find shoes so we could get out of the house. My mind racing at a hundred miles a minute, my body running on nothing but adrenaline and instinct. My dad frantically babbling on:

“I shouldn’t have left them alone.”

“I was only gone for a couple of minutes.”

“It’s Arthur.”

However, three things occupy my brain more than anything else about that initial scurry. The first was the blood. Seeing it smeared all over the walls and floor over by the water bowl. The second was the body. The blood that didn’t make it to the walls was caked onto his fur. His face looked wrong. It wasn’t disfigured, but it was shaped in a way no face should be. The third was the breathing, specifically that fact that it was still there. It was faint, but still there.

Before we left the house, my dad told me to grab something to wrap him in. I grabbed the first thing I saw, a dirty washcloth from the kitchen. If I had known it was what he would be buried in, I would have grabbed something a little more dignified.

Me, my dad, my brother, and Arthur all piled into the car. There was a veterinary clinic right down the street.

“I pray to god they aren’t closed on Sundays.”

As we drove up to it, there were no cars. As I ran to the front door, I was greeted with nothing but a tug. When I jumped back in the car so we

could bolt to the next vet, I was met with nothing but my dad's shaking head. It was too late; he was gone.

In movies, sad scenes at funerals are usually accompanied by rain and somber skies. The world silent, deep in mourning. That's all a lie. Death is warm and muggy. The world doesn't stop. The birds keep singing the song of life despite it all. I watched my sister looming in the window. She had been woken up to the news of Arthur. I looked at my dad and my brother, both standing over the grave with me. Both, no doubt, with similar thoughts to mine going through their heads.

How could a place meant to save lives be closed on a Sunday? As if nothing can be hurt on Sundays? How could the world be so cruel to something so innocent? He had struggled since birth. We had only just started to get him to eat regularly. He did nothing wrong, why did he deserve to die so violently? Killed by a territorial dog who knew no better than his instincts. It's hard to blame him though; he didn't know what he was doing. A blameless death with the least deserving victim.

Finally, I looked at Arthur. Forever to be wrapped up in a dirty rag, unmoving, beneath the earth. Bound to be forgotten by the world. The birds chirped, the bugs crawled, and the dirt fell.

I mourned for his sister, Stardust, as much as I mourned for him. She had no way of understanding what had happened to him. She would grow up and, eventually, wouldn't remember her own brother. How could she? They were still only babies.

But then again, as soon as I started writing this, she started crawling all over me and my computer, clinging to my shirt and purring in my lap.

So maybe she does remember after all?

The Hospital Trip

By Braecklin McDannald

I've made the trip to the hospital countless times, but this time it's different. I barely register the feeling of the smooth, worn down elevator buttons as I hit the glowing number 7. I feel more anxious with every floor we pass. I know the way better than the back of my hand, two rights, then a left until I'm at her door. The DNR on her door knocks the wind from my lungs. "*Why wouldn't they at least try to save her?*", my mind screams! I school my expression back to what I hope looks calm and hit my knuckles on the door a few times in a steady rhythm. I wrap my fingers around the handle and push when I hear a quiet "come in". I immediately can't breathe. My mind is spinning as I take in the sight. My mom, the reason I am alive and breathing, laying there on the hospital bed completely devoid of color. She is sucking in breaths of air and it sounds like it's scraping against every part of her throat.

I barely remember crashing to my knees at her side and grabbing her cold, nearly lifeless hand. My mind immediately flashes back to all the times my little hands fit perfectly into her soft hands. I feel tears threatening to collect in my eyes, so I drop my head and press a kiss to her hand. I try to swallow my emotions like I always do, but I feel a warm, salty tear roll down my cheek and onto her hand. My vision blurs as more tears escape my eyes. I feel a hand on my shoulder, not even knowing who it is, but wishing it was my mom instead.

I hold her hand for what feels like forever and just a second all rolled into one. I don't care if I'm being selfish with my last few minutes, hours, or however long I have left with her. It's my mom and not a single thing can rip me apart from her right now, not even this cruel world. I press more kisses into her hand feeling it warm up, wishing I could bring life back into her. As I do this I think of the song I sent her when she first got diagnosed with cancer, "Hold My Hand" by Lady Gaga. I think of how the song says "but if you decide to, I'll ride in this life with you, I won't let go 'till the end. So cry tonight, but don't you let go of my hand" and promised her, even if she couldn't hear me or understand, that I will be with her every step of the way until her last breath.

At some point I leave her side and go sit on the sofa with my aunt. I scan the room, looking for anything to focus on other than the fact that I am losing my mama. I see a tub of snacks and feel my stomach grumble, realizing I haven't eaten all day. I can't bring myself to eat at a time like

this though. I feel myself start disassociating and relent, not having the energy to fight it. My mind wanders off to a little fantasy world where I'm not watching my mom die. The next few hours feel like a fever dream of memory sharing and waiting. The nurses, thankfully, are giving us plenty of time and space to grieve her. They did tell us that as the inevitable gets closer she will start to run a fever, so I'm constantly feeling her forehead for a temperature; I've also been feeling her wrist for a pulse throughout the night, feeling it get weaker each time. Fly high mama, I love you.

I'm sitting in silence reminiscing on the days with my mom when my grandma says "guys it's time, come over here." I fall to my knees and hold her hand one last time as we all say our goodbyes through sobs. At 11:11pm on May 24, 2023, my mama took her final breath while holding my hand.

After the doctor confirms her passing, we each take turns having our own private goodbyes. When it's my turn, I remind her how much I love her and will miss her. I wiped the tears and snot from my face before leaning over and hugging her while pressing a kiss to her forehead.....one last time.

The Excrescence and Other Disasters

Addyson Harmon

An excrescence is the word used to refer to a kind of disfigurement; an ugly, monstrous thing of which no one wishes to hear you speak of, and heaven forbid see. In fact, many turn their eyes away at the mention of an excrescence, unless they would prefer to rub the existence of this fault in your face. In any case, an excrescence is something that must be hidden. It is also a word for a growth, a pustule, a protrusion, a *wart*. This is a word I have always detested: *wart*. No connotation of the word is positive; at best, it is neutral, and at worst, its usage is such a cause of ear-bleeding that one wishes it had never existed in the first place. I certainly leaned more towards that more extreme view of the wordage, especially when I developed one of my own.

This excrescence was far from grotesque. A growth is a more fitting word; it sort of just grew out of me. At first, I thought my ring had caused this, but then I realized that even weeks after I had removed the jewelry, there was still a rather painful presence between my fingers. That was where my problem sat: between my middle and ring finger on my right hand. It grew to be larger, and at the height of its vastness, it could be seen poking through my fingers even when my hand was closed. I am right-handed, so this became a problem almost immediately. I do not recall exactly when the growth first appeared, but if I were to guess, I would say in late March or early April. It was July when I finally relented and let my parents take me to the dermatologist.

Going to the doctor frightens me. The immense quantity of questions and sharp tools can be legitimate turn-offs that force a person into ignoring their problems just to avoid appointments. This was the case with me. I did not tell my parents about the problem until school let out for summer, and we began using over-the-counter medications in hopes of shrinking the growth back into my skin, but this did not happen. Reluctantly, I agreed to attend an appointment with the dermatologist.

It actually did not strike me at first that I would be going; I do not think I completely realized what *going* meant. It was not until the building

came into view that I began to shake. I was nervous, of course, and this was the reason for my shaking like a chihuahua surviving on Redbull.

When they called me into the room, the physician's assistant told me that there were three treatment options: I could have this *wart* cauterized, I could come in for several injections over the course of several weeks, or she could prescribe me a medicine to apply to it, much like the one I had already been using that was failing to remove it. I was happy to jump at the last option of the three, even though I would have to put the medicine on rather ritualistically, because behind door one and two were injections.

I'm terrified of needles! Few things freak me out as much. Needless to say, I was begging to choose the third option, however, even the P.A. explained that it was not the most effective form of treatment. She said this more to my mother than to me, and it was all that my mom needed to hear before she jumped on board with the first option.

Mom left the room to have Dad come inside, for he has always been my person, my comfort. I am more calm with him, even amid my panic and fright in these situations. This particular event though, I could not calm my emphatic adrenaline rush.

Amongst my millions of strings of apologies to the P.A. for my childlike behavior, she prompted me to speak about books. It did not calm my nerves, but her effort was greatly appreciated. Her steady words and steady hand made the injections hurt less than I assumed they would, though they did pain me.

The injection into my hand hurt, but the anticipation of it was far worse. Between the words spilling from my lips to calm my anxiety and profuse apologies for talking so much, I was able to get through even the part where the burning tool came into play. Cauterization is not just an injection. It also involves using a tool that reminded me of what a person uses on cattle, and the tool would burn off the problematic area. This was when I felt the first pang of true, inordinate nausea rip through me as though I were mist. I blame this on the smell, an awful and gripping scent

that did its best to strangle me. I had inhaled it before, but I couldn't place what it was.

I learned afterward that I was smelling burnt flesh.

I thanked the P.A. for being patient and understanding. She had been kind to me, and I wanted to make sure that she knew just how grateful I was to have been handled by someone who could deal with my extreme fear of needles. I thought that this would be the last time that I would see her. I was wrong.

Dad and I walked back to the waiting room so that we could get the okay to leave, and as a spell of lightheadedness caught me off guard, I glanced at my bandaged hand, only to see blood leaking down my frightened fingers. Come to find out, the wound had not been entirely cauterized, which was why it bled; my hand was still open, leaving my blood to flow out. So, I was rushed back into the tiny room where I proceeded to apologize some more: sorry for being nervous, sorry for talking so much, sorry for bleeding. The angelic P.A. dismissed the unnecessary apologies and finished the cauterization, but I made a brutal mistake this time: instead of averting my gaze, I watched as she performed her task in between my fingers. There the smell was, that dizzyingly foul odor. Only after succumbing to the shock rocketing through my body did I wise up and bring my eyes to my now bewildered father. I was too late. The quease in my stomach did not yield, not when we left for the second time, not when I made my way out of the door. Then my body decided to let me down again. I realized my sight was beginning to waver. At first, it was just my peripheral vision that blurred, but then the spots came. It was like the feeling of standing up too quickly, when the blood rushes to the head, only this was one thousand times worse. My parents noticed that something was wrong, so I mentioned as casually as my racing heart would let me that it was getting hard to see anything.

I told my parents that I just needed to sit down and then I would be fine; however, Dad caught me as I stumbled, which was not a great reflection of my "I am totally fine" act. He helped me into the truck, and it was at this point that I lost my vision entirely. I was conscious though; I

knew this because I could feel myself sitting. I could feel it as I lifted my hand with a great deal of effort and some discomfort. It occurred to me that my parents were speaking to me as my sight ever so slightly came back, but the words were drowned out by my own head. It sounded like I was deep beneath the water; the words simply could not reach me.

I found myself out of the truck on my hands and knees hunched over the curb, breathing heavily and gagging dryly. I could not move against the current of my own sickly sensations, even when I heard my mother suggest that we go back inside of the building where there would be a bathroom and several medical professionals. She helped me off of the ground and brought me inside against my delirious panic and hysteria as I begged not to go in there where they might inject me again. Thank goodness no one listens to me.

As I hovered over the toilet, a single thought crowded my brain: *I've been poisoned. This is my body telling me that it rejected those injections. Those shouldn't have entered my bloodstream, but now they are here. The medicine is killing me rapidly.* This was enough to force something out of my stomach, bile and nothing more albeit. I watched as the toilet slowly came into focus. A nurse burst into the bathroom to aid me, guiding me quickly to an open room. The P.A. came in, and I laughed weakly, joking that I was all of her problems today.

“Things like this happen all the time,” she promised. She explained that I shouldn't be embarrassed, and when I began my string of apologies again, she informed me that this was part of her job. Still, guilt hindered my senses nearly as much as nausea. She gave me a cup of water and walked out of the room, leaving my parents and I alone. Both Mom and Dad looked at me with an intense worry in their eyes. I promised that I would be fine and that I was beginning to see better, and I did not feel like I was dying anymore. I was sorry to have worried them, and this seemed to worry them even more.

My parents gently reminded me that I did not have to apologize for feeling things. Everyone is a victim of their circumstances, not only in these odd situations, but also in life. I was allowed to endure pain and

exist without spewing sorries and spiraling within my own head. I appreciated their words and I told them so.

After ingesting three cups of water and a Fruit Roll Up, I felt well enough to function. We blamed the nausea on the intense adrenaline rush of the entire experience. This time, we were able to leave without something else going wrong. Wanting to thank her, I searched for the P.A., though she was nowhere to be found.

In my head, I still thought of what my parents had said to me upon my insistent apologies. I was not an excrescence of a human being, not a boil upon the rump of humanity. I made myself out to be such a protrusion that day as I was having mine removed, but I was not a pustule. No one should make you feel as though your very breathing is grounds to beg forgiveness. I decided on that day I would not treat myself like the lowly excrescence that was removed.

“Thunderstruck”

By Wyatt McIntyre

It was a hot summer day in Louisville, Kentucky. Inside the arena, it was dusty, humid, and loud because of the noise from the blowers with all the other contestants. As I pulled my heifer inside the chute, my brother and Kenna were checking the bucket with all the paints and glues to make sure we had everything.

“Pull the calves in the chutes,” the judges announced. As everyone else was putting their calves in their chutes, we were checking our power, and everything was working.

“Go” the judges announced, and all the teams started with blowing their animals and then proceeded to pull their legs with glue and powder. The judges started playing the song “Thunderstruck” and oh boy, did that get me going.

I started with the back showside leg, Kenna started on the front, and Quaid started on the tailhead, standing on an upside down bucket. I was praying that the heifer didn’t kick the bucket out from under him because not only could that have gotten him hurt, but he could have made us look silly. The judges announced “30 minutes left”, so I knew I had to put some pep in my step. After I finished the flank, the judges announced “10 minutes left”, so Kenna, Quaid, and I started painting her brown to match her hair color. After we stepped back to see if the color we added onto her was correct, we soon realized that it was too light, so we added a darker tone. Once we finished painting her, we started blowing and combing sheen into her, making her all shiny and fluffy. “5 minutes left” the judges said, and then we pulled her out the chute, gave her a drink, and set her up.

This is where all the pressure hit me; before, I was so pumped and ready to win this thing, but now I was so worried. *Did we do good? Does the paint match? Does it look natural?* I was so nervous I could hardly hold my heifer’s head up when setting her.

They had us pull the calves to the other side of the arena so they could judge us. As we were setting the calves up, they started to play the song “Thunderstruck” again, but this time, instead of me getting pumped up, I was shaking. This was the biggest, most known, and most rewarding fitting contest I’d ever been in.

The judges started by saying a few words of appreciation on the mic, then proceeded to rank the top 3 teams, starting with their 3rd place and up to Champion. They placed team number 16 third (we were team 10). After they placed team 16, the whole crowd started clapping and cheering. They then proceeded to pick the 2nd overall team, and at this point, I don’t know how I was standing up, considering how much I was shaking. They picked team 21 for second. In this competition, there were 24 teams, each from a different state. In my mind, I was thinking: *well, we’re either first or not top 3 at all.*

As the judges made their way back to the middle of the arena, a memory came into my mind. Exactly 1 year ago, I was in this same fitting contest in the same position. The thought of not winning this year like I had done the year before struck fear into me. At that point, I couldn’t hold my heifer’s head up, but a few seconds later, the song “Thunderstruck” came on for the third and final time.

The judges started to walk towards us. They kept getting closer and closer until finally one of the judges stuck out his arm for a hand shake. This is a sign that you have been picked. The entire section stood up screaming and cheering. I was so thrilled to have won, but even more thrilled that a lot of people were rooting me on. This was an experience that has changed my life. People know that I can fit well, so they come to me and ask if I can help them fit their calves.

This story has two big life lessons: 1) trust yourself, trust your team, and trust your friends. 2) If you want to know what you’ll be doing later in life, just look at your friends.

Counting Numbers

Maggie Beaird

Most people learn to count numbers in preschool, kindergarten, and so on. We carry on these basic skills throughout our lives. In my life, I have gotten rather good at counting numbers. My parents are content with my grade in math, but I am better at counting numbers elsewhere. It all comes down to my bathroom. A scale on the polished cold tiles spews out numbers for my mind to count and track.

According to basic biology, most girls grow and mature faster than boys. I was one of those girls, slightly bigger waiting to shed her baby fat. Everyone has insecurities, but people really wonder when they develop them. I used to wonder as well. ‘When did I start to count all those numbers?’ I would always question.

When I was 7, I first stepped onto a wrestling mat. I had constantly been told I was bigger than the boys I would wrestle. That little girl was continually called fat by her other young teammates just for those few extra pounds. My mother always spoke to me so softly and called me beautiful. I never believed her, only the repetitive thoughts constantly racing through my head. I was 7.

When I was 8, entering 2nd grade, I would convince my mother to let me wear a sweatshirt every day to hide what I thought was “fat.” Throughout my childhood, I dreaded how others would prate about my looks and how much bigger I was than they. I was always the little girl getting picked on or getting singled-out for being bigger. I was only 8.

When I was 12, I was locked down in quarantine at the peak of covid. I learned what eating disorders were and what they could do to your body. I soon became fixated on my body after seeing other’s “results.” I had never spent so much time in front of my reflection. My eyes became a camera, taking pictures of every moment of myself in a reflection, only for those pictures to occur when thoughts of food charged through my mind. Like a crow stalking its prey, I knew what I looked like from every angle. I continued to ignore obvious signs of my abusive eating habits and was in denial. My behavior rapidly changed, and I locked myself away in my room around the clock. Even though my behavior was changing, my mother still spoke to me softly, but I did not believe her when she told me I was beautiful. I was only 12.

When I was 14, I became even better at counting numbers. With wrestling season around the corner, I was still in denial about my disorders. I kept the

numbers in order. “1, 2, 3, 4...” I would say, counting the pounds I would still have to skim off. The amount of time I spent working out or the calories I burned determined my mood for the rest of my day. I knew I had a problem, but I never wanted to admit it. I never wanted to tell anyone. I let my thoughts consume me, and I blocked out people I had relationships with. I bordered off people I loved simply because my love for counting numbers was even stronger. I still did not listen to my mother. I was only 14.

When I turned 15, I started to grasp the fact that counting numbers was taking a toll not only on me but also on the ones around me. I centered my focus on wrestling, and it made me realize that what I was doing to my body was destroying my health. I was not going to be able to fulfill my passion if I kept up my unhealthy ways. I knew I wanted to get better for my friends, family, and wrestling, so I fought these habits. I opened up to my friends, and they helped me understand that I am not alone in my journey. They made me feel safe and reassured me that I would be okay. I was astonished that I had fallen so deeply into the trap of abusive eating disorders. My mind and thoughts ate me alive, but knowing I had friends and family to support me helped me overcome it. I finally forgot what the pain of hunger felt like. My mother still speaks to me softly, and I have slowly started to listen to her. I am only 15.

I used to always question when these insecurities started until I understood that anything one person says to another can start insecurities. Most people do not realize their words can influence others’ thoughts and feelings. I struggled most of my life with insecurities and bad habits simply because I listened to others. I am glad I overcame my problems, but I do still like to count numbers sometimes. I no longer count the inches around my waist or the number on the scale, but I may count how many scoops of ice cream I get, the seconds I can hold my breath, the days until my birthday, or my fingers in math class.

A Father to None

Kason Leach

My father, not my dad, was a special man. He didn't have much care or notion for others, only himself. He was still my father though, or so I thought. Often when I would go see him, I would only be left with the toys he bought me; I would ask him to play with me, but he gave no regards before stating the words "Maybe later." I was left sitting in his camper, building Legos while he watched football, only for him to go to bed early and leave me alone to play with toys and watch cartoons. On pleasant days, I preferred to play outside pretending to be a hunter or acting like I was in the army. He demanded I not leave the camper just because he wanted to lay inside on the couch. The most atrocious part of it all was that when I had to go back home to my mom, who actually loved and cared about me, I cried and was filled with anger because I didn't understand. I didn't understand there was a reason my brother lost connection with him. I didn't understand that he didn't have a true love for me like a father should. I didn't understand.

When I heard he was coming to see me three months later, I was so excited. I would sit and wait, even counting down the days.

Eventually three months passed, and I received the same phone call I received numerous times before. "I can't make it this time, but I'll see you in a few months." So, there I was waiting again. Even if he did come to see me, there was always a woman he was coming to see, and she was his priority.

One night, he showed up, and we got a hotel room in town. He did the usual: he took me to the store, and I picked out some toys to play with, alone. Something was different about this night though- I wasn't happy. Of course, I'd been bored before, but I never felt like this. I remember sitting on the floor just thinking about everything. My mom talked about my father before and how he treated her, but I never thought about it until that moment. Tears began to tremble down my face as I could barely see, my eyes fogged by the water glossing over them.

Finally, he noticed. The only thing I could struggle to utter out was “I want my mom.” He tried to change my mind, but I couldn’t say anything besides “I want my mom.” I did, I did want my mom. Finally, I called her and asked her to come get me. I did not say another word to that man until she got there. After getting everything packed up, I heard that line again, “I’ll see you in three months.” Only this time I responded differently; I could only get out three words.

“No, you won’t.”

Don't Step on a Crack

Kaydence Gray

When I was just a little girl and still trying to figure out how to go about living in this world, I would always say dumb rhymes. One I would constantly say was “Don't step on the crack or you'll break your mothers back.” No matter the situation, I always had something to say to fill the silence of the room.

This day was just like the rest: wake-up, give my mom the nastiest attitude that she didn't deserve, eat breakfast, get dressed, go to school, spend the whole day not learning a thing but drawing on my desk instead, get picked up, go home and draw some more. On occasion, my mom would let me walk to the library with a couple of friends, but I let them do the walking that day and went home. My mom had been complaining about back problems since I was little; she never failed to mention it at least once a day. But this day was different: after I had gone through my morning routine, she mentioned that she had a chiropractor appointment. I was happy to hear that because maybe it would ease her pain just a little. Looking back, I wish she hadn't gone.

She had picked me and my younger brother up from school and asked the normal questions like “How was your day?” and so on. I went straight in my room when we arrived home to continue a drawing I started during school. After a while, my mom came in to tell me that she was going to clean offices, which was a side job for extra money. I could tell she was in pain, so I offered to clean them for her. Since they were just right down the road, I could ride my bike. She profusely told me that she could do it. Eventually she gave in, and I rode my bike down the road and began cleaning. I knew exactly what I needed to do from months upon months of helping her clean them on the weekends.

As I was finishing, she walked in just to check on me. At eleven years old, trying to be independent, I wasn't impressed with her unexpected arrival. I assured her that I was almost done and didn't need any help, and with that reassurance, she headed home. Leaving the building, trash bag in hand, I felt so accomplished; I was finally doing

something I thought to be big on my own. But this feeling of accomplishment would be short lived because as I was making it back to my house, I saw a car with its hazards on. At first, I thought maybe she had stopped to talk to someone she knew in the building, or maybe she saw a puppy and stopped to get it. As I got closer, I realized that she wasn't stopped next to the building, but rather in it.

It was all a blur once my adrenaline kicked in. I saw my mom crawl out of the building and she kept repeating "Somethings wrong with my back, somethings wrong with my back." My grandparents were on vacation, and my dad was on a work trip, so it was only me to take care of the situation. She gave me her phone and I dialed 911; that's when it all set in.

This was real, not any sort of sick dream. It was unfolding right in front of me. As soon as the ambulance arrived, my great grandparents arrived to take my brother and me. The last place I wanted to be was home, and I didn't sleep in my own bed for two weeks, and I don't think anyone can blame me.

Right around the corner is when my life flipped upside-down. Even after my mom got home from the hospital, things didn't go back to normal. Eventually, my family decided it would be best if we moved, to leave all the bad memories behind in that town, so we did...

Since that day, I won't step on a crack, not on purpose anyways, just in case it's true.

My Name

Isaac Hood

Three years ago, I realized I was transgender. After this realization, I did not feel like my old name fit me. For months, I tried to think of new names that felt like me. Then, in geography class, we learned about the famous Isaac Newton. So I decided to steal his name. After all, he's dead, so it's not like he's using it anymore. I needed a proper announcement, stating I had stolen his name, so I went on a mission. I searched for hours, went in my spaceship through deserts, snow storms, jungles, swamps, and finally, I was at his grave. I ripped his name right off the gravestone. It started lightening and thundering. The lightning growled at me and then suddenly... BAAM! Gravity stopped! I started floating in the air, and the world started spinning around. I called for my spaceship and got in. I flew off planet Earth, fleeing to Mars. As I looked back, I saw the headstone on my dashboard. I was now Isaac Newton. I looked at Mars, my new home planet. I landed my spaceship, and immediately, somebody pounded on my door. I looked at the camera. It was Isaac Newton's ghost. "Holy moly!" I exclaimed. I started boarding up my spaceship. No way was this dude about to take the name I stole! I did all that hard work, so I deserved this stolen name. The ghost had begun circling around my spaceship, climbing on top of it. He got inside the spaceship from a latch on the ceiling. I froze as the ghost walked toward me and he grabbed my hand, his spirit-like body transforming into mine. We formed together and I was officially Isaac Newton.

Chameleon

Odessa Clevenger

Who would have known that such a lizard, such a creature could be so immerseful? It's daring and dashing colors, darting and changing within every moment, blending to fit in within its environment, after all, the chameleon and I have so much in common. This lizard ranges within any environment it is put into and can hide from its predators with ease by changing its looks. Such an interesting creature, for it even has eyes that can go in full rotation and circle around and look behind itself to watch out for predators aiming to harm such a thing.

The chameleon and I have so much in common. For I may not be able to change my skin color to blend in with trees or the pretty lotus flowers, I can change my appearance in a way the chameleon doesn't have to worry about. I can count my calories and watch as the numbers fall low, for I can shape my body and blend within certain lines. *You can never be them.* I am capable of cutting and shaping my hair to blend with the girls who play sports. I can train and adapt my body to withstand such harsh conditions and I can run until my lungs wish to collapse just like the track girls. I can count my calories, for I unfortunately was not blessed with a quick metabolism. The only way I could possibly fit in is if I wore a size without an X in the front, watching the numbers tip lower on the scale is a past time I have grown accustomed to.

I can change the way I smile, make sure I tilt my head just like the other people when they get their photos taken. I can fake laugh in groups when people make jokes. I actually don't find them funny, for I find them insensitive and unkind, but people do not wish to hear that. They want laughs and smiles, so it's what I give. I can easily change my patterns of speaking, I catch onto slang so quickly so it's easier to fit in and not be spotted. *Everytime I shapeshift a piece of me seems to die even though I worried I was never there in the first place.* My words match those of my peers and I think that is enough blending.

Though, whenever you've been doing something for so long, it's so hard to stop. I have begun to crave the sound of my rumbling stomach

after I have skipped so many meals. I love the taste of hunger on my tongue, and how my lips are chapped and cracked from the lack of nutrients within my body. I feel a sense of accomplishment whenever the number drops lower. Will I ever reach a goal to which I am satisfied enough? I love the way I have so many different varieties of shirts hanging within my closet. Do I want to talk to the popular kids, the weird kids, the smart kids, who do I wish to be today? Though I hardly have a sense of self, unfortunately. Sometimes I wonder if I hadn't learned to blend would I not freeze when people ask me one of my favorites? I don't have a favorite color, what is Selene's favorite, may I borrow it?

I wonder if this aching feeling within me will ever flee and run away just as I did from my self-identity. The hunger and tiredness never got old, they are my friends and they are constantly clawing at my back. I wonder if I could ever blend just right. How do the girls stay so skinny? Do they hear their stomach rumbling just as me? Why were they blessed with the ability to not need to blend to be normal, for they are the blueprint of what everyone wants to be.

Afterall, I have so much in common with the chameleon. I have learned to rotate my eyes and see the back of my head and to watch out for predators trying to rip me apart. I know just how to blend. I'm not able to change my skin color to gray to blend with the walls, but I know just what to ask the barber to blend with the girls. Battles are fought with winning in mind but winning unfortunately hasn't found me. The chameleon has no sense of self, so I know I am blending just right. I am the chameleon.



POETRY

I know you

Abby Marshall

you don't know me
But I remember what you did
I had to calculate your intentions
through the fickle clues of your baffling 'loyalty'.

you don't know me
yet you prance up to me in the ladies room
offering lip gloss and perfume
along with a carefree smile
and traces of 'openness' all over.

you don't remember me
but I'll never forget being a little girl
terrified of swimsuit shopping
birthday parties
P.E.
and every reflection of myself
that I stumble upon
now distorted by your 'friendship'.

I have my own lip gloss.

Music Box

Kaytlin Matsko

Her grace reflects off the glances stolen by my gaze
every prim and perfect leap amounts to nothing
beaming stage lights follow every pirouette
stars from the god, Astraeus, observe every continuous motion
looked over by the crowd of a thousand mortal souls

no amount of godly attention could stray away her elegance
nonetheless; her most profound move will surely leave all of eternity in awe
it is only when the ship reaches a sea of crashing waves
that the anchor will come to some use
the fallen ballerina is still dancing.

although her stance has been slaughtered,
her tree stands strong and proud
–she spreads her branches
suffers the loss of brightly colored leaves
her roots dig into the earth
waving and weaving until the structure cannot be broken

only then does the rhythmic music die from the utter silence buried beneath
and there she is; spotted in all her glory
the ceramic ballerina, sharing the spotlight with the stage
but there is no regard for the ballerina's mistaken performance

In the Moment
Ryleigh Latta

I constantly hear things about living in the moment.
No matter how much I try to remind myself to do it, I forget.

Always going.

Even when we could take a break, we tie our brains over with something else to keep us busy.
Our phones give us not even an inch of spare time, making us forget to live in the moment.

Always thinking.
What is next?

Can't wait to graduate.

Can't wait to move out.

Can't wait to do something amazing.

Memories are made by the moments we are living now, but how sad?
We spend them worried about what is next instead of cherishing what we have here

right now.

We rush to take pictures of the sunset to try to prove ourselves that we do enjoy the little
things.

Yet, we stop looking at it as soon as we get a good picture.

Maybe I feel this way because I would do anything to go back to being a kid.

Maybe then I would appreciate every moment. feeling. memory.

I wish I could restart and not let myself grow up so fast.

I think ...then... I would live in the moment.

She

London Gentry

She is *kind*.

But if she is too much, she is *self-seeking*.

Held to unreachable standards, never *attained*.

Who is she?

She is *beauty*.

Her worth is supposed to be found within;

But she's only *validated from outside*.

Who is she?

She is *smart*.

Expected to do well, but never praised;

When she fails, she is *condemned*.

Who is she?

She is *happy!*

Real for a moment;

Hidden away after the camera is *gone*.

Who is she?

She is *loved*;

has so many friends, but none *know* her.

They just *don't understand*, *no one* does.

She is Us.

The Journey to the Top

Cheyanne Stufflebeam

Head tilted back, the wind whispers in my ear,
Although it seems scary, there is nothing to fear
Gazing at branches that reach far and wide,
Each limb holds a different future that I must decide,
Endless opportunities wait for exploration
Yet my doubts hold me back, lost in deliberation,
Each limb leads further into the unknown
Where possibilities may flourish, and fears can be outgrown,
As feet lift off the ground, anticipation surges within
An intricate new life is about to begin,
With each upward step, new worlds unfold
Amidst the uncertainty, excitement takes hold,
With every branch chosen, a new chapter is sown
Another step closer to finding my home,
The view from above takes my breath away,
A reminder I'm capable, come whatever may,
Through this journey of growth and transformation,
I found we're the architects of our own destination,
Head tilted back, I gaze up at the sky
The wind whispers in my ear, *now you are ready to fly*

Found Poetry

by Emily Sanches



Found Poetry

October is a stranger in my mind
 because lost in the fall breeze,
 I am in love, and it feels so good.

I will see you in another life.

Collywobbles

Addison Fowler

They are things that grin with mismatched teeth,
And hover, all abuzz, amidst the mobile and the cradle.
They are entities that always lurk, but are never seen,
Until one day you stumble unhappily upon them,
Betwixt the first day of class and your parents' retreating car.
They are the dangers only *you* can see, or care to.

Once you find them, or vice versa, you cannot lose them.
They wait for you on the bus, follow you home at night,
And whisper in your ears to keep you from sleep's arms.
They run up and down your spine at the most inopportune moment,
Convincing you with lashing tongues that the shadows have hands,
And eyes, and only the darkest, most *morbid* impulses towards you.

They are the stampeding vermin of *your* thoughts' creation,
Scrambling down your throat, nipping at your breath
And dragging it from you; like a scavenger would carrion.
They herd you blindly into violent corners, chest heaving,
Eyes darting as your shoulders are racked by choked-back sobs.
They are the infestation that shows you, with glee, the day you *die*.

Where I'm From

AnnMarie Torres

I am from broken glass,
from plastic ponies and gouda cheese.
I am from infinite amounts of cat hair lying on the couch
(light, fuzzy It stuck to everything)
I am from the long grass, the wildflowers
whose scratchy texture and colorful smells I feel every day as if I'm still
there.
I am from bikes and bugs from Kaitlynn and Jacob
I'm from the worry-worms and the smarty-pants,
from see ya later aligater! and go outside!
I'm from the beauty inside and out, which words of encouragement I get
from my mother.
I'm from yin and yang, sliders and mole.
From the kidneys my grandma lost to sickness,
The voice my mother buries.
In the back of my closet there lies a box,
full of old artworks and journals,
a blur of memories,
I am from those moments,
now a distant memory,
a part of my history.

What Follows

Ava Burkett

orange dawn
cold fingertips graze my arm

Rustling my curtains
Lurking between the threshold

Reminiscent of a bare amygdala

Shunning its presence,
vast vehement consumes
Reaching out to the
frigid fingertips of grief
Apprehensive in its absence

Orange morning

My veins become gelid
Grand horizons behind my conscious
Kneeling before the altar
Praying to the void
For a step back

orange mourning

Terminus

by Kyla Dean

To have and to need,
Is unfair.
A new flame, a new star,
A new spark in my clutches.
Made from worthless material.
Worthless metal.
But that does not matter
Now.
It burns,
It eats,
It crackles with laughter,
It is alive.
To call it “child” is not enough, for naught.
For words cannot describe,
Who this new blaze is to me.
Together we have made new life.
The most i had done before was destroy it.

White Thorns

Caleb Hysell

She asked me, "Where did the red roses come from?"
I said, "I bought them at the store."
Truly I had stolen them from the neighbors garden
But I wanted to hide the pricks on my hands

In the neighbors garden there were flowers
Many among colors I've never seen before
And the smells reminded me of her
And that's when I saw the white roses

I went to pick them and it hurt
Catching me by surprise I pulled my hand, collecting a single one
But I went back in for many many more
And when I left the roses were colored red

As I turned back I saw an empty garden
I opened our door to see her
And therein lie the beautiful woman
Who would later tell me, "I no longer love you."

World Class Beauty

Mykenzie Criss

In a world where beauty standards prevail,
And social media's reach continues to unveil,
The story of young audiences unfolds,
For they are the ones that society molds.

Today's beauty standards, they say,
Are defined by likes and followers on display,
Photoshopped images, filters galore,
Creating an unrealistic beauty to adore.

Young minds are bombarded with perfection,
As social media targets their attention,
Endless scrolling, comparing, and despair,
As they strive to fit into a beauty snare.

They see flawless faces and bodies so slim,
Believing that's the only way to fit in,
But what they fail to understand,
Is that beauty lies in their own hand.

For beauty is not defined by a number,
Or by conforming to society's slumber,
It's in the uniqueness of every soul,
In the imperfections that make us whole.

Today's beauty standards may be a facade,
A mirage that leaves many feelings flawed,
But we must teach the young ones to see,
That their worth is beyond what the eye can perceive.

Let's encourage them to embrace their flaws,
To love themselves without any applause,
To see their true beauty, both inside and out,
And break free from society's beauty route.

For social media can be a double-edged sword,
But with guidance and wisdom, their spirits can be restored,
Let's remind them that they are enough,
And that their worth is not defined by stuff.

So let us write a new narrative,
Where beauty is diverse and inclusive,
Where young audiences can find solace,
In a world that appreciates their unique grace.

Apocalypse

Trysten Williams

We're all in shambles, but we choose to ignore it,
Because our outside images are more important.
We choose to put a smile on our faces,
When in reality our cases,
Are filled with sadness.

Madness.

It fills up our bodies that wreak Havoc on each other.
We are our own worst enemies,
But we don't do anything about it,
Because we would rather suffer in silence than get help from one another.

It's an apocalypse,
One that we can't get out of.
We can't even come to grips with the problems that imprison us,
And until we do, we will be stuck in this pit,
And continue to be in shambles and choose to ignore it.

Parents

Kooper Coulson

They say daughters need
their fathers.

But what can I do?

My father is the ANGER in
my words, the words in
my silence.

My father is the pain in
my tears, the ghost in my
Smile.

My Mother

Is the hurt in my heart,
The fear in my bones.

My mother

Is the voice in my head,
That claws at my mind.

My mother

That is supposed to
Mold me, Build me,
BROKE ME

A Red Door

Peyton Graham

A door in the forest
Beautiful and vibrant red
Tarnished wood and rusty knob
Open the door and peer inside
the wonderful world on the other side
The sky clear as glass
The breeze fresh as flowers
The weight of your shoulders
light as a feather
Step through and see the wonder
the magical world on the other side
The trees grow high
and the flower fields long and wide
The animals say hello
and the wind takes your hand
Step through and see the wonder
on the other side of a door
in the forest
Beautiful and vibrant red
Peaceful and quiet

Under it All

Avery Brickman

Under the moon we dance

Dancing until there is nothing more to give
and our bones so tired, start sagging

Feet fitted with sores and drenched with the sweat and grit of the night, carry us
home through silent trees and tiny crevices filled with morning dew

We droop with silky haze and watch the moon.

Under the sun we sing

Singing until our throats clot with red sun-baked nodes
and the air burns with exquisite taste

Parched and brittle we don't stop to take a breath
persevering enough to say good day

Veins pop squeezing fresh juice from the fruits of our labor
and seizing this opportunity we drink.

Miss Americana

Valentina Insignares

Each stage of my life is an era,
Miss Americana taught me that's what it means.
Every heartbreak is an era
every fearful moment is an era
every happy moment is an era.
For Miss Americana those eras became lyrics,
for me they are poetry.
I know them "All Too Well," I hear them "All Too Well".
Every era
every album
every song
every lyric
every word
every sound.
I know them "All too well," I feel them "All Too Well".
Her lyrics comfort me,
her lyrics transform me
then I transform her lyrics into reality.
Miss Americana is in her best era,
and so am I.

I See

Bianca Ortiz

In a world of silence, I live and breath
Where sound cannot be heard,
I see people and their expression,
I see that they laugh, I see that they cry,
I see that they sing, but those sounds do not reach me.

We also sing our songs in a peculiar way,
We are children of the universe
Who are born without hearing the whispers in the wind
The sound of crickets and the singing of birds.

In the world of Silence where words lose their voice,
Communication depends on our hands with soft gesture,
And movements we show the world our feeling that
We also cry, that we also love.

In the world of Silence,
It is also a world of light, of stillness,
It is like a road less traveled that must be taken
And that is how I learned to survive and overcome many challenges.



SHORT STORY

Peaceful Night

By Cristina Morente

We were never like this. Everything was perfect and we were perfect!

Until Dad started getting home late and would constantly be drinking. Whenever Mom saw this she would be frustrated with him and would start questioning him. Asking him to give her a good reason why he had been acting like this. But he would just ignore her, like she was nothing and angrily yell to stay out of his business. Everytime they would fight, Dad would leave and sleep in the guest room while Mom slept in their bedroom. While we were left there like we didn't exist.

During some nights, you could hear Mom weeping in her room so loud that even Dad could hear it downstairs. Whenever he was done hearing her cries, he would stomp up the stairs and open the bedroom door and holler at her to quit. After yelling at her, he would walk out the room and slam the door. In the end, this never really helped and would always make it worse. While Mom threw things around the room crying, my little sister would come into my room looking terrified and asking if she could spend the night. I didn't mind her being with me since I also felt frightened of the yelling and crying. She would always have her headphones on and would lay curling herself up in my blankets. Seeing how afraid she was made me feel less lonely.

A few months passed and the fighting hadn't stopped. Dad had an event that he was invited to. Mom knew about this so she decided to drag my little sister and me with her. We asked her if we could stay home, but she just replied to us to "shut it" or we would be locked in our rooms for a week. So we went and on the way there you could see that Dad was irritated by our presence.

At the event, they acted like we actually existed. Talking about us like we were the most wonderful thing to ever happen to them. Acting like they were truly in love, like nothing had changed. I felt disgusted by them. They might be my parents but just the thought of them disappearing made me feel a spark of joy jump inside me.

When we left the event, the mask of the merry and loving parents broke. The nasty words begin to mend together showing their real selves. They didn't even care about us hearing these words, those horrid words that kids my age wouldn't be allowed to say or even mention. How could they do this to my little

sister and me? We did nothing wrong; the only sin we carried was being created by the monsters that we call our parents.

During the night, after the event, I walked to their bedroom, since, today, they decided to sleep together. I started asking why things could not go back to the way they used to. If only they would have thought about us and our feelings or at least tried to get someone to help them. Then I wouldn't be standing next to their bed with a silver knife gripped in my shaking hand, the white sheets on the bed stained a deep red, their hands placed around their necks to try to stop the red liquid from gushing out of their open necks. I wrapped my arms around their bodies giving them a hug like I used to and kissed their foreheads so I could sleep peacefully.

As I was walking back to my room I decided to check up on my little sister. When I walked in she was sleeping so peacefully the same way she used to when she was 5 years old. I haven't had this genuine feeling of happiness and peace for quite a long time. She could finally fall asleep without feeling terrified or having to hear the cries of Mom and the yells of Dad.

The Room

By Kaytlyn Shearmire

Leah was scrolling on her phone about to go to bed, when she realized she needed to brush her teeth still before she did. She got up and went to the bathroom to do so, but left her door open. As she was walking to the bathroom, her door all of a sudden slammed shut. She looked back quickly to see if anyone was behind her, but nobody was there. She assumed it was just her mom so she went on. Leah always listened to her favorite song while brushing her teeth to ensure she brushed them long enough. She played her current favorite song, then sat her phone down on the counter beside her, away from the sink. She started brushing her teeth again, and as soon as she started brushing, the lights started flickering on and off slowly like someone was flipping the switch up and down.

Leah looked up in the mirror; no one was at the door, so she looked behind her to make sure no one was joking around with her, but nobody was there. She didn't hear or see the door open and was sure she shut it, although she didn't think anything of it. Light bulbs went out all the time, so she continued on. When she started brushing again, her music changed without her touching it. She remembered that she put it away from her to keep it from getting wet. She took a step back to hear it start playing one of those creepy children's nursery rhymes.

Leah tensed up more. She started to think something was actually happening. She slowly picked her phone back up and turned the other song back on. She sat her phone down on the counter and picked her toothbrush up to start brushing again. She thought she was dreaming. She turned on the faucet to splash her face with some water when the lights completely turned off. It was pitch black in the room. She couldn't see anything. Leah's face froze as she slowly turned around to switch the light back on, but it wouldn't. She tried opening the door, but it was locked from the outside.

Leah knew that there was only a lock on the inside of the door. She had been living in the same house since she was 3. She banged vigorously on the door and turned the handle rapidly hoping someone in her home would hear her, but it was like no one was home. She banged and banged on the door, screaming for help.

Fifteen minutes later... silence. Leah's mom yelled her name across the house to make sure she was ready for bed and school the next day. She couldn't find Leah anywhere. She checked her room, but she wasn't in there. When she walked past the bathroom, she heard a noise. The sink was running. She knocked on the door because she heard the water and assumed Leah was in there, but no one answered. She walked in, shut off the water, and looked around to see Leah's toothbrush and phone.

"Where is Leah?" She was nowhere to be seen, but her toothbrush was still on the counter, along with her phone, playing another creepy nursery rhyme.

Eventually

Xeaja Howard

“Grief gets easier with time.”

That's what my dad said the night we found out about the accident. That night was months ago. Dad was wrong. The grief has never been harder. At least when staring at the blinding red and blue lights I couldn't see her. I knew what happened, but I couldn't see the full effect. Now? Now I can see it all, and I'm nauseous.

My dad dragged us to our seats at the very front of the crowd and I looked around the silent funeral. To my right there's rows of people that claim they knew me when I was a baby. It's weird, I don't remember knowing them when I was a baby, but I don't remember much from those years. Not many people do.

I look to my left and the silence of the cemetery really settles in. Such a familiar silence. It's silence that almost convinced me everything was okay. It's silence that taught me a hush of a wreck is much worse than a shattering scream. The one who screams is often still alive. I never wanted to hear of terror more than that day, that moment of mortifying tranquility. The familiarity almost brought me to tears.

Many of the adults here say I'm very brave for not crying.

“You got that from your mother, she never backed down from anything. Wild woman.” I wanted to be brave just like her. But I don't feel very brave, I feel angry. I want to cry, I want to scream and break things. My face burns red and my body trembles. This isn't how it should be. We shouldn't be here, she shouldn't be here. I shift in my seat. The chairs here weren't very comfortable, they dug into my back and were too round for me to sit properly, forcing me to lean forward. I felt like they were warning me, telling me I don't belong here. I already knew that. My father places a comforting hand on my shoulder and I shake it off while gritting my teeth. He was calm, his body as still as hers. He didn't even cry. I wonder if my aunts and uncles think he's brave, or if they're like me and think he's selfish. He isn't a bad person, but she deserves more than what he's shown.

My name is called to the podium and my train of thought is broken. My dad's gentle hand is placed on my back to usher me up in front of the crowd of mourning people. I suddenly become aware of every sensation around me. The

itchy prickling of my dress now feels more like a coat of splinters gnawing at my skin and prompting a shriek to bubble up and claw its way up my throat. But the scream never makes its debut, I'm silent. Like that day inside of the ruined car. One thing people don't tell you about grief is the expectation that it'll just go away. I could feel it, this assumption that I was meant to move on without her. I could never do that. I shakily looked at my speech. The words didn't make sense anymore. They blurred on the pages and danced along the margins to coax a reaction from me, taunting me ceaselessly.

"Speak," they said, "and show them that you're not as brave as they say." I didn't speak, I sobbed. Everyone was wrong. My family was wrong for believing I was brave, my dad was wrong for claiming I could ever move on, and my mom was wrong for leaving me with all these wrong people. She was the only one that ever felt right.

. I crumbled my paper and threw it down before stumbling away from the podium idly. I paused in front of her coffin, shiny and clean with golden flowers sprouting from the wooden frame. When we got it my dad said it was a fitting new home for her, my mom always loved to garden. But I think her fitting home was with us. I felt my knees buckle, I didn't even realize how weak I felt until I collapsed. My dad shushed me as I buried my face in his chest, seeking any ounce of comfort.

"You were wrong! It's been months and it's still so hard! I want mom, I want to go home, I don't want to be here!" I shouted and he hugged me tighter, squeezing all remnants of fight from my body.

"They were wrong," I whispered hoarsely, "I'm not brave at all." My dad trembled and I saw tears in his eyes. I had never seen my dad cry before, it was almost soothing.

"You're so brave You have survived more than I could possibly bear" He whispered and we both cried. We cried as the others spoke on the podium. We cried when her coffin was closed and lowered in the ground and we cried all the way home. Together we cried, and crying got easier

The night after the funeral we sat in dad's bed and ate take out, it was hard to cook when you were sad. We began talking and eventually our conversation drifted to mom, it felt like we hadn't spoken about her since the wreck. I thought it would be difficult, it was, but it got easier. Soon we were telling funny stories until we were laughing too much to get another word out

and then he decided it's been a long day and it's time for bed. Adults often use "long days" as an excuse to sleep. He carried me to my room and gently tucked me in. He said he loved me, I said it back. Going to sleep came easier that night. Many things did. As I hugged my blanket tight to my chest I reached the conclusion that, though my dad was wrong about many things, he was right about one thing. The grief would get easier. Eventually.

Peaceless

Jack Turner

My knees started to sore from kneeling under the staircase. The planks creaked eerily as the Taliban men walked over me. My little brother Nadir was kneeling too, burying his face in my arms. He was only seven, which was seven years younger than me. We both thought this was the end. “Farah, when is mom coming back?” Nadir asked as quietly as he could.

The creaking above had stopped. All of the terrorists had finished their massacring in the rooms above us. “Nadir, we are going to wait here for a bit. Then we can go check on Mom,” I told Nadir, still whispering due to the paranoia the Taliban brought upon us. We were still shaking, leaving our spot could mean life or death. After a couple of minutes of silence, we left and went upstairs.

“Wait outside, I’ll be right back,” I told Nadir. Nadir is still quite young, and I didn’t want him to see something that could haunt him for life. I walked through the door and saw what no one deserves to see. I had to be quiet so Nadir wouldn’t hear me cry. I decided there was nothing I could do, so I covered Mom with a blanket and wiped my tears. The terrorists raided our kitchen, and there was no food left for me and Nadir. I quietly left the apartment. “Hey, how about we go on an adventure?” I ask Nadir with a choked-up voice, still holding back tears. We needed to find food anyway, so going on an “adventure” was probably the most logical option.

“But I want to see Mom,” Nadir said silently. He still didn’t know much about what was going on, and that was for the best.

“Mom is resting, we can come back later,” I told Nadir.

“Fine,” Nadir said, pouting.

We duck-walked from the building to stay as unnoticeable as possible. The Taliban were making their way through the city. The town was quiet, either because barely anyone made it out, or because they were trying to. The air was filled with dust, making every breath a struggle. Nadir held onto my dress and waited for me to move. We skimmed around a couple of buildings to get as close to the market stands as we could.

The Taliban group was only about 50 feet away from us, so grabbing some bread would be a risk. “Nadir, I need you to wait here so I can grab us some food. When I get back, we will just stay the night in this building,” I said to Nadir as I pointed to the building behind the market stand.

“Why can’t we just go home? Surely Mom is done resting by now.” Nadir said in a supplicating voice. Every time he talks about Mom, the words seem to hit me in the heart like a bullet.

“Nadir, Mom is still tired and she needs to clean up the house. It was a rough day for her.” I told Nadir as I got up and quickly ran to the market table. I grabbed two loaves of bread and quietly made my way back to Nadir.

We sat on the floor of the building’s second story and ate. Even though it was just bread, it tasted like gourmet food. Nadir and I hadn’t eaten in about two days, so this light meal felt like a blessing. Nadir finished his bread before I could finish half of mine. “Here, you need more food to grow,” I told Nadir as I handed him my half-eaten bread. Nadir was still young, and if I could keep him healthy and his mind protected, he could proceed to live a great life.

“Farah, if we aren’t going home, where will we go?” Nadir said to me in a much happier tone. I had to think for a moment, all I had thought about before was getting away from the Taliban.

“How about Istanbul? Turkey has always sounded nice, and I’m sure it’s safer than what we have now,” I told Nadir in an energetic voice. Nadir’s face lit up at the thought of Istanbul. It was nice to see Nadir smile at a time like this because all I wanted to do was weep. “Alright, Nadir, time to sleep. We have a lot of traveling to do tomorrow,” I said to Nadir as I rested my head on my arm.

We woke up the next morning to the sound of war. Nadir and I looked through the hole in the wall to see the Americans had arrived and were fighting the Taliban. I had to cover Nadir’s ears from the sound of gunshots and screaming as we took the back exit from the building. There were gunshots in the alley between our building and the next, but we needed to cross it to get to the Americans.

“Nadir, we need to cross that alley to get to the Americans, maybe they can help us!” I said to Nadir, trying to yell over the gunshots. I took Nadir’s hand and tried to run to the other building. Nadir let go and stayed back as I crossed the alley. He looked through me with tears in his eyes. “Nadir, come on!” I said, trying to get him to come to me. He couldn’t do it, he just froze in fear covering his ears.

We waited at our two buildings until the shooting calmed down. Nadir was getting ready to run, but he took a bullet to his side on his way. “Nadir! Why didn’t you run when I told you?!” I told Nadir as he started to drift away in my arms.

“Farah, we should have just gone home. I could’ve seen Mom again, and she would’ve made this all better,” Nadir told me as he was gasping for air. My tears showered him as he passed away in my arms. Maybe if I was a better sister, he would’ve been fine.

Tides of Guilt

Lena Kang

Craniotomy. One of the hardest surgeries to date. You've never failed a single one. You look down at your patient. You look at the immaculately clean instrument in your plastic gloved hand. You look at those pink, familiar spirals, exposed for your eyes to see. An uncommon surgery. One you've done more times than most due to your unorthodox reputation, and one you feel confident in.

But you're not stupid. You're one of the most perceptive people around. You can notice the slight shake in your hands, the uncomfortable feeling of your heart beating in your chest too loudly, the sound of your breath falling short of its usual slow, calm pace. Is this how confidence feels like? Does it feel like time simultaneously going too slow yet too fast at the same time? Like the clock was deafening in your ears, and all you could do was watch it go to 12? The painful signal of the next day ringing in your ear, reminding you that, yes, your mother still hasn't gotten up. Yes, you still haven't seen her move.

Yes. You'll never see her smile again.

This isn't confidence. You knew that much, even if you were disturbingly detached from your emotions. Yet you still took on this surgery, or else your patient would surely die. He couldn't afford anyone else. You were his only hope. Kei was his name. His words before he went under were, *"Thank you! I'm glad I have someone as reliable as you to save me."*

Usually, such words wouldn't shake you so much. You've heard them an insurmountable amount of times. You have plenty of experience in the medical field. And even then, not a single death on your hands. That didn't mean you've never seen a patient die at the table before. Even then, it didn't phase you. It wasn't on your hands, and nor was it uncalled for. Death happens all the time at hospitals. Issues like these were a constant. You were used to it from the get-go. You were always calm. You were the perfect doctor by most standards.

Yet, your head was pounding. Your eyes were bloodshot. You felt like your skin was crawling and your bones were crumbling into jagged pieces, scratching your flesh with piercing cuts. You've never felt like this before. What was this accursed pain?

Blood on the floor, red on her lips, her eyes still, her hands limp.

She's just fainted again. She's in your arms, she's still here. She can't be dead, you're holding her right now! You're supposed to cure her. You will! You promised! You feel her pulse again. It's been 2 minutes.

You've checked the clock multiple times. You know it's been 30.

You're back at the operating table. You feel the sweat on your forehead. You feel Kei's pulse. You *see* it. The brain pulses with the heart after all. Most people don't know the heart actually beats in a spiral form, and not in neat lines. It's a spiral. It's a spiral. It's a *spiral*—

You feel like you're going in circles. You feel like you just started this surgery. You look at the clock. It's been almost an hour. You don't recall time passing so fast. You don't remember it feeling so heavy. You've never realized that Kei's eyes were blue. Nor that his face looks strange without a grin.

*You never realized your mother's **dead**.*

It's your fault. You know it. You should've made a cure in time. You should've just taken that funding deal, even if unethical. You should've saved her. You didn't save her. **You killed her.**

HER BLOOD IS ON YOUR HANDS.

Your hands are clean. Washed with vigor. Pale blue rubber covers your fingers and palms. Yet you know they're tainted. You *see* it. You see the red splatters against the material. You see the dirt from the hesitation and poor decisions your hands have done. That *you've* done.

Your eyes are on the clock again. 3 hours. You're always done by 2.

You look down. You look up. You look down again. Your hands tremble. Your eyes water. Your breath falters. How long has this been going for? You look up again.

6 hours.

You look down...

His heart stops.

You feel like yours does too.

Maybe his heart had already stopped for a while. You touch him. He's cold. They're always cold. Death was an inevitable frost. That's the second patient dead under your personal care. That's another sea of blood on your hands.

*You look down. Her eyes. They do not blink. They do not even see. You can tell. Her eyes, once full of life, looked just the same as a failed patient. You know for a fact you are holding her, but her frigid skin tells you that you're not. It's not **her**.*

*Your mind is filled with waves. Waves of confusion, waves of regret. You've never felt emotions much before, yet in such a short amount of time you're drowning in them. You can't breathe. There's guilt filling your lungs. You close your eyes. You let yourself be swept away by the tides. This was the first time in years you let yourself lose consciousness on purpose, and you hoped you'd lose it forever. You wish to drown in this feeling. You wish once you closed your eyes, **they'd never open again**.*

You've been watching the clock for hours now. Kei's still on the table. It's your fault again. You feel a foreign warmth against your cheek rolling slowly down your face.

Another death, and you are still here.

Why are you still here? If you can't make a cure for your mother, then **who is it for?**

Blood on the floor, from your hand it drips, your eyes watery, your sanity slips.

You almost laugh at the question. The answer was so obvious after all.

It used to be for **two**, now it's just for **you**.

Dreamer and Dream

Jamie O'Brien

You told me you were an aspiring Baroque painting (a painting, not a painter). Your knees shelved your chin as you insisted that being perceived as overembellished perfection was your birthright. In the driver's seat, I complimented your ambition in the name of benignity. But I didn't believe you could ever replicate perfection, because cheap bourbon and burger-joint takeout landscaped the air, and all the perfect people I knew smelt of printer paper. The radio answered everything else for me. Like it could hear my jealousy and feared your eavesdropping. The car door creaked in obedience some eight miles from your neighborhood, a pause bookmarking it for deliberation.

"Did I miss a turn?" I asked.

You heaved yourself into traffic like airport luggage. Your heels lacerated the rain-slick expanse of the intersection, the storm's wetness saturating the pleats and straps of your corduroy dress. My bellows were futile, strangled by the downpour. You disappeared behind an onslaught of cars, bookcased inexplicably, almost apparitionally, into the night. Whisked away like a dandelion in a garth.

Silly thing—I swore I'd seen you on billboards or bannered on shop windows downtown, showbiz angst boasting commercialized pleasures: placebo energy drinks, lip plumpers, dieting pills. You were always backlit or vignetted in warmth, donned in vermillion. I suppose you told agents your seasonal palette was autumn. I saw more spring.

An untitled hard-cover book you'd left gathered dust in my front compartment for a week. I'd hoped you would materialize somewhere to take it from me. Not because I liked you or your arrogance, but because it was right. My lunch break persuaded me into humoring you, so I flipped through the jaundiced pages, corners bent like beckoning hands. Half of them were blank. There were no credits, no author's signature. Reading further revealed it to be a biography with a narrator who shared my first

name. Blocks of text, too, articulated the curious zeal of my youth, detailed the insecurities of my adulthood. Chapter three, proudly titled *Tooth Fairy*; Chapter ten, *Dropout*; Chapter eighteen, *Taxi*.

I went to snap the book's spine, but sat still, fingers gripping either side of it like a wheel. It was an eerie coincidence—nothing phantasmal—but still my stomach churned. Maybe to purge itself of shame. The unfeeling shell of the taxi smothered my brooding until the horizon halved the sun.

Days washed over me like a dream to counter the exhaustion that trailed them. Or maybe to give me the time needed to repossess myself. Driving anointed me in the illusion of travel, gave me the incentive to move, to appear well, even if I was not. And if I jumped through enough hoops, I could pretend I was important. I catalyzed tourism. Businessmen and professors in the backseat were too encumbered to notice my imprint on the world. The taxi meter put chickpeas and canned peaches on the dinner table because I knew when to settle. My habit of keeping the windows up was to spite the chill, not pane my face from judgment.

It was noon when I saw you again. My taxi sat nooked in a remote corner where students would smoke and huddle for warmth. Distance pillowed the jingle of a shop's doorbell as customers substituted each other. My own door creaked, inviting a spiteful breeze to chill me no less than you did.

Your eyes weren't the same, dull instead of feline. A wool scarf lassoed your neck far too tight. It was characteristic of city dwellers, skin bogged and discolored after facing the urbanized beehive bustle of the streets. New York's archetype. It dampened my envy. Something else clawed at the opportunity to be known but stung the back of my throat like vomit. Finding comfort in the backseat, you asked the silence to drive you home.

You, quietly as I rounded a curb: "A Dance to the Music of Time."

"What?"

You were referring to a Baroque painting—Nicolas Poussin’s magnum opus. Poussin depicted wealth, labor, poverty, and pleasure as humans footprinting a dustbowl floor in the shape of a ring. A wheel of fortune spun from our infancy. Eyes glinting like knives, you insisted that despite Poussin’s confidence, your future wasn’t up to chance. You told me your life wouldn’t represent a circle. It’d be a rope, serpentine and ready to be knotted over and over. When I tried to meet your face in the rearview mirror, I only saw my own.

The Ride To Birchwood

Journey Grace

October 15th, 1875

“My Lady, you will be late for your train if you don’t leave now,” Gertrude, my maid, says. I rush down the stairs and out the door.

“Alavar!” I call. “We need to leave!”

He dismounts his horse, hands the reins to a servant, and steps into the carriage. My heart flutters with excitement as the trees begin to speed past. Finally, after an hour and a half, we reach the railroad platform. Alavar and I turn many a head as we step from our carriage, so I force myself to push my excitement down—only to draw my back uncomfortably straight, and hold my head high.

“Now we wait.” Alavar sighs as we sit on a bench. I lay my head on his shoulder, then my face breaks out in a smile and I giggle.

“What is it, Livy?” he asks.

“This is our first real trip together!”

“You don’t count eloping as a trip?” he laughs.

“I said first real trip!” I exclaim.

We had been the talk of the town a few months ago. Young Alavar Hawthorn, eloping with Livy Ellis, whose family had only just begun to make a name for themselves. Our parents had wanted each of us to marry other people, but our hearts paid no attention to what they thought, and on a warm summer night, we’d run away together.

“At least we’re not going to pan for gold. Just the other day, Conrad told me men are going mad searching for it.” Alavar says.

“My father used to say, ‘There’s honor in working for your riches. Not hoping that, by chance, you’ll happen upon enough gold to feed twenty for a lifespan.’ And when he put it that way, it did seem pretty ridiculous.” I say.

Then the train pulls up with a whoosh and loud hiss. A young man comes to take our bags, and we step up onto the train. The seats are cushioned with red velvet, and the glass and wood of the windows are polished, reflecting my face. We sit down, and in twenty minutes, which feels like an eternity, the train rumbles away from the platform.

My eyes wander to the passengers. In the row next to us, a man and his wife tell a story to three of their small children, while an older boy stares out a window, trying not to seem interested in it. In front of us, an elderly woman wearing three long rows of pearls around her neck, tells her husband the latest gossip, but she doesn't notice that he's nodding off.

We have our own seats, but people in the second, and third classes often share one. I'm grateful for my status and wealth; Alavar and I donate to orphans and charities often, but most of our class turn their heads away from the oppression of the people. I know Native Americans were pushed out of the way when the railroad had been built, and Chinese immigrants worked for little pay in dangerous conditions, and while the railroad is amazing, I wish it had been built with more consideration.

The train rushes past wide plains and rivers. Soon the sun reaches its highest point.

"What do you think Jane and Aspen will say when they see us?" I ask Alavar.

"Jane will probably cry, 'Aunt Livy!' and not pay attention to me," I laugh as he says this. "But Aspen will show both of us his latest sketches."

"He really has come a long way since his adoption. In fact—" The screeching of the brakes cuts into my sentence. "What's happening?"

"There must be something in the way," Alavar says, trying to look out the window like the others. Soon the conductor comes and explains the situation.

"A herd of cattle is crossing the tracks, slowly," he adds under his breath. "But we will be en route as soon as possible." Then he walks to the second-class car. Several passengers grumble loudly.

“More time I get to spend with you,” Alavar whispers.

I smile back at him, and we continue our conversation. Soon, the herd comes into view; beautiful cattle, splashed with chestnut and white, follow men on horses, while the solid-colored ones bring up the rear. When the tracks are finally clear, the train comes back up to speed. By the end of the day, we reach our destination, and a carriage awaits us.

The sun is setting by the time we arrive at Hollingsworth Manor, and when we walk in the door, Jane shouts ‘Aunt Livy!’ and to Alavar’s surprise, “Uncle Alavar!” then wraps her arms around his neck as he picks her up. Aspen shows us his new train toy after we greet my sister and her husband.

“You like trains?” I ask.

He nods.

“Then we’ve got a story for you,” Alavar begins.

Pup

Noelle Aafedt

Four days prior to his upcoming birthday, Joseph, or as his mother had so affectionately referred to him from time to time “Joey,” had been playing outside on the swing attached to a playset in their neighboring yard. Humidity had turned the summer afternoon to sticky gloom, though that didn’t bother Joey at all. No, all he wanted was to have fun, and one more thing. To adopt a puppy for his birthday. Not too big of an ask, he assured his parents. He was almost nine years old by then and wasn’t he mature enough to take care of a simple puppy? His mother and father had told him no adamantly for the past few months, so by that point he had given up hope. He’d decided instead to ask for a new toy, some silly plastic thing that all the other kids had been chattering about as kids often do. It wasn’t really what he wanted though, it was what he knew would be easier for his parents.

Joseph remained outside for about an hour, but soon the sky darkened and he heard the low rumbling of thunder, rolling like a train on gravel lined tracks. Cautiously, avoiding puddles left from the storm a day before, he traced his way back to his house. He quickly reached the patio and opened the door. At first he was confused, standing on the cold entryway tile, peering into the house. Was he dreaming? Had something happened when he was out to play? There on the kitchen floor was his father, backed up against the cabinets with tears streaming down his face and a cracked phone in his right hand. Joey heard soft painful sobs emerge from the graying man's mouth.

“dad?”

The next few minutes were spent in tearful explanations. While Joseph’s father had been making dinner, and while Joey himself had been swinging back and forth merrily, there was a knocking at the door. An accident had occurred. The police informed Joseph’s father that his wife had gotten into a car crash.

Joey didn't quite understand what was happening, but he did understand that it was bad. When his father had explained it to him he just stood there at first, but as the seconds passed he began to feel hot tears roll down his cheeks. Joseph and his father remained on the ground crying, with Joey curled in his fathers safe arms for almost half an hour.

Time however, as it always had, kept moving, and eventually came the day of Joey's birthday. His mothers sudden death had soured the event and he almost decided to remain in his bedroom for the day, but he did not. For her, he thought. *I'll be strong for her.*

So, the boy slinked out of his room and into the kitchen, the same kitchen where he had found his father curled up less than a week ago. There on the counter was a cake— if you could even call it that. It was lopsided and lumpy, the frosting had melted and pooled at the bottom, but immediately recognizing it was the work of his father, Joey chose to stay silent. Joseph's father was the savory chef of the family, but when it came to cakes his mom had always been the expert. His father was visible just beyond the counter of the dining room and Joseph entered, trying his best to smile. “Hey dad,” he said, sitting down. “Hey Jo.”

The two sat together in silence for an almost eternal feeling minute until his dad cleared his throat and spoke, “I've got your gift here if you want to open it.” Joseph gave a small nod “sure.” His father produced a medium sized box from below the table and handed it to him. Joey tore at the paper to reveal the plastic packaging inside. It was the drearily plastic toy he had told his folks about, “Thanks dad, I-”

“one more thing.”

His father had said it so fast it startled the boy, but soon after, and once more from under the table, was procured a small letter. Joseph opened it and on the folded paper, in a rough cursive font, were the words:

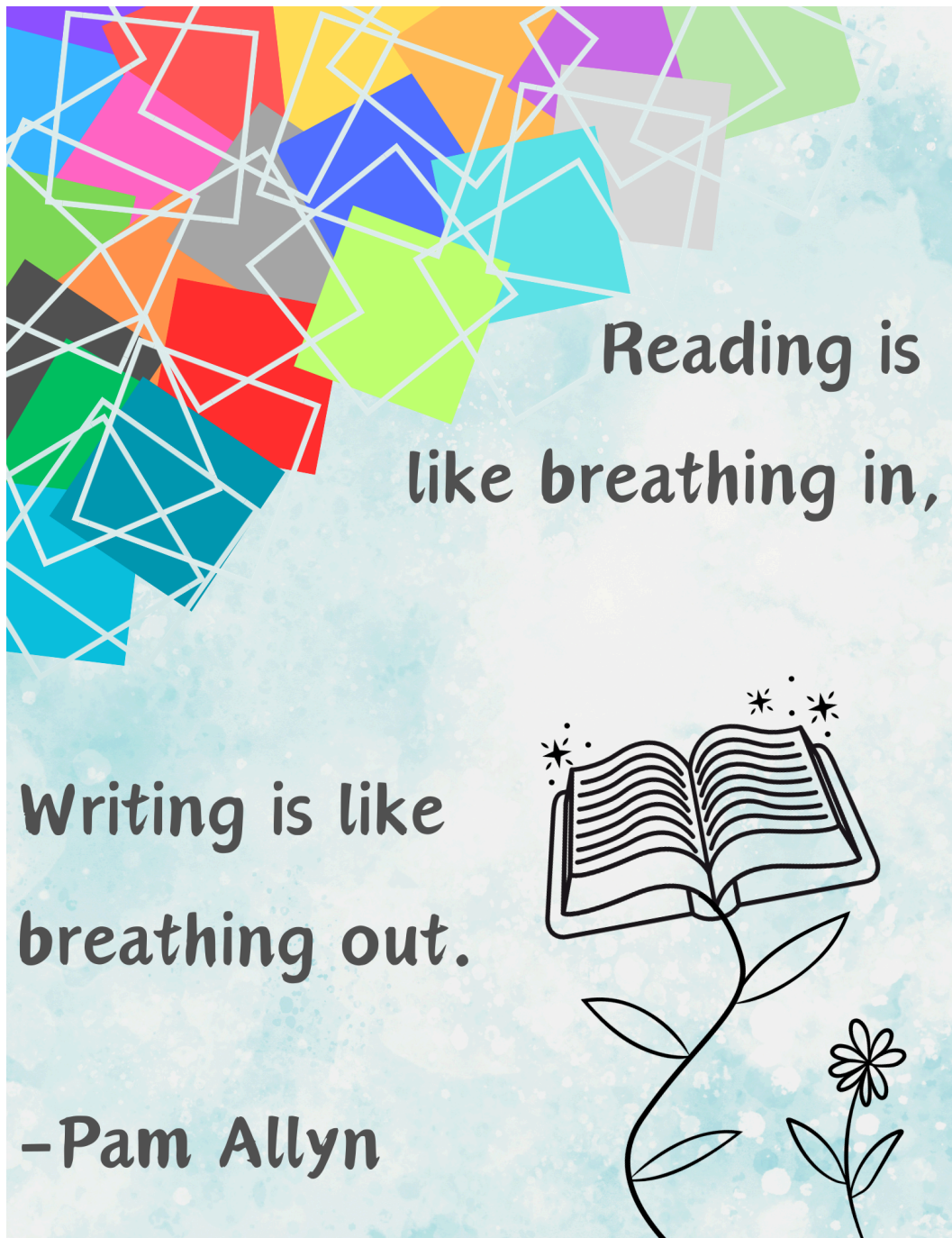
For my incredible son, happy birthday, Joey.

Love, Mom.

Joseph felt tears prickling his eyes as he unfolded the paper which at the very top read “Klark Town Animal Shelter” subtitled “Adoption papers.”

“When they found your mom she had this in her car. She had gone out to get these papers. I didn’t even know until I saw this, your mom always was one for surprises.” Joseph stared at his father in shock, more tears filling his eyes, but this time, they were happy tears. “Go check the backyard, kid.” Joseph did as he was told and ran outside. There on the patio was a small copper dog with a short snout and big paws. She was a boxer with big brown eyes that seemed to go on forever. He raced to the dog and let out choking sobs as he grappled between crying and laughing. His wish had come true, and as he wept, the small pup sat there licking the tears off the small boy's face.





READING IS LIKE

KELSEY VAN VELDHIJZEN



FIRST CAR

JADEN HICKS

In gratitude...

A very special thank you to all the teachers who nurture the hearts and minds of
writers so that they can be, now and in the future,
our scholars, storytellers, and poets.

The writings in this book are winners in the 2024 Young Writers Contest for Oklahoma students, sponsored by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English (OKCTE). The contest is a way for OKCTE to encourage teachers and students to extend their classroom writing to public spaces and by doing so give voice to the lives of Oklahoma youth.



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