

O F F
C E N T E R



Issue 4: Fall 2019
ISSN# 2475-9805
Sidney Blaylock, Jr.
Brielle Campos
Jordan Russ

Off Center

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The front cover has a picture of a vintage black typewriter. Coming out of it is a sheet of paper with a light bulb with a “W” in the center, which is one of the Writing Center’s logos.

Off Center: A Publication of the University Writing Center

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Table of Contents

- 4 Letter from the Editor Sidney Blaylock, Jr.
- 5 Untitled Josh Beasley
- 6 The Permeable Literary Brain Bailey Hilliard
- 12 Grand Jete Jessjoie Curada
- 14 Rose Shane Keene
- 16 Untitled Nora Chisamore
- 18 Infinite Jessjoie Curada
- 20 Roads Jude Romines
- 23 Ad Astra Amy Harris-Aber
- 25 The World is Not in Black and White Nora Chisamore
- 27 Tender Touch Jessjoie Curada
- 29 Grapes for Dessert Amy Roberts
- 30 I Can, I Shall, I Must Andrew Williams
- 33 Art of Frozen in Time Jessjoie Curada
- 36 Will Amy Harris-Aber
- 37 Two Sides to the Story Andrew Williams
- 39 The Wind Sees All Bailey Hilliard
- 45 Untitled Mikayla Dahlgren

47 Faith Shane Keene

48 Dragon Nora Chisamore

50 Puss in Boots (a retelling) Brielle Campos

A Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Fall 2019 issue of Off Center. We have a great selection of fiction, nonfiction, artwork, and images from the talented and creative MTSU community. In order to reflect the UWC's mission of revision and reflection, we have included composers' commentaries for many of the works. We hope to include more going forward! Many thanks to the writers and artists featured in the issue for their wonderful and evocative works.

Sidney Blaylock, Jr. [signature in cursive]

Sidney Blaylock, Jr.

Editor in Chief

[The bottom right-hand corner has a picture of a round coffee cup stain with a few drops of coffee also staining the page.]

Untitled Josh Beasley

[Photograph of Kirksey Old Main from a corner angle. The camera is pointed upwards, so the building only takes up the bottom third of the frame while the upper two-thirds of the frame are filled with sky and wispy pink and golden clouds.]

The Permeable Literary Brain Bailey Hilliard

The sweet, alluring sound of rusting book pages has been the constant source of adventure in your life. As you pinch the covers of a book between your fingers and feel each page graze the tip of your thumb, your mind is racing with the endless possibilities which this book could hold. The whisperings of the words eternally bound by ink to each page are infinitely more tempting and decadent than the richest dark chocolate torte. Jumping into the spine of a book and allowing the characters to envelop you in their conversations and adventurous escapades feeds your mind and soul in unparalleled ways. This is due to the fact that you tend to be a permeable membrane; inspirations leak into your personality and instantly repaint the walls of your characteristics. This mental plumbing problem is both a blessing and a curse (in high school it was most definitely a curse). You have been cautioned against and bragged upon because of your inflamed, passionate spirit and limitless imagination.

It is not possible for you to read the page of a book without completely immersing yourself into the setting and characters. After reading *Gone with the Wind* when you were twelve, you searched every vintage shop in Memphis with crazed determination until you unearthed a hoopskirt and frilly yellow dress that would merit the approval of Scarlett O'Hara (not Vivien Leigh). Upon turning the final page of *Jane Eyre* for the fourth time, you ransacked your house for candlesticks and crept up to the attic door, armed with a burning wick, and pretended to hear the lurid cackling of Bertha Antoinetta Mason. This absorptive predisposition has not faded with age: this past summer you were reading *Undaunted Courage* while backpacking in Colorado and you could almost hear Seaman's bark bouncing off of the walls of the ravines. If someone were to raid the hidden stacks of journals you keep tucked away in your room, they would discover how easily the voices of literature bleed into your writing. Around the age of eleven, you experienced the radical realization that maybe you could carve eloquence out of the mental gibberish swirling around in your brain. So, you swiped one of your dad's beloved Moleskin notebooks and a black ink pen, and allowed your favorite pieces of the dictionary to slip from your lips and be translated from sounds to letters through the pen, and onto the page. Your imagination found life and expansive freedom with that glorious black ink pen. It transported you to every area of your map which had been intentionally pierced by a thumb tack with forceful determination.

But you have a lot to say and this is becoming the type of introduction most high school English teachers

would massacre with their devilish red pens, and bracket with the words “Too long! The introduction should only be one paragraph with a three-pronged thesis dutifully stapled onto it as the last sentence. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.” But luckily you did not attend a school with cookie-cutter English teachers, and therefore you are not afraid of extending your introductory paragraph past the restricting boundary of a measly corralled bunch of sentences. Writing is meant to be experimental and empirical in its construction; it is not meant to be wordsmithing Alcatraz and an upchuck of literary information restrained with inhibiting formalities. Regardless of that, you need to funnel your thoughts into a thesis which will weave the fibers of your experiences as a reader and writer into a tapestry displaying nineteen years of life on this planet. Every single one of those years has been left marred by a burn mark of pain, but all nineteen have also been catalogued by words and stories, either written by your hand, or the hand of another. Your thesis is a statement which is the bedrock of your very being: words, whether written or read, have shaped your character and permeated your brain to create a fervor for literature, and the simple act of picking up a pen, which bleeds uncontrollably into every aspect of your life.

In order to fully grasp the weight of this fervor, a history must be chronicled. You were exorbitantly blessed to be raised in a home which was infused with love and literature. Books are treated with the utmost respect in the Hilliard household. Both of your parents practically inhale them and seek undiscovered knowledge with unquenchable thirsts. Bedtime stories were equated with the value of potty training and were never skipped or shortened. (To do so would have been an unforgivable crime.) It is almost as impossible to vacation on Venus as it is to find a room in your house which is devoid of a bookshelf. However, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in your room is the cream of the crop, the pick of the litter, the prize pumpkin at the county fair, et cetera. Throughout the years, you have caused the wood of each shelf to bend to your maniacal, nerdy will by wedging fictions and nonfictions into every available space before shifting your merciless focus to the next shelf. These layered shelves also house the various trinkets of your cherished travels: shells from foreign beaches, rocks from the riverbeds of the West, and pressed flowers from golden fields long forgotten. Your entire life could be seen through the shelves of this personal library. The earliest, warmest memories of your childhood involve coloring the empty, white canvas of that bookshelf with the prismatic spine of a book. This corner of your room has offered you more solace than any warm hug or steaming cup of hot chocolate ever could. The words, people, and places on each page of each book have been the source of countless smiles, and even the occasional and uncharacteristic tear. (Louisa May Alcott, you know what you did . . . ****cough, cough**** Beth!). Books have offered you escape routes and hideaways; they taught you loyalty, empathy, and how to respect a perspective

different from your own, among countless other lessons. One of the main reasons why you have this fervor for literature and writing is because of Westminster Academy; the school which breathed lively passion into academics, but at a strenuous cost.

Westminster is not just some school you decide to attend because it has a funky, ancient-sounding name and a full suit of armor in the lobby. The student body count, kindergarten through twelfth grade, comes to the grand total of about three hundred to three hundred and fifty. The reason for this comparatively miniscule student enrollment is that Westminster is a classical Christian, honors track school which requires academic excellence from each attendee. You study oftentimes ignored, but exceedingly valuable, subjects such as logic, Latin, rhetoric, and capstone. Like Harry Potter, Westminster had four houses (Columba, Athanasius, Becket, and Boniface) which were in a state of constant competition for ownership of the house cup. Every inch of that school has been coated in classical ideologies and it is an unbelievably rare and exquisite education which is certainly worth the scholastic hardships. (It has taken you three years to be able to write that sentence, but more on that later.) This school was like an intimate academic colony because of the remarkably small headcount it yielded. The people in your grade were your best friends (all 20 of them) because you spent most of your week with them, plus no one from any other school understood the strained difficulty of attending Westminster. You sympathized with Jimmy Lee when reading *The Essay* because you also attended school with the people you had grown up with, something that was uniquely special, but could also be painfully poisonous. Students who had a weak or even moderately strong sense of diligence and self-discipline never survived more than a year without running for the less rigorous hills. But you absolutely and wholeheartedly loved it. Every school day was seven hours filled with undiscovered knowledge waiting to be unearthed. You developed intensely high standards for your academic performance which have never tarnished or lost their emphasis. Westminster planted and harvested the fruits of your mind, as well as inflaming your love of turning the pages of a book and touching the tip of a pen to a blank piece of paper. In third grade, you were selected to be the female recipient of The Rutherford Award for your class. Although you were young, the prestige of that award did not go unrecognized, for the female and male students selected to be awarded this title were the students who displayed the most dedication and love for academics out of all of their peers. It was not an honor administered at random and could never be bestowed a second time to the same student. Along with the sheer joy of hearing your name announced, you were also given the gift of a mysterious square-shaped package wrapped in silky, gold paper. Upon ripping the corner of the metallic wrapping paper, your fingertips slid across the edges of a book. A book! What could be a better reward for all of your hard work than a book? However, after you had removed the

the paper from the entire book, you quickly came to the realization that this was one of the most elegant works of literature your eyes had ever seen. It was a hardback collection of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* with dark forest green covers which were embroidered with gold thread, and a silky ribbon which acted as a bookmark sewn into the spine. This book has nourished your vivacious imagination on numerous occasions and remains the most treasured book on your beloved bookshelf. It was on that fateful Tuesday when you clumsily stumbled up to the podium to receive the mystical square package that you fully embraced your affection for academics, which was fueled by the literature your mind hungrily consumed.

Besides receiving The Rutherford Award, you were selected to present your work in the Student Works Assembly, an opportunity which only presented itself once a year, and was the most esteemed honor the school could award a student. You were asked to present your work three times during your academic career at Westminster from kindergarten through tenth grade. You were recognized for your writing on all three occasions and asked to read papers and short stories written in your hand. Soon it became apparent that you were not abysmal with sentence structuring and phrasing; in fact, you thoroughly enjoyed writing and editing your assignments no matter the subject. In seventh grade you began Upper School, the second part of the Westminster education and you passed over the threshold of your first English class with bated breath. Mrs. Ammons, the teacher, glided in the door from the hallway, spoke one sentence, and you were practically vibrating with excitement for the year to come. She expertly fanned the flame of your passion for classical literature every day from her inspiring orations in the front of the classroom. For your birthday that year you requested hard cash, and not to anyone's surprise, immediately took it to Barnes & Noble where you purchased two hundred dollars' worth from their collection of classical texts. The classics shelf of your personal library blossomed overnight. Mrs. Ammons patiently assisted you with your writing and soon became one of your favorite people in the entire world. You abundantly admired her unapologetic affection for literature and grammar, and the way in which she referred to books as though they were cherished friends instead of lifeless pieces of paper glued to another piece of paper. When your schoolwork began to feel more suffocating than enthralling, her classroom morphed into a place of consolation with a calming, gentle atmosphere.

Due to a myriad of reasons, you left Westminster after your tenth grade year. (Comically enough, so did Mrs. Ammons. It was a horrible year for the school). The education which had fed your soul and quenched your thirst for unexplored academic knowledge had become a breeding ground for stress so tangible it caused hair to fall out of your scalp . . . not an enjoyable experience. Because of your highly rigid personal standards, you were forcing yourself to perfect your work and operate on less than four hours of sleep per night. Therefore, you began to consider the unthinkable:

Westminster Academy. Your father had wanted to enroll you in a different school for years because of the restricting demands Westminster required (you had absolutely no life outside of competitive dance and school), but your mother had taught first grade at the school and been a part of its private colony for over a decade. She was not in favor of the idea of you switching scholastic train tracks. However, your exhaustingly ruthless and uncharacteristically brutal behavior on a spontaneous Christmas trip to New York immediately after exam week, otherwise known as hell week, intensely frightened her and caused her to realize the dire need of taking you out before things progressed in an even more negative direction. You have never been the person who journals consistently. Rather, you have always been an unscheduled and unregulated notebook writer, and the things scribbled into the pages of the days lived during your sophomore year are not Dr. Seuss-like to say the least. But writing outside of school became your necessary catharsis. It allowed you to throw open a mental window and unleash the harbored emotional weight which had been building up for years. When the final decision that you would not be returning to Westminster for your final two years of high school was made, you embarrassingly wept with joy and wanted to burn your Saddle Oxfords on the spot. But instead of casting them into a fire, you decided to keep them as tokens of war and proof of your resilience.

The following year was spent homeschooling yourself and finishing all of your required high school classes in preparation for your senior year, which would be spent in the intimidating classrooms of the University of Memphis as a dual enrollment student. That eleventh-grade year was, in other words, a twelvemonth-long brain vacation. You were FINALLY able to read books which were not required reading, and you read them ravenously. Your Moleskin notebooks remained leather bindings of solace but were no longer routinely tearstained during the wee hours of the night. The ratio of school to pleasure reading/writing was utterly flipped on its head, and you lived in coffee shops with your face buried deeply into a lovely piece of literature. Despite your fears and reservations, your senior year was boundlessly rewarding. The schoolwork required was slightly more time-consuming than the previous year, but there remained plenty of hours for perusing bookstores, settling down with a cappuccino, and reading the last sentence of a new book before flipping back to the first page and reading the beginning sentence.

After completing a decent amount of dual enrollment credits, it was time to begin considering what degree you wanted to put them towards in college. You idiotically decided on double majoring in fashion merchandising and journalism in the hopes of becoming a fashion journalist despite the fact that the answer was always English or history whenever you asked yourself what major you could most easily see yourself fitting into and pursuing past this initial four-year degree. The probable reasons for this are because English felt too comfortable and you were not confident

enough in your writing capabilities to see yourself earning a career through them. Technically speaking, you were being a coward. It became crystal clear extremely quickly that you were not meant to be in journalism or fashion at all. You craved the feeling of writing papers and thinking analytically about literature. This all-consuming scholastic craving led you to the hallowed passageways of Peck Hall. The joy and unspeakable fulfillment you have found in being an English major is unparalleled. This semester you have sat down at your desk to write numerous papers, but each hour spent translating your thoughts into sentences is time spent in happy contentment. You are still not extremely, one hundred percent confident in your writing and it is harder than scaling a mountain untethered to read your personal scribblings aloud. For example, and a brief interlude of comedic relief, the other day you had to read your adaptation of Nancy Sommers's brilliant essay *I Stand Here Writing* to Dr. Pantelides's class, and although you were immensely pleased with what you had written, you read each sentence at the speed of one hundred miles per hour and your voice quaked like a 7.9 magnitude earthquake. You had never read anything remotely personal to a crowd of people, and that was more unnerving than any prior life experience. But your humiliation has faded, and you are proud of the work you produced in those few pages. Knowing there are still over two more years of classes to take and bits of knowledge to absorb are things that fill you with excitement and joyful impatience.

Countless friends and hobbies have entered and exited your life, but your fervor for literature and the feeling of a pen gracefully moving across a blank page has never faded or lost its luster. In every phase of your life, books have provided you with security and strengthened your imagination. Every author's words that you have carefully read have permeated the membrane of your literary brain and left their individual impressions upon your life. Taking a class such as *Writing and the Literary Imagination*, which is focused on simply reading texts and considering their personal implications, as well as their multi-layered meanings, was like moving into your mental, scholastic dream house. The experimental and notably beneficial project of digitally constructing a tiny house for an assigned character gives this analogy a comedic realness. Escaping to India with Adiga and Alicante with dynamic duo of Middleton and Rowley are explorations which have made this class one of the most prominent reasons you have so thoroughly enjoyed your first semester as an English major. And so, your passion for the written word has been intensified in the face of due dates and ridiculously late nights spent hunched over your laptop, fueled by the rigid determination acquired from your days at Westminster, trying to make your typing fingers keep up with your racing mental stream of thought. Your entire life could be chronicled not in years and calendars, but in the books read and words written during those three hundred and sixty-five-day periods of time.

Grand Jeté Jessjoie Curada

[Photograph of a woman performing a ballet jump. She is in midair, her arms are pointed upward perpendicular to the ground and her legs are split at a forty-five degree angle to the ground, her left leg pointing downward and her right leg pointing upward. She wears a pink top and denim shorts, and she is in a white parking garage with plenty of sunlight streaming in. The picture is bound with a wooden frame, like something one might see on a coffee table].

Artist Commentary: Grand Jeté

Jessjoie Curada

Medium: Digital photography.

This photo was taken in an apartment hotel and the session was my first time creating dance portraits. The location was a parking garage and I experimented around to find certain backgrounds to match with certain dance poses. I then saw a leading line near the side of the garage and thought of the grand jeté (pose presented in the photo) and its similar form. I was very lucky to have a talented dance model who successfully matched the leading line that ultimately created great repetition within the composition.

Rose Shane Keene

I hear her wonderful voice, As
It tells me to rejoice. It attacks,
and it heals, It reflects, and it
seals, The fate of man, and
morality, That fatal sin, and
mortality, The Rose, the
ultimate duality.

So beautiful and frail, Yet she
walks on rails. No one dares to
get in her way, Lest they be led
astray, By Her ability to use
humanity, To revoke
responsibility, And make
anything a possibility.

Her bright red dress,
Seemed to address, My own
heart, and hers. It brought
clarity, and blurs. So
mysterious in its beauty, It
relieved me of life's duty. Oh
that sweet Rose's beauty!

Every word resonating with me,
My heart, overwhelmed by glee.
Blind, yet content. Dying, still I
forget. No more fleeing, No
more believing, For now I have
meaning.

Alas, It was gone before it
began, And I never want her
again. A Foundation of lies,
Made of rotten meat and flies.
Vultures fly overhead As I'm
trying not to lose my head. Why
can't they take her instead?

She pricks me again and again
Always claiming to be my friend. Her
beauty entices, But it's all
just devices. Tools of deceit and
hatred, Her petals, beautiful and
sacred, Her thorns, horrible and
hated.

I hear her terrible voice, As It tells
me to rejoice. It attacks, and it
steals, It dissects, and it seals,
The fate of man, and morality,
That fatal sin, and mortality, The
Rose, such a horrid formality!

Artist Commentary Shane Keene

I have been writing poetry for a little over two years now, and it's always been an outlet for my feelings. Most of what I write is just organized thoughts that happen to be bouncing around my head. I really only ever write if I'm angry about something, usually because of mindsets that I feel deserve criticism. When I'm not criticizing society as I see it, I'm usually writing introspectively. Because of this, none of my writing is very cheerful, I like to keep things as realistic as possible.

Much of what has influenced my writing are the same as what influenced my personality. Comedians like George Carlin and Bill Hicks greatly influenced how I view the world, with skepticism being at the core of my views. For me romanticizing things is just not in my mindset. Other influences on what I write are actually from YouTube. People like Sargon of Akkad, Armoured Skeptic, TJ Kirk, and Chris Raygun all instilled this idea of skepticism in me, regardless of their political viewpoints. Although I can't say I agree with a lot of what these YouTubers put out nowadays, that core idea of questioning your own ideas and others is still prevalent in all of them. It's through that that I realized I needed an outlet to criticize the ideas I came across on the daily, and poetry seemed like the perfect medium for me.

My writing process is very simple and disjunct: I don't ever use outlines or any sort of planning. I tend to just write and see what happens, and then comb through the words to build a structure. I only write when I want to or feel inspired by something, simply because forcing things has never really worked for me. This might sound like I'll run out of ideas but I get multiple ideas every single day just from interactions with people. All it takes is one word for me to get me going. Often times I'll start with a title, because whatever that title will give me ideas of where I want to go. Writing for me is very fluid and emotionally raw. As for the structure I use, I usually rhyme one line after the other in couplets just because I feel like it emphasizes each line's importance, it's what comes natural to me. I don't write in meter most of the time simply because I find it restricting. Instead what I do is try to make it flow like more of a song which to me adds a pretty similar effect as meter without all the restrictions. For me, too many rules usually just makes me not want to write. The best advice I could ever give a writer is to do what comes natural to you, but make sure it still accomplishes the overall purpose of what you're writing.

Untitled Nora Chisamore

I cannot live without you—
but it seems I must—
must learn,
must try,
must live.

For me you were the world—
Now the world must be redefined,
for how else can you be gone—
yet I'm still me?
till learning,

I can do it, of course—I must.
If I cannot live with you
I will live for you,
For without you I am lost.

[In the bottom right-hand corner of the page is a graphic of two orange flowers with five petals each on stems].

Artist Commentary: Untitled Nora Chisamore

“Untitled” is a poem that I wrote over winter break. I went to a youth conference and attended a workshop where we were asked to write something that started with a line from an Emily Dickinson poem. I chose to use the line “I cannot live without you” and to make it a poem.

Infinite Jessjoie Curada

[Photograph of a subway tunnel. On the right side is a row of pillars, on the left side are the tracks surrounded by the circular tunnel, and overhead are lights. All of these recede in seemingly endless lines].

Artist Commentary: Infinite Jessjoie Curada

Medium: Digital photography.

I have always had a fondness for finding straight lines and perspective in our environment. I believe it showcases a great sense of structure and form and ultimately creates a visually appealing composition. I was in a subway station in Chicago, and while waiting for the train, I looked at one end of a tunnel and saw how far and infinite the lines could go and captured it at that moment.

Roads Jude Romines

my body is a lonely road,
far-flung blacktop winding,
overrun by thistle and neglect,
daylily-soul in hiding.

the forsythia speaks in whispers when
it can,
but words are hard to come by.
i ask this road,
“can i be a man?”
the plants sing me a lullaby.

but over bracken-song
and roadside chants inspiring,
a steady hum, a heavy drum,
the path: it goes on winding.

and of its course, my mind
simply can't accept;
where i beg for straight,
it defies in curves,
and my soul will not connect.

the weeds, they try to calm me,
as i whet my hands on loathing.
they croon that being out of place
doesn't end the chase
for a life that's worth owning.

but i ignore them fast
as i let the past
ball my fists in outrage.

i grab the singers by their roots,
clip their lyrics, veins, and lutes,
in the hopes their absence will be
binding.

but the path: it goes on winding.

and the blacktop glistens with debris;
there's pools of difference at my feet.
(i rip and tear to feel complete.)

giddy-spent, devoted,
i whisper,
crescent-green, my fingers stained.
i make my vow,
because i know now,
that i can endure the pain:

“i have a map of my own design
that i will this road to follow,
and to bend its path, to claim what’s
mine,
i will shuck its insides hollow.

narrow, broken, and alone,
i am the path less traveled.
the one of fear, and severed cheer,
as this mismatched soul unravels.”

time has passed, and now i walk this
road in shadow,
in the twilight’s dim, the weeds stay
trimmed,
but sometimes i hear their songbreath
rattle.

and i cast a tear
for those years of fear
where i fought this road, my body.

i stifled its song,
because i thought it was wrong
to let my nature write its own doxology.

but now i stare
at these weeds and where
i plucked them from my skin.

if i feel regret
for the scars i’ve kept,
it’s not because i’ve sinned.

no, i’d just like to turn back time,
and accept what it is i own.
because now i have the courage to
love this road,
the strength to call it home.

It feels a little funny to think about this commentary hanging out beside my poem—probably because it’s an emotionally charged piece (at least, it is for me), and I’m pretty sure my doofy babbles on writing are going to make for some harsh contrast. Welp. Here goes anyways:

I’m actually not much of a poet. Stories are my main bag. So when I do poetry, I notice that I tend to incorporate narratives with expositions, conflicts, and resolutions. When I’m scrounging for inspiration, I find it useful to think about an emotion or experience in terms of imagery. Then I use whatever image the emotion or experience evokes as a launching point for a story in verse. For example, in this piece, I associate my body with a winding road. Mainly, my mind just conjures up the image of a road when I close my eyes and think “body.” The bits that come next are more intentional. The fun stuff. Or, at the very least, the cathartic stuff. With that generative base imagery of my body as a road, I spend the rest of the poem playing with complementary metaphors, rhymes, and rhythms to build a story that expresses my relationship with my body.

Yep. And since you’ve read the poem (I mean, probably), I’m sure you’ll understand if we leave the later bits up to interpretation.

As far as inspirations go, Andrea Gibson’s a favorite. They’re a slam poet and activist whose work focuses on politics and queer identities. I suppose what I dig most about their poetry, aside from its social relevance, is its beat. There’s a certain cadence to their performances that makes the verses all the more explosive, dynamic, and emotionally charged. I like to think my stories affect similar rhythms and crescendos. Regardless, Gibson’s definitely a poet I strive to emulate.

(If you’re interested in giving them a listen, I’d suggest “I Sing The Body Electric; Especially When My Power Is Out.”)

Other inspirations include slam poets like Rudy Francisco and Denice Frohman. In terms of prose, I’m a big fan of fiction writers with lyrical styles like Ursula K. Le Guin, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Hanya Yanagihara, Carolina de Robertis.

Ad Astra Amy Harris-Aber

To those who've never been, western Kansas looks like an expansive piece of cardboard stretching for miles in every direction, the primary pallet of which is scrubby brown and dusty green. It's fringed at the sides with crabgrass, sweet clover, and Black-eyed Susans. From November to March, trees appear like stark, dead fingers with sharpened points gesturing upward and wayward. It's Sumi painting on backdrops of sky.

I lived in that space for eighteen years; I found it beautiful. It's possible that you would, too.

The towns there are a far cry from the places of my now.

They weren't "urban" in the way that you likely understand the word. I have friends who say they wouldn't make it because it is tucked away from so much. With this in mind, I'll clarify something for you; Kansans (we) are aware of the greater world. It's just that on a whole Kansans (we) are pragmatic folk.

We know what a damn Macy's is.

We go to Panera, and love art, music, life—just as much as anyone else.

But.

We know the expanse of space; we understand in our bones and gristle what it is to sit on the ground at night, unable to define a horizon's beginning and ending. Laying supine, we stare into—during high summer—a nearly opaque swathe of stars encasing and folding everything into itself; *Via Lactea*, in the Latin.

It's a gift to be simple and the night sky is a sight that's still free.

No charge for admission. In those difficult years between twelve and eighteen, it was the stars and the local NPR stations that connected me. In a world where the internet was still relatively confined to libraries and schools—where owning a cellphone was a privilege reserved for the rich kids whose parents were doctors and bank presidents—I could be completely alone with sky, ground, and wind—listening on my Sony Walkman to news coming through the large arcs and loops of soundwaves that I imagined had already been to all the places I wanted to go.

I would get there, I decided. I would put foot to dirt on other horizon lines.

I fell in love with a mapmaker. His parents were both professors, and so he did not stay stateside during his childhood.

He remembers to me Poland and Estonia. He still tells me about one Christmas Eve when he crossed the Gdansk channel on a ferry. He'd roomed next to Russian sailors who drank vodka and sang songs long into the night; his stomach hurt from the waves.

"Travel is not about comfort," he often tells me. "You find out who you might actually be underneath everything you're used to."

I found this out in the August before we were married. We followed his parents to Poprad, a country town in Slovakia. We slept on straw mattresses and stayed in a house that was haunted by the owner's small, long-dead grandmother.

I could still see her shadow beneath the bathroom doors at night —flitting around the stone floors and perched just below the iconography on her walls.

Every morning, I would greet the tenants of each house next to ours.

Timid, forced „dobrý deň’s “ went unanswered, and the babushkas all stared. It is a country too near Russia for trust.

I don’t (and cannot) fault this logic.

Orthodox churches and statues of Christ sit in town squares. I remember the roadside altars. I threw up in a cemetery on the way to Austria.

Travel is not about comfort.

And I will now tell you two things; you cannot know where you’ll go in this life or how you will get there. You wouldn’t want to, and if you did know—if any of us did—it’d turn to a squishy, seed-strewn mess like the leftover cucumbers in my grandmother’s garden. When I was young, my cousins and I stood in high summer at the garden’s edge, and we lobbed bloated, yellowing hunks of the cucumbers—half-eaten by bugs, or taken by rot—at the side of our barn wall. We’d laugh as they exploded into pieces.

There are some things you can only destroy.

You will go to those places whose existence you admired and dreamed of, but when you get there you may miss where you come from and what you left behind.

I have long since left Kansas.

Before I did, I had pieces of wheat —the spikes, the flag leaves, the blades—tattooed onto the pale skin of my left calf.

One day last January, the mapmaker and I found ourselves on an Auckland bus. We were pointed towards the coastline of the Pacific, and we were all sweat with beet-red cheeks. You have to remember—past the equator, winter is summer.

A woman who looked like she’d had a long day at work saw my leg and asked about my curious mark. It was a true question—she didn’t want to be contentious. She smiled as she asked.

We were making conversation because ... because I think that in big places like cities there is so much everyone that people seem comfortable talking to *anyone*.

I told her the truth, of course. I told her that wherever I go, I want to be able to walk through a field of wheat.

The World is Not in Black and White Nora Chisamore

The world is not in black and white
nor in shades of gray.
Except for printed pages
and photographs from yesteryear.

The world is not in left and right,
though that's how they divide our
brains—
numbers, math, and cold hard facts
or literature and the arts.

Don't tell me that's the way it is,
our brains aren't just one half.
Both sides work in unison—
it's simpler like that.

In science class they see the facts,
we follow the numbers, learn the
terms.
I'm the one with the answers,
the one who knows the words.

In art they see pictures in lines,
life comes in lights and darks, shades
instead of oxygen.
I'm the one who lives for color, for
sparkle,
the one who can feel a texture just by
sight.

I'm neither one nor the other—
neither left nor right.
For what I see are patterns,
be they color-based or number based.

For the world is not in black and
white—
It's a unity bound of mind and soul.

[In the bottom left-hand corner of the page is a graphic that looks like a yellow dollop of paint has splattered on the paper].

Artist Commentary: The World is Not Black and White

Nora Chisamore

“The World is Not Black and White” is a poem that I wrote during a break during my biology lab. When I was walking to the lab that day, I was contemplating how I like both the arts and science, when they are said to take different sides of the brain. So, from that I came up with the idea of the line “the world is not in black and white,” and the line wormed its way into my brain. When I had the chance I wrote it down. When I was typing it, I edited a few lines that were a bit awkward and changed some of the punctuation.

Tender Touch Jessjoie Curada

[Black-and-white photograph of a woman's hands, the right over the left, with long painted fingernails. The photograph is surrounded by a frame with several layers of different shades of yellow].

Artist Commentary: Tender Touch Jessjoie Curada

Medium: Digital photography.

This photo was part of a diptych assignment I had for my Black and White Film Photography class. I looked around my house for objects I could use and I saw several bananas on the dining room table. I then brainstormed about different body parts that could mimic the same curve as the bananas. I looked at my hands and noticed that they had similar forms. Later on, I took a picture of my friend's hands and noticed the quality of the composition is just as strong by itself as it is as a diptych with the bananas.

Grapes for Dessert

Amy Roberts

a few leaves are still clinging to your
stem;

i pluck them and you shiver from the
shock.

your skin, stretched taut around your sweetness,
bulges with effort and
restrains you every exquisite taste.
my teeth release you.

I Can, I Shall, I Must Andrew Williams

I remained myself but nothing has
changed.
I still feel the same way, when I face
the reflection of a person.
That is not me, giving a sermon.
All broken and no signs of recovery.
I am left paralyzed to watch this person.
That is not entirely me crumble and
fall, repeatedly.
Wishing he would just stop talking to
save his own life.
So he can just save his energy.
To fight another day.

I am not myself when I am overpowered
by fear and emotions.
Voices that echoed from the void I
called my conscience.
Telling me it's pointless to form sentences,
That was once remembered for an
audience.
My eyes would wander over to the
brave souls,
That has seen a fraction of myself become
less by the second.
One by one I watched the innocent
conquer the stage.
But when it was my turn I did what
only became natural.
I got up but my mind sat down.
At that moment enlightenment sprang
up within me.
Reaching out to half of me and said:
"It does not matter who I thought I
was.
All that mattered was what I shall
become".
For as I opened my mouth,
Sounds became words,
Words became fragments,
Fragments became sentences.
I cracked, opening up a wormhole in
the galaxy that erased my very
existence.
The podium suffered abuse from my
hand,
As I try to hold on as my life depended
on it.
Once more the darkness swallowed

the very organ that keeps me
breathing.
Immediately, a voice that was soft but
authoritative came within me.
Spoke out: "My child I am the Lord
your God.
I am Alpha and Omega there is no fear
within Me only tranquility.
I stand before you as The Trinity and
the Almighty I am.
I gave Samuel the strength of many
men,
Not even the fiercest opponent could
put fear in his heart.
With Me, You Cannot, Shall not and
Will not be defeated."

The enlightenment had changed the
person that is me.
Looking back at a broken image.
Into someone, I can become.
Miraculously, the void morphed into a
vessel that holds His very existence.
I didn't understand the power within
me.

Overflowing with His love, separated
the atoms in my body.
Until the core of my heart was exposed
to the elements of this world.
Pressurizing it into a treasure chest
that only He & I can unlock.
Tapping into His powerful bloodstream,
liquefy His body.
Then He incarcerated the voices in my
conscience with a unique "breath".
The same breathe that created light
from nothing.
Shoulders broaden and eyes force on
the world.
I opened my mouth and said words
only by the power of God.
"I stand before you not the man I
thought I was but as the man I have
become."

During my last year in high school, there was a talent show contest and the winner got a cash prize. Back then I thought entering the talent show and winning it would be a good idea, but figuring what to do was the hard part until one of my friends gave me the idea of doing a spoken word which became the beginning of my journey of being a poet. She reminded me that poems are supposed to be thoughtful and emotional, sharing with a group of strangers that might judge you but love to hear you speak. So, I began to brainstorm about my “story to share that can move a crowd of strangers that can possibly judge me for doing so!” In high school, I was transitioning from being shy to outgoing. The process of changing myself became a good idea for a spoken word poem.

When I was faced with a group of people I would freeze up and stutter my words. I would panic and think that everyone was talking about me, voices would float in my head making me scared to speak. I kept putting myself in those kinds of situations to get rid of my nervous side. That’s what my mother did when she was young to get rid of her nervousness.

While writing this poem I went through many drafts because I did not know what I was doing. I sought advice from my English teacher, mentors, parents, and friends. My poem has been rewritten, reworded, or even rephrased because I did not fully explain what I wanted to say in my head, and it was not sounding good when I said it out loud. But it was for the best because now I can say my first poem was perfected to my liking and personality.

While bettering myself, I discovered I had a hidden gift of being a good poet. I had to embody this quote “If you do what is easy, your life will be hard, but if you do what is hard, your life will be easy.” Also, I have a group of people that support me and encourage me to do my best in everything. My favorite books are *Live Your Dreams* by Les Brown, *The Secret to Success: When You Want to Succeed as Bad as You Want to Breathe* by Eric Thomas, and The Bible. These books inspired me to write this poem because I was seeking to better myself. Reading these books gave me the power to overcome my fears.

Art of Frozen Time Jessjoie Curada

[Photograph of woman in red jacket and a brown hat holding a camera to her chest. Behind her is a room with white walls, a ceiling with wood paneling, and a clock. The photograph has a frame that looks like an old Polaroid, with its edges dirty, bent, and frayed, and it looks as though it is fixed to the page with a thumb tack].

Artist Commentary: Art of Frozen Time

Jessjoie Curada

Medium: Digital photography.

This photo was taken in an apartment hotel during a photography trip I attended in Chicago. It was the day before I would leave, and I wanted to capture the elegance of the hotel with someone. At the moment, I wanted to freeze time and not leave Chicago, because I was there to create and capture photographs. I was able to take a shot of my friend with her camera in one of my favorite cities, essentially combining my passion and love for travel and photography.

Will Amy Harris-Aber

Once, I bought cologne that reminded
me
of his coat coming off.

There's a metallic kind of smell
when someone comes inside on a day
in January, or maybe late October
that can only happen
under the chilly half-light of a dim,
sad sun—
shining, but never warm.

It was like that.

Tobacco rolling off wool or leather—
out from deep pockets and a blue
scarf
mixing with the air—

It was like that.

I'll miss the chill attached to
gentle light.

Now I know
there are lots of ways we love people.

Presence of absence in the brain recurs.
It's old film circling on the wheel
and it grows brittle—more dear with
each pass.
We rebuild memory, and this is the
danger of telling a story.

Maybe, just now, I can picture emptiness
where something was full.
It takes time to change what was the
real.

But
impressions on silver halide
will set—the shadow will fix.

And
there is a man standing outside,
sunlight and shadow fighting for
space
on his skin and the pavement.
He is smoking a cigarette.

He waves,
but—
I don't remember if he's saying hello.

[On the bottom right-hand corner of the page is a graphic of two tickets, brown with age, that read "ADMIT ONE."]

Two Sides to the Story Andrew Williams

I don't think I live on this earth.
I mean, I live on earth one but there
are two sides to the story.
Flip-flop, top side undergoing the
truth that lies in front of you.
Earth one and Earth Two vertically
transparent
Holding back the beauty they omit.
Splitting image they are but their bodies
are shallows.
Casting nets so far into each other's
souls.
Earth one seems not to care about
Who goes first to explain their mission
or exist.
So he freely rotates around Earth two
by
Her magnetic flux she creates.
Trading her pearl glass slippers for
diamonds,
She stands right side up.
Little more and she's acute.
Feet firmly on the ground she towed
her nose
Blushes her cheeks knowing she's
the star of the night.
Earth one remains stunned as he had
seen a goddess.
An image of a man not responding to
his melted core
That repels him over onto his back, he
stares.
Stares into her eyes that were 50,000
meters of depths in the ocean.
Filled with so much happiness, pain,
and excitement.
He dives headfirst into her sea
That he can see life with her in unity.
As weird as it sounds the water was
quite warm.
It played with his mind as the sun
rays change
Her dark brown eyes into a mixture of
blue and gray strikes of life.

Painted a vivid picture that was remarkably
Aquatic to the creatures in the sea.
But she lives on the land communicating
to birds.
Her voices soften the sky
Smoothens the air with a tune that
shatters glass.
She made Earth one reveal his true
matter.
It didn't matter though;
He was pleased to please her with her
beckoned pleas for me.
Pretty pleas is what really had him
begging for more.
He loved the detailed secret recipes
She politely whispered in his ears.
This invited him into her mind
Which echoes the land to what she
holds dear to her.
She then opens her heart where Yahweh
lives,
Baking a mouth-watering cheesecake
for His faithful and kind daughter.
Can he say amazing when she stares
back at his honey brown eyes?
I think not, but he said wow that ripples
the galaxy
Towards her everlasting flow of tears.
The more he asked, the greater her
story pieced together
His unstable conscience because of
of his observing eyes.
She came from a real-life history of
kings and queens
Crowns related fools.
But they were not fooled because
Her parents don't wear crowns.
They thank God for raising a diamond
literally up
From the ground and the way they did
it, neither is sure of a miracle.
But regardless of the team she still
had to grow as an individual.
Royalty

Artist Commentary: Two Sides to the Story Andrew Williams

At the time, I was in a long-distance relationship with a girl that I thought was the perfect young woman. She was everything I needed and more, I was in love. The name “Two Sides to the Story” came about from my perception of how I saw our relationship and how it felt to be in one. I was in Tennessee for college and she was in The Bahamas working and pursuing her education. We were in two different places from each other, but we both share the same story of falling in love. “I don’t think I live on this earth./ I mean, I live on earth one but there are two sides to the story” came about from a long thought of how I felt when I looked at the wonderful beauty she possessed. I would feel like I was in a different atmosphere, almost like I was on a different planet.

I wrote with my heart. I was Earth One and she was Earth Two. Even though we were far apart from each other, we communicated every day. Sharing and laughing with each other felt like we were never apart. We were investing in each other “Casting nets so far into each other’s souls.” Continuing into the poem I mixed in how I felt about her along with our personalities. I was always headstrong, I like to be the first to do something. She was a relaxed kind of person who waits for something to happen. She was my motivation/drive to get the poem finished in time and perfect for her birthday.

In writing this poem, I only had two rough drafts. Allowing the words to flow was the hard part. First, I started thinking about how she looked to me, she was a goddess, beautiful and stunning. I would find myself just observing her in excitement. I started to change the mood of the poem to bring out more of the personality and traits she possesses. I didn’t use any outline or storyboard to help me compose this poem. I guess I just went with the flow of how I wanted the poem to be. I was fixated on a storytelling climax for the poem.

Since this was my second time writing a poem, I was still figuring out if writing poems was for me. I would always criticize my work because I do not think it’s good enough to be experienced or said out loud. But when I share with to other people, they would fall in love with it. Over time, I got used to trusting my process of writing and came to know how and what motivates me to write. My favorite book is *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai because Malala inspires me to be a better person and a leader in my community. She faced evil every day and did not fear them one bit, she kept pushing on to one day save her people. Her story appeals to me that one day I will inspire my people through my poems.

The Wind Sees All Bailey Hillaird

The car was swiftly making its way down the highway, tearing through puddles and splashing water all around us. My daddy always said this was nature's way of giving us a free car wash. I loved the rain with a quiet passion. I loved watching the raindrops perform their silent waltz as they slid down the window and collided with others of their kind. The rain was elegant and purifying. It washed over the earth, reshaping its cliffs and oceans like a sculptor etches away at marble.

But today I did not see the elegance of rain through my usual lens of appreciation and awe. Today, the rain was a roadblock instead of an artwork. It seemed to be taunting me, letting all of my daydreams about the waiting adventures of today slide out of my control like the raindrops on the window.

I looked over at my dad questioningly. Catching his eye, I looked out the windshield to the torrent of water being released from the sky, and then returned my eyes back to his sturdy face and raised my eyebrows.

"Don't worry," he said. "It can't rain forever. The skies have to close up shop sooner or later. Besides, I put in a special request for the rain to stop in the next hour. You just watch and see." I relaxed back into the worn leather of the passenger seat and breathed a sigh of relief. It's all good, I thought. *He's got it under control.*

I trusted my father explicitly in all things. I knew he was a mortal man, and therefore fallible. But he was as strong and reliable as an old oak being whipped by the lashes of wind in a storm. He might creak and sway slightly, but he would not break. My daddy was a man of intelligence and calm. He was lanky, with large, clever eyes. He saw the world differently from most people through those eyes. He was my emblem of strength, reliability, and imagination.

Imagination. Yes, this was the bedrock of my childhood. I grew up a wild child, on the path of perpetual road trips, who lived self-sufficiently off of dappled sunlight and the beckoning aroma of honeysuckle. Existing in nature filled me to

the brim and beyond with excitement and freedom. I lived in my own little world in which shoes were for wimps and the characters in my books were my fellow compatriots. The fueling of my imagination came ablaze in the form of words on a page. Books were my ambrosia and nectar. I was reliant on them to tell me how the world worked, to explain the details of the perimeters of the map, and export me into the company of alien peoples. I never felt more alive or unrestrained than when I was lying in a field of tall grass with the covers of a book in each hand. My imagination was the core of my very being.

I began to recognize the exit signs. We were getting closer. In the neighborhood of thirty minutes or so ago we had passed the solar panel farm, so it was only a little while now until we arrived. I started drumming my feet in anticipation, painting in my mind's eye the familiar green canopy of pines and the labyrinth-like lichen which cloaked the boulders.

"Daddy, you're driving like a snail with a limp. Can you *please* speed up a little?"

Without taking his eyes off of the rain-battered road, he replied, "'The strongest of all warriors are these two – Time and Patience.' Who was the author of these words?" His gaze shifted ever so slightly towards my face, and on it I saw that smug but humorous look with which I was so well acquainted. This was a frequent game of ours. We would verbally vault quotes at each other until one finally stumped the other.

"You think you're so smart. Tolstoy. Ha!"

"Well look at you. Have you been reading *War and Peace* and keeping it a secret?"

"Uhh, negative. Maybe I'll tackle that one in a few years. It's quite a chunk. You've told me that quote like a million times."

With a chuckle, my father returned his full attention to the road. After a minute, I said, "Okay, okay. I've got one for you now. 'Shed a tear cause I'm missin' you, I'm still alright to smile.' Ha, try and figure out that one." I sat back and crossed my arms, now it was my turn to be smug.

But much to my dismay, he looked over at me and said with false insult, "I am hurt! My own dearest daughter doubts my seriously righteous knowledge of rock and roll. Those are the opening lines of 'Patience'?" We both started laughing and discussing how much patience is actually needed to get through almost all six minutes of the song.

After about ten more minutes, room enough to listen to "Patience" and most of "Casey Jones," we pulled into the parking lot of our trail at Big Hill Pond State Park. This was a treasured Saturday ritual for the two of us. Whenever I wasn't completely bogged down with homework, and work actually let my father be a father, we drove a couple of hours and hiked this trail. We lugged our packs out of the backseat of the weathered Ford Explorer and set foot on the trail.

I lived in America, but this was my freedom. Meandering along a trail through the symphonic rustling of branches and birds was what my soul most craved. It was a release of emotion which was unparalleled. I closed my eyes and let my feet carry me along this familiar path so many others had walked. With my face lifted upwards, I reveled in the natural sensation of rain caressing

my face. It was only a light rain at this point, and after we had ventured into the thick forest for a mile, the rain ceased and the forest began to breathe more freely. The stream running along the trail pulsed with a refreshed power, its glass water tenderly smoothing the rocks of its bed. The birds sang their duets and concertos with bewitching vigor. As a rule, Daddy and I were silent on the trail, soaking in the sensory splendor enveloping us, but every so often he would say, "Annie, what kind of bird is that dusty yellow one?" or "How old do you think that tree is?" But these questions were brief and rare. We shared a communal respect for silence and reflection.

The wind was dancing in and out of my lungs, in and out of the canopy of branches above me. Fresh and clean like newly-laundered linen. It is a curious being, the wind. It both shapes and destroys, cools and burns. Working in a viciously graceful partnership with the rain, the wind soothes and shapes the earth like a potter at his wheel. It howls with a magnificent power as it cuts through the mountains, and bends the trees into natural submission. It causes the simple elegance of sunlight shimmering on the water to transform into a breathtaking spectacle of natural phenomenon. To the person whose soul hungers for higher heights, and whose heart beats with the occasional restlessness of those afflicted by the insatiable desire of exploration, the wind's mysterious language can be interpreted as it beckons the listener to follow its path into the direction of the daunting and tantalizing unknown. Ancient as the earth's core, it is in possession of memories of each and every event to pass through the hands of history. The wind sees all. I marveled at its uncaged power as I felt it pulling me deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Well sugar, there it is," Daddy said, pointing towards the old fire tower. I lifted my eyes to the manmade blotch in the middle of the trees. Lifted by a series of utilitarian stairs and metal poles, it towered over the tree line with a certain amount of authority. For years, it was the protector of the trees and streams surrounding it, but now its time had burned out like the wick of a candle. It was abandoned in isolation. The wind whipped at its emptiness, rattling the shaky windows of the little hut atop the staircases.

It had been hours since we had left the trailhead earlier. I was starving, and the cans of soup in our pack were singing to me a song of the sirens. We began our ascent and were soon nestled in the enclosed hut. Daddy lit the propane stove, and I poured the soup into camp mugs. We ate and comfortably discussed the way the rain changes the forest. But suddenly the air shifted in the enclosed area. The shadows deepened, and the comforting safety of the fire tower morphed into a feeling of captivity.

"Annie, I have to tell you something." His face was grave, no hint of a smile appeared on his chiseled features. He suddenly did not seem as sturdy. It unnerved me. "This place is different from what you think it is," he said.

"But, we've been coming here for years. What am I missing?"

He inhaled and explained, "Annie there are," he paused, trying to locate the correct phrasing. "There are *Others* here."

I crinkled my forehead, trying to unravel my confusion. "Others? Other what, exactly? Other hikers?"

“No, not exactly, sugar.” He looked me in the eyes so deeply that I know he saw the terror building behind them. “The Others are exactly that; other people. In 1973, the government decided to perform an experiment here. They set up an invisible fence that stretched for miles, and released hordes of mentally unstable patients from state sanitariums into the forest. These people were corralled and kept within the established perimeter by the shock collars they wore like animals. The point of the experiment was to test the most basic survival skills of human beings. These people were seen as disposable, and therefore chosen for the study. It’s been about twenty years, but some of the Others are still here. The whole experiment failed and the government operated extraction was unsuccessful in recapturing all of the marooned test subjects. The patients ran and hid from their captors. There has been evidence that these people are still living in these woods.”

I was thoroughly shaken now as well. My mind was racing. I was desperately trying to make sense of this detonation of emotional realization. The birds had fallen silent, and the wind seemed to be howling the crazed cries of the oppressed. The clouds had walled the sun behind their misty bodies. Things were not as they had been.

I thought about what had just been revealed to me for several minutes and finally I looked at my dad and asked, “But how do you know this is real and not local folklore? And why are you telling me all of this now?”

“I know it’s real because your uncle and I camped for the night out here once. We thought the whole story was simply that: a fabrication. When I woke up that next morning, he was absent from his sleeping bag and missing from the campsite. I was alarmed. I found him tied to the poles of this fire tower. Naked, and upside down. He told me that during the night, he had left the tent to use the bathroom outside, and when he walked into the trees, dirty hands wrestled him to the ground from behind and a sour voice spoke into his ear, ‘We are the ones you’ve feared.’ He said he was knocked out after that and woke up in his current position, confused and terrified. So I know they’re real, Annie. And I’m telling you now because you’re thirteen and have the maturity to handle the truth. I didn’t want to frighten you by telling you when you were younger. I know how much you love this place.”

This place. This place that once held the promise of freedom and solace. It was a mere husk of the safe place it had been only moments before. Now it was cloaked in dread and threatening menace. “We have to go, now. Right now,” I said. I began packing up the camp cups and stove, not even bothering to fold them back into their specialized origami shapes. I shoved them into my pack and hurtled myself out of the door of the firetower hut.

I suddenly heard muffled chuckling behind me. Daddy’s face had cracked into a smile; the stern countenance was no longer there. This strange behavior froze my hands in their frenzied actions. “Wh - why are you laughing? I don’t understand,” I said.

“Because it is all a joke! Ha! Aw man, I wish you could have seen your face, Annie. Did you seriously believe me?”

“But what about all of the stuff about you and Uncle James? Did you make

that up too?”

“No, no. That was all real. But you know your uncle, always coming up with crazy stories. I’m half convinced he tied himself up there.”

“Tied himself? Upside down?”

“Aww, come on, don’t think about it too hard. It’s all a joke. Just local folklore, that’s all.” And with that, he began his descent to the ground.

I heard his words, they chased each other around in relentless circles in my head. But somehow I just could not believe the fabrication of this story. In my heart, it felt so real and realized. So very developed and haunting. I could not shake the feeling that this “local myth” was not as fictitious as it was presented to be. And this idea began to consume me.

The sun was starting to transform the sky and light around us from radiant yellow to a dusty maroon. Dusk was biting at our heels like hellion hounds. This mad dash back to the trailhead, and the safety of the car, before the stars replaced the hopeful rays of sun became a race between my father and me, and the lurking people of the woods. The Others.

It isn’t real. It isn’t real.

My imagination began to play tricks with my mind. I saw shadows shift behind and between the tree trunks. I saw dirt-streaked limbs rustle the ferns along the path. The fleeting light of fireflies became confused with the blinking of the ghastly shock collars worn by these forsaken people. The wind tore violently through the trees and seemed to carry the menacingly whispered words, “We are the ones you’ve feared.” I could almost smell that sour breath, and feel the pressure of earth-clogged fingernails digging into my skin. Every snap of a branch, every splash in the stream, every rustle of brush, caused a chill of dreadful expectation to wash over me. I could feel their scathing eyes.

Simple folklore, not the truth.

The sun was sinking lower and lower below the horizon. The race was intensifying. I began to imagine what these people would do to us if they broke out from the shadows of the trees and seized us. Would there be any hope for escape? Would they tie us to the bars of the fire tower as they had my uncle? Leave us to be victims of the elements until we were found? Or would they not be as merciful this time? Would our blood stain the leaves of this wood?

“Annie, sugar, slow down. I was just messing with you. I didn’t mean to upset you, I’m sorry,” I heard him say behind me. But I had to keep going.

Annie, you are letting your imagination run away from your control. This is not real.

Finally, the trailhead came into view. I broke into a run, splashing the puddles underneath my boots, the mud making my footing unsteady. The puddles reminded me of just a few hours ago in the car with the rain dancing down my passenger window. I had been so naively full of excitement and carefree expectation. I had been so enamored by the wooded sanctuary. How deceiving this timbered thicket was. Merely a mask, a façade of tranquility. My source of freedom had been stripped away, and I was left vulnerable and quaking in the wake of it. It seemed like days ago when I was singing Guns N’ Roses in the car with my dad. I paused in my mad dash and looked behind me to

be reassured by the reliable image of my father. But all I saw was an empty trail with my footprints indented into the soft earth. That haunting chill of panic intensified, and a ringing broke out in my ears. I could hear my blood pounding through my body. I staggered a few paces back up the trail and finally saw another set of footprints. Relief washed over me so fiercely that it almost knocked me off of my feet. But this relief was terribly short lived. My eyes caught sight of an empty hiking boot, my father's empty hiking boot. I spun around and screamed for him, completely terrified and completely vulnerable. It was then that I noticed the blinking of a light, akin to one on a canine shock collar, receding into the shadows of the trees. Things were not as they had been.

Untitled Mikayla Dahlgren

The trees bend for fire
I would bend towards your pain
Now both are hollow
 --mercy

[At the bottom center of the page is a graphic of a yellow leaf].

Artist Commentary: Untitled Mikayla Dahlgren

My inspirations for writing come from thinking that there is a different level of connectedness you can find with someone from reading their work. Often you will feel a sense of understanding in what the writer has to say, and my inspiration is almost a response as what has been said. This piece is pretty straightforward and did not take much revision, and I had also written several other haiku along with this one, however, each can stand alone and has its meaning.

Faith Shane Keene

I hear the pianist play his song. I just
wonder what sounds wrong. Even
sweet melodies seem to hurt.
Nothing lines up with what I've
learnt. All my days, I've wondered
why, But in my haze, I've forgotten.

Why I search endlessly Why I love
hopelessly Why life seems so cruel
Why
the powerful rule Why the weak are
beaten and distraught Why our
children
are lied to and taught

Taught to hate, taught to love Taught
to
trust fate, taught to have Faith

Life, full of contradictions Logic,
incapable of making predictions Liars,
our tongue's true forte Truth, always
causes disarray

I swallow my drink in disgust What a
bitter taste that was As that lonely
player plays his chords I'm reminded
that the world is the Lord's

Lord of the
land Lord of
the sea Lord of
you and Lord
of me

One who is fake or real One who
is numb, or you can feel God,
man's answer to everything Why
did that song stop playing?
I look around the ballroom, alone
Judging myself for my sins atoned
What a dreary old concert Put on
by my own heart's hurt

God is
dead Heaven
is dead

Like a candle that was blown out Like
a
light bulb that was thrown out I
stopped
shining long ago For my flame was
snuffed out in the snow

The evidence of my existence, rendered
to
ashes No matter my persistence, time
still
passes That last note still resonating
So weak
yet deafening Until finally it stopped
ringing

Dragon Nora Chisamore

[The picture is a graphite drawing of a winged dragon. There is a gold frame around the image].

Artist Commentary: Dragon Nora Chisamore

Medium: Graphite on paper

The drawing is of a dragon based on a photograph that I took of a dragon statue. It was done in graphite so that I could practice my shading. The ocean aspect of the drawing was decided on after I had started drawing, I have not done much work on drawing oceans before and I thought it would be a fun challenge and learning experience.

Chapter 1

Once upon a time an old man lived with his two sons Max and Greg, and his daughter Ellie in a mill on the outskirts of town. The old man did not have many things; only his mill, a donkey, and a cat. One day he became very ill, and after a few months, he passed away. Max, George, and Ellie were sad their father was gone, but the brothers also knew they had to keep the mill going. The oldest son Max took charge of the mill, and the middle brother George claimed the donkey, using it to help his brother. The two sons believed their sister Ellie would love the cat, so they gave it to her.

“What am I supposed to do with a cat?” Ellie asked them, but the brothers just shrugged and went off to work.

“How are you any help to me, Puss?” She sighed at the cat. Puss gave her a wide grin, the kind that can only mean trouble.

“I can be a great help to you. I only need a few things, and I can make sure you live comfortably,” he told her. Ellie put her hands on her hips.

“I can live comfortably on my own.”

“Well, I could bring you wealth,” Puss reasoned.

“I don’t want wealth.”

“Don’t you want me to help you?” Puss asked. She said nothing.

“All I need is a pair of boots and a bag,” Puss told her. Ellie went and got the items quickly.

“I don’t want to get into trouble,” she warned Puss, as he put the boots on.

“You won’t,” he said, trying out his new boots.

Chapter 2

Ellie and Puss went out into the forest to gather wood and herbs. Puss had his bag on his hip as he strode around in his new boots.

“Aren’t you going to fill your bag with herbs?” Ellie asked Puss. The cat shook his head.

“I want to catch something. Here, let me show you.” Puss gathered up some weeds and slipped them into the bag. He then took a few steps back and became very still. Ellie watched silently as two rabbits came by, and curiously entered the bag to eat the weeds. Puss quickly jumped on the bag and caught the two rabbits.

“I know how to do that,” Ellie said. “My brothers taught me an even easier trap.”

“Did they? Are you sure it works?” Puss asked.

“Yes.”

“Then show me,” he challenged. Ellie asked Puss to wait, went back to the house and returned with a box, a twig, and a rope. She then placed some more weeds under the box. A few seconds later another pair of rabbits came by, and she quickly pulled the stick out from the box. The rabbits were trapped

inside.

“See,” she said. Puss frowned.

“They aren’t as nice as my rabbits.”

“What do you want them for?” Ellie asked.

“I want to take them to the King.” Puss smiled as he spoke.

“Then why don’t we let him decide which rabbits are better?” Ellie suggested. So they both went to the palace carrying their rabbits. They were led through a long hallway to the king’s throne room.

“Your majesty,” Puss said, bowing low, “We have brought you these lovely rabbits as a gift from your loyal subjects. We wish to know which rabbits you like best.” Puss pulled both his rabbits out of the bag, laying them at the King’s feet. The King picked each one up carefully. The King looked at their feet, petted their fur, he even looked in their ears. He then turned to Ellie.

“These are very good rabbits, little girl. You will have to have some beautiful ones to beat these,” The king spoke. Ellie stepped forward and curtsied to the King. While she was taking her rabbits out of the box the Prince entered the room, and stood next to his father.

“I bring you these rabbits as a gift, my King,” Ellie said as she set her rabbits down at his feet. Again, the King picked up the rabbits. The King looked at their feet, petted their fur, he even looked in their ears. “What were your names again?” The king asked.

“My name is Puss, my King.” Puss bowed again.

“My name is Ellie.” The sister curtsied.

“Puss, these rabbits are beautiful. They make a great gift. But Ellie has the better rabbits. Hers have softer fur.” The King nodded to both of them. “Thank you for the gift. Aren’t these nice soft rabbits?” the King asked, looking at his son. The Prince came up and petted the rabbits.

“They are really soft.” He smiled at Ellie. “It was nice of you to bring them. It’s sweet that you caught them yourself.” Ellie blushed.

“I’m glad you like them,” she said.

When they left Puss was chuckling to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Ellie asked.

“Do you like the Prince?” Puss asked.

“He’s nice,” Ellie said, but she didn’t say anything else.

Chapter 3

One day Puss and Ellie were out in the woods and Puss looked up at the sky.

“What are you looking for,” Ellie asked Puss.

“I’m looking for birds,” Puss said. “I think we should bring some to the King.”

“Why does the King need them?” Ellie asked.

“Oh, look! There are two beautiful birds there,” Puss cried. He then followed the birds, waiting for them to land on the ground. He moved quietly up to them, opened his bag, and pounced. Puss caught the two birds in his bag.

“Nice job,” Ellie said, “I could catch some too.”

Puss looked at her.

“They won’t be as pretty as mine,” he said.

“You’ll see,” Ellie said. She then went home and got a fishing net. When she returned she started looking at the sky. It took her a little longer to find a pair of birds she liked, but when she did she quietly snuck up behind them and threw her net on top of them.

“I think they are pretty,” she said, “Let’s take them to the King.” The two went to the castle. This time both the King and the Prince were already in the hall.

“My Lord, we have brought you these birds as a gift from your loyal subjects. We wished to know which birds were prettier,” Puss told the King.

“Please, bring them closer,” the King asked. Puss went first, opening his bag and letting the two birds land at the King’s feet. Each let out a beautiful song that made everyone in the room smile. They were small birds with brown feathers and bright yellow beaks. The King listened to their song, watched them fly around the room once, and then let them land on his throne.

“Ellie, wasn’t it? These birds Puss has brought are very pretty. Do you have prettier ones?” Ellie curtsied as she stepped forward and released the birds from her net. They flew over to the King and landed on his lap. When both birds sang together they made everyone in the room cry with joy. The birds were blue with black tips and dark brown beaks. The King listened to their song, watched them fly around the room once, and then let them return to his lap.

“You have certainly made it difficult for me. What do you think, my son?” The king asked the prince. The prince thought long and hard.

“I think Ellie’s birds sang beautifully, and my favorite color is blue. I think Ellie is the winner,” he finally said.

“Then Ellie is the winner,” The king agreed.

When they left the castle, again Puss was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Ellie asked.

“Do you think the Prince is smart?” Puss asked.

“Yes, I think he is nice and smart,” Ellie said, but she wouldn’t say anything else.

Chapter 4

One day Ellie was knitting some scarves for her brothers, since it was starting to get cold in the kingdom.

“Those are very pretty,” Puss told her, as he walked into the room in his boots.

“Thank you,” Ellie said.

“I can find nicer ones though,” Puss said. Ellie sighed.

“That’s okay. They are for my brothers.”

“Why don’t you make one for the King?” Puss asked.

“Does the King need a scarf?” Ellie looked concerned.

“I am sure he could use one.”

Puss smiled politely.

"Then I will make him one," Ellie said, and she picked up her needles and thread. While Ellie knitted, Puss left the house and went shopping in the town. He found one of the nicest scarfs he could, and put it in his bag. He then waited in town for Ellie to finish. When Ellie was done, she carried her scarf with her in a bag, the tail end of it hanging out as she walked. Puss snuck up behind her and using his claws cut off the tail, swiping at it quickly.

"What was that?" Ellie asked, confused.

"A bug was going to land on you," Puss lied. Ellie didn't see the missing piece of her scarf, so she continued to walk. They both entered the palace. The King was sick with a cold, but when he heard that Puss and Ellie were there he invited them to come see him at breakfast.

"My King, we have each brought you a scarf to keep you warm," Puss said, bowing low. Ellie curtsied to her King.

"Ah, Puss and Ellie. A scarf is exactly what I need. Are you wondering who has the better one?" The King asked. Both Puss and Ellie nodded.

"Well let me... Achoo," the King sneezed. "Let me see them." Puss brought out his scarf first, an extra-long one that was purple with gold thread along the edges. The king looked it over, sneezed again, and then wrapped it around his neck.

"It is really warm," the King said. "What have you brought, Ellie?" Ellie brought her scarf out of her bag, but she could tell right away that something was wrong. It was red with silver on one end, because Puss had cut off the other end. She gave it to the King. The King looked it over, sneezed, and then removed Puss's scarf and put on Ellie's.

"I'm afraid it's too small," the king said, "but... Achoo." The loud sneeze brought the Prince in, worried about his father.

"Are you alright, Dad?" The prince asked.

"Ah, my son, I was just telling Ellie her scarf was too small. But it might fit you better. Here, you can try it." The King handed the Prince the scarf. It fit around his neck perfectly.

"It is really warm," the Prince said.

"I think it looks better on you anyway." The King smiled.

"I'm afraid I can't decide which one is better, Puss and Ellie. Both scarfs were nice. Puss yours fit better, but Ellie yours is nice too." The King thought. He sniffled a few more times, rubbing his nose with his tissue while he tried to make up his mind.

"This is a tie," The King decided.

When they left the castle Puss was chuckling to himself.

"What is so funny?" Ellie asked.

"Do you think the Prince is caring?" Puss asked.

"Yes, I think the Prince is nice, smart, and caring," Ellie said. She wouldn't say anything else.

Chapter 5

Puss sat in the window one day, feeling kind of lost. He had been trying to help his new master, mostly by letting her win the favor of the Prince and the King, but now he wasn't sure what to do. She had shown them both her skill as a hunter, she had shown them her love of beauty, and she had shown them her resourcefulness. Ellie had even mentioned to him that she thought the Prince was nice, smart, and caring; whatever that meant. How else could he help her?

As Puss was wondering about his next move, he saw the Prince come walking up the road, carrying a long pole.

"Hello my Prince," Puss called out the window. The Prince waved happily at Puss, who jumped down into the garden and came to the Prince's side.

"What brings you out here so far from the castle?" Puss asked.

"I'm going fishing," the Prince said. "Would you like to go with me?"

"I don't like fishing very much, my Prince, but my Master Ellie does. Should I go get her so she can come along?" Puss smiled. The Prince nodded, and Puss scurried off to find Ellie.

Ellie was in the barn.

"Ellie, the Prince wants you to go fishing with him," Puss said excitedly. Ellie didn't take her eyes off her work, moving the hay in the barn around to help feed the goat.

"I can't right now. I have chores," she said. "I wish I could, but then they wouldn't get done."

"Oh, can't you do them later?"

Puss groaned. Now was a chance for Ellie to really impress the Prince.

"My chores are my responsibility. I have to do them." Ellie continued to work.

"What if I helped you?" Came a voice from around the barn door. The Prince came in, smiling brightly.

"My chores get done faster when someone helps me. Can I help you do your chores, and then we can go fishing?" The Prince offered. Ellie blushed.

"I would like that, thank you," she told him.

Ellie and the Prince worked hard to finish all the chores. They worked well together, and things were finished faster. Soon all the hay had been moved, all the floors swept, and the herbs were drying in the sun for later.

"We're all done," Ellie said happily. "Now we can go fishing." She went and got her pole and they all set off for the lake.

Chapter 6

The lake was long, with sparkling water. Ripples in the water showed Ellie and the Prince where the fish were hiding, but they couldn't seem to catch any fish. They spent the rest of the day waiting for a bite, filling up the hours talking about everything. Ellie and the Prince had a lot in common. They both liked the outdoors, they both enjoyed animals, and they both thought that oranges were a really weird fruit. They spent a lot of time talking, acting more like friends than a

Prince and a subject. Finally the Prince felt a pull on his pole.

“Woah, I got one,” he cried! The fish kept pulling, and the Prince kept pulling back. Ellie tried to help by grabbing the pole and pulling with him. Puss shouted encouragement from a few feet back, not wanting to get mud on his nice boots. Finally Ellie and The Prince pulled hard enough, and the fish came flopping about on the shore.

“You did it!” Ellie said excitedly.

“We did it,” the Prince replied, “you helped me. We’ll have to share it for dinner, since we both did the work.”

“I would like that,” Ellie said as they gathered up their things.

“Not so fast,” said a voice from behind the trees.

Chapter 7

Everyone turned to look at the place where the voice came from. A big ogre stepped out from behind the trees.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the Ogre said. “Now that I’ve caught you I’m going to eat you both up.”

“You can’t do that!” the Prince replied. “I won’t let you.”

“I can and I will,” the Ogre said. He then took a step forward.

“Are you a magic ogre?” Ellie asked. The Ogre stopped.

“Yes,” he replied, “So?”

“I’ve always wanted to meet a magic ogre. The books I always read say they can change shape. Can you do that?” Ellie asked excitedly.

“What are you doing,” the Prince whispered.

“Just watch,” Ellie whispered back.

“Yes I can change my shape. I can become the biggest, scariest beast you ever saw,” the Ogre said, and with that he turned into a huge grizzly bear, growling at them all and swiping at them with his large claws. Ellie, the Prince, and Puss all dove out of the way in different directions. Ellie went to the left, the Prince went to the right, and Puss backed up.

“Come here Pussy Cat,” the Ogre growled as it came forward.

“That’s all well and good, but any old shape changer can do that,” Ellie called, getting the Ogre’s attention.

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

“Yes. It would be far more impressive if you could become something small. No one ever does that. Something like a sparrow, or a mouse. I would really be impressed then,” Ellie said. The prince got ready to pounce on the Ogre, hoping to save Ellie from it.

“I’ll show you. I’m the best shape changer there ever was,” the Ogre boasted, and in a flash he was a small field mouse scurrying about in the grass.

“Puss, catch that mouse!” Ellie cried, and Puss leapt onto the Ogre and ate him in one bite.

“That was close,” Ellie said, smiling at the Prince.

“That was smart thinking, Ellie,” The Prince complimented. “I’m glad you were here to help me. Do you still want to come to dinner with me?”

"I would like that a lot," Ellie said.

Chapter 8

Ellie, the Prince, and Puss had a long story to tell at dinner when they arrived. The King was pleased to hear that they were home safe after their adventure.

"Ellie, you and Puss have done a great job of protecting the Prince," the King said, "and you have brought me much joy over these past few visits. Would you like to come and stay in the palace with us? You could go hunting and fishing with my son, you can help take care of the birds in the courtyard, and you would make me very happy just to know you are here."

"I wish you would," the prince said. "I like you a lot." Ellie blushed again.

"I would love to, but I have one condition," Ellie said.

"What's that?" the King asked, a little worried.

"Puss has to come and live with me too. He's finally fulfilled his promise. He's been a great help to me and made sure that I live comfortably." Ellie explained.

"Of course," the King said. After that Ellie and Puss moved into the castle. Ellie and the Prince continued to become good friends, and one day the Prince asked Ellie to marry him. Ellie accepted, and her first act as Princess was to make Puss the royal cat, so that he never had to chase mice or walk without his boots ever again unless he wanted to.

[Across the bottom third of the page is a squiggle that looks like it is made of sand].

At first, I was unsure of what type of project I could do that would fit into a class like Survey of Children's Literature. While I did meet some challenges along the way, I think that my retelling of Puss in Boots can at least be considered unique.

Once I had decided on retelling an old fairytale, I also decided I wanted to create a feminist fairy tale that would be suitable for younger children. Reading "Puss in Boots" for the first time in years brought memories back of my youth where I heard the story somewhere before.

Having selected my story, I now needed to understand what a feminist fairy tale actually looks like. While I will admit that even now I am not completely sure I know everything it entails, I have a better understanding of feminist theory and interpretation. In the end I decided that there were a few things I did not want my female heroine to have to do; she shouldn't have to remain trapped in a space, she shouldn't have to remain quiet, and she shouldn't have to sacrifice anything for her love.

When I finally sat down to write my story I found that one of the difficult tasks for me was writing at a vocabulary level fit for a young child. I kept thinking back to a small chapter book I read at some point when I was just starting school. I felt like this story embodied a children's book for me. What stuck with me was the accomplishment I felt for reading a chapter book. I wanted to create a story that did the same thing for my readers, inspire confidence.

I decided on a structure where Puss's owner, named Ellie, would go with her cat to see the King all three times. In the original story, Puss is always alone. By having Ellie present, the sessions became a competition of gift giving. I am certain that Puss's manners and the repetition of these scenes would hold the children's interest. It was important that Ellie present her gifts so that she had a hand in her own success. Ellie works for the King and the Prince's favor.

I was careful to make sure that the Prince was present on all three occasions, so that he made some comment on Ellie. This addition helped me to flesh out Ellie and the Prince's relationship better. I considered naming him, but thought better of it. Never have I seen a Princess get a name, so why bother? Since I was reversing the roles of the characters I also wanted to be sure that I corrected this one-dimensional nature of the love interest.

I have a habit of beating readers over the head with morals when I try to write them in to a work, so I decided it would be little things that children could see, but would not detract too much from the story. The way Puss addresses the King, for instance, is proper manners. Also, the section before Ellie and the Prince go fishing, where he helps her complete her chores was added to remind kids that responsibility is important.

My decisions could be considered drastic; I changed a large chunk of the plot, I swapped genders of key characters, and I decided to make the female character stronger. While this is not a perfect adaption of "Puss in Boots," I think it will be enjoyable to children, and provide a bridge between picture books and large scale chapter books.

[The final page is mostly blank. Near the middle are the words “off center” in all lower caps. “Off” is gray and centered in the middle of the page, while “center” is below it and a bit to the right. In the bottom right-hand corner is the Writing Center’s “Nerd Lightning” logo. Lightning, the blue pegasus, is dressed in a sweater vest, a bow tie, and rolled up khakis. He has braces on his teeth and glasses held together with tape above the nose. He is smiling and giving a thumbs up sign while leaning against a typewriter that has a sheet of paper scrolling out of it that says “University Writing Center].