

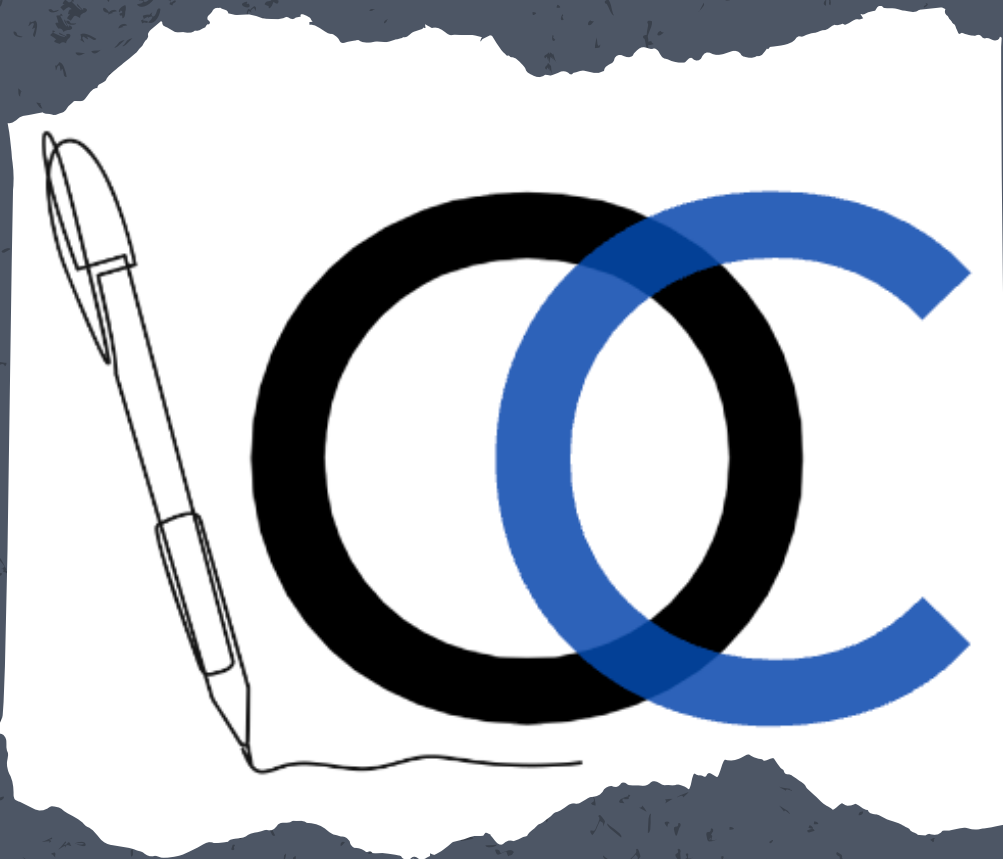
OFF CENTER

CREATIVE MAGAZINE

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WRITTEN.
VISUAL.
STUDIO.



OFF CENTER CREATIVE MAGAZINE

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Sarah Hicks

I've always loved sunflowers.

As I'm finishing the edits for this edition of *Off Center*, a storm is rolling in. The tree in my backyard is blooming with bright pink flowers, but they look dull against the gray sky. I've always appreciated that no matter where they are planted, and no matter what surrounds them, sunflowers never seem to dull. Against a dark sky, they continue to shine.

I see creative minds in the same way — bright spots in a world that so often seems to forget the importance of imagination.

As creatives, our minds work in different ways. The fundamental lens that we use to view the world is unique in that we are constantly finding beauty. Even in our lowest and bleakest moments, we find inspiration that can be transformed into art. And then, in our own distinct ways, we translate that beauty into a medium that can be experience by others.

I call this magic.

My goal for this edition of *Off Center* was for the magazine to be a celebration — a chance to highlight

all the ways that we, as creatives, think about the world. To celebrate the small moments in which we find beauty. To represent the variety of arts and artists who were kind enough to share their work with us.

May you find the bright spots in your own life as you continue to brighten the world with your art.



BACK TO SCHOOL

by Susan Rice (71 years young)

I haven't studied hard in years
But COVID has me bored to tears!
I hope my brain can still compete
Since I'll have homework to complete...
Age is just a number — right?
And my computer will not fight!
Time will tell if this is smart,
Because I'm doing it from my heart!

Author's Commentary:

I decided to write this poem to celebrate my decision to finally go back to school and finish my first bachelor's degree. It just "flowed out of my mind" onto the paper. I had never written a poem before, so I was shocked and amazed that it seemed to flow so well and have a good rhythm. I hope that it might encourage others to think that it's never too late to do something amazing. I must say that I'm SO glad I only took one class for my first semester. Just to "get my feet wet" and get used to technology and typing again... oh boy, is that a challenge! But I'm so glad I leaped off this cliff. I'm having fun.

STICKERS

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:

This edition of *Off Center* features a series of Spraker's work. The focus of the series is to "show a child's world through their eyes with a psychedelic and weird approach." Spraker hopes that this series will encourage adults to "Step into the shoes of a child once more."

"Stickers"- The playful and weird ways we played as children.

LA TRISTESSE DURERA TOUJOURS

by Harley Mercadal

I get lost in the movement of brush strokes.
My eyes follow paths of frenzied oil paints:
Blues, yellows, greens, blacks, highlights of white stars—
Overlapping marks, all in one sort of distorted beauty.

Always, I admire the difference of application in
your work; nothing is quite comparable.
Running my fingers over those paintings would
yield rough hills of paint; how I long for them.

I think about your life and how you lived: always believing
you deserved this, that, but never praise, fame. Always
fighting a hectic heart and mind. Tell me, Vincent, did
your scattered mind fight when it was that time?

I see your rushed marks, the blurring of paints —
I understand how art consumes you, makes
everything feel alright awhile. Distorted beauty in
overlapping marks with highlights of white,

painted by a man unafraid of flaw, I realize that
recognition isn't the goal, certainly not the real
reason I feel the same drive to create, but I
must create for creation's sake: to feel alright awhile.

Author's Commentary:

I've always been a big fan of Vincent Van Gogh's paintings, and I seem to find more and more power and emotion in them every time I take the time to study them closely. I'm not an art expert by any means, but I've found myself looking at his brush strokes and trying to discern feelings and movements

DEATH'S-HEAD HAWKMOTH

by Kylie Petrovich



Artist's Commentary:

The death's-head hawkmoth is an intriguing creature. It is, in some cultures, thought to be a harbinger of doom. The death's-head hawkmoth was featured in "The Sphinx" by Edgar Allan Poe, and many people recognize it from the movie *Silence of the Lambs*. I find moths to be interesting subjects to paint because of the intricate patterns many of them have. My work is done with watercolors, and I also use a technique of applying salt to the paint while it is still wet. Once the paint dries with the salt on it, I brush it off and it leaves a textured appearance. I purposefully do not add backgrounds to my moth paintings; I want them to look as though they are real and pinned on the page.

ABSTRACT DANCE PARTY PT. III

by Nicholas Bush

Here I am again, waiting on deck
who hired this DJ? (And why are there more deck chairs
than people)?

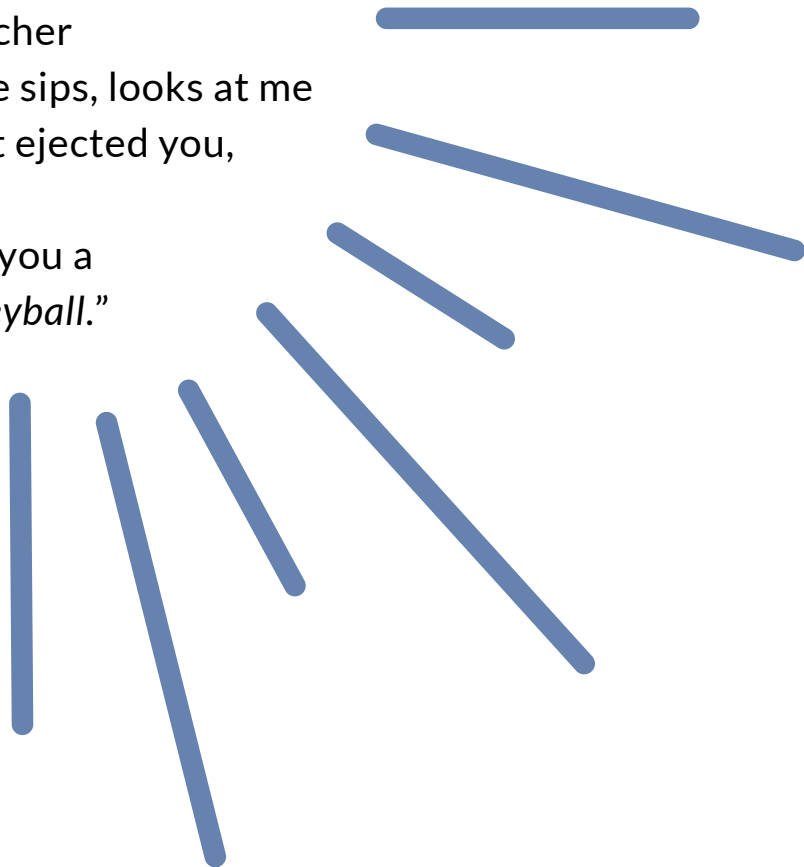
And the bouquet of flowers I'm swinging
are made heavier by a second bouquet,
and the pitcher I'm about to face—
his arm moves fast, but since
he's throwing teddy bears, they travel
so slow, how could I *not* get a hit?

I do like how the fans,
instead of stretching,
are doing the "Cha-Cha Slide"
during "America the Beautiful."

What better way to celebrate our Past time
by passing time in disjointed harmony,
a cacophony of choreography.

And when it's finally my turn to bat,
I stride to the mound,
draw a dollar sign in the dirt with my cleat,
then walk confidently to the batter's box
and complain to the umpire
that I need a sphere not a box
to stand in,
and which point he throws me out
for thinking outside the box
while standing inside the box.

I feel my logic's impeccable as the
goalie mask I'm wearing,
and much more in sync
with rational thought
than our ump,
whose rhythm is so bad
the DJ switches
to accordion music
because it's almost impossible
to dance wrong to that.
And I'm not sure if it's the music
or the mimosa the catcher
has slipped him, but he sips, looks at me
and says, "I know I just ejected you,
but if you want
to run to first, I'll give you a
a walk because—*Moneyball.*"



FALLING IN LOVE... AGAIN

by Michaela Wegman

It's too soon to fall in love again.

The glue is hardly dry—
rose-color returning to the fractured crevices—
blood percolating from missing pieces—
scars all over my hands—
putting it all back together

It's too soon to fall in love again.

But Odin's spear etched her in
my runes
over my scar tissue

Blue eyes sparkling
like the North Sea
locked onto mine

She peered into my soul—
my empty heart-sculpture
did not frighten her
my grotesque scars
did not repel her
monster hidden in the shadows
did not faze her
she understood.

But it's too soon to fall in love again.

Too soon to dive into the azul pools—
to get lost in the forest—
worship her beneath the stars

It's too soon to fall in love again.

But under her enchantment
the sting of my healing heart lessened.

Author's Commentary:

I have horrible timing, always. "Falling in Love...Again" is about working through those emotions, knowing that "it's too soon to fall in love again" but not being able to help yourself as you leap into yet another pool just because the universe has written it in the stars.

BASHFUL

by Rebecca Price



Artist's Commentary:

This cheeky little guy caught my eye while hiking Skellig Michael, or Great Skellig, an island off the southwestern coast of Ireland. He was gracious enough to pose a bit before turning himself just so, and I was able to snap this shot. Something about those eyes just captivated me in this picture; perhaps it is the shape of his eye that makes his expression seem so innocent. Perhaps it was the wonder we both shared in looking at each other, both of us curious and calculating. At any rate, I still find his vivid colors to be so beautiful that he doesn't even seem real.

WE THE MIGHTY

by Daniel Williams

A veined landscape, dun, mottled with green and black,
Veiled behind the dying clouds, and housing untold thousands

Of mites and concrete, we have carved it out upon the novel earth
Like tides of ants washing out and over the parched, deserted land
Making of what was not ours, our own likeness

A perverse symmetry embedded upon the branching fractal
A network of rivers subsuming rivers, water into stone
And leaving nothing to chance but that our chaotic design should hold

The powers of the gods brought low, to be used for baser ends
To feed our insatiable desire for only ours to thrive, seated now
On heavenly thrones which rise impossibly upon the turbulent aether

We, the aspirant, the ever-envying destructors of a canvas
Which can barely be conceived in all its glory, we defilers of the
Grandeur which was not ours to inherit, we the mighty



POETRY COLLECTION

Compiled by Elyce Helford

Commentary:

These poems were composed by students in ENGL 2020, "Holocaust Survivor Literature." They are inspired by specific moments or scenes in Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir *Night*. Emily Turk's "The Snow" reflects how the suffering prisoners experienced the cold and snow during their forced march from a concentration camp away from the front lines soon before the war's end. "One Last Time," by Tyler Moses, shares the bittersweet final violin performance by a camp inmate just before his death. Finally, Corinne Meier's "Still A Child" describes Wiesel's experience of being forced to witness the hanging of a young, beautiful boy in Auschwitz. —Dr. Elyce Rae Helford

THE SNOW

by Emily Turk

As if pain could not be felt anymore
The white canvas always reminded them
Their physical pain was nothing worse
Than the feeling of being alone.
The frostbitten toes and soles of their feet
Were a constant reminder of life.
The life they once knew
The life they once loved
Was now shadowed by the present.
Walking through the cold
Standing on the white-covered ground,
This was both a reminder of the war
And a promise of the future.
As long as they felt the snow beneath their feet
They still had life left to live.
The snow was a blanket of comfort for them
A bed for those in need.
For many it was their final resting place.
The snow was part of everyone's story,
The beginning, middle, or end.

ONE LAST TIME

by Tyler Moses

One last time
The prisoners had been pushed to the edge
Running through the piercing wind
Snow piled on their backs
Their muscles failing them
Their bodies falling to the ground

One last time
A boy reached for his other half
Crawling across the ground
Latching onto his violin
He rosined up his bow
And he played

One last time
He played for the dead and dying
He played for his companions
He played for his family
He played for his God
And he played for his future

One last time
He played for the life
He wished he could have
A life without suffering
Even as it was snuffed out
He continued to play

One last time.

STILL A CHILD

by Corinne Meier

It is undeniable
the brutality of the Nazis
To heartlessly kill so many
and to gladly be the cause of demise
to so many lives and families
Today I witnessed something unimaginable
A child tough as nails,
more of a man than his own father,
resilient while being tortured,
had his life taken by the simple kick of a bucket
He hung there
flailing his legs and looking for help
but none of us could end his torment.
We could only wait for the rope to do its job
and hope that it would be quick
A child, a pipel,
finally showing his age and desperation
I had only seen him as conditioned and durable
then I quickly remembered
the Nazis expose everybody's fragility

THE SHAME OF FORGETTING

by Rebecca Price

I.

your hands

warm and wrinkled in my own,

weathered by sun

and dirt,

Rose's thorns

—oh, you hated them so terribly
and labor.

always laboring for love,

for your Loves.

Feeding. Cleaning. Holding. Folding.

Tending. Nurturing. Creating. Loving.

palms pressing

intent,

bound together by the weaving of whispered prayers

morning, noon, and night.

on Sundays.

on Wednesdays.

on drives through the mountains.

in the aisles of grocery stores.

who did you pray for?

hands that have held the whimpering of the first breath.

fingers that have brushed Death's

too many times for one life.

the chill never left

did it?

hands so warm
so comforting
so fragile
so worn,
carved by the Maker
weathered by the lines of life.

the Dearest hands I have ever known.

how did they feel to hold, again?

II.

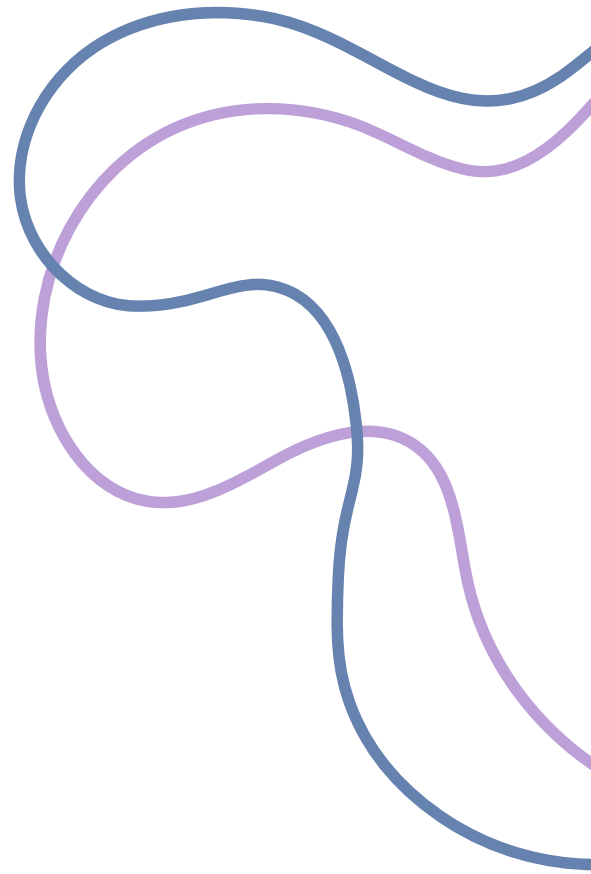
oh tiny stranger
in my arms,
how is it that i know you so well already?
your crinkled nose
your warbling cries
you are perfection in every sense of the word.

I did not carry you.
Blood of the Flesh does not bind us.

yet,

you are mine
my darling boy.

i never knew my heart was capable
of this much love
for a little one
i have never met before.



It is fit to burst.

No longer are you small enough
to fit safely in the crook of my arm
nuzzled to the rhythmic beating in my chest
—it's beating is for you, little one.
how was it to protect you there?

eyes blink
years pass

the weight of you in my arms fades.

III.

the crisp scent of fall was upon us
sooner than we realized.
tart blackberries gleaming between Dawn's rosy fingers,
the mist of her shroud blanketing us
cold,
wet,

a comfort in all her changing colors

there across the glimmering horizon
you stand,
just as you did that day,
unchanged by the time
that has weathered me.

Oh, the beauty you have seen.
Oh, the horror too.

you whisper your secrets into the wind.
they flit through the trees
in the feathers of songbirds
in the babbling of rocky streams
and once
in the dreaming of my youth,
they called to me.

ages it has been
since i've walked your paths,
followed brooks,
the tracks of your kin,
to listen
to learn
to be.

I forget what that oneness of solitude
in your loving embrace
feels like.

Author's Commentary:

This poem is broken up into three sections. The first, dedicated to my Nana Boo, who left us far too soon. Her hands were magic; she could create something beautiful from nothing. I spent so much time holding her hands in mine. The second, to my nephew. I'm not a mother, but cradling him for the first time awoke something within me that I never knew I had. I instantly fell in love with this little stranger, and became fiercely protective of him. It was the most bizarre, beautiful thing. The third, a love letter to the Appalachian Mountains explored during my youth. The mystery, the aura there provides a special kind of languid peace that feels impossible to describe. The specifics of these three distinct feelings and moments of my life are leaving me faster than I want them to. Perhaps immortalizing them like this will make them last.

SUMMER

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:

The feeling of summer: the multiple popsicles consumed in one day, the hot slide, the bright sun.

CHOOSE YOUR SUPERPOWER!

by Gaylord Brewer

Some say Armageddon by fire, some say by ice. Yadda yadda. Notwithstanding, bursting into flame is not a superpower. Shooting icicles from your palms is not a superpower. Nor, for that matter, is a reddened visor ablaze with laser beams. These are grotesque, pitiable afflictions. Sick puppies. Mastery of magic is also not a superpower, neither is gadgetry, athleticism, elasticity, nor possessing high intelligence (yes, the latter's rarity argues for elevation of its status). X-ray vision? Ugh. Unnatural power to heal oneself (albeit only physically as the mind swirls) is intriguing, especially in days of violence and contagion, but this, too, is more oddity. The core superpowers boil down to three: super strength, flight, and invisibility. Let us consider.

1. Super strength:

Clearly the thug's universal choice, power of preference for rednecks, hooligans, a dishearteningly large portion of the current electorate, bullies, children, and those lacking subtlety, grace, and imagination. Knocking down that first brick wall might amuse and impress, but by the second leveling it's a yawn. Sure, flipping an ersatz monster truck—one, say, with exhaust customized to roar upon acceleration (making godawful noise is not a superpower, it's being an asshole; but let's not bring neighbors into this...)—toward the moon might gratify, yet even so. Not to be gruesome, but what good is super strength, Oh Goliath, Oh dull-witted Colossus of the wide stance, when the flung stone penetrates head, heart, or worse (i.e., balls)? (Super strength is often illogically linked with invincibility. How can the metaphor of the invincible be quantified as a power? A .50-caliber shell exploding human tissue is no abstraction. Super strength, friend, ain't bulletproof. The first local yokel with a bump stock and you're dead. Toast. And a suit of titanium armor might be useful in a brawl, but it's a billionaire brat's toy,

not—ahem—a superpower.)

2. Flight:

Granted, this is the romantic option, superficially pleasant to think on, and convenient for short trips. Otherwise, though, what is it but a cheap “high”? Let’s be candid. The purpose of the blessing/curse of a superpower is a) notionally, to help “humanity”—i.e., American citizens—and b) to make money. How will an individual’s ability to fly enable either of these laudable goals? What? Rent oneself out as pony (i.e., freak) for birthday parties and bar mitzvahs? Start a modest home delivery service? In the margin of either humanitarian service or profit, a degrading bargain. And (okay, speaking of neighbors) how long before that good ole boy blows you out of the sky with a lucky potshot? *Got dat flyin’ focker!* Yes, taking wing is the liberal preference, no-brainer for Lefties, tree huggers, Icarus chumps, the overeducated, and those who miss their mamas. Good luck. Enjoy your flight.

3. Invisibility:

Younger, I considered this the most cynical and insidious superpower. That’s because it is! It’s also the smart choice for today’s world. Let us not distract ourselves with some petty rhubarb regarding, say, whether clothing will also transform to the unseen or whether you must return always naked to the visible. Nor unduly stress over how one gets past the proverbial drawbridge, over the gate, through the guards. We’ll learn the science of modesty, the skillset of deception, as we go. And think bigger, so much bigger, than petty larcenies and ho-hum voyeurism. Consider instead those demented villains, the Super Rich, feverish in their plush installations, scheming at their desks. There are a few clubhouse rendezvous that “never happened” that I’d like to attend, some non-existent conference calls to eavesdrop, my presence nothing more than a breeze unnoticed, a hint of shadow just as quickly gone,

imperceptible fly on the blood-stained wall. Initially, of course, invisibility's huge rewards will be for me alone. First things first. But then, humanity—on my word as a hero—for you!



Author's Commentary:

This cheeky little essay is included in my forthcoming book of flash creative nonfiction, *Before the Storm Takes It Away* (Red Hen Press, 2024). Most of the pieces in the book are shorter and more personal (the press is leaning toward defining them as “micro-memoir”), but I had a few far-ranging ideas hanging around. Homoeroticism in Rudolph, the Red-Nose Reindeer. A game of cards arranged around the day of one’s death. The preferable superpower (about which my opinion has changed as I’ve gotten older). Et cetera. If you still choose flight or super strength, God help you. Sometimes, we get what we ask for.

A BEAUTIFUL TRAGEDY

by Rebecca Price

Lovely you, with chestnut hair and eyes of molten chocolate,
a muse, an Adonis amongst the likes of men
that steals the light from the room, oh natural artist,
my weakened heart I could not defend.

The sweetest high I've ever tasted; in my blooming you willed me to bend.
Ever on, I spend my days chasing the intoxicating euphoria of us.
O caress of the flitting breeze. O skittish deer lost in the glen.
your absence a hollowness in my chest, wishing, longing for things never to pass.

How is the view from the confines of your prison, the windows of stained glass
carefully constructed by your hands, as you feign to struggle with all your might?
Justified by duty, a ruse that even you are convinced of. We wilt as
cruel fate, master of our imperfect timing, diverts our ships into the night.

A self-fulfilling, never-ending, achingly beautiful tragedy is who you are.
An endless cycle, bittersweet memories; I cannot breathe—suffocated before we could
ever start.

Author's Commentary:

For months I've mulled over what to say about this piece. It came from the whirlwind romance shared with a previous lover of mine. I cannot deny the explosive power that the connection between us had, though the striking of this match proved to be both exhilarating and dangerous. What still stings is that he called us "ships in the night" after it had ended, nodding to the fact that we always seemed to be close to a collision, but never close enough. I'm of the belief that fate provides us opportunities that we may choose to act upon. What makes him a beautiful tragedy is that he holds the power to change the course of his ship, yet he willingly confines himself to solitude. There is beauty in the hesitation before the collision, and there's beauty in the heartbreak of a moment missed as well.

TELL ME YOUR AGE WITHOUT USING NUMBERS

by Nicholas Bush

I was born during a time when Prince
seemed way weirder than Michael Jackson,
a moment in history when the culture would
equivocate between high hair and long hair,
when computers were a strange alchemy
of outer space and the future,
when gas shortages gave way to drug wars,
a clear break from mid-century sentiments
to late-century realities.

I was born during a time when hard drugs like weasels
swilled into the bloodstream of mainstream culture,
daffodils of free love long since becoming fly traps
of expensive greed, a climate of Cold War of which
we could never quite acclimate,
an evisceration of computer-free living:
somehow furtively creeping to much aplomb.
A paradox of springing forward *and* anchoring in place,
like moving cross-country while keeping the same address.

CANDY DESTRUCTION

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:
When the pinatas bust open, the chaos ensues.

WHY DO YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD? I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS

by Nicholas Bush

Prodigal does not mean what you think it means.
You think it means to leave and go back. Wrong.
Look it up. I'll wait.

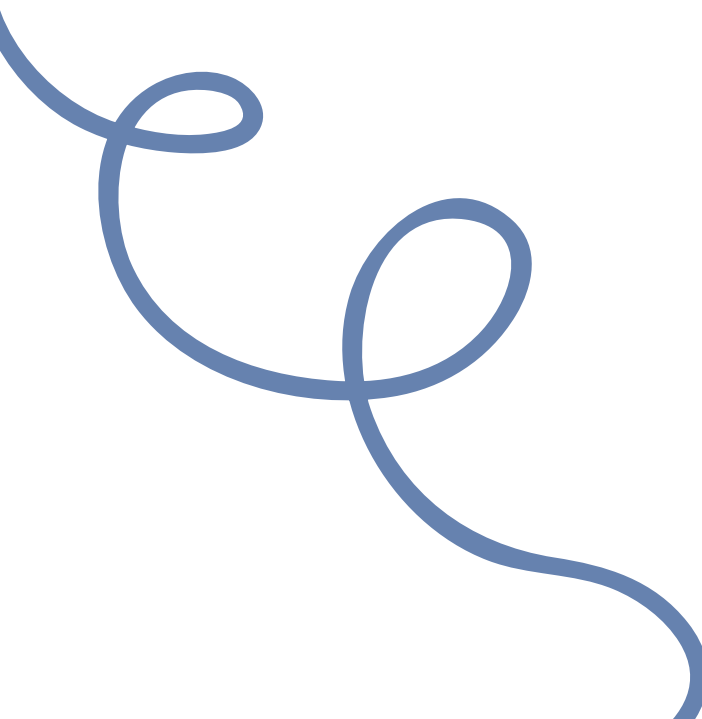
And I always remember the difference between
affects and *effects* because *affects* is a verb,

And a bored high school student is uninterested
An impartial judge is disinterested.
And as far as I'm concerned,
anyone who confuses the two,
should be tried in front of a judge,
uninterested in justice but disinterested in language.

Words have meanings that go beyond meaning,
which is why if you're writing a college essay
and you have to define a word,
just know a dictionary
definition will not suffice.
And while we're on dictionaries,
know that there's only one—three letters: *OED*.

Words, words, words are worth
Wordsworth's wood work, times
what he worried would work.
Word up.

If you disagree, ask a grieving mother
who's watched her son's casket,
draped in Stars and Stripes
the difference between the holiday we celebrate
on the last Monday in May
and ask a mother who gets to hug her son
every November 11th, the difference
between Veterans Day and Memorial Day.



I HAVEN'T ASKED

by Daniel Williams

I never thought to ask if I
Impose too much on you,
Or if, when I should wander by,
Your patience might renew.

No fault of mine could bring us two
On paths in union set,
Yet I cared not, as discord grew,
To assuage the debt.

So burdened, we had rather let
Our shackles bear the strain
Of enmity, uneased regret,
Antipathy and pain.

I haven't asked what I had done to earn disdain
from you; and fear what I will hear in that refrain.

BREATHING THE SALTY BREEZE

by Rebecca Price



Artist's Commentary:

These flowers were nestled alongside the edge of the Cliffs of Moher (Ireland), and their shade was beautiful amongst the other cool tones of the grass and the sea. I took a series of shots here to play with the focus, and there was something powerful about focusing on such small, fragile little things clinging to the vast greatness of the edge of the world. When we arrived here just before dawn, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get any good shots at all; thick fog clouded our vision of the cliffs, the sky, and the sea. If I close my eyes, I can still hear the distant crashing of choppy waves and the faint howling of sharp wind. There is something about the brine saturating the air on the coast that always makes me breathe in a little deeper; this place made me feel whole again.

A SIMPLE PLEA

by Kylie Petrovich

Where are the people
Promoting peace in this
Beast of a country?
West to East
We need to find relief
A brief reprieve from the
Grief stricken, fear ridden
Lives that we lead.

Where is the peace train?
Living in the same American vein
Decades passed
The same problems remain.

Rise to the challenge.
Challenge the game,
In this frail frame of society
Causing nothing but pain and shame.

Change the game.
Change your aim.
Make a stance.
Take a chance on the fact
That your one simple act
Could cause a REACTION,
A SUBTRACTION of pain.

Be a light.
Be THE light
In this world,
In this never-ending fight.

We're all works of art
Can't you see?
I don't wear my heart on my sleeve
I wear my damage proudly
There is no guilt trip in this plea
Just you, and me
And the land of the free

Stand up.
C'mon, I'm serious.
Promise me you'll stand up,
Not just for what's right,
But for what's kind.
Kind in our hearts and in our minds.

Author's Commentary:

I was driving down the road listening to music one day, and the song "Peace Train" by Cat Stevens came on. "Peace Train" was released in 1971 but, as I listened to the lyrics, I realized how much the song resonated with me in the present year. Many of the social issues that America faced in the 1970s are still problems today. So, I started to ask myself, where are the advocates for peace now? I wrote "A Simple Plea" as just that; it is a simple plea to be kind to one another and to promote peace in a country that is divided. Everyone talks about right and wrong, but those can be grey areas. Instead, I wanted to encourage people to simply be kind.

MIGHTY JUDITH

by Harley Mercadal

I took it upon myself that day
to save my great city from a fate
her own leaders had desperately laid
in hopes the Lord would hear us pray.

I went forth, praying for the focus
I needed to attract the general's notice.
I stripped off my widow's garb, silent
now as I dressed to seduce the tyrant.

My skin, rubbed with oils, glistening,
as I adorned my fingers with many rings;
I brushed my hair until silky smooth,
praying my body glowed with youth.

I clothed myself in celebration dress
and left the gates, praying for success.
My maid and I were soon captured, asked
where we were going, what was our past?

We were led to Holofernes himself, where
he allowed me to tell my tale and be spared.
"She must be the wisest and most beautiful,"
soldiers whispered. They thought I was usable.

Four days of prayer led me to be invited
to a banquet for Holofernes! I was delighted
when his eyes ravished me, and I played coy.
He drank too much wine, much to my joy.

After he passed out, and servants all left
I stole his sword and steadfast pressed
down twice against his exposed neck.
In a net, I gathered his removed effect.

My maid and I went back to our city;
we thanked our God that I was pretty.
I called for our people to come and see
that our enemy was dead: Holofernes!

Holofernes' head was hung on the city wall,
and the near attack on us was quickly called
off. With the Lord's help, I changed our fate
and gave us the faithful a day to celebrate.

Author's Commentary:

I wrote this after engaging in the (usually not canonical in Biblical terms) story of Judith; while I'm an Atheist myself, there's no denying how awesome Judith's power is in the story. I tried to put myself in her place and feel her preparations, her desperation, and her steadfastness in this poem. I also gave myself a double challenge as I tried to write a rhyming poem.

MESS

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:
The singular piece of order in the middle of a messy playroom.

BLEEDING POMEGRANATES

by Emiliya Mailyan

The syrup runs black off the spoon,
subtle shades of garnet in the sun.

Where lamb *shaslik* meets bamboo stick,
the *narsharab* hits, sticks, drips—
spills onto the plate, flooding mounds
of rice with lima beans and dill.

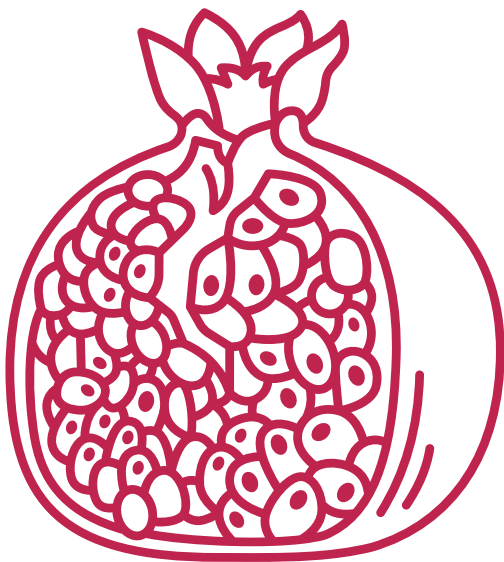
The generous molasses covers
the charred skins of grilled
tomatoes and green bell peppers,
turning bitter to lovely and tart.

Rolled pieces of *lavash* soak up
the pomegranate pools. Between
puckered bites, shots of vodka cut
the acidic overwhelm.

Why do we prefer our dishes sour?
The pomegranates that bled, burst
to make enough juice to be
mixed with sugar, simmered
and reduced—these fruits
are our blood, replenished
by the drop.

Author's Commentary:

In grad school, I wrote a collection of poems about my family's Armenian background and compiled an ethnographic project on Armenian food culture. This time around, I wanted to experiment with incorporating elements of food culture into poetry to show how the foods themselves speak to Armenian history and heritage, as well as highlight the diverse geographic influences present in the cuisine. Pomegranates are an important cultural symbol in Armenia. Narsharab is a pomegranate molasses that's used as a sauce for various dishes in the Caucasus and Middle East. I was inspired by its characteristic tartness and dark color— aspects that perplexed me when I was younger. I would often pour way too much of the molasses on my plate and can still feel the rush of heat to my cheeks from the sourness. The language used to describe the molasses hints at a turbulent past—evoking poignant, bittersweet memories.



SUN-KISSED FRECKLES

by Megan Wegman

Sun-kissed freckles
sprinkled
her porcelain shoulders.

Cute blemishes
invoke
delicate beauty—
far-off shores.

But the sun
didn't gently peck
three hundred
tender little kisses
onto her naked skin.

The unforgiving arid bastard
beat
battered
baked her.

Took her to new levels of pain—
angst
left pulsating welts
disgust
pockets of pus
animosity
crimson-cooked meat.

But in the end,
sun-kissed freckles.

Author's Commentary:

"Sun-Kissed Freckles" is inspired by my own shoulders. Once, I was out in the sun for hours without sunscreen. That neglect resulted in tomato-red shoulders, painful blisters, and peeling for a least a month. This past summer, I reflected on my shoulders, wondered when the freckles had appeared there, and remembered the painful experience that ten years later had formed "beauty" marks. It served as a reminder during a new transition that sometimes we have to go through excruciating episodes to gain beautiful things.



SIDEWALK CHALK

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:
The random collaboration of childlike ideals and ideas.

ONE DEGREE OF SEPARATION

by Candie Moonshower

Robin was my last client.

I'd wanted to be finished by now, printing the résumé packages I'd already sold—not still making sales. But when Robin called, she stuttered and tripped over her words, and I heard her father in the background coaching her. I couldn't say no, so I agreed to meet with her. And him.

The door opened and she stepped in. He came in behind her and smiled at me, a kind-looking man the same age as my father would have been. Her eyes did not meet mine. Soft brown hair obscured a goodish bit of her face. Long dark eyelashes. Round cheeks. A full lower lip and vulnerable upper gave her a childlike appearance, though I knew from our phone conversation that she was at least twenty. Her eventual small smile never reached her eyes.

Anxiety, wariness, neediness—a tsunami of social issues crashed over me, palpable enough that I felt nauseous. I remembered those feelings, which developed after my father was killed and the man my mother married molested me. I learned to hide them. Robin had not. Her father seemed nice enough, but I wondered what trauma she had suffered. I recognized her similarity to me—or thought I did.

During our interview, I learned more about Robin. She'd graduated from high school. She attended college. She wanted to work. She couldn't articulate one particular thing she wanted to do, however, and while her father proudly listed her skills, she imperceptibly shook her head back and forth, denying his belief in her.

Robin was already 24 years old, a late bloomer. Perhaps a non-starter.

Experience told me her résumé might take perhaps a short half-hour to compose, a single page filled with ambiguous phrases such as Hard-working, Willing to learn, and Searching for a position that encourages personal and professional growth. Her father knew it, too. He smiled reassuringly at both of us—as much to me as to her—willing me to see his daughter's possible success, the way parents dream of their babies in utero, imagining futures overflowing with happiness and achievement.

Robin did not see what her father saw.

I did not see what her father saw.

Normally when I interviewed clients, their excitement about starting new careers, taking risks in their current positions, and trying something new, or even the prospect of making life-altering changes, blazed forth on their faces. Composing a new résumé and listing those skills you want to put to good use is intoxicating. Looking for that new position just out of the gate? Not so much. Searching for a new position, especially for people with families to support, usually proved to be frustrating at best and, at worst, demoralizing. But I rarely heard about that part of the journey. My business involved the heady beginning steps, rarely the soul-sucking and arduous process of interviews and rejections until that moment when someone in charge finally says yes.

I saw no anticipation in Robin. She wasn't closed-off or tight-lipped. Her expression conveyed . . . resignation. Acquiescence to something already seen or known . . . or subconsciously anticipated. Her quiet responses didn't sound hopeless. Helpless, perhaps? Detached? Yes, that was the word.

I knew deep down that she agreed to our appointment to make her father happy. Her demeanor reminded me of someone who has been given a terrible prognosis, has accepted it without argument, and has

chosen not to fight. All stiff upper lip and an air of complete submission.

Our time together didn't feel like a beginning but more like the beginning of the end.

Robin's shell sat in my office, shrinking back into the chair each time her father bragged about her high school accomplishments, several years in her past. Her inner self—her essence—existed somewhere else. Her detachment sprang from some elusive, unfindable, undefinable well of knowledge not yet clear to Robin herself.

I quickly realized her father was not the source of what I'd first viewed as her discomfort. I knew in my gut that he hadn't hurt her. My radar for molesters always proved spot on—if the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and my bowels turned watery, I knew. I found myself liking this kind man who obviously adored his girl.

Perhaps she was autistic? That didn't ring true, either. Despite her father's caring gestures, Robin appeared to me to be . . . unanchored to this world. She lived in our world, but she wasn't putting down roots.

Robin was a conundrum I couldn't figure out. I delivered her résumé package, finished packing up my life in Indianapolis, and returned to Nashville. But I couldn't stop pondering the enigma of Robin.

The résumé helped, I'm supposing, or someone in charge of hiring needed to fill a spot immediately, and Robin landed a job at a shoe store, PicWay, in Lafayette. She graduated from Indiana University. I found out because her father called my former business partner and told him to let me know. Later, a manager at a Payless Shoesource in Indianapolis decided to take a chance on shy, sweet, mysterious Robin. Payless was a self-service store, so I knew Robin's interaction with customers would be limited mostly to finding shoes in the storeroom and ringing up purchases.

Dad's continued pride and belief in Robin warmed my heart—and it pleased me that he'd thought enough of me to send word of her success on the job market. But the specter of Robin's resigned face that day in my office, her detachment about the entire process, haunted me. She'd asked no questions—only nodded at whatever her father or I suggested.

I found it impossible to forget Robin.

In April of 1992, I planned my wedding as I worked my corporate job as an Operations Manager, a job I procured through my own résumé-writing skills. A bright future awaited me.

Robin still worked at the Payless Shoesource in Indianapolis. When I thought of her, which was more often than I did about any other client I'd worked with over three years, I tried to imagine her blossoming, making friends—perhaps even dating—and anticipating her own bright future. I tried hard to imagine a happy ending for Robin.

Now I picture what happened that day.

A man walked into her store in April of 1992, on an unseasonably warm day with a hint of rain on the horizon. A few daffodils had sprung up around the scraggly, untidy parking lot of the store, ever hopeful.

Robin, now 26 years old, worked alone that day, according to the police report. She managed the store. She might have taken a lot of pride in her job.

I found out later she'd told her father she hoped to be a mother one day.

She might have smiled shyly as the unassuming-looking man gazed around at the racks of shoes, appearing nervous for such a mundane task as shoe shopping. He looked to be about her age or perhaps a few

years older, but not by much. Slender. Average height.

What might have happened that day is a blur, but it plays in my mind like a benign movie—until I get to the part I know happened.

"Can I help you?" she might have asked in her sweet, young voice.

She might have sold him shoes—there was one last purchase rung up on the cash register about 1:15 PM.

She might have taken one look at him and known. She might have seen him before in some kind of vision.

She knew the ending of this bad dream.

Still, the desire to escape is innate in all of us.

She might have turned to run away from him.

He might have demanded she look away from him.

Either way, she ended up in the back office.

This much I'm sure happened.

The man shot Robin, execution-style, twice in the head at close range, with a gun described by police as a "unique .22-caliber pistol." Cash was missing from the open register, but detectives didn't believe robbery was the killer's motive.

I know this happened.

She was found dead at 3:00 PM that day, April 8, 1992, murdered by the man who came to be known as the I-70 Killer.

Patricia Smith and Patricia Magers died on April 11, murdered by the I-70 Killer, inside La Bride d' Elegance bridal shop in Wichita, Kansas.

Michael McCown died on April 27, murdered by the I-70 Killer, inside Sylvia's Ceramic Supply in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Nancy Kitzmiller died on May 3, murdered by the I-70 Killer, inside a boot store in St. Charles, Missouri.

Sarah Blessing died on May 7, murdered by the I-70 Killer, inside her herbal healing shop, the Store of Many Colors, in Raytown, Missouri.

Thirty years later, the I-70 Killer remains unidentified, perhaps on the loose—perhaps dead. A multiagency task force is dedicated to discovering the man's identity and, hopefully, bringing him to justice.

Robin was his first victim.

Author's Commentary:

Robin Fuldauer, 26, was murdered on April 8, 1992, as she worked alone. Her murderer, still unknown, came to be called the I-70 Killer after a total of six people were killed between April 8 and May 7, 1992, all in stores right off Interstate 70 in Indiana, Missouri, and Kansas. Sadly, her father, Elliott, died of an aneurysm just four months later. I believe he died of a broken heart. This case is cold but, hopefully, our ever-evolving forensic technology will someday produce answers. Recently, I read an article in *People* about the continued hunt for the I-70 Killer; the story reminded me that—as authorities believe—the I-70 Killer murdered Robin first. I've never forgotten that I sold my last resume to Robin—she was my final client. The circular structure presented itself and sparked the idea for the essay.

TRAMPOLINE

by Madison Spraker



Artist's Commentary:

Jumping on the trampoline leaves weird stills in our mind, sometimes losing the full sight of the person we are jumping with.