

Issue 10

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# *Off Center*

A Creative Magazine for the MTSU Community



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# *Off Center*

Middle Tennessee State University

Margaret H. Ordoubadian University Writing Center

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# *Letters from the Editors*

Without art, what are we?

Art is on street corners; art is on billboards; art is bound to a spine, and it is necessary to each and every life on earth. As Kendrick Lamar said in an unreleased song: “The Earth is just a rock without the voices of art.” Call rap what you like, but so simple and poignant a lyric speaks to a distinctly human truth: we need art to live meaningful lives. People eat, drink, and sleep so organs don’t shut down, so our corporeal selves can retain the actual self where one thinks—the self from which art emanates.

But without art we could not possibly understand the warmth of a heart-to-heart embrace, why some of us breath deep the smell of our coffee, why someone might cry tears of joy at the simple phrase, “How are you?” Without art, we would be hopeless to truly make sense of human life or to foster our connection to reality with any meaning. Loneliness would have no merit; everyone would be a body walking with senses scattered throughout the nerves like leaves in a torrential storm.

Art is reciprocal. We consume it, we live it, then we create it. The stories held in this issue of *Off Center* are full of life and that drive for understanding which is art’s staple. Most of the art within this issue is in the medium of the written word, but the images and meanings each piece creates far surpass what the eyes can read. The artists of this issue all shared not only their work with us but a part of their self. That is not only a brave thing to do but a beautiful thing.

I hope you all can learn a little more about what it means to live on this Earth, this beautiful rock, by way of the artists who shared their knowledge – their art – with you in this magazine.

Josh

**Dear Reader,**

It is a joy to be able to greet you and meet you through the pages of this digital magazine. I'd love to ask you where you're from, how you got here, and hear your story. What's life been like for *you*? How would you tell your story?

I'm curious because, after all, stories are the entire reason that this literary magazine exists. Through every photo, poem, or fictional piece found in these pages, there is a story being told. It is my wish that you grasp the honor of getting to soak in each one.

In a reality where artificial intelligence is quickly becoming quite the controversy and stirring up disturbing questions and worrisome conversations for each of us, I'd like to take a moment and assure you that the stories found on these pages are something real, wholehearted, and most importantly, human.

Some of these stories are darker than others. If you're anything like me, they may bring tears to your eyes. However, I can guarantee you that these stories will also make you smile. And laugh. And wonder. And gasp. What a beautiful thing it is to experience this range of reactions, both in the creation and reception of these works. It is exactly this range of emotional responses that make us human.

With this in mind, I'd like to invite you to explore the following pages with an open mind and heart, ready to embrace every living story found within these pages. Appreciate the *humanness* of these creative works – I believe that's something worth celebrating today.

I hope you hear the heartbeats behind every word.

Joyfully,

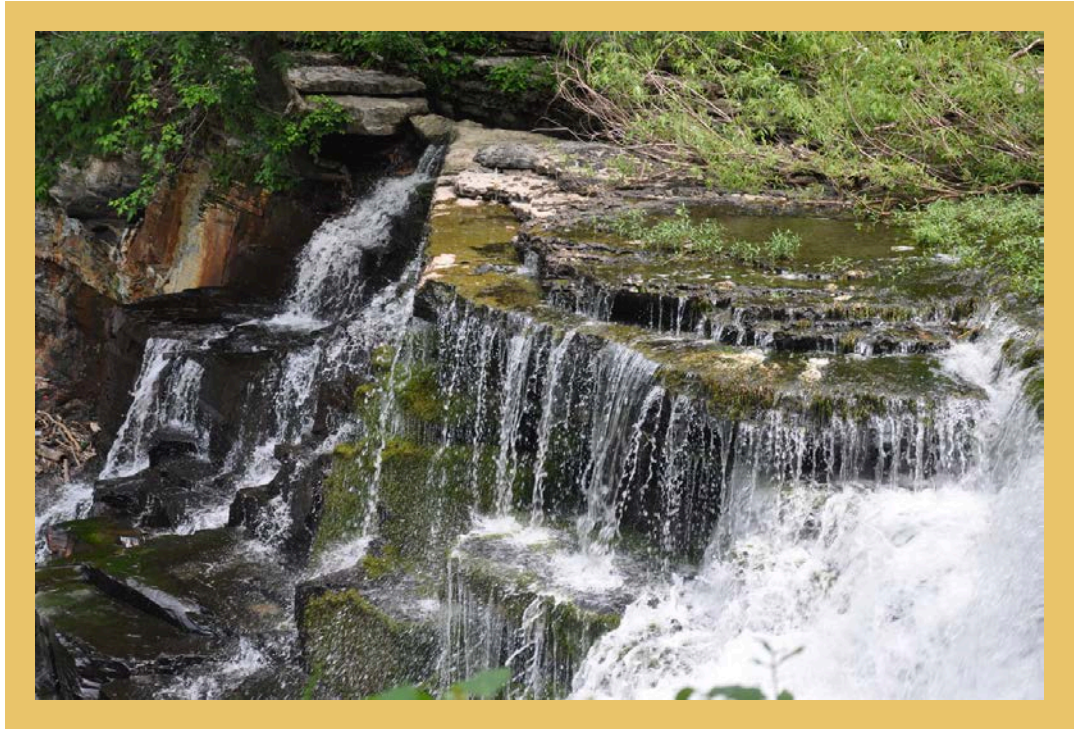
*Autumn*



## **“The Little Things”**

***By Kera Reynolds***

Gather and celebrate not just the grand  
but  
the small victories. Among friends and  
family, is where I find joy. In company, I  
find grace. My triumphs,  
I hold dear. In laughter and even in the  
silence  
I am gracious. For every petal kissed by the  
morning dew and the streams that flow.  
And  
when the harmony not only traveled  
through  
the air but also through my soul, I am  
reminded of the light’s promise to shine.



**“Untitled”**  
***By Kim Deale***

We were the stupid kids, the slow readers, the poor spellers, the class “retards.” We were the “blue group.” A demarcation that everyone understood, that I understood. It meant I was forever dumb. I remember begging my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Miller, to move me to another pod. She did. She seemed to understand my shame. Good readers are celebrated; poor readers are condemned and those wounding words are carried like irrevocable truths, with a capital “T,” sometimes for a lifetime.

So, when I am asked in some icebreaker exercise at a teaching or writing workshop “what is the book that mattered most to you?” I *want* to say it is not *one* significant book, but all books, any book. And because I am now a professor of English, i.e. “a book worm,” that statement would require an explanation. One I hide like an admission to some long-ago crime I committed. Carrying a learning disability is a heavy thing.

As a child, I was afraid of books, while also being drawn to them. I went to the library with my mother and would match her stack book for book. While I borrowed *Ladd a Dog* and *The Island of the Blue Dolphin* with the pretty covers and chapter titles with drawings that hinted at the story, my mother checked out *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1955) by Rudolf Flesch. Even though my picks were grade-level materials, I couldn't read them well. The funny phonics tripped me up and the tricky proper names of people and places were too difficult to decipher. When I managed to get through a page or two, the struggle with each word robbed me of comprehending the story.

But I loved how books smelled and how they felt with their scratchy parchment pages and I wanted to be a *good* reader. I loved listening to stories

## **“The Book That Mattered”**

***By Catherine Berresheim***





told, but I was too big by then to be read to. I mimicked my smart friends checking out the *Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, and *Black Beauty*, and I carried them out looking studious and returned them mostly unread, feeling dim-witted.

In school, I knew how to pretend I understood directions, to dodge, and guess, and mumble. My deficiency, however, was apparent in my failing spelling grades and whenever I was, God forbid, asked to read out loud.

Before being passed onto junior high from sixth grade, the special education teacher called me out into the hallway. I knew her only through the whispers the other children made about the kids she took from class for “remedial lessons.”

She asked, “Do you still mix up your ‘b’s’ and ‘d’s,’ or turn them backwards when you write?”

“What? No, of course not,” I said wondering how she knew. She made a check mark on her pad.

“What about your ‘p’s’ and ‘q’s’?”

“No.”

“Read these words,” she demanded as she turned the page toward me.

Two words were on the sheet: “saw” and “was.”

I knew these answers. I had practiced these as sight words.

“How about these?” she asked.

I saw two collections of symbols: (1) “d. e. a. r” and “d. r. e. a. d” and (2) “t.i.r.e.d” and “t.r.i.e.d.”

I didn’t know the difference, the same two vowels together, or interrupted with a consonant, in what I assumed were different words, were always confusing. These took some time to sort, and usually I could only make the connection by

## “The Book That Mattered” (con.)

**By Catherine Berresheim**



reading the whole sentence in context to determine which word was actually implied. She obviously wanted a quick response. I stalled: “Are there a lot of these? Should I get my glasses for this?” I didn’t wear glasses. “The print is so tiny,” I said trying to sell the lie.

“No, that’s okay,” she said, clearly ready to move on to the next kid. “Very well then,” she said. She then scribbled on the bottom of the form and advanced me onto seventh-grade.

I think the first chapter book I ever read all the way through was *The Diary of Anne Frank*, assigned by my eighth-grade social studies teacher, Miss Lehnert. I didn’t know how to pronounce the last names, so I just used abbreviations: Petonella van Daan, became Mrs. P van D. If a word tripped me up, I skipped it and kept reading, more engaged in finding out what happened to Anne than in letting my embarrassment keep me from knowing. Besides, this book was the work of a twelve-year-old girl, my age, written with simple language arranged in extraordinary ways. Anne kept a journal like I had started to do, and she wanted to be a writer. Reading and writing comforted her. I decided to follow her example.

Through my secondary education, I managed by depending on my auditory skills since I couldn’t rely on my eyes, which still sometimes played in reversals. Slowly, with practice, my reading improved. Still, my face reddened like I had wet my pants when asking a teacher about a sentence for an assignment I was having trouble with, realizing I had confused the noun “apple” with the verb “appeal.” I miscopied it from the blackboard.

It wasn’t until my freshman year of college in the fall of 1979 at Middle Tennessee State University that I discovered the name for what plagued me:

## **“The Book That Mattered” (con.)**

***By Catherine Berresheim***





dyslexia. I found myself in a basement classroom in the education building surrounded by other struggling students enrolled in a “remedial reading improvement” class.

I spent Saturday mornings propped up with a study-buddy, a cup of instant coffee, and a cassette player, repeating the sounds of the consonants and vowels and completing workbook pages. My reading comprehension rose to grade level. Sadly, my spelling didn’t improve. It was the hardest “A” I ever earned. This one class opened a whole world to me.

“What is my book that mattered to me? Being able to read any book I want is what matters most,” is what I want to say sitting at the table of six other English professors and fellow writers. But I don’t tell them any of this. I stay quiet and simply answer, “*The Diary of Anne Frank*.” They nod and ooh and aww, having no idea of what an achievement reading that book really was.

## Author’s Commentary

I’ve spent my entire life hiding my learning disability. First, as a child I was told again and again if I just tried harder, then I would be able to read and spell better. In the 1960’s educators were just uncovering the root causes of this strange condition of “word blindness.” Even after I learned about my neurodivergence status when I first went to college, I was, and am, reluctant to be open about my continued struggles. I am a functioning dyslexic in an often pompous academic space. Good readers and spellers gloat.

This piece is a simple personal essay of how I’ve not gotten courageous, but weary, of the assumptions that all academics are gifted learners. Some of us have had to work much harder to achieve milestones that good readers take for granted. This is the story of how, at one conference, in a smaller group of six at our “getting to know you” activity, I wanted to be honest, but wasn’t. This essay is me, finally opening up.

## “The Book That Mattered” (con.)

**By Catherine Berresheim**

## **“Messy Berries”**

***By Miles Wine***

She is dark and sweet  
like the wild berries that grew on the trees of my childhood home,  
staining my fingers  
lingering on my tongue.

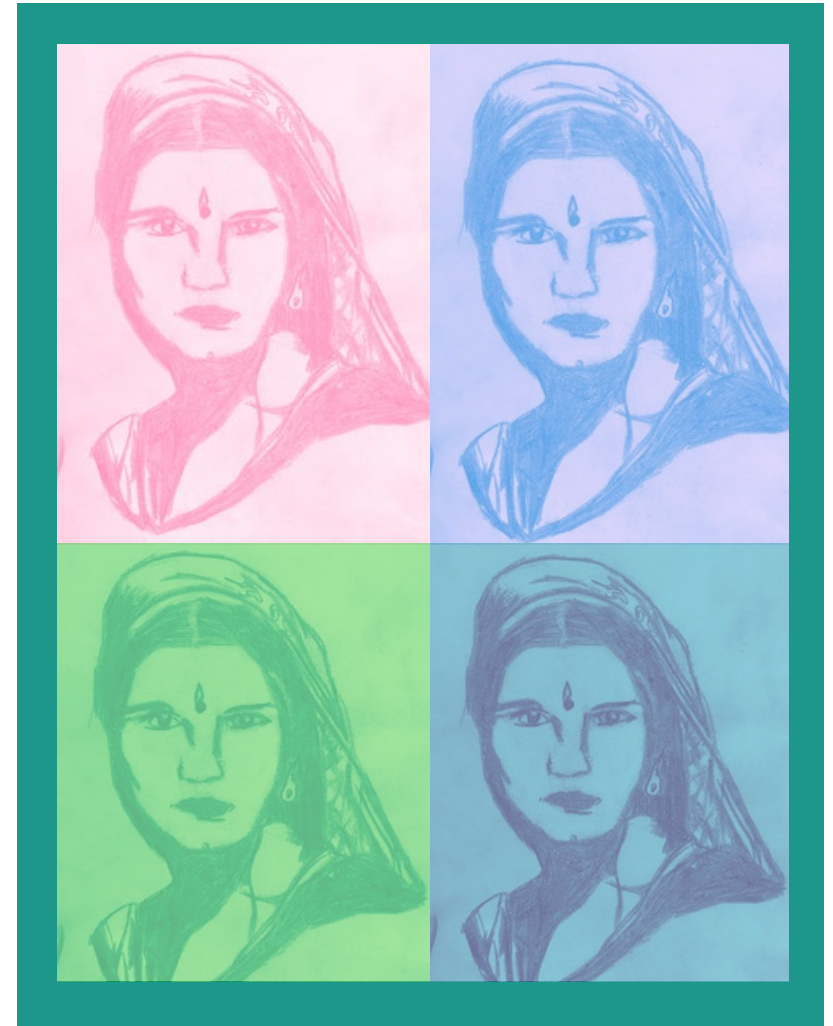
She tinges my lips with a wash of red—  
blood dancing beneath the skin.

Just like then,  
my mother scolds me for the mess.  
She reminds me of the trouble they cause—  
the impenetrable stains and unseen bacteria;  
the severed family,  
the fruitlessness.

She calls it greed;  
I call it survival.

I will wear her proudly,  
for there is no flavor like hers.  
I will bear her diseases,  
for she should not suffer alone.  
I will cut the ties myself,  
for she is family too.  
I will forget the fruits that are not,  
for the fruit that we are.

We will conquer those troubles,  
for they are nothing when placed against her absence.



**“Arya”**  
***By Kera Reynolds***





## **“Take Care”**

### ***By Kaleia Branch***

I’m greeted by the pungent smell that sticks to old clothes like glue. A reminder of their life before they ended up under fluorescent lighting, waiting to be poked, prodded, and picked. Despite it, I inhale the scent, the aroma of the thrift store feeling more welcome than the brisk cold on the other side of the door. A lady leaving the store hands me her cart and smiles with yellowing teeth. I make a beeline for the arrangement of brand-name purses, hoping to find a deal that could satisfy and sedate.

My hands gloss over the assortment of worn leather bags, picking over the stained and scratched. Coach is the prize; it has been since the small, grimy apartments my family used to move in and out of. My nose scrunches at a bright green Kate Spade bag, as neon as the Nike logo on the back of his favorite jacket. “I look like a bum,” he would say when he wore it. I leave the purses and circle aimlessly through the store.

I find myself in the men’s section. Men give me puzzled stares as I head for the rows of graphic shirts. Ed Hardy is the first thing I see, my hands lightly tracing the worn lettering. I can almost see his smile when he walks up to me, the lettering of his Ed Hardy shirt pressing against me. Tears attempt to escape. I move.

Eclectic sweaters and shoes grab my eyes, my hand reaching for a red pair of vintage Anne Klein boots and a matching red sweater. The words “I like you in red,” buzz around my head like flies. I swat them away.

Delicate vintage jewelry lightly coated with dust, tea sets decorated with angelic porcelain-skinned babies and garlands, miscellaneous trinkets with wear and tear and a fascinating story behind them. My gaze lingers on a picture frame in the shape of a heart, a jarring crack residing in the middle. Broken.

I stand in line to purchase my items. I pause at the tall figure standing by the register, pointing upwards at a jacket the same way he did when I introduced him to the store. In a flash, the figure is gone, and I’m left with the inescapable memory of him. The fragments of him throughout the store that I attempted to escape all collide, rushing back into me. I’m flooded with heart-melting smiles and melanated arms wrapped around me. McDonald’s runs, holding hands in the park, listening to music with the windows down. Sleepovers and flustered giggles as we stared into each other’s eyes. The first time we said the words “I love you.” He loved me first. The tide changed with that phone call.

“I love you” turned into “Take care.”





## “Kronecker Speaks”

*By Alex Tumbleson*

Last night I watched the ghosts of our fallen men drifting Eastward over the ice in perfect silence. I stood alone among my slumbering comrades and gazed in terror upon these souls journeying on toward their End. A light of great power bathed their faces, all of which bore the same slack-jawed, mesmerized expression; it shimmered in their eyes, and seemed the Agent of this hypnosis; yet no such light was there, in the polar night. Not the slightest hint of human will remained in them. The poor fellows were being shuffled off like so much Cargo along the trade-routes of a distracted God, to be smelted and reshap'd into other Forms, in other Worlds, perhaps.

The men rose at Dawn and lined up at Mr. Wiggins' tent to receive their rations. I have made a habit of saying a few words prior to Muster each day, as a means of keeping the men focused on the Task at Hand—for the sun rises only three hours now, and a little less each day, and a long winter of sledge-pulling awaits us—but I possessed even less desire for Speech as I did for Conversation, this morning. Instead I paid a visit to Mr. Glass.


He was poring quite pointlessly over a great Map, the bottom half of which, in depicting what is known of this continent's Interior, gradually paled away to obscurity. His

chipp'd fingernail swam over this vast Blankness: 'No, that's not . . . well, pr'aps . . . but certainly that's too far . . .' I placed a hand on his arm. I did this gently, so as not to startle him, but the poor Navigator was so absorbed in trying to reclaim his Bearings, lately at Large more often than otherwise, that he failed to acknowledge this gesture. As to whether he even registered my presence, there was no outward indication. This was not a good sign. I left him alone.

A half-hour later he emerged from his Tent, sporting a clean Shave and a countenance improved enough to suggest that Sanity had returned for its few scant hours of Duty; and if I wish'd to confide in him regarding my Nocturnal Vision, (I told myself), I had better do it soon. But judging it more likely than not that our Burdens would not be halved but rather doubled—with each man carrying the weight of the other's encroaching madness with him across the sastrugi til Day's End, and the dissolving Mercy of Sleep—I again chose the path, familiar to all Captains since time immemorial, of Silence.

I seated myself among the Flour-Barrels, lay my Journal open upon one Knee, and observed our camp as it stirr'd to life. In the shadow of a task so grueling there





prevail'd an air of Time Suspended, in which no idle moment was left unsavored. Green-hands greased the sledge-runners with steaming Pails of seal-fat; men queued up at Mr. Wiggins' Ale-Keg to receive their morning's Fortification—some gradually, others in as few Gulps as physically possible, with several members of the Former party each day defecting to the Latter . . . while in the shadows behind the food-crates I witnessed another, more Mystickal ritual taking place. It was young Tom Finn, lately driven by the death of his beloved brother to whittling Totems, which he believes serve as Speaking-Tubes into the world of Esquimaux Spirits, and who is often seen retreating to the shadows to whisper at length to his jealously guarded Icons, as he is doing now. As I write he holds one to his ear, listening for a signal from that Other World. He knits his Brows. I'll be damned if the boy doesn't appear to hear something.

Like Wolves whose Temerity increases in step with their Hunger, 'til the natural separation is erased—likewise does Death encroach day by day

upon us. Yet I fear we are becoming enamour'd with it.

Bradshaw has just given the Ten Minutes' Holler. The fragile air of Humor and Ease surrounding the Ale-Keg dissolves as the men disperse in silence to their various stations throughout the camp. Jokes are turned away from half-told. Young Tom Finn has disappeared from his hiding-place. As I scribble these words, a corrosive dread settles into my Viscera.

How I wish Broken Finger were here by my side! Alas, he has always possess'd a Good Sense absent from my own morbid constitution, and sleeps now in the comfort of his home. His Wives lie by his side, and his children are near enough to reach out and touch in the night, and the snoring of Elders encircles his Teepee like a Barrier of Familial Warmth, holding in abeyance the Terrors of the Dark Forest. The greater Virtues which I had long mistaken as my own reside there with him now, and our Expedition is greatly imperiled by their absence. What a fool am I. During my 'farewell' visit to his village we nearly came to

blows over this endeavor and its Aims, which he cruelly compared to the circumstance of a Drunkard who, stunn'd by the reflection of the Full Moon upon still Water, and desiring to claim it as his Prize, dives after it, and thereby drowns. Our voices soon rose, and busy outcompeting one another in Volume we hastily lost track of our argument's original purpose, and brought it Outside, leaving his family to pick at their cold dinners in petrified Silence. We sat some distance apart, each carefully looking at Everything but the Other Man; yet we continued to hash out our grievances in that private Interior Space where they remain still, unresolv'd and stinging.

The men are ready now. The tents have been broken down and their poles piled onto the sledges where the flags, with their sharpened tips, lie waiting to bring Glory to our homeland. We must now turn our faces to the wind and press on toward that place of ultimate Descent, that place where all meridians converge, and every direction is North.

## Author's Commentary

This story is written in a style that parodies the more high-flown writing of the eighteenth century. You'll notice that in almost every sentence certain words are capitalized, in order to give them greater poetic weight. We don't do that anymore, so it looks odd on the page, and when books from that era are republished today editors will often modernize the spelling and remove the capitalized letters. But if you read journals or correspondence it can get very haphazard—and since this story is a work of historical fiction, I wanted the page itself to look something like how an explorer's personal journal might actually look.

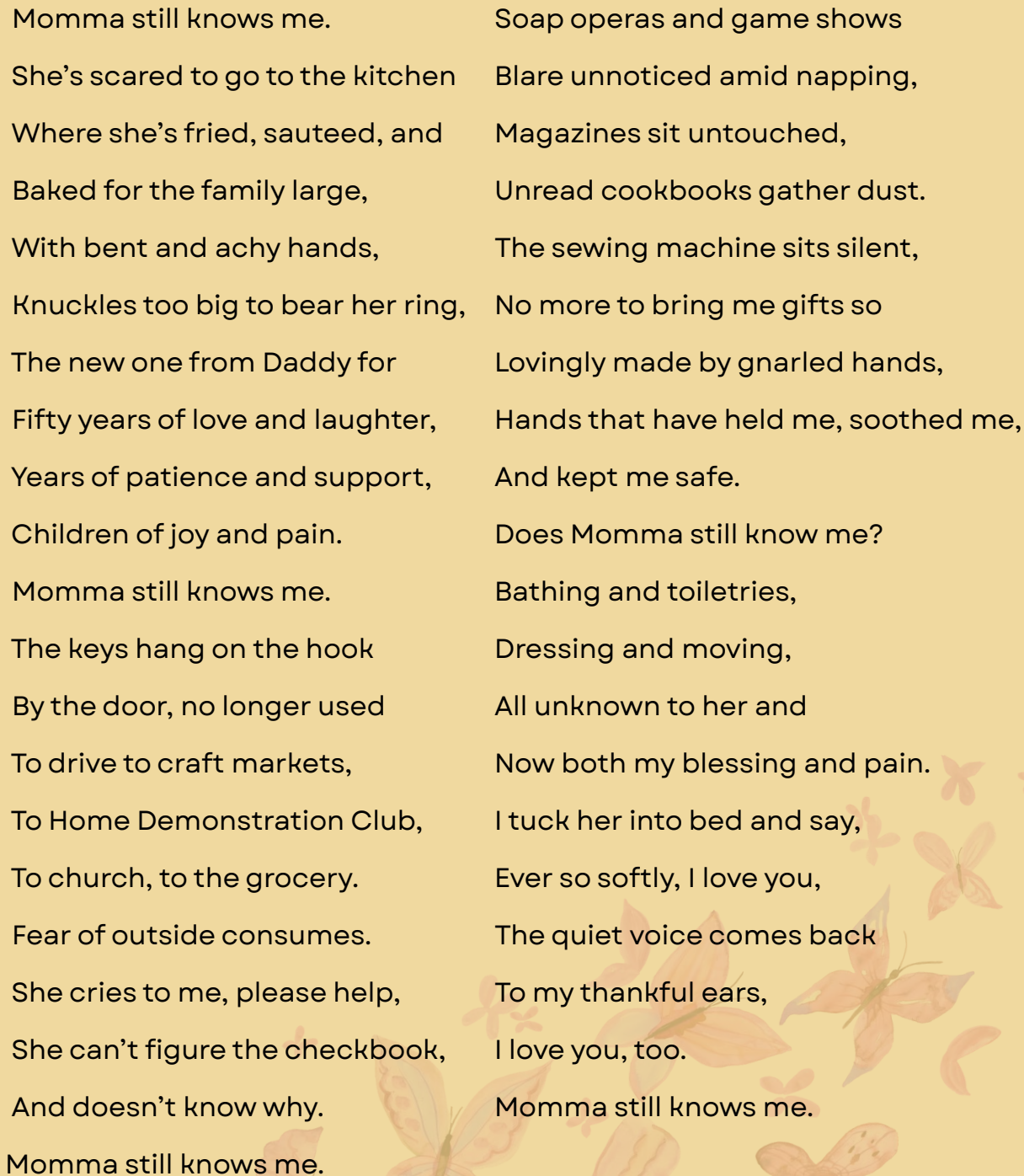


**“Green Drinking”**  
*By Patricia Gaitely*



# **“Momma Still Knows Me”**

**By Patricia Cundiff**



Momma still knows me.	Soap operas and game shows
She's scared to go to the kitchen	Blare unnoticed amid napping,
Where she's fried, sauteed, and	Magazines sit untouched,
Baked for the family large,	Unread cookbooks gather dust.
With bent and achy hands,	The sewing machine sits silent,
Knuckles too big to bear her ring,	No more to bring me gifts so
The new one from Daddy for	Lovingly made by gnarled hands,
Fifty years of love and laughter,	Hands that have held me, soothed me,
Years of patience and support,	And kept me safe.
Children of joy and pain.	Does Momma still know me?
Momma still knows me.	Bathing and toiletries,
The keys hang on the hook	Dressing and moving,
By the door, no longer used	All unknown to her and
To drive to craft markets,	Now both my blessing and pain.
To Home Demonstration Club,	I tuck her into bed and say,
To church, to the grocery.	Ever so softly, I love you,
Fear of outside consumes.	The quiet voice comes back
She cries to me, please help,	To my thankful ears,
She can't figure the checkbook,	I love you, too.
And doesn't know why.	Momma still knows me.
Momma still knows me.	

## **Author's Commentary**

“Momma Still Knows Me” is a personal release of love and loss. Losing my mother to the horrendous disease of Alzheimer’s was an emotional roller coaster. I can’t say that it was an easy poem to write; it was a release of pent-up emotions that I experienced as I read my journal of those last few days of my mother’s life.

I have found depths of insight from my writing experiences, and this poem revealed yet another. I write nonfiction from my mind and my heart, paying attention to details and truths. The fiction is also from the heart, but encompasses imagination with my hopes and fears along the way. Poetry involves all of this with one important addition: it erupts from my soul, sometimes a torrential release of passion and pain, and sometimes with a quiet shower of relief and peace. This piece, “Momma Still Knows Me,” combines both the storm and the welcome gentle rain cooling a hot summer day.

I can’t pinpoint precisely when I started writing. The first poem I remember is a short one I wrote when I was eleven or twelve. It is a simple poem about sitting under a tree in my grandparents’ back yard. My memory of that poem faded until I opened up the Family Bible and found it lovingly placed between the thin pages. The paper was worn, and the pencil



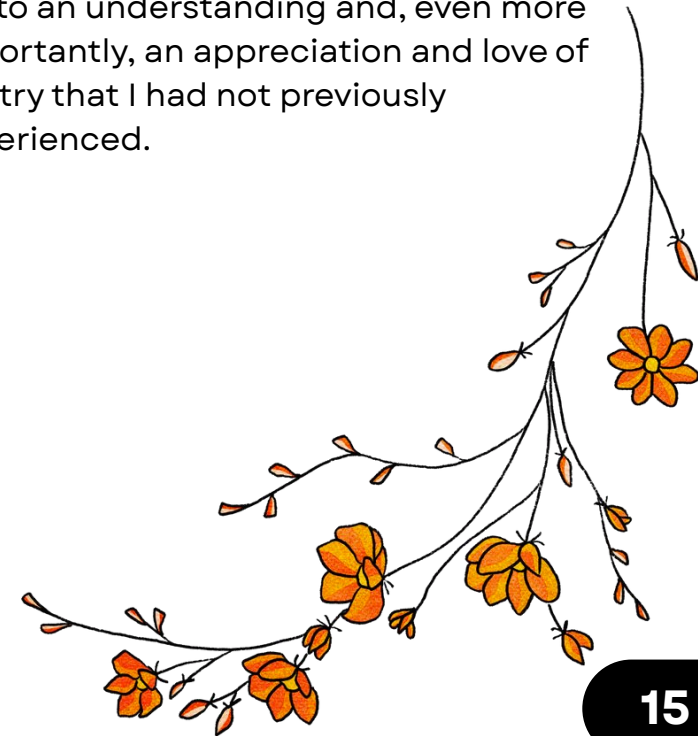


## **“The Cathedral”**

*By Kera Reynolds*

## **Author’s Commentary (cont)**

writing was barely legible. I recalled that I had given that poem to my grandparents, and many years later, after their deaths, I found my poem meant so much to them that it had been placed in an oft-opened Bible for safekeeping. I have written many stories that are now packed away in boxes, unlikely ever to be finished. I now write fiction and have dabbled in some nonfiction; I’ve written for children and adults. Poetry had not attracted me until I attended Dr. Allen Hibbard’s English class at MTSU. He covered many types of literature in the class, and the poetry section was the only one I did not anticipate with pleasure. Dr. Hibbard was encouraging and brought me to an understanding and, even more importantly, an appreciation and love of poetry that I had not previously experienced.



# **“The Night”**

**By Robert McCartney**

The night—  
Bruised and misunderstood,  
Cast aside by those who worship the sun.  
Yet it remains, steadfast and silent,  
A refuge for the forgotten, the wandering, the lost.

Darkness creeps, a veil of fear,  
Yet the night does not seek to consume—  
It is not the abyss they claim it to be,  
But a sanctuary where the weary find rest.

For within its shadows lies a truth:  
The unseen, the unheard, the unspoken—  
Here, voices long unheard find echoes,  
Drawn not by despair, but by the quiet promise of understanding.

The night does not demand, nor does it judge.  
It listens like wind through empty streets,  
Holding the weight of sorrow and song,  
A beacon for those cast adrift.

So, though it may seem fearsome,  
Know this: the night holds you close.  
Through shadowed paths, beneath silver light,  
We do not fade into the dark—  
We become the night, steadfast and bright.

## **Author’s Commentary**

I was primarily inspired by my love for the night—its sound, stillness, and sense of mystery. A song called “The Night” by the band Morphine has always resonated with me, both musically and emotionally. I wanted to write about something often misconstrued or misunderstood, and the night felt like the perfect subject.

So, this poem, “The Night,” was born as a metaphor layered with meaning. It explores how society often fears or dismisses the night, the literal absence of light, and the symbolic darkness people experience. It reflects how those who struggle and don’t conform to society’s bright expectations are often overlooked or cast aside.

In this piece, the night becomes more than just a contrast to the day—it is a misunderstood sanctuary. It holds quiet strength, resilience, and a gentle kind of hope. It represents a space where we find belonging and where those navigating darkness can become beacons for one another.

## “From Soldier to Scoundrel ”

*By Carter Smith*

Born in 1739, when the American colonies were still under British rule, Sam Mason entered a world shaped by hard labor and self-reliance. Young Sam grew up in an agrarian household in Frederick County, Virginia. With twelve children to manage, his parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Mason, ensured everyone contributed to the daily grind of colonial life. Mason served in the militia under Colonel George Washington at Fort Necessity as a young man. By nineteen, he was stationed in the contested frontier lands of western Virginia, but military discipline didn't suit him. In 1760, he was court-martialed for skipping muster, fined ten shillings for his absence. Soon after, he earned an unsavory reputation when he was caught stealing horses from his commanding officer. Though he made restitution, the episode marked Mason as a man to be wary of by the time he was twenty-two.

Despite his tarnished image, Sam found love in 1767 when he married Rosanna Dorsey. They raised eight children together, but Mason's troublemaking ways continued. In 1773, he moved his family to Ohio County (now Wheeling, West Virginia), where his reputation as a rough, self-serving freeloader preceded him.

### **From Soldier to Outlaw**

By 1774, Mason had secured a station at Fort Henry but quickly disgraced himself at nearby Fort Pitt. He shot and killed a young Wyandot messenger who approached the fort bearing a peace offering. Arrested for murder, Mason was spared justice when a mob of settlers stormed the fort and freed him. Returning home, he continued walking the line between law and lawlessness.

During the Revolutionary War, Mason was in a captain's uniform, leading a militia unit in Virginia. His exploits, including a skirmish against native raiders in 1777, earned him begrudging respect. When Fort Henry came under siege later that year, Mason was hailed as a hero for defending the outpost. Yet even this hard-won acclaim couldn't cleanse his name. By 1778, suspicion fell on Mason again—this time for stealing supplies. Facing accusations, he left the fort and moved his family to a Buffalo Township, Pennsylvania farm.

### **From Justice of the Peace to Common Thief**

Incredibly, Mason managed to rise to prominence in his new community. Elected as a justice of the peace and associate judge in 1781, he seemed to turn over a new leaf. Tax records from 1782 show him as a prosperous farmer, owning horses, cattle, and slaves. But this respectable façade began to crumble in 1784 when debt forced Mason to sell his land. He and his sons turned to swindling, selling counterfeit land titles to settlers in the Marietta, Ohio, area, about eighty miles southwest of Wheeling.



By the mid-1780s, Sam Mason drifted southward, squatting on property in eastern Tennessee. General John Sevier, a prominent figure in the area, evicted Mason and his associates from cabins near the Holston River after accusations surfaced. Items missing from Sevier's slave quarters—including tools, foodstuffs, and small valuables—were traced to Mason's gang.

### **From Farmer to Counterfeiter**

Continuing west, Mason claimed property earned by fighting in the war. His new home in Western Kentucky was in a fertile region rich with dense forests and arable land. Mason again tried his hand at farming, raising crops to sustain his family or perhaps to trade in the local markets.

By 1789, Mason had fled northward to the Ohio River, where he dabbled in counterfeiting currency and fake land deals. Despite his growing infamy, he continued to secure public positions, serving as a justice of the peace in the burgeoning settlement of Red Banks (present-day Henderson, Kentucky). But as tensions with local law enforcement escalated, Mason's crimes became more brazen, culminating in violent clashes with a constable and rival settlers. By 1797, he relocated to Diamond Island on the Ohio River, a haven for outlaws.

### **The Pirate of Cave-In-Rock and the Natchez Trace**

Later in 1797, Mason took up residence at Cave-In-Rock, a cavernous hideout along the Ohio River. Here, he established a tavern that doubled as a den for piracy. River travelers lured by the promise of hospitality often found themselves robbed—or worse—at the hands of Mason's gang. The pirates would ply their victims with liquor, assess their cargo, and strike when least expected. Some captives were spared their lives in exchange for joining the gang; others weren't so lucky.

The vast and winding Mississippi River served as the primary trade route for goods from the continent's interior to the bustling port of New Orleans. Flatboats on a one-way trip carried barrels of flour, tobacco, whiskey, furs, and other commodities, prime targets for piracy. Mason and his gang would ambush boats at narrow bends, where pilots had no room to maneuver. Using deception—like posing as stranded settlers—or outright force, they would board the boats, kill or intimidate the crew, and make off with the cargo. The pirates often left the vessels adrift, doomed to wreckage downstream. Their attacks disrupted trade and terrified boatmen, who knew the river carried their goods and their livelihoods—and sometimes their lives.

The Natchez Trace, a land route connecting Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee, was equally fraught with danger. Merchants returning north from selling their goods in New Orleans or Natchez often traveled the Trace on foot or horseback, pockets heavy with gold and silver. The dense forests and isolated stretches of the Trace provided the perfect cover for highwaymen like Mason and his gang. They ambushed travelers at narrow passes and creek

crossings, demanding valuables or delivering swift violence to those who resisted. While the river pirates preyed on commerce heading south, the highway robbers of the Trace targeted those returning home, their wealth ripe for the taking.

One of Mason's most infamous robberies occurred in 1801 when he and his gang targeted Colonel Joshua Baker, a wealthy merchant returning from New Orleans. Mason's men attacked twice, once at Twelve Mile Creek and again as Baker attempted to regroup and pursue the gang. Baker and his companions narrowly escaped with their lives on both occasions but lost significant wealth to the bandits. Baker returned the following year, and Mason's gang attacked him before he was able to reach the market. Baker and his men repelled the attack, but there were injuries on both sides. Baker lodged a complaint with the governor, who dispatched several men to round up Mason and bring him to justice.

### **An End Fit for a Scoundrel**

By 1803, Mason's days of unchecked plunder were numbered. Captured by militia forces near New Madrid, he and his gang were tried by the Spanish for piracy and robbery. Mason orchestrated a daring escape while being transported to Natchez for further proceedings. Pursued by lawmen and vigilantes, he evaded capture for months, though conflicting accounts suggest he was gravely wounded during his flight.

Ultimately, two members of Mason's gang claimed to have killed him and returned to Natchez with his severed head to collect their reward. The head's identity was disputed, however, and both men were arrested, tried, and executed for murder. Mason's true fate remains shrouded in mystery.

Though Samuel Mason's life ended in infamy, his story endures as a testament to early America's tumultuous, lawless frontiers—a time when men like Mason walked the precarious line between hero and villain, from soldier to scoundrel.

## **Author's Commentary**

From “Soldier to Scoundrel” is a work of creative nonfiction, rooted in historical fact. The events, characters, and setting are all based on historical research, with no fictionalized details added. However, the piece employs a storytelling approach that blends factual history with a compelling narrative structure.

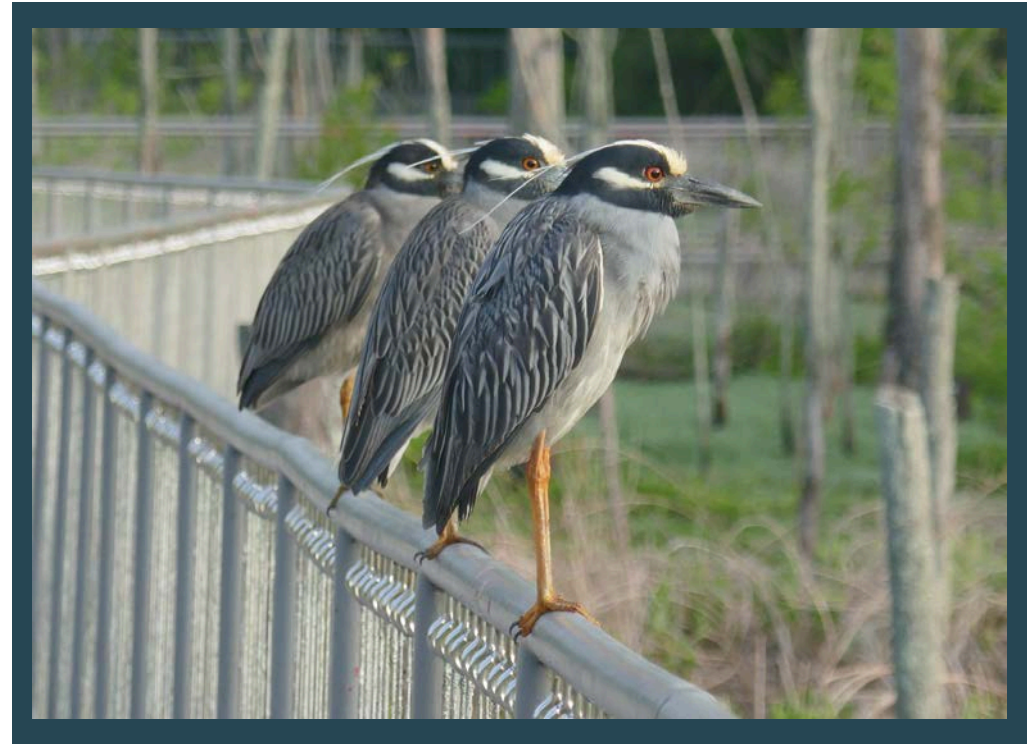
The purpose of “From Soldier to Scoundrel” is to illuminate the complex and often overlooked transformation of Sam Mason from a Revolutionary War captain to one of the most infamous river pirates in American history. While the piece is grounded in documented historical accounts, it is crafted in a way that invites readers to experience the frontier world as it was.

This piece (as well as “The Ballad of the American River Pirate” below) is part of a broader exploration of Mason's life that I have developed through extensive research, culminating in my forthcoming book, *Pursuing River Pirates: The Hunt for Sam Mason*, set for publication by Bloomsbury in Fall 2025.

## **“To the Wake Robin”**

**by Skylar Hazen**

Every spring brings forth that great re-carving or the great shame  
Those trilliums of the land with confined steady grasps  
Truly it must be easy  
In reasoning, in territory, in becoming  
Unmoved by happenings, unbiased towards questionings  
It must be easy  
However, I cannot grasp the wisdom of the trilliums  
The ephemeral whites and reds close to comforting but shattering  
Be easy  
Alas, they forget the truth always swearing to ignorance  
The decay of leaves brings forth the same grass every year  
Easy



## **“3 Yellowcrows”**

**By Patricia Gaitely**





## **“Pariah Meets Charles I”**

***By Kaleia Branch***

I remember thinking that she looked familiar. A St. Louis-born black girl, depicted in the same pose as Charles I lit a familiar flame. Her brown-eyed gaze unwavering, her camouflage-clad body stuck in a thick, black frame surrounded by colorful bunches of geometrically placed flowers. Much like the ones blooming outside of the museum. I feel the flame again as I look into the eyes of the “Pariah.” His similarly regal stance, splashes of color embedded in his poignant expression, afro-textured hair atop his head. A shared message resounding between both portraits: blackness is elegance, is beautiful, is worthy to be painted. And yet, different titles with different meanings. A “Pariah” meets “Charles I” in a battle for the way blackness is viewed: as a disorganized child-like mess or as strategically placed royalty. Oftentimes, when I look in the mirror, I wonder this too.

# **“My Mother, Summer”**

**By Hannah Willis**

## **Author’s Commentary**

The inspiration for this piece is my mother, Racheal. I lost her when I was a teenager, and I wanted to create something that reflected my personal journey with that grief.

Hate and gratitude—  
a paradox inside me,  
fighting,  
begging for reprieve,  
as Summer becomes  
the only mother I have now.

An ancient blooming dogwood,  
a child’s favorite scent,  
thriving in abundant warmth,  
rendering tenderness—  
*Safety.*

Rain marries sweat,  
baptizing me,  
pelting the fragile white florets,  
filling my ears.

What will I find beneath this dripping dogwood tree?  
An apology hiding in the roots,  
swirling, elusive,  
mocking my confusion.

Like a caregiver,  
Summer returns to hold me,  
ignoring my disapproval,  
soothing my aching heart,  
with incomparable patience—  
gentle and enduring,  
it will never leave me.

Natural, torturous—  
God replacing a mother,  
with Summer.

## **“Where I’m From, There is No Autumn”**

*By Saiid Lewis*

Where I’m from there’s no autumn,  
and yet the leaves fall. Confused and floating  
to roofs and streets, and sometimes,  
nowhere at all.

And we see them on floors,  
hurrying like rats,  
or drifting on air, like feathers  
or old man’s hats, searching for a place to sit,  
knowing that it’s calm somewhere.

And we see them tumbling,  
struggling to fly. When it rains,  
we lean over with our backs to the sky.

I’m from where there’s no winter  
no reason to hide or fall from the sky afraid at my side,  
but still they are running to rest or to flee.

To nowhere at all.



## **“The Pyromancer”**

*By Greg Wicks*

### **Author’s Commentary:**

I digitally painted this piece in October, as it tends to be the time of year that I feel like exploring more difficult lighting and composition. This one specifically combines two of my favorite things to paint—clothing folds and light in dark environments. Following the eerie atmosphere, I love the imagery of wide-brimmed wizard hats and liquid fire, so I coalesced these into a flame-proof pyromancer.



## **“I Command It”**

**By Miles Wine**

Many spin myths and legends that drive their love  
But cannot a fascination do just as well?

What is best:  
To be pulled and tied to one another  
Or, rather,  
To be free to discover  
That which makes us bleed?

Must our story be written in the stars of our absent  
father?  
Or could they simply serve as a reminder  
That our choice in company is led by a passion  
Powerful, more so than that which is commanded by  
seraphs?

Yet detached from the greater expansion beyond  
And therefore of our own volition to want

Perhaps one day we will find ourselves to be  
Those binary stars that have forever been bound  
And perhaps one day we will reach that profound  
Supernova,  
But in the meantime, we shall not dwell on what cannot  
be foreseen

I will paint you in bright colors  
But I will not coat you in varnish



I will nurture you as those pure mother's flowers  
But I will not keep you potted

I will savor your glimmers and sheens  
But I will not force you to tarnish

I know not what the future holds  
And I do not care to.



### **Author's Commentary**

This poem was written from the perspective of a blossoming relationship—one where there is no way of knowing the longevity of the connection, but one that is rich with anticipation for what could come. I've never agreed with the concept of predestination. I relish in self-sovereignty; I find it beautiful that we all command ourselves and, in those commandments, may devote ourselves to another who returns it. I wrote this piece as a celebration of love made by choice, a ballad to the independence and individualism of relationships, and an acceptance of future's chance.



**“Untitled”**  
*By Kim Deale*



**“Spoonbill”**  
*By Patricia Gaitely*

## **“Me and Misanthropy”**

***By Joseph Vandeweghe***

I hate you  
As your eyes read this and your mind wonders who  
You  
I hate you

I hate your people, your way of thinking  
Your fabric of being, I hate it all  
If I was afloat upon a boat as you were slowly sinking  
I would cry tears of joy just watching you fall

I am disgusted by your existence  
Void of purpose, engulfed in waste  
Overflowing with pity at your persistence  
Sick and starved at your taste

If you were to bear offspring and reproduce  
I would take upon the mantle of death  
And to each of your children, introduce  
Them to their last breath

If yet, you're grasped by awe and despair  
Or screaming at my work that my hatred isn't fair  
Then pull back your reins, let your tears quench my  
bloodthirst  
And let it sink in that I read this first

## **Author's Commentary**

“Me and Misanthropy” was a self-induced discussion between who I am today and who I strive to be. It's a purposefully explicit proclamation of hate towards myself disguised as misdirected, nonetheless poetic, rage towards the reader. So, what did it teach me? It opened my eyes to just how harsh I'm capable of being when I'm talking about myself in contrast to the generous and uplifting light that I write others in. The moral of the story is that it's a lot easier to hate oneself than to justify hating others. As social creatures, we fear hating others due to the inkling of fear that we may be wrong in doing so. That said, there are those who hate as freely as they breathe, but those same people would suffocate on the thought of hating themselves.





## **“Murky Waters”**

**By Miles Wine**

**Winner of the Will Brown Creativity Award**

**A pond at the bottom of a hill.**

**Age: 8**

I sit at the edge of a rock lodged in the outskirts of a pond, itself fixed between two hills. Down the slope on the northern side, one can find the unpaved street and vast woods that guard my family’s property. Up on the southern side, atop the second hill, sits my house. My eyes fixate on a kaleidoscope of reflecting light bouncing amidst blue waves, guided by a breeze that swarms around us both. Turned towards the water, I see nothing but those choreographed ripples dancing as one, fabricating an illusion that the water stretches far beyond the shore. It is as though I am a sailor on an expansive sea, welcomed without hesitation.

I still recall running across my gravel driveway barefooted, half falling down the hill on account of my eagerness, stumbling so quickly that I only knew I had reached the pond when I felt my feet sink into mud. Most of my summer days growing up were spent sunbathing on that aforementioned rock, soaking in the sun while watching catfish emerge from the depths to break the surface, ruffling the water before diving down again. I’d leap off the boulder’s edge, striking theatrical poses before being greeted by water that pulled me into a warm hug. Squeezing my eyes shut against its dark shadows and bearing the chill of its icy touch, I’d find peace in its waves. I’d spend hours at a time swimming from one end to the other, often with loom-band bracelets tethering my ankles together to play mermaid. I’d float on my back, listening to the bullfrogs croak from the cattails, or hunker down in the shallow end to watch the tadpoles swim about.

My mother never swam with me; she’d sit on the bench just past the water’s edge and watch me intently, smiling warmly before shaking her head, “I don’t like not being able to see what’s beneath me.”

It’s true—you had no way of knowing what was below you in the murky water. You could not track the creatures that lurked at the bottom, nor could you anticipate the knife-like rocks before they had pierced your soles. It had never bothered me much, though.

**A pool in a friend’s neighborhood.**

**Age: 15**

I wade in water at the deepest end of a public pool as my friends gossip about school politics. My eyes dart between faces, trying to read strangers’ expressions before surveying my body through the crystal-clear water. The water here feels lifeless, suffocated by chemicals that left it pale, transparent. There are no natives to guide me through the land, only aliens like me, hellbent on balancing atop social ladders and weaving through secret

rules with twisted tongues. I know that behind their clouded faces lies a deeper mystery. Their impenetrable eyes hide scrutiny both unbeknownst to me and yet formidable, burrowing inside my chest, tearing holes in my lungs, leaving me drowning.

Looking through the pool's staggering glass, I feel like a jigsaw puzzle composed of pieces from several different boxes, none fitting as they should. I imagine that the people surrounding me have already taken note of my splintering edges as mismatched pieces cram into each other. I continue bouncing from the water below to the faces around, becoming more and more buried under the weight of what I didn't know and overwhelmed by the inescapable exposure.

Realizing my identity as a transman offered many answers to long-held questions. I felt grateful to have a word for the parasitic discomfort that had overtaken me during puberty, but the label didn't come with an instruction manual or treatment plan. Rather, I found myself with a new burden of unspoken expectations to uphold. "Transman," like most every label, came with a certain set of ideals. Transmen are expected to do everything possible to appear male—take on "male" hobbies, "male" fashion, "male" mannerisms, "male" hair, etc.. If one deviated from these gender norms—failed to comply with these rigid mandates—therein existed reason to doubt their true intentions. The validity of their identity could then become a central question as the accusation arises that they are a "trans-trender."

As the movement for trans acceptance has persevered, so has the assumption that trans people despise themselves. In an effort to communicate the importance of gender affirming care, trans rhetoric became saturated in stories of pre-transition self-hate while anti-trans parties propagated the lie that trans people were only insecure girls/boys. Still, today, we see how right-wing representatives perpetuate the narrative that trans people spend their lives disfiguring their natural bodies to attain the "biologically impossible." Meanwhile, the left continues to talk about the suffering of pre-transitioned trans people as though it can only be alleviated through strict, binary dichotomies rather than social acceptance. In this way, the validity of one's identity as trans has become dependent on self-hatred. When I first began questioning my gender, I felt that by identifying as trans, I would more so be identifying as self-loathing. I tried to gauge the validity of my identity by the severity of my self-hatred. But by then, I had become so entangled in gender binaries coming from both political isles that I completely lost myself in the sea of self-doubt between them. I was engulfed, sucking water through my teeth while trying desperately to look through the black abyss to decipher whether the waves of my insecurity came from genuine dysphoria or an internalized duty to bear such.

So, per transman standards, I was wedged into a "water-safe" binder (ironic name, considering binders are inherently unsafe). I could feel—see—my chest fat pooling out under my arms. My ribs pinched closer to my organs with each move I made, leading my chest to explode into sharp signals of pain almost routinely. I couldn't hold my breath long enough to race against friends or move freely enough to dance. Pre-transition, bearing a swim shirt and trunks, I looked nothing like anyone around me. Every part of my appearance—my

outfit, bone structure, hair—signaled me as alien, neither a normal man nor a woman, something other. Being encircled by strangers, unable to look through their muddled expressions but painfully aware of their judgment, I had surmised that people either saw me as a “thing” or a “confused woman.” Considering the latter, I’d find myself turning a dull and envious eye to the feminine portraits around me.

I existed in a limbo between my new expectations as a transman and those pre-established standards that still weighed on me as a woman. My hairy legs could grant me momentary euphoria before recalling a memory of my dad demanding I shave before a vacation. Masculine clothing would bring a brief smile before reminding me how my mother responded to my coming out with “but you’re beautiful,” because she mistook my interest in masculinity for insecurity. In line with the popular right-wing understanding of transness, she thought I was only running to manhood in an effort to escape the self-hate I was feeling as a woman. Though I certainly knew that wasn’t accurate, I couldn’t help but feel compelled to still compare myself to the women I “should’ve” been.

Doing so that day at the pool, I began to feel like a beast. Instead of proudly displaying clean-shaven skin decorated by petite two-pieces, I trembled like a wet dog. And just like a measly hound floundering in water, I felt like a clown for all to see. The water offered no shelter, instead serving as a display for my comical performance of a wanna-be-man-woman. My head became gloomy with constant self-deprecation, comparison, and anxiety. I was overflowing with dread telling me that I could never really belong. I had turned from the child that couldn’t be dragged out of the water to the friend who cringed at the suggestion of swimming.

Suddenly, I found myself thinking about my mother, sitting on her little bench by the pond.

“I don’t like being able to see what’s beneath me.”

My heart ached for what I once had.

### **My parents' pool, 4th of July, night.**

**Age: 18**

I am floating on my back in a raised, circular pool that my parents installed a few months ago. I am gazing at the stars, feeling the water on my skin and noticing how my chest subtly rises above and below the surface with my breath. Somewhere in muffled voices, I hear my two friends chatting, their voices blending with the sound of water that caresses my ears. I can still taste the night’s affairs on my tongue. Everyone else departed from the celebration long ago. At nearly two in the morning, we are all skinny dipping.

We had decided to stay up past the party’s ending in hopes of swimming alone together. After everyone turned in for the night, Sydney and Aly changed into their bikinis, and I, still searching for the right swimwear, decided to test out transtape. Having experimented with the product before, I knew that I could get some decent results.



Even transtape has its issues, though. Just as with binders, attaining a completely flat chest proved impossible; you always have to be prepared for a certain level of disappointment. Removing the tape is an exhaustive fight often ending in raw, torn skin. Additionally, as a pre-operation transman, showing off so much skin can be daunting and was the primary reason I had never tried it as swimwear in the past. Surrounded by my closest friends, though, I felt motivated enough to take the opportunity.

The beginning of the night disquieted my mind. I zeroed in on every lump on my chest and couldn't shake the feeling of the tape tugging on my skin. Though my friends said nothing, I worried that I somehow made them uncomfortable. Even in the night, I felt vulnerable to the water's translucence; the glow of the pool lights effectively spotlighted my every feature. I found myself countless times looking directly down at my glassy body rather than towards the faces of my friends. Even when I caught their eye, I felt intimidated by their apparent ambiguity.

At some point in the night, I noticed the tape peeling off at the edges. The overconfidence and mindlessness brought on by Ole Smoky convinced me to ignore such, chalking it up to the typical wear and tear of transtape. It was not until the adhesive had completely dissolved, leaving my whole torso bare, that I realized the chlorine-charged water had disintegrated the material. Overcome with embarrassment and shame, I fumbled to get out.

As my legs fought against the water, feet sliding against the slick bottom like a treadmill, I stumbled over apologies. I wound my arms tightly over my chest, hunching low with my back turned. Having almost reached the ladder, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Upon turning, I recognized the surprisingly unphased face of Sydney.

She snapped, "You have got to calm down man."

She and I have been friends since the fourth grade, Aly and I since sixth. They've been with me through each and every step of my transition. Having known me for so long, they were familiar with my love-turned-toxic relationship with water. Reluctantly, I listened as they talked about their own body issues through their usual quips—huffing about the annoyances of underwire and groaning about inconsistent sizing. They may not have understood everything about my experience, but they knew what it was like to feel uncomfortable in clothes, to watch as your body changes uncontrollably, and to think about how everyone else might be seeing you. Their empathy reached further than our individual labels, and as they laughed, I felt myself ease up more and more. At some point, a silent trust deal formed between us all as they stripped off their tops.

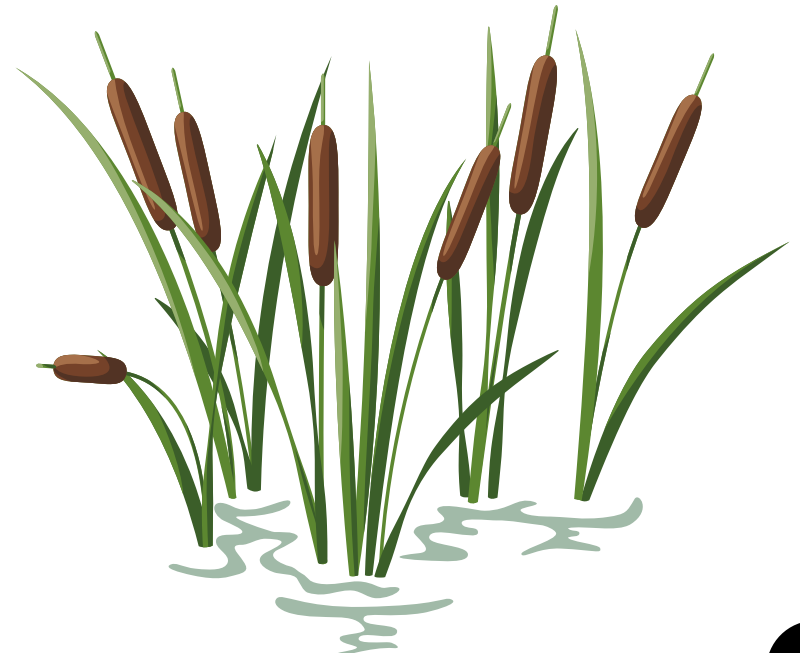
That night, I saw the moon. I saw the stars and the murals they painted within the sky. I saw the tree branches bending to the wind, the pool lights shining through the depths of the water and spreading across the surface. I felt the water on my bare skin—skin that had spent so long crammed or pulled out of shame. I heard my best friends talk to me—to my soul—without judgment, without preconceived ideas of who I could or ought to be. We found solace in vulnerability. I had always imagined skinny dipping as a tortuous nightmare, a ritualistic humiliation. But that night, I felt like I had finally returned home despite already being in my back yard.

I may have floated in a man-made pool, raised far above the grass and void of aquatic life, but, at that moment, I drifted back into a pond at the bottom of a hill. Face turned upwards, eyes closed, I grinned as I thought back on those arguments with my mom.

“It doesn’t matter what’s under you. Don’t you want to swim?”

## **Author’s Commentary:**

I made this piece for a few different reasons. Growing up, I’ve found myself often being put in the position of explaining what often feels unexplainable. I had never known another trans person, and neither had anyone around me. I was expected to explain everything, right after I had spent years barely figuring out the basics of terminology like transgender and dysphoria—a pop-quiz over a lesson I had only glanced at. Though this essay initially began as a sort of reflection on how being trans has affected my lifestyle, down to the hobbies I once loved, I decided early in the drafting stage that I wanted to try and make it educational. By connecting to my audiences and explaining my experience in more relatable terms and stories, I hope to make the murky waters of trans life a little more clear for everyone. I specifically wanted to build connection between the unique struggles of transgender people and their cis counterparts. Allyship does not ask one to know everything but rather for them to place kindness over certainty—to open their hearts, ears, and eyes to that which they may find confusing. I think there is a difficult balance in recognizing how trans experience both mirrors the insecurity that most everyone is familiar with and yet encompasses so much more than mere self-hate.



## **“Prohibition”**

***By Stacy Batey***

And it felt like . . .

no one cared

no one saw

hiding yourself away for another time

perpetually scared

existing, surviving

not being able to access yourself

fits of joyous pleasure when releasing yourself

only to draw back all that life like the ocean draws itself from the shore

curling in on yourself

compressing into your shell

no light

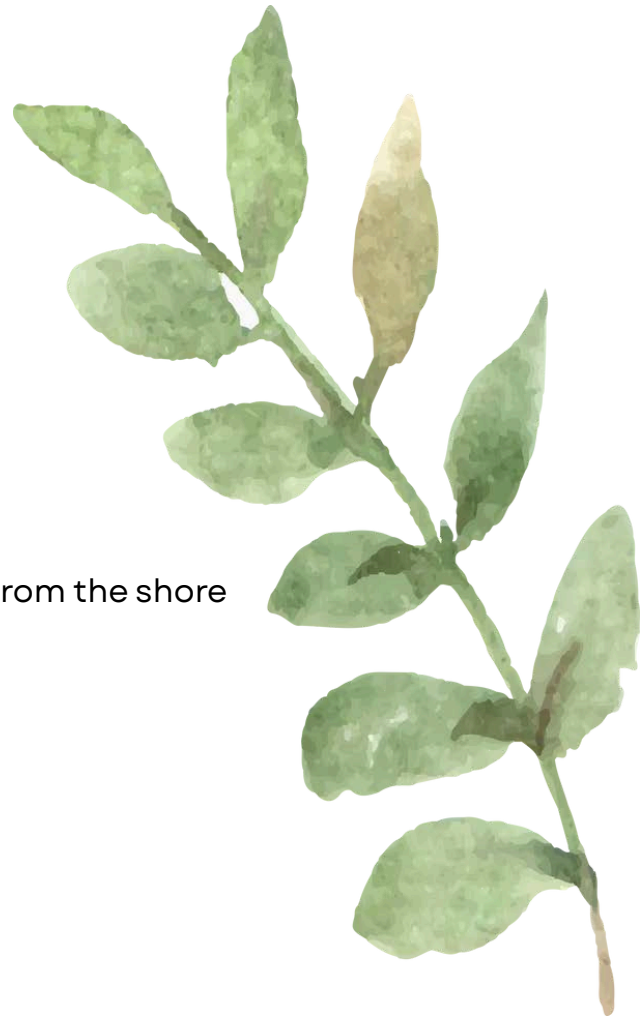
hardened armor, fake robotic girl version of you

always smiling while feeling nothing

no one close

if you see me, I’m ashamed and I shrink

no heartbeat, no life, just living







**“Heron Hiding Under Wing”**  
*By Patricia Gaitely*



**“Territorial Yellowcrown”**  
*By Patricia Gaitely*

## **“The Opener”**

**By Saiid Lewis**

Sweet Sweet my Haitian hills  
as honey in m’ veins,  
slower my beatin drum  
(goatskins make a sweeter strum)

the days of my days  
have eroded to dust.  
de mango trees spoil wif rot  
fermentin on de spot  
where de birds take deir fill  
and de river dries up  
so de crayfish die.

but now time comes for us too.  
heroes are swung  
and never hailed.  
all that is left  
is a penciled portrait  
with coconut trees,

can anybody hear me over de  
sound of history?

Sweet Sweet my French hills.  
please rustle me a tune  
send a drizzle through my window,  
spare strict sun at noon.  
Atlantic waves, carry me a song  
not smiling. but breathing  
not drowning but weeping.

“curse de yellow heat”  
workin through a shirtless street  
wif cracked leather soles  
putrid green from deep in our toes  
whose bodies are hoarse,  
beggin for a swallow;  
and some are blind.

my People my People  
through long freedom we find  
nor I or de Lord  
open conquerors’ minds.  
But I miss my own hills

I hear a patois song play play play.  
through thick-walled jail,  
sitting here convicted  
of living.  
innocence is my crime.  
and have the scars to prove.

For it isn’t enough  
to unplant a seed  
and rip it from its trough.  
even den it’s never done  
to let a man keep his toil  
grown so hard from rocky soil,  
but you choke it  
where there is no rain  
so it’ll never want to grow again.





# “The Ballad of the American River Pirate”

*By Carter Smith*

Upon the waters, hopes were cast,  
With dreams of futures, wealth  
amassed.

The rivers flowed, a lifeblood's course,  
Carrying trade on man and horse.  
But shadows crept along the shore,  
Where virtue faltered, greed did roar.  
From Fort Pitt's gate to Natchez town,  
The pirate menace bore renown.

A soldier once, with musket raised,  
He fought for glory in youthful days.  
Yet honor faded, sin took hold,  
A heart grown dark, a soul grown cold.  
From Frederick Town to frontier lands,  
Sam Mason carved with thieving  
hands.

Horse and coin, goods fair and foul,  
His name spread far, his deeds did  
howl.  
Caught in lies, the courts took aim,  
But Mason shrugged off law's disdain.  
With cunning smiles, he fled the fray,  
And marked new paths for wicked  
play.

Upon the bluff where the waters churn,  
A cavern wide with secrets burned.

Cave-Inn stood, a pirate's keep,  
Where rogues would plunder, lie, and  
reap.

“Liquor vault and house of cheer,”  
The sign proclaims, the cave invites.  
With drink and dames, they draw you  
near,  
Yet death attends their false delights.  
Flatboats grounded on jagged stone,  
Their cargo seized, their masters prone.  
For some, the knife; for others, chains—  
All succumbed to the outlaw's gains.

From Pittsburgh's docks to Orleans fair,  
The rivers teemed with wealth to spare.  
Pelts and flour, barrels of grain,  
Goods for market, dreams for gain.  
But pirates watched where currents  
turned,  
And Mason's gang the riches burned.  
At Gum Springs' edge, their trap was laid,  
The merchant fled, his fortune stayed.  
Near Twelve Mile Creek, their ambush  
struck,  
Where Colonel Baker met ill luck.  
Twice they robbed him, stripped him bare,  
The lawless mock of his despair.  
With every theft, the frontier waned,  
Its pulse diminished, progress strained.

The merchant's purse, the farmer's toil,  
All fell to Mason's river spoils.  
The Trace, a serpent through wooded  
hills,  
Carried goods the rivers spilled.  
Yet on its path, no peace was found,  
For Mason's men patrolled the ground.  
At dusky bends where shadows played,  
The honest traveler was oft betrayed.  
By gun and blade, the thieves laid claim,  
Their acts a stain on the settlers' name.  
Coins meant for homes, goods bound  
for store,  
Were seized by Mason's men of war.  
The Trace became a trail of fright,  
Where few would travel without the  
night.

The rivers groaned 'neath plunder's  
hand,  
Their currents choked with grief and  
sand.  
Commerce staggered, villages starved,  
The pirate's blade a wound unscarred.  
Regulators rose to meet the call,  
Men of the land who'd seen it all.  
With flintlock primed and vengeance  
sworn,



They sought to crush the outlaw's scorn.  
But Mason, cunning, slipped each snare,  
A phantom's laugh hung in the air.  
The law pursued, yet none could tame  
The pirate king, his growing fame.

Yet time and tide are masters stern,  
And Mason's course began to turn.  
Caught at New Madrid's port of call,  
The pirate faced his reckoning's thrall.  
By chain and guard, his gang was bound,  
To Natchez town where justice frowned.  
Yet daring still, Mason broke free,  
And fled once more to treachery.  
Through swamps and woods, he met his fate—  
A severed head, his final state.  
His men betrayed, for gold they lied,  
Yet even they were hung and tried.

The rivers sighed, their veins restored,  
Their lifeblood flowed where wealth was stored.  
Though scars remained, the frontier healed,  
As law and order claimed the field.  
No longer would the merchant quake,  
Or farmer fear the route he'd take.  
Mason's tale, now legend's guise,  
Became a warning, dark and wise.  
So let this ballad echo still,  
Of rivers ruled by greed and will.  
For those who plunder, those who take,  
Shall meet the justice they forsake.



**“Things Are Not Always As They Appear”**  
*By Karla Barnes*

## "The Hierophant and the Hanged Man"

By Danya Qu'D

A brief message from the sheriff reads, "CITIZENS BE WARNED. Influx of spectral and satanic sightings in swamps and cemeteries coinciding with the spike in deaths from CHOLERA. DO NOT VISIT these areas alone at nightfall. DO NOT ENGAGE with these figures. MAYOR ISSUED CURFEW FROM NIGHTFALL TO SUNRISE.

May God be with us all."

January 8th, 1849

*It has barely been a month since the plague reached us. I should invite the pallbearers for dinner after all the bodies we have buried together, to fill in the empty space of the house. It is just dear Anna and I left. No wonder, she would rather die than ever dare to leave.*

*The hole in the wall seems to grow every time I enter the bedroom. I attempted to fix it by pasting a piece of paper on top of the wallpaper, but I never was handy. In spite of my attempt, Anna liked to peel the paper and watch society through the hole, mostly at night when the collectors search for bodies. I worry about her. Her hysteria worsens with every person we mourn. She refuses to listen to me or Dr. Harvey no matter our reasoning or arguments. Just last week she threw a book at my head when I implored her to merely rest! A doctor's order, mind her manners! My concern is beginning to leave me restless.*

January 10th, 1849

*My dear Anna is ill, even more so than before. Her skin is blue and cracked. Anything she consumes comes straight out, she is so very frail. She rarely opens her mouth for she fears vomit will immediately follow whatever she utters. I sought Harvey for comfort, as I hoped he would tell me this was simply another one of her episodes. "Keep her in bed and she'll be right in the morning," I hoped would be his diagnosis. It was not.*

*I should have guessed the news would be bad when I greeted Harvey. He was dressed in leather from head to toe. I could barely see his face on account of a large leather mask stuffed with herbs to stave off the vapors of death. He stepped in our bedroom and was first blinded by the light peering in from the hole in the wall. As his eyes adjusted, he sat by Anna and held her hands in his own. She was curled into a ball facing the door and silently wept in pain. Regardless of the pangs in her stomach and sand in her mouth, she would not move a muscle. Harvey took a mental note of her inconsistent breaths, then the soiled sheets and gown. He looked back to me and escorted me out of the room. Anna's stifled cries would break the silence before Harvey finally did.*

*"Please," I told him. I knew the answer, the problem, but I needed to hear it.*

*"There is no need for me to tell you what you already know, Mr. Dague. That would be cruel," he replied earnestly. I was not satisfied.*

*“Dishonesty is cruel, doctor.”*

*He sighed and turned away from me. Defeated, he said, “The plague, of course, Mr. Dague. For once I have no other answer, no other cure.” He faced me again and in a low voice, so as not to alert Anna, told me he would notify the collectors to visit the house in two days. “It would do you well to leave the body outside . . . along with the sheets. I am so very sorry, John.” I think he meant this sincerely, but I couldn’t tell. He must have delivered this script routinely to my neighbors, to my brother and my sister, to my mother and my father.*

*“Goodbye, Harvey,” is all I could let out. I should expect to see him in a few days’ time, whether it is for her burial or my own.*

*January 11th, 1849*

*It’s the middle of the night and I’m conflicted. I can’t even stand to be in the same room as Anna, whose condition became worse within hours. She sounds like she’s crying, but no tears are able to escape from her eyes. She smells as if she has already begun to rot. I can’t bear it.*

*I’ve spent the last few hours thinking of a solution. I know there isn’t a cure . . . but surely there is something to stop the pain. If she feels as she does now, how will she feel in a few hours? What symptom would finally kill her?*

*I wish she would speak to me, if she can. Her quietness is cruel, especially when I’m in need of an answer.*

John enters the bedroom and studies the shallow hoarse breaths as they fill the air. He sits next to her and takes her hands in his own, using a handkerchief as a protective barrier. Anna closes her eyes tightly, trying to force herself to sleep. She struggles to breathe steadily through her nose, so she instead opens her mouth to ease the chore. Her lips and tongue appear barren and her once-blue skin is now gray, perhaps even white.

John’s hands begin to shake in frustration as he debates how the next few minutes should play out. He wants to end her suffering before it gets worse, if that is even possible. But is that unfair to Anna? Is preventing this death unfair to God, if He willed her to be ill?

John gently pushes Anna’s hands away as she finally drifts to sleep. For the first time in what seems like forever, she looks peaceful. Her breathing still uneven, her skin still ghostly, but her expression soft. John’s lip begins to slightly tremble as he cups the handkerchief. He stands up and gazes at her still body for the last time. He presses the handkerchief firmly against the lower part of her face. At first she has no response, but a minute passes and she awakens with a jolt, trying to pry the hand away from her face. John turns away while strengthening the seal between her face and the handkerchief. He is waiting for a word, a signal to stop him, but the room falls silent apart from Anna’s weak whimpers and the metal bedframe’s slight creaking. Both sounds slowly come to a halt.

*She is so incredibly still. I must move her, I must listen to Harvey, but I cannot bear it. Her body, the sheets, the handkerchief, the room, the house . . . all spoiled. Oh Anna. Forgive me. Anna †*



January 12th, 1849

*As if the house could smell more unpleasant . . . I am not sure what I am smelling. I know I should listen to Harvey. The collectors should be here soon.*

*But I can't move. I can't see her. But surely the flies will smell her, then the rats, then the buzzards, then God knows what other scavenger. I wouldn't forgive myself if all I had left of her to bury were a bag of bones.*

*Harvey left a pair of leather gloves with me during his last visit. I put them on and then entered the room with my eyes closed lightly. I had to see what I was touching, but I didn't want to know. I laid the handkerchief on her face and wrapped her in the sheets. I carried her to the plague pit in the cemetery, in which she dreadfully fit in with the others. When I returned home, I removed my clothes and set them and the gloves alight.*

*I won't enter the room. It would be disrespectful to Anna. I'll sleep on the floor tonight.*

January 15th, 1849

*I still haven't been in the room. But I keep hearing movement. I fear I'm not well, maybe the hysteria is contagious. I hear clinking, like glass . . . no, like metal. Like the bedframe, maybe. The bed has always been creaky, I'm sure the wind from the hole is to blame. But I cannot patch it up.*

*The night air is still, for once. Why do I still hear metal? Why do I still smell whatever that is?*

John works up the courage to enter the bedroom, where a tall mass greets him. No, not greets . . . invades. He has not left the house since Anna's burial, and much less would he invite a guest. Who is this woman, and what the devil is she wearing?

*This lady would not turn around and face me despite me catching her in the act of robbery. She knelt close to the bed, and I heard her sniffing. Surely she didn't know Anna, why would she be mourning?*

*She was wearing an odd head covering, like that of a knight. I could see her hair peeking out from underneath the covering as a long braid kissed the floor. Although this style was odd, her dress looked typical, like one of Anna's. I could not see her hands, but she was barefoot. Her feet were fully black and the skin appeared burnt. I don't know what to make of this.*

*"Ma'am," I said meekly. I finally cleared my throat after a beat and asked, "Who are you, ma'am? How did you get in here?" with some conviction. I heard the metal atop her head shake before I saw any movement. Her head turned slowly to face me. I saw a woman's nose and mouth. But she had bright yellow eyes, except they . . . weren't eyes. They were . . . coins? As if she had risen and escaped from the cemetery. Her bones creaked as she stood. I could not say anything, I could not meet her gaze even though she lacked one. I never realized how the patterns in the wood paneling below me resembled faces.*

*"John Dague," she said with a guttural voice.*

*"I . . . do not know you."*

*"You do not need to. I knew Anna; she was a dear friend of mine."*

*Liar, she had none, is what I wanted to say. Instead, I told her, "If you wish to rob her grave, you will be deeply disappointed. There is no grave."*



*"I am not a robber, John," she replied coolly with the ghost of a smile. Her teeth were unlike any I've seen, almost like she had dentures made of wolf fangs. If a stranger knowing my name didn't already make me uncomfortable, her smile surely would've done the trick.*

*You shouldn't smile like that, ma'am, it's unbecoming, I should have said. I don't think she would have found it funny though, and I didn't want to find out what would happen if I angered her.*

*"Forgive me, but your dear friend Anna has never mentioned you to me."*

*"We met late in her life. A few days ago, actually."*

*Then I knew she was a crazy woman, a heretic. Anna made a friend on her deathbed?*

*"You do not believe me, John. And I . . . do not care. Now please listen closely as I have done for you," she said as she stepped closer to me. "I could smell the stench of death off of Anna for ages now. I knew what would claim her life, and I knew what to do with her after." I finally met her gaze out of anger. It shouldn't have been special for her to know the plague would take Anna, but her entitlement bothered me. It was her last sentence that caused me to look back at the floor. What to do with her after . . . the devil has come to New Orleans . . . to drag Anna to Hell, with me following . . .*

*I tried to protest, but she held a bony black finger to my face, signaling she wasn't finished delivering her prophecy.*

*"You do not need to know who I am. Such knowledge will not change what happens to you, what happens to all the dead," she paused as she expected me to say something, but I only stammered. She continued, "Your home reeks of betrayal. You can call it plague, you can call it mercy, but it is murder. And when the cock crows, you will answer for it."*

*Again, I tried to protest, to subdue her before she started a rumor that would spread across the town faster than the deadly vapors. But when I looked back up, she was just a shadow dancing across the wall. My body filled with dread and shame for not pursuing the shadow.*

*When will I wake from this terrible dream? I must pray.*

John falls asleep on the sofa with the beads of the rosary imprinted on his hands. This is the first time he has slept soundly since before the plague struck. He begins to hear a cacophony of voices, speaking at inappropriate volumes for the hour. Moved by anger and exhaustion, John grabs his handgun from the bureau and strides across the room to silence the source of the racket, which grows louder with every step he takes. As the front door swings open, he is not only vexed with the sudden cessation of the voices but is also perplexed to be met with nothing. He knows this is the work of the heretic who invaded his home earlier. The cacophony turns into her voice alone, which he follows until he stumbles upon a battered church in the swamp outside his house. Before he opens the door, he hears squelching and growls. He can make out heavy raspy breaths and a drumbeat, but he can not tell whether the latter comes from him or something else. He hesitantly opens the door and is bombarded by the funk of rot and the sight of blood. The monster dressed in black and adorned with metal stands at the chancel, ripping and consuming the limbs of the dead from the plague pit. She lines up their bodies from the door to the front of the church. John does not want to move. He wills himself not to, or he would risk being added to the monster's plate. Despite his efforts, he feels compelled by forces he can not describe to follow the path of bones and speak again with The Hangman.

There is a gap between the last skeleton and the monster filled by a small cloth. John immediately breaks down at the sight of the familiar handkerchief and, again, refuses to look The Hangman in her eyes. He knows what she is eating—or who—and his tongue trips over his sobs and coughs.

Finally, he speaks. “Has she been damned? Is it my fault?” He asks, his voice rich with desperation.

“Look at me, Dague,” she replies, deadpan. John’s eyes stay fixed on the handkerchief, now wet with his tears and snot as he hovers over it. He slowly begins to raise his head to face the devil, but will not stare directly in her eyes. He instead gazes at the space near her head, occupied by a large silver cross reflecting the moonlight. Even without facing her head-on, he can see that the lower half of her face is colored red. He jumps as he hears the dripping and the clatter as Anna’s bones hit the stone floor.

“Look at me.”

He reluctantly meets the gaze of her coins, and the dread that fills his heart instantaneously grows tenfold. He feels as if he is sinking in a sea of blackness. As much as he wants to look away, he is paralyzed with fear and shame that he has attracted the devil to his home, to his Anna.

“You should not need to fear me. Or death, as close as it is. You should only fear what you have done and what will follow.”

“What will follow?” A sheepish question to ask as he knows the answer. He will end up in the large pile of bones in the nave.

She chuckles as she recognizes both his embarrassment at this question as well as his knowledge of the answer. “You know,” she says succinctly and ominously.

John grows tired of her cryptic riddles and states in a low voice, “You told me I will answer for Anna. How did you know?”

“Is that what you wonder? You should ask if the collectors know, whether they found the appearance of Anna sudden and in violation of the doctor’s order, or if they found the lack of a record or grave suspicious.” She hears the uptick in John’s heartbeat as she says this in a matter-of-fact tone. She knows that he will answer for the murder, of course. She is tied to fate and knows the fatal destinies of others. It is the responsibility of a scavenger to stalk their prey as much as it is the responsibility of a guilty man to confess. What she takes from John’s bodily response is that he knows of his destiny, and most importantly, he knows trying to prolong it will be a disservice to Anna, who he so dearly misses.

He glances back at the cross which begins to dance with the purple and orange of dawn. “Who are you?” He inquires for the last time.

She turns around, her back facing him. “Miasma,” the monster replies quietly. “We will meet again.”

With the revelation of what he must do, he slowly crawls to the doors of the church. He walks past the cemetery, then past the house, and keeps moving until he arrives at the town square. His cheeks are stained with blood, dirt, and tears as he hesitantly opens the door to the sheriff’s office and confesses.

As John is roughly carried to the scaffold by the sheriff and his deputies, he looks at the few spectators, too pitiful to call them a crowd. He feels the rope lightly kiss his throat until it hugs his neck altogether.

“It is unfortunate that even in these times of darkness, criminals still feel entitled to have their way. John Dague, you have confessed to the murder of Anna Dague,” the sheriff erupts to the citizens.

John can not hear the rest of the sheriff’s monologue as his ears start to ring with that same cacophony. He sees Miasma towering over the citizens, standing in the street. She quickly crosses over and the drumming of his heart grows more intense. He quickly shuts his eyes. He cannot bear to see what will happen when she nears him.

“OPEN YOUR EYES! Witness the torment you have helped to unleash on these good people,” a deputy screams. John is under the impression that others can see Miasma, and if a giant demon approached him on the gallows, surely she would be shot down. But when he opens his eyes, Miasma faces him nose-to-nose and begins shrieking. As she shrieks, John is horrified at the sight of her jaw splitting open, so unnaturally wide that he thinks she will eat him whole.

The shrieking stops, and a split second later, he hears the creaking of the trapdoor underneath him.







**“Puffin”**  
*By Patricia Gaitely*



**“Untitled”**  
*By Stacy Batey*



## **“The Description”**

***By Kaleia Branch***

Sweat ceaselessly drips from my overheating body as we walk. Shorts and a tank top weren't enough to save me from the sweltering heat. I reminisce about the forty-five-minute air-conditioned drive before our ascent, amicable silence as we passed numerous cow-populated fields and churches in abundance like corner stores.

The sun penetrates our melanated skin, a darker hue revealing itself over our arms and shoulders. “Don't stay in the sun too long,” my mom used to say to a younger me in the Southern heat, “You'll get too dark.” I watch her now, head lowered in exhaustion. No choice now.

As regret begins to seep in for my refusal to lather on sunscreen, our gaze finally meets the top of a faded green pavilion. We hear the growing sound of R&B music and obnoxious laughter before our eyes graze the crowd of people.

We reach the top of the hill and are immediately pulled into suffocating hugs from emotional aunties declaring how big we've gotten. We dap up cousins with matured faces and launch into conversations like time had never passed. Hands swat at flies buzzing over the endless tins of tender hot dogs, chicken, and greens. We're older now; no more sitting at the kids' table, endless margaritas flowing into our systems loosening us up enough to dance to music “We ain't know nothing about.”

The sun descends and the night begins, the glowing moon and stars bringing new life into our gathering. Mosquitoes stick to our sweaty bodies like glue traps; we peel them off and mindlessly scratch at the red bumps they leave behind. My smile blossoms as I watch the throng of sweaty, smiling black bodies move united underneath the pavilion lights.

It ceases at the sudden flash of blue and red ones.

The life of our gathering withers away as silver-haired, pot-bellied officers step out of their cars, making determined strides up the hill. Hands are held in tight grasps, children's inquires hushed, and faces steeled over as we wait. I look over to the other pavilions hosting other lively gatherings; curious patrons' gazes float over to us, but they don't stop.

“Why aren't they going to other people's parties?” My seven-year-old cousin asks. She's quickly shushed and silence pursues, but in my head, I answer.

“We fit the description.”

## “The Law of Attraction”

*By Miles Wine*

My father is a decorated hunter.  
Our home, his trophy case.  
He'll leave in the early winter mornings,  
bundled up, chemicals warming his pockets.  
He returns with meat and flesh.  
Our kitchen table,  
underneath an assault rifle.

My mother is a true-blooded vet.  
Our home, her second office.  
She'll depart into the returning sun,  
dressed in scrubs, bags under her eyes.  
She brings back the wounded,  
She cries over the lost.

Souls leaking out of bullet holes.  
A carcass,  
underneath bandages.

—

What had pulled them into each other's orbit?

A suggestive smirk from across the hall  
from the class clown with calloused hands.

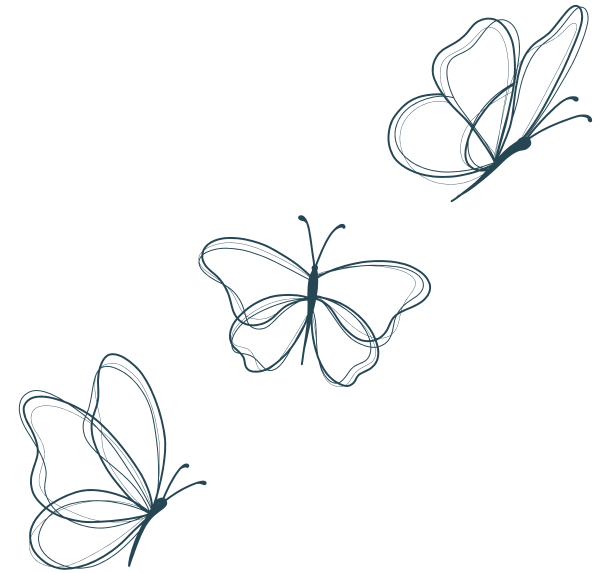
A careful giggle from a nearby desk  
from the reserved girl-next-door.

Had they always been so contrary?

The glow of a pregnancy  
on acne-covered cheeks  
jerks the wide-eyed boy closer.  
The knot is closed,  
their trajectory set.

I watch afar as the truck pulls in,  
bearing a blood-soaked bed,  
as I scratch the cheeks  
of yet another new friend.

We look on,  
spectators to the universe's will.



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### Author's Commentary

Originally one section of a larger essay focusing on growing up with parents who should be divorced but aren't, this poem is a reflection on my parents' relationship. More specifically, it observes some of the key defining features of my parents and sets them against each other. Symbolic of the overall dysfunction of their relationship, this poem simplifies their differences to highlight the questionability of their partnership. I wanted to stress the ways in which my mother's emotional sensitivity and my father's detached passion often work against one another. Through revisions, I found another contrast that I decided to build on: what "must" and what "does." My parents' marriage followed my mother's pregnancy at sixteen, and I've always wondered whether their love came before or after their parental obligations. Had the world really set their paths as one, or had they?

## **“The Flame of Thought”**

**By Raquel Barbalat**

I packed my books, my mind set to soar,  
Stepped into halls I'd not walked before.  
Each lecture a spark, each page a light,  
Ideas awakening in the depths of night.

New theories to ponder, new truths to unfold,  
The fervor of learning, a treasure untold.  
Through science, through art, through problems we solve,  
The mind burns bright, as our dreams evolve.

With every discovery, my purpose grew clear  
To shape a world with less pain, less fear.  
For the flame of thought is a torch to guide,  
A path for creators, with hope as their stride.

Each formula written, each insight made,  
A future imagined, a vision displayed.  
To help, to heal, to build and to mend,  
A legacy crafted, with no true end.

Through graduation's gates, the journey goes on,  
For the fire of knowledge is never gone.  
It burns in our hearts, a beacon, a call  
To serve humanity, to uplift us all.





Thank you for reading the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Off Center*!

Stay tuned for our next issue, publishing in Spring 2026.

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