

A student literary magazine



ALLEGANY COLLEGE
of MARYLAND

EXPRESSIONS

ESSAYS, FICTION, POETRY & ARTWORK



2026



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— of MARYLAND —

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ALLEGANY COLLEGE *of* MARYLAND

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“We’re All Mad Here”

by Abby Cline

In Remembrance: Rebecca Cool, Our Superfan

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Dear Reader,

As we at ACM move through a time of constant change both within ourselves and in the world around us, questions about the future feel more present than ever. After reading this year's final proof of *Expressions*, several recurring themes stood out that reflected not only our campus and student population, but the world we live in.

Many of these pieces explored a sense of disconnection, alongside a longing and deep desire for re-connection, especially within the isolation of an increasingly digital world. With this comes quieter, more personal reflections about who we are in the midst of change, and how we find the stability we need when everything feels uncertain. Across poetry, prose, and visual work, there is a shared experience to make sense of that uncertainty and change.

At the same time, many of these works of art turn toward inspiration and meaning found in songs, in stories, and in the small moments that stay with us. They reflect the ways we look for something steady to hold onto, even as we make decisions about our futures and try to shape what comes next.

Together, these submissions form a larger experience, not just of the individual but also a collective experience, one of reflection, questioning, hope, and perseverance. Each piece, whether through words or images, contributes to a broader conversation about how we understand ourselves and the world around us that we are shaping.

I am honored to serve as the student editor this year, and so very proud of the students who had the courage to share their work with the world. This collected work is a perfect representation of a snapshot of our current moment in time through thoughtful, searching, and deeply human reflections through creative expression.

Christine Caldarò

Christine Caldarò

Student Editor

Fiction: The True Story

Essay

by Drew Blubaugh

The Banditeer accelerated her Peregrin though the Starshine Nebula. Despite the dangers of the fusion plasma surrounding, she pushed the ship's micro-matter engines to their limits. The Peregrin's Grav-shields would protect her from the smallest fingers of plasma, but anything larger could seep into the gaps, or even burn its way through. This danger, however, was nothing compared to the coming doom.

"You better hold out, Slavinson," growled the Banditeer. If he let even a little information slip . . .

Once again, the Regency had captured Admiral Slavinson, leader of the Starbound Rebellion. Unfortunately, it was the eve of the Rebellion's planned offensive to take down the Regency, and *Slavinson knew all of their plans*. If they interrogated him, the results would be catastrophic.

The Banditeer swung her ship right to dodge a plasmeroid. *Nearly there*. Just on the other side of this natural barrier lay the Regency's most secure prison, Fusion Hold. Once she got through, the hard part would begin . . .

The act of writing and reading fiction has shaped our culture in countless ways. Even those who dislike reading have been impacted. Fiction exists in more than books. It manifests as movies, television and streaming series, video games, music videos,

and tall tales in social media. Fiction allows us to see beyond our surroundings, to experience other worlds, other minds, other lives, and other actions. In short, fiction pushes us to experience what we never could without it. It explores alternate pasts, possible futures, and impossible realities. Without fiction, our world could never have been what it is. Every new thing starts out as a fiction that someone wants to be true. While some things are truly impossible, the act of making fiction into reality is a cornerstone of humanity. As historian Laura Ashe explains, "fiction participates in the world's transformation, reflects it and influences it." As everything changes, hopefully for the better, so does fiction.

A ROAR blast clips the Banditeer's helmet as she runs. Her attempts to remain unnoticed had failed dramatically. This would make things harder. Not to mention that she was trying to break *into* a prison. Worse, they knew why she was here. If the Banditeer didn't hurry, Slavinson might just disappear. She slides around a corner into the heavy-security wing, only to find ROAR blasts hurtling toward her face. One collides with her helmet, snapping everything to black.

Since everything on Earth has had a start, fiction does, too. As Ashe explains, fiction, or a story that both writer and reader know is false, and are aware the other knows as well, had its Western beginning in the England of 1155. Before that, no need was felt for fiction, despite a “thriving literary culture.” Works that existed before were theologies, histories, sermons, and epic poems, among other writings. Conversely, fiction tries to guess the unknowable, to see another’s thoughts and motives. In the culture of England before the 1150s, Ashe explains, actions were valued, not motives, not reasons, but sacrifice: “The warrior in the shield-wall, who gives his life in the service of his lord and the defense of his people; the martyr’s self-sacrifice for his faith, or the saint’s self-denial for his.” She goes on to explain that in Old English writing, “to be an individual . . . is to be lost.” In this culture, fiction was unnecessary. However, a new school of thought was on the rise, in which the importance of action would be supplanted by inner motives. This was different that being a unique individual, though. The belief still was that “the highest goal for an individual is to fight (literally or spiritually) in a greater cause and, if necessary, to sacrifice oneself to that cause.” No wonder there was a one-hundred-year war! Finally, in Norman poet Wace’s 1155 translation of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, he added a line that was different than what came before. He puts it in the mouth of Gawain, as his answer to Cador’s speech about

marital valor. Gawain claims “peacetime is good,” that “pleasant pastimes are good, and so are love affairs. It’s for love, and for lovers, that knights do knightly deeds” (qtd. in Ashe). It was here that room for fiction arose. Ashe explains: “now is fiction made possible, for now the individual is justified for his own sake; his achievement of self-fulfillment is enough in itself to feed narrative representation.” Internal motives now mattered as much as external action. Lastly, Ashe concludes that fiction “does not transform the world” but that it is hard to picture a transforming world which does not need fiction.

The Banditeer awakes in a dark, stark cell. They took her helmet, gloves, and worse, her Micro-BEAM gun. If her boots hadn’t been attached to her Shipsuit, they would have taken those, too. Blue hair falls around the Banditeer’s face as she sits up, groaning. Those ROAR guns were at illegal levels. At least she had her own illegal tech. Approaching the wall, her suit began to hum. She should be thankful. A high-value prisoner like the Banditeer would obviously be kept in the high-security wing. Close to Slavinson. With her suit humming at near-unbearable decibels, the Banditeer kicks the door. A concentrated wave of space-time energy blasts from the point of contact, sending the heavy security door flying across the hall. Maybe next time she should be caught on purpose.

Why do we read? What does it fulfill? According to Rosemary Marshall’s article “Reading Fiction: The

Benefits are Numerous,” “fiction can help reveal magic in the everyday of this world.” Reading is relaxing, a form of entertainment that is neither loud nor quiet, social nor individual. In a quiet room, one is surrounded by the sounds of war, or a soft conversation between friends. You join in, and become a warrior, a hero, a villain, a nobody-turned-somebody. Marshall describes a ‘embodied semantics’ theory that “suggest[s] that the reader is the effectively placed in the body of the protagonist,” and she quotes author Anne Bogel: “I can tell you why I inhale books like oxygen: I’m grateful for my one life, but I’d prefer to live a thousand.” Reading fiction can offer adventure, connection, comfort (Marshall). Reading is a therapy and can be like a talk with beloved friends, where one does not need to worry about speaking the wrong word. It can be relaxing and suspenseful simultaneously. Whether one turns a page or swipes a screen, time passes in a numberless blur. We read to be with friends, to engage the mind, relax the body, and offer simplicity to complicated thoughts. We learn from stories experienced by the protagonists, taking from the morals within, to avoid a dilemma like theirs. As Marshall says, “We watch safely as the protagonist . . . fails, adapts, and perseveres through challenge and adversity, often providing gems of wisdom and inspiration directly transferable to our own lives.” Reading has other, more subtle benefits. It can increase our

language skills, lengthen attention times, and boost creativity and imagination. In essence, reading enables and encourages us to write.

Slavinson proves easy to find. Follow the sound of pacing guards. The Banditeer sneaks quickly through the halls, thankful for the lack of cameras, as the Regency fears they could be hacked. They’re right. If there were cameras, she would have infiltrated them and wouldn’t be in this mess. Using the Neural Link Plate built into the spine of her Shisuits, the Banditeer gives it instruction. A hum begins.

The act of reading stories puts in us a need to create our own. Many will create this in their own lives, inspired by the bravery and curiosity of fictitious characters. Still, taking in creation, human or divine, inspires us to create. Writing a fiction is a fulfilling challenge, one that requires planning, practice, and a love of imagination. In the writing of my own book, *A Legend of Two Continents*, I have learned more than I thought I might. For example, I found that if my own writing is boring me, then it is going to bore readers, and that fight scenes are fun to write. Essentially, if one enjoys writing, then the readers will enjoy reading it. Another approach I found that works is to include plenty of sub-plots that feed into the main story. This will increase interest and suspense, creating a deeper, wider story. Having a flexible plot, with room for additions as the story progresses, will help with this. Also,

the first word of a chapter is especially hard, as the first phrase establishes that part of the plot. It is impossible to create something from nothing for a human, so remember to write from experience, and imitate what you found enjoyable in the fiction of others. Creating a character is a unique experience. When we create a new person, we write a bit of ourselves onto the page. If a hero, then the traits are those we admire, have, and hope to possess. If a villain, then our own vices and fears are given. The best and worst of us flows, sometimes slowly and painfully, sometimes fast and intuitive, onto the page. Fiction has both influenced and shaped our culture. The act of reading and/or writing fiction will benefit and grow the reader and creator alike.

A mere brush to each of the guards, and the Banditeer's suit puts each into a state of freezetime. After delivering a space-time blow to the cell door, her suit warns her its power levels are low. However, her goal is so close! Slavinson comes to his feet at the sight of the Banditeer.

"You need to stop taking risks, daughter."

The Banditeer and Slavinson somehow reach the Peregrin docked on the side of the prison. Hidden in plain sight with advanced temp-tech, the ship is connected to a cut window. Slavinson boards first as ROAR blasts fill the air. The Banditeer quickly follows, climbing into the cockpit. All that is left to do is evade the patrol ships and escape through the Nebula. Easy. She smiles in anticipation. This will be fun.

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A Midnight Stroll

Painting | *by Sabrina Morton*

A Life Worth Living

Fiction

by Sean Clarke

The wind swept the white peak of rock that stood in defiance of the heavens surrounding it. A woman slowly ascended over boulders with spikes of ice like daggers in its side. Stabbing her blade into the rock, she wrapped her fingers around its handle and, for the thousandth time, pulled herself up. Looking over her shoulder, a thick layer of clouds concealed the distant ground from her eyes. Shaking her head, she continued upwards, mumbling to herself, "Do you really have to accept every request, Kisa?"

When the village chief had approached her with sightings of strange creatures descending from the mountains to harass local towns, she was intrigued when he offered a thousand gold for the investigation. The rest of the old man's words were nearly forgotten. But now, the realization that what goes up must at some point come down would have had her head in her palms, if she had the hands free to do so.

Her train of thought was interrupted as the tension on her sword suddenly released, a chunk of rock flying past her head.

"Not good."

Her face flew forward, the horns on either side

of her chin digging into the cliff face, sending cold shards of ice scattering into the air. She continued to slide downward, her footing unable to find purchase before finally coming to a jarring stop. Her horns dug so deep that her lips were nearly pressed against the rock. Throwing her sword forward with all her might, she put her remaining strength into her legs, swinging through the air, and Earth welcomed her graceless fall. Rising to one knee, she slowly got to her feet, taking a moment to wipe the accumulated snow from her face.

"On second thought, a thousand gold definitely wasn't enough for this." Letting out a tired sigh, she scanned the peak.

There was no life in the swirling white, as large boulders seemed to be the only things that could withstand the environment. A pit sank from the middle; at a distance, its depth couldn't be judged, but the wind whistling from it spoke of its size. For a moment, she understood why a monster might want to flee from such a place.

Clearing the thoughts from her head, she walked toward the pit, but the ground began to shake, nearly causing her to fall again. Specks of gravel jumped into the air, energized by the continued

vibrations. It seemed like the whole world would shake apart. A black shadow shot out of the pit, blasting back the surrounding debris, and signaling the end of the tremors.

Calming her legs, Kisa glanced up at the shadow which had emerged. Her breath caught in her throat. A long black and purple body tapered to a single point.

Translucent silver wings reminiscent of a butterfly extended on either side, beating slowly as if not minding the massive weight they carried. Six massive eyes looked down at her; if they held emotion, it could not be seen. Atop its head, a single gnarled horn, not unlike her own, extended a short distance from its skull like a root. The monster had the shape of a large larva caught in its rebirth. Its body twitched purple veins visible beneath its skin, as it flew above her.

Watching it do circles in the air, her brain screamed for her to run away, but feeling those six eyes trace her body, in her heart, she knew that running now would be pointless. Her breathing slowed; besides, since she was here, she might as well kill this thing.

She extended her sword in front of her, its shining tip reflecting what little light managed to make it through the tempest.

"You won't harm anyone any longer! Today you'll meet your end."

Thrusting her arm forward, a blast of lightning arced through the air. In an instant, it flashed onto

the creature's skin, an explosion illuminating its grotesque form. Behind the blast, the beast came to a stop, all its eyes focusing on her. Quickly, the burnt skin oozed a black sludge that enveloped the wound like wax. Kisa's face fell; a high-level lightning spell had barely managed to leave a mark. There was a chance it was resistant to that element; however, the other possibilities, well, were too dreadful to consider.

The beast rolled its body, diving toward the ground, its massive form a bludgeon. Clearing her mind, Kisa pushed her feet into the ground, dodging the body falling like a hammer in front of her. Acting on instinct, she slashed her blade down. Her hands rung with the impact, but her straining muscles pushed down harder. Red blood stained her face before the beast's wound too was closed by black ooze. Recoiling further, she scanned the creature's reaction.

Only the outline of its figure was visible through the intensifying storm. It hovered slightly in the air, tracing semi-circles in front of her. It existed in one spot only long enough to draw attention before it moved again. Kisa could almost feel the scales on her body growing taught from the pressure. Her feet hit the ground rapidly, keeping the distance even, but as the ledge became visible, she knew this stalemate couldn't last. Besides, being toyed with wasn't a warrior's way.

Pivoting, she lunged forward, her hands moving in a blur, sending scattering afterimages of strikes

through the air. The beast swept forward its tail like a whip, and seeing the mass approach out of the corner of her eyes, Kisa bent her knees, lunging into the air, and thrusting her sword downward at the same time.

A red mist surrounded her as she rolled to a stop in front of the creature's torso. Wind from its beating wings swept her hair backward. A smile spread over her lips as she lifted her blade for another strike.

Her eye line met its, and a purple glow radiated from the creature's mouth like a ghastly lantern. She could clearly feel the radiating heat from this distance. Her smile turned grim; getting any closer was no longer an option, and the grip on her blade relaxed. Now carried by the strength in her arms, it shot through the air. At the same time, the purple glow exploded into intense light, a beam of purple cutting through the air to meet the blade.

Engulfed by the energy, the blade's surface slowly deformed, dots of liquid metal evaporating into the beam. Nonetheless it continued onward toward the creature's face. For the first time since the battle began, the monster made a sound. A high-pitched whine squealed through the surroundings. The sword impacted a now-lifeless eye, red blood and gore scattering on the ground between the blade and flesh.

The creature swayed. A steady grin spread over Kisa's face even as her body was sent flying backward by an incoming strike. Slammed against

a rock, she felt searing pain flood her back from the impact.

Spitting out a mouthful of blood, she slowly raised her head to see the monster coming closer. The smile didn't fade from her face. She was never its opponent; perhaps even landing a crippling blow had only been through luck. Shaking her head, these useless thoughts fled, replaced with an odd mix of bitterness and calm which spread over her mind, releasing memories of adventures embarked upon and the countless predicaments overcome, loyal friendships in the hardest of times, and the happy faces of men, women, and children looking up to her, grateful when she defeated the monsters that threatened their lives. In the end, it's not so bad for the story to end here, she thought, unable to move from where she lay slumped against the rock. The monster's face came close enough that the blood from its wound dripped on her chest, and the heat from another charging beam scorched her face. She closed her eyes, passing out from exhaustion.

The monster's light grew brighter, natural power mixed with rage. The surrounding snow vaporized into mist. A beam exited the creature's mouth, threatening to snuff out her own light.

Yet, in that moment between life and death, the energy did not move, nothing did. Mist hung suspended in the air, snow unable to fall. Kisa's eyes snapped open, fire burning within their depths, as the world ground to a halt. Slowly, she

rose to her feet, staring down the still frozen beam with a frown. As her lips opened, a weighty, foreign voice exited them.

"Is this what has become of my kind in the millennia since my sealing?" She grasped outward, dispersing the beam into the mist, then walked to the side of the beast.

"Had you fled, I would have let you live, but you couldn't recognize what was in front of you . . ." Her words paused, and she waved her fingers toward each of her horns. "Hmm, or perhaps it's because you knew that made you decide to fight? Did you wish to take her power as your own?" Kisa's eyes burned with fury. Her body a blur, she ripped the sword out of the creature's eye, and swinging it in a single motion, chopped the horn from its head.

"No, even in this age, I am too naïve; your existence is a blot on the natural order." As her words faded the world returned to normal. The monster's trembling body fell to the ground with a crash. Still not daring to move, it pushed its head placatingly under the snow, a series of high-pitched screeches coming from its mouth.

"Do not beg!" The words pushed the air away. "Be grateful that I'm only doing this much." She waved her hand and bolts of lightning shot through the air, swirling above the beast, its body fractured like shards of a mirror, each one thrashing violently to reunite with the others. "One day I hope you

will find a purpose to overcome your corruption as I did," her voice trailed off to a whisper as she slammed her hands onto the ground, bringing the lightning with them. "Seal . . ." Absorbing the lightning into them, the mirrors began to shatter into smaller and smaller pieces before they mixed like dust with the wind that rushed back into the void left by the attack.

The fire in Kisa's eyes dimmed, her body held upright by a receding force. "I'm sorry I had to steal your power once again, Kisa," her voice whispering, though she knew even had she shouted, it wouldn't be heard by the consciousness peacefully resting in the back of the mind she had stolen.

"I hope that when you find the truth, you'll be stronger than I was. Power isn't such a good thing in this world." She sighed, staggering towards the cliff. "The weak place their responsibility on your shoulders but despise you when not acting as they wish. Eventually, you despise yourself as well, hating the world for being so unfair." She shook her head, looking out over the ledge at the clouds below. "A life without struggle isn't worth living. I hope you will see this, too." Her words trailed off as she leaped over the edge, returning the mountain peak to calm.

When Kisa awoke, comfortably tucked into bed, her mind was in disarray. The last thing she remembered was the beam of light shooting toward her, then darkness. Over the following

days, she heard of the monster's death and was given 5,000 gold in thanks from the surrounding towns. Still, her chest felt heavy, with unanswered questions swirling in her mind. Had she really

managed to win against that thing, if so, then how – but these were questions which could probably never be answered, well, except for one: the next day would be a peaceful one.



Branching Out

Photograph | *by Paige Blubaugh*

The Reading Tree

Poem

by Alexa M. Smith

"Come inside for supper when I call for you!" my grandma would shout,
As I raced down to the spot I longed for most at her house.
Warm summer wind flying through my untamed hair,
Barefoot, feeling the grown grass between my toes,
Climbing up to my perch in the reading tree.

Clutching my worn and well-loved *Little House on the Prairie* book in my small, dirt covered hands,
I nestled within the biggest and comfiest tree fork, burying my nose within the pages,
Surrounded by the sound of my father turning on the lawn mower,
Chatter from the TV drifting down the hill from the open kitchen window,
And the smell of clean, wet clothes being hung by my brother and grandma out on the clothesline.

I traveled with Laura and Mary on whatever adventure they were going on next in the 1800s frontier,
Sprawling out across my favorite tree in the world.
It was small and quite old, and my grandma could recall seeing that tree as a sapling as a child.
— I wonder if she ever thought, back then as a child running around this same yard,
That her future granddaughter would take such a liking to it?

Hours and hours go by, the sun kisses my skin, and the bark imprints on it.
I put the book down and talk to myself, about anything and everything.
I am seven and my own best friend. A shy child with a wild imagination,
I can make up stories and adventures in my mind. My grandma would chuckle to herself and say
"She's just like her grandmother, up there talking up a storm."

I would have picked spending all my days here in this backyard over any vacation getaway,
But as I grew, I began to frequent my tree less.
Growing up, gathering more responsibilities, well into my teen years,
Visiting in the summer less,
I began to forget about the reading tree and all it gave me.

The day came upon us, years down the road,
When we had to cut the reading tree down,
"You better tell her that she will need to come say goodbye to her tree,"
My grandma spoke to my father,
And I went to visit my tree one last time.

I climbed up, now in shoes and not able to fit within the fork as easily.
I laid back on my limb, looking up within the leafless branches, all bare in preparation for winter.
Breathing in the air, it wasn't as warm and comforting as when I was so young.
There was no sound of the lawnmower, the kitchen window was shut due to chilly air,
No smell of freshly washed clothes wafted past my nose.

I felt the tears prick the edges of my eyes.
When did the world grow so dull?
When did I begin to outgrow this branch – physically and emotionally?
What happened to the wild summer child within me,
And when did she stop making up stories and dreaming in this tree?

As I laid there and cried.
It felt as if my tree was giving me a comforting goodbye hug, its branches wrapped all around me,
Protecting me in the air as I dangled, as it has done for me all my life,
Thanking me for giving it more of a purpose than just a tree,
Thanking me for loving it well into its old age,
Past the prime it must have had in the time of my grandma's childhood,
Forgiving me for being absent, understanding that I grew up,
But knowing I had never forgotten about it.

The reading tree was a part of my childhood in so many ways –
Giving me memories that I will never be able to remake,
Special moments with my loved ones and my cherished books,
Nurturing my love of reading and writing.
I'll always carry a little part of my reading tree inside,
Its bark imprinted on my heart
As well as it did my skin all those years ago.



Waiting on Santa

Photograph | *by Brandi Rice*

Home in the Woods: How Isolation Shaped Who I Became

Essay

by McKenzie Footen

Growing up in the middle of the woods in Rawlings, Maryland meant waking up to a kind of quiet most people don't get to experience. The mornings were always the same: the wooden porch covered in my mom's gnome decorations, her flower beds overflowing with mums, the smell of her candles mixing with whatever food she had cooking (usually chili), and nothing but trees surrounding us in every direction. Outside always looked a little crowded with seven cars in the driveway, the pool, and now, my daughter's toys scattered all across the lawn. It wasn't fancy, but it was home. And over time, I realized that place shaped me in ways I didn't understand until I got older.

The environment I grew up in was basically its own universe: seventeen acres of forest and a long gravel driveway full of potholes that always came back no matter how many times my dad tried to fix them. The sounds never changed—birds in the morning, squirrels and deer moving through the trees, frogs and crickets at night, and once the sun went down, complete darkness except for the porch light or the stars. Some of my funniest memories happened on my walk home from the bus stop. One day I got off the bus and a baby cow

followed me along the fence line. I'd walk, it would walk; I'd run, it would run. I had to physically restrain myself from trying to take it home like a stray cat. Another time, I fed a squirrel potato chips until it followed me all the way up our hill like I somehow tamed it. Those random little moments still make me laugh today.

A lot of my childhood was just me, myself, and my imagination. Being the far youngest of six meant my siblings were all gone by the time I was old enough to remember anything clearly, so I grew up feeling like an only child—especially since they were my half siblings and closer to their own sides of the family. My parents were older, always working, and usually exhausted. They showed love the way they knew how: gifts, toys, food, and the occasional weekend where we'd actually do something together. Those weekends meant everything to me, because they were the rare moments we sat down, talked about our week, and felt like a family. The rest of the time, love was quieter. My dad wasn't emotional, but his humor was unmatched, and the older I get, the more I realize how similar we are. My mom was always the positive light of the house, even when she was burnt out. I hope one

day I grow into that kind of strength.

Because I was alone so much, I learned how to entertain myself. I played Uno, Monopoly, Life, and Candy Land completely alone—literally taking every turn for every player. I imagined stuffed animals having feelings, created whole worlds with my toys, and spent hours running through the woods pretending I was stranded and surviving on my own. I even tried to play the Hunger Games by myself, armed with a Nerf bow and arrow, fake knives, and snacks scattered around the yard like invisible tributes had dropped them. Later, once I had internet friends in middle school, I spent hours playing *Call of Duty* and *Minecraft* on the old Xbox 360. Honestly, my imagination raised me.

School, on the other hand, was rough. Growing up a “big kid” meant dealing with constant teasing. The bullying followed me for years and carved insecurities into me that I still struggle with today—eating disorders, body image issues—all of it started back in elementary school. But the few friends I did have kept me going. I’d walk from my mountain to Keyser, we’d all stop at the gas station for snacks, and then we’d sit on our one friend’s porch talking about everything and nothing. Even though home could feel lonely, those friendships made me feel less alone.

Looking back now, I can see exactly how everything shaped who I am. Growing up alone made me extremely independent—sometimes more than I needed to be. I rushed into adulthood

fast: got a house with my daughter’s father, created a family, had a failed engagement. I was constantly trying to prove myself. At the same time, isolation made me overly empathetic. I analyze everyone, try to understand their backgrounds, and forgive people even when I shouldn’t. I still have days where my insecurities get loud, but I’ve learned to love my own company. I don’t need anyone, even if it’s nice to have people to share life with.

Motherhood shifted everything for me. Watching my daughter play with her little figurines and dollhouse reminds me so much of myself—only now, she has someone who actually sits down and plays with her. I’m determined to give her the emotional presence I didn’t have. But it’s hard, too. Balancing school, work, and parenting makes time feel tight, and I’m always scared of repeating the same patterns my parents fell into. I want her to know she’s loved every day, not just on the days I have extra time.

Now that I’m raising her in the same woods I grew up in, the place feels completely different. Instead of loneliness, I hear her laughter mixing with the trees. Instead of feeling trapped, I feel grounded. The woods that once isolated me now feel peaceful—like they raised me, toughened me, and prepared me to be the mom I’m trying to be.

I’ve learned that home isn’t just where you live. It’s anywhere you feel safe, understood, and real. Sometimes it’s a house. Sometimes it’s a moment. Sometimes it’s a person. The woods shaped my

independence, my empathy, my imagination, my sensitivity, and my strength. They taught me how to be alone without feeling lonely—and now they're

the foundation I'm using to build something better for my daughter.

The Heat Vent

Poem

by Suzanne Marie Rafferty

The heat vent was my friend
When cries for no one came

The heat vent warmed my skin
My heart & then my pain

My tiny fingers strummed the grate as
Like a harp did play
Although knew not of harp nor note
Of that I could not say

Back forth, back forth
Over warmth which came
Then quickly fade away

Back forth, back forth
I lay there still and wait again
For you

No warmth did come, no one to soothe
My tiny tears now silent grew

Soft whispers now came blowing through
Soft whispers blowing breath to me

To meet my cheek a-fresh, re-new
Kiss sweet goodbye, the tears I cry
Rock well & sing me sleep

Soothe like a mother soothes her babe
From all the cares
I keep

Alas—one comes
For me!
Dear feet!

Quick—look not under cover there—
But behind the crib
Next near the rail

Find sleeping on the painted grate
Your babe who cried & cared not wait

No sorrow mother now
nor father of next day

No sorrow shall I claim
The heat vent is my stay

Back forth, back forth
Rock still me sleep
To slumber let my soul now keep

No sorrow ever any day
The heat vent will my cries
Quick, softly, sweetly take away

If only I could take time's hand
And walk again in yesteryear
To change those things which be not
And make them as though they were
What fine memories would I have now here



Generational Touch

Photograph | *by Madison Vanzego*

Mother

Poem

by Kim Templemon

I wear many capes . . . many that have no color.
I am a stronghold and a force like none other.

I can hold together a generation of folk with just the sound of my voice.
I can reach the heart of many while remaining calm and poised.

My position often changes as life throws its fiery darts at me.
But they don't break me, they don't crush me.
They are the stones which shape me.

I can stand back and watch
Or take matters in my own hands.
I can hold You, and you, and you on my back, my feet, my legs,
And still continue to stand!

Shaping and molding those who came from me.
Together or alone: I can stand on my own 2 feet.

I can break down barriers, I can reshape history.
I can change the world just by changing Me.

I can be at work at 5 and have dinner ready by a quarter 'til 9.
I can be a steel wall to a block of un-bred children.
I can teach a flock of untrained adolescents.

I have many strengths but I have many weaknesses:

Kindness, Love, Trust, Faith and Prayer, too.

What you see as weakness—it's the Power that brings me through, the Power that builds me up and allows me to see Truth.

Eyes behind my head, ears that can hear you think.

I can make you move even when I don't speak.

I shape the world without even being asked, sometimes without even a thank you.

So many of us, but yet so few.

I have many colors,

I have many shapes,

I have many titles,

I hold many positions, and

I carry many others.

Some call ME woman.

But you can call me....

MOTHER

The Blood of the Women Before Me

Poem

by Alexa M. Smith

"Why do we still need feminism in 2026?" You ask me,
You ask me as I, a young woman, am in every way, hypothetically, free.

I, a woman in the 21st century, am free,
Free to stroll to the bank and open an account in my name, not my husband's,
Free to pursue any direction of study my heart desires.

I am free to exercise my right to vote,
Free to apply for a job to make my own money,
Free to marry whoever my heart loves, without consequences.

So, you ask me this question: *"Why do we need feminism in 2025?"*
You ask me this question, as we both sit in this classroom of a college that we both pay to attend,
You, a man, who has always been free,
Free to receive further education such as this college.

You, as a man, who has the blood of men before you flowing through your veins,
Men who were able to always vote since our country was founded,
Men who established the laws, who wrote the very principle this country stands on,
Men who did not have to fear losing those rights.

You ask me this.

The blood of the women who came before me flows through my veins—it screams in my veins—
A heart wrenching scream that rings in my ears—
Screaming to be heard, to be seen, to be stood up for.
The women who came before me who did not get those rights that I enjoy.

A cacophony of voices
Swarming within my head,
Some I recognize, voices I have heard before in my life.
Others are unfamiliar, but I know they are my kin.

Their pain becomes my pain,
Their need for justice and for someone to speak up for them overwhelms my heart with longing.
I can hear each and every cry from them.

The millions of voices of my female ancestors that I never got to meet,
Every single woman and girl begging to have a voice, screaming at me—
Pleading to be stood up for by someone—
Asking anyone to listen, to hear them, to give them the justice they never got.

All of the things that the women of my bloodline were forced to become:
A maid but also a wife—a virgin but also seductive

A mother—but not too focused on her children
A homemaker—but also a nurse: “Take care of your husband, he works so hard.”

But who takes care of her?

The unspoken stories, hundreds of my female ancestors who stayed silent out of fear,
Their secrets dying with them,
But I know—know the secrets they must have kept hidden to protect their families and themselves.
Because it's “not all men,” but for some reason, all women have a story.

Does it not scream within you, too?

It is so loud, so unbearably loud.
Do you not hear the pleading voices from your mothers and grandmothers?

Or is it only me?

Do the threats from your fathers and grandfathers to stay silent scream louder in your heads than
the pleading?
Is that why you cannot feel it, cannot hear it?

It echoes so loudly in my veins, my blood boils with rage,

I want to scream out loud,
I want to travel back in time just to hold their hands and comfort them,
Be someone they can tell their secrets to: the abuse they were too scared to expose.

Tell them that it was all worth it, that their struggles were not in vain,
That we are able to vote, to get a divorce from that despicable husband.
We are able to share our stories of abuse and lock up our offenders,
We are allowed to have an opinion, a voice.

So, you ask me, *"Why do we need feminism in 2026?"*

We need it for the women who came before us—

To serve them justice and hope.

We need it for the women of today, to keep that fire alive,

So we never turn back to a time when we did not have those rights.

We need it for the women who will come after us—

For our future daughters and granddaughters

who will never have to know a time when women didn't have those things.

We need it for the blood of the women before me

that flows through me, thanking me for standing up for them.

We need it for the blood of the women who will come after me,

that fills me with the joy of knowing that my daughter will never know a time when she isn't Free.



Eye of the Tiger

White Pencil | *by Jaiden Fradiska*

Little Pathos - The Lonely Fender Prequel

Fiction

by Jonathan Schmoyer

A young boy named Pathos knew he needed something but did not know what he needed. His mother and father loved him deeply and gave him more than most children his age could dream of, yet a quiet absence followed him everywhere, like the burden of sorrow trailing a mourner.

He was an only child, raised among adults. A plethora of toys filled his playroom, far too many to count, and pets kept him company. A dog named Logos and a cat named Ethos. His father built him a Lego airport and a Hot Wheels racetrack. He even had a foam ball pit, tablets, game consoles, shelves of games, things that should have made a young boy happy. Yet, still, none of it resonated with him. He wandered without purpose, lost in daydreams of childhood wonders and past experiences. The walls of his playroom felt desolate, despite being cluttered with toys. They stared back at him with a cold emptiness, laden with contempt. He did not know how to tell his parents what was wrong because on all accounts, he lived a life of luxury.

Most days, his parents disappeared to a place they called "work," and Pathos was left behind with a teenage girl. She spoke endlessly on her phone or held it out to show him short videos that only

served to confuse him and leave him dissatisfied. He did not enjoy watching them because they always ended too soon, missing the conclusion. He often felt like a stranger in his own home.

His parents took notice and began to worry about him. But they spoke in tones meant for other adults, speaking words that slid past him without meaning. They did not know how to ask him what was wrong nor how to draw answers from him. Pathos was a reserved child but could speak well when he chose to, for being such a small boy.

He could say complete sentences, using concise grammar, but he rarely spoke at all. He learned by watching and listening. He was observant, thoughtful, and selective when he spoke, keeping most of his thoughts to himself.

The most common times he reached out was when he wanted his father to read to him. He would bring a book in both hands, hold it up pleadingly, and ask in a near whimper, "please read to me, father?" Then he would sit quietly and listen. But his parents could feel how distant he was, how each effort, no matter how thoughtful, seemed to push him deeper into himself. Believing they had failed him in some way, they prayed for guidance

and trusted in the Lord to provide.

The days passed in a monotonous blur. With his parents gone and the teenager always distracted, Pathos felt ignored. He would stare at his toys, think about the stories his father read to him, and stir only when Logos or Ethos nuzzled against him for attention.

One afternoon, he noticed his parents speaking in low voices on the phone and glancing toward him when they thought he wasn't looking. His fifth birthday was just two months away, yet he showed no signs of excitement. He did not smile or laugh. He barely even spoke. He felt like he had no reason to.

Pathos knew he needed something. He wished he knew what it was.

His parents had received a call from his grandmother. Pathos's great uncle had passed away and left them his house. He was a shut-in who had lived simply. A musician with no children and very little attachment to the world beyond one thing: his Fender guitar. He had not been close to the family, and because of this, Pathos had no memory of him at all. Although he still cared enough to have a will and left his possessions to his family in the event of his death.

They decided to drive by the house together and look at the neighborhood. Pathos would be starting school that year, and they wanted to see how far it was from the new house. As the car drove through unfamiliar streets, Pathos's father spoke deliberately.

"Pathos, your mother and I are thinking about moving. Your great uncle left his house for us, and we want you to see it first. Maybe a new place will help you to open up a little bit. We love you and care about you"

Pathos said nothing as they turned onto the street. When the house came into view, his father said, "Here we are. Our new home."

As Pathos looked out the window, he saw it, something resting in the bay window of the house, glistening in the evening light. It pulled at him in a way nothing else ever had with its teardrop shape and glossy finish. He could barely make out the steel strings across the long part of it.

Curious, he thought.

With intrigue, he pointed. "What is that?"

His mother followed his gaze. "That's your great uncle's old Fender guitar," she said softly. "Do you like it?" She asked only to keep him speaking, to hear his precious voice again.

After a long pause, he answered with compassion. "It's beautiful, but it looks. . . lonely."

The weeks that followed were filled with hectic boxes and commotion. His playroom slowly emptied with toys he had never played with, and the house grew an echo. As he sat on the only couch left and watched his parents pack, he daydreamed about the guitar in the window, smiling to himself as a cold chill ran down his spine, setting his arm hair on high alert. He wanted to see it again.

When the moving van was finally packed and

ready to depart, Pathos rode in silence, enjoying the Cinema of his mind. His mother tried, in vain, to converse with him, but he did not wish to speak.

When they parked outside the house, his mother noticed him gazing longingly through the bay window at the old guitar. In that instant, she understood what to do.

"Happy birthday, Pathos," she said, turning to him. "Your new house, and your new guitar."

At the words *new guitar*, something magical happened. A smile started to bloom across his face, small at first, then more pronounced. The first true smile she could remember since he was an infant. She struggled to hold back her tears.

As Pathos looked at it, he asked, in his quiet

voice, "What does the guitar do? It's unlike anything I've seen before."

His father answered approvingly. "Your great uncle spent his life making music with it and we think he would've wanted you to experience that, too."

Music, Pathos mused.

A week later, Pathos was beating on its strings and hiding things in its sound hole, exploring it without knowing how it worked. He didn't yet know how to make music, but for the first time, he was genuinely happy. He played with that Lonely Fender every day, and it brought him out of his shell.

Little Pathos knew he needed something but did not know what he needed.

Until, at last, he had *finally* found it.

See

Poem

by Suzanne Marie Rafferty

I cannot see tomorrow
When I barely see today
All I see is yesterday
And it's never far away



The Walk

Pencil | *by Lillian Henson*

Pursuing the Mountain Man

Essay

by Suzanne Marie Rafferty

A bright red fox pelt hung on the wooden peg held up against the faux log cabin wallpaper in my little boy's room, along with several other pegs exhibiting a skunk pelt, a possum, a muskrat, and a beaver hat. The beaver hat was the only one Eli wore over his tousled, sandy blonde hair when he ran around outside in his tiny bib overalls carrying the other pelts here and there, over his shoulder, dragging them through the mud, or tossing them around on a long stick. I'd bought him these stuffed animal faux pelts for his birthday, so he could pretend to be a hunter when he was just fifty-two and a half inches tall at 8 years old—a pretend mountain man. The Ollie's store in Cumberland, Maryland, definitely helped him with make-believe as the toy pelts, which were actually dog toys, looked very believable. I loved it. He loved it.

Fake furs and stuffed toys were easy to provide for Eli. It was the real skins and pelts that he wanted in his room that I wished he would reconsider. "What about a pirate theme?" "No." "Race cars?" "No." Enter toy guns, play pistols, fake knives, real pocket knives, camo, deer hunting signs, and anything else that looked like a mountain man's cabin into his room, and it was good.

Eli's father and uncle, who were and still are avid hunters and fishermen, were just the ones little Eli looked up to and wanted to be like when he grew up tall. So, I let him. I just didn't think that ten years and eighteen additional inches later, he would actually have shot with his uncle and father a 400-pound black bear, which would become a stuffed, shoulder-mounted bear head on Eli's bedroom wall, along with a deer skin rug he could lay on his floor, and antlers displayed here and there in his room. "The poor deer!" "Poor bear!"

The black bear was shot and killed with a 350 Legend on October 23, 2023, when Eli was 16 years and 1 day old. It was the first time he held and hunted with his Uncle's rifle. He made the shot from 50 yards away. Two years later, on September 23, 2025, Eli shot and killed a white tailed buck with a crossbow at age 17. I asked Eli if there were any differences between hunting the buck and black bear, to which he replied, "I was thrilled when I shot the bear and the buck, but since I hunted for several years for a bear, when I finally got a bear, the bear was more special, but both were the same thrill."

Over the years, from 2nd grade when Eli received faux pelts, his first pocket knife, and a fishing pole,

till today at eighteen years of age, wearing real cowboy boots, men-size blue jeans, camo, sporting his 5th pocket knife, and at 70 inches tall, he has heard many emotional reactions and expressions of sympathy from me for the animals he has hunted, and not just land animals, fish also. "Poor fish. You're hurting his mouth trying to pull that hook out. Oh, be careful! Can you please put the fish back in the water? It can't breathe!" Until a few weeks ago, when I went with him to track his first downed white-tailed buck.

Boy, were my son and his father both surprised when I said I would help track the deer. Goodness, I was surprised I even said it. You could say I have felt more toward the heart of the famous John Muir, the Father of National Parks, who held a deep fondness for nature and wildlife, than toward hunters and hunting: "The more I see of deer, the more I admire them as mountaineers. They make their way into the heart of the roughest solitudes with smooth reserve of strength . . . beauty and courage."

"Don't tell Eli, 'Poor deer!'" My husband, Ken, warned me right after he hung up the phone with Eli, when said I would join them to track the buck, followed by those two exact words of sympathy. My husband was right; I knew I wouldn't be able to join in the search for my son's buck on his Uncle Jim's land if I was going to keep uttering such words. Yet, I was strongly encouraged a second time by my husband against doing the same thing when we arrived at my brother-in-law's in Finzel,

Maryland, for uttering those two sympathetic words again under my breath when I stepped out of the car. Heart over hunt was my dilemma. My husband and son have known of this distinction between their ideas of hunting animals versus mine, and for a long time, well, since Eli was old enough to hold his first lightning bug and squish it.

Can you imagine picking up over 4,000 cicadas over a week's span of time as they pushed up through the earth, crawling through the grass in your yard, and placing them one on top of the other into coffee cans to relocate them from the city to the woods? That was me. Eli's mom! A big feat and huge example of a heart closer to the nature lover Muir than those in the hunting world.

Hunting and killing innocent animals, I just did not agree with. But I also didn't entirely disagree, either, after all the Bible speaks about hunting and eating meat. And for some reason, on the evening that Eli called his father and said he'd shot his first buck, I wanted to see and pursue for myself my son, the mountain man, and witness the other side: to see his heart and his love for hunting.

The September night was quickly overtaking the dimming light of dusk as we arrived at Uncle Jim's. The sound of a symphony of insects warming up began; it was music to my ears. The smell of grass, pine, and nature filled my lungs as we hiked to the back of Eli's uncle's yard, getting ready with flashlights in hand and on our heads. Ready to track the droplets and trail of the deer's blood down the

mountainside. And I told myself I could do this, for Eli. I would hold my tongue and not say, "Poor deer," at least not again after I just told myself that I wouldn't.

Eli quickly and readily spotted the first, second, and third drops of blood on the turning leaves of brush at the wood line. He headed into the shadows of the woodland along the path he thought the deer took, disappearing, just as the deer had thirty minutes prior. His Father and Uncle followed while I was on the tail end. As I never tracked a deer before, the only thing I knew to look for was drops of blood, which was entirely the last thing I wanted to see; the slow seeping life-force of the fleeing buck, and yet that was exactly what I saw. The bitter red color displayed on the foliage where the men ventured cried out to me. As Eli was first in line, and I at the tail end, it made it impossible for him to hear two specific words that I had been encouraged by my husband not to say. As I uttered them under my breath, again I told myself not to say them. I was on this quest with Eli, for Eli. This was about him and not about me and my feelings for the dying deer. If my husband had heard me, all three men might have sent me back to the meadow to wait.

I followed on the lone tail of the pack weaving back and forth as I followed my son's path and pushed myself to focus on the overall woods instead of any singular leaf although that was precisely what Eli was focusing on in his scope

of spotlight. Here and there he'd call out that he'd spotted more drops of blood. My son now at 71 inches tall, along with his father and uncle that years ago he literally looked up to, but now look down on, continued on the track, quickly and easily catching sight of the trail where the buck had chosen to flee.

Trudging through the woods, sticker bushes, downed limbs, and rotten wood, over pine-needed floors that rested under large pine trees, Eli led the charge, weaving back and forth, here and there searching, looking, and finding the droplets of crimson red blood. I knew inside my head and in my heart where the end would be and dreaded seeing the downed buck the farther we traveled, while Eli's feet and heart were pulsing to a different drum. My heart was in two places, one for the wounded deer and the other for the pursuer, my son. How can it be okay to hunt an innocent animal when it seems so wrong? I continued seeking what he pursued, from the beginning of the path, to wherever it would end, to understand his passion, and see past the pain of the animal and the pity for its plight. Then, I heard the words I had been waiting to hear, but wishing I wouldn't.

"I found it!" Three small words exclaimed with great pride, voice and adrenaline.

Eli did. He found his deer!

"Great kill, Eli!" Uncle Jimmy said a bit winded. "Great job, son!" Eli's father thumped his back, speaking his praise. I agreed. "Good job, Eli. I'm

proud of you.” I said coming up from behind into the flattened down brush where the deer lay and Eli stood. My words were half-hearted, but the half that held Eli’s heart meant every word spoken even if the other half of me was hoping we’d find the buck upright, whole, and alive with just a flesh wound on its side where the arrow grazed its hide. I could hardly look while Eli took it all in. I asked several times if the deer was really dead. “Yes!” Eli said. It was. My vantage point and evidence of the deer’s death shifted as I edged myself closer to the deer that lay on its side with the deadly arrow hole in sight, tongue out, with glazed eyes open. Eli stood above his buck, eyes brightly shining in triumph.

“Did you pet it?” “No!” “Do you want to?” “No, I don’t want to pet it, I want to gut it.” Eli said with a lopsided smile. I’d asked Eli if he wanted to pet the deer, much like me saying, “Poor deer!” What was I thinking? My mind was still trying to make the connection between nature and mortality. Eli’s downed deer wasn’t his pet. It was not as though it were a family dog that had been fatally wounded by an accident, needing held. This downed buck was a testimony of skill, triumph, harvest, and respect. Eli proudly held on to the buck’s perfect set of 8 point antlers. Later, I ask him about “petting” the deer again, and he told me that, “What I wanted to do

was to feel the buck’s antlers; to get a good look at them to see how big they were; I already knew what a deer’s fur felt like.” That was the first thing Eli touched, the antlers, when he knelt by it. I will remember forever the picture; he held the real thing not a stuffed faux pelt.

I was there, for him and with him, experiencing the sight of his victory and yet, the next minute he asked me, “Mom, do you want to touch the deer?” I did. Would it be okay? Me, petting the deer?

“I do.” I hesitantly answered and slowly bent my knees and touched the deer’s ear, while Eli knelt beside both of us. Creation, nature, mother, and son. A mixture of desire, accomplishment, respect, pride, and reverence silenced the moment. When I stood, all three hunters took off their hats so that all four of us could bow our heads and pray. My husband thanked God for the deer. An uncle, a father, and son; my boy with his tousled blonde hair who was a real to life, strong, brave, determined, and skilled mountain man.

“Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” That scripture in Genesis 9:3 came to mind, along with two other words I felt like saying but didn’t.

Soft. Silent. Still. Majestic. Poor deer. Proud momma.

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A Tribute to Zachary

Letter

by Lucy Halteman

Dear Zachary,

Hi, sweet boy! It's me, your mama. Do you remember me? We didn't get to spend much time together. You left me so quietly, I didn't know to tell you goodbye. I never had the chance to tell you how much you meant to me; how much you changed me; how much I loved you.

The first evidence we had of your existence was those two beautiful lines on a pregnancy test. Your daddy and I were happy to know about you, but mostly we were terrified. You see, there were three siblings prior to you who had left one after the other, all too soon to have even celebrated their heartbeat. But I guess you know that. I'm a little jealous that you've already gotten to meet them. Are the four of you having a good time up there in Heaven? I can't wait to see you all together!

But getting back to your story – after losing so many babies, I guess you can understand why we were so worried about losing you, too. Those first weeks after learning you existed went by so slowly. The hours of each long day trudged by, dogged by anxiety about your well-being. Every moment of every day I braced for the tell-tale signs of a pregnancy gone awry.

Six weeks of this endless suspense crept by till I could finally talk to a doctor about my fears. I sat in that exam room and cried because I was so scared she wouldn't find a heartbeat. I dreaded being told this pregnancy would end, like the previous three, in tears of disappointment. Then, the sweetest music I have ever heard filled the room – the whooshing rhythm of your heartbeat. As if that wasn't beautiful enough, thanks to ultrasound, I got a peek at all of you. I saw your tiny arms and legs moving. You looked like you were swimming. The doctor smiled, and I laughed and cried a little, this time from overwhelming relief and joy. What a mess your mama was!

I messaged your daddy as soon as I left the doctor's office. "This one has a heartbeat," was all I said. He knew how significant those few words were. We would get to keep you. You were OK. After three consecutive losses, we had ceased to believe such news was possible.

We were still a little cautious about telling anyone else about you. But finally, after waiting two whole weeks, we couldn't keep it to ourselves anymore. First, we told your three living siblings. I read one of their favorite books to them. It was about a dog

that had to adjust to a new puppy in the house, and at the end I had a picture of a baby onesie with the words "We've been keeping a secret . . . Baby Halteman, February 2024." They caught on really quickly, and their exclamations of excitement multiplied my own.

Eventually our joy overflowed to our extended family and friends – you know how exciting news spreads. We basked in all the well-wishes from everyone and finally dared to imagine our family with you in it.

For three and a half weeks we lived in untainted anticipation of you. Then one day I felt ominously unwell. I had mild cramping that just wouldn't stop. My heart contracted at the thought that maybe you were in distress. On the advice of my doctor, I rested and hydrated all that day. I prayed for you a lot as I rested and begged God to let us keep you. He already had three of our babies. Surely He hadn't allowed us all this hope and joy just to dash it to pieces.

Evening came and the family all left for a mid-week church meeting. I was still worried about you, so I stayed home to rest and call my doctor again. And there in the quiet of my empty house, while waiting for a return call from my doctor, I suddenly and shockingly got to meet you. But your tiny body was all that was left for me to hold. Your life, your potential, our dreams for you – these were already all gone. And I hadn't even known they left.

It was horrific. You were beautiful. My mind

couldn't possibly keep up with all that was transpiring. But I knew how to be a mama without thinking, so I did what mamas do – I found a small piece of flannel to wrap you, a plastic box you could rest in, and I took a few pictures to remember you by. Pictures of your tiny hands complete with five fingers and a nail on each one, though they didn't even cover the tip of my finger that they were resting on.

The next evening, we buried you between the two trees on our front lawn, marking your grave with a cross and a few silk flowers. It's a beautiful, peaceful place, especially when the flower bulbs around the trees come up and bloom in the spring. But it's not a place where responsible parents leave their babies. After your burial, as night fell, your daddy and I were holding each other tight, aching with your irreversible absence, when he said softly, "It feels like we should go out and get him." I couldn't have agreed more. We wanted to protect you so much even though it was completely unreasonable.

We named you Zachary Davis. Together the two names mean "Remembered and Loved." I really like the "loved" part, but the "remembered" part is not how it was supposed to go, you know. You were to be hilarious, exasperating, talented. Not "remembered."

But because it's all I can do, I remember you. All the time. Sometimes I remember you in the form of crushing guilt. I dropped you when I meant to

carry you carefully; I really did. My body fumbled this most precious of responsibilities, and I'm really sorry.

When I'm really sad, I remember you in the form of a fuzzy little rabbit that has your name embroidered on the ear. I've nearly hugged the stuffing out of it trying to fill the chasm of grief you left behind.

In a broader way, I remember you for the ways you changed me. Yes, wee one, you never said a word, you never looked me in the eyes, but you taught me so much. I guess God has never been confusing to you like He has been to me. I wish I knew Him like you do, but I don't always understand Him. I have a really hard time understanding why He would create you, one of His masterpieces, just to snatch you away again before you had a chance to work and love and develop your

unique personality. But I guess from your place of bliss that reasoning probably looks silly.

Because I'm still down here on earth where I can't understand God very well, I've learned to grieve for you through the process of lament. It's a big thought for such a tiny child, this business of learning to weep deeply while still believing that God is good. I'm happy for you that you will never need to learn it.

Best of all, I remember you most joyously when I realize that you're safer and happier in Heaven than you could ever have been with us. Keep having a good time with God and Jesus and your three little siblings, but keep an eye out for your daddy and me. We'll be there just as soon as we can!

Love,
Mommy



Down the River

Photograph | *by Lauren C. McKenzie*

Help Me See

Poem

by Riley Ebersole

Please help me see
What I have to see,
And help me to believe
That Your plans are always
Best for me.

Lord, please set me free,
So I can truly live for Thee,
And please open my eyes to see
The good in store for me—

Even when my dreams
Aren't quite what they seem,
And the world is getting kind of mean,
Please help me remember I am always seen
Because You died and rose again for me.

No matter how things may seem
Please help me see.

Sorry, Lord

Poem

by Kim Templemon

sometimes I open up
and sometimes I go too far

sometimes I make myself available
and receive many, many scars

I heal, I push through,
and I move on

but I don't let life's hiccups
prevent me from having fun

I'm willing to give and
I'm willing to receive.

except I'm the one giving, but
no one ever asks what is it that I need.

stuck in my heart is an arrow of love,
but not thrown by Cupid

sometimes I feel to give it away,
but sometimes I feel so stupid

all the choices I've made have been,
oh, so wrong

and now I'm like Tony Braxton
singing that same old, sad love song

manipulated by my mind
steered wrong by my heart

when will I ever allow God
to do His part?

blinded by my own self
I tried to offer my help

and wonder why I'm left with
disappointment and less self-wealth?

SMH is what
I seem to always do

disappointed cuz I got tired of
waiting on You.

sorry, Lord!
sorry for trying to be You

sorry for making decisions pretending
they came from You.



Monumental Blossom

Photograph | *by Kayla McMillan*

Lighthouse in the Dark

Poem

by Riley Ebersole

God's the Lighthouse that leads me home
With Him I am never alone.
So—I think it's time for the world to know
That Jesus Saves and Loves!

Just imagine the day
You can give Him a hug.
He fixes and mends
And on Him you can always depend.
His Kingdom has no end.

He's my Lighthouse in the dark
The present help
When the swirling storms try to crash my ark.

He's the Lighthouse in the storm
He's been guiding me ever since I was born.
He's there to help me
When I can't take much more,
And start to wonder what the future has in store,

He calms my mind
Even when it's like a raging War,
And life keeps piling on more and more.

He has Loved me since the start
And is my Lighthouse in the dark.

The Snake Plant

Essay

by Larana Martin

As far back as I can remember, I was involved in the exciting spring activity of planting our large garden that provided most of the vegetables our family would need for the coming year. I remember the freedom of running barefoot in the freshly tilled soil that felt so soft and moist. Planting the garden was often a time of family comradery as we took turns dropping the hard, little seeds into the long, shallow rows. Next, we gently covered them with loose soil and waited eagerly for the little green sprouts to push up through the dirt. Sometimes we children would mark off a small section of the big garden for our own garden and plant a few short rows of whatever we chose. The tiny, green rows emerging in the garden brought excitement and hope for a beautiful harvest. But the charm of gardening often faded when the long days were hot, and the rows of weeds seemed endless.

During my rocky teenage years, I found some peace, approval, and worth in planting and tending flowers. My mom liked my flowers and enjoyed making bouquets and showing them off to her friends. First, I scattered wildflower seeds over a wide row along the edge of our vegetable garden. I expanded into growing a stunning variety of

gladiolas from bulbs, expanding my collection from year to year. Frequently, they would fall over when in full bloom because their roots were not big enough to support the tall stems of flowers. I also needed to check them frequently and cut the blooms early to prevent cross pollination, which would've eventually resulted in only a few basic colors left, instead of the outstanding variety that I started with. I often tended to my flowers in the evenings, when it was cool and calm outside, and the pressures of the day had lessened a bit. My flowers were constantly threatened by a carpet of weeds. My mom would remind me to weed them, but she couldn't help me because of the overwhelming weeds in her own garden. As soon as I pulled the weeds, more grew in their place. It was always a battle between the flowers and the weeds. Much of the time, it looked like the weeds were winning. In the fall, I would dig the gladiola bulbs and take them indoors over winter so that I could plant them again the next year. I also got into saving and propagating geraniums over winter. By also bringing them inside during the cold months, I could have a selection of geraniums ready to plant out in our flowerbeds again the next spring. In this

way, I was able to save my mom time and money. My connection to the flowers and the dirt helped to soothe my soul and bring a bit of approval from my mom amidst my teenage confusion.

As I entered young adulthood, I lived with my parents less and less. I lost touch with my flower garden there. I began to branch out into new relationships, looking for a home and family elsewhere. I spent a good bit of time with an older mentor friend, who lived in the woods and had a huge, outstanding flower garden. We spent many hours walking through her woods, working in her gardens, and sitting in nature as we tended to my own disease-ridden leaves and rotting roots. She mothered me for several years, but then I lost her gradually because of her husband's death and finally her own. The flower gardens were never the same after she was gone. Another family that I lived with for a few years gave me space to plant flowers as well, which helped me to feel connected and grounded during my wanderings from one home to the next. While spending seven weeks in a mental health crisis home, I relaxed among their healing flower gardens. Eventually in my late twenties, I moved into my grandparents' basement apartment and got their permission to redo and expand the flower bed along the front of my apartment. I pruned and discarded the old plants, moved dirt around, and brought in logs to make tiers because the garden was on a hill. My younger siblings, especially my little sister, were attracted

to the transformation and emerging beauty of the flower garden that I was creating. They helped me reimagine that space into a beautiful garden of roses, perennial and annual flowers, and herbs. My grandma looked down from her deck with concern and apprehension about all the changes but eventually seemed to appreciate it a bit. Simultaneously, I began pruning and reimagining my own life which awakened me to the need to pull up my roots and move away from my family and friends so that I could survive the weeds threatening to overrun me. I left that flower garden behind, reminding my family of the beauty and opportunities I brought to them. It is their choice whether they maintain that garden or neglect it. It remains a beautiful memory for me.

Shortly after my thirtieth birthday, I moved in with my great uncle and aunt in a different community. She had lots of beautiful houseplants, and the comfort and peace I experienced among those plants solidified in my mind that I wanted to create a home like that in my future. Living there was my time in the greenhouse before I was ultimately uprooted again and tossed out into the big, wide world of wind and storms. After a severe mental health breakdown, hospitalization, and further cutting of the family and religious cords, I went to live at a homeless shelter. While there, I found a snake plant with broken leaves tossed to the side in a crumpled pot and missing half of its dirt. But it was still alive and wanting to thrive. I took the

plant to our room and we ladies looked after it until I moved it into my apartment with me several months later. My snake plant's resilience got her through being neglected, tossed in the trash, deprived of soil, overwatered, and underwatered. She is now thriving as a part of the family of houseplants in my apartment. I have put her into a

bigger pot with better soil and surrounded her with river gravel. She receives appropriate amounts of water and light. She stands steadily through tough times and easier times. She grows more slowly than a lot of plants, but with time, nurturing, and light, she will grow to a stunning height of five to eight feet. I am a snake plant.



Bottoms Up

Photograph | *by Jamie Andres*



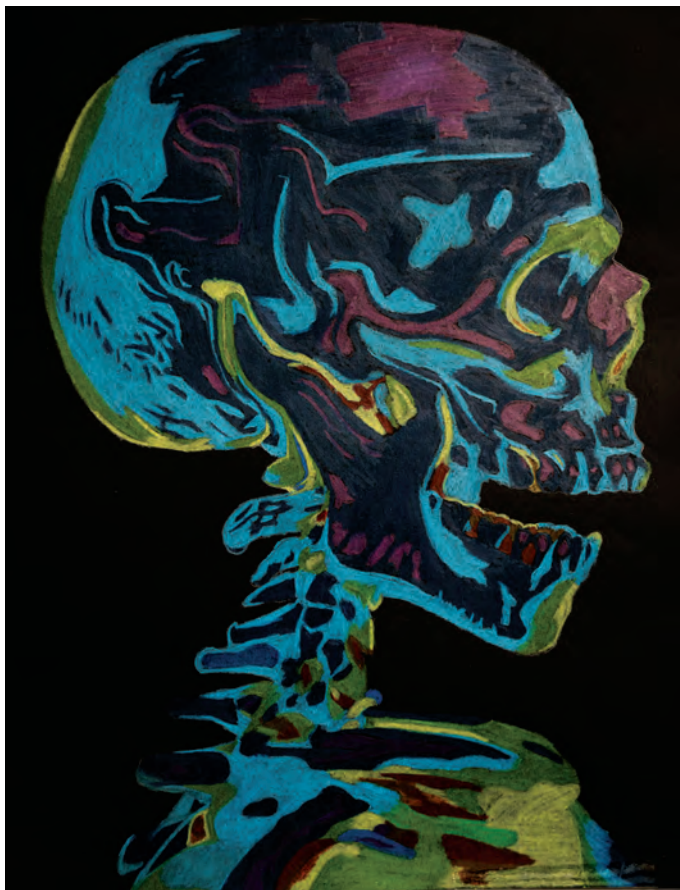
Canoe with a View

Photograph | *by Robyn R. Blank*



Self Portrait

Chalk Pastels | *by Abby Cline*



To the Bones

Colored Pencil | *by Jaiden Fradiska*



Thermal Contrast

Photograph | *by Abby Cline*



Nectar Collectors

Photograph | *by Kayla McMillan*



Goddfrey - The Fruitful Entrepreneur

Photograph | *by Madison Vanzego*



Chasing Waterfalls

Photograph | *by Brandi Rice*



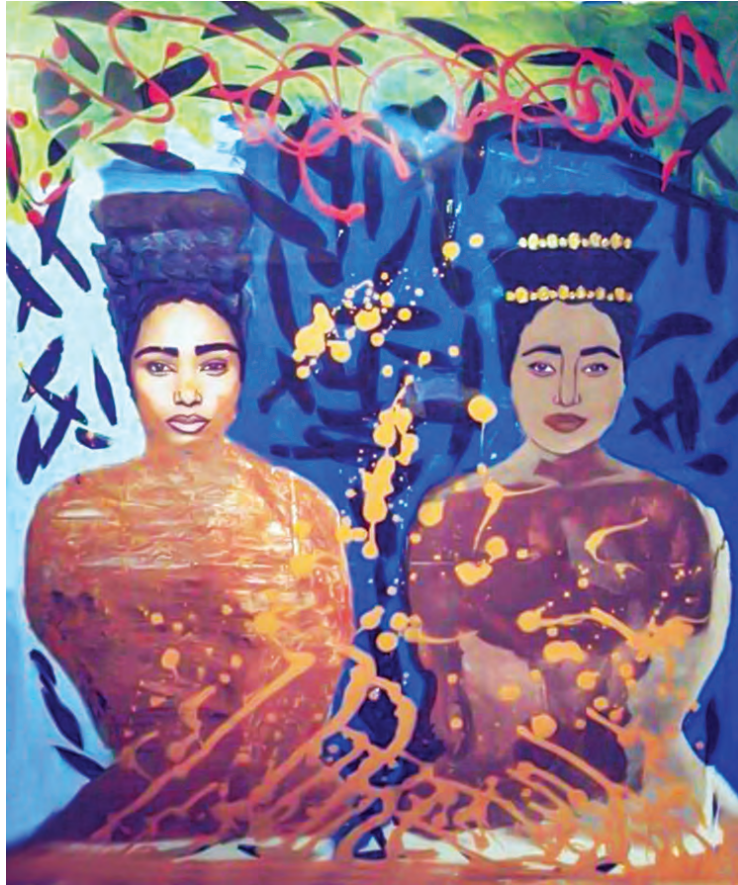
Life is Grand

Photograph | *by Brandi Rice*



Collide

Mixed Media | by Desiree Anderson



Ancestors

Mixed Media | *by Desiree Anderson*



Fungus Among Us

Photograph | *by Kayla McMillan*



Hummingbird Hover

Photograph | *by Jamie Andres*



Country Sunrise

Photograph | *by Amanda Fee*



Farewell to the Lavender Farm

Photograph | *by Robyn R. Blank*



Breakfast on the Run

Photograph | *by Jamie Andres*



Dancing in the City

Photograph | *by Zainab Ahmed*



Vibrant Thermophilic Mats of Yellowstone

Photograph | *by Lindsay and Eric Wendt*

Microbial Marvels of Yellowstone: Adaptation, Diversity, and Discovery in Extreme Environments

Essay

by Lindsay Wendt

While revisiting photos from a family visit to Yellowstone National Park almost a decade ago, I found myself captivated by the vibrant hues of geothermal mats and remarkable colors of the terrain featured in the pictures. Little did I know that these memories full of striking images were not just a sight to behold, but also a window into an extraordinary world of microscopic life: thermophiles. Learning about these heat-loving microorganisms in my microbiology class has deepened my appreciation for the images captured on the trip as well as the unique interactions between life and the extreme environments they inhabit. It amazes me how personal pictures from Yellowstone intertwine with the scientific knowledge I've gained, highlighting the beauty, resilience, and adaptability of thermophiles in one of the planet's most dynamic ecosystems.

Microorganisms have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to adapt and thrive in a wide range of environmental conditions, from the icy depths of the ocean to the searing heat of geothermal springs. Understanding the factors that influence their survival and optimal growth provides

critical insights into their evolution, physiology, and ecological roles. Key environmental factors like temperature, the chemistry of water, and pH levels play crucial roles in shaping the habitats where these organisms can live. Let's explore Yellowstone National Park and some of the interesting microscopic treasures it holds.

Thermophiles are microorganisms that thrive in extremely hot temperatures with optimal growth heat being 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Hyperthermophiles are microbes that thrive in extreme environments hotter than 176 degrees Fahrenheit. That is over twice the temperature that we mesophile human beings can handle, with an optimal growth temperature at around 68 degrees F. Temperature alone and the survival or mere existence of a microbe at certain heats help us identify what they are. The optimal growth temperature at which these microbes thrive is key for the life of all living organisms and how the characterization of an organism depends fundamentally on its growth conditions. Knowing this helps researchers study prokaryotes, understand gene stability and activity with

temperature, and discover heat-adapted proteins in their genomes.

The Grand Prismatic Spring, situated in the Midway Geyser Basin of Yellowstone National Park, stands out as one of the most impressive hydrothermal systems in the world. Its remarkable size is matched by its strikingly vibrant colors, which are a direct result of the diverse communities of thermophilic microorganisms inhabiting its waters. These microbes not only survive but flourish in the extreme heat of the spring, contributing to its unique appearance and ecological significance. These microbes create bright mats ranging from yellow to orange, reflecting the colorings produced at temperatures suitable for photosynthesis.

The presence of these microorganisms is essential to the ecological uniqueness of the Grand Prismatic Spring. The impressive mats are formed by different microbial groups expressing various pigments. These pigments allow microbes to efficiently perform photosynthesis, even in the high-temperature environment of the spring. The result is a visually stunning landscape, where the interplay between temperature, microbial life, and pigment production creates one of nature's most remarkable displays.

One major contributor to the vivid colors is the cyanobacterium *Leptolyngbya Boryana*, commonly referred to as simply "blue-green algae." These autotrophs produce their own food from sunlight or chemicals, while those using only sunlight are

phototrophs. This bacterium helps form colorful microbial mats in thermal habitats. When daylight intensifies, light-sensitive cyanobacteria move away from the mat's surface. Microbes that are less affected by light move upward into the top layers of the mat. This migration is a direct response to the varying intensity of light throughout the day and such shifts within the microbial community highlight their collective adaptation to a dynamic light gradient. By adjusting their position in response to changing light conditions, different organisms within the mat optimize their exposure to light, ensuring efficient energy capture and survival in the extreme environment.

Like Grand Prismatic Spring, Yellowstone's Norris Geyser Basin is rich in microbes, including the well-known archaea *Sulfolobus*. These communities oxidize sulfur, creating acids that help form mud in hot and acidic springs like those at Norris and the Mud Volcano. Once grouped with bacteria, archaea are now recognized as a separate domain sharing features with eukaryotes such as plants and animals. Archaea are classified as extremophiles due to their remarkable ability to endure some of the planet's most inhospitable environments which they can attribute largely to their exceptionally sturdy cell walls. They have been discovered in locations as diverse as the freezing expanses of Antarctica and the highly acidic, boiling waters of Yellowstone's hot springs.

Because archaea continue to survive and flourish

in such extreme and relatively unchanged habitats, some scientists propose that modern archaea may closely resemble some of the earliest forms of life on Earth. Their limited evolutionary change in these specialized environments makes them especially significant for researchers seeking to understand the characteristics and adaptations of ancient life. Studying archaea thus provides valuable insights into the history of life and the kinds of conditions under which early organisms might have existed.

Besides archaea and bacteria, these unique habitats are also inhabited by a diverse range of eukaryotic organisms as well, including fungi, various algae, protozoa, mosses, crustaceans, insects, and trout. The presence and distribution of these beings in thermal areas are also influenced by both water temperature and pH. Each group adapts to the unique challenges posed by varying conditions, contributing to the overall biodiversity and ecological complexity of these geothermal environments.

Inside Yellowstone's one-of-a-kind landscapes, incredible discoveries have been made including the finding of the bacterium *Thermus aquaticus*. The isolation of this microbe led to the discovery of the enzyme Taq Polymerase. This new enzyme in turn led to the invention of PCR or polymerase chain reaction, which allowed for the ability to isolate and amplify strands of DNA. This was crucial in the advancement of biomedical research where scientists and medical professionals are better able to screen for genetic conditions, detect infectious

diseases, aid in crime scene investigating, and help develop cancer and evolutionary research.

This remarkable National Park is a living laboratory of extreme environments, where boiling hot springs and acidic geysers support some of the most resilient life forms on Earth. In these seemingly inhospitable conditions, a remarkable array of microorganisms not only survive but thrive, revealing the incredible adaptability of life. From bright microbial mats painting the Grand Prismatic Spring to hardy archaea withstanding searing heat and acidity, these microscopic pioneers highlight the deep connections between temperature, chemistry, and evolution. Exploring these unique ecosystems not only advances our society technologically but also enhances our understanding of microbial diversity and provides a window into the early history of life on our planet.

Witnessing the vivid colors of microbial life thriving in the park's hot spring, enriched my understanding of their role in the ecosystem and their remarkable ability to flourish in harsh conditions. The combination of memories made and what I learned in this class reveals the loveliness produced by the intricate relationship between life and its environment, reminding us of the resilience found in the natural world. As we continue to explore and study these incredible microorganisms, we gain long-lasting memories in addition to scientific knowledge and deeper appreciation for the diversity and adaptability of life on our planet.

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Monarch Cat

Photograph | *by Heather D. Eckenrod*

Neglecting Adolescent Cognitive Development in the Name of Justice

Essay

by Amanda Stubbs

The Netflix original limited series *Adolescence* has society talking about what it is like for today's youth to navigate the complexities of growing up. The show takes the audience on a journey through the incarceration of a thirteen-year-old boy, Jaime, accused of murdering his classmate, beginning with a horrific scene of police aggressively entering his parents' home and detaining him while he slept. When the SWAT officers burst into his room with their weapons drawn, Jaime is so frightened he immediately wets himself; after all, he is just a child. Did the SWAT team believe that tactic was fully necessary, or is that simply protocol regardless of the suspect's age? Regardless, the traumatizing effects an encounter like that can have on a child are undeniable and will undoubtedly have a lasting negative impact on children subjected to it. Once detained, children in Jaime's situation are usually locked up in detention centers designed to resemble adult jails with similar processes focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation. By focusing on the punishment of juvenile offenders as opposed to their rehabilitation, society is failing the most vulnerable children and perpetuating a

cycle of recidivism.

Scientific research has shown that children's brains are not fully developed and hence, not capable of the same level of rationale as an adult and are unable to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions (McLeod). Science has also shown that a person's brain is not completely developed until after the age of twenty. Despite this, a child legally becomes an adult on their eighteenth birthday and is then held to adult standards. Kids develop a sense of right and wrong at a young age, but the depth of that understanding is very limited. According to Kohlberg's three levels of moral development, stage two (ages 8-13) is where a lot of decisions are guided by external relationships and social expectations (McLeod). Young people's emotions are strong and motivated by more instant rewards and are often short-sighted with scrambled priorities due to a lack of experience in the world. The Center for Law, Brain, and Behavior (CLBB) asserts "scientists know that the adolescent brain is still developing, that it is highly subject to reward- and peer-influence, and that its rate of development varies widely across

the population” (“Juvenile Justice & the Adolescent Brain”). Punishing juvenile offenders with similar methods and sentencing guidelines as adults while aware that they are incapable of understanding their actions to the same capacity is immoral and unethical. While there has been reform recently on a national level to abolish severe punishments for crimes committed as an adolescent, only the death penalty and life-without-parole have been found unconstitutional.

Most children that end up in the juvenile system are victims of some form of abuse. This abuse can manifest in ways like bullying, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect. Children who experience abuse are more susceptible to behavioral and mental problems, disrupting the already tumultuous process of maturing. These children may then lash out or mimic the abuse they know, leading to severe feelings of rejection, poor self-esteem, poor relational skills, and in the worst cases, homicidal or suicidal ideation. Society is more likely to condemn children who commit violent acts than victimless crimes, believing they require punishment that reflects the crime. It is still not uncommon to see young teenagers tried as adults for violent crimes, with almost unanimous community support. With emotions understandably high and the need for justice feverish, the perpetrator’s age can often be overshadowed by the crime itself. Last year in New Mexico, there were four boys, who when initially arrested at ages

11, 13, 15, and 16, the District Attorney declared that all would be charged as adults. The community is understandably upset over the killing of an innocent cyclist but fails to pause and consider how the children ended up in that situation to begin with. There is no mention of accountability from the parents and considering the eleven-year-old had a prior record (Bryan), it is clear behavioral issues were not properly addressed. It is important to understand what factors contribute to the act and take them into consideration, along with knowing how human development and learning works. As stated before, hurt children tend to lash out and hurt others in similar ways. Referring to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, children already experiencing psychological issues that end up in juvenile detention are doomed to be stuck at whatever level of the pyramid they were at when entering into the system. Abused individuals are more likely to not have experience above the “safety” level of the pyramid, and juvenile facilities are not designed to provide anything beyond that (McLeod). Considering children are still developing at this stage, they learn to live with harsh conditions, treatments, and lack of emotional nurturing, leading to a higher rate of recidivism. The CLBB maintains that “current practices regarding older adolescent and young adult offenders inadvertently increase the likelihood that they will be processed through the courts, serve terms of incarceration during critical young adult developmental years,

and become susceptible to crime-oriented social networks” (“Juvenile Justice & the Adolescent Brain”). Repeatedly putting a child through juvenile detention during critical cognitive development phases acclimates them to succeed in a structured environment that does not exist in the real world and therefore facilitates a pattern of recidivism that can last a lifetime.

To better serve our society by better serving our youth, it is important that legal responses to juvenile offenders be primarily focused on rehabilitation and therapeutic resources rather than punishment with incarceration. It should not be designed to mirror adult facilities, because children do not possess the same level of maturity required for any sort of positive effect to take place. Alternatively, there are multiple community-based and school-based programs that have proven to be instrumental in reducing juvenile offense rates among at risk youth. Community and family-based therapies focus on improving social skills, moral reasoning, controlling emotions, and conflict management. School-based systems offer educational interventions such as the Good Behavior Game which separates students into groups, and when a student within the group misbehaves, the entire group receives a point. The group with the least points at the end of the day earns a reward which utilizes positive reinforcement to motivate good behavior. The game also encourages students to work with their peers

and hold each other, as well as themselves, more accountable for their actions (Mayer). What makes these programs so successful is they address the root cause of why children commit crimes in the first place. Confronting the issue and not the action that resulted from the issue lowers the probability of violent and criminal behavior, reducing the probability of incarceration.

With scientific evidence consistently finding that negative reinforcement is ineffective at reducing crime and understanding that children do not possess the same cognitive reasoning as adults, it is time to reassess our juvenile processes on a state and national level. The current system perpetuates recidivism in a country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, and if that is ever going to change it needs to start with the children. By reforming the juvenile system to provide mental health services and professionals rather than legal action and detention we can optimize the opportunity to succeed and live a productive life for those who may not stand a chance otherwise. Therapy and coping skills addressing the reason behind the criminal behavior will better serve juvenile offenders by providing them with the tools required to make more appropriate decisions and understand how their actions impact others. If society fails to shift the focus from punishment to rehabilitation, the most vulnerable and underprivileged children will continue to be condemned to a cycle of incarceration.

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Bloom of the Widow

Pencil | *by Jaiden Fradiska*

Becoming a Peer Recovery Support Specialist

Essay

by Brittany Evans

For me, becoming a Peer Recovery Support Specialist (PRSS) in West Virginia is more than just a career path; it is a personal goal. I am a recovering addict, with close to four years in recovery, and my journey has been filled with great personal losses, along with growth from hard life lessons. During both active addiction and in recovery, I have lost so many people to addiction, including my first husband, who was my high school sweetheart and the father of my youngest daughter. His death is just one of many that fueled my desire to help others going through the same situations, once I, myself, got help. I want to use my story, my struggles, and my survival to connect with those suffering from Substance Use Disorder in a way that shows them that they can make it to the other side. Going through the pain of addiction and finding a way out, I feel, makes me qualified for this role. My experiences give me a way to connect with others on a level that is different and cannot be taught in any class or training. Becoming a PRSS allows me to take everything that I have gone through and use it to help others find hope and recovery.

The requirements to become a Peer Recovery Support Specialist vary from state to state. In

West Virginia, you have to follow rules set by the West Virginia Certification Board for Addiction & Prevention Professionals (WVCBAPP), which align with national standards. According to the WVCBAPP's handbook, anyone interested in becoming a PRSS in this state needs "46 clock hours of education specific to domains, of which ten (10) are specific to Advocacy; ten (10) are specific to Mentoring/Education; ten (10) are specific to Recovery/Wellness Support; and sixteen (16) are specific to Ethical Responsibility" (p. 5). In addition to all of this, you also need to earn 500 hours of supervised work experience, which can be either volunteer or paid. Out of those hours, 25 hours must be specifically supervised in the training areas. You are also required to pass a national exam and sign forms promising to act ethically and confirming you are in personal recovery. One of the points that the handbook stresses is that being a PRSS is not just about a certificate; it is about being proof of recovery. And as proof of recovery, you are always expected to be ethical and responsible in your work.

As of January 1, 2023, in order for a PRSS to get paid by Medicaid in West Virginia, they must have obtained this WVCBAPP certification. This rule

shows the importance of meeting all of the required training, supervisions, and certifications – not only to be seen as a professional, but also to provide services that Medicaid will pay for.

In order for me to start my journey to get those 46 hours of training, I signed up to take the first course from GRaCE Recovery/Life Coach Academy. GRaCE stands for “Greater Recovery and Community Empowerment,” and they offer two courses that allow you to obtain the credentials to become a Recovery Coach. These courses will give you the credits that you need to take your test for the PRSS. The first course was the Recovery/Life Coach Academy, and it is an intense, four-day course. You can take it online using Zoom or sometimes in person. Due to the location being far from where I live, I opted for the Zoom class and was able to attend it from the comfort of my living room. This class taught me the basics of recovery coaching, such as listening skills, setting goals, recovery ethics, setting limits, knowing the different steps of change, and planning for overall well-being. As part of this course, I also received 16 hours of hands-on training through Eastern WV Community and Technical College, and I was able to earn college credit for it. Once I finished this first course, I became a GRaCE Community Coach and was able to use my new skills to volunteer in my community.

With my goal being to become a PRSS and to work in professional places such as hospitals,

treatment centers, and courts, that meant that I needed to take their next class, which is the “Advanced Recovery Coach Professional Academy.” This advanced training built on to what I had learned from the previous one, diving deeper into all four PRSS areas (Advocacy, Mentoring/Education, Recovery/Wellness, and Ethics). It prepared me for the more complex situations that I will be facing as a professional peer supporter. Their whole process matched up perfectly with what the WVCBAPP requires. The hours from both GRaCE courses added up to the needed 46 hours, giving me structured training that is recognized nationally for each PRSS area. After taking the advanced course, I felt very confident and ready for a professional role. These classes helped me meet the state’s certification rules, along with teaching me practical skills such as ethical guidance, how to plan for well-being, and different recovery coaching methods, all things that I’m still building on during my internship and supervised hours.

As part of the hands-on requirement, I am interning at the Travis Phillip Moreland Resource Center in Keyser, West Virginia. Here I am getting my supervised volunteer hours towards the mandatory 500. Under direct supervision, I help clients across all PRSS domains, helping them build coping skills and strategies, connecting with resources from various networks, and bringing hope back into their lives. While at the center, I have

come across so many different people, and the one thing that remains the same no matter who walks in the door is that they are still suffering in some way or another. This really humbles me and brings me back to when I was in their shoes. It reminds me time and time again of why I will continue to work in this field and that I want to help as many people as I can. The greatest reward is when I help someone and watch them grow and change throughout the process. Seeing them go from broken and hopeless to thriving and full of life is an unexplainable feeling.

The final thing I need to do is take and pass the state exam to become certified. Now that I have completed my 500 hours, I need to get a letter from my supervisor at the center that verifies my work, submitting it within the completed application packet. Once I submit the application, I will have to wait to receive notice of approval from the WVCBAPP. No matter how much experience I have or training I have taken before this test, I am still very terrified that I will fail. I have talked with a few people, and they have said that it is all knowledge I have, not to worry, it will be ok. My mind, however, just feels as though I will get so nervous or worried about failing that I will end up sabotaging myself during the exam.

I have been very fortunate that the center's founder offered to pay for my exam, which did relieve that pressure. My preparation for the exam has been filled with practice exams, reading multiple

times the study guides that others who have already taken and passed the test said helped them the most, and asking those same people questions and listening to their advice. While studying, I caught myself thinking back to my own struggles with addiction, the losses I have gone through, and the guilt I have carried. I did not let those feelings hold me back like I once did. Instead, I started to view them as my strength, and this helped me realize just how much I want to use my story to help others. One thing that particularly stood out to me throughout my training is the power of peer support. It is not just about sharing similar stories, it actually helps people recover. Studies have shown that when people in recovery work with peer supporters, they are more likely to stick with treatment, avoid relapse, and feel more satisfied with their progress. Peer supporters can also help build up a person's confidence, emotional strength, and sense of belonging. That is because when you are talking to someone who has been through the same struggles, it is easier to open up and trust them. I have personally gone through this myself during treatment. I found it way easier to share and felt more comfortable with someone who actually had life experience with the same things, other than just reading about them in a book, and tried to relate from that.

Looking forward, all of the steps to get my PRSS are an accomplishment for me. It is a sense of

completion, and I have worked very hard to get where I am. This test is not just about building a career, it is also a milestone in my recovery. I plan on going further in my education, and I am currently

striving for my Human Services associate degree. All of the training I do for one will go along with the other and only build onto my foundation of overcoming addiction.

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The Free One

Poem

by Jonathan Schmoyer

You don't really know pain
until you've done something you loved,
with everything in you,
and then—

one day,
you're just sitting there,
chained to a chair,
watching other people do it.

I see bikes now:
Screaming past,
revving loudly,

And all I can do
Is sit—
And remember—

What it felt like,
To be
The free one.

A Lamb's Cry

Memoir

by Angel Israel

"Angel,"

Emma whispered as she gently shook Angel awake, her hand trembling with a soft urgency.

"Angel," she repeats. "Get up. It's time to wake up."

Reluctantly, Angel opened her heavy eyes, only for Emma's unreadable face to be the first thing she saw. As soon as Emma saw her stirring, she bent to the bottom of the bunk bed to wake up Cordelia.

"Cordelia," Emma whispered to her, gently shaking her awake.

Angel sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. She couldn't help but feel as if she had slept in on a school morning. She let out a silent yawn as she read the clock on her dresser. 10 a.m. *I must have slept in, and now I'm in trouble.* But that couldn't be it, knowing Emma, as her expression was melancholy, not scolding. The color palette that day seemed to be gray, white, and beige. There were highlights of baby blue there, too. It's as if her very soul knew something her mind had yet to find out.

Angel was ten then, the middle child of five. Natalie, the eldest, lived with her and Emma's father in Minnesota. Then there was Emma, Angel, Cordelia, and Isaac. All born of the same Sierra Leone womb, though a case of ADD, "All Different Daddies." As

the sisters followed Emma, they passed the master bedroom. The door was wide open.

Angel checked to see if her Mommy was lying there asleep, but she wasn't. Mommy was very ill at the time. Mommy began to have knee pain just a few weeks ago out of nowhere. Something we children had been told she had gotten from her grandmother in Sierra Leone, in West Africa. The doctor had given Mommy crutches for her pained knees, and she would lay them by the bed for easy reach. Those same crutches were lying on the floor, abandoned at the foot of the bed.

She probably went to the hospital again. Angel's mind raced with neutral possibilities. Or Daddy helped her downstairs.

This felt like an honest morning to her.

Today would be like any other day.

For a second, a thought whispered death, then it left.

What a frightful second.

And in any case, that possibility is impossible. For her mother at least. Mommy was thirty-nine, faithful, and radiant. Mommy, who would pray to Him every morning and night, sang to Him while she cooked, and danced barefoot for Him in their

living room. Mommy, who built the Jesus Christ Lord Prayer Ministry with Daddy, where prayers were a deep focus. From the moment Angel learned to read, her parents gifted her a Holy Bible.

Surely, God would not take a servant like her. At least not this soon.

Mommy was one of the good ones.

They enter the living room, and as soon as Angel's eyes fall on the souls in the living room, something within her shifted. Daddy was sitting down, bowing in silence, and gazing down at his hands, which were loosely intertwined. Roland Fisher, a church member at AME Metropolitan, was sitting a few seats away from Daddy, slumped in his seat. Little Isaac sat quietly beside Daddy.

Everyone was awake.

Everyone was *quiet*.

Her mother was not downstairs.

Okay, she is definitely in the hospital. Angel assured herself. Deep down, Angel hated that she was used to seeing Mommy in a hospital bed rather than her own. *They're just going to break the news down to us, per usual. Per usual.*

Daddy glanced up, his eyes glistening. Roland looked at Angel with sorrow that needed no words. Daddy did not say good morning, and neither did the girls. "Please," Daddy said softly, gesturing toward the middle of the couch. His thick Nigerian accent was present, bringing some form of familiarity to Angel's consciousness, as the entire

atmosphere of their newly moved-in home was thick with something unknown to her.

Emma went ahead of the girls to find a seat first. A moment of silence followed as soon as Angel and Cordelia took their seats. Just pure silence. She could feel the news, a predator, circling her heart, the prey. *How bad is this injury of hers?* Yet her own thoughts were becoming less and less convincing with each passing second.

"Is Mommy okay?" Angel asked at last, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Your Mommy," Daddy begins, his eyes everywhere but on his children.

"I took her to the bathroom this morning, at three in the morning. I took her back into the room, but she slumped into the bed in a way that did not look right." Angel swallowed, her mouth and throat gone dry. She noticed her father speaking in the past tense.

But her mother is alive and ill.

Do not say it. She thinks about Daddy. *Do not tell me what I think you are. Don't you dare.*

"In the ambulance, on the way to the hospital . . . she died." Daddy's last, knife-sharp words of confirmation cut Angel's heart. Slicing it open. Suddenly, without thinking, Angel's body jolts in shock. When she tried to get up from her seat, Daddy quickly grabbed her wrist, anchoring her to reality. They finally meet eyes, and what he holds in them is undeniable.

Elisha Elizabeth Israel passed away on December 4th, 2018.

Angel crumbles back into her seat, her hands inches away from her face, fingers curled, body shaking. Cordelia wailed, Isaac sobbed. The entire room was fractured with grief.

Angel did not cry at first.

She screamed.

Bent double, fists clawed, she screamed. Then she cried a warm river of sorrow. A horrific symphony this was. From that morning, tears would soon become acquainted with her.

She is screaming. She is crying.

She is me.



Born to Heal, Raised to Serve

Photograph | *by Madison Vanzego*

Remember Me

Poem

by Jonathan Schmoyer

Do not mourn the loss of my passing,
Nor the life I never got to live.

The missed opportunities of connection,
Are the ones that I truly cared about.

For I never carried the weight,
of their burdens.

If you could miss something you never had,
How deeply would the pain run?

Life is a fleeting moment
in the expanse of time,
Time is a fleeting moment
in the span of a lifetime.

Forever engulfed in misery and pain.
Yet a single kind gesture,
is all it takes,
To remember the life,
of one so beautiful.

Some Fears Can't Be Beat

Essay

by Abigail J. Squier

"You've got this," Beau, my counselor at Natural Resources Careers camp, stated plainly to me with a smile, crossing her arms. "Just try to ring that lower bell hanging up there. I know you're scared of heights, but if you're still trying to conquer them, you should give it a go."

"It's not that high, I suppose," I thought, surveying the white oak tree I had to climb that towered 90 feet into the air. I would have a harness around me and have good control of my own ascent, at the very least. I had spent years trying to get over my fears, so perhaps the fear had gone away after so long of going without climbing or going high up. This would determine whether I choose working as an arborist or a professional forester after attending ACM. Hiding my anxiety, I shrugged but smiled a little. "Alright. I'll give it a go."

I stepped up to the two men tussling with the harnesses that dangled from the tree and took the offered hard hat. A helmet would not do much to help if I were to fall . . . but it would keep me from cracking my skull.

They hooked me up to the harness, explaining each little process to me. "You need to grip the rope, lift your leg and push down hard on the little

pedal attached to your rope. If you pull up at the same time, you'll get higher, faster," one of the two men instructed. I obeyed, and began my climb. It went smoothly, and I felt calm for the first five feet, but with each additional foot I climbed, my panic began to slowly well up inside with each pull of the rope. It reminded me of years back, when I had gone to an amusement park to try to conquer my fear of heights, once and for all.

"Let's go!" my little sister Gloria shouted excitedly, darting out ahead of us as we entered the Delgrosso's Amusement Park. It had been a long week, completing once and for all the long-dreaded diagramming in our grammar class and assisting our veteran father in building fences for our newly-acquired cows at the farm.

My sister, older brothers and I strolled through the opulent gate and gazed around with wide-eyed wonder at the colors bursting around us, gaping at the impressive rides on every side. A massive dropper called The X-Scream Tower, packed full of screaming people as it ascended, caught my eye. It seemed so tall that one riding it could touch the clouds, and just that thought made me dizzy. I shook the thought aside and continued on with a

smile pasted on my face, following my little sister toward a ride labeled The Yo-Yo.

I was cautious at first, but watching the people ahead of us made it easier. It raised off the ground ten feet, then would swing in a circle lightly, not even dizzily. I rode it with barely a lurch of the stomach, and got off grinning and excited. That little adrenaline rush made me want to ride more, maybe even try the dropper!

We wandered about the park to admire the scenery and made our way to a couple rides, The Scrambler and Crazy Mouse, a spinning ride and a roller coaster. They were dull, and altogether not very memorable. We sampled the concessions and rode the carousel for a while, preparing ourselves for the larger ride we would soon have to face. Each moment we delayed, both my adrenaline and courage began to fade. I nearly decided to not ride altogether . . . until a three-year-old neighbor of mine, his black hair gleaming in the sun, skipped on. I couldn't just chicken out, this toddler wasn't even anxious, and I was a grown teenager!

So there I stood, my legs shaking with nerves as I waited for the line to disperse onto the ride in front of me: The Pharaoh's Fury. Levi, the younger of my two older brothers stood casually off to the side, munching kettle corn out of a plastic bag with a smug expression on his face, completely unbothered by my absolute horror. Gloria shuffled nervously beside me, but her feelings on the matter were completely different. She was practically

teeming with anticipation! Titus was calm but excited about the ride, so he was of no concern to my terrified mind.

It was hot, the noonday sun causing sweat to drizzle down from my temples to my cheek. The scent of hotdogs and damp asphalt from the rain the previous day created an insufferable humidity—I only hoped that the breeze from the high-speed ride would cool me down, at the very least.

I watched the line shuffle onto the ride . . . it was our turn now. I stepped onto the looming boat styled after an ancient Egyptian royal vessel. It groaned in protest as we stepped across the expanse of wood and metal to each of our prisons for three long minutes. I chose the far back end, thinking it will be better if I were closer to the ground at least at one point during the ride. Boy, was I wrong. We buckled in and lowered the bar holding us in place. The ride began swaying forward and back, slowly like a pendulum—then my bar rattled. Wild panic flared in my chest and I gripped my older brother's arm tightly, my eyes wide and darting about to see if that was how everyone else's safety bars were supposed to be. The swinging intensified, and a scream slipped from my lips before I could stop it. The ride was now swinging until it was completely vertical, and it rocked in a way that I was facing directly downward. My little sister squealed beside me, a grin pasted on her face, and the neighbor kid across the way was clutching his mom with wide eyes.

I snapped back to the present. I had nearly reached the bell, my hands burning from the rope and breathing comparable to that of a frightened rabbit. My counselor and the men handling the climbing gear cheered me on from below. With one last hard push, I pulled myself up enough to ring that wonderful, beautiful bell. *"Never again,"* I thought, shaking. *"I'm just going to stick with hugging trees from the ground for a living."*

Now, as the youngest Forestry Technology student in my class, I still struggle with my fear to this day, but it does not rule my life. I may not be able to scale massive trees or prune 90-foot giants at the national parks as some talented people do, but I'm content with my choice to remain on my own two feet and still enjoy challenging my fears now and again.



Living the Life

Photograph | *by Karen Schept*

The Psychology of Collecting

Essay

by Saylor Gross

Living things have long been attracted to the act of collecting, from the instinctual hoarding of food and resources by animals to the more sentimental amassments of humans. Whether it's monkeys stealing and hoarding tourists' belongings or a person collecting rare toys and vintage stamps, collection is woven into the nature of living things. For humans, collecting transcends survival needs and focuses on individual values and desire. In some ways, collecting provides a means of emotional security or nostalgia. Items often hold meaning beyond their physical form, serving as emotional touchstones and anchoring us to moments in time.

At the heart of collecting is an assemblage of psychological motivation extending beyond acquisition. Collecting for many—including myself—satisfies a plethora of needs: the desire for control, accomplishment, and a sense of identity. Collecting can often be chasing an experience, idea, or feeling rather than something tangible. In simpler terms, I'll see a shiny object and decide I absolutely cannot leave without it for no apparent reason. I have no need or space in my house for it, but it is a necessity. It could be the call of the unknown,

the thrill of the hunt, or a sense of accomplishment in completing a set or starting something new. This seemingly irrational impulse taps into deep emotional and psychological currents, providing nostalgia, comfort, and validation. I have a few collections of my own going on, including rocks, quarters with national parks on them, Burt's Bees lip balm, birdwatching memorabilia (I'm an amateur birdwatcher), perfume, Star Wars Funko Pops, embarrassingly pricey replicas of swords from movies, and a very expensive collection of records that I never play because I haven't set up my record player yet. Some of these collections have been accumulating new additions for over a decade, and some are brand new, but they all hold lofty real estate in my heart.

While the act of collection may seem somewhat straightforward, every collector is a complex individual with their own motivations for their specific niche. From casual hobbyists to those driven by obsessive compulsion, collectors can be distinctly categorized based on their psychological needs and personal goals. I would place myself between the former and the latter, simply because I just moved out and can't afford to obsessively

collect expensive things and also afford groceries on a part-time Kohl's paycheck. I collect what I can within my means and heavily hint to family members and friends about my more costly pieces. My national park quarter collection started because my boyfriend and I have had to frequent laundromats to do our laundry, and that calls for many, many quarters. I have a personal goal of visiting every single national park before I die and would jump at the opportunity to work to preserve them when I graduate, so when I saw the Great Sand Dunes printed on the back of a quarter I was about to use to wash my towels, my next venture seemed obvious. It helps me keep my goal in mind and is low cost.

Some collectors, however, are able to grow their assortment without any cost at all, such as the satin bowerbird. The satin bowerbird resides on the East coast of Australia, and according to Kerry Lotzof of The National History Museum:

The satin bowerbird has quite a discerning eye for blue objects. Solitary adult males travel far and wide to collect all manner of blue things with which to decorate their bower (consisting of two parallel walls of sticks) and woo potential mates. Successful bowers can boast painstakingly curated collections of blue feathers from other birds, plus shells, flowers, butterflies, plastic straws, foil crisp packets, pegs and bottle caps. Objects that reflect

ultraviolet light are particularly treasured, and hot competition for these items often leads to a cycle of theft during the mating season. Enterprising builders will even grind up blue pigments with their beaks and paint their nests to achieve just the right look.

I have held a soft spot for the satin bowerbird for a long time, and while we don't share the same favorite color, a love of collection binds us together. Though our motivations differ—mine based in personal goals and theirs a necessity for reproduction—the act of collecting serves as a means of expression and communication. The bowerbird's collection, which they meticulously assemble and present, mirrors a very human need to curate and organize possessions to express identity, creativity, and even status. This shared behavior between species highlights the universal appeal of gathering arrangements of objects and connects us deeper to nature.

The value and meaning of objects are tied to both personal significance and societal context, and imbued with stories and memories. Society and culture have a profound influence on what is collected. Today's digital age is no exception, with modern collectors sometimes satisfying their itch by gathering rare *Fortnite* skins, catching every Pokemon, or spending thousands of dollars on NFTs. NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) are digital assets stored on a block-chain, making them

one-of-a-kind objects that cannot be replaced or replicated, leading many Wall Street hedge-funders to compare them to real tangible objects. I have always heard that NFTs are bad for everyone involved, but according to Mingdong Tang, Xingyu Feng and Weili Chen of the School of Information Science and Technology in the Peoples Republic of China, “NFTs offer transparency, security, and ownership through blockchain integration, protecting creators’ rights and providing immutable ownership records. There is no doubt that the NFT market economy has become a non-negligible economic phenomenon.” While NTFs have garnered suspicion from many (including myself) for their environmental impact and speculative nature, they mark a new era of artistic expression and introduce new ways for artists to profit from their talent. While NFTs have brought attention to the concept of digital ownership, some collectors opt for costless options, such as curating Pinterest boards. Pinterest is a visual discovery and bookmarking social media platform where users can save images of almost anything as inspiration for real projects and aspirations to collections called “boards.” I am an avid Pinterest user and I view my boards as little collections. They give a chance to express identity and can be edited, added to, and shared with an audience.

Collecting can have both positive and negative effects on mental health; the effects largely

depending on the means of collection, motive, and how it is managed. When approached with mindfulness and self-awareness, building a collection can serve as a form of therapy. An unhealthy mindset combined with collection can lead to compulsion and relying on growing one’s accumulation regardless of the damages to outside life. For many, collection provides a sense of achievement and control. As collectors organize and curate their menagerie, they often feel empowered and create a personal narrative through the items they acquire. Arranging a collection can serve as a form of mindfulness or meditation, as the act of browsing, searching, and finding what a collection needs to be completed often provides much needed breaks from overwhelming thoughts. Social connections and friendships can be made through collection, whether it be meeting someone new while out combing for a new addition or leaving a comment on a post about a collection similar to the one you hold. The darker side of this shiny coin proves that innocent collection may turn into something dangerous. Compulsive spending potentially leads to the demise of friendships, savings accounts, and marriages. This can open into behaviors such as hoarding, an easy trap to fall into after isolating oneself. The Mayo Clinic notes, “Problems with hoarding gradually develop over time and tend to be a private behavior. You may avoid having family, friends or repair workers in your

home. Often, major clutter has developed by the time it reaches the attention of others.” Collecting can quickly veer into spending beyond someone’s means, and when coupled with the act of collecting to fill a void or heal an emotional wound, it can become addictive.

Ultimately, the act of collecting offers a fascinating lens through which we can better understand human behavior, identity and desire to find meaning in the material world. Collecting can be therapeutic, allowing individuals a sense of accomplishment and, for lack of a better

word, individualism. Collecting fosters a sense of belonging and a connection with our own nature. On the other hand, when driven by unchecked desire or emotional voids, collection may morph into addiction. The fine line between collecting because it is something that interests us and using it as a crutch to get through life must be managed with attention and balance (everything in moderation). Collecting reveals the human desire to seek order and meaning in the world. When approached with mindfulness, collecting is a deeply enriching experience.

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Stare

Mixed Media | *by Desiree Anderson*

Redefining the Concept of Genre:

Cowboy Carter as Work of Art, History Lesson

Essay

by Robyn R. Blank

Cowboy Carter, Beyoncé's newest album and her first in the country genre, is a significant work of art steeped in cultural history that also challenges the concept of "genre." It is a fully conceptualized album, an artform that we seem to be losing. Complete with purposeful interludes and transitions that make it hard to resist skipping a track, it also serves as musical education on the significant and overlooked contributions to the country genre from Black artists. The album title itself is paying homage to the fact that, in Antebellum Texas, Black workers were referred to as "cowboys" while the white workers were referred to as "cow hands." The lessons only continue from there and listeners are exposed to more than just the country genre along the way.

The album creates a fictionalized radio station, KNTY Radio Texas, that is rich with storytelling. Our radio DJs are Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, and the somewhat lesser-known Linda Martell. While Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton are household names, Linda Martell did not have the same success. She is, however, the first Black female artist to release a country album. She was also

the first Black woman to take the stage at the Grand Ole Opry. In her music career she had 3 songs released on the Country Music Top 100. Her website, *lindamartell.com*, states that in 1969, "Martell had the highest peaking single on the Billboard Hot Country Singles (now Songs) chart at #22, 'Color Him Father,' by a Black female country artist in the history of the genre . . . until Beyoncé's 'Texas Hold 'Em' debuted at #1 on February 21st, 2024." Martell was a trailblazer of her time, and *Cowboy Carter* is here to make that known.

Ms. Martell is featured on two tracks, "The Linda Martell Show" and "Spaghettii." In the opening of the song "Spaghettii" she can be heard saying, "In theory, they [genres] have a simple definition that's easy to understand, but in practice, well, some may feel confined." A blunt acknowledgement that both the listener and artist may be limited in some way by the concept of "genre" but also by the box that artists are expected to be kept in while creating. *Cowboy Carter* is defined as a country album, but it is also a genre-defying album according to many music critics. Country, folk, hip hop, pop, R&B, Americana, and blues come together to create a

highly unique experience. *Consequence* writer Sun Noor calls the album, “An audacious, genre-defying work that celebrates clashing American cultures.”

“YaYa” may be the best example of just how genre-bending this album truly is. It is a hip-hop song with a heavy rock guitar. It features unexpected samples from Nancy Sinatra and The Beach Boys. This beautiful blend of genres creates a high energy song that feels new and fresh, but also somewhat familiar. “Jolene,” the Dolly Parton classic, also gets an update by Beyoncé and is introduced by Parton herself who makes reference to a “juke joint.” This is another cultural callback to the south, as juke joints were typically Black-owned businesses for drinking, gambling, and dancing.

Filled with cultural significance, *Cowboy Carter* does not shy from tough conversations: it invites them. Beyoncé, along with Tanner Adell, Brittney Spencer, Tiera Kennedy, and Reyna Roberts, create a beautiful new rendition of the beloved Beatles song “Blackbird.” The song that is well known, but some may be unaware that Paul McCartney originally wrote it in 1968 after being inspired by segregation and its effects. McCartney has praised the *Cowboy Carter* version and how it echoes the original message he intended. “Ameriican Requiem” is a track that boldly addresses racism both in and out of the music industry. This is again subtly referenced in the song “Levi’s Jeans,” pointing to the fact that the Levi’s brand was willing

to work with the singer’s mother, Tina Knowles, and partnered with Destiny’s Child early in Beyoncé’s career. Tina has stated that other companies were not willing to work with an up-and-coming group of Black artists at that time. In the opening of “YaYa” the singer can be heard spelling “B-E-Y-I-N-C-E” which is a less subtle reference to her mother’s history in the south – she is spelling what her mother’s last name should have been at birth. A nurse misspelled it “Beyonce” on the birth certificate and the family could not get it corrected, stating it was due to them being Black.

Within the radio channel scans of KNTY Texas, *Cowboy Carter* further extends the history lessons by including a glimpse into early country and blues music. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Chuck Berry, Roy Hamilton, Charles Anderson, and Son House can all be heard. The inclusion of these artists creates a rich tapestry of those who are often left out of the country music conversation within one interlude. This allows listeners to travel briefly back in time, witnessing some of the earliest contributions to the country genre by Black men and women. Thus, these artists and their music live on with us within the current work of arguably one of the biggest stars of our time. Brittany Spanos describes it well in her *Rolling Stone* review by saying, “Like everything Beyoncé has done, specifically in the last decade of her career, *Cowboy Carter* is a college dissertation of an album: richly researched

and meticulously constructed. And while she has something to prove to a whole musical community, it's more of a love letter to her Southern roots than strictly a honky-tonkin' romp."

This album also caused what is called the "Cowboy Carter effect" in country music. Shaboozey, a country artist from Virginia who is featured on the tracks "Sweet / Honey / Buckiin" and "Spaghettii," earned the longest running Top 100 song with his track "Topsy" soon after the release of *Cowboy Carter*. According to The Nielsen Company, the music video network Vevo reported an increase of 38% in country music views globally the day *Cowboy Carter* was released.

Beyoncé recently won 3 Grammy awards for *Cowboy Carter* including Album of the Year, and rightfully so. She is the first Black woman to win Album of the Year since Lauryn Hill won in 1999 for

Miseducation of Lauryn Hill. Another award allowed her to become the first Black woman to ever win the Grammy for Best Country Album. She stated in her acceptance speech for the latter that she believes "genre is a code word to keep artists in their place." She has proven with this album that artists deserve the creative freedom to explore.

Serving as part love letter and part call for change, this turned out to be a surprisingly emotional yet fun listening journey. The song "16 Carriages" was able to make a personal connection that fueled and inspired me to make changes in my life that allowed for more room to follow my own dreams. How can it be anything but art to inspire such a thing? I highly suggest listening to the album and going along for the full ride. You may be surprised by what you learn along the way and how you view the concept of genre afterward.

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Post-Traumatic Nightmare

Essay

by Daniel Moore

Sometimes the dreams are peaceful. I'm standing in the desert, sand swirling. I can taste it. The air tastes sweet—or maybe that's just the charred corpses mixed with burning fuel and shit. The body armor squeezes me, a weighted blanket offering a false sense of safety. My sweat is rancid; I haven't washed in days. But that filth is comforting. It's where the rest of me stays. In the ceramic plates and Kevlar, I'm whole again.

But then the dream shifts. The sandstorm hits. I can't see my hands. I hope I'm near the tent. Someone has to know I'm gone. I step forward, bracing to bang my shin on the Humvee's bumper. Nothing. The world tilts. If I fall, will I slam into the ground or slip into the sky? I claw for my mask, but it's too late. The grit fills my mouth. My throat closes. I'm drowning in sand.

I wake up. I gasp, sucking for air that won't come. I thrash onto my side. Is this it? Did I survive the sandbox just to suffocate in my own bedroom? Helpless. Silent. I force a shallow, sharp inhale. My heart hammers against my ribs. Great, I think. I survived the war just to die of a heart attack in the suburbs. What will the obituary say? "Died peacefully in his sleep." They won't see the

struggle. They won't see the fear.

I swallow, forcing moisture back into my throat, fighting to stay conscious. This is when I wish the rocket had hit my tower. Or a piece of shattered concrete from a mortar round had slipped under my helmet. Or an IED had ripped me apart. At least then, my death would have meant something.

I sit up. The room spins, but I hold the nausea down. I feel their eyes in the darkness.

Judging. Disappointed that I survived again. I stare into the void.

"The fuck you want?" My voice is a dry rasp. "I didn't choose this. I didn't think I'd make it back."

They don't answer. They just stare with their dead eyes.

"You're better off," I whisper. "Now you get to watch me decay."

I'm wrong, of course. They deserved to come back. They should be getting old, raising families. Instead, I won the lottery. Now I live with the horror and privilege of the slow rot. They slip back into the darkness. Maybe next time I join them. Until then, I persist, waiting for my name to finally be chiseled into stone.

Dobson Fly

Poem

by Christine Caldaro

Beneath the water lays an ugly hellgrammite.
Watch! These little demon spawns will undoubtably bite.
Crawling along the waterbed with their anal hooks,
Please, whatever you do, don't give this creature another look.

Upon trees, leaves, and rocks,
A paint-like white cluster is locked.
A fortnight goes by, hanging over a river,
In which the precious eggs are delivered.

Crunch! Beneath the stones, a horror bites,
In streams where larval beasts haunt the nights.
Two to three years they lurk as predators,
Engulfing all their smaller competitors.

Three long years beneath rocks, barely visible.
Twelve times molting as larvae is incredible.
Their bodies twitch with each dark change,
Until the dark unveils its final stage.

In the dim twilight of the night hours,
They break free of the river, empowered,
Leaving behind their pulsating gills—
They give everyone they meet the chills.

Five-inch-long wings and just as wide,
Black, brown, and gray bodies don't like to hide.
Soaring through the night air, they fly;
Don't be scared when you lock eyes.

With longer mandibles, the males can attract;
Ew! He traps her with his talons from the back.
A week left is all he has to live,
At least he gave all he had to give.



Oogie Boogie and His 3 Henchmen

Notan Paper | by Trinitie S. Beeman

Feast at the Bone House

Poem

by Abigail Crippen

Laid among The Bone House.
Rib cage bowing in despair.
A mute hymn stitched through
marrow and strings.
Notes withheld unravel the body to wanting.

Maggots surround the mind,
pluck memory down to tendon and ache.
They relish sorrowful song,
Hum its rhythm and relay.

Bestow'd upon the heart,
chorus of gorge.
They state their desire,
quenching tenderness through gorge.

Endowed my-own,
Flowering turmoil.
Blooming song satiates the wretch.
Curation of I, marrow'd deep,
brought forth by jagged teeth.

“Dear Old High School”

Essay

by Daniel Highland

Overlooking Cumberland on Sedgwick Street, the old Allegany High School building served the area for 93 years. Opening in 1926, it closed in 2018 and was demolished in 2022. As a fourth-generation high school graduate of Allegany High, the old school had been a significant part of my life growing up. From attending football games to being a part of several extracurricular activities, Allegany meant a great deal to me and impacted who I am.

After graduating, I attended several events focused on Allegany as an alumnus, including being a part of local photographer Michael Hunter Thompson’s book project *Fade to Blue* (2022), which documented and memorialized the history of the old school through approximately 100 alumni interviews and Michael’s original photography of the building shortly before it was razed. *Fade to Blue* has become an award-winning

photographic and oral history which continues to receive recognition for its story of bringing together classmates and old friends from their Allegany high school days.

During my final semester at Frostburg State

University, I was a part of Annie Danzi’s Emerging Media course, Advanced Single Camera Production, where my semester-long project was to make a documentary based on a topic of my choice. After debating several topics, I realized how much potential Michael’s *Fade to Blue* had for a documentary. Why did Michael write *Fade to*

Blue? What does his book mean for people in the community? I contacted Michael, and together we mapped the direction for the project, which would become the documentary *A Legacy of Blue*.

Throughout the making of the documentary, I used archived pictures and videos from Allegany



on Sedgewick Street to help tell the story of Michael's development of his book. In addition to Michael, I interviewed several individuals, including Albert Feldstein, a historian of Allegany County; Doug Schwab, the photographer who helped to capture Michael's vision; and Sharon Schade, an art teacher at Allegany. By providing information and stories about their experience with the book's development, these individuals helped greatly in the creation of this documentary project.

When I premiered the film to the class and those involved in the project, it was met with admiration all around. A few months later, I



submitted the documentary to the Mountain Maryland Film Festival organized by the Allegany Arts Council. As this was my first submission to a film festival, I was a little nervous, but the film ended up being accepted and shown. It was an incredible night surrounded by friends and supporters of the project, and seeing my film on the big screen felt just as amazing.

Overall, I am extremely proud of this project and the work that went into it. I am grateful to everyone for their contributions and help in the making of this film. From Michael, Al, Doug, and Sharon, to Professor Danzi and my Emerging Media class, this film would not be where it is without you.

Daniel Highland's *A Legacy of Blue* is available on Youtube: [A Legacy of Blue](#)



On November 14-16, 2025, the ACM Theater Club presented

The Wizard of Oz

By L. Frank Baum

With Music and Lyrics by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg

Background music by Herbert Stothart



Photograph by Nate Blubaugh

Director/Producer: Melody Gaschler

Cast and Crew: Jaymielynn Williams, Andrew Croston, Jazz Rodriguez, Abby Cline, Timothy Watson, Dasha Andrews, Phoebe Riley, Heather Kephart, Tasha Stitcher, Brianna Brant, Janel Erikson, Chloe Hoover, Carmen Whetstone, SJ Mendivel, Tiffany Moon, Abby Cutter, Jonna Hughes, Lauryn Moyer, Johna Whetstone, Samantha Marks, Gabriella Nester, Amanda Hoover, Zainab Ahmed, Carrie Andrews, Azlin Neilson, Ka'ron Taylor, Kamar Taylor, Chy Thompson, Madison Vanzego

Behind My Photos

Inspiration Essay

by Madison Vanzego

During my trip to Ghana, I discovered a newfound passion for photography. Although I previously preferred videography, capturing moments through still images revealed my ability to tell compelling stories. Being in Ghana, I felt incredibly comfortable, with the warmth and hospitality of the people making me feel at home. The only challenge was



adjusting to the heat, as I am accustomed to colder weather. My confidence grew as I navigated professional environments, pushing me out of my comfort zone and allowing me to develop both personally and professionally.

I had the opportunity to collaborate with students at the CBS building, which featured advanced facilities that impressed me. Photographing events like the GUSA Games and move-in day highlighted cultural differences,

especially the celebratory atmosphere in Ghana. Additionally, working alongside multiple photographers allowed me to experience a collaborative, professional environment, which was refreshing compared to my school's individualistic approach. This experience deepened my understanding of teamwork in the media industry.

While I didn't have direct assignments related to public health, I documented moments in the midwifery section of a hospital, such as newborns being weighed and vaccinated. These experiences provided valuable insight into how healthcare is delivered and the importance of accessibility to medical resources. Observing these practices in action enhanced my understanding of public health and the role of maternal and child healthcare,



emphasizing the significance of global health initiatives.

Every photo I take challenges me to think creatively, whether I have a clear vision or the inspiration strikes later. This process has strengthened my problem-solving skills, as I consider how to frame shots and what stories they tell. Over time, I've built a collection of images that I plan to organize into series, with the goal of showcasing my work.

Witnessing healthcare differences between Ghana and more developed countries was eye-opening. The difference in resources, equipment, and infrastructure highlighted the need for equitable healthcare access. Meeting healthcare professionals who continue their work despite limited resources inspired me to think about how I can contribute to global health initiatives. This experience reinforced



the importance of advocating for better healthcare and raising awareness of these disparities.

This trip marked a significant milestone in my professional journey, especially as it was my first time traveling abroad. Visiting the CBS building inspired me, reminding me of major corporations like Google and Microsoft, where diverse opportunities exist within one facility. Observing student journalists at work gave me valuable insight into the role of multimedia professionals. This experience solidified my passion for media, storytelling, and the hands-on experience needed in this field, further motivating me to pursue my career goals.

Madison's photos "Generational Touch," "Goddfrey – The Fruitful Entrepreneur," and "Born to Heal, Raised to Serve" have been published in this current issue.



Amanda Fee

Country Sunrise

The beauty of living in the country.



Brandi Rice

Chasing Waterfalls

This was from Watkins Glenn in New York.

Waiting on Santa

Beatrice decided to hide in the tree waiting on her gifts from Santa.



Desiree Anderson

Stare

Stare was made because I thought there needed to be fresh young ideas with colors and beauty in mind.



Collide

I made Collide because I had so many ideas of art composition and wanted to express them all with colors.

Ancestors

Ancestors is a reflection of what lost history looks like for me as a young African American woman in the year 2012.



Heather D. Eckenrod

Monarch Cat

I grew up as an only child roaming the woods and exploring. I made friends with the creatures around me, and the world was magical. Years later and I still find the magic hiding in the mundane.



Jamie Andres

Hummingbird Hover

Breakfast on the Run

Bottoms Up

Taking time to enjoy and observe nature is one of my hobbies in free time. Nature refreshes my soul.



Karen Schept

Living the Life

A mighty squirrel posing for the photo while he enjoys an evening snack. This photo was taken in Zion National Park on the mountains of rock.



Lauren C. McKenzie

Down the River

All of the photographs that I have turned in share a theme. They are all taken in nature, but are also all related to paths in one way or another. In the literal sense, but also figuratively. Moving forward, trusting your path, choosing your path, paths have many meanings. And I find that being in nature helps me to think about what my path is and where I want it to go. I even decided to go to Allegany College of Maryland while going on a hike. "Down the River" was taken as I was kayaking down the flowing Potomac.



Robyn R. Blank

Canoe with a View

Farewell to the Lavender Farm

These submissions are inspired by experiences and art that reshaped my sense of direction and creativity. A personal essay reflects a defining loss that changed my life path and led me to college, while *Cowboy Carter* became an unexpected catalyst for creative and personal growth. Photography has been a lifelong passion for me, and using the viewfinder helps me notice small details, find grounding, and capture nature at its best.

Alexa M. Smith

The Reading Tree

Reading was truly an escape for me as a child who was very quiet and shy. It was something introduced to me through my grandmother and mother. My mother would read a different book to me every night when I wasn't able to read myself. When I would spend summers with my grandmother, I read the Little House on the Prairie books so often that I was worried I would ruin the book spines due to the books already being older. This poem is a love letter to my childhood, to my hometown, to the foundations of my love of reading, and to my mother and grandmother, who inspired so much of it.

The Blood of the Women Before Me

I chose to write in free verse to allow for emotional flexibility and a more authentic voice, to mirror the back-and-forth conflicting feelings that come with navigating modern-day feminism. It is a fragmented journey many women endure, and blood is an excellent representation of our bond. No matter our race, sexuality, or family line, once we reach maturity, menstruation is something we all will experience as women. It is the reflection of life's cyclical rhythm and its ties to nature and the moon, to its deeper associations with power, transformation, and the sacred essence of the feminine. We all come from our mothers. The painful,



physically altering process of pregnancy and childbirth can be beautiful and at times tragic when mother or child are lost. The blood our mothers have spilled and sacrificed to get us to this point, out into the world, is a price not many can pay back.

Lindsay Wendt

*Vibrant Thermophilic Mats of Yellowstone
Microbial Marvels of Yellowstone: Adaptation,
Diversity, and Discovery in Extreme Environments*

In Microbiology we were given the assignment of studying thermophiles, microorganisms that thrive in environments of extreme heat. The microscopic world living among this scenic national park impressed me and opened my mind to a world within our world that I hadn't known existed. It explained the colorful mats of photosynthetic microbial life that I had once thought to be "colorful sand" that was photographed on a family trip to Yellowstone National Park so many years ago.

Drew Blubaugh

Fiction: The True Story

Thus begins the tale of the Banditeer, inspired by my love of a good story and twisting plot, but also by my family.

Jonathan Schmoyer

Little Pathos – The Lonely Fender Prequel

When I wrote The Lonely Fender in the last issue, I wanted to personify loneliness and longing through anthropomorphism, but give the story a melancholy resolution. This year, I wanted to expand on that resolution and give it some back story. This describes the young boys ennui and how all it took was the Lonely Fender to make him whole.

Remember Me

This was inspired when thinking about people that leave this realm and then are forgotten.

The Free One

I was inspired on the first day of warm weather, when all the motorcycles are out and all I could do was listen and remember what it's like to be the free one.



Sabrina Morton

A Midnight Stroll

I'm an amateur artist, new to the art scene, creating pieces that reflect what I enjoy and what personally inspires me. I'm always up for a challenge, which is why I experiment with various media, though acrylic paint remains my favorite. I'm especially passionate about community art and the positive impact it can have on those who need it. This experience is an important step as I am enrolled in a Master of Art Therapy program currently. After graduating, I hope to become a community art therapist which is also reflected in my creative process.



Trinitie S. Beeman

Oogie Boogie and His 3 Henchmen

The Nightmare Before Christmas is one of my favorite movies. Oogie Boogie, Lock, Shock, and Barrel are my favorite characters. My piece is a Notan: I took black and white paper and flipped my design. Lots of intricate pieces to glue down and cut out. It was confusing, but I enjoyed doing this piece.

Suzanne Marie Rafferty

Pursuing the Mountain Man

The Heat Vent

I did “Pursuing the Mountain Man” in Professor Tonya Shepherd’s class and she encouraged me to submit it. “The Heat Vent” poem is based on the very first memory I have, at age 3.

Abigail J. Squier

Some Fears Can’t Be Beat

I created this essay as a continuation of one I wrote when I was about 11 years old. I was hesitant to revisit an old essay at first, but after everything started flowing together like it belonged, I knew I had made the right choice.

McKenzie Footen

Home in the Woods:

How Isolation Shaped Who I Became

I wrote this to explore how my childhood shaped my identity — from loneliness and imagination to the strength I carry as a mother. It’s a reflection on how a place can raise you. My English teacher told me I should submit it to the journal.

Angel Israel

A Lamb's Cry

When I was ten years old, my mother had passed away 11 days before her birthday. She was 39 years old. I was distraught. For 3 years, I had a very unhealthy relationship with God because I blamed him for my mother's death, especially since my mother faithfully devoted her life to him for years until her last breath . . . how could he take her away from me?

I succumbed to addiction, depression, and anxiety. My heart was a void, and my cold demeanor was a cry for help, hence my title, "A Lamb's Cry," because in the end, I came back to God and found contentment in my mother's passing through spirituality. This book I am working on, however, is poetic, messy, and would be the most uncomfortable thing I've ever written. Still, it is the uncomfortable things that help us grow, right?



Lillian Henson

The Walk

"The Walk" was inspired by the luring beauty of nature and the calmness that it brings. The ability to walk and look forward, witnessing many little worlds is something I will always seek.

Daniel Moore

Post-Traumatic Nightmare

This is a short piece I wrote as I began to see positive results from therapy and medication. The original draft was a recollection of one of my more intense episodes following a nightmare. This submission is the version I feel comfortable sharing. I'm getting better, but there are so many veterans who aren't getting the help they need, and they're hoping it will just fade away. There are so many who choose to rejoin their fallen comrades because the hurt and shame aches too much.



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