





# T.

## TRIBUTARIES



### A Note from the Editor

As kids, my friends and I would jump across a small creek that ran through our neighborhood. We all knew about a local legend. Supposedly, a kid floated all the way to the ocean with nothing more than a blow-up raft and a box of Pop-Tarts. Our creek connects to the Wabash River which feeds into the Ohio River, the Mississippi, and eventually the ocean.

*Tributaries* shares a kinship with the imaginary Huck Finn of my childhood. Though we are a regional journal that exclusively publishes the work of student writers, our contributors flow into the larger body of modern literature—a body that much like the ocean needs to be protected and preserved now more than ever.

The educational nature of our journal might surprise readers when they discover the depth and quality of the work within it. From Formalist poetry to experimental prose, this journal provides a view into the future of literature. I have little doubt that the names of our contributors will be seen in nationally-renowned journals one day. With that in mind, all the educators who have worked with these students should take a moment to appreciate their influence. Likewise, all the contributors who have allowed us to publish their poetry and prose should look boldly into their futures—and, most importantly, keep writing.

I hope readers will linger for a moment on the masthead that follows. Putting this journal together was not easy, and my fellow staff members deserve all the credit in the world. Without their effort and dedication, the 2025 issue of *Tributaries* would not exist. And, of course, our Faculty Advisor, Brian Brodeur, warrants special appreciation. It's impossible to calculate how many students he's

impacted in the same way as me—teaching us the language of poetry.

Some argue that this language—poetry—is only read by those who write it. In *The Art of Recklessness*, poet Dean Young addresses this by writing, “It’s been noted by many that poetry is like a foreign language... so what’s so terrible about people who know Portuguese being the people who are interested in listening to and reading Portuguese?” His sentiments hold true for all literary and visual arts.

So, dear reader, know that we’ve enjoyed making this journal. We hope you find the same level of pleasure speaking Portuguese with us.

—Jake Ott





# T. TRIBUTARIES

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SHANNON BROOKS

**Agent Provocateur**

The bumper car philosopher,

a stickler on convergence.

Enter the harmonic exposé

in the key of barricade.

See the varicose murals

sashay, vain,

baroque.





JEALOUSY REZA

### Scab

I am a scab—  
not the picket-line strike breaker  
but a crusty, dried blood smear  
covering over  
a festering ooze of pus.  
I protect your vulnerable mush—  
I'm ivy clinging soft,  
growing slowly  
over the hurt, the ache, that itch  
that whispers You're alive.  
Don't pick at me,  
don't peel or scratch—  
without me,  
your squirming insides  
would puddle on the floor,  
staining the rug  
and European oak.

JEALOUSY REZA

### Stranger Danger

Now I ask strangers to come pick me up—  
I ask a stranger to deliver Taco Bell.  
I open my phone and swipe right to meet  
a stranger I invite into my bedroom.  
When did they stop becoming dangerous?  
Once, at the café where I used to work,  
a woman told me her stepmother died  
of heart failure. Instead of reacting,  
I asked if she needed more coffee.  
I could write that woman a paragraph.  
Online, it's easy to be sincere.  
I go home to my cats, to our own world.  
I make plans with my friends, then I bail.  
I keep scrolling, pretending it's enough.



JEALOUSY REZA

**Note to an Ex**

We went to the ocean—it feels different now.  
The thick air is like breathing through a straw.  
I see you, in your torn jeans and Converse—  
you never dressed for the occasion.  
I feel the warm weight of your salty lips,  
and I can almost feel your heartbeat again.  
You took your own life, abandoning me.  
Yet it's still weird for me to call you ex.  
I don't know why I have to tell you this,  
but I'm seeing someone new and he, well—  
he's completely different from you.  
So I'll keep the necklace you gave me.  
I'll keep your memory, but not the weight.

JEALOUSY REZA

**Symptomatic**

I caught a bat, no net, just my own hands.  
Its leather wings thrashed inside my tent. Released.  
A small nick on my arm. A bite, I think?  
Two pinprick holes, red, begin to tingle.  
A band-aid seals the sting. My small denial.  
Ten days go by. My head pounds in rhythm.  
Afraid of showers and afraid of streams.  
Then unrelenting fever chills take hold.  
My jaw is clenched in pain with spasms tight,  
foam dripping as I tremble through the day.  
I see a shadow standing close to me.  
I beg you, Saint Hubert, give me your key—  
nothing else can save me anymore.



*Nekomata Attack*, Caitlin Jones, Digital Art, 14" x 20"

### *Third Place for the 2025 Prize for Prose*

REBEKAH WILLS

#### **How to Dress Your Farm Animals**

There are four main criteria to dressing your farm animals. The first is to consider how many legs the creature has, since a sheep and a peacock have different amounts. The second criteria is the season—you would never dress an animal in a fall color in the middle of spring, that's abuse. Third, the event must be considered. Fourth and most important is the material of the clothing.

Budget and practicality must be out of the picture. You know this, that's why you're bothering to read up on farm animal fashion. You know that time and money must be spent on our farm animals. Nobody wants to look at a horse that's not in style. Let this be your ultimate guide to keeping your animals stylish and beautiful.

#### *One: Legs*

Fashion has surrounded legs for forever. You want to accentuate them, make them long and desirable. The first step to doing so is counting them. A two-legged creature needs its legs accentuated, much like a human. You must consider how much help they need emphasizing the legs. The main exception is ducks. Ducks spend so much time hiding their legs in the water. Nobody cares about the color of your duck's pants if they cannot see them. For ducks, accentuate the breasts. Break out your makeup palette and get to contouring.

For a four-legged animal, treat the hind legs as legs and the front legs as arms. This means elongating those back legs and making those





front legs a bit shorter. This is easily done by evaluating lines and patterns. Vertical stripes elongate and horizontal stripes stretch. You need to use that to your animal's advantage. If the colors between the front legs and the back legs contrast, that will also help your animal's legs appear longer. Again, some animals need more help than others. Horses tend to naturally draw attention to their legs, and their mane. However, pigs have stubby little legs and need help. Heels are recommended for all animals but especially for pigs. Heels are going to help make your pig's legs longer and give their butt that pop they need to draw out the best part: their curly tail.

#### *Two: Seasons*

Your animals are meant to be in harmony with their surroundings, it's only natural. You need to know the colors that go with each season. In autumn, the peak fashion season, this is most important. Autumn must be filled with darker neutrals, browns and beiges. Think the shades of dead leaves on the ground. Winter comes next with cooler colors. Blues and whites that whisper about the cold. Where is your cow? You can't see her against the snow, just as it should be, in harmony. Spring needs to be filled with bright pinks and purples, like the flowers blooming all around you. Finally, in summer use cool light colors, greens and darker blues.

Patterns must also vary by season. Florals are for spring, plaid is for fall, harsh lines in summer and soft wispy ones for winter. You need your animals to be chameleons of their environment. Seasons start right at the solstices. You should not care that it's still 80 °F. If it's fall, you need to unpack those sweaters and cardigans. Having your animals out of season is criminal. However, there are exceptions. Male peacocks never need to be in season, they are a fashion statement in and of

themselves—their only rule is breaking every rule.

The colors of the animals also might take precedence over the season. In summer, you do not want to wash out your white animals and make them look pale. You could fix this by either breaking the season's rules or by investing in a spray tanning gun or self-tanner (around \$30 on Amazon). You can bulk-buy at Costco if you have a large farm. It will pay off in the long run—people love buying meat knowing it was in style.

#### *Three: Events*

You must consider the events of the day for the fashion of your animals. Do not bring them to the animal show in their casual clothes. Find something elegant, something that screams I'm better than you. The

same goes for the opposite direction. Do not let your animal walk around stepping in its own poop in its most fashionable tux.

Maternity clothes are necessary for those pregnant mammals. For those who are not pregnant, but are needing to be, we must make them desirable. Do not put a cow who is set to be bred in red! Bulls can actually only see blue and yellow. So, bust out those shades your mom wouldn't approve of and get your cows ready to make babies.

The best thing about pigs is pork. When it's time to say goodbye to Wilbur and hello to bacon, all black is most respectful. Imagine what you would wear to your own funeral. Something sleek, slimming, Chanel.

**" Having your  
animals out of  
season is criminal.  
However, there  
are exceptions."**



#### *Four: Materials*

The material of your animal's clothes is the single most important element. It can transform a sweater from *thrifted to designer*. You need to buy high-end materials and brands. It's embarrassing to have your animals walk around in cheap outfits. Preferred brands include Prada, Gucci and Louis Vuitton. If the Kardashians wouldn't wear it, neither should your farm animals.

It's also important to consider the animal when selecting materials. Dressing a cow in leather? It's distasteful. It's disrespectful. However, dressing a sheep in their own wool? It's eco-friendly, resourceful. Sheep were bred to make their own clothes. Any material that comes from the death of an animal shouldn't be used on that same type of animal. However, if you can get the material without killing them, it's recycled and therefore morally acceptable. Materials must be tasteful and expensive.

#### *Takeaways*

When dressing farm animals, consider: materials, events, seasons and legs. Keep your animals stylish and trendy at all times. Don't embarrass yourself, don't embarrass your farm animals. Stay classy.

#### *Third Place for the 2025 Prize for Poetry*

KENNEDY COSETTE

#### **Open Bar**

My therapist doesn't know I still drink.  
Every corporate event I attend  
has spherical ice cubes or dark speakeasies,  
top shelf tequila, subtle and sleazy.  
Could someone please lend  
me a cigarette? Vodka and Pinot  
served cold every other week on the low.  
At twenty-six, this 401k rebrands me—  
I'm no longer nineteen and seizing  
from DTs or alcohol poisoning.  
I'm picking lush, edible flowers from in between  
the same chipped, broke-bitch teeth  
that chewed black caps off King Cobras  
in the closet of my bedroom—dirt cheap.



SCOTT WADE

### Seeped

“Phenol Poisoning From Industrial Waste Suspected in Multiple  
Birth-Defect Cases, Shelbyville”

—*The Daily Journal*, Johnson County, IN, June 1984

A legless man  
contemplates an  
octopus contemplating  
a thunderstorm  
sliding stumps-first  
into cripp poetics  
space shuttle legs  
poor little  
tink tink  
scalpel wishes  
bone-saw dreams  
pain is purple  
anguish smells  
of iodine  
the tree knows  
it has been cut  
but the grass  
cackles  
amputations in shades  
of green and purple  
boil the water  
too late for  
the babies  
phenol for all

SCOTT WADE

### Amputation

When they took my foot,  
it didn't feel like they'd cut it off—  
more like someone had wielded  
a hammer, smashing the bones to powder,  
and stuffed the tenderized wad  
into a cast.

There's a pulling to this pain—  
severed nerves reaching out  
for their missing counterparts,  
howling for what was taken.

The pain is alive—  
it reeks of iodine.  
A presence as real  
as the surgeon's saw and scalpel.  
Nothing exists outside the agony.

I'd pray, but the pain  
has become my god now.  
I'll always be here, in this room,  
nerve endings striving  
for what's no longer there.





SCOTT WADE

**Tradeoffs**

Forgive my boast,  
but I'm pretty  
goddamn disabled.

Crip since birth,  
more crippled since.  
What's Latin for

the one who is cut?  
Malformed hand:  
three tiny fingers

syndactyly fused.  
Whiff of anesthesia,  
surgeon's scalpel,

a two-fingered claw.  
No left leg. Deformed  
right. Epidural, bone-saw,

to even them out.  
But agony brings  
perspective.

Severed nerves never  
shut up. I write out  
their rants. Odin,

the All-Father,  
sacrificed his eye  
to gain cosmic knowledge.

An eye for wisdom,  
limbs for inspiration,  
two bottomless wells.

One-eyed God,  
legless Viking,  
crip poet.



SCOTT WADE

### Buckeyes

A lesson for my daughters:  
find something odd in the woods  
and bring it to me. My oldest returns first,  
red curls flickering behind.  
Her little sister follows in a pink sundress.  
Buckeyes line the picnic table's faded wood.  
Beige pupils gaze in every direction.  
Unseeing battalions. Scooping them up,  
we hold a bucket of blindness.  
A buckeye in your pocket brings  
good luck, but a buckeye in your stomach  
will kill. A poisonous charm, some blind luck.

SCOTT WADE

### One of Nine

Dave's overfull bladder wakes him forty minutes before the alarm. He will lay here as long as he can, not wanting to leave the warmth of his bed. He utters a nearly silent prayer to the empty darkness of the room: "Thank you, Lord, for another day."

He gropes for his silver crucifix, finding the thin chain, then the familiar shape of the cross. Bringing it to his lips, he kisses it. Rolling to the side of the bed, he eases his legs down slowly, groaning slightly at the pain in his hips and knees. He looks around his small bedroom, squinting to see in the dim hallway light that he always leaves on. The act of sitting up has shifted the contents of his bladder. He needs to go even more now.

Lurching to the bathroom, Dave chants his daily acts of contrition under his breath: "Forgive me lord for I offended thee, that I did not know does not make the anguish end. I carry the weight of them as you carry me. Bless each one of them. Thank you for the strength to carry this burden, as is your will."

Dave knows that this is not the Church-approved Act of Contrition, but his sin is not one that can be absolved in the usual way. Nothing that the four priests who came and went in the past forty years said changed the fact that the nine still suffer.

He refrains from his prayers as he urinates an amount seemingly too small for how full his bladder feels. He waits, hoping for more. He

**"He utters a  
nearly silent  
prayer to the  
empty darkness  
of the room."**



waits, but nothing comes. It seems like his whole body is betraying him these days: shortness of breath, chronic pain, the need to piss every fifteen seconds. He continues his monotonous chants of contrition while he dresses, sliding his swim trunks on before his sweats. The doctor ordered that he spend an hour a day in the pool, for his joints and heart. Dave does his act of contrition nine times before he is content to start each day, not allowing himself to skip a single word of this ritual. This act has become second nature, like breathing, as familiar as the crucifix he has worn since his mother gave it to him at his confirmation, as familiar as the guilt he has carried in his gut and mind since that day he found out about the nine.

It was 1985. For over a year, the town had known something was wrong with the water. After residents began reporting a foul taste and discoloration, notices were put in the paper and posted at City Hall and other government buildings encouraging everyone to boil any water drawn from the city supply before drinking it. Dave did not associate it with his job at the factory until a month after the notices went up that the water had been contaminated with phenols. That is when Dave started thinking about the chemicals, and the pit. The pit was a deep hole located just behind the glass factory where Dave worked. The pit was capped over with a steel hatch, and twice a week, Dave, along with another worker, would empty the tanks, dumping barrels of runoff into the pit. The liquid poured into the tanks: a bright pink, foamy substance. But once it settled back into the barrels, it looked almost arterial blackish-purple. Dave once heard another coworker ask why the pit never filled, and the supervisor told him that the liquid evaporated quickly, and the pit was deep. *Were they stupid enough, even then, to believe that? How many barrels had been dumped into the pit over the years? Hundreds?*

Then the babies started coming, a cluster of them born with various deformities. Dave knew in his heart it was the water—it was those barrels. The day the lawyers and safety inspectors showed up marked the first time in decades that the factory had stopped production. They were the ones who told Dave about the nine. He'd been told to stop emptying barrels into the pit just weeks before, but the damage was done. Dave walked through the factory and out the door, not quite knowing where he was going. Nine, nine babies, and their poor mothers. He began to run, his eyes on the steeple of Saint Joseph. He needed to confess—he'd light a candle for each of them, and then confess. Traffic was slow in the middle of the day, which was good for Dave because he never once took his eyes off the steeple as he ran across nearly every street in town to reach the church.

The quiet of the place as he stepped through the door seemed to battle the noise in his mind. He dipped his fingers in the holy water basin instinctively, but as he began to make the sign of the cross, he stopped, realizing that this water, blessed or not, was filled from the city supply. The very basin was contaminated. What had he done?

Father Pat appeared, gliding towards Dave like an apparition.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to confess—I need to make an act of contrition. The babies, it was us, it was me. They said it evaporated, the water—I was doing what I was told. But the babies." Dave sputtered to a stop.

"I can take your confession, but let's sit and talk first." Father Pat gestured to the nearest pew. "What babies do you mean?"

"The babies born at the hospital here, the ones with deformities."

"Yes, I was there. The nurses told me what was going on. Nine babies born with various ailments. All likely to live, thank the Lord. Do you know something about this?"





“I need to confess, Father. I—I need an act of contrition.”

Within the dark of the confessional booth, Dave was able to compose himself enough to lay out the story of what had happened—all the barrels, the pit, his ignorance and blindness.

“I absolve you of your sins. But, Dave, I don’t think you’re seeing this the right way. You had no way of knowing. You were doing what you were told.”

“So were the SS, Father. How can I be absolved when these babies still suffer? The Lord can forgive. But this? I don’t see how.”

Father Pat kept speaking, but Dave did not hear. Through the slats in the confessional door, he caught sight of the stained-glass window. This one depicted the crucifixion with jewel-shaped bits of red to render the drops of Christ’s blood. In the dim light from outside, its red appeared more purple, as if Christ himself were bleeding the poison from the pit.

Dave never returned to the factory, not even to pick up his final check. A fellow member of his church gave him a job working at the horse track where Dave discovered a liking for leatherwork. It all started when he found an old saddle someone had left by the dumpster. Most of the leather was worn, the bits of metal tarnished. Dave stored the saddle in the barn where he usually worked, and any time he got a free moment he’d return to the saddle, mending it a little at a time. Once it was finished, it looked brand new. The leather gleamed with oils Dave had meticulously rubbed into it. The fastenings had been polished to a pristine shine. In the following weeks, Dave repaired another saddle and purchased his first set of leatherworking tools. It was within a year that Dave had spent his meager lifesavings to open his own shop.

In the forty years since Dave’s confession, he learned to carry his

guilt, came up with his own act of contrition, and stopped confessing this particular sin to his priests. He also poured himself into his work to the point of obsession. His guilt was personal, between himself, God, and the nine. Dave never saw any of them. He figured the parents may have moved, maybe to a place where the faucet didn’t poison babies in the womb.

At the pool, Dave lowers himself into the water slowly, trying not to make an unmanly sound as the cold overtakes him. He hates pools, but the doctor said at sixty-seven and with knees as bad as his, walking in the pool is his best option for living longer. Dave begins his slow plod as the man in the lane next to him is beginning his backstroke. He realizes the man next to him has an odd way of swimming, and then realizes that this man has no legs. Dave is amazed at how the man can swim without legs, and for so long without stopping. After every few laps, the man checks the sleek black watch he wears, tracking his progress. Dave thinks that the man is probably a veteran. He has the sudden urge to thank the man for his service. As Dave plods his way up and down the lane, he thinks of the best way to approach the man.

About fifteen minutes later, the man hauls himself out of the pool and crawls towards his wheelchair. Dave, halfway down the lane, wonders how this man with no legs is able to move better than him. He picks up his pace, not wanting to miss his chance, his heart beating in his throat. The man is still on the floor, leaning against the wall with his towel draped over his shoulders.

“How ya doing today?” Dave asks.

The man looks up, smiles. “I’m great, man. How are you?”

“I see you in here all the time, just wanted to thank you for sharing your lane. I’m Dave, my doctor told me I should walk in the pool for my knees. Never been much of a swimmer.” Dave stops



himself; why is he talking so much?

The man is still smiling. Dave takes in his overall appearance, long hair tied at the nape of his neck, an even longer beard hanging halfway down his chest.

"I'm Jake," the man replies, "Jake Dett, good to meet you, Dave. Have a good swim."

It's a dismissal. Dave knows it but still can't stop himself.

"Did you serve?" Dave asks, more abruptly than he planned.

Jake smiles, but Dave sees his eyes go blank, the smile becomes fixed.

"I was actually born this way, so I never had the honor of serving." It sounds like a line he says often.

The words *born this way* echo and clang inside Dave's head. He leans on the side of the pool.

"I'm sorry to ask, do they know what caused it?" As soon as this question is out, Dave wants to take it back, to un-speak it, he doesn't want to know.

"They do actually, the factory right down the road here polluted the town's drinking water back in the 80s. There were nine of us born with various disabilities because of it."

Dave feels like his insides have sunk to the bottom of the pool. One of the nine, right in front of him. Forty years of imagining those children and what their lives were like. *Now you see it, don't you? Here is one of the nine, the babies you poisoned while they were still in their mother's wombs. What suffering did they endure in these forty years? What excuse could you give?*

"We didn't know," Dave blurts. "They told us it was fine. We were doing our jobs—what we were told to do."

"You worked there?" Jake asks. "I never blamed the workers for what happened. I blame the city, state, and federal government for not

regulating it. Damn near everybody in this town has worked there. Our biggest employer."

"I poured the chemicals into that pit, over and over again. They told us it evaporated, that it was fine. They would have fired me and had someone else do it if I had refused. We didn't know—I didn't know."

Jake puts up his hand. Dave feels hollowed out, empty. He is rooted to his spot in the pool, as if awaiting sentencing.

"I don't blame you. I used to picture you guys when I was a kid, sneaking out in the dead of night to dump chemicals, dressed in black and masks like cartoon robbers. I know now there was nothing illegal about what happened back then. They told me I was the worst case, that I had the worst disabilities. I'm good now, no pain. At least it didn't scramble my brain too."

This was not what Dave had imagined. He thought this would be the end of things, like this man could absolve him, as if this man had any responsibility to.

Jake hoists himself into his chair and undoes the brakes.

"Take care, man," he says. "Have a good swim." Jake rolls away.

Dave stands there watching him go. He doesn't feel better. Why did he think he would?



*Ryukyuan Rejection of Imperialist Oppression*, Lani M. Fukada, Digital Photo Collage/Painting, 800 x 1200 pixels

LINDSAY OSBORN

### Campaign Season

Every residential street is infected with at least one or two:  
houses plastered with garish banners and tacky flags.  
Competing campaign signs sprout up from each yard,  
screaming silently from lawn to lawn.  
Why plant a politician in your garden, neighbor?  
Fertilizer is cheap and less offensive.  
And your hydrangea bushes and goofy lawn gnome  
evoke a far friendlier message to me than your oversized flagpole.  
You're free to advertise your poor decisions,  
but spring will not be upstaged by your primary signage.  
So, forgive me, neighbor—I couldn't help but laugh  
when I saw that last night's thunderstorm  
treaded on your lawn, tearing your flag to shreds.



LINDSAY OSBORN

### Midnight Elephant

I have a cluttered nightstand covered with a few  
messy necessities: a reading lamp that emits  
harsh, fluorescent light; a lava lamp containing  
pink globs of paraffin wax that float and bob  
in unnatural blue water; a box of Kleenex;  
and a vial of wholesale melatonin—  
all crowding my CPAP.

My CPAP is permanent décor, circa 2020.  
The bulky hardware insinuates itself  
closest to my bed, its corrugated hose jutting  
from the machine to the silicone mask I strap to my head—  
adorning my face with a powerful, plastic trunk.

The treatment for my wake-up gasps, and those dizzying  
days with a hazy brain and constant malaise.  
There's the occasional fight with a tangled hose,  
and I wake some mornings to a purple, mask-induced  
hickey below my nose: a violent kiss.  
I'm forever tethered to electricity, lightning storms  
threatening to pull the plug on me.

I once heaved awake with speckled spots in my vision  
from a downed line, forcing me into submission.  
Unmasked, exhausted, I laid my head on my pillow  
and prayed to remember how to breathe on my own.

MAXIMILIANO FLORES CRUZ

### Chair

You have left me for a better piece  
Many have sat on me  
Even tore me up  
Used me  
Yet your stay was only temporary  
I am on all fours  
While you are only on two  
I have to make sure  
I can endure  
Or else I am thrown away  
But sometimes  
When I've had enough  
I prefer  
To break my own legs and watch you fall  
So I can die peacefully  
As a chair





*Roebling Bridge Illustration*, Grace Harris, Digital Art,  
2048 x 2732 pixels

*Second Place for the 2025 Prize for Prose*

JAY LEE

**9 Things I Don't Want**

*1. My Brown Skin*

Other than my sisters, I didn't know anyone else who was a "person of color." That is how people would describe me. "You're Indian? Where is your red dot?" "Oh, I'm sorry," I'd respond back with—I felt bad for not having an answer. "Oh, so you're just a brown nigger," the racist white boy told me.

\*\*\*

Growing up, I never noticed the color of my skin—until others started making comments. I always felt like a white person trapped in a brown person's body. I grew up in a white suburban area, a golden retriever at every house, Christmas decorations up the week before Thanksgiving. I always felt like this was where I belonged.

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Tall. Blonde. Blue eyes. Pale-skin. I feel like I don't belong here. I don't look like I belong here. Surrounded by beautiful blondes, I'm beautiful too, I think. Not what they are looking for, I guess. I wonder when I will be chosen. Is beauty only for blonde girls?

\*\*\*

Bleach. Lightening creams. The only two things I have tried to get rid of the brown. I pour a little bleach on my thigh, just to test it out. It burns. But I need to get rid of the brown. That is the only way I will be pretty.



## 2. ADHD Brain

I wonder what it would be like to live in another person's brain. Does their brain *brain* the normal way? Does it understand math? I wonder how quickly or slowly a regular brain processes things. Sometimes I wish I could start my life over and refresh my brain or just go to sleep for three days and wake up with a new brain or just die. It's kind of crazy that one day I will die. Well, we all will die. I feel like my life is going by so slowly but also, I need time to catch up like the days are

**"I wonder what  
it would be like  
to live in another  
person's brain.  
Does their  
brain *brain* the  
normal way?"**

slow, but the years are fast. At the end of my life, on my gravestone, my entire life will be held together and defined by a dash that separates my birth from my death. No fancy accomplishments or awards (unless I were to suddenly become a celebrity or something, I don't know how it works), just a dash. It's scary. Is anyone else scared to die or scared of death or scared that they aren't good

enough to go to Heaven? Some people don't believe in an afterlife, I guess that's okay. But it's kind of a negative and sad way of looking at life. You die and there's just darkness? Okay. I like to think that there is more than just this life and that there is hope out there. It's weird. I believe in Heaven and God, but not aliens? Is that weird? I wonder where I will be ten years from now. Ten years ago, I was dreaming of being the age I am right now, and it's like I keep wishing and dreaming and wasting my life away. I am a happy person, trust me, I am. I like my life but maybe I will be happier once I'm older. When I'm thirty I'm sure my life will be great. If not thirty, then forty, things will turn

around. If not forty, then fifty, maybe I will have a midlife crisis and go on some crazy adventure. Maybe when I'm sixty-five I will be truly happy because I will be retired. Maybe at eighty when I have grandkids and can be a grand person—it's in the title. Okay, ninety-nine I will be super happy because that means there's only one more year until I'm one hundred and wow I've lived an entire century. Okay, I've decided. I will be completely truly, happy at one hundred. So, eighty more years? Ugh.





### 3. *Julianna*

My mom told me she found my name in a baby book. Nothing special. Julianna is a pretty name—if I were someone else. When I think of Julianna, I think of younger me. I had a teacher once call me “Princess Julianna” when I was taking a medieval literature class. It didn’t bother me, it was just embarrassing. Julianna is also just a very stuck-up, hoity-toity name that needs to be humbled. It never fit me. It’s one of those names that sounds like the person would be annoying. Maybe it is just me. Sometimes when I look at strangers, it’s fun to guess their names. Or to see if their names match up with how they look and their personality. Jay is a cool name, relaxed, laid-back. Julianna is weird.

\*\*\*

I once looked up if there was a meaning behind the name Julianna, and it means “youthful.” Huh? That is boring. Not that I even really cared, but I still was somewhat hoping for a cool meaning. It also is described as “elegant” and “graceful.” Blah, blah, blah. Definitely a princess definition.

\*\*\*

Not even my mom calls me that name anymore. It feels like a lifetime ago. It feels like a whole different person. It’s not that I hate the name. I just don’t like it. If someone calls me that name, it’s not a big deal. But I prefer Jay.

### 4. *Credit Card Debt*

I’m not bad with money. I’m self-aware enough to know that I am not the most responsible with my money, but I am not bad with money. I hate owing someone something. Money, gas, time, clothes, a meal, sex.

\*\*\*

I feel like I owe every nice guy. Why are you being so nice to me? You opened my car door, so does that mean it’s my turn to open my legs? Is this what I owe you? I will do it right now so we can get it out of the way. Ugh. Here we go.

\*\*\*

I don’t want it being held against me that you bought me dinner and a movie and all I gave you in return was a kiss on the cheek. Maybe some gas money would make us even. I don’t want the burden of you driving all this way to feel so heavy on me.

\*\*\*

I’m only \$300 in debt. I don’t even owe that much. But still, I need to get this paid off. Maybe I keep a little on the card to make me feel like I have a bit of power, the upper hand. No, that’s silly. This is money. It doesn’t care about my feelings. I don’t have to sleep with money to make it feel good about itself. I am not responsible for money’s ego. Money isn’t a little white boy who needs an ego boost.

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I don’t want to owe him anything. I don’t want to do anything with him. But I need to get out of this debt.



### 5. *Fear of Spiders*

"It's more scared of you than you are of it." Okay, so? I'm still scared of them. Spiders are ugly. Creepy. Weird. "It's smaller than you. Why are you so scared?" You know what else is smaller than you? A gun. Needles. Snakes. Does this help you with your fears?

\*\*\*

I wish I didn't let them have so much power over me. I see a spider in the bathroom and scream for my sister. I watch her flush it down the toilet, but I still ask if I can sleep with her tonight. "No, it's gone. Grow up, Jay." I don't mean to be a baby. I just think they are scary. At what age am I supposed to stop being scared?

\*\*\*

My mom is sixty-one, and she is not scared of anything. I wonder if when I turn sixty-one, I'll stop being scared of spiders. She doesn't like them. But she's not scared of them either.

\*\*\*

I wonder why spiders are so many people's biggest fear. Is it because they are ugly? I would look it up, but I'm scared an image of a spider will pop up. Even talking about them gives me chills. Spiders. Sssspiders. Typing that word makes my skin crawl.

\*\*\*

Ew. I can't keep talking about this. I'm itchy now.

### 6. *The Silent Treatment*

I hate silence. I hate when people aren't talking. I worry they are mad at me. I wonder if I did something to make them upset. I would rather have someone yell at me than not talk to me. I often find myself singing random tunes to fill the silent space. I just can't be comfortable in silence. I physically feel my heart get heavy as it beats faster and faster. I honestly do not know what to do with myself, and I can't be alone with silence either. Silence is so loud—people are saying so much by choosing not to talk. I wonder what is going on in someone's mind when they are not talking. Are they thinking the same things as me when it comes to silence?

\*\*\*

Silence in a classroom is also unbearable. No one is talking, eyes darting around the room, anywhere but at the teacher. Are we all admitting we didn't complete the reading? I don't know how teachers are okay sitting in silence. Do they not feel awkward or uncomfortable? How long are they going to wait before saying something?

\*\*\*

Silence on a train is peaceful. Looking out the window, appreciating the scenery, hearing the tracks underneath you. This silence is more comfortable and calming. Just the entire atmosphere is set in a different realm. Sitting on a train for days with a place to escape to and enjoy when night arrives. Night train rides are a different experience and make time slow down. But not in a dragging-it-out slow, more like I enjoy where I am, right now, right here. I've never been on a train.



### 7. *My Age*

When I turned ten, I couldn't wait to be thirteen. I would finally be a teenager, and people would see me as "more mature" and comment that I have "really grown into myself." I couldn't wait for middle school to be over, so I could start my real life. "Once I turn thirteen, my life will have officially started."

\*\*\*

The next three years rolled around so quickly I hadn't noticed that I even turned thirteen. I just remember thinking, I can't wait to be sixteen. I'll be able to drive and have real freedom and more responsibility which means that people will have to see me as an adult. When I turn sixteen, my life will turn around.

\*\*\*

I am sitting in the driver's seat of my mom's 2006 Honda Pilot. I love this car. It was the only car we had at the time, but I loved everything about it. It was still in good shape, could hold a family of eight, and had 257,000 miles of memories on it. I can't believe that I am now sitting in the driver's seat of a real car. I can drive myself to my job, pick up my sisters, and people will finally see how mature and responsible I am. My life is starting, for real this time. Although, I wonder what my life will look like once I turn eighteen. I'll be an actual adult.

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The big one-eight sneaks up on me and I can't wait to be taken more seriously. Everyone is asking me about my plans after high school, and I can finally be a teacher. I have real responsibilities, like my car payment. Mom is expecting more from me and my job keeps me busy. Everything is happening too fast. People are starting to take me too seriously. Everyone is telling me to "act like an adult" when they don't even know what that means. I wish people would be more laid back and back off for a minute. Like when I was ten.

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My only responsibility when I was ten was the dishes. I miss the dishes.

### 8. *My Current Relationship with My Mom*

I love my mom. I do. But I won't ever tell her that. That is just not something our family does. Love is a strong word, and you shouldn't just go around saying it. I love my mom, but if I told her that she would think I am suicidal. Just to clarify, I am not. Don't want anyone getting the wrong idea. Anyway. I love my mom. But I am also scared of my mom. I care way too much about what she thinks of me at twenty-two. I mean, I still ask my mom if I can go out drinking with my friends. She just responds with, "I don't care. Be safe." But if she told me no, I would not go. When I am drunk, I will ask strangers if their mom knows that they are drinking and if they are worried about what their mom will think. I get weird looks, and they awkwardly laugh and walk away. But really. What would your mom think of you drinking without telling her and letting her know where you are?

\*\*\*

I am more scared of my mother than I am of the cops. I would rather spend a night in jail than at home with my disappointed mom. When she first found out that I had sex in high school, she was pissed. Reasonably so. No mom really wants to hear that their sixteen-year-old daughter has been sleeping around, even if she claims it was with the "love of her life." Yeah. Like you're going to find the "love of your life" in your small town. My sister has though, twice.

\*\*\*

I don't know why I let my mom have so much power and control over me. When I was growing up she was the opposite of a helicopter mom. She was more like a dad, really. I remember I once fell off my bike and scraped my knee. She just told me to get up and get a band-aid. She always taught me and my sisters to be independent and think for ourselves. But if I think something different than her, she will be mad.



She says she is just upset, but I know she's mad. I wonder why she puts a lot of her disappointment on me, though. My sisters have talked back to my mom multiple times, and I think they love her, but they don't like her.

\*\*\*

I think she would have been a better boy mom. She wouldn't have to worry about feelings and all that "liberal crap."

### 9. *My Brown Skin*

Here we go again. Back where we started. I carry a lot of deep, internal racism in my heart and often feel the need to share my racist comments—"jokes"—with others just in case they are thinking it but don't want to make me feel bad by stating the obvious. My papa always told me that this was the way God made me. He never made me feel bad for being brown. I'm the one that makes myself feel worse about it.

\*\*\*

I remember reading once that even in India, they look down upon dark skin. They use lightening creams to erase and get rid of the dark dirt on themselves. It's ugly and no boy wants to marry a girl with a dirty face.

\*\*\*

In 2013, Nina Davuluri became the first Indian American to win Miss America. I was ten when she was crowned, and she gave me the confidence to compete in pageants. She was beautiful and looked like me. I didn't know Indian women could be beautiful. However, she received a lot of hate and shared the racist comments that people made after she won. "Miss 7-11" referring to a gas station. "Miss 9-11" like she was responsible for the horrific event, and they wrote, "Miss America should be American."

\*\*\*

She is someone that I look up to. She changed the face of Miss America forever. Just like Miss America 1984, Vanessa Williams was crowned the first Black American to win the title. God made both of them this way, and I like to believe He made me this way for a reason that I am still trying to figure out.



*Second Place for the 2025 Prize for Poetry*

ZOIE LIND

**Adrienne**

Three seconds ago, her newborn eyes emerged  
from my dark insides  
into the bright hospital light  
revealing to me her face for the first time.  
She sprang upright,  
wrestled free from my arms,  
crawled across the room to the window's edge,  
and hoisted herself onto her feeble feet,  
somehow strong enough to bear her seven pounds.  
And she's off! Wobbling, toddling  
past my bedroom door, down the stairs  
where she scours for Crayolas and heads  
for the dining room wall, scribbling  
a masterpiece—*her in pink pigtails, green dress*—  
until she decides she'd rather blow bubbles,  
draw hopscotch, and glide away on her Radio Flyer,  
straight into her childhood  
while I trail behind, struggling to keep up.

ZOIE LIND

**Post-Ziggy Apocalypse**

Come and meet me, Starman.  
You won't blow my mind any more than  
the semiautomatics that sneak past  
security, straight into film premieres,  
high schools, carnivals full of kids  
clutching cheap plush bears and funnel cakes.  
The pavement beneath them is littered  
with bullet shells where popcorn should be.  
Here, there's only brain bleeds and broken hearts—no stardust.

I take my protein pills morning, noon,  
and night with red-blue lightning  
streaked from forehead to cheek.  
Then, with my helmet strapped on tight,  
I take my post at the bed's edge,  
eyes closed, as I wait for your tin can  
to appear, beam me up, zip me past Mars,  
through the spiders, into that sparkling blip  
of sky we Earthlings still call Heaven.

Are you decked in white silks, tall boots?  
Is the band still together? Do you sing  
of the suffragettes and rebels?  
Hello? Major Tom? Do you copy?  
Earth melts as the sun beats.



Mushroom bombs blow us apart.  
Mr. Gravedigger is in over his head.  
Rich men sold the world for  
Viagra and orgasms in seaside villas.

Your Moonage Daydream has come true,  
but I'll stay at the bed's edge, hoping one day I'll see you.

ZOIE LIND

### **The Christmas Morning Axe Murder of My Thumb**

Gold, choppy flames flutter in the stove, but not  
without my blood and tears. My sweat is spared—  
there's none to give in frozen calf-deep snow.  
The kids dreamed a white Christmas,  
but, for me, this Christmas is red.

Family huddles the tree, waiting for me  
but first—I must tend the neighbor's dogs:  
Frank, a one-ton mound of mastiff,  
and Opal, shepherd of a home  
that bears no central heat—my job this week.

They're hip! Some rustic urban couple who  
coughs up hundreds for my time during trips,  
yet chooses cast-iron heat over common sense.  
Tinsels of plastic silver climb the tree  
for only Frank, Opal, and me to see.

I hand-feed the stove around the clock—  
for if I don't, we're sure to freeze—  
but all they've left me with is a wooden-handled hatchet  
propped against a heap of half-whacked cedar.  
Its rusty blade brims with tetanus.



I peel my gloves from freezing hands  
and find the perfect hunk to chuck upon  
the chopping stump. It stands up tall, like me.  
With infectious blade held high, I swing  
like an executioner dealing out fate.

Straight into the stump, I chop.  
Not wood. My thumb. The hatchet. Fuck—there's blood  
on Frank and Opal and the bathroom shelves  
full, not of band-aids, but of conspiracies  
to read during long, hard shits.

With dimming sight, I drift through space  
while my blood drips down Kennedy's face.

*Winner of the 2025 Prize for Visual Arts*



*Consumer Capitalism and the Mars Colony*, Lani M. Fukada, Digital  
Photo Collage/Painting, 3300 x 5100 pixels



ELIZABETH ROSS

### **On Purpose**

I'm waiting for some profound calling—  
could someone tell me who I'm meant to be?  
At times, it feels like I'm eyeballing  
each leaf-black footpath. Will one choose me?

So what if I snooze through my wake-up call? I know  
nothing—less than nothing—I can say  
for sure, as to a kid whose splintered toe  
she clutches, yelping, while her classmates play.

KAYDENCE SMITH

### **a dream of being weak**

i glare at the one who's wronged me—  
he barks at me as he's done before,  
spitting fire. why do i stay?  
i make a fist, knuckles aching at my side.  
i wind up and i strike—except i don't.  
every time, my fist stops just short  
of his face, an invisible field  
between us, keeping me from contact.  
he flashes a toothy grin, knowing  
he's beat me again. then,  
i wake up, my right cheek burning.



KAYDENCE SMITH

**girlhood**

now, i drive to the doctor alone, but  
i wouldn't dare to walk alone at night.  
now, i do my own laundry, but  
i have to hide my hips.

what is a woman, if not a girl who  
learned that her world is not technicolor?  
what is a woman, if not a girl who  
realized it's better to be blissfully unaware?



*Charlotte*, Mary Hannah, Photograph, 3872 x 2592 pixels



HALIE SCOTT

### Mr. Dunaway

I grew up in a little house. In a little neighborhood. Everyone knew everything about everyone else. What their favorite color was and when that color changed from violet to sage.

My family had a giant oak tree in our front yard. Even with all the storms we endured, that tree stood tall and strong. I had lived in that same house my entire life. I loved my parents—I truly did. But there was a shift in me when I entered my teens. A darkness had taken over.

My fascination began with animals. Nothing too big, at first. I started off with birds. I just wanted to see how their insides looked. How our bones differed from their tiny bodies. The way their muscles looked as they squished between my nails.

There was a fox that lived in the woods behind our neighborhood. He always walked through our yard like he owned the place. For some reason that made me furious. His tiny pawprints ruined my mother's garden. Especially those little pink flowers around the base of the oak tree.

His stained fur was much darker than his original orange coat as he lay in the small grave I dug for him.

My parents were oblivious. I couldn't blame them. They were good people. Still, deep within, I wanted to do something really wrong.

Not just to a fox or a bird.

To him.

Mr. Dunaway had a thing for young girls. He was always looking at them on our street. Not girls like my mother, girls like me.

In the summer he'd sit on his front porch with a glass of too-sour lemonade. He'd stare at us as we played in our My Little Pony tank tops and rainbow shorts. Dresses with Disney Princesses all over the fabric.

I was eight when he first invited me onto his porch to drink that too-sour lemonade. My mom snatched me up and told me I was never allowed to step foot near Mr. Dunaway again.

Since it wasn't me, it was Jenny, who lived across the street. Then Brenda who had flowers blooming in her mother's garden that my mother was jealous of.

Girls would walk up to the porch and drink that too-sour lemonade. He'd put his hand on their thigh. He'd compliment their outfits. Once the lemonade was gone, he'd ask if they wanted freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies. Even then, I knew there were no cookies behind that door.

As I got older, so did Mr. Dunaway, but his taste never changed. Becca, Jenny's little sister, was next.

Everyone knew. No one did anything. Mr. Dunaway was the police chief of our small town. He had every officer in his pocket. Every report that was sent in about him was shredded. Turned to mush, just like the lives of the girls he touched. Someone had to stop him. I started to plan.

There was a lake, just a few miles outside of the neighborhood. Far enough away that no one would hear.

It was dark, still early. A light was on in Mr. Dunaway's house.

I took a small hunting knife that had been my grandfather's. It hadn't been used in years. I climbed the creaky porch stairs. My hands trembled as I knocked.

"Hello, Mr. Dunaway."



"Well, hello there, Mandy. Always nice to see a pretty face."

"I was wondering if you wanted to—" I could feel a burning in my throat.

"Yes, Mandy?" He smiled.

"Would you like to walk to the lake, just me and you?" My stomach turned.

"I don't know."

"It's private. We could sit and talk. It might be fun."

"That wouldn't be appropriate. Someone might see."

"It's early, Mr. Dunaway. The lake is always empty this time of year. It's not fishing season yet."

"I'm not sure."

"Can I tell you something?" I leaned in closer.

"Yes." He looked at my body. It made me sick.

"I've always had a little crush on you. I know it's not okay. I just can't help myself."

He reluctantly agreed. I knew that this was my one chance. As we walked, I thought of that too-sour lemonade. I hated the way I let him hold my hand. I hated the way the morning air felt on my skin. My whole body shook.

I had to let him get close. I smelled coffee on his breath. I knew thirteen was too old for him. So I played the part. I'd put my hair in two braids, making sure to clip in matching bows. I'd squeezed into clothes I still had from fifth grade—I was just starting to outgrow them.

I thought I'd be able to do it. I thought I'd be strong enough. I wasn't. I hated myself for that.

He held me down.

I couldn't fight back.

He took everything from me.

A rage came over me. When he was on top of me, I slid my grandfather's knife out of the back pocket of my jeans. I jabbed the blade into him. Over and over. I didn't stop until my hands were sore.

His muscles did not look like a bird's. Or that stupid fox's. They did not squish beneath my fingers. It was a mess. All of it.

**"A mist had  
settled over  
the water,  
covering all  
its secrets."**

After, I wanted to be washed clean. I looked at the lake. A mist had settled over the water, covering all its secrets. It was still early, still cold. I sat in the damp grass, my knees to my chest.

I flinched when a small fish thrashed at the lake's surface. I could feel eyes on me. Everywhere. They knew. I knew. Yet I couldn't go back. I crawled forward on my knees, allowing my stained jeans to sink into the soft dirt that seemed to wrap its claws around me and drag me down. I dipped my hands into the icy water, washing off his filth, my nails scraping at my skin.

His body would be washed clean too. He would become new.





SAMANTHA MANLOVE

### Crystal Jeans

The last time I saw jewel-studded jeans, I cringed.  
A mom at the grocery store, swaying her hips,  
was reliving, I guess, years she'd never get back,  
or years she never had.

I paid for my first pair with Christmas money.  
Middle-school me was proud to buy  
what my parents had refused,  
smirking at the people shaking their heads  
over the unreasonable price tag.

I wore them to school the first day back.  
It hurt to sit. The plastic gems  
dug into my behind,  
but it was worth being noticed.

All my friends wanted a turn,  
so we passed the jeans between us like a joint,  
everyone getting a drag.  
Chelsea even peed in them a little  
from laughing too much.  
I didn't blame her.

Like the mom at the grocery store,  
the crystal jeans gave me courage.  
They were mine.

KIM KILE

### Knot

When my mother braids my hair,  
I lean into the pressure of her fingers,  
the brushing and scraping  
on my scalp, as she divides  
my hair into three segments,  
the nail of her index finger  
separating strands.

She pulls and twists the sections tight,  
moving from side, to middle, to side  
and back again, repeating the process down  
the length of the triad, then she says,  
"My mother never let me leave the house  
without a braid."

She twines the segments into one  
as her mother did for her, weaving her  
firm touch through my wavy, brown hair  
until she reaches the end, then ties it off.





KIM KILE

### Body Art

I have no need for tattoos—  
my body tells my story,  
our shared history etched upon my skin.

The stretch marks along my now-softened  
belly that grew stronger and bolder  
with each baby I carried  
share space on my dermis with the deep,  
circular chicken pox scars  
dotting my cheek and jawbone.  
A thin white line on my left pinkie  
where it meets my hand  
reminds me of my sister's teenage  
anger and the strength of a slammed door.  
And up my right shin bone, a perfect  
line the width of a blade retells  
the story of four-year-old me with my  
mother's BIC Lady Razor during a bath.  
Each shoulder bears incision marks,  
souvenirs of surgeries to repair the damage  
created by carrying babies, computer bags,  
and armfuls of groceries in too few trips.

My body and I have fashioned an  
imperfect masterpiece of scar tissue  
in the life that we've lived together.

SARAH CONNER

### Holy Matrimony

Fern sat on the deep green velvet couch she and Henry had picked out together and stared into space. She could hear the fridge humming in the kitchen and faint birdsong from outside. She's been sitting, unmoving in the quiet since coming home from work almost an hour ago. The sun shining through the living room window glinted on Henry's prized diamond when she moved her finger back and forth. He'd bought it for her after getting promoted to foreman. She could smell the rotting onion from here.

He was due home at any moment. She was spending her time waiting by vacillating between feeling batshit crazy and absolutely vindicated in her anger. Maybe both things were true. For nearly a month, the onion had sat in the middle of the kitchen floor. She sat up straighter when she heard the truck in the drive and adorned herself in her perfectly justifiable anger.

Henry opened the door and walked through the front hall without seeing her there. He paused in the middle of the hallway to take his work boots and socks off. His path continued to the kitchen, and she heard the clatter as he sat his work bag on the counter. The footsteps came back towards the living room and didn't pause. Not even once. He walked right past the onion. Again.

"Hey, hon. Why are you sitting around with all the lights off?"

"Have you not seen the onion in the kitchen?"

Henry raised a brow. "What?"

"The onion. In the kitchen. It's been sitting there for three weeks, and you've just been walking around it."



“What are you talking about?”

“I wanted to see how long it would sit there if I wasn’t the one to pick it up and throw it away, I can’t stand it anymore. Our entire house smells like rotting garbage, Henry. Have you seriously not noticed?” Fern continued sitting with a face of stone, her temper tingled up her chest and neck, and her voice was getting higher pitched. *Shrill*. She asked in a tone that would have been appropriate in a courtroom, “Do you know Makayla’s husband doesn’t change the baby’s diapers?”

Henry blinked. “What the hell does that have to do with the onion?”

Fern began counting off. “Ryan doesn’t change diapers, Hailey was washing Daniel’s clothes *two days* after Iris was born, and Delia says Ben doesn’t even know how to run their dishwasher because he’s never had to use it before.”

Henry’s jaw hardened. “So, you’re saying you’ve—what—had a meeting with your friends to talk about how shitty your boyfriends and husbands are, and now I’m getting yelled at about an onion?”

“It isn’t about the onion.” Fern brought her hands up to her head and ran her fingers through her hair. “I just don’t want to be the one who always cleans up the rotting onion, and changes all the diapers, and makes sure my husband has clean clothes, and does everything around the house just because I’m the wife.” She stood up, threw her hands out, and barely resisted stomping a foot like a child throwing a tantrum. “I don’t want to be the default maid or caregiver or parent.”

“I’ve been working all this overtime! I’ve been away for sixteen hours a day—”

“And that makes you too tired to pick up a rotting vegetable

that’s been on the floor for three weeks?” Fern gestured to the kitchen. “It takes less than thirty seconds.”

“I buy you flowers. I got you the couch you want. I make sure your car runs. I bought you those shoes—”

“I don’t want you to buy me stuff! I just want you to pick up the damn onion sometimes.” Fern walked a step away and turned back. “How much worse will it be when we have kids? We don’t even have kids yet and I feel like I’m drowning.”

“Doesn’t seem like we’re going to have them anytime soon, does it? With how little you put out. Jesus, I’d have more action living with a bunch of nuns. It’s like you don’t even want kids.”

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Fern had thought the whole sex thing would be a more complicated operation, but she didn’t even have to think about it the first time. Henry did all the convincing, and it was easy to give in. Fern hadn’t seen what all the fuss was about, really. It was messy and inconvenient and, while not unpleasant, it was definitely not “mind-blowing” or an “expression of feminine power” like Chrissy had furiously told her in the girls’ bathroom senior year. The mess and indignity of it all hadn’t been worth the two minutes.

Fern had been shocked that Chrissy would admit to having sex already and had been a little disappointed and worried for her. They had just left an assembly that had been held in the auditorium about the importance of remaining pure for your future husband, given by a loud, sweaty man from the local Baptist church. All the girls (and boys) knew now that girls were a stick of chewing gum. The moment they had sex, they would just be a used wad of chewing gum, and what boy would want something like that?

“Raise your hand if you’d take a chewed stick of gum home to



meet your mama!” Not one boy raised their hand.

Fern had sat in the dark, humid auditorium on the cracked plastic seat and imagined a faceless future husband who would take her and stick her on the bedpost at night, to be chewed up again later. She was somehow ashamed of herself, even though she had never so much as kissed a boy. Chrissy had sat next to her, enraged.

“That guy’s a dick. I can’t believe a public school would invite some guy in here to talk to us like this. Someone should stand up and say something.”

But the two of them had sat in silence like everyone else.

Henry had pressed, and Fern was tired and had felt like a prude as an eighteen-year-old virgin, so she’d given in. She had felt cheated. This was her purpose in life, and it didn’t even feel good. Maybe it only felt good if you waited ‘til marriage. Nevertheless, it was done, and Henry’d sworn after that she was the hottest thing in the world and that he loved her.

Later they’d hung out with a group of Henry’s buddies. “She just laid there like a dead fish.” He’d turned to Fern and thrown a heavy arm around her neck. “Don’t worry, babe, we’ll just have to practice ‘til you get better at it.”

The group erupted in guffaws and digging elbows, and she’d never felt so humiliated. She’d smiled like a good girlfriend but pictured in her head the disgust from her faceless future husband as he chewed on fish-flavored gum that had been in Henry Hanes’ mouth.

They’d used a condom, but until her next period, she’d been overcome by paranoia and hidden in public bathrooms, peeing on pregnancy test sticks she’d bought the next town over, holding her breath and praying for a negative while expecting her mother to burst into the stall like an avenging angel at any moment. *Thank God* her

mother hadn’t found out. She would have dragged Fern in front of Pastor Dave for counseling, and Fern would have been married to Henry that week. In her mother’s eyes, Fern would have been soiled for eternity. She would have never lived the shame down. Mindy Gaines got pregnant earlier that year. She hadn’t told anyone, but everyone knew because Todd, Mindy’s boyfriend, had a big mouth and a tendency to brag. Mindy had worn increasingly bigger shirts until one day she just disappeared. Fern’s mother had said her parents sent her away to live with an aunt because they couldn’t bear the shame and scrutiny from their good churchgoing friends who didn’t raise daughters who got pregnant out of wedlock. Todd got a scholarship to BYU and had a bright future ahead of him. No one wanted to ruin his future for a mistake like the one he made with Mindy. Fern didn’t think her mother would have even let her stay around long enough to go up a single shirt size.

Henry had proposed when they were nineteen, after their high school graduation. A large part of her felt like if they got married, it would nullify the premarital sex, and it would be a relief to not have it hanging over her head. If she had said no, she suspected Henry would have told everyone they’d had sex and that she wasn’t even good at it. The shame and humiliation of her mother and grandparents finding out she’d committed one of the biggest sins, paired with everyone in town finding out she was a dead fish, was horrifying to think about. Lots of relationships have ups and downs.

“Relationships take a lot of work,” her mother, grandparents, and youth pastor had told her. “Marriage takes sacrifice. It’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do.”

Their family and friends had been so excited. It was sweet—the high school sweethearts getting married. Chrissy had already left for



college on the West Coast. “California,” Fern’s family whispered, as if Chrissy had gone off and joined a Manson-esque commune. Fern missed her but had been relieved that Chrissy wasn’t around to witness the wedding. She had hated Henry, and Fern would have hated to disappoint her.

Chrissy had begged Fern to go with her.

“You don’t even have to sign up for school right away if you don’t want to. My parents are covering the apartment, you could just move in and find a job until you decide.”

“Chrissy, I’ll never be able to live so far away from my family. My mother needs me and I’m all she has. My grades aren’t good enough for scholarships, and there is absolutely no way Mother would pay or even co-sign loans for an art degree.”

Chrissy had eventually dropped it, and the two had sobbed as they hugged goodbye a few weeks later.

Fern and Henry’d had a church wedding (not at the Baptist church, Henry’s family was Nazarene). Her mother had been so proud of her “good girl.” Opal County had the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the state, and Fern had made it to twenty and married, with no “little bastards” hanging onto the train of her veil. Her Mother had been smug, proud of herself for raising a good, Christian girl. Fern’s marriage was the finish line for her mother, and she had made it with no pregnancies, drug scares, or tattoos.

Her mother had fussed with Fern’s dress and hair in the preacher’s office that had been designated the dressing room.

“I’m so proud of you, baby. You look so beautiful for Henry.” Her eyes were filled to the brim with tears, and she kept looking to the ceiling to prevent them from falling and smearing her mascara.

Fern couldn’t help but think of the times she had been called

vain by her mother when she’d been caught trying on lipstick or twirling in her prom dress. Evidently, it was acceptable to be pretty only if it were for your husband.

“Thank you, Momma.”

At their reception in the church’s faux wood-paneled, fluorescent-lit basement, Fern’s aunts had laid out bowls of Red Hots, butter mints, and peanuts. Everyone had drank punch made out of 7-up and sherbet because they were in *church*, and their mothers and grandmothers believed alcohol was *sinful and disgusting*. The only music they’d had was the speaker playing Garth Brooks’ rendition of “Make You Feel My Love” as Fern walked down the aisle. It was Henry’s favorite, and he’d always dreamed of his wife walking down the aisle to it.

Fern had dreamed of deep green, velvet bridesmaid’s dresses, flowing champagne, and dancing the night away beneath the archways of a museum’s ballroom with a man who thought she was the most precious soul in the world.

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She really liked Ben and Winnie Hanes. Her own grandparents were just as rigid and judgmental as her mother, but Henry’s grandparents, Ben and Winnie, were that sweet grandparent type that believed in Jesus’ love and forgiveness and in spoiling their grandkids rotten. Still, dinner at their house that evening was uncomfortable. Henry had been giving her the silent treatment since their fight, saying that Fern should work full-time and handle all chores around the house because “it’s a wife’s job” and “her job wasn’t as physically or mentally hard” as his. He had told her mom on the phone earlier that she was being unreasonable because he “didn’t see an onion she’d hidden in the kitchen, and she’d used that as an excuse to go off like a harpy.” Her



mother had taken his side, as she was prone to do.

“You’re darn lucky to have such a hardworking man that takes such good care of you,” she said. “Henry works long, hard hours to give you the house you live in and the food you eat. Least you can do is keep that house nice and clean and comfortable for him to come home to.”

“I work too, Momma—”

“You have a nice, ladylike hobby that you’re lucky enough to get paid for. You know if Pastor Dave finds out you’re using that job as an excuse to be a subpar wife to poor Henry, he’s liable to find some other young lady to watch those kids. I would have never treated your daddy this way. God rest his soul. You ought to appreciate what you have while you have it,” she sniffed into the phone.

Fern was young when her father died, but she remembers him berating her mother’s cooking and her house cleaning and wonders if her mother secretly feels relieved that he’s dead and is just putting on a show of “mourning his loss.” She wonders if her mother chose the life of a widow after being married for so long.

The phone call from her mother berating her for disrespecting her husband during the onion fight hadn’t improved her mood. The longer Henry was angry with her, the angrier she felt with him. At dinner he pulled his usual tricks. Being so sweet to her and acting as if he hadn’t been slamming drawers and doors all week at home. If she didn’t respond to him just as sweetly, she’d look like the crazy, unreasonable one in front of Ben and Winnie. Ben and Winnie had the kind of marriage that people smiled about, and Fern didn’t want to contaminate their peaceful house with her and Henry’s tension and resentment. So, she gritted her teeth and smiled back at Henry and said “please” and “thank you.”

She could barely choke down Winnie’s buttery mashed potatoes, she was so mad. When Ben offered to show her his latest carving after dinner, she jumped at the chance to get away. The workshop smelled like cedar shavings, pipe tobacco, and the peppermints Ben kept in his front shirt pocket. It was lit with metal overhead lights and everything had a place. Fern and Ben sat on old stools, and she tucked her feet into the bar at the base of the stool.

“Hand me that curved blade, sweetheart.”

She reached over the chipped, faded tool bench, and passed the knife to Ben’s big-knuckled hand. He adjusted his thick plastic glasses and bent over the piece of wood trapped in the clamp, bald head glinting in the workshop light. The original block was starting to take the delicate shape of a bird in flight. Ben sliced away at it as if he were carving through butter. It made Fern wish she had some kind of hobby. Ben’s workshop and carving seemed like an extension of him. Perhaps if she could replicate it, she would feel like more of a whole person.

“How long have you been doing this, Ben?”

“Just about fifteen minutes now.”

Fern laughed. “No. Wood carving in general.” She picked up a tiny, intricate wooden gnome and toyed with it, head tilted. “How did you learn to do this?”

“No one taught me. I picked up a whittling knife about thirty years and twenty-three stitches ago.”

“Ouch. So, this is pretty hard to do?” Fern gestured to the bird with the gnome she was holding.

“Nah. This is easy. But took me about thirty years to learn how to do it easy.”

He winked and bent back over the piece in concentration. Fern thought about Pastor Dave’s sermon yesterday on Godly marriage and



submitting to the will of God. She thought about marriage being hard work. She didn't think anything was worth taking thirty years to learn how to do easily.

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Henry never hit her. He may slam a door or two and break a plate or change the passwords on their bank account when Fern makes him angry, but he would never hit her. She didn't really have a good enough reason to leave. She loved her mother and Ben and Winnie. Leaving would mean breaking off all her relationships because Ben and Winnie

**"She was  
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belonged to Henry, and Fern's mother would choose to take care of Henry. She'd never be able to talk to her mother again without hearing about Henry and how Fern's decision to leave negatively affected everyone. She thought of Winnie crying, and Ben shaking his head at her disgrace, and she felt a visceral recoil.

Most of all, Henry knew too much about her. The thought of him telling her mother or anyone else about what she'd done in their marriage bed, or that they'd had sex as teenagers, sent waves of hot shame through her body. She'd never be able to show her face in town again. People loved Henry. He may

be worse than useless at home, actively making messes, breaking things, and leaving everything for Fern to clean up, but he was always willing to help their neighbors and families. He had a handsome smile and told everyone how much he loved her. She was a lucky woman to have such a loving husband, everyone told her. Not every woman is so lucky.

Maybe that was why Fern loved movies about women leaving their abusers. It was one of her dark secrets. Not that she'd ever wish to be physically abused. Not really. She just loved to fantasize about what it would be like to cut and dye her hair in a gas station bathroom. To disguise her appearance and save her life. She'd grab her "go bag" full of stashed cash and a burner phone and take a train or bus to some little town out west where quirky, kind, small-town people would take her in. She'd work as a waitress and start a new life in a tiny, sweet, well-kept apartment. Maybe she would find love with a stern, but kind, man who had a strong jaw and a slight drawl. She'd get a cat. She would have to cut off all contact with everyone back home—it wouldn't be safe to have ties. It would be a completely fresh start. No one would blame a woman escaping abuse. She'd seen this particular movie before, and the wife ends up killing the husband at the end.

Her mother scoffed her pale pink lips and reached a leathered arm up to flip from the movie they had been watching to the news, plastic bead bracelets clacking. She didn't share Fern's love of fresh starts for desperate women, that's for sure. She had found her own escape from servitude in Fern's father's death and had spent every minute since loudly judging women who didn't appreciate what they had in their marriage.

The current news segment showed a clip of a popular young politician, wearing bright lipstick and a satin blouse that Fern would never be able to pull off. The woman spoke eloquently and passionately, about current maternal leave policies and the need for change to benefit working mothers. She undoubtedly went to college somewhere with ivy-covered brick buildings and glass windows. On the weekends, she probably discussed current events with her girlfriends over glasses of chardonnay. Fern had never tried chardonnay, but it looked and





sounded elegant on TV and in movies. She watched the woman debate a man with a bad toupee and red face and couldn't imagine the bravery it would take to stand up and shout down injustices.

"Disgusting." Her mother took a drink of her diet coke and laid it back onto its frilled coaster. "She's *disgusting*. Probably one of those *lesbians*,"—*lesbians* was whispered because it was a dirty word—"Don't matter one way or another, though. There's no man who wants a woman like that." She gestured to the television and looked to Fern for agreement.

"There's no way." Fern agreed and felt her stomach lurch. She quickly looked back at the television to avoid eye contact with her mother.

Fern had never met a lesbian but if the woman were a lesbian, it would explain why she was so vibrant and full of fight. Fern would bet that no one is at home, waiting to criticize this woman for embarrassing her family or asking her why dinner is late. Fern often thought it must be nice, having a wife instead of a husband. Sometimes Fern wanted a wife too. Henry's life seemed so much simpler and more restful than hers, and it was because he had a wife. But Fern had a husband.

"I tell you what. If women don't want to miss work to have babies, they ought to keep their legs shut. Henry isn't going to expect you back at work after you have your first, and rightly so." She nodded her head like she was agreeing with herself. "The two of you are doing things right." She patted Fern's leg and smiled at her for the first time that evening. "You two are going to make beautiful children, and I know you'll raise them right. It'll happen anytime now. Just give it to God. You're going to make a good Momma."

She meant it as a reassurance, Fern knew, but it rang as a threat in Fern's head.

"Thanks, Momma."

She thought about the birth control she had hidden in a box of tampons at the back of her bathroom cabinet and silently accepted the bowl of popcorn her mother offered.

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She placed Henry's plate in front of him and circled the table to sit across from him. She'd finally grown tired of the funk he'd been in and made French onion soup for dinner. His favorite. She liked it ok, except tonight the smell of the onions caramelizing made her think of the rotten onion. She always gave in to the tension first and placated him to keep the peace. Fern had a flashback to that politician on the news who had probably never placated someone just to have a quiet house and possessions that weren't in danger of being broken.

She repressed a wince and curl of a lip as Henry loudly slurped his soup and chugged down a half can of coke. Drops of broth scattered across the table and went ignored. Fern will get them later.

"I've been thinking about what you said when you were yelling at me about that onion you left on the floor. About not having kids yet." He took a huge bite of soup-soaked bread and kept talking around it. "I talked to your mom yesterday, and she said Makayla's mom told her Makayla and Ryan got a prescription for a pill that got her knocked-up in like, two months. Her lady doctor prescribed it no problem. Your mom said their insurance even covered it. We've been having sex for like, two years with no rubbers, and you ain't been pregnant once. So, she said my insurance should cover it too."

Fern's stomach heaved.

"Anyway, I called Dr. Upton and made an appointment for next Thursday to talk about it. 'Course, we'd actually have to have sex for it to work, it's not a miracle drug." He laughed with his head





thrown back, mouth full of half-chewed onions.

Fern thought about her birth control and felt her heart rate pick up speed. Could she call Dr. Upton's office and ask them not to mention her prescription to Henry? Would the fertility prescription counteract the birth control? Would Henry use the fertility meds as an excuse to make her have sex every single night?

She thought about him sweating and grunting on top of her, and the conversations he'd have with his friends and family about the "joys of making a baby," and then about the extra work a baby would bring. She felt bile rise in her throat. She'd be trapped here if they had a baby. Probably forever. At least for eighteen years, and that's if he stopped at one baby. She'd be expected to quit work and stay home and just be trapped here all the time.

Henry's smile fell and his eyes went icy. "Don't look so fuckin' excited about our future children, babe."

"Don't be mean, Henry. I'm excited. I am. It's just a lot to think about. That medication can do terrible things to a woman's body. What if it causes twins or triplets? I don't know if I—"

Henry froze. Eyes open in shock.

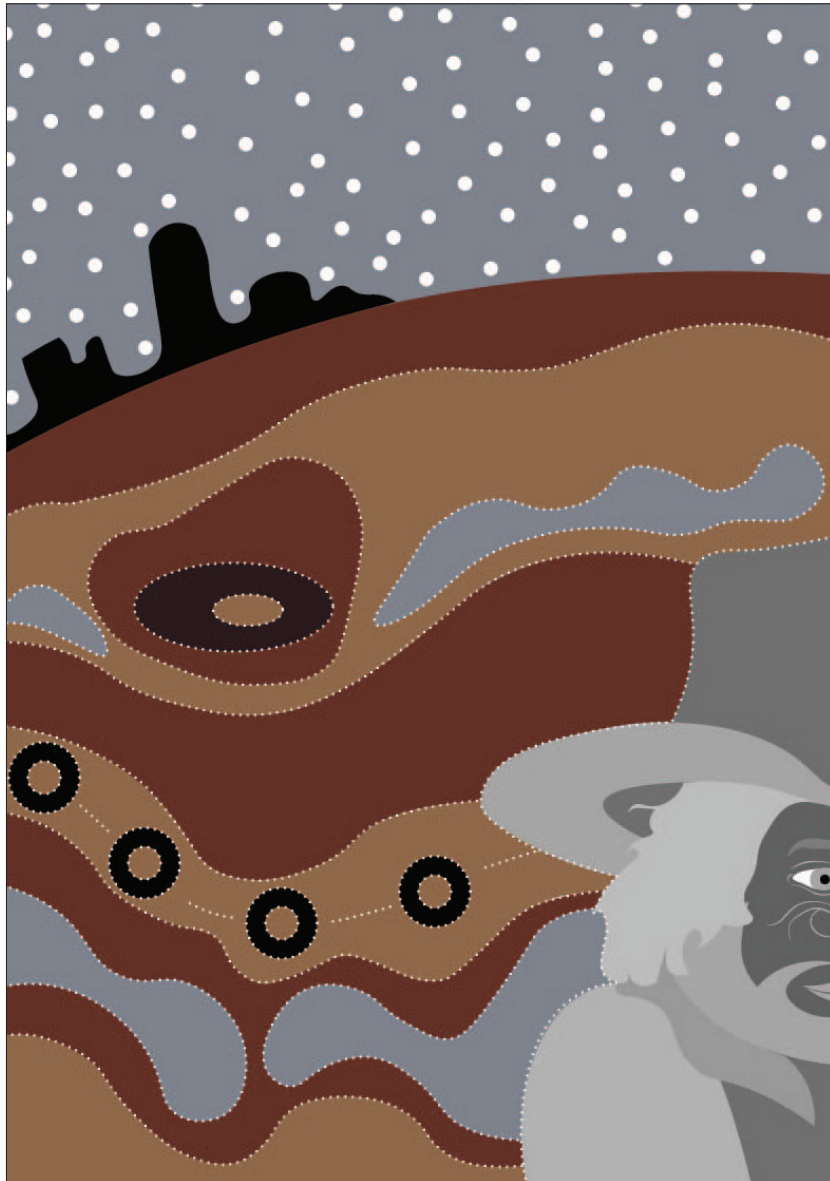
Fern tried to backtrack. "It's just—I'm just worried."

Henry's face turned a purple-red, and his eyes bulged. He pushed back from the table suddenly. He'd never hit Fern, but the movement was so sudden, and his face was so angry. She flinched and stood, nearly knocking her chair over, and put her hands up in front of her to block any blows he might throw.

He didn't move forward. His mouth opened and a strange squeaking noise exited. Fern's eyebrows came together, and she took a step towards him. His hands came up to his throat, and he stared straight ahead at her.

He was *choking*.

Fern lifted her hands towards him then whirled around and clutched her phone. She started dialing 911 and—looked at Henry. He was turning a grayish purple now. And falling to his knees. No noise came from his mouth, but he was still staring at her, hands at his throat. Fern looked at the phone and back at Henry. She stood and waited.



*Rusty Peters Two*, Zoe Brock, Digital Art, 800 x 1200 pixels

CAYLAH GARDNER

### **Pastoral**

I hear hushed voices in the trees,  
echoes in a greenish breeze.  
I wonder if the ones who cut and cut  
ignore those rustling cries—  
or maybe they can't hear the cries at all.  
Land once lush  
is bare, the humming mute.  
Now, a building stands—  
a bright red ribbon hangs in front.  
Men grin and cheer.  
I dream  
a meadow undisturbed and free  
where voices would no longer cry but sing.



*Winner of the 2025 Prize for Poetry*

KATE CRUM

### Grievances

Some bullshit I'll admit I haven't missed:  
our slamming door on seething summer nights,  
sadistic jabs screamed out in driveway fights,  
the way I always caved, then got so pissed—  
rough craters in our walls from boots and fists,  
those times you screwed around, then got contrite,  
the lies I told myself to stay upright.  
For years, it seemed we'd always live like this.

But now that it's all over, I'll be damned  
if I don't sometimes miss the way we'd quote  
*The Big Lebowski*, laugh at inside jokes,  
the trips we used to take in that old van....  
We were alive then, if barely afloat—  
so young and full of all that stupid hope.

KATE CRUM

### Aging Gen Xer Shakes Fist at Sky

I want to be offline again. I'm tired  
of all these terabytes at my command,  
the steady stream of beeps and pings—demands  
I can't ignore that leave me feeling wired.

But wired is exactly what I'm not.  
Untangled from the cords that set me free,  
in thrall to every omnipresent screen,  
the past exerts a pull that can't be fought.

Those days, we were connected to the world  
with TV eyes that we could still unplug—  
the nascent internet not yet a drug,  
its latent power crouching, tightly furled.

We burned the Polaroids, destroyed the tape.  
The buzzing phone left off the hook, we thrived—  
anonymous, unreachable, alive,  
waiting for the future to take shape.



Winner of the 2025 Prize for Prose

MAURICE SAYLES

### Otis Bud Radcliffe

Why do I keep showing up on this day? I hate this time of year. The anniversary of Charlie's passing. Days are colder and shorter. The leaves sway when the wind blows as if waving, giving a false sense of welcomeness. Only to fall from a sudden gust that rustles through the branches, sending a cascade of amber and crimson leaves spiraling, returning to the earth from which they came. The sun reflects at a weird angle, affecting the quality of light.

Charlie hated the dark. Said it forced him to lay with demons that comforted him. I'll never get that. How do demons comfort? Sounds scary as fuck to me. I would have left the TV on, plugged in a night light, something, anything. He could have called me. I would have answered.

Shit, don't start crying now. Suck that shit up. "Niggas die every day, B." You got to have something in this world to keep from staying stagnant.

I'm big on quotes so, yeah, I stole my quote. *Paid in Full* is a great movie. Rico was a fool. Straight nut! But that was the realest shit I ever heard because niggas do die every day.

Death is funny. I came to work at the barber shop this time last year, too. Right after Charlie passed as well. Should've taken the day off. But I did go to that poetry reading he liked to go to. I even thought about reading a poem for him. I didn't get that far. Couldn't bring myself to walk on that stage in front of everyone.

He used to tell me that poetry was the language of a hurt soul. I never understood until now.

I did envy him though—after Charlie became Charlene. Well, maybe I didn't envy, but I was envious of him, her—you. You had balls for a girl. Living your life in the light for all to see. Highlighting muted tones of fear. Yeah, big balls.

Reminds me of the time when you beat Deondre's ass at Watkins Park. He just kept fucking with you. I told him he better chill out. Motherfuckers thought you was soft because you wasn't with all the ra-ra bullshit like them other niggas. That motherfucker found out that day! Dragged that motherfucker so bad, he ran home crying like a bitch. But then came back with his two older brothers, Terrance and Adrien, and their friend Jamaal was with them. You weren't scared though. I was scared as fuck! Seeing four niggas pull up on alloy spoke mongooses with the pegs at thirteen was like seeing four niggas pull up today in old schools on twenty-fours with them thangs ready. Hell, I wasn't ready. We got our asses beat! But it's cool.

A couple days later, we got they ass. Caught 'em slipping on the way to school. All four of they goofy asses, walking, like shit normal. Like we wasn't going to get our lick back. Fuck that!

I figured we go grab our friends, come back and whoop they ass. You said, "Hell naw. Wait here."

I didn't know what the fuck you was going to do. All I kept thinking was how we got our asses beat just a couple of days ago and I didn't want to relive that shit.

But while I'm ducked down behind the bushes, I see yo crazy ass come out of nowhere with a brick in your hand, smacking niggas. I can still hear the sound of the brick crushing against the back of Terrance's skull. You didn't need my help, but I couldn't move even if I wanted to. I was shocked. I mean I knew we both was a little fucked up, but nigga, you was nuts!

After you smacked Terrance, you just went on down the line



like whack-a-mole. First, you knocked out Terrance. Second, you broke Jamaal's jaw with the brick. Without hesitation, you looked up, saw Adrien's wide eyes, and threw the brick right at his face, breaking his nose. That motherfucker Deondre took off running, again, like a bitch! I don't blame him though. After seeing that, I'd be scared of you too, if I wasn't on your side.

I can still see that brick. The thing is you wouldn't even know unless you were there that that brick was used for that purpose. The blood blended in perfectly with the brick's red once the blood dried. When you were done with it, you simply threw it back in the alley and asked, like nothing happened, if I was ready to go.

But I knew she was coming. Death that is. I knew death was a beautiful lady, because of her mystique and allure. Her beauty can be seen in the calmness she offers, inviting souls to rest in her embrace. Only a woman can possess a serene beauty, reflecting both gentleness and an undeniable strength. True power indeed. Similar to Mother Nature or Transformative Nature, if you think about it.

Man, fuck all that and fuck her! Hell, that's why I came in to work anyway. Shit, let me stop talking to myself and finish this lil dude's head up.

But I mean, Charlie used to always say, "What the fuck you gonna do, just sit there and cry?"

Shit, I don't know, but it would have been better than this. Listening to James talk about his daughter getting accepted to college. Or Kam, and his dilemma with the three girls he's juggling. That motherfucker is a fool. You can't help but laugh once you think about it. Why the hell wouldn't he just tell Red and Ke he was sick or some shit. He know Candace is crazy as hell. Instead, you try to make plans with all three on the same day, knowing damn well it's Candace birthday. Better you than me, brother. I mean, three girls sound nice

and all, but a headache, nonetheless.

Besides, I just wanted to spend time with one girl...boy...hell, I don't fucking know.

I snatched my barber's cape off Lil Johnny. He hopped out the chair. I liked cutting little kids' hair because they never had that much to talk about. It gave me time to think. "Hold on little fellow," I said, reaching out to grab his arm. I reached for my spray bottle, misting his hairline with alcohol. "All right, good to go." I smiled and gave him a high five.

Looking at my next client, an older man named Mr. Kenny, I noticed no one sat next to him. I mean, that's not unusual. I just don't think I ever noticed it. Everyone knows everything in this neighborhood. Hell, even the kids know. Usually, well, use to be kids were so carefree and non-judgmental, it's only once the world has a conversation with you that your point-of-view changes.

Weary from a terrible night's sleep, I leaned on my chair and contemplated my decision to come in today. I called up Mr. Kenny. Looking down, I realized, the day was just getting started. It was only about nine-thirty in the morning—Saturday, my busiest day.

This same time a year ago, I, Otis Bud Radcliffe, was in pain. Hell, I'm still in pain. My brother passed away in the HIV treatment center, not too far from my house. The name of the facility is called "Hope." Funny right? I thought so. May's well be called hopelessness. Seems more fitting.

The thing is me and my brother weren't even that close. Truthfully, not since he became the artist formally known as Charlie. Fake-ass Prince. This nigga started going by Charlene. I never even

**"The blood  
blended in  
perfectly with  
the brick's  
red once the  
blood dried."**



knew you were gay! Trans, bi, whatever the fuck you were, the point is, I didn't know. I mean, it didn't matter that you were, who you were. I just didn't know you anymore. I didn't see Charlie when I looked at Charlene and you knew that. I think the knowing hurt us both the most.

I look up and nod to Mr. Kenny, ready for him. Mr. Kenny walks over as quickly as his body allows. I am familiar with the slow approach. I see Charlie in the way Mr. Kenny walks. A dreadful fate I thought.

"How is it going, Mr. Kenny?"

"I have a better question—how are you doing?"

This caught me off guard because Mr. Kenny rarely spoke.

"I'm ok. Another day."

"But the first year without Charlene," says Mr. Kenny.

I hesitated before replying. I forgot Mr. Kenny and Charlie knew each other from the HIV treatment center. "Well, I never knew Charlene, I knew Charlie."

"Yes, you did," says Mr. Kenny. "You've known Charlene your whole life. Just went by a different monicker."

"What, Charlie? Get the fuck out of here. That's not a different monicker, that was his name. That's who he was. That's who I remember."

"If that is all you remember, who's fault is that?"

I took a moment, contemplating his question. "Shit, his fault. I'm not the one that switched up. I didn't put a dress on and call myself Charlene. He did that shit."

"He did, but what did you do next?"

"I did what anybody else would do. I sat back confused. I didn't fully understand. Hell, I still don't fully understand."

"And in that moment of misunderstanding, you both pulled away," says Mr. Kenny.

"Well, you know, shit happens."

Mr. Kenny nods, acknowledging me. He purposely tries not to speak very much to save his breath. I guess today it was just on his mind to bring up Charlie or Charlene.

I fling my cape in the air draping it over Mr. Kenny, causing him to shiver. Mr. Kenny is small and frail. Not very old. The disease just does that to you once you contract it.

He really doesn't have a whole lot of hair. I wonder why he shows up every weekend at the same time. I wouldn't waste my time trying to get cut. I would think you got more important shit to do. Since he's talking and shit, let me ask him.

"Mr. Kenny," I say.

Without saying a word, he turns his head slightly to let me know he is listening. "Why do you come in here every weekend at the same time for a cut? You don't have very much hair."

There is a long pause between us as Mr. Kenny sits there. Figuring he doesn't want to speak anymore, I grab my trimmers.

But, before I can proceed, Mr. Kenny speaks, "I was tired of laying with my demons."

I click off the trimmers and ask, "What you say?"

"I said I'm tired of laying with my demons. For so long they provided comfort. Figured I try associating myself with some regular folk until she comes."

"Until who comes?" I ask.

"The same one that came for Charlene."

I stand there thinking about what Mr. Kenny said. "Mr. Kenny, how does laying with demons bring you comfort?"

Mr. Kenny sits quiet. Overwhelmed, I wait with the trimmers in my hand. I click them back on.

"By fostering acceptance."

I stand there, trimmers vibrating my hand, contemplating his





response.

“What does that even mean? *Fostering acceptance*. When I hear that, it makes me think you choose to suffer in silence. Taking the bad for the bad and living with it.”

“For me,” he says, “it means recognizing everyone has their own experiences, struggles, and reasons for their choices. I try to approach each situation with compassion rather than judgment. Leading to greater self-awareness. Within that self-awareness, is a safe space where I feel comfortable sitting with choices I’ve made without fear.”

I stand there reflecting on Mr. Kenny’s words. It makes me think about Charlie and how he never got the opportunity to escape our mother. We didn’t have the same dad. So, when I moved away with my dad, he couldn’t come with me.

I never understood what he meant by lying with demons that comforted him. I guess I used to think it meant he welcomed negative energy into his life. I guess we both did a little bit back then, especially growing up with our mother. We needed that bit of malice in us, to survive. She was a good person when she kept her distance from substances, but for some reason, she always seemed to find herself surrounded by drugs and alcohol. I think I know where all that child support money went now. That’s another story.

But I never considered his experiences growing up after I moved away or his struggles finding his safe space. We grew apart. Five hours away, we didn’t see each other that often anymore. It makes sense now that I think about it. If I hadn’t broken my ankle back then, I would’ve been stuck with the same experiences and trauma.

Well, my mother actually broke my ankle. She broke it with a broomstick when I was twelve, because I forgot to turn in some homework. Can you believe that shit? A broken ankle. Because of some fucking homework. She didn’t hurt me on purpose. It was an

ass-whooping where she just so happened to grab a broomstick because it was within reach, and she just so happened to break my ankle. One of the many fucking crazy coincidences that occurred while under her care. So, yeah, I’d imagine I’d be pretty fucked up too, had I stayed.

I never told my dad what really happened. I told him I fell down the stairs, but he suspected something more. He knew what type of woman she was. I was just happy, that I was safe.

And by no means am I saying you were fucked up because you were trans. I’m saying we were fucked up, because of who raised us. I just got out. That put a strain on our relationship, and I hate myself for leaving you. But I was twelve. I couldn’t save us both.

Every time we hung out afterward, you seemed different, as if your light had dimmed. Then, on your eighteenth birthday, you showed up at my house, nervously fidgeting with the hem on that blue dress you said you just bought. I remember opening the door excited to see you, only to be met by Charlene instead. I was too confused to speak. Who were you? I can only imagine the hurt you felt at my rejection.

I failed to offer the love we had always shared, and I deeply regret that. I regret leaving you to grapple with the pain that love can cause when it wavers in the midst of change. I regret I never knew Charlene. I’ll always have to carry that with me.



DEENA MONNETT

**"The Poem Tells Me What It Wants to Be":**

**A Conversation with Alexis Sears**

*Deena Monnett:* Your recent poetry collection, *Out of Order* (2022), jumps back and forth in time, a structure anticipated by the book's title. "On Turning Twenty," for example, is placed before "Riding Home, Five Years Later" in which the speaker is a senior in high school. Despite the tangled timeline, the collection is perfectly in order when it comes to the process of grief, ending with poems of acceptance in poems like "Daughters" and "What Do You Do When the Pain Is Gone?" In "Memory: We're Out of Limes," readers are shown how trauma may cause the sequence of our memories to feel jumbled. Was this poem the basis for the arrangement of this collection, or did it gradually come together?

*Alexis Sears:* A lot of readers comment on how the poems jump around chronologically, but I think that was only half-intentional. I did spend a *lot* of time ordering the poems, though! It wasn't until I wrote a book of my own that I understood just how much effort goes into arranging the poems in a meaningful way (and now I'm realizing how much I missed out on by jumping around in poetry collections instead of reading front to back!). For me, the arrangement was less about chronology and more about the meaning of each section.

Like you observed, the collection is in order when it comes to grief. Before publication, an editor asked if I would consider ending the book with "Daughters." Absolutely not. If the last line of *Out of Order* was "Maybe now I'm clean/absolved, a different woman, finally seen," that would be way too neat for me. I'd rather explore uncertainty, and "I'm not sure" as the last line made sense. Is anyone ever sure of

anything, especially when it comes to young adulthood or loss or both?

You asked if "Memory: We're Out of Limes" was the basis. Strangely, no. I didn't go in with an end goal in terms of *Out of Order's* arc, the story I wanted to tell, or the order in which I wanted to tell it. I wrote all the poems, printed them out and threw them on the floor (my favorite part of writing, honestly), and that's when I saw the narrative. Everything accidentally made sense. It's weird, isn't it, the way the book knows what it wants to be long before the poet does?

*DM:* "For My Father: A Sonnet Redouble" is arguably the most structurally complicated poem you've written. When composing this sequence, did you choose the form or the content first? What is the relationship between form and content in your work more broadly?

*AS:* Usually, I pick the form first. It's easier for me to start writing when I have a specific structure in mind. Sometimes, though, I realize that the form is the wrong vehicle for what I'm trying to say.

These interview answers make it sound like I hear voices, but the poem tells me what it wants to be! For example, I might think I want to write a tritina before realizing that ten lines is too few; other times, I might plan to craft a canzone and the poem says, "Alexis, I'm sorry, but you don't have as much to say as you think you do." The sonnet redoublé form for "For My Father" was a rare incident because I essentially chose the form and content at the same time. I had been wanting to write a letter to my dad, opened the Miller Williams's *Patterns of Poetry: An Encyclopedia of Forms* and immediately discovered sonnet redoubles. It just clicked.

Certain forms work better for certain subjects. If I'm obsessing over an incident or idea, I like refrains or repeating end words. If I really want to drive home a point, I like forms where each stanza has a similar structure. A poem in my current manuscript is called



“Heartbreak Ghazal” and discusses the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. A ghazal is a series of couplets with a repeating end word (or phrase). I chose the word “now” to emphasize the constant threat of violence and the urgency of taking action. Form and content are a team. They have to be on the same page.

*DM:* Of the various forms of poetry that you work with, do you have a favorite? If so, why are you drawn to that form?

*AS:* Sonnet crowns! People often view poem sequences as more difficult than they are, probably because of the length and rules. A sonnet crown is relatively easy. Once you write the first sonnet, it’s as if you’re trampolining to the next. The last line of one is a springboard to the first of the following—you don’t have to worry about opening lines for new sonnets and you have a starting point for an idea. It’s more of a boost than a hindrance.

I’ve said this a couple times now (so forgive me, readers, if you’re bored of my simile!) but a sonnet is like a session with a very skilled therapist. You go in with a limited amount of time (14 lines) to discuss what’s on your mind, finding patterns between the topic and other areas of your life (here, the patterns are the rhymes). If you start to go off the rails (free verse), the therapist drags you back on track. Then, the therapist dreadfully challenges you (“but what if...?” or “do you think you feel this way because...?”), which is the volta. So, if you think of a sonnet crown as a bunch of separate “sessions” you have plenty of freedom to explore your subject and enough structure to be helpful.

*DM:* In a recent interview, you mentioned feeling mortified by your first published poem, “Children of the Streets.” Do you still experience self-doubt when encountering previously published work? Has being a

judge for several contests, such as the 2024 Tributaries literary prizes, affected your own self-criticism?

*AS:* I’ve mellowed out quite a bit on the self-doubt, and yes, having the privilege to judge competitions has helped. My friend Matthew Dickman (read his book *Husbandry* if you haven’t already!) said something wise when I was stressing about my poem “Hair Sestina” appearing in *Best American Poetry*. Basically, he argued that after publication, your work no longer belongs only to you. Think of it like a child departing for college. You made this thing, you put your all into it, and now it’s out in the world. I also try to tell myself, as simplistic as it may sound, that if a poem was accepted for publication, how bad can it be? Ha!

*DM:* In “Ode to the Heartbreakers,” you depict the innocent, ever-changing obsession that many have felt during youthful crushes. You’ve taught high-school and middle-school English. Does teaching young students influence your writing in any way?

*AS:* Oh gosh, yes. There is a huge difference between my childhood environment and my students’. Maybe I sound super old, but the rampant technology usage is jarring. I don’t even just mean social media (that goes without saying), but in general, everything is on a screen. Tests and assignments are on computers. I haven’t seen a notebook in years. Kids don’t know what a scantron is. At many schools, the administration allows kids to use their phones in class.

As a result, there’s this strange feeling of isolation and desire for human connection that a lot of young people seem afraid to act on. Kids can perform, so to speak (did you read about that ten-year-old “influencer” who reviews Shirley Temples at restaurants?) but struggle to talk to a classmate. I’ve observed less goofiness and more heaviness.



Obviously, I'm generalizing and don't want to sound superior—Gen Z is incredible in many ways, too, especially about open-mindedness and lack of tolerance for discrimination. I've also noticed a resurgence of older pop culture—80s music, for example—which I love! No one has to tell me twice to write about an old-school musician.

My teaching experiences have impacted my writing—unintentionally—because so many of my poems now discuss casual moments of human connection: the inexplicable warmth between driver and mechanic, a random toddler waving at you at Whole Foods, etc. Not to get all John Lennon, but I truly believe that in this political climate, people will come together and express themselves more comfortably. Then I'll have even more writing material.

*DM:* Two of your recent poems, “After My Mother’s Cancer Returns, I Start Praying Every Night” and “All I’ve Ever Wanted Is to Write,” are odes to what Tennessee Williams, via Blanche DuBois, referred to as “the kindness of strangers”: a freshman helping fellow passengers on a bus, a girl whose friend is always there to clean up her drunken mess. The former poem relies heavily on religious themes, while the latter gives a subtle nod to biblical texts. As readers, we can see the tension between morality and religious expectations. Is this something we will be seeing more of?

*AS:* Unlikely. Instead of approaching my poetry from a religious standpoint, alluding to the Bible and religious traditions, I just really love the idea of God as a chill, funny dude. The poem “After My Mother’s Cancer Returns, I Start Praying Every Night” emerged because, when I did turn to prayer after my mom’s relapse, I heard a voice chuckling, “*wowwww, really?* Apparently, you need me after all!” That said, God appearing through others in everyday settings was something I’d considered for a while. I’m not saying a person *is* God.

But a couple years ago I was on a bus to the Hollywood Bowl to meet a friend, ruminating about a (in hindsight, dumb) romantic situation in which I’d found myself. As I stared out the window like a sad, abandoned lover in a music video, two girls behind me spoke about their mutual friend. One said something along the lines of, “And I keep telling her, he’s not going to change. This man admits he isn’t a nice guy and he’s obviously not mature, and she deserves someone who is.” And I remember thinking, whoa. Was she talking about me? Of course not. But was it something I needed to hear? Yes!

Random encounters with strangers often teach me. I don’t think everything happens for a reason. But sometimes the universe or a higher power or whoever wants to send a message, so they do so through someone else.

*DM:* You have often spoken about using contemporary language in combination with traditional forms. Considering the ever-changing, ununified landscape of poetry (and the rapidly developing digital world), do you have any predictions for future trends in poetry? Who are the poets to watch?

*AS:* Oh, I *adore* this question. It reminds me of those “Ins” and “Outs” predictions that people do online at the beginning of each year! With little evidence to back up my ideas, let’s do the poetry edition:

Ins: rhyming, meter/attempted meter, poems where the last line stands on its own/you hit enter before writing the last line (especially when the rest of the poem is in couplets!), couplets, abecedarians, poems about childhood, poems about motherhood, poems about unpleasant family members, poems about “firsts” (e.g. kisses, hookups, trips to the zoo), villanelles, poems about misogyny, poems about food.

Outs: poems explicitly about government/politics (at this



point, what is there to say?), ampersands, when poets hit “tab” in the middle of lines and the poem takes up more space, poems about COVID-19, poems longer than 30 lines, the word *cicada*. As for poets to watch, I think a lot of new ones will emerge, especially women of color and/or with children.

I’ve heard Brian Brodeur is pretty good, too.

## *Jurors’ Statements*

SARAH ROSE NORDGREN

### POETRY

#### **First Place: “Grievances,” Kate Crum**

This sonnet shows a remarkable command of poetic form—the meter rolls along in a natural, yet skillfully constructed cadence, and the end-rhymes avoid the feeling of awkwardness or shoe-horning that often accompanies a poet’s early attempts at the form. I really enjoyed the music of this poem—the “slamming” with the “seething” and the “screamed,” the layers of assonance within the lines that echo and deepen the end-rhymes. And of course, the poem also successfully presents a self-contained world—a past relationship with the particular miseries and happy memories that make it real in itself while also gesturing toward the universality of its feeling

#### **Second Place: “Adrienne,” Zoie Lind**

I loved the poignant whimsy of this poem. I felt the movement of the poem running away with me as the infant was running away from the mother into her future.

#### **Third Place: “Open Bar,” Kennedy Cosette**

I was taken with the voice of this poem: wry, unapologetic yet-self-aware. And with such satisfying, chewy language.



## PROSE

### **First Place: “Otis Bud Radcliffe,” Maurice Sayles**

I deeply admire this story’s ambition, as well as its heart. In a relatively brief space, this writer manages to develop three sympathetic characters along with an authentic-feeling world of memory, regret, relationship, language. The story yearns to address things that matter and to ask big questions, and the writer is working thoughtfully with the fiction writer’s toolbox (dialogue, setting, character, description...). I hope this ambitious and deeply-feeling writer keeps working and developing their craft.

### **Second Place: “9 Things I Don’t Want,” Jay Lee**

I admire the honesty and vulnerability of this essay, which explores tender issues of identity, race, and coming of age.

### **Third Place: “How to Dress Your Farm Animals,” Rebekah Wills**

I was charmed by this clever, satirical story about farm animal fashion.

SARAH ROSE NORDGREN is an American poet, writer, teacher, and cultural organizer. She is the author of four books of poetry and prose, including, most recently, *Feathers: A Bird Hat Wearer’s Journal*, which earned the Essay Press Book Prize, as well as the poetry collections *Darwin’s Mother* and *Best Bones*, and the chapbook *The Creation Museum*. Nordgren lives in her hometown of Durham, North Carolina, where she teaches poetry, serves as Emerging Poet Feature

editor for 32 Poems, and is the Founding Director of The School for Living Futures, an interdisciplinary, experimental project dedicated to shifting culture and creating possibility in the time of climate change. You can find her writings on the intersections of literature, environmentalism, and technology in her Substack newsletter, *Wilderment*.



PAUL RUTZ

## VISUAL ARTS

### **Winner: “Consumer Capitalism and the Mars Colony,”**

**Lani M. Fukada**

The winner of the 2025 *Tributaries* Visual Arts Contest is “Consumer Capitalism and the Mars Colony.” A well-composed conglomeration of images that reference famous name brands and recall various science fiction tropes (with a dash of Egyptomania), this piece evokes a set of urges laced with fear that feel familiar, timely, and insistent.

PAUL X. RUTZ is a former Naval Officer and ballet dancer who served on the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67) before becoming a reporter for the Pentagon’s press service. In 2011, after finishing a Ph.D. in visual theory, he started a family in Portland, OR, where he works as a visual artist, teacher and writer. His work has been shown in commercial and academic galleries throughout the U.S., including recent shows in October and November 2023, at Gay Street Gallery in Washington, VA, then March and April 2024, at Laura Vincent Design & Gallery, Portland, and Figure Ground Gallery, Seattle.

## CONTRIBUTORS

ZOE BROCK has been at Indiana University East for two years, where she is studying to become a graphic designer and plans to graduate with a fine art degree. This is the second installment of the Rusty Peters series that she has done. She made this piece inspired by him and his artwork.

SHANNON BROOKS is graduating in 2025 with a BA in English. She enjoys writing poetry, listening to music, gardening, and reading.

SARAH CONNER is a graduate student studying Library and Information Science at Indiana University Indianapolis. She currently works at a tiny Carnegie library and is passionate about fostering access to information and community engagement. Outside of work and school, you can find her reading, writing, painting, and gardening.

KENNEDY COSETTE graduated from IU East in May 2024 with a BA in English with a focus in Professional and Technical Writing as well as a minor in Creative Writing. She resides in Noblesville with her partner, Codey, and their three huskies. She enjoys reading books about feminine rage and doing yoga.

KATE CRUM is a Multimedia Technology Specialist with The Media School at Indiana University Bloomington who is currently living a double life as an online student at IU East, majoring in English–Technical and Professional Writing with an expected graduation date of May 2025. When Kate isn’t busy writing or fixing problems for the



student radio station, she enjoys spending time with her partner David and a menagerie of pets.

MAXIMILIANO FLORES CRUZ is from Goshen, Indiana. He graduated in 2024 with a degree in English with a concentration in creative writing at IUPUI. His fascination with sci-fi sparked when he watched anime at an early age which helped develop his interests as both a reader and writer within the genre, also introducing him to other works. In his spare time, he loves outdoor activities such as playing soccer, pickleball, or snowboarding.

LANI M. FUKADA (they/them) is a senior at IUE. They are majoring in Communications and minoring in Fine Arts. They live in Berlin, Germany with their numerous plants.

CAYLAH GARDNER is a college student at IU Indianapolis perusing Psychology and English.

MARY HANNAH is a Fine Arts major at IUE and hopes to have a future in selling art.

GRACE HARRIS is from Cincinnati, Ohio! She is a senior this year at IU East and was on the women's soccer team for all four years. She is studying graphic design.

CAITLIN JONES is a senior student at IU East who plans to graduate in May 2025 with a B.A. in Technical Writing. She has always been inspired by Japan and its vast collection of mythical folklore. As a cat lover and vet tech, the nekomata was a very interesting and fun thing to represent artistically.

KIM KILE is a third-year PhD student in the American Studies program with a minor in English at IU Indianapolis. The focus of her studies is biblio/poetry therapy which is a counseling technique used to help children and young adults overcome traumatic events in their lives through writing poetry or reading books. Her poetic inspiration usually comes while she's driving, washing her hair, or doing other mundane life tasks. Thanks to her Notes app, she has a stockpile of first lines, titles, and story ideas waiting for the "someday" she has free to bring them to life.

JAY LEE is a Junior majoring in Sociology and hopes to work in Human Resources. She enjoys writing creative non-fiction and poetry in her free time; pageantry; currently works at Girls Inc. and teaches Kindergarten.

ZOIE LIND is a writer, student, mother, wife, and future educator residing in New Albany, Indiana.

SAMANTHA MANLOVE is a Junior at IU East pursuing a degree in psychology, as well as minors in creative writing and neuroscience. She hopes to get her novel published one day, but she's recently learned to enjoy writing poetry as well. Thanks for reading!

LINDSAY OSBORN earned her Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies from IU East in May 2024. As the Editor-in-Chief for the previous issue of Tributaries, she is thrilled for the opportunity to have her poetry showcased in her alma mater's literary journal. Her favorite genre, comedy, is a major source of inspiration for her work. She especially enjoys using observational comedy as a means of discussing



deeper topics, from sociopolitical discourse to existential philosophy.

JEALOUSY REZA recently completed their final semester of college and calls sunny Southern California home. A lifelong writer, they've recently rediscovered a deep appreciation for poetry, which now serves as a source of inspiration and personal growth. When not writing, they can be found exploring new hiking trails or spending quality time with their beloved, black cat.

ELIZABETH ROSS is a recent graduate of Indiana University Southeast, where she studied Digital Media and Storytelling. As a senior Digital Media and Storytelling student, Elizabeth experimented with various media tools to enrich her craft and refine her voice. By using different mediums of storytelling, she brought new dimensions to her creative writing and poetry.

MAURICE SAYLES is an emerging voice in contemporary literature, known for their evocative storytelling and rich character development. Currently, enrolled at IU East, pursuing a degree in English: Technical and Professional Writing with a minor in Creative Writing. Their writing often explores themes of identity, conflict, nature, resilience, family, grief, and so many more. Drawing inspiration from personal experiences, dreams, reflections, conversations, emotions, and cultural background.

HALIE SCOTT strives to make a scene feel immersive and realistic. She wants each and every reader to feel that they are in the same place as the narrator. The weird, strange, and scary have always been inspirations for her writing. She is a creative writing major at Indiana

University East and is graduating in May. She would like to personally thank everyone for taking the time to read her story.

KAYDENCE SMITH will graduate with a degree in writing in May 2025. My goal is to become a science fiction novelist, but other passions include poetry and photography.

SCOTT WADE recently completed his Bachelor's in English at Indiana University.

REBEKAH WILLS is an Indiana University student in her junior year. She resides in Columbus, Indiana. She has one dog, a shih-tzu named Homie who she considers her first child. Her favorite genre to write in is poetry.



# T. TRIBUTARIES



ZOE  
BROCK

SHANNON  
BROOKS

SARAH  
CONNER

KENNEDY  
COSETTE

KATE  
CRUM

MAXIMILIANO  
FLORES CRUZ

LANI M.  
FUKADA

CAYLAH  
GARDNER

MARY  
HANNAH

GRACE  
HARRIS

CAITLIN  
JONES

KIM  
KILE

JAY  
LEE

ZOIE  
LIND

SAMANTHA  
MANLOVE

LINDSAY  
OSBORN

JEALOUSY  
REZA

ELIZABETH  
ROSS

MAURICE  
SAYLES

HALIE  
SCOTT

KAYDENCE  
SMITH

SCOTT  
WADE

REBEKAH  
WILLS



EAST

