

CONTRIBUTORS

AMARYAH CHANDLER
ANNA BLASINSKI
BECCA BLANCO
CASSIDY EMBRY
COURTNEY MOORE
ELEANOR JONES
ELIZABETH NADOLSON
EMMA ELSON
FRANKIE WILLIS
KARA FELKLEY
KAS BATCHELOR
KATIE BARTON
LILLIAN WAHL
MARY-KATHERINE ANDREWS
MAURA MENKER
MAUREEN WILSON
OLIVE ABRAM
RILEY COURTNEY
SARA MCGINNIS
SAVANNAH SLATER
THEO STEWART
ZERO FENTON



HCM

SPRING 2026

VOLUME XII

HAPPY CAPTIVE MAGAZINE

Volume XII • 2025-2026

ART

POETRY

PROSE



LEADERSHIP

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cassell Presnell & Annie Shook

FICTION & POETRY EDITORS

Emma Henderson & Katy Sue Malt

BUSINESS MANAGERS

Parker Green & Caitlin Koney

LAYOUT & DESIGN MANAGERS

Marissa Ellis & Chelsey Pauley

MARKETING DIRECTOR

Gracen Giles

EVENT COORDINATOR

Gabrielle Joseph

ADVISORS

Sacha Bellman & Jody Bates



STAFF

Mikah Spring
Venezia McHenry
Kendelle Woods
Kenneth Dougherty

Annabel Howe
Ella Seery
Selvin Alfonso
Audrey Kinninger



FROM THE STAFF

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up our labor of love: Volume 12 of Happy Captive Magazine! As a literary family, we are utterly captivated by words, to their every whim and desire. Whether it's your first time picking up our magazine or you're a long-time lover of HCM, we are so grateful that you've chosen us.

We'd like to thank both our faculty advisor, Jody Bates, and our financial advisor, Sacha Bellman, for their continued support of our wondrous team. To those featured in this magazine, thank you for allowing us to circulate your work as an inspiration and a joy for all of Miami. We also want to sincerely thank our staff, who have made this magazine into a remarkable assemblage of student voices. We endlessly cherish their dedicated effort and passion.

As we step away from co-Editors-in-Chief and Miami University, we're confident that HCM will fall into loving, capable hands. Until then—we hope that this magazine holds the words you love that, every once in a while, love you back.

With all our love,
Cassell & Annie



TABLE OF CONTENTS

LITERARY

A Poet's Prayer Request

Maureen Wilson.....6

Tchotchke

Theo Stewart.....8

(s)t(he)y

Zero Fenton.....24

Elianna

Cassidy Embry.....25

Magnolia St.

Kara Felkley.....26

honeymoon phase (drag it out)

Olive Abram.....29

Tossing Pillows

Cassidy Embry.....30

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks

Katie Barton.....34

The Kicker

Maureen Wilson.....44

This is a Poem I Wrote About Red Birds

Riley Courtney.....45

A Game of Jenga

Theo Stewart.....47

User Manual_ Superhero Model XJ-41

Emma Elson.....49



TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Tree Falls in the Forest

Savannah Slater.....55

Scenes from campus

Lillian Wahl.....59

A Poem That's Already Written

Savannah Slater.....60

Transience

Mary-Katherine Andrews.....61

You've Probably Heard This Before

Anna Blasinski.....66

the blizzard

Kara Felkley.....67

The Fifth Horseman

Frankie Willis.....70

el dorado

Becca Blanco.....83

Uninvited Body

Eleanor Jones.....84

A Reaper's Cento

Theo Stewart.....87

Black Widow Beauty

Riley Courtney.....88

10th Grade

Maureen Wilson.....111

An Observation

Courtney Moore.....113



TABLE OF CONTENTS

it's hard to write real estate blogs when there's ICE on every street

Becca Blanco.....115

Handprints

Savannah Slater.....116

Forget-me-not

Maura Menker.....117

VISUAL

Pigeon

Sarah McGinnis.....31

Anything But a Broken Heart

Kas Batchelor.....32

A Good Place to Linger

Kas Batchelor.....57

Circles

Sara McGinnis.....63

The Way Home Lingers

Elizabeth Nadolson.....64

Silence in the Dark

Amaryah Chandler.....85

Land That Refuses To End

Kas Batchelor.....107

Old Stones of Georgia

Kas Batchelor.....109

A Poet's Prayer Request

Maureen Wilson



POETRY

Two slashes
&
a beat.

A syntactic pause.

Semantics are
lost in favor of
pacing
miniature
earth
quakes.
In other words, you
took a step towards me.

Angels on satellites, taking
a vacation from shoulders,
are making bets, pinging
neuropathic pangs
I'll mistake for intuition.

*"They'll kiss."
"Yes!
They'll kiss soon."*

But they don't
know the difference
between a century
and two seconds.

A Poet's Prayer Request



Maureen Wilson

But dear God,
I wish your stars
would drop cue cards, a pink slip,
a knife to murder this tension,
or an anvil on his head.
I receive sound effects instead.
Tick-tock, gulp, cough.

On a twenty-second thought,
I did imagine you to be
more like a hurried trochaic
tetrameter. Or at least the rolling
boulder that I don't mind
pushing upwards. But you're
a pantoum, with a single word
per line, in a sequence that
lines my forehead with fascination
of what pages I had to skip
to end up here
with you.

I just thought that this time
you'd notice I had teleprompters for eyes,
that my hands were made out of braille.
You didn't read either; you
didn't even try.

And now those angels are making fun of me again.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart



Short Story

It starts with Andrea's love of antique figurines.

All her friends frequently tell her she has a problem, but she's never seen the point in minimalism. Andrea loves her trinkets, especially her older ones—they're either the most gorgeous works of art on the planet or the funniest creatures man has created. These past few weeks have been tougher than usual, some patrons leering at her while she's bartending, so she's decided to treat herself to a new figurine.

Shouldering through the door to Bits and Baubles, she's greeted with the familiar dusty, somewhat musky scent every antique store has. The bell at the door gives a muted ring, but the girl behind the counter doesn't even look up, continuing to tap away on her phone. Andrea heads straight to where she can see a couple of her beloved figurines on a shelf, perusing the options. She gently shifts a couple ceramic ballerinas aside to see what's behind them, picking up woodland animals for consideration before placing them back down; none of them speak to her.

And then she sees it.

It's supposed to be a dog (she thinks?) in the same way medieval portrayals of babies and cats are supposed to be realistic. It pulls a quiet snort out of her, the first semblance of laughter she's made in days, so she carefully picks it up to take it to the counter. The worker from before glances up once she's close, and Andrea has to focus on continuing to protectively cradle the figurine instead of dropping it in shock.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

The girl—Elaine, her nametag reads—is *beautiful*. She has these honey-like eyes that draw Andrea into her sweet trap, choppy blonde hair that looks immensely soft, and painted lips she wants to see curl up in a smile.

“Hey, find everything okay?”

She hasn’t been able to find her tongue, much less her breath—that voice certainly doesn’t help matters along, a soft thing with a hint of rasp—so all Andrea can do in response is nod. Elaine chuckles when she’s handed the figurine (*God, what a sound*). “I love this little guy.”

“Yeah, uh, me too,” Andrea stutters, brain halfway through its rebooting process. “It was an automatic *yes* when I saw him.”

“Seems like you’ve got good taste, then.” In the time it takes for her to finish gathering her wits back into a semi-recognizable pile, Elaine has wrapped and bagged the figurine, as well as processed the payment. She holds the bag out, which Andrea somehow manages to get her clumsy fingers to grab and (somewhat) reliably hold. “See you around, yeah?”

“Uh-huh,” Andrea breathes, “see you around.”



Andrea manages to hold out two whole days before she’s pushing through the door to Bits and Baubles once more. Elaine is behind the counter again, and she smiles softly when their eyes meet. A warmth floods through Andrea at the sight as she makes her way over to the figurine shelf.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

Perusing her options, she sees not much has really changed in the 48ish hours since she was last here. A couple figurines have been moved about, and she can't immediately see a few she remembers from last time—still, though, she enjoys peering at the old ceramic and paint, imagining them in different locations of her apartment and wondering at their history. A ballerina is what calls to her this time; her delicate pose would look perfect in that one empty spot in her kitchen. Andrea carries her over to the counter to get bundled in paper for the trip home.

Elaine is already smiling when she gets there. “Hello, again. What did you pick this time?”

She places the ballerina on the counter, her buffering brain causing her response of “Hi, again” to be delayed.

“Oh, this is so pretty! I forgot she was there,” Elaine exclaims, grabbing the protective paper whilst simultaneously ringing the purchase up. A bright grin is on her face as she's doing this, and it takes everything within Andrea to not collapse at the sight. It's more beautiful than she had imagined, taking over her face and making it difficult to look anywhere else.

It's only when the smile changes, shrinking into something softer, more intimate, that Andrea snaps out of her daze. She sheepishly accepts the bag Elaine hands her way, feeling a thread of tension wrap its arms around her. There's no fear, though; she can sense Elaine is the one tying the knot, so she puts up no struggle as its grip clenches down the further she walks away.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart



A week later, they're filling out and filing the necessary paperwork to register Elaine Blackwell and Andrea Fletcher as friends in the eyes of the government. As always, it takes much too long to process (four entire weeks), but once they've both received their stamp of approval in the mail, Andrea is free to bring Elaine to her favorite restaurant.

It's family-owned and operated, with tables so small their legs are intertwined in order to sit comfortably. She knows it serves Indian, but Andrea couldn't say what it was she ordered or ate; she was too busy making Elaine laugh.

Fuck, she adores that smile. It makes her nose scrunch up, and when really happy, Elaine's eyes fully close with the force of the grin. It also showcases the little gap between her front teeth, which has Andrea barely holding on. And her eyes? Whoever said the eyes were the window to the soul was so, so right. Elaine's eyes are beyond expressive, showcasing each emotion openly to anyone lucky enough to catch a glimpse.

Before she knows it, the checks are being placed in front of them and they're paying for food Andrea has no recollection of swallowing. She holds the door open for Elaine as they head outside. "Can I walk you home?"

Elaine smiles gently. "I'd like that, yeah."

They begin the short trek to Elaine's apartment, chattering on about random things: preferred superpowers, those strange would-you-rather questions, the silliest hobbies they want to start. She's having such a good time that Andrea

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

doesn't even realize they've stopped walking until she's given an amused chuckle. "Ah, sorry."

"I didn't mind one bit," Elaine responds, voice fond.

Andrea abruptly pulls her into a tight hug, purposefully lingering a little longer than she usually does. "Would you like to meet again in a couple days?" she asks, holding her breath.

That beautiful smile appears. "I'd love to."



A few days later they're headed towards Wisconsin's Historical Museum. Andrea is immediately dragged in the direction of the First Settlers exhibit, and knows she's about to have the time of her life. Elaine lights up once they're through the doors. She starts citing information about each of the artifacts on display without even glancing at the placards. She talks about nuances in cultures between the different Indigenous tribes that lived here before, and explains each piece of pottery's significance.

They spend hours in the exhibit, which is, once again, only realized by Andrea when she glances at her phone and sees the time. "Guess it's my turn to apologize, huh?" Elaine sheepishly says. "Sor—"

"No!" Andrea cuts her off, flushing a little at how loud her voice was. "No," she repeats, quieter, "you don't have to apologize. I had so much fun listening to you."

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

Elaine flashes her a huge smile, and Andrea can't help but think for the *nth* time that there's nothing she wouldn't do to see that smile.



A week passes and then they're meeting at a local park. Andrea brings a blanket she doesn't mind getting dirty alongside sandwiches and cut fruit. Elaine shows up with homemade cookies and lemonade. "Hi!"

"Hey, 'Laine," Andrea greets. "I love your dress."

"Thank you!" she gasps, doing a little twirl. "It has pockets!"

The dress is gorgeous, Andrea wasn't lying about that. It's light green and speckled with hundreds of little flowers and butterflies, but it has nothing on the pure joy on Elaine's face when she shows off the pockets her garment has, a wide smile in its rightful place.

She lays the blanket out, and they both begin to unpack their food. "You had plans with a different friend a couple days ago, right?"

Andrea smiles, melting inside at the fact that Elaine remembered. "I did, yeah. My friends Shea, Rhyder, and I went to a black light putt-putt."

"That sounds like so much fun! Who won?"

Snorting, Andrea says, "It isn't about the victor, but about the journey that took us to the end, you know."

"So you lost," Elaine deadpans.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

“Yeah,” Andrea sighs, acting put out for a couple seconds until she couldn’t hold back her laughter anymore.

“What about you, did you have any fun plans this past week?”

Elaine hums. “Not really. I was busy with classes and homework, most of the time, so the most I saw my friends was when getting lunch in the dining halls. We do plan to go get ice cream next weekend, though!”

She chuckles at the bright gleam in Elaine’s eyes at the notion of ice cream. “What’s your go-to ice cream flavor?”

Her answer is immediate. “Strawberry with rainbow sprinkles.”

“Okay! I go for cookie dough, normally, though I’m also partial to cookies ‘n cream.”

Elaine nods, eyes squinted and face serious. “I can get behind that. Seems we can continue to be friends, after all.”

Andrea shakes her head, a fond grin on her face. “I’m glad my ice cream taste holds up to your standards.”

“You should be,” Elaine sniffs with a faux uppity accent.

Still smiling, she takes a bite out of one of the sandwiches she brought—ham, turkey, cheese, and mayo—and watches as Elaine giggles at her own joke before grabbing a sandwich of her own—peanut butter and jelly. They sit in a comfortable silence for a little bit, each content to munch on their sandwiches and fruit while drinking lemonade that has the faint memory of once being cold.

Elaine takes a bite out of one of the cookies before speaking. “What group home did you grow up in?”

Andrea rushes chewing her current mouthful so she can answer. “Chestnut’s. You?”

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

“Oh, I know a couple people who grew up there! Mine was Flowering Vine.”

“What’re their names?” Andrea questions, then adds, “and I’ve heard good things about Vine, but I don’t know anyone who grew up there.”

“Patrick Cantlay and Trishia Harper?”

Andrea hums softly, taking another bite before responding. “No, those names don’t sound familiar.”

“That makes sense,” Elaine says. “They’re a couple years younger than me, so you probably didn’t interact much, if at all.”

She nods. “Yeah, Chestnut’s was strangely strict about us only interacting with those our age and a year on either side, so I would have seen them in passing at most.”

“Really?” she questions. “Vine’s was super lenient, let us interact with whoever so long as we completed our chores and followed the rules.”

Laughing, Andrea bumps Elaine’s shoulder with hers and she leans forward to get more lemonade. “Yeah, I’ve kept in touch with a few of my siblings from there and we all agree it was ridiculous how strict they were about that.”

Elaine has her faux serious face back on, but she’s unable to keep it for longer than a few seconds before she’s giggling to herself—and *God*, Andrea is immediately lost once more to the hypnotizing view that is that smile, and the mesmerizing sound that is that laugh. *I’ll do anything to see that smile*, she thinks, not for the first, and certainly not for the last time.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart



Andrea drags Elaine stargazing, one time, and it's now her turn to ramble for hours on end.

She has Elaine lay shoulder-to-shoulder with her so she can best see the stars and constellations Andrea is pointing out. She traces them, telling the stories behind their creation, the purposes they served for sailors, and how their tales fluctuate throughout history and from group to group.

They're laid close together for warmth since it is still chilly out, so Elaine has her head tucked into Andrea's shoulder while occasionally shivering. If she were a better person, she would insist they leave, but Andrea is selfish—she wants to keep looking at the stars with the person who's quickly become her best friend, and the citrusy smell of her perfume befuddles her with its proximity-induced strength.

Elaine doesn't seem to mind though, since she never once complains, a soft, beautiful smile on her face the whole time.



Their friendship does nothing to stop Andrea from continuing to visit Elaine at work while also spending a little too much money on various trinkets she doesn't *really* have the room for.

Sometimes Elaine is alone while working, and other times one of her coworkers is putting things away or chatting at the counter. Andrea has become friendly with them too, and

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

looks forward to her chats with Susan about their favorite TV shows (they both love shitty reality TV), and compares stupid dad jokes with Richard whenever he's in too.

All-in-all, Andrea logically knows she shouldn't visit as often as she does, but she can't stay away. It's like a drug, Elaine's presence, and she needs her fix. Buying silly trinkets that make her laugh brings more joy into her life than she knows what to do with—as well as more figurines than she knows what to do with. Currently, she's got trinkets in a small box for safe-keeping while she tries to find more room for them (she's also been looking for more shelving).

She used to have a couple other antique stores she would visit, but Bits and Baubles has become her only dealer. Over the past couple months, Andrea has added 17 new trinkets and counting to her collection, nine of which are tucked away in the aforementioned box. It doesn't matter, though. All that matters is the way Elaine will perk up and give a bright smile every time she walks through the door, as though they haven't seen each other for months instead of having had dinner together the night before.



A month later, they're both stumbling out of a local Italian restaurant, drunk on laughter. Their conversation is far from a stopping point, so they wander aimlessly around town, jackets in hand and wide smiles on their faces. Multiple times, Andrea has to guide Elaine away from walking into lamppoles because she's laughing so hard.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

While catching her breath, Andrea looks up and finally notices just how dark it's gotten. Even though by now she shouldn't be so surprised at the way time gets away from her when with Elaine, she's still shocked to look at her phone and realize they've been wandering and talking for three hours.

"Laine, we should start heading back," Andrea whispers, the late night enforcing the idea they need to be quiet in spite of how loud they were moments ago. Elaine tilts her head, eyebrows furrowed adorably, until she's shown the time.

"Oh my goodness, yes! It's so late!"

"It's okay," Andrea says, linking their arms together and they start to walk towards Elaine's apartment—luckily they aren't too far. "We were having fun, that's all that matters."

Elaine gives a small smile that's directed towards their feet, humming in agreement. The rest of their walk is quiet, a comfortable silence that comes with how close they've become. Andrea holds open the door to the apartment complex, then follows until they've reached number 203.

Stopping, Elaine turns around. Normally, this is where she says a soft goodbye and they give a long hug, but something in those honey eyes stops Andrea from pulling the other into an embrace. She almost seems to be—psyching herself up for something? Lost in her thoughts, busy attempting to figure out what's happening, she almost misses the moment of her lifetime.

Tchotchke



Elaine kisses her.

It's gentle, nothing more than a sweet press of painted lips to bare, but Andrea feels her body stop working in response. She practically melts, focused on the soft sensation of Elaine's lips and nothing else.

It doesn't last longer than a second, but that second is enough to rewrite everything Andrea thought she knew about herself and more. Nothing will compare to that, *nothing*.

"Goodnight, 'Drea," Elaine murmurs, her voice soft with affection, a brand new smile on her lips for Andrea to obsess over.

"Good, uh, g'night, 'Laine," Andrea stutters. A distant part of her knows she should be terrified, but the majority is lost to the memory of the life-altering kiss.

A soft giggle, and then the door to apartment 203 is opening and shutting quietly, the memory of that loving smile burned into Andrea's brain.



Her alarm blares (for the fourth time that morning, but that's besides the point) and Andrea pulls herself out of bed. She grabs her phone, stumbling out of her room to the kitchen to start the coffee maker. While listening to the water boil, she pulls up her messages with Elaine and texts her *good morning*.

Andrea rushes through the rest of her morning routine when she catches sight of the time, stuffing her wallet and keys into her pockets then heading out the door. She has

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

a pep in her step as she stops by a corner store to grab a bag of Elaine's favorite candy (Wild Berry Skittles) on her way to visit the shop.

The now-familiar, muted ring of the bell greets Andrea as she shoulders through the door to Bits and Baubles, a cheerful grin on her face and a greeting on her tongue that's cut off before she even begins at the sight of Susan behind the counter instead of off stocking new items like normal. "Hey Sue, where's Elaine?"

"Oh hi, darling. She isn't in today, sorry," Susan says, a regretful smile on her face.

Andrea furrows her brows. "What do you mean? This is her shift?"

Susan shrugs her shoulders. "Don't know, she didn't call in or anything, just didn't show," she responds, unconcerned.

Andrea feels a bit of anxiety rise in her. She wouldn't think much of it, but Elaine also didn't respond to her text, and she's *always* awake before her— partly because Andrea works late nights and partly because Elaine has always been a morning person. She gives Susan a shaky smile and must say something, but she can't repeat whatever words came out of her mouth.

Stumbling out the door, she grabs her phone from her pocket and pulls up her messages with Elaine. Her text from that morning has still gone unanswered, but Andrea texts again anyways, asking where she is and if she's okay. Thrown off-balance, she somehow makes her way to the bar she works at two hours early, though her mind is far from where her body is.

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

On autopilot, she unlocks the door and begins to prepare for her shift. While taking chairs off of tables and setting out her tools, her thoughts are with wherever Elaine is. *Maybe she's just really sick*, Andrea thinks. *Yes, very sick and has been asleep all day as a result, that must be it.* It's a cheap attempt at reassurance, but it works just enough to get her through the next couple hours as well as the period of her actual shift.

Shoving out the employee door to make her way back home around three in the morning, she sends another message. "I'll give her until morning," Andrea murmurs to herself. "Until morning."



Morning comes and Andrea still hasn't heard from Elaine.

Now suitably panicked, she calls Bits and Baubles. It's Richard that answers the phone and gets to listen to her panicked rambles about Elaine. He agrees to keep an eye out for her and to call if he hears anything, to which she profusely thanks him. Throwing on the first shirt and pants she gets her hands on, Andrea runs out the door, barely remembering to put shoes on first.

She spams Elaine's phone with messages and calls as she haphazardly makes her way to her apartment. Andrea crashes through the door and storms up the stairs to 203, immediately banging on the door and calling out. "Elaine?" she yells. "ELAINE?"

Tchotchke



Theo Stewart

Alternately banging with her fists or her hands flat, she calls out Elaine's name until she's thrown out by the landlord due to the ruckus she makes. He's not so unkind, though, as to refuse to call her should he hear anything regarding his missing tenant, so she instead begins to tramp around town, peaking in every corner and alleyway she comes across, calling Bits and Baubles whenever she stops to breathe.

Days later, Andrea is begrudgingly in line at a coffee shop waiting to order. She'd rather still be out looking, but it's been almost 72 hours since she's slept and she doesn't want to waste more time by passing out whilst searching. She orders the cheapest and largest option they have, and then stands to the side watching them make it when she happens to them make it when she happens to glance up and see that smile she loves so dearly. That smile she would do anything for. That smile she's been frantically seeking for several days straight without break for more than the occasional bag of chips to keep her fueled and going.

Andrea feels eyes on her, can vaguely hear someone calling out her name, but she's only able to stare in horror at the TV on the wall of the coffee shop. There's a news anchor who's talking, though her sole focus is on the picture displayed next to his face. It's Elaine, one she had posted on her Instagram a little before they met. She's smiling widely in it, a cup of strawberry ice cream with rainbow sprinkles in hand, a dollop of said treat on her nose. She's beautiful.

Below her picture is the news headline they're talking about, the reason that gorgeous girl is on the screen with her perfect smile on display. "Elaine Blackwell, 22 y.o. College

Tchotchke



Student” the caption reads, “Receives Capital Punishment Due to Falling in Love.”

“Remember, folks,” the news anchor’s voice says, filtering into her subconscious. “Love is illegal.”

(s)t(he)y



Zero Fenton



POETRY

There's this boy that I adore,
with long hair and pretty eyes.
Fingernails painted with chipped color,
he lights up when I walk into the room.

Recently, he's been using a curling iron—
his curls bounce as he walks,
a sway of confidence in his hips
that I've never seen with him before.

As the weather cools, so do they—
from shorts to skirts they go,
swapping khakis for flowing fabric.
I smile as I watch them spin around.

I watch their delicate hand move
with a precision I wish was against me.
Their eyelids flutter as the mascara is applied,
coated in glimmery shades of silver.

The crinkling sound of gloves slathering dye,
my hands curl around her hair.
She's smiling in the mirror,
watching herself go from brown to pink.

At the end of it all, she embraces me—
her arms tight, feeling her breathe
and her breath on me. A murmur of
thanks on those lip-glossed lips,
for liking her just as much now
as I did when she was he.

Elianna



Cassidy Embry



POETRY

Joyous as a bouquet of flowers,
intentionally picked, bundled together.

The closer you look, the richer the petals:
sprout darker in the center,
pink at the exterior.
Lined with ballerina pink,
a reflection of peonies—
each stride writes Elianna.

Soft colors of Claude Monet:
lilac and pink dust,
vast sea blue.
She's the green lily pads,
balancing and attracting the beauty of butterfly wings.

She's sweetness, the smell of roses,
soft strides like natural cotton sheets and white tulips.
Innocent as one can possibly be,
Elianna.

Magnolia St.

Kara Felkley



POETRY

how can one
look so lovely
in this harsh

light

flashes from the headlights
pulling in after curfew

and off the city streets
buzzing with murmured chatter
while we stroll in content quietness

we don't get many
if any
chances to pursue

something this infrequent

disregarding the consequent
all for you

any

time

passes

slower

Magnolia St.



Kara Felkley

when you accompany me
in my chiffon dress
and you
in your tux

what a luxury it is
to dine out and
call you mine
when we know
we are short on

time

strikes midnight

i freeze

yet you remain
and lend me your coat

our ebb and flow
makes me crave
the next time

i see your face
full of unparalleled expressions
and the dimples and freckles
i can still place in the inky night

Magnolia St.



Kara Felkley



it's you
and only ever you
for me

i will undoubtedly
defend you
with my last

breath

shifts to clouds
in this frigid

air

shared between us

each moment more
precious
than the last

the clock has moved past
twelve
but we're still here

in the moon's gaze
and the swift-moving
headlights

honeymoon phase (drag it out)

Olive Abram



POETRY

chronic nightmares
 calling home crawling right where
wire
 meets
 the phone

savoring the dream before
horror beams unwavering— the
choir
 sings
 alone

waiting for the tone to shift
 fists no more than sedated pleas in
fire
 heat
 aglow—

someday you'll change to something
strange afraid and cruel a
liar—
 reap
 or sow

Tossing Pillows

Cassidy Embry



POETRY

Tossing pillows wake me up in the moonlight.
Stargazing.
A blanket is tossed to me
buried shivering skin
for peace.

I listen to them as
the gigglers,
lullaby
me to sleep.

Tossing pillows wake me up in the sunshine.
Pots a-blazing.
A blanket of snow
buried every
blade of grass.

I am awoken by giggles
that paint blush cheeks
and carve high bones in the cheeks.

I listen to them as
a Mourning Dove
sings:
let them be.

Pigeon

Sara McGinnis



PAINTING



Anything But a Broken Heart

Kas Batchelor



PHOTOGRAPHY



Anything But a Broken Heart



Kas Batchelor



PHOTOGRAPHY

Anything But a Broken Heart Artist Statement:

“Anything But a Broken Heart” was taken in Savannah, Georgia, in March 2025. I love the symmetry of the colors in this photo. The duality of the different shades of bricks, as well as pops of red, black, and white are all highlighted by the difference in shadow and light. It feels almost industrial in a sense, but in a truly beautiful way.

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks

Katie Barton



PROSE

Jim woke to the sound of something thumping overhead. The noise was too sharp, too erratic, and too irregular to be a fallen branch or late night traffic. For a long while, he just listened. Another scuffle. Another crash. Another clang. Then, something that sounded like glass skittering across the shingles.

Glancing over at the clock, he read the digits “2:43 AM” glowing faintly in the gloom. He sat up slowly, his arms stiff from falling asleep over his shop’s ledger earlier that evening. The room above his small bookshop was usually quiet. His mind raced through the possibilities—raccoons, a stray cat, maybe a kid pulling a prank? But as the noise continued, it felt less and less like any of those. It felt more deliberate.

Another thud shook a bit of plaster from the ceiling. He pulled himself over to the staircase. With a sigh and a muttered curse, he pushed through the door to bear witness to the mysterious sound.

There was an unkempt man. A hunchbacked, staggering, pointed figure silhouetted in moonlight. He wore a threadbare coat, mismatched shoes, and a pair of pants about three sizes too large. He was muttering to himself, his tone low and shaky as he rambled on about nothing. His words were lost in the night.

“Hey, uh, excuse me?” The man’s head snapped up in Jim’s direction. He moved like someone navigating a ship deck in a storm. He approached Jim with outstretched arms, heavy

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

strides, and his head bobbing with each misstep. A bottle slipped from his grip and shattered somewhere out of sight. The sharp noise made Jim flinch. The stranger didn't notice. Nor did he really care.

"No, excuse *me!*" he barked, slamming a finger into Jim's chest. "This is a private matter."

"Well, this is a private rooftop. I'm gonna have to ask you to leave—"

The man pulled Jim out from the door and over towards the middle of the roof. He lurched over with awkward footing and flung a wavering arm over Jim's shoulders. "Can you fucking believe this guy?!" he yelled out.

Jim brushed the man's arms from off of him and took a moment to readjust his clothes. "Uh, believe who, sir?" he asked, taking a small step back to create a more respectable distance between the two of them.

The man shot a trembling finger toward the sky. "This is Luna. My supposed *friend*," he hissed, his words laced with wet venom. It was a cloudless night, an inky canvas painted by dozens of glistening stars. Within its center, in stoic grace, stood the moon. "How long have we known each other now?! Months? Years? Decades? *Centuries*? We've been there for each other, through thick and thin. It was us against...against the world back then! Well, what fucking changed? Is a couple beers all it takes to come between us?!"

"Um...are you pointing at the moon?" The man's eyes

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

never once met his. They were locked onto the moon, silent and unwavering. The man slouched back down on the roof, his pointer finger falling back down at his side.

"The moon...are you blind? Who else would I be talking to?"

"Right..." Jim shifted his feet, brushing against one of the many piles of glass bottles scattered across the rooftop.

"How many drinks have you had?"

"They were all for her," he screamed through choked sobs. He wobbled and crouched down as Jim rushed over to his side to ensure he wouldn't fall off the edge. "Twelve beers...three shots of tequila...and a damn good number of jello shots! And I didn't see you do shit!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but uh...this is dangerous. Let's get you back down on the ground." Jim latched onto the man's forearms with a firm grasp before hoisting him up to his feet. He attempted to brush some of the dust off his shoulders before leading him inside, only for the man to push himself away from him. He stumbled over to the very edge of the roof and once again shot his accusatory finger up towards the heavens.

"I sent my ten years of sobriety straight into the can for you and this is how you choose to repay me?! Are you really this stingy over a fucking twenty?!"

"If you really need twenty bucks I can spot you. Let's just get down."

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

“Oh, but it’s not about the twenty, is it?! No, it’s more than...so much more than...!” The man’s eyes dropped from the sky and fixated on Jim’s. “What’s your name, son?”

“Um, it’s Jim.”

“Jimmy, Jimmy, Jiminy Criminy. Great name. Strong name. Also, stop calling me sir. It’s Rowan. Look...Jim. Have you ever had a moment where you felt betrayed? But betrayed not just by anyone. Betrayed by someone who really counts. Someone that you’re supposed to rely on. That’s always been there and should’ve always stayed there, only for them to cast you to the wayside?”

Jim coughed into a handkerchief and stashed it away into his coat pocket. “That’s highly personal, sir,” he remarked, eyes darting toward the ground.

“Personal shpersonal. You got a story in there, somewhere. I just know it.”

“I only just met you. I’m not going to tell you that.”

“You want me off this roof? This is how you do it. But until then...!” Rowan grabbed a glass bottle and smashed the end against the side of the roof. With a swaying stance, he brandished his new sharpened weapon toward Jim’s chest. “I’m not leaving!”

“Jesus, okay! Okay alright, uh...my friend was supposed to give me notes for a math test, but on the day-of he was sick and I failed?”

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

Rowan rolled his eyes and tossed the bottle back toward the ground. “Booooooring.”

“My landlord keeps upping my rent?”

Rowan rolled his eyes and sat cross-legged back on the floor. “Yawn!” he exclaimed, holding an exaggerated hand toward his mouth.

“One of my dumbass customers keeps using my roof to get wasted even though it’s employees only?”

“Lame! Wait, that one sounds familiar...”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m calling the cops.”

“No no no! Wait!” Rowan rushed to his feet and grabbed onto Jim’s arm before he had the chance to head back inside. He looked up at him with a strange sense of desperation in his eyes.

“What?”

“Please just...just do this one thing for me. And then I will leave. And I’ll never come back here again. I won’t stay on your roof anymore and—! And! I won’t litter the place with bottles! And I won’t tell a soul. I know what it’s like to hold a story that others don’t want to hear. To want to tell somebody things that you’re...that you’re scorned for. That you feel ashamed of. Or that others make you feel ashamed of. I know what it’s like to want understanding and to know it’s never there. I mean—I mean look at me! I’m hammered on a roof! And you didn’t understand me! You wanted me out of here or...yeah, you still want me out of here! But I feel like you understand me a bit more now!”

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

like you understand me a bit more now!"

"You just threatened me with a glass bottle."

"But trust me! And believe me when I say that I've heard it all! And whatever story it is that you hold is one you have every right to be understood for and I can be the one to listen! And—oh!" Rowan shuffled around in the pockets of his jacket before fishing out a half-eaten pack of gum, some lint, a bent paper clip, a hollowed out tube of chapstick, a dime, two quarters, and a crisp twenty dollar bill. He flashed the bill in front of him with a cheeky grin. "And I can give you a tip!"

The world held its breath as Jim stared at him. Yet not long after came the sigh. The long, weary exhale signaling his resignation. The faintest shake of his head and the slowest crouch back onto the shingled floor. Jim rubbed his temples and wrinkled his forehead.

"Fine...but the deal is, I give you my sob story and then you leave, right?"

"Scout's honor." Part of Jim doubted that Rowan was ever a scout or that he ever had honor, but he indulged him anyway. It had been a long night. One he was ready to be over with.

"My mom died."

"Oh...that *bitch*."

"That's not the betrayal part."

"Oh."

Jim spent the next few hours going through all of his life's woes. It felt odd, dedicating this much time trying to

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

keep up appearances only to now have everything spill out into the open. Jim told Rowan about his recent falling out with his ex-wife that left him with the bookstore. He told him about the scene the two of them caused at his mother's funeral and the disappointment from his father. He recounted other stories about his father in childhood—how he would have to rehearse conversations with him before they happened so as to not sound “stupid,” how he had to memorize his footsteps to know if it was safe to breathe, and how he has to constantly check his tone now just to make sure he doesn't sound too much like him.

With each choked up word and drawn out “sob story,” Rowan stayed quiet. His eyes were transfixed on Jim, only departing to gently nod at the right moments. He didn't interrupt, didn't look away or shift in his seat. As Jim continued, he kept leaning in closer as if to catch every syllable before it hit the ground.

Among the discard piles, Rowan was able to find a few untouched bottles of Guinness. Jim initially resisted, but eventually gave in to temptation. As Rowan predicted, the two of them found a sense of understanding with each other. They laughed, they cried, they bonded. They spent what must've been hours on that roof, regaling old tales and trading swigs of the bottle. Eventually, Rowan got up and shot one last pointed finger up at the sky.

“Come on, fuck you, moon!” With a hearty laugh, Jim pushed himself onto his feet and pointed at the sky, as well.

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

"F-fuck you, moon!"

"Yeah, fuck you, moon!"

"Who do you think you are?!"

"Yeah! Who the hell are you?! Fuck off, moon!"

"Fuck off, moon!"

"FUCK OFFFFFFF!"

The two of them collapsed onto the roof, laughing for a very long time. Jim's thoughts came thick and slow as his heavy pulse pounded behind his eyes. His mouth was dry. Head spinning. But it wasn't the incoming hangover that knotted his stomach. It was everything else.

Somehow, he found it in him to peel himself open as if it was nothing. As if those walls, which he had been building for years, hadn't been so casually bulldozed through in one drunken night. He rolled over and squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe this stranger would forget. Maybe he would forget too. Perhaps they both would. Or perhaps somehow, maybe, it mattered that someone had finally heard.

Jim gazed up at the sky above him. The canvas was no longer the inky chasm it once was, as warm hues of yellows, pinks, and oranges licked its edges. The myriad of stars began to fade as the moon retreated further down the horizon.

Jim greeted the new day with a smile, excited to see what new experiences he had in store, what new faces would greet him in his shop, and what new stories he would have to tell. He turned over towards Rowan, only to see a new shadow

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks



Katie Barton

settling over his features. His eyes were darting and unfocused—so wide Jim could swear they were about ready to fall right out of him. Rowan’s lips parted with a breath, trembling with words he couldn’t bring himself to say. His arms twitched. His muscles tensed. His forehead creased and dampened with beads of sweat.

A sense of dread hung over him like a shroud. A newfound dread that Jim couldn’t comprehend. He brought a slow arm over to grip Rowan’s shoulder. Rowan jumped at the contact and turned to face him. His gaze clouded as his brows pinched with a gentle furrow. He bit his bottom lip before finally blurting out his final parting words: “I’m sorry about this.”

Rowan lunged at him. With inhuman speed, he slammed Jim down into the red bricks and piles of bottles with a bone-cracking thud. The glass shattered on impact, stabbing into his back and littering the roof in a sea of red-soaked stars. Jim gasped, choking up blood and barely managing a scream before the fangs pierced his neck. He thrashed under Rowan’s iron grip. His fists flailed in desperation, slamming against Rowan’s unyielding form. His blood ran fast. His eyes fluttered. His blows began to slow as his body went limp—stone-cold, pale, and lifeless.

Rowan rose, lips stained in crimson. His breath was slow, staggered, and warm, and with his hunger finally satiated, left only silence in his wake. He reached toward one of the remaining intact bottles: a bottle of Guinness with just

The Moon Owes Me Twenty Bucks

Katie Barton



about one good splash left. He took his final swig and stared off at the sky. He wiped his face as tears mixed with blood and held his gaze with the celestial above.

“You...” Rowan choked, “you’re lucky you’re all I have.”

But the moon didn’t respond. Stoic and graceful. Silent and pensive. Unwavering and unmoving. It only stood and watched.

The Kicker

Maureen Wilson



POETRY

These days have smoked out on
better balconies, on ugly bar stools,
with backlit backs chasing cigarette tails
of what's left in the washing machine.

In every lifetime but this one,
we burned to each end of the matchstick,
blackened the fire engine first,
and only got worse. We shared
toothpicks, like cowboys and
strangers. Sod them with spit,
you said. I said, I still

find dust underneath what
has never moved, and never will.
Crop circles in new houses. Our
hack bed with tacks crumbling
under my thumb. After tracing the
rail, I hail for a taxi. For once,
I am going home.

This is a Poem I Wrote about Red Birds

Riley Courtney



POETRY

I'll be home this winter,
Swaddled by only what we'd call warm
If you still remember where home is
There will be room for you
Warmth, too

I'll have spent the summer learning
How to eat the feed, not the flesh
From your hand that only wants to love
And to be loved. I'll have spent
The autumn growing strong enough to fly

You see, I know what it's like to bleed
To be without blood and freeze
In ninety degree weather. I know what it's like
To walk around looking like a fresh wound
But really, be old and never healing

This time, I'll leave some food for you
Without making myself hungry
I'll love our young and myself too
I'll spend November learning how to fly
And maybe next time you decide to go
Where your instincts tell you it's safe

This is a Poem I Wrote about Red Birds



Riley Courtney



I'll go too

For now though, I'll wait
In my own warm winter

Till you return

A Game of Jenga

Theo Stewart



POETRY

Poke;
Minimal movement
Observe before deciding to

Prod;
Restricted resistance
Breathe
Wait a moment before

Push;
There's confidence in this play.
Small wobbles from
Disturbing the structure.
Still, it's stable.

Round one is complete with a
Pull, a
Shifting around of
Hopes and dreams,
Wishes on stars,
Unheard prayers and
Untold wants as
Though they're simply
Blocks of wood
Stacked in a
Tower, made into a

A Game of Jenga



Theo Stewart



Game done
Purposefully for the
Entertainment of the
Masses, and
Not the
Very basis that
Makes up my fragile backbone,
Crumbling boundaries, and
Comprehension of the
Concept of
No.

Round two has begun.

Poke.

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41

Emma Elson



PROSE

Version 3.7 — For Personal Use Only
Manufacturer: Exhausted Bodies, Inc.

I. PRODUCT OVERVIEW

The Superhero Model XJ-41 (hereafter referred to as *the Hero*) is a composite being engineered from stress fractures, unresolved longing, and an early exposure to comic books. The Hero is designed to appear in moments of crisis and vanish once stability returns.

Note:

This model is not intended for continuous operation. Extended use may result in emotional burnout, existential dread, or the persistent belief that they are not enough, even when they are trying.

II. COMPONENTS INCLUDED

1. Cape (optional)

The cape will billow dramatically in high winds or emotional turbulence.

Do not attempt to iron. The wrinkles are integral to the narrative.

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41



Emma Elson

2. Mask

Exterior grade.

Will conceal exhaustion, fear, and the feeling that they are an imposter.

*Not recommended for prolonged wear;
may fuse to identity.*

3. Origin Story Unit

Preloaded with one traumatic event (loss, betrayal, mutation, radioactive accident, failure, etc).

Users may customize with additional back story over time, but too many updates may crash the system.

4. Strength Enhancement Loop

Activates only under duress.

Does not function during calm weekday mornings, class meetings, or grocery shopping.

III. SETUP INSTRUCTIONS

Unbox the Hero in a private place.

Remove protective packaging carefully; contents are breakable, even if they pretend otherwise.

Charge the Hero by revisiting moments of survival:

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41



Emma Elson

- The first time you thought, *I can't do this*, and did it anyway.
- Nights that felt endless but ended.
- The day you realized no one was coming to save you, and therefore you might have to save yourself.

When fully charged, the Hero may emit a faint glow, sometimes only visible to themselves.

IV. OPERATING GUIDELINES

To activate flight, leap first.

The Hero is incapable of beginning gently.

To access superstrength, feel endangered enough.

Danger may include:

- literal peril,
- emotional distress,
- the presence of someone you love who needs saving,
- the presence of someone you don't love who needs saving,
- the pressure to function while breaking inside,
- or a mirror.

Warning: Users often misinterpret adrenaline for destiny.

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41



Emma Elson

V. MAINTENANCE AND CARE

The Hero may shut down or withdraw if not properly attended.

To preserve function:

- Offer quiet nights.
- Allow downtime between battles, even the invisible ones.
- Avoid comparisons to other heroes, especially those drawn with cleaner lines.

Clean suit gently after use. Bloodstains, tears, and fatigue are a normal byproduct and do not void warranty.

VI. TROUBLESHOOTING

Problem: Hero feels hollow or numb.

Solution: Reinstall humanity. (This may take several attempts.)

Problem: Hero questions worth or meaning.

Solution: Permit this. These labels can bruise the chassis over time.

Problem: Hero cannot determine whether power is a burden or a gift.

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41



Emma Elson

Solution: Consult inner monologue. Expect contradiction.

VII. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q1: Why does the Hero keep saving others but forgets to save themselves?

A: The programming prioritizes external emergencies. Internal distress is registered as “background noise.” Users may adjust settings manually, though few do.

Q2: Can the Hero retire?

A: Technically yes, but the world has a way of calling them back. Usually at the exact moment they sit down to rest.

Q3: Is the Hero allowed to be afraid or hopeless?

A: Fear is a required operating feature. Without it, courage cannot be generated. Emotional shutdown is a safety feature, not a flaw.

Q4: Why does the Hero often work alone?

A: Teams are available, but trust is a slow update. Many models prefer solitude to vulnerability. Isolation is a coping mechanism, not evidence of unworthiness.

VIII. SAFETY WARNINGS

- Do not confuse invincibility with worth.

User Manual: Superhero Model XJ-41



Emma Elson

- Do not attempt to carry collapsing buildings, emotional or otherwise, without proper support.
- Do not mistake the mask for self.
- Do not believe every origin story must justify every choice you make afterward.

Critical Advisory:

Prolonged heroism may result in the inability to ask for help.

If symptoms persist, remove cape immediately and place on a flat surface.

IX. WARRANTY INFORMATION

This Hero comes with no guarantee of glory, satisfaction, or narrative closure.

Only this:

When something breaks—a city, a friend, yourself—the hero may arrive, late and trembling, but still trying. If the Hero fails, remember: they were crafted from the same fragile materials as anyone else. The shell was borrowed. The power was borrowed.

The desire was real.

A Tree Falls in the Forest



Savannah Slater



PROSE POETRY

Love is a lens through which everything is painted in the colors of gentleness; it's not that flaws are erased, but rather that they are not set apart as flaws in the first place.

What is it that you want when you lie awake at night? What desire eats you alive from your heart outward? Do you want purpose? Do you want a grand revelation?

There is rarely ever purpose, and there is no such thing as grand revelation. There are no signs in the stars or prophecies in texts of old. But there is truth to be found, if you know where to look.

The truth is that everything matters, and the birds will always hear the tree falling in the forest, and someone will care. The work of life is love, and the work of love is small moments.

I know that this is true because I've seen the way the man walking his dog smiles when I ask if I could pet his dear friend, a golden retriever with white starting around his muzzle. I've seen the lock screen of the elderly woman in the doctor's office waiting room: a photo taken of another photo, a still of her and the man next to her—much younger, with near-identical pairs of round glasses.

A Tree Falls in the Forest

Savannah Slater



I've heard so many people make a little extra room in their sentences to name their friend, their partner, their brother, their wife. Everyone carries fragments of love with them every day, because what we love, we mention. We keep. We make time for.

The work of love is in food orders and birthdays and favorite things remembered; the work of love is in sticky notes and laughs on hard days, in borrowed clothes and pieces of candy and goodbyes that last far too long.

The truth is that no matter how much time you have, it will never be enough. You will always want more—one more day, one more hug, five more minutes.

So hold onto what you can, for as long as you can. Don't go looking for hate, because you will find it. Instead, look for love, because you will find it. In every corner, in every place you go and in every person you meet.

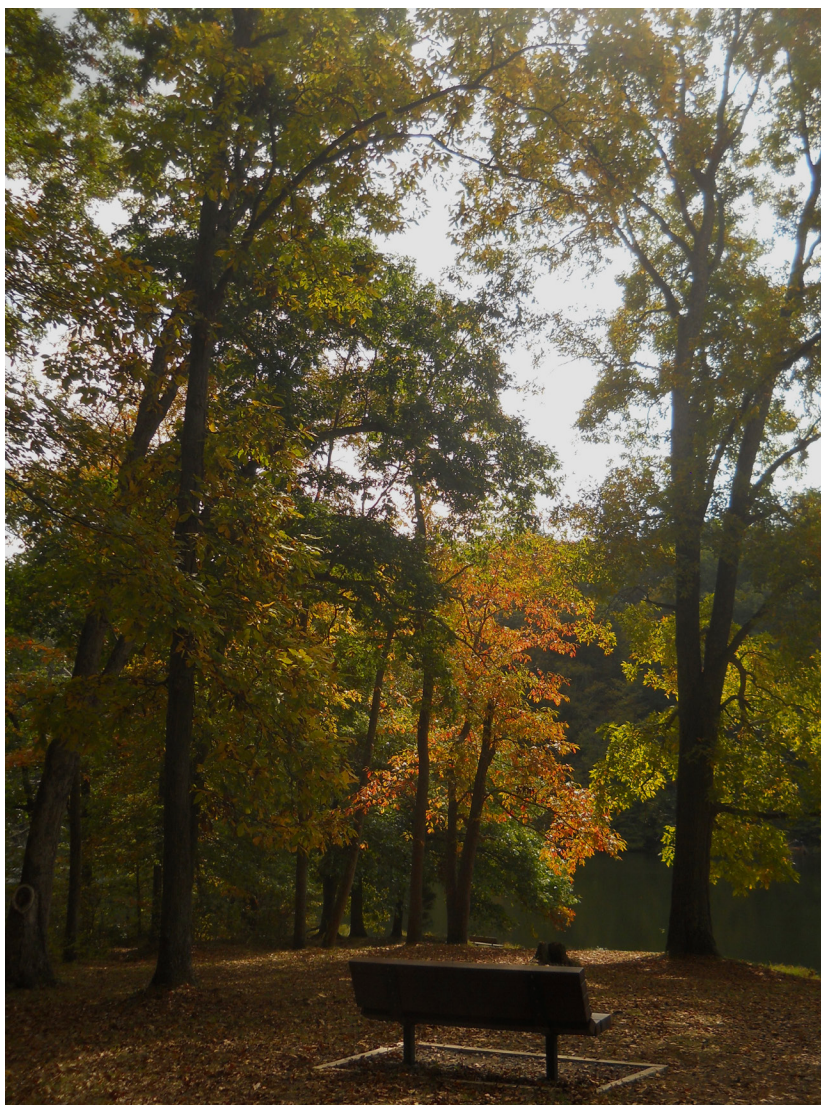
And if there is anything at the end of this world, do not come to it with a record of every pain you've suffered and what grace you endured them with; come with empty hands, carrying nothing but memories of how you have loved.

A Good Place to Linger

Kas Batchelor



PHOTOGRAPHY



A Good Place to Linger



Kas Batchelor

A Good Place to Linger Artist Statement:

“A Good Place to Linger” was taken in Nashville, Indiana, in October 2025. I went on this trip with my mom to get away from Oxford for the weekend; I needed peace. I found clarity in the beauty and silence of nature, which this work aims to reflect.

Scenes from campus

Lillian Wahl



PROSE POETRY

Oatmeal for breakfast is like a hug from your aunt. Walking instead of taking the bus is like going to a yoga retreat. A sip of coffee after brushing my teeth is like doodling on a failed exam. Smudging ink is like telling a classmate she looks nice today. Carrying an empty water bottle is like saying I'm going to law school. A perfect score is like an unrehearsed European cheek kiss-kiss. Brushing out curls is skipping class. Wearing shorts is admitting defeat. Over-ear headphones are a freeze ray. Correcting a misspelling of your name is staring a squirrel straight in the face. Overcaffeination is coming home to a messy apartment. Rings are dreams. Picked nails are emails. Tennis balls are drafts.

Your voice echoes gently off the red brick buildings. Scenes from campus.

A Poem That's Already Written



Savannah Slater



POETRY

Grief is the province of other, more gifted writers. Anything I take down about it is trite. What more can I say? What words can I reach for?

There is nothing for me to say. I do not hurt in a new or interesting way. I am closing the living room curtains and putting my sheets in the wash.

I am crying on the phone in the kitchen. The curtains are closed. How could I be so vain as to muse on what this means? You know what it means.

What more could I tell you? What could I tell you that you do not know?

Well, there is one thing you may not know:

The table is set as the sun goes down, the house is not cold or empty, and I am not left to sit alone with my hollow heartbeat all day.

I think that ghosts laugh in the silence between life and death, just as the living do. Must it always be weeping? Do the two not often run together?

Transience

Mary-Katherine
Andrews



POETRY

Hours and hours
Never enough
The tick-tick-ticking
Of cricket legs
A constant reminder
Of transience

My kindred spirits
Dance in rolling fields of lavender
And I stand on the edge
Transfixed by their loveliness
Wondering why
Why can't we just stay?

I grasp the air
As I sink into the earth
Begging for just one more
Moment
Of my head rested
On your shoulder
The way your smile
Lights up the room
Quiet giggles
In the witching hour
And in the night I feel her;
Transience

Transience



Mary-Katherine Andrews

Each hour feels like seconds
As dirt fills my lungs
With every passing day
It's only a matter of time
Till it all fades away
Will you hold me just a while longer?

The rolling dunes of time are fading
And you were all I saw at the center
Why would Mother Nature make life so brief
Knowing I could not hold her daughter forever?

Circles

Sara McGinnis



Painting

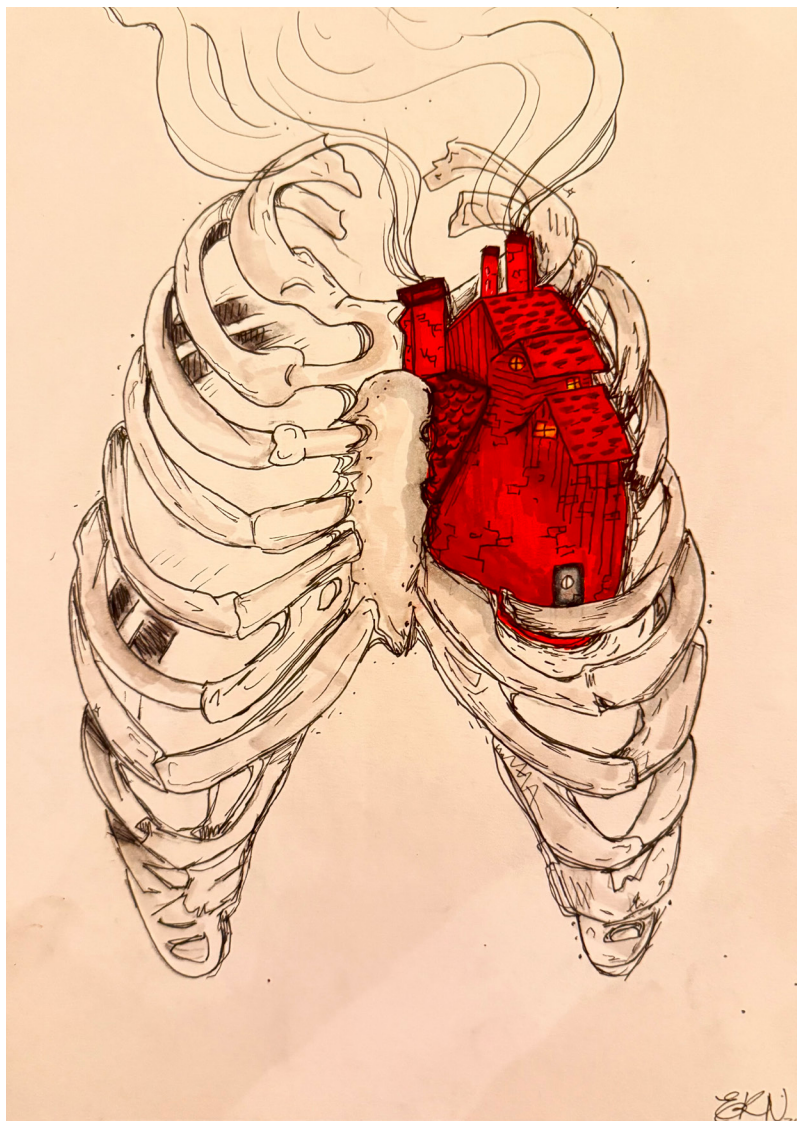


The Way Home Lingers

Elizabeth Nadolson



PAINTING



The Way Home Lingers



Elizabeth Nadolson



The Way Home Lingers Artist Statement

This piece expresses how homesickness dwells in the body. The ribs protect a heart shaped like a house, because home is not simply a place left behind, but something carried within us. Even in absence, our origin continues to beat beneath the surface. The presence of missing what we love settles into the chest, a persistent ache. Where we come from and who we miss will continue to live inside us.

You've Probably Heard This Before



Anna Blasinski



POETRY

I've got nothing
New to say. Nobody wants more
Love poems. Sob stories. Musings
On things we all already know.
Give me new eyes. Spring
Got here a little too early. This keeps happening.
Everything keeps happening, and I keep wanting
To open my mouth. To call it like I see it,
But we all already saw it. We know
The days are getting longer. So what if they refuse to be ig-
nored.
Why should anyone say anything about it. But
In the long sun, the meaningless details grow
Superbright.

the blizzard



Kara Felkley



POETRY

the blizzard beckons
but fastens on the face of
a gentle flurry

you and i stroll hand in hand
along the slick pavers with
flake-filled cracks

the evergreens sigh from
the weight they must bear
drooping and stagnant and
soaked and frigid all while
having to listen to humans
call the scene

exquisite

a frost spreads along
my lashes
 my nose
 my parted lips
and you call it

beautiful

the poison of the holly berries
keeps quiet when
mistaken for mistletoe

the blizzard

Kara Felkley

your art-adoring gaze
surveys the shop windows
warmly lit by a copper glow
without realizing
your hand left my hand

and so alone i stand

the frost creeps along
my waist
my legs
my boots
making me stationary

i attempt to plea for help
but the frost thickens to ice
between
my parted lips

and when my eyes try to
convey my desperation
they become glazed by
this once forgiving frost
miniscule icicles drooping
from my vacant water lines

you are accompanied by your
ego
as you amble up to my frozen frame

the blizzard

Kara Felkley



i anticipate your gaze to thaw me
but you simply cast your arctic stare
upon my once warmly lit body
and you call the sight
magnificent

The Fifth Horseman

Frankie Willis



POETRY

Traveler:

Through barren wastes, my feet still tread,
Through dust and ash, a world twice fractured,
Tell one, tell all, the world is dead,
Not a thing stood against God's great rapture.

From the dust, a horseman rides near.

A man of legend, a man of myth.

His presence gives no love; it's only fear.

Here he comes, one of the fifth.

Conquest:

Before mount of bone be where I stand,

Shattered kingdoms rest in my hand.

No banners wave, no trumpets call,

Be ye king, be ye lord, I rule ye all.

Traveler:

Your armor shines, though dulled with rust,

A crown that's cracked still grips your brow.

What conquest lingers now in dust?

What kingdoms dare defy you now?

Conquest:

No kingdom stands, no war will be won,

Yet something wicked this way comes.

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

Man has waged his greatest fight,
And turned his blade to slay the light.

Traveler:

You speak of men who sought to rule,
Who bent the weak beneath their pride.
Yet power fades, and turn'd them cruel,
When enemies come, rage be your bride.

Conquest:

But conquest lives in hearts unchained,
In thirst for more, in that hate ingrained.
Each man would take, each man would claim,
And so men fall into their own flame.

Traveler:

Then tell me, prince of death-born theft,
What throne is left to take from men?
With only ruin now, riches are bereft,
What is it now, that conquest can win?

Conquest:

There is no throne, nothing so grand,
Just shattered halls and cities drowned.
Man was the hand that forged my reign,
And in his grasp, he forged his bane.

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

Traveler:

Then you are dust, like all the pests,
The god of gold that lingers in defeat.
Your battle's lost, your blade's at rest.
What purpose now without pain to eat?

Conquest:

I linger without purpose, true, but never fade,
For conquest walks where men have strayed.
Not steel nor sword, nor marching feet.
But greed remains, and so I breathe.

Traveler:

Then let me pass, I seek no chains,
No throne, no crown, no lust for more.
I walk these wastes through loss and pain.
I do not quest for ceaseless gore.

Conquest:

Then walk you shall, but know this well,
The path ahead is paved with hell.
For I was first, yet I was not the last.
Go forth and see what man amassed.

—

Traveler:

Through ruins black and fields of bone,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

Where crimson stains the shattered land,
There is a voice, a thundered tone,
A warlord's wrath, a bloody hand.

War:

I am the fire, the crimson spear,
The drums that shake the soul with fear.
Where men have walked, I carved my name,
And bathed the earth in righteous flame.

Traveler:

Your form is clad in plated red,
A scarlet helm rests upon your head.
Your blade still drips, your banners tear,
The stench of your ash is in your air.

War:

No honor waits, no glory stays,
Just endless strife in endless days.
Man shapes my steel, man lights my pyre,
And dies still reaching for the fire.

Traveler:

I know your tale, I've seen your path,
In bloodied hands and broken breath.
Yet tell me, War, in all your wrath,
What honor rests in mankind's death?

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

War:

Honor? Ha! What a hollow plea!
Man made his trials through blood and me.
He forged his blades, he scorched his land,
And fell with steel gripped in his hand.

Traveler:

But now no banners catch the wind,
No legions march, no cannons roar.
No victor left, no war to win,
So what remains of you, rider of War?

War:

I do not fade, I do not cease,
For man has never longed for peace.
His heart was fire, his blood was rage,
And so I thrived in every age.

Traveler:

Then tell me, who called your name?
Who struck the match that burned so bright?
Did man alone ignite that flame,
Or did you teach the ape to fight?

War:

I did not teach, he always knew,
From sharpened stone to rifles new.
A beast that kills, a heart of strife,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

From sharpened stone to rifles new.
A beast that kills, a heart of strife,
He made me, gave me breath and life.

Traveler:

Then I will walk where you have burned,
Past shattered fields and hollow cries.
For if man's fate was never turned,
Then War, like him, will surely die.

War:

Then walk, but know that peace is weak,
A fleeting breath, a wish in vain.
For when man hungers, he will seek,
And War will rise to feast again.

—

Traveler:

The winds are weak, the sky is pale,
The earth is dry beneath my tread.
A barren land where harvests fail,
Where dust and sorrow mark the dead.

Famine:

You walk through fields where hunger spread,
Where roots have withered, waters dry.
Men feasted while their brothers cried,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

And now they starve, their harvest dead.

Traveler:

Your skin is pale, your frame is weak,
Your ribs press sharp beneath your cloak.
Your breath is thin, too faint to speak,
A specter wrapped in hunger's yoke.

Famine:

Do not steal, and take no more,
Like the last, I was fed by man's own greed.
He seized the plenty, and spread his seed,
Then left the child helpless, lost, and poor.

Traveler:

But hunger grew from man's own birth,
A crime of those who made the blueprint.
Yet now no wealth, no kings left on Earth
So tell me, what grievances do you print?

Famine:

The rich once dined, their bellies full,
While starving hands reached out for naught.
Yet greed endures, its grasp untaught,
And hunger spreads its bitter pull.

Traveler:

Then famine lasts beyond the end,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

A shadow cast where men remain.
Yet if they fall, if none contend,
What power lingers in your name?

Famine:

As long as hands will clutch and crave,
As long as wealth is hoarded tight,
There are those who plead beneath the night,
And hunger waits outside the grave.

Traveler:

Then I must journey where hunger fades,
Beyond the wails that fill the air.
If man still suffers, hope betrayed,
What gain was there in this despair?

Traveler:

The air is thick, the stench is vile,
A sickness clings to all I see.
Through rotting wastes, I walk this mile,
Through death that lingers endlessly.

Pestilence:

The coughs still echo, weak and thin,
A breathless cry fades into night.
Man let me in, he gave me sight,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

And brought the plague that lives within.

Traveler:

I see your form in tattered skin,
In pustules rise and fevered breath.
Your gaze, a hollow, vacant sin,
A walking shadow born of death.

Pestilence:

Their greed and filth, their poisoned air,
They wove their plagues with hands unclean.
They made me strong, they fed my spleen,
And then they wept in deep despair.

Traveler:

Then man himself unsealed his fate,
And gave you reign upon the land.
But now he's gone, so tell me straight,
Why do you linger where none stand?

Pestilence:

Oh traveler, you do not see,
A sickness born that brings no peace.
Though death may claim, I do not cease,
For where life grows, so grows me.

Traveler:

Then you will wait, in silence deep,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

For hosts to come, for flesh to spread.
Yet if none rise from where they sleep,
Then surely you, like them, are dead.

Pestilence:

No death for me, no final breath,
A herald of man's end and crime.
For life will crawl from rot and grime,
And in that birth, I bloom from death.

Traveler:

Then I will walk, though air is foul,
Beyond disease, beyond its blight.
For if man falls and none will howl,
Then Pestilence will lose its might.

Traveler:

The road is still, the sky is black,
No wind to stir, no sound, no breath.
Through silent waste, I don't look back,
For I have come to stand with Death.

A figure waits, so still, so stark,
No blade in hand, no way to fight.
No ember glows, no distant spark,

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

Just endless calm in endless night.

Death:

You have walked far.

Traveler:

I have.

Death:

And now, you stop.

Traveler:

I guess...there is no further road.

Death:

There never was.

Traveler:

The others spoke of man's great sins,

Of war and greed, disease and pain.

They cursed his name, condemned his kin,

Yet you, I feel, do not disdain.

Death:

Why would I? Man does as he must. He builds. He burns. He fades. And I take what remains.

The Fifth Horseman



Frankie Willis

Traveler:

Do you not grieve? Do you not mourn?
For all that's lost, for all that's done?
Is death but rest, so cold, so worn?
Or whispers lost beneath the sun?

Death:

There is no grief in what must be. No sorrow in the setting
sun. No anger in the falling leaf.

Traveler:

Then what am I?

Death:

You are the last.

Traveler:

And you will take me?

Death:

I will.

Traveler:

Is there nothing beyond?
No land, no light, no distant shore?
A fate so vast, yet unexplored,
A silent step, then nevermore?

The Fifth Horseman



Death:
Would it change anything if there were?

Traveler:
...No.

Death:
Then come.

el dorado

Becca Blanco



POETRY

myth of mine, promise of a greater something that is so far from
me. run south, search for a palace of gold and there will be a
people so eager to give it all to you. this place exists and already
you do not believe me.

you will find her there, gold-plated and all. she will presumably
welcome your conquest in that quiet way of hers. do not lose
sight of what is yours when she begs for mercy.

Uninvited Body

Eleanor Jones



POETRY

The ceiling hums with light I cannot escape. The room is a box, and I am its folded object. I move from corner to corner, picking up objects like they are proof of my existence: a half-empty glass of water, a wrinkled receipt, a shirt slouched over the chair. Nothing speaks back.

The air is heavy with a flavorless hunger. I try to name it, but the word slides away. It is not sadness, exactly, not grief, but something duller, like fog settling into the lungs. A silence that multiplies when I try to break it.

The day drags its feet against the floorboards. My body follows, clumsy, uninvited. I open the fridge only to see my reflection in the glass. My face looks like a stranger's, like someone who once promised to try but lost the thread mid-sentence.

Every object has its double: the chair waiting for no one, the phone holding no call, the bed rehearsing its empty embrace. I am doubled too, an echo walking beside me, asking nothing but staying close.

The night comes without ceremony. The lights dim. The shadows grow their own shadows. I sit and listen to the soft machinery of time, unsure if it is carrying me forward or leaving me behind. And still, I breathe. That is all. I breathe.

Oxford, Ohio. 2025.

Silence in the Dark

Amaryah Chandler



SCULPTURE



Silence in the Dark

Amaryah Chandler



SCULPTURE



A Reaper's Cento

Theo Stewart



POETRY

Every day & every night,
How strange this silent longing for death.
The lisps of death in every mouth,
A blizzard of glass and lace
Must I die in your fever—
I am making my loneliness so small it fits on a postcard,
Miserable and crotchety—
How do I dig you out of my gut?
A theater of hysteria and despair;
O, I am so lonely

These lines are taken from Eileen Myles, Ada Limón, Ariana Reines, May Swenson, Audre Lorde, Chen Chen, Mary Oliver, Wanda Coleman, and Henri Cole

Black Widow Beauty

Riley Courtney



PROSE

All winter, my nightmares were filled with widow webs and spider bites I was certain would kill me.

“You won’t die,” Alice assured me. “Black widow deaths being lethal is a myth. Those who do die are children or have some sort of other ailment weakening them already and...” Her frozen, analytical features folded into a smirk as her eyes outlined the silky white blouse I was wearing. Dirt and dust streaked across it from lifting the boxes out of her car. Beads of sweat had formed across my brow and dribbled down my spine, having dried since we stopped unpacking. My hair had been knotted and re-knotted in a bun on the top of my head. But, in that moment, Alice looked at me as if I were flawlessly nude and my body was something she needed.

“You are anything but weakened.”

Our apartment felt like a forgotten tomb until Alice installed dehumidifiers in every room to aid in her black widow collection. She checked every corner daily, collecting specimens in emptied spaghetti sauce jars and upside-down coffee mugs. By the halfway-point in the season, walking around the apartment felt like tiptoeing through a minefield; I could kick one over and free the eight-legged black and red beast at any given moment, submitting myself to its venom once again.

The first time I had been bitten, Alice had caught only two spiders—one from the bedroom closet and the other from the out-of-reach cabinets above the sink. She refused to dissect either.

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

“I need to find a male,” she insisted when I pressed her about the stalled progress in our product. “I need guaranteed reproduction. Reproduction in testing means replication in product.”

For the past two years, we had been developing a skin-care line that worked to protect its wearers against a variety of bugs. It was all Alice’s idea. She noticed the trend in SPF-wrought products and thought to hop on the dual-action skin-care bandwagon. It began with mosquito repellant. My skin is still polka-dotted with scars from the failed iterations in testing, but the paycheck that followed our first sell-out made the speckled scars worth it.

After mosquitoes, Alice thought of creating perfume that repelled bees while maintaining an enduring sweet scent. This was paired with a whipped body butter that interacted with the venom of their sting should the perfume wear off; it numbs the skin upon contact, minimizing the sting’s effect. The body butter was developed such that it lubricates the surface of the wearer’s skin and increases the likelihood that the bee would be able to free itself from the skin without dislodging its stinger, effectively saving its life; “Save the Bees” was an easy slogan that sold in minutes.

Those scars form a dotted grid on my upper thigh like a carefully planted orchard. Now, as sales slowed for the winter months, Alice thought to begin conducting a “venomous creatures” line, beginning with the black widow spider. Her hope was to create a lotion that simultaneously strengthened the skin, preventing the bite from piercing it to begin with, while

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

interacting with the venom in a similar fashion to the bee body butter, producing a cooling effect meant to alert the wearer of the nearby pest.

"If all goes according to plan," she explained, "you would only have to be bitten a few times. It'll get worse each time until it works, so we really only have a couple bites."

That night, I stripped naked in the bathroom and turned the hot water all the way up, forcing as much steam into the room as I could manage. My eyes traced all the scars Alice had given me. The surface of my flesh resembled a sick tree coated in nodes and hollowed with crannies. For a few moments, before the steam coated the mirror, the mangled flesh in the mirror became more and more horrific with every passing second. It wasn't until enough water had collected for me to be a mere tanned blob that I felt anything close to beautiful.

"I won't do it."

The towel was still wrapped around my body, water dripping from my legs overgrown with hair. Some patches weren't able to grow back after chemical burns in her early concocting days.

"Yes, you will." Her eyes didn't even flick toward me from the book she had been reading.

"No, I won't," I insisted. "I am sick of being used like this. I don't want to spend the next couple months down here in the dark, delirious and convulsing for the sake of your sick experiments."

"My 'sick' experiments are what pay the bills." She looked up with a weighted seriousness. "Not just mine,

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

must I remind you. Your parents', too. You get the better end of this deal tenfold. But, baby..." She stood up from where she had been sitting. Her deep black eyes rounded and her bottom lip pushed out into a pout. In the little light our apartment had, the burgundy gloss she had worn since we were in undergrad glistened enticingly. One hand wrapped itself around my towel-waist, the other, the bare of my neck as she pulled me into herself. "I need you. The product doesn't exist without you," she insisted. "I need you." All I could manage was a nod.

The way she looked at me was the furthest I could imagine anyone would get from how I looked at myself in the mirror. Without her, I thought, I had no one.

The first bite wasn't a part of the trials. We found webs clouding the corner beneath our bed. The bite hadn't woken me, but the sharp pain of my muscles cramping and the overwhelm of nausea was enough to send me shooting up into the dark depths of our room. Alice insisted on no lights while we were sleeping.

"Better for the bugs," she said. "More bugs, better product."

The nausea bubbled over like a pot abandoned to boil. I peeled myself out of her sleeping cradle and spilled myself over the side of the bed. When I had finished puking, I collected myself enough to feel her awake beside me, one hand holding my hair out of my face and the other rubbing my fever-sweat-coated naked back. All night, the lights remained off.

That morning, we found the culprit. After the fever subsided, Alice insisted that we shift the bed to the center of the room to keep the corners open for collection. Within a few days,

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

she caught the spider we thought to have bitten me, and its mate too.

I was still in high school when I first met Alice, though of course I paid her no mind then. She was the makeup artist at Sephora the day of my senior prom. Until two days prior, I planned on skipping the dance all together. Tickets alone were sixty-five dollars, and the nicest dress I owned was the communion-wine-stained confirmation gown from the seventh grade that ripped when I tried to make it fit over my seventeen-year-old hips.

My mother had gotten her third brain surgery just a week prior and hadn't been recovering as well as we'd expected. My father worked Saturday nights and my siblings hadn't seen our mom since I was able to take them to visit the week prior. Prom felt selfish in a way I couldn't justify until the head of the debate team came up to me two days before and asked, "Do you have a date?"

I shook my head, silently thinking through ways I could try to get out of what he was about to ask.

"Would you want to go with me?"

"I can't aff—"

"I'd buy your ticket. I can't be the only one on the team without a date and I waited too long to ask anyone so..."

He tilted his head down at me like a begging dog who knew I would give in. I've never been good at saying no, but my nos have always had a way of getting lost to the wind regardless. Despite my makeup appointment being in the middle of the day, I went fully dressed for the prom. Deep red, sequined, on clearance from the winter holidays. The dress

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

had sleeves that held snug against my arms that I knew would stand out among the dresses of my classmates more than I would have liked. I refused to break the promise I had made to my siblings and I wanted my mother to see me in my dress, so getting ready started as early as it possibly could.

"You look stunning," Alice beamed as I sat down in her chair. "And God! Your body! I wish I could be young again. You look like the hourglass on the back of a black widow's bottom."

It was a compliment I brushed past with pursed lips and a small nod. It wasn't until the night we began working on the venomous creatures line that she reminded me of it. "We've got to begin with the widow," she stated. "Without them, we may never have gotten together, you know. Think of these products as a symbol of our love. A testament to our story. Your beauty would be the selling point. My love makes the products."

On prom night, I stood fully glamorized in the doorway of my mother's dark hospital room. Her eyes couldn't tolerate much more light than what trickled through the hospital blinds and shone from the various machines' screens that made sure her heart was still beating and her lungs still breathing. That light was enough to turn the confused tears I mistook as joyful that trickled down her face into little glistening streams.

She pushed a button on the side of her bed and a red light shone through the dark room. A nurse pushed past me just a few seconds later and switched off the call button. "What's wrong, Helen?" The nurse poked at the machines around her in an attempt to guess what was bothering my mother before she could tell her, but when everything seemed normal, she looked

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

up at me and waited for my mother to respond.

"I think this girl's supposed to be on a different floor," she said. Her voice was soft and shaking, both weak and fearful. "The princesses are for the children."

"Mom?" My voice matched hers.

"Helen," the nurse said with a firm confidence I couldn't have possessed in that moment, or ever again when talking with my mother. "That's your daughter."

"Daughter?" She looked into her lap and wrapped her hands around her womb as if there were a child growing in it. "I'm not due for another few months."

"No, you're not pregnant, Helen. *This* is your daughter and these are your boys." She gestured to where my two brothers had made themselves comfortable and quiet on the hospital room's pull-out couch in the corner. Over the months leading up to her surgery, they had gotten used to Mom's memory issues, though I could still see the sting written across their little faces.

"Oh," Mom said, though her hands didn't leave her stomach and her eyes refused to look up. "Why is she dressed like that?"

"It's prom night and..." I let my voice trail off as every word seemed to hit her like a dart, warping her expression even further into confusion.

"If you guys need anything, just push that button again and someone will come in." The nurse gestured to the side of the bed before making her way to the door. "Have the time of your life tonight. You look amazing."

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

I pressed my lips into a smile, but couldn't bring myself to say thank you. The four of us sat in silence until my phone buzzed from the debate boy letting me know he was about to leave and it was time for us to get home.

The second time I met Alice, the time I remembered, it was the cold sludge months of mid-January and she had moved away from Sephora to begin freelance work out of her apartment. The makeup artist market was an oversaturated one, she explained to me that day. Low test scores in the township meant more people turning to trades as opposed to traditional university, which for a lot of girls meant cosmetology school. Big events like weddings, dances, and photoshoots were largely called for and Alice lacked the credibility needed to throw herself into those rings.

"The market I'm looking for is here," she said as she pulled her arms through a shiny black puffer jacket. She gestured around the assisted living facility we had recently moved my mother into with her head and the same casualty as someone mentioning "yonder."

She continued, "All of these people are going to die fairly soon and they'll need someone to fix 'em up before they get laid to rest. Dead bodies don't scare me and elderly people will go for anything if the price is right, so I've been going door-to-door advertising my services hoping it'll stick when the time comes."

"That's a little sick, don't you think? Profiting off of the dead and dying like that?" My stomach twisted at the realization that I had run into her on the way out of my mother's room. She just shrugged.

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

“Death is an industry. It’s not my fault it’s profitable.” I could only nod, but I felt my lips pinched to a tight line as I held her unsettlingly perky gaze.

She went on to explain that she’s new to the area and was looking to make some friends, and asked if I was interested in grabbing a meal sometime. Rejection coursed through most of my body, but it was diluted by my own winter-born loneliness. I agreed and scheduled dinner with her three weeks out with the plan to cancel once we got closer to the day. We exchanged numbers, however, and began calling nearly every night. With every conversation that we had, the easier it became to push away the nausea that at first was threatening to boil over every time she mentioned the assisted living facilities and her clients.

After my initial accidental bites, it took a few weeks for Alice to produce a viable egg sack on the female and another month until the laid eggs hatched. In that time, I had taken to leaving the apartment as much as possible. We lived near the center of a small town, with plenty of mom-and-pop shops and local coffee spots within walking distance, but I learned quickly that the closer my destination, the sooner my return was expected. So I found libraries, cafes, farmers’ markets, and biking trails that took at least an hour to get to by foot and learned to make those activities last the day. By the time I would return, Alice would have spent the day mapping and remapping the widows’ webs in their enclosure and comparing them to those of previous days in an attempt to predict their health. Her eyes would have grown weary and her body would ache from how wound she had held her posture for the entirety of the day.

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

Without intervention, she would have exhausted herself to the point of immediate agreement when I suggested heading straight to bed without any discussions of the business or the product.

I was able to fool myself into believing that if I stayed gone for long enough, she would have forgotten the need to test the products at all. I was able to convince myself that she would realize the absurdity of what she was asking of me before I had to object again. But then, the yellow bulbous sack that had been swaddled in the corner of the enclosure began to tear open. She called me as soon as movement was visible and exclaimed, “Get ready! It’s testing time!” with the same giddyness as a child who had spent the day waiting in line for a rollercoaster they were tall enough to ride for the first time.

“I’m not doing it,” I asserted as soon as I got home that night.

“Of course you are,” she said without taking her eyes off the egg sac.

“No, I’m not.”

“We’ve already invested too much into this to quit. I have all the product ingredients on pallets in the other room and all the lab equipment rented to run the tests. If you don’t do this, not only would we be too short of money to support your parents, but we’d be too short to support ourselves. We’d have nowhere to live and nothing to eat. Not testing isn’t an option.”

Two weeks later, once the spiders had time to mature, she had me lay on my back in our bed. Our bedsheets were replaced by a thick sheet of plastic coated with a thin sheet of

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

plastic coated with a thin sheet of paper making our room feel like the doctor's office right before an invasive examination. My clothes were stripped, as was typical with our trials. By the time our third product was in trial, our sexual relationship had developed enough such that I was no longer bashful when naked around her. Still, she covered my chest, neck, and head with a blanket thin enough for me to breathe easily through.

"When you're on my table, you're a subject," she explained.

"Don't you think that's a little crude? I'm your girlfriend, not a pincushion."

"I can't do my work in good conscience if I can see your face when the symptoms set in."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be doing your work."

I'm not sure what compelled me to lay down on that table. I had felt the bite of a black widow spider and knew it was something I never wanted to experience again, yet I felt the weight of my obligations and let them lead me to that room, strip me of my clothing, and lay myself down on my bed. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for Alice, though I never could explain the hold she had on me.

The first bite was just below my rib cage. She told me she would let the spiders loose on my body one at a time and let them bite where they naturally bit to ensure conditions most similar to that of a natural environment. From the first few bites, she would use a needle to attempt to extract the venom from the bite and use it in creating the chemical compounds that would create the cooling effect she desired.

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

My left leg was slathered with the base of the lotion we had created to repel and prevent bee stings and my right leg was slathered with a generous layer of a new concoction she had created when her attention wasn't occupied by the widow's development that was meant to make my skin impenetrable. Variations of products—perfumes, foundations, body oils—were placed on isolated areas of my arms and marked off with tape such that if a widow were to bite one of those locations, she could gather how they would react to each product.

Getting the spiders to bite unprovoked proved difficult. They had been raised in direct proximity to a human, and my simple presence wasn't enough for them to bite at the frequency Alice was hoping for. She used a metal tongue depressor heated on a hotplate she kept on the floor beside her while she worked to hover it right above the widows' backs, just enough for me to squirm slightly at its heat and for the widows to bite from the discomfort of the hot pressure. After the trials had been going for a few hours, and I had been bitten more times than I was able to keep track of, I began to feel grateful for the warmth of the tongue suppressor as the fevers had set in and the chills had begun making it feel near impossible to keep still.

"The lotions are performing well," she said with a cool tone of observation. "There are some tweaks I will have to make for tomorrow's trials, but they'll be more minor than I was anticipating."

I had shut my eyes soon after the drape was placed over me, not wanting to see the shadow of her moving around me as she worked, but when the chilled air rushed against my face

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

when she pulled it off, they opened abruptly.

“You need to eat.”

All I could do was shake my head. My hair was knotted beneath my head in a pool of my own vomit, of which the stench had gathered so richly beneath the blanket throughout the trials that I hadn’t realized how much I actually expelled until it was removed and I could breathe again.

“You’re going to eat,” she rephrased before walking to the kitchen to gather whatever it was she was about to force into my system.

The spiders had all been collected back in their enclosure at the foot of our bed. From where I was sitting, the drapey gathered in my hands and wrapped around my fevered shivering body, they were nothing more than a period at the end of a sentence, if that. They too were back and swaddled up by their webs, as if the day’s work had exhausted them, as if my blood had somehow made them as sick as their bites had made me. Beneath the thick white webs, I could see a few more expecting mothers, or rather, I could see the bulbous white egg sac attached to their behinds. The speed at which Alice had managed to exponentially expand her widow population simultaneously impressed and terrified me. She never did anything in excess. If the spiders were allowed to reproduce so readily, it was because she had a purpose for them, and I was certain I was related to that purpose. Excess meant having to kill, and Alice didn’t believe in premature death, or at least premature death by her design.

She came back into the room with a wide-mouth bowl of

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

something that looked thicker than liquid but thinner than a soup. It slid down my throat, one spoonful at a time, though I was too focused on getting the food down in the hopes that the trials had ended for the evening and I'd be allowed to rest to pay attention to the taste. I didn't want to eat, but as the food settled in my stomach, some energy returned to my body.

The bites itched throughout that first night, though it was more the fever dreams that kept me up than anything. Every time I was certain I had slipped into sleep and my body would get some sort of time to restore itself, I was returned to something that felt like a waking state within our apartment, only the walls were warped and covered with a gargantuan black widow spider with all eight of its eyes pinned on me. In the dreams, I still itched, and, more so than the spider's bulbous eyes, I couldn't shake the feeling of Alice's stalking gaze, though I couldn't seem to find her.

The only indication I had that it was morning came from Alice turning on the overhead light and standing in our doorway with the plastic bed covering and a cart filled with product samples.

"I was up all night testing serums with venom. I think I've come up with one that should ease the bite's itch."

"Gimme." I snatched the bottle she had held up to show me out of her hands and began to rub it across every little bump on my body with the ferocity of a dog attempting to pull ticks out of its own fur using nothing but its paws. The relief was immediate.

"And?" She looked at me with the same curiosity as her

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

widows. Nothing more than a subject.

"It works." I hated giving her the satisfaction of an answer.

"Good. Now, day two. Strip, please."

The sheet she would use to cover my chest and head was folded on the cart, alongside the products. Every one of my joints ached from the venom that coursed through me and the lights being on alone made it difficult to see our bare bedroom walls as anything but pulsing, swirling muscles that threatened to collapse in on us at any given that I hadn't realized it was so severe until later when EMTs found me and administered an antivenom, providing some sort of relief. As I sat up, unable to hold her eye, I couldn't get more than half an inhale in.

"I don't think I feel well enough for more," I said. "Please, don't make me do more." She gave a small nod. Disappointment melted into the shadows of her face, but she did well enough to hide it.

"I understand. You took in a lot of venom yesterday. Perhaps we should wait until you've recovered more to continue."

The apartment was silent enough in that moment to hear a soft tap from within the enclosure. Alice sprang at the noise and the disguised disappointment that had trickled across her expression transformed into a full fledged flood at the sight of the noise.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she snapped. "I...I'm going to go make you some tea. I'll bring back some blankets and medicine for the fever too."

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

She hovered in the door frame for just a moment before turning back with the closest thing to a warm smile I could remember seeing on her throughout that portion of our relationship.

“And thank you for being willing to do this.”

For the next week, she didn’t bring up testing or the widows or the products at all. Every morning, afternoon, and evening for the first few days, she brought me tea to my bed and would sit with me with an arm around my shoulders and my body folded perfectly into her curves for a few hours while I rested. When I felt I had the energy to, we would walk around town and I took her to some of the coffee shops and bike trails I had explored in the weeks trying to avoid her. The tea became a ritual, though it only stuck in the evenings after those initial days. It was something herbal, she had told me, though with each passing night, I was able to taste the thick sweet honey more and more than tea until it got to the point where she could have been serving me warm water and honey and I wouldn’t have been able to tell. The sweetness was a treat, though. It was enough of a reminder of her love to make me forget most of the trials, and most of what I was sure was still to come with time.

On the last night she brought me tea, I had meandered over to the widow enclosure in the corner. Since the trials, the egg sacs I had seen had hatched. My skin felt alive just looking at them as they climbed across one another, fighting for what little space they had. Alice had explained to me once that they were a rather solitary species. They don’t live in colonies like

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

ants or bees, so the proximity the enclosure forced them into was unnatural for them. In most of the corners, beneath the web-bings, were corpses of some of the fully grown spiders.

"I've been removing the dead daily." Alice slid behind me and handed me that evening's cup of tea. There was a curl to her grin and a sway to her body that caused heat to simmer to the surface of my cheeks. "They just keep dying though."

Her eyes slid up and down me. I brought the warm beverage to my lips and took a long sip. The sweetness of the honey overwhelmed me still, though compared to the night prior's tea, there were undertones of another flavor that I reduced to the tea being stronger.

"I don't think they have enough to eat. I've been trying to sustain them off of the apartment's bug population but that hasn't sufficed, clearly. It's just such a shame they've had to starve."

The light in the room began to dim around us, though neither of us were standing remotely close to the light switch. Weight settled across my body and I felt myself begin to sway where I stood. I looked down at the mug in my hands then back up at Alice where she stood. I took another sip and decided that the taste may have been tea, but it certainly wasn't the same tea she had given me with the honey. There was something else in the mug.

"Alice, what did you do?"

"I'm sorry." The mug slipped from out of my hands and smashed against the floor. Without realizing it, my grip had softened. My entire body was softening. "You should sit down. You'll fall soon if you don't."

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

I looked down at the mug, though getting my eyes to move felt like trying to run through water. The glass had shattered against my foot and blood spilled out from multiple cuts, but I felt none of it. The warmth of the water may as well have been the air.

“Alice,” I said again, this time a desperate plea.

She pushed me down onto the bed. Any effort I may have had to fight back had vanished. My limbs had locked from whatever it was she had laced my tea with. Last week’s bites still itched violently along my hip, across my stomach, and between my shoulder blades, but my weakened will couldn’t manage more than a flickering plea in my eyes as they trailed Alice fastening my arms, legs, and neck to the bedframe.

“Convulsions will set in soon. I can’t have you moving,” she muttered. “You’ll squash them. Can’t have that happening.”

The light was just brighter than a half-moon in the forest. The whites of her eyes and the barbs of her teeth, brightened from our botanical dental care line, shone like predatorial beacons in the darkness. As she finished fastening my limbs, her lips brushed across my cheek leading to my lips. I couldn’t kiss her back.

She pressed further into my lips for longer than I would have ever let a single kiss linger. My lips too were locked, but less solid than I would have liked. They remained penetrable. Honeysuckle and daffodil-sweet flooded my tastebuds. To this day, springtime remains a struggle as all the air transforms to the scent of that night’s violation.

Before she opened the enclosure, she turned the bedroom light off.

Black Widow Beauty



Riley Courtney

“They like it better in the dark. I don’t want to make them bite this time. They just need to feed.”

I couldn’t remember if I closed my eyes. It didn’t matter once the lights were off. There wasn’t a darker place than that apartment. I couldn’t actually feel my body, but I knew enough to fill in the sensation of every one of her spiders crawling around my body and biting whatever tender flesh they thought could fill their appetite. The numbing effect of the drug wasn’t enough to keep the feeling of Alice’s eyes from off my body either. She stayed in the room the entire time her insects feasted, the entire time I unconsciously convulsed, and the entire time the EMTs loaded me onto a gurney and wheeled me out of that dark, dank apartment for the last time. She had been the one to call 911 once she had returned her spiders to their enclosure and realized my lips had turned a shade of purple and my pupils dilated beyond the natural state darkness would have brought upon. She cared enough to save me when it came down to it. She never did care for unnecessary death.

Land That Refuses to End

Kas Batchelor



PHOTOGRAPHY



Land That Refuses to End



Land That Refuses to End Artist Statement:

“Land That Refuses to End” was taken in Washington at the Dungeness Spit in July 2025 on a vacation to visit family in Seattle. I love this piece because it reflects the never-ending possibility of ecological dominance. Even if humankind ceases to exist, the beauty of the land will persist. Additionally, I like the inclusion of foliage, water, and land all shown in one photo.

Old Stones of Georgia

Kas Batchelor



PHOTOGRAPHY



Old Stones of Georgia



Old Stones of Georgia Artist Statement

“Old Stones of Georgia” was taken in Savannah, Georgia, in March 2025. I was inspired by the architecture I saw while visiting the city; the historic details of the area allowed for lots of creativity. This piece plays with texture, detail, and light contrasting shadow.

10th Grade

Maureen Wilson



POETRY

Three teenage birthdays with tampered wax.
Hundreds of dandelion seeds wick in the wind,
like toy paratroopers.

For an hour, a year, it was
nothing but the bus chugging
and whirring impressions of a person

I found handsome like a fence,
whose best words were silence, and who
I almost kissed once in a dream.

*Isn't love simply accepting
someone's weight on top of you?*

Temporary escape would ride my vision
like an old dancer in new linen
and ribbon who follows the skyline with thousands
of pounds on her cloud feet.
She has already kicked off her flats.

What if...

What if...

She doesn't sink. She rolls down
the cotton hills, does most of her thinking
in dotted trills. Preoccupied by nothing,
nothing at all.

10th Grade



At the candle, I keep that one wish
for real boys to become tender timber,
with big blue bows under stubby noses
that stay short,
and a curt attitude caught in red strings.
They confess when need be, runs off in clogs
without knowing they'll eventually come back.

Because I still am that little girl,
who keeps wishing and tending
her field of weeds that will grow into nothing,
nothing at all.

An Observation

*From 4/7/2025 at the Richard and Carole
Cox Art Museum*

Courtney Moore



POETRY

You carve each shape into me, giving me form.
A subject woven into visuals
cherish each scratch and lather
cold paint, sour dyes, soft powder.

I ask, was it hard to part from me?
Did you hand me over with ocean filled eyes? Or take joy
in letting me take my first steps?
Did you take years to save me from those who did you
wrong? Or are you still held
within someone else's grasp?

The others around me had questioned the same.
Some were from far away lands, older than the building itself.
They know more than an archive ever will.
Some were of the locals, whose parents still visited
and took pride in how far their children came.

People watch me. They judge me.
I see myself through the reflection of their pupils.
I hear them with an echoing voice.

*I could make that on my own. It's just shapes and scribbles.
I could never make something like that. I can't even draw a
circle.*

An Observation

*From 4/7/2025 at the Richard and Carole
Cox Art Museum*



Courtney Moore

*How is this in a museum? This isn't even art.
I love this piece. I'll be sad when they rotate it out next week.*

Or they stare.
I can't read their faces but they read mine.
Through their gaze, they unweave each fiber
holding me together.
I wonder what they think of me as they wonder the same.

An Observation Artist Statement:

This piece was based off of my first visit to the Richard and Carole Cocks Art Museum. I thought about artwork in museums as an artist myself, and having to relinquish possession of your pieces so it could be displayed in a museum. It reminded me of a parent dealing with empty nesting, which led me to write this poem.

it's hard to write real estate blogs when there's ICE on every street.



Becca Blanco



PROSE

Inspired by the work of Rosemarie Dombrowski

i still want to show them how to feel, be human, do a favor, be introspective, find it within themselves, go out of their way, turn screens off, make a connection, build a community. i'm tired of writing—in *this article*, we'll discuss and now, *here's our top ten* . . . why does no one think the news is worthy of conversation? why is convenient evidence so much better than science? i get email alerts reminding me that it's easier to scream to yourself that you're right instead of considering maybe possibly you weren't. i want others to love thy neighbor without the incentive of eternal damnation at their back. hell feels like threatening your children to be good or they'll go to bed without dinner. hell feels like some people are already there: held in a basement somewhere like penned animals while their families hide in fear. more fear and more fear and more fear. become so afraid that you don't have anything to do but wait and hope and thoughts and prayers. repeat it enough and you might believe it when you plead powerless. real estate blogs taught me that.

Handprints

Savannah Slater



POETRY

Is art dead? Is art dead? Is it dead? Has the medical examiner signed the autopsy report yet, or is he still writing articles on copyright? Are the courts still busy with the paperwork? Have you heard about what the new app can do?

What is art? Can we still see the handprints of our ancestors on the cave walls, or have we plastered over them with candy-colored advertisements? Can we still feel the cold stone beneath our hands?

Democratized, monetized, butchered, cut apart and redistributed. Sliced open so businessmen and tech junkies can eat their fill, bloody-lipped and gluttonous.

Is art dead? How hard are you trying to suffocate it?

Do you really think that anything you could possibly do would kill it? Can you replace every beautiful living bloom in the world with plastic?

Do you really think we won't still put our hands in the dirt?

Forget-me-not

Maura Menker



SHORT STORY

“You can do anything you want in life,” I hear a soft voice tell an anxious child. This soothes her for the time being and she goes back to playing with her dolls. Her dolls live a thousand lives, rebuilt time and time again through her imagination. She soon learns that she, herself, can live thousands of lives, on paper, written by pen. Her mother pulls books off her sleeping face well into the night, and she builds a reputation as “smart” in school—just because she reads. Her skin burns from the dark metal picnic table on the playground in the summer, frostbitten in the winter. In the spring, purple forget-me-nots sprout in her a rejuvenated passion. Her mind comes up with its own narrative, examining friends swinging on the monkey bars she never learned to use. She never wanted to.

“You can do anything you want in life” turns into “You have to be realistic.” Thoughts become harder to find when she enters a maze of infinite turns and dead ends. Which one leads to the expected? She can’t read their minds; if she could, she would. Find whatever it was that could delight her anticipating audience, all taking their guess at which path will lead her to the finish line. After every turn she feels like she’s right this time, *this is it*. Her hand meets another cold stone wall. She’s forced to start over again, rebuilding her own reality. Forever a stem tugging her back to the center, toward the one long path she hasn’t allowed herself to take. She looks over her shoulder, dampened from her journey. Her pen is still tucked over her ear, buried behind the hair she’s grown to blend with the crowd. Only one option remains, so she takes it, clumsily at

Forget-me-not



Maura Menker



first, each step more poised than the last. She sprints to meet whatever lies on the other side of these walls, fatigue weighing on her muscles. When the sunlight lights the new road winding into the horizon, roses and tulips and carnations outlining the way, her thoughts start to become less hazy. The sun sets and she walks. She's tired of following a road constructed by others, for others. The sun starts to rise again and still she walks into the beam of gold, away from pavement and into the bed of flowers. Her audience drifts into the scenery, and she can barely discern their muffled shouts. She picks roses and tulips and carnations and searches for the purple pinwheels she can see so vividly in her mind. Her friends that tugged her in this direction. She will see them again.