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Evey Cooper / *Wear It Like a Hat (5 of 9)*

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Loch Norse Magazine

Northern Kentucky University

Highland Heights, KY, 41099

Dear Reader,

This year was a year of firsts. As *Loch Norse* we have opened ourselves up in a multitude of ways this year that we have not previously. This was the first time we collaborated with SOTA, our first Open Mic with a musical guest, our first time in the Planetarium where students read among the stars, our first time adding a new genre to the magazine. It has also been the first year we have felt the most normal since 2019. We have returned to campus in a way that feels as close to before the pandemic as we may ever get. It has been such a joy to see everyone's faces again, to see life breathed back into campus. And while everything may feel different, we have preserved and explored this year of firsts.

Throughout this edition of our magazine we are sharing beautiful works created by amazing students who make up NKU. These students have pushed through, lived through a pandemic, and are still writing and creating art. They have found beautiful ways to write about what still matters. There are stories of love, of loss, and trying to heal. Wonderful works by wonderful people just trying to make their own way in the world.

Our staff would like to thank everyone who attended our Open Mics this year. We thank you for exploring new places with us and for embracing a diverse cast of featured readers in person, in new places, and on Zoom. We would also like to thank the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of English, and everywhere that has hosted us this academic year.

Welcome to *Loch Norse Issue XII*. We hope you enjoy.

Sincerely,
Josaf na Garcia

Issue XII

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Thank you to all of our contributors, continued supporters, open mic attenders, readers, and our devoted staff for making Issue XII of *Loch Norse Magazine* possible. Thank you for supporting our passions and providing us with a space to be creative.

Do you remember when the earth was still, and the streets
were mute?
We danced together in the pouring rain on our metal balcony
with no shoes
How thoughtless we were to the threat of
the first strike of lightning that ripped through the sky
We didn't retreat to the safety of our living room to watch
the show
We stayed where we were, soaked in the tears of angels

out
with enthusiasm in your voice

We should start a band, you said
We don't know any instruments, I said
You laughed and told me that it didn't matter,
We have plenty of time to learn

We never did.

to



;is to shape-shift your existence
apologize for the space you take
up

James Brown, Bewildered (1958)

Nine-hour drives. I miss it. The feeling
that you get after 14 espressos and 5 albums. You pick one

that caution, so often disregarded by people like us, when in places like Aptos. Caution is wisdom, wisdom is knowing when to use wisdom, and when to let your hair down. You lose that you might as well be dead, so don't lose it- but know when to put wisdom away, even for a few hours....

You're going to be fine. Mescaline never killed anybody, well, it probably has, but we're going to be fine. We'll go watch the fireworks, just off the boardwalk on the beach. The first mortar soars into the California night air. The end of the wick causes a brief silence, then an explosion- with a sound that hits my chest like a slug from a shotgun. It feels swollen. Everyone's face around me stranger or not is illuminated green. The fireworks painting the boardwalk as they see fit. Sundresses and khaki shorts take on a new, colorful life. Red and white plastic Coca-Cola cups turn

weed and if not, do we "at least have a dollar?" I see it all through the blue light of a projected film. I say nothing, not out of spite or ignorance- I've just never been one to talk during films. We walk past them wide-eyed and silent- roll credits.

The beach sounds are different when they're not being heard under the interrogation room lighting style of the Santa Cruz boardwalk. The sand has more give when you can't see your shoes. Sweet artificial lime-just for a moment. The calm of darkness, the stress-relief of turning the light switch downward and watching the film under the blankets of the California storm clouds rolling in from the Pacific, preparing the morning rain.

I long for the morning rain to wash my face clean of the green tint of the first mortar that soared into the California night air. To clean my chest-wound left open from the sounds of battle-field explosions. To drink down the lime and sulfur that lingers on my tongue. The orange rind sun peaks over the oceans now visible horizon. The curtain call for the boardwalk's interrogation room lamps.

One day, around the age of seven, I ventured up into the woods to see a friend.

The pallet of leaves the autumn trees laid out for me crunched under my feet as they roughly swashed around in my boots. The trees would always stretch out their barky hands and pull me further up the hill, out of the holler my childhood home sat within.

Even as a kid I knew that if I kept climbing I could make it to the ridge of the valley and see over my entire town. The whole mile it stretched. I could see the roof of my elementary school, the one my teachers would insist there wasn't enough time to explore. I could see the steeple of my church that held a bell that hadn't worked since the year my mother was born. All I'd have to do is glance to my right to see her childhood home and its blue siding; or maybe it's gray. I suppose that people are right when they say how easy some things are to forget.

The trees that were helping me climb turned to catching me as I began to stumble into the hill's belly button. The brush was always taller there, but I slid through the path I'd trampled before. My dress got snagged on a thorn bush, Mama always suggested that I change before I went out.

! A limQ

imagine their confusion. They complimented my creativity and sent me to my room, shoulders hunched and face twisted.

The next day I made the trek back, just to see if they

to. I'm Daisy."

To this day, I swear he said the exact same words as me except for the last one.

"Since you ain't gonna talk, hows about we race up the crick," we glanced down the stretch together, "First one to that tree wins. I win: you tell me your name; you win: I'll just try again t'morrow."

He shot me a smirk. We both turned on our heels and took off. The tree wasn't far. I glanced down to make sure he was still with me, and he was looking right back at me. We jumped over a thicker branch, and I could feel the crick rocks shooting out behind me with every step. I made it to the tree first, and when I glanced down to taunt my victory he wasn't there. The water was shallow there, it was mostly rocks. I tried being patient; waited a few seconds but he still wasn't there. I didn't know proposing that race was signing up to watch paint dry. It was getting darker and the smell of rain took a seat around the campfire.

Knowing that my lunch must've been cold and betting my mama was near fuming, I decided to start back.

stopped me and made me tell her where I was going. She wanted to go with me.

She followed me up the hill, accepted the branches' hands as I passed them to her. The descent was slower with her with me and when we approached the crick, I could feel every wall of my stomach. Every hair on my neck stood at attention.


He won't be there, I knew it for a fact. It is undebatable. I talked far too much and ran way too fast. With every step we took towards the crick, a rock bounced around my chest and hit my ribs a little harder. We got to the ledge, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Honey, it's just you and me," Mama said. I could feel the tears welling, my cheeks becoming mountains for their runoff. I braced myself, I had to face it at some point, he wasn't real, but when I opened my eyes he was still there. Except, he hadn't come alone either. There was someone else with him. My mother smiled up at me from beneath the surface, "Honey, it's just you and me. We told you, you just have a creative imagination."

The walk back was silent, I stayed a few paces ahead of Mama so she couldn't see my stained cheeks.

That night, I went to bed without dinner. My stomach already too full with the questions he left me with. The questions stay with me still, except the boy in the crick is growing up too. He's becoming the man in the back of the spoon, in the window of the coffee shop, in the mirror. He's becoming the man in the mirror. Sometimes he disappears for a while, like he did on the rainy day at the crick. On nights like that, sleep has trouble finding me and, even though I am hungry, my stomach is full.

Soft moonlight covers me like a blanket
Wanting me to snuggle underneath
Whispering for me to go to bed

Wandering around at night
Playing in the downy light of the moon
Within the woods, I shall never leave 

I will be known as a feral child

The stars
Twinkling at me
Winking at me

Wanting for the day to end
Enjoying the night
No adults telling me to go to bed

The cicadas, moths, and critters enjoying my presence
Giving me a performance

Meeting me into their minds
Showing me how to live under the moon's soft belly

I want to be known as the moon child

There is a dead girl underneath my bed.
Her face is a mirror, a lake of flesh,
framed by a bronze wave of synthetic hair.
A porcelain calm ripples from the fog
that lingers in her frosted glass green eyes.

My family hasn't noticed her absence
for I wear her skin to veil my raw scars.
To them, her name is mine and we are one.
I am dressed in her clothes where her ghost lives.
With my misty eyes, they can't see through me.

At night, she's a secret stealing my sleep.



I stop short of my hospital bed and stare down into the bassinet. After a minute of silence, my husband standing near my shoulder kisses the side of my head. "A little tiny human being, so fragile, so warm," I murmur in her ear. I reach down and stretch my cold fingers over her delicate cheek. Her mousey brown hair is covered in vernix, her dull wonderful blue eyes feel as if they were bright, and her fingers are so minuscule they only just caress mine. She coos loudly and smiles. My voice quivers as I blurt out, "I *almost* died today!" My husband's hand caresses the small of my back; I wince a little as he hit the forming bruise from the epidural.

"Babe," he whispers, "you are remarkable." He takes his hand that was once on my back and glides it over her prominent belly, "Once they got her to breathe, she was just fine."

I give a delicate smile, that kind of smile that you do when you're just in awe, "Well I am grateful that she is fine." I start to feel shitty again, as the coldness creeps up my back. "I'd rather go through what I went through again before I ever let anything happen to her," I declare, as a bout of nausea comes over me, my vision blurs, and I lose consciousness.

When I come to, Dr. Andrews is hovering at the foot of my unforgiving bed, her fingers freely contacting the bed rail. "You're having complications of Eclampsia, again," she states as she gestures her hand. "Your blood pressure reached 187/115 during the end of your labor. That means you had a hypertensive crisis due to Eclampsia," she clears her throat, "Sometimes it just comes out of nowhere." She continues, "We had to use forceps to get the baby out as her heart rate rapidly dropped, and you began to seize." Pausing for a moment, she states, "However, since you are still showing symptoms of Eclampsia, we had to start you on a Magnesium drip that runs through your IV before

you seize again," she gestures her hand again and nods to me vigilantly waiting for my response. I only nod back, as I begin to reminisce on my birth once again.

I stare down the shitty hospital bed, back in my unforgiving thoughts. "I almost died, but I didn't die... but you could have died," the thoughts are racing.

My husband reaches out for my hand, "Hey, Honey, are you doing ok? You didn't answer the doctor."

I glance at him like a deer in the headlights, "Uh huh" I respond as my eyes start to cross, and a burning sensation goes through my body- "I feel like I'm intoxicated."

Not realizing Dr. Andrews was still there, she returns with an answer, "That's normal, as well as being extremely hot for about twenty-four hours," she states as she makes her way out of my room. I hear an agonizing slow dribble for the next twenty-four hours.

It was in my time of need; I was nine and a half centimeters dilated and it was go time. I pushed three times for five minutes when suddenly my blood pressure skyrocketed, and the baby's heartrate dropped. They immediately pulled her out with forceps, ultimately tearing me. They swung

I felt betrayed by the Grace of God because I was dealt some shitty cards, conclusively developing postpartum depression.

These feelings I characterize are valid and they don't have the right to perceive me as a shitty mother. Childbirth is indeed a gift, but it is not wonderful and whoever says that is probably a damn liar. I am, however, forever grateful I was able to experience childbirth because in the end, it has made me a stronger person and the mother I am today. Would I ever do it again? Absolutely not. Though, the whole experience is warranted as I stand here with my daughter in my arms going through the daily struggles of motherhood and for that I will be forever indebted.

What is your favorite Christmas movie?

- A. It's A Wonderful Life
- B. A Christmas Story
- C. Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer

You pull the grate across your fireplace and secure it with the padlock you've been using for the past four Christmases. It's not Fort Knox level intruder prevention, but at least the chimney is officially inaccessible. Frank will roll his eyes when he gets home and sees it, but he'll do the same when you refuse to watch

Not a peep, not a sole, not a single hint of Santa came all

benefits or paid vacation, and the house often feels too large and empty. Even with all the construction workers constantly revolving in and out renovating various parts of the estate, Frank spends any time he's sometimes you wonder if this habit means he's nostalgic for a time when he didn't work so much, or if he's nostalgic for a time when you weren't around.

Every day Frank commutes to the office for long hours at a time while you clean the house and cook dinner, hearty meals kept warm in the oven until the moment he steps in the door, ready to eat. Chicken marengo and pork high pie and lamb ossobuco and creamy beef with mushrooms and anything else Frank will choke down his gullet. He always seems to be hungry. Even in summer months when people tend to eat lighter, you still find yourself cooking half a holiday meal just for one man while you manage to snag a few bites for yourself.

You don't mind how much he eats. You just wish he was more appreciative. You wish he stepped up to cook once in a while. You wish he would at least sit at the dining table and finish the whole meal at a slower pace so the two of you could have a whole conversation for once. It doesn't even need to be every time, you'd settle for once a week. It could be a date night.

What is your ideal date night with your man?

- A. A quiet night in watching a movie with some popcorn.
- B. A fun night out dancing in a club together.
- C. A silly night out playing trivia at your favorite local bar.

You've tried to implement date night before, usually around this time of year when he starts working even longer hours, including weekends. He'll say he's too busy, and when you finally mention it enough days in a row, he'll give in, then purposefully choose things he knows you'll hate: going ice

skating, seeing the *Nutcracker*, driving around and looking at Christmas lights.

That always shuts you up until next year.

It's hard to maintain committed friendships when you live forty minutes away from the nearest town, so you never have plans in the evenings. You'll often curl up with a book for lack of a better option, since the thought of watching a movie makes you think of Frank laying around in the reclining theater chairs well into the night, collecting dust from how little he moves from his seat

A

couch.

It felt like a fairy tale romance at first. You met Frank two weeks into college, moved in with him four months later, and were married in less than a year. Your mother couldn't stop crying tears of joy during the entire ceremony; You were about to start the perfect life that she had always wished for you, the perfect life she prepared you for, the perfect life she never got to finish herself. You dropped out of school after the wedding to devote more time to your new duties as a wife, and Frank made it clear that you never needed to go back. You didn't need a degree when you had him to provide for you. It was a classic, eight-month whirlwind romance that you can hardly remember enjoying eight years later. Surely the stuff of novels, fictional and predictable.

The books keep you sane, and the cooking keeps you busy, so it's hard— p\$ D D

After all, you spend so much of Frank's money now. You

under a tree because it almost feels like tempting fate. No stockings are hung either, but that's probably for the best. You can still remember your father ripping one off the mantle to use the weight of the holder as a weapon. You watched your mother stumble over the tree he had knocked down on his way in through the broken window.

You hear screaming in the living room. Do you...

- A. Go back to bed? Grown-up talk doesn't concern you.
- B. Call the police? The man in the suit said he wasn't allowed to visit anymore.
- C. Run to your mother? You're too young to think about stepping on glass shards anyway.

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options is shrinking until there's nothing you can say to make a difference. " But I need—"

" No you don't." Frank opens the door and turns his body to almost face it. " Look, if you hear a *ho ho ho* from outside, call the cops, okay? I have a lot of work to do, I don't have time for this."

Frank remains frozen until he finally breaks form with a disbelieving laugh. "Excuse me?"

You feel your lips moving this time. "I want a divorce."

"Oh really?" he asks around a condescending grin. "Are you

now, they need me at the office. We'll talk about this in the morning."

He swings the front door open wide and lurches through it like he's trying to wake himself up from a dream, and you call after him before the door can swing all the way shut, "If I'm still here in the morning!"

The resounding slam echoes through the first floor followed by silence descending upon the house. You think about all the choices you could have made and wonder why it took you so long to realize there was an out this whole time. If you don't like the ending, you can always close the book.

It's not how you expected any of it to play out, but you're relieved it's finally happening. You wish it could have waited until after Christmas so you wouldn't be alone tonight, but maybe it really is for the best. Maybe it's time for you to face your fear head-on. What's so scary about Santa anyway? He's not even real. Divorce is real. Leaving your husband of eight years with nothing to fall back on is real and terrifying. Santa shouldn't even be your top priority right now.

Are you still afraid of him entering your house? Or are you just afraid of him entering your life? Are you afraid he'll give you everything you could ever ask for, until your belief in him is so strong that you don't realize how much time you've spent waiting for him by the fireplace, waiting for him to return?

You choose one of the comfy armchairs facing the mantle and decide to curl up in it for the night, straining your ears for sleigh bells on the roof.

/h /n /h k /hi /

1: a fictional disease in which flowers begin to grow in the lungs and slowly spread through the body when the affected experiences unrequited love. Symptoms include coughing or throwing up flowers and flower petals.

2: the disease is cured when their love is returned in some form. If their feelings are not mutual, the affected will die of the disease. The only other cure is to surgically remove the flowers, but the feelings for the person will be lost.

3: in some cases, the flowers begin to grow out of the eyes and ears, and even out through the skin.

I clutch his hand and press it hard into my sternum, my breaths shaky and stuttering.

"Do you feel it?" I ask. His fingers clench, scrunching up my shirt under them, and my heartbeat quickens. He is silent, brows furrowed just slightly as the pressure from his fingertips shifts and changes.

"Feel what?" he replies. I take a deep breath, wheezing, hoping that he'll understand.

"That," I grip his wrist. He spreads his fingers wide across my chest, the movement slow and meticulous. I love when

enough, it starts again.

"Your heart?" He gives me a breathy chuckle, but his eyes are focusing on his hand that I'm clutching like it is the last thing keeping me alive, and it is. "It's beating so fast." I shake my head and pull him in closer. I rest my head against the side of his and breathe next to his ear, the interrupted flow of air sputtering out against his shoulder. I can feel the vines snaking up the insides of my lungs.

"The growing," I say. It's getting harder to breathe, soft coughs passing my lips. "You don't feel it?" He shakes his head lightly in reply and it feels like he's burrowing his temple further into mine. My nails begin to dig into his skin. I cough again, but it gets stuck in my throat. "How can you not feel it?" Tears begin to well up in my eyes as I gasp for breath enough to get the words out.

"Are you okay?" His free hand reaches up to cup my cheek, and I turn my head to kiss it, leaving drops of blood where my lips had been. I pull back from him, eyes wide, and body shaking. I clasp a hand over my mouth to hold the coughs in. His eyes trail my features, I can see the worry in his eyes. "What's wrong?" He presses. I cough, blood spattering out into my hand. I try to hold it in, but I can't. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head, pushing myself back against the wall, trying to distance myself from him.

"I'm f-i-ne." I barely get the words out. I cough, harder now, twice. The blood begins to leak through my fingers and down my hand. He looks horrified as he sees it, moving closer to me.

"What's going on?" He reaches for my wrist to pull my hand away. I cough, three times now, and I feel it start to come up, filling my mouth. I'm too focused on trying to breathe that I can't fight to keep my hand in place. Blood dribbles

I don't know how long he kissed me, but eventually, the pain in my throat begins to dull, the space between the petals returns, and I feel myself begin to breathe again. I take a deep breath as he gulps down the last of the petals in my mouth. He pulls away slightly, resting his head on mine, now gasping for air himself, trying to catch his breath. Our cheeks wet with shimmering tears, we finally meet each other's eyes. I've never seen him look at me like this, yet it feels so familiar, like he has always looked at me this way, but I've never noticed. I can feel the vines begin to recede, shriveling as they retreat back into my lungs.

"I love you," I whisper. He gives an exhausted smile, pulling me in close to him and pressing his chest against mine. I feel our hearts beating to the same rhythm, I feel the shuttering of our breaths matching the others.

"I know," he replies. There's a pause, a moment where the blooming in my lungs returns, before he speaks again, "I love you too." I can feel the flowers wither inside my chest, the petals wilting and dissolving. His arms wrap tightly around my body, but his hands are gentle and kind, like they always are, once again searching for something unknown to them, but in this moment, all of me is new.

Ending 2:

He is persistent and passionate; he wants to save me. I can feel myself losing something, some feeling, some security. He keeps plucking the flowers, the stems breaking and regrowing. The tears on his cheeks drip onto my body. They look so warm on his face, but they're so cold by the time they hit me. He drags whimpers from me as he pulls and I can feel him finally taking hold of the vines, the roots that dig into my tonsils, soft palate, and esophagus beginning to yield. I can hear them snapping and breaking loose from each other and my flesh, blood pouring into my mouth,

leaving holes where they once bore in. I feel the exhaustion beginning to give way to what feels like peace, but I cannot tell.

“ Why? For what? What is happening to you!?” He still looks so composed, but his eyes are darting around my features. I can feel more coming up. I reach my trembling fingers towards my mouth as I gag and retch. My sobs roll out into the room, filling the air between us, the sound muffled by all of the poppies. “ What can I do?” His voice trembles. I try to put my fingers back into my mouth, trying to pull at the flowers, to get them out so I can breathe, but I’m shaking so hard I can’t get ahold of them. He tows my hand away from my mouth and 5 A A A

teeth, determination in his expression. He pulls and pulls as I gargle up blood, spitting as much as I can out so I don't drown in it. The crimson liquid splashes out onto him, staining his clothes, his hands, his face. *I'm not going to let you die.* What a nice thing to do for me. Finally, I can feel the vines give way. He takes one last deep breath before tugging with everything he has left in him, and in that moment, he looks new, beautiful, ethereal, and I know why I loved him. I give a retch as his arm lurches back and pulls the vines and branches from me, flowers dropping around us as the bronchi-shaped root system is finally extracted from me.

The red of the poppies mixes with the blood as I hack the rest of it up. Pieces of branches fly from my lungs and I take a deep breath. It is the first time I have been able to breathe in months. As the last of the flower petals leave my gaping mouth, I look down at the stretching expanse of roots and vines and blooms and think *that's beautiful, I wonder who those are for?* I look up at the boy in front of me, his wide eyes scanning my features with box : I,

of determination, they are tears of loss. I know you are supposed to hug someone when they experience loss, to comfort them, so I wrap my arms around his neck, the twigs between us breaking as I press into him. He wraps his arms around me loosely, and we sit in silence. I feel a wheeze in his breathing, and with my chest strained against his, I can feel it. Something growing. I wonder if he feels it too.

Ending 3:

Ending 3 alt 1:

"I love you," I say. Finally, the roots loosen a bit, their grip on my organs not quite so tight. His eyes gaze into mine, but I cannot read them. For the first time in months, I am able to breathe, and for the first time, I cannot read his expression. He is thinking, but he is taking too long, and the

never seen someone so apologetic, but apologies can't stop nature. Coughs wrack through my body with a force that I cannot describe, and I can feel the branches tearing into me. He pulls me into his arms, my head against his chest as he sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he keeps whispering over and over, but it isn't enough. Sorry can't fix this.

My throat is blocked, but my windpipe is the most alive it has ever been, filled to the brim with red blossoms that would be so beautiful if only he could see them. I am fatigued, the entire weight of my sick body now on him. I try to encase him one last time in my arms, but they are too unsteady. I can no longer take a breath in, and I don't have the energy to push any more out.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to do. I'm so sorry I did this to you..." His words fade into background noise, and all I can hear is the growing and blossoming of the flowers in my lungs, and then I can't hear anymore. Finally, I breathe out.

Ending 3 alt 2:

I try to choke the words out, but the fear strangles me and I can't get them to move past my vocal cords. I want to tell him, but I am more worried about his rejection than whatever the flowers will do to me. I cede whatever confidence I have left and let the melancholy overtake me. I fall into his chest, the vines pulsing with the last of the love I can give.

"What!?" He shakes me, trying to bring my speech back to me. "You have to tell me!" I let out a low groan, but the words can't form, my mouth is too full. Flowers tumble from my lips as I try to push them out with my tongue, but I can't make room enough in my maw to breathe. I choke, my body convulsing against his as he grips my shoulders. "Tell me! You can't leave me like this!" I want to tell him, I want to say

it all, to say, *I am in love with you, I have always been in love with you, and it is killing me*, but I can't. There is nothing I can do. My eyes flutter shut. "Please, don't leave me like this..." His words fade, the world fades, and I can feel the final bloom in my lungs finishing what he started the first time he touched me. His fingers trace patterns across my limp body, new ones, in the shape of flowers, and then I cannot feel it anymore.

Maia Loiacono

Revolution

As in furies of powdered joy

We dance

harken to the unseen sun

a sweet, unopened throw of chance

With petals forcing color bright

We smile

awakened to the simple splendor

that graces the world to wait awhile

Tilting constellations find

painted horizons and mountainous frames

of regal nature questions climb

the light each eye for clarity claims

Ruby Osborne

Three Words, Just Eight Simple Letters

I love you.

Three words that mean so little, yet so much: "I adore you," "you complete me," "I support you," "I appreciate you." So many meanings in just three words, just eight simple letters put together. People put so much meaning and weight on these words when they're really just words of affirmation. I've said these three little words so often in my life, completely disregarding their "weight."

My mother said I love you to me as she coaxed me in the middle of the night, comfortingly shushing my choking sobs as she ran her fingers through my hair, tickling my neck. This became our routine as I wondered time and time again why I felt so different from everyone around me, so lonely despite being surrounded by people.

Laying belly-down on the stiff, rigid rug in my grandma's backroom of her house, Barney, the infamous purple dinosaur of my childhood, sang to me through the TV, *"I love you, you love me... won't you say you love me too?"*

I said I love you to Haley in fourth grade, as we sat crisscross applesauce on the floor, doodling pictures of each other holding hands. We were inseparable as we talked about our future apartments and the places we'd visit someday.

"I get all worked up, and my stomach starts to hurt... I don't know what's wrong with me!" Charlie Brown grumbles to Linus.

"Of course you love me. How pathetic," he sneered.

I decided I would never say I love you to a boy ever again.

"I've loved you ever since I've known you Jo," Laurie confesses to Jo in 'Little Women.' "I couldn't help it, and you've been so good to me -- I've tried to show it, but you wouldn't let me."

"I don't see why I... I can't love you as you want me to," Jo admits.

"You can't?"

"I can't change the feeling and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't. I'm sorry."

I said I love you to my two high school best friends, but I don't think they loved me as much as they loved each other. They were entangled in one another, completely inseparable, and there was never one without the other. They always held hands and rested their heads on each other's shoulders and sat very close. I thought of my childhood best friend, and how I used to feel that way with her. I longed for that inseparable connection my two high school friends had, but I found it odd that they always wanted to be touching each other. I felt lonely once more, as if I wasn't catching on to something everyone knew, as if I was fudging the class of growing up while everyone else excelled. I didn't know why.

I've said I love you to my friends, my family, my cats, strangers. I say I love you everywhere, as if it's a greeting: "Hello, I love you!" "Bye, I love you!" My best friend and I say it, at a minimum, three times per conversation.

Never did it feel like a pivotal moment. These vulnerable confessions I've been shown all my life through TV have always felt overly dramatized. Why is it so scary, shameful, and jarring to say those three little words? How could those three words, just eight simple letters that I've said thousands

of times, be the climax of every relationship? I could never understand it.

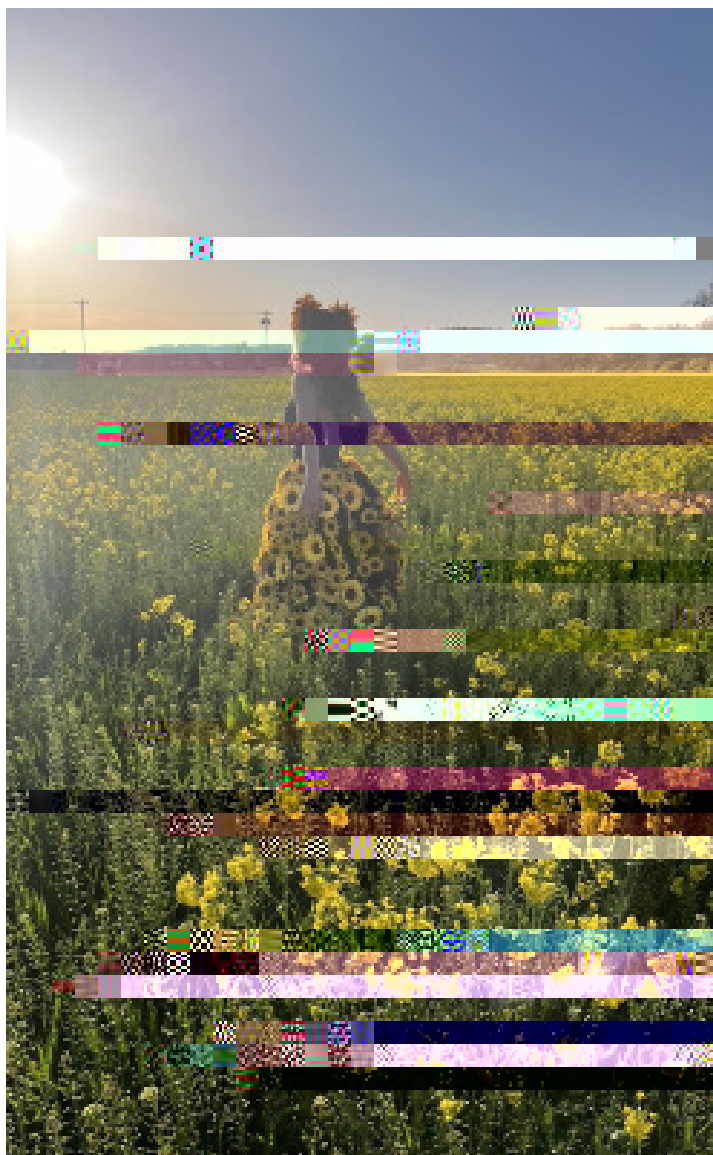
biggest billboard in the entire world.

But I couldn't say it. For the first time in my life, I hesitated to say I love you, even though I desperately wanted to.

And that's when I knew.

Chloe Mullins

The Sunflower Fairy



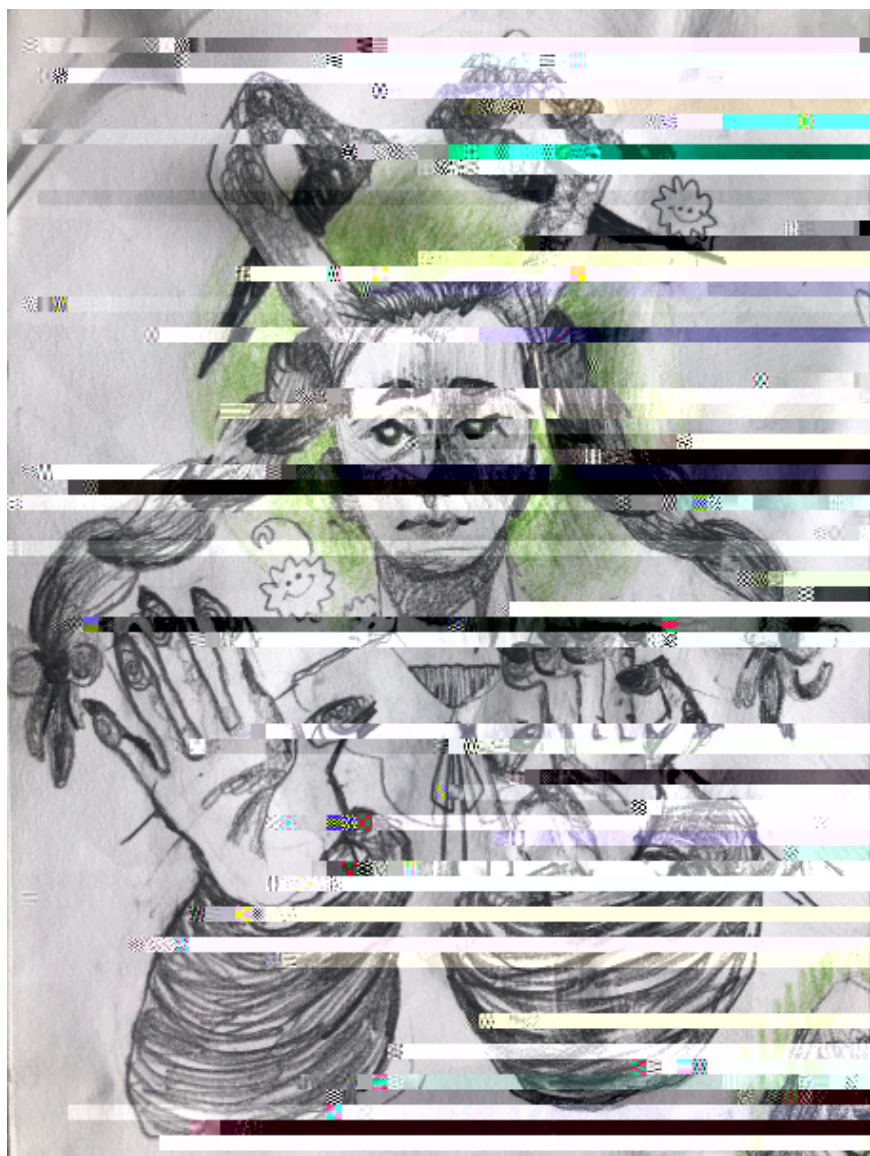
Chloe Mullins

Cincinnati Lane



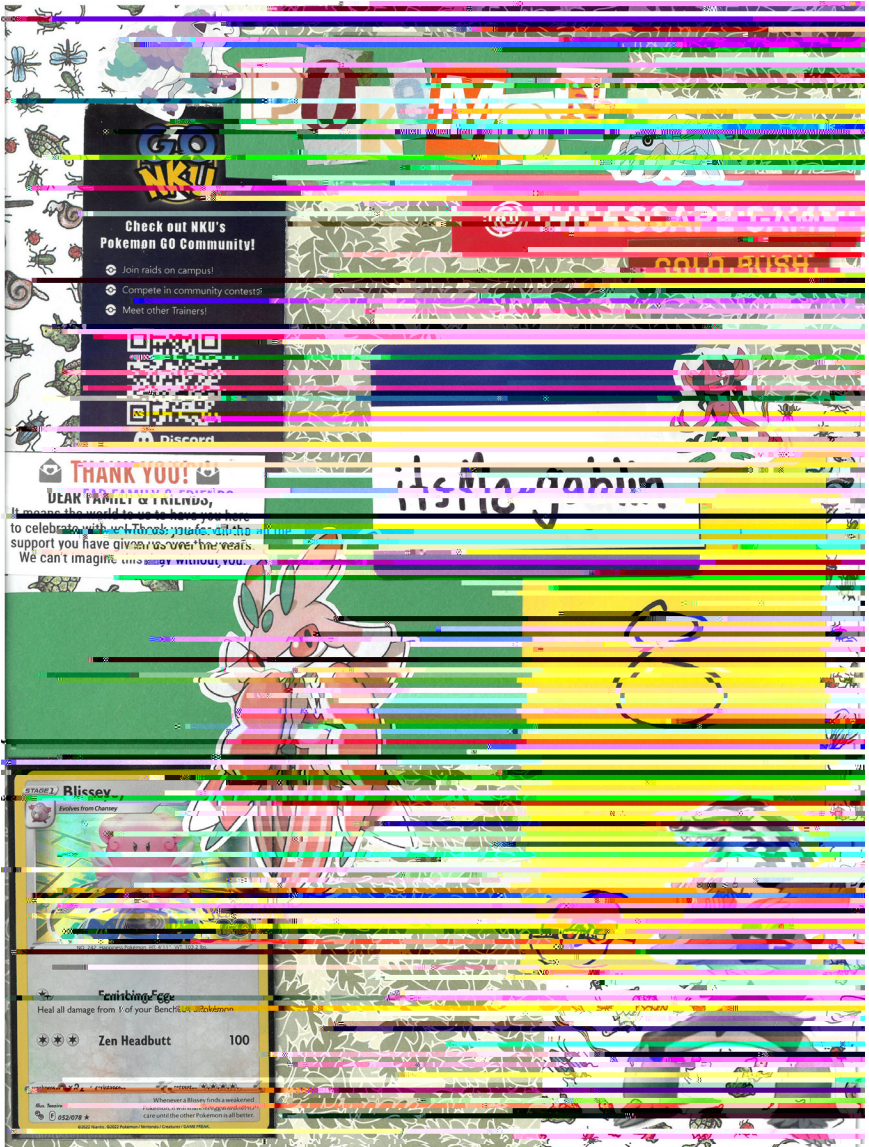
Grace Pfanstiel

Spring Fever



Grace Pfanstiel

Collage Friends pt 1



Evey Cooper

Kevil Collection (12 of 15)

Ezra Knapp

Peaches

By In The Valley Below

The nectar covering our eyes, transporting our tongues away from the troubles outside. We don't mind too much. Each of us reach up the tree, tearing our muscles, desecrating our limbs, the desire irresistible.

The feeling of power, swindling our senses, converting our nerves, to devices it uses to fuel our bodies. An electrifying feeling that numbs our senses to the crackle across our skin. Nothing compares to how we feel now, unstoppable and irresponsible, free to do whatever we please.

There are no consequences when the nectar is in effect. All that matters is getting more, even if that means we are scrambling, clawing, tearing at each other, competing to get there first.

Falling, Falling, Falling, Falling
 breaking, breaking, breaking, breaking...
 standing, limping, crawling,
 going again. going again. going again.

...lying there, as the pain buries deep back in our bones, the nectar gone.

Rachel Little

Daughters

I wish my mother and I
Could've been girls together.
I think we would have gotten along
In our wild youth.
But instead,
She was learning how to be a mother
While I was still learning how to
Just be.
I wish I could've known who she was
Before she grew up.
Before she had to learn how to take care of things.
When she wasn't a daughter, or a sister, or a mother.
Just a girl.

Roma Markle

Pomme Puree

He says he does not want to talk about it and that can only mean "it" is about me. While we sit at the dinner table, I find empty words leaving my lips in the form of small talk, but our hollow conversation plays like a radio in my mind. I can see in his eyes that he's trying to decide which bags will fit the most clothes, which boxes he should keep from packages over the next month to fit his items in, how many things he's fine with leaving behind. I can see he's trying to formulate how to tell me, or if he even will tell me. He is considering simply leaving, without a word. I would receive the divorce papers in the mail a week later; he would settle for whatever I would let him have. I shovel more mashed potatoes into my mouth. I can tell that he wishes that they were homemade, not the instant kind that you buy in red boxes at Walmart for \$4. It seems that if I was a better wife, a wife who put more effort into trivial things - like how I make the mashed potatoes, or scraping the little bit of mud off of his shoes, or making the bed a little neater than usual - that he may decide to stay. In his head, he is criticizing my every detail. I am rough around the edges, but he used to say he liked that.

When I wake in the morning, he is not beside me, and neither are the things on his bedside table - his \$2 drugstore chapstick, his thin frame reading glasses, his copy of a second-hand self help book that he always said he'd read but never got around to. In the kitchen, some of the photographs that were stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet are gone, and so is his favorite pen from the counter.

I do not check for his worn out Adidas tennis shoes by the door.

Instead, I pull potatoes from the pantry, milk and butter from the fridge, salt and pepper from the spice rack, peeler and masher from the drawer, and pressure cooker from its spot in the cabinet. I peel the potatoes, fill the pressure cooker with water, and set it on the stove to boil. I drop the potatoes in and let them cook for 15 minutes.

I do not check for his post-it note reminder to go to the dry cleaner that sat on the wall next to the phone.

I drain the water from the potatoes and transfer them to the mixing bowl, beginning to beat them with the masher, using all of the muscles in my right arm in the hopes that I can summon the memories of my mother making them so I may do this perfectly.

I do not check for his navy coat on the back of the recliner in the living room.

I add the butter, milk, salt and pepper to the potatoes, mixing it all in until they are smooth. I pull leftover baked chicken from the fridge and heat it up on two plates, placing them on either side of the table - one in his spot and one in mine.

I do not check for his colorful glass paperweight on the side table that was a gift from his brother on the announcement of his promotion.

I scoop a heap of potatoes onto my plate and onto his, wrapping the bowl in saran wrap and placing the leftovers into the fridge. I sit at my place at the table, linking my fingers together in my lap. I wait and watch the door, knowing that he will be happy to come back to a home cooked meal. That he will be happy to come home.

I do not check the time as the days pass.

Luciano Montazemi

Passings

JD is an old friend of mine. He's the kind of guy who always looks to make people smile, always down to hang out, to lend a helping hand with anything you may need. I have a lot of fond memories with him; wrapping up the semesters playing *Super Smash Bros*, debating the merit of Tyler, the Creator records, laughing ourselves weak at absurdist memes. He's a really wonderful man.

Back in those days, in high school, he was always this delightful, goofy presence to everyone. His permanent smirk and surfer-dude affect hid an intelligent, kind, mature soul underneath, and I think people took notice of that pleasant contrast. You couldn't blame them for expecting a meat-head, though.

His surname was Poindexter, but he was anything but. An athlete first and foremost, the kind of kid you often meet in small towns, whose first love was football, and slotted neatly into a world of competition and comradery. He was svelte yet strong, short frame masquerading a formidable physique. And yes, football was his M.O. Maybe he'd have succeeded more in other sports, track, baseball, gymnastics, swimming. But he loved football, and he worked his ass off to be on that team, and I could not say it wasn't where he belonged. I certainly considered him a closer friend than he must have considered me, and his teammates were undoubtedly the primary reason.

JD has siblings, but the guys he played with, those were his brothers.

That day, he wept. Once a week, in US history, we spent class in the library. He and I always sat with a group of our peers at a long table. A few minutes prior, the principal had made an announcement over the loudspeaker.

" ... After speaking with local authorities I am saddened to announce...

... they found him at the scene of the crash...

...in times like this, we have to stand strong as a community, as a family..."

You can tell just by the texture of the air. It's that haunting silence after a hurricane, where yellow sky blankets catastrophe's wake.

When I was in the fifth grade, my brother, Jake, lost a close friend in a car accident. Everyone I knew had taken it hard, of course, but he was wrecked. He later told me of how, for

I always wondered how they handled it. The teachers, I mean. My history teacher, a chronic pacer if there ever was one, kept standing still. He must have been thinking. He'd been at this school since the late 80s. He'd just passed 30 years. All the kids he's taught, man. Class of '88, '89, '90... I asked him once what he'd learned about us. After all, he has all these generations of kids in front of him, he must have noticed some interesting things, how we have changed, how the culture has evolved around us. He told me, outside the Internet, kids were roughly the same. We have the same hopes and dreams, The same petty dramas and rivalries. The same anxieties of the future. He's been through it with these students. He's taught kids through the fall of the USSR, dozens of American wars, 9/11, the '08 housing crisis, the rise of opioids in small towns like this. Through Reagan, HW, Clinton, W, Obama, Trump. Nations have come and gone... He's taught juniors all his career, so he's seen all these kids at the precipice of something bigger, something more. He has to have seen hundreds of heartbreaks... hundreds of kids missing out on a big scholarship, losing their home, getting ill, losing loved ones... losing their own lives. That's how you know something's wrong. Because you know if he's stuck in his head, this older, wiser man, trapped mulling it over in his mind, shaken to the core... you know if he can't process it, how the hell can you? How're any of us?

**sC3JEMC

P

Kang

en-

broadcast he didn't even know he was making:

"Hi Coach Roden, this is Brett Fox. I just wanted to thank you for everything you did for me during my high school football career. You are a huge role model to me and I'm glad that you were my coach for my first 3 years. I appreciate everything you taught me about the game of football and becoming a better man. Much love coach. You will never be forgotten."

It's almost five years now without Mom, in case you were wondering. When I awake at night, it's quiet now. My sister, my roommate, is in bed early, needing to wake before the sun rises to open at work. Her room is through the wall just to the left of me. If I were to press my ear agL

A D inc

Ruby Osborne

i'm a fre, and i'll keep your brittle heart warm.

sometimes i think about
the way your body fits into mine.
feel the dip in your back.
i crave to lay down
and hold you,
memorize the way your breath
hitches.

oh, i cant stop this infatuation;
i look at other women
and think of the possibilities,
how it would be for them to graze their thumb
along my hand
like you used to do –
the way you look at me
copied onto other people,
and my heart hitches into my skin
like a catastrophic casualty.

and when im alone, lonely
you creep into my mind
little
by little
until youre an infestation,

(an infestation.)

eating me alive
in the most horrific,

(yet most pleasurable,)

way.

i wish you loved me
the way i love you.
why is it so hard
to hug me
and feel the dip
in my back?

i'll warm your cold, bitter heart
with the bristles of my passion



ing in on myself as I make my way past judging eyes. I turn and offer one more glance back and see that life has moved on. My eyes glance back down at my cup, and I purse my lips before continuing to walk away. I had asked for no whipped cream.

sure.

Regardless, I was out here alone for the next seven days.
Just me and the lake.

* * *

The second day of my stay at the cabin, I stood on the beach watching the waves. The first day I had been too tired

lake that drowned them.

Far out in the grey water, I saw a dark shape bobbing in the waves. At first glance, I thought it was a body, then immediately felt stupid. The driftwood was gone a moment later, off to float about the lake until it washed up on shore in a week or a hundred years. Maybe that wood had once been part of a ship, or maybe it was from a tree that had fallen in a storm a decade ago. No matter what it had been, it belonged to the lake now.

That night as I lay in the narrow hand-hewn bed, I wondered what Sheila was doing. She was probably in bed, but maybe not. I couldn't imagine she was missing me. I thought that was the point of this trip, to make us miss each other, but I couldn't say I was missing her either. I was mostly thinking about the lake, what all I'd have to do to live out here, and a little about the woman I'd met at the bar last week. I decided that I wouldn't worry about Sheila on this trip, and I'd just enjoy the time alone. It would be a taste of what life could be like if I left her. Good. Free.

* * *

Someone must have been here earlier in the season. I knew some of my uncles used the cabin on hunting trips. They'd left a large pile of firewood next to the stove, so I didn't have to worry about chopping any, thank God. There were other little signs of life. Footprints pressed deep into the dirt. A few piles of fish bones near the water. Someone had left behind a radio, which mostly just got static when I turned it on. A few times it caught snippets of a woman's singing, but I could never understand the words.

I hadn't brought much to entertain myself with, so I found

stone, short cliffs standing a few feet above the water. To the east was a long stretch of pebbly beach, and I combed

of my neck that made me want to leave the area as fast as possible.

tell she was staring right at me. She was beautiful. Between one blink and the next, she was gone like she'd never been there.

I should have done something, maybe. Should've called out to her. Should've gone for help. Instead, I stood on the shore, swaying a little bit in the wind. I was clearly seeing things. No one would be swimming in the lake at this time of year. They would freeze to death.

I retreated to the cabin, telling myself everything was fine. What was more likely: a vanishing woman swimming out there in Lake Superior, or that my eyes were playing tricks on me? I wasn't going to worry about it. By tomorrow night, I would be back to my wife. We would have another counseling appointment with Dr. Hayes where she would offer solutions I didn't especially want. I would go back to the bar and see if the woman from last week was there. I might finally print out divorce papers.

The rest of the day I was distracted. More than once I caught myself touching the fish scale in my pocket, drawn to it like a talisman. When the sun had set, I laid in bed and tried to sleep. I kept thinking about the woman in the lake. I couldn't quite picture her face anymore. It was like someone seen in a dream. She was beautiful, though, I knew that.

That was the last thought I had before falling asleep. She was beautiful.

* * *

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In the twilight hour just before dawn, when the world is grey

invitingly. The man slowly wades into the water, uncaring of the cold. He climbs into the boat and starts rowing. The boat and the man sway gently to a haunting tune, soft but growing louder. When the boat is far from shore, and land is barely visible, the man stops. He stares deeply into the

The city of dichotomous tradition. Land of Ancient Tradition and Constant Modernity. Such a stark contrast that borders on the oxymoronic that coexists at all times. Comparing things with which we aren't very familiar is all too easy and a lot of people will do it without thinking. Sure, Tokyo is more modern than Kyoto but that doesn't mean Tokyo doesn't hold steadfast to its cultural traditions. It's also a city where old school meets new school in the form of robotic tour guides giving guided tours of Senso-ji Temple in the heart of Asakusa. You can find the smell of grilled fish in the air and the sound of clacking wooden blocks in every corner. But you'll also find many other things that make Tokyo one of my favorite places on earth: a bustling metropolis with endless options for food, an active nightlife scene, and endless shopping opportunities. I don't want to bore you with all my reasons why Tokyo is amazing so I'll just list them: the beauty of Nakameguro a ramen shop at Shinjuku Station where you can watch your ramen being made by the chef in front of you. The convenience of being able to fit in a quick workout before your night out at Roppongi Hills' state-of-the-art gym with a breathtaking view. You can't go wrong with the classic Tokyo Gyoza! For my money, I'd say Tokyo is the best because of its rich culture and history. It has a long

Mackenzie Basl

Sommelier

My mother is allergic to wine,
and I am allergic to my mother.
I sip Riesling at weddings
as she asks me when I'll finally get a boyfriend.
I swallow cabernet at Christmas dinner
as she tells my cousins that I haven't found a job yet.
I gulp down chardonnay at brunch
as my friends tell me how sweet she is when they've only
met her once.

I don't know if the bitter taste in my mouth
is from the Pinot Noir
or her pinpoint insults.
I may be the failure who falls short,
but neither of us drinks from the chalice at Communion.

The problem is that wine is an acquired taste.
Not everyone likes the strength of it,
the acrid flavor as it coats your tongue.
Others savor it,
test and experiment to find the best pairing
for their fish and fettuccine and flank steak.

Wine is hit or miss, depending on your preference.
My therapist likes Zinfandel
so I tell him my troubles with blunt proficiency.
My father likes Merlot

so I tell him the good in abundance and the bad in sparing
pieces.
My partner likes Sangria

Every Tet or Vietnamese new year, my mother took the effort to visit a family friend who served on the city's board of edu-

the tragedy's only surviving evidence. Behind the iron gate barricading the front door—the sole open aperture into the house—I saw a living room devoid of all except for an altar against the right-hand wall, bathed in cyan fluorescence.

Before then I had never considered myself a spiritual person. My mother was deeply superstitious and my brother claimed he had once seen a ghost, while I was stuck in a mundane corporeal reality, untouched by whatever paranormal phenomena they were discussing over the dinner table. Yet as I walked past that burned house, briefly glancing at the altar inside, a shuddering chill erupted across my skin and persisted until we had taken refuge in the family friend's house next door. For the first time in many years, I was genuinely afraid.

Knowledge of tragedy often drives a filter into our brains, so that we are unable to perceive a place the same way as before we came into that knowledge. When tragedy occurs on a large scale and entails catastrophic loss of lives, the

Charleigh Haley is a fourth-year student at NKU majoring

minor in Cinema Studies with plans to continue on to get his MFA. Nathan enjoys spending his free time with his wife and son, drinking coffee and watching films.

Theo Sells

hiking, and spending time with his niece and nephew. He pulls a lot of his inspiration from Classical and Renaissance art, and has been influenced by the works of Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, and E.E. Cummings. Logan wishes to attain his Master's degree in either Public Policy or English, post graduation from NKU with a Bachelor's degree in English and a minor in Photography.

Kara Ferry is twenty-five years old and attends Northern Kentucky University majoring in Human Resource Management. She was born and raised in the Chicagoland area, moving to Cincinnati in 2019. She attended Cincinnati State and received an Associates of Arts general studies. She recently gave birth to a daughter, A

her own children's books and poetry novels someday, if only she can stop reading other people's works instead.

Grace Pfanstiel is trained in the traditional arts and went through highschool as if to pursue art in college- but life happens along the way and now they are pursuing an Anthropology major with Environmental studies minor. However, art is a use it or lose it skill! So they still do art here and there in their free time. It is a passion and one that they want to continue to flourish- even if it's no longer their main focus.

Evey Cooper (they/she) is a junior pursuing a BFA in photography. They make work featuring landscapes of the Midwest and images documenting the farmland in Western Kentucky where they grew up. They also have an artistic focus surrounding textile art. They have many years of experience working with quilting, sewing, needle felting, and knitting which they use as a subject to document in some of their other photography projects. After graduation, Evey will pursue a career working in freelance photography and they hope to take up a residency making on location work in the future.

Ezra Knapp is a sophomore majoring in English with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. They currently live near NKU, but are originally from Louisville, KY. Their creative writing style switches between ekphrastic poems based on songs and freeform poetry based on a love of nature. In their free time, Ezra loves to crochet and play video games, specifically Slime Rancher and Stardew Valley! They also love to rock climb and can frequently be found at Climb Cincy multiple nights of the week. If you ever see them on campus crocheting, feel free to say hi!

Rachel Little is 19 years old and a sophomore at Northern Kentucky University. She is majoring in English with a Writ-

ing Studies track and hopes to go into editing and publishing. She has been writing since middle school and started out writing short fiction, but transitioned to poetry in high school and has stuck with it since. She tries to write every day and finds inspiration from her own life. She is thankful to her friends and family for encouraging her to share her writing for the first time in her life, and she hopes she can continue doing it.

Luciano Montazemi is a junior at NKU, majoring in Integrative Studies (Psychology, Human Services & Addictions, Creative Writing). His interests lay in the creative and performing arts (particularly writing and theatre) as well as film/television and left-wing political activism. He sincerely thanks his family, friends, dog, and significant other for support in his creative endeavors. Special thanks go to his mother, who always advised him to “leave it on the floor” before performances; in lieu of a stage, he resolved to leave it on the page.

Anna Bohn is a sophomore at Northern Kentucky University double majoring in English and History. She plans on continuing her education and eventually getting her doctorate in English. Anna loves to read; her favorite book is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and her favorite movie is the 2005 recreation of the novel (and she will stand by it). When she isn't reading, she is writing or spending time with friends and family.

Kaylin Conley is a 21-year-old Creative Writing major with a music minor. She has a thousand and one interests, and enjoys bringing them into her work as often as possible. She is especially inspired by the search for beauty in small things,

Hello All my name is **Theodore Alan Clingman Frost** but most people just call me Teddy. I believe that an education not only prepares you for a career but opens your mind to news ways of thinking and exposes you to different cultures and ideas. Career wise I would love to be a content creator and be self employed making enough money to live off of just my own content creation solely. Overall, I am a friendly guy who wishes to travel the world one day. I don't have career goals as much as I have destinations that I want to see when I am older.

Mildred Nguyen is a senior Journalism major from Vietnam with a minor in Professional Writing. She has been writing creatively for most of her life, but hopes to return something to the world through journalism by informing the public and telling real-life stories of those who otherwise might not be heard. She draws most of her inspiration from the natural world, particularly the night sky, architecture, and the forces that shape human society. Currently she is serving as managing editor for The Northerner, NKU's student news organization.

Hello! I'm **Aubree Ruf**, I'm currently a Visual Communication Design major. I'm inspired by the world around me in the beauty of trivial things, I love drawing things that I associate with unexplainable imagery. I mostly use ink and watercolor for my work, but I have a love for any form of art I can be involved with. I fell in love with poetry and the complex worlds it can create when I was involved in Poetry Out Loud, the way the words could capture the crowds fascinated me. I'm very excited to be a part of that magic!

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