

**The Grounded Issue**  
Spring 2023

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This issue of *The Pen* is dedicated to Selena Menjivar

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In honor of the Grounded Issue that our contributors created within these pages and the conviction that we hope this issue incites in our readers, our staff has composed an Exquisite Corpse to serve as this issue's Manifesto:

### **Grounded**

Leaves seceding from trees after a sudden breeze,  
Beyond the ether, unbidden back to earth,  
Lie down to the crumpled, crunching leaves.

We all fall down,  
Beaten and bruised, but built stronger,  
The ground is rock bottom but only leaves you  
standing up.

You've fallen at your lowest,  
Beaten and Bruised, but continue to rise,  
The only way to go was up.

Grounded, powerful, earthy, and free,  
Breathe.

## Co-Editor's Letter

Hello Dear Readers!

When working on this issue of *The Pen*, I started to think about when I first arrived at USCB. Who I was back then, and the person that I am now. I was always someone who feared change and tried my hardest to fight it. To stay where you feel most comfortable, even if it is damaging to your mental health because that's all you know. I'm here to tell you that change will happen, no matter what you do, circumstances intervene that are out of your comfort zone sometimes. The only thing you can do is to see what positive outcome you can make of it; you need to know it's okay. Life happens. Just remember to take care of yourself, because there is only one you, your happiness matters and you stay grounded in this hectic world.

To my pen staff and to my new editor, it has been my extreme delight to work with you all on this issue. You have shown me that you all have the potential to make *The Pen* and Society of Creative Writers even greater than it is now. I can't wait to see what you do next; I'll always be your number-one supporter. And it makes me a bit emotional to write this because I also never thought I would get this far or be in this great position that I was, but I

did. And I'm very thankful I got to meet you all, and Dr. Malphrus on my journey.

From the moment I first started to be the editor of *The Pen*, I was nervous. So much responsibility goes into this precious journal that I believe I wasn't ready for, but Dr. Malphrus believed I was. From the moment we first met, she made me realize that I was able to do so much more than I thought I could. I was able to be someone I would eventually be proud of. I can't thank her enough for having someone that truly believed I was capable of so much. Without her, *The Pen* and Society of Creative Writers would not exist. I would not have been able to have the courage to say yes as being editor. She is someone that you'll want on your side and I'm lucky enough to have her on mine.

Now it's time to pass on the torch. My fellow readers, for the last time I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading this issue. It means so much to me that you chose *The Pen* for your readings, and I hope that you will continue to do so. I can't wait to see what the future entails and the creative works to come!

Love, Selena Menjivar  
Co-Editor



## Co-Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up the Spring 2023 issue of *The Pen*! Our staff is grateful to be able to present the original writing and artwork of our fellow classmates every semester for you. Thank you to Dr. Malphrus and all of our staff for the hard work you put into creating this issue. Assembling these issues biannually is truly a team effort, and I couldn't have asked for a better team of great people to work with this semester.

This issue contains a diverse range of work with a multitude of ideas that are explored by our talented contributors, including the theme of what it's like to fall. Just remember, it's ok to be on the ground. It happens. But you don't have to stay down. I think that's what makes us who we are, whether or not we decide to get back up.

Sophia McKeehan  
Co-Editor

## Advisor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *The Pen's* "Grounded" Issue. As you hold this hefty journal, you can feel the wonderful weight of literary and visual art that has found its way into your hands. It is the work of a diverse group of student writers and artists from across campus—the culmination of interdisciplinary efforts on the part of both contributors and editorial staff. It also carries the weighty accolade of the journal's most recent First Place Award from the National Scholastic Press Association, our fifth such national designation. What an honor! I couldn't be more proud.

The most recent award for *The Pen* was earned under the guidance of Editor Selena Menjivar, who is stepping aside after serving on *The Pen* staff for an unprecedented ten (yes, 10!) semesters. Since the journal was first published in 2006, no one has served longer. Selena has poured her heart and soul into the journal, and it has been all the better for it. Her legacy of sweet-spirited devotion will live on long after she graduates. When that time comes, she will be loved and missed. This issue is dedicated to her.

Selena will be passing the torch to Co-Editor Sophia McKeehan, who has already proven herself as a totally committed and abundantly capable leader. This semester, Selena and Sophia have worked alongside a fantastic team of top-notch student

editors: Elizabeth Blanchard, Hudson DeLoach, Jake McClave, Chad Merritt, Hope Taylor, Patti Teter, Katherine Tovar. Together, they have enthusiastically labored to perform the amazing magic of turning thin air into this beautiful book. They have curated the content, designed the journal, and ably completed the myriad tasks that go into readying the manuscript for press. To have succeeded in doing so in just over three months is a testimony to both their talents and their can-do attitudes. I thank them, one and all, and I'm happy to serve as their Faculty Advisor.

Now, as you open these pages, I hope you become grounded in the importance of art in our lives—to enlighten us, to challenge us, to ennoble us, to disturb us, to entertain us, to remind us what it is to be human. In a time when censorship looms around us, let us ground ourselves in the knowledge that art is a reflection of the human condition in all its wonderful, terrible, heartening, horrific incarnations. Art matters—do not fear it.

Onward!

Dr. Ellen Malphrus  
Faculty Advisor for *The Pen*  
Professor of English  
Writer in Residence



**The Wonderer**  
John Leland

## **For the Wonderers**

John Leland

A wanderer roams the land so free,  
Their restless heart a mystery.  
From mountain tops to ocean shores,  
They seek the world and all its cures.

With knapsack on their weary back,  
They tread a path that's seldom tracked.  
Through winding valleys, forests deep,

Their restless soul they cannot keep

They marvel at the sunset's hue,  
And dance beneath the morning dew.  
They seek the secrets of the earth,  
And treasure every precious birth.

A wanderer's heart is pure and bold,  
Their story has yet to be told.  
They walk with grace and humble pride,

And leave a trail both far and wide.

So here's to the wanderer, brave and true,  
May your journey be forever new.  
And may your restless spirit guide,

You who wanders far and wide.

## **Vagrant**

Patti Teter

I check my being, with my thirst for place.  
Always in full sail, I adjust my face.  
Alone, without shelter, love not a trace  
Spit out dirt, hunger, a life of disgrace.

**HE. BELONGS. TO. ME**

Shyanne Williams-Ferrell

His hand made for mine  
Everyone says its only in my mind

But I can tell you I'm not blind  
Eyes only for me  
Lovers we were meant to be  
One heart, One soul  
No one else can make you whole  
Great nights to behold  
Savored so they won't go old

Typical small-town love  
Obsession it never was  
Magical is what I call it this time  
Eager to tell the world "He's Mine!"

## **Tunnel vision**

Traliya Mitchell

### **I peak inside my own mind wondering what I would see**

The images are bright and quick flashing, not in a good way. I fail to keep my balance.

Feeling as if I could fall into this warp of time that has yet to exist in my world

But I know if I do I'll never be able to escape it

So I hold on to my soul as best I can

I feel my grip slipping as the fog clouds my vision

Submerged into the abyss, mindlessly falling to my end.

I stumble upon

The cold wet tunnel that hides the deepest parts of me



## **The Letter in the Cupboard**

Elizabeth Blanchard

Unreachable

You felt

So I made a plan

And decided to write by hand

Not a proud moment

Not a thing of pride

It stripped it

And made me abide

My intention— persuasion

My scrawl— meager of malice

It full of

Austerity

Accompanied by necessity

for a word

Nowhere to be placed

So

I wrote to you

And threw it in a space

## **The Recklessness of Change**

Chad Merritt

Oh, how could one change a life?  
How one could sacrifice everything they love for  
progress  
To grow to be a version of themselves  
They never thought to seek  
Or thought to water, thought to replenish?  
I ask this question for odd, selfish reasons  
I ask this question because,  
Because I do not know  
I do not know what the dirt is telling me,  
What it's screaming  
What it's whispering and rasping  
What it's muttering under the expulsion of oxygen

You told me  
I told you this once in a dream,  
In a vision of passion:  
“The recklessness of change is the mirrored longing  
The mirrored longing that your lover faces  
When they tell you,  
In all earnestness, in sober minded convictions  
That they miss the person you used to be”

The dust, it says nothing, it only weeps  
So I look to the leaves,  
Harshly dancing in the wind  
In its swollen, breezy and faltering tune

How, when everything is dissolving,  
Could I turn it into something more?  
At once, there is nothing, then in the distance:  
A deer appears from the brush, its antlers  
Velveted and rusting away  
For a moment, I realize, I realize it's a callous  
thought  
To think the recklessness of change will stop  
For any splintered consciousness.

## **Unaddressed Love Poem**

Hudson DeLoach

There is a severance in your gaze,  
That snatches Cupid's arrow midflight,  
And delivers the broadhead itself.  
Not through the heart, which would be cliché,  
But straight through my wild, watching eyes,  
So that I can see no others but you.

## **Distance**

Mia Klinger

You left but you're not gone  
Our love grows so strong  
The distance between us

Will not come between us

And so I declare  
This love may be rare  
No matter where...  
I'm always right there

Waiting.  
Wondering.  
Hoping.

You'll come home...  
And set me free  
From this ticking time bomb

Because when you're gone  
I feel part of me breaks  
And my heart aches  
Because I miss you so.

But our love still grows  
I feel it still  
And I get this thrill  
Because I love you till...

## **A Coup of the Heart**

Gracie Laseter

The night we met  
Butterflies set forth a coup  
Creeping their way into my chest cavity  
Captivating my heart  
And stealing the breath away from my lungs  
I stood, defenseless  
Handing my most vital organ  
Over to this coy bundle of brown curls  
That stood across from me  
No hesitation flowed through my veins  
In that moment  
And forever more  
Nothing else would feel better than that.

## **A Wanderer**

Tyler Johnson

Truthful eyes

Lead me out of the dark

You crucify me 'fore I even start

Your demons make you march

And what I ask you:

Will you be by my side?

Or will you go and hide, soon?

We face tomorrow's skies

But for you

My sorrow reigns

Our heads are in the clouds

You're not the same coming down

Your misery could leave

But I know you need it around

You're escaping but you're bound

To guilt, to me

Your life was not this dream



**Sway**

Jenny McCarty

Medium: Oil pastels on paper – 12x8



## **I'll Be Here in the Morning**

Chad Merritt

There's always a reminder that I am not truly in the wild, whether it's the faint footsteps that I hear on the trail, or the thin blue plastic of a water bottle label contrasting the soil. Maybe it's the low, ambient hum of the cars flying down 278, or the wealthy family's mansion across the water, I don't know.

Spanish moss is suspended over every skeletal arm protruding from their bases, like the old, greyed and withered hair of an aging Mother Nature, grown weary by human abuse, human attitudes, perhaps even me scribing and etching into this journal.

As the sun spies on me, I pass the low-hanging moss, it brushes my ear gently, the soft whispers of Mother Earth quietly calling. Then, a piece of driftwood sits, it's like an arch, wrinkled and ribbed like flame burst from a matchhead, part of it ridged, channeled like an abstract brain. It looks like what I envision dragon-breath to look like: wild, uncontrolled, natural art. They're everywhere, it's a drifting graveyard.

I can only hope that I, like the salt-eroded wood, can aimlessly wander this Earth, going

where the tide decides I am leaving to. And I suppose one day I'll find my beach, my patch of sand to lie down and rest my head, to give way, to surrender to the tide's longing, pining fate. The blue heron standing erect out there in the marshland will know my face, and Mother Nature will know my name. I suppose only then will I have peace.

And alas, my consolation is shattered by the sight of a blistering white grocery bag half-buried in the sand, the words "thank you" printed on it in crimson lettering, like the blood spilled of a once untouched wild. And I pick it up, there's nothing inside it, just discarded by some wanderer, never to be utilized, its only purpose to murder the soil.

## **Between Two Landings I Contemplated Death**

Hudson DeLoach

“My New Year’s resolution is to find life.”

A wish spoken into the void, echoing through the warped passages. The colossal wreck of the interstellar Immortal, with his guts strewn across half a light year. The place where this wish was made a thousand times in a thousand voices a year ago. And once more today as Engineer’s Mate Lewis Barkley traversed the empty space between the Medical and Cryostasis sections.

He leapt and trillions of miles, in a circle around him, was nothing except the pinpricks on an even more distant canvas.

His hand clamped onto the only jutting bar he had seen when he had let faith guide him before pulling himself into a ductway. A half-hour later, when he emerged, he pulled behind him on a tether a cylinder, the upward face of which glowed with blue light. He positioned himself with the aid of jutting debris, his heart pounding, before jumping back towards the other half of the ship...

## **Halfway Crooks**

Logan Murray

“If we still here come sunup, gonna be the last time you see a sunrise.”

I half listened to my brother’s threats as I prepared my lungs for another attempt at untangling the lines caught in our prop. I counted to three in my head before setting a course to what I expected to be a crab trap. Imagine that, our first crack at bootlegging and we were to be foiled by chicken wire and hemp.

Realizing the moonlight was too dim to illuminate the unsought anchor, I emerged in defeat.

I rested my forearms on the gunwale of our small vessel. I could barely make out my brother’s face but I knew it held little mercy for my chattering teeth. He worked his tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other and sighed.

“Knew ya was too weak for dis type ah work.”

I said nothing. I stared at his hunched silhouette at the bow. I focused on his empty sleeve from a German howitzer shell before I fixed my eyes on the solitary barrel of hooch that we were

transporting. I pulled the rest of my shivering body onto the boat.

“Hell ya doing, boy?”

I picked up the barrel, ignoring his protests I tossed it overboard. In my haste, I failed to recognize the buoyancy of our ill-begotten loot. I felt for the Winchester pump action that we had stowed aboard.

“Get that hooch back or so help me.” My brother said training the Winchester at my torso.

“No Charlie, I ain’t getting caught over one barrel of shine or whatnot.”

“You is if you ain’t get us unstuck. Or ya getting found dead.”

I noticed the shotgun quiver from stock to barrel in my brother’s only unmolested hand.

“Who we selling this hooch to anyway?”

“Ain’t concern you boy.”

He rested the shotgun on the deck before determinedly raising it again.

“Think a few gallons of that stuff gonna kill all them Germans in yer head?”

My brother squeezed the gun tighter, pronouncing the tremor. He let his weight pull him to the deck with no concern of a landing place while letting out a whimper normally reserved for wild animals caught in a claw trap.

I felt tears begin to well in my eyes as I watched him press his hand into his face. I emptied my canteen off the stern and leapt back into the frigid water to retrieve the hooch. Once aboard I used a mallet to puncture a hole in the bottom of the barrel. My brother remained unconcerned with my actions until the briny air was replaced by the stench of alcohol.

I tightened the cap on my canteen and traded him the hooch for the Winchester. I took the mallet and set to destroying the evidence of our midnight raid. The sun was beginning to announce itself and after twenty or so hacks I tossed the fragments of the barrel into the tall grasses that flanked us.

“Bou time I take a crack at’er.” My brother stood, swayed, and then made his way past me towards the stern.

“At what?”

“Tha’tangled prop.”

“Charlie, you ain’t fit fer it.”

“Naw, ya done good. Get yerself warm in ah sunshine.”

My brother spilled off of the stern and breached a few seconds too late to instill any confidence in me. I took the three-quarters empty canteen to my lips as I took a seat at the bow. One sip of the putrid liquid was enough for me. My clothes were beginning to dry when I realized I could no longer hear the stream of swears coming from the prop. Adrenaline surged through my head and torso as I leapt towards the stern.

The water was placid and devoid of my brother.

We never were able to bury Charlie’s body. We buried a few of his possessions under a great oak on the property, we even managed to purchase a headstone. That headstone never sat right with me, it had him dying a full four years early. Ma always did say that he never came back from France, in some ways, I guess he never did.

## **The Ocean's Abyss**

Icis Dunlap

\*Events in the wake of our landing

I had a home, now I have nothing.

Where water hugs land,

The sun waves to its saplings

The changes never stop

So life can maintain progression,

This was my home

This is where I must be

They stole me from it

My life gone.

I lay beaten on lumber, with a stiff body  
Yet, A awakened mind powered by screams,

The smells of dying flesh torn by torture,

With loud wails urging for liberation

The rescued shackles binding skin

Accept fate held by the sea

Towards our travels end

Free shackles

Form wide arms embracing its physique,

As it whispers my name, we walk

Fears expedited to happiness

Flowing from warm sand over peaceful feet

The water crawling with every step,

Sees the eternal sun guide on its marine,

As we take this sight home



## **Markers**

Hudson DeLoach

I saw the swamp grass growing  
Between two grand oak trees.  
And I walk away now knowing  
Where the water used to be.

## **Life is but a Mandolins Melody**

Jake McClave

Life is but a mandolins melody  
one that plays an unfamiliar tune  
and strikes each drum differently

Within it echoes vibrated memory  
the sounds they change into sadness and rune  
life is but a mandolins melody

But when the notes shift they bring forth a remedy  
and just like the sun so shall sing the moon  
and strikes each drum differently

Although I may need someone to help me  
I continue to callus my fingers anew  
Life is but a mandolins melody

When I stop to listen the world breathes less empty  
and so does my heart change its mood  
and strikes each drum differently

For with my death I leave this eulogy  
and what shall come still shades in loom  
life is but a mandolins melody  
and strikes each drum differently

## **The Cast Net**

Patti Teter

My last weeks on St. Croix were spent on the beach. Somehow, I could think better. The Caribbean tides soothed me and the morning breezes, cool and unfettered, released a calm there, I had not experienced in a long time. Years of homelessness, hunger and drunkenness escaped my mind and drifted, and the clouds that I studied were no longer untouchable; life posed no threat. Fear, like the tide was sipped away by the ocean, and left a clear white slate dotted with broken shells of anxiety and imminent doom. I desired to let go of the oppression and to change. I won't begin to say it happened that day or there was some miraculous burning bush. It took years of blunder and mistakes, lapses in sanity (and sobriety) love for the wrong people, and misinterpretations to what life put on my plate. I constantly created my own mondegreen and listened to the music but got the words wrong over and over. I cut corners and walked fast. I wanted it all without the work involved. Thank God, grace arrived and as Anne Lamott said, "The movement of grace is what changes us, heals us and heals our world." This is part of the story of what happened and how the change evolved.

I met Lyle and his brother, Billy at the South Shore beach in St. Croix. They stood knee deep in

the shallow waters near the shoreline with cane poles and bait-cast light lines. The gusts of air free-floated the colorful, tattered shirts and their floppy hats bent permanently against the wind. I had slept on the beach the night before, and stumbled over a dead palm tree, which proved to be a perfect place to prop my head.

The men arrived at sunrise just as I awoke, the stronger one ahead with a cast net, while the older ambled behind. They plopped an old cooler down and sat with their legs crossed and squinted at the rising sun. They smiled and glanced back at me when they realized I was there, nodded, and their eyes returned to the sea. There was something about them that fascinated me. They had a sense of place in the universe, and they seemed to be so comfortable with themselves.

“Cast the bait net. Looks like the sprat fish begin to jump.” Said the older one.

“Just wait. The sun soon come. Let me watch in peace.” Said the younger reflectively.

“Water is calm and clear now. Sprat know the tide. We best to spot them on the bottom. Shallow point in a foot a water a good spot,” He pointed. “Fish sneak up and come like rain.”

“I know this old man.” The other said and looked away.

“Easy to take now. Sun too high they hard to catch. I use the wheat bread and jack mackerel for chum. It mash it up good.” He smiled and shook his head and chose to acknowledge his own remark.

“You talk too much. Morning is quiet time for fish and people. Did you bring water?”

“Yes, Bentick gave me fresh water and a pint. Promised him a fish tho’. Help me up Lyle.” He held his hand up.

The older man used crablike movements with his legs, pushed the sand away as the younger one pulled him up.

“Billy, you dead weight. Can’t believe you that heavy. Only look like a bag o’ bones.”

Billy’s weathered black face grinned a toothless smile and picked up the circular throw net with small weights distributed around the edge. He waded through the shallow water and threw the chum ball. A magical arrival of small fish shimmered in rainlike movement across the water and Billy wrapped the thick rope, attached to the net, around his hand.

He cast his body gently side to side using the momentum of the weights to judge his release time and felt the flow of the net. It fell around the chum, and he let go with the dominant hand first

and the lead line seconds after. A calm finesse sprang from his hands to the sea, like a man that tapped a friend on the back and knew the response would be good.

## **Beach**

Klayre King

There's this itch within me that I cannot reach  
Tell me I am pretty, it's dark on the beach  
Sand in my mouth, came from your lips  
Went down too fast like a sinking ship

Wandering hands, cold and rough  
Look at the stars, will that be enough?  
Heavy on top of me, body consumed  
How do I look from the eyes of the moon

Hearing the sound of the crashing waves  
Whisper in his ear, is it okay if we wait?  
The tides pulling back and so am I  
But isn't this what you wanted, just comply

You said you craved it bad and that's all I needed  
The words of a man to feel completed  
I want to be needed but just out of reach  
Left him waiting, there on the beach

## **Dominion**

Sean Pittman

I hear them, the evening's string players hidden in the Green. They are tuning their instruments for the evening's set. The stagehands that have settled into the earth, their arms full of flowering dresses, inch ever closer to the glass sea full of eternity. The boughs are full, yet the seats seem completely empty. The strings will play every night that they can, but they offer a song to the universe regardless of who can hear it. The audience is quiet now, no pollution from the usual suspects. The absence of the flaxen tyrant yields only a brief reprieve as he'll return to break the dawn. For now, the waxing pearl in the sky sits unobstructed for the second time this week, her brilliant light drawing the eyes on the stage for all to see. There is no rain tonight and appears there will be no sky tears for a while.

Two weeks of undulating gray with patches of blue sprinkled in. The grass is finally dry, the earth no longer swollen with the tears from the gray. Gone is the smell that threatens the rain. Tonight, I am a visitor. To the chirping masses, I am a titan—a herald, a plunderer, and invader to the aria that sits in the air. My skin, warmed by the tyrant, regulates and that discomfort begins to fade. I am amenable to environment, but even after two decades, the



breath that stagnates is no more joyous than it was upon my first few days in the biome. It is cleaner-by far— than that of the concrete metropolis I am, and nearly delectable, but alas there are some features that I am not equipped to suffer through. It can't have been more than twenty minutes, and they are upon me. They are ruthless in nature and I am ready to retreat into a modern comfort wherein they absent. The colossus laid low by an army, now no more than a man, and perhaps even less given that he has no true place in nature's design as he bends dominion to his will.

## **The Devils Wife**

Icis Dunlap

A Hot afternoon suffocates the air,  
With the sun kissing my skin  
Glowing raindrops from my hair  
Fall on my hand  
Then I hear  
Soft bangs followed by a dying storm  
Pushing the wind back  
As it leaves no thought  
Why tears flood a sunny sky



**Wood Duck Pair Swimming**

Lindsay Pettinicchi

Medium: Photography

## **breath**

Chad Merritt

breath, shakily mulling over the hill.  
the orchids have run their course once again,  
and life was breathed into the mountaintops.  
flowers, all around the grassland,  
moon over stars and the void over everything,  
over everything must you lie and grow.  
at once, i am blossomed, i am freedom  
growth is almost always done sporadically.  
the lavender-darkened skylines,  
where ground meets lilac cloud,  
where i meet my maker,  
and the symphonies always fall so sudden  
leaves seceding from the trees in autumn,  
whimpering for some kind of familial love or  
some kind of brotherly tenderness.  
water streams, bumbling down the creek,  
and a wise man plays a fiddle in some faraway land.  
the green turns to gold, the gold to a fiery tint,  
dead, dead, dead are the leaves of youth  
long live the leaves of vermilion  
and long live this love i hold for you,  
grassland, field of hearty laughter.

## **Cedar**

Rebecca Taliaferro

The way the wind silently screams at me causes  
A cacophony of silent noise

the howling winds, singing birds, and chirping  
crickets,  
reminds me of that one tree, that special tree.

Dark wood twirled off into branches of green.  
And atop of lush grass laid a blanket of white.

The sky behind lit up with splashes of orange and  
red.

But approaching darkness made it clear of awaiting  
night fall.

The smell of spring water and grass lingers in the  
air as

Light blue fish sparkle in the pond across the way

Now when I'm dressed in the fluffiest pajamas I can  
find.

I reminisce on the place where my childhood once  
came alive.

## **Park Bench**

Hope Taylor

There it sits at the top of the dock under the biggest oak tree in the square a small bench. Our park bench.

Where we sat for hours and hours talking about our days turned into our futures. Together. Not just our individual goals anymore for they quickly became combined.

We laughed and cried. We cheered and fought. Every day we found ourselves meeting at this bench and eventually began to think everyone in town knew that it was ours because it was always empty and waiting for us at six o'clock on the dot.

Sometimes we just sat in silence and watched as the sun set, but neither of us minded sitting and listening to the sounds of the water, the birds, the wind. The world around us moving but us sitting in utter contentment with each other's company.

After days turned into months and months turned into years something changed. We still met at the same bench, but it quickly turned sour. Less laughter was shared, and it went back to individual

goals and small talk instead of everything we had planned for ourselves.

I went to the bench at six o'clock but you started to come late, if at all. I eventually stopped putting in the effort. We met on the bench one last time and decided that we would never sit on it together again as our paths were leading us in different directions. Heartbroken I walked away. It took a couple months for me to go to the square again. It was our usual time. I didn't know if I was going there with the hopes that you'd be on the bench waiting for my arrival or if it was because I simply just missed the scenery.

I made my way through the square where I looked over and saw that the bench remained empty only this time broken like us due to the storm that had passed. I walked past the bench with memories flooding in. I chose to walk by and find a new spot all for myself along the dock.

With my feet hanging off the edge barely above the water I stared out to the point where the water met the sky as my vision flooded with orange and pink. Listening and enjoying to the sounds of nature around me it was broken by a sound so familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I turned slowly and saw as you made your way to our bench with someone new. As the sound of familiar

and unfamiliar laughter fills the air a soft ringing  
consumes the world around me as the large oak tree  
casts a dark shadow. As the ringing meets the sound  
of the water my feelings fade and move with the  
current into the distance.



## **The Tree Outside My Dorm Window**

Klayre King

There's a tree outside my dorm window  
It's August, I can feel the sun's glow  
Everything is new and exciting  
Read the goodbye note in my mom's handwriting  
The tree is happily green  
All on my own, freshly eighteen

Its October now, the tree more vibrant than ever  
I can feel myself changing, still wearing my old  
sweaters  
Bursts of red and orange emerging from the blinds  
Lost and confused, when did I fall behind?  
Nothing feels like home, I don't know myself  
Untouched books and frames creating dust on the  
bookshelf

Went home for the holidays but I missed my tree  
Realized my family's lives move on without me  
My old room is now painted and filled with clutter  
This once was my safe place, hiding under the  
covers  
Now it's the guest room and I am the guest  
Thin walls, parents fighting, the weight on my chest  
Still the child who was stuck in that home  
Being the outsider is worse than feeling alone

Back to my tree but her leaves are all gone  
Winters crisp air, sings a somber song

Wine glass half empty, dragging myself along  
It's hard for a college student to find where they  
belong  
I am okay now, I find comfort here  
It is funny how much a tree can change in a year

## **Equinox**

Jake McClave

Equinox

On the day that equals night

I find my feather

Musing

Perhaps the weather

Of fallen leaves September

May bring myself new

Light

But when the grey begins to settle

And my quill is dripped in awe

Find me beneath the willows

Weeping in the fall

## **Much of My Hours Go to You, Blaze Foley**

Chad Merritt

Much of my hours go to you, Blaze Foley  
Wading through swampland on my own  
Listening to those guitar strings hum, reverberate,  
Hearing your haunted voice roughly bloom,  
Looming and feltlike  
The words of lonesome, the words of isolation  
Reflections of your Kerouac nature, Whitman  
lovesongs  
And now nothing, nothing sounds like yours  
Townes said once that you were a “spiritual cat”  
And a truthful writer  
Like to think I’m a fraction of you,  
Splintered from your bark  
Cut from similar cloth, or from the same pines,  
Same knives stab the same skin

But I know I’m nothin’ like you  
Not as bothered, tortured, self-sabotaging  
I don’t find solace in the bottom of a bottle  
Nor do I sing that well, play that well  
Or write lines like “got no books, just got  
bookends.”  
But part of me thinks there’s somethin’ I fight with  
there  
In your ink, your strings  
The simple fact that you received a bullet to the  
chest

Or through all the drunken stupors and benders,  
You still found time to sing  
Songbirds never refrain from singin' neither  
Townes said they'd all miss you  
When you're gone  
Now I'm writing poems for my hours spent with  
you, Blaze Foley.

## **Codependent**

Gracie Laseter

I don't know who I am.  
When you left,  
All of my colors faded.  
Leaving a lifeless canvas,  
With no muse,  
To sculpt myself after.  
I don't know who I am.  
Or how to repaint myself,  
If not in your image  
Without your inspiration  
Your paint brushes  
Your love  
I don't know who I am.  
I don't know what I am.  
I just  
don't know  
anything .  
without  
you

## **Antiseptic**

Tatum Rose

I will claw my skin open  
And pour hot water  
Into my wounds

Disinfecting your touch  
From my callused hands

Location of incision  
Leads to high-risk infection

Everywhere is diseased  
Everywhere is cut out

Malignant suffering  
Rooted in the bloodstream

## **Inevitable**

Tracy Baptiste

You cannot tame the untamable  
You cannot break the unbreakable

However, some things are inevitable  
Inevitability induces our stupidity  
Praises us for all our mistakes  
Pushing us to the point that we do not think  
But act

Yet we drink  
We drink up all aspects of life  
The pains and the pleasures  
And some of us try to take from it  
As much as it would give to us  
We let that greed consume us.

*Life!* The thing we deem hard  
Has its beauty,  
The rough but fine edges of her body,  
Put things to perspective;  
Showing us things, we should cherish;  
Showing us that the adventure that we are on  
is just one of many and that we are the causes  
to many effects

Her brutality only adds to her beauty

She gives us challenges



But not things we cannot handle  
Her beauty and grace  
Some cannot handle  
I never laid my eyes on something as beautiful as  
her  
I have never felt something as complex as her  
I never had a complicated relationship as the one I  
have with her  
Because in all your glory  
you cannot stop the inevitable  
The same way you cannot tame the untamable

## **Drought**

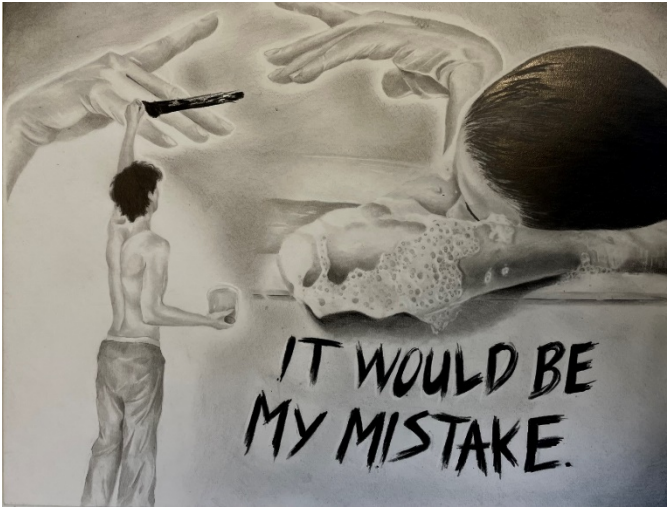
Yasna Hadipour

I don't remember what it's like not to be thirsty. The irritation in my throat is so prominent now that I have had to accept that words would always struggle through my lips in hoarse fragments, too painful to expel all at once.

“Going on a run.” I pick up my two packs: one, vacant; the other, inhabited by a variety of empty bottles and jars.

My sister does not respond. I don't expect her to. She's decidedly converted into a mute since the day her newborn infant died— an unfortunate testament to her dehydration. Her baby's sustenance could not be mimicked even through concoctions conceived through the collection of wisdom of mother's past. Nature has reclaimed what she has lost in blood.

The earth has run dry, and what water remains is deemed unsafe, reiterated by those desperate enough to trickle it onto their tongues and down their throats. Human numbers are diminishing, and it has been through looting and luck that we have survived this long. If I return, it will likely be empty-handed. It is a bitter but indisputable realization: not much longer.



**It Won't Last Forever, Or Maybe It Will**

Lessle Rodriguez

Medium: Graphite and colored pencil on paper –  
11x12

**Bitter**

Sophia McKeehan

“It was so sudden.”

*There were signs.*

“She was too young.”

*Ha.*

“I should’ve seen it coming.”

*You wouldn’t have cared regardless.*

“I’m going to miss her.”

*There’s a first.*

“We’ll keep her memory alive.”

*I’d rather you didn’t.*

## **Home**

Hope Taylor

A safe room without padded walls  
A straight jacket with extra straps  
The trap of all traps with no solution  
No way out as it feels as if your hands tighten  
around your throat  
Suffocating from the inside out  
Mental pain becomes visible  
The trap growing bigger and bigger  
Feelings overwhelm so you tug at your contraption  
Arms stuck by your side  
As the straps grow tighter and tighter  
Pausing breath and movement  
Halting your chance to escape  
The hold on you grows exhausting  
Giving up  
Shoulders slumping, smile fading  
Hope dimming, no way out  
Only option is the consumption of your being  
If you run away your home will hunt for you  
The illusion of breaking ties takes over  
Exiting the ties and locked room  
But you miss it, become homesick  
The only home you've ever known  
Gone  
Searching for a new fill  
Yearning for your home  
Undeniable numbness consumes  
Mind. Body. Soul

Because depression is your home  
And you'll never get out again

## **Bloodied Stream**

Rebecca Taliaferro

There's a lot of things people say about the rain that it's tedious, it's conflicting or how it brings down some people's moods. But the consistency of the pour puts my mind at ease and makes me think of the good through melancholic days. What a sight to behold that steady stream that lightly kisses the windows and dots the grass. And as my eyes glaze over and my body begins to flail my neck too begins to leak a constant stream upon the floor and through the glass the last thing I see is something I love: that consistent drizzle, that steady pour.

## **Cut**

Padraig Stimac

The Final shot  
Trapped in steel

Oh, how we shined  
And spun with youth  
Till the film went slack

The rust that plagues us now  
Won't show in cased frames

For my dance is done  
And the crowd is gone  
But the roll endures

Forever playing  
Forever ending



## **At Odds**

Elizabeth Blanchard

Glasswing butterflies,  
Stained by labor of the fairies  
Conch shells,  
Unable to perform their score  
Ice skaters,  
Ascended on liquid lakes  
Morning glories,  
Past their sunset curfew  
Silk strung pearls,  
Left unscathed by salt of the sea  
Sirens, without song  
Silenced  
And continued to grow  
Young in the fashion of old

A war between  
What's there  
And what's supposed to

Fighting  
Failing  
Flailing  
Only to stay down  
And make company there

## **Under the Bed**

Hope Taylor

Am I too old to hide under the bed?  
Where I used to think the monsters resided,  
but can now clearly see that's the last place I'll find  
them.

Around the corner and through the door,  
Without fail there's a monster gazing back,  
Looking deep into my soul.

Am I too old to hide under the covers?  
Where the blanket acts as a shield from the  
pain and hurt that monsters bring.  
Chaos flooding my brain when I leave this  
Secure, warm place.  
Let me be and let me breathe.  
Don't take me out into the mess we call the world.

This pain the monsters bring,  
Day in and day out.  
They don't lurk in the dark.  
They don't hide in the shadows.  
They make themselves known in the bright light  
The sun casts, giving a false sense of security.  
Enough to be around them.  
Trust them.  
Growing up has convinced me of one thing...

Hell is empty and they're all up here.

Now tell me again.

Am I too old to hide under the bed?

## **Mothers Teeth**

Tatum Rose

between my Mother and I  
it becomes quite clear  
who is all bark and no bite  
and who has chipped teeth  
from speaking out of line

my Mother has gnawed away  
at her claws  
bloody knuckles

and I gnaw at my skin  
ensuring no part of me  
is a part of Her

she is sweet and aromatic  
I am rage  
I am her rage  
I am infinitely unclean  
in the wake of her Purity

I am keeling over the sink  
watching my teeth rot  
clawing at my throat  
when my words fluctuate  
the same way Hers do

If she has Her teeth  
I will have none

## **Cicatrix**

Yasna Hadipour

My shoes blistered my feet the night we fought. Wandering through the city, our blood burned through our bodies, thick with drunken inhibition. We've reconciled since, of course— the instance tossed into the chasm of my psyche, left with all the others. It feels so far away that I've nearly forgotten your specific use of diction as the words launched from your tongue and through my ears, nestling into the pit of my stomach. We occupy a new time now; yet, still- as I crawl into bed and rub my feet together, I detect the ragged edge of a scar.

**I am a SCAR.**

Chase Hills

I come into people's lives and teach them lessons.

I am a mark in a chapter of someone that lasts  
forever

As time goes on the people, I have marked set on a  
path

This path is undetermined and full of mystery

The mystery offers progress and a chance to learn.

This path leads people away so that may grow.

I am left behind, but still there.

A scar that was meant to be learned from, but never  
hated.

## **We Are Gathered Here Today**

Gracie Laseter

We are gathered here today,  
The chill of the wind biting the damp cheeks  
Of the crowd tightly huddled together  
Staring down the mahogany in front of them.  
Mortalities gray cloud looms over the sorrowful  
Serving as a bitter reminder  
Of why we are gathered here today  
Words never said  
Stick their claws into their throats  
As they choke back the sobs  
Of a goodbye never received  
The shots of outsiders rang through the ears  
Of those who had been taken over by the wretched  
feeling of reality setting in  
Tears flown down faces of all in attendance  
As two more rounds were fired  
Once the silence had taken over  
There was no more escaping the truth  
We are gathered here today  
To say goodbye.

## **The Bank**

Sean Pittman

It was an old house. The home was built in a time when there was more joy in this corner of the world. The house fell into disrepair over the last seasons. It was what Tolmund had called home for much of his life. There was hardly a corner in that house where a memory did not find itself. At this hour when all the songs of the day had turned prayers for peaceful dreams, the elderly man finds an absence that is unsettling.

Silence pervades into every corner of the living room. Its roots bore deep into the firmament, through memory, rock, and marrow. The carefully applied wallpaper is peeling in sections, the color shifting unevenly. Critters found shelter beneath floorboards, scattering when the elderly man passed through at unnatural hours of the night. For Tolmund, memory had become fleeting and unless he committed himself to scribbling down his activities, he could scarcely remember what he was doing. Faces held little meaning to him and the past was seldom consistent.

His gnarled hands, knuckles pronounced, he shuffled with cane clutched in one hand around his own property reading carefully placed notes with handwriting telling him the order of things throughout the day. The light nearly gone from his eyes; his spirit endures as it still has purpose.



Tonight, he is visited by a cosmic figure whose alabaster visage as an officer on this side of the dream is enough to drive sane man to ruin. The figure carries no semblance of humanity save for his crude caricature of a face. Its attire was harmonious and drank up light wherever it dared to tread. It was draped in ebony shadows that whispered as he walked. This unholy visitor colloquially acknowledged as Death leans its walking stick against the table, taking care to pull up the draping robe from off the ground. Death sits in a fluffy baby-blue chesterfield chair whose twin is covered in white tarp. Being a looming figure, Death's countenance is awkward and uneven as it sits in a chair like that of an adult at a children's tea party.

The reaper is about his business and proceeds. Before the figure, a small table with lavender colored table runner, a white saucer with a generous serving of cake. Accompanying the pastry, a small floral-graced cup whose contents swirled, an aroma tickling the stranger's nose.

Death was no stranger to bargaining and it snorted at the gesture. What good was sustenance to the dead? From its sleeve, he withdrew an archaic hourglass and a pale blue ledger with Sanskrit writing whose characters are a language beyond comprehension. The bony fingers flip through the golden gilt antiqued pages. Measured in its motions, those voids glance over snippets of knowledge long

forgotten. The ledger's type was meticulously written with various annotations. Death stops on a written entry left unfinished. At last, the cosmic terror turns his attention to the quivering Tolmund before him. Death grasps the hourglass and sets the instrument right-side up. The white sand sifts downward, turning into a midnight black as it fell into the lower compartment. The negotiations had opened.

“Speak,” it said at last.

The old man steels himself and breaks his silence, turning to the seated figure. The reaper's posture would almost be comedic on any other occasion as it adjusted to the furnishing. The old man pondered to himself; how could Death be uncomfortable? It was a creature of bone and will. Tolmund studied the figure. Its frame was so large as though in child's chair, those black pits where no light escaped were level with the Tolmund's eyes.

“O-o-one more—” he beckoned, “I-I swear, just until t-tomorrow—sunset,” the man pressed.

Those empty orbits offered no hint of empathy.

“Sunset?” Death asked, those jaws move as though it could form words with invisible lips. The white terror's grip slacks and he turned his attention away from the smaller shuddering host and back to the tome. Those spindly digits took up the

chinaware and he drew the cup to its face then sipped. Its teeth clinked scraped the lip of the cup as it set away from itself

“Sunset. . . I would think it in poor taste to allow it.”

“I have unfinished business that looks to close on the morrow,” Tolmund urged

“So do you and everyone else,” Death countered. They arrived at the heart of the matter.

Death was a punctual creature who cared little for the toils of the living. The magnificent work was an eternal task to shepherd the living who shed their mortal coil. It had heard pleas and offers from all manner of existence, so to the reaper, this was hardly anything new.

The officer saw little interest in entertaining the exchange, but seldom do the living go out of their way to offer such pleasantries. Death mulled it over for a moment. It sat the glass down and eyed the interior as it listened as the old man spoke at length of the nature of his unfinished affairs. The words hung about Death’s cavernous ears, but it paid them no mind as the visited glanced graphs, charts, incoherent scrawls, and senseless measurements. The level of care that had gone into this endeavor had left little left of the man.

Death’s grip fastened the cup again, the warmth had been drained from it completely. The

specter would do the same in a day's length. Very well then, Death figured, it had waited this long to collect on Tolmund. The figure had vaguely recalled making a trek long before but strained to remember the visit.

Death thought no more on the matter and resolved himself to leave.

“Sunset.” It said shortly, those bony digits clinked against the handle of the hourglass. He turns it over just briefly to let the sand flow again. The darkened granules fed in the reverse briefly before Death lifted the module again to set the hourglass back right-side up. “—and not a moment longer.”

Relief washed over Tolmund enough that his grip on his walking cane was tenuous. Death climbed from his seated position and returned to his natural state. Death collected his belongings and made for the doorway, stopped, and turned its ghastly face in Tolmund's direction yet again. “Not. A. Moment. Longer.” frustration fresh in its words.

“Sunset,” Tolmund echoed, turning the word over in his mind. “Yes.” The cosmic terror had stepped into the ether, and its absence was felt in every bone in the old man's body. The ivory dissipated as a vapor, his robes bled into the dark and but in a flash, Tolmund found himself alone again.



**Far So Fast, It Feels Too Late**

Lessle Rodriguez

Medium: Graphite, ink, colored pencil, and  
watercolor on paper – 18x14

## **Fallen In**

Elizabeth Blanchard

To not recognize you  
I couldn't even see myself

My face,

My hands,

My feet,

But not my person

Magnified

Rose colored glasses—

Gave the hope

That their pink hue would blind you too

A misplaced morality

Will always be

The mistake I learned the hard way.

## **Fighting Anxiety**

Chase Hills

I try my hardest to not act on how I feel. My thoughts race like skipping an unwanted song. Pushing down as deep as I can, but the fear grabs me and leads in the most romantic of dances. Though this dance is unwanted and unavoidable. Seeking to put smiles on others faces because I can't make one myself.

## **Bloom**

Sophia McKeehan

Unfurling. That's what it is to be in love with you. No overgrowth. No dead spots. Just opening, up and up and up, the warmth of your smile pleasantly, gradually increasing the intensity of turgor pressure in my chest, until my cells can't take it any longer. And I unfold.



## Road Trips for Refugees

Yasna Hadipour

Our home set to fire, fed by the wind  
The Regime had produced— “Your religion is sin.”  
Persecuted  
for believing, forced to cover our hair It’s a shame  
to feel strands  
intertwine with the air.

“Wear a hijab, don’t show your face.”  
Hide my identity— Baha’i, Female, Disgrace. A  
hole in my  
heart the size of a country.  
Motherland, I must leave you, but our people are  
hungry.

Bravery against bullets— it’s not on the news, But  
battle’s  
begun, freedom won’t be refused. Watch my hair—  
see its war  
dance in the breeze. Khamenei, can you feel my  
wrath  
overseas?

My country is bleeding, but woman knows red.  
There will be no retreating— on fury we’re fed.  
Zan, Zendegi, Azadi. Woman, Life, Freedom.  
Women’s words should be feared if one fails to  
heed them.

Iran, my trip is coming to end, as your liberty lies  
beyond this bend. Descendant of nomads,  
bred to roam— the end of the road will always lead  
home.

## **Detective**

Sean Pittman

My darling Detective.

Who am I? A question— familiar

Formless, yes, not quite peculiar.

My shade made clear on exposure,  
my essence pool when meat turned cold.

Time withers and I am made brittle.

Be it intention or naught,

Unmistakable,  
unforgettable—

Emotion finds thy eye. Be it violent or consuming.

My presence anywhere conjures thought,

But above all else, it arrests.

Wrest from my visage meaning, dear.

O Darling, shall I tell you?

No—

**Of Him**

Sophia McKeehan

The smell of him lingers

Like stevia

In my frizz

On my mouth

White sage incense

Ten cent books

Raw shea butter

And fresh sweat

But above all

Relief

## **Influence**

Sophia McKeehan

Do you ever think about the ways in which your words have affected others? How sometimes, what you say to someone determines if they decide to stay? Just imagine the characters you play in others' stories. To some, a hero. Others, an antagonist. Maybe neither. Regardless, a million versions of yourself exist throughout, and well after, your lifetime.

I think about that a lot, the roles I've played.

One could argue that our characters don't matter, because when everything's said and done, our own story should be the one most important to us. But I disagree. All of us, all of our stories, are connected, tangled like reeds after high tide. And I hope, I truly hope, that I'm one of the good guys in your story, rather than someone who made your life difficult.

## **Chronostatis**

Kagome

Ten.

I learn a name and a face, and then you disappear.

Nine.

Is there a name to that look in your eyes?

Eight.

Back-up is en route, ETA five minutes.

Seven.

What's happened to the world?

Six.

You can feel my heartbeat from here, can't you?

Five.

We have to go, NOW!

Four.

Never forget this feeling.

Three.

I hope you know what you're stepping into.

Two.

Everyone remembers what happened next.

One.

...

A flame could be considered a representative of  
life— a flickering visage of color and spirit,  
gathering the energy around it

to put on a show whose name is left to the beholder  
to determine. Beautiful, chaotic, but ultimately  
finite.

What, then, is the nature of a pure flame? Devoid of  
any and all but its name and purpose... no thoughts  
given to its birth,

death, or the conditions thereof, under the pretense  
that such things may not even exist, much less be  
pertinent. Would

such a thing, whose very nature makes moot of all  
known laws of the universe, truly be allowed to  
exist? What form

would it take?

Would you remember its name?

...

Shockwaves. An exemplified form of a pulse—  
something we, beings driven by one, have a natural  
connection to. I have

found that it is this shockwave, metaphorical or  
literal, that embodies the moment it represents.

...no, perhaps

"immortalizes" is the better word. This shockwave  
can be comprised of any number of things— the  
waves of compressed

air slamming into the nerves of the event's  
witnesses, the conjoined feelings of chaos and  
fleeting webbed together

through an invisible network of electrical signals, or  
all of that which was ripped from its holdings,  
unable to stand its

ground... but these realizations, like a row of falling  
dominoes, have led me to another.

In this world, there is no moment of peace. No  
moment of calm, nor happiness - not even the  
visages of anger or sadness

are ones of permanence. Ultimately, every moment  
is merely ten seconds away from the next pulse.

Or, perhaps, I should say my world.

...

How long has it been since I last felt that pulse? Or  
did I ever stop feeling it?

...

One.

Two.

Three.



Four.

Five.

...

This wouldn't be the first time I'd started counting.  
And deep down, I know it won't be the last.

**They call me Z**

**Z**

**T.** estosterone running through my veins a

**H.** ormone that

**E.** very living being has

**Y.** et tonight it feels different

**C.** an I pinpoint why the bow tie

**A.** lways seems like the right choice

**L.** et's talk about

**L.** oving the things out of reach

**M.** e? you'd never know that secretly I want

**E.** veryone to call me

**Z**

## Sempiternal

Yasna Hadipour

My regrets thus far, though fierce and unforgiving, have been few, scattered remotely throughout my recurrent timeline. *This is definitely one of them*, I think to myself as I again back my father's car into the family dog.

I hear a strangled cry and watch as my mother runs out from the house, covering her mouth, then her eyes. I mechanically exit from the vehicle and try to internally distract myself as my gaze falls onto our dead, mangled pet. I have seen the gruesome image dozens of times, yet it never seems to get easier. Perhaps that struggle is my one remaining claim to my humanity. Again and again, I must run over my dog; and again and again, I must feel the mortal horror of my actions.

Time, I have learned, is not the linear construct that most of society perceives it to be. It is subjective; time exists for me only in the moments in which I live, and, when I die, it circles back to the beginning of my life cycle. I don't think most people are aware that they are stuck in a time loop, and I'm not sure how many lifetimes I've lived before realizing it myself.

At first, I'd thought it to be a blessing; ever living, my own twisted means of immortality. In my ignorance, when I thought death to be a threat and

the afterlife inevitable, it terrified me to be unknowing of what lay beyond this physical world as I know it. Now, there is nothing I crave more than a reprieve to this monotonous and inescapable existence. Perhaps, if I were able to generate some change— if I only had some control— I would not feel this extent of dread at having to relive my life constantly. Instead, I am merely a passenger in this body, forced to claim constant witness to these unchanging actions.

My father exits the home, and the look on his face is still not one I can decipher. He takes my mother's arm and leads her away, wordless. I follow behind them, crying.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't know he was out.” My mouth feels foreign. I make my case like a criminal on trial, pleading with the retreating jury of two to offer me reassurance and announce the verdict that I'm innocent. Of course, I know now that it is of no consequence, regardless of their judgment.

It has taken me a long time to accept that I am not the criminal, nor the innocent— not the prosecutor, nor the prosecuted. Like Scout, hidden on the balcony looking down as Atticus executes his defense, I am merely the observer.

stream of conscious writing  
why do I have such quiet thoughts today?  
- does the ink smear?  
- or do I normally and simply think they are complex?  
- why did I write both?  
- oops, yes it does - at least it's cool  
- its or its - its  
- how can you record so many layers?  
- or an I wiggle in that?  
- No, that's prideful

Is each individual thought actually a complete entity or does it merely merge into another?  
- oh, duh  
- ew lowercase  
- what was i saying?  
- suppothink  
- entity is not the word  
- hand writing?  
- I need more room.

Do I forget all the other thoughts or simply remember them individually?  
- they run away when you actively perceive them.  
- why isn't this working now?  
- am I less anxious?  
- But it was cool  
- itchy face  
- why boop?  
- Boop boop?  
- cats - Hee - stop - deep  
- typo thinking  
- is the fact that I'm listening to something else taking up a mode of thought?

who is whose  
who's us?  
Let's try again  
here is the first layer  
no thinking of it as saying it  
is it acknowledging in words  
how does voice work in the mind  
it feels muddled  
does anyone else have to mouth some words?

## On Stream of Consciousness Anna Szalc

## **Bad brain waves**

Amir Jenkins

Every step you take right but wait looks like you took left instead. Jotting everything down just to grab the wrong piece of paper. Failing to remember people's names of people that you met. That's right baby, you got bad brain waves.

productive why do that? Just ride the waves of dissociation. To distract you from Satisfaction.

Progress moving forward? Why do that be distracted by the shiny thing over here?! See as a glistens and gleams. It's bad brain waves. Reaching goals higher purpose why do that brain waves.

An Ever Eternal fog never lifting even from the brightest shine of discipline. It's the bad brain waves babies. So don't pretend there's someone else to blame. All the power was in your hands and it's your bad brain to blame. My face worse than death unsure where to go wasting energy to and from. It's the bad brain waves so let it sink in.

Bad brain waves. Pounding in my head. Look at this watch this. Concentration is a sweet release of the rash of distraction that bad brain waves bring out.

But where or where could I get this ointment? I guess I just need to contend with a bad brain.

## **Soundtrack**

Hudson DeLoach

Does your mind ever overpower you? Something catches like a spark on a sheen of oil and just runs away. You think a movement so familiar you feel your muscles tense up like you've just done it, like you swung a bat or threw a punch. Ever hear a song and it becomes your soundtrack for the rest of the day, can't get it out? It's cliché but right now I'm sitting in the dark and I hear Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, but only the good parts, like the part they used in that one movie about Vietnam or every movie about Vietnam after it. The other day I couldn't tell reality from fiction, I woke up so easily it was like stepping through an open door and the music just never stopped playing.

## **Laughing**

Padraig Stimac

Loss of sight, out of mind  
A shivering day, full of glee  
Unto the world comes this noise, a  
Gag of joy and sorrow that bellows,  
How my chords strain and break, so  
I can steal a chuckle, from the  
Nonstop tears, to feed the  
Gall of your demise



## The Perfectionist's Prayer

Chad Merritt

Lo' and behold the golden tinges of my lucidity

Each aching hour turning into burning days

and weeks melting into bleeding months

I loathe the revered for their lack of greatness

like they couldn't cower, like they were marred

like they were somebody stacked

on top of the vituperation of others

I promise there's nothing to worry about, Father

For I am someone again, for I have a purpose

though I consume hours like a parasite eating flesh

and I yearn for a home, or I pine for rain out in the

snow

But nothing, Father, nothing will get in my way

I will make myself bleed, and shed the tears of ruin,

and I will make my muscles fracture and shatter, I

will

ravage my conscience for a taste of pride,

a taste of inflated ego

All for that taste of perfection, to relish

in frenzies of greed, admirers upon my lips

while they clap with compliments in rough,

sporadic applauses

Bowing, the roses fly and brush my eyes to close

them

I will take the stream from my neighbors

and paint my face with it

and kill the one who takes it from me

who takes that applause and turns it into shame

Then, Father, at my last final exhibition,  
take me up into the waters of white  
so I can begin my next piece,  
and undertake an inflated sense of self worth  
and go about my day not in pity  
but in perfectionism.

## **Enough**

Klayre King

Am I enough?

Are my lips soft enough to kiss?

Eyes dreamy enough to get lost in?

Skin smooth enough to touch?

Body desirable enough to crave?

Voice quiet enough to listen?

Weak enough to save?

Small enough for him to hold in his hands?

And if I'm all those things is that enough?

Can I be more?

If I tell him my thoughts

My dreams

My fears

My desires

My goals

My pain

My past

My imperfections

Will he still want me?

Or is all that too much?

When does not enough become too much?

## **Container**

Jackson Cox

What is a person if not a container of containers?  
A vessel only filled with other vessels,  
leading to nothing but inevitable emptiness.  
All the way down.

Nothing more than a sack of skin holding flesh  
together,  
Nothing more than flesh binding bones,  
Nothing more than bones surrounding organs,  
doing their little tasks.

Even the skull, so unique in its design,  
is nothing more than a container of the brain.  
A mind, doing its task of thinking,  
a container of feelings.

Under the skin and flesh and bones  
lies the maker of humanity itself.  
The only vessel of value, not empty  
but full of emotion.

## **From One to Ten**

Logan Murray

Anna Doud's strength had reached its breaking point. She felt her lip quiver before she submerged herself under the suds of her bath and let out a muffled scream. She let the soapy water sting her eyes, a welcomed feeling after seven days of nothing but numb nerve endings. She briefly contemplated her demise until the walls of the tub began to vibrate. She emerged with a dramatic exhale, rising to a level where she could read the name of her incoming call. The caller was unknown, a familiar sight this past week as seemingly hundreds of strangers or long forgotten acquaintances had reached out. She hastily dried her hands sensing that the incoming call was soon to go to voicemail.

“Hello”, she answered with a noticeable lump.

“Hello, yes, is this Anna Doud of 17 Cardinal Street?”

Anna could tell that the caller spoke with a heavy Indian accent, or Sri Lankan, or somewhere else, she always hated to assume. She only knew that this was not someone that she was familiar with. She pulled the phone from her ear and went to hang up.

“Ma’am, ma’am, please, do you have time to take a brief survey regarding your happiness?”

Anna balked at the question; she redirected her finger from the red circle that would end the call to the speaker phone symbol. “My happiness?”

“Yes ma’am, we here at Nova Pharmaceuticals are eager to hear about your current quality of life. Do you have several minutes to take a brief survey regarding your happiness?”

“Okay”, Anna was surprised to hear her voice answer in the affirmative.

“Wonderful ma’am, we shall proceed with question one. Are you prepared for question one?”

“Okay.”

“Wonderful ma’am, proceeding with question one. On a scale from one to ten, how happy are you today?”

Anna audibly laughed at the question. She deliberated on a quip before her trembling lip interrupted.

“Ma’am, ma’am, are you still there?”

Anna cleared her throat. “One, I’m a one.”

“Very good, thank you ma’am. A one, very good. Now, for question two, do you feel that there is anything missing in your life?”

Anna couldn’t help but exhale in amusement once more. “Is this a joke?”

“No ma’am, there is no joke.”

“What is your name?”

“Robert, ma’am, with Nova Pharmaceuticals.”

“Robert, huh?” Anna, in her frustration decided that a man with such an accent could never have a western name.

“Yes ma’am, Robert.”

“Well, Robert, at three o’clock today I watched my son’s casket get lowered into the ground. So, yes, there is something missing in my God damn life.”

“Very well, ma’am. Proceeding to question . . . ma’am?”

Anna massaged the bridge of her nose, unsure as to why she hadn’t ended the call.

“Ma’am, I am very sorry for your loss.”

Anna stiffened her posture, taken off guard by the telemarketers’ off-script condolence.

“I too have lost a child. A little girl, she would be seven next week.”

Anna leaned towards her phone but couldn't find her words.

“Ma'am, you do not have to take the survey, I will leave you in peace.”

“Wait.” Anna's eyes darted back and forth, suddenly eager to speak to this man. “How long ago?”

“What do you mean, ma'am?”

“How long ago did your daughter pass . . . I'm sorry, by the way.”

“Two years ago, she was very sick.”

“I'm very sorry...can I ask you something, Robert?”

“Ma'am, if I am to tell you of my Sarika, I must also tell you that I am not Robert. My name is Vivek.”

Anna laughed at Vivek's candor before proceeding with her question. “On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you?”

“Ah, ma'am, I see. Let me say it to you like this. I will never be a ten the way that I was when my family was whole, but I have made peace in a way that I can feel a new kind of ten.”



“How long did that take?”

“It takes time every day. And some days, I cannot get above a five. Sometimes a two.”

Anna began to develop goosebumps in her long since cooled bath. She checked the time on her phone, remembering that her parents would be stopping over soon to keep her company through the night. “I’m glad that you called me Rob... Vivek.”

“I’m glad too, ma’am.”

“How did you know.”

“Know what, ma’am?”

“To call.”

“You are Anna Doud of 17 Cardinal Street. I had to call you today.”

## Untitled No. II

Hudson DeLoach

I hear a bard of viol's kin,  
With a bow size of a pin.  
He entreats a song to me,  
Of a place he'd wish I'd see.

Somehow near but yet quite far,  
Where the smallest people are.  
Where larger men's feet don't tread,  
But larger hearts take their stead.

When he's done I beg of him,  
Though I know the chances slim,  
"Take me there to share the air,  
Please, I beg, I'll walk with care."

"I'll show to the place I know,  
But you, honesty must show,  
Compose for me, song of this,  
Our meeting here, trees betwixt."

And so the song you do hear,  
I gave to him on that year,  
When I among fey folk walked,  
And with their wise poets talked.

## **The Work**

Sean Pittman

It is terrible work, Stanley thought, but necessary for his well-being. Longing will be a disease best cured by company. He glances at the dusty placemats at the table and abandons his seat. To work. Yes. The terrible work is good. Agony must be addressed. Trawling through the earth's memory, he would put to purpose that which had been strewn across the hillside with reverence. The groundskeeper would not quarrel so long as she was given a tithe. Fresh ingredients upon his workspace, Stanley would put an end to his lingering disposition. He sews affections in the first of many guests. Stanley knows the townsfolk will think him perverse— call on authority to put an end to this practice, but if they don't know, what does it matter? They don't understand. How could they? But, after tonight, the town's approval won't matter because that was no bridge to cross, ever again.

## **To Die Every Day**

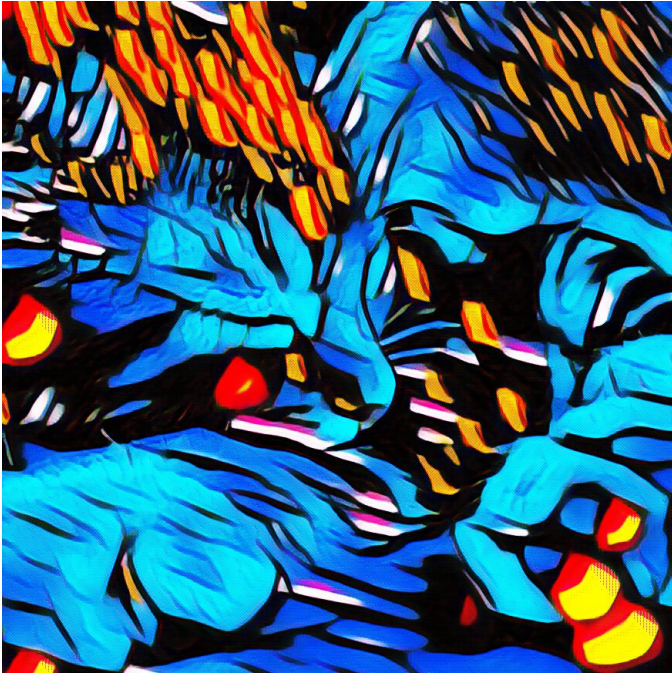
Hudson DeLoach

Here I sit on porcelain throne,  
Thinking of things that have gone on,  
Things that passed, like hearts dried up,  
On memories made and gone away,  
On deaths that are and will one day.

Like a drop in the water ripples  
out amidst a sea of the same  
cracks that to the ocean are nought  
but part of its rolling and washing,  
never to be noticed by anything  
but their nearest neighbour who,  
in having already fallen, saw  
nothing but the water they hit.

So then, who will tell the story  
of how well you hit the water,  
and how many waves your ripple,  
with its nearest drops, turned into?

I don't want to be a king of beasts,  
Trapped in a cage of thoughts,  
That will every year on certain days,  
Come back to make themselves known,  
Like the spectres haunting a castle,  
Or like the past haunting an old man.



**Crystal Catnaps**  
Campbell Crum  
Medium: Procreate

## **Lolli Squid**

Campbell Crum

Her name is Lolli, and she is a killer.

She is only eleven centimeters long but she is a tiger in this murky world, a tiny eater of things. Like all squids, she is a ravenous carnivore. Her little beak is designed to crack and shatter the chitinous shells of the crustaceans she eats. Ringed around this are her five pairs of tentacles, linearly studded with suction cups that she uses to catch and hold onto prey. She allows them to hang as her eyes scan the bottom, focusing on the clumps of oysters. To any predators passing by, she is almost invisible.

She drifts. The rounded tip of her spear-like body is flanked by two membranous wings: her lateral fins, which she flaps to keep herself close to the shoreline. The sapient primates that dominate this planet have named her *Lolliguncula brevis*, just another unimportant species of the Atlantic Coast.

Her attention fixes now on the form of a small crab skittering near the border of the oyster bed. This is a *Callinectes sapidus*, still in its juvenile stage. Its eyestalks twitch as it nestles against the bottom, ever mindful of predators. At this age, it cannot rely on the thickness of its armor or the strength of its claws. Avoidance is the best policy. It begins burying itself in the mud.

But now it has been seen. Lolli pumps water out from her siphon, gently boosting her along, as the crab shovels mud. It spots her with its primitive, beady eyes, and begins to shovel faster. By the time the squid reaches them, a cloud of disturbed particles is all that remains. The crab has disappeared.

But Lolli is not fooled. She hovers now over the place where she saw her prey, waving her lateral fins. Slits located above the squid's eyes pulse as she smells the water. The scent was there, but now the current has carried it away. She swims closer to where the crab hides. Her mouth stretches.

This is one of the most advantageous features of her kind. She knows. She saw the crab, but now she cannot. She cannot see the crab, or sense it, or smell it, but she knows it is there. With a tiny brain composed of only a few million neurons, Lolli can understand that the crab still exists, even though she cannot see it.

Her two larger tentacles stab into the mud. The pad of suckers positioned along the ends find purchase, and the crab is pulled flailing out of the mud. Her other tentacles grab and pull the crab into her embrace. It struggles. Her beak opens wide.

The crab's journey ends with a hideous crunch.

An hour later and Lolli has already moved on into a deeper area of the creek, leaving only an uneaten crab leg behind. The tide is rising into the marshes, and so the creek is starting to come alive. Shoals of small silvery fish pass around her, far too quick to snatch. She travels low along the bottom, allowing this uncatchable prey to sail over her. Larger fish follow after them, and these she avoids with her adaptive camouflage. She cannot change color, but she can make herself appear darker, or lighter, and this is enough.

After a few more minutes of swimming the taste receptors lining her tentacles detect the leavings of another squid in the water, and this causes her to pause. The little neural machine between her eyes starts to work. Lolli knows that the water has started coming into the marsh. She knows that she is swimming against the current, out toward the mouth of the creek. Eventually she forms the concept that this other squid is ahead of her, perhaps heading in her direction, though she feels no anxiety or social urge to seek out the company of this individual. If they meet and the other squid is close to her size, she will consider them a competitor. If they are smaller than her, she will consider them prey. For now she continues to swim along the water's edge, away from all the incoming fish.

Some of them she would consider to be prey if they weren't traveling together like this. The way



that they have chose to keep close to each other and mimic each other's movements confuses Lolli's little mind. She would have her vision dart back and forth as they passed, overwhelmed and unable to settle on a target. It was nauseating for her in a way, but her instincts forced her to look. If a human were capable of sensing the vibrations in the water like she could, they would describe it as a stampede of cattle making the ground shudder as they rushed forward.

Little slaps and splashes of water exploded across the water's surface, making her boost and dash away from their source. The larger fish around her feed with long open mouths that spring forward when they attack, creating a sudden pressure differential in the water that sucks their prey in. They attack from below, and often their momentum causes them to launch from the water as they feed. The smaller fish being preyed on launch out of the water as well, abandoning the safety of the shoal and scattering in the other direction of attacks. Some of them will be caught, but the rest will make it to shelter in the marsh grass, and have time to mate and feed before running the gauntlet all over again when the tide drained out.

Lolli passes through this, keeping close along the shoreline and watching this beautiful madness play out as she swims. She has no opinion, her instincts are the only lens she sees the world through. Small things that wriggle and swim like

fish or skuttle along like crabs are prey. Large things that wriggle and swim like fish are dangerous, and these her instincts compel her to avoid. The muscles of her ink bladder remain tensed, ready to fire ink in the direction of her attacker so that she might escape.

Fortunately none of the predators spot her. She travels out into the mouth of the creek, where the creek in the marsh ends and merges with the river beyond. Some of the older species that once followed the shoals of fish in or other species native to the open water wait here along the edge of the grass, hoping to snatch latecomers hoping to find shelter in the creek. The squid tastes the presence of one of these long before she spots them, and so she travels at the center of the water between the grass, down along the bottom. There are other predators waiting here, lying against the mud like anti-personnel mines, but Lolli couldn't notice these. Her translucent skin and a bit of luck sees her emerge from the creek unscathed and into the river.

## **The Hue of a Morphed Image**

Icis Dunlap

Mirror man with your charm  
you see what I can't  
Fame that never lacks  
Surging carefully  
From your white smile  
Changing in turn,  
Slowly rolling in, when  
Seeing orange red  
your tears are harvested,  
For the pink matter's  
coping  
silent coping  
from the pink matter's  
harvested tears  
Of orange red,  
that slowly rolls  
off your white smile  
Changing in turn  
Carefully surging  
That lacking fame  
you can't see but I can  
Mirror man

## **The Beast of Hollow Light**

Hudson DeLoach

Behind the gates a hollow light,  
Sealed away by ancient knights,  
On surface gleaming long ignites  
flickering spectres that take flight  
into a night of silent tears.

When babe from breast by beast is torn  
and every family near should mourn  
the breaking of the buttressed spears,

Which held them once from the fear  
that things should enter home at night  
and wake to only disappear  
in jaws of beast from Hollow Light.

## **Never Fast Enough**

Jackson Cox

Panic,  
anxiety,  
late once again.  
Definitely fired this time.  
Rushing out the door, as quick as can be.  
Tripping over the doorframe, just like yesterday.

I never learn.  
Eyes open, adrenaline lifting my bruised head.  
Tardiness has long passed, might as well accept  
unemployment.  
Looking down like the sidewalk will provide an  
excuse...  
but there's only a snail.

Turning around. anxiety left behind like a trail of  
mucus.  
Calling out, faking a cough through stifled laughter.  
Changing clothes, getting comfortable.  
Finally at home in myself.

Never fast enough for the world,  
but maybe slow enough  
for me.

## **Dream**

Mia Klinger

When I look at you I see  
The love I hope will last,  
Because you're everything to me.

Now I sit here by a tree  
Remembering my past...  
God, I hope this lasts

I know I overthink,  
and I feel too much  
but it makes me love you more,  
and long for your touch.

Don't leave  
Or I'll be left wiping my tears with my sleeve

I love you  
Irrevocably  
So when you're gone  
I see you in my dreams

## **The hopeful pursuit**

Z

Glass half empty glass half full  
Conceptually is there a glass?  
Or perhaps a glass wall preventing a tsunami  
rushing in  
And killing all in its wake  
If this is a mission a goal  
To conquer the seven seas and everything in  
between  
Then optimism is letting go  
Becoming one with the waves  
Watching the pessimists attempt only to save  
themselves  
While you cleanse your soul  
If pessimism is linked to depression  
Then I am nothing more than ignorant bliss  
No stress no mess  
In the hopeful pursuit  
Of something more

## Unraveling

Yasna Hadipour

I awoke to an unusual stillness in the air. There was no yelling, no slamming of doors or clanging of pots that normally rang through the house as everyone got up and ready for the day. The morning sun didn't shine through my window in quite the same way it always did, and an inescapable chill resonated through the gray house.

I got up and opened my bedroom door, listening. Silence. Making my way through the house, I entered my parents' room. They sat on their bed with papers in their hands, and as I approached, I noticed that my father's face was stained with tears. No words needed to be exchanged— even at a young age, I've always had an ability of knowing.

My father lowered his head, as though ashamed of the visibility of his vulnerability. I put my hands on either side of his face, lifting it up to make him look at me. "It's okay," I tell him. "It's going to be okay." Eight years old and already providing more comfort to others than they cared to extend to me. It would be years yet before this innocence and purity was extinguished by the world's inexorable frost.

Of course, at this age, one rarely is conscious of the weight of life's events. No— only once our backs have bent and our heads have bowed can we truly reflect on the collection of mass that



we acquire inevitably, the heaviness of our existence allowing for an unwanted relation to the burden of Atlas. Perhaps this is my punishment.

There are a number of events that can be credited with altering one's path, though it is difficult to identify a true perpetrator. Perhaps there is no single instance that can shoulder all of the responsibility.

Maybe our lives are connected by the intricacies of multiple happenings, each contributing their own alterations as though life is a cloth sewn together by thousands of hands—hundreds of days—dozens of experiences. Maybe I'll never be able to identify the beginning of the thread that has been unraveled and pieced back into itself to constitute my life— or, maybe, it was a separation that made it all fall together.

## **Executioner**

Tatum Rose

I draw in one last breath  
And imagine  
How we could've loved  
If our unforgiving bodies  
Didn't fill with rot  
And dirt that had not been moved  
In centuries  
I close my eyes  
And pray  
That a planned death  
Is still holy  
I lay my neck down  
And await the swing  
Of a godless weapon  
And choke on my own divinity

## **Rich**

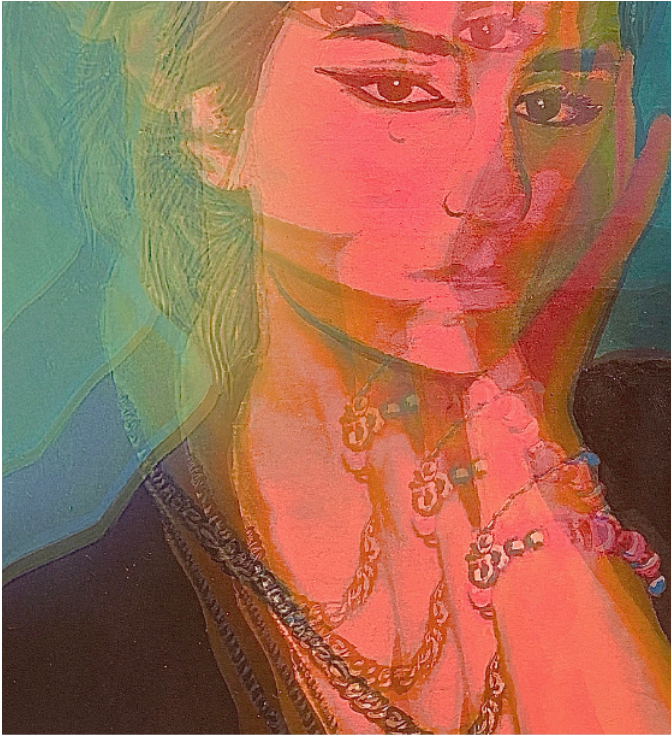
Padraig Stimac

In Richland,  
There's a man,  
With pockets fit for a nation,  
And morals looser than a ripper,

His wealth,  
Obtained with linear blood,  
Spreads thin, throughout the masses,  
For crumbs is all they need, to gain his luck,

His friendships,  
Long strings indefinitely crossing those  
Who crack desperate heads with blunt law,  
To the dark rooms, where the law is scribed with  
taint,

He has his fun,  
Like all the wealthy few,  
From the towers of New York to the beaches of LA,  
There's a man with pockets, full of bloody fun  
dreams



**Fading Friends**

Jenny McCarty

Medium: Acrylic on paper – 10x8

## **For an Old Friend**

Chad Merritt

Do you remember when we were younger, when I thought it was embarrassing for my parents to be dancing inside a shoe store to an old song that I had never heard of?

Do you remember when that kid from the other side of town told us about the old meth lab that got busted a few houses down, or when my father was alerted by the scent of rotting flesh and the cops saw that someone dumped their dog behind the fence? Do you remember the Christmases where we ripped open gifts and felt somehow more blessed than all the other kids while the temperature climbed to eighty in the middle of winter?

Do you remember when we were younger, when I would sit with my grandmother in the chair opposite? And I could not fathom her existence or realize her importance and prominence, so I sometimes would say nothing, I wouldn't ask any questions, but I wish that I had because soon she'd be gone, and everything I ever knew was not from her mouth, but the mouth of my mother.

Do you remember when we would try to climb the tree on the front lawn long before the Great Freeze took it with the wind? I could never get as high as you could, I'd give up after only a few steps.

Do you remember when we would swim in the pool in those scalding, scathing summer days? Dad would always step in slowly, as not to get too cold and we would laugh when we splattered that freezing water onto him and he'd tell us never to go 'round and 'round in the pool until the stairs came to the middle because it'd scrape the bottom of the pool and wreak havoc among finances, but we never listened, did we? We never did.

Do you remember when we were younger, when I would pretend to be some kind of bank robber or astronaut, or assassin, or military man, or all of the above? Do you remember when you would come over and we'd pretend to be all those things in the neighbor's backyard? Do you remember when we would play until dusklight? Your parents never cared what time you came home but I had to beg mine to stay only a little after dark.

I often wonder how you're doing now; If you still get the girls swooning or if you're finally tied down, if you're happy with the way your life turned out, if your parents are okay, or if your sisters are fine. I used to have a crush on your older sister, y'know? I'm not sure if I ever told you, and I'm sure you'll never read this. You'll likely never breathe these words, so I suppose I'll keep that little secret, but you'd never listen, would you? I'm guessing you never would.

## **Awake and Alliterating Again**

Jackson Cox

Why do I sleep so little? Amongst an ocean of blankets, I lazily lie, lying to myself, “I am most definitely tired.” I struggle by tumbling, tossing, and turning, wishing for slumbers sweet succor to muffle my mind, comfortably cushioning my consciousness in the void’s vacant vacuum. Writing words of woe along my eyelids ebbing edges, unable to silence my skull’s silent screeching. Battling bravely behind a mixture of melatonin and marijuana, I can’t keep a cage on this kaleidoscope of chaos. Perhaps psychedelic pacification prevents peace from appearing in my psyche. I am awake and achingly aware of it.

## **A Stranger**

Tyler Johnson

A couple of years ago you wrote me a letter  
And it aches to envision your hand on that pen  
Because it's so beautiful what you said to me  
And no one else will ever say it like you again

You wrote that if you were a stranger to me  
You'd want to be my friend

well, I don't know you anymore.



**Pavlova**

Hudson DeLoach

Glistening still in morning dew,  
Or could it be some sweat from you?  
Drawn out by dancing for so long,  
Just to prove your heart was strong.

Well strong enough, I deem it such,  
But never seeming you do touch,  
The ground without a beat to ride,  
Or at very least a beat implied.

“If never can I dance again,  
No reason to my life amend,  
I’ll die right here in my bedroom,  
Now, please fetch my Swan costume.”

## **Last Flight to Chicago**

Carol Weir

My father once said that my sister got the beauty in the family, but I got the brains. It's amazing what adults will say and kids will believe. I was eight years old, and I had just shown him my straight-A report card. He was standing in the kitchen holding a gin and tonic, waiting for my mom to get dinner on the table. I think he meant it as a compliment but his words seared into me, branding me inside with a hot white light. I was ugly. Tonight as I fly north and west, this memory comes to me unbidden, a window seat to shame about my looks that would last for decades.

When I looked in the mirror I both did and didn't see it. True, I had a gap between my front teeth and short, mud-brown hair that often bent up oddly because I went to bed with it wet. The eyes that looked back at me were brown, not blue like my sister's, and everybody knew blue was better. But I could also see that my arms and legs were strong and well-proportioned. When I smiled, the person in the mirror smiled back and the smile sometimes reached her eyes.

My sister was pretty, no doubt about it. She had long, straight, honey-blonde hair with white gold strands and dimples that adults found adorable. Her shyness made people try harder to get her attention.

The worst part about me – much worse than being ugly – and the thing that made me hate my sister the most, was that I wanted to be a boy. Not just ugly, I was abnormal.

Cindy, two years younger, matched what she was born to be. She was what we called then “a girly girl,” meaning she liked playing tea party and dress up. When talking to adults outside our family she said “Yes, ma’am” and “Yes, sir” in a tiny voice that made me want to knee her in the stomach. Sometimes I did.

This was the 1980s and girls like me were called “tomboys,” not trans. I was lucky that my mother seemed unruffled by my cross dressing and didn’t punish me for using another name— Tony— when I wasn’t at home or at school.

“She’ll grow out of it,” she said to nosy neighbors, concerned relatives and shop clerks genuinely confused when my mom referred to her son as “she.”

My mom was right: eventually I stopped being a false boy, faux to my core. But I didn’t grow out of violence against my sister, not until we both home. Once, after she called me gay, I broke a table lamp over her head. I wasn’t gay, I just tried to pass as a boy. Why? I didn’t know then and I don’t know now. Why are some people left-handed and others right-handed? You just are.

I looked like a boy but wasn't purely masculine: I played with dolls and my mom says that's how she knew I was going to "straighten out."

Both my sister and I were attentive mothers to our dolls (mine were boys, hers were girls), but I was their teacher too, setting out rows of rectangular linoleum floor samples in our family room and seating the dolls so the smallest, youngest ones were in the front row of the class. The floor samples were their desks. Even then, my sister was up against something hard.

"No," she'd start by saying.

"Yes," I'd say, "They have to get some wrong."

"Why?"

"Because kids always get some wrong."

"Yours don't."

"They will," I promised. "At least one wrong each. Yours have to mess up more. Make them get more wrong than right."

My sister was sitting on the floor, legs crossed in what we called "Indian style." Her shoulders slumped and she hunched over her oldest doll's linoleum desk. She picked up the blue crayon I had placed there and began filling out the worksheet that I had made by hand.

“Wait,” she said. “Wait for me to finish them all.”

Time passed and somehow I survived being both ugly and weird and now as an adult I do OK. But beautiful didn’t work out so well for my sister, through no fault of her own. Lately I have come to realize that some of the fault is probably mine. The question is not who did what to who but, can it be mended now?

I grew up to be an English teacher, four classes of composition every semester at Midlands Technical College, where my students come dressed as the working adults they are, some in pencil skirts and low heels, others in scrubs. One of the assignments I give them is a short autobiography, but this is the first time I’ve ever tried to write my own. Teaching comes naturally to me, but self-examination is another story.

Now, for three hours on this flight to Chicago and Cindy, I’m trying to look inside. I have—as our mom used to say after we messed up and got in trouble — “a great opportunity to take a hard look at myself.” If I wanted to, which I’m not sure I do. There’s not much else to think about: the small screen on the seat in front of me is dark; something is wrong with the entertainment system. It’s late and the cabin lights are dimmed. The two seats beside me are empty. Far below, the lights of

Chicago wink on the ground. All I have for a distraction is my phone on airplane mode.

Again I check the text from Cindy that arrived while I waited at the gate in Atlanta: it's a photo of her right thumb and first finger pinched together, grasping a silver poker chip. It's the "OK" gesture, or maybe she's miming drinking a cup of tea, because her pinky finger is cocked, jaunty. In a different life I'd call the color of her fingernail polish "wine." But the silver chip means one day sober so that's a word I'm going to avoid.

Instead, I responded by putting a little heart at the corner of the photo. Now I hold the phone close to my face in the weak beam from my seat's reading light. Is she wearing her wedding ring? I can't see. Is treating the plastic chip like fine china a mocking pantomime? Acting is my sister's greatest love but along the way I lost the ability to read her.

Cindy discovered theater in high school, where her looks got her cast as an ingenue and her shyness melted away. She went on to earn an M.F.A., then worked as an actor for about four years. To date she has been a stay-at-home mom for three times that long.

Right after graduation, she started getting roles with companies in downtown Chicago—professional theater, albeit on a shoestring budget and with a long commute. She also got

married: she and Bob were college sweethearts, which is another expression you don't hear these days. "A great catch" had fallen out of favor by then: our mother described Bob as "on his way up." My sister's acting career was cancelled when Naomi arrived. Bob said, "You can't be out every night when you have a baby," —as if she were in the city partying, not working.

Cindy loves her daughter – my red-headed, firebrand niece who I haven't seen in person in three years— and her son, Aaron, who was born last summer. But being a stay-at-home mom overwhelms her. She is drowning in tiny, mismatched socks, errands, and empty bottles and cans piling up by the kitchen door to her garage.

I don't judge her drinking because my dirty little secret is that I have it easier: a mother with a full-time job, people feel sorry for. But I leave my kids at daycare five days a week, passing my two apple-cheeked toddler sons to Black women who spend all day taking them to the potty and making sure their food is cut into tiny bites so they don't choke. No one judges me if I drop them off fifteen minutes early so I can get a cup of coffee on my way to work and enjoy it in my car— because no one knows.

From Monday to Friday I have the whole day to myself, and I didn't mind sharing it with my students because they're grown-ups. But my sister

doesn't get a break, hardly ever. For her, it's only kid life 24-7. She is the kind of lonely that most people don't see.

I know what you're probably thinking — fathers are mostly absent here so far. Where is my sons' father? At home, where he wrestled them into bed hours ago and is probably watching TV, taking advantage of my absence to let our dog up climb on the couch. Thank God for him because I couldn't make my or my kid's lives work without him. Cindy's dad and mine? Shut up in an old age home where every door, even the inside ones, must be opened by a staff member with a key card. And Bob, Cindy's husband and the father of Aaron and Naomi? Does he help her? Does he pray at night for her to stay sober this time? There's been trouble between them—how much, I guess I'll find out soon.

I hope it's not Bob waiting for me outside baggage claim in their minivan idling at the curb. It's my sister I need to see, as soon as possible and before it's too late. Place her poker chip carefully on the center console. Lean over and let me breathe her in, the cigarette smoke she thinks we miss, a breath mint, her floral shampoo.

“Cindy,” I'll say, “I'm sorry. I love you. Please forgive me.” This is where my mind's eye stops and my certainty fades. Will she stiffen? What will she say? Now the landing gear has locked in



place and we have begun our descent. I am out of time to prepare for arrival, ready as I'll ever be.

## **Dance With the Devil**

Hope Taylor

Beauty be the fallen angel  
Carved by the hands of God  
Sweetly sinister  
Terrifying touch  
Grey eyes gazing deep to the soul  
A heat never felt before  
Burning at the touch  
Leaving marks that he was there  
Disapproved by many  
Loved by some  
Take my hand  
As we pirouette together  
To the unknown depths of hell  
Let me dance with the devil  
Until my very last breath

## **Time**

Sean Pittman

The songs of summer carried by distant wings  
Those lips cooing as they put away their things.  
Rest, sweet child, the sun has gone to bed,  
join her, little one, mind your head.

The embers of the burning season,  
now give way to times of reason.  
Mother's breath grows colder,  
movement slow and no bolder.  
Emerald hair now turned red,  
azure skies now gray  
her dance slowing, she begins to pray.

Her dreams of summer fade on paper  
Our due writing new must now taper.

**Perfect Fool**

Elizabeth Blanchard

Saint-like love

Caused by

Desperate & Undeniable patience

A burst

Of the wrong kind

Fallen from her lips

Releasing a misery

But

Spoken by a mildness

This— unusual

For the Sufferer

## **Memorable**

Tracy Baptiste

I want you to hold my hands  
Look me in my eyes and tell me that I'm yours  
Cherish me with every fiber of your being  
And accept me for who I am

To call me the sweet names you hold dear to your  
heart

To look at me like one fascinating piece of art  
To not let every conflict or argument tear this  
relationship apart

...

Cause what I feel for you is indescribable,  
Undeniable  
And unexplainable in words  
So when this ends it will hurt  
When this ends it will break me  
When it ends I'm sure I will feel it first

You're the first person I felt this way for  
So when you hold me I feel this unbearable pain in  
my heart  
This heavy feeling in my chest  
Can't tell whether it's the love for you that's growing  
Or the sadness sinking in knowing that this will one  
day fall apart

I know love is a strong word but this feeling is  
stronger than like

...

I should have known that it was just attraction  
That I was some sort of distraction

People tell me that I call me a cynic... a pessimist  
But can you blame me

When people just seem to let me down again and  
again

But what they don't know is that I'm secretly a  
hopeless romantic

Well it's not a secret anymore...

I think when you found that weak spot, you found  
your target

Every time I see your face

I want to know what's going on in your brain

How did you feel about me? Truly

Did you just imagine having me but not really  
*having* me?

Or did you truly want to get to know me?

You told me sweet things and sometimes it was  
hard to believe

You called me beautiful but do you mean it

You called me sexy even when I told you I didn't  
feel it

But I loved the way you held me

The warmth I felt from your body

The support that I got from your hugs

The safety I feel once I'm in your arms  
When you laid your head on my chest  
And I drape my legs over yours  
I was a peace for the first time in a while  
I didn't want to move or leave before the comfort  
truly sank in  
Cause I knew...  
That was intense...  
For me...

So why didn't things just work  
Why can't I read this without tripping and stumbling  
over my words  
You made me cry and that's the worst part  
Knowing that you can do this to me without saying  
a single word  
Knowing that you nearly broke down the walls that  
I took so long to build  
In just weeks  
Knowing that you were able to move on and forget  
about me  
For some reason I can't hate you

I want to... I really want to... but just can't  
And maybe that's because I didn't love you...  
Why hate someone I never loved

You made love the fantasy that you created...  
You made me love that I had someone to hold...  
To text... to kiss... and to miss

I don't think I can give you any more of what you  
already have

I'm still grappling with the how much of you and  
how much you took

You and I say it was give and take

But it feels like all I did was give and you just  
took...

You know it was hurting me but you kept taking

But it truly felt one sided and it did fill the ache that

I felt just temporally

So thank you...

Thank you for your time...

Thank you for giving me the dream that I never  
thought I could have

Thank you for showing me that I can become blind  
looking through rose colored glasses

Thank you for never buying me flowers or making  
me your girlfriend

Thank you for showing me what I want to  
experience with my next partner

And thank you for making this so memorable...



## **Bookends**

Chad Merritt

Spill, I spill like red wine, or white wine,  
Or whatever the hell you call it,  
When the slim chance of us is getting ever slimmer  
And I can't stop the weeping of souls lost  
From a time so long ago, time it was  
A time of innocence  
Those rusted old wheels of the ancient Cadillac  
Where we kissed in the front seat,  
Hands on necks and eyes off God  
Looking back on it now,  
I was never truly there  
In realization of the fact that  
There's a binding of spirit and a binding of liquor  
In the warm acidic taste of your mouth.

**Tracy Baptiste, 45, 130**

Tracy is a college sophomore who is majoring in Psychology. But she enjoys putting her pen to paper and writing poems that convey all the ups and downs of emotions. She loves writing and painting in her free time.

**Elizabeth Blanchard, 6, 54, 67, 129**

Elizabeth is an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing and is currently a sophomore at USCB. She is from Charleston, South Carolina. Elizabeth loves writing and any form of storytelling.

**Jackson Cox, 89, 106, 116**

Jackson is an English major with a focus in Creative Writing. Formerly a Mathematics major, Jackson switched majors after one semester to pursue his passion of becoming an author.

**Campbell Crum, 98, 99**

Campbell is a junior here at USCB, currently majoring in Biology. He spends far too much time reading and trying to write when he should probably be studying and deciding what he wants to actually do with his wretched life. He drinks a lot of tea.

**Hudson DeLoach, 9, 16, 22, 84, 95, 97, 105, 118**

Hudson is a USCB undergraduate student studying English, Creative Writing, and Psychology who will be graduating this semester. With any luck, he's hoping to get his M.A. in Teaching at Furman University over the coming years and begin teaching here in the Lowcountry.

**Icis Dunlap, 21, 31, 104**

Icis will be graduating in Spring 2023. Icic is a Psychology major and has been sending submissions to *The Pen* since 2021. Icic likes to write poems and short stories. These submissions come from a spiritual place. Seeing matters beyond black and white.

**Yasna Hadipour, 47, 58, 70, 80, 109**

Yasna is a written word enthusiast and devoted to the process of creation.

**Chase Hills, 59, 68**

Chase is a USCB student and a contributor to *The Pen*.

**Amir L. Jenkins, 83**

Amir is a walking talking Sasquatch who likes to cook and write in his free time. Amir is currently a senior in the Psych program graduating soon (please hire him so he can afford healthcare).

**Tyler Johnson, 12, 117**

Tyler is a Communication Studies major. He is a writer of short films, music, poetry, and daily objectives on yellow Post-It notes. By the time he is an old man, he hopes to become a master of piano, woodworking, and upholstery. Maybe even love, too.

**Kagome, 75**

The author is one who was drawn into the world of writing by its ability to connect the worlds of reality

and fantasy and wishes to master the ways of wordplay to create worlds for all to enjoy.

**Klayre King, 28, 38, 88**

Klayre is a freshman at USCB, majoring in Early Childhood Education and minoring in Studio Art. She enjoys all things creative, whether it be drawing, painting, or writing poetry.

**Mia Klinger, 10, 107**

Mia is a sophomore at USCB. She is a Psychology major. She is twenty years old and is originally from Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.

**Gracie Laseter, 11, 43, 60**

Gracie is a Senior at USCB, closing out her last semester by contributing to *The Pen* for the 5th Time. Gracie is beyond thankful for the opportunities to be published in *The Pen* over the course of time she has attended USCB, and is grateful for the professors, peers, and friends who made her time at USCB amazing.

**John Leland, 1, 2**

John is a current student and baseball player at USCB. He is also an IDST student. He loves painting in his free time and really anything that allows him to be creative. He just recently found out about *The Pen* and thought it was an awesome idea and hoped to contribute to it.

**Jenny McCarty, 13, 113**

Jenny is a current senior Biology student trying to make her way to grad school. She has always had a love for art, and it truly helps her express herself. Since moving to the Lowcountry, she's found so much beauty around her, in nature and in people. She hopes she can bring some happiness and beauty through her work and be able to pay it forward.

**Jake McClave, 23, 40**

Jake will be graduating this spring with a major in Communication Studies and a minor in Creative Writing. Jake is an active member of *The Pen* staff and Society of Creative Writers. He has learned a lot in Dr. Malphrus's writing workshops and will continue to follow his passion for writing.

**Sophia McKeehan, 49, 69, 73, 74**

Sophia is a senior English major at USCB, and an aspiring writer. Lately, her work has been inspired by the love she shares with her boyfriend, as well as her reflections on being human and inherently experiencing both the beautiful and ugly of life.

**Chad Merritt, 7, 14, 33, 41, 86, 114, 134**

Chad is majoring in English at USCB. Writing since age six, Chad has been able to find a voice that is purely his, echoing his vivid appreciation for hopeless romanticism and the looming melancholia of being human.

**Traliya Mitchell, 5**

Traliya is a USCB student and a contributor to *The Pen*.

**Logan Murray, 17, 90**

Logan is a USCB student and a contributor to *The Pen*.

**Lindsay Pettinicchi, 32**

Lindsay Pettinicchi is a USCB Studio Art major. She is an award winning, exhibited and published photographer. She discovered photography while biking on Hilton Head Island with nature and wildlife all around her. Hilton Head Island is certainly a nature and wildlife photographer's paradise. Moving targets are her most challenging subjects; her Tamron 150-600mm lens is her favorite. She also loves ceramics and the silkscreen printmaking technique.

**Sean Pittman, 29, 61, 72, 96, 128**

Sean is a senior at USCB who majors in Studio Art with a concentration in 3D Animation. He is a native New Yorker, but he calls Goose Creek, South Carolina, home. Sean is a digital artist, but he has his roots in traditional media. He has ambitions of making short films that he's been mulling over in his mind, but he's got a laundry list of readings he has to get caught up on before he gets too distracted. After he graduates, he is thinking about pursuing his M.F.A. and would like to teach digital art to others.

**Lessle Rodriguez, 48, 66**

Lessle is a freshman at USCB who is majoring in Psychology. Lessle has always had an appreciation

towards art; no matter what medium or art movement, there is an emotional connection that can be sought out. People and music have invariably been the biggest inspiration when creating pieces. Music tends to have an underlying message that may or may not be obvious, therefore, it's in the eye, or in this case the ear of the beholder. That's why Lessle takes what they hear and interprets it into what they see. As for people, Lessle has always been fascinated by people and their overall beauty. Humans are beautiful in their ways, showing their perspective and engraving the person's loveliness onto paper. Lessle took up art as a hobby and has been reserved and conflicted to show their art, but decided to give it a chance and is very thankful for this opportunity.

**Tatum Rose, 44, 57, 111**

Tatum is a senior at USCB majoring in English with a concentration in secondary education. Tatum loves writing, mainly poetry; it's always been an outlet that she goes back to time and time again. When she is not writing she is a dedicated cat mom, avid coffee drinker, and devoted video game player.

**Padraig Stimac, 53, 85, 112**

Padraig is in his third year as a Psychology major at USCB, with a great love for all things related to storytelling. Padraig expresses thanks to Dr. Malphrus and her creative writing courses for exposing the joy of creative writing.

**Anna Szalc, 82**

Anna is a studio art major with a love for watercolor and printmaking. She tends to pursue whatever subject takes her fancy at a time, though always on her mind are birds, plants, and childhood delights. Szalc is primarily interested in pursuing illustration and teaching as career paths, though she also hopes to be able to work in portraiture and commission work in the future.

**Rebecca Taliaferro, 34, 52**

Rebecca, 18, is a freshman at USCB. She's an English major and has had a passion for writing poems since she was little.

**Hope Taylor, 35, 50, 55, 127**

Taylor is a psychology major here at USCB and creative writing minor. She finds peace when writing and it gives her a great outlet to work through the problems in her life. She hopes you enjoy reading her pieces as much as she's enjoyed writing them.

**Patti Teter, 3, 24**

Patti is a member of *The Pen* Staff and is an English major. Patti works for The Department of Mental Health in Patient Affairs and lives in Beaufort with her husband and three cats.

**Carol Weir, 119**

Carol is a journalist who has lived in the Lowcountry for twenty-two years. She is the USCB



Director of Communication Studies, and a USCB student.

**Shyanne Williams-Ferrell, 4**

Shyanne is a Secondary English Education major in her sophomore year. She is 19 and writing has always been a passion of hers, but poetry has always been her focal point. Shyanne spends her free time with her nephew and younger sister. Without her family and friends as her support system, she would not be able to make it to where she is now. She likes to think everyone knows how grateful she is to them, but just in case they don't, she's here to say thank you to her family, friends, teachers, and most of all her English professors she's had and those to come.

**Z, 79, 108**

Z is a USCB student and a contributor to *The Pen*.

*The Pen* is a five-time national award-winning literary journal sponsored by USCB's student-led club, the Society of Creative Writers. It is produced under the Department of English, Theatre, and the Arts at the University of South Carolina – Beaufort and is advised by Dr. Ellen Malphrus. This publication features creative works from students across all three of UCSB's campuses. Accepted submissions in this creative journal include fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama, as well as other, non-written forms of art such as music and visual arts of all types. *The Pen* (ENGL 211) proudly showcases the creative works of its student contributors and also serves as a credit learning course for any major to gain transferable skills and experience in the publishing and editing world.

## **About The Society of Creative Writers**

The Society of Creative Writers is a student organization at the University of South Carolina – Beaufort that sponsors the publication of *The Pen*. Our student-led club serves as a writing community for USCB's students, welcome to all majors. The Society of Creative Writers' mission is to provide a safe and nurturing place for creative writers to workshop, share, and discuss their creative work, as well as engage students in writing activities to improve their writing skills and inspire them as writers. For more information on meetings and events, please follow *The Pen* on Instagram (@uscethepen). For additional comments, questions, or concerns, please email our editorial staff at [thepenuscb@gmail.com](mailto:thepenuscb@gmail.com).

## Submissions Guidelines

In order to be considered for publication in *The Pen*, those who submit must either be a current USCB student or alumni with no more than two years since their last active semester. Students from all majors are encouraged to submit their creative work. All work submitted must be original, unpublished, and preferably produced while at USCB. Simultaneous submissions are allowed; however, if a submitted work is accepted for publication elsewhere, please inform the editors of *The Pen* immediately.

**Submissions are open year-round; however please note that there are deadlines for each semester.** If there is failure to submit your work before the deadline, your work will be reviewed for the next semester. Creative writing, art, and other forms of expression will be considered. Fanfiction will not be accepted.

**All submissions should be sent via email to ThePenUSCB@gmail.com in one document (Microsoft Word Only; any other form will not be accepted)** with page breaks between each individually titled piece. The author's name should be included in the file name. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font. Polished, college-level work is expected. Any work submitted must include a short author's bio blurb (no more than 100 words) in the submission email.

**For poetry**, no more than seven pieces may be submitted. Poems exceeding our allowed maximum of 66 characters per line will not be considered (character count includes spaces and punctuation).

**For drama**, no more than two pieces of may be submitted, and they should not exceed 2,500 words per piece.

**For prose**, no more than five pieces may be submitted, and they should not exceed 2,000 words per piece. Ensure work is formatted as it is intended to appear on the page.

**Photography and art** must be sent as a JPG or PNG file no smaller than a 5” x 7” at 600 dpi, and no more than ten pieces may be submitted. Artists and photographers must include their name, title, medium (i.e., oil on canvas, charcoal on paper), and dimensions for each entry.

**Music submissions** should include an audio file, along with any lyrics or notes.

Submitted pieces go through a blind voting process— no one on the staff knows the identities attached to the pieces to make certain no voting bias takes place.

The text of *The Pen* is set in 12-point Times New Roman font, a typeface designed by Stanley Morison that first appeared in *The Times of London* newspaper in October of 1932. *The Pen* is perfect-bound and is printed by DX Print & Mail commercial printer located in Hilton Head, South Carolina. The print and color process is 4-Color Process (4 Color/ CMYK). The cover is Lynx 80-pound uncoated cover stock, and the body is Husky 60-pound uncoated stock. *The Pen* uses 30% post-consumer recycled content approved by the Forest Stewardship Council.

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