

THE OUTLET

Bloom Where You Are Planted



*ARTS AND LETTERS
THIRTEENTH EDITION, 2022*

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Cover Illustration: "Carpe Diem"

Holley Ralston

Booklet Design and Layout

Jessica Leake

A vertical photograph of a grasshopper on green foliage. The grasshopper is positioned in the lower half of the image, facing left. It has a reddish-brown head and thorax, with blue and black markings on its back. Its long, green hind legs are visible. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting grass and leaves.

JUDGES' BIOGRAPHIES

Selection of Arts and Letters

Douglas Kinnett and **Gary Bergel** juried and selected the visual art works published in this 13th edition of *The Outlet: Bloom Where You Are Planted -- Arts and Letters*.

Dr. Kinnett, a well-known regional painter, is also the former Coordinator of the Art Education Program at Shepherd University.

Gary Bergel, a multidisciplinary exhibiting artist, is a member of the Blue Ridge Community and Technical College adjunct faculty and of the Berkeley Arts Council and Co-op Gallery.

Sandra Baker, Dr. Katherine Cox, Billie Unger, and Jim Ralston juried and selected the literary pieces published in this edition.

Sandra Baker, Digital Media Instructor, is an active member of the Cultural Events Committee, a member of the West Virginia Writers, Inc., and has written fiction herself. She has published short stories in the *Artworks Literacy Magazine* and past issues of *The Outlet*. Her passion for expression extends to photography and digital art.

Dr. Katherine Cox, Associate Dean of Humanities and Associate Professor of English, has published eight poems in *The Outlet* in the past. She has written an unpublished novel in which every chapter opened with a poem.

Billie Unger, Tenured Professor and Liberal Arts Program Coordinator, was instrumental in the creation of the original *Outlet Literary Magazine* in 2009 and has been a regular contributor of photos and poems over the years.

Jim Ralston, Assistant Professor of English and published poet and playwright, teaches creative writing at Blue Ridge CTC. Author of the collection *Lyrics for a Low Noon*, he is working on his third full book of poetry.

ART WINNERS

First Place

Mystery Solved, WFH

by Megan Anderson

Pg. 43

Second Place

Never Fear

by Jonathan Wilfred

Pg. 17

Third Place

New Year's Day, Shepherdstown, 2022

by Holley Ralston

Pg. 7

HONORABLE MENTIONS IN ART

Butterflies

by Lisa Miller

Pg. 33

Marijuana

by Omar Williams

Pg. 53

Fall Leaves

by Antonia Capriotti

Pg. 37

LITERATURE WINNERS

First Place

What Is Not Mine

by Emory Cote

Pg. 22

Second Place

Growing up as the “Model Minority”

by Reagan Mucher

Pg. 18

Third Place

Gardenia

by Cecilia LeFebvre

Pg. 32

HONORABLE MENTIONS IN LITERATURE

Must

by Emory Cote

Pg. 26

Unbreakable

by Cheyenne McCumbee

Pg. 34

Fears

by Porter Martin

Pg. 42

TORN CARNATIONS

by Emory Cote

Your mother left a bundle of carnations by your bedside today.
The dismal space between those four walls has been empty
for quite some time now, aside from my visits.

You hate carnations. Fake looking, you always call them.
I'm indignant she's already forgotten.

I tear them up at the foot of that bed,
while only the stars outside your window watch in sympathy.
I look out at those stars and pretend I can still see you,
with how I'm certain their dust ran through your veins.

I pretend a lot of things, sitting at the foot of your empty bed.

I pretend I still remember how your face looked.
The portraits lining the hall don't quite feel right, don't quite feel the same.
They don't carry your dimples, or the freckle that sits beside your left eyebrow.

Or maybe it was your right. I'll never know.

I ask Sally, the maid who always changed your bedding in the mornings,
and helped your jewelry on. She doesn't remember either.
I do not think she changes the bedding in there anymore.

I'm angry at her, for not remembering.
The words I throw at her are petty, and ugly.
She stares at me with a pitying look I cannot describe.

She looks at me like I am something quite young,
with all the tears behind my eyes and a bundle of crumpled,
red petals in my fist.

I suppose young is how I feel nowadays,
like a child who simply does not know what to do with himself.

I put the torn flowers beside my head on your pillow,
wilting as they already are. I refuse to throw them away.

Remembering you hate them is remembering still,
and I will hold onto that as tight as I can.



NEW YEAR'S DAY, SHEPHERDSTOWN, 2022

by Holley Ralston

Photograph

WHISPERINGS (A CINQUAIN)

by Cheyenne McCumbee

Don't cry.
Storm will go soon.
Listen closely. Can't you
Hear Rain sharing Sun's promise to
Return?



LATE WINTER EVENING

by Cecilia LeFebvre

Photograph

SEEING GOD

by Joseph Holiday

Glistening Seas
Miraculous Deeds
Your Father's eye
My mother's kiss
Autumn Trees'
Sundry colored Leaves
Seaside Suns
Rising and setting
In a blissful wedding
Summers eve with
Star filled Sky
Mountain highs
A Sermon's Song
To a target hit heart
Aha moments spark
From out of the dark
Warm Fall's breeze
A true story's please
Infant's Cherub face
Lifesaving grace



A TEST OF FAITH

by Jacob Cline
Digital Drawing

A TEST OF FAITH

by Jacob Cline

White. That's everything that this world contains. It's so white that not even the naked eye can see. A low mood is set throughout the white image. Then, the white image starts to change. Blurry motions slowly sweep through my vision. It appears to be somewhat of a rainfall if not slower. The image is getting clearer and clearer until I can see that I'm standing on a field of snow. The rainfall isn't what it seems to be; in fact a slow passive snowfall.

The image of the field now becomes a full blossom of reality. I can look around but seem to have no body. I can see this snowfall clearly, but I don't seem to have eyes. I begin to ask myself, is this world a dream or reality? Is this all real or in my head, if I had one that is? If this is real, what happened to the previous world? Are there other beings around here beside me? Is this the world that I truly belong in?

Once these questions flow in air, I see a figure in the distance. It seems so little and yet so big in shape. It seems to be the shadowy figure of a clear snow. Could this be another being like me? Oh wait, that's right. I don't have a body, so I'm not a being, but how does this figure have a body? I can't make out any face at that distance from where I think I am standing.

The figure is starting to get closer. The shadow outline in the distant snow suddenly has some sort of hair blowing along with the snow. The figure seems to grow, and it is skinnier than before, almost a fragile innocent living thing. The shadow turns into a form of a...girl? Yes, she appears to be a little girl with brown hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a red dress, and has two gold ribbons in her hair, which give her a cutesy look. The girl walks up to me and stops right in front of me. She stands for a second, and then a teardrop runs down her cheek. I try to speak to her, but I have no voice. She then looks up at me; her eyes stare brightly into where my eyes would meet hers.

"It's ok. You are no longer alone anymore."

I suddenly feel a soft warm feeling. She then smiles a little to the next words she speaks.

"I'm so glad that you are here. I thought I would be the only one."

How can she see me if I don't have a body? Yet, when I realize this, the snow suddenly stops.

I then look around and see that the snow-covered area has turned to spring. The girl softly speaks, "I know you can't speak, but you can hear me. You may have no body, but your soul is still here. This world isn't dead or isn't alive. One question truly remains: is this world all in your head or is it reality?"

I certainly want to respond to what she said. Perhaps this world is indeed truly all in my head, but whether that is the truth, I don't know. This could also be a reality that I was recently born into. What about the old one? Does it seem to exist?

The girl continues, "Don't fear. That question will be answered only on your belief. If this world is real, don't be puzzled with it. The old world you have once been in has been destroyed, for dark forces have taken over. This world is created brand new and the only ones existing here are me and you. Come, give me your hand."

This girl seems to forget that I don't have any hands. She then giggles and reaches out her own hand for me to grab.

"Reach out to me."

Then with a swift motion, a hand reaches out and grabs hers. To my shock, it is a hand coming from me, my own hand. The feeling of warmth has grown even further. For once, I look down and come to the stunning conclusion: I now have a body. This inner growing feeling of warmth suddenly becomes a heartbeat, for I am truly alive. This shock suddenly becomes a joy! I jump and dance, feeling all the limbs and the emotions flow through my body.

“Yes!” she laughs, “For you are now truly alive! You have taken my hand as if to trust me. I now believe that this is the beginning, and there will never be the end! For now, you have taken my hand, and it is time to walk together on our journey on this road here.”

I finally speak out in a soft voice “Road? There is no road here. Only this field is in this world.” The girl uses her other hand to point to my right. I look to see an old road stretching across for miles and miles, seeming to have no end. The road has bits of it cracked and broken surface along the way. The girl suddenly speaks, “It may be a long journey, but as long as you keep holding my hand, we will walk on this road together. This road will lead to a city where there will be a gate made of pearls and the streets that are made of gold. This city will be your life, but if you stop holding my hand, then I cease to exist as will that city, and then you’ll be forever truly alone on this road. A test of faith. Shall we walk?”

I looked at the road for a moment. A city far away and only reachable with her hand? Of course, the only way left to go is to go with her, for I do not want to be alone. For she is the only one here for me, and I will always be with her. As I tighten my grip around her hand slowly, I speak out my response, “Indeed, we shall.” I turn my body forward ahead and the girl does the same. She then speaks, “Don’t look back. Always keep your head forward and don’t ever look back.” I take a deep breath and then smile as I place my first step on the path.

INTRODUCTIONS

by Reagan Mucher

Hello!

I enjoy music, specifically, hip-hop and indie.

I like plain vanilla ice cream and watching popular shows for no reason.

I'm very materialistic; I often buy things to show my worth.

I like walking through cities.

I love the atmosphere of claustrophobia on the streets and in the metro.

I love tasting the new food with each and every turn of a new block.

I love the shops, where I can buy more items, waiting for my friend's approval.

Media has always been something I enjoyed.

Not only can I watch and view anything and everything,

but I can document my life to anyone and everyone who doesn't care.

I find myself to be a funny person,

maybe it's for genuine laughs from friends,

or the joy of laughing at nothing.

I can't wait for summer to be here.

I personally dread the heat, but

I love the experiences that come with the season.

One of my favorite memories is spending a summer surrounded by people that loved me.

For that summer, I like grouping all the good memories into one big bunch.

Life was so bright, and not only because of the sun.

But, even then, I was trying to convince my shadow that I was someone worth following.

DON'T LOOK

by Kat Spotts

“Don’t look at the moon!” an alarm blared from my phone. It was three in the morning, and I had just gotten to sleep. All of a sudden my phone started going off the walls with notifications from my friends. “You need to look at the moon!” “It’s so beautiful tonight!” Even the news was talking about it. “This is the most gorgeous moon ever. If you’re awake go look at it!” Then another official alarm went off on my phone. “Whatever you do, **DO NOT** look at the moon!!” Obviously by then I was very curious. But at the same time I wasn’t sure if I should because of all the commotion. It was such an odd night.

“Today is going to be a great day,” I said to myself while getting ready. Today was the first day of school, and I was so excited. I had just moved here this summer. This town called Cloudfield was a fresh new start. I was getting ready to head out the door and just happened to look at the sky and saw that the moon was still out. “Huh, weird” I thought to myself. I just shrugged it off and said that it was normal. When I got to the school I was instantly the center of attention. You see, Cloudfield was a small town, where people lived for their whole lives. And all of a sudden there was a new girl. I was like a shiny new toy. Everyone was all over me wanting to know every little detail about me, where I was from, why I moved here. I finally got away from everyone and went to my morning classes. Lunch came and again I was the center of attention. I hated all the attention. It is just so draining. Finally, afternoon classes were done and I went home.

I ate dinner with my family then decided I was going to just get a shower and clear my head before bed. When I got out of the shower I looked out the window before closing the shade and noticed the moon was a different shade and shape than it normally is. It was really weird, but again I just shrugged it off. I went to bed and watched Netflix or a few hours and was starting to get very sleepy. I ended up drifting to sleep around two in the morning. An hour later all the notifications started coming on my phone about “do not look at the moon.” I started to get a little freaked out and went to find my parents. They were not in their bedroom so I went downstairs. They were nowhere to be found. I was getting really freaked out at this point, and then I looked out the window, and they were just standing outside staring at the moon. I went outside, careful not to look at the moon and tried to talk to them. All they said was “honey, look at how beautiful the moon looks tonight. You need to see it.” I tried to get them to snap out of it but I couldn’t. Just then I noticed my neighbors outside staring at the moon saying the exact same thing my parents were saying. It was like everyone was mind controlled by this moon. Everybody started going crazy and not paying attention to what they were doing and all of a sudden, they started disappearing. One by one they disappeared. No trace of them left. Until it was only me. Alone. I am now the last person on the earth. What happened to everyone?

STUCK IN REVERSE

by Reagan Mucher

(One year after my mother passed)

Music cannot illustrate the way I feel,
and yet songs can make me cry or lift me up
for just a moment.

There are so many components that make something music:
the voice of the notes,
the echo of the beat,
my different feelings for each and every tempo.

I will never truly grasp my love for my mother,
even though I composed the whole song,
so I tried to find the simple route
to know more fully who she really was,
or the person she strived to be.

I finally found that knowledge within music
a year after she passed.

A song can't capture the person she was,
but it gave me a glimpse into a memory of her.

She would probably pick something that better fits her
because she was a fan of classic rock.
Bands like AC/DC were her top pick,
but for me, "Fix you" by Coldplay, reminds me of my mom.
Every single time I hear, it I feel a certain sense of calm.

I would still chase to hear any song, just to see a memory of you.
I want so desperately to fill this empty space that you left behind.

I remember now, I still have music,
even if I feel like I'm stuck in reverse.



NEVER FEAR

by Jonathan Wilfred

Photograph

GROWING UP AS THE “MODEL MINORITY”

by Reagan Mucher

(The “model minority” is a stereotype placed on Asian Americans to insinuate that we are what minorities should be and should experience.)

I was at T.A. Lowery Elementary School in the third grade. We had just finished lunch, and it was time to go back to class to start the math portion of our day. We lined up single file against the beige cinder block walls and trekked down the hallways. The classroom was on the opposite end of the school, where the fifth graders’ section was. We stopped just shy of the corridor leading to our room because a couple of lines from fifth grade were coming down perpendicular to us. I watched in admiration as they walked by in silence. I wanted to be grown up so badly.

I remember one of the kids looking me up and down. I of course smiled at him because I idealized the kids who were older than I, and with some laughter in his voice, he said, “What are you lookin’ at, chink.” I didn’t really know what the word meant so I was pretty confused, but the line started moving, so I did too.

When I got home that afternoon, I asked my mom what the word meant. She was very shocked to say the least. She said it was a terrible word used to bring me down. It was something people would say because I looked a certain way. It was my first time experiencing a slur, and after learning what it was, I cared a lot about what people said to me. I was upset and grew protective of my appearance. I wanted so badly to tell everyone how bad this feeling was. But, as time went on, I learned that a word is only as powerful as you let it be.

In middle school, I was a part of the cross country team. It was my seventh grade year, and we were at Romney Middle School. The course was supposed to be hard because most of it was on top of a giant hill that we would have to climb. We were all standing in a line getting our tags so we could be counted in the race. My friends and I were lined up, and we were all talking about how excited we were to run. Next to us, were the Romney kids getting ready for their home cross country meet. We were talking to a few of them too, asking them about the track, asking about where the hardest part of the course was, etc. One of the larger kids came into the circle where we were talking, and in a mocking tone said, “Maybe if your eyes were bigger you could see the course.” The group of kids fell silent and my friends turned and looked at me. I was silent with them, but the line kept moving, and I did too.

I knew exactly what they meant that day because I had been exposed to slurs and stereotypes that clung onto me as I grew. They were kind of common knowledge to me at that point, though I didn’t really care at the time because I had my friends with me. On the bus ride home, after we won the meet, we joked about it because honestly, it shouldn’t mean that much. A stereotype is only reinforced by ignorant people.

Later in my life, towards the beginning of Covid, I was in the checkout line at Martins. The store was kind of backed up because it was the weekend and people were pretty freaked out about the whole virus thing. I was waiting at the self-checkout line with maybe four items

in hand. My family had asked me to go out to get bread, eggs, juice, and some other things. While walking around the store, I couldn't help but feel watched as I was grabbing items off the shelves. It was so uncomfortable because I was watching the news too. I knew that the virus came from some Chinese city named Wuhan, but I also knew that I wasn't Chinese.

So, I just continued roaming the aisles, reading every hanging sign trying to find what I was looking for. I eventually ended up where the eggs and bread were. And, as I was going to grab whole wheat bread off the rack, a lady grabbing the same type of bread looked to me with her mask below her nose and said, "You started this shit," and that kind of stuck with me as I stood in the checkout line because I knew exactly what she meant. I knew where it came from. I knew the intention behind the words, and I knew why she was angry. I couldn't get it out of my head, but the line was moving..., so I did too.

THE OCEAN

by Antoinette Rampino

I feel as though I cannot breathe.

Drowning in my thoughts, I try to come up for air.

But it's like a weight bringing me deeper towards the bottom of the dark ocean.

There is a voice that speaks to me, telling me to let go of the weight that holds me down and chains me to the depths of the lonely bottom.

I scream for help, but who can hear my cries as they are swallowed by the emptiness that surrounds me.



THE BURDEN OF RIGHTS

by Jonathan Wilfred

Photograph

WHAT IS NOT MINE

by Emory Cote

A fool's errand, isn't it, to crave heartache?

To crave the sense of her hand slipping away from mine,
if only to own the memory of its hold.

To feel my skin chill in the absence of her touch,
if only to have felt it, once.

I would take her sweet words and gentle touches bittering with time,
if only to know that they were gentle, and sweet, once.

I would watch her fondness turn to hate for me,
just to know that fondness was held, once.

I would take it in a heartbeat,
even knowing I'd have to watch it all fall apart before me
like a bird's nest in a storm.

I crave a heartache I know is not mine,
a pain I have no right to.

The pain of her not caring for me anymore,
if only for the knowledge she once did.



GALAXY WOMAN

by Jocelyn Stokes
Acrylic on Canvas

BACK THEN

by Jim Ralston

I can't stop thinking of you
and me as still an us. Even though
you were always looking over my shoulder
at someone taller or driving a sportier car,
while I pretended not to notice.

Now walking to town via Liberty Street,
I remember when we stopped to fight
in the shadows of this Methodist Church,
how we took turns thrusting fingertips
into each other's chest, to emphasize
who gave the less in our relationship.

We could laugh about that now, I wish.
Under this gnarly chestnut tree, you said
I'd touch you again over your dead body.
That was when we were still having sex
now and then,... more or less,... but less
and less, always less. "If you have to ask,
the answer's no," you used to like to say;
"If you want to suffer, make my day."

At the corner of Liberty and Vine,
at this stop sign with bullet holes in it,
I said, "Here's what we've now become.
Stopped. No Exit. No U-Turn. Children
Playing. One way. Your way."

That night all subterfuge and artifice,
we bounced into the Last Chance Lounge
on Karaoke Friday. You sang "I Am Woman";
I, "Love Me Tender," for the bottom line,
down on one knee, my arm outstretched
to your face in the crowd, like I was half
praying for something: "For my darling
I love you and I always will."

Great acting, I was thinking back then.
It surprised even me how I belted it out.

ENKINDLED

by Emory Cote

You shaped me, my dear,
took my broken shards and fit them together
with molten beeswax that brasses like gold.

You smoothed out the cracks with a reverence
sculptors had for their muse,
with the worship that goddesses, on some occasion,
had for their mortal lovers.

But, my dearest, how I wish you'd looked at me
with that kind of tenderness before,
when I was still but pieces of flaking plaster.

You enkindled an entirely new form for me,
my love, when I broke to pieces in your arms,
but now I wonder if it was simply for yourself.

You gazed at me like I was something ethereal, something inviolable,
but it seems you only found me so when you molded it.
Your gaze seems to be one of pride,
one of an artist who's accomplished her vision.

I covet for you to look at me like I'm something beautiful
even split, even when weeds grow amongst my cracks
and birds nest within my palms.

But in your eyes is only an empty adulation,
one that makes the gold you laid into me burn like shackles
around my wrists and neck.

How I wish you'd left me in my broken, chipping state,
as much pain as I was in.
At least then, my love, you were looking at me,
and not what you laid into me.

MUST

by Emory Cote

She is a goddess, must be,
for the heat she carries all the way from her breath to her fingertips.

With the warmth in her eyes when she gazes at me,
when she takes my hand in hers, feet as bare as our souls in the grass.

She is a goddess, she must be,
with how my worship of her comes as natural as the breeze.

Her heat follows everywhere she goes,
lingers on my skin like a stubborn summer sun that refuses to set.

Why, if she is a goddess, (which she is, she must be), has she grown so cold?
She will not respond to me, even when I begin to cry.

Why must she look so frail, like the strength she once held me with never existed?

Why do her eyes see right through me? They are dull.
I wish she would close them just so I do not have to look.

If she was a goddess, which she was, she must have been,
why did her heat crumble under my hands like nothing but dust,
nothing left to prove my worship of her even existed?



APPALACHIAN FOG

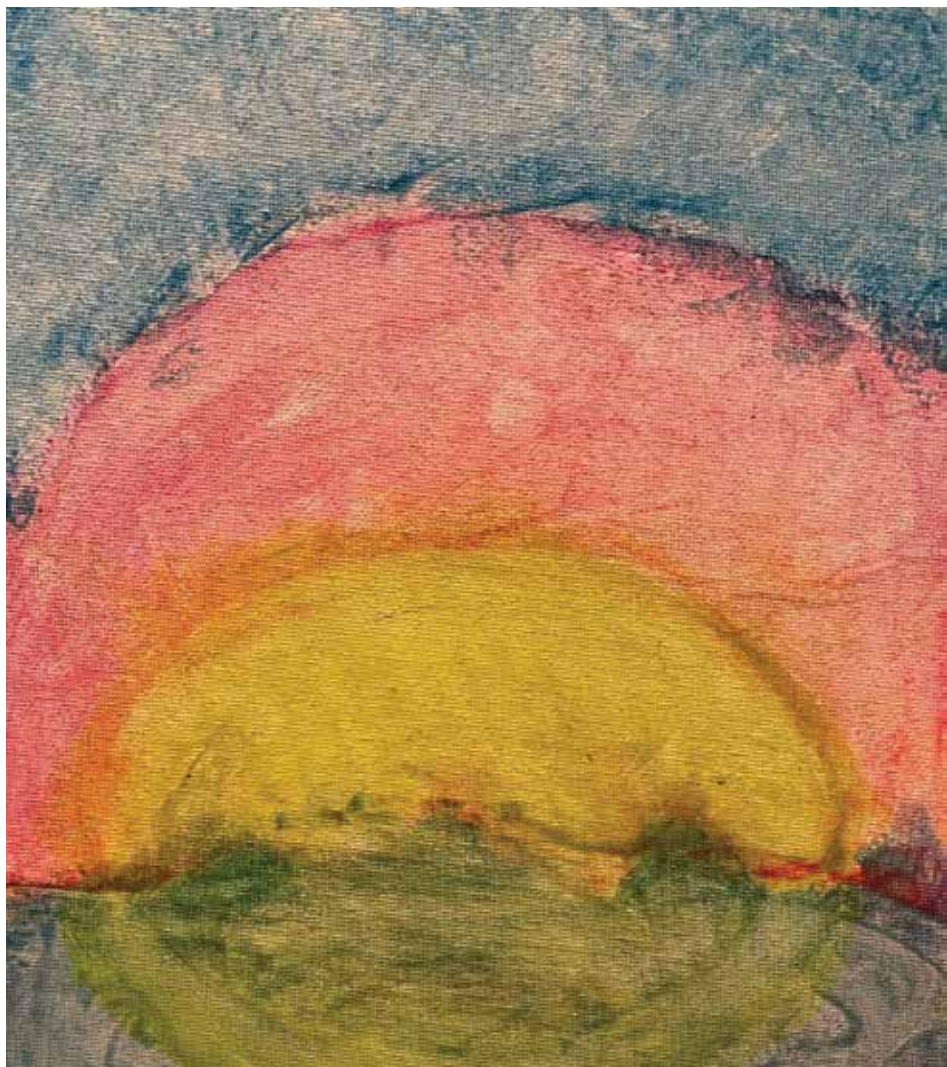
by Kelly Shurnitski

Photograph

LOVE'S ANCHOR

by Katherine Cox

I love to hear him in the other room,
my love, my heart, my husband, and my friend.
Not long since we were wed, and bride and groom
declared the vow to see life to its end.
We look now at that end and say that fall
is part of life, a chapter in the year,
for you have stared down death and heard its call
and known how life can be both frail and dear.
The day is seized. The morning comes to stay,
and I will hold you closely if I may,
as you begin to wake and kick off sleep,
to hold the world and time a spell at bay,
while I am awestruck that I'm yours to keep,
my mainstay and my mast, my anchor deep.



SUNSET OVER THE OCEAN

by Grace Moore

Acrylic on Canvas

INERTIA

by Lily McGuigan

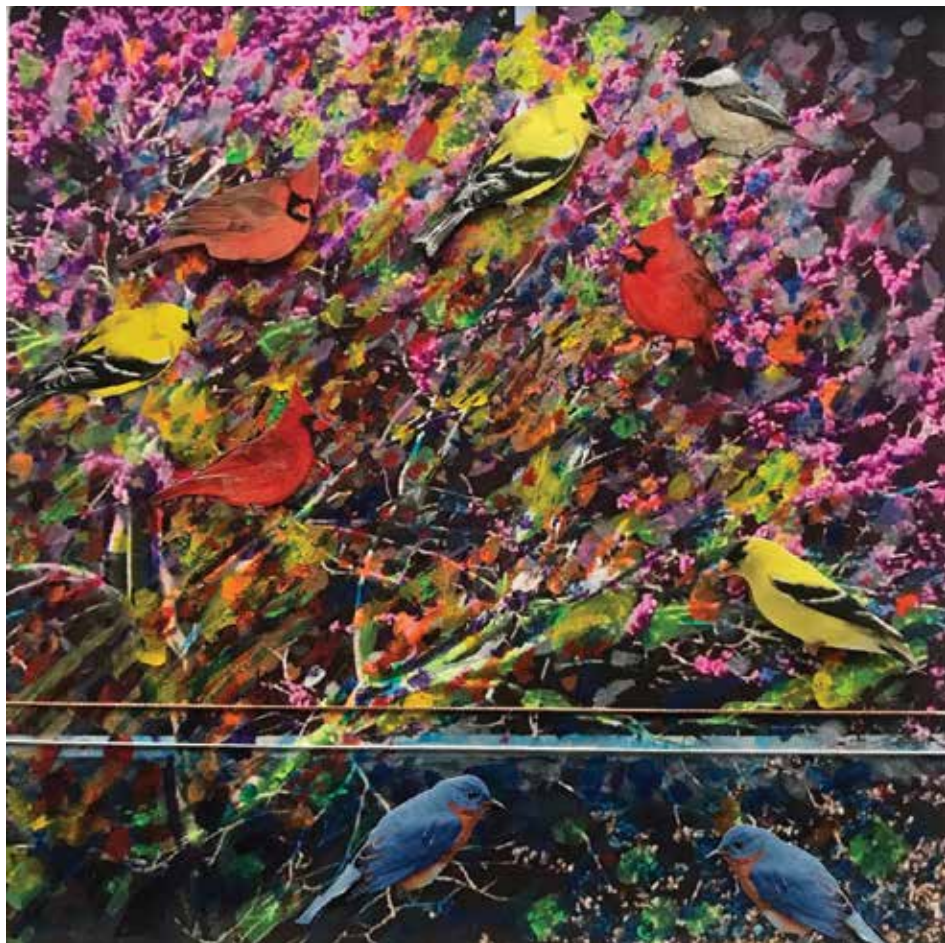
I will never forget that scene,
that day when I watched your future vanish before my eyes.
Your frail bones shattered in pieces.
it has burned itself into my memory.

As I stare listlessly down at your grave that rests at my feet,
I reminisce about the days we spent together laughing as children,
playing pretend in our small corner of the world,
in our own back yard.

Without you, sweet brother,
nothing feels right anymore.
The way the birds sing, the way the trees rustle in the wind,
everything we once shared together feels wrong.
It's almost as if I share your grave.

I long for the day your buried body begins to breathe,
but, alas, I know it never will.

As vile of a circumstance I've found myself in,
I would continue to live for you, my brother, even if
it was only to honor your memory,
my brother.



BIRDSONG

by Gary Bergel

Mixed Media

GARDENIA

by Cecilia LeFebvre

green gated gardens
your flowers and vines overhang
on the exterior

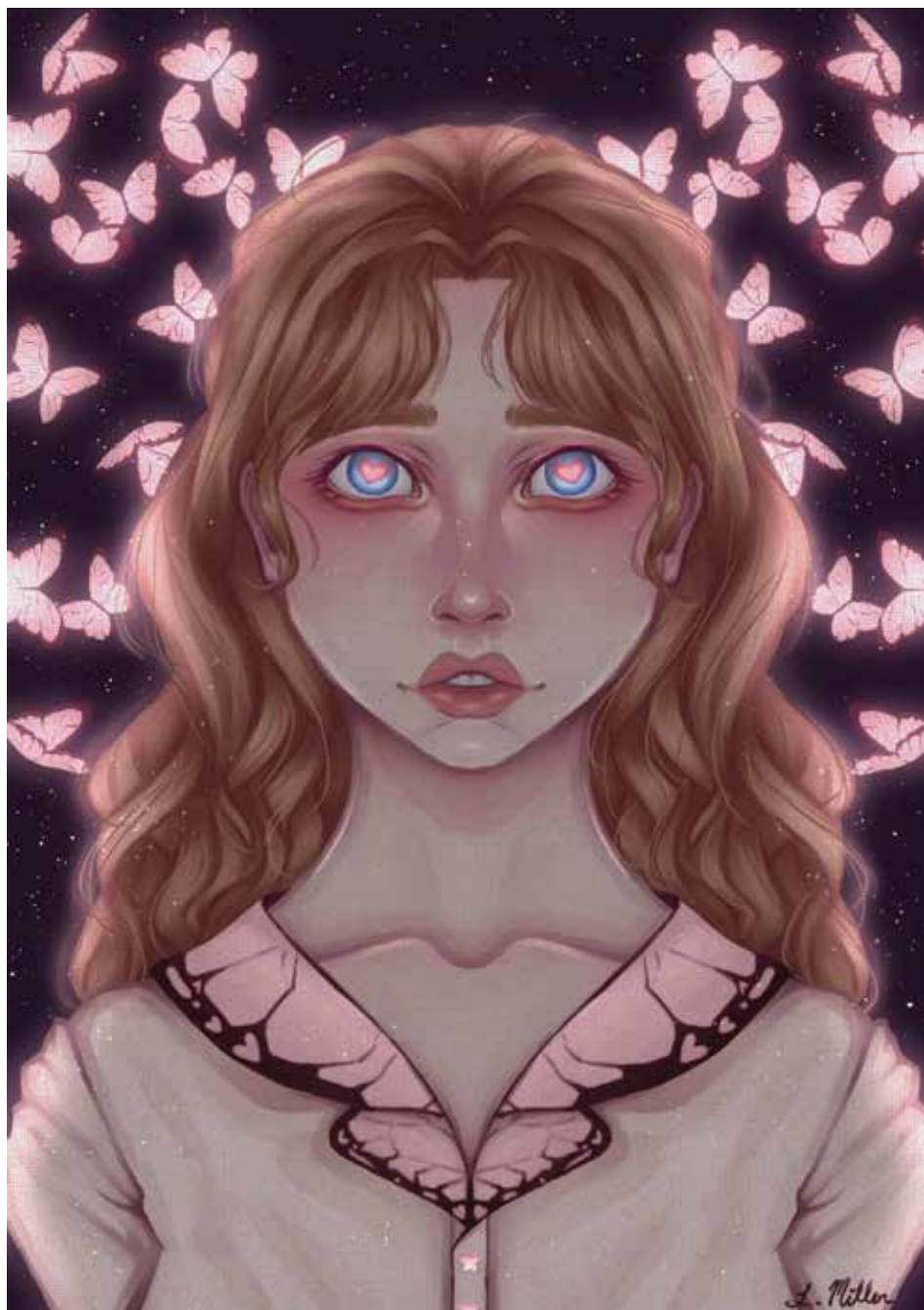
a wondrous land of fantasy
concealed by these gates

but like a preview
your vines present as a tease
to the spectacle behind

a small boy peers between a window and the fence post
he searches for the door

oh garden, why must you be locked

why do you hide
your extravagant beauty



BUTTERFLIES

by Lisa Miller
Digital Drawing

A strange noise bellowed from the factory's wood splitter. Before I was able to act, my right hand was pulled into the machine, and I instantly felt searing pain as the blade cut deeply into my skin. Thankfully, one of my colleagues heard me yell out and rushed to my aid. He took me to the emergency room, and after receiving an abundance of stitches, I was at home with my boss's permission to take off as much work as I needed.

Three weeks passed. My hand was still aching, but it was finally usable, so I decided that I should go back to work. When I got to the factory, I found my boss in his office. "I'm back, Mr. Johnson!" I said as enthusiastically as possible in spite of the throbbing in my hand.

"What can I do for you?"

Mr. Johnson took a deep breath and then said, "What you can do for me is leave."

"What?" I asked, completely confused.

"You're fired, Josh," he answered.

"Fired?" I said, my blood starting to boil.

"Yes, fired," he repeated.

I stood motionless for a moment and then yelled, "Fine!" I stormed out of his office and straight out the factory door.

As I walked to the subway station, questions relentlessly attacked my thoughts. Why had Johnson fired me? Was he simply tired of paying me? Was he blaming me for the wood splitter's malfunctioning? Or was he just so concerned with keeping his business's reputation as the nation's best furniture maker that he couldn't bear to keep me around, fearing that I would be a constant reminder to the public that his factory wasn't perfect? How was I going to support my family? Would my wife Charity have to get a job outside the home and stop homeschooling our daughter Sara so we could have a source of income? What was my family going to think of this?

When I arrived at the station, I walked down the stairs and then entered the hallway that led to the train tracks. The ceiling, floor, and walls were made entirely out of glass. I had seen this unique hallway numerous times before, but I looked at it differently this time. Without my job, I would soon be broke. Glass could be broken too.

I looked all around me. There were no other people in the hallway. There were no security cameras watching me. I spied a rock about the size of my fist lying on the ground. Letting my anger consume me, I picked the rock up with my uninjured hand and forcefully threw it at one of the glass walls.

Much to my surprise, the wall didn't break. The rock didn't even make a crack in it. Maybe I hadn't thrown the rock hard enough. I picked it up and threw it again, harder this time. The wall still didn't break. I picked up the rock once more, with my injured hand this time. It was my dominant hand, so I figured I'd be able to throw harder with it. That was a mistake. Not only did the pain of throwing the rock nearly kill me, but the wall still didn't break. My rage slowly dissolved into wonder. "It's unbreakable," I whispered to myself.

Suddenly, a small voice inside of me began to speak. “You need to be unbreakable too,” it said confidently. “So what if you lost your job? That doesn’t mean you can’t get another one.”

“I need to be unbreakable,” I said quietly.

“I need to be unbreakable!” I said, much more loudly this time. Then I noticed another man walking into the hallway. He gave me a strange look, but I didn’t care. I picked up the rock, put it in my pocket, and headed toward the train tracks with a smile on my face.

“Daddy, you’re back early,” Sara said when I got home.

“I was fired,” I responded.

Charity gasped. “Josh, what happened? Why did your boss fire you?”

“I wish I knew,” I said. “But don’t worry. We’ll be okay. I’ll start looking for a new job right away. This won’t break us. We’ll be unbreakable, just like that glass wall.”

“Unbreakable like a glass wall? Daddy, that doesn’t make any sense,” Sara said.

“Never mind that part,” I said with a sigh. “Just remember that we’ll be unbreakable, okay?”

“All right, I will,” Sara assured me, and then I headed to my home office. I had only taken a few steps when I remembered something I had planned to do while I was on the subway.

“Oh, Sara?” I called.

“Yes, Daddy?” she replied.

“May I borrow one of my little artist’s paint sets?”

“Sure, but what do you need it for?”

“It’s a surprise,” I told her.

“I like surprises,” she said with her signature smile. “I’ll go get the paint for you.”

“Can you bring it to my office?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Thank you, sweetie.”

“You’re welcome, Daddy,” she said, and then I went to my office.

After Sara had brought me the paint set and left the room, I pulled the rock out of my pocket. I used the white, gray, and blue paints to paint my best representation of glass onto the rock. I let that dry for a little bit and then used the black paint to write the word unbreakable on the rock. I’d show it to my family later, but for now I set the rock down beside my computer to remind myself to be unbreakable as I was looking for a new job.

It was a lonely evening to be living alone. My twin flame had died nearly thirteen years ago. And now here I sat, staring at the bed posts as the rain dribbled outside. Drip. Drack. Drip. Drack. Drip. Drip. Over the years alone, I had become obsessed with a legend: the tale of the doppelganger. It had been said that the unlucky few who saw their evil twin would die within days, or maybe hours, of the sighting. Catherine the Great had seen her double. Seated on the throne itself, the ruler's mirror image reigned. Then, in just hours thereafter, the great Catherine had succumbed to the malevolent force, suffering a stroke, lying comatose in her chambers. The thought spurred my memory, for my lover had experienced quite the same. No, we weren't rulers or anything of the kind, and yet she screamed during the darkest part of one night, claiming that she saw herself, or a version of herself, seated in the bathtub, lying inside a pool of water, staring directly back at her with the deepest, darkest, saddest eyes. And so, I, from my slumber, awoke and went to check, and there was nothing amiss. Not even a sign of a single drip on the tub bottom. So, calmly and wisely, I told her to come back to bed. We slept still that night, yet when I awoke again, she was no longer wrapped in the comfort of our delicate sheets. No, I found her. In the bathtub, filled to the brim with water, gone, the faucet still dripping. Drip. Drack. Drip. Drack. Drip. Drip. According to the investigators and doctors, she had died of a stroke while bathing. But what about what she had said? Maybe it was, indeed, all true: the myth of the doppelganger. For it's said that even Lincoln and Queen Elizabeth passed shortly following such rare encounters. As the stories go, Elizabeth saw her twin, "pallid, shivered, and wan," only to be a corpse herself just days later. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. The rain was pouring now as the light reflected from my chamber's chandelier. Oh god, I thought rather vivaciously now. Would I be next? I had borne a fear of the double, the evil twin, the fake me. But I would never actually see that side of me, would I? Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. I opened the cage-like, mausoleum doors to the patio and strolled outdoors into the brisk air and falling rain, just near the side steps. I turned the lights on outdoors and thought that I had seen something, no someone, in the reflection of the water on the wooden stairs. Oh god, was it my time? Was it me? Not the real me, but the one from hell? The one that would drag me to the next realm? I glanced into the reflection this time like I really meant it, and aghast at seeing what I did, I slipped on the stairs and tumbled into the wet gravel, neck shattered and knees bent. It wasn't me that I saw. Not my doppelganger. But her? How could it be? Was it reality? No, it couldn't be. Impossible. My mind playing tricks. A terrible lie. And so, as the paramedics scurried me away, I reflected in peace, for here I stand and here I live, alive and well, still kicking, nothing the matter, just breathing in the doubts of my own existential oration, an ode to a life where all we ever seem to do is helplessly contemplate our own deaths.



FALL LEAVES

by Antonia Capriotti

Marker Drawing

***WINTERY WINDS WITHIN WIDENED WINDOWS,
OR ESSAY ON IMPROPER EXPOSURE TO ICY AIR***

by Weston Kaelin

My flesh doth shiver to my marrow meek;
A warmer climate would I seek,
But my mother dost open the shutt'rs wide,
Letting the frigid air without inside.
Aghast, I turn to her and sayeth, 'Avast!
Whiest grant thou admittance to this frigid blast?'
She merely sayeth the air doth stink;
For me to don a coat she thinks,
Would be the wiser option of mine to take,
Giv'n I pose my warmth at stake.
So my coat, comfortable as may be,
Taken from the closet, I loathe to see.
Prefer, I would, the air be warm,
Than forcèd into a coat being worn.
But now I see, as the warmer clime I now do meet,
The temperature makes not my constitution meek.
It occurs to me, as I avoid window's freezing leak,
Perhaps it be my mind, not marrow, is weak.



ROLEX

by Omar Williams

Assemblage

SOLITUDE

by Lily McGuigan

A reflection of self-inflicted solitude manifests itself on my cheeks.
The sky's tears mimic my own,
a mockery of my desolate state, a state longing for peace and comfort.

There is nowhere that seems to carve out a place for me.
Whether it's that haunting cityscape littered with crime and prejudice,
or these isolating woods I'm trapping myself inside.
I have nowhere to call home any longer, no place to belong.

Nonetheless, flashes of red and yellow leaves catch my eye,
reminding me of a more cheerful past,
the crimson autumn providing solace in such a dark and dreary place,
a revelation amongst the trees, leading to a moment of tranquility.



SUNSET MELODY

by Heather Huggett

Photograph

FEARS

by Porter Martin

Lately, I've started to fear my own death.

Even though I am only 19 and my life has just begun.

The constant threat of war looms over my head and the idea that the environment is going to hell.

I have visions of me dying in war or in some famine alone and without family or friends.

Blam, poof, gone, the end of my existence.

My last moments feeble and sad.

Even though I am only 19 and my life has just begun.

I realize that almost every generation goes through this worry, but this time it feels real.

I want to do and see so many things before I die, and the only thing holding me back is my time left on the planet.

I mean what can I even get started with? There is so much to do in the world.

I want to travel, try exotic things, and experience different cultures.

How am I supposed to do all of this if the world is ending? Should I even be trying? Should I roll over and give up?

Should I end my life so the end of the world does not weigh on me? Even though I am only 19 and my life has just begun.

Writing these thoughts down has made me realize that life is too short to wait and think about the end.

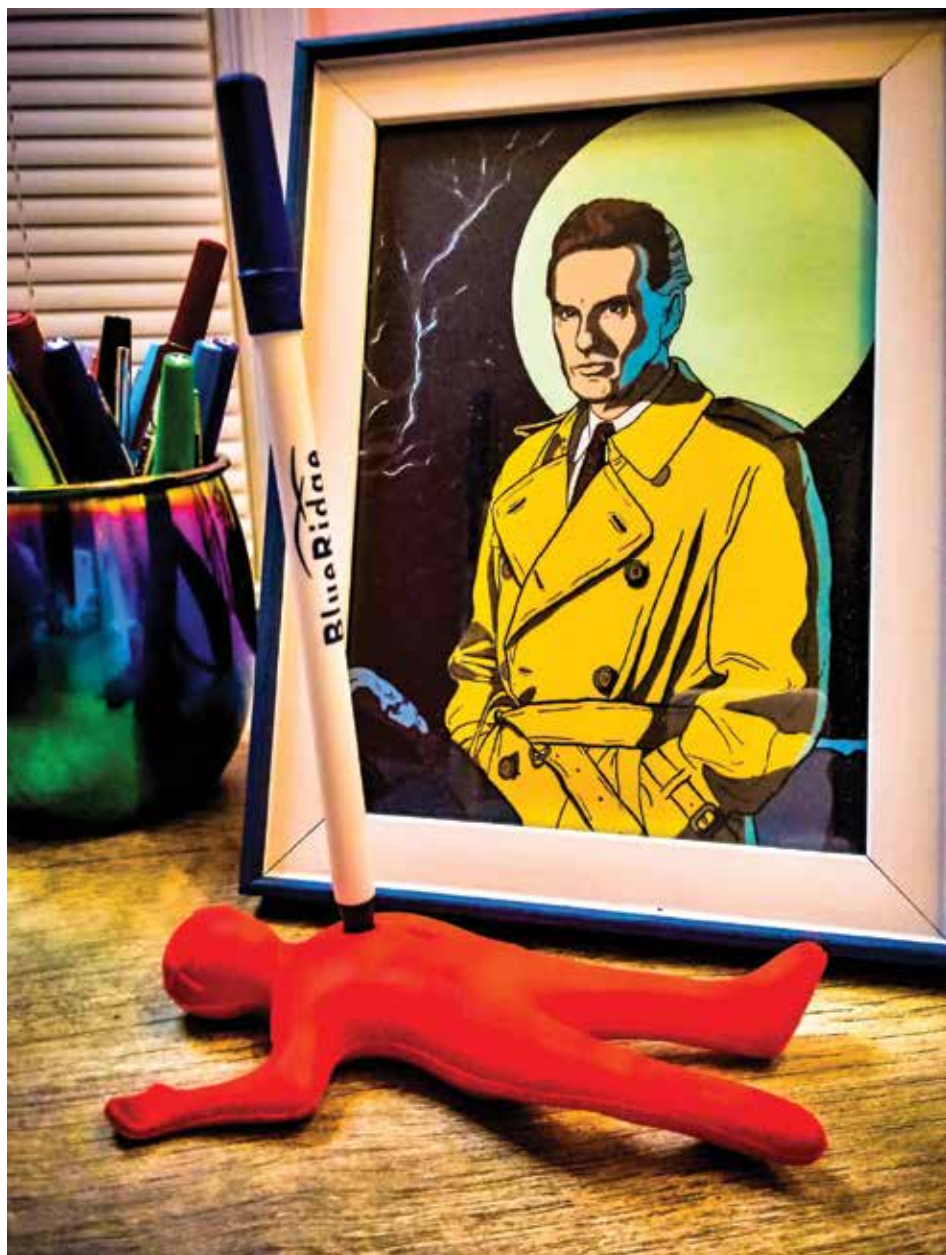
I need to bend my will, make my own fun, and spend more time with the people I love.

Find my own calling.

Fill my life with so many happy and good memories that it did not matter if a bomb dropped or a massive drought hit today or 80 years from now.

Maybe it would be fine if I did not live a long life as long as I could get a joke in with my loved ones before the world ended. Seeing all of my loved ones laughing and smiling so I did not know it had even happened.

Even though I am only 19 and my life has just begun.



MYSTERY SOLVED, WFH

by Megan Anderson

Photograph

BIKER CHICKS

by Billie Unger

“It’s just like riding a bike,”
we often hear folks say
when we embark on something new
on any given day.

The last time I hopped on a bike
was thirty years ago.
My sons were young, and so was I;
Now neither one is so.

“I have arthritic knees,” I yelled.
“I know I just can’t do it!”
My dear friend Jen persisted,
“Hop on. I’ll help you through it!”

“This first time we’ll bike just one mile;
I’ll bring a bike for you.”
I scoffed and laughed, “Okay. I’ll try
and see what I can do.”

That first time I was wobbly
and nearly fell off twice,
but I just kept on trying
to follow Jen’s advice.

Somehow we pedaled for five miles.
The next time we rode ten.
Increasing miles each time by five,
we pledged to bike again.

I got so hooked I bought a bike
that I could call my own.
We pedaled through November
’cause we were “in the zone.”

With spring around the corner
and warm weather ’round the bend,
once we both are healthy,
we’ll be biker chicks again.

These biking trips remind me
how life and strife can be
with friends to keep us balanced
and lift us knee-by-knee.

No matter what life throws us,
true friends will stand beside,
remind us to keep pedaling
and just enjoy the ride.



ADVENTURE BY THE SEA

by Megan Anderson

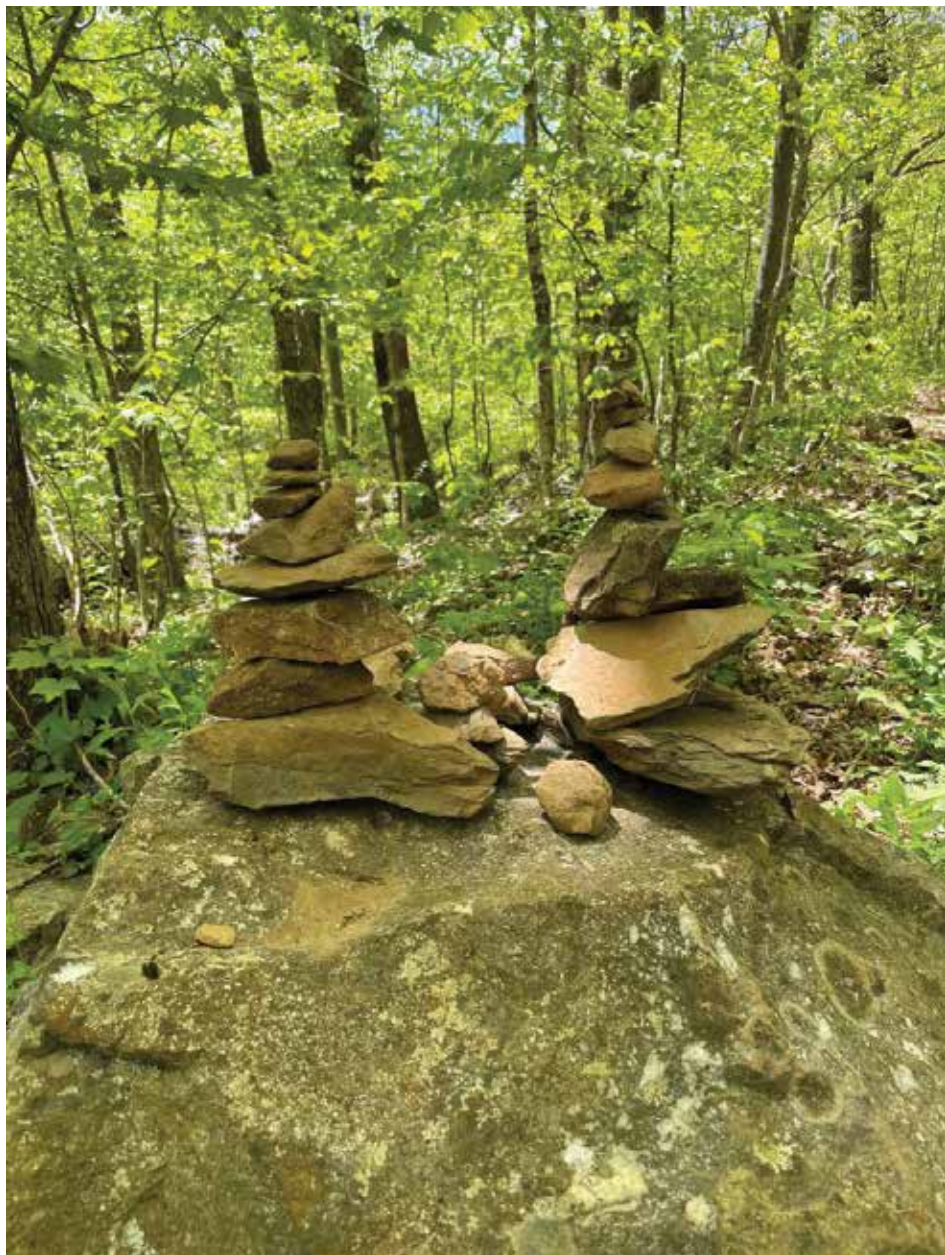
Photograph



TAKE ME HOME

by Billie Unger

Photograph



BALANCE AND HARMONY

by Heather Huggett

Photograph

GREEN WITH ENVY

by Amanda Burnell

Evergreen, evergreen
Cascading from sky to floor with your piney sheen
Longing endlessly to be deciduous
So green with envy, you lean promiscuously
Lean into light that does not belong to you
Spite is a sap that spills as you sway
Sway in the direction of roots that will never
be your connection to this ground
Teetering endlessly toward water
that will never reach your cambia

Conifer, beautiful conifer
Your crown is a bough worth celebrating
Your place in the woodland is founded
respected
Be green and watch as you wilt from the weather
Of a life that takes root in the soil of desire
Desire to take what is not yours
To be what you were not created to be

Evergreen, Evergreen
Take the shape you were fashioned to take
Give way to the symmetrical nature of your frame
Be respectful of the leaf-bearing neighbor that you see
Broadleaved, then barren in the winter snow
A journey from stem to trunk that you will never know
The oak, maple or the elm
Or the fruit baring beauty of the java plum
Watch carefully, the affair that you seek to own
Tread wisely as you seek to take what you have not grown



COPPER ESSENCE

by Jocelyn Stokes

Acrylic on Canvas

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

by Lisa Wood

He had time to wonder if the switch downstairs was stuck in that halfway position, neither on nor off – stuck right in the middle just waiting for the right jostling to move it. He had done that before – not turned the switch off all the way and it popping back into place and he didn't know why. It could have been the house settling or someone walking heavily on the floor above: anything could have created enough of a thump to make the switch pick a side. Only there wasn't anyone else in the house this time – no one to jump around on the floor above and bang the ceiling to shake the switch into action.

It was just him.

He had enough time to think about that, the fact that he was home alone. It was a rare occurrence these days – with school being out and his wife working from home, there was always someone else around, beating him to the room he had planned to claim to watch TV or using the last of the cheese and forgetting to write it on the grocery list. When the kids went to their friends' houses for sleepovers and his wife and her girlfriends decided that their girls time was long overdue, he couldn't believe his luck. His wife had asked him if he was going to be lonely at home all by himself, and for a moment he thought she might change her plans to have a date night with him instead. And that would have been fine too, but he was going to stay up and wait for her to come home anyway, add a part two to the evening. He wanted her to have a part one doing whatever she wanted to do, and he wanted one too – one that was just him and an action movie playing as loud as he wanted it; him with a cold one and some explosions, popcorn and bad acting. He wanted to be alone in the house for the first time in what seemed like years.

His wife of 15 years, love of his life, and mother of their kids, understood.

So out she went with her friends and out he went to drop off the kids. He expected the kids to stay up half the night doing the same thing he was doing – watching loud movies and loving every minute of them. One would be watching horror movies and the other action. None of them would get any sleep. But he'd deal with the sleep deprivation tomorrow. Tonight was his.

He had time to remember that the microwave would beep soon to remind him that his butter was ready: melted perfection just waiting to kiss the popcorn he had already made. He also wondered if the fan on the stove would come on again while he was standing there, stuck, glued in place. That's what it had done when he came into the house after dropping the kids off – just turned on for no reason. He thought it too was in that weird middle position – the knob precariously there in limbo. He wondered who had cooked last and left it like that. Probably his daughter. She was good for that, was always cooking, always filling the sink with dirty dishes. It was probably her. His son rarely turned the fan on at all, even when the room was filling with smoke.

He checked, but no. The knob was in the off position, pointing straight up, just like it was supposed to be. Yet it was on.

Electrical problem. It had to be that. First the stove and now the light switch. He would definitely have to call someone out to fix it – he had time to remember thinking he might not be able to fix the stove on his own when he saw it earlier, had time to wonder how much that little visit would cost. One burner had been running hot recently, burning up all the food, even when it was set to 2 or 3. And now the fan was having problems.

He had time to remind himself to send an email to his account so that he didn't forget. Had time to wonder if he'd really get the chance to do that or if this was just his brain trying to save itself because time...time was for someone else to worry about, for someone else to spend, because his was up.

It was dark outside; night had fallen while he was prepping for his time alone: renting the movie, grabbing the beer, popping the popcorn. He had turned the light on as he made his way up the steps because the stairwell was darker than it had been when he had left it, and he didn't want to run the risk of tripping over something the kids had left out – the hoodie he saw balled into a wad on the floor near at the bottom of the stairs was chief in his mind, but there could be more stuff left around that he didn't remember. It was smart, he thought – turning on the light like that. His father had once fallen off the last step because his foot twisted on the face of some toy. He could remember the way his father's glasses had slid across the floor, how mad he was to find himself on his knees. It probably hurt too, but his father had never said anything about that.

He didn't feel like taking a detour to that pain if he could help it.

He had time to wish he hadn't set himself up in the basement, the place that had ceased to be his as soon as the kids got old enough to commandeer it, the place he hardly even went into anymore except to check that the sump pump was working and that the furnace wasn't blocked by anything.

He had time to wish he had brought the butter down with everything else even though he knew he would have dropped something if he had tried.

Stuck in the middle...the switch. Curious.

He had time to consider reaching for it, time to think about taking steps toward it to change its position...time to realize he'd never make it, not with legs that no longer seemed under his control or a mind that knew, was absolutely certain, he couldn't change it – would never be allowed to. It was finished and as much as he wanted it to, time would never deign to wait for him.

Quiet.

So very quiet.

He had time to wish he wasn't alone in the house, so very alone, but was grateful that it was him who was standing in the stairway, halfway between floors, in the sudden darkness, because he didn't want his family to see what he saw when the light went off.

PARASITE

by Porter Martin

Even though I was fond of hating them, why did I still love them?
They were like parasites, always there day in, day out.
As the host of the monsters, I was in pain.
Desperately waiting for them to go but they never did.
I tried brushing them off easily, but I found their grip on my life too strong.
They clung onto me like ticks, digging into me, affecting my thoughts and life.
I had to resort to desperate measures.
It was starting to wear on me, destroy me, change me.
But why did it hurt so much, why were there so many tears, why did I still love them.
Even though I was fond of hating them, why did it hurt so much?



MARIJUANA

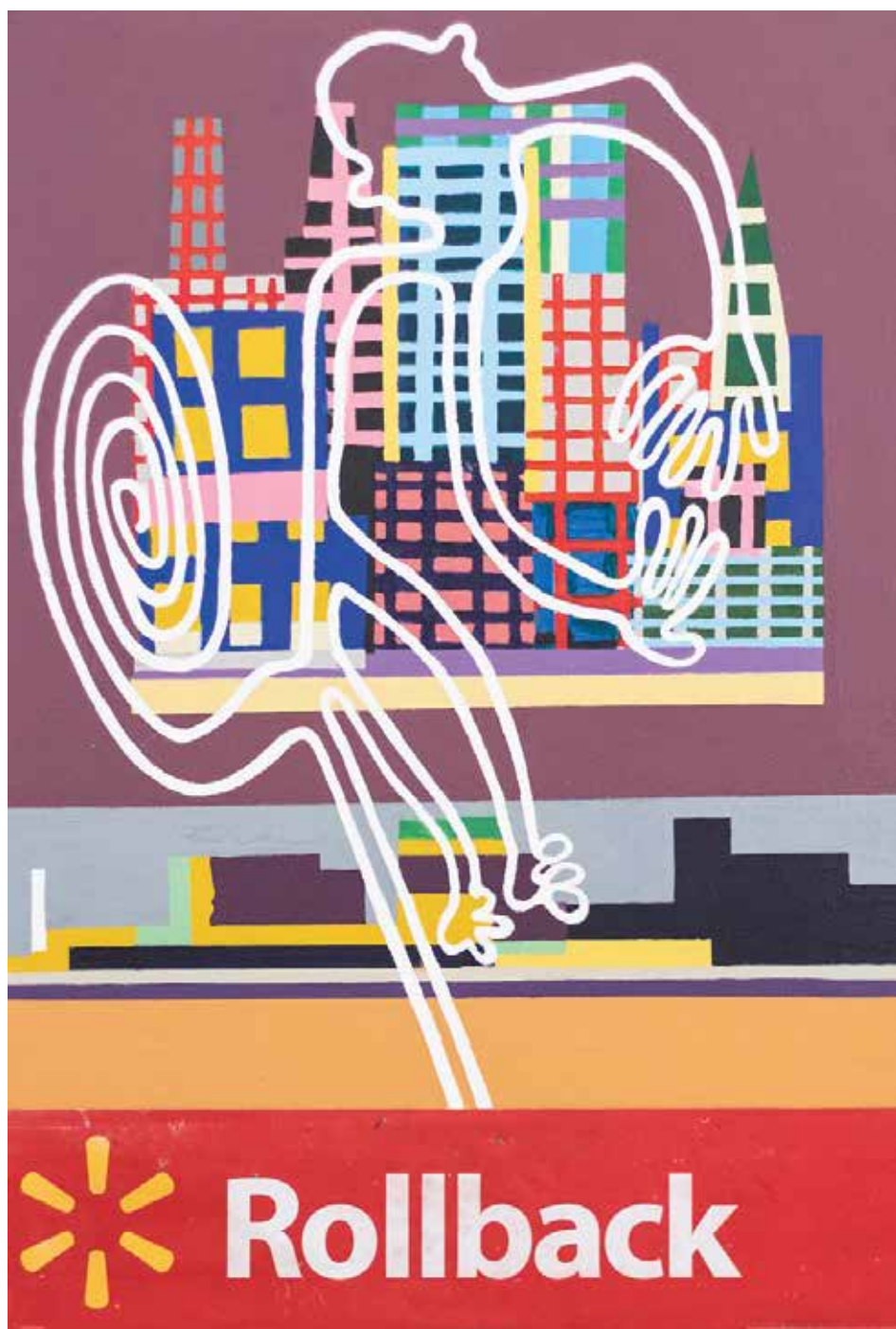
by Omar Williams

Collage

FACING HIS CANCER

by Kathy Cox

I, anew, come out like Dante shaken,
I have touched hell. I have known God
to never be mistaken.
So finally, I close my eyes,
draw in the spirit clearly.
The past is past, the way unfolds,
and love, I hold you dearly,
as all is lost and all is gone,
save like Pandora's box,
the bright hope in a single ray
casts out the worst, unlocks,
and tells me you will always hold
my love in clear cold seeing.
I know you will go on my love,
beyond the grave, bright Being.
So I will join you, husband, then,
as God will wash my feet
today and in the darkened days,
to render me complete.



IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

by Doug Kinnett
Acrylic on Canvas



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