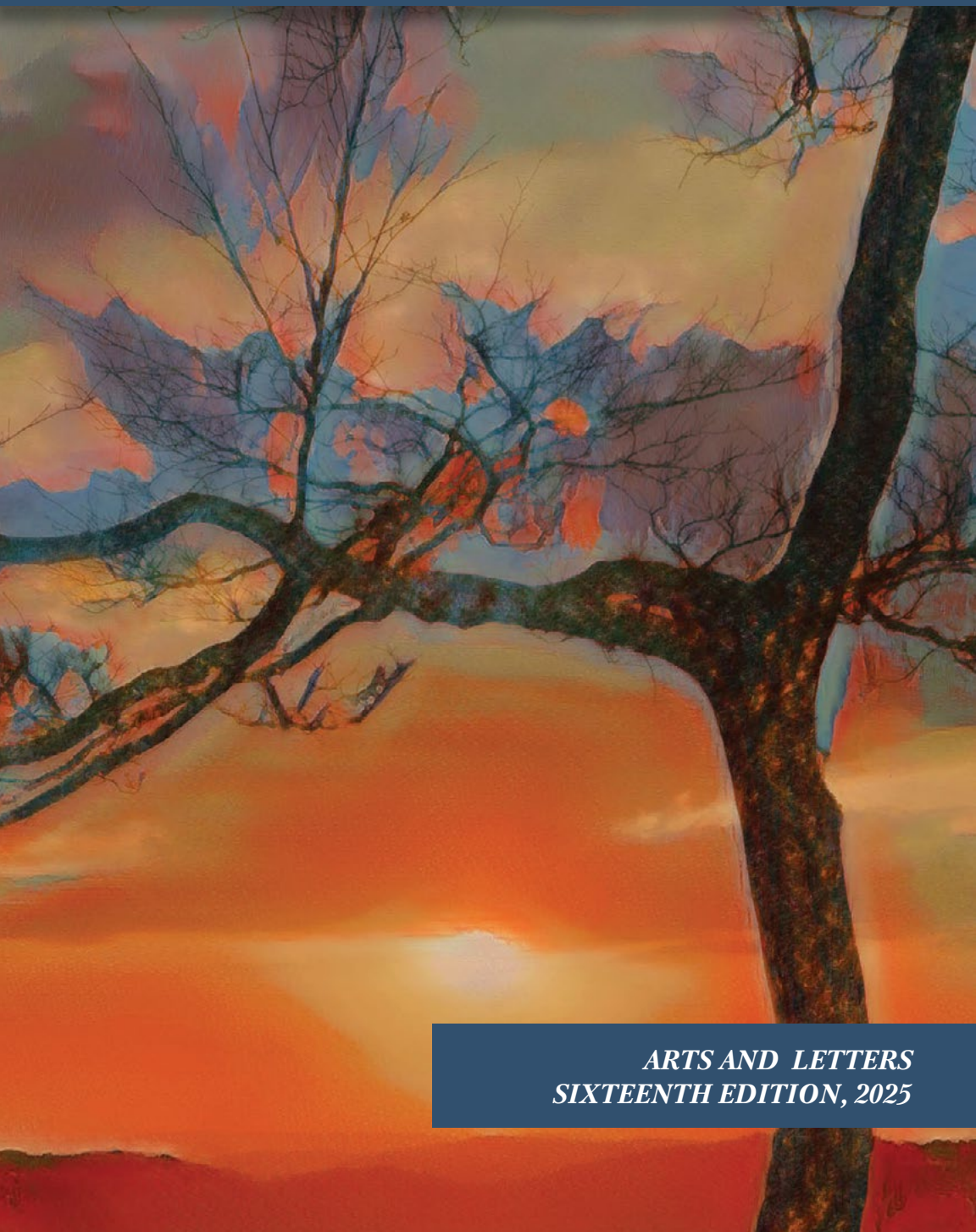


# THE OUTLET

*BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED*



*ARTS AND LETTERS  
SIXTEENTH EDITION, 2025*

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**Cover Artwork:**  
“Warm Wood Sundown” by Sandra Baker  
Photo Art Rendering  
  
**Booklet Design and Layout** by Jessica Leake

# JUDGES' BIOGRAPHIES

Selection of Arts and Letters

## VISUAL ARTWORK

Juried and selected by:

**Gary Bergel**, a multidisciplinary exhibiting artist, is a member of the Berkeley and Jefferson County Arts Councils and co-op galleries. Gary has been awarded the 2nd Place Juror's Award in Photography at the Washington County Museum of Fine Art Cumberland Photography competition.

**Sandra Baker**, Digital Media Instructor, is an active member of the Cultural Events Committee and has written fiction herself. Her passion for expression extends to photography and digital art.

## LITERARY ARTWORK

Juried and selected by:

**Dr. Katherine Cox**, Associate Dean of Humanities and Professor of English, has published fourteen poems in *The Outlet* in the past. She has written an unpublished novel in which every chapter opened with a poem. She currently is working with a writers' group, Bookends, which has strengthened her voice and expanded her versatility as a poet.

**Aspen Monsma** serves as the Student Access Coordinator, and this is their second time working with *The Outlet*. They previously served as the senior prose editor for Shepherd University's literary magazine *Sans Merci*. They have published poetry, drama, non-fiction, and

fiction, as well as had their original play *Welcome to the Poetry Club* performed by Shepherd University's Rude Mechanicals drama troupe.

**Dr. Billie Unger**, Tenured Professor and Liberal Arts Program Coordinator, has written poetry as gifts for friends and family members since she was a child, 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.

**Nicole Yurcaba (Никола Юрцаба)** is a Ukrainian American of Hutsul/Lemko origin. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Atlanta Review*, *Seneca Review*, *New Eastern Europe*, and Ukraine's *Euromaidan Press*, *Lit Gazeta*, *Chytomo*, *Bukvoid*, and *The New Voice of Ukraine*. She currently serves as the Humanities Coordinator at BRCTC.

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The 16th edition marks the first fall semester publication of *The Outlet*. Distributed in January, as days lengthen, the outpourings and variety of expressions showcased in this edition are a testimony to the enduring, vibrant creativity of the college community. Art classes help inspire students, as does the Creative Writing class, and several of the published writers are in the Creative Writing Club. We hope you will consider submitting or resubmitting to the magazine next year before Thanksgiving. Please see the QR code on the back of the magazine and enjoy reading.

## ***ART WINNERS***

### **First Place**

#### **Road into the Unknown**

by Lindsay Massey

pg. 36

### **Second Place**

#### **Rocket for President**

by Omar Williams

pg. 49

### **Third Place**

#### **Cigarette Daisy Dreams**

by Moon Hart

pg. 53

## ***HONORABLE MENTIONS***

### **Leopard Yawn**

by Sandi Caroscio

pg. 23

### **My Heart in Motion**

by Kelly Shurnitski

pg. 35

### **Little Wonders**

by Rachel Clark

pg. 59

## ***LITERATURE WINNERS***

### **First Place**

#### **The Coward**

by Robert Baugher

pg. 38

### **Second Place**

#### **Rise**

by SherrieLea Blackburn

pg. 56

### **Third Place**

#### **Pray**

by Emma Mellott

pg. 58

## ***HONORABLE MENTIONS***

### **Xander**

by Madison N. Martin

pg. 24

### **Touchstone**

by Julia Carter

pg. 30

### **I Am Lying Here Just So**

by Madison Harvey

pg. 64

***OH HOW I LOVE(D) YOU***

by Emma Mellott

i loved you like a warm summer breeze.

i loved you like my life depended on it.

i loved you like the trees giving me oxygen.

oh how i loved you.

like the first rain after a drought.

i loved you like the smell of fresh air in the spring.

oh how i *loved* you.



***CALM LILY***

by Sandra Baker  
Digital Photography



***TWILIGHT'S EMBRACE***

by Aiden Dennis

Mixed Media





***STRANGERS LIKE ME***

by Rachel Clark  
Digital Photography

## ***A CHILDHOOD...***

by Kerri Namolik

I was only three  
The screaming  
The dank musty basement  
Concrete  
It wasn't the first time

Most of the time I was  
unseen  
In the basement  
The back of the garage  
Or the nook behind the door  
The crawl space  
I hid everywhere I could  
I still do

It was in those moments  
Alone...

You didn't know I was there  
I remember  
You didn't care what I saw  
What I heard  
Cursing  
Yelping  
Crying

But he ran away  
Maybe?  
I couldn't run away  
I still can't

You don't see me, even now  
But I still remember



***DYING DAYS***

by Trina Bartlett  
Digital Photography



***ETHEREAL ECHOES AT TWILIGHT***

by Heather Huggett

Digital Photography



***GROUNDED BY MY ROOTS***

by Rebecca Chason

Digital Photography

## OUR DAILY WAR

by Nicole Yurcaba

tuesday 2100

oleh writes from boston

*my parents...their apartment...chlorine  
factory...a missile...*

& i think of my own parents

twenty miles south            sleeping in their bed

three kittens tucked between them

their house's windows open

inviting early autumn

& oleh continues

*they sealed their windows...chlorine levels dangerous...  
in zaporizhzhia—a children's cafe, one boy killed*

& i remember my father teaching me

to jump plastic swords    reliving his youth

of performing our dances

leaping high            knees bent

calculating landings

once i fell

pretended to die

but my father wouldn't let me

forget a village near lviv

my ancestors' language

how dido mykola wrote pysanky

remain facedown in summer grass

& somewhere in zaporizhzhia

a mother falls to her knees

onto rubble shards & burning metal

cradles her dead boy

wipes blood from his cheek

brushes his black hair from his blank eyes

& if i fell

while dancing

while walking

in need    in death

amid the glass after a missile's shockwave

shakes the flat & blisters our at-dawn

lovemaking    throws us from our bed

would you

fall

for me

as i would for you?





"BLIND AMBITION"

Owl

**BLIND AMBITION**

by Omar Williams

Collage on Paper

## ***THE COUNTING OF THE DAYS UNTIL I RETURN TO MY HOMELAND***

by Nicole Yurcaba

1837 days

44,100 hours

2,464,000 minutes

158,760 seconds

since i last stood at a Boryspil Airport counter

showed my passport to a frowning border guard

cleared two security checkpoints

walked to a gate while holding one bottle of vodka for my father

two hand-painted necklaces for my mother

& these days i unlock my phone (200x)

check air alert maps (10x)

listen to our national anthem (1x)

count the intervals when electricity arrives (4x)

inventory the number of tourniquets \$50 can purchase (3x)

each day since 24 february

& the only math functions i can correctly perform

are subtracting today & the day on which i will arrive

from the total number of days in between

unknown x & y

am i counting

how long it has been

since i held your syllables on my tongue

rolled your river stones in my mouth

kissed the soil of your mountains

wrote our names in black sea sand

& let your rain soak into my hair

as i reached for you from the carousel

along the docks in kyiv on an august evening

when the sunset formed dnipro diamonds

the goths held parasols by saint nicholas chapel

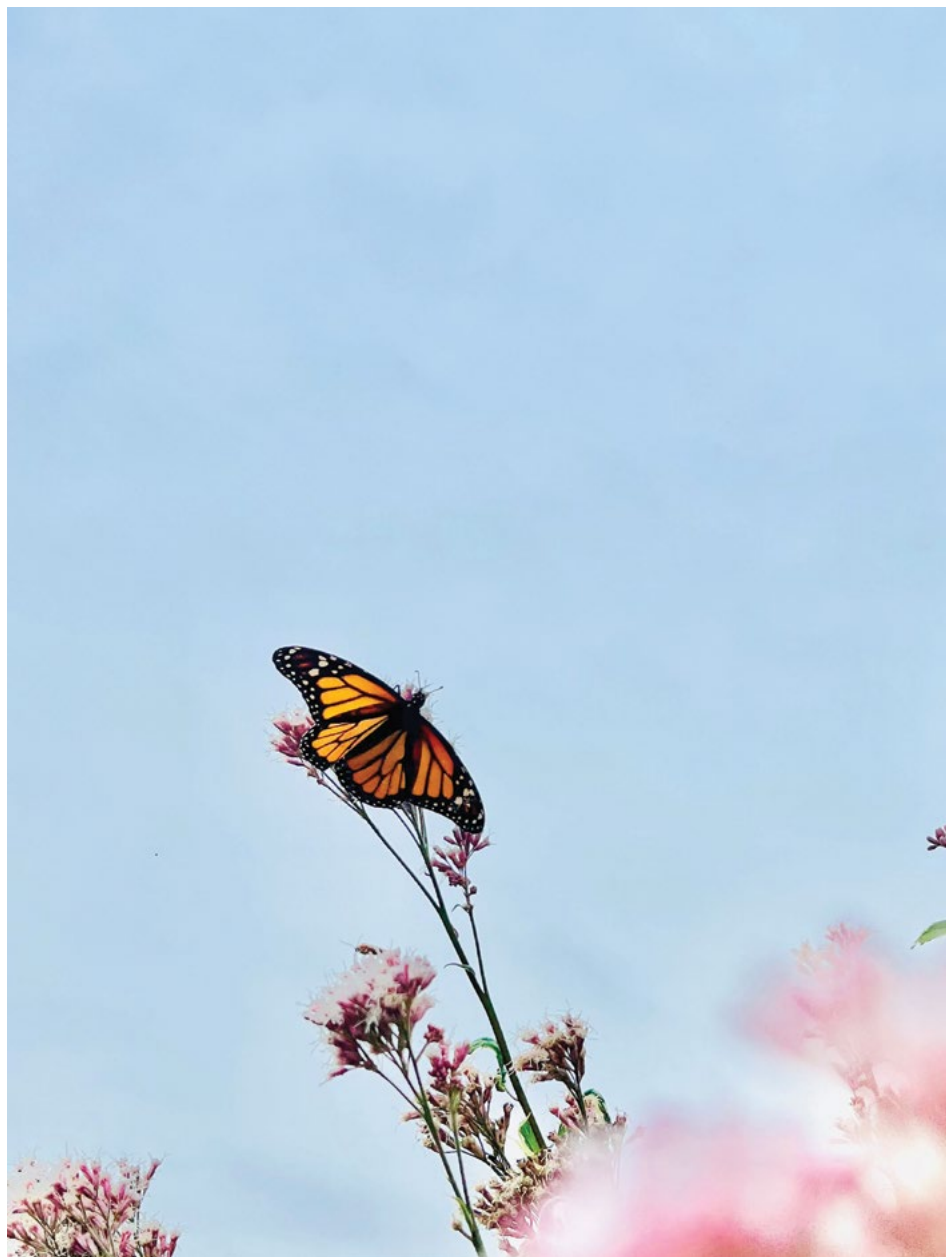
the children screamed when the carousel stopped

i knew i'd incorrectly calculated

the number of days until

i'd kiss you again





***SAVE THE MONARCHS***

by Chalice LaRose  
Digital Photography

### ***ODE TO LUNA***

by Ann Gentile

Luna, you are the sunshine in my life.  
You replaced my heart's darkness with wisps of light.  
Your midnight kisses and soft caresses soothe my soul,  
And mornings are beautiful now with you near.  
Softness, kisses, soothing, loving, touching,  
Sweetness and lightness beyond measure for the  
midnight that once hung so close.  
Our time together may prove short,  
But we'll cherish our days as we hold each other in the  
dissipating shadows of life.



## ***CITY OF VIRULENCE***

by Nick Okore

I watched my mother lie there, helpless and frail, her body broken by years of struggle, and I swore to protect her at any cost.

She hated the sight of me, cursed me for resembling my father, that careless bastard who walked out and left her to suffer alone.

She slapped me, spit at me, her words a sharp reminder of the hurt I had no hand in causing. Yet, I kept coming back.

For her, I would do anything.

So I wore a mask, hid my face. She hated my face, but she loved my voice.

I sang for her, read her the poems of Der Mond—her favorite writer.

Sometimes, we'd sit in silence, and I'd listen to her breathing slowly as she drifted to sleep.

And when she finally closed her eyes, I'd take off my mask and kiss her three times on the cheek, just like she used to when I was young.

Each kiss a promise. Each kiss a silent "I love you."

But love has a cost.

I did what I had to do to pay for her bills, acquiring wealth and resources in ways that left my hands stained with blood.

Soon, they began to call me the "Masked Assailant," a lone force of power and fury in Phaedrus.

I was feared, infamous.

But I didn't care, not if it meant I could keep my mother safe.

Then, one night, I returned to the hospital and found her—her body slashed and brutalized, every laceration mocking me, telling me I had failed her.

They'd kept her alive just long enough to let her suffer.

That sight shattered something inside me.

My friend Reiz, who I hadn't seen much of but knew I could always count on, found me at sun-rise.

I'd hung myself from a balcony, grief heavier than the breath I could no longer bear to take.

Reiz mourned me for two days straight.

He buried me, but he didn't leave me behind.

He took my mask, my life, my pain, and wore it as his own.

His cloak, already a deep scarlet, soaked through with blood, became darker still as he set out to avenge my death.

The pattern of those slashes on my mother's body gave him the clues he needed to hunt down each one of the bastards who'd brought me to this.

As he roared through Phaedrus like a storm, they started calling him Akezi, the Black Talon—the Red Demon of the Black Talon.

His blade, dark as night, burned as it slashed through flesh, leaving his victims marked by fire and fury.

The common folk saw him and the few others like him and named them “The Specters of Justice.”

And when those who crossed his path asked who he was, he'd only give them one answer: “I am Nocturnal Fury.”

The mask he wore, once mine, now bore his rage, his burning carnelian eyes filling them with ter-ror.

But it was my face they saw. It was my pain, my love, and my memory that kept his wrath alive.



***THE EARTH DRAGON***

by Philip Libby

Needlepoint on Plastic Canvas



***EYE OF THE TIGER***

by Challice LaRose

Digital Photography

## ***XANDER***

by Madison N. Martin

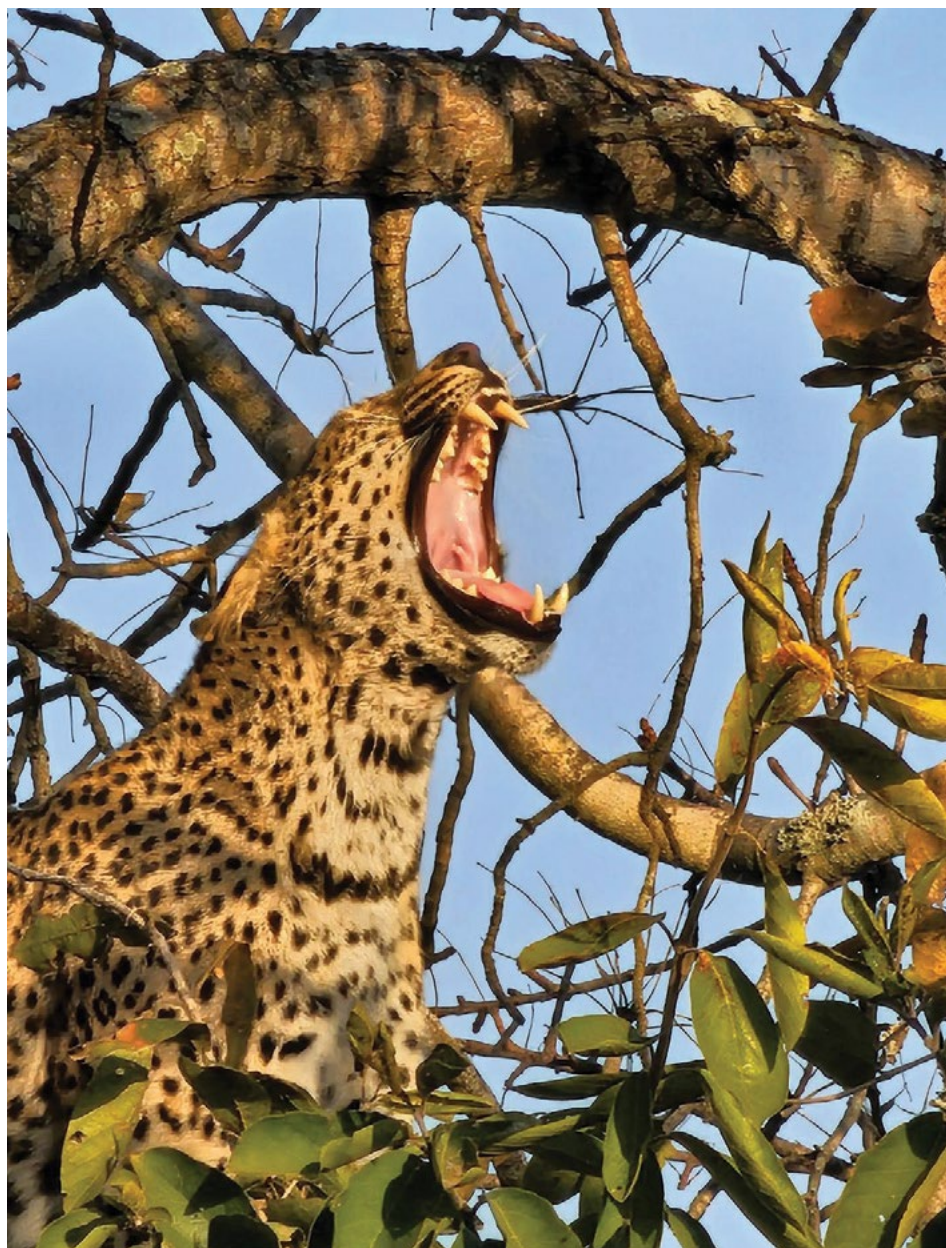
The bone was thrown, but not fetched,  
The time you spent can no longer stretch.  
I watch you blend in with the blizzard,  
Nothing is heard, only the river.

The silent morning listens,  
It listens to the mourning.  
Memories are written on paper buried, secrets untold,  
The heat is carried, so I hug my sweater from the cold.

The mice come to visit, but I will not chase them off.  
I know you will, you will come, bark and growl,  
But the mice come and go,  
Never bothered by a howl.

I miss your touch, your yips, and your name.  
The memories will stay but they will never be the same.  
I know this is farewell, but I cannot say goodbye,  
For my mouth is sown shut and my eyes will not cry.





***LEOPARD YAWN***

by Sandi Caroscio  
Digital Photography

## ***MILE MARKERS***

by Katherine Cox

Time stretches and constricts,  
travels and stops in spots.  
I keep pace at times and rush,  
or I move with unhurried step.

The marks and stones and miles  
come twice to me and sure:  
They come in time and hard,  
or they stretch ahead like sun

above a new flower bed  
bespeckled with blossoms reaching.  
I like the beckoning future,  
the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in fall,  
while I plant summer flowers,  
late but quick with joy.

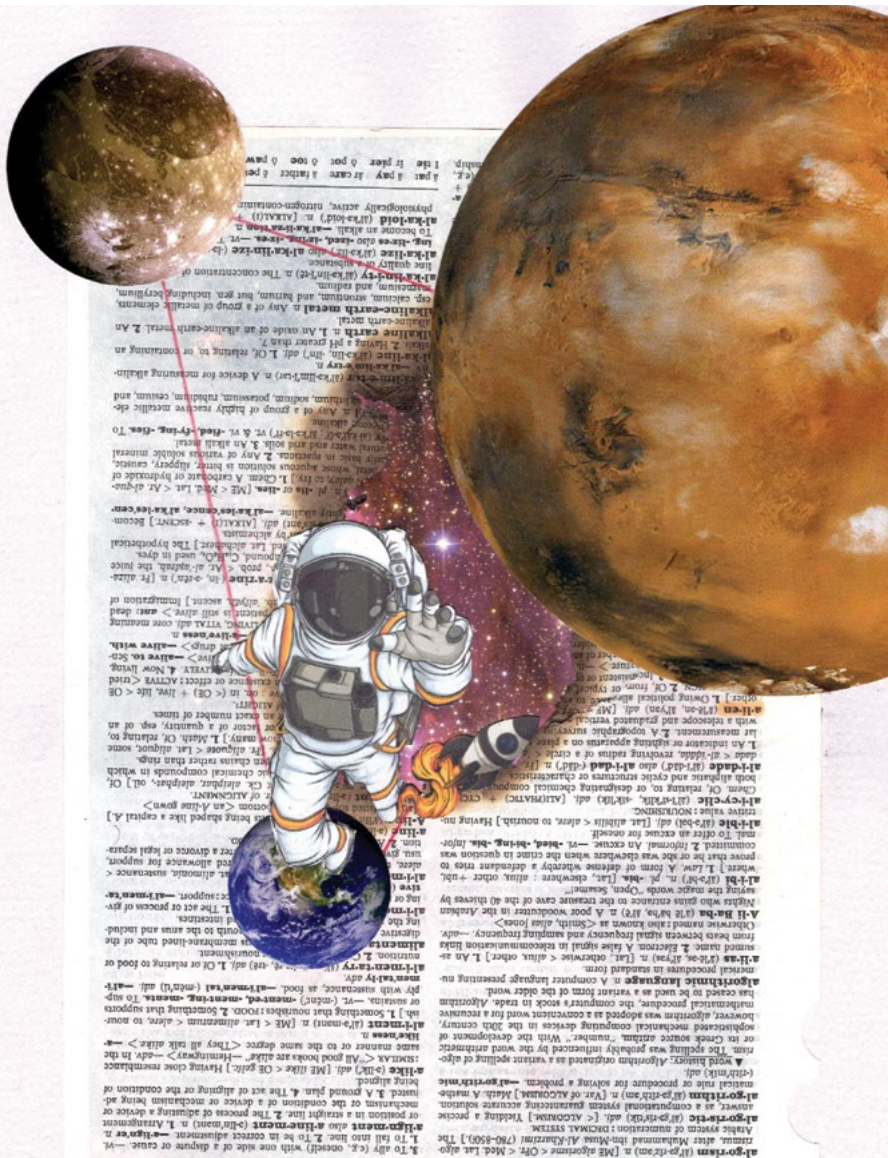
I do not work alone.  
You dig into the soil.  
I dig my heels on a track,  
and so we make time bend  
to the wills of two who work  
separately in peace,  
and when we join to walk  
stepping stride with stride,  
I see the future plain  
as a quiet gravestone passed:  
no stops, no marks, just miles.



***SKYSTONE – ONE BERRY***

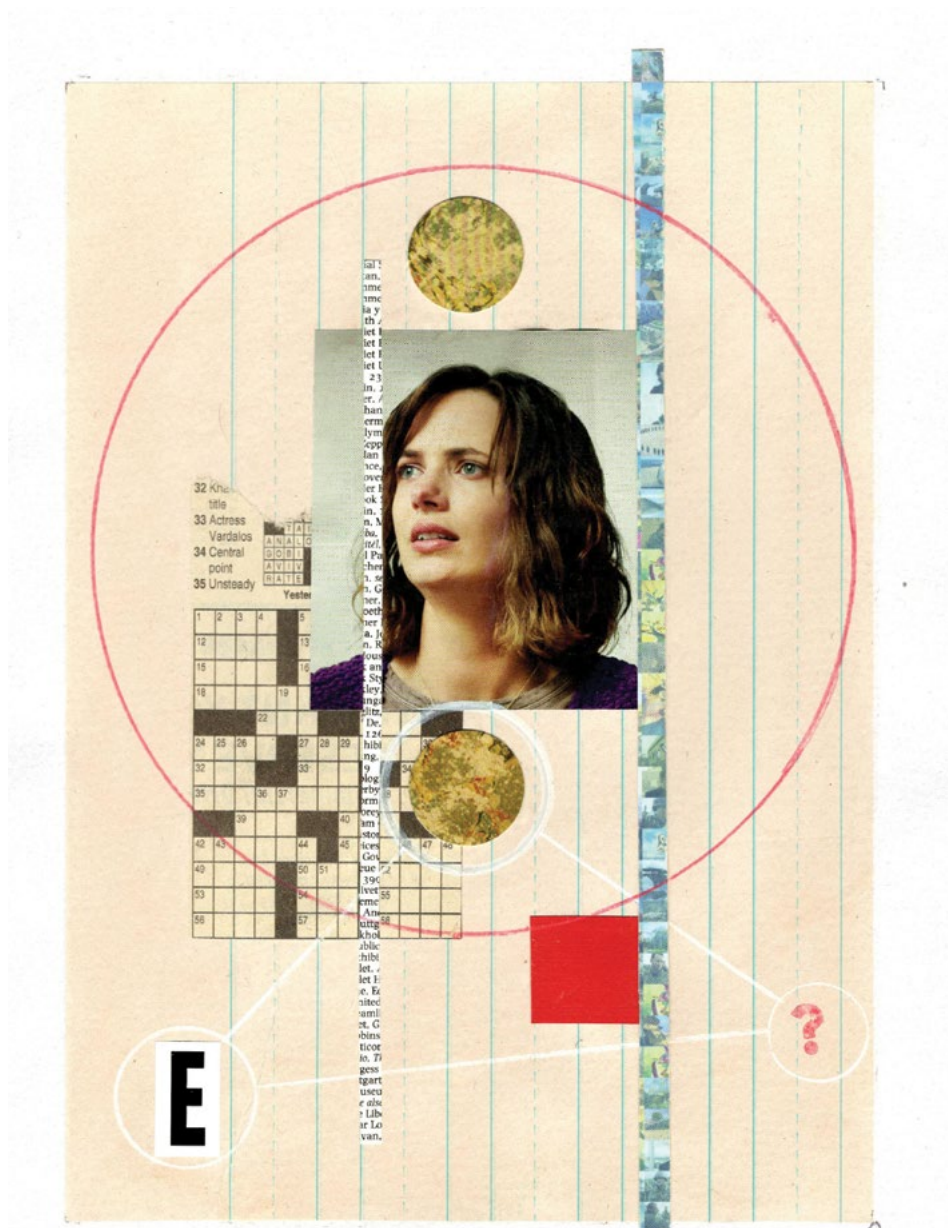
by Gary Bergel  
Digital Photography





## SPACED OUT

by Omar Williams  
Collage on Paper



## LOSS FOR WORDS

by Omar Williams

Collage on Paper

## ***TOUCHSTONE***

by Julia Carter

I can feel your presence, my friend,  
and not a single breath goes by  
where you are not with me.  
You kept a weather eye on me growing up  
your constant presence never wavering.  
You functioned as my umbrella when that black cloud barreled in  
and cast a twilight glow of consternation over my twelve year old simplicity. And I held on  
tight.

But I understand  
that when the wind grows wild,  
umbrellas will tear apart and blow away,  
helpless in its grasp.

Oh my angel, best friend and protector,  
will you be by my side forever?  
I was caught in a storm, and you were nowhere to be found.  
Every sign of rescue, every hand reaching for me,  
I turned away from.

The sun, too, had been blown out,  
and there was a moment of stillness,  
where I was lost in the depth of it all.  
Then, two arms wrapped around me—  
firm but gentle,  
and I found myself too tired to pull away.  
The rain ceased, the wind retreated,  
and not a thought cut through the silence,  
reassuring and deep.

For the first time in three years,  
I began to see light.  
My eyes stung with its unfamiliarity,  
and I longed for the darkness,  
but your arms held on,  
steady and unwavering.  
Safe.

These arms are familiar,  
as is the warmth—  
an old, neglected feeling  
I had forgotten after clinging to the black dog  
Who wrapped me in its heartless, bitter embrace.  
But you pulled me from that place, my friend,

and I don't want to let go.  
I'll stay by your side,  
as you stayed by mine  
all those years ago.  
My angel,  
eighteen years we've been together,  
and in the light of your love,  
I've forgotten the storms we once weathered.  
You are the light of my life,  
and with you, I know  
the sky is beautiful,  
no matter the color.  
You are not just an umbrella,  
but the roof over my head,  
and with your hand in mine,  
Life is so good.



***BOATING AND RAINBOWS***

by Moon Heart  
Digital Art





***THE CURIOUS OBSERVER***

by Heather Huggett

Digital Photography

## ***PRAISE WORTHY***

by Habibat Adeniran

I think my whole life I have had two shadows.  
Even before I knew what it was.  
Even before I knew it was there.

I did not exist without my own, and then there was hers.  
Looking back now as I write this, it didn't really matter how old our shadows were, at least to me, hers always had tiny feet that paddled behind mine.

They were the kind of steps that trailed in hearty thumps of rhythm and song too, just like the own-er's spirit.  
Gleeful bouts sprung from her often, too.  
She made noise wherever she went and why wouldn't she?  
A soul as boundless as that was never meant to be quiet.

When I first saw her, I didn't know what to make of her.  
Curiosity cocked its thin neck down at her face just to take a look.  
But even my first memories of her were inscrutable – they seemed more like a tethering of some-thing unutterable, something clicking into place, an unnamed weight being anchored at an awfully familiar harbor.

At some point we must have been inseparable because I don't quite remember when the padding of feet behind me began, and they have not stopped.  
I knew even then in my tiny frame the way I trust now that this creature was worth going to war for.  
I was not brave, no, not in the slightest, but for her I would try.

Because secretly, I think, God took all the good things he had ever created and stitched it into the corners of that smile.



***MY HEART IN MOTION***

by Kelly Shurnitski  
Digital Photography



***ROAD INTO THE UNKNOWN***

by Lindsay Massey  
Digital Photography

## ***THE COWARD***

by Robert Baugher

The Coward made his way down the dirt pathway.

It led up to the crumbling remnants of a low stone wall in front of a small house that stood alone. The small house was weathered with walls made of hewn wood and a sloped roof, patched with mismatching tin sheets and thatch, with the tin sheets catching the morning wearisome light of March. A faint glow cast itself over the porch below the sloped roof. It was nothing more than a modest porch and was made of little more than a few wooden planks that had begun to sag. The porch was worn, gray, and splintered with an overhang propped up by two precariously angled beams. In the corner of the porch sat a crooked wooden chair and a dented, rusting metal bucket, as if it had been abandoned in the middle of a chore years ago. Overgrown weeds and scattered stones littered the sparse yard around the small wooden house. At the edge of the yard by the stone wall, sat a rusting German military truck, a straight-edged black cross outlined in white – the Balkenkreuz – visible on the side panel of the truck and remnants of a swastika clinging to the hood. The metal was riddled with bullet holes with aged spent casings lying on the ground beside it, an eerie reminder of the violence that once had filled this place. Its tires were halfway sunken into the earth, with vines beginning to creep through the broken windows.

The Coward approached the door, a folded piece of paper, a letter, clutched tightly in his thin and trembling hands that were crossed with healed blisters and burns from endless days of forced labor. The creak of the steps and porch planks beneath his worn boots provided the only sound in the somberness that still filled the air. His coat was patched and heavily worn, hanging loosely over his gaunt frame with fabric that had faded from exposure to the elements. A small rucksack, its edges frayed, slung over one shoulder – his testament to the time he had spent traveling since leaving the remnants of the Bliżyn labor camp behind. His face, hollow-cheeked and jaundiced, bearing the marks of starvation, and a serrated scar that ran from his temple to his jaw – a fainting but brutal reminder of a rifle butt wielded by an SS guard in the camp.

He had been liberated from Majdanek in July of 1944, after having been transferred from Bliżyn. The Coward had spent several months in Lublin under the Soviets after the liberation, before making his way east to Chelm displaced persons camp, where he regained the strength to travel again. From there he had traveled nearly 175 miles west to Kraków. As he stood at the door, the letter he carried was heavier than ever, as though the paper had been weighed down with the miles walked and months delayed in its delivery. He had carried the letter since before his time at Majdanek, through rain and frost. The corners were creased, and the folds were worn from it having been held tightly, too often. An aged, faint, rust-colored stain seeped into the folds – a mark no amount of weathering could erase.

The Coward paused briefly. He stared at the tarnished handle and the loose hanging piece of cloth that limply covered the window beside the door. For a moment, the only sound was the low whistle of the wind in the hills. He raised his hand and knocked.

There was a moment of silence after he knocked. Then he heard slow, deliberate footsteps. The door creaked open and standing in the door frame was a woman. The woman appeared to be in her early 30s. Her face was pale, and her skin showed lines of the aging of someone much older. The deep lines embedded around her mouth and eyes carved years of grief and hardship into her skin. Beneath the scars of aging and sorrow, there was a beauty to her – her delicate features softened by light, spilling through the doorway. Her dark hair was streaked with silver and pulled back loosely under a kerchief, framed by a pale and tired expression that held a subtlety of grace.

*“Dzień dobry, pani,”* he spoke softly, slightly bowing his head, his words spoken in careful respect, fearing the weight may shatter the silence.

*“A good morning,”* she replied, speaking in a soft and uncertain tone. He took a small step back, unsure of his next steps. He fondled the letter with both his hands. Finally, he broke his silence.

“You don’t know me,” he said in a hesitant and light voice, “but...may I come in?” She gazed at him for a moment longer, then briefly drifted her attention to the letter in his hands and then back to his eyes. She backed up and stepped aside, gesturing for him to enter.

The Coward sat at a small round, wooden kitchen table, shoulders hunched, and the letter still clutched in his hands. The room was small – bare walls and an old stove in the corner with a single window letting in the pale light. The woman poured steaming water from a hissing, chipped, enamel kettle over tea leaves into mismatched mugs. She set one mug on the table in front of him and sat down across from the Coward, her posture rigid, the other mug in her hand. It was then, he noticed a faint, inked number on the inside of her forearm, partially hidden by her sleeve cuff. He knew it instantly – Auschwitz.

“You’ve come a long way?” the woman asked, her voice low but steady. There was an instant familiarity in her tone, a quiet recognition between the two of them.

“Yes. Bliżyn first. Then Majdanek, then to Chelm” he replied. “You...Auschwitz?” “Auschwitz, then Ravensbrück,” her jaw stiffening. There was no need to say more. The name itself carried the weight of everything left unsaid. He looked down, fondling and clutching the letter, brushing the edges of the paper. Her eyes moved to the letter in the Coward’s hands. They both sat in silence for a moment, absorbing the shared trauma that floated through the atmosphere. He inhaled deeply and exhaled, as if feeling a small weight was lifted as he began to speak.

“I didn’t know him long,” he spoke distantly, a heavy weight in his voice. He hesitated, slowly placing the letter on the table before continuing, “The man who paid for another man’s cowardice.”

She sharpened her gaze, curiosity reflecting in her expression – she gazed quietly and let go

of her mug and folded her hands into her lap, waiting for him to continue. He struggled to find the words to begin, "It wasn't so long ago. At Bliżyn..."

The Coward felt the sharp aching of the wooden bunks beneath him covered by the thin, lice-ridden blankets that were doing little to stave off the damp chilled air seeping into his bones. The muffled coughs and groans of the sick filled the barracks around him. Bunks were heavily splintered and stacked three high against the wall. They were layered with flattened, straw mattresses that were laden with vermin. The cramped spaces of six men per bunk contributed to the air reeking of unwashed bodies, rotting corpses, sweat, and a faint, sour and tangy sickness lingering, regardless of how cold it was. He shared what little space he was given with several corpses – some he once considered friends, other strangers that had been there for quite a few days.

One dead man in the bunk beside him had been there for four days. The body lay twisted in the straw – a skeletal frame with barely any concealment by the soiled fabric clinging to him. His skin, drawn thin over clearly visible ribs and collarbones, had begun to form a waxy, discoloring pallor, blotched with darkened bruises and early decay. His face had sunken in and was unrecognizable. The cheeks were hollow, and lips retracted, revealing his teeth in a ghastly grimace. Clouded over, his eyes remained half-open staring vacantly into nothingness. Giving an almost inhuman appearance, his skin had started to collapse inward, revealing nearly protruding bones. A sickly-sweet aroma of rot was clinging to the body, adding to the rancid odor of sweat and death.

The coarse material of the grey-blue striped uniforms rubbed against the raw patches of his skin beneath. His trousers were held up by a frayed rope someone had knotted together to replace the missing waistband, they were barely clinging to his hips. His feet were bare, blistered and reddened with sores. His toenails were beginning to crack, and blood hardened the tips of his toes, which had begun to blacken from frostbite. He had once worn a pair of sabots that had been confiscated by one of the SS guards in the camp. Some of the other prisoners still wore the crude wooden clogs, leaving their feet heavily calloused and blistered. Many of the other men were the same condition – many worse – clothes were hanging from many of their emaciated frames like rags over scarecrows. The thin fabric offered no protection to the lingering chill.

The Coward turned his head to face the Man lying in the same bunk. The Man lay there, cheeks gaunt, but less hallowed than many of those around him. He looked to be in his mid-30s, hair nearly gone, only a few patches still clinging to his scalp. Wear had set in, but not as deep as many the Coward had seen before. This Man had not been here as long. His body had not been consumed and ravaged by the relentless hunger that populated the camp. He had befriended this man closely over the last couple weeks, and he was the closest thing the Coward could recall to family since the inexplicable horror had begun. The Man spoke quietly.

"When we get out of here, I'm going to eat so much bread, I'll forget what hunger feels like." The Coward forced out a light chuckle, an unnatural sound in place where joy had long been absent. "How about bread and soup. Bread and krupnik," he murmured, a slight



smile cracking painfully. He could already taste the barley broth thick with potatoes and vegetables, a distant memory he clung to. His smile widened, "Maybe...even butter." "I think I'd kill for butter," the Man replied with a forced smile.

Before the Coward could respond, his smile quickly vanished as the barracks door came crashing open. The freezing morning air bellowed in, biting their faces and swiftly freezing the damp floor underneath them. Thunderous sounds of boots on wood filled the barracks as SS officers stormed in, wielding their Karabiners, shouting commands that echoed through the barracks like gunfire.

"*Raus! Alle Raus!*" yelled one of the SS guards. "*Out! Everyone out!*" "*Schnell! Schnell! Aufstehen!*" another yelled as he yanked a man from the bunk across the aisle by the collar, "*Quickly! Quickly! Get up!*"

The prisoner's head smacked into the ground with a sickening crack. The prisoner's dull thud was followed by the gurgling sound of blood bubbling from his mouth as he began to choke on his own blood. The butt of the guard's rifle whipped into the man's ribcage, the sound of snapping bones piercing the air. The guards poured through the barracks methodically, ripping men from their bunks, corralling them to the door as if they were livestock. Whips were cracking off the skin of prisoners throughout the barracks, leather sinking into exposed skin and leaving behind raw and bloody welts. The butts of their rifles cracking off the nearly visible skulls of others. The Coward felt a hand on his shoulder. The Man's face was steady, despite the clinging of fear.

"Get up," the Man whispered urgently. "Don't give them a reason." The Coward nodded and forced his legs to carry him out of the bunk. They stumbled together, into the cold morning air. The frigid cold was biting through the threadbare uniforms, the fabric chafing against sores and open wounds, while the cracked skins of their hands bled with nearly every movement. The guards herded the prisoners into a small, enclosed yard by towering wooden fences. The Man and the Coward kept hearing yelling, "*Bewegen! Bewegen! Nicht stehenbleiben!*" "*Move! Move! Don't stop!*" Fifteen prisoners, including the Coward and the Man were forced into a tight line up. The area reeked of ash and the ground was stained with old bloodstains that had soaked too deep to disappear. At the center of the yard stood, SS-Oberscharführer Paul Nell, a cold and commanding presence. His eyes had an ungodly reflection to them as he looked at the prisoners and paced down the line, his polished boots crunching against the frozen ground, his gaze sharp and unnerving. Pasha, his dog, followed at his side, baring sharp teeth and a low snarl and growl in its throat – the Coward had seen his dog rip men apart before. "*Diebe! Thieves! All of you!*" Nell's voice suddenly exploded. His voice felt like venom flowing through their ears. He paused, leaving a long unbearable silence. He continued with a low and deliberate tone, "*Treason! An act of treachery has been committed against the Reich! A loaf of bread! Stolen from the stores!*"

He paused abruptly. Cold eyes were scanning the prisoners for a moment before his voice rose again, "If the thief is not man enough to confess, you will all learn the cost of betrayal! Who among you dares defy the Führer? Answer me, or you will face the consequences—



*immediately!*" Nell again scanned the prisoners for a hint of guilt, hearing and seeing nothing but silence. His silence clung to the air as if it was an instant death sentence. The Coward's chest tightened. The Man stood beside him; his eyes fixed ahead. Many of the other prisoners' heads were pointed to the ground to avoid eye contact.

"*Nein?* So be it," Nell said, brandishing a heavily used Luger from his holster. "If no one will confess-" he marched to the beginning of the line-up, cocked his pistol, and pointed the Luger at the temple of a hollowed-eyed figure who could barely stand. Nell kicked the back of the man's leg sending him to his knees, "I will start here. Every five seconds, I will execute another man until the thief is known!" The prisoner's eyes darted wildly around, stammering incoherent pleas. Nell looked down the line and smirked, finger tightening on the trigger.

"*Fünf...vier...drei...zwei...*" he counted down in clipped tones, amused by his own cruelty, "*Eins...*"

"Stop!" A voice rang out, interrupting Nell's counting down and bringing a halt to the prisoner's execution. Eyes turned to the Man stepping forward, shoulders squared despite tremble in his legs and voice. The Coward's hand was shaking, his heart pounding, every breath shallow and unsteady. Nell lowered his gun and walked sternly and slowly to the Man. He met Nell's gaze directly, "*Ja to zrobilem.*" the Man said in a firm and trembling voice. "*I did it.*"

Nell stared at the Man with an icy fixation, piqued by the interruption, his look bore the tone of mockery and suspicion, "You confess?" he asked. Nell saw the falseness in his confession.

"*Tak,*" the Man replied, his voice unwavering, "*Yes. I stole the bread. It was me.*"

Nell smirked, stepping up to the Man, "How noble," he sneered, "a rare quality among thieves." He paused and inspected the line-up before he raised his Luger, leveling it at the Man's forehead. The Man's chest was heaving, but his gaze was fixed on Nell, without a trace of fear. Nell exclaimed loud enough for everyone to hear, "Let this be a lesson – that courage is a poor shield against justice!"

The Coward's stomach dropped as Nell pressed his pistol to the Man's forehead. It was as if time had frozen still. The click echoed, followed by the thunderous ringing out of the gunshot, piercing and deafening. The Man's body folded and crumpled to the ground awkwardly as a spurt of blood and bone shot from the back of his skull. His blood painted a gruesome arc in the frozen dirt. Crimson spilled quickly beneath the Man's body. His eyes had once been steady and unyielding, now they stared blankly ahead into darkness. The Coward staggered back slightly, his legs nearly giving out. Averting his gaze from the lifeless body before him, the iron tang of blood had filled the air. A sharp pain of guilt lodged itself deep in his gut.

Guards began barking orders to disperse and send prisoners back to their barracks. The

prisoners shuffled away, heads lowered, and shoulders hunched. As he turned to walk away - his eyes watered - the Coward saw a folded piece of paper protruding from just inside the Man's sleeve, partially soaked from the blood that had pooled beneath the Man's lifeless arm. The edges of the paper were worn and faintly stained from having been concealed for so long. There was a hint of faint writing on the paper, though he could not make it out. The Coward's heart pounded as he quickly glanced around to ensure none of the guards had noticed. With trembling fingers and brief hesitation, he knelt and swiftly snatched the folded piece of paper and hastily tucked it into his sleeve cuff before moving to follow the others back to the barracks.

Memory of the nightmare faded as the Coward's voice faltered. He found himself back at the small kitchen table sitting across from the woman. The blood-stained letter rested on the table between them, his hands shaking. The weight of having carried the letter had grown increasingly heavy and felt near impossible to hold. The letter had begun turning into a rusted hue with age, and the faint imprint of blood marred the paper. The Coward stared at the letter for a long silent moment, his lips pressed into a trembling line. His eyes were beginning to well with tears. He could feel the woman's gaze.

Sitting silently across the table from the Coward, the woman clasped her hands tightly in her lap. Her eyes had turned into a glassy reflection, mirroring the weight of what she had just heard. The woman had experienced and heard similar stories, but they always brought tears to her eyes. It was a pain that could never be healed, not even with time. Silence weighed the air in the room, broken only by a light whistle of the wind outside.

"It should never have been him," the Coward said, finally breaking the silence. His voice was hoarse, and slightly more than a whisper. He ran his hand over his face as tears began to pool and stream down his face.

The woman's forehead wrinkled slightly as she glanced from the Coward to the letter lying on the table. Her eyes caught something on the paper. Lettering beneath the stains and creases, just visible through the discoloration, but fading with time. She tilted her head and leaned in slightly closer, her breath catching as she made out the delicate writing - handwriting that she recognized instantly: "*Dla Anny, mojej ukochanej żony*" - "*For Anna, my beloved wife.*"

She stared at the letter and closed her eyes, her face crumpling with emotion as tears dripped from her eyes. She reached out her hand and touched the aged bloodstain on the letter, but didn't pick it up. Her tears fell in quiet streams as she continued staring at the letter, the words seeming to glow beneath the stains, as though seeing his written words might bring him back. The feeling grew heavier with each passing second. She raised her head and looked at the Coward, tears still streaming down her pale cheeks.

"I found it...after. I read it once. Carried it all this way, hoping I'd find you alive," he said, his words breaking under the weight of his grief. The Coward leaned forward, looking at the letter, his hand trembling on the table, and his voice shaking as he continued. "He was

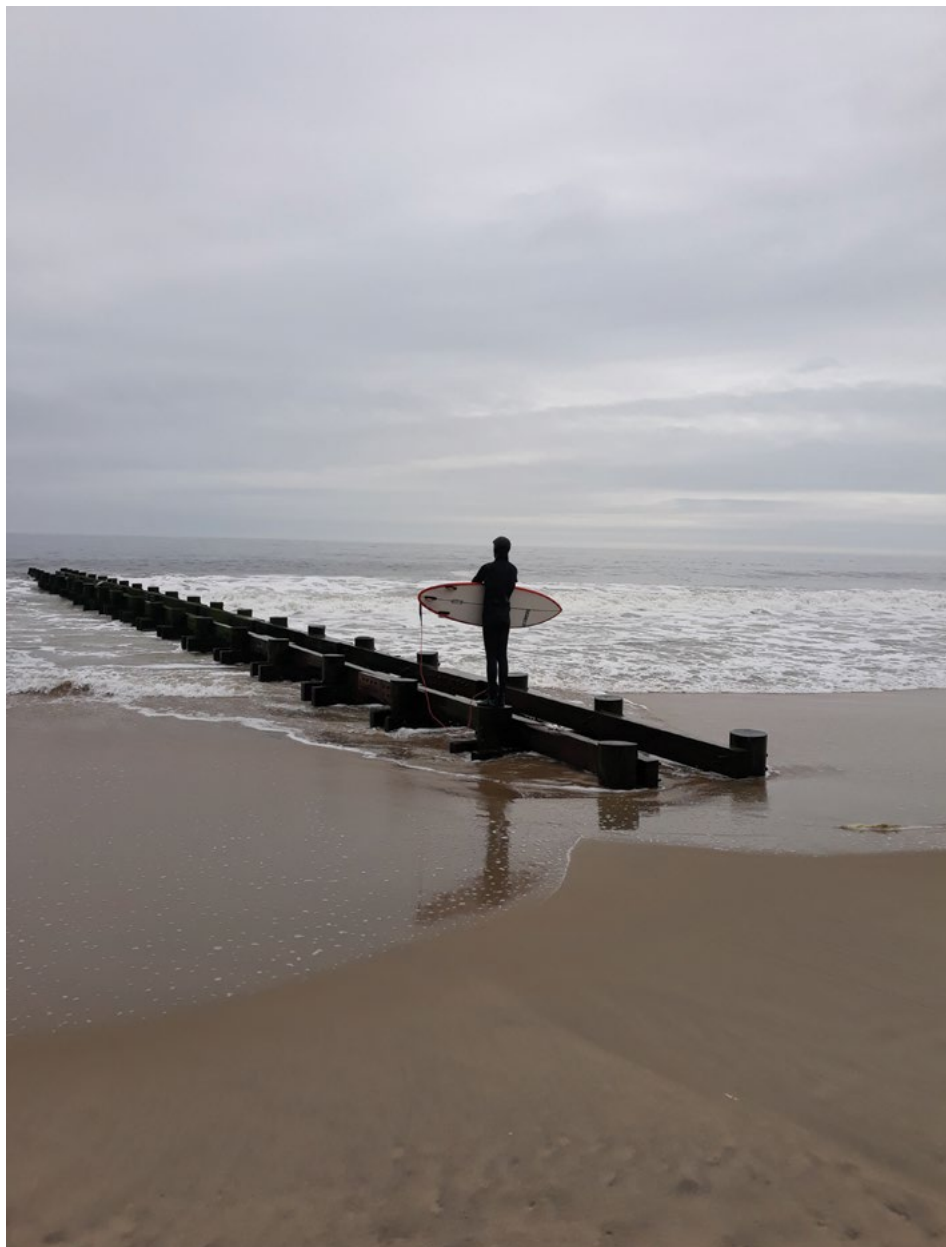
a brave man. Selfless. Good... everything I wasn't." He shook his head, his slightly bowed forward, his tears falling onto the table. The Coward lifted his head and looked at her and took a deep breath.

"It was me," he said quietly and delicately, "I was the one who stole the bread."

Anna froze, almost in shock, her tears continuing to silently fall down her cheeks, each tear heavier than the last. Her mouth hung slightly open, but no words came out. All she could do was look at him, searching for something – an explanation, maybe – but there was nothing she could say. All she could see was the weight of his pain and anguish, a thing she was all too familiar with.

"He was everything that I wasn't..." the Coward said, his voice beginning to break entirely, tears beginning to flow heavier, "and I... I was a coward!" The words escaping him in a broken wail. "*Bylem tchórzem! I was a coward!*" The sound of his guilt and sorrow grew louder, anguished, as he buried his face in his hands, the sobbing wracking his thin frame as if his body could no longer bear the weight of his guilt. "He sacrificed everything... and I was a coward!" He repeated, fractured and desperate, a heavy cry filling the room.

Anna's hand remained on the letter. She didn't speak, she didn't move. She closed her eyes softly as her tears continued to flow down her face – the only sign that she understood the depth of his grief. As he sobbed in guilt and grief, she mourned with the silence of teardrops. After a long silence, Anna reached across the table and rested her soft, yet scarred hand gently over his trembling one. He looked at her, she looked at him, quietly, both in grief and in closure. She said nothing. There was nothing left to say.



***PERSPECTIVES***

by Holley Ralston  
Digital Photography



***BEE DRINKING***

by Kylan Hill  
Digital Photography



***CATERPILLAR***

by Kylan Hill

Digital Photography



***A POETRY CORNER: THE POLITICIAN AND THE ORPHAN***

by John Rudder

As I survey the wreckage lying here on the ground  
The dead and living quiet, only dying makes such a sound  
The war is over finally; the dead have all gone home  
The loser is the living; he must somehow go on

Oh show the politician the sights before my eyes  
My words are oh so silent before a mother's soft cries  
Light that lamp so gently; turn the damned flame on  
Stand him in this wreckage; show him what he has won

Count the ways of victory, number them one through two  
Mark the profits made here, and number them one through  
Mask the bloodied orphan, raise him as your own  
For you have wasted his father and now he too goes on



***ROCKET FOR PRESIDENT***

by Omar Williams

Collage on Paper



***DOWN BY THE RIVER***

by Rebecca Chason

Digital Photography



***FLOWER***

by Kylan Hill

Digital Photography

## ***TO-DO LIST***

by Dr. Billie A. Unger

Self-care and rest.  
Declutter, de-stress.  
This is my mantra.  
I'm under duress!  
I have no more space.  
My closet's jam-packed  
I'm ready to downsize  
but this is a fact:  
those dresses on hangers  
and scarves on the shelf  
Are (were?) my unique way  
of expressing myself.  
I'd first choose an outfit  
and then accessorize  
with shoes and earrings –  
the right color and size.  
I now work from home,  
When do I wear a dress?  
(Zoom's a "waist-up" exception)  
It's time to confess.  
Now it's t-shirts and leggings  
for days upon end.  
I'm all about comfort.  
Spandex is my friend!  
I need room to breathe  
(if you get the gist)  
so I'll tackle this task  
on my long to-do list!



***CIGARETTE DAISY DREAMS***

by Moon Heart

Digital Art

## ***HIDDEN AGENDA***

by Dr. Billie A. Unger

He greets me at the door  
and peppers me with kisses.  
His eyes light up when  
I enter a room  
and follow me  
when I exit.  
Sometimes he does too!  
He appreciates nature  
the way that I do.  
We sit on our deck,  
listen to the birds,  
and watch the wind  
blow through the trees.  
When I am weak, weary  
and worn out from work,  
he nudges me to  
get outside and take a walk.  
With him by my side  
I am protected and safe—  
He is a living example of what's important in life:  
Love, family, loyalty, and trust.  
More human than canine,  
my rescue dog Roguen  
lies beside me in bed  
with no hidden agenda.  
It is he who rescued me.





***SMILING ELEPHANT***

by Sandi Caroscio

Digital Photography

## ***RISE***

by SherrieLea Blackburn

In shadows deep, where silence cries,  
A whisper stirs beneath closed eyes.  
A grip like iron, cold and tight,  
Pulls down the day, devours the night.  
In tangled paths of heart and mind,  
The broken pieces seek to bind,  
Each step a shiver, raw and bare,  
A breath of hope in toxic air.  
Hands shake, hands fall, but rise again,  
The war is loud beneath the skin.  
Where light seems faint and shadows leer,  
The will to live is forged in fear.  
And yet—a spark, a stubborn fire,  
A promise pulled from blood and mire.  
In every fall, a chance to stand,  
To find the strength in fractured hands.  
A thousand stumbles scar the way,  
But still the soul endures the fray.  
For every cut, for every scar,  
The heart rebuilds, the spirit stars.  
From dark to dawn, from dust to flight,  
One step, one breath, one spark of light.  
In broken bones, a fragile bloom,  
In barren souls, there's always room.  
Addiction fades like haunting dreams,  
Recovery flows like mountain streams.  
A voice, a choice, a whispered plea—  
The chains that bound are now set free.  
And so you rise, though trembling still,  
A warrior born of iron will.  
With hope alive, with life reclaimed,  
Your spirit, fierce—unchained, unshamed.

November 6, 2024



***ISLE OF PALMS PIER***

by Rebecca Chason

Digital Photography

***PRAY***

by Emma Mellott

I pray for the day a man doesn't tell me what to do with my body.  
I pray for the day i don't have to fight for my right to choose.  
I pray for the day i don't have to risk my safety by simply walking down the street.  
I pray for the day women all over the country won't live in a constant state of fear.  
I pray for those days.  
and I'm not even religious.



***LITTLE WONDERS***

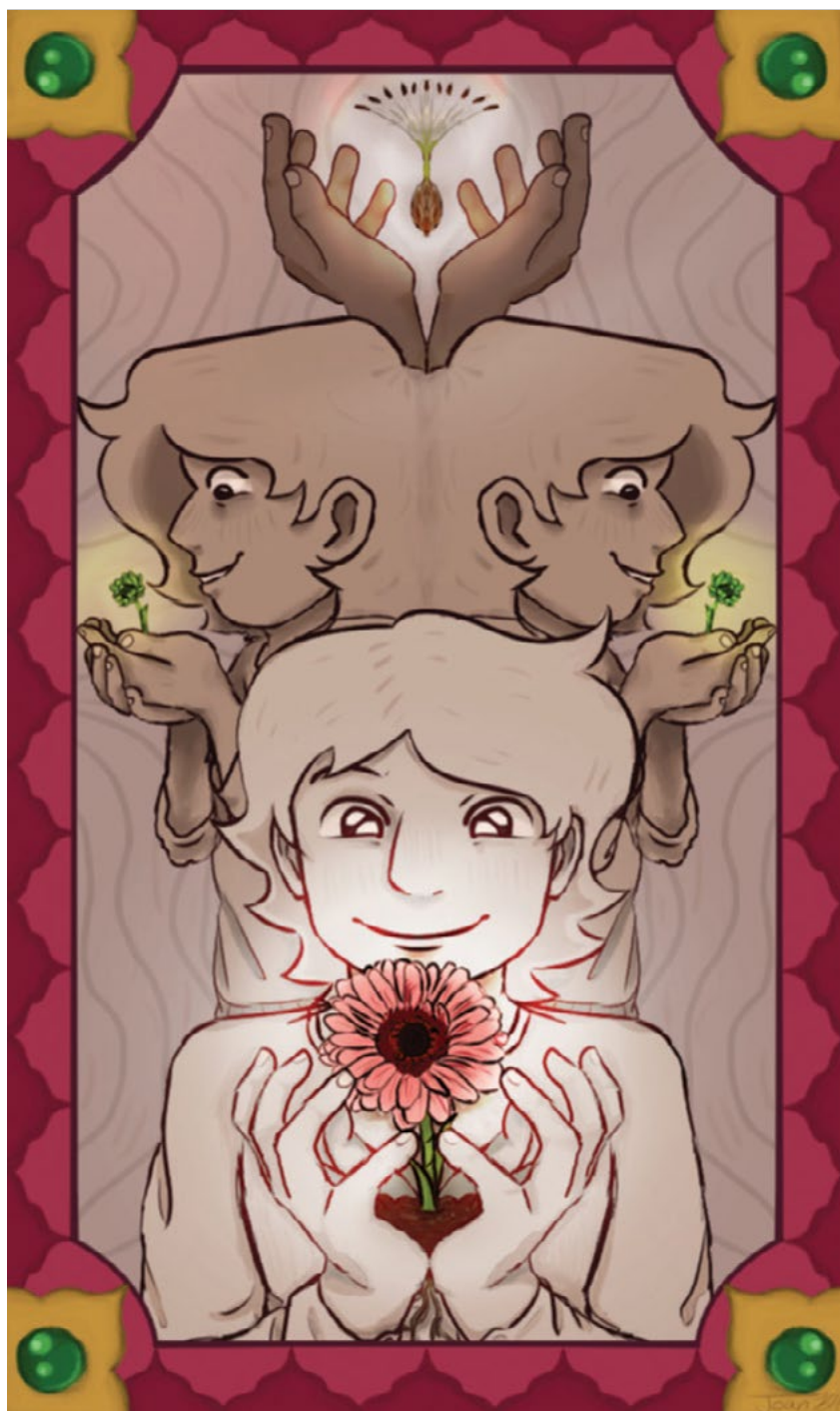
by Rachel Clark  
Digital Photography



## ***PRIDE***

by Dr. Billie A. Unger  
Digital Photography





***A SEED'S POTENTIAL***

by Isabella Hearld

Digital Art



## WAR MUSIC

by Nicole Yurcaba

ac/dc's "thunderstruck" & metallica's "sad but true"  
"nothing else matters" & rammstein's "du hast"  
folkner's "karchata" go\_a's "kalyna" probass i hardi  
dakha brakha & kommuna lux i play them on loop  
during morning make-up sessions when my sister  
my cousins  
my friends  
send *i'm safe*  
*we're alive*  
*talk later*  
one by one via text

& i sit for hours

alone  
reading their words  
thoughts  
prayers  
requests  
anger  
making you playlists containing  
Lemko folk songs  
esoteric messages  
classical interjections  
U2 & aimee mann  
lana del rey & eurythmics

& maybe some day the war will end

& i won't cry each time i hear "Ще не вмерла"

& the fear i'll wake up & my homeland will be erased

my sister & my cousins & my friends are dead  
my language & self are a schism i no longer understand  
i'll never sip coffee in lviv on a monday  
or sleep outside in the garden during summer  
you'll decide one night i am too filled with shrapnel  
drone alerts  
shahed screams  
charred tanks  
& soldiers' narratives

& the songs i send won't mean anything

& the tone arm drops

& my mother's crying—again

& the cats are hungry

at 0430...



***OPEQUON CREEK, WV***

by Gary Bergel  
Digital Photography

***I AM LYING HERE JUST SO***

by Madison Harvey

I have but hope and misery in my bones  
A settlement of sediment  
That has gathered over years  
Buried by dirt, rock, and leaves  
Two feet over lay lines  
That spark with ancient powers  
None that could be mine  
Because I am not yet unalive



***BEE'S KNEES***

by Rachel Clark

Digital Photography





**101 FLOWERS**

by Antonia Capriotti

Prismacolor Pencils





**101 MERMAIDS**

by Antonia Capriotti  
Prismacolor Pencils

## ***THE SPACE BETWEEN***

by Joanna Johansen

I cannot love you  
Not in the way that's within you  
Where hearts reach across the expanse  
And tangle and dance  
And become something new  
A new shape unrecognized

My heart was not made to make the journey  
To cross that distance and reshape  
Within you  
I find comfort in the space between  
Because it can be filled with every color of you  
The way you move through space  
The way your being makes the world brighter

As more color is added to the expanse  
The more of you I see  
Silhouette, where everything matters  
All the gaps between your fingers  
Every line and curve and edge you don't like  
Until I see a whole shape of you  
Surrounded by color and light

So here I remain across the expanse  
Where I can love you  
And all the space in between





***WHERE PEACE LINGERS***

by Habibat Adeniran

Digital Photography

## ***I WANTED TO WRITE YOU A POEM***

by Aspen Monsma

I wanted to write you a poem— I really did.

I wanted to write about the way your eyes reminded me of melted chocolate pools, and your hair was always the perfect mess of curls even though you hated that they wouldn't lay the way you wanted them to. I wanted to write about your soft hands, and the way your winged eyeliner was always flawless. The way we lost ourselves talking about what life might mean, and the way your car always overflowed with cassette tapes.

I wanted to write you a poem that told you I loved you— I really did.

But all I can seem to say is that I'm sorry it's a fight for me to wish you happy birthday on Facebook because I'm so hurt that you left, and you have no idea because I never told you, and I'm sorry that I get pangs of jealousy when I see the way you smile when you're around him, and how well the two of you fit together. I'm sorry I resent the way you left without telling me you were going to, even though I wish I had the guts to do the same.

So I'm sorry. I wanted to write you a poem— I really did, but it turns out I can't say what I want to—because I still miss you too much—

And you still don't know—That I wanted to write you a poem.



***CELESTIAL MIRROR***

by Heather Huggett

Digital Photography

# BlueRidge

COMMUNITY AND  
TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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