

TROUBADOUR

THE EPISCOPAL LITERARY MAGAZINE

ARTICLES • ARTWORK • FICTION • PHOTOGRAPHY • POETRY



Dear Readers,

Above all else, *Troubadour* is an outlet for expressing oneself and holding pride in what we create; it is being brave enough to share that with the entire student body. Even through the endless announcements and the constant offerings of prizes for writing and photography, what we bring together in the end is worth it.

This magazine is, at its core, by you and for you. It is for you to look back and remember the memories you made and the time you took to put them on paper. Through the process of celebrating individuality and compiling it into one beautiful, online magazine, we, together, create something special. Not only is this magazine a diverse and quality collection of the Episcopal student body's writing – it is a reflection of the thoughts and emotions that can only be explored through your art, both literary and visual.

As you can see, we revamped the style of this edition of *Troubadour* with the theme of finding one's identity within the vast, chaotic world. In amplifying our use of themed contests along with nature-themed photography and art, we hope to use this year's magazine to explore the intersection between the natural world and the simultaneous wonders and hardships of humanity.

With that, our team would like to thank everyone who submitted to this magazine and participated in one of our contests. If you didn't get a chance to submit your work by our deadline for this issue or do not see your work in this issue, we hope to see your work next year.

Sincerely,
The *Troubadour* Editors

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Revival

by Wylie Schexnayder

Nothing begins with sadness. People are not born to hate nor destroy their surroundings. We are all moveable fluid in our thoughts and actions. We are influential and influenced. It is a genuine misfortune for humans to rid themselves of all hope. A calamity to believe that in our sorrows, we are alone, desolate from the beauty of the world.

I look back on my life and see what I wish to forget. I know a despair that stemmed from the world. A world that is imperfect and treacherous. A world in which you search for fulfillment, you will be searching in vain. I saw a girl who was looking to the world for her satisfaction. She looked to music and friends to determine her self-worth. She looked to the world and its ways to determine how she would act and feel and live. Her being did not begin in sadness. She was not raised to hate nor destroy. But she learned. She was influenced.

That girl was holding onto a thread of hope and a rope of hopelessness. She is me, and I am her. However, that was in the past, and I was a different person then. You see, we are ever-changing beings. Is that not wonderful to think? I am a different person than I was yesterday or the day before. I am me now, and when that moment passes, I have changed, I am different, I am transformed, I am revived.

I began holding onto actions of the past and, by doing this, never found myself in the present. I fell, and fell, and fell until I felt I could fall no further. I was in the depths of anguish, and no one knew. I felt closed from the people around me, and I was blind to the hands that tried to

lift me up. Have you ever imagined being underwater and having these hands reach down to pull you from the currents? You felt so sure you were going to drown in the riptide, but you opened your eyes, and there was light. You wonder if you are dead, but little do you know you were reborn.

As I was lifted out of the water, I heard the joy of the crowd, watching in anticipation. I smiled, knowing that I was free. Baptism was a rebirth, not in body but in spirit. I wiped my eyes and moved my wet hair off of my face. I smiled at the kind face of the pastor who guided me out of the water, thanking him when he handed me a towel. I was shaking, not from the cold, but from the realization of what had just happened. I had been revived.

Before I was submerged under the water, I had a feeling. Something that cannot be explained by mere words, for they do not express fully what I mean to say. Words on a page could never fully express what I wish to say. I was crying. Not for sadness or joy, but knowing that I would be changed, and this moment of great anticipation was hurtling towards me at full speed.

I find true solace no more in temporary things. I grew to realize that it is not what we first think that gives us peace. I found a want, a need for peace and that surrounding myself with people who provide me with peace and are at peace with the world and themselves is a necessity of survival. We find ourselves hoping in vain to find the tranquility of a turbulent world, and although we can hope and pray that

Revival (cont'd)

by Wylie Schexnayder

the turbulence will simply disappear one day, we must acknowledge that we are influencing the world. We are all people who hold power in this world, all people

who can create change and be the change, and so, for now, we must find solace in such.



Ryan Richard

Spreading Love is the True Means of Winning

by Grace Ciesielski

I believe that the authentic measure of success transcends mere material wealth or accolades. It resides in the boundless affection we extend to others, the meaningful bonds we nurture, and the profound influence we leave in the wake of our interactions with fellow souls. In this perspective, success is not an isolated achievement, but a painting created from the art of compassion, empathy, and benevolence. It is the radiant glow that emerges from hearts touched by sincere compassion, the harmonious orchestration of lives intertwined in a common mission, and the lasting legacy that surpasses fleeting achievements.

This was not always my outlook on life, though. Being a swimmer from such a young age, I inadvertently molded my mind into a vessel that fervently held the belief that victory stood as the paramount goal. The relentless laps, the rhythmic strokes, and the ceaseless pursuit of excellence ingrained in me the conviction that the ultimate measure of success was the taste of winning. This unwavering mindset propelled me through countless early mornings and grueling training sessions, pushing the boundaries of my physical and mental endurance, all in the singular pursuit of standing atop the podium.

I used to believe the number of gold medals I possessed symbolized my self-worth and my value as an individual. "I may not be the best yet, but I could be," became the mantra I recited like a fervent prayer to the heavens. As I strived relentlessly to outshine others, my once-inspiring competitive spirit veered into hostility, and each time I fell

short and the medal around my neck gleamed silver instead of gold, I couldn't help but be consumed by resentment. It was a painful realization that the hunger for victory, while driving me forward, was also sowing seeds of bitterness and discontent within.

Basking in the glory of our victory at the state championship relay last year, a profound epiphany dawned upon me. Surprisingly, it wasn't the glittering medal around my neck that filled my heart with the most heartfelt sense of happiness. Instead, it was the indescribable joy of sharing that moment with my teammates that resonated most deeply within me. As I stood on the podium, the euphoria of winning coursing through my veins, I stole a glance at the faces of my fellow swimmers to see their eyes sparkle with a shared elation, mirroring the same radiant smile that adorned my own face. In that instant, it became unequivocally clear that the true essence of that victory was not the solitary achievement, but the collective symphony of effort and unity that had orchestrated our success.

Listen to Your Body, Explore Your Mind

by Emma Engstrom

In the fall of my junior year of High School, I attended The Traveling School, a tech-free semester program that immerses students in the outdoors while traveling across the Western United States. For 105 days, I experienced the world with nine other young women, without the influence of outside media and limited contact with my home life.

The motivation for this journey came at me fast and hard after the COVID-19 pandemic and the forced seclusion within my home for extended months. This experience is one that many other students felt compelled to pursue. By the summer of 2021, the Institute for International Education reported a 523% increase in US college students going abroad, with 83% of schools expecting an increase in the 2022-23 academic year.

As a generation, we have collectively gone through the effects of quarantine and a required dissociation from the regularities that we had become accustomed to. Traveling has been a human desire since the Wright brothers, requiring us to go outside our comfort zones; we naturally desire to get out of our routine and responsibilities.

When COVID-19 momentarily rescinded this privilege, there was a collective understanding and appreciation for traveling, and the majority of my generation has since taken a proactive approach to reconnect with and regain our desire for difference. With the collective increase of a growth mindset, people's relationship with traveling and learning new things has only been boosted by the limit that the Coronavirus implemented.

National Geographic claims that travel should be an essential part of human life, with the pandemic only highlighting the value and importance of experiencing different cultures and a change in routine. This feeling of adrenaline that comes with traveling is rooted in the human connection with nature and the dopamine released when we experience the outdoors.

While experiencing the great outdoors on my trip last year, I developed a deep and understanding relationship with nature that I had never anticipated or expected. I could understand myself better and experience a genuinely surreal and divine peace. Although it took me a flight across the country to realize and develop this connection, this experience can be different for everyone.

Our experience with traveling and change has become tied up with the notion of leaving. Shifting to the idea that to travel and experience the outdoors, it's required that you go and take a trip to be able to have a different experience outside of the normalcy of everyday life. However, the importance of maintaining a connection with nature can be handled in far less severe conditions.

Typically, we associate trends circulating and concepts getting popular through social media. However, there are also upward trends that we may need to realize or consider. With all of the stress and anxiety that COVID brought with it, people began to realize

Listen to Your Body, Explore Your Mind (cont'd)

by Emma Engstrom

the importance of mindfulness and being conscious of ourselves. This stress is the reality of more than just the pandemic. As the climate crisis continues to worsen every day, there can be this unconscious tension that looms above us, and it is essential to take time for ourselves to maintain emotional stability.

In 2017, a survey by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health reported an 11.1% increase in adults practicing some form of mantra-based meditation, mindfulness meditation, or spiritual meditation in the last 12 months, tripling from 2012. Since the pandemic, there has also been a reported increase in general mindfulness, according to the National Library of Medicine.

Meditation is an individual outlet that many people consider to help with their state of mind and well-being. By clearing

the mind of stresses and other influences, meditation allows for a clear mind and an emotionally balanced state. With this calming activity, people can train their attention and awareness to allow themselves to truly listen to their bodies and form a clearer understanding of themselves.

There has grown to be a generalization of the required complete immersion into nature to form a connection and truly experience mindfulness. However, this is not the case. It's important to understand that meditation and mindfulness can be experienced from the comfort of your backyard. The values for intention that have developed over the most recent developments have been limited. Still one, but one of the values of intentional mindfulness is the idea of the boundlessness of our minds.



Waterfalls

by Anonymous

Imagine going into the woods wearing a heavy white jacket and too-small gloves, carrying a pair of loppers while clearing out vines for hours as twigs and dirt get stuck in your hair. I did that with every ounce of my free time, at will.

My little brother and I had recently discovered domes of vines in the woods in the back of our neighborhood, affectionately named “the hut.” Multiple domes were connected, some bigger and some smaller, almost like a house. It was as if someone plopped a semi-sphere in the woods, left it to be taken over by vines, and then left the sphere to slowly dissolve into the moist Louisiana dirt.

It was summer now, and I was perfecting my forest getaway. Loppers in hand, I marched along the muddy creek, pausing to listen to the sound of water rushing over a log in a small waterfall. I ducked under the dome entrance, greeted by immediate shade with some sunbeams peeking through.

I went to the hut, demolishing any vines and sticks in my way, to the unfinished room. It still had some vines hanging down, and I got to work clearing it.

In awkward positions, I attempted to cut vines down, trying to put my entire weight on the loppers. Every time I cut a vine down, I discarded it to the side, and it seemed as if six more spontaneously grew to replace it. Fifty minutes in, my fingers were sore, my hair was a mess, my clothes were dirty, and I was tired. Pulling my walkie-talkie out of my draw-string bag, I contacted my friends.

“Do you copy?”

The walkie soon came to life with a staticky voice. “Yeah, what is it?” Clara asked.

“Can you come to the woods and we can eat lunch together? Over. And also bring a swimsuit and a towel. Over. Also, can you bring me a granola bar? Over.” Apparently, back then, we hadn’t understood that saying “over” meant that you should be done talking.

Avery came crackling through the walkie. “I’m coming too!”

Within ten minutes, Clara and Avery stood in their swimming suits, carrying bags that must have had peanut butter sandwiches and my granola bar, which I snatched first things first.

Together, we walked through the hut and to the best beach there was: Dragontail Beach.

Walking cautiously across the half-decayed log, we slowly made our way across the creek, shrieking every time a foot slipped or a hand made a piece of wood fall into the stream.

The beach was muddy and dirty, as expected. That didn’t stop us from having a fantastic time. We tried to catch non-existent fish with handmade nets, found a moldy couch cushion beneath the veil of muddy waters, had clay-making contests, and held picnics.

As I sat on Dragontail Beach, I listened to the birds singing new songs and the water rushing as the sun shone through

Waterfalls (cont'd)

by Anonymous

the leaves, highlighting the forest floor. I wish I could do this every day.

All too soon, it was hurricane season. It seemed Ida swept across the nation, leaving destruction in its path. When I returned to the hut, I saw full tree limbs strewn everywhere. My tennis shoes crunched on leaves as my hands moved stray branches out of my way. The leaves above me rustled as birds chirped, and the stream provided a constant calming sound. I heard squirrels scampering in every direction as I continued forward.

I snapped a twig when I stepped into the Hut and gasped. The hut was destroyed. All of my hard work was undone. New vines lay splayed across the dirt floor, and more sunlight attacked my eyes because there was no roof anymore. I could barely squeeze into the other rooms because the vines seemed to have multiplied, blocking the doorways. We would have to go around the hut to get

to the beach now.

Shocked but not hopeless, I crept back home. I changed clothes and snatched a pair of loppers from the shed. I grabbed my walkie-talkie and told Clara and Avery the situation. Within minutes, we all stood together, not with PB&J's but our loppers in hand.

Determined, we worked tirelessly to restore our sanctuary. We painfully cleared vine after vine, grinning to ourselves when we finally saw progress.

After weeks, our Hut was once again ours. We practically skipped across the decayed log, splashing each other with brown water once we got to the beach. We had reclaimed our utopia, the only thing that truly, 100% belonged to us. But you can't do that without eating peanut butter sandwiches on Dragontail Beach afterward.





Halloween Hit!

by Toby Laperouse

Excitement filled the air on that eerie Halloween night as my dear friend Zach and I ventured into the moonlit streets. The hauntingly decorated houses beckoned with promises of sugary delights for all the little goblins and witches. We were on a mission; our pillowcases bulging with sweets gathered from the generous households that embraced the Halloween spirit. We were having fun.

As I walked alongside Zach, the glow of my smartphone illuminating my face, I engaged in a text conversation with my dad, orchestrating our rendezvous point. Our destination was Zippy's, a vibrant Mexican restaurant nestled nearby. With each step, the anticipation of indulging in delicious cuisine grew stronger.

However, fate had a sinister twist in store. As I approached the street, a sudden thunderous impact rocked my world. It was as if a supernatural force had propelled me into the lush grass, causing the candy I had collected to erupt into the night sky like a shower of spectral confetti.

Amidst the chaos, my father arrived at Zippy's, and his eyes widened in horror as he witnessed the surreal spectacle unfold. The vehicle responsible for my unexpected flight was an ominous shade of purple, its occupants revealed as two bewildered college students.

Nevertheless, in that surreal moment, blame dissipated like mist in the moonlight. I had been struck, miraculously, by the side of the car, sparing me from a potentially fatal fate. In this twist of fate, I emerged

unscathed, allowing me to recount this eerie encounter and share the tale of my Halloween escapade.

Upon my return home, a deep sense of confusion enveloped me. I grappled with a whirlwind of questions, unsure of the events that had transpired and the circumstances that had led me here. The world around me felt surreal, and I pondered the essence of life itself. How could I have emerged from a situation that seemed perilously close to the edge of mortality? The fragility of existence weighed heavily on my mind as I contemplated the fine line that separates life from the unknown abyss of death.

Amidst my confusion, my thoughts inevitably turned to my mother. I wondered how she would perceive this turn of events on Halloween, from happy trick-or-treating to near death. How will she react to this information? Will she be mad, relieved, happy, or sad, I didn't know. In times like these, people are hard to read. She was relieved I was alive in the end, although I was rightfully punished later.

After all of this, there is only one clear thing about this. No matter when, what day, and what time, never walk while on your phone; look at the streets all the time. Wait for cars to cross the street. I already knew this, but I assumed the streets were closed for Halloween to save children. After all, there were not many cars on the road. But remember, anything can happen. You could be one step closer to death at this very moment. You could hurt so many people by being careless. You

Halloween Hit! (cont'd)

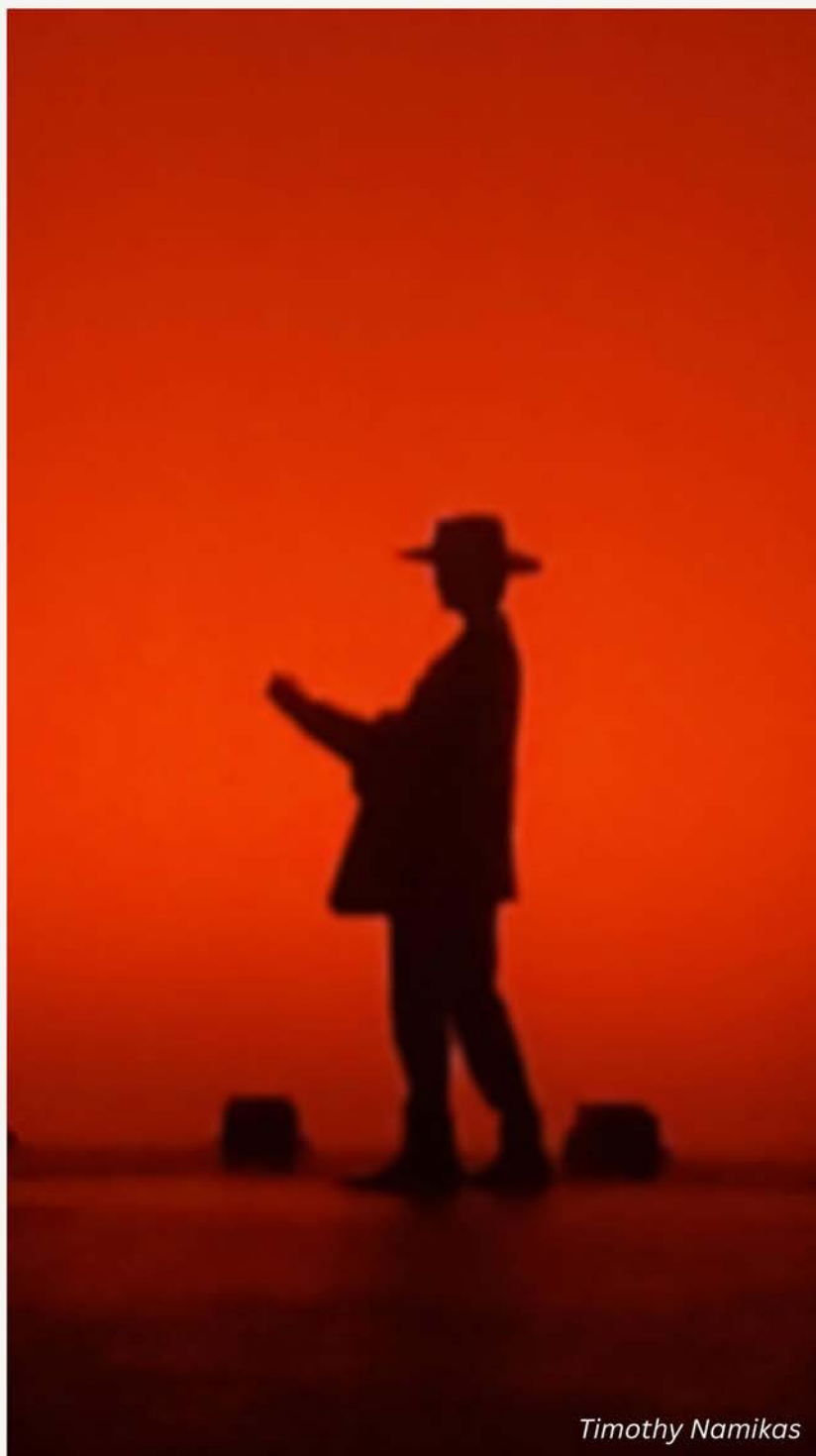
by Toby Laperouse

could be in danger at any moment. Be careful at all times.

I was alright, and I turned out ok; for many others, they are not as lucky. They

may never see their families again.

Maybe they have never experienced it their entire life. Nothing is more important than your life; you can text them later.



Timothy Namikas

Bubble

by David Dickerson

Everyone has a bubble. Bubbles can cross, lap, intertwine. In our lives, there are complex bubble systems that make us who we are. Some people never leave their bubbles. They spend their whole lives looking at other bubbles or attaching to other bubbles but never leave their safe, secure, magnificent bubbles. Bubbles are strange things. Inside of a bubble, everything on the outside is clear, but distorted by the texture and position of the bubble. The few people who step out of their bubbles struggle for security and protection, before quickly grasping right back onto their forgiving, but now damaged bubble. See, when you leave a bubble, in some cases, it will pop, and in some, it will let you squeeze right back through. If it pops, you now have the option of blowing a new bubble or living outside the bubble in the non-bubble world, where who knows what will happen to you. One day I was playing around with the inside of my bubble and suddenly, it popped. I fell to the ground and was overtaken by a strong gust of wind. I stumbled around, looking up at all the smiling and playing and resting that had so much to do with the bubble world, all those bubbles pressed together, overlapping and intertwining and weaved together in the afternoon sky, making an intricate pattern of nothingness. As I continued to walk, I found my feet starting to throb, as jagged rocks and pointy sticks opened gashes and wounds in my skin. My brain became fuzzy as it was not used to the purity of the oxygen in the walking world. I continued to walk because I was in the walking world. My soul pulled me farther along the vast rocky road. The bubbles started to grow scarce, illuminating the beautiful sunset that hung over the horizon. In the bubbles, I could never see the sun. Bubbles surrounded me, trapping me into my own world with no sense of reality, no sense of the dazzling constellations that now tattooed the night sky, no sense of the yellowish moon that peered out from the highest branches with a crescent grin, as to tell me that it was all going to be ok. In the bubbles, I slept soundly and peacefully. The bubbles sang melodies to me as I curled up in a ball with no sense of the falling rain that now splattered all over the endless rock path, pressing my hair to the back of my head, and making the blood trail that stalked me float away. I walked all through the night, growing more hopeless for a new reality. As I kept walking on the unrelenting rocks, a baby blue tint came over the sky, as the blazing sun cast shadows on my figure. I walked and walked, and walked. Occasionally I thought back to my time spent safe in the bubbles and envied it. But as I thought those thoughts, I opened my eyes from oblivion and gazed in wonder at the blooming azaleas, at the ripples in a clear pond as a rock skimmed the top, at the graceful songbirds that flew into infinity, and I realized that as I walked down this path, this road, that I was experiencing something real. Many years later, as my hair flowed down my back and my joints began to crack, I suddenly stopped walking. I looked down at the orange-yellow fallen leaves that enveloped my now strong and callused feet. I bent over and ran my hand across the road, feeling the sharp rocks that I had become so accustomed to and letting out a deep breath. As I looked up again at the road I noticed that the rocks started to come together, causing the road to narrow. I continued to walk on the narrow path, picking up my speed. The path soon became a skinny trail, and the rocks that first collected my blood and sorrow changed shape, becoming small granules of dirt. The

Bubble (cont'd)

by David Dickerson

dirt path entered and began to snake through s, running through trees and bushes, and now running was me, as my arms pumped and slashed through the air. My soul latched on to something at the edge of the woods, and a certain security filled my mind, causing my brain to send swift orders to my nerves to send swift orders to my legs to continue to pump my arms through the crisp wooded air. Finally, I began to slow down, bringing my sprint down to a jog down to a walk. The trees began to thin out. I walked, every step shorter than the last, finally bringing me to the edge of the wood. I stopped, looking down at a vast, still river with peace and security. I smiled, thinking back to my days tucked away in my safe bubble, and laughed as I gazed up toward the crystal blue sky. I looked back down at the still, peaceful water and with one swift motion, dove, headfirst, straight in.



Cultivated

by Mr. James Moroney

Moon blossoms
 In the rich, fertile blackness
 Of the night
 Flutters delicate, feathery petals
 Of light against the deeply sheltered
 Landscape; subtle brushstrokes on a dull canvas
 That draw my gaze skyward.

Galactic garden
 Cultivated amidst a weedless soil
 Burning bulbs that breathe a vivid vitality
 Into the frozen vastness

And each dot,
 Each luminescent lilac,
 Whether faint or vivacious,
 Throbs bright with the beating lifeblood of an
 Untamed frontier.

And each dot,
 Each resplendent rose,
 Reminds me that they grew from chaos,
 From a great burning cascade of
 Entropy
 Swirling
 Violent
 Power
 Slowly domesticated over an unimaginable time
 Into vast communities which orbit harmoniously

Amidst all of the
 Mathematical uncertainty

I gaze up
 Admire diamond blossoms,
 Beautiful orbs of light
 And Smile.

We will figure it out someday



Grown to Hate While Watching My Weight

Content Warning: Body Image

by Anonymous

The ringing of my alarm pierced my ears at 3:30 in the morning. It was still dark outside. I rolled out of bed and put on my leotard. I tried to find one with smooth cotton that would be more comfortable, but they were all dirty. I slipped into the itchy, tight leotard and slicked my hair into a bun. I grabbed my gymnastics and school bag, and then, out the door I went. My mom drove me every morning to the gymnastics gym, and she was happy to do it because she loved knowing I got to do something I loved every day. As we drove, I drifted back into my slumber, but I was quickly awakened by my mother unbuckling me. I got out of the car, said goodbye, and was off.

I opened the door; the frigid air hit my skin. A few lights flickered creating the same eerie feeling. The familiar face of the blue floor smiled at me while the face of my coach frowned at me. Coach Dru busted through the door, shouting at us to warm up. Her face was so white, with little crevices in between her eyebrows from how much she furrowed them. Her short blonde hair with a few strands of gray creepily frizzing up. My friends always had so much energy despite the fact the sun hadn't risen yet. Their smiles were like sunshine at this dark hour. We began warming up; my legs were moving, but my mind wasn't. My eyes shut and then opened again. By the end of the warmup, I was fully awake from the dramatic yells of my coach. We started with the uneven bars. I slipped my hands into my grips and trotted over to the chalk box. I coughed and struggled to breathe from the aroma in the air from the chalk. I began rubbing the white substance onto my grips. It

would dig up under my fingernails and make a screeching noise as I applied it. I finally started my routine.

I made a skip onto the springboard. The board made a quick clicking noise before catapulting me onto the bar. I used all my strength in my abs to pull myself onto the bar. After a long 30 minutes of practicing bars, I moved to the beam. I applied the chalk just as I had done at the bars. I began making graceful movements on the beam. Leaping, jumping, turning, flipping, and attempting to stick my landing. I then went to the floor to do a quick floor routine. As my music played, I was so happy, dancing and flipping. By the time my routine was over, I was out of breath gasping for air. I walked over to my water bottle and had a quick swig, the cool water removing my quenching thirst. I ran to Vault while my coach yelled, "Get over here, you slow pig." I regarded the comment because my little 5th-grade brain didn't understand what she meant. I ran, sprinted, then flipped over the vaulting horse, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, it was done...until conditioning.

We sprinted till our lungs couldn't keep us going. We did push-ups until our arms gave out. We did a countless amount of squats until the numbness of our legs forced us to collapse. We ran until we threw up. Then we stretched. My coach sat on us, bending us in half. My muscles felt like they were being ripped in half; I could almost hear them tearing. My eyes squinted in pain and agony. Finally, it was over. I ran into the locker room, shoving the door open immediately getting a sense of comfort

Grown to Hate While Watching My Weight (cont'd)

by Anonymous

from my teammates. We laughed and mocked our coaches, having the best of times. In the gym, they did not react to Coach Dru's rude comments about their thighs. When we entered the locker room, everything poured out. All the tears we wanted to cry in the gym, all the laughs we had to hold in, and anything we wanted to discuss happened in the locker room. These were the moments that made it all worthwhile. I changed into my school uniform. Chalk still remained on my legs. I got into the car and drove to school.

In every class, it seemed I had forgotten to do my homework; my excuse was to blame it on gymnastics. I went to lunch, and it was brunch! I had so much that my stomach felt like it would explode. A little voice in the back of my head told me not to eat; that voice was my Coach's. The voice was quickly silenced at the sight of the fluffy pancakes, the caramelized bacon, the juicy strawberries; it was delicious. I didn't have many friends at school; my only friends were my gymnastics friends. I didn't have time to grow relationships with any other people. An hour later, I checked out of school to go back to the gymnastics gym.

I arrived promptly at 1:30 and began practice. Little did I know this would be the practice where everything changed. The second I busted the doors open with a smile on my face, my coach quickly changed my big smile into a terrified look. Practice started at 1:30, but I walked in at 1:32. She was always quick to anger.

She screamed, "WHY ARE YOU LATE?"

She eyed me up and down until her eyes fell on my tiny stomach. I tried explaining the traffic, but she didn't care. She picked me up and threw me over her shoulders so easily. Couldn't she see I didn't need to be any skinnier? You could see my ribs and every indentation from my muscles. My excuse to my mother why I didn't eat, was because I was picky, but in reality, I was scared of what my coach would make me do for eating more than I should. Coach Dru put me down in the kitchen. The door slammed shut, causing my ears to ring. I had my tight leotard on, and my gut hung out of it, although I didn't have much of a gut at the time. I was just bloated from lunch.

She screamed, "WHAT DID YOU EAT FOR LUNCH, EMMA TAYLOR?!"

My voice trembled as I attempted to swallow my fear, but it didn't work. My voice was quiet and cracked as I said, "I had strawberries."

She screamed again, "YOU DIDN'T EAT ANYTHING ELSE? DON'T LIE TO ME, YOUNG LADY!" I confessed to indulging in a normal-sized meal. She shamed me and made me feel fat and ugly. While all my friends practiced bars, beam, floor, and Vault, I was forced to do conditioning. Practice was from 1:30 to 8. I never got to touch one piece of equipment that day.

I ran until I threw up my lunch. I held a plank for 8 minutes, my abs burning and my lungs struggling for air. I held a wall sit for 12 minutes; my legs began shaking from the aching pain. I watched the clock for those hours. I

Grown to Hate While Watching My Weight (cont'd)

by Anonymous

went to the bathroom and cried and cried. I looked at myself in the mirror and judged my weight and my muscles. Until my reflection met my eyes. I stared in the mirror, making eye contact with myself. My face was pale, I was skinny, and my eyes were red. I zoned out, staring at myself in the mirror. My ugly reflection was laughing at me. My mind told me I was pathetic and stupid. The banging of the door snapped me back into reality. I began shaking, afraid to open the door. I slowly turned the knob, petrified of who was on the other side of the door. My biggest fear is my coach. She yanked me by the arm, pinching me, leaving a rosy red mark with a clear indentation of where her fingernails, which were as sharp as a freshly sharpened pencil, dug into my fragile, frail skin. She forced me to climb the rope five times. The sweat was dripping down my forehead. I watched the clock, hearing the quiet noise of the tick-tick-ticking. The sound played in my head constantly, tick tick tick as the seconds went by. Finally, the day was done. As the clock struck 8, I ran out the door. I didn't ask if I could leave, I didn't grab my water bottle or shoes, I just left. My teammates asked where I was going, but I didn't reply. All the voices began ringing in my ear. I finally got outside to the quiet, where the only noise was my heavy breathing. It was dark until the bright lights of my mother's car blinded me.

I got in the car, and my kind mother asked how practice was; I told her great. I had become a great liar due to the fact I had to lie to her every day about the sport I had grown to hate. She turned her Christian music up, and it was the

first time I intently listened to the words. I looked out the window; a single tear fell down my cheek. It was warm and salty. The only sense of warmth at this time was my own tears. The song's words sang, "The Lord will send out an army to rescue you from the depths of your despair." At this moment, I realized I was giving my life away to people who didn't care about my well-being. They enjoyed watching little girls suffer from overwork, eating disorders, and verbal abuse. At this moment, I realized that the sport I loved since I was a tiny itty bitty little girl became my worst enemy because of my coaches. They tore me down; they took everything out of me until I had nothing left, but my faith was more vigorous, and God gave everything he had to me. When I had nothing, he gave me everything I needed.

My perspective changed. I told my mom I wanted to quit; she was concerned but realized it was a toxic environment. And that was the day my life changed. After I quit, I made more friends, I gained much-needed weight, and I didn't see myself as ugly; instead, I saw myself as amazing because I had the ability to move and breathe. That's when my new journey began. Running miles for no one but myself and God. Running was my sport, not anyone else's. I watched what I once loved crumble to pieces because of people; I decided never to let people ruin my relationship with running. On that day, my life changed for the better, and I never questioned that decision ever again.

Growing Up

by Anonymous

Birth
Growing up
New brother
Old brother
Very loved
Growing up
Went to school
Got my first crush
Very loved
Growing up
Grandfather died
Feeling sad
Feeling less loved Growing up
Graduated
Moved schools
Loved
Growing up
Lost again
Feeling alone
Not loved
Growing up
No friends
Wanted to end it all Not loved
Growing up
Brother sent away Bottling it all up
Not loved
Growing up
Things getting better Found my people
Feeling sorta loved Growing up
People who support me And love me for me Feeling loved
Growing up
Happiest now
Brother back
Friends
Very loved
Growing up
I still feel sad sometimes But I guess it's just a part Of being loved;
And growing up.

Blacker Than Thou

by Rebekah Reid

Growing up at this school,
Constantly being poked at by people saying, "So you don't know
about (insert "common" thing from black culture)?"
That's the thing with these people and their questions, you know
what they really mean when they ask questions.
You don't act black, you don't know black culture.
But what does
acting black
even look like?
My sister used the term "blacker than thou" in her LAUNCH
presentation which is the perfect feeling I get here.
The unspoken words and feeling of people thinking that they are
blacker than thou.
Me.





A True Friend, A True Inspiration

by Anonymous

Content Warning: Suicide

The sound of the church bells rings in my head, bringing back all of my most fond memories. The happy times and times when life was careless and reckless, and it did not matter what people said to us because we just wanted to have fun. Now, there is not us; it's just me. I am alone, sitting in a pew, watching and looking as my once best friend is lying in a casket in front of me. It does not feel real. I think my mom's hand grasping mine is to help me cope with the fact that he is gone, and this service feels like the end of a part of my life. A bond that I have lost and will never regain. A part of me once filled with innocence and joy now closed without ever saying goodbye.

"Okay, and then we build a house not too big, not too small so that there is still room in the backyard to play in," he would tell me.

"Yes! And maybe a pool with a super swirly slide."

We would build our own house, made out of wood planks and painted in a rustic white so you could see the wood peaking through. The inside would be two stories with a slide connecting them; there would be a designated Lego room for him and a Barbie room for me. Stepping out of our front door was a basketball court to the right, two trampolines to the left so we could each have one, and a swimming pool right in front with a grey-swirled slide.

Max loved to picture what life would be like for us as we grew up, and for some reason, we always wanted to live in my parents' backyard with our fifteen

kids. Life would be simple that way, with few distractions and lots of perfectly cooked food from my dad. It is difficult to use the past tense when speaking about our idealistic future, but that is what life has brought us to: one still in touch with the world and one of us carefully watching over the other and protecting her every move. I can feel him when I am struggling, lifting me and caring for my thoughts and emotions.

When I stepped into the church, I could feel the warmth and light through the stained glass window, and the scent of aged wood and incense came to me. As I sit in the pews, smooth from years of use, I bow my head, praying to the Lord to bless Max's family as they are huddled in front of me. The priest starts the service with prayer and scripture reading; I don't recall any of the scripture, only focusing my eyes on the casket in the aisle. It feels as though nobody is paying attention to it, as if it is just something we ignore and focus on the words being said, but I refuse; I refuse to believe that he is actually gone. When his father walks up to speak out about Max's life and the impact he had, he says that Max was the goofiest kid anyone knew, and little did he know, but that is what sparked my humor as a child.

In the first grade, Max made me laugh so hard in morning assembly that we had to be separated, but that did not stop us from hand signaling from fifty feet away. We didn't hand signal about important things, just making silly faces at each other to see who would laugh first. I lost every time

A True Friend, A True Inspiration (cont'd)

by Anonymous

because that was Max's effect on everyone, just making them laugh and be happier. Max shared his humor and goofiness with everyone, but his charismatic heart is what I loved most about him. He would never try to anger anyone, whether it was a friend or a fly on the floor. Max just wanted everyone to be happy, which he inspired most in me. Even when I would forget my lunch or have a bad day in class, around him, it didn't matter because he made me forget it all and just laugh. Now that he is gone, the laughter we once shared is filled with tears of grief and mourning, something he would have never wanted me to experience.

Nobody prepares you for death; it is not something taught in schools or by your parents, but it is something everyone goes through. I don't believe that there could be any preparation for this, the loss of one of your first best friends. It starts with disbelief, which I experienced for a long time, not believing that my life had barely begun and his had already ended. Losing someone to suicide is a pain that feels different from other kinds of loss. An ache that lingers, making you question what could have been done differently. Leaving you alone thinking to yourself: Could I have done more? Should I have noticed the signs? Losing a best friend to suicide taught me that even in the brightest people, darkness can come upon them without notice. It made me more conscious of the importance of reaching out, listening, and showing love to those around me because we never truly know the battles people may be fighting silently.

Max's life has had a lasting effect on

me, not just with grief and sadness but with gratitude and inspiration to live through him. Every action I do has more intent than it used to, focusing on cherishing every moment. In school, I am more determined to get my work done, knowing that my education is not just a necessity but a way to honor Max's memory by making the most of my opportunities. In sports, I push myself harder, turning my sadness into motivation and using every chance to play soccer as a tribute to him. In my friendships and relationships, I am more appreciative and compassionate of the people around me, recognizing the importance of capturing all the time with the people I love.

Once the mass starts to end, I can feel it, and I can feel our bond slowly ending, knowing this is the last time I will ever see him. The priest lays a thin linen blanket over him and prays over him. Then, he is lifted up and begins his way back down the aisle. Carried by his parents and loved ones, he comes past me. There it is; it all feels over, and the sweet friendship of two young children is over. After he passes me, I just want to run after him, but I know I cannot. Now, I just want to leave. I can't be in this place anymore; I can feel him everywhere, yet he isn't here at all anymore.

The months following his funeral were challenging to live life normally. In the beginning, if I focused too hard on something, I would think of him, and if I tried not to focus on anything at all, I would find myself thinking of him even more. It has been almost a year since Max left this world, and I have felt

A True Friend, A True Inspiration (cont'd)

by Anonymous

his presence with me every day since
then, and I know that won't end anytime
soon.



Teagan Ayres

Sunrise

by Sophia Macias

The sun peers over the horizon waking the sleepy flowers. They tilt their petals towards the rays dancing shyly over the clouds. The trees whisper to each other, a stale wind gently rustling their branches.

I can hear the gentle buzz of cicadas singing an early morning hymn, but the grass is still in bed, tucked under a blanket of fog. Up by the road I watch for the occasional car, distant colors that blur into the backdrop.

The powerlines dip cradling dozy doves, and their coos drift quietly towards me. I feel the breeze weaving tangles through my hair and I watch as the sun slowly ascends into the sky. It's now twenty shades of pink bathing the world in a rosy haze.

The lights flicker on inside, reminding me. It's time for school.



Emma Engstrom

place of peace

by Emma Engstrom

breathing in the brisk tuesday air
the Sun peaking over the Mountains, taking her time, enjoying the moment
exhaling the stress of growing up
Leaves rustling as the Wind passes by; leaving some behind.
unattached. untethered. free
breathing in the bliss of the moment, making a point of noticing. remembering.
passing through the Meadow, Dragonflies escaping my footprints
where i've been
exhaling the past. the worries that have brought me here
the collage of moments that have all led to me, to now
breathing in the brisk tuesday air, feeling the hairs on my arm, the chills, the joys
feeling
thanking
a peaceful moment is forever a happy moment





My Bed

by Anonymous

Purposefully stacked layers of silky, thick, white covers
So flawlessly obstructing my skin from the blowing, cold air around me
A Saturday morning, generously granting me the right to open my eyes on my time.
The absence of an alarm, the sigh of relief
The source of all life peaking through the window without permission
Reflecting on my wall, the sliver of light that the curtain failed to protect.
I roll over and check the time, at peace to see that I can rest my eyes once again
The place where I don't have to contain my mind
So simple, yet so therapeutic
It's an underrated feeling.
It's an underrated place.



Tinted With Happiness

by Autumn Baldridge

The sunlight warmed the back of my neck. My hair glinted gold and flowed in the warm fall breeze. I glanced up at the trees where the yellowing leaves had just begun to drift down. The world looked suspended, like it had been put through a filter where everything was tinted with happiness. From a distance, I could hear the swim team practicing drills. The splashes in the water sounded inviting, like a cozy coffee shop that beckoned all the passersby in. Earlier, I had tested the water, gingerly dipping my foot in. I waited for the shock of coldness, but to my surprise, the temperature was perfect.

I had sat on that bench for what felt like an eternity. It may have been an hour or perhaps just twenty minutes. Either way, it was bliss. A bird chirped; its pleasant melody penetrated deep into my mind and brought me back to reality. I got up, my hand brushed gently against my leg, and I made my way towards the pool. The swimmers, who had just finished their drill, waved politely in my direction, and I returned the favor. I looked out onto the gravel road and started to walk home.



Emma Engstrom

The Twelve Fearless Crab Hunters

by Mary Carter Borman

I sat in the worn, faded wooden chair overlooking the peaceful ocean, taking in the beautiful view from the beach house porch. The sunset was a mixture of pink and orange with hints of darkness indicating night would soon fall. As I closed my eyes to try and enjoy the few minutes of peace I would get before my twelve cousins came outside, suddenly, the sliding glass door behind me opened and revealed a jumble of voices. I opened my eyes in annoyance as my seven-year-old cousin, Maggie, slid onto my lap, beginning to play with my sandy hair.

"I'm gonna do space braids on you," Maggie declared, yanking my sandy hair into two messy knots on the side of my head.

"Okay," I winced, pulling out my phone to check the time. I glanced at my phone and noticed it was nearly 8:30. Dark was just beginning to set over the white sanded beach, so I knew it was almost time to leave.

"Alrighty, y'all, who wants to go crab hunting?" Uncle Ed asked as he stepped onto the porch.

Almost instantly, eleven voices chimed, "Me!" I slid Maggie off my lap to dig the crab-hunting equipment out of the cluttered bin of everything beach toy you could think of. Maggie skipped behind me to come and help get the nets out of the messy bin.

"Mary Carter?" Maggie asked, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

"Yes, Maggs?" I answered, knowing what

question was about to be asked.

"Will you carry me when we go crab hunting?"

Yes, ma'am, I will," I said. Even though Maggie was nearly eight, she was terrified of the almost invisible crabs pinching her tiny feet.

I started down the boardwalk with Maggie on my back and nets in my hand when Augusta came sprinting up behind me and jumping down the eight steps on the beach.

"Watch my aerial!" Augusta exclaimed, doing a cartwheel in midair. A smile spread across her tan face as she landed gracefully in the sand.

"Yeah, watch mine too!" a high-pitched voice yelled behind me. I turned around to see Ramsey Kate skipping down to the beach to try to show off to all of us. I noticed my little sister trailing behind Ramsey, not as excited because she knew she couldn't do an aerial like the other two. I smiled, trying to tell her it was okay, but she glared back at me. I set Maggie down on the warm sand and handed out nets to the five girls and six boys, wondering what we would all catch tonight.

As I walked near the shore, a horrible stench filled the air. "Crab! Crab! Crab! Big crab!" Barrett yelled from near the ocean. I ran down to where he was to see the crab he had found. I stared in awe as Barrett shined the flashlight on a huge blue crab that was giving off the terrible stench I had smelled.

The Twelve Fearless Crab Hunters (cont'd)

by Mary Carter Borman

"Ew! It's dead," I gagged, hastily walking away from the crab. I turned back to look at the crab one last time and saw that it wasn't there. I shrugged, walking away, thinking the crab had probably just gotten washed back into the ocean.

I continued down the beach with Maggie on my back when I suddenly felt a sharp pain shoot through my leg. I shined my flashlight onto the smelly blue crab, clenching tightly onto my purple sweatpants.

"Help! Help! Help! Crab! Crab! Crab! On me!" I screamed, hoping someone would hear me. Uncle Ed sprinted towards me, grabbed the crab, and flung it into the

dark ocean. I sighed in relief, knowing I was safe from the monstrous crab.

"Mary Carter?" Maggie asked, sitting on the sand, her hands stretched to me.

"Yes, Maggie, I'll carry you back to the house," I answered, my heart racing as I picked her up and carried her back to the house. *We are the fearless crab hunters if we could survive getting pinched by a giant crab*, I thought to myself as I trudged through the sand back to the enormous white house glowing from the light inside, where the whole family would hear my story and laugh at it for years to come.



Un Poème Qui N'a Pas de Sens

by LK Watts

Pour l'œil français non averti
Ce poème a sans doute l'air joli
Mais en fait, il ne parle de rien.
Si vous comprenez, c'est bien.

Ah, la première strophe est trop simple.
Montons d'un cran, je recommence.
Vous voyez ce que j'ai fait avec le son schwa.
Vous dites: "Regardez-la, un vrai poète!" Ouais, c'est moi!

Je parle à tous les profs d'anglais quand je dis qu'il n'y a pas de sens caché.
Mais vous allez quand même "comprendre" ce charabia, alors arrêtez!

J'ai clairement expliqué
que je fais ça pour m'amuser.
Ces mots ne veulent rien dire.
Beurk, je ne vois pas de rimes.

Je pense que ce poème devrait se terminer ici.
À la personne qui lit ces absurdités: merci.
Il n'y a que toi, moi, et l'onglet Google translate de ton ordinateur.
Hé, attends, ce n'est pas juste, tricheur!

Twas the Night Before Mardi Gras

by Sophia Macias

Twas the night before Mardi Gras and all through the city
No one was asleep, there was a party on the Mississippi

Beads hung from the streetlights flashing their colors
A metallic string of pearls, thrown to one another

Children hollering from the curbs along the street
"Throw me something mister," hoping for treats

Just around the corner, the music had begun
trumpets and trombones a beat that swung

As the clock struck midnight the party continued on
For Mardi Gras arrived with no sign of dawn

In the bayou nearby where the alligators wade
Their eyes glowed yellow watching the parade

They trudged through the shadows of the murky swamp
Listening to the city dance, they found a rhythm to stomp

The alligators sloshed and splashed spinning around
Flicking their tails, dancing to their own sound

So twas the night before Mardi Gras where city and bayou meet
Alligators danced in the swamp moving to the beat

A fusion of cultures, a celebration so vast
In the heart of Louisiana where traditions forever last



Happy Places

by Jayden Hiles

Happy place is where you are your best self
Happy place is reading by a bookshelf
Happy place is Thanksgiving with the fam
Happy place is stuffing your face with ham

Solving math problems on a clean whiteboard
Taking risks, exploring the unexplored

Happy place is hugging a furry friend
Happy place is chilling on a weekend
Happy place is sand in the long jump pit
Happy place is in your bedroom, sunlit

Listening to far-distant thunderstorms
Listening to some music in your dorm

Happy places are all of these great things
Just find yours and all the joy it can bring



Dr. Karin deGravelles



Dr. Karin deGravelles

Big Sky Country: Winters

by Avery Kyle

As I wake up, stretch my legs
Slip on my slippers
And walk into the kitchen
My dad hands me a fresh cup of coffee
I look out the window
to see a fresh blanket of snow

My family gathers in the living room
Listens to the snow report
I change into my fluffy snow clothes
Transforming myself into a blob
Braid my hair into two pigtails
And then sit down to eat a quick breakfast

“LOAD UP”
My dad yells
I step behind the wheel
And pull the truck out the garage
We trudge up the mountain carefully
Snow tires and spikes helping us make the drive
I turn by the “Big Mountain” sign
And find parking

I race up the steps
Click my skis on
And skate into the singles line
my dad just behind me
We’re seated on the same chair

As we reach the summit point
And unload the chairlift
I call to my dad
“RACE YOU DOWN”
The icy air hits the slivers of my skin exposed
The world begins to feel like bliss
Adrenaline rushes through me
Stress begins to blur away

After a few hours
My family is all spent
We load the truck back up

Big Sky Country: Winters (cont'd)

by Avery Kyle

And head down the mountain
All collectively deciding
We are in need of some huckleberry wings
We head into the Bulldog Saloon and enjoy

Once we're home
We all take showers
Put on our comfy pjs
And watch movies together
It's a Charlie Brown Christmas





Rendezvous

by Darren Weng

"Hey, Bob. We're almost fully grown!"

"We're? Stop hogging the stem, Daniella," I remark. The world was straightening out. I could feel it as well.

All my life, I've known my family: Jackson, Aiden, Aahan, and Daniella, yet I've never known where I am, but I know I exist. Every day, dark, peaceful, and the feeling of, well, something flowing upwards toward me. Jackson tells me it makes me grow, but I can't trust him. None of us has seen the outside world; maybe someday we will.

"Bob, don't you feel like we've been here forever?" said Aahan.

"Of course, and I bet you know why that is, too."

"Actually, time should be moving faster due to time dilation from Ansteip's theory of relativity..." Aahan always goes on these rambles. I don't even think Ansteip is a real guy.

Humans are always rustling past us; when this happens, it feels like we are wobbling randomly. Aahan has termed this dancing.

"When will we be able to harvest these poppy seeds to send to China?" said a man. *Poppy seeds? Was he talking about us?*

The voices started to move away and became incomprehensible. "Don't you love those people?" asked Aahan.

"Why would I?" I replied.

"Because they were talking about

Newton's third law of gravity creating an equal and opposite reaction the other day."

"Ok, bud, just shut up."

"What were they talking about this time, though, Aahan?" asked Jackson.

"Something about China."

"What's China?" asked Aiden.

"From what I've heard, it's this vibrant wonderland that these guys really like," Aahan said.

I wish I could see what everyone else on the outside sees. I've been entrapped for ages.

Finally, the sense of warmth was replaced with the frigidness of the air. The trilling of the crickets and the constant hoots were the only things keeping us company. Sleep, as the humans called it, was not an option for me. Time could not pass quickly. "Who's using the stem first tomorrow?" asked Daniella.

"Me!" we all said.

"We should let Bob use the stem first tomorrow. He looks like the most immature of us all," said Daniella.

Suddenly, I could feel a source of heat. "The British told us these seeds need to be processed and sent immediately," said a voice outside.

"But these poppy seed buds aren't even that developed," said a second voice.

Rendezvous (cont'd)

by Darren Weng

"I don't care. Do you want to make money or not?"

"I guess so. I gotta feed my family somehow. Here, hold the lantern."

Immediately, it felt like we were flying.

"Woah, woah, woah," said Aahan.

"What in the world is happening?" I asked.

"Here, hold the basket," said the man outside.

The world quivered with an unrestrained fury. A tempest of tremors sent shockwaves through every part of my being, loosening me from the restraints of the bud. As I plummeted, I was blinded by the orange light emitting from something the man was holding: a lantern? I landed on something hard, and along fell the rest of my screaming family. Recovering from the fall and flashbang, I finally glanced up. Darkness. Was this what the outside world was like? "Wow. All this just for the outside world to be the same," I said, sighing.

"Wait, we haven't seen anything else yet," said Aahan.

A brown face with indistinguishable features appeared over the opening of the basket. "Seems like that's about it for this poppy bud. On to the next one."

Numerous other seeds rained down on me. The barrage of seeds, screaming together as they pelted me from above, seemed relentless. I was separated from the rest of my family, and all I could hear was the cries of despair from lost family

members. All of my cries for my family were drowned out by the uproar.

After being flattened by all the seeds above me for who knows how long, the man's voice rose above them all, "In the morning, lay out these seeds to dry in the sun."

Wait, what? Whatever drying is, it can't possibly be good. The other seeds also shared my thoughts. "What is happening to us?"

"Let me go back to my bud."

"We're done for!"

And so I remained at the bottom of the basket with nothing to do. I don't know how much time has passed. I did not want to think. I just waited for morning to come and the new experiences awaiting me. I hoped my family was not being crushed by the other seeds.

When the sun rose, a man came to disperse us onto a wooden table. The world tilted sideways, and I rolled out of the basket and looked up. The sky was beautiful, a gradient of pink and orange hues casting warmth onto me. Wispy clouds floated over me. I glanced to my side, and all I could see was a sea of black, taking in the beauty of the outside world. I watched as the sun moved across the sky until it was no longer visible, and the sky turned black. Each time the sun did this, the weaker I felt. The more helpless I felt, the less I could talk. Was this what drying was?

The poppy seeds next to me started to pipe down. The world's silence was

Rendezvous (cont'd)

by Darren Weng

quite beautiful, with only the songs of birds to greet us. I began to lose track of the sun's movement. Had it been three rotations? Seven rotations? I don't remember. The scenery above me constantly changed, but it was different this time. The brown man appeared again at the face of the table and turned around. "These seeds have stayed in the sun long enough. We can send these to China now."

"Where's John at again?" asked the man behind him.

"Just collect the other seeds from the other tables and bring them to the shore. John will probably be there to collect them," said the man.

A hand started to grab the seeds at my table. There were no screams or cries for help. All the other seeds were too weak to squeak out any noise, and so was I. We were chucked into a big brown sack. The darkness enveloped me yet again, but I have grown accustomed to being in the dark. "Put these in the cart and tell Patel to bring these bags to John," said the man.

"Alright," said the other man.

The sack was lifted, and we were tossed onto a solid platform, making a muffled thud. Inside the bag, seeds rustled about. "Hey Patel! You can bring these to John now!" shouted the man.

"Alright!" I could hear the brisk patter of footsteps nearing the cart. "Go, go, go," said Patel, breathless.

"Neigh," complained something.

The sack immediately jolted back, and I fell backward. Right in front of me was Aahan. We stared at each other, unable to communicate. *Are you doing fine? I bet you're trying to communicate with me in your head, or maybe you're still thinking of really geeky stuff.* We stayed staring because we couldn't move, but occasional bumps on the road separated us.

After some time, I could hear the squawking of a bird. The wind whistled against the trees, and the waves brushed against the shore. "Ah, a seagull. I can finally get paid by John," said Patel. "Hurry up, you damn horse. I'm trying to get home after this."

Eventually, the cart came to a halt. I could smell the strong salt scent from inside the sack. "Hey, John! I have your package," said Patel.

"About time, man. You guys were almost late with your package. Don't let this happen again," said John. "Here's your money, though."

"Thanks," said Patel. I could feel another thump on the cart. Patel must be getting a fair share of money for this.

"Patel, help me bring these bags of poppy seeds onto my ship," said John.

"Oh, come on. Get your crew to do this."

"No, hurry up, or I'm taking the money."

The two men made quick work of the bags. We were lifted up and loaded on the ship. One by one, other sacks of

Rendezvous (cont'd)

by Darren Weng

poppy seeds were dropped onto the ship. The rocking of the boat against the waves was comforting. It reminded me of the wind blowing against my poppy bud. "Put these bags in the storage under the ship. We dried them for a long time. Can't have them getting wet again from your trip to Guangzhou," said Patel.

"Yeah, I know. I know. You've told me this so many times. Just leave already," said John.

"Okay. Smooth sailing."

John relocated us to the bottom of the ship. The smell of wet wood was overpowering. "Set sail!" John shouted. The boat lurched forward, its sails billowing like wings caught in the wind. I started to count every time the boat rocked back and forth. *One, two, three, four...*

Eventually, I lost count. Was I at ten thousand million? Aahan taught me to count to one million, but we did not get past there. The ship was rocking violently now. The waves slapped the port and starboard, and the pitter-patter of rain was intense. "Lower the sails! Men, keep rowing!" yelled John. "Don't give up! Keep going! We can't die here. Think about the money!"

"Aye, aye, captain!"

"I'll go check on the cargo under the deck," said John.

John opened the sack I was in. Instead of a brown face, his face was white. I saw him pick up a poppy seed. *Is that Aahan? No, no, no. It can't be.* John squeezed the seed, and the dust rained on me. *Why*

did it have to be Aahan? Why couldn't it be a random seed that I don't know? Oh my. Don't let me be next, please.

"These look dry enough," said John. He closed the sack. His sloshing footsteps on the wet wood faded as he returned to the deck. *Ten thousand million one, ten thousand million two...*

"Land ho!" said John from the deck.

"Captain, that's Liu's men over there."

"Good callout," said John. "Adjust the sails!"

The anchor splashed into the water. "Hey, Liu! I have the goods," said John.

"I have the money from last time!" shouted a distant voice. "Toss the bags down, and I'll give you the money!"

Each crew member grabbed a poppy seed bag and threw it on shore. Thump. Thump. Thump. "Thank you. I'll distribute these. Put the ship ladders down," said Liu.

"Liu. Do we take our bags now?" asked one of his men.

"Yeah, we gotta sell these fast," said another man.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, but you guys better come back with all the money," said Liu.

The bags around me were picked up with a woosh of air that swept the side of my bag. Finally, my bag was picked up. "Alright, meet back here in a month," said Liu.

Rendezvous (cont'd)

by Darren Weng

"Hey, you're going to Tianhe to distribute, right?" asked the man holding my bag.

"Yep. Still going there."

"Can you get me some snacks when you're done? I'll get you some bread. I heard it was good in Haizhu."

"Sounds good."

The delivery man threw the sack onto a cart. I've grown accustomed to being thrown around at this point. I heard another horse neigh, and the journey continued.

Not much happened during this part of the trip. I stayed in the sack the entire time. No seeds were crushed to dust in front of my face, and no violent storms brewed up. It felt peaceful rolling around in a sack on a cart. I missed the voices of the other seeds, though. I zoned off, thinking about...nothing.

At last, the cart stopped. Someone lifted up the sack I was in and rolled it. Whap. Whap, after every drop. "Come on now, Qiu. I told you not to move those things down the stairs. The last time you did this, all the seeds burst out of the sack," said the delivery man.

"Don't worry about it," said Qiu in a slurred voice. "Here's your money for the delivery."

"Thanks, I'll go deliver the other sacks." I could hear the wheels of the cart rolling away.

"Finally, some more opium. I've needed this," said Qiu. "Hey! Ming! Help me bring

this in!"

"Haiya. Stop smoking, man," said Ming, creaking open a metallic door.

After the sack was brought in, I could smell a heavy scent of smoke. "I'll start crushing the seeds. You gotta try it this time," said Qiu. *Wait. I don't wanna die already. Stop it.*

"Fine. Fine. All my friends are smoking opium anyway," said Ming.

The sack opened, and I saw a hand reaching for us. We were lifted and put in a stone bowl. I saw a thick stone object coming down as I looked up. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

My body shattered into a million pieces. I felt more and more confused with each hit. *Wait what? I'm not dead? I can still see and think, but I can feel every separate part of my body. Does that mean Aahan isn't dead, either?*

"Grab me the paper," said Qiu. Ming handed Qiu a white substance. *What are they gonna use that paper for?*

"Here, roll it up like this," said Qiu. He grabbed randomly at the crushed poppy seeds and caught most of me. "Spread out the seeds like this." My body was in many different places, back in the bowl and dispersed on the paper. "Then, you have to roll the paper like this. To seal the wrap, put some water on it and then leave it to dry in the sun."

Oh, come on, more drying? I've had enough of this misery. Through the end of the roll, I peered out. We moved

Rendezvous (cont'd)

by Darren Weng

toward the metal door, and the sunlight hit me. *What a lovely sight after being in that sack for months.* Qiu walked up the stairs to the surface, and I saw the houses. There were vibrant reds and golds and the carvings of symbols that made no sense to me. He laid the roll on the ground and went back inside. I faced a tall, green plant dancing in the breeze. *That must have been what my family and I looked like together.*

Qiu occasionally came and placed more rolls next to me. Finally, Ming came to pick up my roll. "Hey, Qiu! Can I use this one?"

"Sure. Let me start the hearth. Come back inside."

A fire? I instantly felt the heat.

"Just set one side on fire," said Qiu. I stared directly at the flames. Occasional embers flew out. The closer I got to the fire, the hotter it got. *Hot. Hot. Hot. Very hot. Hot. Ow. Ow. Ow.* My entire body was on fire. Thousands of thorns were pricking at me, and I felt lighter and lighter. *Is this what dying feels like?* I started ascending into the air. *Am I going to heaven?*

I floated out the half-cracked window. I kept going higher. The sky was a serene blue with thick, puffy clouds, and the roofs looked like tiny specks of red reflecting the sunlight. I looked down but couldn't see my body. More and more gasses of seeds floated out of the window and joined me in the ascent into the skies. Gradually, Jackson, Aiden, and Daniella appeared in the skies. *How many rolls are they lighting on fire right now? Are they sharing it with all their friends or something?* Finally, I saw Aahan. *He was alive, after all.* I tried signaling to him that it was me. I tried staring and speaking to him, but I couldn't. I was a gas. *We started in a bud and ended in the skies.*

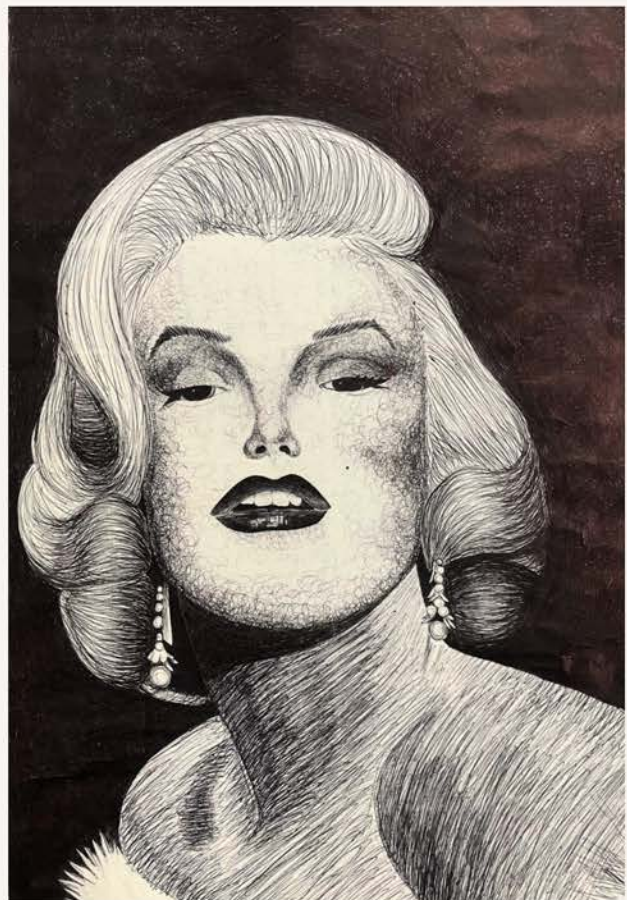
Together, we floated and floated until we couldn't float anymore, eventually succumbing to the sun's beam. I became one with the sun. The feeling of warmth embraced me. *Was this my purpose? To float into the heavens? To feed human desires? What is going to happen to the rest of my family? Will Aahan find me somehow? I'm not sure what will happen after this part.* Perhaps the cycle will restart.



Running Out Of Time by Finn Gray



Right Where You Left Me by Airi Homma



Marilyn by Teagan Ayres

Two-Sentence Horror Story

by Jayden Hiles

The master bedroom in our new house used to be the kids' room, evident by what I thought were the remains of glow-in-the-dark stars and dots stuck on the ceiling. It was all fun and games until I woke up one night to those faint yellowish-green spots blinking back at me.



Megan Gibson



The Figure

by Ryan Richard

I leaned against the side door of my car, and I was so tired that at that point, I didn't even care that the car was really dusty and my shirt would get dirty. I watched the numbers rapidly change on the display screen of the gas pump as I held the nozzle. This gas station's tank must have been very close to empty, as the numbers were going up way slower than the gas station by my house, which they filled regularly. I could feel the vibrations of gasoline flowing through the hose, although subtle and low-pressured. I frequently looked around, weary of my surroundings. I didn't want to become a victim of someone or something jumping out of the woods behind the convenience store wanting to take my money, car, or worse.

I felt the slight jolt of the nozzle click, indicating that my tank was finally full. I put the nozzle back and twisted the tank cap until it clicked and locked. I turned to the pump's display, waiting for the receipt so I could go home.

"Clerk has receipt," it read.

This was the last thing I felt like doing this late at night. I sighed and started walking towards the convenience store adjacent to the pumps, figuring that I could go for some gum and a drink while I was at it anyway.

The parking lot was empty except for the old, beat-up sedan that probably belonged to the clerk. It was pretty dark, but the yellow lights at the station did enough for me to see where I was going. I walked up to the door, grabbed the handle, and pulled the cold piece of metal towards me. The bell above the door made a chime as I opened the door,

and I walked through the door frame. The first thing I noticed was that the clerk didn't say anything when I walked in, and I didn't really notice anyone behind the counter because I quickly turned to my left to find where the candy was. I thought it was a little odd, but I figured that he must have been as tired as I was this late at night. I grabbed some gum and got a cold Coke out of the drink cooler.

I began to turn around to go to the desk to pay, but once I caught a glimpse of the area I stopped. There was a man, it looked like, standing behind the desk, in all-black clothes and a dark mask on. He was facing the window that looked out to the pumps, but he was looking down at the floor. A shiver ran through me, starting in my chest and reverberating all throughout my limbs, giving me goosebumps. I didn't move, expecting to see him move first so I could react accordingly. I knew he had to have already seen me walk into the store, so I thought I was doomed for sure, whoever this was.

Staying as still as possible, I looked around, trying to evaluate what exactly was going on. I looked at the floor just to the right of where the front desk ends, and I noticed some old boots sticking out from behind the desk. The soles were visible, but they were not touching the ground like they would be if someone was wearing them and standing up. They were on their side, as if someone was wearing them but was lying on the floor on their back.

The dark, masked man crouched down behind the desk, and I noticed the edge of the boots that I could see had

The Figure (cont'd)

by Ryan Richard

disappeared behind the desk as well. I took my chance and made a run for it, quickly making a dash for the door, holding on to my pack of gum and a cold Coke. As I was rushing out the door, I heard a horrible, ear-piercing scream come from behind me, encouraging me to run even faster to my car. I ran across the dimly lit parking lot and quickly opened the car door. I fumbled the pack of gum and dropped it on the concrete but got into the car and slammed the door shut anyway.

"Screw this," I said out loud. Just as I went to put my key into the ignition, I noticed in my rearview mirror that the lights inside the store started to flicker vigorously behind me. Nervous and terrified, I missed the ignition the first time as I fumbled the keys. Luckily I was successful the second time. I turned the key, started the car, and pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The tires made a loud screech as I gunned it out of that parking lot onto the empty road.

Once I got far enough away from the station, I started to slow down. I was definitely awake now. The tiredness that I had when I pulled into the parking lot of the station was gone. I was full of adrenaline. My heart felt like it was beating out of my chest. The quiet drive back helped calm me down, though.

I came to a red light about five minutes down the road and I stopped. I put the car in park, as there was no one else on the road. I took a second to breathe. I closed my eyes for a little bit and took some deep breaths.

With my eyes still closed, I noticed that the light that was able to come through

my eyelids had turned brighter, and I instantly opened them, thinking the traffic light had turned green. The light was yellow and super bright, and it was moving around in front of my face.

"Sir, are you awake?" I heard a voice ask me.

"Hun, what? Where am I?" I responded with a groan. I looked around and realized that I was back in my car next to the pump at the same gas station.

"Sir, you have been parked at this gas pump all night and the clerk called us to get you moved. You're taking up customer space," he said.

I soon realized that he was a cop. I was amazed that I had actually fallen asleep in my car at this gas station. Just a second ago, I was running for my life. Now, it was early morning, and there were people pumping their gas like normal, on their way to work.

Had I really been sleeping in my car this whole time? I thought. If so, thank god it was just a bad dream.

"Oh, ok. Yes sir, I'll go now. I just need a second to wake up," I said.

"Alright, then. Next time try not to drive if you're that exhausted," he said.

"Yes sir," I responded. He walked away and went back to his cop car. I sat and looked around for a second, trying to gather my thoughts and figure out what happened. Then I remembered there was the mysterious man, the dark parking lot, the tires screeching, the screams. Recalling that it was probably

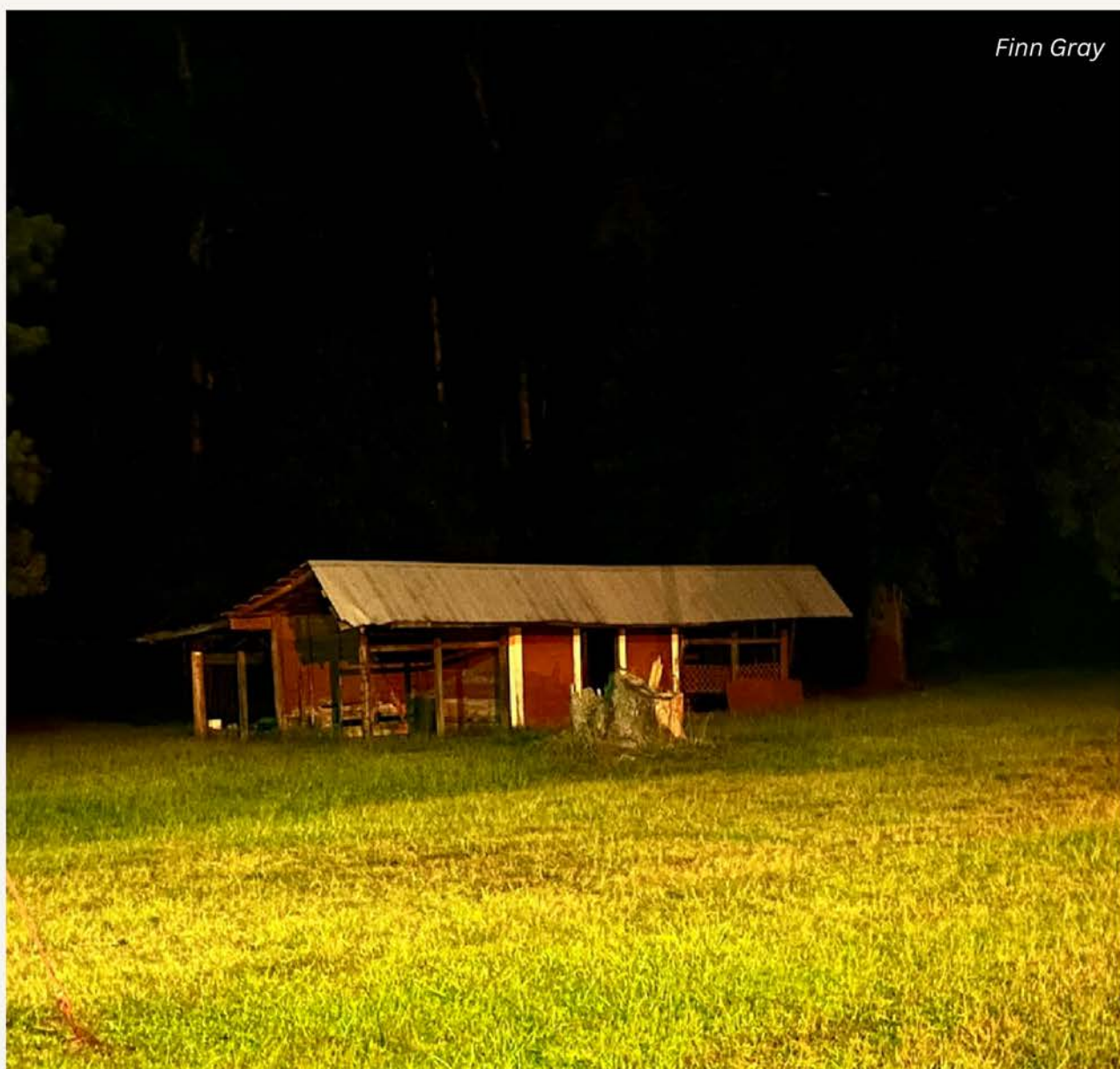
The Figure (cont'd)

by Ryan Richard

a dream, I brushed it off. I refocused and turned the key in my ignition and started the car. I adjusted my mirrors, and right as I was about to leave I checked my rearview mirror. The dark, masked man

was standing in the window of the convenience store.

"Oh, heck no!" I stepped on the gas and got out of there as fast as I could



Finn Gray



Mr. Patrick Doring



Nick Smallwood

Salt Water

by Mrs. Melissa Easley

Maw Maw Colleen doesn't have much time left. No more pool days, beach days, bay days. My favorite neon green inner tube lays flat and molded with everything else in her shed. I find a cheap wooden easel in the attic, and every Thursday, I ask her to choose a subject, any subject, and I paint. The brush strokes occupy our growing silence, and she doesn't feel obligated to speak. She has congestive heart failure, but she's dying from depression.

"The beach, Marie," she says. She spent as much of her life at the beach as she could, often bringing me and Alice along, and some of my warmest memories are there with her. Long walks splashing in the surf and collecting shells and driftwood. But some of my coldest memories are there with her, too. I set up my color palettes starting with a large amount of white, blue, and green and small amounts of black, brown, red, and yellow. I use white to lighten the blues and greens and to make gray, tan, pink, and orange. I divide the space between sand and sky and gulf.

I start at the bottom of the canvas, adding smooth layers of white and gray sand. She's so quiet, I almost forget she's there in bed, propped up by a medical pillow. Because she won't eat, there is so little between her front and her back now. She's all one line. When I was a child, she'd hide Pecan Swirls and Jimmy Dean sausage biscuits, squirreling them away in the pantry behind innocuous cans of black beans and Vienna sausages, worried I'd eat the whole box. I imagine her disappearing body filled with soft, buttery bread.

I excuse myself to put on breakfast while

waiting for the sand to dry a little before painting the Gulf. The hall is filled with framed family photographs. One of them is a fireplace-sized painting of a young Alice on the beach. Her tight, blonde curls blow in a Gulf breeze, and she holds a conch shell in her hand. She admires the shell in ways I never would have when I was that young. I would have been more likely to throw the shell and see if it broke.

Back at the easel, I pick up a new brush, and get ready to paint the water I know so well. I mix blue and green with white to make different tints, choosing colors from the clearest days because I know Maw Maw hates ugly. But the Gulf is not always clear and blue. I love when storms dredge up dirt and sediment and turn the water muddy. Sometimes, on those clear days, everything is too beautiful. Muddy can be beautiful, too. I don't dream of leaving these bayous like most of my family does. But this painting isn't for me, and I know what she thinks is beautiful. I curve my brush, and blues and greens of varying intensity wave from the canvas.

"Pretty." She startles me.

"Like I remember from our trips."

"I remember." The smell of bacon drifts to Maw Maw's bedroom. "Makes me want a BLT. Warm toast and bacon, cold crisp lettuce, a thick, juicy slice of tomato, and a lot of mayo," she says. "A lot of mayo."

"I'll go fix you one."

"No, Marie." She points at the canvas.

Salt Water (cont'd)

by Mrs. Melissa Easley

"Cloudy day. Cloudy with gray skies over the water."

"Ugly weather?" She really must be dying.

I pick up a new brush and split the remaining white paint into two piles. Then, I dab my brush into the black paint and combine black and white. I mix until I get the gray I'm looking for. The one that smells like rain and salt. If I could conjure it, the smell of oxygen and nitrogen combining in the clouds might move my Maw Maw to eat, to walk, to live. I brush the paint in wide swirls, but when I finish, the paint is just paint, and the Gulf feels far away.

The sand is dry, so I add little details on the beach: driftwood, scallop shells, and a sand dollar. "Remember how I used to obsess over sand dollars? If Alice found an unbroken one first...remember what you said? I was the ugliest little girl."

"You broke hers."

"I was six." There's something I've always wanted to say to her, so I do. "You loved her more than me."

She could fade away at any moment, a pointillist portrait in reverse. She grabs my wrist, and says, "I did."

Her bedside dresser is wooden with a glass top and curved drawers. On its surface sits a gold-leaf picture frame protecting a photograph of her parents and a giant sand dollar in a gold-rimmed glass. The photograph looks so old because it is. Her mother grins, her youthful face beaming out of curled locks of hair. Her father is tall and thin like he'd remain until his eighties when his belly popped out. They've just married. Their faded bodies clutch each other. I open the glass box with the sand dollar inside. I sniff, and it smells thick and chalky like homemade paper. I should take the box and put it on my dresser. I could keep it there, a memorial urn. Or maybe I'll throw it and see if it breaks.



Luke Stelly



The Flame, The Rose

by Wylie Schexnayder

She saw him. She knew he was real. There was no doubt in her mind. Everyone else was wrong. They didn't know him like she did. They wanted her to believe she was crazy, that she couldn't be trusted with herself and her own mind.

It was a grotesque scene. The aftermath was devastating. The fire spread. It licked the walls, the old embellished paper slowly disappeared into ash and dust.

The house was intricate. Its rooms were filled with antiques, the family who lived there always enjoyed the vintage look of their large home. The old cedar wood was rare. The house was a maze of flawless beauty, showing the richness of memories spent there. The Montgomery estate was the envy of all those who looked upon it, with a large labyrinth made of dark green shrubs and thornless roses.

Rose petals drifted to the ground. Time became the consistency of honey. The grandfather's clocks slowed and eventually ceased to move at all. As the petals hit the ground, they aged and quickly became stiff, frozen in the same shape forever.

She was out in the garden. Her soft, pale hands brushed over the fragile flowers. Her breath could be seen billowing out of her mouth in the icy weather. She made a point to, every day, go to her garden and care for what she thought was the only thing she could care for completely. She was an outcast. Her quietness was mistaken for arrogance, and her shyness for egotism. She never thought much of her lack of company;

she drifted through time without so much as a word, but her mind was always in motion. Things moved faster there. She imagined people sometimes. She imagined their hearts speeding up, and up, and up, not to be stopped until they burst and their bodies crumpled to the ground. She gasped as she looked at a growing red dot of blood on her hand. She drew her hand back from the long, sharp thorn. There was a foreboding in the air. Something was off, something was wrong, something or someone would die. She heard a scream from the house. As she turned to the house, she saw a plume of dark smoke from an open window. The walls were licked by the flames, and the smell of burning cedar wood was filling the air. She stood completely still, in horror, as she watched the roof crash down on her unexpected family. Between then and the next hour, the house was smoldering on the ground, and the officials had come, finding her in shock, watching from the rose garden.

People spoke after that. Not to her, but they would speak about her. They gossiped about Elizabeth and how heartbroken she must be. How her family was all she had, and without them, she was truly and inevitably alone. Of course, they would say this and make no effort to console her restless thoughts.

Years passed. She never moved. A new house was built in place of the Montgomery estate, and she stayed there, never leaving. This house that she lived in became a cage that she made around herself. Art was her consolation. After her family passed,

The Flame, The Rose (cont'd)

by Wylie Schexnayder

she painted her house black; she did not stop at the windows; she painted over them. Once she was done with that, she would paint the walls on the inside. These, however, were different. Paintings of her family filled the walls of her house. Their faces were blank, and their features were blurred, all except for hers. People still spoke of her, but not in the present tense. No one knew of her whereabouts if she ever left the house, or if she died in that house alone.

She, however, was not alone. She danced with her ghosts. Her past self would visit her, the girl she was before the incident, for she had to grow up quickly after that.

She danced with her family, her brothers and sisters, and parents in her dark and elegant home. She danced with her lover, but he was no ghost. He would visit her often, sometimes just to hand her a singular rose. She grew old, and with him, she died as happily as she could considering her circumstances. Her paintings and collection of dark dried roses were only ever found when her house was broken into years later, with no corpse in sight, only rose petals on the ground. They looked stiff, frozen in time; honey dripped along the gears of grandfather clocks.



Joey Roth

Episcopal-Themed Crossword

by Nate McLean

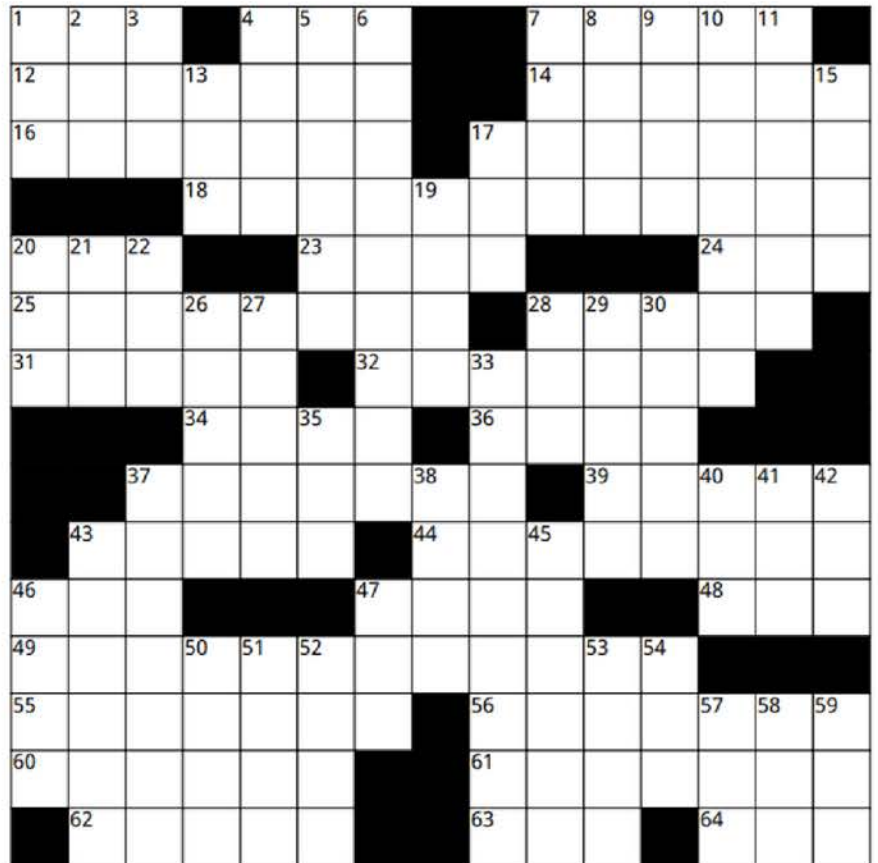
ACROSS

- 1 Wedding words
4 Improve one's jawline, perhaps
7 A macaroni necklace is a popular one
12 "Indeed!"
14 Triumphant exclamation
16 Feature of "February" and "Sriracha"
17 Genuine
18 *Academic club with an annual Episcopal tournament
20 In vogue
23 June 6, 1944
24 Simple card game
25 *Academic club with an annual Episcopal tournament
28 Where sacrifices must be made?
31 Moses' Mount
32 Vivid language
34 *Half of high school?
36 *Half of high school?
37 Chess club president Trey
39 Outlook message
43 Despises
44 *Informative usually published every 7 days
46 "Ouch"
47 Off-Broadway award

- 48 Word after "ginger" or "pale"
49 *Informative usually published every 7 days
55 Did it again
56 Modernist painter Manet
60 Capital of Kazakhstan
61 Rages
62 Camping shelters
63 Gp. dismissed first during Morning Announcements
64 First lady?

DOWN

- 1 Mensa ratings
2 Possible result of a failed Breathalyzer test: Abbr.
3 OPEC concern
4 List of dishes
5 Oaxaca, por ejemplo
6 Pitbull's nickname, with "Mr."
7 ___ Pet
8 Smallest of the litter
9 St. Louis landmark
10 Express highway
11 Sauce often paired with fried fish
13 President pro
15 Listen
17 Timid



- 19 ___ Sunday
20 Command centers: Abbr.
21 Yes, in Paris
22 Element with symbol Sn
26 Restaurant guidebook
27 Ecosystem
28 Turkish title
29 "Drove my Chevy to the ___" (American Pie lyric)
30 "Bet"
33 Anxiety, informally
35 Dumbbell meas.
37 New Orleans pirate Jean
38 July birthstone
40 Alias letters
41 Unwell
42 Caustic soda

- 43 Genuine
45 Gardening tool
46 Gumbo vegetable
47 "___ Town Road" (Lil Nas X song)
50 Nana
51 Clue (at)
52 Lipton products
53 Sorrows
54 Shady, in modern slang
57 What "r" means in many text messages
58 Gun, as an engine
59 Ike's initials



Solutions

