

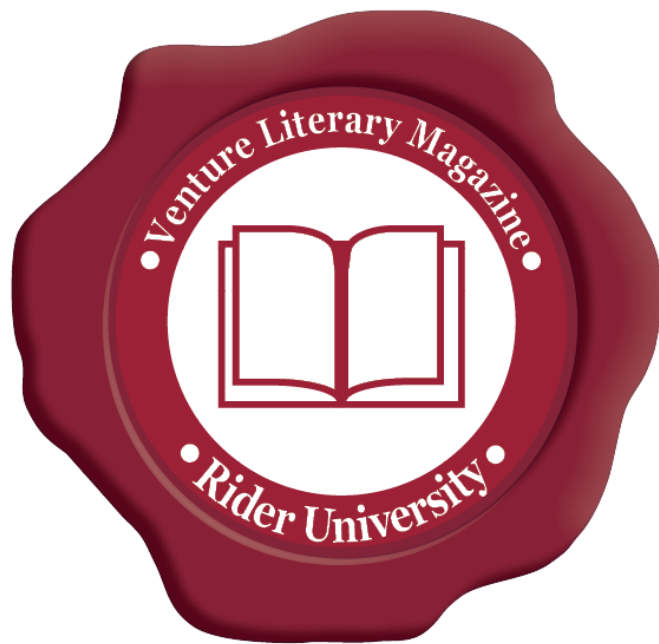
# VENTURE

2025



# Venture Literary Magazine: Reflections

Spring 2025



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# Venture

*Venture* is an the online literary journal of Rider University. After relaunching *Venture* as an online literary journal in 2024 we have continued to expand our platform and showcase a range of writers and artists. We have built a vibrant literary community where all are welcome to share the opinions and create connections.

For more information, email us at [venture@rider.edu](mailto:venture@rider.edu) or visit our new website, [venturemagazine.org](http://venturemagazine.org)

## Our Mission Statement:

*Venture* is Rider University's literary magazine. Our journal publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that shares and represents the diverse perspectives of the Rider community. *Venture* fosters a creative space where individuals are able to flourish and use their own perspectives to connect with other as well as their readers. Through stories, poems, and art the students and staff of Rider are able to showcase their talent, share personal experience, and invite readers into new worlds.

# A Letter From The Editor:

After we published last year's issue I was very nervous about the fact that the majority of our members who helped relaunch the magazine would be graduating this year. We were very lucky in being able to recruit many people who are excited to expand *Venture's* horizons. I am so incredibly grateful for our newer members' enthusiasm and dedication in publishing our Spring 2025 issue. I especially want to thank Eli Norton, our new Web Editor, who has worked so hard to make this issue come to life on our website. I also want to thank Aiya Rabah, who is succeeding me as Editor in Chief; she has put so much effort into promoting *Venture* to anyone and everyone. I know that *Venture* will be in good hands with both Aiya and Eli at the helm next year.

The theme for this year's issue was Reflections, which is a bit broad, but it produced some amazing works. "Generational Wealth" By Emily Castro Eugenio and "November 6, 2024" by Jay Roberson reflect on bigger issues in the world without losing a sense of hope, which I admire greatly. I also quite enjoyed Zie Muller's untitled nonfiction piece which is a well written exploration of gender identity that uses the reflection theme in interesting ways. There are so many more thoughtful and amazing works found in the rest of our Spring 2025 issue that I hope you will enjoy just as much as the editors and myself have.

It truly has been such an honor and a privilege to be the Editor in Chief and I hope that *Venture* only continues to grow in the future.

Maura Corman, Editor-in-Chief of *Venture*

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# Fiction



Welcome to the fiction section of *Venture*. Like the theme of our 2025 edition, the pieces we selected show what true reflection means: to contemplate not only the world around you, but the deepest corners of yourself. Through messy thoughts, dangerous rooms, and the road-not-taken, these stories show the moments of life you will be left thinking about for years to come.

“Dragonslayer: Remnants of a Jesus Portrait” by Nick Medal ©2025

# A Flame In Your Heart

*Finn Alexander*

Open server.

[INITIALIZING SYSTEM...]

Good Lord, if this process didn't take so long, –

[OPENING SERVER 12A — 5992 RAMBLE GREEN TRAIL — UNCERTAINTY, TX]

[PASSWORD: \*\*\*\*\*]

Please be up there, please be up there...

[ Γ — — — — — CONNECTION ESTABLISHED — — — — — Δ ]

Delta?

Delta, can you hear me?

It's Gamma.

*Hello?*

Delta?

Delta! Do you read me?

This is Gamma, contacting you through the-

Delta! I can-

Thank goodness!

That's sure as hell true.

*This is Delta, I-*

*Hey, I can hear you!*

*Hahaha! Oh god,*

*what a day already.*

*Jesus, don't tell me I've been trouble for  
you down there.*

No, not you, more the pile of crap you're piloting.  
Been giving me bad reads all morning, at one point  
I thought you'd crashed, but no, you're there  
all the same.

*It'd take more than some space rocks to take  
me out, that's for damn sure.*

So, what do you see out there?

*Well, just a lot of stars, so far. It'll be a  
while before my window turns enough that I  
can see Earth.*

*Yeah?*

Well, that's good, though. It's more exciting to  
have a grand reveal, I think.

*You're probably right. You usually are.  
You-*

Oh, come on now, that's not true.

Do you remember how many tries it took me to  
get this thing into planning?

*Ooooooh...  
Yeah, I remember Dunman wasn't too happy  
with our scheme to begin with, but-  
Wait, hey, that wasn't you being wrong, that  
was just-*

Mmhmm.

I know, I know, but I sure felt wrong.

Dr. Dunman's not somebody you can compel with  
bad science, even if you go way back.

*You've gotta quit giving yourself a hard  
time. I'm up here, am I not?*

You are.

Yes, you are.

And I'm stuck down here...

*No...*

Keeping you safe, I suppose.

You're the important thing, though.

When I thought you'd crashed, I...

I couldn't handle myself. You...

Well, you shouldn't've seen me.

Delta, what's your current rotation?

What?

What are you talking about?

Are you seriously seeing-

Delta! Come in! What's happening out there?

Delta—

Oh Good Lord, you've gotta stop trying to scare me. That was horrible.

You could've phrased better. How do you mean, "I can see me out there?"

*You're more making the 'small step for man' on this one than me.*

*You what?*

*Oh.*

*195 degrees.*

*It's still just stars out here. Maybe that's the moon coming into my window, I can't really tell. It's dark enough that I can see me out there, out in the darkness just outside the ship.*

*Oh no. Oh god no. Holy shit! It saw me! It's coming after me!*

*Hahahahahahahahaha.*

*Gotcha...*

*Well, to be fair, you're the one who got my metaphor mixed.*

*I mean, when I look out the window, there's that faint reflection of my suit in the glass. I*

*look big. I should really feel small out here,  
shouldn't I?*

Not necessarily. I mean, you've always had some  
confidence in your blood.

I think that's why we ended up being friends.

Or why I—

*It feels almost like the stars are speaking to  
me. Like I—*

*Oh— sorry, you were saying something. I  
didn't mean to—*

No, it was nothing important.

Delta, what's your current rotation?

*Coming up on 230 now.*

Ah. You should be able to see Earth soon.

*Oh good! That "best view in the universe",  
like we used to talk about.*

Like we always wanted.

*It is really pretty out here.*

Yeah?

*Thank you.*

*For giving me this.*

It's nothing, Jamie, I—

*Hey, if you don't wanna use the nicknames  
we don't need to use the nicknames.*

Oh, eh, sorry... Delta.

Alright, we—

*But really, thanks.*

*I'm sorry I made you go through with this,  
even though we couldn't build this thing big  
enough to fit you in it too.*

No, that's fine.

It's enough that you get to see what's up there.

Plus, even when...

Even if something were to happen,  
You've got supplies enough to last you for a long  
time, hopefully enough for you to hit the ISS and  
get help.

Theoretically, you can. Worst case scenario, you  
flip some of the levers on the wall until you feel  
yourself start to move.

That's alright, Jamie. I'm sorry.

Delta,  
what's your current rotation?

Can you see it now?

Jamie, I love you.  
I've always loved you.  
I've loved you since the moment you stepped into  
my life, and it's always hurt.  
I just thought we'd have more time.

*What?*

*Oh, but that's not gonna happen. No way.  
Absolutely no way. Can I even steer this  
thing?*

*Hey hey hey don't talk about that please, I'm  
the one in space here, I don't want to have to  
think about that until it's absolutely  
necessary.*

*Are you okay? I think I hear you crying.*

*Alex.  
Alex, talk to me, please.*

*What? I—  
I think I can see Earth! I can see—  
No.*

*Oh my god oh my god no.  
What the fuck is—*

*Is that fucking fire!?*

*No, I—  
Alex, what are you doing?*

*I need to get back down there. Don't you*

Every time you're around me I feel spikes thrust      *fucking do this to me.*

themselves into my mind, I feel the hummingbirds, *Alex, what is going on?*

I feel cold in my calves and heat in my fingers and      *Alex, I'm—*

I want nothing more than to make you feel.

Not necessarily feel for me, but feel for anything.      *Why didn't you tell me this was going to*

Feel at all. You're so beautiful when you're      *happen? I was with you there in Uncertainty*

hopeful, or snarky, or—      *for weeks preparing, why didn't you tell me?*

Your voice keeps me grounded. Your voice makes      *Shit. Shit shit shit shit. I have to—*

the fire not feel so hot anymore.      *What can I do? I have to fix this. Please.*

I needed to keep you safe. Keep you alive.      *You knew. You knew! You asshole, you knew!*

Keep you feeling. I love you, Jamie.

I'm setting the system trajectory to get you help.      *No. Stop. God, please.*

Maybe you'll meet the other last humans alive.      *Alex, you can't just make me watch this.*

You won't have to steer at all.      *I'm not gonna let you die, I can't—*

[TRAJECTORY SET – BACKUP – INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION]

Goodnight, Jamie.

I'm sorry.

This was so selfish.

I'm so, so  
sorry.

*Alex.*

*Alex, I love you too.*

$$[ \Gamma \text{-x- x- x- x- x- CONNECTION TERMINATED -x- x- x- x- x- } \Delta ]$$

*Alex?*

[ACTIVATING THRUSTERS]

*Alex, I love you too. Can you—*

*No, you can't.*

[ALIGNING FLIGHT PATH]

*Fuck.*

*Am I—?*

[ADJUSTING ORBIT]

*I don't feel big out here anymore. I'm alone.*

*Stay with me.*

*Oh, I can keep the recording!*

*I can keep the log!*

*I need your voice with me.*

*God, I can't—*

*Oh, I need to turn this thing off first, don't I?*

*Wish me luck, Alex.*

*I...*

*I accept your apology.*

[SHUTTING DOWN...]

# Shards of a Lovely Heartbreak

*Klaudine Bessasparis*

“I think I love him.”

Pity infiltrates her face like months-old trash contaminating a lake but more beautiful, an essence of ethereal magic dropping from shiny eyes coated with desperation. She slams the cherry red lipstick on the counter, wincing when the flimsy plastic cracks, blinking slowly while she shakes her head.

“You – you... you *can't*.”

Slapping my arms against my thighs, a sigh of frustration escapes my lips.

“You don’t think I *know* that?”

“Well. Good. So... stop.”

She crosses her arms, leaning against the wall behind her like a defiant teen stubbornly insisting she needs to wear *this outfit* to the dance, no matter how ridiculous it looks.

My hands fly up again, sarcasm leaking from my mouth, “Great. Thank you for that *beyond helpful recommendation*.”

Her head ducks into a raised hand, the other landing on her hip, exasperation solidifying her new posture. She watches me for a moment, eyes widening, mouth puckering.

“All those times you mentioned him, I thought it was just... a little *crush*. I never...”

“I didn’t think it *was* anything more than a crush.”

I pick up the lipgloss, the tube making a “pop” as I open the brush. Nothing but my breath disturbs the room’s air as I apply it. Hesitation clings to the air purifier above me.

“... he told you no.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the waves in my eyes back to low tide as I face her, annoyance entering my tone.

“Yeah. I remember it quite clearly.”

The rejection rebounds through my head, each word ricocheting off the backboard in a missed shot – *not thinking about a relationship... dating is a far away thought... wasn’t flirting...*

“That... that was *months* ago. Why are you still holding on?”

I whirl away from her gaze, snapping, “You don’t think I *want* to move on? You don’t think I’ve spent *every waking minute* since that day *trying*?”

“The mixed signals...”

I reopen the gloss, swiping another layer over my lips. I lean against the counter, still avoiding her sympathetic, heartbreak-filled eyes. Raising my hand to list every single signal, I pause as my orange-painted nails flash into view. *Hm. His favorite color.*

“Let’s see... leaning in while working on a project together; maintaining eye contact with me when we have a conversation with the group; touching my arm and lingering when my knee grazes his; inside jokes that we keep close to our chests, never explaining to others and letting them figure it out themselves if they care that much; calling me ‘bro’ or ‘dude’ after every exchange; making me laugh when all I want to do is cry...”

“Sure, some of those things are misleading in a romantic-leaning direction, but can’t friends offer a few of the same comforts?”

“I mean, yes, but it always felt *intentionally flirtatious* versus how I see him with other people... a hint threaded into his tone during a quip that from others would sound more like a tease.”

“How does that make it love, though? You’re just explaining things I notice when it’s a crush...”

“You remember all those times you raced home after a stressful night, ready to wrap yourself in blankets and rest alongside your mom? Remember how, no matter what the circumstances were, you always felt at ease the moment you were in her presence? Like everything was going to be okay and you just needed to exist in her space for a little while to recharge?” She nods, leaning back against the wall, arms behind her back, clutching the lip gloss. “Well, the same sensation comes over me around him. I just... I relax more than I realize I need to, and I never get those ‘butterflies’ that really only ever felt like nerves with other crushes. I think... I think he’s the first person I’ve truly *liked*... and it hasn’t gone away – if anything, it’s grown stronger... so it *has* to be love...”

“You might’ve just misinterpreted those feelings in the past. You might just calm down around him the way someone would with a best friend.”

“But it always seemed like *more* than that.” I throw my head back, posture straightening like an oak tree in freezing weather, annoyance flooding my veins. “Clearly I was wrong though, since he said it wasn’t flirting... I just can’t believe that everyone – *every single person I talked to* – interpreted each action the same way, helping me pack my bags for the Dating Express only for him to close down the

road for good... unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless... it's just a detour... a pause before we *can* be something more."

"You know damn well that's not a healthy way to process any of this, and leaning into that love you think you have won't help." She hovers over the counter, staring me straight in the eyes through the mirror. "Given how long since everything happened and how nothing has changed in that time... it's time to move on."

The damn breaks, salty water gushing from the fall, cascading down soft cheeks, landing in a puddle on the countertop next to the lip gloss container she placed back down. Frustration transforms to anger, turns to disgust, reveals self-loathing. Shouts climb up from my lungs, blasting out of my mouth like cannonballs.

"Goddammit, I reprimand myself each time he crosses my mind and hangs around for more than two minutes, wiping him off like dirt on my skirt. But then I remember I rarely wear skirts, and how he would've complimented me regardless, how he appreciated the effort I put into my clothing every day. And I watched him pour all his energy into passion projects that were so attractive to watch him produce and discuss. And he'd recall basically anything I told him, like he was a vault to my memory with a keypad I didn't know the code for. And he'd remind me of such with comments like 'oh, that's your favorite pair of earrings' and 'yeah, you mentioned something about that rough time before.' He'd throw in one of those jokes that're incomprehensible to the outside viewer like a language shared between lovers..."

"But every time I texted him to no response, I catapulted through the trampoline I was jumping on, landing on my back, out of breath and gasping for help. I try every goddamned day to let go of those feelings, and then some song, movie, show, topic, whatever, comes up that we once talked about, and I'm right back at square one, alone, confused, and still in love."

I start to pace back and forth, flailing my arms without purpose. "Maybe I'm romanticising every action, bound by hope and strangled by desire, but when love seems to be within your grasp, you just can't help but keep *reaching* for it. I spend an embarrassing amount of time daydreaming about us, what we could be, knowing damn well he isn't doing the same but still unsure of how to function without those thoughts to buoy me in the river of my emotions."

Silence coats the walls, the sorrow-filled air pungent with bewilderment.

“I hate that I can’t just get up and forget I liked – love – him. If it were that easy, I wouldn’t be having this issue right now.”

“Oh, honey.”

“Don’t you *dare* condescend me, you two-faced fool.”

I pick up the cracked lip gloss tube, lock eyes with her, and use as much force as possible to throw it at her nose. The tube hits its target with a “clang” before I watch fragments of my face deconstruct, spiderwebs across the mirror as shards land in the sink, a blurry vision through tear-coated lashes. Nothing remains but smudged lip gloss on her mouth and red-rimmed eyes.

A sob breaks free, my body shuddering in lovesick pain as I fall back against the wall, sliding onto the tile, where I lay for another ten minutes, wallowing in self-pity, disgust, loathing, what have you. When I’ve calmed down enough, I stand back up again, straightening my orange dress and adjusting the matching bow in my hair. *He would’ve loved this outfit.* I wipe under my eyes, splashing my face with cold water while carefully avoiding the remnants of my broken reflection on the counter. I tuck the lip gloss into the bottom of the garbage bin.

Fueled by comments I imagine he’d made about how I’m dressed and how I look, I slip out of the bathroom, waving over the first employee I spot and shouting, “There seems to be a crack in your mirror in the ladies’ room,” Sabrina Carpenter’s obnoxiously cheery tone poking fun at misinterpreted signals through rusted speakers.

I stumble back to the table, hardly sure I have the right person until he smiles back at me. Failing to remember his name or face probably isn’t a good look for me.

“What took you so long in there?” The stranger asks, genuine curiosity on his face.

I slide into my seat, shrugging. “Couldn’t get my lip gloss on right.”

# A Real Boy

*Carole Cobos*

Pinnochio observed himself in front of the full-length mirror. It was a handsome mirror, carefully and lovingly crafted— just like him. The mirror was the same smooth, warm brown as Pinnochio himself, and at times, Pinnochio fancies that he and the mirror share a mother.

He smoothed his hands down his vest, the way he’s seen Geppetto do on occasion, and then turned and twisted to see if his back looked as neat and smooth as the front. It was; everything was in place. Everything was *good*. Pinnochio, after all, was a real boy now. A real boy who was going to real boy elementary school. Fourth grade. That was a big deal, wasn’t it?

Pinnochio rubbed some hair gel onto his real-boy palms and beamed at the mirror as he artfully pushed his curls back into place. Perfect. He looked exactly how he wanted. The boy in the mirror looked happy, real, and full of life.

That boy was Pinnochio.

It took a few weeks to realize that just because Pinnochio *looked* like a real boy doesn’t mean he knew how to *behave* like one. That’s where observing Geppetto failed him. He needed help from an expert.

Luckily for Pinnochio, he knew just where to find one.

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Pinnochio was watching his second-favorite classmate as he dribbled the ball for about seven minutes before the other eleven-year-old cracked, pivoted, and glared right at him. “Why are you looking at me?” Jake demanded, arms crossed self-importantly, the soccer ball forgotten by his scuffed shoes. “I want to practice *alone*.”

“I want to be a real boy,” Pinocchio said, crossing his own arms. “You are really good at it. Show me how.”

Jake raised his brown bushy eyebrows. “Whatcha mean I’m good at it?”

“You’re a boy,” Pinnochio explained patiently. “And people love you. Ergo, you’re good at being a boy.”

Jake nodded along. He was the kind of boy who would make the jokes that the girls laughed

hardest at. He was the kind of boy who could tell his friends that he had to practice alone and they wouldn't give him a hard time. He was the kind of boy that didn't *have* to be good-looking to be beloved. Jake was possibly the best boy in his fourth-grade class; and Pinnochio only wanted to learn from the best.

Jake smiled brightly, boyishly, proving his title as the best boy and Pinnochio's second favorite friend. "That makes sense. I guess."

"So, show me how."

Jake's smile faltered, head falling to a tilt like the dogs by the deli when they want a bite of Pinnochio's sandwich. And for a split second, Pinnochio imagined he was back at the workshop, and Jake was a doll too, a puppet, and one of his strings had been snipped, dropping his head to that angle. Just as quickly as that vision came, it passed, and Pinnochio was focused on more important things, like how Jake didn't know the answer to his question.

"You don't know how," Pinnochio accused, upset to have been wrong about his second favorite friend. "You can't help me."

Jake bristled. "It's not like I try to be a boy. I just am!"

"I want to be a boy too!"

"You can!" Jake insisted. "It's easy!"

"I don't know how!" Pinocchio whined, tears popping into his eyes. "I just became one recently." Hiccups started to rack Pinocchio's frame, and his snot and tears wet his face in unpleasant, new ways he wasn't accustomed to yet. "I want to be a real boy."

And, just like that, Pinocchio was sniffing and crying in front of Jake, who was looking at him with unconcealed irritation.

"Well, you can't be a boy if you cry like a girl!" Jake scolded.

That shocked the sadness right out of Pinnochio's system. "What?"

Jake sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, the way Jake's father did when he was on important-looking phone calls.

"Boys don't cry," Jake explained. "So you can't do that anymore."

"But..." Pinnochio's lower lip wobbled, frustrated by his lack of clarity. "But I have eyes that cry; I can't help it."

Jake observed him closely. He was silent for a long time before saying, "If you want to be a boy,

you can't cry."

Pinnocchio wanted to argue this point further but sensed that Jake would grow frustrated and return his focus to his soccer ball if he did.

"Okay, fine." Pinnocchio rubbed at his eyes and inhaled deeply because breathing was something he could do as a real boy. "Boys don't cry. What else do they not do?" Jake seemed to know the answers to this question since, after barely a breath of air, he said: "Boys don't cry. Boys don't, uh, they don't wear dresses or pink." Jake's gaze flickered down, looking him over quickly. "So, you should stop wearing pink."

Pinnocchio looked down at his shirt, relieved not to be wearing pink that day. "Okay. What else?"

"Oh, and you shouldn't wear bows either. Not every day, anyway. Maybe at like church or something necessary. Boys don't *want* to dress up."

Geppetto had been the one to lovingly tie the bow to his collar. Pinnocchio had not minded, but he *had* already cried and worn pink. He was desperate to find a way to prove his boyhood.

"I don't like dressing up," Pinnocchio insisted. He thought of Jake's scuffed shoes. "I like getting dirty."

Jake nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, that's right. Boys like playing outside and running around and stuff. Boys like getting dirty and hate getting clean."

Since becoming a real boy, Pinnocchio had always enjoyed his luxurious bubble baths. He'd liked keeping a tidy room. He hadn't known he wasn't supposed to. "Okay," Pinnocchio said. "What else?"

Jake scanned the courtyard, hands on his hips like a King about to give a verdict. His gaze landed on where a cluster of girls sat; amongst them was Pinnocchio's first favorite classmate, Anna. Her pulled-toffee hair was curling in a pleasing way he had praised just that morning. She and her friends were giggling, and braiding flower stems together to form a ring of sorts.

"Boys don't wear jewelry or make it, or, or gossip like." Jake turned back to face Pinnocchio, and his brows furrowed in concentration. "And boys don't play with dolls or dance to girly, romantic songs— unless you have a girlfriend— but even then, boys don't *want* to. Only do it because *girls* want to."

Pinnocchio flexed his real boy hands. "So... boys can't dance, but girls can?"

“Yeah, wait, no. We *can*. We can do anything we want. Boys just don’t *want* to. Unless it’s something cool.”

“And... boys can’t wear pink or bows or like to be clean?”

“But girls do,” Jake confirmed. “They also cry and cook and stuff.”

Pinnocchio crossed his arms, feeling oddly jilted. “It sounds like boys don’t get to do *anything*.”

Jake frowned. “That’s not true! Boys can play sports and wear clothes like this,” Jake said, spreading his arms to show off his boxy shirt and shorts.

Pinnocchio wisely didn’t comment that he didn’t *want* to wear clothes like that. Instead, he said, “But I have eyes and legs and hands like a girl. I can cry and dance and make pretty things, too.”

With unprecedented gentleness, Jake told him, “You *can*, but if you want to be a boy like me—and you asked me!— then you have to follow these rules.”

“I thought if I was a real boy, I could do whatever I wanted.”

“You can,” Jake assured. “If you follow these rules.”

Pinnocchio was silent with his dissatisfaction.

“Look, Pinnocchio, you were a doll before you became a real boy. Nobody expects you to fit in, so if you don’t want to, you can probably get away with it.” Jake shrugged. “You don’t have to be a *real*, real boy.”

Pinnocchio set his shoulders and ripped his bow off his chest with only a bit of a struggle. “But I want to be.”

Jake grinned, kicking the soccer ball right at him. It bounced off the top of his clean shoe, leaving a smudge and settling snugly in front of him. Pinnocchio didn’t go to wipe it clean like he would have before and instead badly kicked the ball back in Jake’s vicinity.

Jake, who had taught him how to be a real boy, then proceeded to teach him how to play soccer.

And when Anna tried to show him how to make a friendship bracelet, Pinnocchio ignored her in favor of chasing after his first favorite classmate, Jake.

(And if he made Anna cry with his careless, boyish cruelty, then that’s just what boys do.) And when Geppetto asked what happened to his bright bow, blue to match his eyes, and nice shoes, Pinnocchio will instead complain about his hunger and pester until he is served dinner early.

(And if Geppetto’s bright smile faded once he caught on, then, well, he ought to know better. And if Geppetto really was crying that night, lamenting some sort of innocence lost, then he ought to

understand that real boys don't cry.)

And when Pinnocchio made the occasional slip, perhaps liking the wrong genre of books or favoring the wrong kind of foods, then Jake and his friends were there to gently, and not so gently because boys weren't gentle, course-correct him.

(And if he stood in front of his mirror and didn't understand why he looked a bit less real, even after all those years of following along, well that was no one's business but his own. And his reflections, maybe.)

Though, he'd never admit it, Pinnocchio started to look forward to Sundays, since that was when he was allowed to wear his nice shirts and bows. And that was when he could comb his curls back in front of the handsome mirror and adjust his bow tie. Sundays meant he could linger in the tub. Sundays meant he could spritz on some of Geppetto's cologne. Sundays meant he could pose in front of the mirror and look the way he wanted.

And if he took his sweet time changing out of his fancy clothes, well, it's not like Geppetto would tell.

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Anna, now sixteen, like him, fell in love with a boy called Charlie. He wore nice sweaters and a nicer cologne to high school. He liked movies and was teased good-naturedly for being a bit sensitive. When Pinnocchio found out, he had felt a quick rush of jealousy. Though, in all honesty, he wasn't sure if he was jealous that Anna was in love, or if he was jealous of the boy's sweater and confidence.

On cue, Pinnocchio's friends started wearing cologne and nicer, more stylish clothes. It's almost infuriating. Did they change the requirement again? Why didn't Jake tell him? He asked Jake, and all Jake had to say for himself is. "I dunno, Pinnocchio. Maybe we're not boys anymore. Maybe, now, we're becoming men."

Jake had his attention on his locker, his head bowed like in prayer. His hair was cropped neat and looked darker than when it was long. He looked serious when he wasn't handing out easy smiles.

Pinnocchio had been crushed. He had asked, "There's a difference?"

Jake, who had tried to shoot him a smile, stilled. His smile had gone twisted. "I think so. Honestly, I don't get it all the way either. Do whatever you want, I guess. We're not hurting nobody."

"What about the rules?" Pinnocchio had asked desperately.

Jake had snapped, "Listen, dude, *I don't know, okay?* I don't know. I don't think I ever really

knew.” Jake’s mouth had wobbled a bit, eyes glistening with furious tears. “Stop asking me because I don’t know. I don’t think anyone even fucking knows. It’s stupid, okay? It’s all fucking stupid. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“So everything I did was for nothing?” Pinnochio had demanded. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Not for nothing,” Jake had said, voice halting. “I mean, we did this together, didn’t we?”

Pinnochio had deflated. “Yeah. I guess we did.”

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The next morning, Pinnochio stood in front of his handsome mirror and tried his best to be real again.

# Murmurs in the Mirror

*Brielle Engelhardt*

*There are just too many mirrors in this place, it's creepy to look around and only see yourself.*

Dylan had recently moved into a new house, it was small and felt even smaller with all of the mirrors. When he had moved in the house, it was already furnished and he did not have the time or energy to make any changes. Everything from the curtains, to the rugs, to the couches were old-fashioned. However, as long as he had a place that he could sleep with a roof over his head, then he was happy. Even so, that didn't prevent his annoyance with the mirrors, he felt as though he was always being watched with the constant reflection of the entire room.

One day, as he was brushing his teeth, he leaned down to spit out the toothpaste and as he stood up, he was met by his reflection just a second too late. It happened so quickly that he wasn't certain if it happened at all. He quickly brushed it off as he got ready for work, but later that day, when he was watching TV, he turned his head to look outside the window. He managed to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror, which again, was just a second too slow. He noticed these instances happening more often. At first, it was as if the mirror was delayed just a second, but as time went on, it gradually became more noticeable. Dylan didn't want to think about what these mirror distortions could mean, so he chose the next best option, covering them up. He took extra sheets, blankets, and towels in order to cover the mirrors. When he ran out of sheets, he resorted to taking a few mirrors off the wall and placing them on the floor, backwards, leaning against the wall.

The peace that he felt was short-lived. At first, he felt relieved, *at least I don't have to see myself at every turn*. Yet, there was something in the back of his mind trying to convince him to uncover the mirrors. He had become accustomed to the placement of the mirrors but, even so, they always made him feel unsettled, as if he was being constantly watched.



The doorbell rang, and as Dylan opened the door he was met with the familiar faces of Liam, Elliot, and Jillian.

"Hey guys! Come inside" Dylan said, gesturing for them all to follow him inside.

As his friends walked in they all couldn't help but notice the covered mirrors that littered the

wall. With a wave of confusion and discomfort they began to settle into Dylan's living room.

"It's so great to finally have you guys over. Trying to get settled into the new house and new job have taken what feels like forever but I'm glad you guys could make it."

Both Liam and Elliot looked to Jillian, expecting for her to voice what they were all thinking.

"It's great to see you too, the place looks so good. If you don't mind me asking though, what's with all of the sheets covering the mirrors?"

"The place just seemed a little claustrophobic with all of the mirrors so I figured it would be best."

"Why didn't you just put them away somewhere or just get rid of them if you have no intention of using them."

"No." Dylan said, nearly shouting at the notion of removing the mirrors.

"I know that all of the sheets might not look the best but, I can't get rid of them."

That thought resonated throughout Dylan's head, *I can't get rid of them*, but why? He could get rid of them but, for some reason it felt as though there was something holding him back. He considered following his friend's advice and simply put the mirrors either in storage or on the curb but he knew he wouldn't be able to bring himself to do it. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off about the mirrors but, even so, there was this unspoken force that compelled him to hold onto the mirror.



Dylan's eyes slowly began to open as he woke up. *What happened last night?* He didn't remember last night clearly, he remembered his friends coming over but he didn't remember them leaving. *How did I get into bed?* As he glanced around the room everything looked normal, just as it should have, except nothing felt normal. That when he started to hear it, a quiet murmur, a hushed whisper, so miniscule that he wasn't sure if it was real. It gradually grew louder, as he tried to tell where the sounds were coming from he landed on the last place he wanted to look. Ultimately, he landed on the mirror that was hung on the wall of his bedroom, covered by a sheet. He got out of bed and walked closer to the mirror and there was no question where the sound was coming from. With a shaky hand, Dylan hesitantly reached out and slowly pulled the blanket aside. He saw himself smiling wide. The only problem being, Dylan wasn't smiling.

"Hello," said Dylan's reflection in the mirror as he chuckled at the horror on his face.

“Who are you?”

“Well, I’m you. At least the otherworld version of you, call me Daniel.”

*This is a nightmare, a really, really bad nightmare. This cannot be real.* Seeing that Dylan is frozen in shock, Daniel says, “Glad to see you’ve finally uncovered me, it took long enough. I thought I was going to have to borrow your body again.”

“Borrow my body? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about, everything I do while I’m in your body you are aware of. Dylan, why do you think you never brought these mirrors downstairs? Storing the mirrors downstairs would have been much easier than covering all of them up or taking them off the wall. What do you think you’re going to find down there? Or should I say who?”

Dylan couldn’t make sense of what Daniel was trying to say. However, as he is speaking, Dylan begins to get flashbacks of vague memories that do not feel like his own.

Dylan retorts, “These mirrors are antiques, I couldn’t risk dropping them down the stairs.”

With a condescending tone Daniel replies, “Well, this mirror is small so, if you don’t want to see me then take it downstairs.”

It was as if something in his mind was urging him to leave the mirror where it was, or at the very least, not take it downstairs, but he couldn’t stop himself. Dylan picked the mirror up off the wall and headed downstairs and began to descend. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he flicked on the light switch and as he looked around, all he saw was bodies. He scanned the floor and saw three of his best friends all laying dead on the floor. He nearly collapsed at the sight and in the process he dropped the mirror.

The mirror doesn’t break on impact and instead is cushioned by the grey rug on the floor. Dylan is suddenly hit with a wave of memories of the murder of each of his friends by his own hands.

“Do you finally remember?”

Dylan quickly turns his anger on Daniel, “You did this, not me!”

“Maybe I did, but you could have stopped me. It was your weak mind that allowed me to venture into your world. You could have prevented their deaths. You were so pitiful that you weren’t able to.”

Immediately following Daniel’s words, Dylan walked over to a shelf and grabbed a hammer out of an old toolbox. He walked back to Daniel and held the hammer high, before bringing it down on the

mirror. *This is what you deserve for killing my friends.*

In this process of his quick actions, Dylan didn't realize how Daniel resumed control of his body mere moments before the shatter of the glass.

"A reflection can only cross into this world in moments of danger. So, thanks to you Dylan, your fear gave me the chance I needed. Your body is mine now, forever," Daniel said.

As he gazed at the shards of the shattered mirror scattered across the floor, each jagged piece reminded him of the glass that had once held him captive—now reflecting nothing but freedom.

# I Grew to Hate You (But I Don't)

*Brooke Foster*

Amelia hummed to herself as she pushed the metal shopping cart down the endless aisles of Johnson's Grocery. The squeaky wheel in the front of the pushcart would have annoyed most people, its high pitched whines scraping the air like nails on a chalkboard with every turn. To Amelia, it was a wonderful reminder of the task at hand. It soothed her anxieties as she stood on her tiptoes to reach for the nearest box of Cheerios. Even though she was just at the store last month, it felt like her prize was four yards instead just four inches away.

There's no way she was shorter, right? She was only twenty-one. Humans don't start shrinking until they're at least thirty. She still had nine years!

A large hand reached out and pried the vibrant yellow and red box from its skyscraper of a prison. It appeared in Amelia's field of vision with a wiggle merely a moment later.

"Allow me to help you with that," a familiar voice said to her right; a voice smooth as silk and warm as a fresh cup of coffee. The same voice put the brakes on happiness with those famous five words meant to be a consolation instead of a biting attack.

*No.* It couldn't be.

When she turned around, she felt her heart as it sank to her feet. There he was. All five-foot-eleven-inches of Sawyer King. With his shining chocolate brown eyes she used to get lost in for hours and deceptively soft maroon sweater that made for the best movie night pillow.

For Amelia, it had been a painfully cruel six months. Twenty-four agonizingly long weeks. One-hundred-and-eighty days of her practically rolling onto the floor and shuffling through the monotony that was her daily routine. It had taken her six *years* to finally get him out of her head – free of the longing and crying under covers, desperation to hear the old station wagon that used to be his deadbeat father's sailing into her driveway. When she left for New York, she never looked back...at least, until her own father had a heart attack and needed to be taken care of.

But was Sawyer fazed by it at all? Apparently not, because *God*, he still looked as perfect and put together as always.

"Still having trouble reaching the top shelf, sweetheart?" he teased in a tone so rich, Amelia

would have thought she won the lottery. “I think you need to get yourself those platform shoes you always used to talk about. Otherwise you’ll be asking us tall people for help the rest of your life.”

Sawyer said it so casually, it almost fooled Amelia into thinking it was as if nothing had changed; as if he had never broken her heart and she could nuzzle her face into his sweater without a second thought. “So what have you been up to?” He leaned casually against her cart, trying his best not to trigger the squeaky wheel (she still seemed to be cursed by grocery stores). “How has life been treating the great Amelia Harper? I heard about your dad. How’s he doing?”

“Pretty well.” *Good, keep the tone even, Amelia. Don’t let him see that it bothers you.* “I have an exposé going out next week for the entertainment section. Dad’s doing better. Still won’t listen to me when I tell him to stay in the damn bed, but what are you going to do?”

Sawyer nodded. “Always knew you were going places,” he said, sending warmth against her cheeks. “*Buuuut* I’ll have you know you’re not the only big shot in town.” He paused to stretch his back out against the cart with a smirk. “Oh yeah, I’ve got a real classy job now. Couldn’t be better. ‘Get to see all the stars anytime I want.’”

“Oh really?” Amelia crossed her arms over her chest, eyebrow raised in challenge. “And how are you connecting with these Hollywood stars in the small town of Hartley?”

“Working at the Best Buy down on Mayfield. Have you seen the size of those TVs there?! It’s almost like Julia Roberts is *right there* next to me.”

She couldn’t help the snort that escaped as Sawyer sent a teasing wink in her direction. “Sounds like you’ve got it made, Your Highness. Mr. King, living large and in charge.”

“You know it,” he said with a wink and an exaggerated flick of his hair.

Before she could stop herself, Amelia wondered how it’d feel to run her fingers through it again. Would it be as soft as she remembered? Did he still use the shampoo he knew she loved because it smelled like grapefruit? As quick as the thoughts came, they dissipated when he rapped his knuckles on the shopping cart handle.

“I should head out,” he remarked. “Hartley High is hosting the winter formal tonight– hey, do you remember when we went with Lacey and Derek and all of them? That was crazy!” Without waiting for a response, he continued. “Well, anyway, Mr. Lewis wants me to chaperone. Have to make sure there’s no risky business going on, if you know what I mean. God, I remember how hammered everyone was after we went to Derek’s afterwards! Dave took that whole keg!”

Of course she remembered that night. Well, at least, parts of it. That was the night Sawyer had started out by promising her between stolen sips of spiked punch that forever had nothing on them. As the night went on, however, his tone began to change. . .



*(six years ago)*

“What do you think it’s going to be like?” he had asked.

In the dark of her room, Sawyer’s voice bounced off of the walls. The reverberations combined with the scent— his scent— had her surrounded by the boy who had captured her heart. Amelia had needed to fight back a sigh of contentment when the vanilla smell of his hairspray and something else that was just so *Sawyer* entered her airways. It was refreshing, like the damp smell of morning dew, or the air after a dense storm. She wanted to wrap herself up in the feeling his close proximity gave and never move.

The two of them were laying across her mattress, pinky fingers barely brushing as Sawyer reached his free hand over to trace his thumb against her upper thigh. She could feel his curious dark stare trail over her face, creating a path of invisible flames which burnt her skin.

Amelia’s own gaze was plastered to the stick-on stars littered across the ceiling. Truth be told, she was surprised they had maintained their faint green glow. The things were over a decade old, carefully mapped out and adhered to the plaster by her parents when she was eight-years-old and going through the astrology phase. It was a short-lived hyperfixation, but the stars always seemed to be a comforting sight before she drifted off to sleep.

It was going to be weird to adapt to life without them every night.

“You getting deep with me, King?” She tried her best to keep her voice as level as possible. It wasn’t that difficult of a question to interpret with graduation looming, but she was afraid to keep the conversation going. “What is *what* going to be like?”

“You know,” he continued, “you going off to college and me...well, not.”

And there it was: the elephant whose presence has been stifling since Amelia had received the news in the mail. NYU had been a pretty far reach, but she would be lying if she didn’t feel the slightest amount of satisfaction when holding that purple and white envelope in her hands.

“Do we have to have this conversation?” She didn’t want to look at him, too afraid tears would start to build up at the thought of leaving him. “You’re acting like my room is filled with boxes already.

I only submitted my deposit yesterday.”

“Yeah, I, uh, I know. And I’m so proud of you. Really, I am! It’s just...it’s going to be hard not... not seeing you every day.” His thumb moved away from her leg and reached backward to skim against his neck. The mattress dipped as he situated his right arm behind his head. His left pinky wiggled out against hers, though, as though he was afraid to lose physical contact with her.

A small smile tugged at Amelia’s mouth as she fought the wobble of her lower lip. Without thinking, she hooked her pinky with his own. It had become an unspoken form of communication between the two of them over the years – a simple means of reminding the other that they weren’t alone.

“I know,” she choked out, frowning at the way her whisper flitted through the air. Amelia could hardly recognize her own voice. It sounded hoarse, like smoke was caught in her lungs. Her heart thudded heavily against her chest and she had silently willed it to slow down. “We still have a few weeks before graduation, then there’s the whole summer...”

There was a brief period of silence as her voice trailed off. It hung over them like a cloud, each passing second feeling like an eternity as neither dared to speak. After a while, there was a sharp inhale followed by a long puff of air.

“I can’t.” Sawyer’s voice, although soft due to the late hour, cut into her eardrums like the sharpest of blades.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I can’t...I can’t do this, Amelia,” he chose his words carefully, as though tip-toeing around a fragile floorboard. “You’re going to find someone better. Hell, you *deserve* to find someone better than someone who’s probably just going to be mopping floors at Johnson’s for the rest of his life.”

“Sawyer–”

There was a soft shuffling to Amelia’s right as she tried to reach for him. Sawyer’s dark form entered her vision as he sat up on the bed, then bent down to reach for his discarded tie and dress shoes. Ignorant of her gentle jostling of his shoulders, he adjusted his appearance and slowly stood. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment, “but I can’t screw up your future.”

She felt as though she’d been slapped in the face. “You can’t mean that,” she stuttered out as she fumbled to switch on the lamp beside her bed, the soft warm yellow glow casting a shadow over half of his face.

“I do.” Sawyer’s shoulders tensed. “I really am sorry. It’s not you. It’s me.”



“Anyway, that’s enough reminiscing.” With a small shake of his head and a small wave in her direction, Sawyer started to saunter out of the aisle. “Enjoy your Cheerios, shortstack. Call me if you need any more help reaching the top shelves while you’re here in Hartley.”

As he walked away, Amelia didn’t feel the twinge that always appeared in her heart when she thought about him. In fact, she felt lighter than she had in months. Hearing Sawyer talk about the high school formal reminded her just why they didn’t work. He was the type to hold onto high school for far too long, sticking around their hometown while Amelia was ready to move on to a future that didn’t involve Hartley. They had simply gone down two different paths, a fact she had been hung up on for far too long...until now.

“If you don’t leave after graduation,” a friend of hers once said, “you’re never getting out. You’re like a painting – trapped as the person you once were.”

As she watched the retreating figure of what (or rather who) she thought would be the only love of her life, Amelia came to realize that maybe, just maybe, that advice wasn’t too far off.

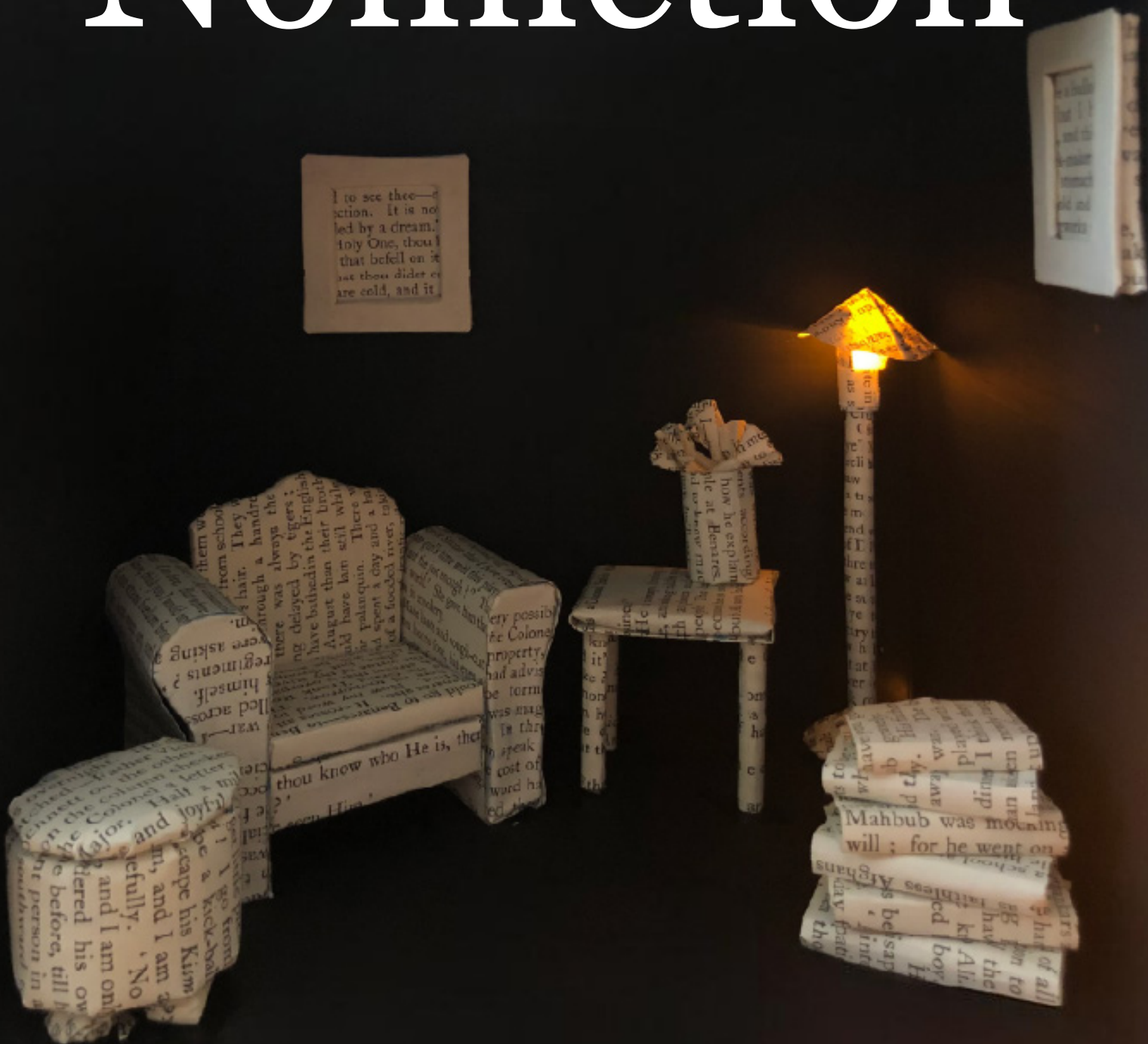
If she had stayed in Hartley, she would come home to takeout from the local burger hut and DVDs purchased with the employee discount. She’d hear the clunking of old trucks and barely alive hummers as they hiccuped down the streets. Her favorite coffee shop would always know her order. It would have been easy to keep up with the latest gossip in the town paper. A simple life in the world of which she was comfortable.

Yet if she didn’t go to New York, if she *hadn’t* done the thing that scared her shitless, Amelia would have never discovered her love for the city. Hartley seemed too...slow now for her, too still to really enjoy life. In New York, everything was rapid; either you ran to catch a cab, or you were hobbling up to the 34th floor after racing two blocks. Amelia loved her apartment with its blue-coated walls and suspicious damp dark patch on the ceiling. She can’t fall asleep anymore without hearing the sounds of bustling streets and muffled conversation outside her slightly raised window. She couldn’t wait to go back to nights of randomly selected takeout from places she found just wandering the streets after work, her trusty audio recorder at the ready to pick up any action she may come across. The city was a place for action, a place for hope, a place for stories just waiting to be written. One day she would make it into that penthouse overlooking Central Park, a laptop securely in her

lap as she flipped between editing her recent scoop and the rough draft of her soon-to-be bestselling novel.

Most importantly, if she had stayed in Hartley, she never would have met Max — someone who has made her life better in ways Sawyer never could. She couldn't fathom the thought of trading her best friend for Sawyer; not in a heartbeat. Now, Amelia saw past the need for romance, focusing on the need to explore the life she was excited to make and the dreams that could finally come true.

# Nonfiction



For this issue of Venture, the nonfiction editors have chosen pieces that encapsulate both reflections on the self as well as reflections on the art forms surrounding us. Each of the four published works illustrate the impact and depth of connection on all its levels -- from the incredibly personal to the academically analytical. Dive into these meditations on music, mental health, and movies; perhaps you'll emerge with a new perspective of your own.

"Pages of Peace" by Brielle Engelhardt ©2025

# Thematic Paradigm

*Jerel Fields*

Within Film, the audience is shown all different types of heroes all with all different moral compasses and motivations that drive them. The Author of “The Thematic Paradigm” Robert Ray has organized these heroes within 3 different categories based on their moral principles as well as actions throughout the film. The 3 categories are the Reluctant Hero, the Outlaw Hero, and the Official Hero. An Reluctant Hero is someone who originally doesn’t want to be a hero and has the role forced upon them. An Outlaw Hero is someone that toes the line of villain and hero due to their moral compass being a lot less strict, allowing them to kill and be much darker and aggressive than someone who’d be considered an Official Hero. An Official Hero is a hero that stays on the straight and narrow: they follow the rules, don’t kill, and they are usually someone who sees the good in everyone and is willing to help anyone in need. Each one of these Heroes have their own unique individual stories, with a multitude of variations while still keeping the same archetype. A Good example of the most common and well known variation which is the Official Hero is “Captain America”, a hero who fought to protect and save as many people as possible with only a shield.

Steve Rogers is the American hero known as Captain America from the Captain America franchise within the Marvel Cinematic universe. He is an perfect example of an Official Hero based off of what Robert Ray wrote “the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong”(Pg 1). He would fall within someone who represents the American beliefs, therefore the name “Captain America”. He first represents this in his origin movie “Captain America: The First Avenger”. Before he had gotten his powers, he was a scrawny kid from Brooklyn, and despite this he would try to stand up for what’s right and help those in need, both successfully and unsuccessfully due to his stature, he would help them in his own way by subverting the attention of the attack or harassers to himself to protect those being victimized. Yet he wanted to join the fight in WW2 with all his heart, and he was able to do that after he was given “The Super Soldier Serum”, once he had the serum he dedicated all his new found power to helping the United States fight against the Nazi’s, yet when offered a gun, he opted for a Shield so he would

be able to save and protect as many people as possible. With this act it shows his compassion and sympathy towards others, further representing another point provided by Robert Ray “the official heroes embodied the best attributes of adulthood: sound reasoning and judgment, wisdom and sympathy based on experience”(Pg 2.Line 54-56). And as the movie goes on he is taking down Nazi Fortress’s left and right, while saving hundreds of American Lives. Yet he wasn’t able to save every life because during a mission on a train the shield had gotten knocked down off the tracks leading to the alleged death of his best friend Bucky Barnes. Steve used this to motivate him to stop the man behind it: the Red Skull. Once Steve managed to discover what the Red Skull had planned he defeated him, and to save thousands of lives he chose to load up all of the explosives Skull had into a ship and flew it into the ice, doing the most heroic act of them all, sacrificing himself. However he would surprisingly survive and be put into a coma for 66 years, and would go on to do plenty more heroic acts, even saving the earth on multiple occasions. Steve followed a strict code of honor, and stuck to his morals, no matter what. However some other heroes have a different approach to their “heroic” duties; an example of this would be the Outlaw Hero Deadpool.

Wade Wilson is a mercenary known as Deadpool from the Deadpool Movie Franchise, he provides an example of the Outlaw Hero as stated by Robert Ray “Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements”(Pg 1). In which Wade embodies both a Gunfighter, wanderer and Someone that values self determination and freedom from entanglement. At certain points throughout his 2 movies he shows the traits of a loner despite being surrounded by others more often than not. Wade began his story as a simple Mercenary doing jobs and helping those in need, until he met a girl that rocked his world to the core and it was a nice time until he was diagnosed with late stage 3 cancer within his Liver,Lung, Prostate, and Brain. Once he learned about this he was pretty much guaranteed death, but a man offered Wade a chance at survival with an experimental treatment that may save his life, and with no options left he left a note in the middle of the night for his girlfriend explaining that he had left. After being taken to the facilities for the treatments he was horribly experimented on, they disfigured him and awakening his power of an extremely powerful healing factor which saved his life, at the cost of skin and freedom. He would manage to escape after an explosion and indirectly faking his death after battling the man that did all of this to him. He would then seek out an old friend to help him track down and kill those that did

this to him while building up the name deadpool and getting more clues about the whereabouts of the man behind it all, Francis. While doing this he would enact these bloody killings with jokes and quips showing a common trait within outlaw hero's which is a sense of childish nature, Robert Ray Says in page 1; "The attractiveness of the outlaw hero's childishness and propensity to whims, tantrums, and emotional decisions derived from America's cult of childhood". After finally catching up to Francis he manages to finally get a chance to kill him, yet he is stopped by 2 Heroes Colossus & Negasonic Teenage Warhead. Leading to Francis escaping and Kidnapping Deadpool's former girlfriend; she was out looking for him after he had gone missing and disappeared for a month. Afterwards, Wade reconciled with the hero's and the team up to save his girlfriend. In an Epic Climactic Battle at an abandoned Helicarrier, followed up with a bunch of explosions they manage to save his girlfriend while violently killing Francis. After the battle is done, Wade finally reconciles with his girlfriend and shows her his disfigured face after the accident, and she accepts him for who he is and they then go on to Longinly and Romantically Kiss as the movie ends. Deadpool's journey is filled with blood and comedy, making it the classic Outlaw hero story, and to follow up with the next example for the reluctant hero with another mercenary of sorts is the assassin Ladybug.

Code Name Ladybug is an assassin and main protagonist of the movie "Bullet Train", and he shows the characteristics of an Reluctant hero based off of a quote from Robert Ray; "Reluctant Hero is an average "every man" who is thrust into extraordinary circumstances and becomes heroic due to circumstances beyond his or her control"(Thematic Paradigm Slide 11). Ladybug is an assassin who was assigned to a mission as a substitute for another agent due to illness. He was told by the organization that this was a small time assignment and that he just needed to retrieve a briefcase. After getting on the train he soon learns that there are a series of other assassins after that very same briefcase, and as the movie progresses he is confronted by several assassins. Within these confrontations, his unluckiness plays a factor each time leading to him accidentally killing several of them. While this is happening, Ladybug manages to get the briefcase and then loses it; he also attempts to leave the train, and then somehow ends right back on it in the end. Using a quote from Robert Ray, "At times, a Reluctant hero might begin as a selfish character, who is forced to set their own needs aside and pursue a greater good" (Thematic Paradigm Slide 11). Throughout the film, Ladybug is focused on getting the mission over with as soon as possible to the point where he tries

to quit, but in the end he stays on the train till the end to inevitably confront the man behind both the case and the train. After he finally confronts the mastermind, he learns that this whole train, all the high jinks as well as those who were on it were all a part of one revenge plan to knock down two birds with one stone: to take out all those he had a personal grudge against. To Ladybug's surprise, he learns that the original agent meant to be on the train was the one he wanted to get revenge on, and in a last ditch attempt to get himself out of the situation, he yells that it isn't him. Before the mastermind can hear this, an explosion goes off, sending him right back into the train. After the train crashes, the mastermind, injured, attempts to kill Ladybug with his own gun, and then it ends up exploding in his own face due to it being rigged earlier in the movie. Ladybug ends up being the most accidental hero that nobody knew they needed.

With that being said, Robert Ray the Thematic Paradigm shows a great representation of heroes within stories and how these three archetypes can be used to define a multitude of protagonists throughout the history of storied media. These three examples all follow completely different stories yet they all match perfectly with their given archetypes. Captain America truly represents an Official Hero with his iron will and drive to help and save as many lives as possible. Deadpool shows the brutal nature of the outlaw hero with his childlike attitude followed by brutality. Ladybug shows the unwillingness of the Reluctant Hero as he is thrust into a position to help those in need. The Thematic Paradigm perfectly defines heroes within stories and will likely continue to do so for generations to come.

# The Monster Inside of Me

*Adrianna Jaccoma*

When I was six years old and cried during the birthday song, nobody thought it meant I had anxiety. When I was eight years old and throwing up everyday before school, nobody thought it meant I had anxiety. When I was nine years old and crying every time my mom would leave me for the night or the weekend, nobody thought it meant I had anxiety.

When I was in kindergarten, I had an emotional support aid because I would not get off the bus when it got to school because I was so nervous to go into school. And in 2008, mental health issues were just something that crazy people had. They weren't as concerned with high anxiety levels in the late 2000s as they are now. Every kid has trouble adjusting to school, but for some reason I was different.

I remember in kindergarten we had a center day thing when everyone in the school would go around to these different tables and our parents would volunteer to help out. My mom was a stay at home mom at the time, so she would always volunteer to come in and help. I remember the one day she was there I went up to her center and only stayed at hers. The teacher did not like that I wasn't "doing my work" and "only wanted to be with my mom" and tried to pull me away from my own mother. I obviously threw a fit— because how dare she pull me away from my mother— that I became so insufferable that I had to sit in the nurse's office drinking Hi-C juice until my mother was out of the building and we were able to go back to class.

Obviously I don't remember much about kindergarten because that was years ago, so I don't really remember much about how my anxiety presented itself at that age. But I do remember that fire drills scared the shit out of me (and they still do). Something about the loud siren and buzzing noise would make me start crying. But when I was still in kindergarten, our classroom was next to the custodians office and they would shut the office door when a fire drill was about to happen. I still remember the feeling I would get when I saw the office door shut. It was like my stomach had dropped 500 feet. But there was nothing I could have done to make it better. I didn't know when it was coming and couldn't prepare myself for it. And I still had to do whatever we were doing in class while we were waiting for the drill to happen. I think I would be sobbing when the alarm went off and would not stop

crying till the alarm went off and we were back inside. My disability and sensory issues were definitely in full force there.

When I was in fourth grade I was on hall patrol. I remember I had a gut feeling that we would have a fire drill all that day and I was standing at my post that morning sobbing. Once the bell rang and I was released, I was taken to my social worker's office to talk to her. I basically was telling her about my fear of the fire alarm and how I just had a gut feeling that it would go off that day. And of course my anxieties were right and we would have one that day. But she gave me a stress ball to cope and told me she would come support me before it went off. She kind of helped me with that.

I can't tell what it was that made me so afraid of fire drills. Maybe it was the fear of the unknown or the loud noises. But who knows what might have happened in the past that might have caused me to be so afraid of these loud noises.

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Another very fun thing I got from my anxiety was being deathly afraid of when we would go to restaurants and they would sing happy birthday to people. I remember when we would go to Friendlys (which we frequented a lot when I was growing up) and my parents/grandparents would have to ask our server if they would be singing the birthday song so they could be prepared to take me outside when it would happen. I recently discovered that when we would go out with my grandparents and they would be singing the birthday song, my grandfather would always volunteer to bring me outside when the singing would happen so he could have a cigarette while we were out there (I miss him).

Even when I was little and would go to my friend's birthday parties, I hated the birthday song and hated even more when people would clap at the end. So my own birthday parties were literal hell for me because I wasn't able to go to the bathroom while everyone sang. But this is how I learned how to applaud in Sign Language— someone figured out this is how we could avoid the loud noise of clapping for me while we still clapped. I eventually overcame this and am now okay with hearing the birthday song and people clapping. I feel like when you are younger and you hear certain things they sound so much worse than they do when you grow up. When you are younger the world feels so scary to you, it's not scary anymore.

I mentioned a lot about the similarities between my anxiety and disability which is what everyone just thought it was for a while. Sure my anxiety may stem from my disability, but anxiety and CP are two different things. I feel like for so long people would say that it was just my disability

and that nothing else could be wrong with me— boy were they wrong.

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Every morning before school in like second or third grade I would throw up before school. I remember watching the bus drive by the house after coming out of the bathroom after throwing up all morning. My mom never thought that I was throwing up from anxiety and it was that bad, we just thought my stomach was so sensitive that I couldn't eat breakfast so early in the morning. And while that is kind of still true, it was majorly from having such bad anxiety. This would inevitably lead me to have poor eating habits— but we don't have to get into that too. I remember my mom tried to get me to have Carnation Instant Breakfast shakes in the morning to try and hold me over before having snack at school (of course I had the chocolate ones, not vanilla. I'm not a psychopath, I have morals,) but of course that didn't work either because my stomach would still become too sensitive for me. When I was in elementary school, my handwriting was so bad that I needed someone to come and write for me. And when it was time for her to come write for me, it was snack time and I used to tell her that I wasn't having breakfast so I was very hungry by the time it got to having snack. I don't remember what her response to that was— I told Henrietta a lot of dumb shit during her time with me.

Around fifth grade, I got my first dog Spike. He was this tiny boston terrier who was afraid of everything that is afraid of anything smaller than he is. I was initially afraid of dogs and was so against the idea of getting a dog because of how scared I was. I didn't even go into the pen to pet him when we first went to pick him up. But the day after we brought him home from the shelter, I was all over him. He quickly became my best friend. Whenever I get sad or anxious, I go right over him and cuddle him and he immediately calms me down, and then will start barking cause he heard the wind blow.

High school was when it became more prevalent in my life. I remember one day during junior year having a conversation with my best friend about her social anxiety. I remember this moment so clearly— we were coming out of our nutrition class and going down stairs to our theater class. She was telling me about finding a dress to wear to her field hockey banquet and said she didn't even want to go and said she might have social anxiety. I had no clue what it was (come to think of it I didn't even know what many mental health issues were,) and she told me it was how the thought of social interactions may give someone anxiety. At the time that definition had really resonated with me and I told her “oh I might have social anxiety too.” I will never forget how she responded with “no you have regular anxiety.”

During COVID my anxiety was understandably high. I was only seeing my family, I couldn't see any of my friends, I was basically just in my room all day watching Netflix. And don't even get me started on online school. I did actually like it and I found it to be fine, but I also didn't like having to sit on Zoom for six hours a day, it was so fucking boring. But I remember my senior year I was having panic attacks every morning during my math class. It was so random and I don't really remember why it was occurring and at 7 am, crazy.

But at least once a day during 2021, I was crying every day over random stuff and was having frequent panic attacks. There was nothing that I could put my finger on that my anxiety was coming from. My parents didn't know what to do— they thought they were doing good to me but unfortunately everything they were trying to help me with just wasn't working. But then they caved and got me into therapy.

Starting therapy was honestly the best thing to happen to me. Talking it out with another person was very helpful for me and developing coping strategies was a game changer. From there she also suggested that I should start seeing a psychiatrist and get on medication. Seeing a psychiatrist however, was the worst thing that happened to me (I literally dread having to go every single time.) Though I hate going to the psychiatrist, being on medication has helped my anxiety in great ways and I've now been able to manage it in ways that I haven't before.

My anxiety isn't perfect, I'm not perfect. I'm still working through a lot of things and trying to figure everything out (I'm literally just a girl.) But from here it only gets easier, from here we go up, there is no going back.

# Untitled

*Zie Mueller*

*“Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride. Or a perfect daughter”*

These are the lyrics that begin Lea Salonga’s song “Reflection” from Disney’s *Mulan*. I was eleven years old when I sang them in my elementary school’s talent show. I was obsessed with the song, and although I knew it wasn’t a *happy* song, something inside of me resonated with it. The way Mulan navigated her inner identity, womanhood, and complicated family dynamics were struggles that I related to but didn’t have words for at the time. Seeing her story depicted on screen and those lyrics presented to me made me feel less alone in a world that I didn’t even understand I was lonely in at the time.

Two minutes and twenty six seconds. The song runs for the length of a commercial break, the time it takes to brush your teeth, or to load and start laundry in the washer. For two minutes and twenty six seconds I was singing my soul out on the stage of our gymnasium.

I was awarded first place.

I was on cloud 9 about receiving such an honor for my singing abilities. But looking back on this moment ten years later, I wonder if my accomplishment was deeper than voice alone. I wonder if it was emotion.

*“Can it be I’m not meant to play this part?”*

I always knew I was different. I would be jealous of the boys sections in clothing stores, I hated getting super dressy, and I always had a feeling like I was foreign to my own body. I never had words for these feelings, and I thought this was just a part of growing up. My parents told me about hormones and how there’s sometimes some weird feelings that come up when they start to change. They told me

these changes mean that I'm becoming a woman, and that they should be embraced.

*"Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart"*

Going through middle school with a weight on your shoulders as big as, "I'm a woman but I'm not a woman," was one that I didn't know how to process. So instead I took on all the roles that women were supposed to take on. I grew my hair down to my waist; I wore padded bras; I dated boys; I shaved my legs; I pushed down all my feelings of otherness; drowned them under layers of foundation and mascara, hid them under dresses and high heels, and lived the way I was supposed to live. I thought if I played the role well enough, I could trick myself into believing,

*"I am a woman."*

*"Who is that girl I see, staring straight back at me?"*

But it doesn't work that way. I found myself anxious and depressed, unsure of what was wrong with me. Why couldn't I look in the mirror and like what I saw? I compared myself to all the girls around me, and questioned why I never felt as confident as they seemed. This feeling followed me into college. It crept up on me everywhere I went: the women's bathroom, the assigned shopping sections for clothes, and even my Disney+ streaming profile. Gender was everywhere. It taunted me my whole life.

Until I made the realization that I wasn't looking at a girl in the mirror.

*"Why is my reflection someone I don't know?"*

I was twenty years old when I first said the phrase "I'm nonbinary" to myself in the mirror. And yet, as much as that felt like it fit me, I realized it wasn't as simple as assigning another label to myself. It's about getting to know myself.

I thought I knew myself. I had lived two decades in this body already. But my true self was hidden behind a mask of womanhood. I had to learn what this commitment to being authentic meant. I had to re-introduce myself to *me*.

*“Somehow I cannot hide who I am, though I’ve tried.”*

I was twenty-one when I publicly came out to everyone—ten years after singing a song about needing to hide your identity for the sake of others, despite what that means for yourself. Ten years later, I finally see me.

*“When will my reflection show who I am inside?”*

When I was eleven years old I stood in front of a mirror and didn’t see myself in the reflection. I hid under a mask of makeup and make believe until I finally had the courage to know the person underneath it.

When I was twenty-one I stood in front of a mirror again.

And this time it wasn’t just myself liking the reflection I saw; it was my reflection looking back and liking me.

# Mixtape

*Maggie Robinson*

Track 01: “Why Can’t I?”- Liz Phair: Have you ever had a playground crush that felt so seismic that you felt the need to stare out the window and sing along to a romcom soundtrack; feeling things that no one could possibly understand?

His name was Ricky. He had hazel eyes, wore braces, and thought KFC was too spicy. That last one was not an exaggeration. Our moms were friends and we sat across from each other in third grade. I had crushes before, mostly on cartoon characters, but this felt different. There were butterflies, girls and boys chasing each other around the playground, my best friend and I attempting a love spell. I probably should explain that one. In between enthusiastic discussions of Bratz dolls and Girl Scouts, Aimee handed me a note. “Sun of moon, sea of fire, let him be my true heart’s desire”.

“Put this under your pillow and say it three times before bed”, she said. We were really into *Charmed* at the time. I would do this ritual every night for three months. Shocking probably no one, it did not work. I wanted to kiss him, despite feeling too embarrassed to articulate it even in my own mind. A simple “Hi” from him would send me to cloud nine. Ricky, Ricky, Ricky. He took up so much space in my brain, if not all of it. This is probably why I still struggle with long division.

Track 02: “Doll Parts”-Hole: Sixteen, a dangerous age. Emotions and desires are in overdrive and the brain will not be fully developed for another decade. A psychology professor once compared this to a speeding car without any breaks.

He was gangly, nerdy, and tortured. He loved Neitzche, wanted to be a writer, and questioned whether forever really existed. I considered him to be my best friend in high school. When I fell in love, it felt like getting hit by a truck. The feeling was not mutual, but he had other ideas in mind. I settled for the role of an ever-loving fuckable object. Made to be tossed aside when he got bored. Made to be the target of his anger. Made to have my consent taken away time again. I was told by friends repeatedly that he was not worth it. Yet still I was willing to burn down the world for him, taking myself down with it.

Track 03: “Moonchild”-King Crimson: Not too long after graduation did it hit me how fucked up everything was when it came to him. I was already diagnosed with depression and anxiety at this

point, but the realization that I was on the receiving end of sexual violence was a breaking point. Like throwing kerosene on an already raging fire. I had a full on mental breakdown. I struggled with leaving the house and essentially became a hermit for three years. I never wanted to be seen, and as far as I was concerned every man was a monster. I felt disgusting, monstrous, unlovable. I wanted out of this skin that felt like it was covered in slime. The only thing that kept me going (except not really) was an acidic, boiling anger aimed both at myself and the world around me. My parents were understanding, but I knew they were struggling to make sense of this new person in front of them. I also became a full blown insomniac, often watching movies until the sun came up, binge eating to avoid feeling anything. My favorite at the time was *Buffalo '66*. Those years were a blur truthfully. It would be a decade before I fell for anyone again.

Track 04: “Everybody Lost Somebody”-Bleachers: Twenty-five, the age my mom was when my grandma passed. Twenty-five, the age I was when she passed. It was breast cancer, stage IV. She fought for three years and lasted longer than most people thought. But that did not change the fact that it was bullshit the way my siblings and I only had two decades with her, that she will never see the adults we will become. Bullshit that my parents wouldn’t get to grow old side by side. Bullshit that she now only existed in the form of memories. Jack Antonoff sings “I am lost in a world without you” and it is the only thing keeping me together. I learned that grief is a form of love that will never go away, rather you learn to make room for it.

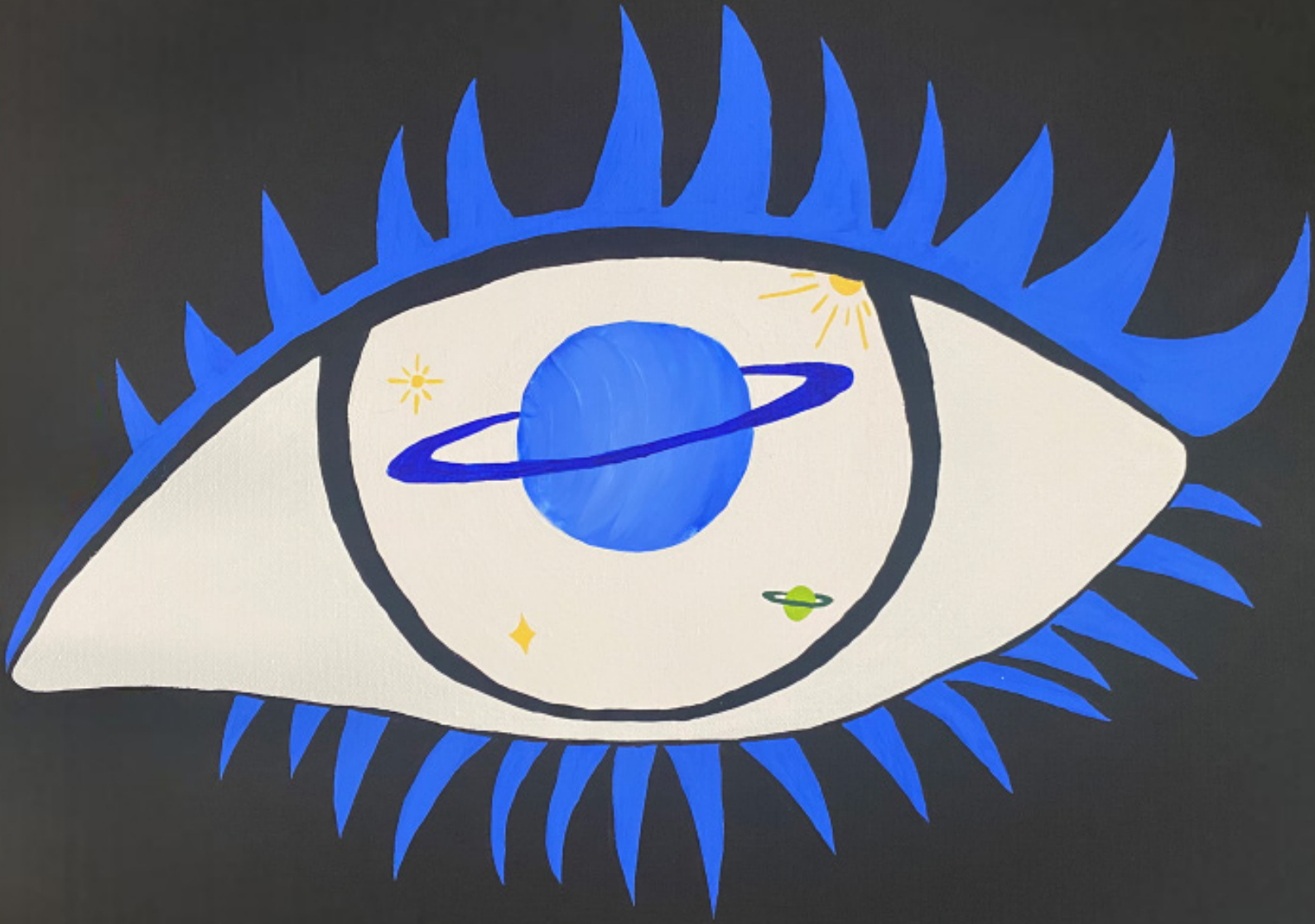
Track 05: “Outside”-George Michael: It was the pandemic, so aside from trying five million hobbies there was not much else for me to do but reflect. Something in my brain clicked that the way I was carrying my unresolved trauma from all those years ago was not sustainable. I was tired of hating myself, desperately trying to hold on to my accumulated rage. In the wake of my mom’s passing and the feeling that the world was going to end, I just could not anymore. I started going to therapy. I was diagnosed with PTSD, and wrote a lot. I came to terms with my sexuality, long held at an arm’s distance, and embraced my bisexuality. I also listened to tons of pop music, the kind that made you want to flock to the nearest dance floor. I learned to prioritize platonic love in friendships. I learned that maybe I could love myself, even if it was only a little. I’m still a work in progress, going to therapy and trying to be a better friend both to others and myself.

Track 06: “Shotgun”-Soccer Mommy: DJ and I at my Aimee’s wedding. He was the best man, I was the maid of honor. I guess I got my romcom wish after all. DJ lives in Ohio so we have to get

creative with dates over Discord, twice a year visits, and endless texting. He looks like a lumberjack and does hilarious voice impressions, the kind where my laughter turns into psychotic screams. He knows about my messiness, yet it does not scare him because he has his own. He talks me through my panic attacks as we go on long drives together. He adores my siblings and wants to pay his respects to my mom. He also eats potatoes raw like an apple and it's weird as hell. We are now talking about moving in together. It's not all sunshine and rainbows because no healthy relationship is. We came into this with our respective traumas and are facing them head on together. I love this. I love him.

Track 07: "the space between two world"-nujabes: We are learning about poetry. The professor tells us it is probably not a good idea to write about love. It is overdone, often to a mediocre degree. Besides, we are far too young to know what love is. *With all due respect, fuck that*, I think to myself. I will write all the love poems I want. Ones about my boyfriend, ones about my friends, ones to myself. This is what will sustain me.

# Poetry



In this publication, the poetry editors wanted to showcase the different interpretations of our Spring 2025 theme of “Reflections.” Every story deserves their moment to sparkle and shine. Whether it’s a personal self-reflection, social commentary, or seeing yourself through someone else’s eyes, it is our hope these works resonate with you as much as they did for our editors.

“Staring into Space” by Brielle Engelhardt ©2025

# The Pride of a Man

*Nadine Abouzid*

Arab man, change your ways.  
Be the best for your children.  
Cigarette smoke is your cologne.  
Daughters only.  
Each born in the hopes to have a boy.  
Feign ignorance, believe you are not responsible for the  
Generational trauma passed down from you.  
Hide the truth of your ways from everyone, but  
I know the truth.  
Just pretend you know me as well as I  
Know you.  
Lie your way through.  
Money in place of love  
Never speaking to each other.  
Only business.  
Prideful man  
Question my anger  
Related by blood but never by love  
Sabotage my mother's name  
Tell the world your pain and never ours  
Until you succumb to the dirt beneath your feet  
Vexed with lack of control  
Wary of the splintering mask you wear on your stage  
'Xuding the fear of  
Your family needing you no longer.  
Zero ways you have changed, Arab man.

# Generational Wealth

*Emily Castro-Eugenio*

It's cold and painful,  
the feeling you get when you are no longer *you*.  
*You'll be okay*, you chanted over and over

and *over* again.

You closed your eyes, ready  
to go, why must you  
go.

Now you stand in the middle of a field  
of dead dreams, tattered hearts, and broken-down bones.  
With tender flesh, black and blue  
and bloodied thoughts of those who came before you  
and those who will come after.  
The same sad eyes and the creeping feeling,  
there's no turning back.  
A warm embrace is all that is needed.  
It would fix many of your broken thoughts.  
So here you stand, cold and empty staring at the field.  
The grass has grown taller, and the sky has stopped weeping.  
You are the key.

With your rich legacy passed down you stand  
tall with glasslike tears leaving your eyes.  
Your bloodied eyes and bruised hands  
hold your ancestry.  
There is no gift other than  
the gift of burden.

Do not fear it,  
the past, the present, and the future.  
Live another day of regret  
and live a life of despair, for you are the one who will  
make it out alive.

# Mosaic

*Skye Chernobilsky*

I am a mosaic of everyone  
I've ever  
Loved.

But that's not what I mean  
When I say I am  
A mosaic of everyone  
I've ever  
Loved.

My ex-best friend,  
She never cursed  
So now I say "Jeez the Wheeze"  
When I'm bound to burst.

My first grade teacher,  
She cared when I was upset.  
Saying I didn't like school  
Are words that I regret.

When someone raises their  
Voice at me though,  
Fear runs cold  
Right through me.

Something I learned from  
My dad  
Who's wide set bones  
I acquired.

When my mom fails  
To pick up the phone  
I always fear the worst.

I fear she's on  
The side of the road again,  
Her car is overturned.

Sometimes I drive  
By Taco Bell and  
Reminisce on talks  
With friends.

And then I sit and wonder

What to do when all of this  
Will end.

I am a mosaic of everyone  
I've ever loved.

Ebbing and flowing  
Ever changing and growing.

With life, I am in love.

# 2013

*Maura Corman*

*“It was so easy then never takin’ any stand  
It was so easy then, holdin’ hands”  
–Carly Simon*

I used to watch  
The Fairly Odd Parents,  
every Saturday,  
laughing at Timmy’s  
neglectful parents leaving  
him with Vicky  
even though she had a bag  
full of torture devices.

Mom sat with us with  
half her attention  
on us and the show.  
Dad was upstairs  
reading about some emperor.

I outgrew Timmy  
and his suffering, so  
I turned to  
flash games and videos.  
“A Day in My Life”  
*Factory Balls*  
“My No-Makeup Makeup Look”  
*Papa’s Pizzeria*  
“Top 10 Dieting Tips That Changed My Life”  
*The Impossible Quiz*  
“The Mandela Effect”  
*Disaster Will Strike 3*  
“Top 5 Weirdest Conspiracies”  
*Disaster Will Strike 2*  
“Conspiracies That’ll Blow Your Mind”  
*Disaster Will Strike*

Pain was once  
broken bones and  
getting shot  
with a NERF bullet.  
Fear grew out of  
school shooter drills.

Timmy cross dressed,  
but it was just punishment  
for saying it would be  
“a waste of a wish”  
to wish to be a girl.  
His dream girl,  
Trixie, cross dressed too.  
She did it to hide  
her love of  
gore-filled comics.  
Timmy ended up learning  
the basic lesson:  
boys can like girly things and  
girls can like boyish things.

Forgotten like many  
gender swap cartoon  
episodes, Trixie returned  
to the vapid popular girl stereotype,  
and Timmy never had a girly interest  
ever again.

My peers and I never changed.  
Boys played with boys.  
Girls played with girls. But  
if your interests crossed the line...  
You're Gay.  
You're a Lesbian.  
Nothing changed.

# Crunch

*Talia Hincks*

Chew on my bones so you can feel my heartbeat  
Consuming, captivating, *grinding* in your teeth.  
Curl deep into my organs, let us not be discrete,  
Know every inch and corner. Wear me as a wreath.

I'll sit behind your molars, where wisdom used to lie,  
And upon my hallowed skin you'll taste not' but pride  
Sinking on your tongue, searing in my flesh. Deny  
Me no river stones buried deep within my breast

Instead use sturdy hands, dig deep within my soul;  
Grasp the water worn edges of hurt I used to know.  
And free it from my veins, which tangle for control:  
The roots of an old willow tree struggling to let go.

Your phantom palms pull apart my ribs, label them with care.  
Make a million whispered promises, convey them with your stare.  
Forehead on mine, breath intertwined, show me I'm not alone.  
Condemn the barren future, for I hunger to be known.

# If You Are The Sun

*Emily Invanauskas*

Don't look at the sun,  
They say.  
Well, I guess that's why when I look at you,  
I find that you are blinding.

I have always considered myself  
To be like the moon.  
Reflecting your light,  
While my eyes are still reeling  
From the sight of you.

You have always been  
A constant.  
Patiently waiting for me  
As my eyes adjust  
And I just  
Continue to revolve around the Earth,  
Once a month, covered in shadow.  
Once a month, bathed in your light,  
And, with a twirl, I say hello.  
I open my eyes, and start to glow.

I'm sure you already know  
That without your presence  
My world, as I know it,  
Would be a lot darker.

But with you I can dance  
As we brave this vast expanse  
Of space,  
Together.

# i accidentally slipped into a hole the other day

*Ashley Morales*

i slipped into a hole the other day.  
trying to find my  
wandering self

~~loathing, worthless mind in my  
piece of shit for a brain.~~

it happened on my bed.  
the springs began to coil  
collecting my  
body, striking the inside of my head,  
wiring my jaw shut.

~~you don't cry for help here. right?~~

as i started towards the bottom,  
i found there to be  
no drop of water that i could wade on  
no soft earth to sit and settle upon.

it was just

hard concrete.  
cold asphalt.

and lie there.

as i  
lie there

and lie there.  
my eyes wide, mouth shut, head aching,  
i am staring up

reach.

at a sky  
that ~~continuously~~ seems to be out of

# Atomotus

*Claire Palmer*

The sun did not disappear -  
The slit squint dimming.  
There was no premonition of the end of days,  
Just dust circling, settling restless.

We were in the kitchen,  
Nicking fingers on freshly sharpened somethings,  
Simmering on low.  
Chicken portraits cock eyed,  
Not quite straightened.

The noiseless *flash*.  
Fine china demolition rat-tat-rattles,  
Shaking her figurines  
And flipping a finger  
At the sweeping shock  
Wave, crashing -  
Waxing and waning.  
First quarter not encompassed, daystar snuffed.

Battle on middle earth,  
man made stuff,  
And nature shunned.

# November 6, 2024

*Jay Roberson*

That feeling eight years ago  
Creeps back in again  
Woke up in tears  
Afraid of all the pain  
Just like I did in the eighth grade

And I can see me  
In the students I teach  
The disappointment  
And fear for their future  
They ask me why?

The souls that will be taken too soon  
Lost control to autonomy  
Collective youth sits and weeps  
Mourns what could have been

So many brothers, sisters, siblings  
Already lost to the world  
Of unforgivable, fiery rage  
For sparking joy  
In the most authentic way

We're forgettable and "fake"  
But you stay saying our names  
We remind you of pain  
You feel for your phoniness

My friends who proudly wear pink and blue  
Dwindle day by day  
I'll march for you  
No matter the color  
A reminder you have to stay

Prove them wrong.  
You're here, and you're strong.

# Dear Mother

*Kaitlyn Seawood*

Did you ever think of me  
when you wrapped your arms around others,  
clutching them close while I learned to stand alone?  
You took in children who weren't yours,  
but left me searching for hands that never came.  
You never held me when the world was too much,  
never whispered the secrets of being soft  
in a world that demands hardness.  
I built my own role models,  
found strength in places I didn't expect—  
and maybe, just maybe,  
I became the woman you never wanted to teach me to be.

Now I stand,  
stronger than you ever let me be,  
learning to love what you couldn't hold.  
Maybe one day,  
someone will need me like I needed you—  
but I'll be better,  
more steady.

With everything I've become,  
Your daughter.

# To Be Or Not To Be

*Michaela Smith*

How do you define my existence?  
My crimson-stained cheeks  
with jet-black eyelashes and  
tear splatters on my face  
weeping with regret  
it is all I know, as a woman  
carrying the weight  
of expectations, but only  
crumble into ashes, it would  
befit for a tragic heroine  
to be Ophelia, dead among the flowers or  
poisoned by insanity  
the parts of me that I hate  
I want to unleash my rage  
A descendant of my mother's temper  
who stands in my way, now  
being feminine means living and dying

Perceive me as a man  
a chiseled jawline  
a stare that breaks bones  
sculpted in the image of Achilles  
being masculine means void of emotion  
is weakness, because  
of the world, that  
I cannot fail, to  
be a disgrace, it is a fate  
I do not want  
to be Hamlet, with his ambition  
motive to kill  
it is in my nature, after all  
vengeance is my birthright  
eager to devour anyone  
prepare to be ripped apart  
by envy's sword

# In Mind I Might

*Lilly Trace*

Is this a test?  
I feel it odd to so engage  
A person as myself  
In such a manner:  
In mind I might—  
In body, however...

Do you wish to bring me lower?  
Unable to have me one way,  
So you'll settle for  
Demystification.  
I am real. I am physical.

In mind I might  
Say yes – I do, actually—  
Despite my apprehension;  
Despite the compromising it implies.

Is that it? An experiment:  
“Oh, she is not as incorruptible  
As I thought.”  
Do you believe I've fooled you?

I believe, at times, that you  
Are trying to fool me.

In mind I might,  
In body I shouldn't.

But perhaps I will.



# Artwork

Welcome to the art section of *Venture*. This year we have chosen pieces that showcase the creativity, emotions, and skills of these artists. Each work was chosen for its ability to captivate and convey unique perspectives through their powerful storytelling. We sought out submissions that offer fresh perspectives and which we believe truly reflect our talented community.

“In the Throes” by Mitchell Meyer ©2025



“Beneath the Surface” by Brielle Engelhardt ©2025



“Hush, they might hear us” by Anastasiia Kokoulina © 2025

# “Stills from *Niña Linda*”



By Ashley Morales



“Chromatic Pulse” by Jp Perez ©2025



"Untitled" by Marianna Sonitis ©2025

By  
Marianna  
Sonitis



# Author Bios

## Fiction Authors

Finn Alexander is a current Rider undergraduate in the Musical Theatre Class of 2028. You might find him around campus performing or at home in Austin, Texas. A new writer, this is Finn's first and only literary publication to date, and he's deeply honored to be celebrating it with Venture.

Klaudine Bessasparis (she/her) recently graduated from Rider University following previous participation in Venture as the Treasurer and a Poetry Editor. Her college experiences as a copywriter, copyeditor, and tutor assisted her in becoming a copywriter at Whitestone. She is a book lover, an outdoor enthusiast, a tap dance fanatic, a decent volleyball player, and a constant source of (very bad) puns. Klaudine presented a short story at the New Jersey Women and Gender Studies Consortium Colloquium and was an invited panelist for Rider's Gender and Sexuality Studies Colloquium the past three years. This is her second publication in Venture.

Carole Cobos (she/her) is a member of the Fiction team. She is an English and Sociology major with a minor in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She's been published by Venture and is really proud to be part of the magazine now!

Brielle Engelhardt (she/her) is an English major with a minor in Journalism. She is the treasurer of Venture and was the design editor for this year's issue. She is in the Baccalaureate Honors Program at Rider, as well as being the treasurer of the national honor society Alpha Lambda Delta. She loves to write and paint and is excited to have both a literary piece and art pieces selected for Venture's Spring 2025 issue.

Brooke Foster (she/her) is currently a junior English major and Social Media Strategies minor working as an Embedded Tutor for Rider's first-year composition courses. While she enjoys sharing stories of all kinds, Brooke tends to gravitate toward fictional works of science-fiction, mystery, and the occasional romance novel. Outside of writing, you can find Brooke trying to cross books off of her endless to-be-read (TBR) list or discovering her latest comfort show on Netflix.

## Nonfiction Authors

Jerel Fields is a sophomore majoring in AEIM with a concentration in Film & Television. He was previously a marketing major for his first two semesters at Rider, but has since found a much better fit within the AEIM program, where he works with a diverse group of talented students. He is involved in the Aikido Club, Broncs Box Office, and Club Badminton, with E-Board positions also set for Aikido and Box Office next year.

Adrianna Jaccoma (she/they) is a recent graduate of Rider University where she studied English and Psychology. She is honored to have this piece be a part of this issue of Venture.

Zie Mueller (they/them) is a junior studying secondary education and English writing. They are a Venture staff member, helping with the marketing and nonfiction teams. Zie has always been a writer; they most enjoy exploring the intimate themes of identity, vulnerability, and the human experience through their writing. As a future teacher, Zie hopes to encourage young readers and writers to explore the limitless spaces reading and writing can bring to a person and enrich students' experience in English class one page at a time.

Maggie Robinson is an “accidental” writer and occasional poet. She will also not hesitate to tell you that she is bad at bios. In addition to being a poetry editor, this is her first published piece for Venture. She also likes cats, Taco Bell, and the 1990 film Pump Up the Volume.

## **Poetry Authors**

Nadine Abouzid (she/her) is a sophomore Film & TV major from Caldwell, New Jersey. She comes from a fully Egyptian household which inspired her writing. She enjoys all things creative such as crocheting, knitting and photography. She is honored that her first time writing poetry can be displayed in a place like Venture and looks forward to seeing all other submissions!

Emily Castro Eugenio (she/her) is an English major. She is a transfer student from Middlesex College and is in the second semester of her junior year at Rider University. She is also a first generation student who loves art, literature, music, and sports. She can be found drawing or cooking when she isn't writing or reading.

Skye Chernobilsky is a sophomore at Rider University with an Elementary Education and English Literature double major and a minor in middle school education. They are the equipment manager for the Rider University Pep Band and the Public Relations and Recruitment Manager, as well as a founding member of the Cranberry Collective, Rider University's Jazz Band. They also serve on the executive board of Rider University's Hillel as the secretary and are a Content Tutor and Student Writing Consultant for the Academic Success Center. In their free time, Skye enjoys listening to acoustic folk music, sitting by a tranquil lake or river, and taking photographs of nature.

Maura Corman (she/her) is the editor in chief of Venture. She is a senior English major who works at Rider University Libraries as a Student Back Processor. Previously she was on the editorial board and published in her high school's literary magazine, Insights. She has been spending the past year writing her own poetry about the American suburbs. In her spare time she likes to listen to music and read.

Talia Hincks is a senior at Rider University, where she studies English, Professional Writing & Publishing, and Management & Leadership. She is president of the Aikido Club; a member of the National English honor's society, Sigma Tau Delta; and head fiction-editor of Venture, Rider's University's literary Magazine. Talia is passionate about writing and literature, and she is interning with the Norton College Sales department this spring.

Emily Ivanauskas is a sophomore Environmental Sciences major with a minor in English writing. They adore both science and poetry, and have previously had poems featured in digital magazines as well as a local zine. Over the last few years she has been finding her voice in verse, writing about her experiences with love and heartbreak, and finding inspiration in nature alongside the Rider Poets. Some of her fondest memories come from her senior year English class in high school in which she would improve her craft while receiving support from her teacher and peers.

Ashley Morales (she/they) is a recent Rider University graduate and the former Web Editor for Venture Magazine. She still enjoys analyzing terrible (yet good) movies and listening to curated Spotify playlists. When she isn't in deep existential thought, Ashley enjoys writing and making films with friends.

Claire Palmer is a songwriter and poet who seeks to combine imagist and dada techniques within their work, drawing inspiration from nature, childhood, and synthesizing the distant past with contemporary themes. They were published in Venture in 2024 for their piece entitled I did so many

drugs in so many parking lots, and have since released a song on all platforms called 4th of July. They hope to continue writing in multiple mediums as a means to connect with their community, contribute to a larger conversation, and respond to an ever changing world.

Jay Roberson (they/he/she) is a senior studying Secondary Education and English. Currently, they are involved in The Rider News, Unified Sports and 107.7 The Bronc. They are looking forward to their start as a high school inclusion English teacher in September.

Kaitlyn Seawood (She/Her) is a senior journalism major with a minor in social media strategies. She is a transfer trustee scholar from Northampton Community College, PA and serves as vice president of the Transfer Student Association, social media editor of The Rider News, vice president of social media for the Gail Bierenbaum Leadership Council, promotions manager for PRSSA, and works in Admissions as a Transfer Experience Coordinator. Kaitlyn can be reached at seawoodk@rider.edu for questions and inquiries.

Michaela Smith (she/her) is a recent Rider graduate who majored in Communication Studies and minored in Arts and Entertainment Industries Management. She enjoys writing poetry, and hopes to publish a book of poems in the future. She is a creative thinker who loves to experiment with different forms of writing. Michaela loves music, painting, and spending time with friends.

Lilly Trace (any pronouns) is a junior English major with a minor in French. Writing is quite possibly their favorite mode of creative expression, with other hobbies like running, swimming, and baking occupying the other sectors of free time they have. Poetry in particular has been a favorite genre of Lilly's to play around in, though they occasionally dabble in nonfiction as well. Their idea of a perfect evening is a dinner of comforting Greek food and an egregiously thick book to devour alongside it.

# Editorial Masthead

## Editor-in-Chief

Maura Corman (she/her) is the editor in chief of *Venture*. She is a senior English major who works at Rider University Libraries as a Student Back Processor. Previously, she was on the editorial board and published in her high school's literary magazine, *Insights*. She has been spending the past year writing her own poetry about the American suburbs. In her spare time she likes to listen to music and read.

## Assistant Editor-in-Chief

Aiya Rabah is a sophomore English and Criminal Justice major. In addition to being on the events and design teams, she is the assistant editor in chief of *Venture*. She enjoys reading everything from literary fiction to comic books, writing short stories, and always trying new hobbies.

## Web-Editor

Eli Norton (they/them) is a junior English major with a minor in Music Production. They are the Web-Editor of *Venture* magazine and a member of the magazine design team. Even when they aren't managing the *Venture* website, they are never truly offline and are usually playing video games or doing some writing of their own.

## Academic Advisor

Prof. Vincent Toro is a Puerto Rican poet, playwright, and performer. He is the author of three poetry collections: *Hivestruck* (Penguin Random House, 2024), *Tertulia* (Penguin Random House, 2020), and *Stereo.Island.Mosaic.* (Ahsahta, 2016), which won the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award. Professor Toro is also a recipient of the Letras Boricua fellowship, a partnership with the Flamboyant Foundation funded in part by the Carnegie Mellon Foundation. His work has been published in dozens of magazines and journals and has been anthologized in Saul Williams' *CHORUS*, *Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon*, *Best American Experimental Writing 2015*, *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4: LatINEXT*, and *Latino Poetry: the Library of America Anthology*.

## Lead Editors

Talia Hincks is a senior at Rider University, where she studies English, Professional Writing & Publishing, and Management & Leadership. She is president of the Aikido Club; a member of the National English honor's society, Sigma Tau Delta; and head fiction editor of *Venture*, Rider's University's literary magazine. Talia is passionate about writing and literature, and she is interning with the Norton College Sales department this spring.

Lilly Trace (any pronouns) is the head nonfiction editor at *Venture* Literary Magazine. Lilly is an English major with a minor in French, and is currently a junior at Rider University. They also enjoy egregiously long books, as is demonstrated by them incessantly talking about *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

Brooke Foster (she/her) is the head poetry editor at *Venture*. She is currently an English major and Social Media Strategies minor working as an Embedded Tutor for Rider's first-year composition courses. Outside of writing, you can find Brooke trying to cross books off of her endless to-be-read (TBR) list or discovering her latest comfort show on Netflix.

## **Fiction Editors**

Skye Chernobilsky (they/them) is a fiction editor and PR team member of *Venture*. They are a double major in Elementary Education and English Literature with a minor in Middle School English. They are on the executive board of several clubs including the Rider University Pep Band and Hillel. In their spare time, Skye enjoys photography, cooking, and listening to music.

Carole Cobos (she/her) is a member of the fiction editorial team. She is an English and Sociology major with a minor in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She's been published by *Venture* and is really proud to be part of the magazine now!

Brielle Engelhardt (she/her) is the treasurer of both *Venture* and the national honors society, Alpha Lambda Delta. She is an English major with a minor in Journalism. Previously, she published stories and created cover art for her high school's literary magazine, *Wasabi*. In her free time, she enjoys crafting, reading, hanging out with friends, and drinking coffee.

## **Nonfiction Editors**

Sasha-Andrea Flowers (she/her) is an editor for the nonfiction portion of *Venture*. She is a Film and Television major with a minor in English. She is an independent student at Rider University, who loves writing and reading. Currently in two internships for editorial writing and production, she enjoys her position for *Venture*.

Anthony "Tony" Cammarano (He/Him) is a nonfiction editor at *Venture*. He's an English Major and works as a tutor at Rider's Writing Studio. He loves listening to music, playing video games, and watching pro wrestling.

Zie Mueller (they/them) is a junior secondary education and English writing major. They are on the marketing and nonfiction editing teams at *Venture*. Zie's hobbies include reading, running, and cooking, and spending time with their miniature poodle, Rosie.

## **Poetry Editors**

Bridget Gum-Egan (she/her) is working on both the poetry and marketing teams of *Venture*. She is an English major and works at the information desk here at Rider. She is very involved on campus in many clubs and is graduating this spring! She has a service dog named Sheriff, as well as 4 other dogs at home and she and her family's foster dogs.

Maggie Robinson (she/her) is a poetry editor at *Venture*. She is an English major with a concentration in writing. Her biggest goal is to be published in Taco Bell Quarterly. She loves perfume collecting, cooking, and anime.

Ashley Semmel (she/her) is a part of both the poetry editorial team and marketing team. She is a Secondary Ed and English-Writing major with a minor in Special Ed. This is her first year with *Venture* and in a literary magazine. She enjoys writing poetry, photography, listening to music, and binging too much TV!

Jake Tiger (he/him) is a poetry editor for *Venture*. He is a journalism major, executive editor of The Rider News and a student writing consultant at the Academic Success Center. This is his first year as an editor for *Venture*. He loves the Philadelphia Eagles, running, and his dog, Franklin.

# Acknowledgments

Thanks to all of those who have submitted to *Venture*. We appreciate your contributions of thank you for sharing your talent and unique perspectives. We would also like to thank our editorial teams for their commitment, adaptability, and their intensive work which has not gone unnoticed. To our faculty advisor, Vincent Toro, your guidance and assistance has been invaluable and we appreciate your encouragement, among many other things that you have offered throughout this process. Finally, to our reader, thank you so much for engaging with our magazine and your continued support. We hope that this edition has allowed you to reflect upon the experiences and creativity of others and we are grateful for all of you.

## Continuing Our Journey

As this issue comes to a close, we are looking to the future with excitement. *Venture* is committed to showcasing the voice of students, faculty, and staff in order to allow the Rider community to express their artistic voice. We encourage all writers and artists to submit their work to *Venture* next year. If you're interested in keeping up with *Venture* you can find us at [venture\\_litmagazine](#) on Instagram and if you are interested in joining our team, you can reach out to [venture@rider.edu](mailto:venture@rider.edu). You can keep up with the latest *Venture* updates on our new website, [venturemagazine.org](http://venturemagazine.org) where you can view the opening and closing of submission, as well as blog posts from our wonderful staff at *Venture*.