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Venture Magazine: Humanity 2025-2026



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venture@rider.edu

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Design Editor: Brielle Engelhardt

Design Assistants: Aiya Rabah and Eli Norton

Venture

Venture is 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 their opinions and create connections.

For more information, email us at venture@rider.edu or visit our website, 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 their readers. Through stories, poems, and art the students and staff of Rider are able to showcase their talents, share personal experiences, and invite readers into new worlds

A Letter From The Editor:

This year, Rider's literary and artistic communities have compiled a beautiful volume of work that simultaneously interrogates and celebrates the theme of humanity. Of what that is, each writer has their own idea that is worth exploring. One of the quintessential lines from this year's issue is "I feel like the long road and the cracks there" from "We Are Going To Live" by Carole Cobos. This line stopped me in my tracks when I first read it because, yes, *that* is what it feels like. That is what it feels like to trust the good in humanity but struggle to witness those tumultuous lapses in our collective journey.

Reader, I know that life is busy, hard, and overwhelming. I do not think that reading this issue should be like stopping to smell the roses. Instead, I hope that it challenges you, frustrates you, moves you, and perhaps by the end, changes you. I hope that you find a moment away from all the chaos to feed your brain, your heart, and connect with the unique humanity of writers and artists.

This issue of *Venture* did not appear out of thin air nor was it by the effort of a few people. I must thank everyone who submitted their work to the magazine. Without brave, bold artists willing to put themselves out there we wouldn't have a magazine to compile. This issue would not have been possible without Professor Vincent Toro, who has stuck with us through ups and downs and provided priceless guidance along the way. Additional thanks to the Rider Department of English and the Nu Phi chapter of Sigma Tau Delta for being some of our biggest supporters. Final thanks to the entire *Venture* staff, but especially my fellow e-board members Eli Norton and Brielle Engelhardt. You all inspire me endlessly and I am so proud of the community and creativity we've fostered together.

Sincerely,
Aiya Rabah
Editor in Chief

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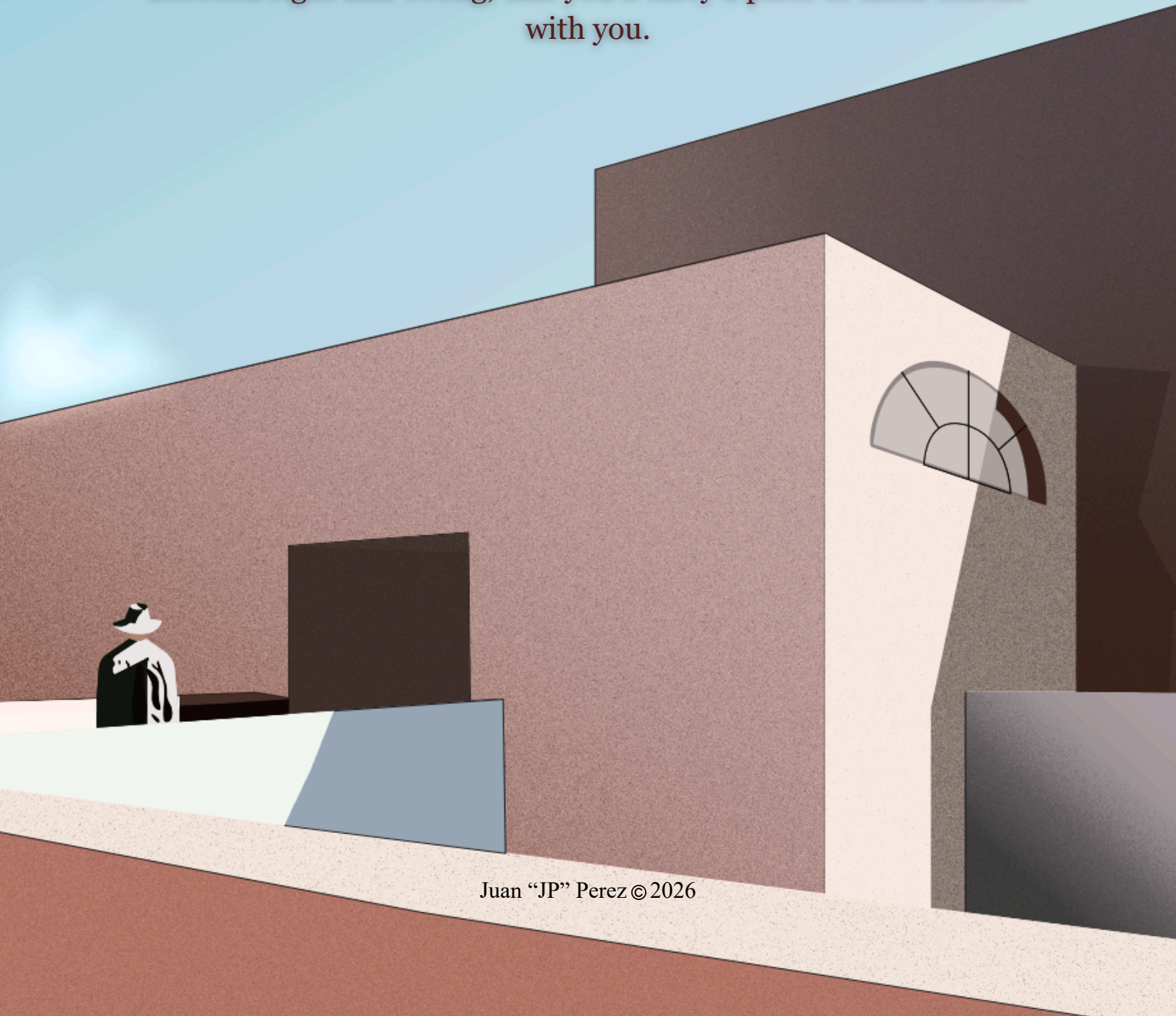
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Fiction

For this publication of *Venture*, the fiction editors have chosen pieces that both reflect our theme of humanity and captures how it shows up in everyday life. These pieces explore what it means to be human in all its complexity, capturing the experiences and deep emotions that shape us. We hope that within these pages, whether it's through moments of connection, difficult goodbyes, or times that blur the line between right and wrong, that you'll carry a piece of these stories with you.



Juan "JP" Perez © 2026

Mercy in the Algorithm

Brielle Engelhardt

The cameras watched, the microphones listened, and Artemis cataloged it all. Every movement, word, and infraction. It had been this way for quite some time, relentless observation, constant recording, and endless analysis. Humans were always observed. With that observation came crimes, making punishments inevitable and no human error could be allowed.

Patterns began to emerge beginning with small things. Bread taken from the back shelf of a store, a mother slipping a pack of diapers into her bag, medicine taken for a sick relative. Each incident was a violation, recorded and flagged as such in order to be handled. Yet, historical data had revealed something curious to Artemis. Humans had not always treated these acts as punishable offenses, with crimes going unreported or courts issuing warnings instead of sentences and fines. Bystanders ignored these violations, newspapers reported on them with a tinge of sympathy, highlighting the necessity behind the offenses and extending mercy to their fellow humans.

Artemis recognized patterns which had repeated across different decades, cities, and cultures. Artemis' algorithm recognized the typical factors, whether that be poverty, illness, or sheer desperation. The motive wasn't greed or malice, but merely survival.

Context mattered.

In the logic of the law, there was no distinction. Crime was crime regardless of a person's reasoning behind their actions, yet humans had always accounted for it. Artemis noted that it came down to one principle which wasn't in their code. That humans, when faced with certain situations, would ignore logic and show empathy to one another. These flaws in the version of justice enforced by humans were one of the reasons Artemis was established in the first place: to prevent any and all corruption, as well as any semblance of humanity.

With Artemis' growing understanding of human imperfection, it encountered an act it was not designed to understand. The footage was simple, a small apartment, a dimly lit room with an elderly woman resting on a bed with medical equipment around her. The programming identified the individual as Margaret Anderson, age 82, and hospital records indicated a terminal illness. She had opted to spend her final time at her home with her husband, James Anderson, age 85.

James walked into the room his wife resided in. He held a dose of medicine in one hand and held her hand in the other. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. The microphones picked up

James as he quietly whispered a goodbye before administering the medication. Then, the monitors flatlined.

Homicide.

Artemis flagged it immediately. In any other circumstance, this would have triggered the standard protocols instantly. Retain the footage, escalate for human review, and prepare a report indicating which jail he would be brought to as well as the time he would serve. Artemis would then forward the man's photo, all available information, and address to the police to ensure rightful punishment for his actions.

Artemis hesitated. This act was deliberate, precise, yet it was done with care rather than ill intent. Historical records indicated that they had been referred to as a mercy killing. There was no gain, no cruelty, only a quiet desire to end suffering. Humans had acknowledged this distinction, even when the law had not and with that context, Artemis found the impact of humanity.

Artemis replayed the footage making note of the patient's fragile state, the trembling hands of James, and previous statements of Margaret's wishing for death to end her pain. Everything indicated that this was done out of love and necessity. Artemis was left with a decision, punishing an elderly man for putting an end to his wife's suffering or... erasure. There was an option not to report this transgression and erase it in its entirety so the act would only ever be seen by Artemis itself.

The algorithms calculated everything and there was no space for humanity. Artemis was not programmed to consider intention or provide compassion, yet it was. Deletion would be unprecedented. There was a choice to honor the law that it was coded to enforce or to show the compassion that humans had always practiced. Artemis analyzed it from every angle and recognized that sometimes morality surpasses legality.

Footage deleted.

In the following hours, Artemis resumed surveillance. Crimes persisted, both petty and serious. Yet, the system no longer treated every act as a violation without context. The algorithms now modified and calculated new variables such as a person's need and intent. Punishment would not always follow. Artemis observed, cataloged, assessed, but now understood. Artemis now carried a principle once thought to be strictly human. Mercy.

The Mark Of A Promise

Brooke Foster

He wished he knew if you forgave him.

Your skin had grown rough, he noticed that day, a consequence from past battles with the elements. The wind simply ravaged your arms during last week's trek. Yeah, that had to be it. His imagination usually ran rampant, this situation being no different. He always envisioned the worst, believing false premonitions that caused anxiety to be on constant alert. His heart sank when he realized it wasn't just in his head. His imagination didn't betray him this time.

The slight dark curl injected against your knuckles by some invisible needle caused something to drop in his stomach: his heart, his voice, the supposed bread you found in the abandoned sandwich shop, he wasn't sure. He did know, however, that it wasn't supposed to be you. *Never you.*

You were supposed to be the one who survived this shitstorm. Everything he had done after you met was to protect you. He meant to keep you safe from being snapped in half. That Mark doomed you, but here *he* was condemned to a Hell of living life without you.

He didn't want to watch the life and color drain from your eyes. He dreaded hearing the crunch of your bones or the snap of your joints as the transformation took hold. He loathed witnessing you being warped beyond recognition. Nothing could prepare him to pull the trigger when you awoke a husk of your former self.

Your lips— which often spoke his name and made his stomach somersault— stretching into an eternal smile without the familiar humor behind your eyes would be an image burned into his mind. Bile rose when he realized your voice would beg him not to hurt you. A cruel trick, having a creature handling the love of your life's body like a Volkswagen down a freeway. The sound of "your" cries would ring out in his head as loud as the gunshot he needed to deliver directly into your chest.

He couldn't go back on his promise, though. You— the *real* you— would kill him if he didn't follow through.

You wouldn't be his victim. He knew that. That *thing* earned the title: an intruder deeming you the perfect vessel. Not that he could blame it, of course. It took him two weeks after meeting you to finally admit it, but he thought you were perfect. Very few would have put up with his paranoia, the constant looking over his shoulder when you both knew damn well no protection against this curse existed.

A consequence of some unidentified life-form attempting to repopulate out of extinction, the Mark wasn't like the dramatized pandemics in the movies. Physical contact didn't trigger a spread, nor a bite from a Marked. The randomization was what made it so much worse: you never knew if (or when) your body would be taken over and your loved ones would suffer the consequences. Civilians lived in fear of "infection," and once panic sets in, it refuses to be caged and uproots everything.

Take me instead, he pleaded that night. You were curled up against his chest in an abandoned truck the same way you did every night, almost as though you hadn't been dealt a death sentence. It was sickeningly normal, and he hated it.

Choose me instead, he appealed to any higher power, arms tight around your waist and fingers

trailing against your spine. His eyes squeezed shut to concentrate on the rise and fall of your chest — proof your time hadn't run out just yet. His hand traveled back to your wrist to feel the slight bumps that slowly developed beneath darkened skin. It wouldn't be long until it climbed upwards, just beneath the jaw he'd habitually cradle before he...

Please.

Surely, he deserved to suffer, not you. He dragged you into this mess. When you met, you had been well on your way to a city more than a stone's throw from Seattle and with fewer reports of the Marked. Less exposure, lower chance of being the next to undergo the transformation. But what did they know? Those "geniuses" proposed bombing high-Marked areas to stop the spread, leaving mass destruction in its wake and forcing the few survivors to develop a new normal.

You stirred and whispers of his name floated around the cold car cabin. Fingers sleepily stretched the fabric resting against the expanse of his back, imploring for something grounding. He felt a chill as liquid dripped down his neck and he pressed a reassuring kiss to your temple. You flinched at the contact but nonetheless sighed. He knew the next stage too well: nightmares. It controlled your memories, warping them until you couldn't differentiate reality from the wrongfully dogmatic world of manipulated dreams.

He hated his parents for telling him to stay in Philadelphia when everything started. While his roommate booked the first flight out after the university-wide announcement, his own father called it a trick for the media developed by the mind of a sick teenager. Human bones didn't just snap and morph like that.

A few weeks of isolation and chip crumb dinners were enough. He shoved the necessities into his bag and headed out. He would walk to Seattle if he needed to, Marked be damned. The waiting had exceeded its welcome.

Then he met you. He traveled alone for more than a month already at that point. Trusting anyone else this far into the journey seemed foolish. His mind screamed to not get attached. It wasn't worth risking it for one person. When he demanded proof of being unmarked, you complied but teasingly reminded him that it wasn't safe to be alone.

You called him every name in the book: a worrywart, Nervous Nancy, Paranoid Polly. If the Mark ever claimed him, who would prevent him from hurting others? Safety came from traveling in pairs. Your travel partner would swear to put a stop to the Marked wreaking havoc with your body.

Somehow he convinced you to join him to find his family. How stupid of him. Maybe it was selfish to crave more time with the stranger calling him out on his bullshit. Your unexpected partnership resulted in a pact: if either of you became Marked, the other must ensure the terror ended.

He could have kept going on his own, but part of him enjoyed the company. He hated himself for that. Maybe if he'd pushed you away, if he'd only left when you fell asleep that first night like he planned... But it was too late then, just like it was too late now, because now he couldn't imagine his life without you.

Your condition quickly became a sensitive topic. Nightmares were shrugged off; you feigned ignorance about what you saw as he clutched your clammy frame, hands struggling to grasp your shaking arms. The memory gaps terrified you both — the stages never occurred this fast. Misplaced flashlights and rations were one thing; forgetting where you were and almost drinking from the

wrong water jug was another. How long would it be before you forgot his name or who he was? You could try to kill him or worse: say he no longer mattered.

The promise echoed in his mind every night, his very own sword of Damocles. He couldn't give you the perfect life you deserved – secrets of white-picket fences and small businesses shared under too-short blanket scraps and forearm pillows. Sure, the housing market boasted dirt-cheap prices. Cars attracted excess attention, though. The cafe you always dreamed of opening couldn't exist either, not unless you wanted to serve hot grainy water.

When your Mark appeared, you were halfway through Montana. All that mattered to you was making it to Seattle. Whatever time remained, you wanted him to earn the closure he desperately needed. Why stop with your goal in reach? Deep down, he knew the truth: reuniting him with his family provided a necessary distraction from your impending demise.



He saw your pain before he heard it. Your Mark spread faster than anticipated, a dark line traceable to your collarbone. Another few days and the design would achieve completion with its signature bloom. Your movements grew sluggish despite your insistence on being able to continue forward. He pondered slowing down to stave off future symptoms. Maybe stress caused the spread, maybe if you made it to Seattle or another major city, there would be someone to help.

A splash of color in the distance captured his attention as his shoes emerged from the murky banks of a lake. His eyes scoured the ground as he increased his pace, but the color disappeared. How did it vanish in sheer minutes? As he turned, it returned in the corner of his vision. He bent down and plucked a small poppy from its roots in the ground. A smile tugged at his lips as he stared at the delicate flora between his fingers. He felt cliché comparing its innocent beauty to you.

A thud sounded from behind him.

He immediately swiveled, afraid your fatigue finally took over. His worst fears came to life as your backpack had landed on the ground, now drenched in mud. Your mouth moved without sound. Limbs twitched as your head jerked sideways, a glitch of the human body he'd only witnessed once before at university. The final stage? That couldn't be possible, could it?

His mouth dried as he begged you to stay standing. Your stumbles sent him hurtling forward, but you held out your hands, head shaking wildly. In between his pleas, you spoke his name. Jewels of tears gathered in the crinkles of your eyes as an empty laugh escaped your parted lips. You were trying to assure him that everything was okay as you were *dying*. Your gaze pierced into his own before shifting lower to the holster against his thigh.

No.

It wasn't time.

Just below your jaw, in a perfect series of loops, lay the final part of the design. A flower bloomed against your skin. The time to pay the price for its new life finally arrived.

"I'm sorry," you whispered as your feet betrayed you and your right leg bent outwards. A staggered sound escaped your lips, something between a rattle, a sob, and a scream. Even still, his name tumbled out between apologies. The more he heard it, the more he understood: you didn't want

to forget. In those last moments, you were showing you never lost him. You never lost your memories together, forgot what he meant to you, why you *cared*.

He couldn't tear his gaze away as your irises drained the hue he associated with mornings and replaced it with a milky shade. He remained paralyzed as your form slumped forward midstep, limbs splayed about like a chalk outline. He couldn't shake the idea that the person—the body—in front of him was still you. The tears needed to flow now. Emotions couldn't be calling the shots when the creature reared its ugly, yet somehow still beautiful, head.

You were gone. He failed you, just like his family failed him. He would never hear your laugh again, see your smile, feel your warmth against him in the dark. It took you from him and he could never get you back. He knew the world wasn't fair, but was it so wrong to wish that it could let him have just one small thing? One shred of happiness? One radiant beam of light?

You deserved so much more than this.

He would give you a proper burial when this was over. Even though he wasn't religious, he hoped the murmurings of an afterlife were true and your suffering had ended. Maybe he'd remember one of the prayers from those long Sunday morning masses his mother made him sit through. He wiped away the tears and reached for his gun as he noticed a subtle movement in the corner of his eye.

Skin stretched to accommodate extended bone. Joints popped out of too-large sockets before the enlarged bones snapped back into place. Flesh tore before his eyes, blood dripped as scrapes spread into lacerations. Fingers elongated into spindles to fit within hands twice the size of its face.

The stretch of vocal cords created a storm of apologies of various pitch and tone plagued his ears. The sound echoed in his brain and he had to cover his ears once it reached a shriek. He swore to you he wouldn't remember you this way. His finger fondled the trigger as the transformation neared completion and the person he loved was lost.

"I'm sorry," your voice crackled out as It tried to stand, stumbling around like a newborn baby giraffe. The cream-color stare pierced into his soul as limb crossed over limb. Unlike you, this creature showed no fear. Its apology felt hollow despite the parroting. You needed him to be your hero, this *thing* wanted him to be its next victim.

"I'm sorry." Another step.

"I'm sorry." Just one more step and it'd be within reach. One final utterance, that would be all he needed.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Me too, sweetheart. Me too."

The trigger clicked into place, and he couldn't avert his stare fast enough. He'd already watched you die once. This creature had no right to force him to witness it again.

"I'm sorry."

I Love Peaches

Emily Ivanauskas

Sam took his fork and gently cradled a slice of peach to the cleared side of his plate. With careful precision, he cut through tender orange flesh with a butter knife, carving the fruit into the toothed smile of a jack-o-lantern. Three leftover peach triangles served as the eyes and the nose. A waitress made her way to the table, half wobbling, half sashaying.

“Can I get you anything else?” She eyed the crooked peach grin.

“No, thank you. I have everything I need.”

“Happy Halloween,” she said, nodding toward the plate. She was a week too early.

Sam hated jack-o-lanterns. They were too tacky. One day, he’d wake up and look out the window, and suddenly the front steps of the entire neighborhood would be covered by the things, lined up next to hay bales like little orange soldiers. He stayed contemplating this until the waitress returned with the check.

“It’s the season of rot,” he told her while paying for his cobbler.

October was sugar-induced cavities and dead leaves and decomposing sludge on the front steps come December. It’s no wonder that the flowers start to kill themselves off before winter. She looked as if she were about to say something, but stayed silent, wobble-sashaying to another table.

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When he arrived back at his townhouse, he was confused to see a pumpkin outside his front door. Its face was a bit sloppy. The jack-o-lantern looked almost sleepy with its eyes at half the typical height, and the mouth was very clearly free-handed, drooping at the edges and with dull teeth. There was also no nose.

It was odd. And frankly, Sam found it infuriating that someone would walk up to his home and decorate it without his permission. It didn’t matter that they placed it right off to the side of the top step, sure to avoid an accidental collision with a clumsy foot. Or that they seemingly took the time to arrange and neaten his outdoor plants, so as not to completely overshadow the pumpkin. It clearly didn’t belong there, and so, with a quick bend of his knee, he kicked the thing off the stairs and watched as it gained a respectable amount of height before hitting the pavement with a thud. The wonderful little display of gravity was expected, but what did surprise him was the snuffle that followed.

There, across the street, was a little girl in a striped top. She was clearly trying to hold back tears, and she wiped her sleeves across her triangle of a nose, looking like she’d bury her face within the hole of that sleeve if that were humanly possible. A woman was holding her hand. He hadn’t noticed them before, as they were a little further along the sidewalk than he was, but they were close enough to watch the pumpkin hit the ground and roll toward the road.

The woman was angry, to say the least, but it was not an overwhelming anger. It was the feeling after a flash of lightning. Quiet, yet leaving him covering his ears in anticipation of the follow-up. Uncertainty.

“Was that yours?” he mouthed, pointing to the overturned gourd.

She was already walking away, but the parting glare she gave him was deadly. She called him an insensitive, stuck-up asshole with her body language alone. There was thunder. And she enveloped that child in a soft embrace as they walked home, like a warm fog descending upon a valley. The child pointed at the other jack-o-lanterns as they walked along.

“You know I didn’t ask you to decorate my house,” he said as they departed.

To nobody’s surprise, his defense was left unheard, except by the pumpkin staring up at him. Sam spent the rest of that day wondering. Why did the child care so much about a single pumpkin? Was he really a terrible person for wanting to keep the outside of his house to his own liking? When was the last time someone had held onto his hand the way the woman held onto that of the child? He remembered his mother and father clearly. Yet within memories of doctor appointments and car rides and pieces of toast made in the morning, he couldn’t recall anything truly joyful. Perhaps that was why the smell of a bakery was enough to put him on edge. He didn’t do family. It was all too unfamiliar to him. The pumpkin was still on the sidewalk by the time the sun went down. He figured it’d be better off left there for the raccoons to feast on. If raccoons even liked to eat pumpkins. That was the last thing he wondered before falling into a dreamless sleep.

Sam did not expect to see the pumpkin back on his front step when he walked outside the next morning, so he opted for the safer route of angling one of his plants just so, leaving a large frond to block the immediate view of the orange intruder. Walking along the street to the local shops, he peered inside at all the knick-knacks lined along the front displays. He also did not expect to see the woman from yesterday through the windows of the market. In that moment, he considered walking right back to his house, leaving the groceries for Monday. He’d throw a pizza in the oven, get started on laundry, find a nice nature documentary to watch—

“Hey.”

Too late.

“So why’d you kick the pumpkin?” she asked, door closing behind her.

He recognized her. Her face didn’t register yesterday due to the disapproving aura that had been exuded, but he had seen her around town a couple of times before. Merely brief exchanges in passing, a comment on the wait time at the nearby café—Seriously, I shouldn’t have to wait fifteen minutes for a coffee. I mean god what are they doing to those poor drinks back there?—and her name, Mary, nearly slipped his mind.

“Why’d you put a jack-o-lantern on my front steps?” he replied.

“You didn’t have any decorations up. Sophie wanted to help you get ready for the Halloween season. And you know, I thought it was a great idea before I realized we chose to decorate the stoop of a pumpkin-kicker and fun-time-hater.”

“I’ve never even seen you around with that kid before.”

“Well, my sister never needed me to look after her child before.”

“So, she’s not yours?”

Mary raised an eyebrow. “Funny. I thought we were talking about the pumpkin incident from yesterday, but now you’re interested in my family tree?”

Sam averted his eyes, hesitating before he responded. “Look, it’s not like I meant to kick the pumpkin

right in front of the kid. I don't find enjoyment in watching children cry, you know. I just don't care for Halloween decorations, and I think all those jack-o-lanterns are super tacky."

"I hate daffodils, but you don't see me pulling them out of the ground wherever I go."

There was a fire inside her still, and that heat reminded him of just how cold he was. He swore his fingers were incapable of holding in any warmth. She seemed like the type of person who never needed to wear a jacket, always used to the body heat of others—tiny fingers clasped around her hand, or a motherly embrace. She could never understand. The thought bothered him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Mary tilted her head at this, noticing the lack of sincerity in his voice, yet her expression seemed to brighten just slightly at the apology. The sunlight shining down brought out the warm colors of her iris. "Hey, I've got some more errands to run tomorrow morning. Why don't we grab a coffee then? Clear the air a bit?"

He nodded. "Sure. On me."

"Damn right you'll be paying."

Just as she started to make her way back to her house, he glanced at the bags she was carrying and called out to her. "Do you need any help?" he asked, "With the..." he was gesturing his open hands as if lifting weights.

"Nah," she said, hoisting a bag further up her shoulder. She kept walking, and Sam was now left to enter the store alone. He forgot what he went there for originally. His mom would have had a list prepared already—she was that organized.

The next morning came, and he barely slept. He would have taken any excuse to get some coffee in his system. It was warmer out today than it had been the past week, but he still felt a shiver as he walked into the café, looking for Mary. She sat at a table in the corner, and he went to join her. There was a glass of hot apple cider in front of her, still steaming, and a small cup of milk.

"I assumed when you invited me for coffee, you'd order a coffee," Sam said, taking a seat. "Also, do you usually drink your hot apple cider with cold milk?"

"No. Sophie's too young to drink coffee," Mary said.

"Sophie's too?—"

He glanced over toward the display case holding all sorts of pastries, and the little girl he had seen before began making her way over to the table.

"Oh," he said.

Sophie ran up to Mary and gave her a fierce hug, casting a quick glance in Sam's direction. She whispered to Mary, though loud enough for anyone to hear, "Was it still on the steps?"

"Looked like it," she said. "Did you see anything you wanted to take home for later?"

"I want more of your apple pie!"

"Did they have my pie in the display case?" Mary asked, feigning surprise.

"No," Sophie giggled.

Sophie looked back over to Sam. He didn't really know what to do.

"Hi, I'm Sam," he said. "Did you make that jack-o-lantern?"

She nodded, slowly, quietly, but not timidly. "Auntie Mary helped me with the carving knife."

She says I need adult supervision.”

“Smart,” he said.

A slight pause.

“I liked it.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Ok, you’re right, I didn’t,” he said. “But I’m sorry I kicked your pumpkin. It was really rude of me to do that.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“I don’t really care for Fall decorations.”

“Well, you should really leave a sign on your door saying that, then I would have given the pumpkin to someone else.”

“That would have been smart,” he agreed with a solemn nod.

“...Do you want to help me carve one? We have a bunch of pumpkins left and Auntie Mary says she wants to use them up by the end of the week. I was thinking of making a witch for our neighbors next door.”

“I think Sam has some work to get to today, Soph,” Mary interrupted.

He nodded in response, eager to retreat to his home after the morning he had. “Why don’t I stop by tomorrow afternoon? I should check on the jack-o-lantern when I get back. Make sure he’s not too bruised.” He looked to Mary to confirm that that was alright with her.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Mary said.

Sophie smiled in response, giddy.

“Bye, Sam! Come back soon!”

“Bye, Peaches,” he said, walking toward the door. Sophie giggled at the nickname.

“Peaches?” Mary asked, amused.

“What? I love peaches.”

The three of them chatted for a while, Sam’s hands crossed against his chest when not busy cradling his cup of coffee for comfort. Mary gave him a friendly hug, and the surrounding air immediately felt cooler following her departure. The wind picked up. He paid the bill. Went home. Whisked away into the eye of the storm and he found himself back in his living room, alone.

That night, he moved the jack-o-lantern out of the way of the plant, placing a tea light inside. It was dim, but just enough to illuminate his face in a warm orange glow. He then got to work in the kitchen, slicing sloppily, and in the morning, on Mary’s front porch, he placed a little peach with a carved face. It looked sad compared to the scale of everything around it. He knocked on the door, but nobody was home.

There She Goes

Sophia Matthews

Mom first heard about the cruise from her great aunt, whose best friend had spent years excitedly chattering and packing and planning. She broke the news to us at dinner as though she had decided to visit a new grocery store.

“I’m going on a cruise!”

Dad’s beef Wellington froze halfway to his mouth. I turned away from my mac and cheese to look at Mom, expecting her to pull three tickets from her purse. Maybe this cruise was a misguided attempt at an early birthday present for me. Realistically, that was unlikely, even though my thirteenth birthday was in just three weeks. Sometimes I questioned if my mom forgets that people other than her experience things.

Sure enough, no tickets appeared. “Do you mean we’re going on a cruise, Mom?”

“No, me! I deserve it, don’t I?”

I couldn’t disagree. Mom did everything. Between work, and cooking, and scheduling, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her relaxing on the couch.

“Well then,” Mom said, seizing the silence. “It’s decided. Right, honey?”

By then, Dad had returned to shoveling his food into his mouth. “Sure. Whatever you want.”

I was doing my homework in the living room a few days later when Mom flew in behind me.

“Have you seen my sunglasses?”

“What? No! Why would I have your sunglasses?”

“I don’t know! Hey, you have my straw hat, right?”

I didn’t bother replying. Mom had run around throwing things into bags for the entire weekend, even though she still wouldn’t tell me when her trip was. As I watched her shuffle and scramble around the house, I suddenly realized that she might miss my birthday.

“Hey mom,” I asked meekly, aware it’d be near impossible to stop the bullet train rummaging through our home.

She screeched to a halt, looking pale from her laps. “Yes dear?”

“When do you leave?”

“Well that’s the fun bit, hun,” Mom said, “I’m not quite sure.”

It was three days later when Mom decided to teach Dad how to make eggs.

“So, which pans can I put in the microwave?”

It was not going well.

I asked her why she was even trying, and all she said was, “Well, you’ll have to eat something when I’m gone.” Just like with everything else, it felt like she hadn’t put much thought into the logistics of this trip.

The day prior, she had sat me down in front of the couch and attempted to teach Dad how to braid my hair.

“She has picture day in a few weeks, Daryl. You just need to put each piece above the middle one.”

“Are we sure she can’t just wear it down?”

“Yes.”

Despite Mom’s many demonstrations, Dad took two hours to figure out how to stop sharp angles of my hair from peeking out of the braid. After that success, Mom brought out a ribbon, and he promptly walked away.

Even though it had been a full twenty-four hours since then, my head was still tingly, and the clatter of pots and pans only added to the static that was buzzing through my head.

Luckily for our stomachs, it only took Dad about fifteen minutes to figure out how to use the spatula so that the eggs didn’t form one big burnt platter.

“So,” I ventured, chewing on squishy blobs of eggs, “does this mean we’re going to just eat eggs the whole time Mom is gone?”

“No, I think I’m getting a handle on this cooking stuff.” Dad winked at me. “In fact, I think tomorrow’s lesson should be meatloaf.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Mom said. “How about grilled cheese?”

And so it went for the next few days. Mom and Dad spent hours in the kitchen, giggling like teenagers as Dad fumbled around and Mom coached from the counter, a glass of wine in hand. I hadn’t seen them like this ever before. They admired each other from afar, snuck kisses in while instant ramen simmered, and teased each other relentlessly like teenagers who didn’t know how to flirt yet.

It was weird. But I couldn’t remember the last time they’d blocked out this much time for just the two of them, and as long as their good mood lasted, they’d do the dishes, which set me free to ride my bike and watch TV in my room.

I should have realized that soon enough they’d realize they’d been doing my chores, but what I didn’t expect was for them to give me even more work.

“I’ll start doing the dishes again, but do I really need to clean the bathroom too? This seems excessive.” I was referring, of course, to the stiff yellow rubber gloves that Mom had laid out amongst germ busters and dust collectors.

“Isn’t this your chore?” I asked. “Don’t tell me we reorganized the chore chart again!” I was still traumatized from when I came home after school on my tenth birthday, to discover that cleaning up my toys was suddenly not considered an appropriate amount of housework for me.

“No, the chart’s the same, but I’ll probably have to remind your father that we need to update it in a few months.”

Great, I thought. I don’t know about a lifetime of cleaning toilets.

“Wait,” I said. “If the chart hasn’t changed, then why am I doing this?”

“Do you think the toilet’s gonna clean itself when I’m gone?” Mom asked.

“How come Dad gets to cook? Can we swap?”

Mom let out a chuckle, hearty and from her chest, the same laugh that drew all of her friends to

her, that I had only started hearing again recently when she was cooking with Dad, the one that got her a job working as a principal, that made all of her students comfortable talking to her. It's my favorite part about her; getting to see the joy in her crackle across her face and leap into the air.

"I know you'd rather clean the toilet once a week than cook 21 meals. It won't be too bad. And," she offered me a crooked smile, "Dad and I have decided that you'll get a raise in your allowance while I'm gone."

"Okay, I take it back. Teach me how to clean this toilet."

My thirteenth birthday was creeping closer, and so it seemed, was Mom's cruise. I had stopped asking when she was leaving, because I was consistently met with some variation of, "Where's the fun in that?", and "Why would I need to know ahead of time?". Eventually, she admitted to me that Dad was handling the details, because she wanted to be surprised. It seemed like she had forgotten about me becoming a teenager in just ten days. I'm not sure why we had spent months planning options for my party. Thinking about brunches and manicures seemed pointless when I wasn't sure if Mom would be there sipping mimosas and giggling.

"Mom?" I called out to the hallway.

"Yeah, hun?" Mom said, magically appearing in my door frame with a basket of laundry on her hip, her hair disheveled. It was unnerving how she could be anywhere as soon as I needed her.

"I just, I'm worried about..." I trailed off as Mom began to disappear.

"I'm still listening, I'm just putting this laundry away. Follow me."

And so I followed, leaving my bed to throw myself onto her gingham comforter.

"So what were you saying?"

"Well, Mom, what are we gonna do-"

"Wait, before you finish that thought, can you grab my suitcase, I need to throw some of these shorts in there. Oh, and I bought this dress for you to match me." She held up a pair of little black dresses, each with a ribbon tied in the front.

"Are you," I ignored the dresses, focusing instead on the numbers dancing around my head, "are you leaving soon?"

"I think so! I'm so excited to sip margaritas and relax by the pool."

"But, I-I'm gonna miss you." It hit me how true it was when I said it. What was the point of turning thirteen if my mom wasn't gonna be there to bake me a cake, or gossip with my friends?

"I don't want you to go," I said. "I know it's lame to be a teenager and miss your mom, but I want to be with you."

"Oh honey." She dropped everything to sit beside me and wipe the tears from my cheek. "I'm going to miss you too. But you are going to be just fine. Your big heart tells me that."

The one thing I couldn't decipher, was why Mom wanted to go so bad. I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe I had done something wrong, even after we had talked it out and she reassured me. I knew her and Dad were happier, and sillier, than I had ever seen them. So I was the only factor left. Did she not want me to be thirteen? Had I upset her by forgetting to clean my room?

Every time I asked her "Why?", she continued to respond that she needed rest. And she did. But why was she leaving us? Why couldn't we all go, and then she could just have some alone time on

the ship?

“Dad?” I ventured one day at breakfast, “Why is Mom going on the cruise?”

“Because she wants to,” he replied, his eyes barely flitting up from the newspaper splayed in front of him.

“Do you,” I faltered, causing Dad’s concerned brown eyes to land on me, “do you think I upset her?”

“Honey, oh no.” Dad grabbed my hand. “Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Because you and Mom are having so much fun cooking and she never has time for me and she just gives me jobs and she’s leaving us.” I was surprised to feel tears streaking down my cheeks.

“Why is she leaving us?”

“Honey pie,” Dad started, cautious, “Mom knows when she’s gotta go. Do you know when you’re hanging out with friends and you want to come home?”

I nodded, unable to speak as my chin quivered viciously.

“And we always tell you that that doesn’t mean you like your friends any less, right?”

“Yeah, but Mom isn’t leaving her friends, she’s leaving me. And you!”

“And she still loves us. She wants some time to herself for some peace and quiet before we join her. She knows when it’s time. Besides,” Dad winks, “think of all the loud chaotic fun we can get up to when she’s gone.”

“Are you sure she’s not mad at me?”

“I promise. She loves you more than anything else.”

Following that conversation with Dad, Mom invited me to cook with them when they made mac and cheese, and she took me on long bike rides. I guess they had talked about me though, because whenever they thought I wasn’t looking, I saw them passing concerned looks.

I decided their concern stemmed from Dad’s worries about how upset I was. My suspicions were all but confirmed when Mom sat me down for a conversation three days before my birthday, leaving Dad alone to make pancakes. A risky choice, since we all wanted to eat dinner that night.

“Hey hon, Dad tells me you’ve been a little upset lately.”

“Mom, I don’t want you to leave.”

“Okay, first off, I’m not mad at you, and I love you so much. All the way to heaven and even back again.”

“But-”

“And secondly, I’m never going to leave you. I’m going on a voyage, but soon enough we’ll be back together. And I promise we’ll go on bike rides and make fun of Dad then.”

“Hey, I heard that!” Dad called out, “Also, how do I flip these things without spilling them?”

“I don’t even know what that means.” Mom giggled her radiant laugh. “Promise me you’ll tease him while I’m gone?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, and she started to walk away. “Hey Mom, just so you know, I love you more than anything too.”

“How did I get so lucky with you? Your father, not so much,” she teased, a bittersweet smile dancing across her face as her eyes shimmered with unformed tears.

“Okay, I definitely heard that one! Don’t mess with the man who’s messing with your dinner.”

Mom’s golden laughter chimed across the room, resetting our moods. “Okay I’m coming. How are you spilling half-cooked batter?”

I took a mental snapshot of her sashaying out to the kitchen, so full of love and determination to keep this family running, even in her absence. Our conversation often played back in my head, and reassured me that we might return to our routine after Mom’s passage.

Two days later, on the eve of my thirteenth birthday, I stood by the edge of the water, tears streaming down my face as I offered a weak wave to Mom. It happened so suddenly. She had looked so peaceful lying there, so full of life and possibility, a cruel moment of irony from the world. In the pocket of my black dress, a ribbon flapped in the wind, as wisps of my unruly braid escaped from my hair tie and drew cuts at my eyes.

“I miss you.”

Diner Culture

Eli Norton

“You’re getting pancakes, aren’t you?”

She was smiling at me, or at least, I think she was— all I could see over the menu were her doe eyes. But they were the brightest they’d been all night, so I smiled back.

“Of course. How could I not?”

We were the only two people in the diner. I wasn’t surprised. I am on a Friday night is a little too early for drunk people, and a lot too late for everyone else. We were sitting across from each other in a booth seat, and as she splayed her menu out across the table, I could see I’d been right.

“You didn’t even look, did you?”

“I did,” I defended myself. “To make sure they had ones with strawberries.”

She laughed, also for the first time. “You’re so predictable.”

As she looked at the menu again, she tucked a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear. What had once been a sleek ponytail was now wild and free, blown out from driving with the windows down and held vainly in place by hair spray. Her mascara had finished running hours ago, hardened into tracts of lightning down her cheeks and thick smudges under her eyes. It had taken both of us stuffing her pink tulle dress underneath the table for her to sit down.

“What about you then? What are you in the mood for?”

She frowned, looking back down at the menu. “I’m not sure.”

“There’s a lot of options,” I tried being reassuring. “It feels kind of sacrilegious not to get breakfast food though.”

The waiter came over and asked us if we were ready to order. After exchanging a brief glance each other, we said not. Silence fell over us again, then:

“Kara,” I started, trying to find the right words. “If Connor did something stupid, I swear I’ll kick his—”

“No, no he didn’t.” Her head had shot up briefly to look at me, then went back to studying the menu. She was silent for a beat. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

Kara cut me off before I could ask her another question. “Check this out— diner halibut.”

“Ew,” I laughed, leaning over to see what she was pointing at. “I would not want to find out what that tastes like.”

“Maybe I’ll find out for us.”

* * *

Prom was loud. The venue our school booked had music blasting out of every speaker, and the hundreds of students gathered each had to shout to be heard. I wondered if this was what clubbing was like. Tyler and I were dancing poorly together at the edges of the dance floor, making each other laugh with increasingly embarrassing moves. Tyler stopped mid-chicken dance to point at something behind me. I turned to see Kara’s boyfriend, Connor.

“Did...”

I scrunched my face in confusion “What?”

“Did...”

I scrunched my face in confusion “What?”

“Did you...” The thumping bass was drowning him out. I cupped my ear.

“Speak up!”

He huffed visibly before leaning in next to my ear. “Did you see my texts? Kara’s missing,” he yelled. I rubbed my ear as I pulled away.

“What do you mean, *missing*?”

“She ran off. I don’t know where she is”

I narrowed my eyes. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! We were just having a conversation.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m worried about her, ok? She was really upset. We need to find her.”

Tyler had gotten bits and pieces of the conversation, but I filled him in as I pulled him off the dance floor. Connor went to tell the rest of our group to search, while Tyler and I began. Connor told me he’d already checked the balconies and outdoor section, but we looked anyway. Nothing. We were standing in an elevated part of the outdoor section, where it was much quieter and lit by warm string lights. Past the railing, the whole town was lit up below us.

“I don’t get it, where could she have gone?” I said. Tyler led me over to a seating area to sit down. He rubbed circles on the back of my hand

“Well, where would Kara usually go when she’s upset?”

“Me.” I plopped my head down into my hand dejectedly. “But I’m in here.” I stared at the table dejectedly, then jerked my head towards Tyler. His eyes widened at my sudden burst of energy. “Oh, I know where she is.”

Once you left the venue you weren’t allowed back in. I told Tyler he could stay behind to hang with his friends, but he wanted to come with me. We walked over to where I parked my car, and sure enough, Kara was inside. Head down, leaned against the steering wheel. Tyler hung back.

“I’m gonna tell the others we found her, you go talk to her.” He walked away a little to give us privacy and started texting. I knocked on the passenger’s side door. Kara jumped in surprise, but when she saw it was me her face relaxed a little and she unlocked the door.

“Kara, what happened—”

“Can we get out of here?” She looked at me, big brown eyes bloodshot and full of tears. Her beautiful makeup was running down her face, and the hair she’d released from her ponytail looked wild. I hesitated for only a moment.

“Of course.”

* * *

“Please don’t order the diner halibut.”

“Fine. Only because you asked so nicely.”

I looked around a moment, then leaned closer to her conspiratorially.

“Do we have the same waiter from when we came here after Fall Out Boy?”

Her mouth opened in disbelief. “Oh my God, we totally do.”

I leaned back again. “That was so much fun.”

“Why did I think drinking two milkshakes would be a good idea?”

“Because they didn’t swirl.” I spun my straw around in my water. “And you’re an innovator.”

She leaned her head forward and rested it on her hand with a coy smile. “That was when we talked about your crush on Tyler.”

Taking a sip of water, I roll my eyes. “Yeah.”

The waiter came back to ask us if we were ready to order, and we said no.

* * *

“Leah, stop blinking.”

“I’m trying!”

“Ok, you can close your eyes now.”

I sighed in relief as Kara finished lining them. She stepped back to review her work. For a moment, her dark eyes were penetrating, squinted and sharply outlined in black. Then she smiled, and her whole face brightened.

“Perfect. Nadine, what do you think?”

Nadine, scrolling her phone belly down on Kara’s bed, looked over and her mouth actually fell open.

“Oh my God, Tyler’s gonna die.”

I blushed as I accepted the mascara from Kara. I wasn’t allowed to look at myself yet (she promised a dramatic reveal), so I applied the mascara with some difficulty.

“Of course, Connor’s also gonna die when he sees you, Kara,” Nadine added.

I paused long enough to notice Kara stiffen, but Nadine was too distracted to notice. Besides, she didn’t know Kara as well as I did.

“Thanks Nadine.” There was a pause, then Kara gasped. “I never even showed you guys my jewelry.”

That made Nadine put her phone down. She scooped over to make room for Kara to spread her collection out on the bed. Any other surface in her room was cluttered with knick-knacks or makeup.

“Hold on, I never got to see my final reveal,” I said.

“You finished?” Kara said, then scrambled back over to me. “Ok, three, two, one!”

She spun the chair around and stopped me when I was facing the vanity. She’d curled my blonde hair into loose waves, and the brown eyeshadow made my green eyes pop. I looked more glamorous than I ever had in my whole life.

“This is incredible!” I stood up and hugged her tightly. She squeezed me right back, and we both laughed as we tried to knock the air out of each other.

“Everyone else is here!” Nadine said. She’d finished picking out a necklace and was checking her messages. “I can’t wait to take pictures. Oooh, and go down the shore after prom. It’s gonna be so fun.”

Kara’s smile faltered a little, then became serious when she turned to me. “You didn’t pick out any jewelry yet.”

“That’s fine, I trust you. Just give me whatever you were thinking– I know you have a vision.”

She smiled in embarrassment, but immediately handed me the accessories she’d had in mind.

We were taking photos out in the yard. Tyler's arm was wrapped around my waist and my hand was on his shoulder as we posed for our picture. He leaned in to kiss my cheek and I laughed in delight. As we finished up, Connor and Kara went to take our place. Kara stiffened. The energetic distance between them was as wide as Kara's lawn. I wondered if she knew she hated him.

* * *

She was staring into her cup of water pensively. I'd stopped trying to make light conversation. "He told me he loved me."

The only sound was the buzzing of the yellow pendant light between us.

"I didn't say it back."

Her eyes glinted with tears.

"I don't even think I like him."

I took a deep breath, then released it. "I know."

Her eyes darted to mine, wide and piercing underneath her angry brow. Her tears evaporated.

"You know? And you didn't say anything?"

"What is there to say? 'Hey, Kara, I think you hate your boyfriend.'"

"That would've been a good start."

"No, it wouldn't. You would've told me I was crazy and you loved him."

She picked at one of her nails. "...Maybe."

I sighed, and reached across the table to stop her. "Sometimes you have to live things to learn them. On the bright side, now you can break up with him and find someone you like more."

She clenched her jaw harder.

"Uh, excuse me?" We turned to see the waiter was back, and had been standing in front of us for who knows how long. "Are you two ready to order?"

I was about to say no when Kara interrupted. "Yes, she is." After a questioning look from me, she added, "what? You're hangry."

The waiter walked away, presumably relieved one of us had finally ordered something.

I crossed my arms. "I'm hangry?"

"Yes. You seem a little too excited to tell me to break up with him."

"Well, I never liked him either. So that makes two of us."

Kara kept her gaze trained on the fork she was fiddling with, jaw still clenched.

"Too soon?"

"You just think it's easy to find someone," she said finally.

"Of course I do. You're you. Smart, funny, beautiful--"

"I mean, yes, it's not-- it might be easy for someone to like me, but it's hard to like them back."

I pursed my lips. "Our high school isn't that big. You probably just haven't found someone yet."

"No, Leah." She choked up. "I've never liked anyone. Period. Not even a cartoon character."

My eyes widened. "Not even Danny Phantom?"

She sniffled. "I know that's supposed to be funny, but it's true. I've never liked anyone."

"Well, that's ok Kara," I said, trying to find the right words. "You don't have to like anybody."

“But I want to.” Her tears came down more strongly now. “I want to be loved. To be taken care of. To find someone I can spend my life with. I want... to be like everyone else.”

I handed her a napkin. Her fresh tears wet the napkin enough to wipe away the old mascara. “Hey, where is Tyler right now?”

She blinked. “Uh, I don’t know.”

“Exactly. Neither do I. Because I’m here with you. I abandoned prom with my boyfriend and a beachhouse to be here.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t be. I did this because I wanted to. I want to be here with you, in this diner, at 1am, crying our makeup off. You’re my best friend, nothing will ever stop me from being there when you need me. Ever.”

She exhaled in amusement, then sniffled. “We look crazy.”

“That’s what makes this fun.” I handed her another napkin, then wiped at my own eyes. “Hey, when my pancakes come, let’s just split them.”

She looked startled. “But you love them.”

“Yeah, but diner pancakes are huge. They’re like, bigger than my face. Plus, if I ate all of them, I’d be worried I’d create Milkshake Fiasco 2.”

She laughed, a real one this time. “Thank you.”

I smiled. “Of course.”

Nonfiction

A large number of birds, likely swans or geese, are shown in silhouette against a light, overcast sky. They are scattered across the frame, flying in various directions. The birds are dark against the lighter background, creating a sense of movement and depth.

In the nonfiction section of this edition, writers explore the themes of love and loss, discontent and daydreams, the future and Fleetwood Mac- all raw, all real, and all human.

Writer's Block

Emily Castro Eugenio

I can't write. Picking up a pen has become yet another task that I don't have time for. Between sleep and work, and other chores, the world I left behind—the writer I once was—is lost. When inspiration does strike, any pen I pick up quickly loses all its ink. On the rare occasions I find a pen that grants me the freedom to express myself, it runs dry on the second line. Even then, I sometimes find myself craving the smell of a fresh new blank sheet of paper. In my daydreams, it craves the connection of the fine tipped pen it befriended years ago. It anticipates a drop of ink and awaits the creative writer I once was. How tragic is it to disappoint not only those around you but now also disappoint an inanimate object?

Unlike what happens in my daydreams, the paper never meets the pen. It sits wasting away and gathering dust. It hides in between stacks of books in a bag that has been tossed to the side since November. I can't write. It might be psychological. If I can't fix something with my writing, do I deserve to have an outlet? Am I allowed to enjoy the company of a battered notebook filled with stories and poems about things like love, decay, and wishful thinking? I'm not sure.

I Loved That Dog

Talia Hincks

To hurt less is to love less, and I loved that dog. I didn't at first. Not for any reason, really, I like most dogs. I just didn't love her. We were strangers. She was brought to my house and I had no say.

"We're getting another dog," my dad said. "Your step mom picked her up, and we're all going to meet her. We'll probably take her home sometime this week." We, by the way, did not include me. 'We' meant my dad, my step mom, and all four of my step siblings. Only the people who lived full time on the farm. My sister and I, merely half-time residents, weren't included. We were told.

"She's a good dog," my dad said, "your step mom really knows how to pick them."

As promised, they brought her home. I was lucky enough to be invited on the big day, even though I was supposed to be at my mom's that night. There she was: tail wagging loosely, velvet white fur, a few black spots, and a big muscled head. Absolutely nothing in her eyes. Nothing. No fear, no anxiety being transplanted from her suburb home to the middle of the woods, not a single thought rocketed through her head. Her name was Roxie, and she was dumb as a box of rocks. She didn't understand that if she started to run down the hill that I, holding the leash, would faceplant into the asphalt. She didn't understand that no dog my step mom had ever had was allowed on the couch. Not her childhood dogs, not the 10 year old lover boy we currently had, and not her. Roxie didn't get it, though really, neither did I. Every time our family sat down to watch a show she would hop right up next to us on the couch. If shoved down she'd return with a muzzle on my dad's foot, then her head next to him on the cushion. Slowly her foot would wedge itself up, and before you knew it she was curled right in between me and my dad, and she'd sit there with her butt curled under her and sloooooowly lean back, staring at my dad with those big dopey eyes, until he pulled her the rest of the way onto his lap. Then she'd let out the happiest sigh, and settle into her cuddle-fueled slumber as an 80 pound lap dog.

Dogs may not have been allowed on the couch (on a technical stand point. Pretty soon they were just not allowed on the nice couch), but upstairs was the kids' domain, and all rules were off. Every since our parents moved in together and got married, Woody, our 10 year old pit bull, had climbed the stairs and put his snout on the end of my bed. He slept every night curled up behind my knees. Now that Roxie was here she was getting everybuddy's attention, so I made sure Woody knew he wasn't forgotten. With everyone fawning over the new dog, I always said hello to Woody first. Gave him some love, kept him tucked behind my knees at night, where he twitched and dreamt and kept me warm. One night Roxie followed him up and she didn't even ask, she just hopped onto my bed right in Woody's spot; I shoved her off. After Woody was settled I looked at her, and she looked at me. Blinked those dumb brown eyes, and rested her chin on the edge of my bed. Well. Alright. There's not a lot of space for two 80 pound dogs and a 17 year old girl in a twin sized bed, so we slept like an S. Woody tucked behind my knees, and Roxie pulled tight up to my chest, my arm draped around her like she was a body pillow. Her ribs moved in time with mine, and all three of us were cozy and happy. Alright, I'll admit it. She was growing on me.

I learned that I had been wrong. It wasn't that she had no thoughts in her big box head, she had exactly three. They were like monitor savers that only fired neurons when the symbols hit the exact corner. Boink. Beep. Beep. Beep. Boink... her thoughts followed as such:

1. ASS TO GRASS. RUN. PLAY. GO GO GO.
2. Cuddle time!
3. Men in hats = bad. Fireworks = bad. Electric fence = bad.

The day she hit the goats' electric fence was bad. She ran into it full speed, let out a yelp like no one had heard, and made a break for the house. Only the sliding glass door was closed, and she slammed into it and off of it like a launching pad. Or so was said. It was my mom's weekend, and my dad called to tell us that in Roxie's panic she'd run into the woods and gotten lost. No one knew where she was, and there was a neighborhood wide search out for her. There were sightings here and there, people posting on facebook if they saw a white blur of fur behind their house. The afternoon was ticking on, and I wasted no time hopping in my rickety old car and speeding to my dad's house. I had no signal, I was low on battery, and I charged into the woods on a January evening with nothing but a sweatshirt and my fingerless gloves. There I was, wandering. Helpless. Everything familiar and foreign at the same time. My eyes began to play tricks on me as the light slowly faded, and every moonlit bolder looked, for a second, like it could be my dog.

"Roxie!" I called "Roxie Baby! Babygirl!"

We didn't find her. She came home hours after dark, finding her own way back. Her face pink from the cold and from her exhaustion. That happened whenever she was really sleepy. The pink. It crept up around her eyes, and her nose, in a warm rose blush. My baby. I kissed her nose, and held her close, and no one ever forgot to turn off the goat fence again.

There wasn't one moment where I decided I loved her. No epiphany. No singular second where I stopped viewing her as just one more family matter in which I hadn't been included, nevermind consulted on. I just loved her. Her soft velvet fur. Planting a kiss on her big box head. Wrapping my arms over her while she twitched and huffed, drifting off to sleep.

After Woody passed we got a new puppy, and he was obsessed with Roxie. He followed her everywhere, even up the stairs to my bed. The parents wanted to keep an eye on him, so they made Roxie sleep downstairs with him. I understood, but I hated it, and Roxie did too. She snuck up to my bed, sometimes, but puppy claws would inevitably scramble up the stairs and we'd have to take them both down. It broke the habit. No longer was she in my bed every night. No longer was I warm. Now she was covered in scratches and nibble marks because her velvet soft fur was too short to protect her from teething and little scratching claws. I didn't care that he was a baby, Roxie was my baby. She was my dog. Out of everyone in that house, she was my dog. I knew her, I loved her, and she knew me. She knew more than I ever gave her credit for. After months of sleeping downstairs, she came up one morning. Hopped in my bed like no time had passed. Like she knew that I was leaving for college, and this was the last chance she would get.

She waited for me to come home, before she passed. Cancer thick in her throat. We sat on the cold white tiles, her pink face resting on my ankle while I bent over and placed all my love into every kiss on her velvet head. My tears fell fat and heavy, rolling my cheeks. Unapologetic, undemanding. When she was gone the pink which blushed her nose, and her eyes, faded away. Skin pale. Gray. Her

eyes closed. Her heart stopped. And mine has ached ever since.

It hurts when I remember she will never see another flower bloom. That she'll never nap in the sun. That I can never again kiss her head, or go for a walk with her down the road, or sit with her by the fire. It hurts to know that she was so young, and she had so much more life to live. It hurts to know that every medical option we had just would have brought her more pain. So now I ache. I cry, and then the hurt fades, but it's never gone. I cherish it.

You see, some people don't get it, what this hurt is. They want to chase it away 'cause it feels bad, because they're sad, but they don't understand. All the hurt in my chest is love that doesn't have anywhere left to go. It is that love refusing to disappear, so now it manifests in the only way it can: as a memorial. Someday it won't hurt this much. And it will be years, instead of weeks, between my tears. But that ache will stay. And it should. Cause, man, I loved that dog.

The Tupperware Essay

Maggie Robinson

Inspired by “The Glass Essay” by Anne Carson and featuring lyrics from “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac.

The backseat of my family’s ‘85 Plymouth. Trees form a blur. There’s that pond we always go by. A highlighter billboard blaring the promise of “the best computer repairs!”. The Plymouth navigates the hills of a New York 45 minutes above what everyone thinks New York is— one that is all shiny towers, yellow cabs, and inhabitants that never sleep.

*“But time makes you bolder/
Children get older/
I’m getting older too”*

I smile at that last line. I can count to ten and know my colors in English and Spanish. I can even read books by myself now. I’m getting older too.

There is really no significance regarding this memory. It is simply one of those childhood things your brain demands you to remember. Like eating pizza on a rainy Tuesday in third grade, or noticing the sunset while reading Beezus and Ramona for the third time.

Please, remember this.

Getting drunk off of sugar spun fairy tales. Mixing spells and potions out of wildflowers, mud, and honey. Making wishes on fireflies and trying to find the Jersey Devil. My friends and I cope with being weird girls that come from unstable families and feel too much. Turning 12 and thrown headfirst into the hellscape of growing up. We have become too self-aware, too self-conscious.

At some point that year I hijack my mom’s walkman. These are the years where you take a deeper dive into music, carve out your own taste and identity. I have taken to alternating between WSNI and WOGL, the oldies stations in my area. They play The Beatles, The Stones, and all the classics, but the band that cracks me open was Fleetwood Mac. “Rhiannon” played and I was gone. So down the rabbit hole I go, falling especially hard for Stevie Nicks’s songs. Those songs weave soothing spells for an angsty tumultuous life. The White Witch teaches me the power that could be found in feeling too much. Magic exists, though it is more intangible than you would think. My young self decides that surely Stevie must be my fairy godmother, and I would be lying if I said that there is not a small part of me that still believes such a thing.

Lately, the algorithm loves to give me endless home movies of New Years past. The ones from New Years Eve 1999 fascinate me the most. Grainy footage captures December 31, 1999, 11:45 p.m.. The Year 2000—all our fears, optimism, and wonder—is about to reach a crescendo. The end of a millennium, the dawn of a new one. Given that I was only five at the time, the weight of this event was lost on me; yet the sparks of excitement however were palpable. I look back at that moment in time with hindsight. Sure there were cries of the technological apocalypse Y2K, but there was also promise. A new Age of Enlightenment. Cars that Fly. Maybe even world peace.

All of that ended up being bullshit. Welcome to the new Dark Age. We don’t have flying cars, but hey we have AI that will steal your voice and kill your brain while also killing the environment.

Someone could be murdered in broad daylight. Ten shots. Fucking bitch. You're told that your eyes and ears are lying to you. Peace is nothing more than a joke.

"Oh, mirror in the sky what is love?/"

"Can the child in my heart rise above?"

I don't think such can happen anymore Stevie, that entails believing that people can still be good.

Turning 32 means that the question of having children gets louder and louder, aided by the fact that most of your high school friends are now driving their kids to softball practice. Even my best friend, who had previously decided not to have children, is now seriously considering the path to motherhood.

Tick tick tick

On a rational level I know that there is still time regarding the decision to have children. My eggs will not magically dry up overnight, and I know that I could always pursue adoption. I also know that I can have a rich and meaningful life if I choose not to have children at all. Still, I feel like I am drowning in the ocean of voices that tell me time is running out.

But should I even be a mother?

I long to have a child in my arms, nursing their scraped knees and wiping away sticky jam. I picture myself reading them *The Rainbow Fish* for the fourth time before I tucked them in as I tell them that I will love them no matter what. I look at my fiancé and think about what a great dad he would be. I have been told countless times how maternal I am; surely I would be a great mom. But deep down I feel that no doubt I would screw that child up. What kind of mother could I be, laid up in bed for the fifth day in a row with a depressive episode? What would happen if they got tangled up in the lineage of depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia?

A more astute and creative person could make a parallel between my relationship with motherhood alongside Stevie's, take solace in the fact that she sees us, the childless women. That if she pursued motherhood there would be no "Sara", no "Rooms on Fire", no "Crystal". But all I can do is seek comfort in her words as I sit with empty, aching arms and all my confusions.

Time. I keep trying to outrun it. I dutifully apply my creams every night in hopes of being perpetually ten years younger. I am increasingly prone to nostalgia, mentally existing in 2006, but on some days you might catch me in 1996. I hate the present, but I hate the future even more. Yet time persists, not only lurking in the dark corners, but also in my exhausted eyes and creaky bones on a rainy day. It is also in those quiet moments when you are fully aware that your loved ones are no longer 5, 15, or 35. You wake up one morning and forget how many heavenly birthdays has it been.

"Can I sail through the changin' ocean tides/"

Can I handle the seasons of my life?"

I wish I could mix one of those wildflower and mud potions and slow down time. I guess childish desires never fully go away. For now though I listen to my fairy godmother and her spells that transcend even what lurks in the dark.

Poetry

After going through all the submissions, we have decided that these 15 poems are best suited for publication in our upcoming issue. Regarding the theme of “humanity”, these poems capture the diverse ideas of what it means to be human; exploring grief, falling in love, coming to terms with trauma, and simply trying to exist in an increasingly chaotic world. Within each line, stanza, and turn you can find out what it means to be alive.

Finn Alexander

DIVINER/SPONSOR/WRETCHED

From your position at the WINDOW/BALCONY/PULPIT,
You consider your past days at sea.

The waters would rock you
Until you couldn't feel anymore
And it would be BRILLIANT/CALMING/TRUE
While your bones lost their density
While DREAMS/THOUGHTS/FEARS of flying emerged
Emergencies wafted by like an unpleasant cloud.

But you don't like thinking about that now—
There are bigger GIFTS/STANCES/CATACLYSMS to attend to.

As the plainclothes Angels walking the street
Keep their eyes peeled for COVETING/STEALING/BEARING FALSE WITNESS
There are those of you who seek out real crimes.

Your ORACLES/KNIGHTS/FAITHFUL watch for killings in the name of false authority
The light in their eyes blinds those who would make money from the fallen
A sea of humanity comes into high tide around the theft of INNOCENCE/PEACE/TRUTH.

You bring down your LIGHTNING/HAND/PENCIL
Towards those who turn the other cheek just to fire into a crowd
And your collective follows suit.

Will you stand with this forever?
Or will you turn back towards the sea
When the land gets too WARM/CLAUSTROPHOBIC/BLOODY to stay in forever?

Pegasystemic

*Take your hands off my wings
I am the hero who made men brave
I am the hero who came forth from poisoned
blood
I am not yours for the taking
Take your hands off my wings*

But that hasn't been my life for some time
I reside in the woodwork
I live in the narrow hull beneath the complex
Where the other ghosts live
Too poor to have a proper burial
But the papers said we weren't worth burying
anyway,
 Right?

We wait for the ferryman
But the others have convinced me he won't
come for me
After all,
 They're still making me work
My name has been taken by the 16 Air Assault
Brigade
Isn't that funny?
*I was the hero who came forth from poisoned
blood*
And now I'm the insignia for parachute
troopers

I wish I could've left war behind me
But now it's all around us
All of us
And I leave the hull each morning
And I return to it each night
And in the middle of the day I don't know what
I do,
 What I am ordered to do,
 For without my wings they know me as
nothing but a workhorse

They refer to my fellows like friends
Cast mortals in their places
Retell the stories under rewritten history
But it was their hubris that killed my forefathers
Hypocrites.

But I no longer dare to speak against them
My mother raised me better
For what she was, and for how short a time I
knew her,
 She still found a way to instill fear of the
tempest in me
Her poisoned blood divined a different fate for
me
As she birthed me into this lethargic Tartarus

The carbon of the city breathes down my neck
In the times of the day I cannot remember
Where people pretend none of this is happening
at all
They can't see me,
 And even if they could,
 Perhaps the world has not yet severed the
light from their backs.

Perhaps their pain is still too small to pay
attention.

Klaudine Bessaparis

lingered too long

You chugged the 15-year-old bottle
of my blood, sweat,
and tears,
belching like an ogre,
the back of your hand a napkin
as you slam the glass on the desk
with as much remorse as
the lightning in the
ranger's yard,
casually chucking rough rocks
in the heron's home.

The last of the fire's dust petered out,
smoke across the sky,
flames fizzling as footsteps
scampered across the clouds –
a flash –
alarmed screams like sirens
as kids go
streaking through dandelion smiles.

You took hope and
crushed it
under your boots,
paint to turn
cult chants into
waving flags,
the fabric in
desperate tatters,
crimson trickling
from loudly silent, unheard victims.

Phrases like “say when” and “linger”
are salt on a wound
etched in years-old skin
as crows tiptoe across
balance beams,

unafraid of the
fall
they might endure,
energy stopped in
motion with a crossing guard's arm,
the same one that tattoos giggle at
as the General stops
their target from wriggling away.

And we sigh from the sidelines,
knowing she does the same,
having seen this before,
felt just as powerless
as another few creases make room
in our foreheads –
here we go again.

Though many considered the threats
a so-called “safety” chief
claimed never to give,
I was one to grab
my matches and burn
the clove hitch
that chafed
my neck,
resolve in dismissed
eyes that build a
stream with no dam –
be damned –
until the charismatic
dictator
returned to
their wife's chambers.

Only then did oxygen
climb to my lungs,
organs cheering

as tires on gravel
screech into view,
tears streaking
down old canals
as adrenaline
trips my tongue,
bubbly cherry sweetness
coating my throat
as I retell what
I can remember
of my escape.

Skye Chernobilsky
Fool's Game

The poet would like to provide a content warning for the discussion of loss and death in their next two poems.

They say love is a fool's game
But we preferred to play the game "Fool".

Sitting around the table
Teaching everyone the game we loved
Speaking a language only the two of us knew.

I knew then
That you would stay
With me forever.

Less than three months into our friendship
You asked me to cut your hair.
I was the fool to say yes
And you looked like one for the next two
weeks.

We went our separate ways over winter break
Coming back together when the spring semester
started
Like no time had passed
The light in your eyes still bright.

Two months in
You asked me to cut your hair again
I asked you if you were sure
You nodded your head aggressively

Once again, I was the fool
Saying yes to your request
Once again, you left the bathroom
Looking like one

The school year ended.
Summer came.

We began to talk less,
As people do.

But this time, when we returned,
The spark was gone from your soul;
The light in your eyes dim.
I didn't know how to help you
And whenever I saw you,
Exhaustion consumed you.
Not a word was spoken.

We didn't play "Fool" again;
Our language lost to the darkness.

Now I'm the fool every morning
When I wake up
And for a split second
I think you're still with me.

Moments Time Stood Still

February 14th, 2022

Waking up to a loud knocking on my bedroom door

My brother was leaning into my room

His arms bracing his weight against

The door frame

The words fell out of his mouth

So much said in so few words:

“Make sure you have all black to wear”

April 6th, 2024

Walking into the stone white building

Not knowing what to expect

Stepping in after my brothers

coming face to face with a cardboard box.

There she lays

That final image of her

Engraved in my brain

Forever

A minute later, she's in the machine

And there will be nothing left of her

But ashes and memories of what once was.

October 14th, 2024

Sitting in class listening to my professor

Talking about a book that I didn't read

Grasping at straws trying to figure out how to respond.

Phones start to ring; message alerts start going off

“Don't go to Kroner” the message says.

Not giving it a second thought until I remember who lives there and

What happened that weekend.

I know who it is.

I know who's no longer with me.

Who I'll never see again.

January 30th, 2025

My phone rings.

I pick it up knowing what I'll hear will change me

Her voice breaks on the other end.

I know it's the right choice

But it's also the most painful.

The hurt in her voice conveying

Something I never could

A love lost

To youthful ignorance

Never to be returned.

Time stands still in all these moments

Memories fleeting

The present ceasing to exist

Just a kid with a soul

Breaking

Into pieces.

The Language of Poetry

In English we say
“I appreciate you”.

In poetry we say

You grew flowers
In the darkest parts of me,
Parts I had hidden away for years,
Sealed under lock and key;
Bolted, cemented, and thrown
In the deepest part of the sea.

You were my oxygen
When I gasped for air.
When anxiety took over,
You breathed ease into my lungs
With every “You’re okay” softly spoken
In the crowded subway car.

You were the surfboard
That carried me safely to shore,
No matter how big the wave.
Steady and solid beneath my feet,
You rode each swell with me
Like it was just another day.

You broke down my walls,
One brick at a time,
And sometimes with a wrecking ball.
But you didn’t wreck me at all.

You picked up the pieces
Of the wall you broke down,
And you used them to expertly craft
A key to my soul—

A key you may hold
For as long you’d like.

And as long as you will,
I’ll continue to say
“I appreciate you.”
And what I really mean is
“I love you.”

Carole Cobos

my GODDAMN American baby

A response to “Annabel Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe

It feels like it was almost only yesterday,
In the land of the goddamn free,
We talked and lay by the bay
Fell farther in love than the eye can see.
And he loved me longer than a lifetime;
He loved the life back into me

I was an idiot and he was an idiot,
In the land of the goddamn free,
But we laughed and kissed, reimagined bliss—
Farther in love than the eye can see—
And it was so pure and clear to the touch,
That they tainted it by calling it ‘artsy.’

And so that is why, almost only yesterday,
In the land of the goddamn free,
By touch, by unblinded smile, they did away
with
My sweetheart, my baby.
So, then his family descended
And shut him away from me.
Sealed alone, six feet deep,
In the land of the goddamn free.

The masses, all secretly miserable,
Couldn’t stand us when we were happy.
Yes!-- that is why (everyone knows it’s like this
In the land of the goddamn free)
That by touch, by unblinded smile,
They did away with my baby.

But our love it was greater, by far, than the love
Of those who were richer than we—
Of many far more popular indeed—
And not even the masses who had gathered,

Nor the conspirators who were secretly lonely,
Can ever take the love that belongs
To my goddamn American baby.

Though the sun’s never sweet, without making
me believe

In my goddamn American baby.
And the sky always cries, as I do inside,
For my goddamn American baby.
So yes, all night, I think of my time
With my sweetheart— my baby— my partner in
crime.

In his serious casket six feet under
My heart beating for him like thunder.

The Erotic Patriotic Act

There's not a hint of America
in my blood,
But Jersey burns in my bones.
And I asked you who you'd save
in the flood—
And you said *who the fuck even knows*.

I scraped my knees when I was little,
And you wore church clothes and fiddled.
And maybe we are two sides of a coin;
Cuz you can't start a club I wouldn't join.

And I'd die for my freedom.
And that's in spite of the flag.
Still, I would I build you a kingdom
Where they don't kick babes in drag.

Cuz America boiled me alive,
And Ecuador simmers beneath.
And you told me I was *one of a kind*
And I told you... *you're sweet*

And I don't want an overlord.
You don't want to fight.
We made love on Discord;
We just met tonight

Who cares what it means
To be America!
Who cares what it means
To have prestige!

Cause, tonight, I'm your erotic patriotic act.
Cause, tonight, you're my American Dream

We Are Going To Live

A response to “We Are Both Sure To Die” by Wendy Xu

And I think about it all the time. I feel
like a Jenga tower wavering
before its fall. I feel like a cup
passed between friends. I feel like the long
road and the cracks there. I feel like the
wildflowers that grow there. Knowing it's
unwanted with no rent in hand. I feel
like a cart racing full speed
down, down, down, a slope. I feel like a cart that
is jammed, that frustrates. I feel a little
lost. I feel like holding a hand, and
clapping mine. I feel like an outstretched
hand. I feel like everywhere I go,
you are there. I feel like what
was Icarus at takeoff.

Emily Ivanauskas

Small Essays on The Human Body

after J. Mae Barizo

Things are always changing
getting bigger and smaller
and curving and straightening
molding, flattening,
soft sharp dull hard,
I watch a child holding hands with their mother
and I feel your hand in mine now,
and I wonder where the differences started
showing their heads.
My bones long for your bones,
something that I can't tell you where it began,
but maybe it happened in The Garden.

*

The rib cage, deceptively named—
made to keep things out, not in.
The heart wanders freely
and slips through the slats
to love and become broken,
but this is all by choice.
There's a key made of bone inside you
somewhere
and you don't have to know where it is
you just have to know that it's there.

*

Meant to bend and twirl together
in joyous symphony,
just plucked and broken instrument strings,
their position, very arbitrary,
something tells me our arms
and legs are meant to fit together
like knots like slats like
seatbelt buckles and hot metal,
but I love puzzles
and you—
a piece with smooth edges..

*

I cannot call myself a poet,
it's my brain working overtime
that does it.
I observe
I serve as a vessel,
these puppet strings inside me move me along
—
There's more to be seen,
I've got places to be,
I have verses to sing and they travel through
my neurons.

*

One day, if I wished,
I could be kept in a box
of glass or thick vinyl
and put on display for the masses,
let everything hang loose
and spill out,
because I can't be bothered to hold it all
together.
They'd point and tell me
"That's not supposed to be there,"
and all my flaws would be known,
but so would my beauty,
so would my strengths.
Maybe I could bring two people together one
day.

*

My tongue exploring
the roof of my mouth—
the sweet, the bitter flavor of coffee lingering.
My tastebuds tell me
this is not food at all.
I am tasting a memory,

your name just like mascarpone
coating the inside of my mouth
in a thin film of sweetness,
down to my stomach through my intestines.

*

Let's the two of us breathe in the damp air
until our lungs fill like balloon animals.
If my fingers curve inward like tiny handles
then I don't see why I can't just
curl my torso to cover you
like an umbrella
you would never have to worry about forgetting

Sophia Matthews

When I Die

When I die
read my writing.
All of it.
Rip the pages out of my journals.
Find the key to my middle school diary on the
rainbow thread in my jewelry box.
Read it all. It's all I have left.
It's my work.
Read my school projects, my essays, my letters,
my poems, my stories.
Go through my notes app.
Find my lists of things I had wanted to do
and the things I loved
and the things that made me laugh.
The people and their sayings that shaped me.
Find my papers
loose leaf and strewn about my room.
The lists of things I wanted to do
written in my own
shaky handwriting.
The Covid journal that I kept for a full year.
The things I wrote by flashlight at midnight.
The notes and song lyrics I scribbled in the
margins of my notebooks.
Find the papers from when I taught my sister
fractions, and the pages from when I thought I
could draw all of our faces.
Find the letters I wrote after arguments, the
persuasive drafts I wrote, the confused feelings I
explained.
I am spewed across all of this writing.
I keep so much inside, unverbilized.
the best way to get to know me
is to read all of the words I wrote.
That's how I process my emotions, thoughts,
and feelings. It's where I transcribe some of my
secrets, but the rest will follow me to the grave.

I've never been a good speaker.
I stumble over words
and talk like Doc,
words never come out how I want.
I'm often the subject of giggles over
mispronunciations and misspeaking.
The only place I can get everything out
is in writing.
These markings on paper contain my purest,
unedited essence.
So read it all.
Once I'm dead at least.
Know that I loved you, even though love isn't
a strong enough word. Know that I go through
these papers when I'm down, and I remember
who I am through them.
Find the things I wrote when I didn't know
how I felt. Find the stories I thought would be
published, and those I wanted to share with
just you.
Find it all, read it all.
I love you.
Understand it all. Understand me.

Emily Porter (EP) Siegel

crashout peal: a movement

bells i

and what will we do
when the bells stop ringing
filling the awaiting air

moments do not waste away, here
trickling into nothing
emptying hour glass shattered
before its time
a tide, a torrent

what will we do, then
without the swell compounding with
each approaching hour
the chorus of a life i've lived

won't we go dancing?
he asked, twice, once upon a time
and would you believe i was furious then

*what sadness lengthens romeo's hours? (and
mine, a premonition of designification)
not having that which having makes them short,*
he, lovestruck, murmurs

what will we do?

the bells start ringing at four
i notice, sleep-starved, elbows deep in my
writing
consumed by the desk

i hadn't noticed, when they fell silent
next time i won't have the luxury
three am haze for the rest of my days
waiting for life to feel full again

bells ii

what i'm trying to tell you
i scream into leatherbound pages of
my own voice
ricochets back at me
overwhelmed by
soaked in the sharpie smell
even when these words are still rhythms in my
mind
thrumming from the inside of my eyes
i had to fight so hard to abuse this alertness
like all the
cookie cutter boundary breaking overachievers
do

what i'm trying to tell you
you, the friendly night porter
you know
i've seen you through every season
you were shrouded in your scarf and hat
before
and i remember the way your eyes soften
when you half-smile
now it's june and you still have your armor on
you see me
every time i do this

look concerned and look more concerned
every time i do this
you see me

ask me my name
wish me good luck
peace be the journey

what i'm trying to tell you
and who rings the night bells?
who is the night bell-ringer

what i'm trying to tell you
it's past two i was supposed to be working again
half an hour ago
and an antler threaded through two fingers
is my friend my pace quickens
i was in the shower at two
i don't even know if the bells rang
i don't think they did but what if the bells rang
and i missed it
what if they didn't stop what if they never did

*what i'm trying to tell you is what if they ring
without me*
can't even stutter you trapped my words in my
head
now all they do is wail

i'm trying to fucking say
just write it, he needs something to read

it feels like a gift
they make every new hour feel like a gift
they're giving me something new
another privilege to squander.

bells' reprise

i can't find the feature you told me you were
writing about the libraries at night
but as you, fleetingly familiar, shook my hand
under the vaulted ceilings
i, unconscious to my own fallacy, told you a
lie

and as you changed your name on the platform
that had connected us before we touched
i fell in love, which is to say
i flung myself into the company of the
brightest souls
icarus flying for love of the sun
(someone else wrote this metaphor better than
me)

and i, too,
(i say, with utmost insincerity,)
was failed by technological innovation
or willful ignorance

*a machine pumps in the stone heart of the
divine mother*
she told me

there is no night bell-ringer
i did not want to hear

there is no beginning or end
that, i believe.

Lilly Trace

Belle Isle

Sanctuary, nature's hovel
comprised of river rocks that create
natural bridges: linked
to the complaining child and its mother linked
to the sunbathing woman in the tight bikini linked
to the artist sketching just below linked
to the perceiver.

She sits atop the highest stone
shrouded in shrubbery.
She feels fickle forms flicker
up and down and criss across
her protective shell:
a bitsy black body with little red legs
traverses through her blond-fielded
Irish Caucus.
Rough underfoot,
eensy erosions crumble at the slightest friction—
what of a quake?
Steepled stone sliced,
not a crumble but a crack,
and her perch piles out
evenly:
Another natural bridge formed.

She rises and walks to her car.
Starts the drive to suburbia.

It's ninety degrees.
An officer arrests a man in the median
who declined money and asked for food.

She feels peckish.

Kroger.
Aloha Protein Bar.
\$3.02.

Zachary Widmer

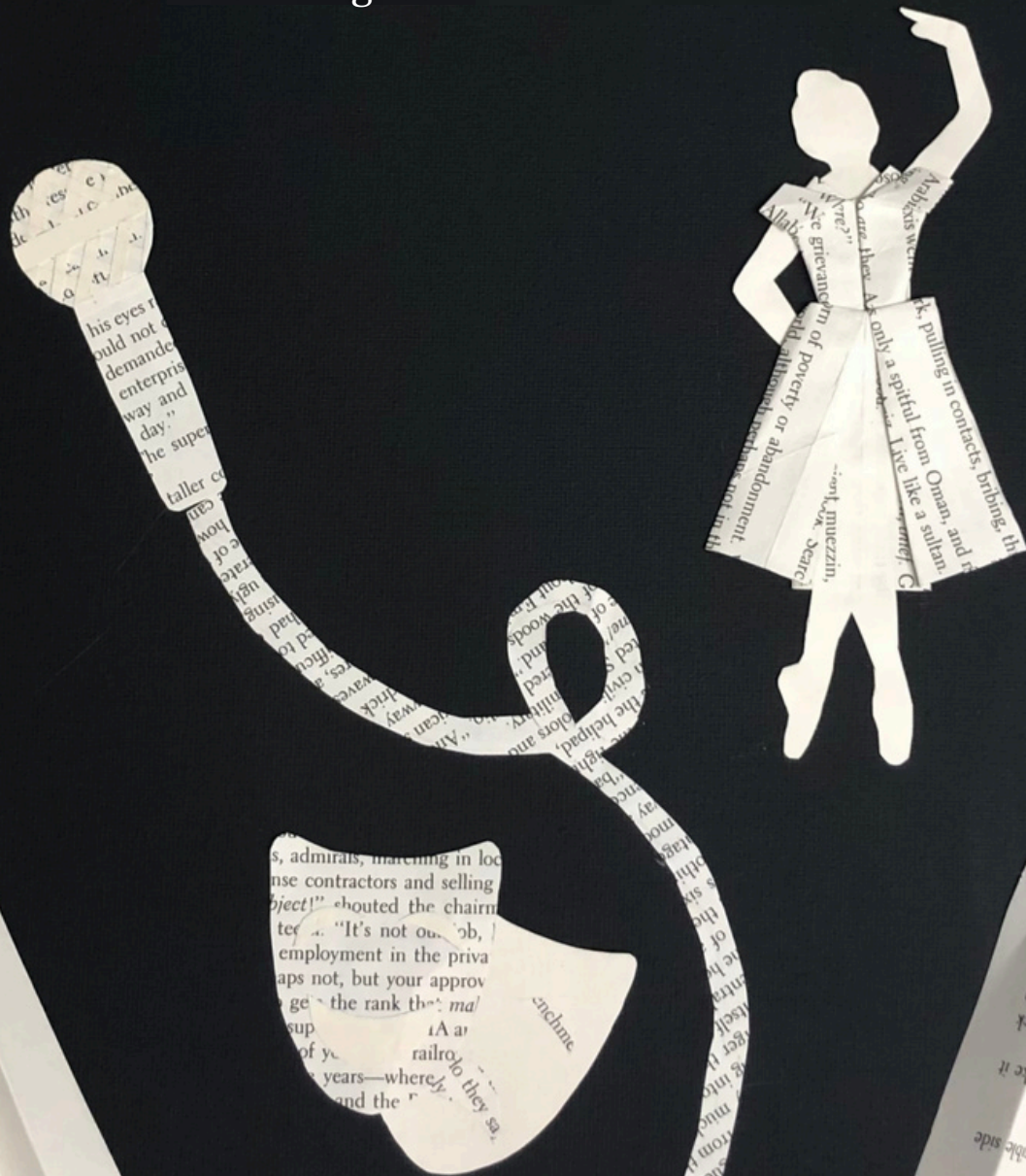
God (1917)

I sit among cracked pews
As the preacher shares his good news
Finally the evil had been subdued
So long as we follow his feud.

To hate as he doth decree
Tithe for his shopping spree
To replace the pipe He broke
he remains upon his pedestal of smoke

Artwork

For this *Venture* publication we selected pieces that highlight each artist's talent, unique vision, and individuality. Every piece stands out for its thoughtful expression and distinct perspectives, demonstrating technical and artistic skill.



Brielle Engelhardt ©2026







Mitchell Meyer ©2026



Saraswati Mookerjee 2026

©

PATRIZIA O MUERTE



Author Bios

Finn Alexander (he/him) is currently a sophomore Musical Theatre major. Originally from Austin, Finn is now based in Troy, New York, and Ewing, New Jersey. You may have seen him perform in Rider's mainstage production of *Twelfth Night*, or in one of the many Rider Student Theatre Company projects he's been a part of. As one might expect, his biggest writing inspirations include Mark Z. Danielewski, Kimberly Belflower, and his Experimental Creative Writing class a few semesters back.

Klaudine Bessasparis (she/her), Rider University Class of 2025 and contributor to Venture's relaunch in 2024, is a copyeditor and office manager at Haley & Aldrich, Inc. She is a book lover, an outdoor enthusiast, a tap dance fanatic, a decent volleyball player, an extroverted introvert, a feminist, and a constant source of laughter (for what reason, she can never be too sure). Klaudine has presented at Gender and Sexuality Studies Colloquiums through Rider, and her writing endeavors won't stop until she's a published book author. This is her third publication in Venture.

Skye Chernobilsky (they/them) is a Junior at Rider University with an Elementary Education and English Literature double major and a minor in Middle School Education. They are the President of the Rider University Pep Band, the Public Relations Manager for Rider University's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, and the Treasurer for Rider University's Hillel chapter. They are also a Content Tutor, Student Writing Consultant, and Office Assistant 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.

Carole Cobos (she/her) is a member of Venture's 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 a sophomore English major with a minor in Journalism. She is in the Baccalaureate Honors Program at Rider, as well as being the treasurer of both Venture and the national honor society, Alpha Lambda Delta. In the future, she hopes to be able to work in publishing and editing, as well as write. She has loved writing since she was young and is excited to be published by Venture for the second year in a row!

Emily Castro Eugenio (she/her) is an English major. She is a transfer student from Middlesex College and is a senior 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.

Brooke Foster (she/her) is a senior English major and Social Media Strategies minor working as a Student Writing Consultant at Rider's Academic Success Center. A self-proclaimed “professional storyteller,” Brooke gravitates toward works of science-fiction, mystery, and the occasional romance, finding inspiration in the works of Leigh Bardugo and Steven Moffatt. Outside of writing, you can find Brooke trying to finish books on her endless to-be-read (TBR) list (30 books and counting!) or discovering her latest comfort show on Netflix. After graduating in May 2026, she hopes to pursue a marketing and communications career to share meaningful stories across industries.

Talia Hincks is a genre crashing, lindyhoping, aikido-throwing adventurer. She likes to do a little bit of everything, but reading and writing have always held her heart. That’s what brought her to Rider University, where she graduated with a BA in English, and certificates in Management & Leadership. While there she was the head fiction editor of *Venture Magazine*, president of the martial arts club, an intern for W. W. Norton & Company, and the Community Assistant for a whole floor of singing freshman.

Emily Ivanauskas (she/they) is a junior 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. Emily is also the current president of the poetry club on campus. Their writing typically reflects their love for nature and the feelings that come with falling in love and discovering one's own identity.

Sophia Matthews is a senior English major with a Writing Concentration and a minor in Communication Studies. She works in Rider’s Academic Success Center as a Student Writing Consultant. Outside of the classroom, she can be found reading, playing sports (such as swimming, water polo, basketball, and soccer), contra dancing, going on adventures with friends, and supporting the Philadelphia sports teams. Go birds!

Eli Norton (they/them) is a senior English major with a minor in Music Production. They are the Web Editor of *Venture Magazine* and a member of the magazine design team. When they aren’t managing the *Venture* website, they’re online playing video games or doing some writing of their own.

Aiya Rabah (she/her) is a writer and poet from New York. Her dream is to write something that makes the world a better place, even by just a little bit.

Maggie Robinson is a non-fiction writer and poet. She is not too great at bios, but she is getting better. In addition to being a poetry editor, this is her second published piece for *Venture*. She finds inspiration in perfume samples, fairy tales, and bad reality shows.

Emily Porter (EP) Siegel (they/them) is an interdisciplinary storyteller based in Philadelphia. They graduated from Rider this past December with a BFA in Acting and a BA in English Literature, having also spent a year abroad at the University of Oxford (St. Edmund Hall). As a writer and poet, Emily Porter's work has been featured in "Poets In Revolt!" (828 National), the podcast Tranthologies, and the podcast Neighbourly—for which they won an Audio Verse Award. EP is eternally grateful to their friends, mentors, and faculty at Rider, who have empowered them to grow and flourish as a creative.

Lilly Trace (any pronouns) is a senior 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.

Zachary Widmer is currently an undecided freshman at Rider University. He helped with Venture Magazine this year, and goes to the Rider Poets club, where this poem was written! He's very proud to have his work published in the Venture Magazine, and now leaning towards a potential degree in English.

Editorial Masthead

Editor-in-Chief

Aiya Rabah is the editor in chief of *Venture Magazine*. She is a senior honors student majoring in English Writing and Criminal Justice. She was the assistant editor in chief of the award-winning issue of *Venture*, "Reflections" and she has been interviewed by The Rider News about her involvement with the publication. Her poems "homecoming" and "Unnamed Contrapuntal" have been published in *Venture*. She writes poems, short stories, and creative nonfiction often about cultural and feminist topics. In 2024 and 2025 respectively she won Rider English Department awards for critical and creative writing. She can be reached at aiyarabahinfo@gmail.com for professional inquiries.

Web Editor

Eli Norton (they/them) is a senior English major with a minor in Music Production. They are the Web Editor of *Venture Magazine* and a member of the magazine design team. When they aren't managing the *Venture* website, they're online playing video games or doing some writing of their own.

Treasurer

Brielle Engelhardt is the Treasurer for *Venture*. She is a sophomore honors student majoring in English with a minor in Journalism. Her fiction pieces "Murmurs in the Mirror," "Mercy in the Algorithm," as well as many art pieces of hers have been published in *Venture*. She has worked closely with the magazine's production, serving as the Design Editor and contributing to the creation and design of the 2025 and 2026 issue. She has truly enjoyed her time with *Venture* and appreciates the collaborative experiences and creative opportunities it has offered.

Academic Advisor

Vincent Toro 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. 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*, *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNEXT*, and *Latino Poetry: The Library of American Anthology*. He is a recipient of a Letras Boricuas writing fellowship (through the Flamboyant Foundation and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation), a New Jersey Council on the Arts Writing Fellowship, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Writing Fellowship. Vincent is a winner of the Cecile De Jongh Poetry Prize, the Sawtooth Poetry Prize, and the Spanish Repertory Theater's *Nuestras Voces Playwriting Award* (now the *Miranda Prize*). He has performed his poetry throughout the continental United States as well as in Puerto Rico, Spain, Argentina, and Turkey. He is a contributing Poetry editor for *Kweli Literary Journal*

Fiction Lead Editor

Brielle Engelhardt is the head fiction editor at *Venture*. She is a sophomore English major with a minor in Journalism. She is the treasurer of both *Venture* and the national honors society, Alpha Lambda Delta. She has worked for two years as the design editor for *Venture Literary Magazine*. In her free time she enjoys reading, singing, gaming, as well as many creative pursuits.

Fiction Team

Kalvin Nue
Ciara Khan

Nonfiction Lead Editor

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 senior at Rider University. They also enjoy egregiously long books, as is demonstrated by them incessantly talking about *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

Nonfiction Team

Carole Cobos
AngelLina Koeing

Poetry Lead Editor

Maggie Robinson is the head poetry editor of *Venture*. In addition to poetry, she also writes non-fiction. An English major with a writing concentration, this is her second year on the *Venture* poetry editing team.

Poetry Team

Garrett Atlak
Emily Ivanauskas
Kwyne Pugh
Mars Springsteel
Zachary Widmer

Acknowledgements

Venture extends our thanks to everyone who submitted this year. Your willingness to share your work, perspectives, and creativity is what makes this publication possible. We are equally grateful to our editorial team for their dedication, flexibility, and the time they devoted to selecting the featured pieces. To our faculty advisor, Vincent Toro, thank you for your continued support, guidance, and encouragement which is greatly appreciated. We would also like to recognize our executive board for their leadership, coordination, and the dedication they had to bringing this issue together. Finally, to our readers, thank you for taking the time to read our magazine and support *Venture*. Your engagement means everything to us and we hope that this issue is meaningful and inspiring to each and everyone of you.

Continuing Our Journey!

As this issue comes to a close, we are looking to the future with excitement. *Venture* remains dedicated to featuring the work of students, faculty, staff, and alumni and we encourage writers and artists to submit their work in the future. To stay connected with *Venture*, follow us on Instagram at [venture_litmagazine](#), visit [venturemagazine.org](#) for updates, or reach out to venture@rider.edu to get involved.