

A misty, foggy landscape with trees and a fence in the foreground. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dawn or dusk. The background is filled with a thick layer of mist or fog, obscuring the details of the trees and buildings. In the foreground, a dark wooden fence runs across the bottom of the frame. The overall mood is quiet and atmospheric.

Voices in the Mist

2022-2023

Voices 2022-2023
Mundelein High School

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Little Ladies

Person 1: Italics

Person 2: Normal

Both: Bold

Little ladies don't slouch.
Sit up straight.
You look like you've broken your back.
Don't make me break it for you.

Little ladies keep their legs closed.
Cross your legs.
You sit like a man.
Don't make me cut off your hair.

Little ladies don't eat so quickly.
Slow down.
You look like an animal.
Don't make me lock you in a cage.

Little ladies behave.
Why are you not behaving?
Don't make me tie you to a chair and leave you there.

Little ladies are quiet.
Stop talking!
You're too loud!
Talking is a privilege!
Don't make me take that away too!
I take these things because I love you!
I know what is best for you!
Let me help you!
I'm doing this for you!
Don't you see that stripping your identity away hurts me just as much as it hurts you?!
But you need to be a little lady!

Why are you moving out?!
Don't you care about us?!
Have we not done everything for you?!
Stop crying!
You're making me the villain!
I am not the villain!
Little ladies listen to their parents.

Marsh Covarrubias

Lower Your Standards

Your standards are too high is what they tell me.
What do you mean? I've always wondered.
Why should I lower the bar for someone who is too lazy to jump?
I will not lay down willingly at the altar of your scrutiny.
I refuse to accept someone with no respect for me at all.
I will wait.
There must be someone.
Someone who asks if I want it.
Someone who respects my opinions.
Doesn't objectify my body or shrug off my feelings.
Someone who is caring, and not just to my face.
Someone who will listen without a judging gaze.
Two halves don't make a whole but make each other more.
So I will raise the bar, high above my head, and wait for someone who is not afraid to find a ladder.

Amelia Willis

Here, Parents

If clear skin and a full head of hair are what you want,
here is undisturbed flesh and unplucked strands.
Here is the even color throughout the flesh,
the ever-grown strands of hair, unknowing to trichotillomania,
the pain never felt by the epidermis.
Here is the perfection and motivation you crave,
that insurmountable pride and joy, that glorious
relief rushing through body and blood. And I dare you
to continue your praying and hoping for success. Because here, parents,
here is where I continue to strive to suppress my behaviors,
here is where I get help every week and continue to fight through these disorders,
triggering immeasurable amounts of self-criticism after one singular failure,
each strand of hair pulled and each piece of skin picked twisting
the knife that is judgment into my heart, because here, parents,
here is where I try and try, but feel like the cycle will never end.

Parker Dumalski

Little Madwoman

My mother has been anticipating my first night since the day I was born. She has contemplated all the various ways that it can play out, and I am eager to see if I can make her dream a reality. But first, I have to get through the day; another lovely day with my husband, Charles.

To call my husband a workaholic would be an understatement. Thankfully, he is always in the workplace which has aided my effort in trying to keep him away from our living room. Sometimes I think the collar bones and skulls that frame our television may shock him. Or perhaps the strung bones of fingers and toes that I lined along our windows will surprise him more. But, one day, his face will grace our fireplace. Eyes boring into the marrow scattered across our house, he will see our living room in true.

“Are you leaving now?” I ask Charles as I hear the door open.

Naturally, I hear him respond with a “Yes”, and imagine him driving to his clinic. Charles is a gynecologist, meaning a women’s doctor. A bit strange, I must admit, but he’s dedicated nonetheless. Ready to prepare the house, I drag the bones my mother gifted me towards the living room. I set up for the first half of the day: decorating the fireplace with pictures of each of my fathers, preparing a frame for Charles’ photograph to be added, and gathering the tools my mother gave me for my first night. Remembering the gift my mom gave me years ago, I draw towards the bookshelf. I pick up two beloved books that my mother has read to me time and time again: *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *A Room of One’s Own*. I’ve always been my mother’s little madwoman. Her pet name has carried with me throughout my life.

“Come here my little madwoman. I have another set of bones for you!”

“Thank you mommy! I love them so much,” I reply. Over the years, I have thanked her for the many sacks of marrow that I have garnered.

I return the books to their respective shelves, and the memories leave my thoughts. Needing a distraction, I prepare a meal for myself. Knowing Charles won’t be home to eat with me, I cook his favorite dish and leave it on the counter. After eating dinner, a wave of anxiety drowns me. I worry that I will perform incorrectly, or that I may stray away from the instructions my mother gave me. I want to make her proud, but I am scared that my first night with Charles will leave me no option of a second or third with someone else.

A voice interrupts my thoughts as Charles declares, “I am home,” monotone and direct as always.

I do not respond. Seeing him entering the living room, I clench my precious tools tighter. A picture of his body is tattooed in my mind as I wait for him to cross the room to get to me. He is quite a dull man, but I am unable to rid the anxiety and rising remorse that is stirring within me. With a knife and hook held behind my back, I murmur, “Welcome home my mad man. I will miss you,” as I swiftly begin and end my first night.

Watching his limp body displaying a gaping hole in his chest, I think to myself, I did it, giddy that it is now over. Guilt and repentance lack any influence on my conscience; I am my mother’s little madwoman after all. Feeling empowered and already eager to have a second night, I continue with the procedure that my mother outlined for me.

“Be sure to skin his bones, discard the excess skin, and sanitize your hands prior to cleaning the bones.

Collect a cloth and bucket of water to scrub the marrow, then divide the bones into piles based on size,” my mother relays in her voicemail.

One by one they accumulate at the entrance to my house; all 206 cleaned and polished by 3:58 a.m.

In a shallow whisper, I exhale, “For a mad woman is only mad because of the maddest man.”

Charles is dead, I repeat to myself over and over in my head. Calling my mother to tell her how my first night went, I am shocked and elated to find her at my door.

“My little madwoman, I am so proud of you!” she exclaims while embracing me, “Charles’ bones look pristine, and your house will look gorgeous with them.”

I look at my house, feeling a sense of pride in its decor. My first set of bones lay beautifully in my living room.

“Thank you mother!” I gush, “I hope I made you-”

But as the word “proud” is leaving my lips, my mother unsheathes her dagger, and a sharp pain in my abdomen shocks me paralyzed.

Reverb resounds in my head as my mother releases her final declaration, “You learned well my little madwoman. A photograph of you will grace the fireplace along with those of your fathers. Afterall, they made me the maddest woman. How could I let you fill my place?”

Jadyn Ko

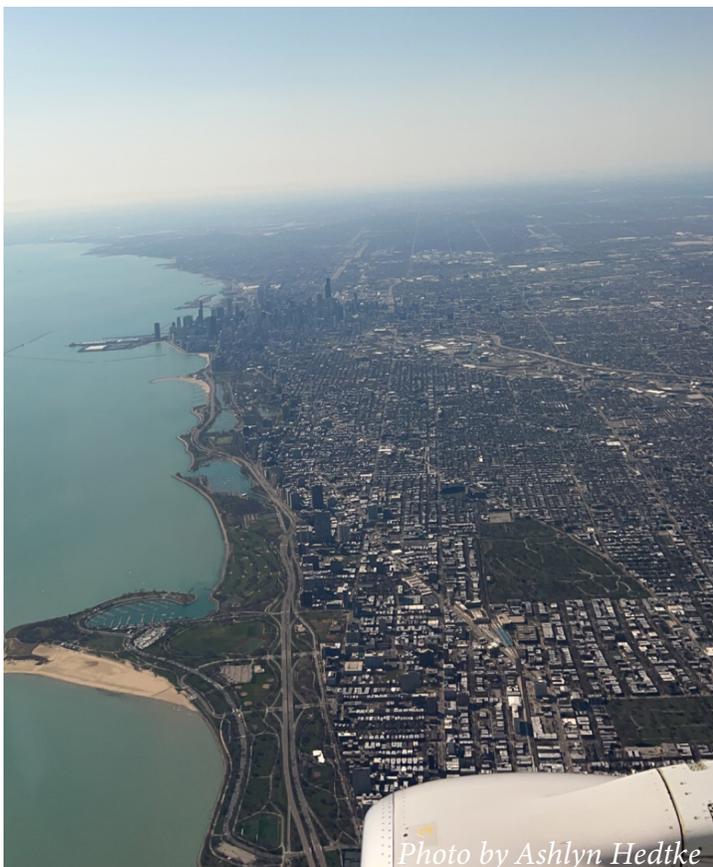


Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

Untitled

sometimes
i feel like i'm falling
spiraling, into an endless void
my thoughts, they jumble
the walls i so carefully built, they crumble
sometimes
it's like i'm screaming
but no one can hear me
it's like i'm in front of these people
but i'm invisible and they all look through
sometimes
i put a smile on my face and pretend like i'm okay
i wake up and pretend i'm fine
oh, and sometimes
i feel like disappearing completely
no one would miss me, anyway
Sometimes

Avishi Mehta

VOICES

We Are Not Weapons

That boy you knew is gone
In his place stands a beautiful woman
With a similar height and the same shimmering
blue eyes
You decide that you don't like
This woman all that much
You decide that because the boy is gone
You will use him as a weapon
You use his name,
That has been long forgotten by most,
As your sword
And his flat chest as your shield
As you create holes in her body
With every swing of his name
She gives you a sweet smile
And asks how your day is going

That girl you knew is gone
In her place stands a powerful and motivated
person
You miss your friend
You miss the girl with wavy black hair
And you scowl each time you see the person
play with their purple hair that is half shaved
As you walk into the person's house
A frown appears on your face
As you notice the work boots that sit
Where that girl's high heels used to have a home
You decide that the person
Is changing the girl's home too much
You decide to use that girl as a weapon
You use the girl's pronouns
As poison in the person's tea
And the girl's dresses to try and steal
The air from their lungs
As they gasp for air
And their veins course with pain
They thank you for visiting
And send you home with a few cookies
They baked prior to your visit

You go home thinking about
The woman at work and the person in the girl's
home
You think about their friendly smiles
And the way they waved goodbye
As they bled out and suffocated

You want to ask them how
But you know you shouldn't
Instead you fall asleep
And dream about the woman with the blue eyes
And the person with the purple hair.

Notes: This poem has confused a few people so I felt it would be necessary to explain. The person talked about in the first stanza is a trans woman. So they changed from the guy at work to this brand new woman. In the second stanza, You were friends with this woman who is now non-binary.

Marsh Covarrubias

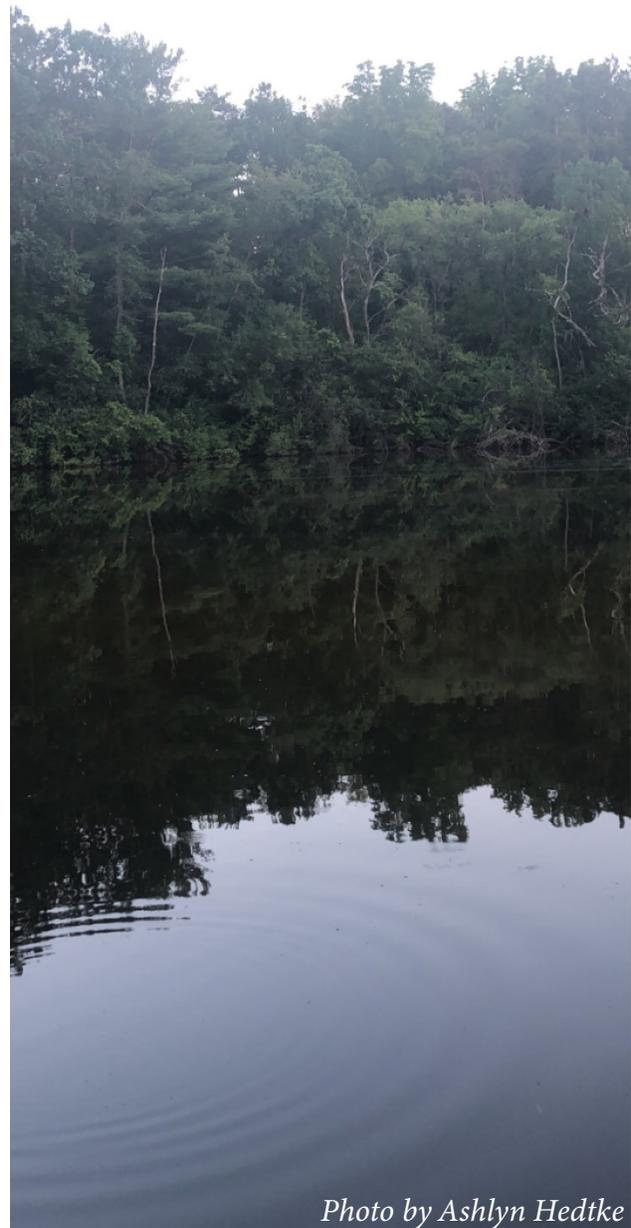


Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

There are bees here

If you listen,
you can hear the
buzz of their wings
beating vigorously as
they float around lightly
in the afternoon sky.
But no,
their wings are not blades
that can harm you,
and their legs are not needles
that wish to cause pain.
But they are those that carry pollen to flowers,
allowing them to flourish around the world,
spreading beauty wherever they go.
They merely wish to dance in the wind,
gossiping about the latest drama.
But people mistake their peaceful dances for threats,
and as they dodge the numerous
attempts to strike them out of the air,
all they can think about is getting home to their family.
And no,
their home is not a place where
violence and destruction occurs.
It is where sweet honey is made,
and it is a place where everyone works in harmony,
and there are bees here,
so many beautiful bees here.

Hannah Boone

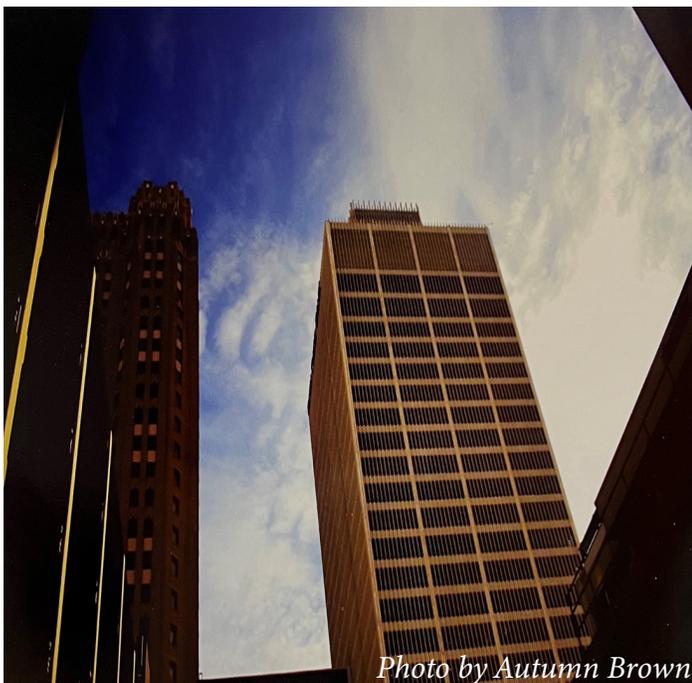


Photo by Autumn Brown

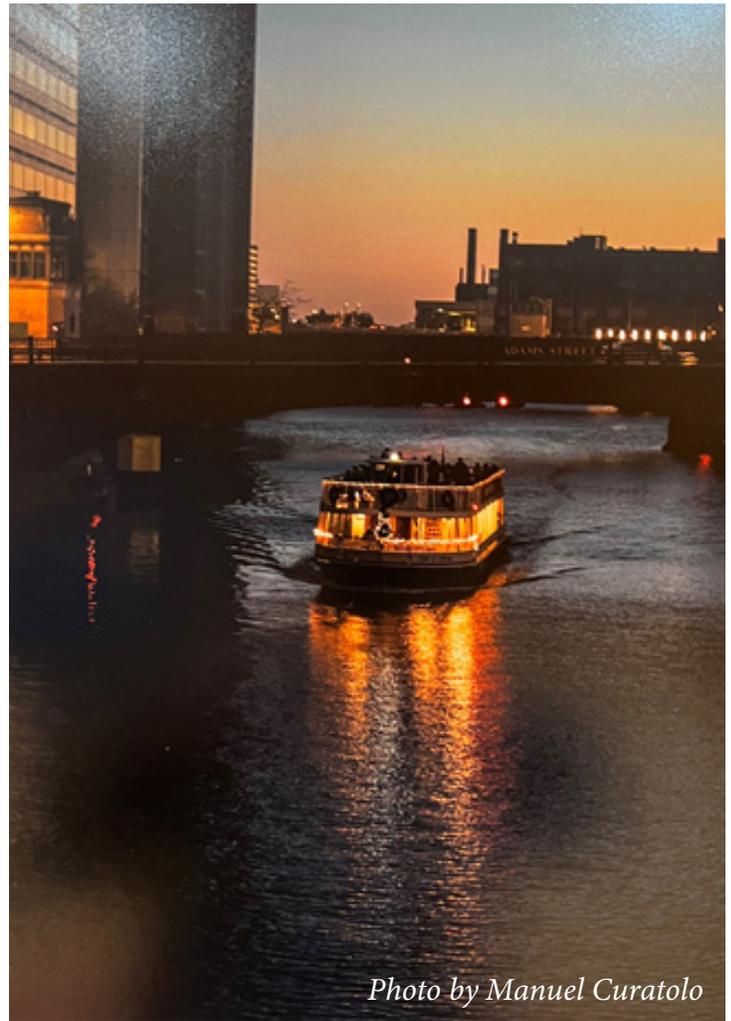


Photo by Manuel Curatolo

Something You Should Know

Something you should know is that I got pregnant at 16.
I honestly thought my life was over.
Those 9 months felt so long.
For 9 months I was afraid I wouldn't be a good mom
I was afraid I wouldn't know how to care for a baby.
I was afraid to bring a baby into this cruel and unusual
world we live in.
But as soon as I first held her, every ounce of worry and
fear left my body.
I felt relief that she was finally here.
I was relieved to know that she was healthy
I knew she would be in good hands.
After 8 months of having a kid
I realized my life was never over
It was just beginning.

Jayda Chavez

Treading the Line

The sand is so golden it sparkles. It's dry, welcoming, and soft. The warm feeling between my toes; the obscure texture of crushed shells. The light crash of the wave that sounds once the water meets land, carefully carried, delivered softly, and receding gracefully. The song of a bird from up above. It all feels so comfortable, but still, the wind carries my hair, enticing me to walk forward.

I trace the outline of where the water meets the sand with my steps. Careful to stay on the dry sand. Careful to avoid the wave where the water meets the sand. Careful not to err on the side that exposes my flesh to another ecosystem.

With each step, I lose focus. With each step, I lean a little closer. Like a trainwreck, I can't take my eyes off it, but like watching a butterfly taking flight, I refuse to look away.

And then it happens.

One step over, and I've done it. I've crossed the line. My toes greet damp, cold, gray, and dense sand. Feeling the grit between each toe, I make an imprint on the ground.

All I can do is look down in horror. Soon, the wave will come crashing in, I can hear its chant, its hymn, its warning. The sound echoed in my head, filling me with fear, but, in retrospect, simultaneously, adrenaline. I try to move my feet, but they won't carry me. I am cemented to the ground, cemented by this course, wet, and daunting texture that I can't seem to separate myself from.

All throughout life, I find myself entering new ecosystems. New environments with niches I have to adjust to.

I'm always assuming that because the habitat I have built for myself has become comfortable, it is best for me. I worry if exposing myself to the possible tragedies that could be waiting on the other side, is even worth the chance of discovering something new, something "better".

But then, something clicks, and I'm pushing myself to explore territory I haven't charted before. Trying to experience everything that every mystery has to offer. And however long I find myself taking to make that final step, to enter them, these new worlds, I've learned, I always adapt in time.

Making that final step is not always so easy. I'm holding my breath until I make the plunge. I'm looking up until I truly must look down. I'm leaping, manifesting making it over. I'm scaling the top, trying not to think about how I'll get back to the bottom. I'm entering something unknown, already longing for what I left behind.

Once I'm at a point beyond return, once an imprint of my foot is left in gravelly sand, it's time for me to make an effort to enter this area with the confidence I would expect of an adapted adventurer, a mature mountaineer, or a professional pioneer.

Then, it's only time until I am captivated by this new environment, soaking it up like an ocean sponge, consuming it entirely like an invasive species. Being one with it like its air runs through my blood.

One deep breath and I'm no longer treading the line, I'm treading water. I'm running through it, throwing myself into it, determined to make contact with every square inch of it. To absorb its salty essence in my skin, and carry it with me forever.

I run and I splash. I scream and I leap. I will dread the moment I will have to leave, but I will savor every salty second I am spared before I must go, to my next adventure. This time, with the confidence of a seasoned swimmer.

Holly Lisetta Scaramella



Photo by Talia Zavialov

Causing a Racquet

You've probably never heard of the legend of the MHS Tennis Court ghost. The legend is not well known, but once, there was a girls tennis player named Graciela. She was known throughout the North Suburban Conference as a threat, the best player at Mundelein High School. In the most difficult battle of her career, she was in a tiebreaker third set against Stevenson High School with no ad scoring. Then, in the climax of the match, they went to a deuce. Back and forth they went, knowing that the next point would decide the winner. Then, Graciela's opponent hit a drop shot. Graciela sprinted as hard as she could but THEN! Her shoe sank into a piece of gum on the tennis court that a kid from a PE class had spit out. She was slowed just enough that she didn't make it. Stevenson won the match.

No one knew that senior Leila Moon was watching from the shadows. She whispered angrily, "Confound it! These reckless camels will know the wrath of Leila Moon!" A little piece of her spirit died as she uttered those words. That piece of spirit left her body and began to haunt the MHS tennis courts. While Leila was at marching band, her spirit watched the PE classes and saw those students who spit their gum out.

While Leila was studying, her spirit watched from above as students visited the courts at night, took pictures for Instagram posts, and then spit their gum out afterward onto the ground. While Leila filled out the Fall Athletics form, her spirit snuck back into her body and whispered the names of all of those gum spitting offenders. But she spared them and did not write their names in the "facilities complaints" section of the form.

After Leila graduated, that piece of spirit remained. It floated darkly around the courts, watching every gum spitter. It followed those gum spitters and ensured that they failed their tests and forgot to floss the spinach out of their teeth and got paper cuts, which is just plain embarrassing because high schoolers aren't supposed to get paper cuts.

Oh, but the curse can be broken! If even one courageous gum spitter feels a stab of guilt, there is a second chance. If they pick their gum up off the court, fold it neatly into a wrapper, call their best friend Hubba Bubba all day, and call their parent or guardian Juicy Fruit all day, then the spirit of Leila Moon will rest itself forever, never to haunt again.

Leila Moon

The Birthday After

Melody walked into her room and shut the door softly behind her. The light was already fading although it was only 4:00 PM. She pulled up a chair and sat down at her desk putting her head in her hands.

On the desk sat a cold cup of coffee she had forgotten to drink a day or two ago. The window was cracked an inch, so the cold winter air chilled Melody to the bone.

She looked up at the picture of her and her best friend Sarah hanging on the bulletin board. They were holding hands and laughing hysterically at a joke only the two of them understood.

Next to the photo hung a worn bracelet whose gold plating was long gone due to Melody's nervous habit of running her fingers across the inscription. She could no longer wear the bracelet, as the gold band had snapped a year prior.

After a couple of minutes, Melody took a deep breath and pulled out her phone. She opened it to see another picture of her and Sarah at the beach.

That was the best summer of her life, the summer she had met Sarah. They had gotten ice cream at the parlor which Sarah proceeded to smear all over her face in her rush to eat it before it melted, not caring in the slightest. They ran through shops and bought things they knew they didn't need. Late in the day, they found themselves at the beach. They stopped, sitting down on the warm sand.

"I like squishing the sand between my toes," Sara laughed.

"You're so weird!" Melody replied, a smile playing across her face.

"And you love it!"

"Yes. yes, I do."

"Promise me it will always be like this. Me and you. Always and forever."

"Always and forever," Melody repeated.

They sat that way until the sun began to set on the sea of possibilities before them. The memory warmed Melody's heart, but the feeling quickly faded as she opened her phone.

"Happy birthday," Sarah's bright voice laughed. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you to celebrate."

Melody glanced over at the window as a car drove past before she responded.

"It's ok. I know your parents never let you out past 10:00."

"Hey, save me a chocolate cupcake, won't you?"

"Already did."

"Oh, and you will never believe the present I got you! It's made of real gold and it cost me my whole monthly allowance!"

Melody smiled sadly looking up at the bracelet.

"Why?" she whispered.

"It has our names inscribed on it too so we will never be apart. I have one too. It will be me and you. Always and forever, Melody."

"Always and forever, Sarah," Melody repeated back.

"Anyway, my mom's calling me. See you at school tomorrow!"

The line went dead, and Melody sat shivering. She looked up at the picture of her and Sarah once again. A tear traced a path down Melody's cold cheek.

Melody stood and walked out the door, re-entering with a small chocolate cupcake in her hand. She lit the candle thinking back to the summer day at the beach and Sarah's ice cream-covered face. She leaned down to blow out the candle and made a wish she knew would never come true.

Amelia Willis

Untitled

...and he went. Chasing after her in some unforeseen maze, rather out of site.

“Give it now!” he demanded, but she would never give up.

She ran for miles and miles, screaming for help but to no avail.

“Help!” Maddie screamed but still, nobody would hear her.

Then she plunged ten feet down a hill, tumbling and stumbling, unable to catch her balance. She got away. She was in the woods now. She had to find a plan. But she was rather lost in a labyrinth of trees, smells, and nature.

She finally got to the bridge where she had meditated before. It was in shambles and dismay. Memories just as shattered as those wood posts. She took the .357 magnum out of her pocket and steadily started to load it.

She shouted, “Come get me! I’m not afraid!” and the killer did just that with his hideous hockey mask covered in blood. He tried to backstab her using his combat knife, but she moved out of the way.

He missed the stab and ended up dropping the knife. Maddie punched the killer back and he was on the ground trying to get up.

She took the knife and threw it off the bridge into the river, and watched it disappear downstream. But she wasn’t done, for she knew she had to unmask the killer to see who took the twenty-five lives of those poor, innocent souls in that small town in Indiana for his own greed. Who was it? The questions flooded through her brain as she slowly pulled the mask off. “Dad?...”

Daniel Neuwirth

Superman and Me Imitation

A story with a working end. An introverted teenage boy from birth trying to face his anxiety of talking to people. He musters all of his courage to form a broken sentence while most kids his age have the ability to speak freely and openly without worry of being ridiculed. If he’d been anything but an introverted kid with social anxiety, he might have made some friends. But still, he is an introverted teen with social anxiety. He is simply seen as the odd one in between the friends he does have. He still can’t speak or make friends without reliance on medication. A simple teenage boy who speaks of his struggles in third person in hopes of easing the pain that his insecurities have caused him throughout the years.

An introverted teen is an outcast, widely shunned by both friends and society alike for not being outgoing. When given the chance they forced me to talk, to speak, and I didn’t feel comfortable speaking. Always standing there in silence on the verge of tears when told to go to the front of the class. We as humans were expected to be social and outgoing no matter the conditions. Almost all those kids met the expectations. Talking, laughing, making friends, not being afraid to speak. With no understanding, they left those who couldn’t speak alone and ignored.

I refused to be ignored, I was bashful, I was reluctant, I was astute. I tried to speak more openly during school, recess, and anywhere in between where I could muster up my courage to talk to someone. I tried to draw attention to myself during class, outside of school, in public places. I tried standing out in public, wearing the one neon red outfit I had amongst my black monochrome wardrobe, the most uncomfortable feeling in the world. I tried standing in front of the class, presenting or just speaking in general, speaking till anxiety caught my tongue. I tried making friends. I tried speaking freely. I tried talking to the familiar student faces I saw in the hallway every day while walking from class to class. I tried going to populated areas. I tried surrounding myself with other people. I tried going days without medication. I hated being ignored. I hated still being judged after playing my part to fit into society. I hated not being able to speak my mind openly. I hate that I’m simply trying to fit in.

Leonardo Galeana Pacheco

Mother Knows Best

When I was five years old
I was Spiderman
I saved the world from crime
I swung through the air with my webs

When I turned six
I learned of imagination
And I could no longer do all those things
And I was no longer Spiderman

When I was seven
For the first time I tried piano
My mother guided me through the notes
And together, somehow, we made music

When I was eight
I rode my bike down the street
Until my mother couldn't see me anymore
And I wondered if she missed me

Nine
I asked santa
For a brand new lego set

Ten
I asked mom
If santa was real

I don't know what age I was
When I found out that mom wasn't perfect
Even though she could glide through those piano notes
or bike anywhere she wanted

She could talk to santa claus, or make up santa claus
And do all those wonderful things
But she can't do everything

She still has her own set of fears
She still made the same mistakes that I had made
Did all the stuff I regret doing
Said all the stuff I regret saying

But to my mom, thank you
I thank you for being my piano tutor
I thank you for being honest and open with me
And I thank you for trying your very hardest
So I'll cherish you until my very last breath
Because after all, mother knows best.

Matt Gomez

Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

The River

BANG.

Billie dragged the body into a bag, and he ran away as far as he could. The ringing in his ears wouldn't go away. His vision was distorted. He diverted into the dark, eerie forest. The owls were screeching, and the wolves were howling. Billie couldn't believe what he had done. He was freaking out, and no one was there to calm him down. His mind was racing. He needed to find a way to escape this horrific world. He ran towards the river. He couldn't turn back. He soared through the midnight sky... before plummeting downward to Hell.

Rance Cruz

A New Path?

I wasn't enough. I was so consumed by darkness that I began withering away every ounce of life around me. As the days passed no one stopped to help. Until I finally realized no one would help. Anger began sweltering up through every pore on my skin. My Love for others faded as red consumed my vision. But before I lost myself completely I looked deep within and realized I wasn't angry with the world. I was angry with myself for not helping myself. I realized no one would be there besides myself. And from that moment on I Lived.

Andrew Galfield

Nightclaw

I sat with the boy, a dim lamp warming the tiny bedroom.

"I promise, a 'Nightclaw' isn't a thing. It must have been a trick of the shadows," I reassured, standing up.

He began trembling and whispered, "I saw something, don't leave me!"

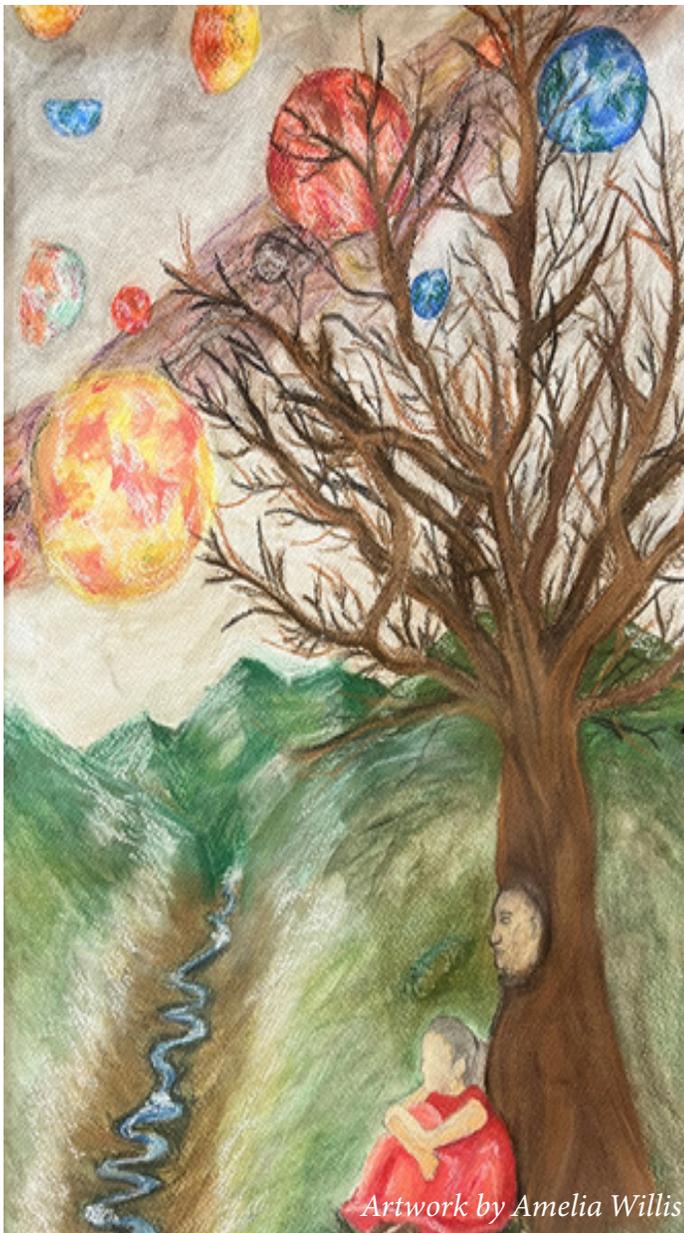
I embraced him then turned towards the door. I flicked the light switch, blinking as darkness sucked away the last of the bulb's glow. When my eyes opened, I was back on the edge of the boy's bed, but now he gazed at me with horror.

His already-too-large eyes widened as my midnight-black, scaled claws reached toward him.

Paige Prochnow

Untitled

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-coloured
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.



Artwork by Amelia Willis

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are
bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground,
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows-
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Aiden Mounce



Here, Stress

If frustration is what you want
Here are headaches that throb the same rhythm as a heartbeat
Here is the endless insomnia
Here is the chest pain
The high blood pressure
Here are the panic attacks
That strike out of nowhere, like an atomic bomb
Because here, stress
There is a thick border
between you and I
Here is where I am calm, collected, and careful
Against your excessive desires
Here is where I love and cherish
Every moment
Because here, stress
Here is where I stop letting you dictate
My life.

Adrian Mel Xavier Afonso

The Secret Ingredient

I've been perfecting my recipe for lemon pepper chicken with green beans and mashed potatoes since last week's dinner at the Murphys' house. I've been eating mashed potatoes so much to the point where I'm sick of them. I don't care; I won't be eating them tonight anyway. I've been friends with the family across the street for months now. They came over with a plate of banana nut muffins when I first moved in; unfortunately, I'm allergic to nuts. They invited me over for dinner that night and ever since then, it's been our weekly tradition.

I preheat the oven before I turn my attention to the chicken. I season three whole breasts with pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, and lemon juice. Once the oven beeps, I pop them in and set the timer. I've gone through the motions so much that I don't need to look at the recipe anymore. I tend to the potatoes and green beans and move to the latter part of my plan: the big finale.

It's not long before there's an enthusiastic knock at my door.

"Hey, Trevor!" Mrs. Murphy, Kim, hugs me as she walks in, a pie balancing in one hand. I force a smile and hug her back. I didn't ask for a pie. This will throw the night off; everything must be perfect.

"Hello, Kim. Thank you for coming."

"I brought dessert!" She hands me the pie. Strawberry rhubarb, disgusting. She walks in and canvases the place.

"Can I help with anything?"

"No, everything is perfect." I respond casually. As I'm setting the table for six, Mr. Murphy, pulled along by their three kids, enters the living room.

"Hey, Trevor," Mr. Murphy, Kevin, nods at me. He plops the little one in the highchair they brought and the other two kids find their places across from each other.

"Dinner should be ready in a minute, so feel free to grab a drink," I quickly check on the chicken before I salt the green beans and transfer the serving tray to the table. I take the mashed potatoes and put them on the other end. Kevin helps me carve the chicken and while his back is turned, I coat the chicken with my special ingredient. They won't know what hit them.

"Trevor! This chicken is delicious! I love the tanginess of the lemon." Kim exclaims as she shoves another bite in her mouth. I smile in delight. The lemon is working. I make sure to not eat too much. No way am I stuffing myself before dessert. Her two eldest, Marcie and Luke, also have heaping plates of chicken. The only one who hasn't been eating my chicken is Kevin.

"Don't you want some chicken?" I ask him.

"Oh no, I'm getting full," he lifts his hands apologetically.

I bristle.

"Please, I insist. Just a little bit."

"Yeah, Kev, it's delicious!" Kim serves him a small piece of chicken. It will be more than enough for the effect to take place.

Kevin reluctantly takes a bite and smiles, "Okay, you guys were right. It's amazing." He continues to finish it and even takes seconds.

"I'm going to get dessert ready," I get up and place my napkin on my plate. Kim motions to get up as well, but I wave her off. As I'm in the kitchen, cutting up the pie and humming to myself, I hear one, two, three, four, five thunks. Although little Joey's thunk is more of a plop.

"Everyone okay?" I pop my head into the dining room and look around at everyone's heads shoved into their food. I can hear their raspy breathing slowly fade. A slow smile creeps across my face.

"Excellent." I mumble. Quickly, I check the pantry to ensure my escape route is secure before I go to town on my dessert.

I start with Joey. I make quick work of his limbs, breaking them off his torso and tearing the skin off with my teeth. He tastes just as I'd imagined: sweet as confectioners' sugar. Once I'm done eating the meat, I break his tiny little bones and suck the marrow out. The jelly-like substance goes down deliciously. Marcie will be the last

one I eat. I don't want to sample Luke; I'd imagine his flesh would be tough and bitter.

Once I'm done delimiting Marcie, I tear the sweet meat off her bones and suck up the tantalizing marrow. At this point I'm sitting on the floor next to her chair, trying to consume every last drop of her flesh and bone marrow. Once I'm done polishing off my dessert, I clean up the table. I leave Luke, Kim, and Kevin where they are, but I take their plates and set them in the sink. I even go as far as to wipe the blood from the table and highchair.

Finally, I open the pantry and look at the assortment of nuts I bought last night. Peanuts, pistachios, Brazil nuts, almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pecans, walnuts; so many ways to end my misery. I open all the containers and dump the contents into a big bowl, not caring about making a mess on the floor or countertops.

Immediately, my eyes start to water at the mere exposure. I shove handfuls of them into my mouth, barely stopping to chew. I feel my throat constrict; I sink to my knees and claw at my throat. I scold myself for fighting it.

Gargled moans pass my lips as I struggle to breathe. Then finally, nothing.

Asha Mehta

Essay

I, being a regular kid, glued to Youtube, scrolling through videos being bored of all the regular famous influencers doing the same videos over and over again, came across Bob Ross, painting beautiful rainforest mountains with possum black and starfish red. My sticky, Cheeto dusted, chubby fingers kept clicking through his videos, astonished by how he could be so talented with wacky hair and a calm voice, creating these beautiful mountains, skylines, and waterfalls.

Being the 7-year-old I was, I ran to my father screaming, "Dad, Dad, Dad!" as I was running across the entire house.

"What's up, kiddo?" he responded in a worried voice thinking something was wrong.

"We have to go to a craft store right now," I said, huffing and puffing as I'm trying to catch my breath. "I need to make something beautiful!"

My father was the most impressive and supportive person, he did not question me at all. So, we took a trip to Michaels Arts and Crafts Store. When we arrived and those sliding doors opened, I felt like I was in art heaven. I followed him to the painting section and we completely filled our cart with some beginner's acrylic paint, 10x10 canvases, and a packet of brushes. We went to check out, ran to the car, and being the duo we were, we stopped for McDonald's, and got chicken nuggets, happy meals and an Oreo McFlurry. We came home, and I launched myself into my new painting career.

The painting was anything but decent. Needlessly, it was the most horrific painting ever, it looked nothing like Bob's and I was mad. I was so determined to create this painting and be the best painter there is. Thanks to Bob Ross and growing up with the internet, I have one of the most relaxing, fun, and messy hobbies to do when I get home from school, cheer practice, or anytime I am bored or need a stress reliever, and I absolutely love it.

But painting isn't just about who the artist is or how good the painting is, it is so much more. For all those reasons, it's what made me love it even more. Each stroke, dot, and color have a meaning behind it. The artist shows us their pain, excitement, and anxiety in one single painting, but no one knows the true meaning behind every single layer of color they put towards their hard work.

Scarlet Savers

“Teach Me How to Speak”

My first language was not English. In fact, I barely spoke English when I first started preschool. For the first several years of my life, my mother tongue was Vietnamese. I talked to my family, I sang songs, I could speak to my aunt in Vietnam in a language she had grown up speaking, and I could do all of that with ease. Then, at around the age of 6, I completely stopped speaking. Later, I realized that this phenomenon I had experienced had a name—receptive bilingualism. Receptive bilingualism is when one can completely understand a language fluently but can't speak it. Vietnamese was the key to connecting with my cultural identity and I had completely lost it. There wasn't an exact moment where I could just pinpoint the moment I had lost it but I know it was going to your typical American school.

I was in trouble the moment I first started school. Deep trouble. You see, not being great at English and losing your mother tongue at the same time wasn't an easy thing for a 6-year-old. Balancing friendships was prioritized over connecting with my family. I dismissed my own background so I could feel like I fit in with the white girls. I starved myself at a young age because I hated it when kids would judge the ethnic food my mother would give me, the food she woke up early to make and with love that her mother had never given her. Then, when my mother picked me up from school she would ask, “Hôm nay ở trường thế nào?”. How was school today?

“It was fine,” I would respond in plain English because I couldn't bare to tell my mom about the racism I experienced that day. My speech was deteriorating in front of me and I didn't even realize it.

For the longest time, I couldn't get over my own incompetence. I cried for prolonged periods, grieving over the death of a language that was never really mine. Along with my own grief, it seemed like throughout the years, others were just as disappointed. We could not grasp the ridiculous idea that someone could just forget a language. While my parents never said it, their looks expressed their own distaste for my inability. Most of my family members can get by in English but it's not the same as speaking in their native languages. The number of family gatherings we had every year always frustrated me growing up. Why did we all need to see each other all the time? We all live in the same state and within a 15-minute radius of each other. It never occurred to me that they don't have friends. They went to America with barely any knowledge of the English language or its culture. They went to America with only family to bind them.

“Tại sao cô ấy không nói được tiếng Việt?” My great-grandmother asked my mother once. Why can't she speak Vietnamese? Her wise eyes narrowed onto me as if I was some sort of alien that landed on planet Earth.

My mother managed her best smile, “Cô ấy có thể nghe tiếng Việt nhưng không nói được tiếng Việt!” She can understand Vietnamese but she can't speak it. My stomach churned as my mother held her head high but still bit her lip. My eyes fell to the ground, my face growing hot and red.

“Hiểu biết để làm gì nếu cô ấy thậm chí không nói được tiếng Việt?” What's the point of understanding if she can't even speak it? That was the nicest way my great-grandmother could find to call me absolutely useless. After the conversation came to a close, I seemed to blend into the background yet again.

In school, I had to take tests since English wasn't my first language. They were a series of speaking and comprehension tests in English. I had always despised doing it. I thought I surpassed the other kids who were there by a lot. In reality, we were all just in the same boat. I kept taking tests until the third grade. I knew I had to get better at English if not for me than for my family. For some reason I guess my small brain decided that the only way to advance in one language was to abandon one.

I realized that if the American kids didn't want me and my family couldn't understand me, I needed a new outlet. Wielding my self-hatred and my need for a sense of belonging, I turned to literature. The spines of books became pillars that held me up, and the build of a pencil became the microphone that I could speak through. Reading and writing taught me to speak a whole different language—they were the way I could open the door to somewhere that wouldn't hurt me. Somewhere where I could make myself belong.

I spent hours in my room with my wood bookshelves, sitting down with a book in hand. I flipped through each and every page, feeling the grains of paper sinking into my hands. I read until my eyes could no

longer focus or when I knew I had to go to sleep.

I truly read books like a madman. I made worlds in my mind—I thought maybe, just maybe, I could write fantasy into reality. Alas, life continued. I finished elementary school and started middle school. While the racism of others stayed, it became just a thorn in my side instead of the whole rose bush. I couldn't say the same for my own hate for my ethnic background. I always have believed that the heart is a heavy burden, especially my own. I always felt like I felt things on a deeper level than most. My own feelings are colossal—it's both the reason I can and can't breathe.

I remember how I dreaded going to Vietnam this one summer. I hated seeing all the relatives that I didn't even know still existed. I hated seeing their faces when they learned that I still couldn't talk to them and that I was only getting older. I hated the heat and the sweat and the smell of gas on the street.

There was only one reason that I liked going—my aunt on my mother's side. One of my best memories of her was when we visited in the first grade and she helped me write about the trip. It was the first time I really wrote something. I still cherish that journal. I can say I love my mother's side of the family only because it's really just my mother and her sister. The fact that I love them inspired me to want to try for them. If I loved them so much, maybe I can relearn how to love my own language and culture.

Through reading, I've found that I'm not quite alone. Reading about others' experiences with receptive bilingualism alone in my room has made me feel more seen than in a room full of people I know.

It will always be my story to share.

Ella Luu

Imitation “Superman and Me”

This might be an interesting story all by itself. An exceptionally quiet child silently passes through school, making few comments and even fewer friends. During class, when the other children were joyously reciting “The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round,” he stayed silent and listened, and when they excitedly discussed their weekend plans with one another, he did not share his own. No one disliked him but no one really liked him either; he had no bullies but also no friends. He grows into a young adult that often shares his story in the third person as if it will somehow separate himself from his younger identity.

A quiet child is seen by society as odd. Popular movies and TV shows portray children as always laughing and shouting, clapping their hands in glee. They depict them as little people with no filter who say what they please, prone to saying things most would leave unsaid. Quiet children were overlooked; the loud ones were the ones who got all the attention. They drowned out others with their incessant wall of sound, not caring if what they said was actually relevant to what was going on around them or not. Quiet children were meant to be forgotten amongst the loud. We were to fall back into the shadows and passively observe the chaos, separated and alone.

I refused to be forgotten. I was important. I was good enough. I was special. I began to become more confident in my voice. I started small. I talked to my family more; during our family dinner every night, I talked about my day. I talked to my brothers about the games we were playing. At school, I talked to my teachers about problems I was having. I talked to my peers about their favorite P.E games. I talked to the mailman who came every afternoon to drop off the day's news. I talked to the cashiers in the checkout lines at the grocery store. I talked urgently. I talked softly. I talked to whoever I met, seeking to form a connection. I talked not only to entertain myself but to entertain others; I talked to leave a mark.

I was trying to be remembered.

Kurt Dublauskas

There is rain here

After Jamaal May
For rain lovers

There is rain here.
Rain that zones out the
world. And no, not the kind
that floods people in, keeping
them away from the world.
I mean the kind of rain that children
play in, dancing to the pitter-patter
it makes. And no, the rain is not one
that is as cold as ice, but
the kind that warms one's heart
as they admire the beauty of the
world. And no, it's not the kind
that thunder and lightning follow,
but the one that drizzles oh so gently.
No, not the kind that makes people
scowl, I mean the rain that fills the
mind. No, not the kind of
rain that reeks and tastes bitter,
I'm talking about the rain
that is earthy and fresh. No,
this rain does not leave people
In tears, this rain makes them
smile until their cheeks cry out.
And no, these people do not
miss the sunlight. Rain is a
Broken clock. Time simply
stops while the raindrops fall.

Precious Oyebanji

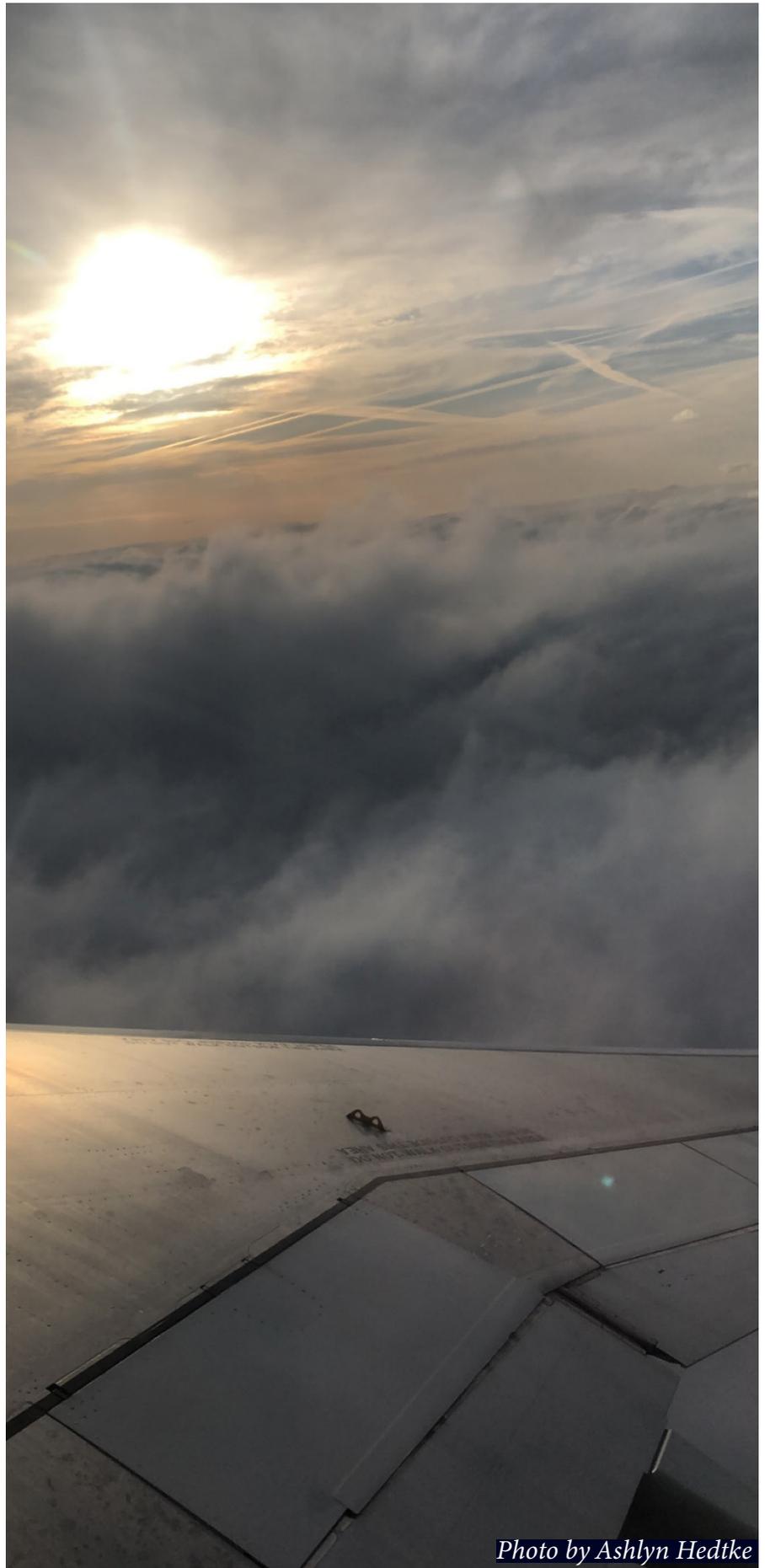


Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

Flowers that remind me of you

I walk along a path
A path surrounded by a field
A field full of all kinds of various, magnificent, beaming colors
Each color making up a fabulous, flourishing flower
Each flower giving off all kinds of nostalgic emotions
As if each flower saves one moment
a memory captured in time and stored
I pick out one flower, a gorgeous lavender
I couldn't help but smile when I saw it
Just like how I always smile when I see you
I pick out another flower, a warm yellow marigold
The warmth filled my hand
Just like the warmth of your hand holding onto mine
I pick out one more flower, a blushing pink rose
The color highlighting the heartwarming love within
Just like when I look into your eyes
These brilliant, bright, breathtaking flowers cover the field
With each blooming petal, I think of you
There is still so much space for new life to grow
For new memories to form
My heart fills with honesty, happiness, and hope
As I walk along a path
Surround by an infinite field
A field full of flowers that remind me of you

Vanessa Dirzo

A Showering of Flowers

The flower showed up
it showed up on the first date
when they were sharing a milkshake
it showed up on the wedding day
the best day of their lives
the start of something great
a new and chosen fate
a new human enters the family
young and fragile
the flower shows up
the flower shows up when the child is grown
when the child chooses a path of their own
it shows up when their visited by death
Before they take their very last breath
and even when their gone
the flower will show
cause even though their gone
the flower will continue to grow

Addison Hagel



Photo by Sarah Choi

Essay

Although I'm not much of an animal person, I would definitely classify myself as a stuffed animal lover. Even though I just turned sixteen, a part of me still clings to the collecting furry friends part of my childhood. There has always been something about stuffed animals that just captivates my mind from whatever else is going on in the moment. Whether it be a seal, sloth, or even a snake, any plush is fair game to me.

My room is filled with hundreds of soft, cuddly creatures that do nothing more than provide comfort and long hugs at the end of the day. The moment I pick one up and look into its eyes, I'm merely flooded with the joy and memories it carries, which could be its first day in my presence or a lovely experience I've shared with it. If there's one thing that's certain, it's that I will never have favorites. I know that deep down every animal is special in its own way, and not one deserves more attention than the other.

With stuffed animals, I find pureness, simplicity, and happiness, something often derived from childhood. The times when there were no worries, except for middle school drama, which now seems to only be a silly memory. Childhood was where creativity soared, from the endless possibilities of what games you could play with your plushies, and when anything could be accomplished right at your fingertips. These thoughts often linger in my mind, as I flip through the photo albums from years past, wondering, "Will I ever truly experience this life again?"

The realization of aging pulls me away from my grasp on my youth, from the moment I look into the mirror and discover eyebags just like my mothers caused by the stresses produced by work and school. It is the tug of the wind on my kite rope, the cutting of the string on my balloon. The fact that everything from here on out gets harder, worse, and more time-consuming, evaporating every drop of happiness flowing in my veins.

Adults always emphasize how big and scary the world is once you've reached a certain point when the only thing you have is yourself. But why does it have to be dreadful? Why scare the younger generations and create a longing for youth that is unrealistic and will only set them up for failure when they finally age? These are the questions I ask myself as I lie awake at night, pondering the mystery that lies beyond the very few years that I still have left within myself. The struggles of moving on remain within me, but I put on a face as I take one step closer to the finish line.

As I stare into the beaded eyes of my favorite stuffed animal, I hang onto childhood for the last time, always reliving its memories through my comforting furry friends, but never forgetting those feelings as I prepare myself for the great unknown of adulthood.

Shannon Quimet



Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

I Am Me

I am a poet
And what is a poem
Without passion
Without sorrow
I am an artist
And what is art
Without a crazed
Creative mind behind it
I am of a broken home
And what is that child
Without plastic smiles
Without sleepless nights
I am loved
By a sister and
Someone with a blurry face
But one day they will make
Themselves known
And I will know love
I am a liar
And what is a liar
Without silence
Without humor
And faked confidence
I am me
The person who says they're fine
But everyone knows they're not
Who wants to read
But can't find the strength
Who wants to learn
But can't sit still
Who wants to be known
But can't let down their guard
Who wants to cry
But does not want to be seen as weak
We want to be free
But know that we are eternally
Trapped
I am me

Marsh Covarrubias

Butterfly

I find that having a phobia makes you human; whether it's heights or flying or even balloon animals, it's natural. That said, some fears are more embarrassing than others. I am no stranger to people laughing when I divulge my phobia. I am afraid of many things--most of those things are irrational, like clowns and seaweed. (I've never even seen a clown in real life). My biggest fear is bugs, which is not uncommon, lots of people are afraid of creepy insects. But they're usually afraid of the big, ugly bugs. I'm scared of butterflies. My condition is called lepidopterophobia. Why would someone be afraid of butterflies, you might ask? Well, my fear stems from my general hatred of bugs, and it may also have to do with the irregular flight patterns that butterflies possess. But that's not all.

During the summer before third grade, my mom took my brother and me to the zoo. She bought tickets for the butterfly garden. Essentially, it was a huge greenhouse filled with flowers and butterflies. How they got all those butterflies in a tent is still a mystery to me. I was a little nervous, being hesitant with bugs and all, but I went inside.

An employee presented us with an informational speech before we saw the butterflies. As we stepped into the greenhouse, the garden loomed before us. It was pretty, plants and flowers bloomed everywhere. But most importantly (and terrifyingly), there were butterflies. They were flying around, eating sweet fruit, and doing what most butterflies do: sit and look pretty. The only thing I remember the woman saying was that if you touch a butterfly's wings, even accidentally, they will die. Apparently, no one else thought that little tidbit was concerning. Just me.

I desperately tried to keep up with my mom and brother as they walked around the garden, but I fell behind. I looked in every direction before taking a step, making sure I wouldn't crash into any rogue butterflies. Shrinking my tiny eight-year-old body even smaller, I somehow found myself in the middle of the garden with my mom and brother nowhere in sight. I squeezed my eyes shut, clenched my fists into tight balls, stood completely still, and prayed that no butterfly would land on me.

I worried that if I accidentally touched a butterfly, I would murder it and from then on be known as the "Butterfly Killer." Not only would I be a danger to butterflies everywhere, but I would be a traitor to my own religion, which states that one must never cause harm to another living thing. (Which I ignored when my dad killed rogue spiders, but God forbid I accidentally touched a butterfly and got kicked out of the zoo).

After what felt like hours, my mom ushered me into the adjoining vestibule. By then I was bawling and wanted to go home. Although I was in the safety of the covered tent, sectioned off from the greenhouse, I kept feeling phantom butterflies crawling all over me. I desperately tried to swat them off, looking like a crazy kid to anyone else.

Ever since that fateful day at the zoo, I run for cover every time I see a butterfly with their erratic flight pattern and sensitive wings. And yes, it is embarrassing to run around and try to avoid a butterfly, but I've already faced my fear and that went spectacularly, so my only other option is to embrace it.

I have come to realize that my fear of butterflies is unorthodox, but I've learned to embrace it as my own eccentricity. This phobia bloomed from being afraid of harming another living thing and that's something that will always be part of my character and how I interact with the world--by observing life around me and doing my best to preserve it.

Asha Mehta



Not So Happy Ending

There was about 30 more minutes of the movie “A Dog’s Purpose”. As a kid, dog movies seemed like great movies to watch since I loved animals. My mom and my 6 year old self were sitting on the sofa. Both of us had eyes locked on the TV screen.

“A dog’s purpose must be to have fun and help others have fun,” – That was the last line of the movie with the dog left by himself. As the screen faded to black with the credits rolling, I could feel tears, and I could see them falling from my mom’s eyes.

“Mommy? What happened? Where is the happy ending?” I questioned her while she was lightly sobbing. I was confused. Why doesn’t this movie have a happy ending like it’s supposed to?

“Aw baby, not all stories do have happy endings.” she whispered. I felt my heart break as I processed what she said.

Maritza Coronel



Artwork by Holden Alsbury

A Last Minute Appreciation

Procrastination has pushed my
chance to the last possible moment.
A gift for my Mother.
A vital show of appreciation
for her never-ending care.
But yet again I wait until the last
moment.
A struggle for ideas
rushes through my mind,
reaching for an obvious conclusion.
A bouquet of luscious flowers,
accepted gratefully by her
warm kindness.
They sit in her vase of choice
for as long as they
retain their beauty,
But as the days pass, the
dying flowers lose their
shine, and my mother finds
herself cleaning the fallen petals
off of the kitchen counter.

Parker Van Arsadale

Here, Hunger

If a longing sensation is what you want,
Here is to sleepless nights.
Here is to the ball of energy,
spiraling, and traveling along the body,
until you itch of wanting from head to toe.
Here are the dreams you crave,
not the expectations that cage you,
unrealistic, silly, thoughts,
or so you're told.
Because here hunger,
here is where you persevere,
growing from a spiraling, traveling ball,
into a sun.
Here is where I accept you as you are,
living up to "changing the world,"
or "becoming a better person."
Hunger, you have told me
To be bold.
To jump first.

Lia McKenzie Koski

Here, Perfectionism

If strife is what you want,
Here is eternity to strive.
Here is obsession.
Here are red-rimmed eyes, quickly fading peace,
tunnel vision locked on an impossible goal.
Here is a low-ceilinged cave, a steep incline,
a hike of hot glass beneath raw, unprotected soles
Here is the strain you lust for, the
Pain that gives you power.
Here is the pinch you put me in—try to lie to me again.
But here, perfectionism, here is where I let it go
of all the things you tell me I need to be,
when I am plenty as I am.
Here is where I turn my head,
realize your dream is really a nightmare.
That I don't have to please you,
be you, or believe you.
Here is where fear ends, and grace begins.

Chloe Langford



Photo by Ashlyn Hedtke

“There Are Mountains Here”

Dedicated to Colorado

There are mountains here.

They are filled with white blankets of snow.

And no, it's not the type of snow that's so

heavy it could crush your soul. I mean the

snow that you go sled in and stretch your body

across to make an angel-like figure. And no,

these aren't the mountains that undergo raging

avalanches that could break your bones into a

million pieces. These mountains are filled with

children and skiers gliding with their snowboards

and sleds. These children scream. And no,

not the type of screaming that one would have

when they see ice trampling down at 100 mph.

These screams are filled with giggles one would have

when they see a puppy jump out of their present box

on Christmas morning. It snows on this mountain

and it's not the type of snow that makes your

skin feel like ice and numbs your entire body to

where you feel nothing but the shivers and

chattering of your teeth scraping against each and

every tooth. It is nothing like that.

This snow that falls acts like an angel that flutters

simply from the clouds to where it lands on your

tongue and melts so nicely and softly. It gives

you a warm and comforting feeling. And no, you

don't hear ambulance sirens echoing through the

mountains as you slowly lose your breath under the thick

layer of whiteness. You hear the bells chiming from the

nearby church. You hear the Christmas carols as you start

to get cozy on the couch awaiting the Hot Chocolate your

family is cooking up after a long day of skiing in the

mountains. You feel the warmth of the fireplace as you look

outside and see the pines covered in the elegance of the white

miracle falling from the sky.

Eli Yavorskiy



Artwork by Emma Cohn

The Water Station

“What do you mean I can’t see the foreman?” Kenneth was distraught, he needed to see the foreman. Yet, this man stood before him, blocking the only way between him and his superior.

The man, John, looked down at him with a disinterested gaze before saying, “He doesn’t want to see anyone right now, so why don’t go back to the plant and do whatever you... do.”

“But I need to see the foreman! He needs to know what’s happening because if he doesn’t the whole town is at risk!” Kenneth pleaded.

“Yeah? And what’s this ‘thing’ that he needs to know so much about?”

“A leak!”

“A leak? Really, that’s it?” A smile played on John’s lips as he couldn’t help but let out a small snicker. ‘A leak?’ he thought, ‘They need the boss for something that small? God, he really thinks I’m an idiot doesn’t he?’ John regained his composure, crossing his arms across his chest as he looked down at Kenneth with an amused expression.

“Something as small as a leak isn’t important to the boss, so I’ll say this one more time: The boss doesn’t want to see you or anyone right now, so go back to the station and do your job, capiche?” Kenneth was flustered but kept his anger under control, not wanting to give the man satisfaction of seeing him angry.

“No, I need to see him. Now.” He said assertively. John was slightly taken aback, though it didn’t show on his face as he sneakily reached back for the radio on his belt.

“Look, this is your last warning, go back to the station or I’m-”

A loud boom sounded through the hallway. Dust fell from the ceiling, the concrete floor shaking beneath their feet as the fluorescent lights above them flickered off and on before the hallway was plunged into darkness. Neither John nor Kenneth could see each other, the red light of the emergency lights filling the darkened hallway moments later with a crimson glow as a panicked voice rang out from the intercom.

“AN EXPLOSION HAS OCCURRED AT STATION 3B. I REPEAT, AN EXPLOSION HAS OCCURRED AT STATION 3B. ALL PERSONNEL EVACUATE THE FACILITY IMMEDIATELY.”

And as the voice fizzled out, it said, **“MAY GOD HELP YOU.”**

Second to the Sun

Most people would say that
I am decently understanding
and I don't disagree
but what I definitely can't understand
is why so many people
would love to be in second place.

Second place is a silver medal
like the moon at its fullest
bright and beautiful
Sending soft beams of light to the ground
But never expected to be as bright
as our beloved Sun, the source of our life.

Second place is a nice place to be
if you're looking to shine without burning,
to be someone or something who impresses many
without standing in that ten thousand degree heat,
flaring up in flames of fame that can
bring both riches and ruin.

But I am willing to take the risk of ruin,
to fall into gold in search of a cure
for my addiction to applause and approval

And even though I am afraid
I would rather disappear into an eclipse
Than melt away unnoticed like the shape
of a crescent that wanes into nothing
And people love the moon, I love the moon
but the moon is a reflection that can't cast its own
light
and unless there is a Sun to back it up
The moon is but a blank shadow in the sky.

Invisible.

What makes it worse still is,
the Sun and Moon are twin spirits
who walk hand in hand, footsteps in tandem
from one end of the Earth to the other
around and around in an eternal dance
for all to watch

Weaving through the sky, waltzing
with wings of butterfly and moth,

equal in elegance but divided
Where one bathes in gold
While the other is left
With only a little silver sliver

And two souls once bound together
Begin to drift to opposite sides of the world
A rift that hasn't been crossed
In years, if ever at all

But even when the moon is by himself
in the sky he still carries with him
the presence of the Sun in his light
And even though the Sun knows
the Moon is his own person

With a power that can awaken the tides
Or call upon the wildest of creatures

It is the sun who people worshipped first
As the most powerful god
whose strength is coveted by all
Including his brother from the shadows.
His brother who bursts not into tongues of fire
But into a surging tsunami of frustration

Because what is he without his twin Sun?
He would just be a rock floating in the vacuum of space
Remembered for doing so well but not well enough
Remembered only because he is intertwined
With a more powerful counterpart
And yet, for some goddamn reason

Some people still paint their moons in gold.

Sylv A. Pacis

Why It Is Murdered For These Aliens

Why no one scrutinizes the tree? I don't know.
Why it is undressed by the gazes of humans? I don't know.
Why it is murdered for these aliens? I don't know.

These trees, sharing roots of the very same planet,
being those who exhale the oxygen for our inhale,
to kindle hearted flames in mother's white hurricanes.
To shelter our homes at oppressed sacrifice.
But, to be of such value and elegance in the same eyes.

I don't know why trees lack value in our minds.
I don't know why we care enough to admire,
but lack the investment to save its life.
I don't know why a living being is destroyed
without hesitation or pity or regret.
Humans do not have emotional connections
with the bark and branches of these birches,
so we kill them without so much as a backward glance.

Perhaps this answers a curious proposal:
Killing one you love or one you hate,
one you have never met before.
It is said to be easy to kill one you hate,
and difficult to kill one you love,

so why are admired trees wrecked regardless?
Regardless of their connection to you?

I don't know. I don't know.
I don't know why we hurt those we love,
why we couldn't care less if we harmed an innocent,
why the loved, hated, and unknown are treated the same.
But, I surely hope to never find out.
I surely hope humans define their intentions.
That they will distinguish adoration from infatuation
hatred from trepidation, hostility from timidity.

I surely hope to live a day when I love without remorse,
when I resolve fear instead of mistaken loathing,
when I converse while embracing my shyness,
and not worrying over my "frigid" appearance.

Now, I still don't know why no one scrutinizes the tree.
Why it is undressed by the gazes of humans.
Why it is murdered for these aliens.
But, maybe they will be determined before.
Maybe they will make a choice before,
before they act on the final prompt:

Why it is murdered for these aliens

Jadyn Ko



Artwork by Ava McQuain

Untitled

I was a criminal at a young age, not because I was an inadequate child, nor was I ludicrous... simply curious and impatient.

In reality, I was a four-year-old princess who still wore diapers when they were well overdue. I would become so focused on a task that stepping aside, even for a few minutes, was inconceivable. But that didn't stop my inquisitive brain from communicating to my fingertips the necessity of purloining peas from my dad's garden. I enjoyed the beauty of the outside, the bird's nest that sat under my deck, and the slugs that would leave a slime trail as they slithered on leaves. It wouldn't be long before I started my mischievous games, only to bend the rules just enough that being a criminal is actually a good thing. For the sake of learning, of course.

While waiting for the right moment to pounce, I sat under a nearby tree with a notebook and pen. Writing never seemed to bore me even as a child. I could spend all day outside writing about a simple flower, because when there is no limitation- creativity has no limit. This is where I could share my imagination, but many wouldn't want to hear about the awesome adventures a four-year-old could create.

My father was piqued by what was keeping me occupied and asked me to come to follow him. Shortly after I would jaunt to the side of the garden where the sweet peas and other vegetables bathed in the sun. I once again ripped the pear-like pea off the plant while my dad was not looking, as I turned aside I popped it into my mouth. This time it was a bit bitter. I would continue to take them as my dad watered the plants, but no matter how many I took they all seemed to taste execrable. While curious, I kept trying more...

"Stop you little thief, your stealing all the peas!" My dad would say.

I innocently spat out a pea stuck between my teeth. "It was not good anyway."

"Of course," My dad would smile and laugh. "They are not ripe yet, everything needs time to grow, the more patient you are, the better they taste."

But why didn't I see this before? Each sweet pea was abridged and just starting to cultivate into something better; not bitter but sweeter. What if life is filled with bitter things that are just meant to be sweeter, they just didn't have enough time to ripen.

Time...something we have so much of, but we always seem to lose. You see, pick too soon you get an absinthe taste; pick too late-it's simply too late. You can say I am a criminal for stealing the sweetness out of potential, but even a criminal's intentions are not always wrong. For I didn't know things take time to fully grow to reach their full potency.

I guess I am a sweet pea... for I have not been picked, but yet, it's not too late, I am still flourishing.

Aliani Zires

Perspective #1: Need a Coat?

You left your coat last winter. It was sitting there, on the bench, all lonely looking. I took it for safekeeping, in case you came looking for it or in case someone unsavory tried to take it. Maybe you would see me walking around in your coat and would want it back.

I doubt that you miss it anyway; it's not very warm, and it itches underneath my armpits. It's also entirely too long for me which is more of a problem for me than for you; I bet that your coat fits you just fine. I'm not too fond of the color either. I think that chartreuse green washes me out. I wonder how you looked in your chartreuse green coat. Maybe that's why you decided to leave it last winter.

I don't know why you would want to get rid of it during the winter. Isn't that the time where you most need a coat? I hope you had a backup coat on hand after you left it. It's almost December but I've had to wear your coat most days since mid-October. I get cold easily, especially in this coat which at this point has more patches than original fabric.

I checked all the pockets; nothing but some change amounting to \$0.32, a button that doesn't match the ones on the coat, and a small tin filled with cinnamon mints. I ate a couple thinking they'd be sweet. They were not. I don't think you were fond of them either considering that there were a lot left. And of course, there was the grocery list I found crumbled up in the inside pocket. I wonder when you needed 2% milk, A&W Root Beer, red and pink sprinkles, and dill pickle spears. Were you hosting a party? A slumber party? Did you go on a mid-week grocery run?

I wonder what you wear now to keep yourself warm. Is it another chartreuse green coat? Have you switched to another, equally ugly color? On the off chance that you want your coat back, meet me where you left it all those years ago: on the south-facing bench in Whittier Adams park at 2 pm this Thursday.

Asha Mehta

Perspective #2: Unwanted

My ex got me this horrific coat two winters ago. I sucked up and wore it because I am a good man. I was a good man until I found her in bed with her boss. She always said she wanted to climb the business ladder, I never imagined that would be the way she went about it.

I left the jacket the same way I left her. Wordlessly. It was scratchy in all the places it needed to be smooth and it was too tight around my armpits. It was such an awkward length, just too short. It looked almost cropped on me. Not to mention that it was the most god awful, horrific, migraine inducing shade of chartreuse. I guess she thought no one would approach a man who looked like one of those highlighter kids you sat next to in the seventh grade. It didn't even keep me warm and it was so cheap, the fabric was falling off. I had to patch it up more than once.

I dropped it on the south-facing bench in Whittier Adams park, and I passed it almost every day for months until it was just gone.

Honestly, I thought a homeless person picked it up since the weather was becoming bitter. Funny, I thought, as I saw a girl in what I could have sworn was my ugly, chartreuse coat cross the street and head toward the park. It was 2 pm, and I was on my way home from work. I get out early on Thursdays.

Lucy Vecchie

“Feet”

Feet: that was the word that defined me at that moment. I was so many things, but this meager piece of paper had limited my identity to something singular.

I was new to the school and had just switched classes; I was unsure how to relate to my peers. My new fifth-grade teacher had introduced my group to a project: we were to write a Shakespearean sonnet; as a prompt, he asked us to pick a random piece of paper from the pile. We went around the circle, all waiting impatiently to see what word would define our story. Everyone kept getting these fantastic words that had so many stories to tell: Ice cream, Youtube, Recess, Favorite Food... words with infinite potential. I was excited to see my word, the grouping of letters that would make me limitless. Finally, it was my turn, and I was elated, but this moment was tinted by the fear of a word that was bland, boring, and unworthy of building a world of fourteen lines around it.

My hand reached for the center of what defined me, and I was hopeful that it would be epic. Once in my hand, I felt the power this feather-light, white, folded paper had over me. I opened it for the crowd around me to see, for them to judge me, and to prove them all wrong about the importance my story had in this life. And yet, these four little letters scribbled on this moment were the foundation of my all-consuming prison, and my peers around me and their spinning thoughts were my jailors. We plod through the rest of the circle, all. At the same time, my fingers itched to pick another word, one that was worth a hymn of wondrous angels and would tell a story of how I had slayed dragons plaguing the world; one that would ensure success and glory and demonstrate my brilliance and how interesting I am to my new peers. What I had to work with was feet.

Feet. What could I do with feet that would show others I was worthy? That I deserved to be there? That I was someone interesting and worth knowing? What kind of kingdoms could I build from feet? Feet were something entirely outside of my control, but to ten-year-old me, it was now a defining factor of who I was; a random word someone had bestowed upon me had now become a part of my identity, and I had a choice: I could shrink from it, or I could embrace it.

I made the choice. I accepted the challenge. I built a kingdom of smelly, grubby things, of hobbits and beaches, and measurements of distances between worlds, of a body part humanity mostly shares but largely neglects. I built a space for myself and my feet that was unexpected and creative. I used feet to create and cross a bridge between the identity someone else placed on me that was outside my control, and the person I knew myself to be.

I found someone new blooming inside of me, and that no matter the box someone gave me to fit in, it was never going to confine me. There's a chance for even feet to find their place in this world and build something worth remembering.

There will always be an identity society tells us that we fit best, but that doesn't mean it is befitting. We have a choice in how we shape these factors of our identities; we can either shrink from the pressure or become something completely new from it. Like the process of a diamond, not every piece of coal chooses the path of resistance and is rewarded with a beautiful end. My feet chose a path that gave me experience, and the foundation for the world I could stand on and was starting to see as my own.

Mari Hoover

Restart

I knew life would come with many conflicts. I just didn't expect them at such a young age. And I definitely didn't expect to be sitting on the front steps of my house at 10 years old watching police walk across the lawn and lawyers go back and forth over the phone. How did I get here? How did we get here? This was supposed to be my day of closure, the day I say goodbye to my home and leave to settle in a barren small neighborhood an hour away littered with empty opportunities. Why did I have to leave my sanctuary of big graceful willow trees that traced the ground with their gentle branches, or the apple trees that attracted all the animals someone could imagine? Well as many a 10-year-old could imagine. I grew up engrossed in nature, the streams, forests, and animals always captured my attention. To think I would leave it behind to travel to a sky that never captured the beauty of the night stars or display a perfect ocean-blue sky seemed miserable.

And so there I sat watching my mother close to hysteria like a dormant volcano that just became active.

"Well, this is bad," my brother sighed next to me. I looked at him and back at the lady trying to move into our house. I watched as her bulldog tracked mud into our precious house leaving slobber and dirt in its wake. It was painful to watch as dirt and sludge covered the ground my family sought pride in. I try to pay attention to the bees that glide across the flower beds celebrating yet another successful year of maintaining their hive. My hive was fleeing. I was transfixed all my attention to the bees, it was far more relaxing than listening to the lady, Mrs Smith. All she was doing was coming up with reasons not to pay for our house. I was secretly happy. How could I not be? If this lady left, my family would be forced to stay here for at least a couple more months. At least then all the fish in our overheated car wouldn't be dying and the nature of our forest wouldn't be dismissed.

"I'LL CALL THE POLICE!" a shrill voice shrieked from our lawn; I looked past the bees to see Mrs Smith.

"That's not necessary. If you just pay for my house, my family can leave and buy our house," my mom pleaded; the lava started boiling.

"There was supposed to be a FRIDGE," Mrs Smith whined in 30 different pitches. My emotions were soaring, masked beneath a calm face.

"This day was hard enough already, it just keeps getting worse," I mumbled and turned to my brother sitting next to me. He nodded and we sat in heavy silence reflecting on how amazingly terrible this day was.

"I would give you the fridge if it were here, but it wasn't in the real estate agreement and it's at my supposed to be next home that we can't buy unless you buy our house!" My mom huffed on the verge of being frantic, stress was rising. So was the lava.

"That's it I'm calling the police" Mrs Smith announced in her whiny voice.

"What are the police gonna do?" I whispered to my brother, no response. The sun beat down on everyone that day, making it more and more obvious the fish in our car were definitely going to die soon. Time and patience were running out.

I got off the steps of our porch and went over to my mom who was now rubbing her head and looking into the sky as to what to do. "Mom, the fish are gonna die soon. We've had those fish forever, and they're gonna die" I whined, all my emotions came out with no warning, "they're gonna die and be gone like everything else, our home, our friends, our neighbors, IT'S ALL GONNA BE GONE." I snapped, tears trembling in my eyes.

"No, no, the fish will be fine," my mom said gently.

"Please Mrs. Smith," my mom said, clinging onto a thread of hope.

Mrs. Smith turned her head to glare at us, her hand holding her phone next to her ear, “The police are on the way. I’m getting my lawyer.” My heart dropped and my mom was frozen in an expression that can only be described as pure rage, and the volcano erupts.

The day became warped with tensions, the sky hung lower than usual and the bees were retreating from their beautiful allamanda flowers.

“I almost feel like we should go back to bed” I mumbled to my brother while we listened to the WWE vocal brawl between our on-phone lawyers. The wailing of cop cars rang through the neighborhood, breaking the silence of an already pessimistic morning. The cops never came to our neighborhood, they had no reason to. Prying eyes began to pile. I looked at the houses belonging to our neighbors and was greeted with nosy eyes peering behind closed curtains, how delightful our family affair had become the neighborhood’s afternoon entertainment. My mom walked over to my brother and me and greeted us with a heavily weighed-down smile.

“You know our neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Evans,” my mom stated rather than asked. My brother and I shared a glance and then nodded. “You are both gonna go down to their house while I sort this out,” my mom said. Her smile barely concealed the wretched amount of uncertainty in her words.

“What no?!” I said in disbelief. “This is our house and our problem too, I’m not gonna be swept away while you battle lawyers and the police!” I exclaimed. Tears started to well in my eyes. I was 10, I didn’t know a lot about the police, but I knew someone usually got locked up and I wanted to make sure my family didn’t draw the short end of the stick.

“I don’t want you two to be exposed to this,” my mom said, her voice lightening just a little.

“No? NO!” I pleaded, I looked back at the flowers, no bees. My mom kneeled down and lightly shoved me and my brother in Mr. and Mrs. Evan’s direction. Tears were falling, and I didn’t care what neighbors heard and saw. My sadness was quickly reconstructed into anger . SHAME ON THEM FOR WATCHING THIS HAPPEN AND BEING SUCH COWARDS TO NOT LET US OFFER HELP WHILE WATCHING THEIR FRIENDS FOR 20+ YEARS GET BULLDOZED BY SOME STUPID LADY AND HER SLOBBERY DOG.

My brother grabbed my arm and started dragging me towards the Evans. I watched as the police got out of their car and as my mother and Mrs. Smith joined them, all the while my brother towed me away while I left a lake of tears every quivering step of the way.

I held an empty mug in my hands, equivalent to a rain catcher catching the tears cascading down my face. Mrs Evans tried to comfort me and my brother but if anything I was feeling worse and worse after every word that left her mouth. I would never see or hear her talk again, I would never be inside this house again, and I might never see my mom again because I LEFT HER WITH THE POLICE. My mouth was constricted like an anaconda after scoring a big meal, my eyes were as puffy and red as the lights atop the police cars. Seconds felt like minutes and minutes felt like hours, and after fifty long agonizing minutes, there was a light knock on the door. I froze and clutched my mug tighter to the point where my knuckles turned white. Mrs. Evans slowly opened the door, and there was my mom. Relief washed over me and I went to hug her ditching my rain catcher. My mom sat down on the entryway stairs in Mrs. Evan’s house.

And for the first time ever, I watched my mother cry.

Sophia Sauer

Untitled

My breath is unstable. My legs feel as weak and flimsy as paper. I can't continue running. I've lost all hope in myself, and I feel like giving up.

All of these thoughts were racing through my head, and I couldn't control them any longer on my own. I needed motivation if I wanted to continue.

Between the ages of 9-12, my dad and I would go for runs all the time. At this point, I was at my peak endurance level. My dad and I would casually compete in a few 5k races every year. My dad always signed us up for these races during the holidays so he could have an excuse to eat a lot of food. Now, my dad is an extraordinary runner and he's participated in many half marathons and even a full marathon. My dad was always super supportive during these runs, and he would always run by my side no matter what, even though he could easily have run it a lot faster than me. One race before Halloween, I had been really nervous to run because there were a lot of people. When the race began, my mind was running in circles, and my heart was beating so fast it felt like someone was banging on my chest. In hindsight, I don't know why I got so scared of a bunch of people I didn't know. However, at the moment, I felt so much pressure to perform better than most of these adults.

The race began and off went the massive blob of roughly 2000 participants. My dad and I started off really strong. We continued at a steady pace of approximately 7 minutes for 2 miles. My breath remained consistent and my confidence rose a little. At about the 2.5-mile mark, my dad said, "Do you think you can handle a faster pace?"

"I guess we can try it," I said. It wasn't until 1 minute later at that pace that I began to realize I couldn't handle it. Since I didn't want to disappoint my dad, I pushed through the utmost pain. My lungs felt as if they were on fire and my legs were wobbly like Jello. I was able to maintain this pace for a little bit. I repeatedly reminded myself that there was only half a mile left in the race. Also, the amazing scenery from the run helped my mind relax. However, despite the nice scenery, I couldn't handle it anymore. With only 0.1 miles left in the race, I felt like bursting into tears because I couldn't handle the pace anymore. "Dad! I can't do this anymore!" I told my dad.

"Jack, we're so close! I know you can handle this. Just think about the end and the reward," he replied. "Focus on your breathing and I know you'll be able to make it." This piece of advice from my dad pushed me to one of the proudest accomplishments of my life. We finished the race with a final time of 20:36. Without my dad, I'm almost certain I would've stopped to walk. He taught me a lesson that day. He taught me that even when something may seem impossible, there's always a way around it, and it often requires you to slow your brain down to find it. This advice has helped me throughout my entire life, not only in running but in school and other sports as well.

Jack Van Kammen

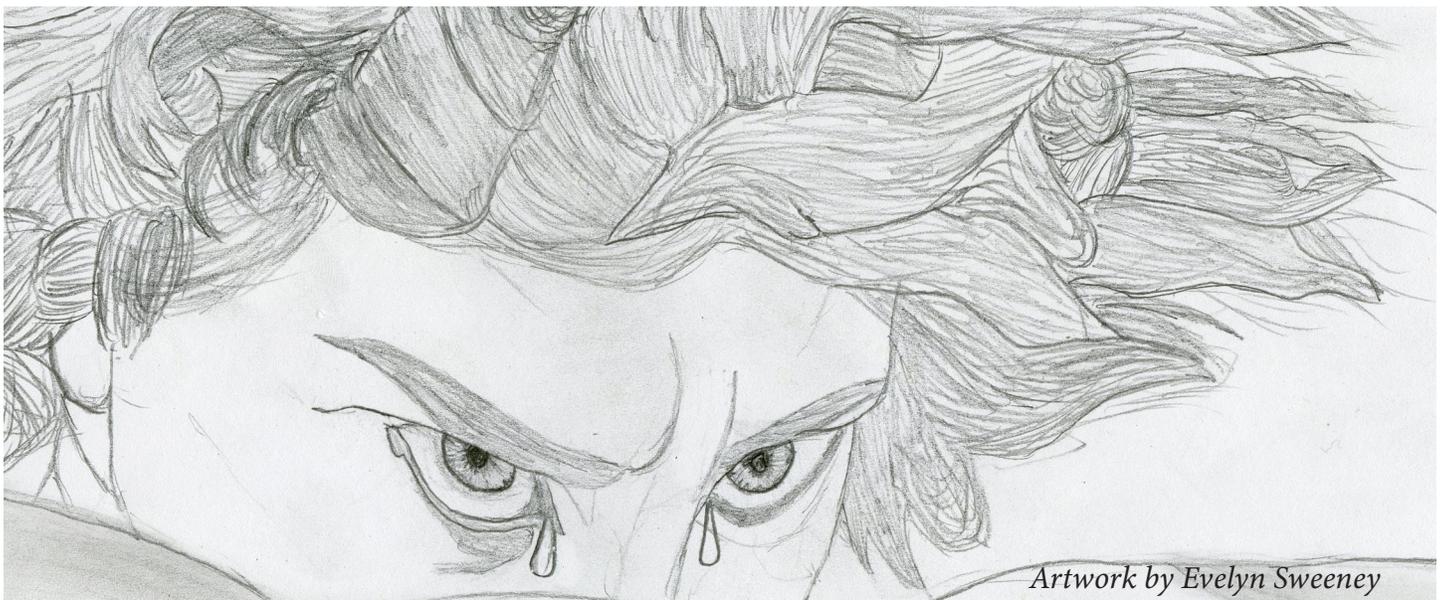
Imitation of "Serving in Florida" from Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

Imagine an extrovert's worst nightmare. Others have fun with their friends for hours on end while you're stuck watching. The boredom of it could kill a man. This place is a prison, and you're in solitary confinement- with a catch: they gave you a little window just to remind you that while you're stuck here, the rest of the world continues to march on without you. The only interaction you can have with it is when you have to yell at kids for breaking the rules. As each minute is stretched into an hour and each hour an unbearable eternity, you feel you may just go insane- if only to have a reason to go home early. Hopefully, with the sun beating you down, you remembered your sunscreen and an extra water bottle. With nothing else to do but scan, the repetitive ripples of the water begin to hypnotize you and you feel your eyes get heavy. You shake your head, sit straight, and take another sip of water. Oh look, here comes an inmate to relieve you. It's rotation time. Don't get too excited though, your 15-minute break isn't for another hour and a half. It looks like your next cell doesn't have a chair, I hope you like standing! Welcome to Barefoot Bay water park.

After a long day here, with nothing to show for it but burnt skin- it happens regardless of how many times you reapply your damn sunscreen- and a slight headache from staring into the sun reflecting water all day- sunglasses help but not enough- you're ready to go home and crash. Over the loudspeakers: "Barefoot Bay is now closed. We ask that you collect your..." A sigh of relief as you get ready to head for the exit. Wait a second, you didn't actually think you could leave yet did you? You have to stand there for another half hour at least and wait for every patron to leave- yes, even the old guy who's heading to the locker room for a nice long shower and the family that had to be told a few more times that the pool was closed before they realized that meant it was time to get out of the water. Then you get to go home- after about another 45 minutes of mopping, sweeping, and scrubbing.

A little boy and his mother are taking forever to pack up their towels and floaties. When they finally get up to leave, you stare them down with such hatred that they'd probably run away screaming, if not for the reflective shades they can't actually see your death glare through. As they walk past your station, the little boy looks at you with the biggest smile "Thank you!" he says with the perfect combination of sincerity and cuteness. Your heart melts down to a just above-freezing level as you realize that although each workday sucks for you guards, it's a day of excitement and play for every kid that comes through those doors. Plus, 15 bucks an hour ain't bad.

Tom Russ



Untitled

When I was four I wished I had a brother. When I was eight, I got one and I started to regret my wish.

Okay, I know how polarizing and grim that sounds but let me explain. Some of my earliest memories come from me sitting on the light blue swing and my back yard, folding my hands, closing my eyes, and praying to God for him to bring me a little baby. It took him a while to answer my prayer. In the meantime, I would pretend I was a parent of thirty-two (stuffed animals that is). I gave them all names: my blue cow: Cody, my monkey with a yellow shirt: Peter, my chocolate brown teddy bear: Daniel, my lamb who was missing his eyes: Max, my chocolate scented teddy bear: Chocolate (I never said my name choices were the most creative). Caring for these “children” birthed my caring heart. I would line all of them up on the long green couch in my living room in front of the television and we would watch it together, and I would make sure they were cozy in my bed even if it meant I didn’t have any space.

After many years of waiting, my prayers were finally answered. Well, kind of. Our family had brought in a five year old girl named Aleena who had been dealt a tough hand; her mother was imprisoned and her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. Nevertheless, she was always very cheerful. But, just as we were going to adopt her, the family she had in New York swooped in and took her from us.

What I learned from this is that God works in mysterious ways because not even two weeks later, a family reached out to my parents about a little boy and invited us over to meet him.

As soon as we walked in the door, we were greeted by two very sweet people and they led us to him. And there he was. Brody. Sitting on the floor laden with animal cards. His grandparents told us about his love of the Incredible Hulk and he displayed his “Hulk smash” They also told us how he is developmentally behind and that he has a feeding tube. As we heard more of his story, I think my parents AND I all knew that we wanted to take him in.

He started living with my family on January 9th, 2015. It was difficult for me, I wanted him so much, but I was not used to having somebody divert my parents attention from me. Although I have always loved babies, I wasn’t so sure about living with one 24/7. With him being a little developmentally behind, it was frustrating at times to communicate with him since he wasn’t able to understand me.

But I began to change. Because of Brody I am more patient. Because of Brody, I am more caring. Because of Brody, I am more loyal.

I remember on the first birthday he celebrated living with our family, I hand wrote him a card in which I called him my brother for the first time. I remember watching him make his first basket at basketball practice and feeling so proud and cheering as loud as I could. He wasn’t the only person to gain a cheerleader though. Brody always comes to all of my performances and tells me how good I did. Whenever I cook for him he compliments me and tells me to make it again. Although we still push each other’s buttons, we are each other’s biggest cheerleaders.

Having siblings is not easy, but it’s so meaningful and has shaped me into the person I am today. There’s a lifelong friend built in with a sibling and not to brag, I have the best one. So, although I started to regret my wish, I wouldn’t change it for the world.

Sam Zwiefelhofer

Largely Inspired by Alexie Sherman's *Superman and Me* piece

Someday this might make an amusing story. A son of Peruvian immigrants is taught Spanish from birth. He says “hola” where other kids say “hello”, and asks for “helado de lucuma” where other kids just want some chocolate ice cream. If he'd been born in Peru, he'd fit right in, and his story would be lesser because of it. But he lived in a strange place called “Mundelein” and could only repeat fragments of what he saw on the TV, mumbling about “NBC 5” and “The Today Show” in broken English. His doctor informed his parents that he would not be able to learn two languages at once, and English was chosen for him. Henceforth, the elegance and beauty of the Spanish language was lost to him. Had this choice not been made for him, perhaps he would've grown into a dull, ineloquent man, who would've struggled to read the last paragraph as it is now. But the choice was made, and now he recounts those years in the third person, seeking to reflect on this consequential decision.

A boy not wholly belonging to any culture is a strange boy, looked upon with fascination, and perhaps pity, by his first-grade classmates. I was a stranger in a strange land, unknowing of the culture, tradition, and most importantly, the language. They would talk about Power Rangers and the Boy Scouts, and I would nod my head, hoping that was the correct thing to do. They would pronounce everything correctly on the first try, whilst I stumbled through words and phrases. To them, I was a strange boy, who couldn't spell or speak very well. I was on the outside looking in, through the grating of the language barrier.

I cared not. I was young. I was eager. And I was curious. I read, even though I didn't understand all the words the first time through. I spoke, even if I would be corrected. I read their tomes of knowledge and I watched their favorite shows. I read about dinosaurs. I watched shows about dinosaurs, just so the next time my classmates talked about dinosaurs I could say something. I spoke about the latest “Nay-shun-al Jee-o-gruh-fic” Kids Almanac, and I took note of how it was actually pronounced. Though it took a while, I finally made myself at home. They hadn't welcomed me in so I took it upon myself to break down the door.

I had made myself at home in this strange land.

Mariano Rodriguez



Artwork by Addy Irwin

Fortnite: A new Vengeance

In sixth grade, I loved playing Fortnite with the boys. I played every day for at least an hour after school. Some days I would even wake up early and play before school. But even though I played the game a lot, I wasn't really great at it (Even though I thought I was at the time). My friends were a lot better than me and they carried me almost every game. They always thought of me as the "noob," or the one friend in the group that was the worst at Fortnite. That was, however, until one game where I proved them all wrong.

It all started out normally as we queued up for a game of squads. It was my first game so I wasn't expecting myself to perform that great. The game didn't start that great because almost as soon as we got in the game I got knocked. "You're trash Jack!" exclaimed one of my friends after I got eliminated.

"Shut up!" I responded in defense. My teammates then proceeded to revive me and we continued on with the game.

We came across a couple more squads and I didn't get a single elimination out of either of the squads that we faced. My friends all had crazy loadouts while I had nothing. So, while my friends went searching for new squads to fight I was looking for loot.

They found a squad and proceeded to fight them without even realizing that I wasn't near them. While I was looting and dazing off, I heard someone shout into the mic, "Knocked one!"

I looked at how many people were alive and realized we were the final team and that my team was fighting the other final team without me. I hopped in a golf cart and drove over to my team.

By the time I got to the battle, I found myself in a 1v3. My friends were screaming in my ear, "JACK WHERE WERE YOU!" and "JACK YOU'RE SO TRASH!" So, in a state of panic, I built a box and camped in the final storm. My friends grew angrier with me by the second as I camped in a box.

So, I left the box and began rushing the other team. They were all John Wick skins, the sweatiest skin at the time. I cranked 90s on the first kid and pulled off a clutch 200 damage headshot, knocking him. At this moment in time, my heart was beating faster than a child chasing down an ice cream truck and my armpits were drenched in sweat. The other two enemies were both crossing an open field. I sniped one, knocked him, and shouted in excitement. My friends in the Xbox party stopped yelling at me. "You got this Jack!" exclaimed one friend.

"Please don't throw Jack!" shouted the other. I began to build towards the final guy but accidentally fell and took a lot of fall damage. In sheer panic, I boxed up and popped a med kit. The final guy sprayed my wall and unexpectedly took away almost all of my shield. I started cranking 90s and he tagged me one more time, making me one tap. Any single shot would eliminate me and I would lose the game. I got the high ground and started spraying him, cracking his shield. He started building up towards me and I sprayed his builds, knocking both of us down. Thankfully, I was higher up so I landed after him and he was eliminated. I had done it. I had won the game.

"OH MY GOSH JACK YOU'RE INSANE!" shouted the whole party at once. The moment I won was one of the best moments of my life. My friends admired me from then on and I was no longer the "trash" friend. From that game I learned that you can always prove yourself to the haters. I did so that night by clutching up and winning.

Jack Van Kammen

