



2026

THE VANGUARD

LITERARY MAGAZINE

FEATURING:

Fiction

Non-Fiction

Poetry

Art

BY THE RCSJ COMMUNITY

Letter from the Editors

As 3+1 Applied Professional Communication students, we made it our mission to display the artistic works of RCSJ students with excellent attention to detail and creative understanding. Art is diverse, coming in a wide variety of forms, many of which are presented in this year's edition of the *The Vanguard*.

Throughout this experience, we have learned the foundations of publication and design, as well as how to transform the knowledge gained into real-world practice. For the very first time, *The Vanguard* includes hand drawn artwork, including a specialized cover page and title pages, created by one of our magazine editors, Lu Grayson.

We would like to send our deepest gratitude to Professor Andrea Vinci, who led us through the creative and technical editing process using her own knowledge and experience in Publication, Layout, and Design. With her guidance and constructive feedback, we were able to produce an innovative magazine design that adequately showcases the talent and creative minds of participating RCSJ students.

Thank you to each and every student who submitted their work for the 2026 edition of *The Vanguard*. We are grateful for the opportunity to get, even just a glimpse, at the passion that drives RCSJ's students to create works for our community to enjoy.

Kindest Regards,
The 3+1 APC Publication, Layout, & Design Class, Student Editors

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FICTION

VERITAS

by Lu Grayson

I was fixated on my phone's screen for a long time, staring at the account. It had been displaying the same message as my desk monitor:

We'll be right back! <3

In a frilly pink font, it mocked me.

Veritas would livestream for twelve hours at a time with a few breaks, always playing some obscure farming simulator. She was dedicated like that, constantly telling viewers how much she wanted to hear from us. I had been watching her for over two years, sometimes being the only one tuned in. I'd come to know her pretty well, like all the restaurants she'd get takeout from, her favorite clothing stores, I could go on forever. I guess my favorite thing about her was how she could always stay happy. No matter what time I log in to see her, she's always smiling and laughing. But today, she would be offline for six hours.

It happened the same time, every week, every month, every year. She claims that she wants to protect her privacy, so no one knows why the interruptions occur. It doesn't matter because I have hours of old content saved, so I can always listen to her. She doesn't archive anything, for, I assume, similar reasons. In fact, she never spoke of her real name, family, friends, or where she was from. Seems it's better to be safe than sorry these days. I go into the files on my phone, connect my headphones, and pick one from last month. Her voice fills my head, and the screen lights up.

..It's on. Hi! I'm in this world again today...

The game was all pastel colors and showed the inside of her farmhouse when she started it. Her head and shoulders appear at the bottom-right of the screen in a small pink box overlaying the gameplay footage. She has long brown hair, usually put into two ponytails or braids. She always wore pink heart-shaped headphones and light, pale makeup, I think. I couldn't get incredibly clear details of her face; she even took her social media photos from a distance. It could be intentional.

I close my phone, but keep the audio on and put it down on the desk, which is the old kitchen table from when I was little. It was just large enough for my keyboard, mouse, and two adjacent monitors. My actual computer sat on the floor beside the table leg, quietly humming. I slid the mouse to close the window on my desktop with Veritas' channel and checked my messages.

Your girlfriend's still sleeping.

It was a guy from history class. We play video games together, and he invited me to his graduation party a couple of weeks ago, but I don't think he ever really cared for me. Sometimes I regret telling him about her, but I don't care. No one watches her...she only ever peaks at 50 viewers. A forum I frequented was how I found out about her, but other than her social media accounts, that was it. Honestly, I don't even remember how I initially came across the forum.

It was made shortly before Veritas was posted there, and it was called “game servers,” so I assume I was searching for PC advice or something. I respond.

I'm aware.

He replies with emoticons and some pictures. Before I can read any, I hear my mom right below me in the kitchen downstairs. I'll feel like dirt if I don't at least help her clean up after the breakfast she made me. I stumble out of my chair, which rolls backward and thumps my bed frame. Similar to my desk, my room has just enough space for everything, with the only other piece of furniture being a double dresser at the foot of the bed. I'm fine with it, I don't have a lot of stuff, and no one's ever in here but me. Plus, the window behind my desk gave me a nice view of the neighborhood. Typical suburbia, except more pine trees, a faint saltwater smell, and wider gaps between houses, with every third one having sand and pea gravel in place of grass. From here, I can see the hood of my parked car on the side of the house: a 15-year-old beat-up red SUV, formerly my dad's. I hook a right out the door into the landing, which is way brighter than my room, and head down the narrow stairway. The steps are old and weak, like a lot of stuff in my house.

At the bottom, I make another right and pass the front door to see her smiling at me from the stove on the opposite wall. Our kitchen is quaint, with a standard sink and a window facing out to the front of the house, nestled beside a fridge shorter than me with cereals and cooking supplies stacked on top. Other than that, all wooden cabinets and counters lined the walls and ceiling of the small room. My plate of the usual egg breakfast is adjacent to her, placed on the high counter with the two stools underneath.

I take a seat, my back to the larger dining room table, with the living room behind that through a cased opening in the wall. We never sit there; it's only the two of us.

She breaks the silence. “A shift this morning?”

I nod.

“Well, better eat.”

I do. “Thanks.” I look up at her. “For the eggs. I appreciate it.”

She went to make her plate, satisfied with my answer. She was small, her clothes getting bigger every day. Watching her shrink was unnerving at first, but it soon became a normal occurrence, like feeling the temperature drop in September. At all times, her faded gray-black hair is loosely tied back in a hairband or clip, and she wears big t-shirts, sweatpants, and socks, especially now that school's out for the summer. She's an elementary teacher, and whenever anyone hears my last name, they're already asking if I know her, my own mother, and telling me she had them for first, third, or whatever grade.

Veritas spoke in my ear.

...It's good to have company like this, y'know?

Mom clears her throat. “Think it'll be busy today?”

“No.” I lower the volume and keep eating.

“Little League is on Saturdays usually.”

“Even in the summer?”

I nod.

She stares. “Well, I hope it's a good day.”

I wish I could give her whatever she wants, but I'll never know what it is. She looks so tired, but it's early. I nod. I take my plate around the counter to the trash and wipe crumbs into it before rinsing the dishes.

I reach back to the stove and dump leftover bacon on a paper plate before bringing it to the sink to do the same. I hear her stand behind me. "If you have a shift, you can go."

I nod if she can see that, but keep rinsing. Is she gonna let me leave dirty dishes in the sink? And have her wash the pan that she used to cook me breakfast before I go to work? I'd dig up my dad and ask him what he thinks, but at 19, I've probably made him roll over in his grave so many times that he's in too deep to reach for.

I rest the dishes in the drying rack before rushing up the stairs and into my room, snatching the rest of what I need. It's hardwood everywhere, which Mom keeps very clean, so I have to be careful even when I'm rushing. Phone, charger, spare headset, wallet, dumped into my drawstring before I throw on my hoodie. I stop at the bathroom next door to brush my teeth, and I get a look in the mirror.

My eye bags are super dark...like as dark as my hair. People probably think I do drugs. Mom will cut my hair whenever she needs to (or forces me to), but it grows back too fast. It just kind of poofs upward loosely in weird curls. I feel like this is the pastiest I've ever been, and the lankiest. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't care.

I spit my toothpaste, then I'm back down the steps. I reach for my key from the hook next to the front door. Mom is still to my right, sitting at the counter. She's staring again and smiling.

"I hope it's a good day. I love you very much."

"Love you too."

Read the "[Veritas](#)" full story [here!](#)



Character Designs for Veritas by Lu Grayson

MOUNTAIN HOWLS

by Shane Dougherty

In a worn yet spacious tent, lying undisturbed in a makeshift bed, the smell of blood, sweat, and feces permeating the air, the unknown man looked to be at peace. Such peace was occasionally broken by painful whispers of the howling. Having remained unconscious for the previous several days, his only company “Doctor” Anderson, the closest the outpost had to a medical professional. Many of the troops stationed at this backwater base succumbed to stories of where their mystery guest hailed from, and what strange tales he would speak when awakened. On the morning of his fourth day since arriving, the whispers grew to moans, the moans to shouts, and suddenly the good doctor found himself calling for assistance as he held the flailing man down, his face drenched in sweat as several men came to assist. After what could only have been twenty to thirty seconds, yet feeling like an eternity, the man had finally woken up, only to find himself held down by several others, resulting in a raving fit. After a momentous struggle, the doctor applied chloroform to place the man back into slumber, sending one of the men off to collect the post commander.

Those gathered in the tent hadn’t long to wait, for after only a few minutes, the post commander came rushing in, a look of stern indifference masking grave concerns, the soldier sent to collect him sticking close behind as everyone gathered around their mystery guest. For the post commander, he had already received reports from several military posts in the east to expect wagon trains by this time.

Instead, all that was shown was a withered skeleton of a man who reminded him too much of the troops he served with during the Southern Rebellion. He needed to know what had happened to those wagon trains. Were they delayed, and he was merely a foolish straggler wandering through, or had they been ambushed by bandits or redskins? While waiting for their guest to reawaken, he was updated by Anderson on the previous struggle, and together they took their seats off to the side, the commander placing two guards by the tent flap to stop the man, in case he was to act up again.

After chatting for half an hour on various subjects, the man began to rouse from his forced slumber, taking notice of one of the guards who motioned to the commander as everyone in the tent tensed up, ready to leap upon the man if necessary. Thankfully, none of that was needed as the man groggily took in his surroundings, the only sounds to be heard were sorrowful whimpers. Struggling to sit up, the doctor came to his side to assist as the remainder of the tent's inhabitants watched on. The doctor and his patient were locked in a conversation of whispers, briefly broken by the doctor asking one of the guards to fetch water for their guest. When it looked like their talk was over, the post commander called the doctor over, while the guard had returned with not only water, but he had also brought along a bottle of whiskey, quite common in frontier military outposts such as this.

Read the [“Mountain Howls” full story here!](#)

MATTE

by Ethan Hillman

Still. Still, Ann waits by the window pane. Watching the water shimmer as it laps at the banks of the mud and sand. Watching the water disperse into the reeds and cattails, following its path by observing which plants bend and move under its force when the liquid becomes obscured. She sat in a sturdy, simple, handmade white oak chair. The wood is undamaged yet speckled with dirt and dust. It's no surprise the chair is not damaged. It hasn't moved from that spot since Martin finished carving it and put it on that side of their wooden folding table. The table itself was quite a creative touch to the cabin. Hinged below the window, it could fold upward to be near flush with the wall, allowing it to cover the window. A steel latch sat at the top of the frame to hold it erect once folded. When needed, it could be lowered by releasing the latch and letting the two firm, white, wall-planted ropes hold it parallel to the floor.

He never let any space go to waste in here, thought Ann as she carelessly pinched and twirled some ends of her dry hair. A long, quiet exhale escaped her as she let silence linger in the one room cabin. Her hand unconsciously traced what was carved into the table. Neatly chiseled were the initials A+M sitting in a heart just above a date.

5/5/89

It has been three months since Martin left those initials. Two months since the storm. One month since Martin went to find help.

She gazed outside, briefly focusing her eyes on the wooden dock that surrounded the cabin, stopping her wandering pupils on the piling at the end of a stretch of boards that extended out over the mud to the shallow, murky waters. Evidence of rope wear could be seen halfway up the pillar of wood. Quickly, Ann shifted to look beyond into the thick clumps of sawgrass.

Movement. Subtle, yet present.

Ann trained her eyes on the tall grass. It gently parted as something moved toward the mouth of the river from the left side. One slender leg emerged. Then another.

"It's back," she rasped. Water was a limited resource.

Long slate grey legs gave way to feet with four twiglike toes ending in short lengths of keratin. The legs were connected to the lower third of a narrow torso that was clad in muted blue feathers. An unremarkable color. Atop the body was a winding S-shaped neck with a white stripe down the middle that stopped just below a wedge-shaped head and beak. The unmistakable figure of a blue heron. Ann had seen this particular bird before. The past week or two it had regularly appeared in the same spot with the same purpose. Do not go hungry. A sentiment Ann wished she could share. She was always hungry these days. Unwavering, the heron stands still, waiting for any unsuspecting aquatic prey to swim within range of its spear like beak. Ann always admired the winged hunter's patience.

It gave her hope. At least, it used to. Ann had recently observed the heron acting strangely. It used to move with a quiet confidence that only predatory animals know; now, she notes a solemnness to the bird's cadence. Step. Weak leg raise. Step. A slight, ragged tightness showed on the heron's features that was visible even through a cabin window some thirty yards away.

Ann's features slipped into a frown. Her lip quivered. She couldn't bear to look at the bird for another second. The poor creature, drained, fighting, holding on. Desperately waiting for something to come along to spur life back into it. Living in repetition, monotonous repetition, expecting a different result from the same actions, from being in the same place. Maybe the heron was manic. Perpetually diseased, supernaturally unwell because God hated it and forced everything willing and unwilling in his divine power to somehow miraculously culminate in that creature's suffering. Now, Ann began to sob, not shy sobs, wracking sobs. The kind that can only be mustered in states of intense grief or complete hysteria. The sun was making its way to the western horizon. Ann's mind did not race as racing requires some kind of direction, an end goal. It ran. Scared. Terrified of the situation it existed in, the waves of emotions crashing and crashing with the ferocity of a summer storm.

The storm. A violent, blindsiding tempest that fed on everything that was not secure. Fishing rods, a grill, lanterns, coolers, gas canisters, freedom, the future. It was a miracle their small boat stayed moored, only doing so due to its sleek, low box design. Ann recalled the sound of rain colliding with the metal roof. Millions, no, billions of droplets had one mission.

It was to make Ann feel hopeless, afraid, trapped - so inconsolable that even Martin could not calm her. To make Ann fear for her life, when the liquid infantry could not fully satisfy these results, they decided to drop bombs. Lightning struck close, evident by the near instant thunderclap after the world was white for a fraction of a second. The blitzkrieg lasted from the afternoon one day and finally marched onward and away just after dawn the next day. The cabin survived. Ann remembered every minute because she knew any one of them could have been her last. The storm passing did not mean life returned to a comfortable equilibrium. Food they packed for what they thought was going to be a freeing month of total serenity in their freshly built cabin, a dream they had shared since marrying thirteen years ago. The marsh had always called to them. It turned out to be the whisperings of a devil.

For the first time since Martin left, Ann rose from the chair. She ate, drank, and slept with a purpose other than to satisfy her body's needs. She was going outside. Willing her atrophied, malnourished figure to the door, she opened the screen door inward, then the sturdier wood door outward. Tears still streaming, Ann breathed deeply and began to meander down the dock, stopping right at the end. The exact spot Martin told her he would come back with food, water, rescue, a pretty shell if he found one. Hope. She relived watching the little boat on just under half a tank of gas troll through the shallows then speed off in full plane parallel to the bank as it hit open waters. That was Ann's last memory that meant anything. The last moment that offered any chance of escape from what would become her prison cell.

At times, she contemplated slogging through the mud back in the direction they came from, hoping some lost fisherman might stumble across her and give aid. A pipe dream it was. Ann knew how deep the mud could get. One moment, the wet earth is barely reaching up your ankle; the next, it's devoured your whole torso. Not a fate she fancied earlier on in her solitude. Yet, the mind alters when one grows desperate.

Her tears meant nothing now. Just hollow drops of indifference simply waiting to be reunited with the saltwater she stood above. The initials in the table meant nothing now for neither Ann nor Martin existed anymore. A hint of a bygone era, the last evidence of lives that were, something of the past that will be forgotten as quickly as it was learned. One last tear escaped Ann's wide eyes. The marsh was orange now. The whole world was orange to Ann. Black tendrils reached from the reeds to her, and she waited until the glowing vibrance subsided, standing still. Waiting.

Still.

Waiting.

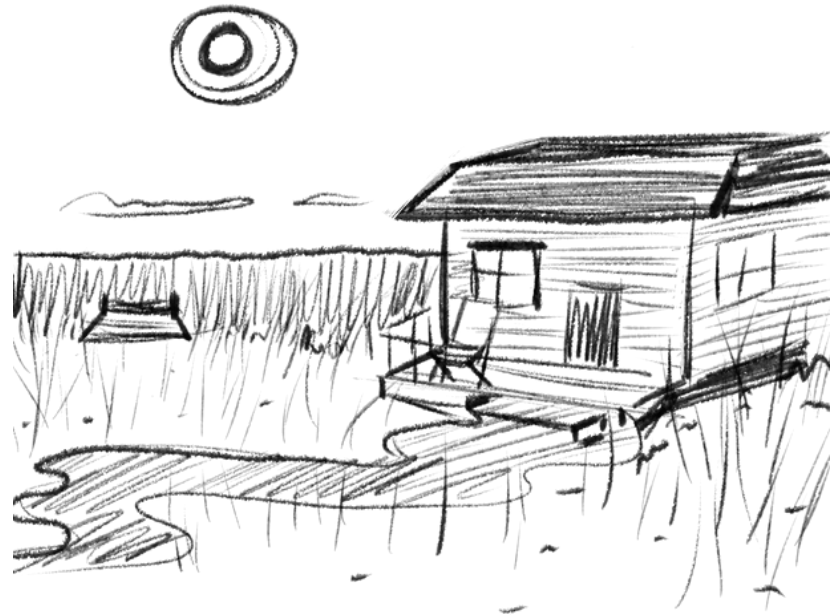
Still.

Waiting.

Darkness fell.

Ann looked around with a lucid curiosity, then retired back to the cabin. The marsh hummed like itself for the first time since the storm. Insects chattered intermittently, a fish could be heard jumping somewhere in the winds of river. A bat flapped and darted across the night, feeding. A thick wooden slam echoed in the night.

The beak of a blue heron was sticking up from the water as the waves pulled the submerged body too and fro. Ann's corpse hung from the rafters of the cabin by a firm, white rope.



MY DEAR LISSIE

by Brooke Scheetz

There was a rumor that the piano at the old St. Philip church played by itself. It sat in one of the side rooms adjacent to the lectern, seemingly abandoned and untouched. Some assumed a myriad of different things, such as the piano was old and that the notes played only due to the rotting of the mechanisms inside, or that the church had a vermin problem, and rats would bounce about the keys. Some even considered a more divine feature, and that God played the piano himself. However, sweet little Lissie knew the truth.

It was a bleak, cold Sunday in Liverpool. Lissie grasped her mother's hand as she crossed the street, shivering in an old, discolored wool coat that was one size too small. As they slipped inside the St. Phillip church, a cascade of warmth tumbled through Lissie's body, and she could no longer see her own breath. The St. Phillip church offered a feeling of finally being home, a solace from the grave and dire situation that England found itself in. Lissie did not understand what Christianity was, but the church was warm, and God seemed like a good man. Whenever Lissie prayed, as she was forced to do so before bedtime, she would always ask God for a new coat.

Lissie pretended like she knew what to do and copied the adults around her as the Priest started the service. She even got the hang of saying 'A Man' when she was supposed to, although she didn't know what that meant. As the service ended, other families came up to her and her mother to talk about things that Lissie did not understand, just like the Mulligans did this specific morning. Mr. Mulligan tipped his hat towards Lissie.

"Hello little lady"

Lissie smiled back a small grin and waved at him shyly as he greeted her mother, June. She saw that their son, Dustin Mulligan, was also with them, and Lissie was shocked when he bounded away from his own mother's grasp to whisper something in Lissie's ear.

"Wanna go see the old piano with us?" He said excitedly.

Lissie nodded and broke away from her mother to meet the other kids staring through an old door. Lissie had heard the rumors that the piano played by itself, but she was too afraid to investigate it alone.

"Look, it's *playing*, that's so *creepy!*" One of the girls exclaimed.

The other kids watched in awe as the piano played some all-too-purposeful notes. Lissie finally took a look inside, and she cocked her head, confused. There was clearly a man sitting there, playing the notes that left the other kids shocked. However, Lissie noted that there was something off about the way he moved. When his hands moved to play a different note, each movement left an afterimage in the air from where it just was, as if he was moving too fast for her eyes to perceive it. However, he was moving slowly as he pressed the keys. Lissie also noted that the stone wall behind him was fully visible, proving that he was not as human as she. She stared right into his eyes from the door while the others investigated the piano, the man giggled as Dustin waved his arm straight through him.

However, the man abruptly stopped laughing as he saw Lissie looking dead into his eyes. He stopped playing as he contemplated her, the one human who had looked straight into his eyes in a very long time.

"Blimey, it stopped! No fair!" Dustin whined.

He and the other kids sighed and left when it was clear that the piano would not continue. Lissie stayed, frozen in fear. Though Lissie did not know much, she knew that she was not supposed to be able to see him. She wondered if she had done something wrong and had disrespectfully looked into the all-seeing eyes of God, for she believed that this could be his true form. She lowered her head in shame and contemplated praying for his forgiveness that night instead of a coat. However, to Lissie's surprise, a warm smile materialized onto his deathly pale face.

"Come child, there's no reason to be afraid." The man eased back into playing the piano while keeping an eye on Lissie.

He looked shocked as Lissie physically registered his voice, eyes facing him as he spoke. Lissie slowly crept toward him and investigated his face. He had a cherubic look to him and had slightly pink cheeks amongst his pale face, and his eyes were a kind hazel right underneath shaggy black hair. The man patted the other end of the bench, and she cautiously sat next to the transparent figure.

"Are you God?" Lissie questioned, her head still slumped over in shame.

The man exploded in laughter, a delighted tone of playfulness.

"Heavens no!" He broke into a small giggle before he continued, "My name is Joseph, I live here.

What is your name, dear?" He said kindly.

"My name is Lissie." She said, though her name came out as 'Litthie' due to the recent loss of her two front teeth.

"Well, Lissie, did you know that you are the first person I've talked to in 92 years?" Joseph declared. Lissie's jaw fell open.

"So, you're dead," she said, very matter-of-factly. He chuckled at her nonchalance and nodded. He flipped through the pages of the music book and found another song to play. Lissie's eyes widened. "Ooooh, I know this one! Ave Maria!" Lissie said excitedly. She readied her tiny fingers and started playing. The beautiful song, impressive for a 5-year-old, emanated from the piano. Joseph smiled brightly.

"That's gorgeous, my dear. I believe we have something in common."

"Yeah, Mum says I'm gonna be a pro-dee-jee." Lissie tried to pronounce.

"Is that so?" Joseph said, amused.

Joseph brought his left hand up to assist her in playing. They sat in silence for a good while, smiling at each other as they continued the song.

"Elise Hartwell, I've been looking everywhere for you. Come here this instant." June stood at the door looking angry, her arms crossed.

Whenever she was angry or otherwise relatively calm, she never used Lissie's nickname. Keeping appearances of formality and class was of the utmost importance to her, despite the fact that they had only the kitchen sink to wash their clothes. June was incredibly ashamed that her family was poor, so she simply pretended that they weren't. Lissie looked down and stepped down from the stool, sad that she needed to leave her new friend. She looked up into Joseph's eyes.

"Bye-bye."

"Who on earth are you talking to?" June said, eyeing the room.

"My new friend, Mummy!" Lissie said, pointing to the piano. However, June only rolled her eyes and pulled her away.

.....

Lissie poked at the canned peaches on her plate with her fork. These days, Lissie was always either hungry or starving. However, she had no desire to eat slop, no matter how much her stomach growled. To Lissie, they were slimy and had the consistency of large worms. Each dinner was a new, disgusting assortment of canned fruit and one slice of stale white bread.

"Elise, I know you don't like it, but it's all we have. You need to eat. You've been getting too skinny," her mother said.

Lissie cringed as she forced some peaches down her throat. Her father was the opposite; he basically gorged on the meal whilst covered in grime and grease. He always ate like that since desperately taking a job at a factory for Rolls-Royce, where he was denied the right to a lunch break.

"A car for the wealthy made on the backs of the poor" June would always say. Funnily enough, June did not care about abysmal factory conditions until it affected her family. Dinners were quiet and somber, and they tried their best to savor each bite, often coating the bread in the canned juice to soften it. Lissie broke the silence with a question that she had not yet considered until that day.

"Mommy, Daddy? Are your parents dead?" She asked innocently. Her parents, June and Henry, stopped in their tracks.

"Yes? Why?" June questioned.

"When did they die?" Lissie ignored the question. "A long time ago, before you were born. Why do you ask?" Henry pushed.

"I just wanted to know," Lissie muttered.

June got up from the table and searched through an old table drawer. She pulled out an old album that was fraying at the edges. She came back to the table with it and it spewed dust when she laid it down.

"This doesn't have your father's parents, but this is an album of my family going back at least two centuries."

She flipped through the disintegrating pages, the portraits at the beginning done in pencil and then transitioning to photographs in the 1880's. One specific page jumped out to Lissie as her mother flipped through. The specific portrait depicted a man with a cherubic look to him and had slightly pink cheeks, and his eyes were a kind hazel right underneath shaggy black hair.

"That's him Mummy! My friend!" Lissie shoved her finger at the page which read:

**Joseph Cottle
1815 - 1840**

Next to him was a woman named Ada Cottle, who lived 30 years longer than him. Lissie was eager to know how she was related to Joseph. June rolled her eyes and scoffed at her daughter.

"You don't know him, hell, I didn't even know him." She looked at Henry, wanting support. Henry just stared at them blankly.

"Who was he?" Lissie said eagerly. June sighed.

"He was my grandfather, but he died before his child was born. Nobody knew him except Grandma Ada. Poor thing never remarried nor bothered to try," June said sadly.

"So, Joseph is my *Great-grandfather!*" I can't wait to tell him!" Her mother scoffed again, louder this time.

"You must have seen someone who looked like him; he's been dead for 92 years."

"That's what he told me!"

[Read the full "My Dear Lissie" story here!](#)

GNOLEUF

by Mason Edelmayer

"Damn it where did they go?" Colin grumbled, rifling around the junk drawer. "Lose your keys again?" Olivia called from the kitchen. His wife of three years was making eggs so the couple could eat breakfast together before heading off to work. Reaching for a clothes hanger under the counter, Colin heard a jingle. Found at last. As the keys scraped toward him, he wondered why they—once again—weren't where he'd left them.

"Liv," he called, "they were under the counter. I remember putting them on the key hanger yesterday when I got home."

"I don't know," she said dismissively, "Breakfast's done though."
"But I put them on the..." He stopped his thought, "Whatever, I need some coffee."

In the kitchen, the pair ate together as they had every morning since marriage. Five out of seven days a week, the tradition was succeeded by eight hours of work, followed by seven hours of nothing, and ended in their bed. On weekends, the couple skipped work and got right to nothing. The lives of Colin and Olivia were bland, just as they liked them.

However, all good things must come to an end. The bacon and eggs, being an exceptionally good thing, had met their end. That being said, it was time for the pair to go their separate ways and enjoy feasting on endless piles of papers from the gloomy confines of their office cubicles. Colin set out on his quest to cubicle seventeen, kissing his bride before bravely battling the vicious snake known as Interstate 95.

He'd been avoiding looking at the car's clock for the whole drive, late or not, he didn't want to know. Entering the parking lot, he caught a glimpse of his watch. "Eight minutes late, perfect," He thought. Rather than entering through the front door and risk receiving a scolding from the mean desk lady, or—even worse—the boss, he opted to use the side door, a cunning maneuver that would land him a few cubicles down from his. Opening the door, he was greeted by the one and only boss.

Getting some fresh air Colin?" His heart sank.

"I'm sorry sir I really tried to—"

“No, no you deserve it. I saw some files of yours in the copy room, I just wanted to thank you for coming in early.”

What the hell are you talking about, I just got here?

“Oh, it was no problem really...”

“Alrighty then, while you have those files out, can you get me a report by 10 o’clock?”

“No problem, sir.”

Curious, Colin checked the copy room. Despite the locked deadbolt that secured his cabinet, his files had inexplicably been strewn across the counters. If he had more time, he might ask around to see what happened, but time was of the essence if he were to complete that report within the hour. Just as he began to chip away at the seemingly endless stacks of files, Colin’s coworker came in to make some copies.

“Colin can you move your stuff over to that side, I need some space.”

“Hey, do you know who did this?”

“Did what?”

“Somebody unlocked my cabinet and scattered my files here.”

“Well, it wasn’t me. The only other people here are the boss and the receptionist.”“...Alright”

“So, nobody’s owning up to it,” he thought, planning a counter-prank. “Alright then—once they finally slip, I’ll know who to get back.”

Colin gathered his files and headed to his cubicle, where he began his favorite task,

summarizing them into one, cohesive report. As he outstretched his hand for a pencil, he reached past a photo frame of his wife. A grin formed on his face, and he couldn’t resist a second glance. This time, the photo had been replaced with a picture of a gross, bearded, red-hat-donning garden gnome with a crooked smile. Ever the short-fused soul, he picked up the frame and valiantly stormed to the copy room to interrogate his coworker.

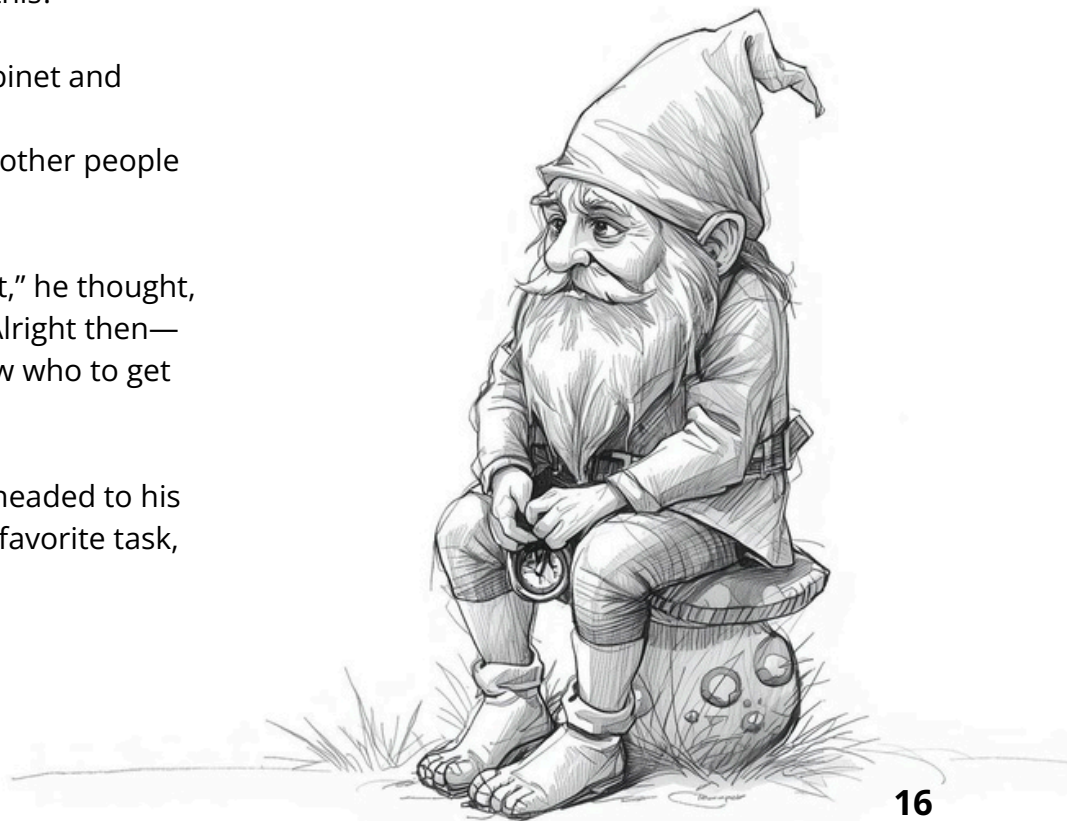
“The files were funny, I got that,” he said, raising his voice, “but this is different.

Where is the picture of my wife?”

“It’s in your hand! What the hell are you yelling for?”

“Does this look like my wife?” He showed him the picture, which resembled the woman he described.

[Read the full “Gnoleuf” story here!](#)



GHOST TOWN

by **Stephanie Lombardo**

With one last stitch, I finish the unicorn doll and put it in a box to sell. The only thing to indicate how long I've been working on all of the crafts in the box was the clock on the wall, a clock that I painted pink, purple, and blue, and my phone to double-check. Midnight already? I sigh and get ready for bed, drinking a cup of lavender tea and bringing my stuffed dragon with me, holding it between my legs and pulling myself up on the bar before grabbing the dragon and hugging it in my wings.

Sunrise comes sooner than I thought it would, and the minute I open my eyes to see the morning rays peek through the window, I let go of the bar and quickly land on my feet. The first thing I do is check another day off the calendar. One more week until the craft fair. I look over to my boxes of finished crafts and smile in pride. I have a lot of things I could sell there, and I still have plenty of time to make more. And with each sale I will make at that fair, I will be one step closer to leaving this ghost town behind.

The smell of warm, whole-wheat toast with hummus on top makes my mouth water, and even a small bite to test if it's cool enough to eat already feels like Heaven. Another bite, and I remember when my father told me about the breakfasts that the diner used to serve when it was open. Fried eggs over easy, fluffy buttermilk pancakes, crispy turkey bacon, and waffles with a dollop of Greek yogurt and berries. All served with a

nice glass of fresh orange juice or milk. The even had chocolate milk for the kids and the kids at heart. He told me of when he met my mother there, how it was like love at first sight, and how they went on many dates there. And every time I heard those stories, I would dream of going there, at least once. But I know it's a hopeless dream, because every time I pass the diner, all I see is an empty building that's starting to become home to growing moss and ivy.

I grab my things and put them in the basket of my kick scooter, and ride my way to work. I'm glad that the way to work is easily accessible by bike, or in my case kick scooter, because not only do I get some nice fresh air in the morning, I also get to enjoy the sights and sounds of the morning on the way. The sweet singing of the birds in the trees, the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze, and the way the sun's glow gently touches everything and makes them sparkle. And among my favorite sights, is when I cross into the next town over.

Compared to my hometown, almost the entire town is awake and already bustling. People walking all over the sidewalks, crossing the street, and almost everybody's friendly with each other when they do have the chance to stop and say hello. The window displays are creative and vibrant, and I can smell the sweet treats in the bakery as I passed by.

On a bright sunny day, the town is at its most bright and lively, and on gloomier days, seeing everything around the town makes the day feel even better. I remember when my mother told me about how my hometown was back in the day, and the way she described it was just like how this town is now.

I park my scooter, lock it, and open the door to my workplace, where one of my coworkers, a tiger named Diana, smiled and said, "Good morning, Stella, how are you?"

"Oh, I feel fantastic!" I happily answer back, making Diana giggle.

"Excited for the summer festival, I see?" I playfully nudge Diana. "How did you know? Are you a psychic or something?"

Diana's giggling turned into laughing as she playfully nudged me back. "You've been talking about it for the last week or so!"

I smile as I punch in and get ready for whatever I need to do. Working in the library is a nice, quiet job, and I'm surrounded by a bunch of books, which is a very nice thing, especially since, with all of the crafts I'm doing, alongside other things, to make money, I haven't really had much time to read, so here, in this library, I find any book that interests me and read whenever I can; and a lot of the time, I finish the book before my shift is over. Break time in my library shift is the only time I can give myself an actual break now. No need to earn money, no crafts to do, just relax for a moment and not have to worry about much.

After hours of reorganizing books and helping out anybody in the library, my shift is over, and once again, I manage to finish the book I'm reading. I put the book back on the shelf, say goodbye to everyone, and take my scooter back home. When I get distracted by a particularly attractive window display at a toy shop, I accidentally bump into a bunny.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," I say as I get off my scooter and help the bunny up, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little shock, that's all. Oh, and thanks for picking up the bags, too." The bunny looked into the bags and breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness the food wasn't messed up. Oh, I was doing a delivery from The Lean Bean."

The Lean Bean - I know that place all too well. It's the small health food café in this town. It has pretty much every trendy health food under the sun. From avocado toast, to yogurt, to those "detox" juice blends with blue spirulina, The Lean Bean has any health food that at least once was touted as the next big thing on every social media platform. But unlike many other places I saw offering these types of foods, the food from The Lean Bean actually tastes good. Except the charcoal avocado smoothie. That I will never in a million years understand. I fondly remember it as the place I first discovered my taste for hummus on toast, and from time to time, I get a quick pick-me-up.

[Read the full "Ghost Town" story here!](#)



NON-FICTION

DEATH LEFT

by Sean Schemelia

I remember the day old came and death left.

We were so well behaved, my wife and I. Seated with our hands folded and the blankets neatly up to our waists, unblinking forward into the big black eye of a broken television. A pile of laundry animated with unseen armature, slithered up the stairs, sniffled about in the parlor, and went stiffly with purpose down the hallway before nesting on the foot of our bed. Her baby's sock tongue forgotten for years and coated with dust-sapid receptors, panting as the room grew several orders of magnitude hotter in an instant.

We slept sitting up, gasping, our dancing eyelids powered the matrices of 2,272 microscopic villages, the elders of which leapt spryly out of their own beds and worked crinkled hands and steaming amplifiers to rid their lot of worms without one wasted saccade. The men donned their cellulose-lined chitin biomittens and mucus lenses.

The worms were skinned with gut hooks and clamps. Their cuticles were gathered in a large pumice stone bowl and beaten with breaking knuckles, radii, humeri, and craniums, until there was naught left of them but spinal columns on girdled legs weakly planted, whisking the contents dutifully to collapse.

The sons rose from bed then, languidly rolling their fathers' lower halves into the street where women planted them in wheelchairs and they sat limp before the dream now beginning to witness itself. The sons got to work spreading the gray pink worm meal over the eyelids, as before that, we might sleep ceaselessly. The heat and the labor aged them rapidly.

The dog let her know with some imperceptible electric high sign, and to my left, my wife has put her hands in my chest again, tickling ventricles and rubbing concentric circles onto my right lung's third lobe, pinching playfully and blowing bubble kisses into my thorax. Six million five alveoli burst beneath her smiling fingers, and a wheelbarrow full of slush caught on a snag and spilled, soiling one past, one present, and one future interminably. Five plus five plus five is three.

KNOW YOUR WORTH

by Addison Farrell

Crisp October days, with the biting ice-cold wind remind me of the times I let you consume every thought in my head. Even our first conversation had the power to ruin my day. Why did I stay so long? It's a question I often ask myself. Our love was real at one point; it had to be. As I look back at pictures, I try to piece together when things went wrong. The relationship was never perfect, but it was pretty close. I loved you more than anyone I've ever loved before, and for a while, you felt the same. The necklace you got me, I wore it around my neck as if it were an engagement ring on my finger. The small golden chain and the charm that hung from it. On the charm was your handwriting; it had the date we got together and the words "I love you." I never took it off that entire summer. We spent almost every day together. Breakfast before long shifts, beach days every week, and movie nights on a rainy day. Each day we spent together made me feel like you were truly my soulmate. I didn't mind spending all my time with you. Even when we only saw each other for ten minutes or nights, we had to hang out in my car to get around our parents. You were my best friend.

There was something about the warm August weather that made us believe we would be eighteen and in love forever. By October, any warmth we had left from the summer seemed to fade away. You turned cold. Our conversations became shorter, your anger intensified, and the power you held over me grew larger. I didn't know how to stop us from falling down this hole.

As I felt you slip away, so did my worth. Holding onto any last bit of love I could receive from you, I started to lose myself. I projected your qualities onto everyone else.

Angry – I was never an angry person until now. I was angry at myself, but also you; angry that you couldn't love me like you used to. That I let you change the person I was.

The first bouquet you ever bought me. It was the most enormous bouquet I had ever seen; the roses were dyed a burnt orange and had baby's breath mixed in. The wrapper around them looked like an old newspaper, and a small note hung from the side that read, "I love you forever and always." I felt so happy that I wrapped my arms around you and squeezed you tight.

I wanted that feeling to last forever; however, it only lasted a few hours. Something I did made you mad. The things on my shelves had been torn down, clothes taken out of my drawers, and the picture of us on my desk broken into pieces. Looking in your eyes, I saw pure black. I could feel the rage in your soul. In that moment, I froze. You reached towards the flowers and grabbed them out of the purple glass vase. I watched you scream at me while ripping them apart and breaking them up. Your voice was muffled, and all I wanted to do was cry. That wasn't an option this time. I stood up and began to feel my worth return. I grabbed your bag in the corner of the room and threw it out the door.

"Get out," I said.

You looked back at me, confused and frozen. I repeated myself before putting myself behind you and pushing you out of the door. When you were finally out, I closed the door and locked it while you pounded and screamed my name. I sank to the floor, with my knees pressed to my chest, and I sobbed.

I knew things had to change for me. It was never actually about the flowers; they weren't what made me so upset. It was the power you held over me, the idea that no matter what you did, I would still be there.

Some time had passed, and I moved on to better things and found better people. From the moment I sat on that floor sobbing, there was never another time I had not put my worth before others. I spent a lot of time alone; it was comforting to know I still had myself through everything. Quiet days aren't always bad ones; they are the ones that fuel the desire for change the most. I wrote down everything I felt; my notebook stayed in my bag like my phone in my hand. Word after word, I could make a novel out of the writings. From the hardest days that I felt like I'd made no progress, to the best days when I hardly had anything to write. It's the stability I've searched for my entire life. My notebook listened to every word I had to say. The best listeners are the ones who don't speak back.

I started saving for another tattoo. For a while, I didn't know what I wanted. I knew it would have meaning and that I'd never get tired of it. A friend and I were talking about the growth I'd made. She asked me how I did it, but I wasn't sure how to answer her at first. It was a simple explanation. I stopped putting others before me. I learned that no matter what I did for others, they wouldn't change unless they wanted to. I knew that I deserved something better.

On the day of my tattoo appointment, I was filled with excitement and nerves. The lady began, and I felt a slight pinch on my arm. The pain wasn't bad; I'd endured much worse. She finished after about thirty minutes and told me to take a look in the mirror. I stood there with the biggest grin on my face. Seriously, my smile reached from ear to ear.

"Know your worth."

Now I will never forget my worth and remind every person I meet.



ROOM E-616

by Emily Jordan

The hallway smelled of Lysol wipes and cheap air freshener. The walls of Holly Pointe Commons stretched in every direction. It was a maze of names and room numbers taped to doors with all different kinds of handwriting. Me and my parents traveled up the elevator to the 6th floor. It felt like the elevator was moving in slow motion. When I arrived at E-616 it felt both too small and too big at the same time. I stood there with a ball of nerves, holding a trash bag of my clothes, since I was too lazy to buy boxes. I stared at the door for a minute, contemplating my decisions and if this was for me. My whole life had been packed into duffel bags and trash bags, but I wasn't sure I wanted to unpack it.

Inside, my roommate, Marina, was already there. Although her room wasn't messy, it wasn't the most put-together. Her side of the room looked homey; her bedding was mismatched, she had some personal paintings on the wall, and a few decorations on the desk. Mine was a pile of trash bags and a pillow that didn't match anything. "Hey," she said without looking up. "You're Emily, right?" It was polite but distant. The kind of greeting that says we'll coexist, but we're not the same kind of person, which is weird because everything seemed so good during the summer over text. Nonetheless, my parents and I got to work unpacking my things.

By the first weekend, it was clear that sharing a room with Marina would be its own kind of survival test. She liked to host people late at night, her music blasting and reverberating

laughter filling the space, while I tried to sleep with a pillow over my head so as to be ready for my 8:00am class. When I asked if she could turn it down, she looked over and said, "It's really not that loud." It was said so simple, like I was the one asking for too much. That was our first argument, but definitely not the last.

During the day, I escaped with Angelina, my best friend from high school, who lived on a different floor. I'd confide in her about anything. She was always down to listen to my crazy roommate issues, go out for a walk, or sit in silence. She was the calm I needed in the storm I was in. Oftentimes, we'd sit outside the Student Center with iced coffees, watching students rush by with backpacks bouncing against their shoulders. She loved it here, the freedom, the people, the noise. I tried to love it too. But each night, when I walked back to E-616, I'd feel a quiet weight in my chest that I couldn't name. I missed my mom's cooking. I missed my dad. I missed knowing who I was.

One night, it had been freezing all day, the kind of cold that made your fingers sting even through gloves. I stopped by Domino's on my way back from class, the cardboard box warm against my hands, smelling like comfort and home. I imagined eating in silence, maybe watching Netflix under my blanket. Next thing I know, I got a call from my mom. She had been watching my hamster, Hazel, while I was away at college. I knew her time was coming, but I didn't think it'd be so soon. "Hi Em," my mom said. "Hey Mom, what's up!" She proceeded to tell

me how she came home to feed my hamster, but sadly, she was found to have passed. I was distraught. She was my first pet, all mine, I bought and did everything for her. With everything going on at school, my roommate issues, this all just made it so much worse.

After grabbing my pizza and bawling my eyes out on my walk back to the dorms, I opened the door to E-616, finding six people crammed inside, music playing, bags and shoes scattered everywhere. Marina and her friends were sitting on my bed, laughing about something on a phone screen. I froze in the doorway, holding my pizza like a shield. There was nowhere to sit, nowhere to think. Doing homework felt impossible, and even hearing my own thoughts over them was a stretch. Inside, I was stuck. It was her room, but mine too. I was so conflicted about what to do next. I was nervous to say anything because of the problems we had before, but then again, I was an adult, and I needed to set boundaries, too. I decided to see how it would play out before I did anything drastic. I made sure to get everyone off my bed and away from my side of the room. I ate two slices in the hallway on the floor before heading to the study room just to breathe. I messaged her, "You could have given me a heads up before filling our room with strangers." She didn't answer, I headed back to the room, and it's like she was in there waiting for me to return. "It isn't just your room, you know," said to me.

"I know, but it is courteous to just let me know." That was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to our issues.

The internal tug-of-war was constant. Half of me wanted to call my parents, to say, "I can't do this, I want to come home." The other half was often saying, "If you leave now, you'll never know what you could've become." College was supposed to be the start of

everything, but for me, it felt like everything familiar had ended. I was feeling stuck.

One night, after another disagreement with Marina about guests, I put on my slippers and walked down towards the Rec Center. The air was cool and smelled like rain. I sat on a bench and just watched as the trees swayed in the wind. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear someone laughing. It was one of those belly laughs that you only get when you feel comfortable. Like you belong. I wanted that feeling. I wanted to belong, too.

That night, I texted Angelina, "*You still up?*" She replied almost instantly, "*Always.*" We talked for hours in her dorm about how hard it was to pretend like everything was fine when it wasn't. She told me I didn't have to figure it all out yet, that staying didn't mean I was stuck, and leaving didn't mean I was weak. Something about that made the weight in my chest feel lighter.

When I walked back to E-616 that night, the room was dark and quiet. Marina was asleep. Her fairy lights were soft yellow. I sat on my bed, staring at the ceiling, realizing that maybe both things could be true. I could miss home and still want to be here. I could be uncomfortable and still grow. I could be homesick and brave at the same time.

By the end of the semester, Marina and I had decided that it would be best if we didn't have people over. She ended up moving out after that semester. For the time being, we weren't friends, but we learned how to live side by side. And as for me? I learned that sometimes independence doesn't feel like freedom right away. Sometimes it feels like loneliness with the potential to be amazing.

BLUE BIRD

by Isabella Aguayo

There's no one I look up to more than my grandmother. My mom spent a lot of time working to support my brother and me, so my grandma stepped in and took care of us throughout our childhood. She lived in the basement of my aunt's house, which she filled with many things she collected over the years. One thing she loved to collect was anything with blue birds.

She had so many different kinds of ceramic blue birds throughout her basement. Along with that, she had blue birds on her clothes, in paintings, and as magnets on her fridge. They were everywhere. As a kid, I was very confused about those birds. I didn't really understand why she was so obsessed with them. Regardless, I grew to like them.

My grandmother did so much for us. She always cooked us three meals a day, took us shopping at Marshalls, and always made sure we got to and from school. When my brother and I were in elementary school, she would wait in her car in front of the school, sometimes for two hours before we got out, just to make sure she got a good parking spot. Looking back, I don't really remember her complaining. She was always very patient with us. One of my clearest memories of her is watching her cook. At the time, I was too little to see what was on the stove; she would move a chair over, so I could stand on it and watch. She would always have me peel the potatoes, and eventually had me cut up vegetables. I remember her telling me I would be a good cook because I cut things very slowly and precisely.

I thought doing it faster would've been better because it would save more time, but she would explain to me that most things turn out better when not rushed. She taught me that it was better to take your time with things and be more precise with what you're doing instead of trying to get it done faster, because the quality would be better.

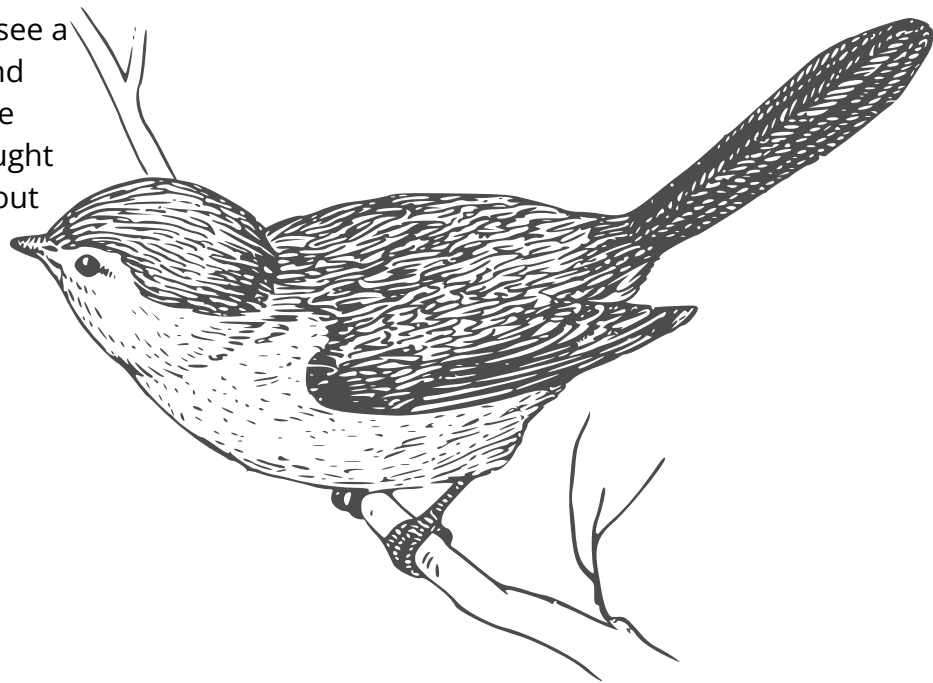
Most importantly, she taught us to have good morals and values. She always made sure we knew to have respect for others and for ourselves. There was one time in middle school when I found out a girl had been making fun of me to her friends. I told my grandma about it, and I was so upset. I initially wanted to do the same thing back to her. I wanted her to know how it felt to hear things like that about yourself. My grandma disagreed. She told me when things like this happen, I should still try and be nice to them because I wouldn't want to lower myself to their level. If I did that, I would be just like her, and I needed to hold myself to a higher standard. That lesson really stuck with me over the years and kept me out of a lot of high school drama.

As I grew older, my grandma started to tell me about her past, and I learned a lot about her. When she was younger, she was very independent and did everything for herself. She started working at a very young age and learned early on how to take care of herself. She became very confident in who she was and never let anyone, especially a man, talk down on her. I admired her for that a lot. I wanted to carry myself the same way she did: strong, unbothered, and self-assured.

After my grandma passed, I definitely saw a shift in our family. My mom had to take on a lot more, and my brother and I had to start helping out our mom with things my grandma did. I think everyone realized just how much she did for our family once she was gone. My aunt moved some of her ceramic birds upstairs into the living room. Looking at them brought me back to my childhood and reminded me of how much I looked up to her. I don't know if it was a coincidence or if I was just actively looking for them, but I started to notice blue birds everywhere. I liked to think it was her still watching over us.

I still wonder why she liked blue birds, specifically. Maybe it was the simple look, since they are cute. Maybe something in her childhood, or where she used to live. I honestly don't know, and wish I did because it might help me understand her more. The more time passes, the more I realize how much she shaped me. How much of who I am came from the things she taught me and how much I wanted to be just like her. To this day, anytime I see a bluebird, I think of her immediately and how much she impacted us. I hope she knows how many of the things she taught stuck with me. All the things she said out loud, and everything I learned by just watching her.

She taught me that it was better to take your time with things and be more precise with what you're doing instead of trying to get it done faster, because the quality would be better.



HVERFORD AVENUE

by Madilyn Exler

Haverford Avenue really hasn't changed much, except for the fact that I distinctly remember it looking bigger. Like much bigger. Maybe "big" is not quite the right word to describe how little me perceived it. But it just looks... small now. *Insignificant*.

Yes, the road has been repaved, and most of the houses, from what I can tell just from peering every so often out my window, have been revamped. Modernized and put-together in a way that contradicts their past construction. There's a three-story house diagonal from my childhood home that used to be only two from what I can recall. And my old home, the home I spent fourteen years in, it looks okay. It's aesthetically pleasing to look at, sure, but monochromatic color palettes for homes built in close-knit neighborhoods like this one have never been my cup of tea. My house was always homey: browns, burgundies, and bricks.

So, I guess, at a quick glance, everything looks the same as it did when I left ten years ago. Except the road appears to be much shorter. The houses seem closer together. Even the sidewalks look narrower.

I find myself doing this trip down memory lane every so often. Like today, for instance, I'm taking the long way home, so I can revisit simpler, happier times in my life when I still lived on Haverford. Memories twenty-three-year-old me wishes to relive, so I could leave adulthood behind and be a kid again, even if it is only for a mere moment. But every time, without fail, I'm hit with the realization that my road isn't as expansive as I once thought.

I mean, this road was my fortress. My own personal playground, considering most of the other children rarely played outside, and the other part of the street's population consisted of old couples whose kids, now with families of their own, only visited every so often. But to me, my road felt as if it stretched endlessly, with the possibilities feeling just the same. I remember when my childhood best friend, Kate, who I'm fortunate enough to still be in contact with to this day, would throw rocks at my bedroom window whenever she wanted my company. Her grandparents lived directly across the street from me, and we would spend hours upon hours creating stories to act out in our backyards, or in my pool, or in her Poppy's dusty, old, spider-infested shed. We would ride our motor scooters we got for Christmas up and down the street all day until the batteries died and needed recharging (both the scooters and us). We even picked up the hobby of roller skating for a brief period, going up and down our road repeatedly until our legs were aching and the sun was setting. I forgot to mention, I did live on a pretty steep hill. If you think about it, we had all the time in the world then.

Maybe that's why I drive down here from time to time. To remember what it felt like to just exist in a space where there wasn't any stress or anxiety or responsibilities or constant worry looming over me. At the time, I wasn't even afraid to run across the hot street barefoot, often littered by broken glass and tiny but rigid rocks that would stick to the bottom of my feet. I wasn't afraid to learn how to skate, where I would inevitably fall and

scrape both my knees in Kate's Poppy's driveway. I wasn't afraid of being judged or depressed or hurt by the things I couldn't control. I wasn't worried about running out of time in the day because there was always a tomorrow. I wasn't worried about eventually coming to the realization that the world I see, the one I perceive, is not as big and bright and beautiful as I once thought. That tomorrow is, in fact, not guaranteed. That eventually I would have to feel all of those emotions that were once merely concepts in my head.



I'm realizing as I take yet another drive down Haverford that maybe my road was never that expansive or significant. Maybe the houses were always close together, and the sidewalks were always narrow. Maybe the world was never big and bright and beautiful. And maybe a part of me always knew that. Perhaps, what I see now at twenty-three is exactly the same as what I saw at six, or ten, or thirteen. But back then, I had the luxury of childish ignorance.

So, in reality, Haverford Avenue hasn't changed much. I'm not driving fast, only fifteen miles per hour or so, but the wind through my driver's side window is hitting me in the face, and reminding me that it's me. It's me who has changed.

Maybe the houses were always close together, and the sidewalks were always narrow. Maybe the world was never big and bright and beautiful. And maybe part of me always knew that.

HER RING

by **A n o n y m o u s**

My grandmother had a collection of jewelry tucked away for decades, some I have seen and admired; others I've never seen before. On the day of my confirmation, she gave me a ring that had been passed down to her from my great-grandmother. She wrote me a note explaining its meaning and to cherish the valuables passed down through generations. Little did I know that day would be the last time I would ever see her. She passed away five days later, after three years of battling cancer. The ring became even more important to me, as I made sure to wear it every day as a reminder that she is still with me.

My Nan was such a special person in my life. The way she cared for everyone she loved is something I have grown to admire and have tried to take after as I have gotten older. Whether it was driving any distance to take care of her grandkids, calling my mom and her sisters every day, or simply spending quality time with her, it was always the best. I remember when I was about ten years old, she and my grandfather surprised me for my birthday. They got me these silver sparkly boots that I wanted, and we spent the day together. As heartwarming as that is to look back on, I feel like I didn't appreciate it enough in the moment. I used to be so excited when she would get me gifts or take me out somewhere, but as I grew up, I just wanted to be with her. I didn't realize how much of an impact she had on me until she was gone, and I found out the kinds of things she had to go through in the last twenty years of her life.

I was fifteen when she passed, so while I did get more time with her than most of my cousins, I can't help but wish she were still here to see me grow into an adult. There are so many qualities to her that I would've never noticed at a young age, yet she still instilled her strength and kindness in me.

Almost a year after my Nan died, I found out that my grandfather had been having an affair for as long as I've been alive. I really didn't know what to think. I was shocked, hurt, and most of all, angry. My mom and my aunts were being extremely secretive and suspicious before the affair was brought to my attention, so my cousin and I decided to eavesdrop and snoop on their phones. We found out he had cheated on her years prior through one of their text chains. We didn't want our moms to know we went through their phones, so we had no one to ask about our unanswered questions. Did she know? Did our parents know the whole time? What was he thinking? All of those questions went unanswered for years. The only information we knew was the woman's name and that she worked for him. We found out a few months later that he had been seeing the woman again after my grandma died. After each discovery, I was stuck between wanting to know more, and wishing I didn't know anything at all. I realized that growing up meant that thinking everything is perfect is far from the truth, and it was my grandma who kept the idea of our family being perfect alive. Everything I knew and loved about my grandfather vanished after I found out the truth.

The day after my Nan died, he had all of his granddaughters surrounding him as he told us stories about their life together while fighting back tears. He told us how they met and how he finally convinced her to go out with him. Yet this same man, the one crying over his loss, had cheated on her. He had an affair that lasted for years, completely betraying her and what was the perfect family. I couldn't, and still can't comprehend how he could be so unfaithful, yet claim to love her as much as he did. To this day, even with him being in poor health, I find it very hard to sympathize with him. Every time he talks about her, saying how much he misses her, I have to bite my tongue and pretend that what I'm hearing isn't complete bullshit. I'd like to believe that he did truly love her in his own messed-up way, but maybe I just can't imagine anyone not loving her.

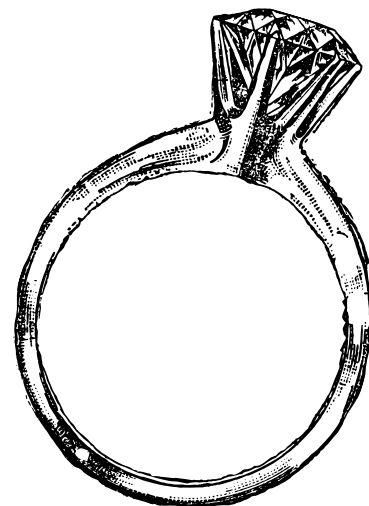
After a few years of focusing on what my grandfather did, I began to think more about my Nan. She had to shoulder this truth on her own to protect her daughters and her family, yet she was the one hurting. I very recently talked to my mom about it, and I told her that I knew what he did, and I finally got answers to all the questions that had been spiraling in my head for six years.

She told me that she and her sisters had only found out a week before we did, so it was a massive shock to everyone. As much as I respect my Nan for trying to keep her family together, I wish she had done something about it. Of course, it would've been tough for the family to have to go through, but at least she wouldn't have had to go through it alone.

Everything she put up with, even aside from the cheating, makes me question how she was able to do it all—taking care of all of her husband's needs when she was sick herself, while knowing what he had done for years.

The ring that she gave me turned into so much more than I thought it was. As I grew up and learned more about the situation, I wanted to keep it with me at all times to keep her with me. She is a constant reminder for me to prioritize family and to cherish the good moments I have with them. As much as I love her, she also taught me to never put up with what she did. I believe she felt like she had an obligation to keep her family together and didn't want to ruin what we had, and what she had. I understand how hard it is to leave something you love, but knowing the pain she must've gone through, I would never want that for anyone, especially myself.

I put the ring on a necklace to make sure I never lose it, and so it is always on me, and on my heart. Every time I look at it or touch it, I am reminded of her strength and love, not only from her but also from what she taught me to find in myself.



by Kiarra Arroyo

It was senior year, and most teenagers were already preparing for prom and college. Not me, though. I was instead sitting in my kitchen, counting pills after googling how many painkillers does it take to kill someone. I lost count after a hundred. My fingers were shaking as they moved the pills one by one after I gave them their number. I just wanted everything to stop. I wanted to stop drowning in my own sorrow. I wanted to stop trying to reach expectations only to be received with disappointment. I wanted to stop feeling. Right before I could start popping pills, my dad came home to a parent's worst nightmare. Pills scattered all over the counter; his daughter collapsed on the floor, barely breathing between the sobs.

I was seventeen years old then. I really was just a kid, even if my old self would cringe at me saying that, because I thought I knew everything the world had to offer. But my world was small. I couldn't even begin to fathom my future. How could I? I was only seventeen, and yet the pressure of being expected to know what I wanted to do was crushing me. I had no idea what college I wanted to go to or what I wanted to do professionally. At seventeen, it made me think of a bleak future for myself. One that I didn't want to see come to fruition.

I found myself lying down on a rock-hard mattress after my mental breakdown. I wasn't allowed to wear shoes that had strings or my favorite hoodies. My parents couldn't come with me.

I had nothing but a book to keep me entertained while I sat in solitude to think about what I had tried to do. There were no clocks or windows. I never knew what time of the day it was until it was bedtime because that was at eight p.m. It felt like a strange limbo. As if I did die.

We sat in a circle. Joking about how our introductions would be what we are in for, as if we were prisoners. As people began to say their name and age, the difficult part of what *they* did made me realize I really didn't have a reason why *I* did what I did. At least not a direct one, unlike the others who had awful home situations. My parents were loving to me, and I can say I was spoiled as an only child. Sure, my parents were divorced, but that happened years ago at this point, and that situation didn't cross my mind for a second when I attempted suicide. Part of me felt like I didn't deserve to be in this circle— that I didn't have it nearly as bad as other people. And when it came to my turn, I froze. All I said was that I tried to commit suicide because I felt too embarrassed to say any more than that. I didn't realize my immature way of thinking then.

I got to know people, considering there wasn't much else to do. We would sit in the common room playing cards until it was time for the next activity. I actually recognized a guy there. I knew him from school, but I hadn't seen him for quite some time. Turns out, he transferred to a trade school.

I didn't know why he was here, but I didn't bother to ask and just kept the conversation to awkward small talk. I also wasn't paying much attention to him, having my eyes glued to the floor where the cards were. He asked me about my school and what was going on. I didn't give it much thought and said that nothing really was happening. But I didn't get a response. I finally looked up to see him hunched over in a fetal position, and the ward units coming over. That was when I learned he suffered from schizophrenia. I once again asked myself, "What was the reason for what I did?"

I spent a little over a week in the hospital, which I knew was nothing in comparison to the other patients who had been there for weeks, even months. I felt like my whole breakdown was practically nothing. That what I felt didn't fit the criteria of hardships. So, I pretended none of it ever happened. I was ashamed and embarrassed by the whole ordeal. I felt like I put my parents and friends through hell over spilled milk, even though I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder. I wondered if that was enough of a reason to put your loved ones through hell.

I thought this way for almost a decade. I am now twenty-six. I have a cat, one I would have never gotten to meet if I had died at seventeen. My parents have moved on to find love with different people. I would have never been able to meet their new partners if I had died at seventeen.

I have loved and lost. I have fallen and gotten back up. I watched my parents grow to be better and happier than when I was a kid. I am proud of them, and I would have never witnessed it if I had died at seventeen. This is a natural conclusion to come to. But I had a gripe with the age of seventeen.

I felt like I had never aged past seventeen. What I did was my own personal curse I put upon myself. I couldn't move on until I faced myself to learn the reason why I did what I did. At twenty-six, I realized there was no reason, and I didn't need one. I was just a kid under the weight of impossible expectations, something I was still putting poor, seventeen-year-old me under. Expecting my teenage self to come up with some excuse to justify her actions when she didn't need one. She was drowning and refusing to shout for help. It was inevitable that her lungs would fill with her own sorrow and sink her to the bottom of her own self-loathing pit. What she needed was a helping hand to rip her out of that pit— not a reason.

At twenty-six, I treat myself kinder. I have grown to have ambitions in this strange life we all have to live. I now want to see my future come to fruition. I can finally let my seventeen-year-old self rest.

I couldn't move on until I faced myself to learn the reason why I did what I did.

UNTITLED

by Deacon Lee

Growing up, the television was always tuned into a news station. My grandfather controlled the TV remote in that house like a dragon and his prized trinket. Most days it was 6abc, some days it was NBC10, and on some super rare occasions it was FOX. I never understood what was being talked about. I was barely old enough to write my own name, let alone understand who al-Zarqāwī or Bin Laden was. It did affect me, though, the little info sponge that I was. My imaginary friend was Barack Obama, who I would "call" on a soap bottle while in the bath.

It also affected who I became friends with. Most kids at that age couldn't give a damn about politics, more worried about who was spreading cooties or who was the cop in the next recess' game of cops and robbers. There was one kid, however, let's call him Mark, who did want to talk about that stuff. His views were so different from the ones I heard at home, likely because his dad was a cop and a veteran. But I didn't care about his exact thoughts. I was an anti-social elementary-schooler who really only knew the bare basic talking points and took the chance to make a friend.

In the early years, his views didn't matter to me. I would parrot back his hateful rhetoric, nod along to things that I barely knew the meaning of, and defend him on more than one occasion for his views.

Our friend group grew a bit as we got to the age range where people actually should start to care about those things. Most of the group were generally in agreement when it came to politics, aligning with Mark's mindset. A few didn't care about that type of stuff yet. There were obviously disagreements at times, usually over small things. The group only ever got into one big fight, and it wasn't over anything actually worth arguing over.

That group is who I spent most of my formative years around. We always grouped up in class, played video games almost every day, and basically spent all our free time in group chats. Of course, as had become the usual with Mark, nearly every conversation was politics.

In summer, we went to this campground. It was a man-made lake where Mark's family had a camper. I spent most of my time there from the ages of ten to around sixteen. That's where most of the out-of-school memories I have come from. I spent probably three to five days a week at that campground, at least before I picked up a job. I would stay at the camper and walk the rickety trails of single-plank wide bridges over murky water, swim in the pine water we dubbed "Forbidden iced tea," and talk the day away while sitting at the pavilion.

As we reached the age where the talks would normally shift to crushes on celebrities or schoolmates, I feel like I sort of fell behind. A few members of the group had crushes on various girls we knew. One of them had gone on a “date,” or at least the closest you could actually get to one when you don’t have income. Mark and another member had begun relationships. I felt a little left out. I hadn’t had a crush, nor a date, let alone a relationship. Later, I would come to realize that I was “behind” on those things because the people I would’ve had crushes on were people I knew the group wouldn’t approve of, mostly for things those people couldn’t control about themselves. Another fact I would hide from them, out of fear of judgment.

Differences like these kept coming up, especially as we entered high school, shortly after the 2016 election. The differences were varied. Some small, some bigger, some fundamental. Disagreeing with Mark and the rest of the friend group on opinions about current events, on history questions, and things like that became my norm. It didn’t take long after that before I realized that the only thing we agreed on was whether the weather was bad or not. I didn’t make my opinions known, of course. I more or less played the fool, voicing my opinions in a “devil’s advocate” manner. I was still too afraid to speak out. These were basically my only friends. Not exactly easy to make new friends when your current ones are borderline fascists.

Sometime in high school, though, I made a few new friends. I had joined a group of guys in my gym class for lunch, and we hit it off pretty well. I don’t know why my anxiety and anti-social tendencies decided to suppress themselves at that moment,

but I didn’t care. These were people who didn’t know Mark and the crew.

These guys I actually liked. I found myself, especially during in-school hours, distancing myself from Mark and the old group. Not fully, not yet. I was afraid of some sort of backlash. When I wasn’t making distance from Mark, I outright did things to get an uproar out of him and that group.

I spent 2 weeks researching and building an argument supporting a communist or socialist state that directly argued against Mark’s views. That was a big, multi-day argument. At one point, I took a copy of the Constitution, folded it up, hid it in a copy of Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, and slipped it into Mark’s backpack.

At some point, I let it slip, whether purposefully or by accident, that I was queer. We were at that campground. The whole group was there. There was a single, even slightly positive response from Mark’s girlfriend’s best friend. As for the rest of them, it was somewhere between open insults and joking disbelief. I used it to my advantage, though. I found it funny to watch them squirm like I was the plague.

I did it all, hoping for an explosive response. I wanted a reason to stop being friends. A big argument, a physical altercation, something, anything. But other than some loose sparks of conflict, our friendship just sort of... petered out. I lost interest and a feeling of requirement in staying friends with that group.

Our daily, multi-hour hangouts slowly turned into once-a-weekend, then once-a-month, then “when available” (A.K.A. when I felt like it, which was nearly never), then just never. We stopped interacting through

basically everything after graduation, save for a shared larger group chat. The campground had already been a thing of the past at that point, the new owners forcing long-term renters out of their spots.

Today, I still talk with one member of the old group. They've gotten worse, but this one guy is alright. Mark is a pest control specialist who gets paid minimum wage to get sprayed by skunks. I still think about those guys every so often. I basically have to if I wish to reminisce about any time in my life. But I don't think I miss them. I definitely don't wish to see any of them again.

I thought I was going to be a lot more upset when I stopped hanging out with what were my childhood friends, but I didn't feel much in the way of regret or anything like that. I felt free. I have my village now. A real one, filled with people I love. People I trust with the real me. Doing things I want to do, being with whom I want to be.

I felt free. I have my village now. A real one, filled with people I love.





POETRY

GEMINI

by Maya Ferguson

I hear a voice
But a mouth hasn't opened
It captures my life
No detail unspoken

I face this dark cloud
That takes many forms
Of the ones I hold dear
Of those I wish were still here
It lures me into its storm

Falling fast into a false sense of
complacency
I have yet to learn what exactly has
taken me

It slows my pulse
Steals my breath
Brings me to my knees
And feels of death

My body goes limp
My thoughts race
My head spins
My heart fastens its pace

It finally reveals its true form
And the image expands
I gasp for air and awaken
My tears fall heavy within my hands

Finally catching my breath
I rush out of bed
I grab my sketchbook and draw the vision
That still remains in my head

When I finish
My soul flees in haste
To my surprise
I gaze upon my own face



ODE TO DAVID LYNCH

by William Dean

A deformed baby, an elephant man

The fall and rise of the Atreides Clan

Bluer than velvet, was the night

Sailor and Lula put up a good fight

Doppelgängers galore, on the highway thats lost

And an actress in love, but oh at what cost

From his simple tale of a man on a trip

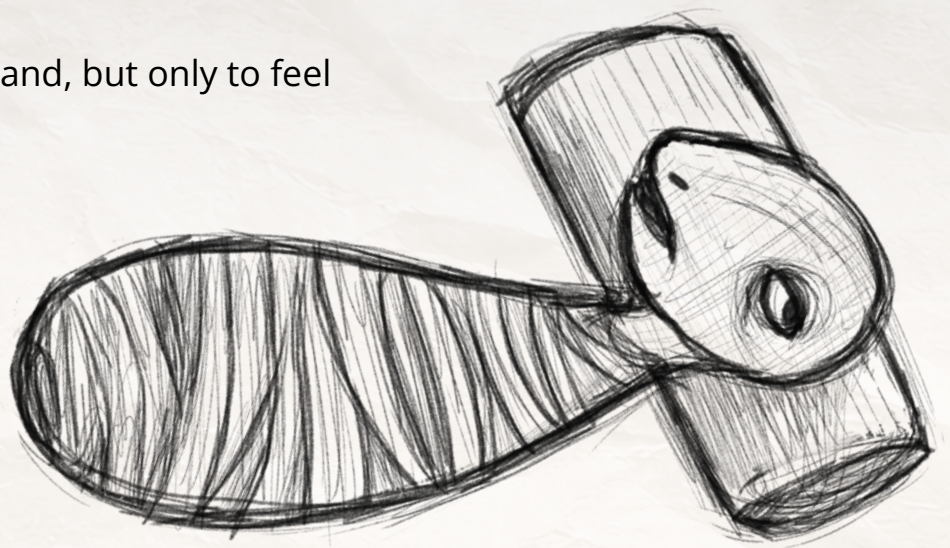
To his strangest fable, 'twas made with no script"

But we cannot forget his most amazing of feats

The strange goings on in the town of Twin Peaks

His worlds were a dream, a vision, surreal

We're not meant to understand, but only to feel



Eraserhead Baby from David Lynch's *Eraserhead*
Drawing by: Lu Grayson

HOW BITTER

by Ethan Hillman

How bitter
It must have seemed
As the world one by one
took all of your dreams

A farm
A dog
A father you loved
Cast over the bow
Through your tears and blood

Do you remember how to cry
Or has the world taken that too
Emotional erosion
I guess there are things you can't do

All that stains your face now is paint
and dust
A perennial anguish
An indescribable lust

Not for your wife
or any other woman
But for the freedom, the life,
the dream that could have been

You're dying each day
Maybe that's how you'll make the world pay
For what it did to you
Do you know I see it all too

Work, wish, and stare
Jolt awake from another nightmare
Suck cedar from the air
Did it all go by in blurs?
Did you ever get those spurs?



DRIVER, DRIVER

by Ethan Hillman

I hate fate
It leaves no room for life
The spaces in between that seem the realest
They always cut the deepest
For the blade isn't sharp

It's chipped, grainy, and rusted
Ripping and infecting tissue
Turning something gold
Black and blue

The poems you wrote - they stabbed me
Then song drove bone to artery
The edge came out with little mess
Just a doe-eyed hole in my chest

I always wonder what would happen
If it all happened again
Do I make a change
Change the timeline
Do I end up in the one
Where I'm out of my mind

In a space outside of fate
I will write the truest story to date
With a plot that will never happen
With a coffin only the driver can stand in

So I'll wait while I hate
On the corner of vivid and drab
Trying to patch any infrared holes
As I wave
To hail the cab



ARTWORK



Original Designs

By Lu Grayson



Made with Procreate for iPad

Original Designs

By Lu Grayson



Made with Procreate for iPad

Fan Artwork

By Lu Grayson



Made with Procreate for iPad

Characters from the series *The Amazing Digital Circus* by GLITCH Productions.
Designs by showrunner @GooseworxMusic on X
@Gooseworx on YouTube

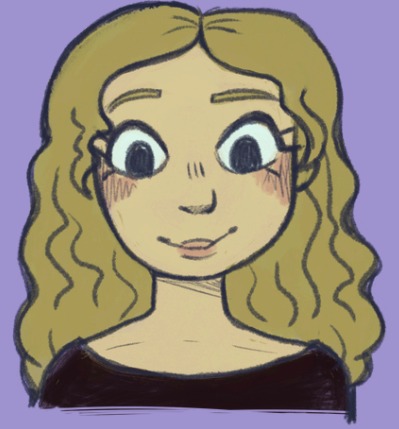
MEET THE VANGUARD TEAM



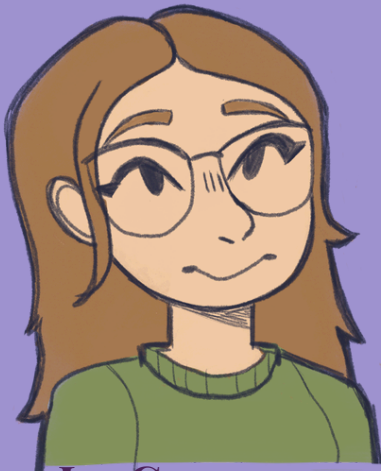
Layne Anyzek



Shane Dougherty



Madi Exler



Lu Grayson



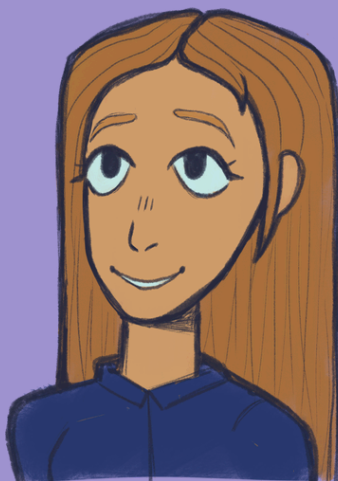
Harmony Herrschaft



Emily Jordan



Domenic Klemash



Andrea Vinci



Riley Sheahan