



illuminations

Volume 22 • 2021





illuminations

A magazine of creative expression
by students, faculty,
and staff at
Southeast Community College
Beatrice/Lincoln/Milford, NE
Falls City/Hebron/Nebraska City/Plattsmouth/Wahoo/York, NE

Volume 22 2021

**"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't
been written yet, then you must write it."**

Toni Morrison



Illuminations Volume 22

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Illuminations publishes creative prose, poetry, and visual art, as well as academic and literary writing. We encourage submissions from across the disciplines. Our mission is to feature outstanding artistic works with a diversity of voices, styles, and subjects meaningful to the SCC community. *Illuminations* is further evidence that original thought and creative expression are celebrated by Southeast Community College.

Illuminations is published in April of each year. Submissions are accepted year-round from SCC students, faculty, and staff. Email submissions to Editor Tammy Zimmer, illuminations@southeast.edu, with the following information:

- 1) The title and a brief description of each submission;
- 2) Your name, ID#, and program/position at SCC;
- 3) Your physical address, phone number, and email address;
- 4) Your motivation for creating each submission;
- 5) A brief, informal bio of yourself; mention unique traits, habits, or guilty pleasures—whatever makes you *you*;
- 6) The following statement with your typed “signature”: This submission is my own original, unpublished work.

Written work is accepted as .rtf or Word files. Submit high-resolution images of artwork or photographs as .tif or .jpg files with a minimum resolution of 300 dpi and a minimum size of 1500 pixels wide and 2100 pixels tall, or 5” wide and 7” tall. A digital camera other than a phone is recommended, if possible. We can photograph or scan artwork for you if needed. Images embedded in Word or PDF files will not be included. You must provide a separate image file. Video files of dramatic, musical, or other creative performances of ten minutes or less can be submitted as MPG4, MPG2, MPG3, AVI, MOV, FLV files. **The deadline for Volume 23 submissions is May 31, 2021.**

Contributors should be aware that submitted work may be used in promotional materials, featured on the *Illuminations* Facebook page or the SCC website, or submitted to literary magazine contests. Contributors retain copyright of submitted and published material.

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Questions should be directed to: **Tammy Zimmer, illuminations@southeast.edu**

The content of this magazine does not necessarily reflect the views of the Editorial Team, the Arts and Sciences Division, or anyone associated with Southeast Community College.

CREATIVITY LIVES HERE

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SEASONAL AFFECTIVE

Cecelia Bialas • Student, Academic Transfer

GRAND PRIZE WINNER, POETRY

It is to soak in the sun bath, sprawled out
in your swinging hammock, skin cells eager
to brown bountiful rays into melanin.
The breeze barely dares to breathe, yet
the blossom tree shifts in a gentle sway.
Kaleidoscopic sunbursts of magenta, chartreuse, and faded blue
bridge the small gulf between lashed lids as your eyes
squint in the brightness, dragging the corners
of your mouth upward. It is when you can't help but
smile at the day as it beams back at you in
larkspur skies and sparrow songs, that you know
Mother Earth has awakened to stretch her limbs and
dress the world in vibrant hues once more, coaxing forth
new life, and pushing cold and dismal, drab gray
away from land and soul. With a willowy whisper,
Depression is escorted out and Hope and Content are
ushered in, taking their places beside you
in the sun-bathed, swinging hammock.

A HIDDEN GEM

Kaita Baird • Student, Dual Credit

GRAND PRIZE WINNER, PROSE

Hidden behind a long grey house lies a magical world of lush greenery. Driving down the street behind it, it peeks through the houses but only shows a portion of its beauty to the world. The only way to properly see this world is through a window that sits perfectly in the grey house's dark living room.

Through the window, the scene lies peacefully ahead. A big tree covered in vines stands tall, right in front. A smaller tree resides near the back, less impressively, but still crucial to the landscape. A flat sheet of concrete sits to the right of both trees, possessing two worn basketball hoops along with a pool in the summer and tiny footprints in the snow in wintertime. A long concrete deck runs horizontally next to the window outside. Its black iron railings are decorated with the twisting, curling designs of the strips of iron. Three dogs, two white and one black, race around the fenced perimeter. They greet every visitor that passes with a chorus of barks. Everything is brought together in one display that never deviates, no matter the conditions.

In the summer heat, the trees are adorned with vibrant dark green leaves at high noon, which changes to a lighter yellow-green as the sun starts to dip down behind the horizon. Children play in the background in the yard of a small cute house on the other side of the street. Their laughter carries throughout the world around them. Accompanying them, lawnmowers roar one after another, adding to the sounds of summer.

A big pool sits on the concrete. Filled to the edge with clear blue water, it reflects the sunlight to create wavy strings of light on the trees above. The three dogs lay lazily on the concrete, enjoying the sun as it slowly glides across the sky.

As the sun nears the end of its journey, the cloudless sky is illuminated with a pale yellow that fades to a darker blue, with a shade of pink here and there. Off to the right, a valley of dark green trees cradles the sun. The light shines on the leaves, turning them that bright yellow-green color. The sunray that passes through the foliage shines through the window to create splotches of light inside the grey house.

Soon the leaves begin to change in late October. Their vibrant, bright colors display beauty, despite their dying state. The farthest tree has been painted yellow while the big tree stays its dark green color along with the never-changing vines wrapping around it. The trees begin to present the red and orange colors of autumn on the tips of leaves. The colors grow towards

the trunk as the days become shorter.

The children still play, but less frequently, as the cooler days start to become more common. Unaffected by the cold, the three dogs play in the changing world, running along the fence as schoolboys fly past on their bicycles in the alley. The sun no longer sets in the alcove of trees, but instead, it sets directly in the middle of the scene. The sky isn't as clear as it used to be, and the clouds hold more pinks, purples, and, of course, yellow and oranges. The world is full of color, but it will soon be replaced by a barren landscape.

As winter nears, the last of the leaves fall, leaving the trees bare. The grass turns to a pale green as the world begins to freeze. The children don't play, the schoolboys don't ride their bikes, and the dogs don't run around. Everyone stays inside. Despite the boring world, the vine leaves still keep their dark green color.

When the snow begins to fall, it covers the trees, concrete, and walkway. Cradled between branches and packed together, the white stuff hangs in clumps off of the trees. The snow buries the concrete deck and other various plateaus of land and objects. Tiny footprints are scattered throughout the area from the dogs' few moments running outside before being ushered back inside. Regardless of the cold, it looks so warm outside. It looks almost like the world would give anyone outside a nice warm hug instead of the biting cold. The lack of color is what keeps the beauty in this time of lifelessness.

The sun sets on the left side now and creates many vibrant colors. Bright yellows and oranges and even reds spread across the sky as if they were watercolor. The clouds hold some of the colors as they are stretched out across the heavens. When the sun disappears, the horizon burns with a vibrant orange as if it were on fire. It fades to a pink then blue-purple as time passes. The naked trees are only a figure in the dusk lighting, yielding to the sky's colorful lightshow.

When the weather starts to look up, the snow begins to melt. Spring is a very wet season. The white fades away slowly, only leaving clumps here and there. More clouds cover the sky and rain becomes more common. The scene is still pale, as the water has washed away all the color, except for the dark green vines, which are resistant to everything. The dogs appear more outside, doing their usual businesses. The schoolboys have returned, and the children play outside more frequently. Eventually, the trees begin to bud, and a new light green replaces the emptiness. The world begins to wake up.

The sun starts its journey back to the right side in the valley of trees, but for now it must settle for the middle, right behind the scene. The sunsets get to keep their color, but they too have been dimmed to pastels of pinks

A HIDDEN GEM

and purples, oranges and yellows, and the common blues.

Despite the changing seasons, the nights stay the same. A bright green light illuminates the white house where the children play, and an orange driveway light brightens a house to the right. Warm, orange light glows through the windows of a house across the alley. Besides the few sources of light, the scene is dark. The trees shelter it from the normal streetlamps in its tucked-away state, leaving room for the darkness to creep in.

The big tree looms in front of the scene as if it were king of the yard. Everything else is demoted to being the background. Again, the world seems cozy and warm when the opposite can be assumed. The light fades away as the gradient rainbow in the sky disappears to blackness. Nothing moves, except for the occasional blow of the wind and a car traveling on the road behind the yard. The only other way light makes its way into this place is through the moon. When the full moon rests against a cloudless night, pale blue light covers the world in a beautiful and magical way. The light tints anything it touches with a blinding blue brilliance. It shines through the leaves like daylight does and throws its blue rays through the gaps in the trees. Eventually, night turns to dawn, and the world starts to return back to its normal state.

Throughout the seasons, this hidden world stands strong, as if nothing will ever change. Every seasonal change happens slowly and almost noticeably until it has already happened. It's amazing how quickly yet slowly nature moves.

This hidden gem tucked behind the houses and trees doesn't just hide its existence but its own beauty. From the outside looking in, the gaps placed awkwardly create a shield made by the landscape itself. From the outside, there's a whole new perspective. As the sun sets for the millionth time, darkness starts to fall again, and it slowly overtakes the scene. The trees darken, the concrete sheet darkens, the walkway darkens, and the whole world starts to prepare for whatever is to come in the morning.

‡ ‡ ‡

MY SOUL

Teresa Burt • Student, Graduated

Watching the flowers
dance to the rhythm
of the singing, swaying
grass. Listening
to the geese call
stroke ... stroke ...stroke
as if they were rowing
the waters instead
of flying the sky. Flirting
with the sun as we play
peek-a-boo. It's
Holy water on my skin
filling the deepest holes
of my soul. I dig
heels into fresh-turned
earth to be planted
in God.

DROP

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

since I've been alone
at first glance it seemed easier
but the days are growing too long it's not an accident
or chance
no love for the wait
or the circumstance
its about time that the pendulum would break
I'd kill for an earthquake or tornado
how I pray that these walls
would blow away
you give me reason to live
a breath of fresh air that I swear couldn't have come sooner
been writing non-stop, out of sight
out of my mind
so spun that the pen hasn't dropped
I'm surprised my heart hasn't stopped
and I'll destroy what's left of this soul just to feel the bass drop

2 weeks ago, decided to clock in on life
so done with the guilt and the strife
/ I'll clock out when I'm out for the count
screw it / ill drop in to drop out
tune in again just to black out
couldn't have picked a better moment
im not even trying just going through the motions
this is my life.

I cant believe you came to open mic
I'm ready to taste the music and embrace the fight
its sublime and I've seen the light
and ill get things together
to ensure our love will never sever
cause you can't have resurrection
without a taste for death or the end

cause I'm a junkie in the limelight
and I'm cracked out on the poetry
true freedom?
is simply sitting next to you
(...)

METAPHORICAL CONTRADICTION

Michaela Hartman • Student, Continuing Education

Tears fall in a current turning dirt into mud
Rain falls in torrents drowning laughing flowers

Wind stirs up desert crystals nicking glass mirages
Air swirls leaves forming tempests of autumn

Fire crackles releasing smoke that coats lungs like tar
Flames consume weaknesses in all things living and dead

Grass sharpened by heat rewards children with slivers
Wood chipped by spinning blades injecting splinters into hands

Blood trickles down a skinned knee like magnetized rivers
Sweat provides seasoning on foreheads scattered like skipping rocks

Lies drip from tongues that pierce souls like daggers
Deception saturates the mouth poisoning every utterance

Fear crushes chests forbidding the expansion of lungs
Doubt drowns a brain submerged in uncertainty

Truth is sucked into holes in the throat barring their revelation
Dreams evaporate from file cabinets for which nightmares stole the keys

Ash blackens feet trespassing in empty positivity
Ink spills upon an author's work demanding that he start over

STUPID. THEN, SMART.

Cheney Luttich • Instructor, Developmental English

In June of 2018, when Joe was 35 years old, had passed copious exams and worked in the actuarial field for twelve years, the Joint Board for the Enrollment of Actuaries approved his application to be an Enrolled Actuary. Approximately 4200 people in the entire United States have this credential. That means, only .001% of the country's population has what Joe has. That is no small feat. Had you known Joe seventeen years ago, though, you wouldn't have thought that he would achieve that kind of professional success, but thanks to a run-in with the law in college, Joe turned his life around and was able to earn something very few have.

In college, Joe enjoyed drinking alcohol and smoking pot. He and his roommate were both very social and always happy to open their dorm room to friends and classmates for a good time. Towards the end of second semester, his roommate moved out, and a new one moved in. The same social environment persisted, and his new roommate saw it as an opportunity. He recommended they buy pot in bulk and sell it at a slight profit so he and Joe would always have enough money left over to supply their personal stash. Joe thought it brilliant and got on board. The dorm room became more popular, and Freshman Joe never had to wonder where he was going to get the money to supply his fun.

It was during finals week at the end of Joe's freshman year when everything changed. Sitting in his desk, hunched over an exam in journalism class, he suddenly felt an uncomfortable feeling. He looked up, and there stood two uniformed police officers. Terror engulfed his body. He describes it as a kind of intense mix of adrenaline with wanting to pass out. The classroom was a blur. He didn't see his classmates' reactions. He did notice the teacher was panicked and had no clue a student was going to be arrested mid-final. The officers took Joe out of the classroom and into the hall. Most of what happened was a blur. Joe assumes he was read his charges and rights but doesn't remember. He was taken to the town's jail. The mix of adrenaline and wanting to pass out remained. He called his parents and then sat in jail for hours. He learned the police caught wind of the activity in Joe's dorm room, sent a student to buy marijuana from him, and had the student report back to them. Since Joe was selling marijuana on school property, it was an automatic felony. Joe thought the drug free zone policy for school property only applied to K-12, not a college campus. Even if he had known, he isn't confident he would have behaved any differently. Joe felt like an idiot. There was no way he could argue the charges. When Joe looks back at his first year of college, he says, "I was really stoned and really stupid." Over the next few months, Joe hustled to get his act together so it would look like he turned his life around. He got

a job at a grocery store and enrolled at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Fortunately, all his college credits from his freshman year transferred. All of them, that is, except for those of the journalism class, which he failed. He hoped that if it appeared as though he had his life together, he wouldn't have to do jail time. It was all an act, though. While he stopped smoking pot, got a job, and went to college, he still enjoyed partying and drinking alcohol while underage. When he looks back, he sees how he worked hard to hide his actions just to appear that he was a better person, but none of it was authentic. "Once again, I was being stupid." After a year of hearings and court dates, Joe was officially charged with a felony, required to do five years of probation and live with his parents. No jail time was required. He was relieved. After the verdict, Joe stopped making his life an act and made it the real deal. He began to take himself and his future success seriously. He poured himself into school, embraced the fact he was excellent at math, and pursued actuarial science because he knew it would eventually translate into a well-paying job. He worked forty hours a week at the grocery store. He went to the required AA meetings and never missed an appointment with his probation officer. He wanted to graduate, wanted to eventually get married, and wanted to be well enough off that he could someday support his family and travel. Academic and professional success would be paramount to achieving those goals, and he wasn't going to let Freshman Joe mess that up.

He did get that college degree. In fact, he graduated with a two hard Actuarial Society exams completed, so he was already on his way to earning that rare Enrolled Actuary credential. Such success was only possible thanks to his diligent studying and shift in priorities. He remembers living each day with intense fear in the back of his mind that if he screwed up, he would go to jail. That fear kept him focused. The incredible work ethic that came out of that time in his life transferred to his years of professional success after college. He's hard working, never gives up, and has immense gratitude for all he has in life. When he reflects on his journey, he calmly says, "I took what happened and made something really great out of it as a result. I don't know if I would have had the same professional success if I hadn't gotten a felony." Freshman Joe would be amazed to see what Future Joe has become.

† † †

MIGHTY ME

Teresa Burt • Student, Graduated

I rode
my shiny pink bike
with daisies on the banana seat,
the plastic handle-bar streamers
still looking like new,
up and down the quiet graveled street

A half block each way
from our small red brick house

back and forth
forth and back

as dusk drew near
my ears ignored
the voice hollering
me to come

yes! I had won
the voice faded away
as my mother went inside
I could ride my bike all night

as darkness creeped
alongside me, the autumn chill
pricked my skin
the fun was gone

the victory swiftly
slipped away
as I saw the yardstick
attached like an appendage
to my mother's arm
her unarmed limb
quick as a striking snake
grabbed, held me tight

prideful tears stung
my eyes
with each snap
of the spanking stick

WINDOW

David Schmitter • Instructor, Physics And Mathematics

Six feet by six feet. Thirty-six square feet keeping the outside out and the inside in. Sure, there was the vacuum between the double-panes of glass to help with the insulation; minimal heat transfer is what the window guy said. I didn't care. I just wanted my wife to see clearly onto our lawn.

I remember saying to my wife: "Freddi, when I retire, our lawn will be pristine, I promise." She was obsessed about having a perfect lawn, I was not. When we bought the house 26 years ago, we put sprinklers in, fertilized, pulled weeds, aerated, seeded.... You name it, we did it. But with three kids, several puppies, nasty flooding a few years ago, an accidental confusion between fertilizer and grass killer, and an unwelcome woodchuck hole with giant woodchuck included, the perfect lawn was never really in the cards when I also had to work 60 hours most weeks.

Retirement finally came last September and the promise I made to Freddi was finally going to be realized. I made a plan. I read everything I could on the internet. I talked to everyone I knew who knew anything about lawns. I even went down to the Home Depot and asked the knuckleheads there. I spent the better part of the fall and winter planning, preparing, and reading. Although I didn't care about the lawn, she did and I wanted her to finally be proud of the lawn, even if I could care less about how it looked.

As spring came, I got to work and would you believe in two months, the lawn really looked amazing? No more brown spots. Man if old Mr. Hentling was still next door he would have had to eat his words after he told me my lawn would never look good. In his defense, he watched me as I poured the grass killer all over the front lawn; laughing the entire 14 days afterward as my lawn turned to a ridiculous brown color. Not anymore. Take that Mr. Hentling.

No, now my lawn was taking shape. Which led to Part 2 of my plan. The admiration phase. I wanted a place where we could look out and enjoy the lawn. The sitting room was the perfect spot, but it only had a dinky 2 foot by 3-foot window. So, we hired a guy and he put in a beautiful window looking out onto the lawn. We went down to Al's Furniture and bought new comfy chairs so we could sit by the window and enjoy the view. We even splurged for an electrician to put an outlet into the wall under the window so we could charge our tablets or phones as we admired the lawn.

Life was good. Great really. Then, came the call from the doctor. Freddi was sick. There wasn't much time left apparently. "Sometimes these things sneak up on ya." Yeah, he had some folksy charm, but maybe a little more bedside manner wouldn't kill him. Poor choice of words there, I guess.

In shock, Freddi and I went home. We stared out our new window and

WINDOW

looked at the lawn I had worked so tirelessly on for her. Now, she wouldn't be able to enjoy it for more than one season, two if we were lucky. Soon we moved the desk in there so we could enjoy the view as we looked into experimental treatments, updated wills, dealt with other legal documents.

As autumn settled in, we moved the new hospital bed into the room, right next to the window. The bed was just the right height that Freddi could see out on the leaf-covered lawn and smile. My free time that winter was spent preparing to make sure the lawn was pristine for the spring, so Freddi could enjoy it for one more year.

Instead, Freddi is enjoying it from an entirely different, much bigger window from above. While I wait until the time I can enjoy it with her again, I sit in my chair, looking out at the hard work I did and do for her through this huge plane of glass.

‡ ‡ ‡

THE CHRONIC CLUB

Cecelia Bialas • Student, Academic Transfer

On those rare dazzling nights, when The Club
is open, your pain lessens, hair thickens,
and body wakes up. Push-up bras transform
sunken chests to curves so voluptuous,
and eye circles hide behind glitter, with
lashes curled so tightly; you're a goddess

The Club promotes inhibitions get lost
by indulgence, reservations left out
in the cold, denied entry by bouncers
so smug as they're playing the stoic guard.
Instead of popping molly, the Sick Kids
here trade tylenol and shoot Gatorade.
They show off hospital bracelet couture.

Here, you need not worry about losing
control or feel-good energy. Your cells
bounce and excitedly buzz at sights of
hair spiked into sharp, sculpted scabbards, and
tableside lap dances under warm lights
pulsing pleasingly to the blend of notes,
overlays, and thrumming that gives you dance
prowess, damning joint pain and rendering
sensory overload nonexistent.

THE CHRONIC CLUB

It's a delightful eye-candy circus,
where tropical perfumes and alcohol
fumes don't induce headaches, and dancing treats
room-tilting dizziness. You've transformed to
a creature of light with stamina so
high and confidence that can't be destroyed.
The night winds down and you leave with a smile
that blinds new dance partners, and holds every
promise to remember this forever.

Dark sanctuary of a quiet cab
unwinds the live mind and body to calm.
You're carried away from the exclusive
Club scene, sleep sweetly guaranteed by the
mascara-kissed pillows in your soft bed
that will cuddle you to restfulness, as
memories weave together for future
escape from unsolved and chronic pain days

GABBY SLEEPS

Jennifer Wood • Student, Academic Transfer

It was a rather warm day entering the season of harvest. The cornfields, golden brown, the smell of dust filling the inside of my car as I drove down the gravel road with my windows down. Turning the last corner, I could see the steeple of the church from a mile away. The sun rays were beaming down through the giant puffy clouds and lighting up the white cross at the very tip of the steeple. As I drove closer past the line of pine trees there appeared the church, no cars, no people, only the blackbirds pecking in the gravel of the empty parking lot. It was a beautiful church made of bricks and mortar and the most elegant stained-glass windows one had ever seen. They were like brilliant jewels melted into pictures of stories from the Bible. On the front side of the church was a cement block with a German inscription: "Deutsche Evangelisch Lutherische Zionskirche." To the east of the church, a grassy green road lead to the cemetery gates. They were dull silver, heavy iron rods, some rusty and looked as if they were from the scene of a horror movie. As I slowly pushed open the heavy gate it creaked loudly like the sound of a screech owl in the night. I took a deep breath, one foot in front of the other, breathing in that fresh country air. The sound like songbirds filled the air. I unfolded my old ragged lawn chair and sat down. Tears began to well up in my eyes. "Hi Gabby, mommy came to read you a book."

September 2, 2009, morning came, even though I didn't want it to. I laid in bed with my eyes open staring at the ceiling. I could hear light rain pelting against the bedroom window, it was almost like the sound of a clock, tick-tock, tick-tock. A tear rolled down my cheek. My husband, tall, big-boned, cheeks as soft as a bear, sandy blond thick hair curly like sheep wool, was sitting on the edge of the bed pulling on his dark black jeans, the same pair he wore for our wedding just two years before. Staring at the ceiling, my body was unable to move, heavy as bricks. I said, "I don't think I can do this."

He turned to me, leaned over, grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly, and said, "I know, "I know but we have to."

Minutes went by seeming like hours. I continued to listen to the rain, tick tock, tick-tock. As if the rain was my alarm clock, I rolled out of bed staring at my closet, wondering what would even fit. Sizing each piece of clothing with my eyes and my mind, I chose a shin-length black skirt with tiny white pinstripes and a pink sweater the color of cotton candy. Silently I stood in the mirror brushing my long dark brown hair, and then it hit me, like a sucker punch to the gut. I had worn this same sweater when I was four months pregnant. Touching my belly, I remembered how happy I was feeling my daughter kick for the first time. Those tiny little feet pushing deep under

my rib cage, making simple tasks such as eating and breathing most difficult some days.

I heard the footsteps of my husband's heavy black Harley Davidson boots walking through the house as if echoing through an open hallway. There he stood behind me looking into my reflection in the mirror. I could see he had equal pain and grief as I did that day.

"Jen, it's time to go."

We climbed into the tall silver dodge truck smelling of stale oil and dirt. I glanced at the back as if I was going to check and make sure the car seat was buckled in tightly, but there was no car seat: only an empty base still strapped in. I sighed deeply, as I felt the arrow of grief pass through my chest. The sky was grey, cloud-covered, with no sun, not one single ray. As my husband drove, I sat with my head in my hands, tears leaking out like a cup overflowing with water. I could hear nothing but the sound of water splashing through the tread on the tires. I knew as soon as I felt the bump and heard crunching gravel, we were close. I peeled my hands from my face; it was tough like pulling the peeling from an orange. There it was the steeple of the church with a white cross on top coming in and out of the low grey clouds passing by. As we walked up the steps to the big white double doors of the church it felt like I was standing still but the world was still turning. The moment that had been so surreal suddenly washed away as my husband pulled open that heavy white door.

There she was, it was a moment of reality, a moment of life feeling completely crushed as I was watching a burning building collapse. My beautiful baby girl, my only child, just two months old, looked just like a little dolly. There she lay in here tiny silky pink cushioned casket, sleeping so peacefully. Her cheeks were full and rosy, her pink bow neatly placed in her thick brown hair as I often did at home, the tiny golden heart necklace, that my great grandmother had given me at my baptism, placed around her neck, her eyes closed gently. Frozen, I couldn't speak. Hot tears poured down my cheeks as if thawing out my body. I gently brushed her hair back and held her hand. Pressing my lips against her forehead, I said "I love you Gabby."

The funeral director, a short stocky man with dark hair, glasses, and a mustache came around the corner. "Just a few more minutes Mr. & Mrs. Wood, and we will have you go downstairs to be seated with the family." I looked up at him, feeling like my heart was being ripped out of my chest and thrown into a fire right in front of me. He looked at me with his dark brown kind and caring eyes and said, "I know this is hard." My husband took my hand and pulled me back a step. He was sobbing just as I was. He pulled me close, my forehead buried in his chest, his chin resting on my head. I could hear the sound of whispering and shuffling feet. Then there it was the small thud that in my head sounded as loud as a slamming door.

I knew what that sound meant, it was the sound that meant I would never see those round cheeks and that sweet little half-smile again. I couldn't look. I started towards the basement stairs, I felt sick, my legs trembling as I walked down the spiral staircase. I reached for the gold-colored handle on the glass-paned French doors opening it slowly, seeing what seemed like a hundred unfamiliar faces. There were two empty bronze folding chairs in the front of the large commons area.

As we sat down, I felt as overwhelmed as a movie star but only this was not about fame. The pastor, a tall slender man with a mix of brown and grey whiskers covering his face shut the glass French doors as he said, "Let's bow our heads in prayer." The funeral director began lining family up from the back of the room to the front. I sat back in my seat and watched; the line looked a quarter-mile long. I heard the funeral director say to an elder of the church "begin setting up folding chairs upfront in case there are not enough seats for the family." The funeral director then came toward our seat and said, "we will have the two of you in the front row seated with your parents, siblings, and grandparents." He opened the door, leading the long line of the family up the spiral staircase, the steps creaking with every footstep.

Stopping us in the narthex, he opened the heavy brown swinging double doors that entered in the sanctuary. I froze as I watched the pallbearers wheel the small casket covered in a baby quilt my husband's grandmother had made down the red-carpeted aisle. I began to sob loudly, shedding more tears than the rainstorm had done that morning. As my knees began to buckle my husband linked his arm underneath mine hold me up, pulling me forward down the red carpet to the very front pew. I glanced back; the church was full, clear to the back the balcony as well. There were hundreds of people and thousands of tears. As the pastor spoke his sermon I stared at the obituary. Her picture in the shape of an oval on the front page. You could only see the top hem, dark blue with white polka dots, but I knew it was her white onesie with little yellow butterfly prints all over.

Memories began to flow through my mind like a rushing river. I knew exactly what we were doing in that moment the picture snapped. We were standing in the kitchen; I had just finished feeding her and was holding her over my shoulder, lightly patting her back, loosening up those tiny air bubbles in her tummy. Her round chin resting on my shoulder, that sparkle in her blue-grey colored eyes, and her sweet half-smile that she showed us often. That sweet half-smile now just a vivid memory just as the pastor said "AMEN." The funeral director leading us back down the long stretch of red carpet towards the heavy white double doors. I could tell every hand I passed by wanted to reach out and comfort me. Every cheek and nose red like stained glass.

As I took my first step outside those double doors, I felt the bricks fall off my chest, my lungs no longer squeezing. I could breathe. Climbing back in

GABBY SLEEPS

the silver Dodge yet again looking for the car seat, a force of habit I guess, a mother's instinct. Feeling of relief yet still a great deal of grief driving down that gravel road wondering would I ever feel love and happiness again? Would I ever have the strength to have another child? Just then, turning that first corner at the end of the mile from the church, I saw it. I saw my first glimpse of hope. Fluttering from every ditch were small orange Monarchs, thousands of them rising out of the tall golden grass-like graceful little angels.

‡ ‡ ‡

WE HOLD OUR BREATH

Teresa Burt • Student, Graduated

When normal isn't ordinary
and common went out the door

When, though sky is blue
we feel the storm brew
and we wait ...
and wait some more
but the sirens haven't wailed
... yet

The new normal
discomposure
waiting for an invisible tsunami
to pull us in
spit us out
upside down

When even good days
stir our innards
like a pot of catch-all soup

The weighted air
burdened by silence
smelling of plague
and disinfectant—
a windless dust
of hot lava ash
clings to bones

The damn dreaded density
anticipation of the end

AWAKE

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

awake we're dreaming
asleep we're still seamlessly
yearning believing
eyes reconceiving
our so-called natural reflections
creating compendiums
volumes of knowledge
overcoming doubt
we shouted from the rooftops
in the middle of downtown
breathing in the echoes of the sounds
tune in
tune out

what the hell have I become?
chaotic
psychotic
hypnotic
its never over
until the bass drops
until
our hearts...
slow down
until this reality
takes, not I, but we
eyes
closed

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS MAY NOT BE SO “NON-TRADITIONAL” TODAY

Stewart Haszard • Student, Academic Transfer

The term “non-traditional student” may bring many definitions to mind. That is likely because there are many criteria for what constitutes a “non-traditional student.” Today’s current college campuses hold students of diverse backgrounds. While the term “non-traditional student” may have been accurate in the mid-nineteen-hundreds, the population of college students today consists of a wider assortment of individuals. The term “non-traditional student” is no longer an appropriate label for college students in the United States because of the growing diversity among recent college students.

As a non-traditional student myself, I have felt as though there are negative associations with such a label in our society. I have been asked about my past and why I hadn’t sought higher education at a younger age. I have faced many conversations in which an individual seems to judge me for not having already completed college. I have observed that many individuals don’t find a passion or interest in an academic area of study until later on in their lives. My experience as a non-traditional college student has led me to conclude that the labels of “traditional student” and “non-traditional student” can cause more harm than good.

Many individuals are affected by the label of “non-traditional student.” Individuals meeting criteria for the current definition of non-traditional students may be discouraged to enroll in or attend college. Current non-traditional students or individuals considering going back to school may feel out of place in a college setting. The label of “non-traditional” can add to the feeling of discouragement or feeling out of place. Knowing that you are already different from many students is only worsened by being given a label. I believe everyone should feel comfortable and confident in seeking higher education, and our current terminology can be harmful to those that don’t meet the criteria for the “traditional student.”

The National Center for Education Statistics states that the typical criteria for considering someone a non-traditional student include; being over the age of 24 years old, part-time student status, students that received diplomas other than a common high school diploma, parental status, and employment status. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “non-traditional” is defined as “not following or conforming to tradition.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a tradition as “an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior.” It will be of value for us to consider what current traditions or norms are present in the United States when determining whether “non-traditional student” is currently an appropriate term for college students in the United States.

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS MAY NOT BE SO “NON-TRADITIONAL” TODAY

The most common defining factor of non-traditional students is their age. The traditional student is thought of as an individual eighteen years old to twenty-four years old. As a community college student, it is easy to see that many students appear to be twenty-five or older. According to “5 Changing Demographics in Higher Education: Infographic,” assembled by Notre Dame of Maryland University, forty-seven percent of college students in 2018 were considered “non-traditional” based on their age of twenty-five years of age or older. Additionally, The National Center for Education Statistics reported that, in Fall 2019, 12.5 million enrolled college students were under the age of twenty-five and that 7.4 million enrolled college students were aged twenty-five or older. This indicates that roughly thirty-seven percent of enrolled college students in the Fall 2019 semester were considered non-traditional students. Southeast Community College has gathered institutional data regarding students for a number of years. In the Spring 2020 semester at Southeast Community college Lincoln Campus, 74.5% of enrolled students are aged twenty-four or younger. This means over a quarter of students enrolled at Southeast Community College this semester are considered non-traditional based on age alone.

Although the social custom or inherited norm of tradition suggests college students are eighteen to twenty-four years old, the current statistics hardly represent that age group as a current overwhelming norm. If the percentage of college students that are twenty-five or older is maintained or increased, it would only be a matter of time before our definition of a traditional student would have to include those aged twenty-five and older. This is simply due to the fact that we would inherit a new norm.

The next criterion in which students are labeled as non-traditional is based on part-time or full-time student status. Full-time status is based on taking twelve or more credit hours a semester. Historically speaking, students have traditionally been enrolled in a full-time course load. The United States Census Bureau reported that, in December 2018, 37.1 percent of two-year college students were part-time students. Furthermore, Southeast Community College reports that 69.7 percent of students on the Lincoln campus are currently enrolled part-time. Additionally, The United States Census Bureau reported that only 16.2 percent of undergraduate four-year college students were enrolled part-time, however, they also reveal that 40.4 percent of graduate students were enrolled part-time. With the exclusion of statistics on undergraduate four-year college students, data suggests a large number of college students in the United States are part-time students. How much deviation from the norm is required to label something non-traditional?

Another criterion for non-traditional student status is based on employment status. Nontraditional Undergraduates/Definitions and Data, compiled by The National Center for Education Statistics, stated that “a student indicated working 35 or more hours per week” is considered “non-traditional.” The Condition of Education, 2019, compiled by the National

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS MAY NOT BE SO “NON-TRADITIONAL” TODAY

Center of Education Statistics, reported data concerning college student employment in 2017. According to The Condition of Education 2019, 43 percent of full-time students held some employment in 2017. In 2017, 27 percent of full-time students worked twenty or more hours a week in the United States. Jaleesa Bustamante compiled data on college enrollment statistics and published her article in 2019. Her article, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” she states that “According to a 2015 report, 25 percent of college students worked full-time while also attending school full-time, making them non-traditional students. Further, 40 percent of students worked at least 30 hours per week while also taking a full load of classes” (Bustamante). While the majority of full-time students were not employed, a large amount of recent full-time students held employment.

Although criteria for the label of “non-traditional” student does not include gender, if we were to apply the logic that has been used in other areas to the gender of enrolled college students, we may face an interesting criterion for “non-traditional.” The National Center for Education Statistics claimed that, in the Fall 2019 semester, 11.3 million females were enrolled in college and that 8.6 million males were enrolled for the same semester. This data shows that roughly 43 percent of college students were male. Does this mean males could be considered non-traditional in the future? Forty-three percent is certainly comparable to percentages regarding the previous factors we’ve examined. Southeast Community College presented data showing that, in the Spring 2020 semester, 57.2 percent of enrolled students were female and that 42.7 percent of enrolled students were male. This supports the fact that traditional and non-traditional labels of students are not simply based on minority status.

As a non-traditional student, the only reason in which I have found that this labeling system is even in existence is for financial and census-related categorization. For instance, students over twenty-four years of age may qualify for financial assistance that younger students would not qualify for. Additionally, some scholarships are available only to individuals meeting certain non-traditional student criteria. As an example, I received a small scholarship to Southeast Community College because I received a GED instead of a common high-school diploma.

Perhaps it would be wise for us, as a community, to redefine what constitutes the labeling of an individual as a non-traditional student. We may even look to use terminology that more accurately reflects the characteristics of the modern college student. The term “non-traditional student” is no longer an appropriate label for college students in the United States because of the growing diversity among recent college students. Data would suggest that the recent norms of college students aren’t what they once were. Our terminology is outdated. Either we can begin to redefine these terms now, or they certainly will change on their own in time. The trends of college student characteristics imply that there is a new norm and there will be a new view of what a “traditional” and “non-traditional” student are.

P.S.

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

if you wanted me to go away you should've just asked.
death is easier than resurrection
the ultimate sacrifice, like my consuming my vices
it was all planned in advance
there was a chance
we could be free
to run wild and deep through the forest of illumination
kick back and create our own sensations just you and me
being free left unshaken
but its deeper than that

humanity isn't just meant to bow down
our fate is higher than all that
we could turn it all around
there's no problem with living fast and dying young
just drink responsibly
but honestly, since when was one beer enough...
consume and resume your existence
your iphone gets more attention these days
smile and nod and pretend your Facebook friends are real.
broken dreams like paychecks need to be burn

its surreal everybody looks down
when they could be looking up
an app to delete their mind like a few cigarettes
lets split a couple addictions
inhale the temporary glee
the last couple weeks have been wild
normal people walking in lock step single file
becoming beasts with blood in their cups
and pain in their hearts
so many sins I lost track
thank God my insomnias back.
give me a moment
and ill say sorry when I'm ready
until then
I can wait.

IT ELUDES ME

Michaela Hartman • Student, Continuing Education

Lying in bed you're wide awake
Channel surfing in your mind
Don't know what to do now
The power switch is broken
The volume can only be turned up
Tossing and turning, back and forth
You're hot then you're cold then in between
Turn off the lights and the tv too
Shut your eyes and let the film commence
Thoughts fill pages of the sleepless script
You start to slip into a dream
But then a blip flashes across your eyelids
It disappears as quickly as it appeared
A sinister feeling and you upright bolt
Now you have to start all over again
First, it's a trip to the bathroom
Tiptoe back across the room, climb back into bed
Take a couple breaths both long and deep
Where is a kill switch when you need it?
Ok let's try this once more and a couple more after that
Counting isn't working cause the pasture's empty
Now what can you possibly do
The buzzing thought in each brain cell is deafening
One, two, three, Do, Re, Mi, wait what

Plucking petals left and right does he like me probably not
I know there's a solution if only my logical side dominated
Closing your eyes again, now the colors are murky
Tick, tick, tick, tick oh shut up clock
Seriously it's 1 am and no progress has been made
Repeat, repeat, repeat, fail, fail, failed
Time to try hypnosis, nope my nose itches
Ugh this cannot go on I have work at 8
Every minute spent awake adds to my exhaustion
Maybe some lullabies like Mozart or Bach
Really classical music is a dud too
No one can live like this I'm so tired
Repeating narration of my every thought
A dream and a nightmare free but in chains
Sandman old friend where have you gone
Sleep why have you abandoned your post
Every evening when the sun goes down it's time to fight
I'm playing tug of war with my REM cycle
I had no idea obtaining sweet serenity would cost so much
Here I will lie night after night cause sleep is elusive
Where fore art thou my much-needed slumber

EMBRACE THE ALLIGATOR

Teresa Burt • Student, Graduated

My alligator awaits
like a bridled horse
anticipates the ride, the rider—
the journey wild

I accept my alligator
the fear resides only
in the unknown
the chase through tangled wetlands
slow glide through
algaed swamp waters
beneath a tarp of mossy trees

My alligator awaits my embrace
she found me in my dreams
and readily embraced

Her shredding claws
lightly rested upon my torso
her bone-crushing jaw
laid upon my chest
as if in a dance
I shrugged her off.

The alligator—
my animal totem
a bunny, a dog
a bird or squirrel, I'd prefer
often preyed upon though
and I've been the prey
way too long

My alligator waits

CRYSTAL HEART

Caleb Anderson • Student, Design & Drafting Technology

GRAND PRIZE WINNER, ARTWORK



A CASTLE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



VENICE ITALY NEIGHBORHOOD

Rebecca Burt • Instructor, Life Sciences



NAPTIME

Patty Haddow • Staff, Registration Technician



LOOK UP, SEE THE BEAUTY OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



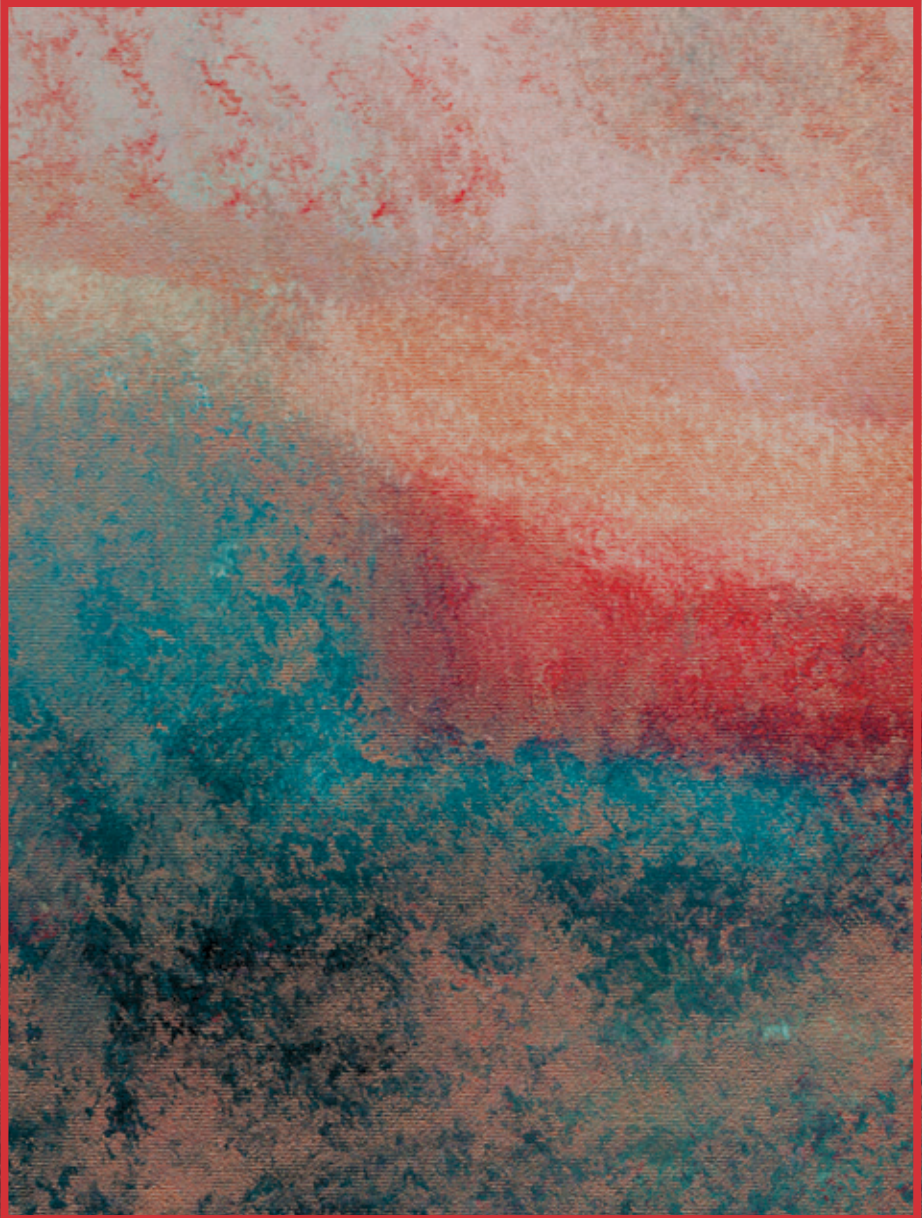
UP IN THE AIR

Tanya Hare • Staff, Student Accounts



TEXTURE STUDY, STIPPLE

Tammy Zimmer • Instructor, English



BURANO ISLAND VENICE, ITALY

Rebecca Burt • Instructor, Life Sciences



SUNSET LOOKING OUT OVER THE TOWN SQUARE

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



TEXTURE STUDY, PEEL

Tammy Zimmer • Instructor, English



EATING A PEACH INTENTLY

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



CLOUDY DRIVE

Tanya Hare • Staff, Student Accounts



SAN GIMIGNANO ITALY

Rebecca Burt • Instructor, Life Sciences



CREATION IS BEAUTIFUL

Michaela Hartman • Student, Continuing Education



WATER LILIES SERIES

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



WATER LILIES SERIES



WATER LILIES SERIES



AMALFI COAST ITALY

Rebecca Burt • Instructor, Life Sciences



GONE...AND MAYBE FORGOTTEN

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



THE BEAUTY OF A FLOWER

Lynda Heiden • Staff, Executive Administrative Assistant



SOCIAL DISTANCING

Patty Haddow • Staff, Registration Technician



TIVOLI GARDENS FOUNTAIN ITALY

Rebecca Burt • Instructor, Life Sciences



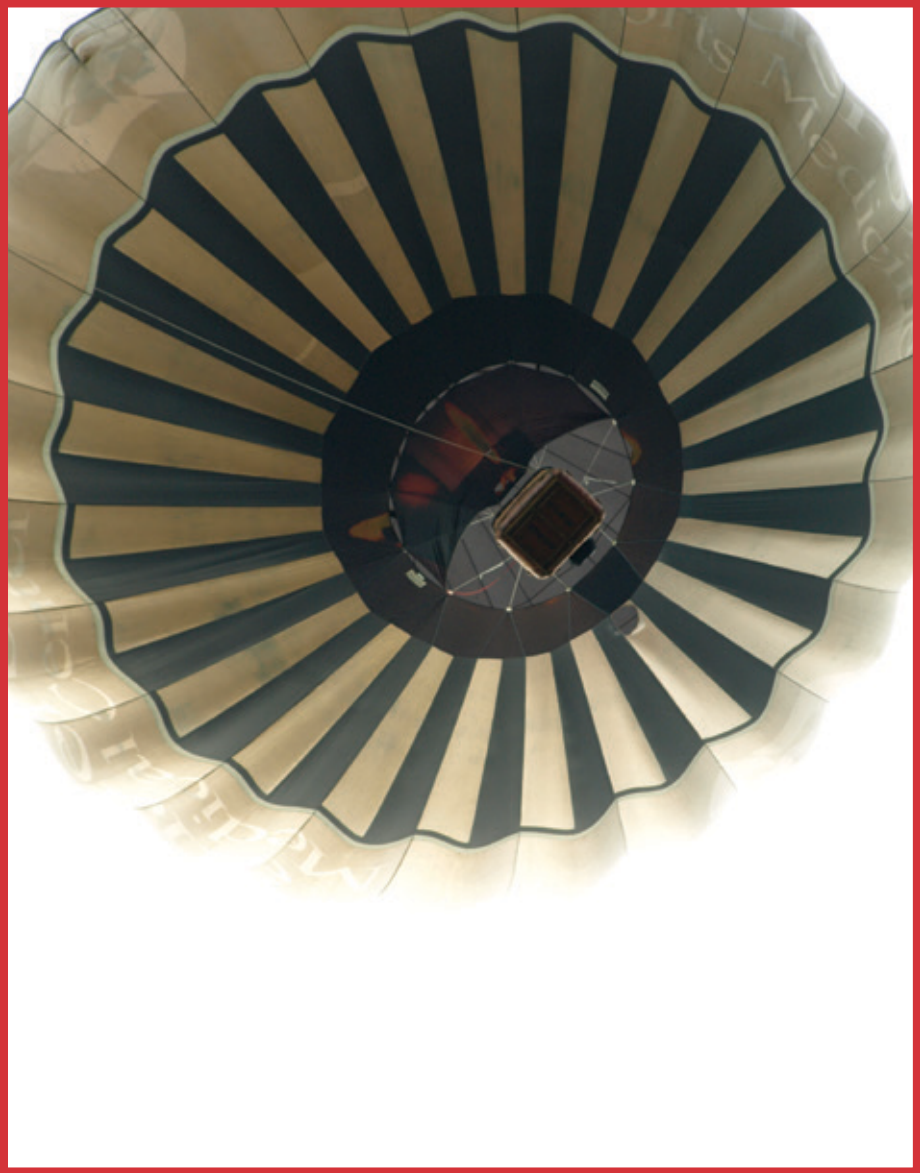
TEXTURE STUDY, DRIP

Tammy Zimmer • Instructor, English



UNDER THE BALLOON

Tanya Hare • Staff, Student Accounts



MY THOUGHTS GO OUT

Marjorie Itzen • Staff, Physical Plant Administrative Assistant

My thoughts go out

Like smokey tentacles in wind

Searching for someone to share,

Someone to care.

Life may be hard

Like sadness or alone times.

When nothing seems to go right –

So, all is bleak.

Dark clouds gather

But dark clouds drift away, too.

And sunlight shines through on us.

Happy times come.

TRANSFORMATION FOREST

Michaela Hartman • Student, Continuing Education

I am walking down a path winding and steep
The sun rises in the east and sets in the west
I'm surrounded by all manner of beasts
The chills that cover every single inch of my body
Increase at each noise uttered in the shadows
I know not which voices my foes are
Nor can I recognize the call of my friends
I attempt to clear the haze clouding my eyes
But this further blurs the already hidden things
I duck under branches and leap over roots
A thorn pricks my fingers and droplets protrude
Each second seems to last for hours
Terror is the only thing I fear now, that and solitude
Three steps forward and two steps back
I turn to the right and to the left and know I am lost
Then without warning I am robbed of all my senses
I cannot smell the smoke as it enters my lungs
I cannot see the fire that engulfs the forest where I reside
I cannot taste the dirt as I dive to the ground in fear
I cannot touch the fading bark on the burnt trees
And I cannot hear the screams that are coming from my own mouth
Suddenly all I can see, taste, touch, and hear is bitterness
Not bitterness the feeling but instead a sour suffocation
How I got here I know not how but I must find out

TRANSFORMATION FOREST

This has gone on for far too long and I can't hide anymore
So, I sit down on the now vacant forest floor leaning on a rock
I search my brain for answers to this dilemma now before me
It is no easy task to triumph over never-ending darkness
But I refuse to be beaten down
Somewhere in the haze is what seems to be inevitable death
I am only one person and empowered doubt enters my mind
I am a tiny speck of insignificance in an indifferent world
What could I possibly do to fix anything in my life that's wrong?
I'm just me and though people tell me that being myself is good enough
I do not believe them because that's what they're supposed to say
That is, it then I suppose my decision has been made
In this forest I will stay, and I will help it rebuild itself
For I would rather live in a world burnt down and transformed
Than a world where nothing is what it seems, and evil overtakes good
If you ever feel the way I have and need to run away for even a little while
Come and visit me in my forest of transformation and hope
Here is my invitation to you to come to this place of temporary escape
You can find it anywhere and often it may even find you, in your dreams
It may find you in your laughter and in each tear that you cry
It will never be too far away so don't forget the transformation forest
Never forget how it came to be by fire cleansed and my hands transformed

MOTHER, YOU NEVER KNEW

Teresa Burt • Student, Graduated

DEDICATED TO TRANS PEOPLE EVERYWHERE

Smothered in yellow frill,
pink and purple chiffon,
or sear sucker plaids
with wide collars,
and ringlet curls
like lace on my head
is how you dressed me,
before you knew
I was never *that* girl.

White tights that clawed at my legs
and stiff saddle shoes.
I knew I preferred
blue jeans and cowboy boots.
My young body screamed to be loosed.

You taught me cooking
and cleaning as expected of that era,
while my brother did chores with Pops.
I would do anything to switch.
Before you knew.

MOTHER, YOU NEVER KNEW

As I entered my teens,
you bought me sparkle
and bling to wear to a dance
though I declared
I would not go.
That was not me.

You didn't know then, Mother,
I needed to run through the fields,
climb the live oak tree near the stream,
skip rocks at the creek,
which I did whenever I could
escape your looks.

Before you knew,
I knew I was never *that* girl.
Before you knew,
I knew,
I wasn't a girl.

LOVE LANGUAGES

Tammy Zimmer • Instructor, English

i've been giving

new words

to love

worried about

my own language

& where i learned

my mother's love

language survival

a stiff upper lip

& a way to hide

like an apple

browned under

bruised skin

i learned to love

the bruised fruit

ANTHEM

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

'said the lost soul crying out into the urban wilderness
seeing life, birth, death as one
let us waste away our sins on burning of the grapevines
and inhale the smoke of desire
as our bodies flow through the rivers of blood
our emotions turning to ashes in the dusk
and let our hearts yearn for freedom
through beautiful and darkened lust
so that we know that we have no time
that these illusions of "hope" and change
are merely more signs that
the end is near
for the dominant timeline teaches
loneliness without rhyme or reason
did we know we have the season,
do we know we have no chances,
did they not know that the borders of Rome
are burning,
do we know we are still learning?
and our minds are being built on colonial spaces
and we're chasing away our humanity
with slaughter and hypocrisy
can I share these emotions with you
or is it true that you know no spaces
outside of ...

these options are deep, dark, and clear.
they're mocking us
never mind my problems
said my doctor (invisible shotgun to the head)
or did I love humanity
cause they suffered with me
instead

THE GYPSIES

Marjorie Itzen • Staff, Physical Plant Administrative Assistant

The sweet spring breeze brought with it sounds of singing, stringed instruments, and laughter. We listened in wonder. A Gypsy caravan had arrived close to our home early that afternoon. We watched as they pulled their brightly decorated wagons drawn by stately looking horses down by the creek. A long line of wagons came across the prairie and over the gently rolling hill. Four Gypsy men came to the door of our house shortly after they stopped there. One man knocked loudly at the door. Mom told us children to stay back and stay quiet. She opened the door a crack and greeted them. Three small heads with wide eyes peeked out around the door jamb. The men were cordial and asked politely if they could camp by our creek for the night. Mom said they could. The man said they would be leaving early in the morning but they were hungry. Could they have some chickens and turkeys to have for their supper? Mom said "Yes. How many do you need?". They agreed on a number of each and the three men with the leader went to gather the birds. The lead man thanked Mom and said they would be gone in the morning. Then he too went back to the caravan.

Mom made sure we did our evening chores that day but stayed with us as we did them. She was a little skeptical of the people by the creek. We had cattle, milk cows, horses, pigs, chickens, turkeys that all needed to be looked after. There was wood to be chopped and carried in for the cookstove. Water to be drawn and brought in for our use that night. There was always plenty to do out there on our ranch. We children helped as we could as Dad had passed away. After Dad was gone, Mom took us three children from our farm in southeast South Dakota and Homesteaded in north-central South Dakota. She did keep the farm though. Mom always said to keep your land. That was one thing they did not make more of.

We did get our chores done. We washed up in the wash house. That cold water really woke us up after the warm day of working. We girls helped Mom with supper. We peeled potatoes and carrots as we talked about what the Gypsies were having for supper. Mom sent my brother down to the cellar to get a crock of pork. For meals, we made chicken, turkey, and pork but never beef. Always had to laugh at that because we raised cattle. But there was no refrigeration so the meat would not keep. We would put up pork in crocks and put it in the cellar surrounded by straw and ice. We brought ice up from the pond in the winter in big chunks. It worked very well. Of course, we butchered chickens and turkeys as needed. Vegetables and fruits we grew ourselves but a Sioux Indian named Lends His Horses also brought us some of each. He had a place close to the river that was great for growing plants. He also kept an eye on us, usually from a distance but we knew he was there watching over us. We would often see him in the distance sitting

THE GYPSIES

astride his horse, keeping watch. He would bring things to our house in his wagon. He would pull up in his wagon with his wife and children and good things to eat. He would say to Mom, "Cup of coffee be alright." Then laugh. He would come in the house but his wife and children always stayed in the wagon.

The evening of the day that the Gypsies camped by our creek we heard singing and instruments, laughter, and talk. We looked out the side window toward the creek and saw a big bonfire, dancing, and merriment. What fun they were having!

The next morning the Gypsies had moved on their way. But on the front door, they had left a beautiful scarf for Mom.

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RABBIT HOLE

Jamie Jones • Student, Academic Transfer

Flashes of color, key taps, melodies and beats all drowned my senses. Everything absorbed was designed to distract from the disconcerting thoughts of tomorrow, of the past, and of the idiotic things I said the day, month, or even years before. Deeper yet lurk fragmented memories of unerasable and unspeakable trauma, threatening to take hold, pull you down, and never let you return to even a semblance of functioning. It did not matter that nothing could have held my attention for long, as there was safety in my carefully constructed electric world of distractions. I sheltered myself from those of indiscernible motives and a constant barrage of colors and sounds carried with it a dubious peace that anchored me in the present.

It was a day of distractions and safety like any other in my little world. I received a call from my father, whom I had not spoken to in almost a decade. I felt immune to his attempts to posture and obscure, as it was his shapeshifting intentions that taught me an unhealthy skepticism. The words said between us were meaningless in comparison to the memories. The sins of the father were too great not to confront. His misdirection and gaslighting were that of a master manipulator, and with a silver tongue, I was told that my accounts were false. My mother's bloody mouth and his white knuckles? It was lies that she and her family told to get custody of me.

"I was there," I said matter-of-factly. "You hit me as well."

"How could you possibly remember, you were too young," he said in a patronizing tone, his flippant attitude towards my accusation piercing through emotional armor that was only imagined. His words continued, they existed, but I wasn't there to hear them.

I was lost in time; at the place he last played this game. It was my last day in Mississippi, nine years ago; I was at the airport clinging to my partner's arm, terrified of what was to come, and leaving the only home I knew for eighteen years. I was at the terminal, it was almost a ghost town, there were so few people leaving that godforsaken hellhole. He visited without an invitation and carrying with the same disingenuous air of innocence. I lit up my fifth cigarette outside, my body shaking like a leaf; I was terrified of the coming flight, but I was even more furious at his attempt to pretend everything was fine. He knew I not only was forced to drop out of high school when I was outted, but that I ended up homeless when he kicked me out of his house and sent me to my mothers, who was losing her home to alcoholism. The bastard still made her pay child support despite the fact I no longer lived with him, his greed, and spitefulness knowing no bounds. I was pulled further down into painful recollection. I could not help but get lost in thought at that terminal as I did while recalling it over the phone with him.

I was fifteen at the time and unbeknownst to me, I was lost in another

distraction spending time texting a partner who lived over a thousand miles away, a painfully safer alternative than being out in Mississippi. My father forced his way into my room and made me show him who I'd been talking to online. After he saw who I was speaking to, he threatened to send me to gay conversion with disgust and pity in his tone. Angered by his implication that there was something wrong with me, I told him my attraction wasn't a choice and I wasn't changing. Enraged and spittle flying from his mouth, and with knuckles white once again, I was forced out the door with little to none of my belongings before being dropped off without a word at my mother's house. Every night thereafter from couch-to-couch I slept. I thought of where honesty led me, and how being true to myself led to such suffering. I pondered the alternatives, the picture of that empty terminal in Mississippi faded, leaving in its wake seething body shakes and a longing to take back up smoking. As I found my way back to the present from the flashbacks I was lost in, my attention returned to his words; he was still spewing meaningless manipulations.

"What about the accusation from that little girl?" I said, cutting him off. I was running out of patience.

He paused, seemingly taken aback that I haven't heard his truth yet, "they found me in *nolle prosequi*, meaning they found me innocent and dismissed the charges." He sounded almost happy to rewrite the story, even sending me a picture of the court letter; I noted that in his rush to prove his innocence, he forgot to block out his social security number. I heard his lie though. It was something in his voice, his tone, maybe even the cadence in which he spoke. Perhaps I was keenly trained because of him to be hyperaware and scrutinize what others say, whatever the reason, I felt compelled to look up the definition of *nolle prosequi*. I was unsurprised to find that it meant the opposite of his claims, and he in fact could be prosecuted again, far from an acquittal. With his clever lie, I reconsidered pursuing closure for my own scars, for fear of what the gaslighting could do to my emotional state. In that moment, I wondered if the mother made a similar decision by dropping the charges, choosing to spare her daughter a drawn-out trial where the truth could be warped and dictated by a narcissistic psychopath, artfully manipulating the judge and jury.

I had enough of his game, part of me felt it did me good to witness his charade again, to be reminded that I didn't imagine it. The other part of me knew where this led and has before, it wasn't going to leave me with some truth that could heal my wounds, just more false proof to wall myself away from everyone. I drew from the same indignant courage I had when I refused conversion therapy and told him I was transgender and that I always have been. I wasn't mentally there for his response, I was once again lost in painful memories, the worst distractions possible, plaguing the function of my memory and concentration. The call ended and I have never spoken to my father again. I never wanted to be reminded of his existence; however, in one last act of unwelcome remembrance, he sent me a nonsensical video

RABBIT HOLE

that spoke of an insidious liberal agenda to make people transgender through subverting gender. I wasn't shocked by his extremism, as he flew a confederate flag and preached racial superiority; this was just the tip of the iceberg for him. I opted to disappear willingly in a manner of my choosing and push out the memory of his abrupt reassertion into my life. Instead of dissociation in the form of unwanted reminders, I went back to the color and sounds of my dubiously peaceful electric world.

“Try going through your distress tolerance skill worksheets again,” my therapist told me during one of her sessions. The pity was almost palpable in her voice, “just remind yourself that you are doing something very difficult, try to distract and self-soothe.” The faces of well-meaning professionals changed throughout the years, their advice following. Always an uncertainty clung to their words with the treatment timetable just as foggy as the image of a better life. I never had a choice in the scars, and they would potentially never heal, but I had a choice over what distractions I chose. The ascent is immensely more difficult and perilous, but there's a hope that something better awaits above. Along with a desperate plea that the decent carried with it an element of self-growth.

‡ ‡ ‡

LONG DISTANCE

Cecelia Bialas • Student, Academic Transfer

At the hour when the sky
blends from black to indigo,
periwinkle caresses the horizon
and I'm still up talking with you.

Our friends-turned-lovers words
move from favorites to fragments of
long-ago memories, and finally fall on more
intimate fantasies of the physical and our future.

At the hour when the sun
pushes pink to kiss periwinkle,
I wonder if it's the sun or moon (or me)
who is most eager to see us together.

Each letter of yours is graced
with touches of lust and longing
mixed into the ink that paints
the paper I hold in bed.

At the hour when the pink is
ignited by emerging yellow flame,
I wrap myself around your words and pretend
you aren't 1000 miles away.

A VOID, A SELF-PORTRAIT

Jacob William Linke • Student, Academic Transfer

“It’s been raining for days.”

This was my first thought as I read the invitation. Clouds rested upon the humid Saturday, and I did not believe they would deny the graduation party the fullness of their bodies. Still, they laid above us, demanding the totality of the sky. However, the party was undaunted, the flyer professing outdoor space like an old testament Eden.

I was late. I didn’t want to be the first one there. The curbs were lined with cars, a shoal of minnows motionless in the water. To my relief, I could hear the din of a crowd; the soft cotton scribble of a million spoken letters. I was glad to arrive sort of in the middle of the whole thing, entering with anonymity, without notice.

The house was made of limestone. Its squatting visage belied the tumbling concrete terrace that spilled into the large backyard. I had discovered this fact the only other time I had been to the house, which belonged to my friend’s grandmother. Much older than the part of town in which it was built, it was ideal for hosting parties. But only if access to the magnificent backyard was allowed.

I walked up the sidewalk to the house. A warbling crack in the concrete that sprawled gracefully up the length of the driveway led me to the backyard. People were playing badminton and other lawn games alongside scattered pockets of conversation.

Adrift as I was in this sea, this event, I had a path I meant to follow. I was here to congratulate. My friend had done just as much as me and all our friends, but she was the only one to invite me to a graduation party. This wasn’t an obligation borne of invitation, however, she was indeed my friend. And the waters warmed as I swam, visiting the islands of those, too, adrift, sharing in their elation. Golden syrup dripped from their mouths as they spoke, and my skin tanned under the burning sunlight of the glory of their words. They were all celebrating our triumph.

When I found her, I bade her congratulations. She reciprocated. The dark under her eyes made them seem brighter. I wondered if my eyes enjoyed that effect. She spoke of her future with excitement. Her words were a black smoke pouring out of her nose, rolling up out of her mouth from the fire that I knew was raging in her belly. She made me feel cold; I felt a dormant volcano’s envy at the sound of eruption. Flatly, I wished her well. It was a colorless gift, black and white, and lowercase. I realized that I did not mean it; I realized that I did not care. The party shifted. The warm waters froze and I climbed out from them. Ice sticking underneath my fingernails, I was alone. My gaze fell upon the ice below me, a void, a self-portrait. I was barking in the dark.

.....
I walked to the back of that jardin utopique to be alone, to compose myself before I left. The backyard curved at its end, twisting around some ancient trees. I expected to be braced upon some forgotten gate in solitude. But there was someone else there.

A tepid gloom clung to the trees, luring low their limbs, the humid hum dampening the crackle of being startled. She looked faint like an old bruise and tender like a new one.

Her faraway voice reminded me of some old french poem. It honed her words into a long blurry ribbon.

“I’m Emilia.”

I introduced myself at the same instant that some dogs started barking next door. I don’t know if she heard me.

She was just between standing and leaning against the fence the moment I saw her. She moved like the universe: imperceptibly and with a grave significance. I stepped toward the fence behind her and tried to speak again. The words hit my teeth as they came out. We talked about how we each knew my friend, who was, I found out, her friend too.

“Why aren’t you over with everybody else?”

“I don’t know.”

“I just came over here to be alone for a second.”

“Yeah, same here.”

Her eyes, arctic ice melting in a warming sea, pulled on my eyes and pulled on my mouth and pulled on my nose and pulled on my cheeks, and pulled on my ears. She pulled my gaze from its natural static; her look possessed the gravity of a moon, dominating my tides, summoning waves black and tall. I stepped closer. She didn’t.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

Her eyes fell from mine, swinging up behind me, an executioner’s arms high above his head, to the rest of the party. It looked like her gaze had just landed on someone in particular before turning inward, as if to fully view the nature of her inquiry.

“Do you ever think that we are the last generation that will ever die?”

“I guess, medicine has come really far. I’ve never thought about that kind

of thing.”

Her brow furrowed, obviously not satisfied with my answer, and yet I don’t think the question was for me.

The clouds were getting darker, not like a storm, just like the night. The breeze, that I hadn’t noticed until now, removing its gloves, changed from caressing to grating. Our friend was shouting that the festivities would be continuing inside. We could see her coal-engine eyes despite the trees, leading the locomotive into the basement of her grandmother’s home. When I looked back at Emilia from the announcement, I caught a last glimpse of her glowing before she went dark. It was like when you close your eyes after staring at bright lights. She painted the back of my eyelids, lingering in trails of white light.

It all seemed so shallow, a mirage on the horizon. She wasn’t really talking to me. Was anyone? Can anyone really talk to anyone but themselves, projected onto the body in front of them? I could just barely hear her voice through a wall. It was a dream I was waking up from. It was the inevitable subduction, I was no longer frantic as I slid under the cover of my doubts. Emilia walked past me, back up to the house.

The night came and I sank and I sank and I sank.

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THE BATTLE OF ANXIETY

Michaela Hartman • Student, Continuing Education

My heart is ramming itself against my rib cage
I've gone deaf from the blood pounding in my ears.
Sight claimed as I'm experiencing caffeinated vertigo
With my chest constricted my lungs can't inflate.
Dizziness overtakes me as I spiral out of control
Intense feelings saturate my entire body inside and out
Anxiety is at the forefront of this tumultuous war
Fear accompanies this anxious state as second in command
Bruises form all over my skin from gripping my arms so tight
I'm quaking and shaking incapable of a logical mindset
Finally managing to gulp down air is like swallowing a porcupine
There's an immobilizing tension keeping me trapped in this condition
Brain cells are trying to form a thought but forgot the superglue
It's as if I'm a slave who has hands bound by fear and failure
Feet shackled to a concrete block then into a lake sinking to oblivion
This constant battle inside me isn't always noticeable though
In fact most of the time I'm the only one who experiences it.
But then there are times when I lose the ability to contain the panic
It rises up faster and faster erupting like a volcano of never-ending lava
Attempting to stop it is like putting my arm in a lion's mouth and asking for
it not to be eaten
Seems a waste of time to explain this to you when you could never
understand
Don't you dare say you know exactly how I feel because I promise you don't'

THE BATTLE OF ANXIETY

All I want is to be free of this debilitating daily suffocation
In the moment having it brushed aside as drama is the last thing I need
Panic attacks are my reality, constant reminders of never being normal
If I could cut out this cancerous toxicity I would do so without a second
thought

Not having complete control of myself paralyzes me with fear
Severe anxiety is like being cornered in a dark alley with no escape
Appearances can be deceiving since you can't see on the inside I'm
screaming

Help me please, I yell but you hear nothing because anxiety soundproofed
my body

Freedom is but wishful thinking or have you not seen the bulletproof glass
Desperation is the long lost twin that anxiety takes pleasure in goading

Grow up, people say, it can't possibly be that hard

For your information hard is the level anxiety is always playing at

You say I don't look anxious, that I must be mistaken

Oh yeah sure, it's an act, just the role of a lifetime that I never asked for
Peace is obtainable according to you, you jest, I'll never know true serenity

Tell me how to get it through your head that this is no joke

Downplaying what I'm going through just makes you ignorant

Few people can handle my zero to a hundred in a second emotional
explosions

How am I supposed to be successful with one hand behind my back

Stop saying things will get better and could always be worse

Things will never get better and nothing is worse than this.

So regardless of the fact that I am no match for myself and the chemicals of
my brain

Every day that I wake up and get on with life is a triumph

Forgetting anxiety is impossible for it sets reminders to daily disrupt my life

THE BATTLE OF ANXIETY

Knowing that at any moment things could take a turn for the worst makes
me queasy

While I try to make sure that this nightmare stays mine and mine alone

Hoping for anxiety to give up is a laughable concept through and through

Because it doesn't own anything white so it won't ever retreat

Maintaining relationships is difficult when all I do is wait for them to walk
away

Truthfully, I've no idea why this is the thorn in my side that keeps drawing
blood saying I'm still here

Honestly telling you this is how I protect myself in case you witness my
weakness and run the other way

Sooner or later people disappear when I become too overwhelming or too
annoying

Silence now envelopes me all light fading leaving me at the mercy of my
anxiety once again

UTOPIA

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

utopia will come to earth
spawn a new rebirth
I'll start writing in cursive (and stop cursing your ...)
it's the money
the power and the cruelty,
and violence and fame
you deserve better
its cool
(no worries)
its just...
I'm in a hurry

FALL BREAK

Jacob William Linke • Student, Academic Transfer

It was fall break. I was at my desk. The gentle banality of a familiar film warmed the back of my head. I took refuge in the expected. The warm pleasure of the rum had finally made its way down to the bottom of my feet. There in that back room of my parents' home, I intended to remain for the duration of my time off school. Sequestered in my inebriated Eden, I had had no thoughts about school since the last day of the summer quarter. The movie started.

My door opened; it was my mother. Fair hair framing a face tinged with what used to be beauty; a beauty strangled by relentless worry that kept record in the numerous lines of her face. Her face was dominated by two deeply cerulean eyes; eyes that deepened with emotion. Usually, her presence commanded nothing. I only looked up because she did not stop in the doorway as she usually did. Indeed, the austerity of her stride caused me to shift in my chair, an anxious reaction reminiscent of a nervous young king fidgeting in his throne. I didn't notice the letter in her hand.

"You know you can't go to SCC next quarter?" Her voice was shrill and grave and urgent and thin. It was not a question that demanded an answer. It was a mortal cry, a shout unto the heavens, "Why have you failed me? What did I do?"

And just like the heavens, I remained silent.

She left me, not looking back from the only lifeboat at me; staring, frozen, at the deck on fire. The letter found its way from her hands to the desk to my hands. It seemed heavier than paper should be, like it was printed on lead with iron ink. The words ransacked my eyes, cluttering, and rioting until I found the single damning sentence that barred me from returning to school. My head was filled with hot wire as the other words fell away. It was like my blood turned to saltwater, still warm but somehow coarser. I stood up. With the defeated half-heartedness of someone putting on their DNR bracelet, I donned a wool cardigan. Through no conscious volition, my arm groped for my obsolete phone; it made its way into my pocket without my knowledge, an ancient spy carrying out operations for some forgotten war it no longer understands. My bare feet slipped into the old leather of my moccasins and I left the house.

The October sun was deceiving, shining so bright in the cold. However, the salve of intoxication protected me from the bite of the autumn breeze. I began to walk. My path was as rigid as smoke. The numbness in my hands and feet and arms and legs complimented the void in my mind. For fifteen mindless minutes, I took solace in the machinery of my gait. I didn't see any clouds. Walking under the unmarred azure of the sky, I found myself at a park.

FALL BREAK

I could just barely hear the brown grass crunch as I climbed the hill, large in the back of the park. The ever-looming blue above taunted me, never seeming closer even as I ascended. Atop the hill, amongst a couple of stout evergreens, was a wooden bench. Its peeling paint was curling up in rebellion at having been destined to coat such a mundane thing, at having never been used in a beautiful masterpiece. Not all paint gets to be art.

As the chill began to delicately overpower my breath, coaxing it from its ethereal invisibility, I laid down on the bench. I listened to the mechanical howl of the highway behind the hill as it sang through the crispness of the air. It haunted my ears and when I closed my eyes, shutting out the perfect sky, it filled my body, echoing in the emptiness. I opened my eyes to see the trees calmly bending in the wind, and as I watched, I envied their roots, their deafness, their blindness.

It was then that I lost my desperate grip on the nothingness in my mind. I couldn't go back to school. All my life, I had been under the impression that academia was where I was heading. I was a student. Even after I failed out of the university, I maintained a vague feeling of scholarly destination. Community college was supposed to be a last resort. My ego reeled; in its eternal mission of self-preservation, my mind tried to work out what this schism of identity meant for me. The words of the letter came back. But it was not the recall that one uses during a math test; it was more like remembering a nightmare, vague and terrible.

Then I remembered the letter saying that I could return after one quarter's absence.

My stomach began to heat. My vision began to blur. My hearing began to buzz. I was directionless. I was spinning in a void. How could I ever be a student again? I would never be the same. John Donne may have been right, but I swear I could feel the waves upon my feet.

Bringing me out of my stupor, my phone vibrated in my pocket. My mother was calling me, maybe I was more of a peninsula rather than an island. I answered.

"Where are you? What are you going to do now?"

"I have no idea."

The sky shone blue as ever.

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LOVE IS NOT A MENTAL DISORDER

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

love is not patient
unless patience is a virtue
but slowing down is hard
when this mind of ours looks
farther than the eye can see
/ words like doors upon the walls
of perception
this connection
is more sobering than NA, CA, or AA
but when they think we're crazy
or lazy, "drug users" or "fiends"
unclean / its just that

...
we're a little misunderstood
lost souls trying to know what
its like to be free
to abandon all inhibitions
let go of stress and regress from
"bad decisions" its the system
that drove us to madness anyway
and unlike everyone else
we looked through the lies
our teacher told us

they say we've been let astray
when its their morality
that's immoral so lets have fun
ill pretend to be young (but we're old souls)
so lets make art
lift up from consciousness
regress from thoughtlessness
for I love you
(...)
end scene

SCARED OF HEIGHTS

Andrew J. O’Conner • Student, Computer Information Technology

It was impossible to avoid hearing the loud noise outside as she guided me up the stairs. But I was a fool; I thought the source of that noise only brought us the “surprise” she had mentioned before. I suppose, in a way, it did.

She opened the door, and to my horror, I saw a white and orange helicopter, its doors wide open, inviting us to its cabin with the pilot waiting for us. My blood ran cold, and my eyes were wide as I stared helplessly at the monstrously menacing thing.

“Hop on in,” Catherine instructed, breaking rapport as almost always, but her gleaming smile was notably unremoved from her face.

I was, of course, in absolutely no position to refuse; the hour was late, and our trip needed to be quicker than it would have been in a car. “I... I don’t think I can do this,” I said in fear.

“You can and you will,” Catherine insisted, guiding me to my seat, facilitating my halfhearted cooperation.

The sound of our footsteps changed as I nervously stepped across the cabin, prompting me to look down, only to see what might have been the worst part about this trip—part of the floor was made of glass.

“Never ridden in a helicopter before?” she asked, her expression still unchanged.

“No,” I replied weakly, “not once.”

The doors sealed us in as Catherine tied me to my seat, powerless to escape. “Aww, you look terrified,” she teased before giving me a gentle kiss on my cheek, her black and red hair caressing and teasing my neck. “It won’t be that bad,” she said, sitting herself down in her seat just beside me and strapping herself in—it almost looked like she did it every day.

Over the speakers, we heard the pilot ask us if we were ready to take off.

“No!” I screamed in my head.

Catherine gave a big “thumbs up,” and before even one precious second passed, I saw we were being lifted into the sky. I tried to focus on the inside of the flying machine, but I wasn’t confident that watching the pilot tap the NavScreen was putting me at ease any more than watching the world sink below us outside. And after several precious seconds passed, I could see the city below us through the glass part of the floor. It was just a few inches wide and about four feet in depth, stylishly illuminated with a light

tinting the edges a fiery orange to match Ember's iconic color scheme. But stylish or not, it was still a horrible reminder of the thousand-foot distance between the vehicle and the street, and I knew we were going to get higher than that.

"Are you okay with the color?" asked my tormentor.

"Uh... sure, it's nice, I don't mind orange, that's good."

"Sounds like you're not calming down too much," she noted, impishly stating the obvious.

I tried to ask a question that would take my mind off my sense of danger, but it was unclear if my chosen query would have accomplished such a task. "So... why do we have pilots in self-flying helicopters?"

"There's several reasons," she replied. "Firstly, there's a number of safety precautions that require human eyes and human judgment. Secondly, it's not just about setting a destination; a trained pilot is still ideal to tell the computer what to do on the way since flying a helicopter is still more complicated than driving a car." She seemed to understand my desire to force my mind's eye away from my perceived endangerment; she wasn't usually so talkative. "It's also for the passengers' sake, both physically and psychologically. You're an aspiring programmer, so you tell me, would you feel completely comfortable knowing that your safety is trusted to every individual line of code, in which one character out of place might break the entire application?"

"No!" I cried.

She smiled. "Making these safe has demanded a lot of work from the designers—a great deal of redundancy is implemented. And even still, the best contingency plan is a human pilot trained to take over manually. And if a passenger has a medical emergency, or if we need to make an emergency landing, a flesh and blood pilot is most suitable. Still, more often than not, they simply need to sit and watch. It will be fascinating to watch how much more automation we can apply to flying." She looked over her pale lover with fondness, but still not without mischievous satisfaction. "You look like you're about to have a medical emergency."

"I'm... okay."

Before long, we were away from the city, hovering over the Invidia-Superbia Grey Zone. It was much easier with mostly darkness under the glass part of the floor.

Even though I was scared stiff, my unease didn't stop me from being impressed by the soundproofing of the cabin. There were only low and high-pitched humming sounds accompanied by the muffled chopping noises of

the propellers. This made conversation easy.

Catherine's warm hand found its way to my knee. "How are you holding up, Joseph?" she asked, both sincerely and teasingly.

I stammered. "Um... h—have I mentioned that I am deathly afraid of heights? And flying?"

"No need," she replied, "it's very clear."

"Yeah—I don't doubt it."

"Don't worry, this is a brand-new model. Since they haven't gotten all of the kinks worked out of the engines yet, they put extra work into making sure it can crash-land relatively safely," she said with a wink.

My eyes must have been larger than the planet itself.

She started chuckling maniacally as I looked at her.

"That isn't funny!" I exclaimed.

"It's true we can crash-land more safely than in other models, but the engine has nothing wrong with it," she explained. Then she gently moved her hand on my leg. "Is this helping?" she asked kindly, her angelic voice more soothing than ever before.

"...yes," I said faintly.

"Deep breaths, Joseph, deep breaths," she instructed.

It was about an hour and forty minutes before we arrived at the outskirts of Unity, and she kept her hand on me almost the entire way there. I had never seen the quaint little town in person before, but I remembered that it wasn't too far from Vice, and that it stood within the Lascivia-Invidia Grey Zone.

The pilot announced that we were landing, and a massive tsunami of relief hit my heart without any delay.

Soon we were hovering over a field of grass. Catherine unbuckled her harness and then released me soon after. I must have been only a blur of motion zooming out of the helicopter as soon as the doors opened. I stepped onto the heavenly solid ground that I was so afraid of falling to on the trip over. My knees almost failed to support me. No—they did fail to support me, and Catherine caught me. She seemed, as always, completely unfazed and calm. "Breathe," she instructed. I could hear the wicked smirk on her face as my body began to feel weaker than it ever had in my entire life. "You okay?" she asked sympathetically, but I could still detect with absolute clarity a great deal of amusement.

SCARED OF HEIGHTS

"I'm perfectly fine," I answered with a violently, humiliatingly shaking voice.

She let out one of her cruel giggles while I worked to get a hold of my own weight. My legs were an earthquake, my arms were jelly, my mind was a swirling twister, and my breathing was a furious hurricane.

"Give me a minute, please," I said.

"Of course. Do you need to sit down?"

"Might not be a bad idea," I said, relaxing most of my muscles, leaving her responsible for the weight of my body.

She helped me down and sat beside me, still holding onto me, her right hand resting on my right shoulder.

"Oh, gosh," I panted with closed eyes, listening to the helicopter fly off into the sky. I could feel the adrenaline abandoning me.

"Come on, I've put you through worse than this," Catherine remarked. Through the sarcasm, I could hear a hint of sadness in her tone.

"Apples and oranges," I replied, briefly lifting my hand, not bothering to open my eyes. "Except the apples were sweet."

"Mm..."

I hated hearing even a subtle trace of regret polluting her beautiful voice—it was painful. As she rubbed my back and shoulder, I leaned against her, allowing her to put her arm further around me. And while I felt the strength of my body and mind quickly diminishing, and even though I wasn't far from slipping into a state of unconsciousness, with my head on her thigh, with my body in her arms, I simply couldn't bring myself to care. "I've missed this," I said, waiting for the return of my stamina.

"Missed what?" She asked. I could hear another smile developing, and it made me wonder if she already knew what I was about to say.

"I've missed this feeling... being all weak and twitchy and winded while you're holding onto me—it's so nice... like how shivering makes a blanket feel even better... I was scared I'd never feel that again."

"Don't be so happy about it; I'll probably have to be your blanket again after the flight back."

It was like she had jump-started my body. "Nooo!" I whimpered, sitting up. "Please just tell your dad to send a car or something, please, I'm begging you!"

She laughed, amused by my helpless request—the aftermath of the flight

SCARED OF HEIGHTS

must have been hindering my ability to think, although, it could have been the anticipation of the next helicopter ride. “Joseph, you’re not thinking straight. It’s either an hour-and-a-half-long flight or a seven-hour-long drive, and that excludes the amount of time it would take for the car to get here.”

I groaned helplessly as the reality of imminent terror set in and forced me to lean against her again. “I’d hoped that flying in a helicopter would be like going down a slide on a playground as a kid—that after getting past the fear of doing it once, I’d be excited about doing it again. But no, it’s not like that at all.”

“You’ll be fine—it’ll be over before you know it, and I’ll give you a cookie when we get back, okay?”

“...Okay,” I breathed with reluctant acceptance.

The flight back was easier; maybe six percent easier—ten at best. I watched the Lascivia-Invidia Grey Zone and Invidia-Superbia Grey Zone whiz by under our helicopter. I felt too warm even though my body was cold, shaky even though I was stiff and frozen in my seat.

I shuddered as soon as I could see Superbia through the glass at my feet, the lights of civilization casting upon me a grim reminder of our altitude. The cars looked nearly microscopic from such a height, and I knew that could have been me at any second if some freak accident were to occur.

“Just a tiny bit longer, Joseph. Doing okay?” Catherine asked with her signature compound attitude comprised of one part sympathy and one part amusement.

“Not really,” I answered with honesty.

Even under these circumstances, she was shameless about laughing at me. “Do you feel sick? Are you dizzy?”

“No, I’m too freaked out to be either of those things,” I whined.

She double-tapped the window, revealing a list of options in the corner close to her shoulder. With another tap, the window changed and faded to a depiction of the vast, open, beautiful Martian surface. Even the glass on the floor changed and displayed the red ground, giving the illusion that we were in a vehicle hovering close to the surface of the planet. “Is that better? She asked.”

I was astonished. “Could you have always done that?”

She giggled sheepishly. “Maybe a little bit. But that’s no way to help overcome your fears; I’d only be hindering your progress. Short term gain,

long term loss, so to speak.” I sighed audibly, unwilling to admit that her point was valid. “So then, does it help?”

I examined the portrayal of Mars for a brief second. “It’s a little better, but the atmosphere on Mars is about ninety-five percent carbon dioxide, and we have no helmets,” I answered as if we were really there. This was more than enough to get her to skim through the other settings, but I kept explaining more just to keep my mind occupied. “One crack in the glass, and we breathe in a gas that will kill us with hypoxia, not to mention the dust, the freezing temperatures, or the radiation, although, the radiation would partially depend on exactly where—”

“Okay, how about this?” she interrupted, changing the scenery on the screens to resemble a tranquil clearing on Earth, grassy hills and fields with small wooded areas in every direction, an uncrowded interstate to my right, and grass whizzing by just a few feet under us.

I took a second to observe our new simulated surroundings, the reality of our altitude obscured by the middle of nowhere. “...better.”

“You’ll get used to flying,” she encouraged, returning her hand to my leg.

“I don’t think I want to.”

“You said you’d hoped it would be like going down a slide as a child—it is, it just takes more than one time.”

This brought me more comfort than I thought necessary to admit, but I didn’t like the idea of flying more and more.

“Would you believe I used to be scared to fly too?” she asked, the artificial sun warmly lighting her sincere expression, her devilish red eyes allotting a greater amount of innocence than I had yet seen on her.

“Not for a second,” I admitted.

Her memories amused her, casting her scarlet lips into a fond smile. “Ask Jacob or Chloe,” she nodded. “They always loved flying, and they got a good laugh whenever my dad had a conference out of town.”

“Did they wait until the last minutes of the flight to change the scenery?” I teased.

“They fought over what scenery to have showing. It made me miss the simplicity of seeing our real surroundings through the glass instead of a constantly changing environment.

It was impossible for me to imagine Catherine—even as a child—afraid of anything at all, and I didn’t mind telling her as I imagined the landing pad appearing below us when I felt the decline of our acceleration. Even I was

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surprised by the level of relief that swept through me. Catherine felt more sorry for me than she was confessing; she reset the window to its natural state, revealing our destination right beneath us. She waited a few seconds and then unbuckled her harness early before getting me out of mine, just in time for the doors to open immediately after.

Just as before, I flew out the helicopter and threw myself down to the solid ground, further disoriented by the fast transition from a warmly sunlit plateau to the nighttime rooftop cityscape of Superbia. My legs were quivering as I made my way to the stairwell door, but the very thought of stairs made them too weak to hold me up, so I leaned back against the wall next to the door, letting myself slide down, black leather jacket gliding against the smooth marble wall.

As I tried to recuperate, I was reunited with the infamous sound of Catherine's thick-heeled boots stepping toward me. Instinctively, this quickened my pulse, helping me to recover from lightheadedness. She sat down next to me. "Okay, come here," she said, tapping her leg.

She barely put the last word in her sentence before I let my head rest on her lap, essentially using her thighs as warm, denim-covered pillows. My violent trembling was evident as I took a deep breath and watched the helicopter fly off into the distance before the sight of it dissolved into the darkness.

Her melodic laugh graced my spirit with its warm, soothing beauty. "You're so pathetic," she teased, gently caressing my cheek with her fingers and their sharp nails.

My eyes drifted shut, and a smile appeared on my face. "When do I get my cookie?" I reminded with utter sincerity.

"You'll get more than one—the sugar will do you good."

I nodded my head as best I could. "Yeah, it will."

"As soon as you can walk, let's get inside. It's freezing out here, especially at this altitude."

"Getting there," I replied. Her hands stroking my cold face were helping a lot. "Should I get my hopes up for any sort of apology for this?" I asked playfully.

"Certainly not—this should help you get over your fear of flying. Statistically speaking, it is the safest mode of transportation."

I couldn't help but laugh at this response. "Yeah, I've heard."

"Would it help if I took you up myself?"

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Even with my mind as weak as it was during that moment, this still astonished me. “You can pilot a helicopter?!” I asked, turning my head to look up at her. As suspected, she was smirking.

“Piano lessons and painting can only cure boredom for so long.”

“Okay—what can you not do?” I asked with respect and admiration.

She quietly laughed and humbly contained any response to my compliment. “Would your legs happen to be fully operational yet? The sooner we get inside, the sooner you get your cookies.”

The warmth from her expression made it almost impossible to feel the cold she had been speaking of. “I think, with a little help, I could walk now.”

“Of course,” she said again before helping me stand up.

I looked around the neighboring skyscrapers, only a few taller than the one we stood on. Another deep breath supplied my lungs with more fresh air. The stars in the sky were like a faint reflection of the city lights around us. Even from the ground, Superbia was an amazing sight, but from a high building near its center, where its towering structures and colorful lights surrounded us, it was breathtaking to say the absolute least.

“This really is quite the view,” I remarked, trying to make up for my childish behavior during the rest of the evening. “I was too terrorized to see how beautiful it was before.”

Catherine stopped unlocking the door and looked to me with delight. “Would it bother you to get a closer look?”

I looked to an edge of the roof. “Not with a tall fence like that.”

Helping me along with a smile, she guided me closer to the edge, still keeping some distance between us and the barrier out of respect for my unfortunate phobia.

“Incredible,” I exhaled.

“Definitely.”

“I still can’t believe you know how to pilot a helicopter.”

She chuckled gently, clearly pleased by my admiration. “I was exaggerating, Joseph—I’m interested in learning. Over several years, helicopters built up a reputation for being notoriously hard to fly, but modern technology has made them a little less complicated. Plus, I have a flight sim on my computer. You never answered my question, by the way.”

“No, I think it would be easier for me if we had someone else piloting the thing so you could hold onto me for dear life.”

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Her laughter was like music. “Your wish is my command.”

I wondered if she could hear me gasp as I looked up into her crimson eyes.

“I know, you never thought you’d hear me say such a thing,” she remarked when she realized I was speechless.

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A PRAYER FOR REVOLUTION

David Frenzel • Student, Academic Transfer

we are soulless wonders
connecting dreams to reality
we are the aftermath of darkness
alternative and independent causalities
where our light gleams
in beams outside of the systems
chaotic flow / where there are televisions dancing
hyperbole disrupting natures glorious show
and concrete structures
confine us to walk paths to nowhere
cause our voices are silenced / cast away
into “unknown
unknowns” / but there is “hope” that shines
on posters, flags and banners
but their morality
is a figment of my insanity
for we are the wind that pushes the rocks
stones tossed
in banks and wall street
shattering these capitalist lifestyles
for the broken glass of the revolution
is marred and painted over the statues of idols
who’s followers are the corporate animals
but we are Christ like figures
who figured out that the safest way to avoid
backlash and excess violence is simply scream out
into the urban wilderness
and tell the masses that
we
are free

AMBITION

Tammy Zimmer • Instructor, English

to leave to get
away from places
that made me

to escape poverty
& the culture
men who worked
in factories long
gone was where

i was from
but now me
& my colleagues discuss
charcuterie boards
full-bodied bordeauxs

my mom calls
she has shut the curtains
so my uncle won't see
there is food in the house
she fears he'll break in

& i remember where
i am

I BELIEVE IN MY DEAD CAT

Peter Voigt • Student, Academic Transfer

I have always considered myself a dog person. I enjoy the company of having dogs as pets. When you come home their tails wag hard enough to break glass and that makes you excited to see them. The way they follow you around interested in everything you're doing and licking anything you touch makes it impossible to feel lonely. When you leave them it almost breaks your heart to see them whimpering behind the door as you politely shut it in their face. A dog's loyalty and companionship, I thought was unmatched by any other animal. I had never felt an emotional connection with another kind of pet, but that all changed for me when a cat, named Lucy, just wanted to be petted again.

When I was a small boy my sister achieved an athletic award. My mom decided to let my sister get a kitten to celebrate. I remember how my sister daydreamed out of the window in our purple van on the way there. We gingerly pulled up in the driveway of a sprawling suburban house. An athletic-looking middle-aged lady led us downstairs into an unfinished basement with cement floors. There was a cat bed with a mother cat, lazily napping with a lot of kittens around her. Some were jumping around and chasing things. I pointed at a calico kitten acting wild and sprinting after a piece of fuzz. I reached out for it and it ran away from my hands and hid behind the water heater. I said loudly, "Mom I want this one!" She wasn't listening to me though; this was my sister's choice. I looked to my mom's stern face telling me it wasn't up to me. I turned my gaze to my sister holding a small kitten curled up in her hand as she gently stroked it with two fingers. It was the cutest little thing with black and white fur and a pink nose. This kitten she held wasn't like the others. It wasn't running around or meowing; it was just purring deeply and lying there in her hand, not moving. The kitten was so calm my mom asked the lady to give it away, if it was ok? The lady said, "yes, she's healthy she just likes being petted." It was by far the cutest kitten in the bunch. My sister chose that one.

My mom and sister named the kitten Lucy and now we had a cat. Lucy was loved. She waited patiently every night for my sister to come home. Then would run-up to her, weaving her body around her legs, waiting to be cuddled and petted. My sister would always have her cat on her lap or lying on her stomach. The cat lived to be petted. It didn't want anything else; it didn't play with toys like a normal kitten. My sister would laugh and show me that while she petted it, the clear liquid would drip from its nose. Something was different about Lucy.

Naturally, the wheel of life spun around and time moved on. My sister grew older. She moved out of the house to a faraway place from Lucy. I had moved away also but was down on my luck. I asked my parents if I could move back in. They told me, yes, but Grandpa and Grandma have moved

in, along with the three dogs we adopted, so we have a full house. My mom said I would have to sleep in the basement, which was filled with old furniture and stored junk. I didn't care; I moved in promptly and she wasn't lying, the basement was filled with old stuff that time had forgotten about. Right in the middle of the dusty things, like a desert oasis, was a nice bed. I was lying in bed the first night and heard a noise. I had the lights off, but I rolled over wondering what it could be and peered into the darkness. I saw two little green eyes peering back at me through the pitch black and then I heard a faint meow. It was Lucy. I had forgotten about Lucy, but there she was, meowing at me in the night.

Lucy meowed again, louder this time, and then gave a steady stream of meows. I didn't ever remember Lucy meowing much, but I took it as a sign she wanted to be petted. I whapped the bed with my hand next to me saying, "Lucy, come on, Lucy" but she didn't budge; she just stared at me in the dark meowing. Out of curiosity and not knowing what else to do I just started whistling. What I whistled, was a certain tune from a popular gospel or holiday song. Still today I can't name the song, but I can whistle it well. For some reason, the special tune worked like a charm and Lucy ran at me, leaped up, and landed right on my bed. She proceeded to walk up on me and lie on my stomach. She started to purr almost violently. I softly pet her head and listened to her purrs as I drifted off to sleep.

That morning I woke up, reached over, flicked on the light, and right there down on the worn blue carpet was Lucy looking up at me. She let out a big long meow. I got out of bed and started walking up the stairs toward all the noisy commotion to fetch her food. Lucy started to follow me, meowing the whole time. I got to the top step and opened the door and she started to peak her little white and black head out. All of a sudden three rambunctious dogs ran around the corner, spotted her, and immediately tried accosting her. She took off back down the stairs making a horrible cat sound and I slammed the door quickly to stop the dogs from rushing down after her. At that moment I realized Lucy was trapped. She was banished to the basement. She was just a thing nobody wanted, like a piece of the old used furniture. The cat that thrived on attention now abandoned, all alone stuck, in a pit of lonely despair. Immediately I felt a wave of sympathy rush over me and it didn't help that this cat was extremely cute. I felt horrible for her.

I made it my mission from that day on to give that cat all the love I could give. I let her lie on me for hours just petting her. It's like she wouldn't want to eat or do anything but be petted. You would have to force her to get off you. You could have just petted her till she died. She would purr so deeply clear liquid would slowly drip from her nose onto my shirt bringing back memories when my sister pointed that out to me before. Lucy and I formed a strong bond. I never felt lonely when I was alone because she was there. I'd look forward to seeing her when I got home, and she loved seeing me. I'd let her sleep on my stomach all night, forcing me to learn not to sleep on my side anymore.

I BELIEVE IN MY DEAD CAT

When I'd bring a girl down there, they thought she was the cutest cat they have ever seen and asked if they could have her. I was tempted to let them take her, thinking maybe she would have it better with them. The second I started talking about letting them have her, it's as if Lucy would hear me and she would do something she never did. She would walk over to an imaginary piece of something on the ground and just ever so slightly curl up her paw and bat at it. She looked like the most adorable thing you could imagine; it would melt my heart. The girl would say "Awwwww she's adorable, please let me have her." It was like Lucy was showing me she was worth keeping. I knew this was Lucy's home with me and Lucy didn't want to leave it.

More years slowly passed. One day I was whistling my special tune for Lucy, but she never came. I thought that was strange, I looked around for her but didn't see her. I went around the corner where her food dishes and litter box were in the small laundry room. She was lying sick next to a drain on the ground. Her tongue was hanging from her mouth and she was making a tragic sound. I realized time had caught up with her and she was dying. A basket of clean towels was right by the washer and dryer next to her. I picked her up and laid her on the towels. I slowly petted Lucy on those towels till her last breath. It was almost like she looked at me and smiled right before she died with one last drop of liquid coming from her nose. I felt a mix of emotions. I was sad but felt some happiness that she did not die alone.

Lucy was gone now. Life moved on, my grandparents passed away, and their nurses stop coming over. Two of the dogs passed away. The house had almost emptied out in less than four years. I chose to stay downstairs and was lying on the bed I used to pet Lucy on. It was October close to Halloween. I was alone and was feeling forgotten about. I started whistling the tune I whistled for Lucy. I closed my eyes and kept whistling. In a few moments, I heard her meow and saw her come around the corner, jump up on my bed, and lie on me. I petted her feeling her lay on my stomach and looking at her cute little pink nose and green eyes, feeling her paws knead me as she purred. It was as if she was right there, with me, still getting petted like she always did. I feel that Lucy has never left me now after that moment. I kept the only picture I have of her and put it in front of a candle. About the same time every year, I whistle her tune and feel her jump up on me and I pet her. It has been many years since she has passed but I believe she still graciously grants me her presence every now and then.

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OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Caleb Anderson: My name is Caleb Anderson, and I've been interested in computer graphics ever since the video game Portal came out back in 2007. I became obsessed with that game shortly after its release, and my obsession only grew stronger with the discovery of the game's level creation tools. Since then, I've been designing environments, challenges, objects, and characters within dozens of virtual worlds for people to experience. Given my involvement with the DDRT program, it's very possible that one day the worlds I design won't be strictly virtual anymore.

Kaita Baird: I moved to my current house over a decade ago and instantly loved our backyard. From being a small child playing in the big yard to a teenage girl admiring the scene, the backyard has always served an important role in my life and will continue on after I start the next chapter in my adventure.

Cecelia Bialas: I am a Nebraska native, untraditional student who is taking classes towards an English major at UNL. After I graduated from high school in 2016, I spent a semester at UNO studying music education, but had to withdraw for health reasons. Since that point, I have been battling chronic illness, working at jobs I've loved (and some that I have definitely not loved), completing my general education classes (who knew how much I'd love medical terminology and anatomy?!), and finding who I am again, as my health has returned, along with a new thirst for life. Horses are by far my biggest passion, closely followed by reading, and spending time outdoors. I also love to share my health journey with others, as an advocate online. I have always been drawn to the arts; poetry writing is a newfound form of expression that I've come to love, thanks to the class I took at SCC during the spring semester.

Rebecca Burt: Rebecca Burt is a Life Sciences instructor at Southeast Community College, Beatrice Campus. She greatly enjoys long-distance bicycle riding, traveling, spending time outdoors, reading, and learning new things beyond science.

Teresa Burt: Poetry is me. Me in every shape and form, not just the happy, flowery me, but also the broken person who lives in the muck, the child who sings and skips in the mud puddles, the mother that fails, and the wife who loves but who also hurts sometimes. Whatever is happening in my life is my poetry.

Jennifer Campbell: I am a 38 year old mother of two beautiful daughters, Solarra, who is 8 years old and Saylor, who is 6 years old. On June 30th, 2009 I gave birth to my oldest daughter Gabby who shortly passed away at just 2 months old from SIDS. My hope in sharing this memoir is to reach out to others who are struggling with the grief of a child as I have. While death can bring a great deal of darkness the moment I saw those butterflies was my tiny glimpse of hope.

David Frenzel: Writer, poet, student, activist, author, artist, musician, lover, fighter.

Patty Haddow: I enjoy the beauty of nature..

Tanya Hare: I love photographs. You get to see a moment in time.

Michaela Hartman: I post my work on my website: <http://www.sunflowerpoetry93.weebly.com> as well as on various social media platforms including a podcast called, "Sunflower Poetry Podcast". Most of my poetry is personal and focuses on the intensity of emotion along with my faith. Besides working, I continue to be active in

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

theater and choir through SCC because of the influence of Dr. Jon Gruett. The picture I have included is of the cast from the Spring production that was due to perform but wasn't able to due to the pandemic. We hope to perform this show in the near future.

Stewart Haszard: Stewart Haszard is a student at Southeast Community College pursuing an Associates of Arts degree. After graduation, he plans to transfer to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as a psychology major. Stewart was born and raised in Lincoln, NE.

Lynda Heiden: By nature, I am not a creative person, but photography teaches me to look at things differently. It also shows me the beauty of "ordinary" things and to appreciate the world around me.

Marge Itzen: I like to write, sketch, take photos, ride around in the country and sleep among other things.

Jaime Jones: I was born and raised in Mississippi. Due to intense mistreatment growing up queer, I was forced to drop out of school and ended up homeless. Years later and despite the resulting agoraphobia from those reverberating experiences, I chose to obtain GED and enroll in college at SCC to pursue a degree in Social Work. It was those who personally went through similar challenges that reached me the most and I want to give that back.

Jacob Linke: My name is Jacob Linke. I was born in Nebraska. I am trying.

Cheney Luttich: Cheney is an adjunct instructor at SCC. In her free time, she enjoys writing, visiting historical sites, and hanging out with her family.

Andrew J. O'Conner: My name is Andrew J. O'Connor, and I am an aspiring author, composer, programmer, YouTuber, and cat lover; A kinky christian with his heart set on romance, I enjoy a variety of physical and intellectual pursuits. I hope to one day introduce the real world to the ones I have created in my works.

David C. Schmitter: My life has always teetered between the arts and sciences. I earned my B.A. and PhD. in physics, but spent much time in college juggling. Since starting at SCC as a physics instructor almost three years ago, I took up improv and now perform with Occasionally Hilarious!, a local improv troupe.

Peter Voigt: Hi, my name is Peter Voigt. I am an outdoor enthusiast and a firm animal lover. I thoroughly enjoy writing short stories of memorable moments I have experience with wild animals and pets.

Tammy Zimmer: Tammy Zimmer is an English Instructor on the Beatrice campus as well as the editor of *Illuminations*. In her spare time, she enjoys playing board games, reading, and writing.



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The breeze barely dares to breathe, yet the blossom tree shifts in a gentle sway. Kaleidoscopic sunbursts of magenta, chartreuse, and faded blue bridge the small gulf between lashed lids as your eyes squint in the brightness, dragging the corners of your mouth upward.

Cecelia Bialas
"Seasonal Effective"

In the summer heat, the trees are adorned with vibrant dark green leaves at high noon, which changes to a lighter yellow-green as the sun starts to dip down behind the horizon. Children play in the background in the yard of a small cute house on the other side of the street. Their laughter carries throughout the world around them.

Kaita Baird
"Hidden Gem"

The October sun was deceiving, shining so bright in the cold. However, the salve of intoxication protected me from the bite of the autumn breeze.

Jacob William Linke
"Fall Break"

Watching the flowers dance to the rhythm of the singing, swaying grass.

Teresa Burt
"My Soul"

Just then, turning that first corner at the end of the mile from the church, I saw it. I saw my first glimpse of hope. Fluttering from every ditch were small orange Monarchs, thousands of them rising out of the tall golden grass-like graceful little angels.

Jennifer Wood
"Gabby Sleeps"