

# Floodwall

volume 2, issue 13

spring 2026



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Front cover: Detail from "Study on 11/21/2025,"  
by Donnelly Fuglseth



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*Floodwall* is a production of students at the University of North Dakota. The magazine is produced by volunteers and students enrolled in the certificate program in Writing, Editing, & Publishing. Submissions to *Floodwall* are open only to students currently enrolled in an undergraduate, graduate, or certificate program at UND. Submission guidelines are posted on the *Floodwall* website: [www.und.edu/floodwall](http://www.und.edu/floodwall).

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## From the Editors

Spring is officially here, and so is *Floodwall* 2.13, the latest issue of UND's student-run literary magazine! After the . . . interesting . . . weather patterns we've had this season, it's great to have a new issue to carry us through these transitional periods. We here at *Floodwall* are so excited to once again share the work of our incredible contributors with you all.

Speaking of transitions, this issue carries a bittersweet feeling for those of us on the masthead. It's hard to believe so much time has passed since the last issue, but as the semester draws to a close, we find ourselves once again passing the baton to new editors and new ideas. Our two assistant managing editors, Azayla Sabin and Caius Buran, will become full co-editors this fall. The two of them have done a great job so far in learning the ropes and adapting to change, and we have no doubts that they'll continue to do great things under the guidance of *Floodwall's* advisors, Dr. Courtney Kersten and Dr. Patrick Henry. While we—Jasmine and Vern—may not have gotten a great deal of time to work on the magazine, we are incredibly thankful and proud of the work we've done with *Floodwall*. It has been a joy to interact with our community, contributors, and masthead to produce something that everyone can enjoy.

Our cover, a study from a series of artworks by Donnelly Fuglseth, explores romance and the complexity of emotional states through reference photos, intermeshed and woven together like a collage. As you turn the pages in this issue, you'll see more of this collage of ideas and emotions come together; from musings on color, hauntings from ghosts good and bad, and visits from butterflies. As you journey through these pages, you'll discover a true ode to the human experience.

As always, we'd like to give special thanks to our advisors for being incredibly helpful and answering our many, many questions. We'd also like to thank and acknowledge the wonderfully dedicated team we've worked with this year; our team of student readers, section editors, copyeditors, chief copyeditors, design and layout volunteers, and proof-

readers are what make the world of *Floodwall* go 'round. It truly would not be the same without them. Be sure to check out our masthead for the full list of volunteers.

Of course, our magazine would not be what it is without the trust and talent of our contributors. To those who've contributed, past and present, thank you for sharing your stories, your art, and your thoughts with *Floodwall*. Whether it was because a friend told you about us, or an instructor strongly recommended you submit work, or because you submitted to one of the scholarships (like the Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry, the John Little Fiction Scholarship, or the Gladys Boen Scholarship), we thank you all the same. Our favorite thing about this magazine is our privilege to work with so many diverse pieces and individuals. You guys rock, and we will miss these moments with you.

To you, dear reader: thank you for continuing to support our magazine. Although we may be leaving, we hope that you'll continue to show up for our little community and share in the love of creation. Your support reminds us all why our work is so important.





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***fiction***



## In the Depths of Space

**Joseph Zimbleman**

331st Century, Year 10, Day 1

Mark was alone. The vast emptiness of space was something he would never get used to. Only the groaning and shuddering of the old spaceship filled the silence. He stared at his tablet's interface as he swiped through the ship's logs. Old messages littered the screen. He knew each of them by heart. Being in complete solitude for the past month had given him ample time to reflect on the past.

Essentially, he had nothing better to do. The old ship didn't offer much in the way of entertainment, which left him to revisit the past as he prepared for the future. He hated many of the files. Yet, he needed to see them, if only to remind himself why his journey mattered. If only to justify it all.

The red glint of his eyes reflected in the screen as Mark opened his inbox full of video and text messages. He pressed on the oldest one, and a video appeared on the screen. Three people stood in frame. His older brother, Buck, their precious younger sister, Autumn, and the most beautiful person he would ever have the pleasure of knowing, his wife, Irinna. He felt a smile creep onto his face as he pressed play.

*Inbox, Mark Gelenhal, 331st Century, Year 1, Day 1—*

*Hey, Mark, his sister said excitedly. We know you're probably busy*

*right now, since your expedition just started, so we wanted to send you a little goodbye message. We just want to let you know that we're incredibly proud of you, and we know you'll do great things out there. Buck is proud, too, even if he won't admit it.*

*You got this, buddy. Buck looked at the camera with his usual mischievous grin. Make sure to bring me back something cool. An alien relic or something. Or a woman if you meet someone cool out there.*

*Buck!*

*Whoa, calm down, Irinna, I'm just messing around.*

*Irinna looked into the camera with those beautiful blue eyes that Mark would never forget. What Buck is trying to say is that he misses you, just like we all do. I know you'll only be gone six years, but it's going to be the longest six years of our lives living without you. Just know that we love you and hope you're safe. And you'd better reach out whenever you're not busy. I love you, Mark.*

*Good luck, Mark! Autumn waved at the camera vigorously.*

*Safe travels, bro! Buck stood up and reached for the camera.*

*—End of message.*

Mark's smile disappeared as the video came to an end. It had been nine years since he departed on the six-year mission. His time on Earth was like another lifetime. Videos like those were all he had left to remember it.

Mark picked up his coffee from the desk as he stared at the screen, his red eyes reflecting in its glare. He flinched as the coffee reached his mouth, burning his tongue from the heat. He regretfully set down the cup.

The burning sensation in his mouth persisted, adding another layer of misery to Mark's life. He thought about getting some cold water, but he didn't see the point. Instead, Mark stood from his chair, ready to go about his daily routine.

Life alone on the ship was surprisingly easy. It didn't take much to keep everything in order: the spaceship mostly piloted itself. He simply had to set its destination and fix any maintenance issues that arose. Daily tasks were minimal.

First, Mark did his rounds in the ship's lower rooms. Most of the lower areas were reserved for living space. Every one of these rooms was devoid of life, except for a few decorative plants that still survived.

At first, he hadn't bothered to maintain them, but a few of the plants just refused to die and he eventually took pity on them.

He admired their resilience. It reminded him of his own life. His early years hadn't been easy. Neither of his parents had been around since he was five. Mark wasn't sure of the details of their disappearance. Buck knew, but he kept the details to himself, as if sparing them from the truth was any better.

For all of their childhood, Buck took care of them. Often through very unconventional methods. They used the little money their parents left behind to buy a home. All other expenses were left to Buck. Still, Mark's older brother made sure they never starved, no matter the cost.

People always judged them harshly for it. Buck grew quite a reputation back then, and that reputation followed Mark and Autumn like a shadow. Very few people wanted anything to do with either of them. Mark wasn't quite sure what exactly Buck did, but he knew his brother was considered among the best of the best at his work. Law enforcement in their area was very lax, which meant that Buck never did get caught.

Then, Mark landed the job at Alternative Technology and their lives were changed. He discovered his natural talent as an engineer, and the money he earned became enough to support all three of them.

With the plants taken care of, he moved on to the engine room to check that everything was functional. It was wise to check the engines for repairs daily to prevent disaster. Most of the engines didn't need fuel. They were powered by the reactors, which used a combination of the ship's waste and sunlight.

He didn't mind the task. Even when the rest of the crew had been around, it had been his job. Unlike the rest of them, Mark enjoyed the unbearable heat of the engine room. It reminded him of the day he met Irinna.

It was during his first month working for AltTech. They had him doing similar maintenance in one of their stations back on Earth. Back then, he found the heat of the engines painful, like everyone else. As he was working, he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned around, he was looking at the most beautiful girl in the world. She held a bottle of water in her hand and was extending it out to him. In the scalding heat, next to her, it was the best thing he had ever tasted. He remembered she complimented his green eyes as he drank.

When later asked about it, she would look at him in confusion. To

her, it was a simple act, but to Mark, it was completely alien. Her kindness shook him to his core. It was an unfamiliar feeling to receive kindness from someone other than his siblings. Yet there was a girl offering it up to every person she met. It hadn't taken long for Mark to fall in love with that girl and her kindness.

The dreadful heat became too much, and Mark brought his thoughts back to the present. His tasks in the engine room were completed. He had done them subconsciously without the need for focus. Mark rushed away from the engines and quickly slammed the door behind him.

Even after exiting the engine room, his face still burned from the heat. Mark realized he had been so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even know how long he had been in the room. Long enough to give his arms a slight burn, it seemed. He had no doubt his face was a similar sight.

With everything in the ship's lower deck in order, Mark ascended the stairs towards the ship's medical bay, hoping for something to soothe his burns. The ship's medical bay was equipped to handle nearly every situation imaginable. Handheld scanners could identify any known disease, and their replicator could produce anything they needed: ranging from medicine to internal organs. Before their departure, the medical professionals at AltTech calibrated the replicator to fit as many medical needs as they could think of.

The room was lined with shelves of different medicines, ointments, and tools, all prepared ahead of time for the problems deemed most likely to occur. An extra bed lay in the corner in case of the need for emergency isolation. The bed resided inside a casing that could be manually closed and locked from the outside. The pod itself was designed to fit a person's every need. The bed was by far the most comfortable in the entire ship. Mark remembered how they used to always joke about how much better the isolation pod was than their own beds. Kyle and Phoebe would always fight over the rights to the pod.

The AltTech executives had chosen the best of the best for the mission. Joining him were five others: the scientists, Xavier and Helen, the Assistant Engineers, Kyle and Phoebe, and Captain Sierra. Mark missed Kyle and Phoebe. He missed Kyle's innovative thoughts and Phoebe's inquisitive questions. He loved being there to guide them. He was to them what Buck had been to him and Autumn.

With his burns soothed, Mark exited the medical bay and walked into the lounge area of the ship. It was a cozy place. They had the finest furniture of their time. Mark collapsed into one of the reclining chairs and looked blankly at the space above him.

Their lounge was rather large. This gave them the luxury of having many windows in this particular room. Even the ceiling had a good view. Mark found it enjoyable to just stare up at the ceiling and look into the endless void before him. His thoughts really flowed when he did so, and, in such an isolated place, his thoughts were really all he could turn to.

As he reminisced on the past, he pulled out his tablet. Every message, every video, and every call was recorded and kept within his tablet. He could revisit those moments as many times as he wished.

Expedition Starlight began on the first day of the 331st century. Ground-breaking technology brought about the creation of a portal that took whoever entered far out into a distant galaxy, well beyond what was possible to reach with normal spacecraft. With the creation and testing of this technology, a mission was created. A mission to explore the new galaxy and learn as much as possible during a span of six full years before returning at the beginning of the seventh year of the century.

The best of the best were chosen for the mission. Before joining AltTech, Captain Sierra was a renowned military leader. Xavier and Helen were widely considered the best scientists alive. Phoebe and Kyle were AltTech's most skilled engineers, aside from Mark.

During his time at AltTech, Mark's skills as a mechanic and engineer surpassed those of anyone else. He could build spaceships and habitats more efficiently than anyone else. With time being so important, his presence had, naturally, been requested on the mission.

The first year of the expedition held most of Mark's fond memories. Once they were through the portal, everything went smoothly. They made many remarkable discoveries on the first day alone. At least, that's what the scientists kept claiming, and Mark was content to believe them.

Some nights, he and Irinna would talk for hours. He would tell her what he could about the expedition, and she would tell him all about her day. Mark remembered several instances where they both stayed up all night and he had to work through the next day without sleep.

One day, Mark saw on his tablet that Irinna had left a short message. *Please get on video with me tonight. We really need to talk. Love*

you.

At first, nothing seemed different when they talked. She spoke about her day, and Mark was content to listen. Then, she said words Mark would never forget.

“Babe, I’m pregnant.”

Mark’s world was knocked completely off balance by a whirlwind of emotions. The joy of starting a family with Irinna was a dream come true. But the timing was very unfortunate. Their child would have to live without a father for the first few years of its life. Moving forward, he would constantly be reminded of this fact, no matter how many times Irinna urged him not to feel guilty.

Over the following months, Mark made sure to check in with Irinna constantly. He always made sure he had time for her, no matter how busy he got with work on the spaceship. Occasionally, he would talk to Autumn as well.

With the money Mark earned at AltTech, he was able to help get Autumn into a good college. Shortly after his departure, Autumn began her studies. Mark wasn’t surprised to see her thrive. He had always considered his sister a genius.

Buck’s life was also turning around. After trying for months, Mark finally got his brother on a video call. Buck spent most of his time talking about the changes in his life. He had finally gotten a proper job.

A few days after the call with Buck, Mark’s son was born. They named him Adam, after Irinna’s late grandfather. Adam came into the world strong, healthy, and with green eyes just like his father’s. Mark took every opportunity he had to see them whenever possible. The first year of his mission really was the best.

In the second year of the mission, Captain Sierra chose the location for their base of operations. A small moon with breathable air and water. Xavier and Helen noticed a few signs of alien life, but never caught sight of anything.

During the construction of their base of operations, Mark was unable to contact Irinna as regularly. It was difficult for both of them, but they did their best to make use of what little time they were given. It was during this duration that Mark got on a video call with Autumn.

“Buck got in an accident,” Autumn cried, tears streaming down her face. “H-he didn’t make it.”

It took him five minutes to get those words from Autumn. She could barely compose herself enough to give Mark any information. Not that he was given time to process it anyway. They were on a tight schedule—there was so much that needed to be done in their six years. Captain Sierra gave Mark little time to mourn the death of his brother.

By the third year, their base was considered operational. With a proper place to operate, the pace of everything increased dramatically. The scientists had more room to work. Mark found himself growing busier each day.

Captain Sierra always had something new for the engineers. They didn't waste a single second. Mark had less and less time to himself. He could feel a gap beginning to form between him and Irinna. It angered him.

His relationship grew even worse with Autumn. Buck's death sparked a change in her. She grew more distant from Mark. She rarely sent messages and stopped trying to call altogether. Irinna told him Autumn was starting to fail her classes. She just stopped caring. Adam was the only one who still got her to smile.

Thinking back, it was difficult for Mark to remember much about how he spent his time. They did so much work that year. Built a whole damn station on that moon. Yet, it was all a blur to him. The only memories that stood out were the very few times he saw Irinna and Adam. He remembered every detail of their meetings.

The fourth and fifth years tested what remained of his resolve. They were on a three-month-long trip to the planet that the moon orbited. The planet was habitable, though conditions were much worse. Most of it was a frozen wasteland.

Surprisingly, despite the much harsher conditions, the planet had life. There were animals oddly similar to some that might be found on Earth. The scientists hypothesized this was because the traits of those animals were life's best way of surviving in such harsh conditions.

Xavier and Helen were so fascinated by their discoveries one day that they had to be forcibly dragged back onto the ship when it was time to leave. Or so Mark was told. He didn't participate. He was too stunned to be of use.

Earlier that same day, Irinna called Mark over video. His eyes wid-

ened when he noticed she was in a hospital.

“Wha—”

“Mark, w-we need to talk,” she said, tears already forming. “I know it’s gotta be really selfish of me to put this on you while you’re doing such important work, b-but I . . . I can’t keep this to myself.” She covered her face with her hands. Tears flowed out of her hands and down her arms as she continued, “I’m sick. Th-there’s n-no cure. Doctors say I have a couple years at best.”

Mark didn’t know how long he had spent sitting on the ground staring at the black screen of his tablet after the call ended. Long enough for them to pack everything up and prepare the ship for takeoff. Phoebe had supposedly overheard the call and explained it to the others. They helped him get to the ship, though he had little recollection of it.

They set him down in his chambers during their departure. Mark stared blankly up at the ceiling as he lay on his worn bed. Irinna didn’t want to tell him because she thought it was selfish to put her problems on his conscience, as if he wasn’t the selfish one for taking away the time they could have spent together during her final years.

Captain Sierra gave him a day off. One fucking day. After all the pain he had endured, that was his compensation. After that day was up, he went back to work.

His work became even more taxing as time went on. The fourth year turned into the fifth, and what time he could have spent with Irinna in her final years was instead spent engineering a second spaceship with some of the materials they had collected during the expedition. Mark suspected they needed a second spaceship to fit all of the samples they had collected.

Mark was barely able to see Irinna once a month. He knew it was hurting them both, but she didn’t let on. Irinna stayed as strong-willed as ever. Mark, on the other hand, felt his own resolve begin to crumble.

Their sixth year changed everything. Mark noticed that they weren’t making any preparations for their departure. Instead, they seemed more focused on the newly constructed spaceship. He had assumed it was for storage on their return, but he began to grow doubtful. His suspicions grew as the year came closer to an end.

Mark noticed that no one else seemed to be excited about going home. When he asked the scientists about it, they brushed off his sus-

picians, citing the love of their work. He did catch up with Phoebe one time between missions. She said she couldn't wait to go home either, but the look she gave him was one of pity, not of anticipation. Kyle reacted similarly.

Mark wasn't sure what tipped the balance for him, but he soon found himself sneaking into the captain's quarters of their old ship to discover what he could about the inner workings of Expedition Starlight. Only Captain Sierra was briefed on everything. It was no secret that certain parts of their mission were hidden. Captain Sierra was to debrief the crew on a case-by-case basis, based on her own judgment.

The computer in Captain Sierra's room was heavily secured. It required a password and clearance from the fingerprint and eye scanners. In other words, there was no possible way for anyone other than Captain Sierra to pass the security checks.

Fortunately for Mark, he had built many of these systems, including the one on the ship, so he knew how to disable them. After a brief period of tearing at the inner workings of the computer system, he had complete access to its files. He looked through the most recent mission reports and made a startling discovery.

*Captain's Log, 331st Century, Year 6, Day 1, Mission Report #127—*

*Today is the start of the sixth year of this mission. An important anniversary for sure. We have made a lot of progress in the past five years. The new ship will speed things up greatly. I must admit, the decision to bring Mark Gelenhal on this mission has raised our efficiency. His skills as an engineer are unmatched. However, I can't help but fear the conflict that may arise once he learns the truth. He's starting to ask questions. It's causing discomfort. Phoebe approached me recently. She asked if all this was really worth ruining someone's life. It won't be long before Mark learns that we don't have the technology to return home.*

*—End of Mission Report.*

*Mission Report #127, Response—*

*Captain Sierra. This message is straight from the top. Continue preparing what you can for settlement. Do not begin construction of anything that is a clear giveaway until Mark has learned the truth. Keep him ignorant for as long as you can. Once he discovers the truth, dispose of him if necessary. These beginning steps were crucial. We would*

*not have been so successful without Mark Gelenhal, and he would never have agreed had he known the portal we created was a one-way trip. So, tell your crew that, yes, it is worth ruining one man's life for the benefit of our species. Because of your crew, we'll finally be able to colonize this new land in the near future.*

—End of response.

Everything else Mark found among the other files supported what was summarized in those two messages. At one time, learning such a truth might have broken him completely. Yet, the suffering he had already endured gave him the strength to keep moving.

Mark remembered the events that transpired afterwards very well. The crew were all hanging out in the lounge area of their base of operations. Everyone was there, including Captain Sierra. That was where he confronted them.

"Did you all know?" Mark asked the question immediately upon entering the room. They all looked at him in confusion, wondering what he was talking about.

"Know what?" Phoebe looked up from her notebook.

"Did you all know?" he asked again. He could feel the tension in the air. There was a divide in the room between looks of pity and of concern.

"Yes, they did," Captain Sierra answered plainly. "Even your subordinates knew. You're the only one we couldn't afford to tell. I hope you can—"

"Dammit!" Mark yelled. "How could you do this? I can't believe you pieces of shit. How can you justify this? I go through all of this, just to learn that I'll never go home again?"

"Mark, calm yourself," Captain Sierra ordered calmly. She stared at Mark with an intensity that made his skin crawl.

"No, he's right," Phoebe interjected.

"Phoebe—" Kyle warned.

"He's completely right," Phoebe said as she stood up from her chair. "What right did we have dragging him here with us? We all knew what we signed up for and chose to come anyways, but he didn't. How can we say that sacrificing his life for the betterment of our cause was justified?"

"Don't encourage him, Phoebe," Xavier warned. "We don't know

if—”

“I can’t believe this,” Phoebe exclaimed. “How can you all sit there, thinking about everything that has happened, and say what we did was right? I think—”

“Don’t,” Kyle warned again.

“Mark, are you with us or against us?” Helen asked gently.

Mark let out a genuine laugh at the question. “My brother is dead. My sister’s mental health is ruined, and I’ll never be there for her—or any of them. I’ll never be a father to my child. My wife is dying, and I’ll never see her again. And you ask if I’m with you?”

“He’s right,” Phoebe said softly. “We never should’ve—”

A loud gunshot broke the silence. Mark remembered the pain he felt as he fell to the floor. He remembered how helpless he felt in that moment. Everything seemed so pointless as he stared at the blood beginning to pool around his face. Everything went dark.

Three years later, Mark opened his eyes again. He could remember being confused at first. His last memory was one of death. Then he noticed Kyle and Phoebe standing nearby, watching him as the memories came back.

Mark had anticipated Captain Sierra’s actions. He suspected she would determine him a threat to the mission. So, before confronting the crew, he went to the replicator in their old ship. Within its system was the prototype of a Mindstream, a small metal device that scanned your brain, recorded everything it saw, and kept a copy.

It was a rather faulty design. A prototype like the Mindstream wasn’t meant for actual use. Human brains were incredibly complex, and to replicate that was beyond difficult. Mark knew that better than anyone. The Mindstream was a prototype of his design. So, in that moment, he found himself at the complete mercy of his own creation.

During its creation, Mark sent a message to Kyle: *Kyle, I trust your judgment. I know the truth. I’m not going to stay silent about this. In case something happens, I left a Mindstream in your room. It’s the prototype I told you about. I trust you to make the right call. If you decide that everything was justified, then so be it. If I die today, I leave my fate in your hands.*

In the end, Kyle chose to side with Mark, as did Phoebe. It took over three years for them to build a new body for Mark. They took their

time, making sure to hide all evidence of their actions. They fabricated whatever they could with the medical replicator, including skin, a heart, and most other internal organs. They did what they could with organic materials and filled the gaps with mechanical parts. Mark's new body was designed to look exactly as his old one had. The only notable difference was that his once green eyes now glowed red.

Mark brought himself back to the present. He had lingered in his thoughts of the past for too long. He still needed to visit the ship's cockpit. He stood up from the recliner and walked towards the front of the ship.

The lounge was pretty, but the cockpit was, by far, the most beautiful view in the whole place. The front of the ship came to a point, and that point was almost entirely made of the same strengthened glass that was used for their windows.

Staring out at the sea of stars before him was once a sight he had considered breathtaking. Now, all he saw was an endless void. His perception had changed a lot over the years.

He checked the ship's trajectory on its radar. He was close. Captain Sierra and the scientists were on an expedition back to the frozen planet for a few months. In their ignorance, they had left Kyle and Phoebe behind to continue work on the small moon. Mark's old companions didn't hesitate to use the given opportunity to bring him back.

Mark chose to leave Kyle and Phoebe on the small moon. If he survived, he would return to them once it was over. Mark doubted he could ever forgive Kyle or Phoebe for what they had taken part in, but for their change of heart, he could at least bring himself to spare them. Let them suffer in their regrets, just as he did.

He sat down in the pilot's seat. A handgun lay resting on the dashboard. He often considered using it on himself. A simple solution to his pointless existence. But then he would watch the video to remind himself that his job was not done. Not until someone paid for the consequences of the damn mission.

Mark pulled out his tablet and went to the most recent messages for one final reminder. After he had been brought back, the first thing he checked was his tablet. Three years was a lot of time. He remembered how his heart skipped a beat at the six unopened messages. All of them from Irinna.

The first message was very simple. *Hey, I know we just talked re-*

cently, but can we get on a video call soon? It's been a while since I saw your face. The next four messages were similar follow-ups. Each grew more and more concerned. Then it ended with a video.

*Inbox, Mark Gelenhal, 331st Century, Year 7, Day 3—*

The room was empty, except for a doctor leaning against Irinna's empty hospital bed. *Hello Mark. I know it's probably strange seeing an unfamiliar face. I'm Dr. Cole. I'm terribly sorry to be sending this to you, but your wife, Irinna, passed away. She was a strong, kind woman. Truly a gift to this world. It is a miracle she was able to fight her condition for so long. She passed yesterday, the day after you were meant to return. We were quite shocked by her passing. She was strong for so long. It's almost like she simply lost the will to keep fighting. Anyway, I'm sure you don't want to hear much from me right now. I promised her I would send you her final message. In a moment, it should start playing.*

The video switched, and Irinna was lying in her hospital bed. She had dark circles around her eyes and red marks from recent tears.

*Hey Mark. She said, tears already beginning to form. You said you would come back. You promised. She paused for a moment to regain her composure before continuing. A man came to me yesterday. I'd been bothering the executives at AltTech since you stopped responding. They finally told me the truth. You aren't coming back. You never could. You knew you weren't coming back, and you lied to us. She was fully crying now. She continued to speak as she struggled to get the words out. I-I loved you so much. I-I g-gave you e-everyth-thing. How could you leave me behind like that? Everything we did together. Did it mean nothing to you? Do I mean nothing to you? You were my every-thing! But it was all a lie, wasn't it? She stopped speaking as she fully broke down. She continued crying for two minutes before recomposing herself once more. When you see this, I want you to know that I really did love you. I guess it was one-sided, though. You never loved me. I see that now. Goodbye, Mark.*

*—End of message.*

Mark didn't know if he was the same person anymore, but seeing that message broke him every time. Irinna died thinking he hated her, and he could do nothing about it. He would never forgive himself for that. He would never forgive the people who lied to him for that. He would

make them pay.

The ship's computer beeped to signal that it had arrived at its destination. Mark looked outside, stunned. There really was something wrong with him. He was so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed that the ship had landed. He had arrived.

Mark let out a huge sigh, grabbed the handgun from where it was resting on the ship's dashboard, and activated the doors. He crept up to the ship's doors as they began to open. He stayed as tight to the wall as he could while he tried to get a glimpse outside. He landed right next to their ship. They were probably already outside the doors.

It didn't take long for his suspicions to be confirmed. "Kyle? Phoebe? Why are you here? You were supposed to stay on the moon." There was a hint of fear in Helen's voice.

Mark heard footsteps approach, and he was met face-to-face with Xavier. Xavier reeled backwards in shock and fell to the ground at Mark's feet, fear in his eyes. Before Xavier could say anything, Mark pointed the gun and fired.

Screaming and shouting ensued. Mark turned the corner and fired at Helen. He missed his shot as she dove behind some nearby crates. Mark exited the spaceship and walked towards the boxes that Helen had hidden behind. He could hear her crying to herself as he approached. Then it occurred to him. Captain Sierra was missing.

His instincts screamed at him to turn around, but, before he could, he heard a gunshot that wasn't his and felt a bullet embed itself in the back of his skull. Shock from the impact knocked him to the ground.

"You dumb bastard," Captain Sierra hissed. "You just don't die, do you?" She kicked his body with her boot. "I knew we shouldn't have brought you with us. I tried to warn them, told them this would be a disaster, but they didn't listen. Now look what you've done. You don't even have the decency to die and let us continue our work."

He felt Captain Sierra slam her boot into his side as she continued, "How are you even alive?" Captain Sierra pressed her boot against him again, this time flipping him over onto his back. Her face paled as she looked into his red eyes. Mark reached for his gun as Captain Sierra shot him again. He felt a searing pain in his heart, but he ignored it. His heart had felt worse.

As Mark grabbed his gun and pointed it at Captain Sierra, she looked down at him in disbelief. Mark met her eyes one final time before

he pulled the trigger. Captain Sierra's lifeless body slammed against the frozen ground and the world grew silent.

Mark felt the bullets exit his body as the mechanical mesh within him worked to keep him alive. Luckily for him, he wasn't entirely human anymore. It still hurt though. Gun in hand, he stood and advanced towards Helen with violent intent.

"Please," Helen begged. "It was wrong what we did, but I can't change it. Captain Sierra said you had to die. We needed to go public with the mission once the deadline for our return passed. For that to work, your family had to believe you intentionally went on this one-way trip. We needed you dead so they would believe the lie. It was horrible of us. Please—"

Mark became deaf to her words. He pointed the gun at her, ready to shoot. Then he heard a noise come from his tablet. It was still clipped to his waist. He unhooked it and stared at the screen. He had a new message. It was from Autumn. With the gun still pointed at Helen, he opened the message. It was only a text.

*Mark, I know this will reach you, but I doubt you'll respond. Today's a special day. It's the anniversary of the day you left us behind. Not that you care. Anyway, I figured I should send you one final message. My therapist said it might help me move on. I've been taking care of Adam since Irinna passed. It's what Buck would have done. I'll teach him to keep his promises, unlike you. This will probably be the last message you ever receive from anyone on Earth. Congratulations, Mark. Everyone who cares about you is dead or moving on. Hope you're happy with your life.*

Mark stared at the tablet in silence. Helen looked up at him nervously, waiting to see what he did. After a long, drawn-out silence, he gestured towards the ship. "Get in the isolation pod. I'll decide what to do with you later."

She gave him a confused look. Puzzled, but still fearful. "W-why are you sparing me?"

Mark looked up at the sky. He imagined that he was looking at Earth, somewhere off in the far, unreachable distance. "I have a message to send," he said simply.

**Joseph Zimbleman** is a sophomore majoring in English. He hopes that, as he continues to improve his writing, he may become an author of a few books in the future. Whether experiencing or trying to create, Joseph loves a good story. Aside from reading and writing, in his free time, he enjoys going to the gym or picking from a long list of beloved video games to play.

## Two Flash Fictions

**Robert Moore, Jr.**

### **The Main Character**

Monica was born with pink hair. Can you believe it? Pink. Hair. Nobody else was born with hair in shades other than the usual brown, blonde, or red. They all had nice, normal colors for their hair. Monica had pink. Could they have made it more obvious that she was the main character? To top it off, she was now 18 and had no memories of her childhood. Sure, there were pictures and elementary school friends, but the stories they told weren't memories. They just popped into her head, fully formed, as needed. No one else seemed to notice these things, but she did. Now she was 18, at her own birthday party, and resenting the lack of coherent flow to her life.

"Hey Monica. Happy Birthday." It was Thomas Redland, the boy she'd had a crush on since sixth . . . No! No, he wasn't. She'd never seen him before today. She had never seen him before this party and his birthday wish to her.

She knew she was supposed to blush, smile nervously, and stammer out, "Thank you." She felt the urge. It was a compulsion driving her to do these silly things for a complete stranger. Her face heated. Her

tongue worked to form those two words. And she fought it. She might be in a movie, but she would not follow the script.

Her mouth opened and she thrust the first thing that came to her mind out. "Fuck you, loser." There was a gasp, and for the first time in her life, Monica felt free.

It took her a moment to recognize that the gasp hadn't come from her. In fact, it hadn't come from anyone in the room. Her living room was silent and everyone in it was still. The smells of burning candles and icing disappeared.

She'd done it. She'd beaten the script, and with more far-reaching consequences than she'd considered. The world reasserted itself quickly, though, and as everything started moving again, she felt the urge to run from the room in embarrassment. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to stay where she was. She lifted a hand against the weight of the world and waved away her words.

"Sorry about that, Thomas. I'm sure you're a nice guy, and I shouldn't have said that, but I don't really know you, and I had to break the script." Monica turned to a random spot in the room to look at the camera and said, "Right?"

## Oblivious

Mark Watkins is heading to work this morning. Only, he can't just go to work. He has to be special and stop by the coffee shop. Getting himself a cup would be understandable, but no, he has to get something for the entire office. Four lattes, two mochas, and some herbal thing for the intern that pretends to not like sugar. Oh, and he can't forget the Danishes.

He doesn't notice how pathetic they think he is. How can someone be so oblivious? All the whispers and covert glances go right over his head. They think he's a chump: trying to buy their friendship and goodwill with pastries and caffeine.

It doesn't stop there. He's late for a meeting with the marketing team, but of course he holds the elevator for the mailroom clerk. He stands there smiling while the clerk hesitates, as if deadlines are optional when you're being decent.

And heaven forbid the intern has a breakdown. Her account report is due tomorrow, and instead of working on his own, he doodles a cat on a sticky note. As if that's not sappy enough, he writes, "You're doing great!" on it and gives it to her, like that fixes anything. She smiles, sure, but they always smile. The whispers start once he's gone.

He lets a coworker step in front of him at lunch. Of course he does, then smiles as his food gets cold. Later, he refills the coffee pot instead of leaving it for someone else. He picks up the office assistant's dropped memo. He'll change the world for certain.

Now it's quitting time, and it's raining. At least he has his umbrella. Not for long, though. There's a kid waiting at the bus stop, hunched up against the cold and wet. It's not going to matter to this kid, but he goes over and hands them his umbrella anyway. It's still a long walk home, but now his shirt clings to him and water drips into his eyes through his rain-flattened hair.

His key is stiff in the lock to his apartment, probably from the rain. He pushes the door closed and stands there while water squelches in his shoes. His head drops against the door. Water drips on the floor in slow, patient taps. That'll need cleaning later.

"Can I have just one quiet day?" he asks.

Silence fills the apartment, settling around him like a comforting blanket.

One breath.

Two.

*You see? A little cold and wet, by his own choice, and he's falling apart.*

**Robert Moore, Jr.**, is the lab manager for the Department of Physics & Astrophysics. He's also a student pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. In his limited spare time, he writes, considering himself a storyteller and hoping others will join him around the fire to share a tale. In his travels around the country, he's also managed to take an interesting photograph or two.

## Evening Routine

**Brenden Kimpe**

Franklin Foster is a very particular man. Each morning, before he departs for his corporate insurance job, he follows a strict, set routine; of which he has been stuck within since he was able to get ready for school without the help of his mother. Immediately upon awakening at 6:00 a.m., he rushes to the bathroom to brush his teeth with industrial strength toothpaste that leaves his molars glistening. Mother had always said he must brush his teeth first thing in the morning. Besides, he likes the sting of peppermint upon his slightly cracked tongue, but even more so, he loves the paralyzing sense of fridity that he gets from drinking an ice-cold glass of water afterwards. He relieves himself for the first time of the day while drinking. The tandem intake and output of liquid leaves him feeling exhilarated.

The next box to be checked on Franklin's morning routine is breakfast. At 6:10, he creates a hole in the center of a piece of bread with the same glass he drinks from and plops a jumbo-sized egg into it once the pan is hot enough. Franklin munches his breakfast while standing at the counter and sips a glass of pulpless orange juice. He nibbles around the egg filled toast and when only the center remains, he shoves it into his mouth, breaking open the gooey yolk with his tongue. There's never any variation in his breakfast, as he feels that consistency is the spice of life. He doesn't let his breakfast dishes touch the table—that's reserved

strictly for lunch and dinner—and lets them rest beside the sink. At 6:40, he starts the electric kettle and prepares a mug of green tea. Franklin despises coffee because it tastes like mud. Bean juice. But the little boost from the caffeinated tea is plenty enough to get him riled up. This morning routine has been conducted in his tighty-whities, but thankfully he now gets dressed while sipping from a hot mug.

Franklin looks out the window upon his idyllic neighborhood after he finishes dressing. The sun has almost risen, and he sees that his neighbor across the road, the Parsons, already have one car missing. Good old Mr. Parson is already on his way to today's construction site while the wife is left home to wrangle the kids. Franklin feels sorry for the woman. He would never leave his wife to such functions, but then again, Franklin doesn't have kids. He doesn't have a wife either. The closest he ever came to that stage of his life was when his mom had offered to go to prom with him in his junior year of high school. That was only after he had gotten too many rejections to care anymore. She did things like that, and Franklin remembered her for it.

He departs for work after finishing his tea, backing out of the one car garage connected to his small, ranch style home. The wheels hit the asphalt of Pine Drive at 7:15 and never go above the speed limit. The workday for Franklin is filled with mundane tasks and assignments once he arrives at the office by 7:45. For the average person, an occasional box of donuts in the break room or the bi-yearly fire drill would make up the more exciting ventures at Johnson & Feder Insurance. Franklin is not an average person. He takes joy from stapling hundreds of papers a day or fixing the jammed printer because they're low stakes assignments. He's a trusted man at Johnson & Feder. But he always avoids the post-shift conversations or invitations to the local bars or BBQ joints because he has a routine to get to, one that even considers the twenty to thirty minutes of post-work traffic he is sure to encounter on the way home. If he arrives early, he waits in the driveway.

When the clock strikes 4:30 p.m., Franklin goes inside and completes his afternoon chores. He handwashes his morning dishes that were left in the sink because the dishwasher would inevitably become filled with the detritus of long forgotten meals. Dishwashers are nothing but a treasure trove of bacteria and Franklin relishes the feeling of soaking his hands in warm, soapy water, especially when it softens the food enough to squish between his fingers. Since today is Thursday, he tosses

in a load of laundry and begins cooking dinner at 5:05. He turns on the television in the living room so that he can listen while cooking. Later, he will lock eyes with its screen until he finishes his meal at 6:00 p.m. In more ways than one, Franklin Foster was also a very peculiar man, as this routine had remained largely unchanged for nearly twenty-seven of his forty-six years. That is, until tonight.

Franklin was stirring the slightly browned ground beef on the stove, acutely listening to a bumbling contestant on tonight's episode of *Wheel of Fortune*, when he heard a faint scratching noise coming from the laundry room. The stirring ceased. He listened for a moment longer, but there was nothing. He began stirring again and turned his mind towards the prize puzzle. Tonight's contestant had the opportunity to win an all-expense paid trip to Barbados. The wheel of good fortune rattled in the living room accompanied by another, more foreign sound.

The scratching had started once more.

Again, it stopped when he did.

A faint chill ran through Franklin's body and the hair on his arms stood at attention like good little soldiers. He walked briskly into the laundry room and turned on the light. The washing machine was slowly pulsing towards the end of its cycle, and the air was tinged with the sharp scent of detergent. There was nothing here, but Franklin had to be *sure*. He allotted exactly seventeen minutes in his evening routine for such distractions. Occasionally he would turn away diligent girl scouts spouting the lowered prices of cookies or devoted Jehovah's witnesses looking to berate him about their god, sparing only seconds if he could. This was no different.

The scratching picked up again, and he noticed that it was coming from behind the washer. He pushed his hamper to the side so he could get a good look at the back, hoping it was nothing but a quick mechanical fix. He stuck his hands into the dark crevice between the wall and machine and nearly screamed with surprise when a mouse darted between his kneeling legs. Franklin spun around just in time to watch it skirt the corner and head towards the kitchen.

He let out a slow moan.

No. No no no. This can't be. A mouse was sure to bring a slew of distractions and inconveniences. Mother always claimed that mice were a sign of disorganization and filthiness. A horrid memory resurfaced where she had released one into Franklins room once when she felt it

wasn't cleaned to her satisfaction. She had held her body against the door and laughed in triumph as he yelped in fear. He simply didn't know what he would do if he couldn't solve this issue in a timely manner. He scrambled to his feet and followed the direction of the mouse, coming to a stop in the middle of the kitchen. The ground beef was still bubbling on the stove, the spurting clack of the wheel of misfortune came from the living room, and a slight scratching noise escaped the cupboard beneath the sink. He wrenched open the doors and began pulling cleaning solutions, sponges, dish soap, and spare rags onto the floor, subconsciously noting the time it would take to replace them. A beam of light reached perfectly into the back left corner, and that's where Franklin got his first good look at the face of his demise.

The mouse was small and a sooty brown. It panted heavily in the corner as it stared into Franklin's hazel eyes with its own beady black ones. It looked scared; terrified, even. And for the slightest moment, Franklin felt a sense of pity cross into his emotional threshold. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was 5:28; there were only fourteen minutes left in his designated distraction window. Anger and frustration returned with a vengeful flare and Franklin found himself crawling under the sink. His outstretched hand intending on squeezing the mouse until its own time had run out.

He was inches from enacting death when the mouse sprung. In a sudden bold move, it jumped onto his hand and skittered up his arm. Franklin felt that he no longer saw fear and desperation in the mouse's eyes, but instead, determination, grit, and possibly worst of all, a plan. It blew past his ear in a brown blur and jumped off his shoulder, landing squarely behind him. Franklin jerked with surprise, letting out a real scream this time, and slammed the back of his head into the underside of the sink. There was a muffled crunch. His final thoughts were how stupid it was to be so scared of a little mouse and that the ground beef on the stove was going to burn.

There was a wet sensation soaking the left side of Franklin's face. He groaned yet kept his eyes shut. He was coming out of a long and nightmare fueled dream. He had dreamed that there was a mouse under his sink. That it was disrupting his evening routine and getting up to no good. Thankfully, the dream had ended right before his dream-self had felt confident enough to reach for the damned thing. He would never touch a mouse. Mother always said they were foul, disease-ridden crea-

tures. His eyes cracked open, but he couldn't see a thing. The world was black. No semblance of light or color reached his tortured retinas, so he panicked. He didn't immediately jump up—some inert part of him said not to do so, of this he was thankful—and instead raised his head enough to get a whiff of what he had been lying in. It was the sharp and impeding scent of multi-purpose cleaner that burned the insides of his nostrils. The kind that was advertised as lemon scented but was more like an inbred cousin of one. He slid out from under the sink in a reverential daze. The dream hadn't been fictional after all. It was an inconceivable nightmare that came back to him in horrifying clarity. He attempted to stand but was brought back to his knees by a pounding ache in the back of his head. He ran his fingers through his hair and found a soft spot that when touched, sent arrows of pain into the backs of his eyes. His fingers came back sticky. While remaining motionless, piecing together what had just happened to him, a voice spoke from within the gloom.

"I was beginning to wonder how long you would sleep. You were starting to worry me."

Franklin looked around him, still panicking at his blindness when it became clear. It was no longer midafternoon in the Foster family home. Quite the opposite. As if on cue, the blurred outlines of furniture materialized before him and the windows in his kitchen allowed the soft glow of the suburban night into the house. Franklin had lost hours underneath the sink. There was so much he was supposed to have done. The car needed to be put in the garage, a shower had been lined up, dinner was in the middle of cooking! He reflexively spun towards the stove and winced in pain. It all rolled in grandiose waves that began at the back of his head and broke upon his brow.

"Don't worry. I turned off the stove so your dinner wouldn't burn. Although it wouldn't matter much since you won't be eating tonight."

Franklin was sure that he had been imagining the voice at first, but its presence was irrefutable. And yet, impossible. He looked around and saw no one. Not a shadowy figure, disembodied head, or floating ghoul hovering in his vicinity. Yet, there was the presence of something else. He wasn't alone.

"H-hello? If you're really there then show yourself. I think I need to go to the hospital." Thinking was an understatement, and he wouldn't be able to do much more of it if he didn't get help soon. Movement had inevitably broken the weak clotting that had taken place during his

impromptu snooze, and he could feel the blood trickling down his back, snaking along his spine and soaking the elastic band of his tighy-whities.

The voice clicked its tongue in disapproval, "Oh poor Frankie. Did you bonk your wittle head?" Franklin froze and trembled with fear. His eyes were widening, the blood-soaked hair on the back of his neck rose in apprehension. His hands grew white as they clutched his knees. He recognized that voice but simultaneously knew it to be impossible. He rejected the very idea. What he did know was that someone was there, and that they knew he was hurt yet didn't care. They were *toying* with him. He attempted to muster an authoritative voice and scare away the intruder.

"Who's there? Tell me right now or I'm calling the police. If this is your idea of a prank then I don't find it very funny."

"This is no prankie, little Frankie. Why don't you face me when I'm talking to you? It's the polite thing to do." The voice was soft and cooing, lulling him into a state of mind long forgotten, locked into the deep recesses of his mind.

He knew he shouldn't go along with this. Nevertheless, he replied, "I don't know where you are. I can't see you."

The voice suddenly took on a new dimension, condensing into the side of the room that held the stove. It was whistling for attention, "Yoo hoo, over hereee." Sitting atop one of the burners, perfectly positioned in a beam of moonlight, was the damned mouse that had started it all. It sat perched on its haunches, back erect with its hands dangling by its sides. Its ears were cocked towards him and its whiskers stood deadly still. Not even its nose twitched. One would think it was nothing but a figurine if not for the gleam of its eyes. They were black all the way through. So dark that they were nearly purple, and so deep that they reflected the entirety of the cosmos with indifferent boredom. They bore into the soul of Franklin Foster, through his own widening pupils. He broke and turned toward the floor.

His eyes brimmed with tears. This couldn't be happening, not to him. He would look back at the spot where he had imagined the mouse and find it empty. The vile creature would be gone to whatever depths of heaven or hell it had fallen or climbed from.

He risked a glance and saw that it was still there, unmoving, and he quickly looked back to the floor. It was his refuge in this time of crisis. His tether to reality that he was clinging to, desperate not to fall into a

bottomless pit of insanity. Fat droplets of blood had begun to fall there, curving around his downturned head and dripping off his nose and lips. They mixed unhappily with the tears that had begun streaming out of his eyes.

"What's the matter? Mouse got your tongue?" The mouse giggled at its own witty comment, sending a shiver through Franklin. The voice was soft and sickeningly sweet, but the laughter had come from some deeper unspoken place, full of bass and malevolence.

"You're not real. I know it. You're just some fucked up thing that I'm seeing because I hit my head." Franklin began babbling to himself, hoping to air a degree of comfort to his unraveling mind, "You've had a serious accident, Franklin. You bonked your head up real good and now you're imagining a mouse that speaks, with your own mother's voice, no less. You need to stand up and call 911. You need help." But Franklin couldn't get himself to work up the courage. He had frozen in this kneeling position, prostrating at the feet of his own madness.

The mouse spoke up, "You are in desperate need of help, Frankie, but not due to your head. Oh no, you're in much deeper trouble than that. But you don't need me to tell you that, do you?"

Franklin gave up trying to imagine that this was some cruel vision, some sick play directed by his own mind starring his long dead mother. "What do you want?" He cried, "If you're here to kill me, then just get it over with."

The mouse laughed heartily now; a booming roar that echoed through the kitchen. "Why, what a fine idea! But no, I'm not here for that. It's only fun for a moment."

"Then what do you want?" the question was laced with terrified curiosity. He desperately needed to know what it wanted. What it needed so that he could satisfy it in any way he could.

"Why should I tell you? Wouldn't that spoil all the fun?" The mouse disappeared from the stove and materialized before him, moving much too quickly for his aching eyes to see. "Why don't you sit down. Get a little more comfortable for me, why dontcha?"

Franklin suddenly realized how shaky his knees were. How much blood had pooled between his feet. Slowly, he squatted and plopped onto his backside. His head pounded in protest while his legs cried out in relief. The mouse was sitting now, too. Resting back with its tail curled around its sprawling legs. It was mimicking him.

The mouse spoke first, "So, how was your day?"

Franklin's resolve wavered at the simplicity of the question, nearly resorting to a scream of confusion before mumbling that it was fine.

"Aren't you going to ask how mine was? Conversation is reciprocal, you know." The mouse held no discernable expression, but its eyes conveyed a smugness that irritated Franklin to no end. Was it truly here for conversation and conversation only?

"Fine. How was your day . . ." Franklin paused.

"Ms. Mouse is fine. I prefer the formality."

"How was your day, Ms. Mouse?"

"Why, I'm so glad you asked," Ms. Mouse replied brightly, "It was going swell. Good food, nice weather, I even decided to clean up my house a bit since it was Thursday. You know, just *routine* stuff. But then this guy decided to scare the shit outta me. Can you believe that? I actually thought he was gonna kill me." Ms. Mouse paused, "And you were going to kill me, weren't you, Frankie?"

"Of course I was. You're a mouse living in my laundry room. It's only natural."

Ms. Mouse feigned shock, gasping dramatically and putting the back of its hand against its forehead, "How very macho of you. The big strong man playing at exterminator." Ms. Mouse got up and approached Franklin, waltzing delicately through his puddle of blood and leaving a trail of perfect footprints. "Didn't it ever occur to you that *I* was also worried about it? A human, of all creatures, infesting my house and claiming it as their own. How disgusting." Ms. Mouse spat on the floor. "I've been trying to get rid of you for years."

"Years? That's impossible. Mice don't live that long."

"Do I look like a normal mouse to you?" Franklin thought that yes, it did look like a perfectly normal mouse. But upon further study, he discovered that Ms. Mouse was no mere stereotype. Its eyes faced forward rather than to the sides. Its hands bore useful looking thumbs longer than the rest of its fingers. The sooty brown fur atop its head was longer, coarser, resembling something more like hair. Human hair.

"No, you don't look normal. You're anything but." His eyes had to be deceiving him. Just a moment ago, the rodent in front of him had looked perfectly natural aside from its uncanny ability to speak. Now the hair atop Ms. Mouse's head was growing longer by the second, extending past its bony shoulders and stopping right above its hips. The fur

on its face was also changing; being sucked in through enlarged pores that gaped in the now visible pale skin. Its teeth remained frozen in the rodential buck-toothed grin that screamed insanity. He had only seen one grin like that in his life. Now it began, no. No longer it. She began to grow by writhing unnaturally as bones cracked and skin split into grander versions that took the place of the old. Breasts that had been remnants of his childhood memory sprouted in front of him, teasingly perky with their youth before deflating into the aged specters that were features of her final years. She stood before him, large and imposing as a caricatured imposter of his mother, occasionally jerking or twitching this way and that as her metamorphosis neared its completion.

Franklin sat before his mother, offering soft whimpers when sounds crept out of her body that he refused to acknowledge. She towered, hands on hips, and laughed at his gibbering.

"You really thought you were hot shit, didn't you?" Franklin didn't reply so she continued, "Day after day I busted my ass making sure you had the childhood you deserved. Did I get anything in return?"

Silence.

"Don't give me that shit. I was sick of it then and I'm sick of it now. But you got me back didntcha? And you know exactly what I'm talking about. I did *everything* for you. I got rid of your father, gave you the structure and order that you craved, got you into a good routine. I even let you stick your—"

"Stop!" Franklin screamed, "Please stop. I don't want to hear this; I'll do anything you want me to but just please stop it. I can't take it."

Ms. Foster's voice lapsed back into the soft coo that it was when the night began, stretching out her words, "You waited until you knew for sure I couldn't fight back. I always knew you were a coward, too much of one to take on your mother when it was fair. You know I couldn't leave that alone. You knew I would be back even after you tossed me under the crabapple tree with less of a ceremony than a family pet."

Ms. Foster continued ranting but Franklin was spent. Burned up. Tired and defeated. He no longer spoke or protested when she continued her monologue. He was trapped inside a Freudian nightmare of epic proportions and couldn't wake up. He didn't utter a sound when she slapped his cheeks or splashed water on his face. He wasn't there for any of that. He was gone. Losing sight of the routine, Franklin's time finally ran out.

Yellow tape encircled the front lawn of the Foster household. Red and blue lights washed the front of the Parson residence in their sterile glow while droves of characters walked about with their tasks lain before them. One of the Stern County detectives walked up to his colleague, fishing for clues.

“Hey Jim, how’s it looking?”

“Oh, you know, pretty bad one this time. Gonna be a while before I get this stink outta my shirt.”

“You’re telling me. I haven’t even been in there yet.”

Jim was surprised, “Really? Well, you better steel yourself up real good then. It’s quite the scene.”

“I know he was dead for a couple days, but it couldn’t be that bad, right? I’ve seen my fair share of cases.” Hal was a bit skeptical about Jim’s insistence on the extreme nature of the situation. He had been working for Stern County for almost fifteen years now and had seen a variety of cases that would give anyone the heebie-jeebies. There was one time when the abusive husband of a young lady had grabbed the wheel of the car as she was driving and steered them off into a telephone pole. He was still in the car groaning that he didn’t mean it, but one half of his wife was about fifty yards in front of the other. Another time he had gotten a call out to Milltown on a homicide involving a teenage male. Hal had later found out from the boy’s therapist that the boy had apparently been having some strange dreams which resulted in him going off on his family with his dad’s flathead screwdriver. All but one of the fingernails on the boy’s mom had been pried off, premortem too. Regardless, Hal took Jim’s words to heart. He had also been working on this type of stuff for a few years now and wasn’t someone to shake a sore finger at.

Hal could smell him before he opened the front door. That sickly sweet scent that told the nostrils “yes” while the brain screamed “no.” The man—Franklin Foster, according to the report he had read on the way in—was lying on his kitchen floor. He had been melting into the linoleum because, for some reason, the air conditioner had been turned off even though it was the end of August. Hal didn’t think that Franklin was too bad, considering the circumstances, until he got a good look at his face. His stomach grew queasy, and he had to step out for a few minutes. Jim wasn’t kidding. It was clear that Franklin Foster had a bit of a rodent problem.

If you've ever read a book or short story that was so scary it knocked your socks off, **Brenden Kimpe** would like the recommendation. When he isn't reading or writing, Brenden enjoys cooking, listening to music, watching movies, and fawning over his cat, Marceline.

## Cinnamon Buns and Ghosts

### Gabby Park

“Even my bags have bags, Jesus. I thought I’d have adjusted to this by now.” Anna swept her brown, curly hair into a loose bun and pulled her face away from the mirror. She trudged out of the bathroom, hitting the light switch with the back of her hand. She walked to the window and shut the blinds, trying to keep the growing daylight out of her room. A groan escaped her as she flopped onto her bed and threw the green quilt over her head.

Anna closed her eyes, fighting off thoughts that threatened to keep her awake: how much her feet ached, what time it was, who she would help tomorrow, and why she decided to open a food truck with the inheritance from her grandma. The bed creaked as she tossed and turned. Her mind wandered to the quilt: how soft it felt, how it was the perfect shade of emerald, and how happy her grandma was when Anna opened the present and hugged the gift. The pillow under her head dampened as the tears rolled off her cheeks. She used the quilt’s edge to dry her eyes and took a deep breath.

After a moment, everything started to slip away and sink into black as sleep finally came. Suddenly, metal crashed outside her door. Anna jolted awake and sat up. Through the crack below the door, a soft pale light seeped in—possibly the kitchen light. The one Anna had turned off before heading to bed, like every night.

She slid out of bed, crept up to the door, and paused, with her hand on the doorknob. The air smelled of cinnamon and sugar, warm and sweet like it did when she and her grandma would make cinnamon rolls every Sunday morning. Anna's breath hitched and she shoved open her door, running past the stacks of unopened boxes lining the hallway. Her eyes flitted across the room, desperate for something—any kind of sign. She reached the kitchen only to find it empty and dark: no light, no smells, no Grandma. She had thought maybe tonight would be different. Instead, only a large baking pan laid on the floor, dented on the corner due to its fall from the wall rack where Anna kept the pots and pans. Another gift from Grandma.

She remembered when they would bake her famous cinnamon rolls in the pan, topped with the most perfect cream cheese frosting Anna had ever tasted. The thought made her mouth water. Anna picked the pan up off the floor and held it close to her chest. She sat in the silence of her empty apartment, staring at the boxes she couldn't bring herself to unpack yet. Boxes that were filled with *her* belongings and dusty photo albums. After an hour had passed, she finally picked herself up and headed back to her bedroom, leaving the pan on the floor. This time, when she laid down, she immediately fell asleep.

"Hey, Tammi, how are we on the new red velvet cupcakes?" Anna called over her shoulder. The day had passed quickly, and it was time to get back in the truck for another night shift.

Tammi pulled the tray out of the fridge, checking each one, and replied, "All set! The cakes look great."

Anna sighed, "Thank God," and opened the window attached to the side of the bakery-on-wheels. The baby-blue food truck was perfectly refitted as a bakery, able to be moved to any street in the city. It just so happened that it had, so far, only been parked on one.

Anna had stumbled upon the food truck, one that was selling for the same amount as what she was left in the will, a few months ago. The guy selling it just wanted it to go to someone else as fast as possible. She bought it before she even realized what she was doing. The next day, she called Tammi—who, miraculously, just got fired—and they fixed it up together. They spent a week just adding the glass display case for the sweets and fixing the white-and-blue-striped awning. After the truck was fully cleaned, painted, and licensed, they had a fully functioning

bakery to take on the town.

As the two finished their prep for the night, a middle-aged woman walked up to the order window. She was dressed in a large, flowy, purple shirt with a blue scarf; wore a ring with different gemstones on each finger; and had her frizzy, curly hair piled high on her head in a messy updo. She was holding a bag that read: *Medium, Not Psychic, There's A Difference.*

Anna grinned, "Welcome back, Mrs. Calatti. Want to try out our new cupcakes? We just made some red velvet."

Mrs. Calatti gave a nod and said, "You know I can't say no to you girls, although, why you decide to operate at night, I'll never understand."

Anna looked out the window at the setting sun dipping behind the trees nestled in the park across the street, "It might seem weird but, trust me, we get a crowd."

The woman shook her head. "If you say so, Anna. By the way, how are you holding up, kiddo?"

Anna felt a sharp pain in her chest and fought to keep her smile. "I'm doing okay Mrs. Calatti. It still feels weird though, like I'll turn a corner and see her there, laughing."

Mrs. Calatti gave a soft smile and nodded. "I miss visiting her and chatting, never knew anyone who could warm up a room like her. And those cookies, I mean, my God . . . I think she'd be proud of you, Anna, and what you're doing here."

"I . . . Thank you, Mrs. Calatti." Anna felt the tears gathering in her eyes and focused on her hands handing over the regular order box of cupcakes and cookies. Mrs. Calatti grabbed the box from Anna's hand and smiled.

She started to walk away as she said thank you, but stopped and yelled, "By the way, Anna, if you ever need me to do a seance for your grandmother, give me a call! My gifts have been strong lately: I can feel the spirits are strong tonight."

Anna replied, "I'll keep that in mind!" and then, after a moment, softly said to herself, "You're more right than you know, Mrs. Calatti." Anna looked out at the street and park. A woman stood in the middle of the road holding her child, both of them looked pale and gaunt and were dressed in clothes right out of the eighties. Behind them, a man held his left arm—which had been cut off in some kind of accident—and

had leaves and dirt matted on his clothes. All three had a faint glow around them and their bodies were a bit transparent. A few more ghosts like them walked along the street. With a sigh, Anna said, "Tammi, it's going to be a busy night."

Tammi nodded, "There's some pretty gruesome ghosts today, huh?"

Anna replied, "Yep. Let's give 'em something sweet."

The night went quickly: Anna worked the order window while Tammi put together the orders. Anna would call out to the ghosts who were drawn to the sweet smell of cupcakes, cookies, and their special cinnamon buns. Neither of them could figure out why their sweets attracted the dead, or even how they were able to eat the delicious deserts, but it did, and they could. Anna remembered the first day the two of them opened their truck. A man in a ruffled suit came up to the window and asked for a chocolate chip cookie. Everything seemed normal, but, when he went to pay, Anna saw a branch sticking out from his chest. She screamed and Tammi joined in when she saw it too. The man looked surprised at the girls and joked, "Never seen a dead man before?"

Since then, the girls figured out that the truck granted them the ability to see ghosts, even when they were away from it. After that first week, they decided to name their bakery Midnight Morsels, and opened after the sun went down to quietly serve their peculiar clientele. They noticed, over time, that the sweets they sold seemed to help the trapped souls move on, or at least to find some solace in their Limbo.

Tonight, they received a few particularly notable ghosts. One was a woman who had walked dogs for a living and died when a car ran a red light. After her death, she looked after dogs who got lost in the park. She ordered a few of Midnight Morsels' pupcookies as a special treat. Another customer was a nonbinary person who ordered a batch of cupcakes to share with their friends to celebrate the anniversary of their choir group's death due to a rollercoaster mishap at a nearby amusement park. Each customer brought a personal story to Anna, who listened, empathized, and tried to help each person find the perfect treat to ease their journey in the afterlife.

Around 3 a.m., an elderly man in a knitted, green sweater and smooth khakis walked up to the counter; he looked alive, but the faint haze gave

away his real state. Anna greeted him with a smile and asked, "What can I get for you? I have a fresh batch of cinnamon buns coming out of the oven that smell pretty delicious."

The man nodded, "Thank you, that sounds perfect. I was in my home when I smelled something so delicious: just like the buns my wife used to make."

"That's a high compliment, sir. The recipe was inspired by my grandmother: she taught me how to bake these when I was a kid."

"You're lucky to have those memories," he smiled. "My grandson lives right there," he said, pointing at a nearby high-rise apartment. "He's seven now. He grew so fast. I passed before he was born. Now, I sit and watch them tell stories about me as he points at photos of me on the mantle. I decided to stick around so I could watch him grow. I want to have some memories of us together, even if he doesn't know I'm there."

"He's lucky, I was . . . hoping my grandma would be here watching over me."

"Hmmm . . . I don't think I'll wait around too much longer. I've realized something."

"What?"

"My family would be sad to see me like this: stumbling around from room to room, clinging to them as their lives continue, knowing that I waste away while waiting for the day they die to see them again, even though there's a perfectly good afterlife next door. There's an unease, a restlessness, in this Limbo, like a door is slowly closing the longer I wait. Anyway . . . What do I know?" He held Anna's hand for a moment, then grabbed his box of cinnamon buns.

She stayed silent as the man walked away.

Around 4 a.m., Tammi suggested closing up for the night.

"Please, Tammi, one more hour?"

Tammi shook her head and asked, "Are you waiting for someone? It feels like every night you keep us out later and later, as if you're expecting somebody."

Anna was caught off guard and quickly said, "No, no, I think there's just a few more customers. Who would I be waiting for?"

Tammi looked at Anna with suspicion and raised an eyebrow. Anna opened her mouth to respond to the look when she saw something out

of the corner of her eye: a motorcycle revving down the street, bringing a fog and chill in the air with it. The bike was painted with a white horse, flames spouting from its hooves. Its rider wore all-black leather and a black, shiny helmet. Slowly, they walked up to the counter, like all those before. They had no haze. Somehow, though, both the girls knew deep in their bones that this person was not alive.

Tammi spoke first, in a hoarse whisper, "How can we help you?"

"MmmmM . . . MM . . . "

"What?"

The rider held up their hand and flipped up their visor. The girls peered into the helmet, which covered a skull—just a skull—with blood red eyes.

Anna stopped breathing.

"So sorry about that! Yeah, I forget that people can't hear me with this thing down. I don't usually wear the helmet, but when in the mortal world, you do as the mortals do. Or, I guess, don't, considering how many people I greet that go without one. In any case, I am going to need a couple of assorted boxes from you ladies if that's alright. I hope I'm not too late, I had meetings all night, but tomorrow's the employee-of-the-year party: you know how it is. You'd think the reaping business would get easier over time, but, nope, just more bureaucracy. Well, I promised my employees desserts, and I have not stopped hearing about you guys all month! So, I figured, hell, I'm in the neighborhood—why not stop by? I'm a big fan of your work, you two."

The two girls, dumbfounded by meeting Death and at the revelation that Death was a chatterbox, just stood.

"Hello? Sorry—you can hear me, right? Don't usually talk to the living."

"Y-yes. Yes. Sorry," Anna replied. Tammi snapped out of it and started moving again, putting together the assorted boxes they had for large orders. Anna tried to smile, "We, uh, we're awestruck. Usually, people meet you after they die, not before."

"Yes, well, this truck gives you guys a sort of special privilege, you might say! I remember when I was tricked into making it. That guy . . . little trickster. 'Just one small favor, Death, just one little thing.'"

Tammi almost dropped the box she was holding and choked out, "You made this truck?"

"Yeahhhhh . . . I got in a lot of trouble for it. A man helped me

out—gave me a holiday for a day—and asked for a food truck in return so he could see his family: they passed away in a car accident. Of course, I warned him, but he didn't listen."

"What happened?"

"They were happily reunited, but his loved ones were forced to suffer in this place for longer than they should have. He tried to revive them, force them into the mortal world where they didn't belong. Their spirits were torn asunder, and they lost everything. No longer able to move on, not able to return. They wander, trapped here forever."

A silence settled over the truck.

"How awful . . ." Tammi whispered as she handed Death the finished boxes.

"People always want what they shouldn't, though, am I right, Anna?"

Anna looked confused. "What are . . . Are you talking about my grandma? Wait, please! Can you tell me if she's still here?"

Death just winked at her. And, in a blink, they, their bike, and their boxes disappeared.

The two closed up the food truck as Tammi ran through their closing checklist. Afterwards, Anna left, deciding to walk around the park trying to chase away her daily disappointment. In the distance, an old woman sat on a park bench, with some sort of blanket on her lap. She was feeding the birds and humming a tune familiar to Anna.

Immediately, Anna dashed towards the woman, ignoring Tammi's calls to head home. Anna stopped right in front of the woman—who had a faint haze covering her form—hoping to see the same familiar wrinkles or soft hands. To see that glowing smile. She was disappointed again. The woman looked to be a few years younger than Anna's grandma was. She had a similar, short bob and wore a track suit similar to the one her grandma loved. She was quilting, like her grandma used to, and she was sitting on the same bench as her too. Like her grandmother, she was dead.

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The woman looked at Anna, surprised, and asked, "Are you alright?"

Anna looked embarrassed and said, "I'm sorry to startle you, ma'am, I thought you were, uh, someone else."

"Who did you think I was?"

Anna replied, "My grandma. She used to sit and knit here too."

The old woman smiled and said, "Ah, then I understand the confusion. Do you own that food truck over there? It's a weird time of night to be open so late."

Anna rubbed the back of her neck, saying, "Yes, ma'am, it is. I'm hoping to meet someone. We used to chat here."

The old lady asked, "Your grandma?"

Anna nodded, "She passed a few months ago, and I miss her so much. I still can't touch her belongings that I have stored in my apartment. I'd give anything to see her one last time."

The old lady looked thoughtful for a moment and finally said, "When my Ernest died, I hoped that I would see him in mirrors and things: to know he was still there looking after me." She motioned for Anna to sit next to her.

Anna complied. After a pause, she whispered, "I keep thinking, 'Why can I see other people everywhere but not the one person I need to see so badly. I can see ghosts everywhere except for hers.'"

"I know the feeling. I thought that, when I died, I would be able to finally see him. But, after I opened my eyes in this great beyond, he was nowhere to be found. I remember being angry. So angry that he didn't wait for me, didn't want to stay behind and watch over me. I thought he gave up on me."

"Exactly! Why . . . why didn't she stay so we could make more memories, make more bread, or chat during backgammon? Did she not care? I would have stayed for her." Anna's nails dug into her hand as she balled up her fists, trying to fight back the tears in her eyes.

"Darling . . . I'm glad now that I can't see Ernest."

"What?"

The old woman gently picked up Anna's hand and said, "I think it's

better we don't see them. If we did, what would it mean?"

" . . . "

"It would mean that they had something left to do or were stuck here, unable to move on to that next place where they could feel at peace. This place, it's not meant for lingering. When you're at peace, it's time to let go and trust in your loved ones to be okay."

Anna sank into the bench and held the old woman's hand, thinking about all the ghosts she had met over the last few weeks. Their stories and their lives in Limbo, the in-between they were trapped to wander in. And then, she thought of her grandma, and remembered herself at the funeral, telling her grandmother that she would be alright and not to worry about her. Giving her permission to feel at peace before Anna realized that they would have the ability to be reunited.

"Thank you, Grandma. Thank you for believing in me, thank you for loving me." Anna closed her eyes and could, for just a moment, feel the soft warmth of her grandmother's quilt and smell the familiar cinnamon and sugar. Tears streamed down Anna's face as she smiled. "Maybe it was a good thing I didn't have the truck yet when you had passed. I don't think I could have let you go."

When she opened her eyes again, Tammi was walking up to her. "Are you okay, Anna? I was calling you; we need to head home." She looked to the bench's other occupant and said, "Hi."

Anna wiped her sleeves over her face and replied, "Sorry, Tammi, I saw this woman sitting here and I thought she was my grandma."

The old woman waved at Tammi, "Hi, I'm the almost-Grandma."

Tammi looked at the knitting woman and then at Anna, concerned, "Oh, geez. Sorry about all of this."

"It's fine, we had a nice chat," said the old woman, patting Anna's hand.

Anna rose from the bench, "Thank you for the chat, if you ever want any desserts, you should stop by."

"I might just do that."

Anna and Tammi walked back, Tammi holding Anna.

"Are you doing okay, Anna?"

"I think I am. Or, at least, one day I will be."

"Mrs. Calatti said it best, Anna, your grandma would be proud to see all this." She gestured to the truck parked at the street in the distance. Tammi stopped and pulled Anna into a hug, "It'll be okay."

The two of them packed up the truck, finally done for the night, and drove off back to Anna's apartment. Tammi gave her another hug and waved as she walked down the street into the rising dawn. Anna pulled out her keys and walked into her home. She took off her shoes, walked into the hallway, and opened the first box.

**Gabby Park** is a senior at UND working on her bachelor's in English, with a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. She is currently vice president of the Adelphi Literary Society. Gabby loves books and is enjoying the hard work of filling her many bookshelves. She enjoys making things or doing anything creative; currently, she is creating a video game of her own with her friends. She is excited to soon graduate and join the world of editing and publishing.

## A Fool's Game

**Audrey Tumberg**

It's a fool's game, the idea of quitting what you once revolved around. The more you try not to let that addiction occupy space within you, the more accustomed you become to spotting it in places outside of you—in real places with real things that didn't mean much until now. It'll find its way to the familiar space of your body where it once lived so comfortably. It'll find its way back to you regardless of how many blue-inked lines are tallied on the sticky note stuck to the fridge titled "Days Without."

It's a fool's game, kicking an addiction.

Third Thursday of the month, February. Eight A.M., sharp. Corner of Kittson and 2nd. There you are. Not in the flesh, but in the crummy cracks of pavement littered with wet, inflammable Marlboro Reds. Not my own, I gave that habit up a month ago (barely). It's been thirty days since I've touched those things. It's been forty-five days since I've touched you. I tally the days of both on my fridge every morning on my way out the door. Staring at the soggy cigarettes on the broken cement, I swear I saw your eyes in the leftover rolls of brown tobacco. Not the color, but instead something more detailed. In the folds of tobacco, I saw the wrinkles that line the edges of your eyes when you turn the corners of your lips up into a smile, an image I remember too vividly. In an attempt to shake you from my gaze, I turn myself outside in, finding my-

self focusing on my own skin. I feel an expired nicotine patch on my right arm, peeling at the edges, itching to detach itself. I smell my knock-off tobacco fragrance, a recommendation from you that I ran with, still way too strong for my personality. This isn't working.

*The streetlights are a shining blur, their projections of light bouncing off the reflective nature of the street signs. I'm burning up, regretting the last couple rounds of Irish whiskey. Ordering it felt like an out of body experience, I don't even drink hard liquor. A swift gust of cool night air brushes my flushed cheeks, it feels like a miracle sent to me. Maybe I'll take up religion again while I'm collecting out-of-body experiences. The air smells clean, as clean as it can get in a city where taxis run like a river. I lean against the corner and slide to the ground, the jagged bricks catching my sweater on the way down. I close my eyes, the neon signs from inside the bar project themselves onto the inside of my eyelids. The worn bar door next to me opens, bringing a whiff of alcohol with it, and ushering an angel out of the bar. At least that's what I saw when I caught my first glimpse of you; you're something someone could easily get addicted to. I look up at you while you light up a cheap smoke.*

*"You smoke?"*

*"Hell no, that shit will kill you."*

*You extend your hand anyways, cigarette dangling between your index and middle finger. If an angel reaches out her hand and offers you something, how can you say no?*

Desperate to rid your ghost from my nerves, I follow my shoes. They meld and blur, one in front of the other. Black leather loafers, bought in an attempt to explore a new aesthetic that my boxy figure just doesn't work with. I've been too prone to spontaneous shopping sprees lately. I've spent hundreds of dollars on my self-soothing, just for it to fly away once I get five feet outside the store. The right one is always prone to untying, still I never find myself double-knotting. There you are between my shuffling feet. Of course, you've made a home in a place that I can't run away from. Stooping down to get a closer look at you, I see your name etched into the fabric grain from the times your hands delicately grazed the laces. The curves and sharp lines that make up your name are barely coherent, but apparent enough for the searching addict's eye. A familiar itch starts. I feel it in my teeth, in my jaw, down to my palm and

through my fingers. It feels like static, sharp and stinging; it feels like water, natural and cooling. For a split second, I think about going back and picking up a couple of those wet Marlboro Reds, just to fuck around and see if one will light. For a split second I think about calling you, just to have a taste of your voice through the broken connection. Frantically shuffling through my pockets, full of wasted lottery tickets, lint, and silver wrappers, I pull out a stick of nicotine gum. With no care for the seams, I unwrap it and pop it in my mouth. It tastes like shit. They always do. I'm not sure how, but a piece of gum seems to know how to add insult to injury. My temple shifts slightly as my jaw moves. My temple used to be a temple for your lips, someplace sacred that held something holy.

*Sun streaming gently through the sheer linen curtains; they hardly have a purpose. Daylight illuminates the room regardless of their presence. Soft gingham sheets, blue and white, lavender laundry detergent. Ash tray on each nightstand, an equal number of remnants in both. I wake up before you every morning like clockwork. I'm alone for two or so hours, I don't mind. Sunday morning New York Times crossword, answers etched in all caps, black pen. Shifty eyes moving back and forth: from you to the paper, from the paper to you. Long auburn hair flowing through my hands like water. Pale skin, warm to the touch. Sleepy eyes cracking open, wide smiles, no teeth. Soft good mornings whispered as if they were a secret. Intentful kisses tracing upwards—hand, shoulder, neck, mouth.*

"That shit will kill you," I remind myself. To allow my eyes to view something other than fragments of you, I pick up the latest issue of the local newspaper. I see them every day on my daily commute, in a blue metal box on the corner that is in a constant state of oxidation from the rain it experiences. I've never had an interest in local news, but I feel like I could begin to be an enthusiast at this moment; eager for anything that can serve as a distraction from the mess I am right now. Throwing the folds of the paper open, I find that every line consists of descriptions of you. You occupy the entirety of the publication; you even fill the negative space between the columns of the irrelevantly obscure advertisement section. In a panic, I throw the paper down onto the street. Out of anger and disgust, I kick the edition into the sewer. Anger directed not at you, but at the ghost author of that paper. They didn't do you justice. I

could describe you better, with an eye for all your miniscule details, with the sense of softness you embody.

*Fourth of July, the deadly heat of the sun dissipates with the cool drizzle of evening rain. Cars parked in lines atop a ginormous hill, the entering ones following in suit of a created parking lot type organization. Three-hour-long firework show. Perched on the beat-up car roof. Popping colors replace stars. Layers of blankets beneath us. Rain soaking through them. Wet legs. Closeness is warmth, fusion is natural. You suggest we peel out an hour early, beat the bottleneck of traffic that comes with the end of the show. I'm never one to disagree with words from your mouth. Stale car heat. Window cracked, threads of smoke escaping. A handful of cars in front of ours. Red brake lights illuminating your face, illuminating mine. White-hot tears rolling down my cheeks, emotional at the pure sight of you. Your cold hands cup my face like they were meant to serve that purpose only. My eyes fixated on you like they were meant to serve that purpose only.*

On edge, my eyes dart to the train station. I catch the nine A.M. route every weekday. The train station seems dirtier every day. It seems like decomposition is in its nature. It's only eight forty-five, surprisingly, so I make my way to the array of benches by the station. I plop down, the wooden panels of the benches creak with my slightest movement. The vocality of the splinters makes me aware of how uneasy my body language is. Bouncing legs, shaky hands, head on a swivel. I always get this way when my addiction permeates my thoughts. I allow my eyes to wander, to try and ground myself. Unknowingly, I take a drag of you in my peripheral. There you are, lighting up. There you are, in the flesh, real and jarring, looking as addictive as ever.

I haven't smoked in thirty days. I haven't seen you for forty-five. I'm coughing up at the sheer sight of your realness like I've never smoked a pack; the type of fit that can only be soothed by intentionally holding you close to my mouth, feeling you on my fingertips, and bringing you in between my lips. I hold my gaze in your direction. Fixated, frozen. You quickly turn your head my way and cheekily catch me in the act. Tennis eye contact. Relief. Flash of white teeth. Flicker of smile lines. Guilt. Smoke curling around your face. Cigarette placed between your index and middle fingers, the same ones that I'm wrapped around. Arm

**Tumberg** | *Floodwall*

extending in my direction. An all-knowing stance.  
It's a fool's game, kicking an addiction.

**Audrey Tumberg** is a senior at UND majoring in English and obtaining a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. Audrey hopes to enter the editing field post-graduation with a direction in developmental editing. In her spare time, Audrey can be found downtown writing new ideas for her creative work, reading, or sketching.

*art &  
photography*



## Two Photos

**Robert Moore, Jr.**

### **Artist's Statement**

The world is an amazing place, and there are wondrous sights to behold. The photographs published this issue reflect just some of those wonders, such as a twilight path through the Appalachian Mountains or the explosion of light and color in a North Dakota display of aurorae. I encourage everyone to open their eyes and have their cameras ready.

The Sky So Bright



Along the Appalachian Trail



**Robert Moore, Jr.**, is the lab manager for the Department of Physics & Astrophysics. He's also a student pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. In his limited spare time, he writes, considering himself a storyteller and hoping others will join him around the fire to share a tale. In his travels around the country, he's also managed to take an interesting photograph or two.

## Two Drawings

**Donnelly Fuglseth**

### **Artist's Statement**

These two pieces are from a selection of studies starting around the fall of 2025, going up until mid-winter. Most of the completed pages were focused on improving weak points in the values of my compositions as well as experimenting with collages of multiple reference photos. An additional interest of mine was how I could combine simple, unshaded line work with more rendered faces and bodies: I cannot say that my idea is fully developed yet, but I have made progress.

The subject matter often focused on romance and eventually would include rabbits. I cannot say that these works have a singular intended meaning: these pages, if anything, more so reflect certain emotional stages since August of 2025.

Study on 11/21/2025



Rosier



**Donnelly Fuglseth** is a dual major in both history and English, with a minor in linguistics. Having a long-standing interest in portrait work using minimal tools for composition, a majority of his work favors utilizing easily accessible mediums. A4 paper, cheap HB pencils, and ballpoint pens are often the artist's tools of choice.

## Three Artworks

**Caius Buran**

### **Artist's Statement**

*Eyes are the windows to the soul. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. An artistic eye.* This collection grapples with ocularcentrism's grip on creation. Is the easy assurance that one may ensnare an image with little effort so valuable in art?

## At What Point in the Application Process Should the State Capture the Applicant's Image?

To be seen is to be known. Does the State know you?

Marker and colored pencil. Drawn soon after receiving a new state identification card.



## Evening

Evening: the time of day

Evening: the tragic figure

Evening: a balancing of the scales

Watercolour. Painted alone in a hotel room, sleepless before the fitting appointment for my prosthetic eye.



**In the Blink of**

The Ship of Theseus was torn asunder by time and then rebuilt—plank by plank—in its precise image. Is it no longer itself? Who are we when our cells die? What is wholeness if pieces of ourselves are so easily replaced?

Photography. Me.



**Caius Buran** is a McNair scholar pursuing a bachelor of arts in English with certificates in creative writing and classical studies at the University of North Dakota. He is one of the assistant managing editors for *Floodwall*, the treasurer of UND's chapter for Sigma Tau Delta, and the president of the Adelphi Literary Society. His free time is spent starring on, and creating for, *9mm Retirement Radio*, an actual-play podcast, and doting on his dog, two cats, and ball python.

## Small World, Shared Ground

**Lacey Anderson**

### **Artist's Statement**

These photographs were captured in the GRO.UND Learning Gardens, where I work as a garden fellow. I designed the garden and collaborated with staff and volunteers to plant, tend, and care for the space: building not only beds for food and flowers, but habitat for pollinators and moments of shared attention. The gardens exist because of a shared commitment to providing space, resources, and intention for cultivating living, ecological learning environments.

As I worked, I photographed alongside the labor itself, moving slowly, observing closely, and sharing time with pollinators as they moved through the worlds we were collectively creating. Most of these images were taken with my iPhone in the midst of daily garden work. They were not staged or orchestrated, but captured in passing moments, reflecting the world as it exists when we pause long enough to notice it.

These photographs only exist because this space exists. They speak to what becomes possible when institutions invest in gardens not as decorative landscapes to be observed from a distance, but as living places that invite participation, care, and relationships. While food is

grown here and shared back with the university and the broader community, the learning gardens do more than feed us. They cultivate place-based connections, ecological awareness, and an ethic of care for the land itself. Gardens belong on university campuses not simply as amenities, but as spaces where people work, teach, learn, and come to love the land together. Like our social worlds, gardens thrive through biodiversity, sustained attention, and collective responsibility.

Through these photographs, I aim to make visible the quiet beauty of these small worlds and to invite viewers to slow down, reflect, and notice what often goes unseen. They are an open welcome into the gardens themselves: an invitation to step closer, to care, and to belong.

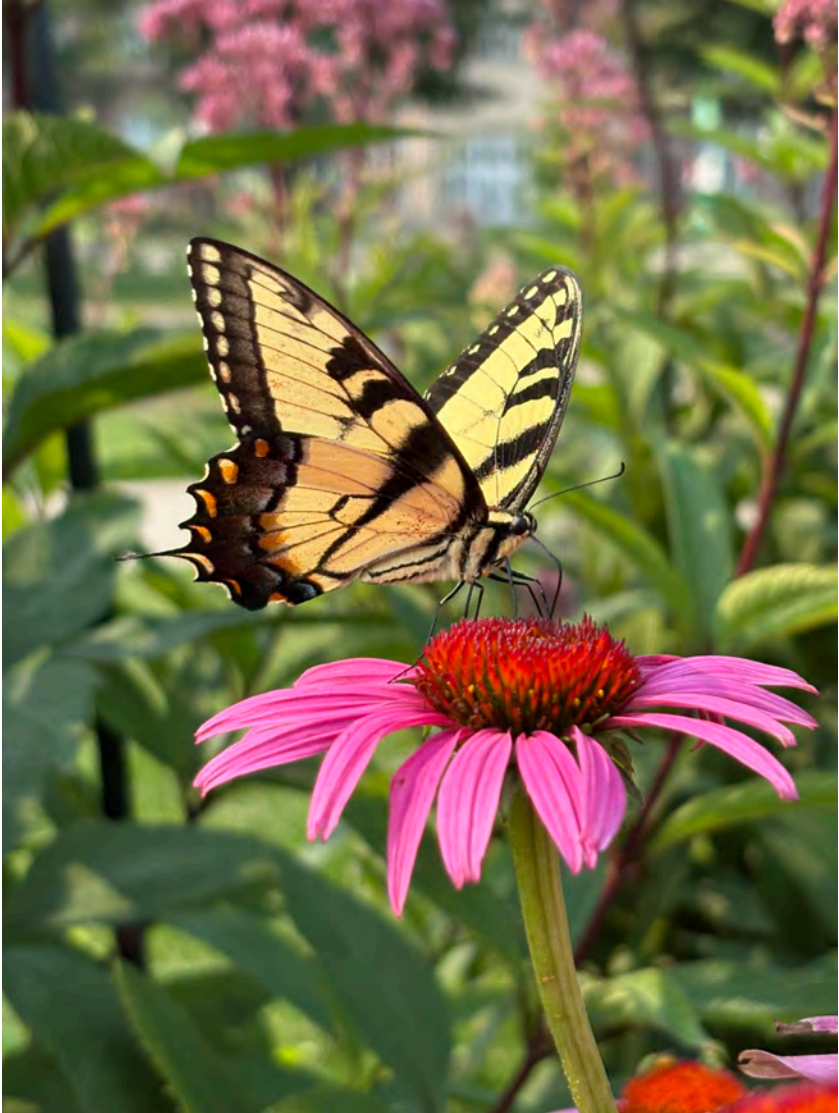
At Home in the Garden



Gathering Abundance



Resting Place



**Lacey Anderson** is a photographer whose work draws attention to the natural world through intimate images of plants, animals, and pollinators encountered while gardening. A PhD student in educational foundations and research, she also serves as a garden fellow with the GRO. UND Learning Gardens, where her photographs were captured. Her work highlights biodiversity in everyday landscapes, revealing the beauty and complexity of the small worlds beneath our feet. Through close observation, Anderson's photography invites care, curiosity, and deeper attention to native plants, pollinator habitats, and the living systems that sustain us.

## Two Artworks

### **Gabby Park**

#### **Artist's Statement**

I enjoy art in all kinds of forms. For me, whether it's painting or drawing, stitching, or just taking a photo in the moment, the joy is in capturing an image that's interesting. It's that joy or interest that I hope to share with others. I find that, when working on these pieces, I am encouraged to stop and evaluate the world we live in and the beauty that nature and humans can create. My advice to anyone is to find a minute to stop and enjoy nature and art.

Dahlia in Charcoal



Sunset on the Eternal Flame



**Gabby Park** is a senior at UND working on her bachelor's in English, with a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. She is currently vice president of the Adelphi Literary Society. Gabby loves books and is enjoying the hard work of filling her many bookshelves. She enjoys making things or doing anything creative; currently, she is creating a video game of her own with her friends. She is excited to soon graduate and join the world of editing and publishing.

## Two Photos from *A Walk on Campus*

**Theodore Hayman**

### **Artist's Statement**

I've always enjoyed watching nature and seeing the beauty in it. While it might not be the same, I hope these pictures can bring a bit of nature's beauty to everyone who sees them.





**Theodore Hayman** is a freshman studying elementary education. He's a lover of books and the serene and can usually be found in the library or his dorm room. With hobbies such as writing, photography, and reading, he is a lover of the arts.

## Two Photographs

**Tabitha Lee**

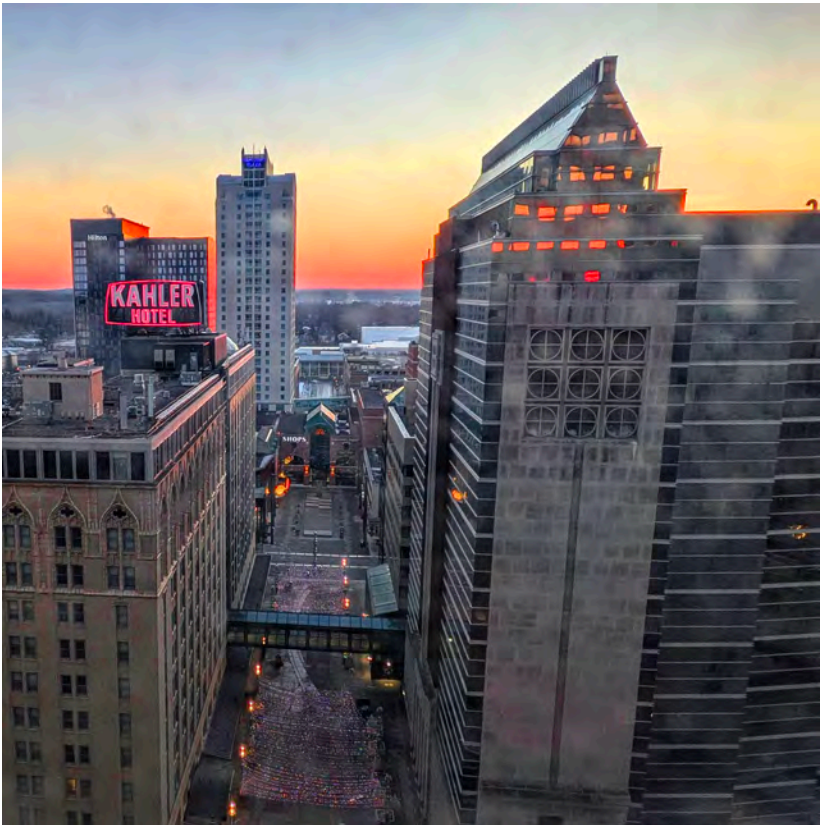
### **Sassy Bird with Arms**

“Sassy Bird with Arms” is a collage piece that Tabitha made as a goofy little project for a class. This bird speaks to art being something that can be less serious and more whimsical for everyone involved. This simplistic piece also speaks to the fact that anyone can do art if they put their mind to it.



44° 1' 21.21" N, 92° 27' 59.84" W, 327.5 m above sea level

"44° 1' 21.21" N, 92° 27' 59.84" W, 327.5 m above sea level" is a picture taken in Rochester, MN as part of a project to capture the beauty of a city that is a haven for the sick. This picture shows just that: beauty thrives even when we are in such morbid place.



**Tabitha Lee** is a twenty-one-year-old genderfluid individual pursuing their bachelor's in English with certificates in creative writing and in writing, editing, and publishing. He enjoys spending time with their cat and writing, enjoying time with their wonderful fiancé, and snuggling up with a good book.

## Three Photos

**Spencer Meeker**

### **Artist's Statement**

During my lifetime, I strive to experience as many different human civilizations as I possibly can. Each nation has its own characteristics that make it unique and exciting—its landscapes, its people, its customs, its history—things that make each new place a learning experience that can't be replicated in any classroom. I am constantly driven by my desire to expand my worldview and cultural competency, and this is a glimpse into a small part of that journey. My goal was to capture as much soul and essence of a certain place with a single photograph as best as I possibly could; though, there is always so much more to a location than any one photograph can ever capture.

Denmark



Japan



Germany



**Spencer Meeker** is a senior who is double-majoring in biology and German studies, as well as minoring in global studies. Spencer's greatest passion is engaging in educational programs internationally, including this upcoming summer of 2026, where he will participate in an intensive medical and public health summer program in Paris, France, and, immediately following, will also study international relations in Seoul, South Korea, to round out his time at UND. After graduation, Spencer plans to attend graduate school for medical dosimetry, a profession that works to create radiation treatment plans for cancer patients.

# Mother of Mine

**Liv Schlosser**

## **Artist's Statement**

My digital illustration depicts the statue of the Virgin Mary with her mother, Anne, that sits in my hometown parish. I used to stare and wonder what it meant to the original sculptor and to myself.



**Liv Schlosser** is a senior at the University of North Dakota majoring in psychology and English, with certificates in creative writing, forensic psychology, and Spanish. She plans to pursue a graduate degree and continue writing. She enjoys doodling, spending time in the mountains, and enjoying the company of her cat, Frankie.

## Three Photos

**Rachel Held**

### **Artist's Statement**

I am drawn to the quiet moments when something in nature makes me pause, and these images reflect my desire to capture my exact point of view in those instances. Whether it was a dog resting in bright green grass, sunlight stretching across an open field, or a sky glowing with pink and orange at sunset, I wanted each photograph to feel like the viewer is standing where I stood, seeing what I saw, and feeling that same sense of calm and awe. My goal was not just to document a scene, but to preserve the emotion of recognizing beauty in an ordinary moment. I believe beauty in nature can be found anywhere and at any time. It can be seen in familiar places, everyday surroundings, and fleeting light if we are willing to slow down and notice it. Through these photographs, I hope to encourage others to look more closely at the world around them and realize that extraordinary beauty often exists within the simplest moments.

Reach for the Sky



A Day in Nature



Let the Light in



**Rachel Held**, who is a Hagan Scholar, is a sophomore at UND studying English and journalism. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching movies with her dog. She likes to read and write poetry in and out of class. She also enjoys taking photos of nature. Her future goals are to study abroad and to be a published novelist.

***poetry***



## Poetry Is

**Sarah Golden**

Poetry is peeling back  
Each layer of my wretched soul  
And hoping to unearth some wriggling wyrm  
Or glitt'ring light  
Or nascent spark  
Or  
Something

*(Please, just anything?)*

With a single mote of substance  
That someone else before has felt  
And hasn't dared to say

*(Must it be for someone else?  
Can't it be just mine alone?)*

Poetry is scraping at my skin and bones and teeth and eyes  
Shunting them  
All aside  
Looking up into the sockets,  
Shining up a little penlight  
Excavating soft gray matter  
With naught but a smeary nib

Pleading with each meager scoop-full  
In-cess-ant-ly

*(Please,  
let-there-be?)*

Poetry is something I can't  
Grasp no matter what I try  
Eating a-way, all-consuming  
E-mo-tion reduced to word

*(Wait, this is something!  
I have something here!  
That's it, keep going!)*

Poetry is crying late at night and finding inspiration  
E-lu-sive, ever escaping  
Can't-quite-put-your-finger-on-it  
Exhausting vocabulary  
Using up a well of passion  
Second-guessing, more defeated  
What else can I say about it?  
. . . what else *can* I say about it?

*(Is that all I've got?  
Surely I've more to say?  
No, maybe it was nothing  
After all  
. . .)*

Poetry is finding my own way  
When I don't see a way through  
Poetry is asking questions  
Many more have asked before  
Poetry is turning over corners of my heart yet unseen  
Poetry is staring at a page with hopeful optimism  
Poetry is doing my best to express what I am feeling  
Poetry is standing up and brushing off  
And now I'm thinking

What *else* can I say about it?

**Sarah Golden** is a senior majoring in accounting as well as working towards a creative writing certificate, with plans to pursue her master's of accountancy and CPA after graduation. When she isn't putting yet another hobby or scheduled event onto her metaphorical plate, she is finding inspiration for poetry in everything, rediscovering her love of reading, and desperately wishing there were more hours in the day to get things done.

## Two Poems

### Olivia Kost

#### Dangers of Smoking

aged by stale cigarette smoke and hostility,  
the only sign of passing time is the progress  
moths are making on the tattered couches and discarded  
matches on tobacco-stained linoleum, like miniscule  
hands of a clock: burnt out, useless—a familiar word  
to these withering walls,  
*they have ears you know.*  
moments of castigation castrated only by cracked windows;  
this is a family affair.  
paint peeling off in curled fingers, flecked  
by hues of scarlet and split knuckles.  
mold emanating from fist-sized holes in cream-colored dry wall,  
a dark bruise spreading its way across pale skin, marring to the point of  
completed consumption.  
formerly unbent beams buckling under a ceaseless sun, glaring through  
absent shingles  
long ravaged by nature's unyielding elements;

*Floodwall* | **Kost**

straightened spines curved by the clock, an amaranthine onslaught of  
thinly veiled abuse.

curtains once drawn to keep out rivulets of rain and contain  
pouring-down blows of thunderous rage,  
reduced  
to dilapidated drapery.

**gorgon's gaze**

cold marble  
softening  
footsteps brushed in linen  
gaze of the virgin  
    turned  
in deified devotion

cold marble  
unrelenting beneath  
scrabbling of unblemished hands  
gaze of the god  
    turned  
in whetted appetite

cold marble  
unyielding  
against alabaster knees  
gaze of the goddess  
    turned  
in rage

cold marble  
grasped  
in ivory claws  
gaze of the lover  
    turned  
in shame.

**Olivia Kost** is currently a first-year English PhD student at the University of North Dakota. She has a passion for Ancient Greek mythology, and, specifically, the women contained within it. If you are ever looking for her, you can most likely find her at Urban Stampede, chatting her husband's ear off about her latest mythic revelation over a hot agave miel with almond milk and an extra shot of espresso.

## Average

### Maddeline Borkhuis

She cooks and cleans  
primps and preens  
notices and reminds  
sews and binds  
nurses and feeds  
hosts and leads  
washes and folds  
soothes and holds  
listens and obeys  
smiles and displays

She never argues or complains,  
never dares utter the word *no*

Not because she is told,  
but because she is expected.

She packs the lunches  
Makes the appointments, plans the days  
Wipes the tears, finds what's lost  
Replaces the chaos with calm

He cooks

feeds

holds

smiles

*What a good husband,  
helping out his wife.  
How did you get so lucky?  
Wow! What a superhero!*

She is a wife,  
a mother

*He is the perfect husband,  
the best dad*

Because this,  
this is her job.  
Her responsibility.  
Her obligation.  
Her expectation.

She is average

He is perfect

**Maddeline Borkhuis** is an honors freshman pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology, as well as a minor in Spanish. She aspires to help others in any way possible, as her biggest goal is to make a positive impact in others' lives. She likes spending her free time reading, writing, and being with the people she loves!

## What is a no?

### Edward Tortorelli

An arbitrary two-letter word?  
A sound that echoes while no one seems to hear it?

Is it something I should yell?  
Maybe keep it at a whisper  
Translate into something else that they'll finally understand.

Maybe the sound is wrong  
The intonation somehow off  
Maybe I didn't say it right or lacked the conviction.

When I say it again and again and again  
Repeat myself until hoarse,  
Is it even a word anymore?

But where did the yes come from?  
Did I agree while I wasn't aware?  
What is it about me when I don't ever say the words?

Was the fear not enough?  
The panic I know was palpable

The way I ran every time, begging for it to end.

Am I supposed to get violent?

Should I have to?

Is it my fault then if I don't?

When it happens again and again

Is it something wrong with me?

Is this what they mean by insanity?

**Edward Anthony Tortorelli** is a current student studying sociology as well as too many STEM subjects. He loves a good book, traveling, and spending time with his pets.

## Admiral Blue

Tabitha Lee

It was *admiral blue*, my dress to that frat formal,  
It was my first time drinking so much with so many,  
I ate with your best friends of so many years,  
And I wore pitch black stilettos, that by the end of the night,  
I couldn't walk in properly, so I stayed at that frat.

I would say that would be the night I died.  
Two years of so slowly and so painfully dying—  
Died like I did at 16,  
Died at 15,

14,  
13,  
12,  
11,  
10

I feel *admiral blue* because I was reawakened from death itself,  
Seeing the light now, away from the maggots that burrow in my flesh.  
I climb out of my grave, craving to be out of this rotted coffin  
That was built to stiffen my flesh and tendons over time.  
I can't walk properly now, so I limp.

I would say I died that night—  
Died in a self-made suicide,

Given away to the maggots.

But tonight?

*I shall live once more with holes in my skin, without you.*

**Tabitha Lee** is a twenty-one-year-old genderfluid individual pursuing their bachelor's in English with certificates in creative writing and in writing, editing, and publishing. He enjoys spending time with their cat and writing, enjoying time with their wonderful fiancé, and snuggling up with a good book.

## Tormenta

**Azayla Sabin**

An earthy smell hangs densely  
In the air. Petrichor.  
I can predict the rain  
But not the storm.

I know you like I know the rain.  
Handling a stress that overwhelms,  
And loss after unexpected loss.  
It weighs you down  
Until it becomes too much.

A sprinkle can turn to a downpour,  
And I am stuck in the rain  
Waiting for the reprieve—  
A brief intermission.  
So I can pick up the fallen branches  
And call someone to fix the roof.  
I will give and give  
And grant you grace  
In hopes that the sun will  
Shine brighter after the rain.

**Azayla Sabin** is a senior at UND majoring in geology and English. In her spare time, she can be found reading a new book, crocheting, or writing in a coffee shop.

## Take a Bite

**Shawn Sullivan**

Coffee poured  
Morning mouth  
Inhales steam

Sun light refracts  
Baking us in its warmth

Slivers of margarine  
Melt graciously into saccharine preserves

Your voice drips out like syrup  
Coating the air in a sweetness worth savoring

Tapered prongs meet your lips  
Metallic silver flush with damp vermillion

Berries compressed by gritted teeth  
Leak between my molars

Eyes darting back and forth  
I steal hungry glances

“What?”

I swallow

Satiated stomach

Starved mouth

Craving your salvation

Thirsting to quit this fast

Meet my gaze knowingly

Aware of the gnawing voracity

Chew carefully

Sip slowly

Indulge my sinful appetite

Feed my depravity

Dare me to take a bite

**Shawn Sullivan** is a first-year PhD student in the clinical psychology department. In the future, she plans to be a practicing clinician, specifically working with children and adolescents. When she’s not teaching introductory statistics, she’s probably spending time with her two cats or reading.

## Some Truth

**Audrey Tumberg**

Lean in  
Softly  
There  
Tell me  
I'm not too far off  
To think

Think thoughts  
Of us spinning  
Tight circles  
Symmetrically neat  
Our feet  
Two mirrors  
Tracing the knots  
Of the wood grain

To see  
See sweet apparitions  
Of you  
Moving silently  
Behind me

Steamed glass  
Cheeks flushed  
Smile twisted up

To feel  
Feel softly sculpted hands  
Wrapping around  
My body  
Forming  
A second layer  
Of ribs  
More gentle  
More sound

To hear  
Hear your heart  
Beating there  
Beneath me  
Alive, moving, pulpy  
Let the hum  
Of my thoughts  
Be the pulse  
That gets to reach  
Every piece  
Of you

Lean in  
Softly  
There  
Whisper me  
Some truth

**Audrey Tumberg** is a senior at UND majoring in English and obtaining a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. Audrey hopes to enter the editing field post-graduation with a direction in developmental editing. In her spare time, Audrey can be found downtown writing new ideas for her creative work, reading, or sketching.

## Love for You

**Rachel Held**

They say,  
if you look into  
someone's eye,  
you can see their soul.

A soul  
marks the eye  
with a thick black line  
around the colorful iris.

A soul  
sparkles through the pupil,  
out of excitement,  
when it spots the one it loves.

I thought I saw a sparkle in your eye,  
but, in reality,  
the sparkle wasn't from your eye,  
but a reflection from mine.

If I'm cursed to carry  
everything about myself  
into all of my lives,  
there would be one thing I'd be glad to take.

The love, deep in my soul,  
seen through the sparkle in my eye.  
I'd be honored if you let me take that with me;  
if you let my soul carry that love into every life.

It's worth carrying around  
what I hate about myself,  
if that means I can bring the love  
I have, deep in my soul,

that belongs to you.

**Rachel Held**, who is a Hagan Scholar, is a sophomore at UND studying English and journalism. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching movies with her dog. She likes to read and write poetry in and out of class. She also enjoys taking photos of nature. Her future goals are to study abroad and to be a published novelist.

## sun-kissed dining room

**Ceallan Hunter**

I ask for you desperately, and I don't tell the truth.  
For hours there is silence. I want everything I don't tell you.

Fish hang from your ears and water drips down your sides. Perfect  
small circles your eyes.  
You've been tired for weeks now.

You don't sleep well anymore.

I cry when bleeding never stops, and you try to make me smile.  
You wrap your arms around my chest, kiss the back of my neck,  
hair caught in your lips, and smile through pinched eyes.

When I find you next, you haven't moved, and for days we lay in  
crumpled sheets.  
Nipples taut under brisk air, and legs intertwined.  
I ask you to play that record once more, and Christmas comes early this  
year.

I don't celebrate it, you desperately want me to,  
and I worry your mother doesn't like me.

Teeth wedged in corners and after a long-time, marks are left on my arm.

After an even longer time, I come back to you, lost in my own stubbornness.

I can see you more clearly now.

Hats pulled over eyes,  
and sleeves layered on fingers.

Your collar is on your chin and cold winds can't hide your pain.

Winter has come early this year. I wait in the silence of snow as darkness comes and moves like a giant in the dark.

Conceal me and wait for pale legs with wool socks to pad over cold wooden floors, watch the misty morning break in bleak sunlight and clouds of vapor over coffee mugs.

Me and you . . . hang over the sides of the beds . . . hair falls in the space between and we meet together, as one.

Sickly sweet and wonderfully malicious touching your warmth.  
Bounce in the rooms, together as one.

**Ceallan Hunter** is a senior at UND pursuing degrees in English and visual arts with certificates in creative writing and photography. Ceallan likes to write prose and poetry with a focus on nature and land-based writing. Her photography is similar, with depictions of landscape and nature along with abstract and expressive themes. Ceallan Hunter's poetry is reflective of her time in nature and portrays the movement of time and the fluidity of space around us. Her poetry contains fragments of her imagination and what memory prevails. When Ceallan isn't writing or taking photos, she likes to backpack, listen to live music, and read various poetry and fiction collections.

## Remembering Klaipėda

**Anna Unser**

I don't remember much  
I don't remember the cloudy weather  
or the language barriers  
I don't remember the walking and walking  
or the plane ride to and fro  
I don't remember the flush in my mother's cheeks  
as she tried to tame her young children yelling  
in English whilst everyone stared

I don't remember much  
I don't remember the bus rides  
or the beach (there was beach back home)  
I don't remember the khrushchevkas  
or the adults drinking vodka orange juice  
I don't remember the smell—  
(or maybe I do, maybe it smelled like oakmoss;  
maybe it smelled like my mother)

I don't remember much  
I don't remember being held by my family members  
that are all named Aleksandr, Sergej

I don't remember any of them, or anyone  
that did not show up to meet me  
I don't remember realizing where I was,  
just that it was somewhere different, and  
different wasn't bad, it wasn't bad, not even  
foreign

I don't remember much  
but I do remember *moya prababushka*  
offering me cookie after cookie  
dismissing my mother's protests  
like most *babushkas* do

I don't remember much  
but I do remember *moya prababushka*  
rocking me in her arms, swaddled up  
in a blanket (*two years old*, too old  
to be rocked and swaddled)

I don't remember much  
but I do remember playing  
on Dania's slide, though we  
didn't really talk.  
perhaps it was because we couldn't—  
words were useless

I don't remember much  
but I do remember chasing the birds  
on the sidewalk, eating Italian ice cream  
on my mother's lap. (Then, *mommy*,  
but—*mamochka, mama*)

I don't remember much  
but I do remember wondering  
if I'd ever return to this place  
if I'd ever see them again  
I didn't

But I don't remember much.

**Anna Unser** is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master's degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she's not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she's either reading the same novel she's been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.

## Growing Up

### Gabby Park

Once,  
I ran to the edge of my yard,  
Past the broken-down fence,  
And the rotting trees,  
Near the highway, where pollution bled into the ground.

I danced in the sludge, and I built myself a palace.  
It was snow and rocks and sticks.  
In the center was my rock—one I pulled into place,  
Just barely big enough to sit on.

I sat and watched the cars go by, and  
I sat and watched time tick by, and  
I sat and watched the birds fly.  
I watched my walls melt into water,  
Seeping back into the dirt.

My castle hit midnight and my carriage  
Of sticks and snow came tumbling down.  
I slipped off the rock into the mud below.

I heard my name and ran back for dinner,  
And I never went there again.

**Gabby Park** is a senior at UND working on her bachelor's in English, with a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. She is currently vice president of the Adelphi Literary Society. Gabby loves books and is enjoying the hard work of filling her many bookshelves. She enjoys making things or doing anything creative; currently, she is creating a video game of her own with her friends. She is excited to soon graduate and join the world of editing and publishing.

## More Springs with You

**Casey Fuller**

Jacob Lasley, last angel  
of the Red River Valley,  
we come to you, having failed  
to rise out of the water  
ourselves. We see a big story  
in being caught below  
from what is broken above.  
I think you deserve  
to become a symbol.  
We have already almost  
forgotten your name  
and replaced you with  
the paraglider who fell  
into the trees. People  
take pictures as the sun  
falls on your bridge.  
You add to our quiet.  
You look like our cousins  
and brothers and sisters  
and everyone we'll ever love.  
Tell us we are not lost.

Tell us we can cross here.  
No one believed the reports  
of a man swimming  
north up the river  
a day after the ice melted.  
We believe now.  
Kiss our cold brains.  
We want more springs with you.

## Ode to SpongeBob

**Joshua Asante**

My daily routine is that if I have class I would head to class and if there is work, I would go to work, but when I have free time available, it varies. Sometimes I would study by doing homework or preparing for exams. Other times I just choose to read books, watch TV, or play video games. One of my favorite shows to watch is *SpongeBob SquarePants*. It's a show that I loved as a kid and I still love to this very day. The show centers around the life of the titular character. Episodes range from SpongeBob trying to get his driver's license, to trying to stop Plankton, to stealing the Krabby Patty secret formula. SpongeBob is one of those shows that gets better when you watch it as an adult, ranging from jokes that you wouldn't get as a kid to how the average adult life is like. My favorite characters would have to be Plankton and Karen; I love their dynamic as a couple. In one episode, they can argue with each other, and in another episode, they're in love. While SpongeBob is known for comedy, the show can have some emotional moments, like when Gary leaves home and SpongeBob looks for him. It was emotional. Like any show, it has its fair share of low moments, but the good outweighs the bad. I enjoy talking to other people about SpongeBob. I am part of the SpongeBob community. We discuss episodes we like or hate, and the show's current state. In reality, I'm free to talk online. Being in a fandom means that you're a part of a community. Even though people on the

internet are strangers, you're still able to find friends. It makes me happy to talk to my online friends.

**Joshua Asante** is an undergraduate junior at UND. He enjoys reading books, watching TV, and playing video games.

1978

**Miguel Castro**

I love you with all my heart  
And from the bottom of my wallet.  
I love you just as you are  
But I wish for a few improvements.  
If only you had a stronger heart  
And a brighter mind.  
Your bones have weakened with the rain;  
Your feet can hardly feel the earth.  
If I had all the money in the world  
And the time enough to spare  
I would spend every minute and dollar with you,  
Working to save you from your age.  
But I love you just as you are.  
Just take me to work tomorrow,  
and we'll go out this weekend.

**Miguel Castro** is a UND helicopter operations major from Mason, Ohio. He enjoys playing *Halo*, attending his AFROTC courses, and spending time with friends. He was strongly encouraged to write these poems for his ENGL 226 class and hopes you enjoy reading them!

## I Wrote a Letter to Bruce Springsteen

**Peter De Lone**

He hasn't responded.  
I imagine he is a busy man,  
Focusing on the labors of the  
Past.  
But he takes time to consider the  
Present.

I sent him  
My thoughts, feelings, and gratitude,  
And that is what stressed me. I  
Find joy that he hasn't responded,  
Because my words continue to be  
My words.

**Peter De Lone** is a commercial aviation major at UND, currently pursuing his certified flight instructor certificate. He is a cadet in the Air Force ROTC program and wishes to be a pilot for the U.S. Air Force. In his free time, he enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, and listening to all forms of music and public radio. He believes the greatest joys in life come from diversity of experience.

## The Color Yellow

**Liv Schlosser**

But how sweet to be the color yellow?  
Ma says it's as dear as last morn's sunrise,  
like a western meadowlark to bellow,  
God's ancient fury quaked in her demise.

Ma says it's as fair as crops to autumn—  
cling to a reason to preserve her peace.  
Ma says not to blame the human custom,  
to destroy and scavenge for just a piece.

Ma cries in prairies waving in amber,  
golden wheat under the sun's warm wallow,  
until man rips and floods her raw power.  
Oh, how sad to be the color yellow?

From our oil pipes to the great Garrison,  
we ruin our Mother without abandon.

**Liv Schlosser** is a senior at the University of North Dakota majoring in psychology and English, with certificates in creative writing, forensic psychology, and Spanish. She plans to pursue a graduate degree and continue writing. She enjoys doodling, spending time in the mountains, and enjoying the company of her cat, Frankie.

## Whispers in Purple

**Jaleigh Schneider**

Purple hums in twilight skies,  
A whispered calm where daylight dies.  
It holds the mystery, soft and deep,  
A royal dream the night will keep.  
It rests upon the blooming flower,  
Soft as rain in evening hours.  
It soothes the world both near and far,  
A quiet hush where heartbeats are.  
It holds the night, serene and deep,  
A tender shade the earth will keep.  
In every breath, its colors blend,  
A gentle calm that will not end.

**Jaleigh Schneider** is a published poetry and children's book author. Her work includes poems within the themes of writing, music, mentorship, faith, and life. Jaleigh's current published children's book is titled, *Simply, Imperfectly, Perfect* while her poetry book is titled *Poetry In Bloom*. Writing poetry is a great way for Jaleigh to view life in beautiful ways: she believes that poetry is the art of her heart. Outside of poetry, Jaleigh loves music, and her personality shines through both her love of the colors purple or pink and her soft caring heart. She is currently a UND undergraduate freshman.

## Revelations on the Living Room Couch

**Josephina Wieczorek-Bettendorf**

I left my kitchen this morning  
With a warm coffee cup in my hand.  
I used to watch the news on my  
Six-inch phone screen,  
But I stopped when I stopped knowing who to believe.  
There's a textbook on the wooden coffee table,  
Bunny-eared from my reading last night.  
The woman who wrote it has an eight-year degree,  
And she tells me what's wrong and what's right.  
I used to believe in that too.

Now I measure wisdom in  
Daylight  
Seeping through the living room blinds,  
Because Right is the grey cat,  
Enveloped in gold,  
Who sleeps undisturbed by my side.  
Now knowledge is measured in knowing  
That Wrong is being certain I'm not,  
And Truth is the fact that  
The sun rose this morning

Without caring if I saw it or not.

Without caring if I wrote down the time  
Or made it some theory of mine.  
The sun rises whether rising  
Can be used for my life's theme  
Or my habit of philosophizing  
And making poetry of things  
That are greater than me—

& Right is,  
& Wrong is,  
& Truth is greater  
Than me.

**Josephina Wieczorek-Bettendorf** is a junior at the University of North Dakota, where she's studying English with certificates in writing, editing, and publishing as well as classical studies. She plans to pursue a PhD and become a college English professor. Josephina enjoys writing as a means of illustrating personal memories and creating stories that will make a lasting impact on others. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, watching movies, and spending time with her husband, Jonah, and her two cats, Sebastian and Arwen.

# God

**Andrew Quinlan**

I don't think I believe in God  
Not the way you might  
But I see something called god  
All the time  
In stones, in moss, in trees  
In cruelty and in death too  
In the sad way wasps get stuck in apartments  
In stars and in planets  
And the desolate beauty of the moon  
I see it even in cathedrals, too, (how could I not)  
But maybe most of all  
I see it in the way snowflakes fall  
And land in my lover's hair

**Andrew Quinlan** is a commercial aviation major at the University of North Dakota. He is twenty-one years old and enjoys video games, reading science fiction, cooking, and spending time with his boyfriend and friends at restaurants and bars around town. He has a passion for imagining sci-fi stories and hasn't quite gotten around to writing any of them down—but he promises that one day, he will.

## Caelestis Ars Poetica

**Ryan Prusak**

An angel crosses the golden pillars of heaven,  
cooling himself inside the clouds  
before entering the throne room of God  
to sit in a creaky chair  
and ask: Was I ever born?

The throne is empty.

The room is too vast, bright, golden.

There's not a crack in the pillars  
or a line carved out of place.

Stanzas line the walls,

each perfectly, unquestionably infallible.

God sits across from the angel,  
in a creaky chair, too, but Hers  
looks better with Her in it.

She's stooped so sharply that  
She can hardly be noticed,

in all Her wondrous glory,

holding an ivory mirror  
so that She can watch Herself  
write poetry.

Seems a bit awkward,  
holding a mirror and writing,  
but the angel knows better than to say such a thing.

The angel is told to speak purely.

The question becomes the angel's next poem, and the angel adds that  
he can read a birth certificate that proves his beginning,  
and he can imagine himself sheltered  
from the outside.

God reads it,

without looking away from the mirror,  
and pokes a little hole in the angel's heart:

She says that  
something is missing.

Are these words too direct,  
forming a whole that lacks  
Expression?

Where is the Soul?

I hesitate to define myself,  
for fear of what my words are  
missing.  
That a god like You

will look from the outside, and see  
a birth certificate.

**Ryan Prusak** is currently an MA student and graduate teaching assistant in English at UND. He studied marketing as an undergraduate, also at UND, earning his BA in spring 2025 with a minor in criminal justice and a certificate in creative writing. Needless to say, his interests are eclectic! Speculative novels have a special place in his heart, but he is interested in exploring other forms of writing—from poetry, to CNF, to professional communications—in general. Ryan has written a young-adult fantasy manuscript, titled *Regicide: Eye of the Seraphim*, and he has multiple other creative projects currently in the works.



***nonfiction***



## Poe (The Crow)

### Josephina Wiczorek-Bettendorf

We found it on the side of the bike path—my siblings and I. To this day, only God knows who the original crow-finder was. I remember my feet pushing the stiff pedals on my pink beach cruiser, working to the rhythm of heavy breaths.

“A baby bird!” a little voice cried out.

“A crow!” another added, matter-of-factly.

“Everybody, stay calm,” an exasperated adult warned.

We explained the tragic scene in a dissonance of high-pitched proclamations. I—to the horror of my stepfather—let my new bike fall to the pavement and reached desperately for what seemed to be the corpse of some lovely, dark creature.

(It was not dead.)

The crow had a lame foot and wing, but childlike life swirled and jumped from its eyes. They were black, but not beady. Now and then, it gave its wings a careful shake and let its head twist mechanically from side to side; these simple acts seemed like the crow’s full capacity for motion. We children thought the injuries resulted from some failure in aviation. Perhaps the crow, hungry for the same summer skies we were, jumped the nest before its wings could make a covenant with the air around them.

(The truth is that dysfunctional nestlings are thrown from the tree by their mother. Knowing the baby will not likely survive, she disregards them in favor of the healthier, more dependable offspring.)

Why nurse a child who will never mean more than a surplus mouth? Why raise your predator's next meal? Some may count it injustice, some mercy. Our mother named the frail creature Poe. Its own mother, I'm sure, did not bother with such a ceremony.

"I have a pet crow at my house," I told my classmates with arrogant joy on Monday morning, dull crayons in hand.

"A pet crow? Where did you get it?" replied the pig-tailed girl across from me.

"I found it hurt by the bike path. I'm taking care of it until it can fly again." At this final declaration, a whistle-toothed smile fled from my lips. "Bird-savior" would be a handsome new title.

At home, that night, I stood outside of my stepbrother's bedroom, watching the creature in its newly leased shoebox home. The bedroom entrance, a repurposed patio door, was made entirely of windows. I could see my mother bobbing to and fro behind the wooden grilles, dressing the crow's wounds and feeding him bites of water-mushed meal when the opportunity arose.

"Why did we name it Poe?" I asked. The name reeked of grandparents. Babies were not called "Poe."

"Because of the poem," my mother explained simply. I scrunched up my nose in a scowling reply. I had no interest in old people's poetry, and Poe was not a raven. As my mother finished her work, I stepped closer to admire the beast, using two fingers to stroke his freshly cleaned feathers. How marvelous it felt to nurture something that usually ran away—how special to be trusted.

In a way, I felt glad that Poe was not healthy like his brothers and sisters. Healthy birds are prideful. Healthy birds cannot be saved.

Every day after school I would ask my mother, "Is Poe getting better?"

"He's getting better," she would affirm tenderly.

Eventually, Poe found a melody in his chirps, and his feather shaking became more memory than sight reading. We moved him outside to our garden. There, Poe lived under an oak tree. The ground was shaded, and the leaves overhead grew sparse enough that kaleidoscoped

sunspots twirled across his dark eyes as we sat with him. The wind blew sweetly upon the tree's star-shaped leaves, leading them in a gentle ballet. Despite him still being lame in foot and feather, the crow's spirit thrived. Maybe, I thought, the mind healed first. I grew fond of the dirt beside his little box, sitting cross-legged there in the afternoons, watching as he wondered at the world around him or tested his incapable steps. I cooed to him gently the way my mother did when I had a bad cold, and I wondered if he liked it here, too.

"Do you miss your mother, Poe?"

(I could not imagine that I would miss mine if she ever flung me from the rooftop. But, then again, I might have started to once dinner time came and the California winds grew cold with the nighttime.)

He did not reply, but, as I sat in that cool dirt, I heard an answer in his eyes. They didn't dance, childlike, anymore. Instead, they pooled with deep intelligence, as if they held a treasury of secrets and still hungered for more.

(I don't imagine eyes like that, grown-up eyes, ever miss their mother.)

One late afternoon, I skipped out to the garden to meet my mom by Poe's box.

(I wish I had not.)

Before I reached the cool dirt or the dancing leaves, I watched Poe die. He lay in his box, seizing. His feathers shook loose, filled with a hauntingly still tension, and then shook again. His body hit the cardboard like a sickening metronome.

...

(*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Shhhhh.)

That weekend, I sat with my father at a table in a restaurant I do not recall.

"Our crow died," I admitted. "I guess we couldn't save him."

"I'm sorry," my father replied, a bit halfheartedly.

"Me too. He was a good crow."

**Josephina Wieczorek-Bettendorf** is a junior at the University of North Dakota, where she's studying English with certificates in writing, editing, and publishing as well as classical studies. She plans to pursue a PhD and become a college English professor. Josephina enjoys writing as a means of illustrating personal memories and creating stories that will make a lasting impact on others. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, watching movies, and spending time with her husband, Jonah, and her two cats, Sebastian and Arwen.

## Scary Stories

**Liv Schlosser**

The book is hidden on the far side of the school library, a room always smelling of dust and an anticipation for childhood nostalgia hidden in that green carpet. It is on the fourth shelf, only reached by the heights of the older kids. I am tall, though, so Mia drags me to the corner, whispering that if we use the stepping stool, I can reach it. She will check it out and keep it until our weekend sleepover.

I don't want to touch the book. It won't bite, nor will it burn my fingers. The spine is black and tattered. It's far older than many of the plastic wrapped novellas populating the shelves. Mia says it's because it's been passed through generations. Everyone who's ever owned it has perished suddenly and without explanation. I don't doubt it, but the publication date would disagree. I can barely bring myself to grab the thing, much less open it to start searching. When I grab it, I catch a glimpse of the cover.

There's a clown on the front. Or something like that. It's ballooning head sprouts from the earth, a pipe clenched between teeth revealed by peeling gums. The illustration looks at me, and I look away. It's a non-sensical picture. The head has no body. It's larger than the little shack beside it. It's scary for the sake of itself. It angers me. I hand it to Mia like my fingers have been singed. Mia calls me a *big baby* when I go look for another book without her. I fall asleep in a struggle that evening. I close

my eyes and I see the clown. He sees me.

Mia keeps her promise that weekend. We squeeze into the crawl-space beneath the stairs. I sneeze from the dust and ignore the thought of creepy-crawlies populating the corners our little, pink flashlights can't reach.

Mia sits cross-legged, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She sets her light in her lap. It illuminates her face from below. I'm sure I've seen a DVD cover like that in the horror aisle of the Blockbuster on Maine. She opens the book. The cover faces me and I don't look at it. I stare at the thin line of light peeking through the door instead.

"Have you ever heard of the curse of Bloody Mary?" Mia says.

I shake my head. She's not reading from the book. Mia is a storyteller. The book is her prop. I know what Bloody Mary is, but I indulge her.

"The curse of Bloody Mary is centuries old, passed through generations of tortured families. The legend goes—" Mia starts to read from the book. She's found an expert that explains the rules of the game. Then she ignores the rest of the pages and makes her own story. Later we end up in the second-floor bathroom, whispering to not wake her mom in the room over, and holding each other like something might jump out of the dark corners of the creaking house. The bathroom closet is ajar. I want to close it, but a gnarled, rotting hand might reach out and grab my own. Neither of us can convince the other to say the words *Bloody Mary* three times in the mirror. I picture Mia with blackened, bloody eyes anyway. She'd scream for me to help her. Then Mia grabs me with a little *BOO!* and runs back down the stairs. She laughs when I join her in the crawl space, glad the darkness hides the tears in my eyes. I don't look at her much for the rest of the night.

Mia says we should check out the book again. We only read one story in it last time.

"What about the poltergeist story? I saw another one about someone getting buried alive, isn't that scary?" Mia waves her fingers in my face like it might scare me. My stomach flips but I'm too embarrassed to admit it.

I check out the book but tell Mia to keep it in her locker. I tell her my parents would be mad if they found it in my backpack. In reality, I don't want it anywhere near me, like the musty old pages would curse me in I laid a finger on one of the ghastly illustrations. I have nightmares

every other night, now. It had them before, but it's been harder to fall asleep. When I close my eyes I see that clown looking at me. I see it opening its mouth and laughing. It's laughing at me because I'm scared.

The next sleepover ends early because I'm sick. I feel sick, like hardened hands are twisting and strangling my guts, tearing them apart hungrily. My dad picks me up in his white truck and asks what's wrong. I snap at him and I have a stomachache. He asks if I'm going to spend the night on the floor of his and mom's bedroom, curled up in the corner by the dogs where no monsters can get to me. I tell him no, but it ends up being a lie. Dad does not laugh at me, he just shakes his head. I think he's disappointed.

Mia and I don't talk for three years. We fight one day and that's finally the end. I feel relieved.

I spend the rest of primary school in a group of girls who wear crosses around their necks and go to the optional morning prayer services. I spend middle school with them, too, but struggle. I sleep too much now. I can barely get out of bed. I can barely look myself in the mirror. I don't look at anyone, hoping they don't look at me. I start wearing as much black as my private-school uniform allows. I wallow in what the grown-ups around me call teenage angst.

One night alone in the basement I pull up a sketchy, pirating site on the old computer and I watch a scary movie. The featured clown doesn't scare me. I go back for more. I eventually get in trouble for the long list of slasher, splatter, paranormal, possession, and psychological horror flicks I'd become familiar with. I sit with my arms crossed while my parents asked why I've become so obsessed with all that scary garbage.

"I thought you stopped looking at that stuff when you stopped being friends with Mia. Trash like that isn't good for your faith. This isn't going to help you feel better," mom says. She's right, I guess. Lots of it wasn't making me feel better, but everything else had a similar effect.

Dad was more sympathetic, but he warns, "There are just some things you can't unsee." He's right too, I know.

I talk to Mia again in high school. Then I lose her again with a fight right before I leave for college. I collect horror books now. I watch every horror flick that fits my taste in spooky trash I've refined over the years. I hold the controller during game night while the rest of my friends cover their eyes waiting for the jumps care. I still get nightmares, but they're dreams about spilling a cocktail on a fussy regular at the restaurant or

sleeping through a final test that bug me.

It's only recently that I sit down to watch the movie adaptation of that little, black book I used to check out at the elementary school library. It's PG-13 and a buzzkill, but I recognize the illustrations in the CGI. I smile at the thought that a decade before I'd toss and turn until my dreams were filled with frights for weeks.

I go searching for the book, finding a used copy online. I almost buy it, but decide against it. I don't think I'd want to touch it, if only out of respect for the wishes of my younger self.

**Liv Schlosser** is a senior at the University of North Dakota majoring in psychology and English, with certificates in creative writing, forensic psychology, and Spanish. She plans to pursue a graduate degree and continue writing. She enjoys doodling, spending time in the mountains, and enjoying the company of her cat, Frankie.

## Envy of Butterflies

**Rachel Held**

The small farm, where we felt at home, engulfed us on a summer day. I was by the barn with the triangle above the doors. I threw rocks at the triangle to practice for softball. Our sister was in the driver's seat of the glittery green truck, pretending to drive. You were in the seat next to her, playing music only you liked. The cool summer breeze swept cotton and white butterflies across the entire yard. I followed the butterflies and danced with them as I got closer to the music, escaping the truck.

I saw you two in the truck that mom had left half on. The air conditioner was on and cooled both of you off. One of you was a NASCAR driver in her mind. The other was the lead singer of KISS, serenading a crowd of thousands. Climbing into the truck proved difficult as I struggled to reach the seat. Once inside the truck, I cranked down the window with all my strength just so I could sit on the window frame. I swayed to the beat of the song you played and kicked my legs out of the truck window.

You started to sing, and I turned around to look at you. You were the one who could make anyone laugh, almost like you felt like it was your responsibility. I slid back into the truck and sat in the passenger seat with you in the middle. We all continued to sway to the beat of the song. Time seemed to slow down as I watched you smile. A true smile that I had never seen from you before. Fake smiles were your favorite outfit,

and you always had them on.

A butterfly came into the truck and landed on the dashboard, sun-bathing in the one spot the vibrations couldn't reach. You were staring at the butterfly. You leaned towards it. The butterfly, that finally escaped the breeze, just rested in peace. It didn't have a job to do or a place to be. It could just rest. I could see envy in your eyes. You struggled to feel like yourself. Always trying to be what others needed and could never truly be at ease. As you watched the butterfly with sparks in your eyes, I watched you. Your behavior was as if the butterfly finally eased your worries.

As the middle child, you had standards expected of you that I had never experienced. I didn't understand you, and you didn't understand me. You were the middle child, and I was the youngest. You liked rock and country music, and I liked pop music. Your favorite color was red, and mine was green. You and I were completely different, but I saw you. I knew you. I knew how you never actually smiled or laughed. I knew you would act like an adult. I knew that you tried to be what our parents wanted, even if it went against everything you actually were.

Sitting in that passenger seat, I was able to see you relax for the first time. You were happy, even if it was just for a few seconds. Our sister turned the volume up, and we could feel the vibration of the song on our feet. You laughed again, and I could see it. The sparkle in your eyes made it very clear. With our sister in the driver's seat and me in the passenger seat, you were happy. For the first time, you were happy to be in the middle.

**Rachel Held**, who is a Hagan Scholar, is a sophomore at UND studying English and journalism. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching movies with her dog. She likes to read and write poetry in and out of class. She also enjoys taking photos of nature. Her future goals are to study abroad and to be a published novelist.

## A Brief List

### Sarah Golden

. . . of things I remember from childhood, in a somewhat particular order:

Age 2, almost 3. Eating a bowl of Cheerios. Leaving my house to go stay with my grandmother, while my mother went into labor with my little brother.

Riding in the car to visit my mother and just-born brother. Holding a picture of my mother in my hands. "I'm coming, Mommy."

The hospital room my brother was born in, just down the street from our house. Sitting at the foot of the hospital bed, playing with stuffed animals with a young friend. Asking if I could trade my dog plush for his deer plush. Looking back and realizing that I'm glad he said no. I would have missed that dog.

Looking longingly at the small plastic toys in the grocery checkout aisle, hoping that if I looked sad enough, the cashier would just let me have it for free.

Walking alongside the house with my father. Him telling me that someday I would run off with some boy and wouldn't want to listen to his sage

advice anymore. I didn't think I would then, I still don't think I will now.

Climbing the giant pine in my grandparents' front yard. Reaching the very top with my brother, us both a very unsafe distance from the ground. Scraped arms and knees, coming in covered in sticky pine sap. The sting of the rubbing alcohol to try to get it off.

Waking up crying, because I had a dream that I didn't get a donut and other people did.

Looking longingly at the small dangly keychains and knickknacks by the cash register at our favorite Chinese restaurant. The cashier, our family friend, giving it to me for free. My mom telling me not to do that anymore so they didn't lose money.

My great-grandmother's funeral, when I was very young. It was an open casket; my grandmother pressed her lips to the corpse's forehead.

My neighbor's parakeet, laid to rest in a cardboard box under our back porch. Sometimes I would grab the box and open it up, just to stare at it. My mother eventually buried the box in the side yard, claiming it smelled awful. I hadn't noticed the stench.

Riding in the kiddie-cart at the grocery store. The red plastic with stickers that made it look like a fire engine. I remember the way the little plastic steering wheel felt, how the horn let out a sad squeal at the touch of it. Sticking my head out the front and watching the bigger people go by.

Watching a movie in the theater with my dad, trying not to cry at the bittersweet ending. I wanted to look tough, since it was only a movie anyways.

Stumbling over at a violin recital rehearsal, the world going gray. I'd locked my knees too long. Fumbling to the bathroom and shaking and sniffing for a while. A woman, maybe one of the parents, following me in and checking on me, smiling kindly and offering her sympathy. I don't remember her face, but I remember the apple juice box she gave me. It was heavenly.

Laying on my bed and staring at the wall at night. Seeing the shadows cast from my night-light. I found familiar faces in the uneven paint job and gave them all names. I cried when I switched to the room across the hall and my friends were all covered up with a shelf. I couldn't explain it. It sounded silly to tell anyone.

Sitting in the room with my grandfather, hours after he had passed away. Looking at him, not recognizing his face. Not moving closer to get a better look. My brother reaching out to hold his leathery hand. I couldn't muster up the courage to do the same. Glancing towards the giant pine out front as we headed home.

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***creative writing  
scholarship winners***



## Picture Perfect

### **Brenden Kimpe**

*Winner, John Little Fiction Scholarship*

Ray Skipter had finally decided on vegetarianism, but the way he arrived at this conclusion was much more interesting than the gleaming new cookbook he just picked up.

He was a *professional* window fitter. Being a small business owner, he needed to maintain that sort of air about him. He installed all kinds of windows—small ones that peeked out from attics; cloudy ones in bathrooms that concealed the toilet user but let in just the right amount of light; ones above the sink that offered a view while doing the dishes—but Ray's favorites were those of the picture variety.

He loved the grandiose look at the world they offered while positioned behind the couch in a living room or next to the dining room table. Wherever they were, they opened the area to a seemingly infinite array of possibilities. Maybe he just liked big windows.

It all started when he got a call for a job down by Marsh Lake, a small town almost twenty minutes from his home on the outskirts of Stratton. The caller was an older lady who wanted a nice picture window in her living room. Ray accepted the proposal immediately, set a date in his planner that worked for the client, and hung up happy. Up to this point, it was going to be the biggest window he had ever installed. Being only a few years into his self-employment, he had mostly been on average jobs where he replaced a frame, fixed a botched DIY, or fitted a

new pane of glass into a space that had previously been shattered. He was excited to have such a daunting prospect.

He surfed the web for longer than he probably should have, checking all his local dealers and then eventually moving on up to places where a shipment would be necessary. The small town chums didn't have anything big enough, so he ordered a sheet of glass from a faraway place. When it arrived, Ray marveled in its vastness and treated it like royalty. He didn't want a single scratch on its surface. Finally, the day arrived.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Barnes. My name is Raymond Skipter, but you can just call me Ray." He plastered on his best customer service smile and offered his hand. She took it delicately in her own and pumped it once.

"And you can call me Margarine, like the butter." She chuckled at this, even though Ray suspected it was a line she had used more than a few times. He was tempted to say that margarine was more of a fat than butter but knew better than to say such things to a lady.

"I got your big window in the back of my van here. How about you show me the spot you want it?"

"Well," Margarine began as she led him around the outside of the house, "I do have a big window in the spot, but it's scuffed up so bad that I can hardly see the birds when they get to my feeders."

"I totally understand." Ray had a few bird feeders in his backyard himself. On his days off, he would stare out the window that he himself had installed and admire the fluttering creatures as they fought over sunflower seeds and buried their beaks into suet cakes. Nearing the back of the house, Ray saw exactly what she was talking about. The sheet of glass that stood there was a grimy, lousy excuse for a picture window. He suspected that even a hearty cleaning wouldn't do it any good and his suspicions were soon confirmed by Margarine herself.

"I tried scrubbing it down real good with every kind of cleaner I could find down at the hardware store. It just doesn't seem to come clean." Margarine seemed disappointed at this, and Ray could tell she had put a lot of effort into something that he knew was a fruitful task. Nevertheless, he offered his sympathy.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get this new window put in and it'll be so clear you'll hardly be able to tell it's there." She brightened up a bit after that.

The installation went well. He carried the huge pane of glass into

the backyard using a giant, handled suction cup for support, and was able to take the old window out with no issues. Margarine had gone to do some errands while he worked, but she showed up just before he finished the final polish, mouth gaping at the clarity of the view.

"Oh, my days! That looks absolutely stunning. I'm not sure I'll be able to get anything done now; all I want to do is admire my new view." From her praising, Ray felt a certain sense of pride at doing a good job. She paid for the installation, graciously accepted his business card by saying she'll spread the word, and ushered him out the door with a smile plastered on her face. All seemed fine and dandy in Ray's mind. The customer was more than satisfied with his window, and the bigger project had gone without a hiccup.

A few days later he got a call on his work phone.

"Hello? Is this Skipter Windows? I need to talk to Ray." The voice on the other end was distressed, panicked.

"Speaking."

"You need to come over to my house and take a look at what you've done. Your darn window is too clear."

Ray was confused, "Too clear? May I ask who I'm talking to?"

"This is Margarine Barnes, down in Marsh Lake. You installed a picture window at my house just last week."

"Oh yes, Margarine like the butter. I'm not sure I get what you're saying. You said the window is too clear?"

"It certainly is. I think you need to come down here and take a look at this."

Ray's thoughts were buzzing on the drive down to Margarine's place. He wasn't sure what exactly she was talking about when it came to the window being 'too clear.' For a second, he imagined her running into it late at night, thinking it was an open door rather than a closed window, and giggled at the thought. The humor petered out when he thought about Margarine getting hurt because of it and suing Skipter Windows until there wasn't one anymore. He pulled into Margarine's driveway and greeted her at the front door before following her around the house in a strong haze of *déjà vu*. The window was still standing, which was good, and Ray wasn't sure what the problem was.

"There! Don't you see it?" Margarine was nearly crying, pointing at the ground.

Ray did see it, or rather, them. Littered beneath the clear barrier

were multiple splotches of brown, white, and black. He stepped closer and was surprised to discover that they were birds. Nearly half a dozen sparrows, songbirds, and various other feathered friends were lying in heaps below the window, necks askew and wings broken. They had evidently mistaken the window as a gap of nothing, running headfirst into eternity.

"Isn't it just horrible? I can't take it anymore. They thump against the window all day thinking that there's nothing there! Oh, the poor things."

"Is this all of them?" Ray was still in somewhat of a daze, and his eyes were locked onto the crumpled forms laying on the ground. One of them was still twitching.

"No, not nearly. This is just from *today!*"

Ray was dumbfounded. It had been nearly a week since he had installed the window, which meant that dozens of birds had met the same grisly end. He bent down and gently scooped one of them up. It was warm and soft in his palm. It looked like any other sparrow he had seen, but Ray saw something special in it. Something that excited him.

"Well, are you just going to stare at it or are you going to fix this? I can't have all these birds dying just because I want a good view." Margarine was crying for real now. The tears streamed down her face and she sniffled between breaths.

Ray broke from his trance, understanding that he needed to maintain his professional demeanor, "I'm not too sure what I can do. You can dirty up the window or get some decals to stick on there so that they won't fly into it as much. You probably won't be able to stop them completely, but it would at least help." He paused for a moment, before adding, "I can clean these up for you too, Margarine. I'm real sorry that this happened. I've never seen anything like it."

"Please do. I don't want to touch another dead bird if I can help it. I've been throwing them into my trash can all week." She went inside with a huff, presumably to buy some of those decals off Amazon, and left him standing alone with the corpses. He scooped them up gently, one by one, and placed them into a plastic grocery bag that he retrieved from his truck. They huddled together at the bottom, pushed against one another by their own weight. He left Mrs. Barnes' place by saying goodbye and letting her know to call him if the same thing kept happening after the decals were put on. On the drive home, he couldn't stop his

eyes from lingering on the bag of birds, resting in the passenger seat, concealed from his view by the thin, opaque plastic. He could still see them underneath it. Formless blobs of brown and gray that refused to offer details. Halfway home, he opened the bag.

It was nearly the end of summer, and Ray was entering what he considered the busy season. Everyone wanted new frames and panes before the autumn chill began to seep through their old ones. No one wanted to get a window replaced during the wintertime. This year's busy season also carried with it an unexpected uptick in corporate contracts. Gone were the days when his bills were paid by local families who had a future doctor in their hands. Here were the days when law offices and college campuses pushed contracts to a blue-collared local so they could save a few bucks. Ray Skipter wasn't complaining. One of the better parts of this was that he was installing more picture windows than ever before. What had started as a rare few, beginning with old Margarine, had resulted in a picture-sized window nearly every week.

One of his biggest jobs came right before the first frost hit at the University of Portsmouth up by Burnsville. They had wanted Ray to replace nearly every window in one of their oldest halls. Ray was sorry to see them go. The old windows had been divided by muntins that gave the building a gothic aesthetic, which fit the bill since the brick and mortar were well over a hundred years old. The front entrances were adorned with fanciful brick designs, and the insides hosted the languages and philosophy departments. The university's PR group had rallied behind replacing these antique windows with sleek modern ones, a move that Ray didn't necessarily approve of but couldn't deny because of the pay. They were in the process of slowly renovating the building to revitalize departments that didn't get much enrollment. But that was really a crock of shit. The enrollment would stay the same, in Ray's opinion, and maybe even go down after they erased the historical charm.

The installation had gone smoothly. None of the windows had broken and there had been a stretch of good weather while Ray was sequestered to the rickety scaffolding that clung to the side of the building. He was just finishing up the final window, giving it a polish and making sure the seals were sound, when a loud thump nearly sent him hurtling towards the ground. He looked around him and saw that no one was nearby. It was late in the afternoon and most of the students who had been milling about all day were now back in their apartments or

dorms. He was about to lower himself safely back to the ground when he noticed a smudge in the window that he had just finished polishing. The smudge was dusty and possessed a red haze. Ray had a suspicion of what had caused the mark and was proved correct when he looked towards his feet. Laying on the grate of the scaffolding was a small brown bird. Its body was canted awkwardly at an angle that was wholly unnatural, and its beak was skewed nearly backwards. The poor thing had flown full speed into the invisible barrier, shattering its body and ending a glorious flight in an abrupt, sad way of being. Without a second thought, he scooped the bird up into his hand and placed it into his pocket. Blood had been leaking from its nostrils. It was a dark red, rich with oxygen and vitality. His palm was smeared with it, the streak pushing up towards his wrist from the motion of stuffing the small animal into his pocket. By the time he reached the ground for quitting time, his hand was licked clean.

Ray was a man of many trades when it came to windows. When business was lacking, he took up the methodical job of cleaning windows to pay the bills. He didn't like cleaning windows as much as installing them, but it oftentimes gave him a good look at the work other installers were doing around the area. There had even been a few instances in which he had convinced a client that the windows were not up to specifications, and that they would do best to let him reinstall them. He didn't shy away from this. A good window wouldn't make or break a good home, but a bad window could.

There was an incident a few weeks back when he had been cleaning windows for a nice family over in Brewersville. They were a young couple who didn't have a kid over the age of five. The fingerprint smudges relegated below two feet were certainly evidence of this. Ray was doing his thing, whistling a tune from the Eagles, using the wand to deftly scrape across each pane with smooth, unbroken movements, when an imperfection caught his eye. There was a spot on the window to the nursery where the frame hadn't quite settled. The gap was large enough to let in cool air or a few bugs but not big enough to grab the attention of any average Joe. He had brought up the issue with Bart and his wife Joan before he had left.

"Say, before I go, I noticed that there was a bit of an issue with the window to the nursery. Do you happen to know who installed it?"

"I'm not sure," Bart had replied, "We haven't gotten anything big done to the house since we bought it last year. I'm sure it'll be fine if

we've made it this far."

"Oh yeah, it'll probably be okay, but it wouldn't hurt to fix it either. Could save a few bucks on your gas bill this winter if you do."

Bart had looked at his wife, who shook her head slightly, "I think we're okay. We're not afraid of throwing on a sweater or two inside during the winter. We all run pretty warm anyways."

Ray had hesitated and then left before saying more. There was some part of him that had wanted to push it, but he knew that being overly persistent was likely to lose him a customer quicker than gaining one. It wasn't too weeks later before he had caught their last name on the second to last page of the local paper. The family was grieving after one of their sons, a three month old named Sammy, who had been found dead in his crib. It turns out the kid was allergic to bee stings.

He had one more job for the day in Stratton, not a few blocks away from his own home. This was a quick one; just a few small windows and a single sliding glass door that led into the Crafton family backyard. He saw the BBQ grill out back and his mouth watered. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten all day aside from munching on unsalted sunflower seeds as he worked. Popping another handful into his mouth, he squirted a few pumps of his own special mixture of window cleaner. It was really only a few different household names dumped unevenly into a spray bottle from Walmart, but it boosted his credibility to say that he developed his own formula. Besides, it's about the scrub of the sponge more than the zip in the chemical. Cleaning was meditative for Ray. He didn't listen to music or podcasts or an audiobook as he worked. Instead, he preferred to hear the swish of the microfiber towel as it rubbed across the glass. The grating pump of the cleaner being sprayed into the window. The squeal of the wand gathering liquid. The sounds and smell of the job were enjoyable and didn't need to be covered.

There were only two windows left, both in the master bedroom, when Ray heard the muffled thumping that came from the living room. He walked across the house to investigate the noise, hoping he would see what he wanted to see. A swarm of birds had swooped a little too low on one of their acrobatic passes, and nearly a dozen of them had collided with the still gleaming windows. Sure, Ray knew he would have to wipe down again before he left, eliminating any evidence, but feelings akin to the joy of Christmas morning had begun to seep into Ray Skipter. He whistled as he worked.

There were ten birds in the plastic shopping bag that Ray held in his hands as he walked up the front steps of his modest home. Two of them were still alive, presumably with broken wings or legs. Just enough to keep them kicking. He liked it when they stayed alive for a while. There was a spare bedroom towards the back of his home where he kept them. Before going into the kitchen, he tossed these two survivors into the carpeted room and locked the door behind them. They joined a multitude of other prisoners. There were woodpeckers with streaks of brown and gray in their feathers, finches that possessed bold yellow markings and thick beaks, chickadees with fluffy black and white feathers, and a few red-winged blackbirds that croaked at the new arrivals. They were both mere house sparrows but stood out for a moment amongst the others who shied away from them instinctively.

Ray sang a tune as he worked. "He rocks in the tree tops all day long, hoppin' and a-boppin' and a-singing his song." The feathers of the birds fluttered to the countertop as he plucked. He was careful to make sure none fell on the floor, as he had plans for them, but the most precious bits were the glistening medallions of meat hiding beneath the feathered exterior. There was now a row of miniature breasts that ran alongside a white plastic cutting board. "All the little birds on Jaybird Street, love to hear the robin go tweet, tweet, tweet."

Ray had been eating songbirds for a while now. It had started when he had gotten called to Margarine's house nearly a year ago. The birds lying in a heap on the ground had fascinated him. For some reason, he had felt compelled to take them with him rather than throw them in the trash that day. He wasn't entirely sure why. His mouth had begun watering on the drive home.

By this point, he considered himself a pioneer in fowl cooking. He populated and even founded several threads, blogs, and forums on various websites advocating for the consumption of otherwise unheard of meal choices. He wasn't sure how he would prepare these ones. There was a recipe he had developed and published last month. It was a circle of roasted finches surrounding blue jay foie gras. The creation had been meticulous. Harvesting the jay livers alone had taken him nearly two weeks of patrolling. It would have been much quicker if he substituted other species, but what could he say, he was a purist.

His contemporaries enjoyed the presentation of his meals more than anything else. The variable plumage of songbirds begged for a

beautiful plating at each meal. He had lined one dish with feathers, placed a few primaries so they stuck up like a frill on another, and even arranged them upon the table to resemble the birds who had grown them. He felt he was doing a mighty service to the animals, much more given than for any cow or pig.

They didn't like it so much when he discussed uncooked meals and he felt that they truly weren't able to wrap their head around his genius. Sushi prepared with the uncooked brains of finches possessed a slight metallic undertone which sent glorious shivers of ecstasy down his spine with each bite. He also regularly munched on raw wings and legs. The typical American tradition of chicken wings was archaic. Smothering the flesh with batter and cooking until the juices no longer had a proper home, only to cover up what taste remained with a litany of sauces that were nearly blasphemous to Ray by now. He couldn't go for more than a day or two without eating. In the beginning, he had only indulged here and there when the opportunity arose. Not unsurprisingly, the local grocery store didn't carry cardinal. That was where the Chirp Shack came into play. That was what he had started calling it. The back room which had become rank with the smell of droppings housed a repository of backup plans in case he didn't come across anything fresh.

He scoffed at the idea of preparing lowly poultry dishes along the lines of chicken, duck, and turkey. He believed that the true holy grails of meat lay within the birds everyone saw in their backyards, picking at the cracked sunflower seeds and drinking sweet syrup from feeders. He gained a sense of freedom from eating what others deemed inedible. He also knew that with this afternoon's fare, tonight's dinner would be one for the recipe books.

The new arrivals had been gradually accepted into the ranks of Ray's prisoners. They chirped anxiously amongst themselves, sharing what went on in this strange place, how long it had been since they felt the wind under their wings, and the strange happenings that had resulted in their capture. It was the sort of interspecies communication they would have turned away from when they were free. Things like that dissolved when situations became desperate. One of the sparrows that had been soaring high with its compatriots that very afternoon looked around the room with interest. There was nothing in the room aside from bare walls and carpet, or what had been. The tan shag had nearly been drowned out by the black and white paintings of its fellow prisoners.

There was no closet, but two windows allowed jutting rays of sunlight to burst into the room. Several of the birds had managed to get themselves onto the ledges of these windows, broken wings and legs aside, and wouldn't come down even to eat from the seeds that Ray scattered across the floor or drink from the metal bowl of water in the center of the room. The sparrow flew up to one of the ledges, finding that it had merely been stunned by the impact rather than mortally wounded. Its wings felt sore but strong.

The windows were kept in impeccable condition so they could peer into the backyard. It was decently sized, with a small grove of trees lining the far end, and a multitude of bird feeders that hosted many eager beaks. The free birds flitted from pole to pole, feasting while those inside the room looked on with weariness. While they could see into the outside world, there was nothing the outside world could do for them.

The sparrow was not quick to give up, however, and flew around the room in what started at first as panicked circles. It soon turned into exercise for both the body and mind. It noticed that the towel which had been shoved under the crack of the door hadn't been replaced after Ray had last been there. The other birds were either too weary or too dumb to notice; of which the sparrow wasn't sure. It landed at the base of the thick oak door and peered out from underneath. The hallway was dim and lit only by the glaring fluorescents in the kitchen. Whoever lived here was strange. It slid underneath the door, panicking slightly as its body became stuck in the middle, and then popped out into the hallway. Aside from the whispering chirps behind it and the singing that came from the kitchen, the house was silent.

"Rockin' Robin, tweet, tweet, tweet. Rockin' Robin, tweet, tweedle-lee-dee." The sparrow knew that its chances were slim, so it jumped into the air and burst into the kitchen.

There were bodies everywhere. They were the first thing the sparrow noticed. Wings lay askew attached to dead birds on the countertop, feathers were scattered across the entire kitchen as the man at the counter was dancing and singing, tossing fuzzy down into the air and letting it drift lazily toward the floor. Occasionally, a white tongue would dart out of his mouth and snatch a piece from the air, and the man would close his eyes in euphoric bliss. He didn't notice the sparrow since he was too engrossed in this ritual, and the bird managed to make its way into the living room. Its escape was nearly cut short. An entire wall had

been converted into a giant window, opening up the living room so that the backyard was merely an extension of the house. The sparrow remembered the pain of its collision earlier that afternoon and stopped itself short before crashing into this one.

“Aagh! I knew one of you fuckers would escape eventually.” Ray stood behind it. His hand was white knuckling a butcher knife and the other was curled into a fist that was quivering in the sparrow’s direction. It bolted. Speeding around the left side of the room, hugging the wall, and sticking towards the ceiling, the bird made its last ditch effort at a longer life. Ray swiped through the air with his knife and missed. He screamed in frustration.

The kitchen was now filled with a sizzling noise that made the bird’s stomach turn. A massive black cast iron pan was sitting atop the stove, emitting steam and pops of juices as the tiny bite-sized chunks of flesh developed their crust. It flew in the only direction it hadn’t been yet, which was down a narrow hallway that branched off in the opposite direction of the Chirp Shack. The hallway was also filled with windows, not nearly as large as in the living room, but big enough to make the narrow space feel open. Roomy, even.

It felt a slight breeze as it passed by one of them and nearly crashed into the wall. The second to last window was open just a crack. It flew down to the sill and began scrambling through the opening. It could hear Ray stumbling through the kitchen, pausing for a moment to flip the bird burgers.

It wasn’t going to make it.

The gap was simply too small, and the bird was simply too big. It was stuck in the middle just like the door in the dreadful Chirp Shack and soon the man would be coming down the hallway towards him and when he got there he would slam his fist on the top of the window and crush it or cut it with his knife or snatch it up in his hand and squeeze until he was satisfied and then he would raise its broken body to his face and—

Ray’s heavy feet clomped along the hardwood floors, growing louder and louder. He had spotted it. The sparrow heard the man chuckling to himself. He was muttering something about stupid birds and their windows. The sparrow decided to give up. That this was the time to be done with it all. It had been through enough.

But there was something else.

After a split second it realized there was wriggle room. The fresh

air pumping through the window was the scent of freedom and it shuffled its body one last time.

The tip of the knife embedded itself in wood as the sparrow broke free. It soared high into the air and was soon beyond the range of the terrible man's anguished wail.

Ray was furious. This was the first time a bird had escaped his grasp and the great number of specimens still in his possession did nothing to ease him. He marched back into the kitchen, surly despite the smell of meat, and resumed his dinner preparations.

With shaking hands, he took the meat out of the pan and let it rest on the cutting board. Something needed to be done to calm himself. He went to the living room window and began squirting cleaner over it. The swooping of a microfiber towel, the sharp scent of window cleaner, and the perfect view of the backyard helped to soothe him. It made him happier seeing all the birds that populated his backyard feeders. Over the last few months, he had bought nearly every kind of bird feeder imaginable. There were long and skinny feeders that held perches for small sparrows. Next to those were triple-barreled feeders that only emptied out at the bottom with a large tray. He had issues with squirrels at first, but a little PAM cooking spray on the stands solved that problem. He loved the look of the nectar feeders that housed sweet concoctions of cherry and pure sugar. Their bulbous forms stood out among the ramrod straight feeders that stereotypically took over a backyard. He had rammed several posts into the ground with platforms on top that resembled plates. On these he would scrape spoonfuls of jelly or marmalade for the orioles and others with sweet beaks. Sometimes, if he felt like splurging, he would buy oranges and grapefruit to cut in half and place atop the plates. The birds went absolutely feral for these arrangements. They shoved their faces deep into the flesh of the fruits and Ray watched them with mesmerized joy. He had set up some feeders inside as well. They were decoys to incite collisions with the glass. It had worked fairly well so far, and he believed that more birds had been stunning themselves than before he set them up, but he wanted something more.

That was enough daydreaming for today. He felt much better, and besides, a five star meal awaited him and his theoretical guests. He swooped into the kitchen.

"Friends, family, and exalted guests, welcome. I present to you a feast of unimaginable proportions. Dug from the pits of my own creative

genius, I have prepared a three course meal that would satisfy even the snootiest of critics.” Ray marched around the kitchen with exaggerated vigor. He had donned a tan sport coat and kept both buttons undone. His bloodstained shirt shone beneath it. “The courses have been meticulously arranged for your eating pleasure. First, we will begin with the house salad. This selection of greens has been pruned from the finest grocery store down on 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. However, the real star of the show is not the greens, but everything else. Each dish is adorned with a soft-boiled Jay’s egg. The yolk is soft and creamy. Let it roll over your tongue like a delicate wine. Next to the egg are chopped hearts from various choice songbirds. The heart is one of the most nutrient dense organs and it provides this dish with the zip that makes your mouth water. Finally, it’s all covered with a nuthatch balsamic glaze which is made by blending nuthatch breasts with balsamic vinegar. With a combination of secret spices, the vinegar is slowly reduced over the course of an afternoon, eventually culminating in the pinnacle of flavor available for your drizzling needs.

Ray’s speech for the first course was over, and he sat at the table he had been setting as he spoke. Tonight was a performance for him. He munched quietly on his salad, occasionally looking over at the bowls he had set out for his invisible guests. He finished by licking his bowl clean and placing it back in the cupboard. He sat back down at the table and was still for a moment before clearing away his guests’ portions.

“Ah! I see we are enjoying the first course, I am glad. Our next course is meant to pique the curiosity of the tongue. A homespun classic in the form of fine dining.” Ray began placing plates onto the table loaded with food. “What we have here are seared sparrow medallions with an accompanying gravy. They are seasoned only with salt and pepper to preserve their genuine taste. You will notice notes of sunflower, orange peel, and fresh air within these cuts. Each medallion is garnished with a pinfeather. It functions as a beautiful display of color given to us by these very birds but also fills another purpose: a toothpick! Please, dig in. We wouldn’t want it to get cold now, would we?”

Ray was about to sit down for his second course when he heard a thump from the living room. An excited palpitation ran through his body. A bird must have hit the window. He ran into the living room and began inspecting the outside world. Before he could find the source of the sound, another thump rang out, and a bird flopped to the ground,

leaving a smear of blood behind.

"Holy hell! You must've been booking it to leave a mark like that. I'm gonna have to clean that after dinner." Ray remarked as he studied the bird. It had run into the window with enough force to shove its head into its chest cavity. Blood spurted from its eyes, nose, and ears. Ray watched the bird take its dying breath. Another bird ran into the window, not as hard as the previous, but enough to kill it instantly. Ray couldn't believe his luck. The silence between the thumps slowly began to shorten as more and more birds met their grisly fate.

"Yes! Yes! I can't believe it. Fly to me my little birdies. Fly, fly, fly!"

Ray began to sing "Rockin' Robin" at the top of his lungs, spinning in circles as the murmuration of birds that had been gathering above his house began dropping down into his backyard to greet an invisible forcefield of death. They were endless. Timeless. Lifeless. They collected on the ground at the bottom of the window and died buried beneath their friends as Ray sang and jumped around, not noticing the growing smear of blood and feathers that grew on the center of the window. When silence no longer existed between the collisions, when the non-stop suicide of the birds became unignorable, Ray began to get nervous. The flow of birds wouldn't end. It seemed like it never would. They piled onto the ground and covered the window in gore. He screamed for them to stop. He begged. He offered seeds and nuts and fruits beyond their wildest dreams while kneeling against the window.

The glass spiderwebbed and cracked as the beaks pummeled its surface. Ray's intuition had proved reliable with the death of baby Sammy. It had proved reliable when seeking out gaps or weak spots in window composition. It had proved more than reliable in flouting recipes of grand proportion for his eager followers.

This time, his infallible intuition told him to run.

Soon after ducking into the kitchen, a loud crash came from the living room, and a wave of noise rolled through the house. They poured through the open window and filled the house, tearing at Ray as he swatted into the air. Their sharp beaks stabbed into him, and he groped for them, crushing dozens in his fists with his eyes squeezed shut. He needed to get away. They were going to kill him. Other windows throughout the house began bursting inwards as the droves of birds shattered the glass. They liberated the Chirp Shack, and the few able-bodied prisoners flew out into the world, free to do and fly as they pleased.

Ray scrambled across the floor on his hands and knees, aiming for the bathroom. It was the only room in the house without a window. They pummeled his back and left deep gouges in his skin. His hands were covered in blood by both him and the birds he murdered. He forced the door shut after crawling into the bathroom. They squeezed under the door and began pestering him, two replacing every one he killed. This was it. He was going to die in this bathroom with no place to go. He thought of every window he had ever replaced, every pane he had painstakingly cleaned. None of them had been worth it. He shoved a towel under the door and spent the rest of his time killing the remaining birds. He threw them all into the tub and closed the curtain.

He was alone now.

The fluttering outside his door didn't go away for a long time. Ray wasn't sure how long it took exactly, but his knees were stiff when he finally worked up the nerve to leave. He left his house and didn't come back for three days, sleeping in the back of his work van, cancelling all his appointments, and driving aimlessly around the area. He visited all the places where he had picked dead or stunned birds: businesses that had entire walls as windows; university campuses that house giant windows where birds struck and then fell into the mulched landscaping; residential neighborhoods where the sun glittered off windows as he drove. Each place lured its victims with the prospects of exploration, new foods to be eaten, or shelter to keep them safe.

His final stop was at the Walmart in Stratton. He didn't feel like cooking at home much anymore, but when he eventually came around to it, he knew he would need some good recipes to follow.

If you've ever read a book or short story that was so scary it knocked your socks off, **Brenden Kimpe** would like the recommendation. When he isn't reading or writing, Brenden enjoys cooking, listening to music, watching movies, and fawning over his cat, Marcelline.

## Post

### **Anna Unser**

*Runner-up, John Little Fiction Scholarship*

A final violent scream wipes out all the air in my lungs and I can feel my body heat radiate off of me. I can barely focus on not hyperventilating as I suck down breaths. My hands are still gripping the sides of the bed, and even though I can barely feel them, I force them to relax.

There is an overwhelming sound of chatter; everyone around me is talking. An unholy wail rises above the voices. It's unfamiliar.

The sound swims around the back of my head like an alarm clock in a dream. I read books on what is supposed to happen, but I'm not sure what's going on. I read books, though. That should count, right? Three, I think. Two and a half, maybe, because I skipped all of the pictures. I won't see all that anyway, really. Right? But I read books. So I guess I should be more prepared. I mean, I am prepared, I just don't *feel* prepared. I'm not really ready, I guess, but it's too late for that now.

I can't feel my legs.

Fluorescent lights really look like the sun if you stare at them long enough. I stare for a while. It's almost like I really am outside. My eyes trace the long shape of one of the lights above me. My hair sticks to my forehead and neck.

One of the doctors laughs as he cracks a joke to a nurse, who also laughs. He takes his position in front of me again. "All right, time to deliver the placenta now, sweetheart." Sweetheart. I'm twenty-six.

"Oh, you didn't do that yet?" My husband asks from his chair by

the door. He wanted to get the “best angle,” he told me. For the delivery and the game. “Picture-in-picture,” he laughed. I didn’t. I barely lift my head up to look at him. A blur of bright greens and blues.

“Nope, not yet,” the doctor winks at him. Some secret exchange between men. Two men and the woman whose only purpose to either of them is her “child-bearing hips.”

The placenta is delivered and I never want to talk about it again. They tell me to eat it but I don’t want to because the books I read said that I don’t have to. But I guess it’s like the whole breastfeeding versus formula debate. My husband wants me to breastfeed because it’ll keep my breasts larger for longer and because his mom did it that way, so therefore it’s the right way to do it. I don’t really want to think about it, but I bought a pump and have no formula, and what I can supposedly make is free, and I’m secretly afraid of all of those rumors on Facebook about the negative effects of formula. Reading them makes me more scared.

Something feels wrong, very wrong, but I can’t explain it, and even though the room is full of people, there is no one here to help me.

I’m bleeding through the mattress, I think. I call over a nurse two times before she comes over and I ask her to check if there’s a Jordan River of blood soaking the nice white sheets. She takes a few steps back, lifts the sheets, glances over, and tells me that everything is normal. I ask her what normal is and she says that I have nothing to worry about. I should drink more water, that’s what I need. The beaded condensation on the clear plastic cup makes me sick looking at it.

My eyes are drawn upward again. Years go by. What do they do if you die in a hospital?

Quiet cheering on the screen. “Damn it!”

I tell my husband I’m sorry for doing this on a Sunday. He doesn’t laugh.

Another nurse ducks her way into view. “Hey, Mama!” She does not know my name. “Ready for skin-to-skin?”

I say yes because the books told me to do that. She sets the squirming little thing on my open chest. It is a little cold, I think. I can’t remember what I’m supposed to do about that. The nurse shifts its blanket and my paper-thin hospital gown for warmth. Ah.

“A beautiful baby girl, seven pounds and two ounces. Have you thought of a name?”

I don't say anything because names have power and I don't really feel like I have that right now.

My husband walks over and, for the first time in the past ten hours, his skin brushes mine. A different skin to skin. He calls it cute and then jokes that if we keep this up, we're going to have to adopt a boy. I tell him that there is no "we" and that it's the male's job. He doesn't respond.

I finally look down at my chest. No hair, pink skin. Its eyes are closed. I am suddenly very aware of my breathing and have to do it manually instead of automatically. I hold back the yawn in my throat because I'm scared I'll accidentally move it and mess up somehow. I hold up my hand to make sure the fluorescent lights don't cast down on it. And, seeing its breath sync with mine, this wholly vulnerable creature, I start to think that maybe I can love this fear of mine. I know I'm supposed to, but it's not as automatic as everyone says it is. I mean, I don't think I could lift up a car or anything. But maybe I could just love it and that would be enough.

They tell my husband to take his shirt off and take the child away from me so he can do skin to skin too. The books agree that this is good. His face lights up as he stares down at our creation, and for a moment, I fall in love again, and I think that, maybe, my fears were made up, hormones or something. Then his eyes flicker up.

I lay back down in bed. Years go by, and I wonder if I'm too old to be a mother. Then I wonder if I'm too young. Then I wonder if it is kind of scandalous that I did this. After all, I had to have sex in order for this to happen. I remember the talks I received in high school. I was a virgin then. Now I'm twenty-six, and will have to give that speech when I'm forty. I'm going to be forty at some point. Soon, really. Am I too old to be a mother?

A nurse swaddles the child for us and my husband tries to rock it very unsteadily—little jolts instead of smooth swaying. I tell him to be careful, he could give it Shaking Baby Syndrome. He tells me that's not how it works but I disagree because I read books and he didn't. He sets it down in its clear plastic bed. A long series of high pitched dinosaur sounds fill the room as I study a new row of fluorescent lights. The weight of stares prickles my skin and I'm scared that I'm supposed to do something. I push myself up on my elbows and rub my eyes. A nurse eventually picks up the child and offers it to me. She gently pushes it in my arms, helps me sit up, and walks away.

We stare at the lights together. Even though its eyes are closed, I know it would stare if it could. I shade her eyes again. After a few minutes, I give it to my husband.

My family rushes in and my husband's family quickly follows twenty minutes later. They crowd around the child, gushing with loud whispers and clapping my husband's back. I am cold. I'm not upset at missing out on the conversation. They unwrap its blanket to count all its fingers and toes, which I realize I forgot to do. It has all of them, though. The average amount, I mean. They rewrap it, change its first diaper. Or second. I'm not sure. My mom tries to kiss it and I tell her not to because the books said it was bad for the health of something so vulnerable.

They all look up at me, startled. My father-in-law asks if he can hold it and I say sure and learn where my husband got his rocking style from. My mother-in-law coos, "She has your eyes!"

"Does she."

My husband shares the name and everyone congratulates him again. The view of their backs isn't very interesting, so I turn my head and focus on the crack in the paint on the wall in front of me, which has been bothering me since I was checked into this room.

"How are you doing, baby?" my mom asks.

"Well."

"Are you comfortable here?"

I blink a few times and slowly shift my gaze to the little table by the door. "I think some tulips would be nice."

"Well . . . we could get you some, if you'd like."

I don't respond.

"You must be tired."

"Yes," I say, and she turns back to the child.

It's seven at night and I have to pee. I managed the impossible earlier, but now this is my worst fear. I sit up in my bed and look around; there is no one in the room. I sigh and nervously press my shaking hand on the assistance button and press it again for a second time after counting to two hundred. I press it again after counting to four hundred.

I'm alone again.

Except for the child, but it doesn't count. And so I ease my legs gently over the bed, and I want to die for the millionth time today. Mak-

ing it to the bathroom was like crawling through the trenches. I can't remember how to assemble a postpartum pad, but I try my best. It is big and scary and basically a whole diaper. There is a lot of blood.

My heart stops for a second when I see a dark figure moving in the corner of my eye in the mirror. In the soft lighting, my eyes look darker and more tired. My hair is a mess. But my body, now a childless shell, looks the same. It is only for a second, but it feels like minutes.

I turn out the light before opening the door to leave.

The whole bathroom adventure took about forty minutes alone. I turn my head and my brow furrows at the little thing next to me. It doesn't seem real. It doesn't seem mine, or me, or whatever. We're roommates, really. I try to close my eyes, but sleep never comes.

"Hey, Mama!" Light pours through the crack in the door as a nurse peaks her head in.

I forgive her. I don't remember my name either.

The nurse checks and informs me that I did not, in fact, assemble my postpartum pad correctly, and shows me how to do it correctly again. I should have remembered that. It was in the books. She helps me to the bathroom again and asks me where my husband is. I tell her that he went home to sleep in a bed instead of a chair. At least, I think that's where he is. I can't remember too well. She supervises me assembling my pad correctly and helps me put on my pants, which I am grateful for beyond words. She guides me back to bed, and I grab her wrist as she begins to walk away.

I have her attention for ten seconds. I count to nine. Swallow, articulate, force the words out.

"I'm scared."

She gives me a knowing smile. "It's like that sometimes."

But I really am quite scared, and I don't think she really understands. I let go, and she leaves.

The door clicks shut.

Alone.

I write my bathroom instructions on the back of a card so I won't forget again.

The air stills whenever I look at the child. I can barely think, barely breathe. My body is as weightless as the child is. Before it can dare cry again, my eyes flutter, threatening to close.

I fall asleep looking at it.

**Anna Unser** is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master's degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she's not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she's either reading the same novel she's been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.

## Three Poems

### **Audrey Tumberg**

*Winner, Thomas McGrath Award for Poetry*

#### **Baby, I'm on Fire!**

I'm catching fast  
I'm catching quick  
Burning an imprint into the ground underneath me so cleanly  
Witnesses' eyes whisper  
"Impressive, that!"

Months ago, I dug my knees down  
Down into the soil  
Months ago, I tilted my lips up  
Up towards the sky  
And asked for something that would shake the frost clean off

Answered prayers are extreme in nature  
Aren't you old enough now to know better?

The grace of being answered is accompanied  
By a burning loop of a dense fever

Blistering hotness underneath my temples  
Flushed heat behind my eyes

White-hot palms turned over  
Shallow lines face up  
Towards the height of the pale pines  
What does it say when one doesn't put up a fight?

Pleas spoken aloud to the high sun  
Empty begs for mercy, mercy, mercy  
Let them not be heard

Eyelids hot  
The thinness nearly melded  
Small crack of light  
Familiar shadow in the distance

You, even when my eyes are shut for me  
There, kicking up embers with an upturned smile  
I'm a mirror, watch me move  
the corners of my mouth in the same way

Just like that?  
Just like that

Baby, I'm on fire,  
just come burn the rest of me already!  
Baby, come on,  
don't waste no time!

**Nana**

Landline  
Bike ride  
5<sup>th</sup> gear  
“Cut across that lawn there”

Green grass  
Mighty big hill  
Across the way  
Larger than life

Slight shoulders  
Gently settling  
Into curved dirt

Silver hair  
Blonde curls  
Hazel eyes  
Two pairs  
Matching set

Set lines around a tan face  
Sunkissed many times  
Smooth ivory skin  
Sunburnt just once

Let us lie in the same grass  
Let our pressure make that wild turning Earth be still  
Let us point out the same cloud  
With our matching pairs

“That one—  
There.”

## Gentle Tasks

Tracing a thin gold chain down  
To the point of a cross sitting there  
At the crest of your chest

Remember how  
That warm toned metal looked  
Set flush on pale skin

Measuring the small depths  
On each side of your spine  
With careful fingertips  
Mindful pressure

Remember how many centimeters it took  
To reach the smooth soft edge  
Of that shallow depth

Outlining your knuckles  
Up and over and over and up

Remember how  
Those peaks and valleys felt alive  
As they rose and as they fell

Gentle tasks  
Held in the muscle memory  
Of my body  
My skin

Let me remember how it all felt  
Let me hold onto it  
Let me memorize it by heart

I've placed it there

For safe keeping  
Just in case we're onto something

**Audrey Tumberg** is a senior at UND majoring in English and obtaining a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. Audrey hopes to enter the editing field post-graduation with a direction in developmental editing. In her spare time, Audrey can be found downtown writing new ideas for her creative work, reading, or sketching.

## Three Poems

### **Caius Buran**

*Runner-up, Thomas McGrath Award for Poetry*

#### **Body, Floating**

It was an easy thing to accept when  
suspended.

Above, through ten feet of heavy, were  
chlorine, sweat, and sunscreen.

Below nearly three more impassable fathoms:  
white cement stretching out,  
a blank slate.

My eyes didn't even burn. My lungs didn't even hurt.  
It was easy to breathe.

Drowning educated a prior  
suspension.

Above, through layered organs, were  
iron, tears, and antiseptic.

Below inches of flexing muscle:  
white sheet stretching out,

a blank slate.

I only started choking  
when dragged to the surface.

## Body, Beautiful

I remember the waxen faces of my three  
classmates at their wake, coated in  
make-up to mask the incomprehensible damage caused by  
a man and his F-150.

Their youngest sister couldn't attend,  
because she was in critical condition  
and survived. I wonder  
who kept her company while  
they were in heavy, velvet-lined coffins under the  
flat, white lights of a church that stunk like flowers.

They say the dead look like they're sleeping, that the techniques of modern

morticians can zhuzh up the battered corpse into something just nearly  
breathing.

Three murdered children should  
not look like three murdered children.

Three murdered children, bruised and pallid and scarred,  
should be undressed by strangers, should have their mouths and eyes  
glued shut, should have their blood drained through the jugular, should  
be flushed and filled

with embalming fluid in the carotid artery, should have the process repeated

for their internal organs, should be washed by strangers, should be clothed  
in their Sunday best by strangers, and should be  
placed in heavy, velvet-lined coffins under the  
flat, white lights of a church that stinks like flowers  
by strangers—

all of this so they can be, soon,  
buried over Texas oil  
and under Texas sky  
by family.

I started sobbing once I ran outside,

*Floodwall* | **Buran**

jostling my way through other mourners,  
twelve years old and blind with sickness,  
determined to get to the car. And once I did and  
the door slammed and my mom asked if I wanted to go back inside,  
I screamed. And after that, I think we drove home.

## Body, Playground

In my mother, even now,  
seven years post hysterectomy and  
twenty-five/eighteen years respectively since we moved out,  
my brother and I, we live on.

In me, even now,  
eight years since I knew *something* was wrong,  
my body carries you.

I wonder where you've settled. Have you  
nestled in my heart's walls  
to beat along with me? Boisterous hands  
slapping against a drum  
again again again! Do you wander  
watching for the wounds I've borne  
and will bear again  
so to mend them together? Tender, anxious eyes  
overseeing the press of a Band-Aid to a scrape—once secured,  
leaning in with the all-important kiss  
upon the plastic. Is it fun  
to swirl and dance with my blood cells  
through veins like tube slides? Up and down and up and down screaming  
laughing and blissful in the dizzy rush down and up and down and up  
forever my baby forever forever

**Caius Buran** is a McNair scholar pursuing a bachelor of arts in English with certificates in creative writing and classical studies at the University of North Dakota. He is one of the assistant managing editors for *Floodwall*, the treasurer of UND's chapter for Sigma Tau Delta, and the president of the Adelphi Literary Society. His free time is spent starring on, and creating for, *9mm Retirement Radio*, an actual-play podcast, and doting on his dog, two cats, and ball python.

## In Light of One-Act

**Anna Unser**

*Winner, Gladys Boen Scholarship*

“She picked it!”

It’s October, and you can already see your breath. Your uniform skirts are slowly transitioning into the boys’ dress pants that you bought for cheap at Walmart. As the remaining warmth of your senior year dwindles away, the anticipation only grows.

“Guys, she finally picked it!”

Your friend shows you the orange poster hanging in the halls. Your director has picked the one-act play. *Finally*. The wait felt like forever. Then you read the poster.

“*The Little Match Girl?*”

You and your friends are skeptical, but you all go to auditions anyway. Of course you go; it’s your “*thing*.” It was not your best audition, but you feel assured anyway.

You get the lead.

You celebrate privately—finally, *finally*, a good part. You still blush with embarrassment whenever anyone addresses you as “the main character.” Even though you have the most acting experience in the cast, secretly, you feel incomplete. Like you don’t deserve it.

Like always, December approaches, and the rest of your winter is devoted to the play. Go to school, work, then play. Write eight-page essays for class and then go to play. Stay up past two in the morning

working on homework, then go to school, then play. Sob in your boyfriend's arms about your *prababushka* passing away, then go to play two hours later, where your friend plays the role of your character's dead grandmother. Don't say anything about it. Go to your internship where you have to pass on weekly meetings because you have play. Don't get scheduled to work for two weeks because, guess what, you have play. But it's fine, because you love it all the same, right?

Perform for critics to prepare for competitions and learn that you need to look colder, but not "too cold the whole time." Stand outside in the snow to get a better feel: it's even better if you're in your socks. Driving your car that takes twenty minutes to warm up in the negative fifteen-degree weather for weeks on end makes it easier to remember what freezing feels like. Think more seriously about method acting, about sitting outside with no coat or shoes on in the icy weather to get a real feel of what it's like to freeze to death—just to spite your director, to spite everyone, and then decide not to because you don't have time to waste to torture yourself. Eventually, master the art of looking progressively colder over the span of thirty minutes. You're sweating under your costume-under-another-costume combination, but luckily the circulation in your fingers and toes is not the greatest, and the stage floor is always ice cold through your socks.

Listen to more critiques that you disagree with as an actress and blocking coordinator for oral interpretation. Work with your director when she decides to reconfigure almost all of your blocking and try to remember the specific spots you're supposed to hit, even though no one remembers where they really are, and it changes almost every time.

You have a quiet fondness for the scene with your father. It's a terrible scene, really. The character is an alcoholic and abusive widower, and he yells at you and takes off your gloves and shawl and throws your basket of matches across the stage (try to stay in character as you attempt to save it from falling off the edge multiple times). The actor who plays your father is your friend, and you have been in theater together for years. You're great at working together, you really are, and it's bittersweet. Out of all five plays that you've shared, this is probably the only scene that you two have ever really interacted with each other in.

Performance night arrives before the regional competition. You're actually *nervous*. It's your last ever performance for oral interpretation. Your reader's theater group (which won superior at state) is opening the

show. You want to cry, and you start shaking, because you realize that this really is the end. You don't need to throw up, you don't need to throw up—you think about how a guy a couple of years older than you mentioned that he always threw up before all of his play performances, and you have a great desire to not continue that tradition.

The crowd claps, you bow, and then rush off the stage with your friend, running through the halls in heels and a dress to quickly change into your costume and add on to your "poor dead girl" makeup.

Vocal warm up. Pray. Try not to cry again. Places. The curtain opens, and you're once again glad that you've never had the opening line. You're the only one offstage, but since you're performing, you don't lie down on the floor (like you usually do to bide the time) and quietly pace instead. Peek into the crowd for a millisecond and recognize your old castmates from previous years. Realize that, soon, you'll be one of them. Step onto the stage, try to sell matches, get yelled at, freeze, cry, and then die. Routine work. You're not sure how to react when you hear that a majority of the audience cried, so you just shoot them a thumbs up and awkwardly laugh whenever anyone mentions it to you.

Practice more. Pack the trailer. Wake up early to go to regions and realize that you were assigned the same dressing room you used during your first one-act competition. It's both fun and a chore to apply stage makeup onto the reluctant boys in the cast, but you're glad that it doesn't have to be perfect. Help the girls out too. Years of play (and also going through a . . .phase) has made you experienced in eyeliner.

Curtain. Stand offstage. Step into the light, try to sell matches, get yelled at, freeze, cry, die. Don't think about your dad in the crowd, watching you *again*. Step offstage with Leah, one of your best friends that has been performing with you since day one. Watch as the friend that plays your father visually dies on the inside as he discovers your character's dead body. Curtain. Rush everything off stage so as to keep within the forty-five-minute time limit, even though you are nowhere close to it. None of your tears on stage were real, and when your junior-year best friend starts sobbing because she realizes that you and the rest of the seniors will be leaving her, keep your heart hardened. You can't let those feelings come out yet.

Listen to the judges' critiques. Sit in the front row for the first time. You win a superior actress award, and your play places first in the region: you're going to state.

Practice, practice, practice, and then practice more. You perform on the second morning of the three-day state run at South Dakota State University. Something is in the air, besides the flurries of snow—nerves, excitement. An absolutely electric feeling.

You're one of the last to leave the dressing room, and you all head to the stage and line up. The time starts now. Set the stage, take your position offstage left. Barely resist the urge to nervously bounce on your toes as anticipation buzzes through you. Curtain. Act. Be real. Start freezing, more and more with every second. Every step must look painful, every breath must feel like glass. Your fingers should be numb and barely usable. Try to protect any exposed skin, especially your ears, nose, and feet. Slip and fall on stage (intentionally, of course)—it doesn't matter if it hurts.

Hands shaking, barely manage to grab a fake match from your beat-up basket and swiftly pretend to light up the battery-powered candle that you're concealing in your hand. Make sure that the basket is carefully placed behind the curtain line so it's not knocked over at the end. Your body is warm but twitching harshly. Freeze, freeze, freeze. Warm tears pool in your eyes as you watch a flashback of your character's dead mother dance with a younger you, humming "The Holly and the Ivy."

And then you're alone, but you're too into it to let it get to you. Wiping your tears with weak and stiff fingers, slowly curl onto your side and sob. Sob in front of hundreds of people and make sure that they see your face. Your body is convulsing: coldly, sickly, *convincingly*, and you remember your director emphasizing that this moment should be *long*, and, since it's state, you *really* drag it out. The awful, raw sounds of hyperventilating, of choking, echo into the dark audience, and everything that you decided that you were too busy to feel comes out as you slowly count the seconds in your head: . . . *ten* . . . *fourteen* . . . *fifteen* . . . *sixteen* . . . Then, relax your entire body: your head, neck, ankles, tongue, toes, knees. Everything. A thick silence. You're dead.

Snow dancers twirl around your grey body as Leah softly plays "In the Bleak Midwinter" on the flute, and they drape their white tulle skirts and wrist-attached dance scarves over your entire body. The entire ensemble appears out of the wings, solemnly humming the rest of the song.

*Electric.*

As this is happening, the snow dancers slowly strip you of your first layer, tugging off your socks and unzipping the back of your dirty grey dress, pushing the sleeves and bodice as far down as they would go. The lights fade. Your “mother” enters, and the lights return. Again, you hear her humming “The Holly and the Ivy.”

You snap up, as if from a dream. Look at the audience, then at her, then back to the audience with a growing smile on your face. You do not have to act this time.

“Mama!”

Stand up, revealing an angelic, white dress, and make sure to not step on the snow dancers as you take off running into your mother’s arms. You’re barefoot.

That’s when time slows. You hug her, hug her tight with every ounce of love and pain that you’ve felt this year, and laugh through your tears as she spins you in the air. She sets you down and you step back, looking at her, taking it all in. There is a gold light shining on her, and you see that she is crying too. You’re not sure if she’s ever cried in this scene before, and you can see in her eyes how bittersweet she feels, another junior, watching the seniors move on.

That light.

You’ve never noticed the gold that they used, and, just for a second, your eyes follow it, up and out toward the audience. Heavenward. Streams of white and blue and gold pour through the dark, and you know, you *know*, that this is it. Your last moments on stage, your last minutes of feeling like this. It is only the first week of February, but your senior year has ended. Your mother holds your face and pulls you into another, possibly unscripted hug, and you both feel each other shaking with tears.

Leah, your “grandmother,” steps into the light, and you gasp, “Grandma!”

Run to her. You can see it in her eyes; she feels it, too. The light. These were both of your final moments. Your final *real* moments. You hug tight, and then she guides you offstage with your mother into the afterlife.

Return the embrace that your crying costumer gives you once you step offstage. Slip on your purple slides (you’re not allowed to be barefoot backstage). You just know that your makeup is a mess. You feel a release, lighter. Watch the wreck that your father turns into as he sobs

over your first costume layer. Those were real tears too, he tells you later. Manage a few shaky notes of backstage humming. Lights out. Curtain. With the little energy you have left, speedily tear down the set. Nearly sprint to the room where the judges are located, laughing with your crew. Sit in the front row again; your friends saved you a seat. Your mom gave you a tissue as you made your way in, and you clutch it in your hand as you listen to the feedback. You realize, for a great majority of the time, you cannot stop crying. Dab away the little tears before you wreck yourself again. You still feel like a feather, the same weight as the spirit that left from the little match girl. Quietly respond “thank you” more times than you can count.

After critiques, everyone slowly leaves the room. You change out of your costume for the last time and remove all of your tear-stained stage makeup and then reapply a more basic look. Brush your hair. You’re done crying, you realize. And you’re free. Free of *what*, you’re not quite sure, but you know that this part of your life is over.

The cast feels weird because the usually lively crowd was oddly quiet during the performance. It turns out, they were crying.

Maybe they were all crying for different reasons, but you think that you all realized something. Everything is finite. Nothing will last. Sometimes that’s awful, but sometimes, when you take a moment to notice every speck of dust floating in the streams of golden light flooding down on you, it’s kind of beautiful.

**Anna Unser** is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master’s degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she’s not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she’s either reading the same novel she’s been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.

## Three Poems

### **Caius Buran**

*Runner-up, Gladys Boen Scholarship*

#### **Body**

Take sacrament  
—holy cannibalism—  
submit to being  
enveloped in  
the gash.

Of Adam's side, Eve was born.  
Between her lips beget  
the fruit.

Salvabitur autem per filiorum generationem.

Sup of milk  
—blood refined—  
let His meatflesh melt  
and anoint  
awaiting anchorholds.

## Tennos

At the finish line, you brush me away.  
Turn. I'll mentally trace your vertebrae.

To hold a heart is but a simple task  
Though, what thrums in me: (damn that wretched meat!)  
A grisly mass all torn and maimed and patched,  
You are right to fear its buh-beat, buh-beat.  
A written auscultation, so to speak:  
"Just fluttering pulse?" Listen closely . . .  
"Scarified terror! Ventricular freak!"  
"The chambers thrashing disconcertingly!"  
Perhaps that is why it is found mostly  
Mothworn, hidden in hermetic closets;  
Ichorous ulcer, hewn erosely;  
And upon kebabs skewered by prophets.

## Wasabi

I see reflections of myself in odd  
places: prying open a rectangle of cheap SNOWFOX sushi  
and diving in using two mismatched chopsticks  
from my utensil drawer. I learned how to wield them with the guidance of  
a *Kung Fu Panda* DVD's special features  
and my uncle.

Resting between thin strips of wet, pickled ginger and  
the soy sauce packet is what I'm meant to assume  
is wasabi. Most people eat around it. Years ago, my aunt took her  
napkin and scraped the offending paste off her roll,  
her nose upturned, "*It tastes so cheap.*"  
Years ago, a lover cradled his ginger  
in his palms, and cleansed it of the reviled spice  
beneath Grand Forks tap water.

The gray-green glob—  
splattered in a sink, squished in an avoided corner, or spat out in horror—  
is just ground horseradish  
with food-safe dye and cornstarch. Some manufacturers  
add a dash of mustard too. This "wasabi" lasts longer  
on store shelves and is less expensive to produce en-masse. It  
also burns more.

I grew up eating horseradish on everything:  
pâine, crenvurșt,  
kofta kebab,  
fried okra,  
sushi. My face always pinches at the sting. I picture myself  
smoldering.

**Caius Buran** is a McNair scholar pursuing a bachelor of arts in English with certificates in creative writing and classical studies at the University of North Dakota. He is one of the assistant managing editors for *Floodwall*, the treasurer of UND's chapter for Sigma Tau Delta, and the president of the Adelphi Literary Society. His free time is spent starring on, and creating for, *9mm Retirement Radio*, an actual-play podcast, and doting on his dog, two cats, and ball python.



## **contributors**

**Lacey Anderson** is a photographer whose work draws attention to the natural world through intimate images of plants, animals, and pollinators encountered while gardening. A PhD student in educational foundations and research, she also serves as a garden fellow with the GRO. UND Learning Gardens, where her photographs were captured. Her work highlights biodiversity in everyday landscapes, revealing the beauty and complexity of the small worlds beneath our feet. Through close observation, Anderson's photography invites care, curiosity, and deeper attention to native plants, pollinator habitats, and the living systems that sustain us.

**Joshua Asante** is an undergraduate junior at UND. He enjoys reading books, watching TV, and playing video games.

**Maddeline Borkhuis** is an honors freshman pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology, as well as a minor in Spanish. She aspires to help others in any way possible, as her biggest goal is to make a positive impact in others' lives. She likes spending her free time reading, writing, and being with the people she loves!

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with certificates in creative writing and classical studies at the University of North Dakota. He is one of the assistant managing editors for *Floodwall*, the treasurer of UND's chapter for Sigma Tau Delta, and the president of the Adelphi Literary Society. His free time is spent strolling on, and creating for, *9mm Retirement Radio*, an actual-play podcast, and doting on his dog, two cats, and ball python.

**Miguel Castro** is a UND helicopter operations major from Mason, Ohio. He enjoys playing *Halo*, attending his AFROTC courses, and spending time with friends. He was strongly encouraged to write these poems for his ENGL 226 class and hopes you enjoy reading them!

**Peter De Lone** is a commercial aviation major at UND, currently pursuing his certified flight instructor certificate. He is a cadet in the Air Force ROTC program and wishes to be a pilot for the U.S. Air Force. In his free time, he enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, and listening to all forms of music and public radio. He believes the greatest joys in life come from diversity of experience.

**Donnelly Fuglseth** is a dual major in both history and English, with a minor in linguistics. Having a long-standing interest in portrait work using minimal tools for composition, a majority of his work favors utilizing easily accessible mediums. A4 paper, cheap HB pencils, and ballpoint pens are often the artist's tools of choice.

**Casey Fuller** is your standard-issue English PhD student at UND.

**Sarah Golden** is a senior majoring in accounting as well as working towards a creative writing certificate, with plans to pursue her master's of accountancy and CPA after graduation. When she isn't putting yet another hobby or scheduled event onto her metaphorical plate, she is finding inspiration for poetry in everything, rediscovering her love of reading, and desperately wishing there were more hours in the day to get things done.

**Theodore Hayman** is a freshman studying elementary education. He's a lover of books and the serene and can usually be found in the library or his dorm room. With hobbies such as writing, photography, and reading,

he is a lover of the arts.

**Rachel Held**, who is a Hagan Scholar, is a sophomore at UND studying English and journalism. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching movies with her dog. She likes to read and write poetry in and out of class. She also enjoys taking photos of nature. Her future goals are to study abroad and to be a published novelist.

**Ceallan Hunter** is a senior at UND pursuing degrees in English and visual arts with certificates in creative writing and photography. Ceallan likes to write prose and poetry with a focus on nature and land-based writing. Her photography is similar, with depictions of landscape and nature along with abstract and expressive themes. Ceallan Hunter's poetry is reflective of her time in nature and portrays the movement of time and the fluidity of space around us. Her poetry contains fragments of her imagination and what memory prevails. When Ceallan isn't writing or taking photos, she likes to backpack, listen to live music, and read various poetry and fiction collections.

If you've ever read a book or short story that was so scary it knocked your socks off, **Brenden Kimpe** would like the recommendation. When he isn't reading or writing, Brenden enjoys cooking, listening to music, watching movies, and fawning over his cat, Marceline.

**Olivia Kost** is currently a first-year English PhD student at the University of North Dakota. She has a passion for Ancient Greek mythology, and, specifically, the women contained within it. If you are ever looking for her, you can most likely find her at Urban Stampede, chatting her husband's ear off about her latest mythic revelation over a hot agave miel with almond milk and an extra shot of espresso.

**Tabitha Lee** is a twenty-one-year-old genderfluid individual pursuing their bachelor's in English with certificates in creative writing and in writing, editing, and publishing. He enjoys spending time with their cat and writing, enjoying time with their wonderful fiancé, and snuggling up with a good book.

**Spencer Meeker** is a senior who is double-majoring in biology and Ger-

man studies, as well as minoring in global studies. Spencer's greatest passion is engaging in educational programs internationally, including this upcoming summer of 2026, where he will participate in an intensive medical and public health summer program in Paris, France, and, immediately following, will also study international relations in Seoul, South Korea, to round out his time at UND. After graduation, Spencer plans to attend graduate school for medical dosimetry, a profession that works to create radiation treatment plans for cancer patients.

**Robert Moore, Jr.**, is the lab manager for the Department of Physics & Astrophysics. He's also a student pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. In his limited spare time, he writes, considering himself a storyteller and hoping others will join him around the fire to share a tale. In his travels around the country, he's also managed to take an interesting photograph or two.

**Gabby Park** is a senior at UND working on her bachelor's in English, with a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. She is currently vice president of the Adelphi Literary Society. Gabby loves books and is enjoying the hard work of filling her many bookshelves. She enjoys making things or doing anything creative; currently, she is creating a video game of her own with her friends. She is excited to soon graduate and join the world of editing and publishing.

**Ryan Prusak** is currently an MA student and graduate teaching assistant in English at UND. He studied marketing as an undergraduate, also at UND, earning his BA in spring 2025 with a minor in criminal justice and a certificate in creative writing. Needless to say, his interests are eclectic! Speculative novels have a special place in his heart, but he is interested in exploring other forms of writing—from poetry, to CNF, to professional communications—in general. Ryan has written a young-adult fantasy manuscript, titled *Regicide: Eye of the Seraphim*, and he has multiple other creative projects currently in the works.

**Andrew Quinlan** is a commercial aviation major at the University of North Dakota. He is twenty-one years old and enjoys video games, reading science fiction, cooking, and spending time with his boyfriend and friends at restaurants and bars around town. He has a passion for imag-

ining sci-fi stories and hasn't quite gotten around to writing any of them down—but he promises that one day, he will.

**Azayla Sabin** is a senior at UND majoring in geology and English. In her spare time, she can be found reading a new book, crocheting, or writing in a coffee shop.

**Liv Schlosser** is a senior at the University of North Dakota majoring in psychology and English, with certificates in creative writing, forensic psychology, and Spanish. She plans to pursue a graduate degree and continue writing. She enjoys doodling, spending time in the mountains, and enjoying the company of her cat, Frankie.

**Jaleigh Schneider** is a published poetry and children's book author. Her work includes poems within the themes of writing, music, mentorship, faith, and life. Jaleigh's current published children's book is titled, *Simply, Imperfectly, Perfect* while her poetry book is titled *Poetry In Bloom*. Writing poetry is a great way for Jaleigh to view life in beautiful ways: she believes that poetry is the art of her heart. Outside of poetry, Jaleigh loves music, and her personality shines through both her love of the colors purple or pink and her soft caring heart. She is currently a UND undergraduate freshman.

**Shawn Sullivan** is a first-year PhD student in the clinical psychology department. In the future, she plans to be a practicing clinician, specifically working with children and adolescents. When she's not teaching introductory statistics, she's probably spending time with her two cats or reading.

**Edward Anthony Tortorelli** is a current student studying sociology as well as too many STEM subjects. He loves reading a good book, traveling, and spending time with his pets.

**Audrey Tumberg** is a senior at UND majoring in English and obtaining a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing. Audrey hopes to enter the editing field post-graduation with a direction in developmental editing. In her spare time, Audrey can be found downtown writing new ideas for her creative work, reading, or sketching.

**Anna Unser** is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master's degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she's not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she's either reading the same novel she's been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.

**Josephina Wieczorek-Bettendorf** is a junior at the University of North Dakota, where she's studying English with certificates in writing, editing, and publishing as well as classical studies. She plans to pursue a PhD and become a college English professor. Josephina enjoys writing as a means of illustrating personal memories and creating stories that will make a lasting impact on others. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, watching movies, and spending time with her husband, Jonah, and her two cats, Sebastian and Arwen.

**Joseph Zimbelman** is a sophomore majoring in English. He hopes that, as he continues to improve his writing, he may become an author of a few books in the future. Whether experiencing or trying to create, Joseph loves a good story. Aside from reading and writing, in his free time, he enjoys going to the gym or picking from a long list of beloved video games to play.









# Floodwall

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Maddeline Borkhuis  
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Theodore Hayman  
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