

# CONFLUENCE

VOLUME 14, 2022

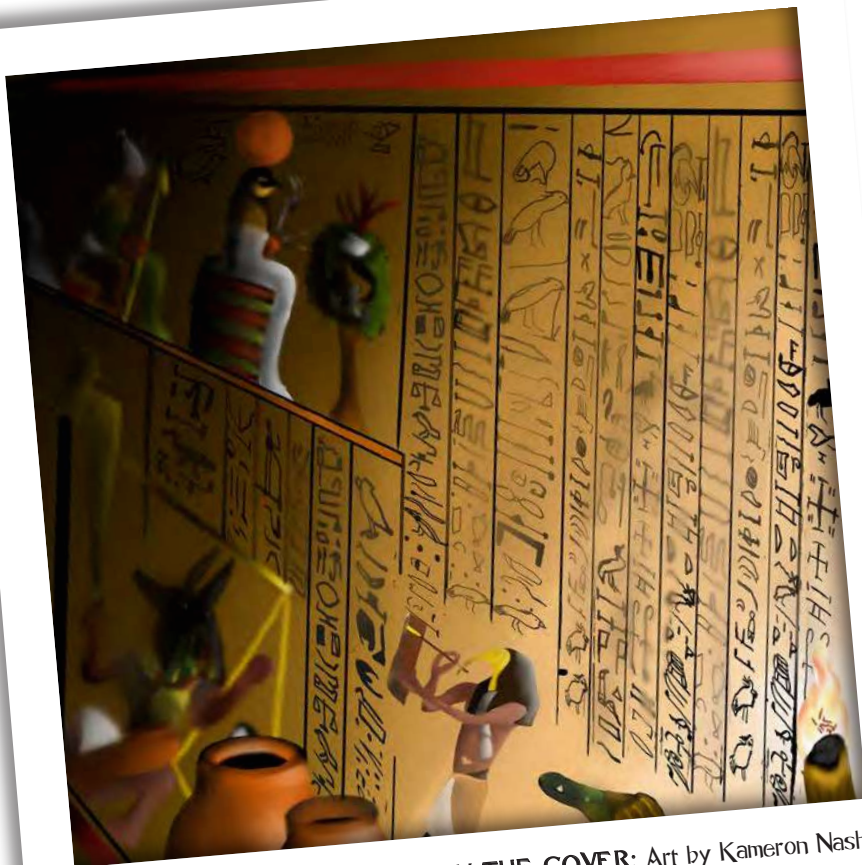


**con•flu•ence \kən-flü-ən(t)s\ noun**

1. A coming or flowing together; meeting or gathering at one point.
  - *a happy confluence of weather and scenery*
2. The flowing together of two or more streams.
  - *the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers*
3. The creative writing journal at Three Rivers College
  - *an issue of **Confluence** in your hands*

# CONFLUENCE 2022

Where Students and  
Creativity *Converge*



ON THE COVER: Art by Kameron Nash,  
student artist at Three Rivers College.



The literary journal of

## THREE RIVERS COLLEGE

2080 Three Rivers Blvd. • Poplar Bluff, MO 63901

1-877-879-8722 • trcc.edu

Volume Fourteen

# AWARDS OF DISTINCTION

**2009**

Megan McKay, “Life Is... “  
Corey Lutton, A Short Tale

**2010**

Paula Robinson, “What Our Future Holds”  
Will Stephens, “My Old Baseball”  
Jessica Downing, “Monster Inside”

**2011**

Cara M. Sorrell, “Summertime”  
Jennifer C. Wendler, “My Festival Frock”  
Elizabeth L. Twaddell “... I miss you, Daddy”

**2012**

Heidi N. Sopko, “Defeating Fear of Mind”  
Damien D. Rivera, “The Phantoms “

**2013**

Damien D. Rivera, “Passion”  
Michaela Smith, “Test Taking”  
Bob Amendola, “The Coven of Incubus”

**2014**

Mark Herman Deaton, “Adventure Bag”  
Tora M. Ellis, “A Walk on Campus”  
Tom Turner, “Icebergs”

**2015**

Cassandra Priest, “End or Beginning”  
Alexander Jameson, “Eremophobia”

**2016**

Damien D. Rivera, “What is Man”  
Sheria R. Macklin, “Don’t Be Blinded By Love”

**2017**

Bethany S. Colvin, “Smile for the Camera”  
Conner G. Terrill, “The Urchin Sea”

**2018**

David K. Kearby, “I Am”  
Conner G. Terrill , “Muse in the Stars”

**2019**

Levi D. Wilhelm, “The Unspoken Pain”  
Cindy White, “Past, Present, Future”  
Emmaleigh G. Stone, “Little Lamb”  
Patrick W. Wheeler, “The Bible: Chapter I”

**2020**

Ashlee Mathis, “Marvin the Mantis”  
Christopher Pense, “The Strange New World”

**2021**

Johnny D. Boham, “A Place Where I Belong”  
Marie R. Wheeler, “At the Restaurant”

**2022**

Best Short Story: Deven Gunter for “Blind Date”  
Best Poem: Johnny Boham for “What Monsters Fear”

All students, faculty, and staff may submit essay, poetry, or fiction. Submissions are accepted from November to February. Each entry should be 1,000 words or less, maximum three entries per author. Entries must be submitted digitally and can be emailed to the editor at [confluence@trcc.edu](mailto:confluence@trcc.edu).

© 2022 Three Rivers College  
All original works remain the property of the individual authors and may not be copied, reprinted or published without the permission of the individual author.

Editor: Mark J. Sanders  
Designer: Bridget Curnutt

*All uses of copyrighted materials are used for non-profit, educational purposes under the Fair Use doctrine of Federal copyright regulations.*



2080 Three Rivers Blvd.  
Poplar Bluff, MO 63901  
(573) 840-9600

TRCC.EDU





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Information

Title Page .....	i
Copyright Page.....	ii
Introduction .....	v
Authors' Biographies.....	vi
Typeface Designers .....	67
Colophon.....	68

## Creative Works

<b>1</b>	“A Piece of the Puzzle” by Japeth Logsdon
<b>3</b>	“The Youngest Mastermind” by Sarah Westbrooks
<b>4</b>	“My Soul Defines Me” by Zoreonta Moore



- 6 “Just a Few Words”  
by Acacia Yates
- 9 “So, the Story Goes...”  
by Macy Webb
- 10 “How”  
by Alissa Redding
- 11 “Spring”  
by Jo Schalk
- 12 “The Forefathers’ Quill”  
by Shellie Gonzalez
- 13 “One More Month With You”  
by Nathanael Grummert
- 14 “Behind a Closed Door”  
by Terri Petty
- 16 “Excerpt from *The Snow Leopard’s Curse*”  
by Alex Fitzpatrick
- 18 “Darkness in the Alley”  
by Noah McGowen
- 20 “Peonies on a Sunday”  
by Mackenzie Ramdial
- 23 “Last Day”  
by Marie Wheeler
- 24 “What Monsters Fear” (award of  
distinction: best poem)  
by Johnny Boham
- 28 “Blind Date” (award of distinction:  
best short story)  
by Deven Gunter
- 31 “An Echo of Reflections”  
by Cassie Knox
- 32 “One of Life’s Rewards”  
by Acacia Yates
- 34 Artwork  
by Shishanna Roberson
- 35 “My Sister”  
by Marie Wheeler
- 36 “The Tiny Grave”  
by Sarah Westbrooks
- 38 “Born Girl”  
by Sarah (Kalich) Wheeler
- 42 “Don’t Watch the Screen”  
by Tiechera Samuell
- 43 “An Ounce of Ongoing Optimism”  
by Cassie Knox
- 44 “A Minor Accident in Traffic”  
by Nathanael Grummert
- 46 “Excerpt from Echoes of *Rolling Hills*”  
by Alex Fitzpatrick
- 50 “A Villain’s Perspective”  
by Noah McGowen
- 53 “A Narrow Path”  
by Noah McGowen
- 54 “Live, Laugh, Love”  
by Acacia Yates
- 56 “Deep”  
by Mackenzie Ramdial
- 58 “Bird in a Cage”  
by Alex Fitzpatrick
- 59 “Today”  
by Mackenzie Ramdial
- 60 “Ishtinike in the Wild”  
by Johnny Boham
- 64 “She Doesn’t Love Him”  
by Cassie Knox
- 65 “Truth”  
by Marie Wheeler
- 66 “The Sunset”  
by Sarah Westbrooks





King (Tut) Tutankhamun's tomb, containing fabulous treasures, was found early this century by British archaeologists Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon.

Source: [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)

## INTRODUCTION

### Mark J. Sanders

Professor of Philosophy, Three Rivers College

Ancient cultures have long been a source of fascination for American audiences, but practically none other captures our imagination as powerfully as Ancient Egypt. From the biblical stories of Hebrew slavery and their nation-defining escape to modern films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *The Mummy*, the sands surrounding the Great Pyramids provide an exotic and mysterious land where mystery and magic still resound.

This year's issue of *Confluence* turns its attention to Egypt on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the opening of King Tut's tomb. This event enthralled audiences in the 1920s with the riches of the boy king's treasures as well as frightening stories of a curse upon those who dared to venture inside.

Because of its geography, Egypt has existed for centuries as a bridge between worlds, a meeting point on the trade routes from east to west, a link between the old gods of myth and the new faith of Christianity, even a passage from this life into the afterlife, a journey that the ancient Egyptians tried to facilitate with

their death practices of mummification and ritual.

The Egyptians are also notable for the practice of writing. Although they used hieroglyphics instead of an alphabet, their records help provide historians with a guide to their culture, practices, and beliefs. In *Confluence*, our contributing writers use their words as a record of their ideas and imaginations.

Just as ancient Egypt left behind a record of who they were, our modern world makes its own mark upon the human record with our essays, our short stories, and our poems. When future societies 5,000 years from now look back at this century, what will our words reveal?

As writers, we leave our own footprints in the sands of time. Time itself will decide whether they will be as indelible as the pyramids, mysterious as the Sphinx, or as eternal as the Nile River. For now, however, they represent the creative efforts of our students, faculty, and staff, and we hope you enjoy the experience of their words.



The Great Sphinx of Giza (foreground) is a giant 4,500-year-old limestone statue situated near the Great Pyramid in Giza, Egypt. It is one of the world's largest monuments, measuring 240 feet long and 66 feet high.

Source: [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)



## AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

### Johnny Boham

In Spring 2022, I will be graduating from Three Rivers College with an Associate of Arts degree in English. Next year, I will be returning to finish a degree in pre-Engineering. I will be transferring to Missouri S&T in 2023 where I will be majoring in Aerospace Engineering and Creative Writing. Twenty years from now, I see myself lying in the sand behind my beach house property in Florida, Zooming with astronauts, and writing my next best-seller.

### Alex Fitzpatrick

I am Alex Fitzpatrick, an aspiring writer! Some of my earliest memories are of reading and writing. Growing up as an only child outside of town, playing pretend and creating stories came naturally to me. I have included two excerpts from my works in progress and one poem aptly titled "Bird in a Cage."

### Shellie Gonzalez

My name is Shellie Gonzalez. I love old fashioned life-sustaining hobbies and pursuing my education in pre-Law. As old as our Constitution is, I think it is worthwhile to keep it intact. I wanted to write something along these lines with a mix of a poetry and prose together.

### Nathanael Grummert

My name is Nathanael Grummert. I am currently in General Education at Three Rivers College. I enjoy drawing, playing video games, and occasionally writing stories. I wouldn't call myself very self-confident, but I've been told that I need to put more faith in my writing capabilities. I hope my works will bring readers joy, amusement, and an appreciation for how fast time can fly by.





## Deven Gunter

Deven Gunter. I like to write fiction in my spare time, but I'm terrible at finishing things. I like writing stories about (somewhat) normal people in somewhat normal situations, and other boring things like that. My favorite way to write is to come up with a catchy or funny opening line, and then just write whatever comes to mind from there.

## Japheth Logsdon

Japheth Logsdon was born and raised in the Philippines and has been a resident in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, since 2017. She enrolled as a full-time student in Associates in General Studies. She has played classical piano since age 3, produced and performed her own concert-for-a-cause at 17 years old, represented the Philippines in an International Dancesport - Latin category at age 17. She is an entrepreneur and started a business in 2008 that assist business owners all over the globe with business operations and management. Up to this day, she finds a piece of her puzzle of life.

## Cassie Knox

My name is Cassie Knox. I work at Three Rivers College as a student services advisor. I have written poetry on a variety of topics for years, which has turned into an abundant collection. I tend to write about my thoughts and feelings at the present moment.

## Noah McGowen

I am Noah McGowen. I'm a first-year college student, and I have a passion for storytelling. I like to come up with ideas and themes in my mind but have trouble committing them to paper most of the time. I enjoy games that have multiple endings so you can try to make your own stories

and running tabletop role playing games like D&D. The creative process is one I'm familiar with and both love and hate. I love coming up with ideas and thinking out these grand stories in my head but never can commit to writing them it seems, which is something I hope to improve on.

## Zoreonta Moore

My name is Zoreonta Moore. I am 20, from Charleston, MO. I am currently studying Business Administration. I like to write poetry in my free time.

## Terri Petty

My name is Terri Petty. I'm married to the most supportive man ever. I am studying Psychology here at TRC and love how encouraging all of my teachers have been. I aim to one day have my own practice and be able to write and publish my own fiction books to the side. When I'm not studying or writing in my journal, I love to read (mostly romance, and fantasy). When I'm home, I love to play on my gaming PC with my husband.

## Alissa Redding

My name is Alissa Redding, and I am currently majoring in Art, which I hope to continue into a degree in graphic design. I love experimenting with writing, and short stories are my passion; but, occasionally, I enjoy dabbling in poetry as well. I hope I can continue my exploration of poetry (and art and design) far into the future!



## Mackenzie Ramdial

My name is Mackenzie Ramdial, and I have really enjoyed this opportunity in expression! I have always loved writing, and I used to write in every spare moment I had. However, now I don't have as much free time to write or read or participate in any of my old hobbies, but when I took note of this activity, I realized I just couldn't pass it up. I have especially enjoyed letting the creative process take me where it wants, even if I don't quite know where it's going, even at the end of the story. I feel like with writing, it is always the easiest and the most effective to write about something that is happening in your life. It is also the most therapeutic.

## Shishanna Roberson

Shishanna Roberson is an Art student at Three Rivers College.

## Tiechera Samuell

Tiechera Samuell lives in Poplar Bluff with her husband, Christopher, and her children, James and Emily. She has been teaching at Three Rivers College for 17 years. In her spare time, she reads, follows Major League Baseball, and takes far too many pictures.

## Jo Schalk

My name is Jo Schalk. I am getting my AA in Music Education here at Three Rivers. Poems are something I just do once in a while, but I like making music more.

## Macy Webb

My name is Macy Webb. I am a student at Three Rivers College and at SEMO. I enjoy singing and performing, so naturally I enjoy poetry as well. This was my first time submitting to Confluence, and I can't wait to do it again!

## Sarah Westbrooks

My name is Sarah Westbrooks, and I am a 15-year-old, home-schooled, farm girl. I'm old-fashioned and laid back in most ways but hand me a pencil and paper and I won't hesitate to jot down a story or a poem! I love to sing and garden along with baking and drawing. My greatest dream is to become a wife and mother one day in the future.

## Marie Wheeler

Marie Wheeler is a 17-year-old junior at Campbell High School. Some of her favorite subjects are math and history, but she always finds time to jam out to Taylor Swift with her friends. She is involved in volleyball, basketball, and quiz bowl. She enjoys working at the Malden Vet Clinic, baking, reading, acting, and hanging out with friends and family.

## Sarah (Kalich) Wheeler

Sarah (Kalich) Wheeler. I am a new math tutor at TLC after I stayed home since 2000 raising five children. I began writing at age eight when my parents required us children to write Thank You letters for gifts we received. While a Math major in the 1990s, I discovered that proving math theorems was parallel to searching for the perfect wording for an idea. One must think along unique paths, which sometimes one to mull around the estimate of an idea or theorem for days before a solution emerges. And when it appears, do not question where it came from but write ferociously before it disappears.

## Acacia Yates

Acacia Yates I am 44 years and have been married for 24 years. We have four children and two grandchildren. In our free time, we enjoy hunting and fishing. I treasure quality time with family.



# A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

By Japheth Logsdon

Do you know that each step you make has a reason why you took it? Do you know that for each job you had, serves a greater purpose for a bigger role in the future? Each day is a puzzle, you find a single piece of the puzzle and try to connect it to where it suits. You may not realize it now, but in the long run, it will make sense to you even the greatest disappointments in life, they still are part of your puzzle. The breakups, getting fired, failing an exam, all of that leads you to a greater purpose and gives you a piece of the puzzle.

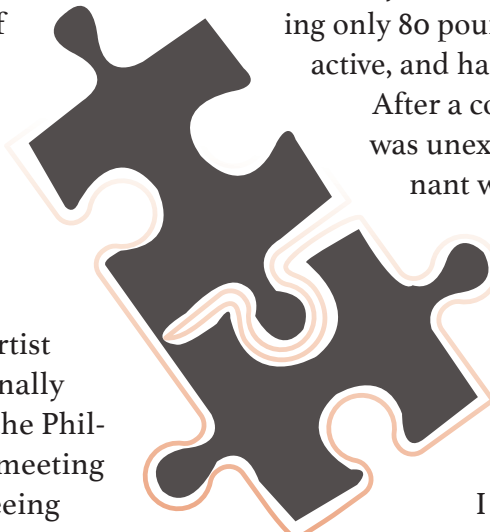
I became a mother at the age of twenty-three. I was young, full of high hopes for who I wanted to become, represented Team Philippines in International competitions for Dancesport Latin Category, and won a couple of local competitions. On top of that, I was signed up with local talent management as a singer artist and sharing the stage with nationally known musicians and artists in the Philippines. I enjoyed the stardom, meeting new people, the experience of seeing different

places. Training for upcoming competitions or gigs was not easy, it was tiring, with tons of muscle aches, sweats, and lots of sleepless nights. But it was fun to perform with friends and see people appreciating your talents.

In every gig or performance, there will always be people waiting to meet and take photos. I was not famous, nobody knew me but because they loved our show, they would always want to take a picture of the band or the dance group. Wearing the best clothes or costume there is for the show and with a body as fit as a physical trainer. My waistline was 23 weighing only 80 pounds. I was fit, active, and happy.

After a couple of years, I was unexpectedly pregnant with my first child. I first felt such a big disappointment, throwing away all my dreams and ambitions. I could not bear

*continued ...*



the thought that I will no longer be able to perform or dance. In my first trimester, I gained so much weight that I was unrecognizable. I became depressed and ashamed and so I stayed most of the time at home and disconnected myself from the world. For 9 months, all I can think of was the shame, the disappointment, and depression. Then my first child was born. Becoming a parent changes your perspective of the world. It changes your train of thought, your priorities, your emotions. You're no longer focused on yourself but on the baby. It was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen in my entire life and all the negative feelings went away. I did not care if I had all the stretch marks, weighing 190 pounds, unrecognizable to who I was. All I care was to provide the best life for my child.

While nursing, I had a lot of realizations including the entertainment job was not and always been an unstable profession unless you land yourself a million-dollar contract. But, even if you did, it still will not be stable as your income will depend on how society accepts you as an artist, your music, your vibe, your physical appearance, and all that. After realizations, came the planning on a career path. What jobs can I apply for with the skillset that I have and how much

does it make. I now have to consider money because I have a child to feed. I then landed a job in the call center industry. At first it was working for the sake of putting food on the table but later on, I got promoted as a Workforce Analyst which sparked my interest in data analytics. Long story short, I lasted in the call center industry for 12 years, 8 years as a call center agent, and 4 years as a Workforce Analyst. In 2008, I slowly ventured to as a work-at-home mom before Virtual Assistants were known to exist to be able to see my kids play in the bedroom while working on client reports, answer client calls, manage emails in the same room with my kids. I have not lost weight, in fact, I have been having such a hard time losing the extra pounds, but my son who is now 11 years old, still loves hugging me and telling me not to lose weight because he loves me the way I am. Along the way were so many heartaches, failures, disappointments, and all I can say is I am still ecstatic to find each puzzle piece there is in every moment of my life to be able to reveal the bigger picture. I don't know what it is, but the thrill of discovery makes it even more fun and interesting. My life changed in an instant but I learned how to embrace the new blessings that life gave me. ♦





# THE YOUNGEST MASTERMIND

By Sarah Westbrooks

So, you think I'm just a baby.  
Well, listen, I'm not dumb.  
There's lots of things I do besides  
Sitting, sucking my thumb.

I have ideas - giant ones -  
Just see my diagram!  
A cannon, missiles, armored tanks!  
And all this for my plan.

"And what's your plan?" you  
might've asked-  
To one day rule the world!  
The crowds would toast me in the streets  
As through the towns I'm strolled!

And all my cuteness, chubby looks-  
My greatest weapon be!  
For all soldiers would drop their arms  
At just one sight of me!

The rivers just with milk would flow,  
And rattles fill the air,  
With mandatory naps for all-  
Clean diapers everywhere!

I've thought every small detail out,  
Down to each little walk.  
But there is just one problem though-  
I haven't learned to talk. ♦

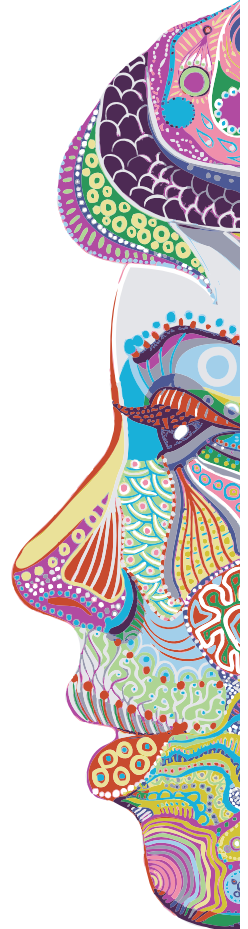
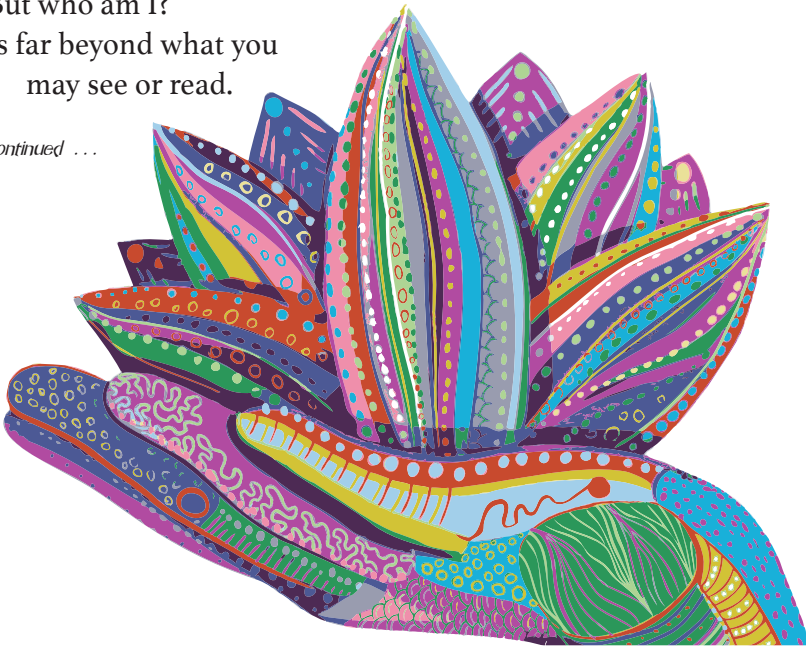


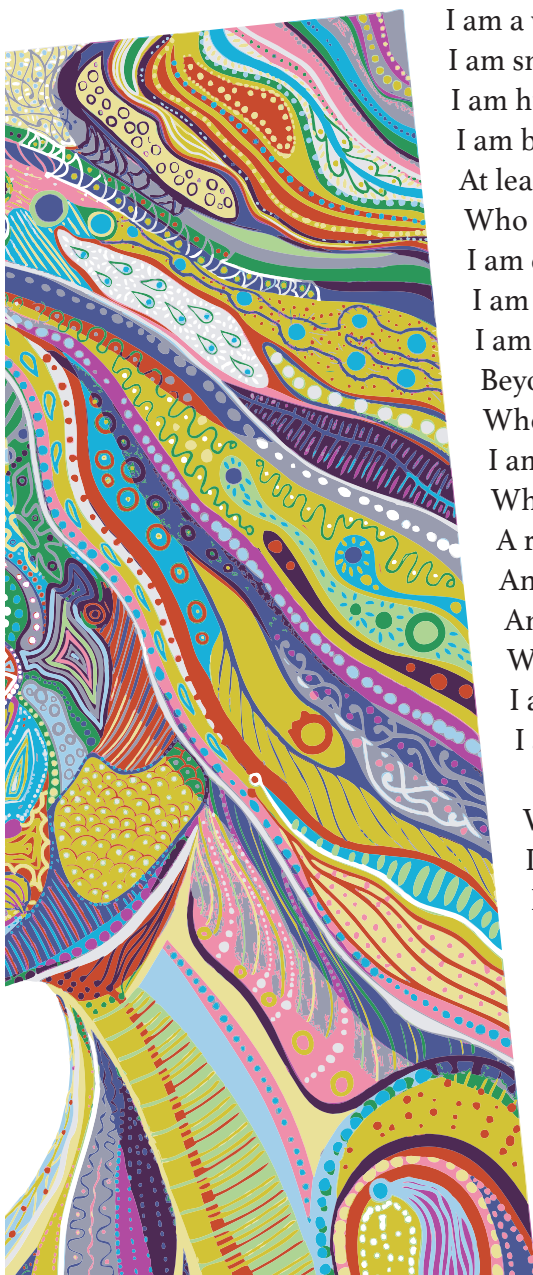
# MY SOUL DEFINES ME

By Zoreonta Moore

Who am I?  
I'm not my skin, or my complexion.  
My clothes, nor my reflection.  
Who am I?  
I'm not what you perceive or what you reflect.  
Who am I?  
I'm not the people on the screens or the fitted clothes I wear.  
Nor am i a product of my environment.  
My soul defines me indeed.  
It's the inner, that really intrigues.  
It's the way I walk & talk & in the way that I think.  
Who am I?  
I am a descendent from ancestors who bleed.  
But who am I?  
Is far beyond what you  
may see or read.

*continued ...*





I am a woman.  
I am smart.  
I am humble.  
I am black.  
At least that's the truth in what you can actually see.  
Who am I?  
I am equal.  
I am everything that I say I am.  
I am passionate.  
Beyond what the world perceives.  
Who am I?  
I am a grateful, to live in a world that perceives me.  
Who am I?  
A reflection of all your insecurities.  
An inspiration to many.  
An enemy to few.  
Who am I?  
I am blessed.  
I am a child of the almighty who made me in  
his perfection.  
Who am I?  
I am a greatness.  
I am successful.  
I am destined.  
Who am I?  
I am everything one said I wouldn't be.  
I am a strong.  
I am powerful.  
I am me.

*This was written under the inspiration that we are the only ones who can define us. We determine the route of our destiny, we are good enough, we are worthy, and we are capable of all things. — Zoreonta Moore* ◆



# JUST A FEW WORDS

By Acacia Yates

As I attended a close friend's funeral today, I read a paper his granddaughter wrote. This made me think back to my own childhood. My dad has been gone for many years now, and as a child, we never said the words I love you. When he got sick and went into a coma, I remember begging him to wake up so I could tell him he was a good dad and I loved him. As I have got a family of my own, I make sure every day to tell each of them I love them. My dad would say to me "come follow me" and we did all sorts of things.

At age 5, he said, "Come follow me." We went down to what is called the diversion channel and fished all day. We caught nothing that day but at the end, he said, "Don't worry;

*continued ...*





you don't always win." We sat on that muddy bank all day. I never understood why we spent all day throwing a line out and waiting for the fish to bite. Why after a bit did he just not give up and go home, but I would do anything to sit there again. Then the next time we caught all kinds and he said, "Never giving up is the key to success."

At age 9, he said, "come follow me." We went outside where it was a beautiful day. He started this loud machine and tilled the ground for what seemed to be forever back and forth. I got to try a couple of times to run that tiller, but I was too little. So, I picked up big weeds and stick because he wanted that to be only the dirt. Then we ran a string to make straight rows. Now it was time to put the seeds in the ground that were in the packs that I kept playing with. Every day it was my job to go out and make sure there were no weeds in our rows and water them when he told me to. A few weeks went by, and we had small plants everywhere. Then all of a sudden, we were bringing vegetables into the house that we had grown. I remember him telling me that hard work pays off.

At age 13, he said, "come follow me." This time, we went out to where he had been building us a new deck on the house. He handed me a paintbrush and told me to start on the bottom. This was no small deck, and it even had a rail all the way around. It got to where I didn't like that deck because I painted on that deck for days. He would come in from work and there I would be still painting on that deck, and he would smile and walk inside. I wasn't sure if I had done something wrong and was being punished. I was so happy when I got done and never wanted to do that again. He came home that day and said, "Now that's something to be proud of."

At age 15, he said, "come follow me." It was mid-July and hot outside. Under the big shade tree in the back yard, he had put an old junk car there a few days ago. He started taking parts off that I thought needed to be on the car. Then he took the back seat out, still I thought that should have stayed. Then he took the battery out from under the hood and put it on the back floor. So that is why he removed the seat, I guess.

*continued ...*



We rearranged that car for a month or so. Then one evening, he loaded it on a trailer and left. When he returned, he didn't have the car. I wondered now why we put all that time into that car for him to just take it away. The next day he took me to the county fair with him. I sat in this row where I could see the whole bare field. There were a bunch of junk cars lined up around the outside. A man came across the speaker and said something then all those cars went to running into each other until only one was left running. This took some time, but it had to be one of the funnest things I had ever watched. After it was all over, on the way home with our beat-up car that didn't run, dad told me, "Now that is good clean fun."

At age 18, he said, "come follow me." It was late that evening, about 7:00, and we had just gotten done eating dinner. This time we drove a few blocks away to an old laundry mat. We walked in the front door, and you could tell it was a mess and he said someone must clean it. I knew he was tired and needed my help because he had worked all day at his job, so I didn't mind helping. He swept and mopped while I wiped off every washer and dryer. Then he emp-

tyed all the machines of the quarters in them. About 10:00, he shut out the lights, and we went home. On the way there, I remember a conversation we had. He had told me that even though he worked all day, the laundry mat needed clean, and that would help with the rent.

See my family never spoke the words "I love you." As I read that paper that girl had written about her grandpa, I realized my dad told me all the time he loved me by saying "come follow me." He had taught me that even if you don't win on the first try to not give up and you will succeed. He taught me that with a little work, you will be rewarded. He taught me that if you want to do something and be proud of that, it takes time. He showed me that there is such thing as having fun wrecking a car without being in trouble. He showed me that when it comes to family, you do what you must to make sure they are taken care of. See he passed on so much by those little words "come follow me." In fact, when I begged him to wake so I could tell him "I love you," we had been saying it all along. Me by never questioning and doing as he told me, and him by those few words. ♦



# SO, THE STORY GOES...

By Macy Webb

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, but these pickled peppers were never plucked from the perpetual garden in which Peter might have plucked them.

And yet Peter was never pardoned for the parochial picking of the pickled peppers which can be determined as pastoral property in Pennsylvania.

Without legal legislation Peter would arise to communal agitation and would seek ramification.

Perpetually Piper would have been proven as a pesky peeve that would plague the population and society would ruin and stain his reputation.

Putting forth preposterous pressure to annihilate a propeller of displeasure.

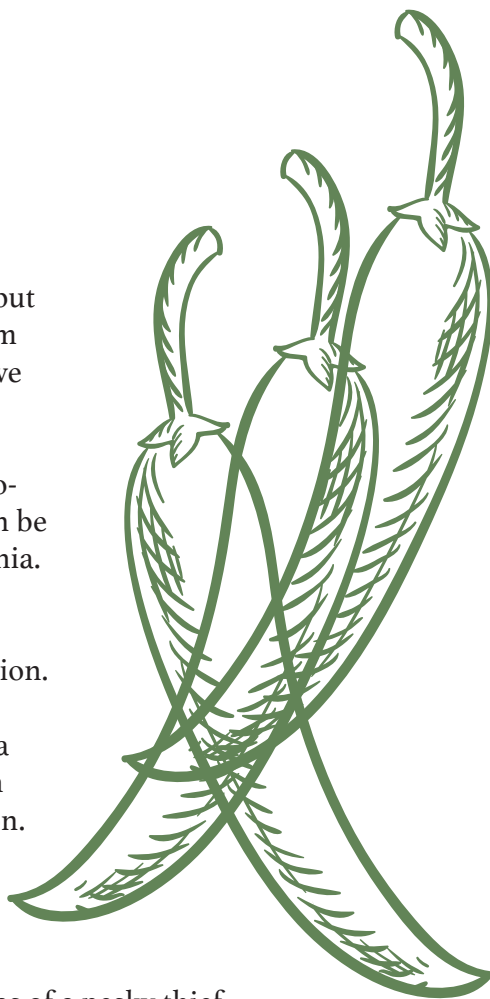
But pay no mind to the pain and pestilent pleas of a pesky thief.

Putting forth the passing of a peasant Piper would cause no communal grief.

So yes, Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Providing people with the personification of a social terror.

But was Peter Piper really in error? ♦



# HOW

By Alissa Redding



How often do we think of each other as people? We interact, talk, make plans for the following day, but at the end of it all how well do we *know* each other?

How well we even know ourselves fluctuates, like the rise and fall of the weather in spring. We spend hours looking into a mirror, trying to pinpoint the moment our own faces became strangers. The shape of cheekbones and that prominent nose shifted and only grew millimeters out of the shape we had seen, making faces in our grandparents' rearview mirror driving out of daycare.

How is the real truth that none of us know how little the world can crack before we take notice? Because if we were to say the truth of how big a change it would take to notice, we would look like bad human beings to everyone, and the comfort of people we have taken to perceive a handful of months out of the decades they have been alive in their own skin, is held more highly than our own observations of ourselves.

How we would rather weave a skin of our own likeness that doesn't exist, than to be sincere that no, we haven't

seen the crack in the ceiling growing, because we've just been so *busy* with our own lives- and how much better does that sound against the confirmation that yes, we have seen that plaster slowly splintering over these past few weeks, but have never had the strong enough urge to do anything about it?

How that in one way out of millions, we might just be lying to ourselves about the world that is only a reflected image cast upside down through our own eyeballs. We take and categorize what we see into little boxes and files because the fear of not knowing might just be as strong as witnessing our own unraveling from the place we have grown to fit our own selves into around us.

How do we lie, saying we have a plan, and joke when our own skin shifts giving sight of a part of us we don't wish for anyone to see?

We are sitting on an irregular sphere hurtling through space, yet we are more concerned over the comfort of our trip that we fail to see the stranger staring back through the mirror-

How odd is that? ♦



# SPRING

By Jo Schalk

It was a crazy spring evening  
I was a musician playing  
He was an artist painting

He was my lover  
My only artist

We used to giggle so well together  
Travel the world together  
To stay with each other

But after a while we grew apart  
Never to see each other again ♦



# THE FOREFATHERS' QUIRR

By Shellie Gonzalez

On the plight be still, there once was resolute ink and quill.  
The forethought of our forefathers once told.

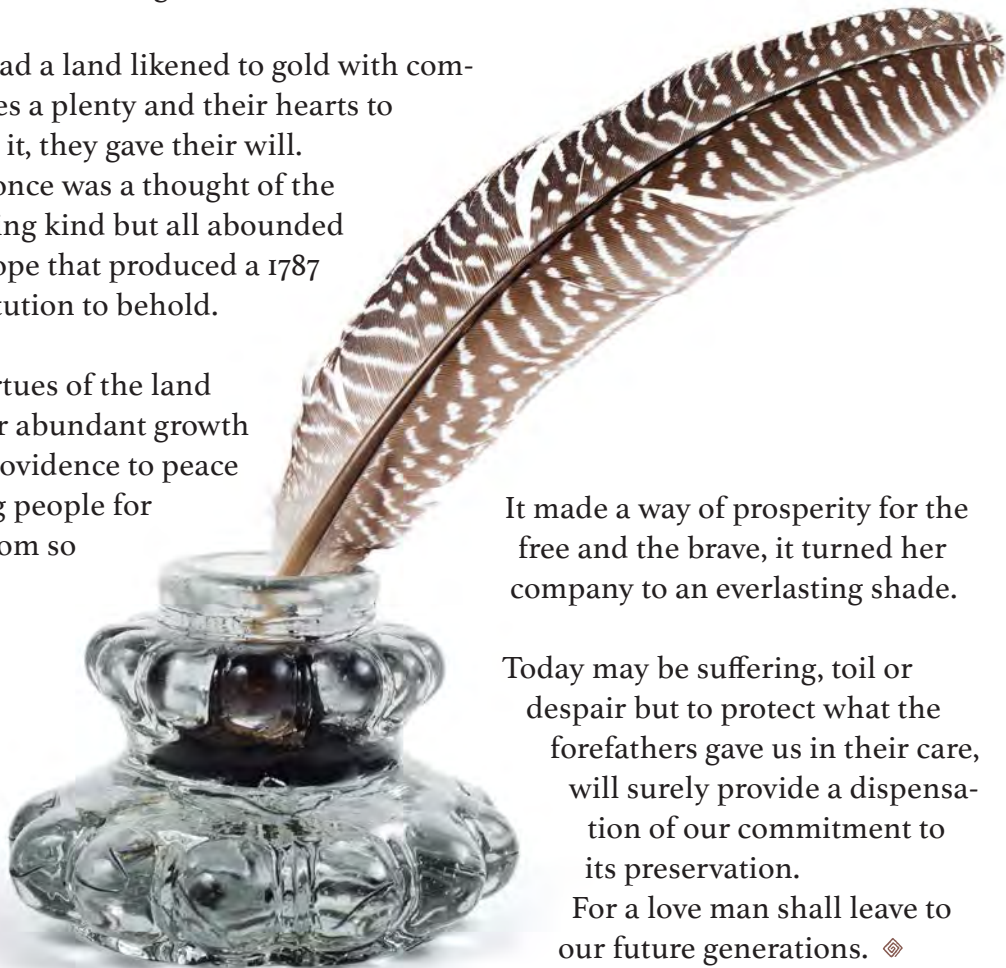
They had a land likened to gold with commodities a plenty and their hearts to protect it, they gave their will.  
Never once was a thought of the menacing kind but all abounded with hope that produced a 1787 Constitution to behold.

The virtues of the land and her abundant growth gave providence to peace seeking people for a freedom so bold.

It made a way of prosperity for the free and the brave, it turned her company to an everlasting shade.

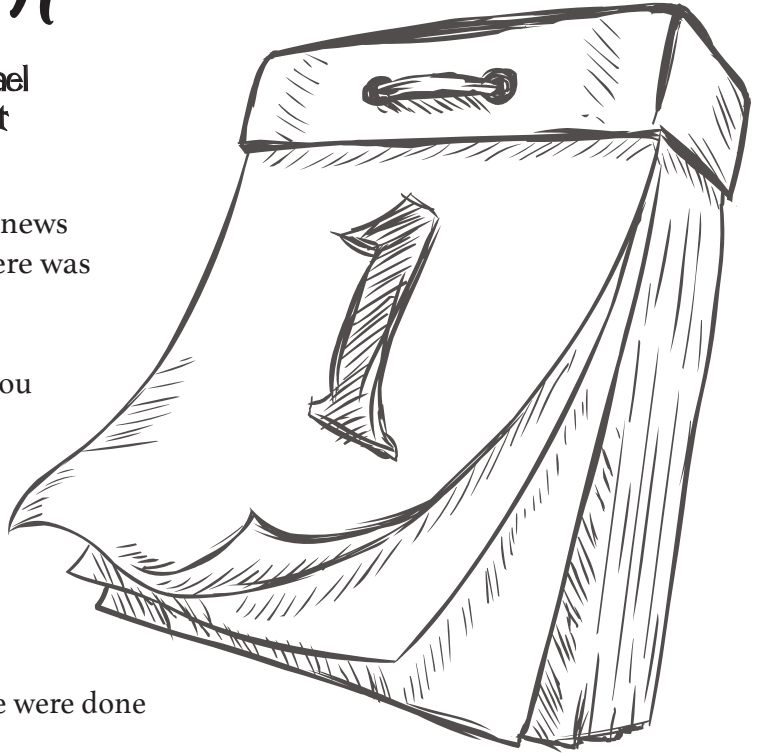
Today may be suffering, toil or despair but to protect what the forefathers gave us in their care, will surely provide a dispensation of our commitment to its preservation.

For a love man shall leave to our future generations. ♦



# ONE MORE MONTH WITH YOU

By Nathanael  
Grunmert



It was 6 pm when I got the news  
That you were leaving, there was  
nothing I could do  
Yet I took solace in the fact  
I had one more month with you

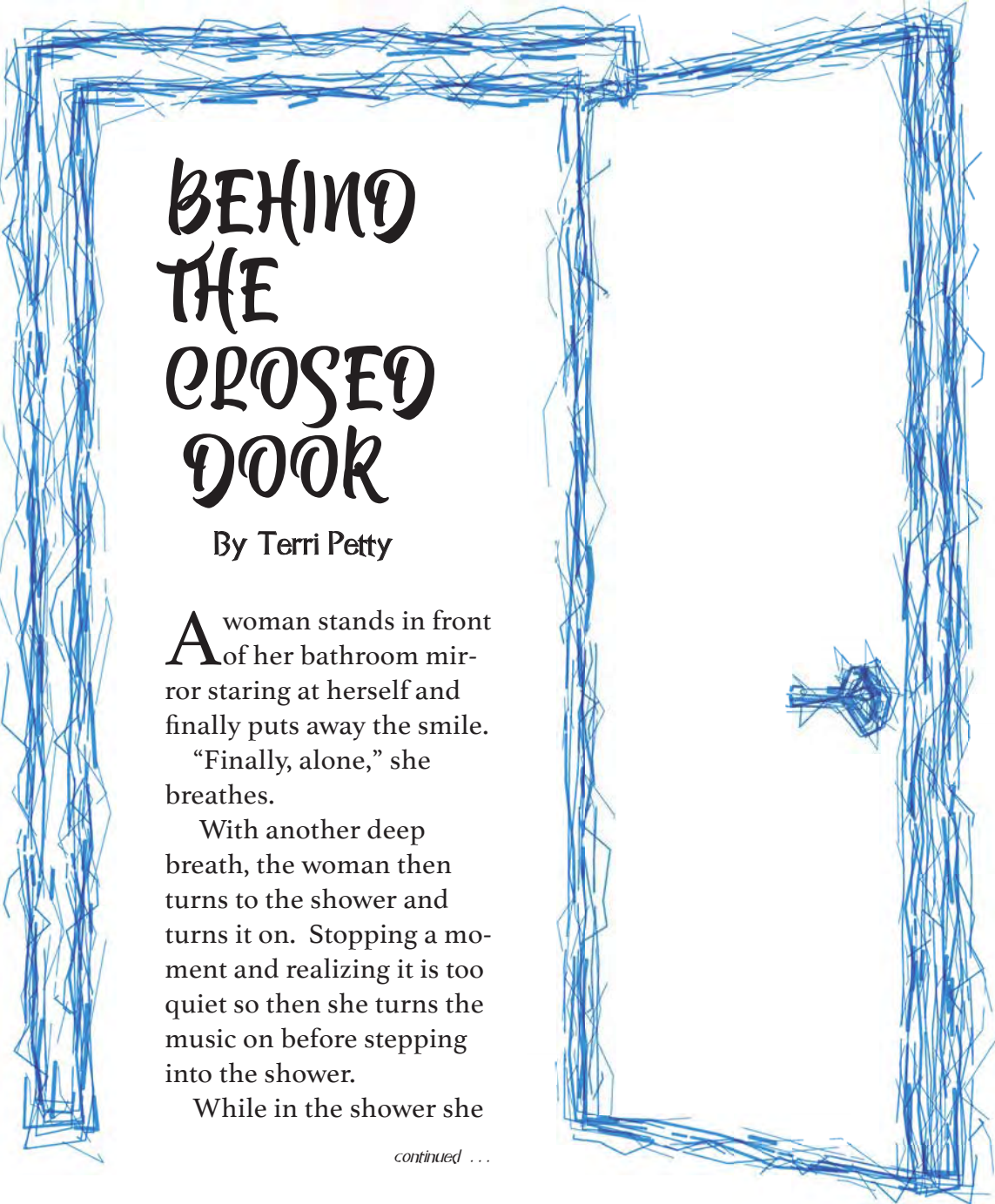
We gave it all a good  
long run  
We played our games,  
we had our fun  
But by the time we shut  
it down  
Just three more weeks then we were done

All night long we talked and laughed  
We texted memes, spoke of our past  
Yet when our time the sun hijacked  
The final week had come at last

In time we had our fill of chatter  
All joy was gone, we had grown bitter  
And so, we sat in silence loud  
On the final week we had together

At 6 am the day was due  
Your time had come, that much I knew  
Yet I prayed God would give me back  
The chance to have just one more  
month with you ♦





# BEHIND THE CLOSED DOOR

By Terri Petty

A woman stands in front of her bathroom mirror staring at herself and finally puts away the smile.

“Finally, alone,” she breathes.

With another deep breath, the woman then turns to the shower and turns it on. Stopping a moment and realizing it is too quiet so then she turns the music on before stepping into the shower.

While in the shower she

*continued ...*





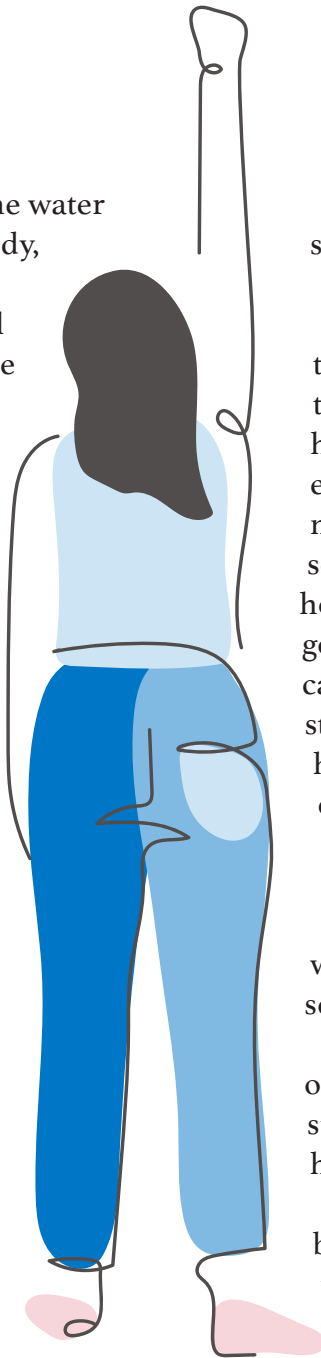
just stands there letting the water cascade down over her body, then lets a tear fall and another and another until she could not stop, and the tears are flowing just as much as the water surrounding her face. Her knees start to buckle and so she starts to slowly slide down the shower wall until she is on her knees. She just stays there releasing all the stress and words from the day. Recalling his voice dark and raspy yelling them again at her.

“You will never be good enough.”

“Why do you keep trying, just give up.”

“You are so worthless!”

“You don’t know what it’s like to hurt.”



“No one will ever love someone like you.”

“You are so heartless!”

As the woman recalls all the words, she had been told throughout the day she just holds herself and lets the emotions out, knowing the music and shower covers the sound for no one else in the household to know what is going on. After a while, she can finally bring herself to start washing herself up. After her shower is finished, she catches herself looking in the mirror again at her blood-shot eyes.

“I am more than those words,” she whispers to herself

“They do not know me, or what I go through. I am strong!” She puts a smile on her face and walks to the door

“I am strong!” she said again before joining society again on the other side of the door. ♦



EXCERPT FROM

# THE SNOW LEOPARD'S CURSE

By Alex Fitzpatrick

The bear seemed to live just behind Toma's eyelids. Every time he fell asleep, he was plagued with nightmares of the beast. Sometimes it crushed him with its weight and pierced his skull with its fangs. Other times were more gruesome and grew more prolonged and torturous with each minute he slept. Yet other times, there was no violence at all. The bear would talk to him then. He fell back into the dream.

*"Toma," groaned the bear, "Look at yourself."*

*Toma was frozen for a moment but gained his wits and looked down. He was covered in blood from his forearms down to the claws at the ends of his fingers. More leaked down his torso, matting his gray fur.*

*"What do you think I am?"*

*Toma stopped to consider the question. He looked over the creature. Its brown fur was thick and not unfamiliar with the graying of age, but despite its numerous years, Toma could still see waves of muscle ripple underneath its fur and layers of fat. It lumbered*

*around with the seemingly mindlessness of a killer beginning to grow bored. He looked into its dull, black eyes.*

*"You're me."*

*The gentle yet stinging answer hung in the empty air. There was no echo and no world in which Toma's words could be hidden. The full weight of them hung between the two oppressively.*

*The bear chortled and its lips curled about its snout.*

*"No, but you are wise. Perhaps one day."*

*There was a long pause before the bear continued.*

*"And what do you think you are?"*

*Again, Toma went silent with consideration. He wished only to speak from the heart, which ached with anguish. It felt as though his heart was trying to pull itself apart, chamber from chamber.*

*"A monster," he answered.*

*The bear nodded.*

*"You should hope so."*

*continued ...*



Toma stirred, and his vision faded until he left behind his dreams. He stared at the ceiling, feeling the cold trail of tears that had stained his cheeks. Toma briefly smiled, glad it was only a dream, but it died quickly. Silently, he stepped out of bed onto his old floorboards and then out of his room. The only sounds audible to his attuned ears were the fireplace crackling in the main room and his dull, placid heartbeat.

Grandma was in her chair next to the fire. Her gray eyes peered into the flames as she took a pensive sip from her steaming cup of tea. One plate was at the dinner table. There were two eggs, fried over the fireplace, and a small loaf of bread. It was

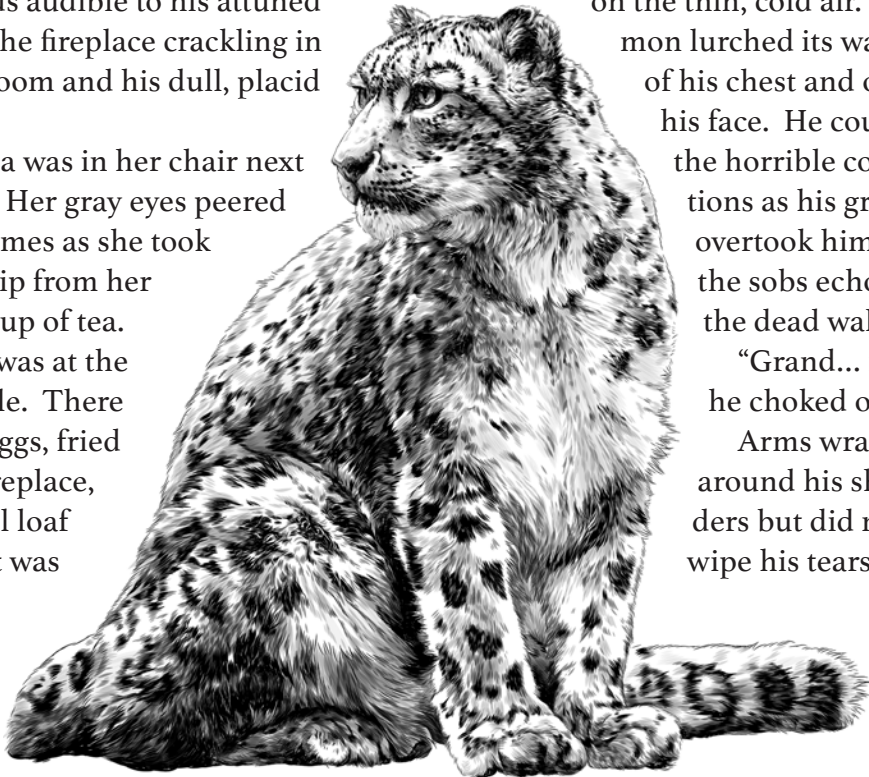
an unfulfilling meal, but it would do. Toma sat down and ate slowly.

“I love you, Grandson... I still love you.”

The dry bread scraped down Toma’s throat. He wanted to say something, to thank her, to say it back, but when he opened his mouth, he choked on the thin, cold air. A demon lurched its way out of his chest and onto his face. He could feel the horrible contortions as his grief overtook him and the sobs echoed off the dead walls.

“Grand... ma,” he choked out.

Arms wrapped around his shoulders but did not wipe his tears. ♦



# DARKNESS IN THE ALLEY

By Noah McGowen

My name is William Rogers. I'm a high schooler, I've got average grades, and really only one friend, so I'm nothing special. The only thing I'd count as odd is my way to school. There's this alleyway that always seems to call to me. My friend Daniel normally meets me a little before the alleyway. We talk about what's happening and what plans we have for the weekend, usually a new date for him and for me having to hear about how bad it went, not like I've got anything better to do anyway. The alleyway isn't too big of a deal most of the time as Daniel distracts me enough to keep me from caving into my curiosity. That is until today.

Daniel didn't show up today. He's probably sick or something, but it didn't bother me too much since I've got enough willpower to just walk forward. I've got this. Once I got to the alleyway, I felt a curiosity I couldn't shake. Looking into the alleyway, I noticed the grime on the concrete floor, how the darkness almost seemed to ink the brick walls of the buildings beside it to give it a sense of deep foreboding.

My body almost moved on its own as I stepped off the street towards the alleyway. Everything in me felt pulled to something in that horrid place, but I didn't feel fear, just a warm comfort that pulled me into a hug that promised me everything would be ok. The warm town street behind me faded away giving into the endless darkness, a sea of darkness surrounded me as any sound seemed to fade as what I saw as a comforting hug of an ethereal entity pulled me further into the abyss of blackness, until it spoke.

**"You finally came."** The icy voice carried with it a deep hatred and malice, any sense of comfort or warmth left my body as I was frozen with a sense of pure and unholy terror as whatever it is kept speaking. **"I've been waiting for some time William."** Its voice echoed around me like ripples in water, each carrying the same confident hatred-filled tone. I felt a clawed hand touch my shoulder, weightless but grasping me in a hold I didn't dare try to shake. Finally, I summoned the courage to

*continued ...*





speak. “What are you?” my own voice shaky beyond recognition, the raw fear that gripped my bones translating into my voice. **“I’m what you need William. I can offer power out of your measly existence. I can feel your uncertainty, how much you loath and hate being invisible next to your friends, how you’re just their accessory.”** And, as much as I hated it, the voice started to appeal to me. Daniel only used me as someone to rant too. I had no other friends and ... it sounded

appealing. “What would I have to do?” I felt the hand on my shoulder release as the darkness seemed to laugh and spin around me before in front of me was an image of a man in black, a long pointed tail curled behind him as his silky black suit almost seemed to blend into his charcoal black skin that curled up into horns on his forehead. The man seemed to have no hair, but where all my attention was at was his eyes, a burning fiery red that reflected the wrath and malice I’d heard from him earlier. **“All you have to do William is shake my hand.”** He extended a clawed hand to me, offering me power and freedom with an unknown cost to me

The footsteps echoing behind me got louder and louder as Daniel turned the corner and spoke, “Hey dude. Sorry. Had a girl over and got up a bit late after an eventful night.” He takes a few steps into the prison of an alleyway, looking around and then back to me, squinting a little. “Hey man, you feeling ok? You look a little off.” I turned around and smiled a little at my host’s friend waving off his concerns as I walked towards him. **“Don’t worry Daniel, I’ve never felt better.”** Leaving with Daniel as I looked back at the alley, I once called home, finally having consumed my prey. ♦



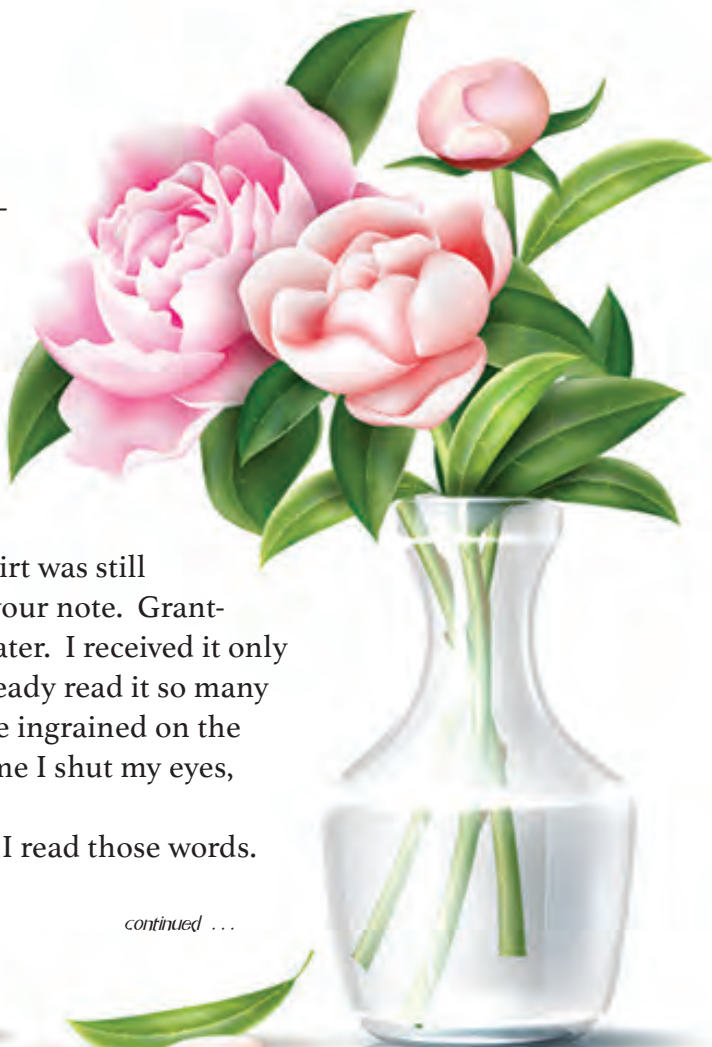
# PEONIES ON A SUNDAY

By Mackenzie Ramdial

The table usually held dinner. A few boxes of Chinese. Spaghetti when we felt fancy. But today it held only the shattered vase and peonies cast into their own puddle. I still sat at the table. Still in my spot. My head in my hands, and my elbows in the puddle of peonies. My shirt was still damp from the rain. So was your note. Granted, it was also in the peony water. I received it only a few hours ago, but I had already read it so many times it felt like its words were ingrained on the backs of my eyelids. Every time I shut my eyes, the note was still there.

Your note. A million times, I read those words. I'm sorry. I had to.

*continued . . .*



Were you?

Did you?

I heard them in my head, in your voice, in mine. The rain through the open window was loud, but those words were louder. They have screamed at me nonstop since 2:34 in the morning when I read them for the first time. When I realized you had truly left me. If you were truly sorry, you wouldn't have done this. You would have at least said goodbye. Waited until I was really awake before leaving. Or trying to. Your escape plan was miserable, by the way. I might even say pathetic. You know I'm a light sleeper. Always have been, always will be. Especially after this.

I was awake as soon as your bare feet hit the hardwood floor. I doubt you even went to sleep. You probably laid awake all night, itching for your opportunity to slip away. You'd probably planned this for weeks. Waited for that perfect moment to leave me as painlessly as possible. Painless for both of us, you would have hoped. I wouldn't have to physically watch you leave, and you wouldn't have to look at me. You wouldn't have to see the mess you leave behind you everywhere you go.

This time you saw it though. You looked it square in the eyes and couldn't pull away. There was so much in that single stare-down, more emotion than you'd felt in this relationship in the past month. I know because I felt it too. First I was confused. Then my heart dropped. Yours must have too, with that heavy feeling of being caught in the act. Busted.

I asked you where you were going. Your mouth opened, your eyes fluttered, but you didn't say anything. You wanted to, but those words were much too stubborn and painful to drag out. You shut your mouth and swallowed, and I knew what that meant. There was no sound in the apartment after that. Just the simple pattering of raindrops on the windowsill outside.

You, my dear in the headlights, you stared. I stared. Your little hands clutched your little suitcase handle, and I felt my entire being begin to sag. That's when your eyes left mine, and you reached for the door handle. I watched your face as you turned slowly to the door. That face was always so familiar and easy to read, but now it was written in a foreign language. When you stepped

*continued . . .*



through the frame and closed the door behind you, you closed it like you always had. Gently. But you didn't lock the door this time. Because your key was taped to your note on the kitchen table.

After an eternity of ten minutes, I stuck my head out the window. You will never know this part of the story, but I will never forget it. I watched you walk down the street in the rain, no umbrella. You hated umbrellas. I could see your pain from here, I could still feel it. When you reached a sleek black car, you stopped, and a man ran out from the driver's side door. He held his umbrella high like it was a crown on his perfectly groomed head. When he reached you, your face lit up, that thousand-kilowatt smile switched on for the first time in years. That same switch shut me down, and I was numb as I watched the two of you wrap around each other.

As that car drove away into the dark, I left my head hanging out the window for a moment. Each droplet of rain that rolled through my hair and down my face mixed with my tears. I am not one to cry, but you bring that side out of me. When my head began to feel loose, I pulled it back inside the apartment. I carried it to the kitchen



table and sat down. I stared the peonies in the face, and they laughed at me. Laughed at my pain. My stupidity.

You really thought some flowers could fix your relationship? They jeered.

Does she even like peonies?

I guess I'll never know. ♦





# LAST DAY

By Marie Wheeler

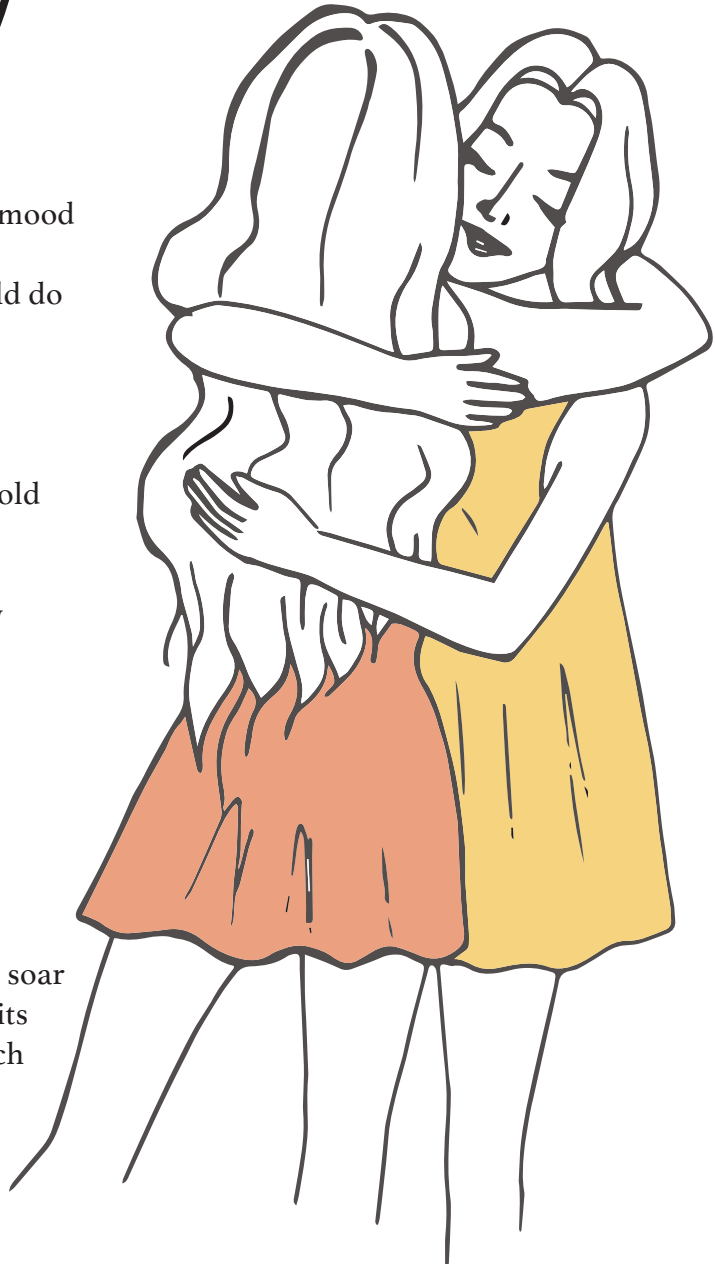
Right sunny day  
is the opposite of my mood  
seeing my sister off  
is the saddest thing I could do

three hour trip  
winding along the road  
memories being shared  
laughing to fight off the cold

the car begins to slow  
airplanes come in to view  
the time has finally come  
I know what I must do

I crush my sister in a hug  
sadly saying goodbye  
tears leak down my face  
as I begin to cry

in college I know she will soar  
and embrace all that awaits  
but I will miss her so much  
I love you Kate ♦



# WHAT MONSTERS FEAR

By Johnny Boham



“What monsters fear,” said the  
little troll,  
With a big droopy yap and a waddle  
in his stroll,  
“Is jubilating music and exultations  
of the soul.  
All that gleeful noise is poison to the air.  
It sets my ears on fire and makes me  
pull my hair!”

“No, no, that’s not it!”  
Said the vampire bat with a cackle in  
his quip.  
“I’ll tell you what monsters fear the most.  
Step a little closer and do take some  
notes.”

“What monsters fear,” proclaimed  
the bat,  
With a puffed-out chest and a tip of  
his hat,  
“Is an act of kindness as a matter of fact.  
A deed so generous that it melts  
the heart.  
That really grinds my fangs and makes  
me snark.”

“I’ve got both of you beat!”  
Wailed the ghouel through a breath  
that reeked.  
“I’ve been dead a long time and I know a

thing or two.  
I’d say that gives me the edge over you.”

“What monsters fear,” moaned the creep,  
“Is being forgotten by the mortally meek.  
To be confined to myth and the figments  
of sleep.  
That sort of thing upsets me the most.  
It’s enough to drive a fiend to give up the  
ghost.”

Shuffling, sauntering, and stalking down  
the street,  
The three monsters paraded as the night  
fell deep.  
And in the middle of this tawdry,  
tempestuous scene  
Lay a town that was blanketed in a  
shroud of sleep.

From around every corner, nothing else  
could be seen  
Except the tranquil houses with secrets  
in their eaves.  
And there was no other sound, nor a  
trick nor a treat,  
Only the wanton chatter of those  
cacophonous three.

Until suddenly...

*continued ...*



*"I know the answer in which  
you seek."*

And, at that, the trio stopped dead  
on their feet.

*"I know what it is that monsters  
fear,"*

Came the voice again, so wispy  
and weird.

"What? Did you say som  
thing?" inquired the bat.

"No, not I," said the troll,  
drooling as he spat.

"Perhaps you?" they said,  
pointing to the ghoul.

"Don't look at me," exclaimed  
he, "I am not the fool."

Angrily, the vamp demanded:

"Who is responsible for this  
rude interruption?"

"Whoever it is," snorted the troll,

"I'd sell my own horn to possess  
such gumption."

"Speak up," implored the ghoul,

"Or we'll have your brain as a mi  
night luncheon!"

From the East a rustling noise  
grew from the leaves



And the three of them  
leaped to face the unease.  
There, from the shadows,  
between a house and a  
shrub,  
Arose the shape of a thing  
that made them all  
numb.

A warm, fleshy creature,  
red-faced and round,  
Stepped into the lam  
light and gave a shy  
bow.

But, sensing their  
imminent and hostile  
report,

He stopped short his curtsy  
and returned to afore.

Then, raising one hand to  
postpone their beseech,  
He cleared his deep throat to  
give a short speech.

"Friends, friends, I mean you no  
harm.

Accept my apologies if I caused  
you alarm.

I was just over there behind

*continued ...*



that gray shrub  
When I heard you making a curious  
hubbub.”

“Friends!?! Friends!?!” growled the little  
troll.  
His horn blew out steam, and his guts  
did a roll.  
“The nerve of this man!” reverberated  
the bat.  
His chest whiffled out and his hat fell  
down flat.  
“Do my ears serve me right,” grilled the  
ghoul,  
“That a human being thinks we are of  
the same pool?”

“But human beings are the scariest  
monsters of all,”  
Said the man. And, upon hearing that,  
the others guffawed.

“Pray tell, now what do you mean?”  
Begged the troll, whilst trying not to  
rupture his spleen.  
“And don’t be coy and fly off like a  
ghost.  
We haven’t the time for whimsical  
jokes.”

The man adjusted his ruff and began  
to speak.

“Humans,” he said, “are the most terr  
fying beings.  
In public, we wear costumes of the  
prettiest gleam.  
We preach tolerance, respect, and love  
for each other.  
But, behind closed doors, we change  
into ugly things.  
We practice rejection, mistrust, and  
hate everything  
And, for a trifle offense, we declare war  
on each other.”

“So, if I were you, the last thing I would  
fancy to meet  
Is that inexorable creature known as *the  
human being.*”

“He IS one of us!” the vampire declared.  
“But why were you eavesdropping on us  
from over there?”  
He placed one fingernail on the cleft of  
his chin  
And waited, with earnest, for the man  
to begin.

*continued ...*



The man looked down and took a tone  
less formal.

“Forgive my incursion,” he said, quite  
mournful.

“But I no longer live in the homes of the  
borough.

Knowing what I know, I could never be  
complete.

Regret, in general, has brought me  
much sorrow.

Therefore, I settled to live on this side of  
normal

And observe, as pure life passes by on  
the street.”

“Very well,” gurgled the ghoul, “that all  
sounds fair.

And, for thee, my heart bleeds for your  
cursed despair.

But you still haven’t told us what we all  
want to hear.

What is the one, true, thing that a  
monster does fear?”

The man let out a sigh and made  
his decree.

“What monsters fear,” said the sad  
little man

With a voice that creaked and clattered  
like a tin can,

“Is the one thing that most of you will  
not understand.

But if you think hard enough on it  
maybe you will see

That monsters fear the same thing I  
have always feared,

And what I fear is...

REALITY.”

The monsters all looked at each other  
quizzically.

They agreed that the man was suffering  
insanity.

But, seeing as he was another hopeless  
tragedy,

They asked him to join in their mid  
night revelry.

The man humbly accepted the offered  
branch

And joined the ranks of the souls of the  
damned.

Then away they departed to haunt new  
lands,

A band of four monsters—  
all hand-in-hand. ♦



# BLIND DATE

By Deven Gunter



“So, tell me about yourself.”  
“Well, my father was a con-  
man,” I said. “So was his father, and  
his father’s father. Bad men all the way  
back really.”

“Then what about you?”

“I’m just a bank teller.”

“That’s right,” she said. “You already  
told me that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

A waiter interrupted us, walking up  
to the table with a little notepad and  
a nice vest with a bow tie. He wasn’t  
smiling because this restaurant was too  
fancy for smiling waiters. He asked us  
for our drinks.

“I’ll have the... Cabaret Sauvignon,”  
she said.

The waiter wrote it down and then  
looked at me. “Just a glass of water,  
please,” I said.

She cleared her throat. “Change  
mine to a water, too, please.”

“Two waters?” the waiter asked.

“Yes, please.”

The waiter nodded and left us as  
quickly as he had arrived. I leaned back  
in my seat, and she fiddled with the  
tablecloth across from me.

“Alright. What about  
you?” I asked.

“Hmm?”

“What do you do?”

“I’m out of a job right now.”

“Okay, if you had a job, what would  
you be doing?”

She put the tablecloth to rest and  
looked up at me, then to her left and  
right. She crossed her arms on the  
table and leaned forward a little bit,  
making her voice quiet.

“I’m a psychic.”

I laughed. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’m telling the truth.” Her  
voice got even quieter. “I can read your  
thoughts.”

We sat in silence for a moment, let-  
ting the hushed sounds of conversa-  
tion and clinking silverware around us  
punctuate her last statement. I pas-  
sively tapped a couple of knuckles on  
the table.

“You don’t believe me,” she said  
finally.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What number  
am I thinking of?”

*continued ...*



“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Then how does it work?”

“It’s more vague. Like a feeling.”

“Okay. Give me an example.”

She straightened up and flipped the left side of her hair back. “Okay. Let me focus.” She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. “I can tell you’re an intelligent man. A good problem solver. You can weave your way out of almost any situation you find yourself in.”

“I’m flattered.”

She opened her eyes and smiled.

“And I can tell that you’re lying.”

The waiter—same one—came back with two glasses and a pitcher of water. He put the glasses on the table and filled them, then put the pitcher on the table as well. My eyes were locked on hers, and hers on mine. The waiter asked what we wanted to order.

“We haven’t decided yet.”

He nodded and left us.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“What bank do you work at?”

I sipped on my drink.

“North Centennial.”

“I’ve never seen you there.”

I laughed. “And I’ve never seen you there, either. What are you, a cop?”

Her gaze didn’t falter. “What kind of relationship did you have with your father?”

“You tell me, psychic.”

“I’m guessing it was a very good one.”

“Psychics don’t make guesses.”

“Sure they do.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “You’re not really a psychic, are you?”

“And you’re not really a bank teller.”

An uncomfortable and lingering silence once again took hold between

*continued . . .*



us. I took a steady sip of my drink, now halfway empty, while she still hadn't touched hers.

"I've lost my appetite," I said.

"Me too," she said, chin in her hand, turned away. "What was your original plan for tonight?"

"Well, the first thing I would have done was make you pay for the dinner. I would have said something like, 'Oh, I'm strapped for cash,' or 'I guess I left my wallet in the car.' If the night went well, I'd plan a second date, and then a third. Three weeks into our relationship, I'd lose my job, and then my mother would get sick not long after. Her treatments would be expensive, and I'd have no money, so I'd ask you for some instead. And I'd thank you on my hands and knees for saving my mother's life, and then I'd turn around and deposit it in my bank account. After a couple of months, I'd say, 'Things aren't working out, babe,' and 'It's not you, it's me,' and then I'd cut ties, and I'd move on to the next girl." I leaned back and shrugged. "At least, that's the gist of it."

"You think I'd fall for that?"

"It's worked on three other women so far."

"I didn't think I looked that gullible."

"I didn't pick you because you looked gullible, I picked you because you looked loaded." I took another sip. "And what

was your plan?"

"I was going to get you so drunk you could hardly stand. I was going to pretend to invite you back to my place, then steal your wallet while you were nearly passed out drunk in the back of an Uber."

"Not very subtle."

She shrugged. "It gets the job done."

I finished off my drink. "So, what now?"

"Well, I imagine we both leave this restaurant empty handed, go our separate ways, and then never see each other ever again."

"And you'll go back to robbing poor, helpless men?"

"Not poor, not helpless. And as long as you keep tricking innocent women, yes, I will."

"You know, if it weren't for all this," I said, motioning between us, "I think you and me could have worked out."

"Not a chance."

"You don't think so?"

"The only reason we're even here right now is because we're both terrible people."

"I know. But what if we weren't?" I said. "Start over?"

She thought about it for a moment.

"What the hell, why not?" she said, waving down the waiter.

That night, we decided to split the bill. ♦







# AN ECHO OF REFLECTION

By Cassie Knox

There was a song; you reminded me of it  
There was a movie; I watched as if you  
played a major role in it  
There was a mood; you enhanced it  
There was a town; we came alive in it  
There was a time; we embraced it  
There is a place in my heart;  
you still affect it



# ONE OF LIFE'S REWARDS

By Acacia Yates

It's four a.m. and the alarm just went off. As I sit up on the edge of the bed, I think what in the world makes a person get up at this hour? I get up and turn on the light and am reminded that I cannot take a shower because this will ruin the hunt. Hunt, hmm, this is why I got up so early. Today I am going deer hunting. I am so excited that four a.m. and no shower seems to be ok. I get ready in a hurry, grab my gun, and out the door I go in the cold.

I am in my deer stand before the sun even started to come up. As I sit there and watch the sun slowly peak over the hill, I catch a glimpse of something in the corner of the tree line. I can't make out what it is just yet. I sit and wait for the sun to give me just a bit more light. Then finally I can see the silhouette. There stood the most amazing sight. It is a 10-point buck standing tall and proud. See, now the bucks are in rut, and there were two doe a few hundred yards away. I had not noticed them until he had made a few steps in their direction. Only this meant now

he is standing broadside. I can see his whole shape through my scope. Breath, now hold your breath, and pull the trigger.

Done. Now to see if I get to take that magnificent creature home with me. See, this is the reason, I got up at four a.m. and left the house with no shower. No, not to only go kill a deer and bring it home. The hunt is so much more than that. It takes days to prepare for. In the summer, I start squirrel hunting, but as I look for squirrels, I am also looking for deer signs. Then, in the fall, I go turkey hunting, which is just before deer season, so I pay closer attention to any signs of deer I may see. Without seeing a deer, I can tell if there have been bucks in the area by rubs, scrapes, and tracks. A rub is where a buck rubs his horns on trees to get the velvet off them. Then there are scrapes where a buck will scrape the ground clearing out an area that the doe will then urinate in. The buck will then come by

*continued ...*



and pick up the doe's scent from the urine and follow that scent until he finds the doe. So finding these two signs mean there is a buck in the area.

There is more than just the hunt. Hunting is so peaceful and rewarding. As I walk through the woods quietly looking for squirrels, I also get to see the birds singing in the trees. As I sit so still waiting for a turkey, here comes

a bobcat that jumps up on a fence and walks it all the way down from one pole to the next with such elegance and balance. As I sit in the cold waiting to see a deer and the sun starts to set down behind the hill, I hear an owl hoot and sometimes a coyote howl. The woods to some seem so empty, but, in fact, if you take the time to really pay attention, they are so full of life. ♦





ART BY Shishanna Roberson  
art student at Three Rivers College.



# MY SISTER

By Marie Wheeler

My sister and I don't get along  
In fact we fight quite often  
We argue over clothes and hair  
People treat us with caution

Though I am four years older  
She's still taller than me  
I hate when she steals my stuff  
She hates when I don't let her be

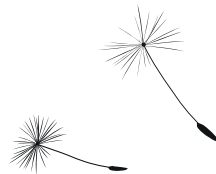
But she is growing up so fast  
I can't seem to let her go  
She'll always be my baby girl  
I just want her to know

She holds a piece of my heart  
No matter how much I annoy  
Even though we disagree  
She will always be my Joy



# THE TINY GRAVE

By Sarah Westbrooks



I found her while walking through the cemetery with my friend, on a refreshing spring afternoon. Her small, pearly-white tombstone stood out from all the rest, instantly catching my attention.

I softly knelt down beside her and slowly traced the fading dates on her stone with my finger. My breath caught sharply as I lifted my trembling finger away from the weather-worn grave.

She was barely one and a half years old, lying all alone six feet under the ground, and had been sleeping there for about a hundred years.

I wondered if anyone remembered her, or at least, knew something about her. As far as I understood, I was the only one who had stopped by her grave in years, daring to read her stone and feel sorry for the heart-broken mother she must've left.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what this young child might've looked like, before Death wrapped her in the folds of his cloak. I saw a little darling, rosy-cheeked and smiling, falling into her mother's arms just after taking her first steps. Her short, brown hair was wild, with soft and gentle curls touching the

base of her neck. Her dark, olive-green eyes twinkled as her mother caught her and swung her over her head, causing a babyish squeal to escape from her lips. She was too small, too precious, and too alive to be buried. It just couldn't be true.

Yet it was. Here was the stone, and six feet under, there was a tiny casket with a forgotten child in it. A child who could never run again into her mother's waiting arms, until they met again in heaven, which they surely had done by now.

My friend's voice snapped me out of my dreaming, and I zoned back into reality, finding myself still staring at the old, marbled stone. "What'd you say?" I asked, "I wasn't listening."

"What are you lookin' at?" he repeated, kneeling beside me. "I found somethin' you might like, but if you're busy..."

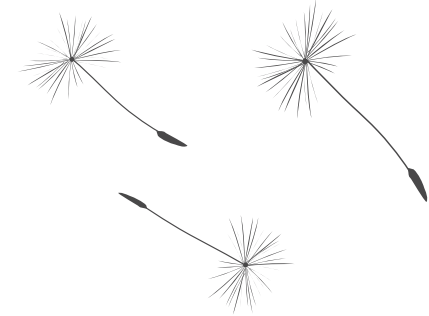
"Oh, it's okay," I reassured him, as I stood up and brushed the dirt off my knees. "I was just lost in thought, that's all."

When my friend didn't answer, I glanced down at him and smiled.

He was tracing the dates on her stone with his finger, clearly lost in thought just

*continued . . .*





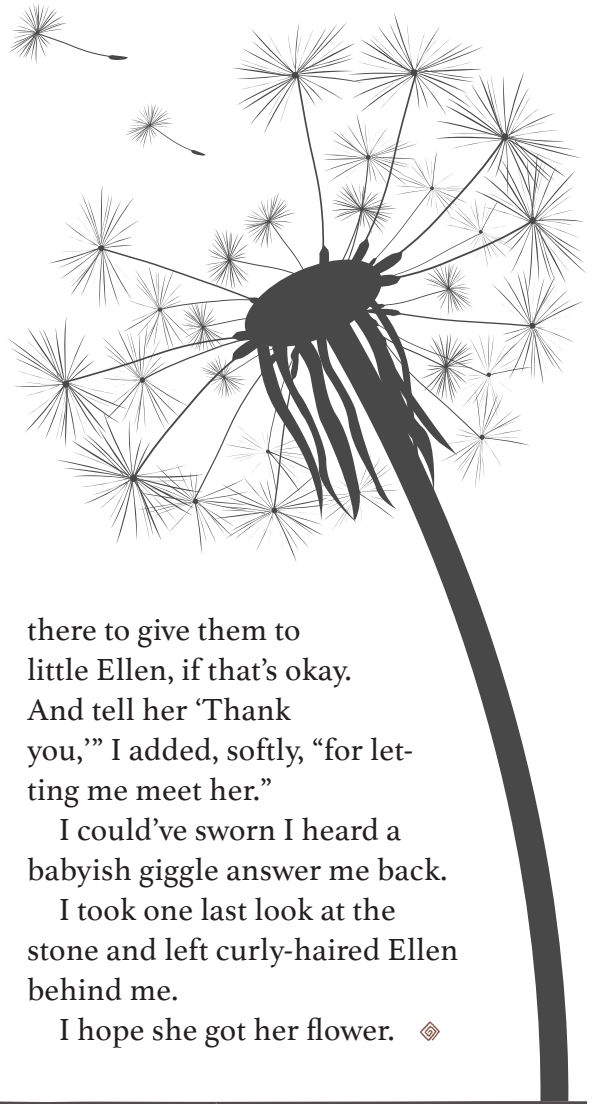
like I was a few moments ago. I stepped back and read her name as my friend met a rosy-cheeked child in his dreams just like I did, until he was forced to leave his fairyland that she lived in.

“So, what did you want to show me?” I reminded him, after a few moments had passed.

“Oh,” he said, as he hastily stood up. “It’s over here somewhere...” He strode off in another direction, leaving the child’s grave behind him, as he shook off her dream-like spell.

I started to follow him, but I felt like I had to say good-bye, in a way, to the child below me. I gently plucked a nearby dandelion from its stem and scattered its petals into my palm. I then blew them into the air where they were caught up in the breeze.

“Please take these to heaven,” I whispered. “Tell the angels



there to give them to little Ellen, if that’s okay.

And tell her ‘Thank you,’” I added, softly, “for letting me meet her.”

I could’ve sworn I heard a babyish giggle answer me back.

I took one last look at the stone and left curly-haired Ellen behind me.

I hope she got her flower. ◆



# BORN GIRL

By Sarah (Kalich) Wheeler

Maggie cut 15 inches off her hair, his cherished braids, and sent it to him along with this story:

She was born a girl, but it seemed only now her body had fully caught up with that identity stamped on her birth certificate. Soon after Grandfather visited that summer from California, her father developed the photos. In one she was demonstrating her shooting form for Grandfather. He had sent money that Christmas to pay for a basketball goal to be installed at her driveway, and he was visiting to see the fruits of his investment.

The photo revealed much more than a seventh grader attempting to impress both father and grandfather. One aspect drew all her attention. Not even a thick shirt could hide them anymore.

She was evolving into one of those girls her favorite older cousin pointed out, the ones who wore bras for his pleasure to snap in class when the cousin became bored. This game brought instant entertainment to him, a face transforming to horrified, red with embarrassment as she struggled to

refasten the device.

Or the ones who raced short distances in track. As they approached and passed by, the cousin would insert sound effects of “bonga-bonga-bonga” to the timing of their chests bouncing. What could Maggie do but giggle at his jeering?

She wasn’t ready to be initiated into that group where her chest became the spokesperson for her body. Fortunately, she had access to only hand-me-downs and as of now, only one bra had been handed down. That’s how she managed to avoid wearing them thus far.

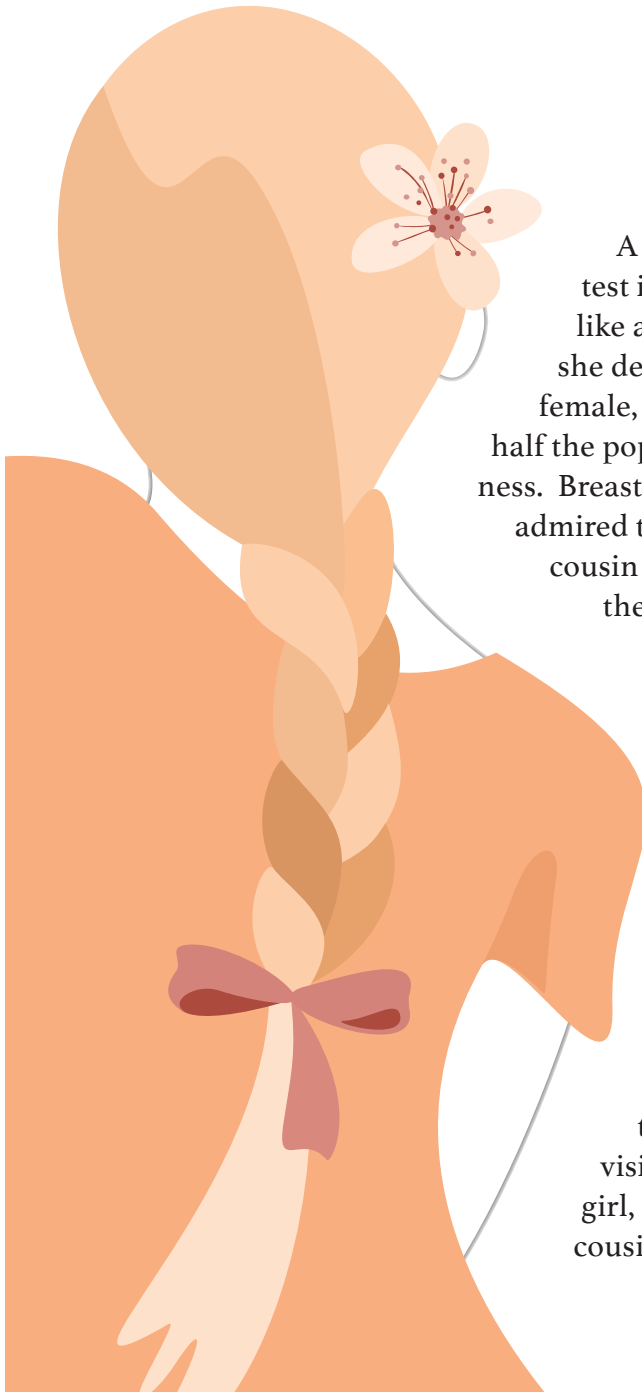
A bag of hand-me-downs had arrived when she was in fifth grade, including a training bra. She scoffed at the small delicate flower sewn in the center, an attempt to fool a girl that wearing one would bring happiness. The flower may gently decorate the garment, but paradoxically it ordered her chest to become a private part.

She snatched up the bra, stuffed it into a dark bag, and hid it underneath her panties in her dresser.

*continued ...*







A day came where she felt drawn to test it out. She may have feared looking like a woman in front of an audience, yet she desired exploring the grace of being female, having artistic curves. After all, half the population was denied that uniqueness. Breasts were beautiful. She'd always admired them on other women, but with her cousin presenting a twisted description of them, she couldn't risk growing any.

She searched for a thick shirt in her drawer, one that could conceal her bra and pulled it out.

Occasionally in the summer the cousin would visit. He was an only child, and his mother wanted him to experience siblings. Thus, she would send him to live with her family of six for two weeks.

Each time he arrived, her siblings surrounded him, ecstatic that big "brother" had come for a visit. Even though she was the oldest girl, Maggie hung back, unsure how her cousin would classify her this time. His

*continued ...*



eyes most certainly did not meet hers with a platonic view of a sister. Their intensity was too great. If Maggie was of dating age, she would have watched enough movies or read enough romance stories to recognize it as seduction. But as a child who still believed in the tooth fairy, her best guess was unsolicited admiration.

The cousin always saved greeting her for last. He might be surrounded by the other children and feed them jokes that would delight any general audience, but he reserved a homemade hello for her, holding it inside until the moment she emerged in the corner of the chaotic room, observing with anticipation yet dreading the tone of his first hello.

After he scraped her last sibling off of him as his comedy show was dying down, their eyes met. She held her breath, "Please still be my cousin,"

"Hi-yuh Maggie!" he spoke enthusiastically with playfulness.

She released her held breath with great resistance. No one needed to know his first hello was an event she was forced to participate in every visit.

It was a secret even unspoken to them. Both denied the chemistry, one afraid, the other knowing better than to explore the line.

Thank goodness! He is still my cousin! And she gestured "Hi Tony!" back to him, mimicking his playful tone. Her cousin's tone gave her permission to detonate the awkwardness between them. Again, he was choosing to assume the role of cool cousin, sticking to his perfect score. Before this first greeting though, she never knew if he would request she try more. So far, he had never asked, but his stories of male and female interactions were becoming less clothed with each visit.

Settling in, the cousin invited her and her sister to play tennis at the park. She told her sister and cousin to go ahead, that she needed to get dressed more comfortably.

At her dresser she desired to look pretty for her cousin as a little girl while secretly dressing as a woman. He would only be able see the little girl, but she would know she was a woman. This

*continued . . .*



was the only safe way to enjoy the excitement of being a woman in his presence without the risk of being treated like one.

Soon she arrived at the tennis courts and entered through the gate. After taking her position on the court to play team tennis, she observed everything but her cousin. Her peripheral vision caught his position, but she was saving his face for last in order to avoid his perception of her. It was all that mattered yet terrified her.

The game progressed smoothly. Nothing but tennis. But after a few games, out of nowhere, the cousin began laughing like a hyena. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” Maggie panicked in her head. “He saw my bra strap!” He wouldn’t cease laughing.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she shrieked from the opposite side of the court. He couldn’t. Or wouldn’t. Sometimes a thought became stuck in his head. Naturally drawn to laughter, diluting it with repetition reduced its funny factor only minimally.

She charged across the court to si-

lence him, somehow. Wild with shame and embarrassment, she aimed to smash his chest with her tennis racket. He jerked up his forearms to protect his mid-center in total surrender, exposing their insides to her, his vulnerable palms facing her as well. He would never consider physically harming her. He idolized her beauty, innocence, and eager fascination with him that adorably stuttered when bashful.

“Maggie! What’s gotten into you!” the cousin cried, confused. He endured the beating, perplexed by her actions but hoping her energy would exhaust soon.

She continued cracking him with all her might. As his laughter was soon reduced to restrained groans, she became cognizant of this eerie transition, that her frail essence was inflicting great pain upon him. She threw down her racket, sobbing defeatedly to her internal argument of “Why won’t you let me be a woman!” “I don’t have a choice about this!” “Can’t stop it, can’t hide it!” She fled home, leaving them to ponder what freaked out the sweet quiet Maggie. ♦



# DON'T WATCH THE SCREEN

By Tiechera Samuel

They tell you early not to watch  
the screen.  
But, when the alarms come, and  
they always do,  
You have to know what they mean.

HR?  
124.  
Mentally compare to last check.  
That's lower.  
Sleeping?  
Seems okay.  
SPO<sub>2</sub>?  
90?  
Mental Review of Preemie Primer.  
26-week micro-preemie, aged 4 weeks  
with BPD on O<sub>2</sub>?  
Seems fine.  
BP?  
79/50?  
Maybe?  
Wait.  
The shrieking alarm stopped.  
Why?  
The monitor doesn't say a word.

The nurse knows.  
Peering through the glass, the  
compassionate young man shuts the  
alarm off and wishes he didn't see you

staring at the screen,  
Willing it to talk.

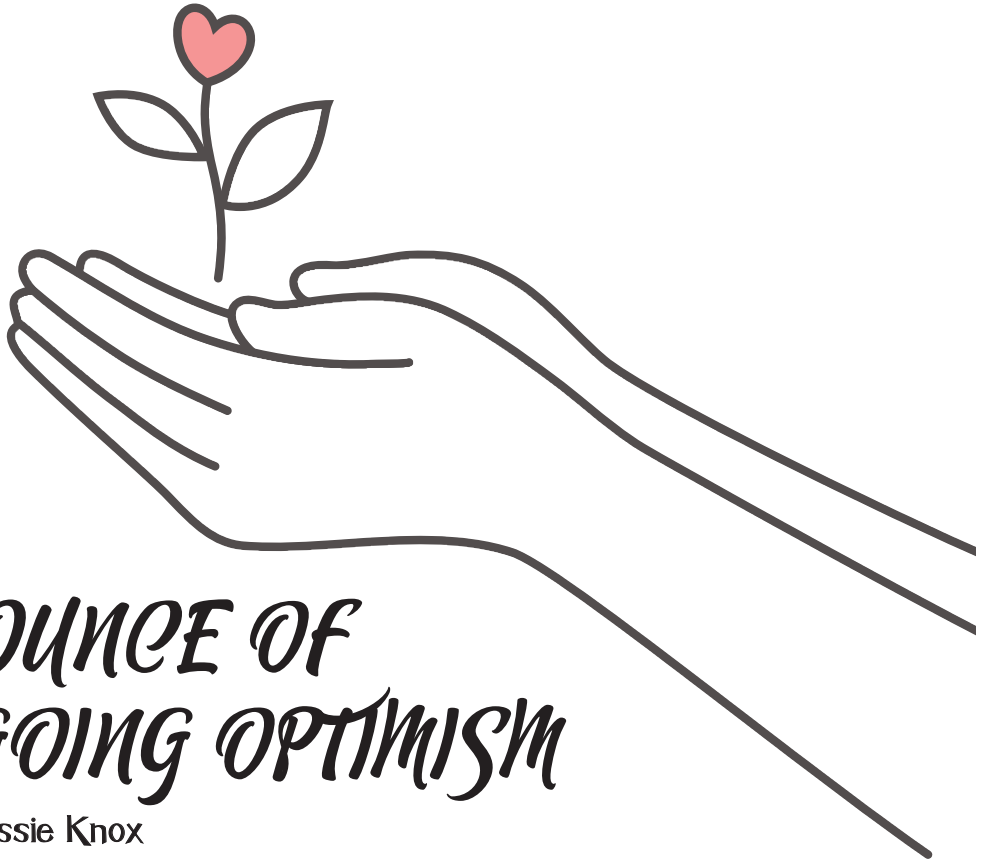
The doctor knows.  
Pouring over records, later that evening,  
the businesslike woman pauses to  
note the sudden oxygen desaturation  
that caused the blaring alarm,  
Though the screen numbers returned  
to acceptable levels long before your  
eyes fixed on the SPO<sub>2</sub> and deemed  
the number acceptable.

The social worker knows.  
Pondering the piles of printed data,  
months later, the gentle nun makes  
room for options like in-home  
nursing, tracheostomies, and  
insurance premiums to crowd the  
private conference room table and  
join the discussion.

They all know, and could tell you, the  
meaning of the alarm.  
But, they aren't in the room when the  
sound cries out, and the screen that is  
mounted to the wall over your baby's  
bed just won't talk.

So, tell yourself one more time, don't  
watch the screen. ♦





# AN OUNCE OF ONGOING OPTIMISM

By Cassie Knox

An encouraging word lasts forever  
I will remember your confidence  
in me  
When I feel as if I cannot rise above  
it all, my mind regenerates your  
consoling voice  
I am once again free

How astounding it is to have someone who  
believes in you  
I feel like a success, like I have a super grip

on the world, like life is easier to bear  
It's all on me and I can handle any kind  
of unforeseen mishap from now on  
because...

An encouraging word lasts forever and  
your confidence pulls me through

Discern that this is not one-sided, you have  
a gift, and you're one of a kind  
I genuinely believe in you too and with  
mutual beliefs miracles can arise ♦



# A MINOR ACCIDENT IN TRAFFIC

By Nathanael Grummert

A blur of cars crossed several meters ahead of me, but I took no notice of how many there were, nor could I see past the annoying brick buildings to learn how many were left. To me they seemed like a five-mile train, dragging itself pitifully along the track at an annoyingly slow pace. I couldn't stand it. If I had known traffic was going to be this bad, I would have completed my business at the office as opposed to trying to hightail it home. But this particular job required the peace of mind that one can only ever find in their own house.

As the cross traffic came to a halt, the light in my lane turned from red to green. A dozen cars, all neatly lined up in front of me, slowly began to move. Unlike with the lane across from us, however, I kept track of exactly how many cars there were between me and the light.

Twelve...eleven...ten...nine...eight...  
As the light switched to yellow, I quickly became impatient. "Come on, drive faster!" I growled. "This is serious!"

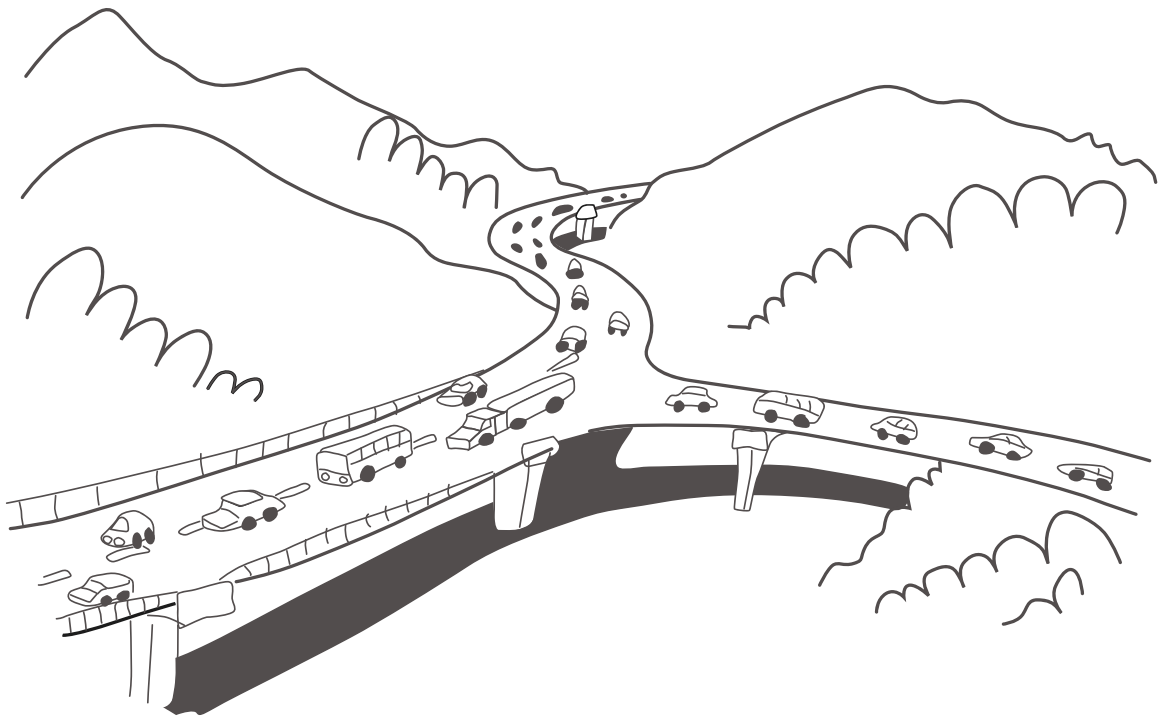
...seven...six...

The light snapped a menacing red, halting any progress. Now it was the side traffic's turn. I squinted past the reflected glare of the sun on my dash to check the time. "One forty-seven," I whined. I had little time left to get the job done. When I left the office, I had nearly thirty minutes to finish my work. Now I had three. I squirmed in my seat as a cold sweat dripped down my forehead and off my nose. "It's no use," I sighed. "I'm doomed."

Once again, the traffic stopped, and it was our turn to move. As the parade of cars began, I started counting

*continued . . .*





down again.

Five...four...three...

It stopped at three. For some unexplainable reason, that car—a silver Chevy Silverado—did not move. Horns were honked like bugles signaling an army to attack. The person directly ahead of me flung his door open and marched to the offender. “Not good.

Why now?” I wondered. I heard yelling, I saw the light go red, but none of it mattered anymore. “It’s too late.” I was out of time. There, amidst the ensuing chaos, a trickle of warm liquid ran down my leg as I fell victim to the most pitiful and idiotic accident that ever had occurred on that intersection. I wet my pants. ♦





EXCERPT FROM  
*ECHOES OF ROLLING HILLS*

By Alex Fitzpatrick

All was silent on that dark night. Even the wind had died down this close to the mountains, and Dick Chelsey couldn't help but shudder. He was a tall, barrel-chested man with dark hair and a black duster coat to match. Still, Dick had an uncanny feeling about this trail he was following, a scarlet line winding through the grayish-green grass.

It was nothing that he hadn't seen before. After ten years in the hired gun business, there was little that a man didn't see, but the atmosphere was off. It was the night of a new moon and no coyotes barked; no wolves howled. Dick turned to his horse, Charlotte Gray, a gray and white American Paint, and

*continued ...*







blew a short stream of air from his lips.

“C’mon girl, I think I’ll tie ya up somewhere safe.”

He took her lead and led her to a thin stump. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do since there were only so many trees for hitching in a prairie. After tying a knot and giving it a tug to make sure it would hold, he went back to following the blood trail. His hand, however, went to his gun.

He reached the bottom of a hill where the blood continued up and branched apart like a river and its tributaries, but his keen eyes spotted something up ahead. The grass parted like a deer bed.

*Can’t see that deer waking up again, he thought.*

But, of course, what laid there wasn’t a deer. Hired guns were never hired to

*continued ...*



hunt animals, not the kind that lived out of town anyway. His kind of animals were the ones that mingled with society and bled it dry, the ones who stole, killed, and did whatever they could get away with. The sheriff here was no exception to that rule.

Dick knelt down next to the corpse and shook his head.

“What was it for, Sheriff Brown? You’ve strangled your wife and for what? Shame? Jealousy? Look what it got you. Shot in the back.”

He heard the crunch of thick grass behind him but didn’t react right away. He stood up slowly while his hand inched its way to his holster. Dick spun around and whipped out his six-shooter. There stood another man wearing a brown button-up shirt and a black neckerchief hiding his face. The glint of clean steel brought his attention to a long dagger in the man’s hand, poised and ready to strike like a snake.

“Well,” the man drawled, raising his hands. “Ain’t often a stranger pulls his gun on me.”

“It ain’t often I catch a man sneaking

up on me with a knife neither, but here we both are.”

Both men’s eyes narrowed. Dick glanced at the man’s hip and caught sight of his pistol hanging loosely in its holster. It was hard to tell, but to Dick the barrel looked black, as if it was dusted with gunpowder.

“D’you shoot this man, stranger?”

Dick dared a glance back at Sheriff Brown’s body. There was one bullet wound where his neck joined his shoulders. *He was probably left paralyzed. Been here a while then.*

“Nope, but I’m beginnin’ to think you did,” he replied. “And if that’s so, I’ll have to return the favor.”

The man began to laugh. It was a dry and raspy breath that he quickly held back.

“Mister, I don’t think my friends would like that.”

Dick scanned the hills behind the man with the knife. He saw lanterns dotting the sloping landscape and the sheen of well-oiled barrels. Rifle barrels.

*continued ...*



He lowered his revolver and stuck it back in its holster.

“There we go. I was hoping we could talk this out like gentlemen. See, I’m Wesley Smith, and I’m with the Wolves of the Prairie. The leader actually.”

“Wolves of the Prairie? From what I can tell, you’re more like a pack of coyotes, clingin’ to the dark and shootin’ folks in the back,” Dick said.

“A coyote’s still better than being a dog,” Wesley replied.

“At least I’m loyal. That’s more than what you lot are.”

“That you are,” he laughed. “That you are, Dick Chelsey.”

Dick paused and thought, *My name precedes me*. By now, adrenaline was pumping through his veins, but he felt ice in his heart. If needed, Dick figured he could take out Wesley and run for it, using the hills as cover, but it turned out he didn’t need to. Wesley whirled around on his boot heels and began walking away.

“You can try and keep order to Rolling Hills, merc, but sooner or later we’ll break it down. You should hope you’re

not in town when it happens. That’s our message.”

One by one, each star-lit rifle barrel went away, and a chorus of cackles, whistles, and claps echoed off the hills. The Wolves of the Prairie rode off; the horses’ hooves sounding over each other. Dick waited for a good while until he was sure every last one of the bandits was gone, then he turned back to his work at hand, the late sheriff. Despite the chill in the air, he wiped a drop of sweat from his forehead with his leather glove.

*I hear you loud and clear, Wesley Smith.* He dragged the body down the decline and hoisted it on his shoulder at the end. With the deadweight in tow, he trudged back to his horse, Charlotte, and draped the body behind the saddle. She snorted, sending frosty breath up into the air.

“I know, girl. Hopefully this will be the last time,” he said. He knew it wouldn’t be.

Climbing up into the saddle, he and Charlotte rode through the prairie back to the settlement of Rolling Hills. ♦



# A VILLAIN'S PERSPECTIVE

By Noah McGowen

In a world of superhuman abilities, everything is decided by power. There are those who are born with extraordinary abilities that can enact their will on the world whether that's for what fools call the greater good or those like me who see that power is to be used for personal gain. I'm what people call a villain. I didn't have much choice with my birth abilities, but it doesn't matter. I've never had the drive to do good, and my ability of absolute destruction, what some call antimatter, suits me beautifully. I was on top of the world with no one to challenge me; the strongest villain on the planet with no challengers until she showed up. She was some small-time hero that had the look of what you'd expect from the hero types--blonde hair and blue eyes with a trademark smile that aspired hope in the masses. She had an ability that barely put her into the realms of what a superhuman is--enhanced strength and speed with a radiant glow around her lighting her up like a beacon.

The first time I let her win was just out of boredom. The next time, I made

up an excuse of it would be boring without someone to foil me. Escaping the so called super-human prisons was trivial, yet I always found myself going back. I found excitement in seeing her and setting up these scenarios that made her look stronger; where she could foil my schemes and send me off not having the heart to end me--not that she was even able to, but she didn't know that. I enjoyed these games and found myself yearning to see her more and more to the point I decided to go out in secret, dropping my dark suit and posing as a normal guy going to a coffeeshop she had noted as her favorite in an interview.

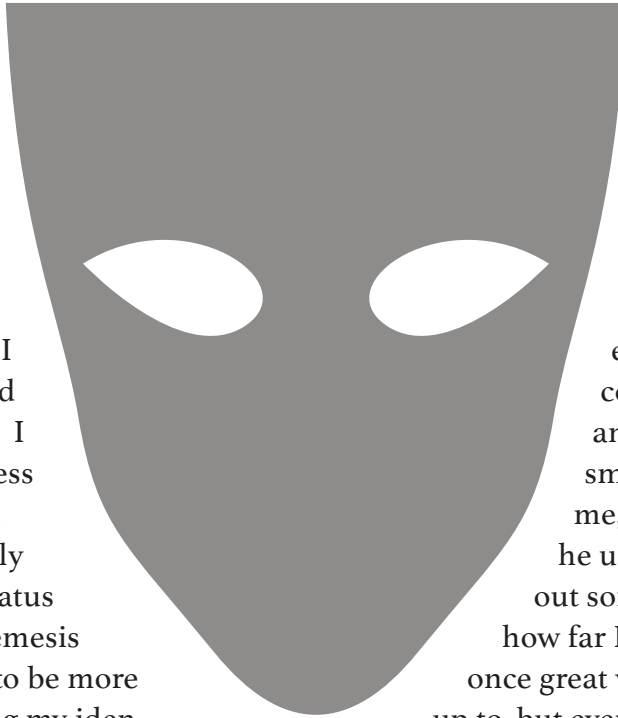
I walked up and introduced myself to her. Luckily, she didn't recognize my voice, and I always wore a mask in my villain form. She cheerily introduced herself, and I played dumb to her heroic deeds, talked to her like she was a normal person, and it went well. We talked for hours, and she asked me if we could meet up again; to

*continued ...*



which I agreed, no reason not to. This went on for months, I was happier than I ever had been, and we started dating. I used my powers less and less and went out as a villain only to maintain the status of her having a nemesis and making sure to be more careful with hiding my identity from anyone. I thought about hanging up my gloves and just being normal. She was enough for me.

On one of our dates, I went to meet up with her happily checking my phone to find the meeting place before I snapped out of my trance and looked up finding her tied up by energy ropes as one of my old friends stood above her with fire and destruction freshly scattered around them. He was unscathed as should be expected. He was an imposing force for most with



an ability that can be used in dozens of ways-creating whips of energy that he can control the power and length of. He smiled, recognizing me, and acted like he used too; spitting out some bravado and how far I've fallen from the once great villain he looked up to, but everything he said went in one ear and out the other.

My fist clenched as I steeled myself for what I was about to do. An action that's going to ruin everything I had worked for over the past few months.

My voice carried the power and prestige it once used to. "Shut your mouth, Whiplash, and let her go."

He laughed at me and responded, "Are you serious? Don't tell me you've grown attached to this little t-." His eyes widened in pain as he screamed,

*continued ...*



a bluish black blade of energy cutting through his arm as my hand casually wielded it like it was nothing. The bluish black power pouring from my eyes as the ground around me started to fade away being consumed by my aura as I released my full power for the first time in years. My love's eyes looked at me full of tears and confusion as the energy cords that restrained her faded away, and I walked towards Whiplash as he screamed at me, "What are you doing! You're supposed to be the best of us, and you're defending this D rank hero?! What happened to you!!" His cries ended swiftly as I moved to him and slashed, easily cutting through his armor revealing his bare skin. I was rusty and cut a little too shallow.

He fought back for a while, using whips made of energy to lash at me and keep his distance as I advanced faster with every passing moment, cutting through his attacks with a blade of antimatter only I could wield. As I pushed my hand forward and released a large wave of energy, I felt the rush of power

and pride I once felt as I watched Whiplash and everything behind him for the next mile be consumed by my energy and erased without a trace left. Just a flattened wasteland where once stood buildings and people, a smile almost curled over my face as I heard her speak.

"Mark? What...what was that?"

I turned to her as the energy faded, and I remembered where I was as I walked up to her and helped her up while she looked at me with the confusion and betrayal I expected.

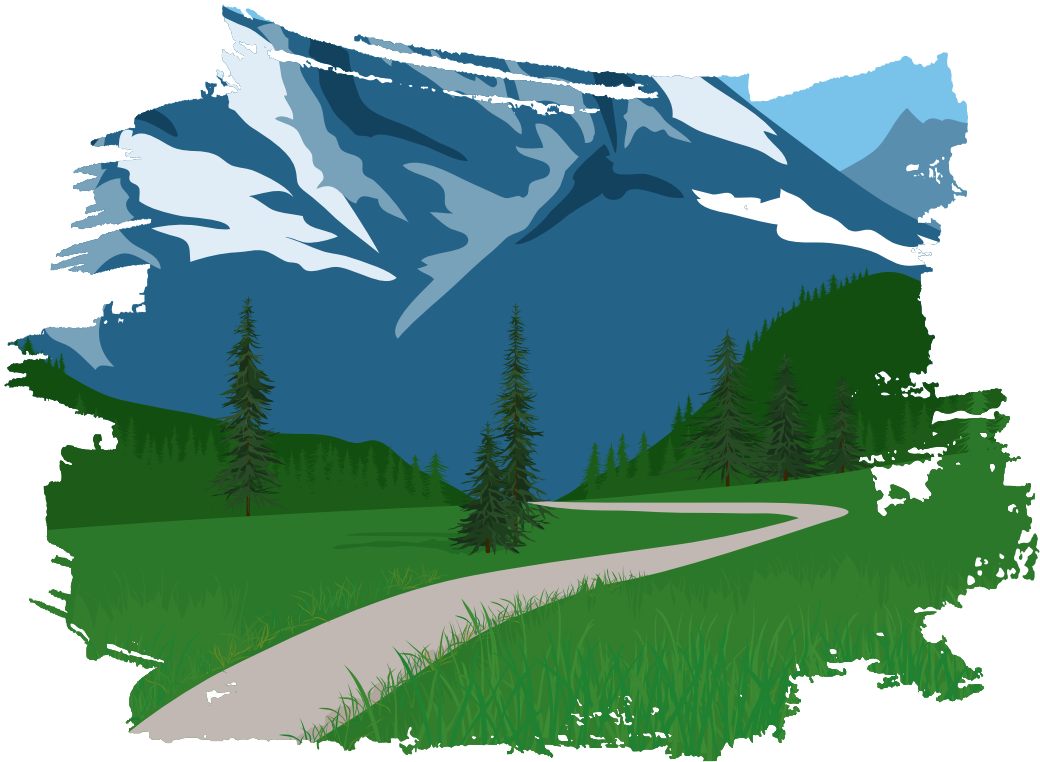
"Well, we have some things to talk about," I said with the hope she'd give me the time of day, and after some time she did. It took a long time, and the promise that I'd not use my powers for selfishness anymore and a lot of helping her to make up for my misdeeds, but I don't mind. If it makes her happy, I can drop the villain part and be docile. Who needs world domination when I can spend my time with someone who means the world to me? That's how I see it at least. ♦



# A NARROW PATH

By Noah McGowen

Walking down a narrow path  
That few have traveled down  
Taken by the mysterious  
Surrounded and unbound  
I much like the others  
Put on my mask today  
Or maybe it was never off  
It's truly hard to say ♦



# LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE

By Acacia Yates

Life is full of surprises, you never know when, what, or who is headed your way. Some live to be eighty-five years old while others only minutes. Everyone's time on earth is numbered. As I get older, I realize that we all are born to eventually die. That's a hard realization, but not one of us on Earth can get out of it. Just as you think it's all good or you have it all figured out, life throws you a curveball. In a blink of an eye, it can all change--some for the good and others are for the bad. So, live to the fullest, laugh as much as you can, and love with all your heart.

It was twenty-two years ago, life changed for me. My dad was diagnosed with brain cancer. He passed away just eighteen months later. He spent all his life raising us five girls, and just as we got grown, he passes away. See, he spent all his time working and teaching me as much as he could. We went camping in makeshift tents because we didn't have much money. We also weren't fortunate enough to go on any family vacations. A dream of his was to own a Harley, but his life was cut too short at the age of fifty-four. It was done. Now some say

I'm going somewhere all the time. It started with a few trips to Branson. I've taken my children to Disney World in Florida. We have seen water as far as the eye can see at the ocean and the Gulf. The mountains in Colorado are beautiful. All the amazing bikes at Sturgis were cool. Yellowstone stunk like sulfur, and we waited an hour to watch Old Faithful do its thing, but it was a trip I'll remember. Niagara Falls to the Statue of Liberty to Washington was a long bike ride but worth it. Arizona is a desert, but Sedona, now that is beauty. The Grand Canyon was huge, and the little Grand Canyon was like a painting. Rock City near Chattanooga was neat enough we went twice. Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, I don't think we have seen it all yet and have been a few times now. We work every day to make money and save every extra dollar so we can do things. So, if you get a chance live every day to the fullest as you are not guaranteed the next.

Blessed with four children, life got interesting. You never know how funny people can be until you watch a child. A two-year-old girl sitting on the porch

*continued ...*





with a five-gallon bucket of tomatoes that it took weeks to grow only to come back from the garden and she had taken a bite out of each one. A five-year trying to convince you that cake is healthy if he can dip it in milk because the milk is healthy. An eleven-year-old begging to go follow a bald eagle through the field and explains if we get stuck, he can get dad's tractor and pull the bus out. A quiet fourteen-year-old boy who doesn't say much watching his dad pop a wheelie on a dirt bike, the bike hits a bump, and bounces in the air ten feet and says, "Boy, he messed his stuff up," and walks away. Then there is the dry humor of a husband of twenty-four years. To some, these are not funny but to me every one of them was funny. The key is to laugh as much as you can because a smile or laugh takes less energy and makes you feel good.

This last one is the biggest one. Life is tough but remember you're tougher. When something makes you mad and you feel like arguing or fighting, don't. Because if you won't remember what it was over ten years from now, then it's not important. A grudge is the hardest thing

you will ever carry. When someone is talking about you, and hurts your feelings, don't let it because if they are talking about you then they are leaving someone else alone, so be the bigger person. When someone is being mean, they have often been on the receiving end at some point, so break the chain. Show the people who mean the most just how important they are. Tell them you love them with not only your actions but also words because you will regret it if you don't. It takes a big person to realize love and even bigger to give it. LOVE with all your heart and those around you will feel it.

Life is really what you make it most of the time. On the other hand, it sure likes to throw you surprises. How you handle each one determines how your life is going to go. No, it's not perfect, and there will be good with the bad. Take in all you can from this small spot you have. Go places that you want to go even if you have to work and save money go. Pay attention to the small stuff because that's where the real smiles are. Show love to everyone no matter if they know how to show it back. Life is too short so LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE. ♦



# DEEP

By Mackenzie Ramdial

There is no light at the bottom of the pit. The only way she knows the ground from everything else is the dull gravity pulling at her hair. Pulling at her tears and the fine skin of her face. Pulling at her heart and making her bones feel like lead pipes. The gravity begs her to come closer, to sink into the ground with it. She is flattened to the dirt like a piece of paper, and she pleads with the gravity to leave her alone. Its voice does not cease. It cries to her, sings to her. It tantalizes her with the idea that she will never be alone again, so long as she joins it deep under the surface of the world. For a second, she thought about it. Thought about what it might be like to get out of the hole, not by climbing out, but by burrowing in.

Climbing out of the hole, she realized, was barely an option. She didn't know how to climb anything. How would she make it out of the hole in the first place? If and when she finally did, she would be so tired. Her hands would be covered in dirt and ripped up by the small sharp rocks she would

have to grab on her way out. She would smell like a pit, earthy and sweaty and damp. Not suitable for any kind of reliable relationship. Who would help her in a state like that? Say she did get out, say she made it to the surface and could find someone to take her in just for one night. Who's to say that anything would get any better? How would the world be any more enjoyable this time, knowing that she is right on the edge of a pit at all times. Knowing she must be careful not to teeter into it, but with no way of knowing how.

The only reason she is in the pit at this moment is because of someone else. Someone who swore up and down that if she ever fell into a hole, he would be there to lift her out with strong arms. But now these strong arms were the same ones to have tossed her into it. How could she avoid something like that? There's no way she could have seen it coming. She was blind to that sort of thing.

This is why gravity's proposition

*continued . . .*



tempts her so. It is so much easier to sink deeper into the ground than to brave the climb up. She didn't want to grasp the wispy roots and the crumbling dirt any longer. She turned her ear to the ground once again, pressed it as close as she could, and could feel gravity's breath. Though the dirt was cold, freezing her fingers, the promise of an end to this struggle was warm and inviting. She began to dig at the floor. She burrowed deeper into the pit, her fingernails on the verge of falling off.

Gravity's siren song grew louder and louder. With every scoop of dirt, she pressed into the walls around her, and she became more and more cocooned into the Earth.

Eventually, her fingers hit something. She pressed harder, and it didn't give way. At this point, gravity's call was booming around her from all sides. It screamed at her to get closer.

**PUSH THROUGH.**

She did. ♦



# BIRD IN A CAGE

By Alex Fitzpatrick

There once was a bird with a  
white head and tail feathers  
who fancied itself an eagle  
It jumped from one perch  
to another in search  
Of something with a nature  
so regal

Freedom, the little parakeet  
thought  
Was the most beautiful thing in  
the world  
It could be fought for again, and  
again  
But never could it ever be bought

But the poor bird was so blind  
Nay, there was no affliction in  
the eyes  
But when the door to its cage  
was left open  
It would panic and cling to  
the sides

It wanted change, it wanted  
freedom,  
It wanted to finally fly,  
But forever things would stay the same  
and there in its cage it would lie. ♦





# TODAY

By Mackenzie Ramdial

The breeze is faint today. The top of the hill usually catches every single movement in the atmosphere, but today, it is impervious to change. The grass tickles my back. No blanket today. Usually, when I come here to think, I do it with a little preparation, but not today. I couldn't prepare for anything today. I couldn't prepare for that text. That news. Not today.

The clouds don't look like much today. Usually, they hold stories from other ages. Things I can write about, things I can paint. But not today. There is not much of anything lively today. The clouds are almost consoling, which is nice, but not quite what I wanted today. I wanted something

filling today. That is why I came here. Why I ran here. Why I busted up my bare feet through the streets and to this hill. I felt trapped thirty minutes ago, and I knew that I just had to come here. Today.

Why not tomorrow? Why not the next day? Was today the day you had to pick to leave in such a hurry? Is that why I had to leave in such a hurry too? I wish you didn't. I wish I didn't. I wish I had my best friend back. I wish I could have at least said goodbye. Or I love you. I wish I had said it yesterday when you still might have had a chance to say it back. Or to listen. I wish it wasn't today. I wish that you'd be here tomorrow. ♦



# ISHTNIKE IN THE WILD

By Johnny Boham

Luke Fortner did not like to venture too far into the foothills. That strip of land that stretched from the Ozarks in the west to the Appalachians in the east used to be a beautiful natural expanse full of promise and beauty. At one time it had even been a gateway for settlers venturing out west, but now it was an ugly no-mans-land littered with empty highways, abandoned buildings and burnt-out houses. In a sense it had returned to the days of its former glory as a frontier, but now the wild things that inhabited the land were not the coyote and the deer, nor the Indigenous tribes from long ago. Now, the dangers of that land arose from the lawless denizens that dwelled there. Outlaws, lunatics, and scavengers were the new pioneers of that region.

Fortner could survive as well as any outdoorsman, but the foothills was an untamed country full of the unknown—and the deeper you got the more inhospitable it became. Fortner did not like the unpredictable. Even though he himself was a resident of the foothills, he had spent his

entire life living methodically and being monotonous. He was happy in his small concrete bunker situated on the far western reaches of the wild. And, if it were up to him, he would spend the rest of his days sitting quietly next to his pot-belly stove, his blue heeler sleeping near his feet and a book of Mark Twain in his hands. But circumstances dictated that the people of the foothills were to survive by any means necessary. For someone like Luke, that meant sometimes trekking into dangerous territory.

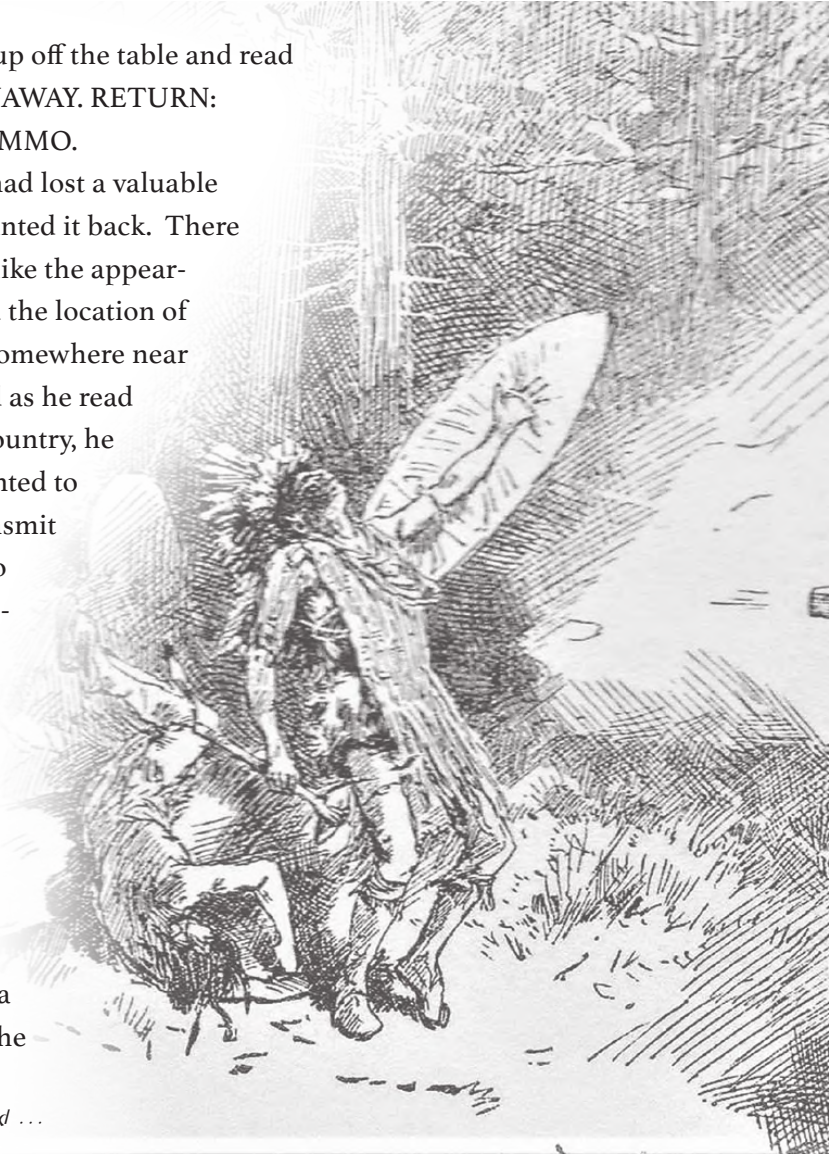
Luke had been quietly reading right before his concentration was broken by the machine sitting on his makeshift kitchen table. Bells and buzzers started sounding off. Then the soft tapping of little needles could be heard. Finally, a small card popped out of the top. Luke read the card, put it down, then began to pace back and forth. There was no way he could go back to his book now. The exploits of Mr. Sawyer would have to wait another day.

*continued . . .*



Luke picked the card up off the table and read it again: WANTED: RUNAWAY. RETURN: ALIVE. REWARD: YR/AMMO.

Somebody up North had lost a valuable piece of property and wanted it back. There were other details too—like the appearance of the runaway, and the location of where it went missing. Somewhere near Kanawha. Luke frowned as he read the word. That's biker country, he thought. Part of him wanted to tear up the note and transmit a refusal message back to the sender. But he reconsidered. The third line caught Luke's attention more than anything. It was code-talk for a year's worth of ammunition. What it really meant was as much ammunition as one could carry. Ammunition was a valuable commodity in the



*continued . . .*



foothills. Not only was it a means of survival, but it could also be used to bargain for resources from the local traders. To Luke Fortner, it meant at least another year of survival for him and Watokige.

In times of doubt, Luke would often think of his grandmother. She had meant the world to him, but she had been dead now for some twenty-odd years. She was a half-blood Otoe woman and one of the last of her kind who could speak fluently the Siouan language—the mother tongue of her people. Before he could even run, she had given him the name of Ishtinike because of his amazing ability to get into mischief and adventure. When he was a young boy, he would often sit on her lap and hear her tell old Otoe stories whilst knitting her quilts. Her quilts, he thought, were a lot like her—rigid, yet radiantly beautiful.

“Ishtinike,” she often said, “someday you will become a mighty wasose, and you will forget all about me.”

This made the boy sad. “But grandmother,” he said with pouting lips, “I could never forget you!”

Luke Fortner made up his mind and transmitted a response back to the sender.

Then he began to look around his bunker for supplies. He picked up some hunting knives and an old army backpack, which he decided to pack light to impel haste. So, he added only one canteen and a few rations. Other provisions he would have to hunt for out in the wild. Next, he changed into a pair of dark-green canvas pants, a red tartan shirt, a pair of moccasins, and a long dark-grey wool coat. Then he found his grey mackinaw cap and put it on with the flaps covering his ears. Somebody had once remarked that it looked like he was wearing a baseball cap with earmuffs. Luke smiled at the thought of it. Little things like that always amused him. Finally, he picked up his .22 caliber Long Horn and slung it over his right shoulder. The rifle was very much an extension of himself. Whenever he felt the ornate patterns on its rosewood stock against his fingertips it felt like a renewed burst of energy had penetrated his soul.

Luke closed the damper on his stove and then calmly waited for the fire to burn out. After a few hours, when all that was

*continued . . .*





left were a few red embers, he moved to the rear of the bunker to a stairwell that stood sentinel below a wooden frame. He reached up and undid two latches, then noiselessly pushed open the trapdoor. The piercing light blew out the darkness inside the bunker and temporarily blinded Luke. He paused for a few seconds to allow his eyes to adjust and then, slowly, ascended into a dim and dreary world.

On the surface, the smell of his stove hung heavy in the air. The chimney flue jutted out of the ground amidst the rubble of a decades-long charred debris. From a distance, the smoke impressed the illusion that this was a recent burning. This discouraged any passersby from venturing nearer. Remains such as this were common in the foothills; this one had been Luke's very own childhood home. He stood on the top step and surveyed in all directions. The first signs of Spring had not yet shown, and the air was still bitter. But nothing was amiss. Luke let out a soft whistle, which was quickly met by the patter of Watokige's paws as he ran up the steps from below. Luke shut the trapdoor behind them and made a mecha-

nized attempt to hide it with dead foliage. Pleased with his work, he knelt down and felt under the edge of the door. His fingers found the secret trigger and he carefully reset it. Hidden inside the frame of the door was enough dynamite to deliver a nasty surprise to anyone foolish enough to come prying around.

The two companions began walking in a northerly direction. They crossed over a broken fence and were soon heading toward a thicket of Elm on the other side of a clearing. A few moments later, and only a hundred yards from his home, Luke Fortner felt that he was no longer himself. All the safety and comfort that he had felt from the confines of his underground shelter had left him. At first, he felt a sense of dread. However, as he marched further, his stride increased and so did his determination and grit. The *Luke Fortner* that he knew had no place in this land. Deeper into the wild he would have to leave that name behind. He would no longer be that humble scavenger and survivalist. Now he would have to be *Ishtinike*, the wasose—a deadly warrior feared throughout the foothills. ◆



# SHE DOESN'T LOVE HIM

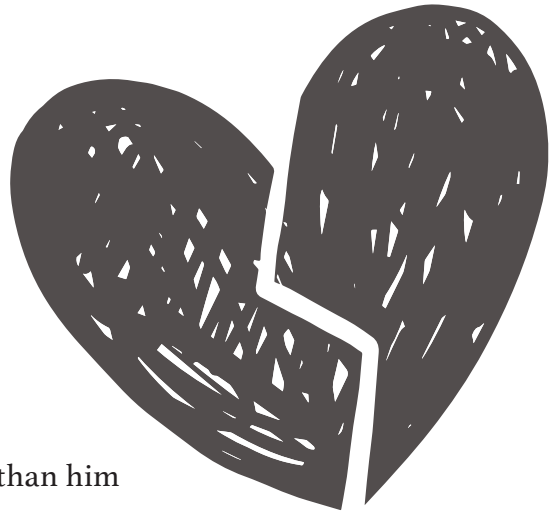
By Cassie Knox

He loves her  
His world revolves around her  
His dreams involve all of her  
But she doesn't love him

She has other hopes, other dreams, other than him  
She views life outside of him  
She sees the light in someone else's eyes  
And she doesn't love him

When they are together, he offers her the world  
He sees no other girl  
She would be happy without him, with another  
She doesn't love him

He'll get over her someday  
Someday may not come soon enough  
But it is in his best interest  
For she doesn't love him ◆



# TRUTH

By Marie Wheeler

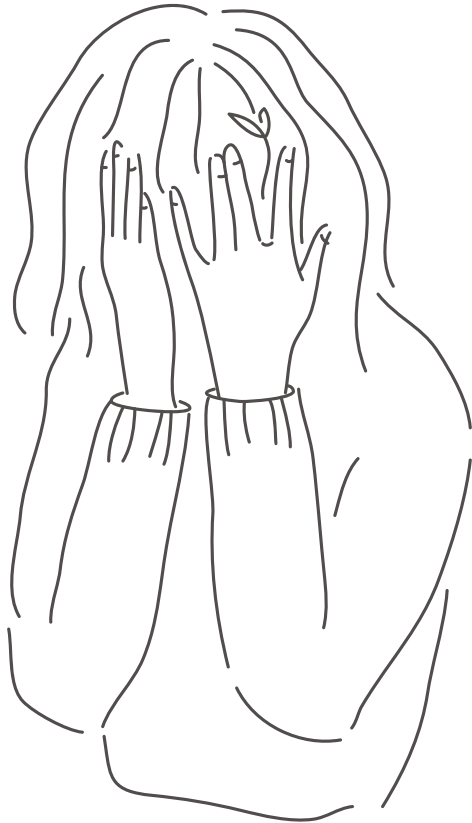
Do you know what it's like to  
Feel sad  
Be trapped  
Always feel bad

Do you know what it's like to  
Hate you  
Be fake  
Never feel true

Do you know what it's like to  
Feel stressed  
Be anxious  
Always a mess

Did you know that most teens  
Feel this way  
Nowhere to turn  
Nothing to say

Did you know that it's  
Sad  
Did you know that it's  
True? ◆



# THE SUNSET

By Sarah Westbrooks

Each cloud becomes  
bordered in gold.  
The trees on fire light.  
The east is slowly  
darkening,  
Preparing for the night.

Patches of orange float  
through the clouds  
And peek between  
the gray.  
A hint of pink kisses  
the gold,  
As the blue fades away.

The gold releases from  
the sky,  
And tiptoes on the trees.  
The shining coin above  
the earth  
Sinks down upon its  
knees.

The moon opens her weary eyes,  
As shadows hold the ground.  
The clouds become scarlet rubies,  
And all without a sound.

As purple shadows dim the sky,  
And one star flickers on,  
The light sinks down behind the trees,  
One moment - then it's gone. ♦



# TYPEFACE designers

## ATOCHA CAPS

Designed by Alejandro Paul and Joluvian — *source: fonts.com*

## TIMES NEW VESPASION

Designed by Paulo W — *source: dafont.com*

## Caligo

Designed by Mateus Boga — *source: dafont.com*

## Athelas

Designed by Veronika Burian — *source: fonts.com*

## DALEK PINPOINT

Designed by Keith Bates — *source: dafont.com*

## Avenir

Designed by Adrian Frutiger — *source: fonts.com*



CONFLUENCE<sup>2022</sup>

# COLOPHON

The cover stock is Kromekote 12-point C1S gloss cover printed in full process color.

The text stock is 80# Endurance Velvet Text printed in full process color.

Title heads and years are set in **ATOCHA CAPS** typeface.

Publication title set in **TIMES NEW VESPASION.**

Author's Names are set in **Caligo.**

Body copy is set in **Athelas Regular.**

Category banner heads are in **DALEK PINPOINT.**

Photo captions set in **Avenir Black.**

Folios and category heads are set in **Caligo.**

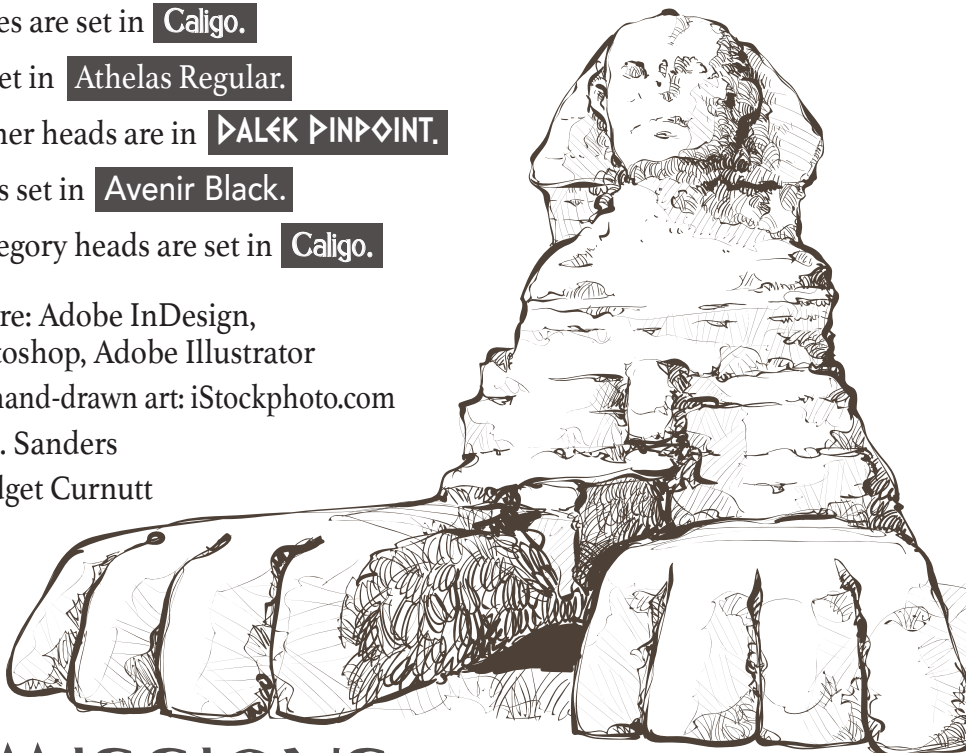
Design software: Adobe InDesign,  
Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator

Stock photos, hand-drawn art: iStockphoto.com

Editor: Mark J. Sanders

Designer: Bridget Curnutt

*Confluence* is  
funded annually  
by Three Rivers  
College.



# SUBMISSIONS

All students, faculty, and staff may submit essay, poetry, or fiction. Submissions are accepted from November to February.; Each entry should be 1,000 words or less, maximum three entries per author. Entries must be submitted digitally and can be emailed to the editor at [confluence@trcc.edu](mailto:confluence@trcc.edu).







# CONFLUENCE

LITERARY JOURNAL OF THREE RIVERS COLLEGE



# EGYPT

2022's issue of *Confluence* turns its attention to Egypt on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the opening of King Tut's tomb.