

**The Nemadji Review Staff  
2026, Volume 15**

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Cover art by Sara Valentiuk, *Reflections at Oxburgh Estate*

## Editor's Note

Fellow Readers and Creatives,

This year, *The Nemadji Review* is pleased to present our fifteenth volume, "Through the Crystalline Lens." Inspired by the themes of change and transformation, this journal celebrates and honors the ways that experience shapes perspective.

Moments of any magnitude hold the power to redefine us, to mold us into entirely new versions of being. The way we move through these moments matters. The way we process them matters even more. I encourage you to browse through this journal as if you're the light passing through the crystalline lenses held up by our contributors. Consider what you can learn from their words, stories, and experiences. Consider how you, in turn, are being transformed.

Brought to you by an editorial staff of University of Wisconsin-Superior students and alumni, this journal is a labor of love that represents the voices of students, staff, faculty, alumni, local artists, and friends from afar. It would not have been possible without the hard work and support of many, for which we are truly grateful. Thank you to each of our contributors, and a special thanks to our faculty advisor, Julie Gard, for all her wisdom and guidance.

Yours in art and literature,  
Sara Valentiuk  
Editor-in-Chief

## Land Acknowledgement Statement

In honor of the Anishinaabe people, the original peoples and caretakers of this land, we would like to recognize that the University of Wisconsin-Superior inhabits the land of the Ojibwe people. We honor and celebrate ancestral Ojibwe land and the sacred lands of all Indigenous Peoples.

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# *The Nemadji Review*

Volume 15

Through the Crystalline Lens

2026

## Troy Peters

### *The Focusing*

It's becoming clearer  
 As years stack up years  
 Our memories layer upon the brow  
*The steady march - The focusing*  
 Before us the road narrows  
 Peripheral views grow dim  
 But in front of us the world becomes clear as crystal  
*The steady march - The focusing*  
 As some mysteries are solved  
 Those that tarry simply fade as unimportant  
 Because age sharpens our views even as the touch dulls  
*The steady march - The focusing*  
 One last bend for us to turn  
 One last bridge that lingered late  
 Rest waits ahead just steps away  
*The steady march - The focusing*  
 Today we breathe  
 And tomorrow is a breathless dream



Lithograph Print by Sarah Packa, *Dream Cloak*

**Sam Tunan***Petri Dish*

We can analyze  
 why some folks  
 band together  
 where others  
 selfishly isolate.  
 Step back and  
 slide this  
 under the lens  
 of social microscopy.  
 From here,  
 we observe  
 this phenomenon  
 was aptly named  
 a culture.

**Callisto Shanafelt***Life under the Rock*

made it hard to acknowledge what I thought I believed in.  
 Like how the words would crawl right past and find their way  
 onto my lawn of hedged pillars eroding from time spent  
 hoping this otherness was just a stomach flu  
 I could stomach for just a little while.  
 Like how I would crawl onto Dad's lap,  
 curling like the roly poly I saw when I was four;  
 its innocent body detecting a harmless danger larger than itself.

But I can tell you this: all people are insects  
 desperately scuttling their legs toward something tangible,  
 like the dewy daydream I hoped to inhabit.  
 Unable to believe again that this is reality, my legs are stuck;  
 a dream sequence stealing voice and movement,  
 time and want slowing to a frustrating freeze-frame.

I am too good for anyone and when you know you know,  
 but the shadow is there with magnified glass  
 directing his sun to burn across my skin as it crawls  
 at the revelation that I still can't find the words for any of this.  
 But you just said my name and my spine inches taller,  
 sensing a stray ray that tells me this is safe.  
 I spread out, testing the early air,  
 a stretching of insectile limbs.  
 And with delightful breath  
 and newfound belief,  
 I yawn.



Photograph by Ian Seefeldt, *Crystal Ball*

## Hailie Evans

### *Pandora's Jar*

I think hope is a scrap of  
art, tattered and charred,  
thrown to the bottom of the jar,  
our last resort when  
everything else has run dry.

**Rachel Linder***Monstera*

My monstera  
 A name that takes up  
 Space, as you do  
 Branches stretched  
 As arms  
 Lacking any sense of weariness

My green wonder  
 A sign that I can  
 Accomplish big things  
 If I use patience and proper dedication

My example  
 Of what it means  
 To stand with strength and gentility

May I soak in the sources of light in my life

May I stand still

May I water the depths of my roots rapturously  
 As I have watered yours  
 And provide patience to my small leaves

May I grow to fill  
 The space around me with tender tranquility  
 And hope  
 So that I may fill the room of this world with life

**Troy Peters***All of Us Wander*

This long trek from stop to stop past goals and points of life  
 Pushing further into another unknown  
 Inscrutable steps dropped tenderly  
 Towards a hope of something solid and lasting

The obdurate pull to round another corner  
 It is coupled with buried fear of taking  
 A journey less traveled and having it end  
 At a wall all alone and broken

Every soul a soldier in a vast array  
 All marching step after step, pushing daily to our limit  
 Each of us straining at the weight of existence  
 With some set free before their time

But most of us endure a path that is ineluctable  
 And we pull and push ourselves and bend when needed  
 This relentless search for a prisms beam of sunlight  
 To give us strength to start another day

**Brian Hunt***A Rose*

A rose is soft, but hidden thorns are sharp,  
And sharp will be felt if your hands stray too far.  
Holding the beautiful is fraught with pain,  
When you touch a rose, your hands risk blood stain.



Drypoint Print by Ash King, *Transformation*

**Vyacheslav Konoval***Voice from Ukraine*

\*\*\*

Cold mist settles in the dampness,  
 over the fallen carnage,  
 black clouds exhale broken tanks,  
 vilely hiding behind the stench of corpses.

The commander's foot glides freely  
 over the reclining green man  
 who quietly hums serenades of contract valor.

\*\*\*

There is no honor  
 in those who know how to shoot,  
 who have taken the oath of allegiance,  
 a police patrol circle in the empty gray neighborhoods  
 in search of men.

The scars of war echo  
 in the veterans' prosthetic limbs,  
 a once-burly man argues with the cops,  
 protecting a boy they caught in hell.

The shame and courage,  
 they crossed the red lines of the last meanness  
 and intertwined into new attributes  
 of the eternal bloodthirsty confrontation.

\*\*\*

Choked at the table of bloodthirstiness,  
 the insatiable horsemen of the apocalypse,  
 they having tasted the bone  
 of the Ukrainian hero for the last time.

**Brea Ruddy***Blending Roles*

As I enter the door, measures must be  
 taken. Like the surgeons do, scrub,  
 mask, and gloves. Temperature and all.  
 Light is sparse as to not cause pain.  
 Find your way to the small, darkened room.  
 The man lay, too weak to sit or stand.  
 But business must go on, in any way it can.  
 Read e-mails, yes, the junk as well.  
 Make a long list of things to do.  
 Build the ad, make the calls.  
 All while cleaning each thing that you touch.  
 Smells that burn and sting.  
 One single germ could end the man.  
 Each day a different task, stranger  
 than the last. Buy that rare red laser machine,  
 deliver the medical equipment sold.

Then one day, the goal changes.  
 A different kind of  
 assistance needed.  
 Special food must be made  
 in very specific ways.  
 Pills that can't be touched must  
 be given. Roles blend into something  
 more vulnerable and trusting.  
 I bump his knee on accident, so thin.  
 As I spoon his life's need.  
 Business can't always be done.  
 Sometimes death's call can't be ignored.

**Christel Maass***Tarry*

*You may forever tarry.* – Robert Herrick

Now I knew. That word Webster defined as:  
*to delay or be tardy in acting or doing;*  
*to linger in expectation; wait.*

Of course, wait, despite my impatience  
 while endlessly referencing  
 his to-do list.

Oh it defined him alright,  
 that husband of mine, baptized  
 with the charming name  
 of Terry.



Acrylic Painting by Sophia Sagerer, *Wisconsin in Point*

## Sarah Royer-Stoll

### *Docks to Nowhere*

We drove onto Minnesota Point last week  
 A cool late summer day, with autumn  
 Just beginning to peek through curtains  
 Crafted of careful sunshine and the sweetness  
 Of transition, as leaves just start to whisper  
 Their change and the breeze is scented with  
 A damp and earthy comfort of resolution.

We saw the fog descend and settle  
 Hung as soft linens on the rope laundry lines  
 Of my youth. Each emerging tree from the  
 Lake looked as though it floated within  
 Nothingness. Heavy white clouds upon  
 The still white water made the shoreline  
 Appear as a cliff's jagged edge, dropping off  
 Into misty vastness. The space below only  
 Revealed itself to be gentle ripples when we  
 Peered in close. We breathed in the quiet mystery.

Sometimes change comes like that, the illusion  
 Of danger when all you need to do is dip your  
 Feet in. All around, the docks stretched into the  
 Opaque air, their lines softened into an offering.  
 I feel myself settling into my own harbor, trusting  
 The anchor of my knowing will hold as I believe  
 In something wholly new, the fog lifting as faith.

## Sarah Royer-Stoll

### *Let's Decorate with Stars and Pause to Watch Them Glow*

We talked yesterday about the treatment  
Not working. Such a sadistic injustice.  
I imagine this slow flow of pitch black  
Ink coursing through your body, cruelly  
Staining all the years of love that I've had  
For you, smeared carelessly over all the years  
Of love that you've embodied for all your  
Precious ones. The lives you've polished to  
Gleam. The way you make the dust in the light  
Dance the very moment you enter the room.

I'm not ready to let you go. I've let your  
Kids know how fiercely I love them.  
I hope they've known that. For now the love  
Pours out over everything, the way your  
Stained glass glimmers in the afternoon  
Sun, and the glint of gray diamonds shines  
In your beloved's hair. I trust in this, that  
Your light fills in the spaces that I can't reach.  
That when I can't breathe, when I consider  
What I would give just to reach into your being  
And take this out from you, that it's my love for  
You swelling as the sea, ebb and flow of time.

When we drove into the mountains that day,  
Each fresh as the scent of deep and knowing  
Earth, we spread out an old blanket, its colors  
Worn yet vibrant, now holding wine, cheese,  
And bread, nourishment for eager souls. We  
Made plans to love partners differently. Drew  
Lines to mark new journeys into ourselves and  
Out into the world, making it better. The time  
You painted ladybugs on your adobe walls,  
Believing they ushered hope. Promised new life.  
You've forged new ground in years. Took ravaged  
Love and created vessels, figurines to enact joy.

Now I prepare for an altered state of union.  
The lights will twinkle on your rail, a sight for  
Miles across the Enchantments, your tender  
Ornaments chosen carefully, each a moment.  
You can describe the story of every one. My cells  
Continue their life cycle, every seven years a  
Regeneration. A marker of new chances.  
These Decades surround us with gratefulness, grace  
In watching your legacy pour out as silken  
Amber over valleys, gold etched upon the peaks.

**Wylder Moriarty***Monarch Butterflies*

Let me tell you a story of the primeval meadows  
places of peace, free from violence  
where there existed not a single evil lurking in the shadows  
or a single voice smothered by silence.

Let me tell you a story of the primeval meadows  
where little orange butterflies floated for miles in the breeze  
wandering free where no borders could possibly enclose  
crossing continents as vast as seas.

Let me tell you a story of the primeval meadows  
where those little orange butterflies transcended a form consigned at  
birth  
soaring high through storm clouds and rainbows  
overjoyed in their euphoric mirth.

Of course, those meadows are long gone now.  
No more are the vast plains without borders nor walls  
where huddled masses yearning to breathe free may find respite.  
No more are the fluid bodies unchained from their shackles  
who could hold bodily autonomy without permission from society.

Now we look out on those once primeval meadows and find  
hierarchy.  
Walls confining those little orange butterflies to unsafe lands south of  
the border.  
Walls confining those little orange butterflies to the caterpillars they  
were thought to be at birth.  
Each trapped in a single homeland and a single gender for all of  
eternity.  
Each trapped in a body and a nation that will kill them, sooner or  
later.

But it does not have to be like this.  
We have seen the primeval meadows.  
We know that we do not need hierarchies in nation, nor gender.  
One day, not long from now, we will overthrow those who have  
confined us.  
We shall abolish nations, governments, borders.  
We shall abolish patriarchy, transphobia, gender hierarchy  
and finally, when the ashes have settled, those primeval meadows  
shall return  
for we are those little orange butterflies, and we shall not stop until  
we are free once again.



Photograph by Patricia Thomas, *White Admiral Chrysalis*

## Jessica Bresina

### *Say the Things*

It echoes back to me  
 what I said  
 The voice you prepared for me  
 is what's in my head

I heard you speak  
 as my lips moved  
 How did it get to this place  
 where I'm removed

As evening sets  
 and quite time resides  
 It's all the voices  
 everyone's but mine

I tithe my person  
 to the masses  
 And in return  
 a new mask it sets in

I fear this game  
 and all these masters  
 I'm broken down  
 a sheer disaster

One day I'll beat this  
 One day I'll see  
 My true created purpose  
 The true voice of reason for me

## Ursula Charles

### *3 moons*

I thought about it today, and I have been wanting you for 3 moons. The desire comes up in waves.

is shut down by the sun, all the sun;  
the computerandphoneandTVandlightsatworkand.

all the artificial sun

artificial sun tells me to do,do,do, and to not concern myself with the undercurrents.

I don't see the real sun so much these days, but I don't feel fondly towards him. ...

Probably we are overdue for a chat,  
by now I have burnt myself down on so much artificial sun,  
it would be nice to have a chat.

It's winter and the sun sets by the time I drive home,  
some nights it does not get dark though, the sky is lit up by  
streetlights reflected on snow,  
and too: the moon.

Oh god I am tired

Oh G-d,  
We are all tired.

at night, when the moon is full, i am lit up with desire. desire for more, for better, to be seen, to be loved. to be together. for the moon to pull us together. for her to take me to you. to wake up in your waters. like a prank gone right, floating on my mattress but home. together. i lose it in my sleep.

pick up my phone and i'm on land,  
Fool! forget those dreams  
And the moon isn't there to encourage me. So I guess i give them up.

**Bailey BeBeau***Montag You Fool*

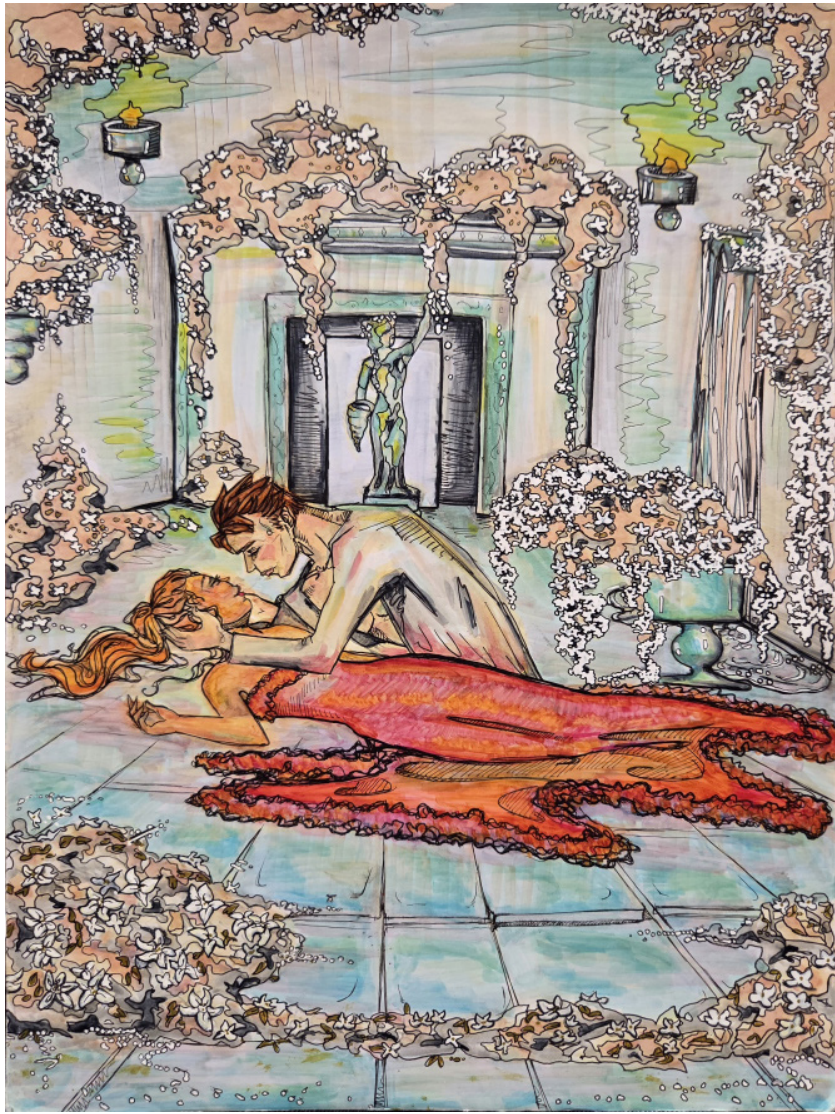
Watching, watching—  
 screens slung over sight; new sets of eyes  
 seashells imbedded in ears babbling  
 on and  
 on and  
 on.

Little pixilated scenes  
 feeding only the best and truest—  
 tight wound and cut loose;  
 hands running over latches and screws,  
 fixating displays to skulls.

Marveling at the melding  
 of flesh and metal while mechanical  
 hounds skulk,  
 sniff de-skinned limbs,  
 and scuddle on.

It's safer this way,  
 Montag—  
 so long as you don't loosen the bolts—  
 though the red, ball-dotted sun assaults bone  
 till it bleeds and blisters;  
 flaking away, drifting high and nigh  
 and melting,  
 burbling down as muddy,  
 bloody rain.

Simply smile—  
 simply watch wet lilies land on lapping lips;  
 consider them with ashy hands,  
 the walls whispering answers on demand;  
 saying how such beauty can't stand—  
 and nod  
 and nod  
 and nod in agreement.



Alcohol Marker Drawing by Paige Evans, *Chrysolyrēs and His Beloved*

## Leisan Yusupov

### *Stardust*

He is the stardust in my lungs  
 the very air I breathe  
 the fibers of the carbon core  
 from which we both are weaved  
 components that compile us  
 were joined so long ago  
 a single star among galaxies  
 warmed only by its glow  
 hot hydrogen and helium  
 burst within its crust  
 which over time deteriorates  
 in colors it combusts  
 and from those specks  
 the shattered star left floating in the black  
 forms us two beings  
 small and stardust, who love in the abstract.

**Robert Wildwood***The Sound of Social Media Deleted*

there's a new cube  
plugged into the wall  
routing our desires  
what does it say  
to something i cannot see  
someone is talking  
on a device i have  
turned off  
i can't hear you anymore  
i deleted my account  
i miss your voice  
can i come visit  
a few hours' drive  
let's open up the steel box  
plastic-coated copper wires  
power company will never know  
flip the master breaker  
off  
there is no silence  
in the dark  
as ears are always  
working  
the sound of my  
body  
fills my head  
now to you  
i am listening

**Rochelle Anderson***Speed of Light*

My life was luminous,  
moving at 186,000 miles per second.  
Like an astronaut headed out of the galaxy,  
all systems go, hurtling onward.

Later, my horrific stroke was the prism,  
altered light's trajectory,  
splintered photons haphazardly.  
Satellite's orbit decayed,  
asteroids cratered the Earth's crust.  
Sun became a white dwarf, and  
black holes collapsed to infinite density.

Now, my recovery is years of therapy  
to get the beam refocused forward.  
Opportunities return  
in many splendid variations.  
Where is the final destination?



Oil Painting by Jenny Ostazeski, *Right Place, Right Time*

## Bud Brand

### *A Simple Sigh*

As I stood looking  
 at the sky  
 I could not help  
 but wonder why  
 We humans here  
 on planet earth  
 Think our being  
 has such great worth  
 That we inflate  
 our egos so  
 That confidence  
 is never low,  
 And yet the fact  
 is we will die—  
 Our life worth but  
 a simple sigh.  
 Our egoism  
 then will crumble  
 For heaven only  
 takes the humble.

## Preston Meys

### *Five Minutes Before the Therapy Session that Fixes Me*

I sit slumped in the cracked leather of my car's driver's seat and stare through the windshield with eyes weakened by a four-year long weight, hypnotized by a gray ocean of clouds rushing across the sky. Over the radio, a metallic orchestra swells in a crescendo that, if not confined to the speakers in my car, could've stretched so far as to grab the sun and bring it back into the forefront of the sky, and something in the hollow of my chest mimics the soaring symphony: a sudden radiant twinge that squeezes the heart pleurably. Above, a lone goose flies against the current of clouds; then another; then a pair, soaring so close together their wing tips almost meet midair. I'm suddenly enchanted: the entwining of music and nature in this enclosed moment possesses me, makes me light enough to be whisked away with the sky's forever-flowing tide and the cyclical southern migration.

Having basked in the quaint magic of this world with brevity, I slip off my seat, into the street, and am swept up—not by the innate pull of north or south nor by wind or tide, but rather by the counseling clinic's call. The wind's at my back as I wander towards the door, not desperate to leave the outdoors yet equally eager for my session. I hold the song, the breeze, and the birds in my chest as I step through, believing there's something just as wonderful waiting for me on the other side.

## Deborah Rasmussen

### *The Least Expected Time for Relief*

is when you make it home from the famous clinic again, solo this time as he heals in rehab. You feel you've been awake for weeks. How tired the bare fields you drove past must feel, too, facing a bleak winter without snow. Weary spruces probe the sky for flakes, extract few, gone before they hit ground. Exhausted grass isn't sure whether to fade or grow.

You sympathize with confused cornfields this mid-January, endless autumn, no sign of spring, nothing as usual, just cold uncertainty like the way you feel about cancer, how you've come to believe it's too late to expect anything normal to happen ever again

until restlessness stirs the air. Clouds build as you unload the car, haul in all the baggage this journey requires. Branches begin to dance overhead, worn grass wakens, keen to greet new hope. By evening, heavy snow. Earth sighs under its welcome weight and you surrender, for now, to long-awaited sleep.

**Jan Chronister***Cosmic Promise*

At Fajada Butte  
precise alignment  
of stone slabs  
directs sun through slits,  
marks equinox & solstice  
twice a year,  
records the truth as it has  
for thousands of years—  
light always returns.



Mixed Media Painting by Annie Showers-Curtis, *Nocturnes*

**Amy Jo Swing***The North Shore*

We drove two hours up the lakeshore looking  
for fall colors. We're too early yet.  
What stands out instead are the wheaty shades  
of grasses by the road, the stalks growing  
in the ruts and outside the treeline.  
The trees look braced for fall, not turning yet,  
but stiffening. Some of the evergreens—  
spruces and skinny pines—look nervous,  
sensing they'll be eclipsed, for a few weeks  
at least, by the oaks and paper birches,  
even the low-down bushes on the forest floor.  
The bigger pines are puffed out, waiting.  
In the woods, those birches are  
peeling themselves, some in long strips  
as if I could unravel the whole trunk,  
while others split from the middle, splaying  
a new layer, lighter than the last. No one  
says *winter* or *snow*. No one dares.

**Lynn Watson***Lady Miracle*

you spin  
silken strands to  
span emptiness  
with patterns of purpose

you swirl  
steel strong snares  
to swaddle blunder-prey  
into stillness

you suspend  
filigrees that filter  
crystal through  
the night

you sip  
from fragile jewels  
none can own  
beauty's necklace  
in the dawn

**Please note:** This piece contains references to needles and transphobic language.

## Preston Meys

### *Transitioning (in Frenzied Anecdotes)*

The surge of hormones in the body:

a ste-

roid rage

against the systems that want to make me

small

and slimy

and senseless—

I take the needle and plunge it into

the soft of my side.

\* \* \*

I will make myself into a man

despite the federal push to erase me

I will make myself into a man

despite a national effort to denature my identity

I will make myself into a man

despite a will suspended in shattering like hot glass against

cold cruelty

\* \* \*

Pushing the testosterone through the thin metal I feel it: the fire inside me expanding: the passion, the rage, the very center of my soul expanding: hot air trying desperately to warm both the body and the world. It makes me want to scream *CAN'T YOU SEE I'M ALIVE* to ears covered with cupped hands concealing from minds this personal truth, allowing in only fetid lies: "genital mutilation" "unnatural" "predators" "deranged" "sick"

*"there's only one way to live, and it's ours"*

*"there's only one way to live, and it's ours"*

\* \* \*

The surge of hormones in the body:

an intimate reminder of the lives who carved out—

with bleeding gums and whittled teeth;

with broken fingers and worn wrists—

a possibility for this kind of life

in which I can be mad and whole

simultaneously.



Photograph by Ian Seefeldt, *Fiddle Me This*

## Nancy Deever

### *We Always Leave Something Behind*

Our creator was wildly generous.  
Wherever we go, whatever we do,  
the walk, the run of animals, the smell of plants,  
the sound of trains, autos, death—  
Something always is left behind.

Think about this.

All that dead skin, loose hairs, footprints,  
and so much DNA wave us goodbye  
as we go about our everyday source of living.  
For me, it was a blue, beloved high school ring.  
A priceless, signed book by one of my favorite poets.  
My sweet dog at the farm, Ginger,  
who I never got to pet again after leaving for college.  
And those broken dishes, tarnished earrings,  
an old Schwinn bike, homemade scars—  
all gone, all disappearing,  
in the scope of life running on.

**Sara Fulton***The Ladies of Llyn Superior*

Ladies of Llyn Superior~~  
 not one light, but two,  
     braided into something new.

They move as a pair of currents.  
 Learning from each other~~  
     Tugging a small universe behind them  
     ~~keys, leashes, lures,  
 and still, it feels like home.

Their love is soft~~  
 Not in the way  
     people expect softness to behave.

~~It's practical~~  
 It knows how to back a trailer  
     into a tight site by feel,  
 how to make a meal from almost nothing  
     and still set a plate down  
 with the weight of ceremony.

They've learned the math of two:  
     how one tired voice  
 becomes two steady ones,  
     how one setback  
 turns into a plan, a laugh~~  
     a hand on the back saying:

*We're still here. Keep going.*

They are not asking permission.

They are not waiting for applause.

They are living where the world thins out~~  
     where the sky feels closer,  
     where the rules are left behind.

Fringe, they call it.  
 As if the edge is less real.

As if the center is the only place  
     a heart can find its home.

## Rochelle Anderson

### *Autumn as Life*

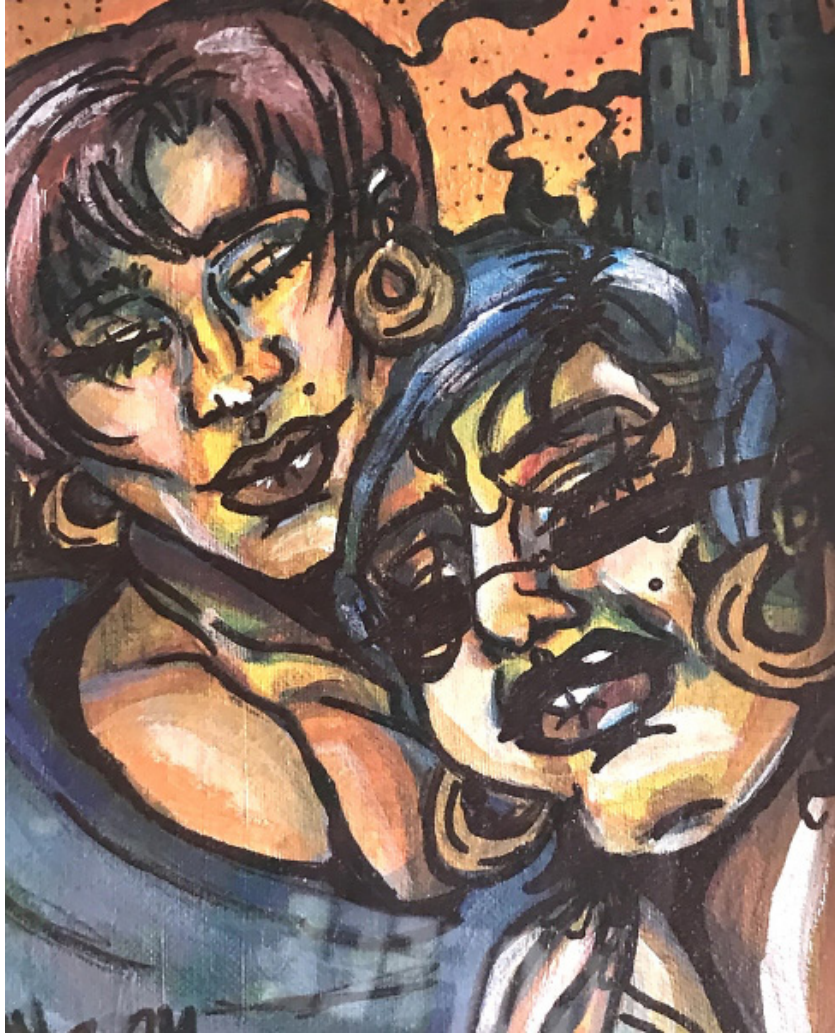
See a flash of an image for an instant, then vanish.  
Is it just a jigsaw puzzle? Many leaf pieces,  
red, orange and gold, scattered from the box,  
upside down and sideways. Start the adventure  
with the four corners, construct the straight edge border.  
Match the shapes and color patterns so the entire picture  
becomes clear as the lens brings completed puzzle  
into focus.

Eyeglasses show a fuzzy view like a shattered mirror,  
you are growing old. A hike in the woods among  
ferns and pines, get chilled and put on jackets.  
Season changes with bright yellow aspen,  
brilliant crimson maples. Beautiful hues flutter  
to the ground, and the fallen leaves soften the path  
as multiple layers cover the forest floor. Stroll among  
the shadows of twilight, and with the first winter snowfall,  
stillness. Film roll at its end; the aperture has closed.

## Kimberly Hodgman

### *is that me?*

my flower water is starting to stink.  
indelicate. pungently. maliciously  
I was wrapped around your finger  
before you tied me around something more  
impermanent. impertinent? I am indecisive  
and what I need is a change of face.  
what else am I supposed to say?  
you said *it's not a race* but it was  
and we were gone at the speed of light.  
I'm a burned-out creative  
with ink-stained fingertips  
wild, flaming bright. what will I do  
with this dried-up black dahlia?  
I've overgrown it. I will crush the flower  
into a powder and use it  
to deodorize the carpet under my feet.



Acrylic Painting by Sophia Sagerer, *Good-Looking*

## Jordan Rader

### *casual(ty)*

my phone flashes bright from a text and i can barely keep my eyes open but it's hard being someone's late night *you up?* when just two months ago i was waking up to the smell of our favorite locally roasted coffee we found by accident three years ago to the day while it was pouring down rain and we needed somewhere—anywhere—to stay dry and the baristas thought we were crazy when we ran inside their quaint little shop dressed to the nines because neither of us checked the weather that day but we bought three different bags of coffee to apologize for how loud we were though we hardly noticed because we were so in love and so excited to get back to our little house that was slowly turning into our cozy home littered with hair from our two dogs and i begged for a third but maybe we'll just stick with two for now and i smiled at the hallways lined with the polaroids from our last camping trip to the mountains and the four of us happily together and never separated because we needed each other, or at least i needed you, but i wake up and the scent of our coffee lingers until i realize i can hardly remember the layout of the coffee shop and i haven't seen the dogs in months and you aren't next to me and we are not in love, at least not anymore  
so yah, i'm up

**Jack Gilbert***Empty Buildings*

Do I think of you?

No.

Why would I?

I work two jobs

I'm involved in three extracurriculars this semester

I go out with my friends 3 nights a week

I go to the gym once a day

I'm making a film

I'm in a play

I fill every spare second

In my day-to-day life

Doing anything

Anything

To keep myself from thinking of you.

So no

I don't think of you

Because I simply have no time to.

But sometimes

When the students clear out

And the faculty take their leave.

When the light outside fades

And the air becomes stale.

I find myself in these empty buildings.

Emptied from the buzz of life.

I walk through the hollowed hallways

And when I look to my left

I see you there.

Walking beside me.

I like to think that you tell me all you've done.

That you traveled the world

And saw all your favorite places.

That you became a renowned psychologist

And published several award-winning studies.

That you married a man who loves you

The way I wish you had let me,

And then you stop.

I imagine you say,

That you never stopped thinking of me.

And in those silent moments

In those empty buildings

When only the walls can hear our secrets

I would tell you the same.

**Meridel Kahl***Fourteen*

I remember what I wore—  
rust-colored skirt, flared at the hem,  
nut brown sweater with gold flecks,  
t-strap shoes with tiny heels.

I don't remember if I held my elbows  
like opened wings, if I glided my feet  
as I closed them. I only remember  
I felt tall, elegant as my skirt brushed  
my legs, as the instructor and I demonstrated  
the tango for the rest of the class.

I didn't call my father to pick me up.  
I wanted to walk, to drift in the quiet night,  
relive in silence the newfound joys  
of the past two hours.

The sun had set. Within three blocks  
I realized how alone I was in the dark,  
only scattered globes of light  
from houses nearby. Suddenly afraid,  
I ran the last two blocks home.

I opened the door, walked into the kitchen, its  
light the color of melting butter, its windows misted  
with silver beads of condensation. They were  
waiting for my call—my little sister in the breakfast nook,  
my father at the sink, my mother in front of the stove.

Twenty minutes earlier  
I had thought I didn't need them anymore.



Watercolor Painting by Virgil Teal, *Twisted Stars; the moon king*

## Sarah Packa

### *Changing the Narrative*

If I'd been given a language  
that wrapped my body in worship  
words for those who had different ways to love

Known that my body and its varied longings  
were also holy  
that I could call for a goddess to worship  
for a love that didn't feel forced

I go back as an angel to my child self  
to free her, even now  
to tell her about the serpent secrets  
Lilith and her wings defiant

I go back  
even now  
to show her  
my hand in hers  
wingbuds  
under our shoulder skin

emerge

**Please note:** This piece contains references to gun violence.

## Evan Tungate

### *Vivid Dreams of Loading a Charleville Musket*

in shaking hands that remember  
 as they grip the sheets: the sturdy  
 walnut, the action's pitted steel,  
 the shock. And a mouth, dry, in which  
 cartridge-paper taste yet lingers:  
 the lard and bitter astringence  
 of black powder—fed to dogs,  
 my grandfather said, and soldiers,  
 to keep them mean. In the middle  
 of the night I got up, padded  
 to the bathroom—flinching gunshy  
 at the flickering streetlight—and  
 washed my hands of their shaking, rinsed  
 and spit the powder from my mouth,  
 and found I could not remember,  
 when I had cocked the hammer and  
 bit the cartridge and filled the pan,  
 rammed the cartridge down the barrel  
 and replaced the rod, tucked the stock  
 into my shoulder and my cheek  
 and aimed so careful, and fired,  
 and awoke, what lay beyond the  
 muzzle that I had wanted dead.

## Hailie Evans

1/29/26

I like it here—where the  
 ceilings aren't so high—gentle tiles  
 over scholars, not the lofty daunting  
 pillars of law.  
 It is calm, where I lay on the  
 floor with my textbooks in a  
 dead-end hallway, my school resting  
 out the window to my right and an  
 evergreen, turquoise canvas of  
 blurring trees, leaves, and seas  
 swirling stoically, statically before me,  
 and I wonder what the artist  
 sees in their masterpiece that to  
 me looks like corporate decor.  
 It was dedicated in memory of  
 mentors who made waves after all.  
 I'm sure dozens of snow, salt, and  
 sand-clad boots have trod where  
 I lay across my undergrad jacket  
 on the crunchy church-style carpet,  
 but I have not felt peace like  
 this—alone in my empty passageway  
 outside the auditorium—since I  
 moved to this city that stands at the  
 front lines of a conflict between  
 unbroken people and unchecked power.  
 Tonight, under soft-white square tiles,  
 I write. And I breathe.



Photograph by Elise Lawton, *The Rider*

## Robert Wildwood

### *While the Children Are Asleep*

The fairies have been at it again  
 leaving brown bags of apples on our doorstep  
 and tiny chocolate candies on the old tree stump  
 jumping onto our cat Poppy's back and  
 riding him wildly through the yard  
 pushing a little soil blanket over the corn kernels that  
 fell from the bird feeder and watering them

The fairies have been at it again  
 tucking dollar bills into their favorite books at the library  
 and trading children's teeth for metal coins  
 making stickers that say "WAR" and  
 slapping them under "STOP" signs

The fairies have been at it again  
 having late night tea parties with the Barbies  
 and stuffed animals eating all the bakery  
 trying on Barbie high heels and falling  
 flat on the hardwood floor  
 waking up a parent upstairs  
 who rolls over and returns to the  
 unlimited chaos of dreamland

The fairies have been at it again  
 writing letters on the walls  
 painting pictures lifting vision  
 teaching trolls about love  
 while the children are asleep

**Meridel Kahl***Refugee**written in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine*

You watch first light touch  
 the winter maple in your yard.  
 You wash a few dishes—  
 one plate at a time, front, back  
 each mug, inside, outside, rim.  
 You run hot water  
 over shaking fingers,  
 not noticing the biting heat.

The sun is up.  
 You move away from the window,  
 take one numb step, then another.  
 It's time to leave.

Your eyes rest on your mother's candlesticks  
 grandmother's china cup  
 your books,  
 once cherished treasures,  
 now to be abandoned.

You sink freezing fingers  
 into your cat's plush fur,  
 scratch her forehead  
 the way she loves,  
 set out extra food, water.

On the table you place a lipstick-sealed letter  
 for your husband, already at the front.  
 You put his picture in your pocket.

You pick up your precious  
 little girl—your life—  
 warm and cozy in her pink snowsuit,  
 boots, angora cap with pom-pom ears,  
 her mittened hands clutching Yellow Bunny.

You bless your home.  
 If only you could fold it up,  
 fit it into empty spaces  
 of your backpack behind sweaters and pants.

You lock the door  
 walk downstairs.

Like a wounded deer,  
 stunned, stumbling,  
 you join the queue  
 of neighbors  
 heading for the station  
 to board a train  
 bound for nowhere.



Linoleum Print by Leisan Yusupov, *The Bird and The Bug*

## Gavin Glen

### *On Demand*

What do I do?  
 I tell jokes  
 aloud, proud  
 to a crowd  
 from a couple out  
 on their first date  
 to a corporate party  
 boozing up from  
 their heated budget debate.

I whisper  
 for a guy I work  
 with, clean slates  
 he needs, pleads  
 for other staff  
 as if I'm a timid referee  
 exchanging  
 calm messages  
 between my breaths  
 & his hairy ears.

I write  
 for work by  
 how behaviors display  
 the vulnerable ones' days  
 I'm present,  
 content  
 on how I pay my rent

as I get home  
to my orange-striped journal  
where I go to vent.

I play  
guitar & ukulele.  
I try  
to sing lately  
on my own lyrics  
I typed down at a party.  
So even in my down time,  
I'm looking up to autumn trees  
to spot my own colorful leaves  
to seek around  
my personal pages  
& decide later  
which ones  
are the songs & poems  
of the ages.

I read  
Mark Manson's book to prepare  
for a new book club  
& my old Bible  
to make sure  
I'm an endearing hub.  
I go over  
the verses I loved  
back when I was sixteen.  
Before all of the sinful things  
I've seen  
with the  
crystalline lens of adulthood.

I walk  
to get out of my cold sleep.  
The news has gone Hell deep  
as a war is coming up  
on the Holy Land.  
I guess I better pray more.  
Hands together is on demand.  
I worry about  
the existence later  
to the Big Man.  
This walking trail  
is on my morning's  
attention span  
& put more faith  
in my new plan:  
Healing crystals.

**Annie Showers-Curtis***Little Bat of Aztalan*

Sapphire night skies  
of eleven p.m.  
stretch over the fields  
of Southern Wisconsin.

The moon is dark,  
the stars shine bright—  
metallic threads  
worked into crushed velvet.

As night wings glide,  
fields turn to mounds—  
the rich dark emerald of summer.  
The heady scent of sweetgrass  
hangs thickly in the air.

Overlooking mounds and meadow,  
atop the highest hill,  
a figure—

Her hand drops to her side,  
and a disconnected call  
casts a patch of grass  
into glaring light—

all is still.

She bares her chest to the sky,  
her arms thrust wide  
like the wings of a bat.

A raging shriek  
sings from her throat,  
a sonorous static—  
reverberation and night entwined.

All that returns  
on darkened air  
is the calm of sweetgrass,  
stars, and velvet—

the swelling silence of the night.



Photograph by Elijah Molina, *Formulating a Plan - Northern Flickers*

## Liz Minette

### *Diner*

The parapet  
sounds of  
cups and  
ketchup  
bottles.

The waterfall  
clatter of  
silverware,  
the rock slam  
of stacked  
plates.

The smell  
of sugar,  
coffee and  
eggs.

A small silver  
spoon stirs  
honey in tea,  
its sound like  
a delicate  
keep.

**Please note:** This piece contains depictions of war-related violence.

## Angela Fulghum

### *Heart-Shaped Medicine*

Bosnia and Herzegovina ripped me to pieces and buried me deep  
under her toenails.

I imagined her a beautiful woman, brought low despite her strength,  
cheeks bleeding and smudged with dirt,  
long, dark, tangled hair falling into her face,  
clothes and body tattered and filthy from being robbed, abused and  
abandoned.

After the savagery of genocide,  
she was still catching her breath  
while the world stepped in, claimed “peace,” and moved on.

After years of studying genocide and postwar “reconstruction,” and  
my short time there,  
I returned home  
from learning stories and nuances of history, war, the resulting  
political gridlock and corruption,  
from meeting with families that still grieve over missing bodies,  
from the mothers who helplessly held their small children as their  
insides flowed down their  
outsides after finding a landmine the hard way,  
from a modern city forced to turn an Olympic stadium, less than ten  
years old, into a graveyard.  
I returned home to excess and voluntary ignorance.  
I returned to friends complaining about the toppings on their pizza,  
about the flavor of their cocktail.  
I tried to talk about how good our life was, how hard it was

elsewhere,  
tried to give voice to the suffering I witnessed,  
and was tolerated for a little while.  
I was met with forced smiles and big eyes begging to talk about  
anything else.  
I continued, and eyes rolled.  
I was told I was ruining the mood, that I was a downer.  
I was told I had to let it go, get over it, focus on the good in the world  
or risk getting “eaten up.”  
In an attempt to keep my friendships,  
screaming on the inside,  
I swallowed my rants about the torture, rape, executions, mass  
graves, and concentration  
camps, despite how much I obviously wanted to talk about it.  
In my silence, I lost myself.

At the time I thought I was losing myself in the pain of it all.  
In a way that was true, but now,  
I think the real loss was giving in  
and shutting up.  
The real loss wasn't my breaking, but having to break alone.  
It was the presence of a culture where others felt unwilling or unable  
to break with me,  
the way I believe their souls wanted to.

For years I shoved my tirades about colonialism, genocide, war, the  
ways we scar the Earth,  
and daily social injustices back down my throat  
in an attempt to make the people around me comfortable.  
Not only that,  
but I eventually found myself guilty of joining the masses in  
attempting to avoid everything else

in the world that broke my heart,  
 attempting to hide from feeling more heartache, pain, or loss.  
 The news was too terrible so I stopped watching it.  
 I felt unsafe, betrayed by my countrymen at the ballot so I stopped  
     meeting the gaze of others.  
 I packaged it for myself as “self-care” but I now see it all causes harm.  
 It creates a terminal disconnect from myself, from others, from Earth,  
     from God...  
 It is a disservice to life.

Now,  
 I refuse not to care  
 about the condition of the world.  
 I refuse to overlook its beauty.  
 I refuse to pretend that the loss of it doesn't hurt, even scare me.  
 I refuse to be afraid of the overwhelm of it.  
 I refuse to sit alone, quietly fretting, pretending it will all be over  
     soon.  
 I refuse to ration my love.

I am going to take in as much as I can about the world.  
 I am going to feel all the joy and all the pain that brings me.  
 I am going to examine what haunts my soul and grieve what breaks  
     my heart.  
 I am going to learn how to digest it.  
 This is what makes me feel alive.  
 This is what makes me feel human.  
 This is what allows me to realize love in the truest form.

It is in this way that I went from believing my brush with war had  
     made me lose my faith

in humanity and in God, to realizing it was the catalyst for me finding  
     it.

When I allow myself to recognize and accept pain, my heart aches.  
 When I recognize and accept heartache, I can grieve.  
 Allowing that grief is the only way I can heal.  
 It is the only way I can learn to live with the truths of our time.  
 When I grieve, a tenderness rises—this is love.  
 This is medicine.  
 This is what I can offer in my time here.  
 This is my commitment to my loving heart,  
 to my struggling soul,  
 to life,  
 and  
 to peace.



Photograph by Elijah Molina, Red-Winged Blackbird

## Betsy Westlund

### *Understanding Dissociation*

I still clearly remember the first time the walls broke apart into a million fragments of color: alone in my bedroom at 10 years old, I'd watch the walls until everything slowly dissolved and nothing was real. Since then, that feeling has always lived with me—in the “grey” that clouded my thoughts, in the bright colors that made what was once familiar strange, in the unknowing of who or where I was when I woke up in the morning.

There is a clinical name for what I experienced: dissociation. Dissociation is described as an experience of feeling detached from oneself or the surrounding world (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For some, this can include feeling like a robot or as if looking at life through a glass jar. For me, it meant feeling as if the world around me was unfamiliar. I could walk the same forest trails of the same camp I spent my summers at every year—with the same people, same cabins, same songs, same meals, same everything—and still not recognize it from day to day, or even hour to hour. This disconnect from reality often resulted in lapses in memory, leaving me confused and disoriented.

My experience may sound extreme to some, but, often, I found that people in my life were not shocked by my dissociative experiences. My close friends and family responded to my (frequent) episodes of dissociation as if they were merely odd or intriguing and not alarming. As someone who was experiencing many traits stereotypical of someone portrayed as “crazy” in pop culture, the lack of concern was...odd.

It turns out, however, the general ambivalence regarding my dissociative episodes might be part of what allowed me to eventually

have a healthy relationship with dissociation. The most prominent indicator that someone's dissociative symptoms will escalate is having a fear of losing touch with reality (Hunter et al., 2003). Harboring anxiety about losing one's mind can accelerate exactly that. As unsettling as it was that no one seemed freaked out by my distance from reality, overall, it curbed my own anxieties towards the experiences, keeping me from spiraling further into dissociation.

After decades of therapy visits and hospital stays that all attempted to "fix" me, I found the most important pathway to my management of dissociation was cultivating an understanding of *why* I was dissociating (alongside a deeply acceptance-based practice). This led me to ask: Can psychoeducation be an integral part of the healing process? For me, the answer was yes! Greater understanding brought immense comfort to a world that previously felt isolated for me, and maybe it could do the same for others.

That was one of the first comforts I learned in my journey: There were others—and more than I thought. 26-74% of the general population will experience dissociation at least once in their lifetime (Quigley et al., 2024). The percentage is lower for people who experience long-term dissociation like me, roughly 2%, but it isn't zero.

There are logical reasons why dissociation happens. I wasn't just losing touch with reality; rather, my brain was trying to make sense of signals that didn't actually make sense. When looking at what happens in the brains of those who experience dissociation compared to those who do not, researchers found that people with dissociative symptoms experience an over-activation of neural activity in the orbitofrontal cortex and an under-activation of neural activity in the left caudate nucleus compared to those who do not have dissociative symptoms (Büetiger et al., 2020). What this indicated was that there was a bottom-up effect happening where the brain is alerting for a need to panic despite lack of imminent danger in addition

to a top-down effect where the brain does not efficiently process danger. Basically, the brain is saying: "I'm freaking out!" and responding to itself with "That's a lot and I'd rather not?" This response creates a numb or disconnected feeling when there is increased panic or danger.

This explanation resonated with my own experiences. Like many others who have dissociative experiences, I lived with high levels of anxiety. My brain was on overdrive, convinced there was something to panic about, some danger lurking just outside of view. And like many others with dissociative experiences, I had lived through trauma. My brain was more than happy to disengage from danger cues as a means for survival. With both of these things occurring, of course reality was going offline! Knowing my neuroanatomy made some things click for me. It gave my dissociative episodes a purpose. My brain was trying to keep me safe in the only way it knew how: by going offline and keeping me from intense panic.

There was one study I found during my research that looked at a variety of people with and without dissociation to see if there was a direct relationship between trauma experience and dissociation severity. It found the answer was more nuanced than expected. Not everyone with dissociation had experienced trauma and not everyone with trauma developed dissociation (Daniels et al., 2024). I'd love to see more studies done on whether that relates to how a dissociative brain was designed (nature) or how it evolved (nurture).

Many humans struggle with some aspects of mental health every day, be that anxiety, depression, or something else and it's not uncommon for someone with anxiety-based disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, or depression to also have dissociative episodes. Nor is it uncommon for someone with trauma-based disorders such as borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder or schizophrenia to have dissociative

episodes (Daniels et al., 2024). By understanding more about why symptoms happen, the path towards healing and acceptance could be a little clearer. Much like how knowing your first aid skills can make an unexpected injury less frightening, understanding the reason behind psychological reactions to stress or trauma could make them less frightening, too.

There is still much to learn about dissociation, but I've found that experiencing symptoms of dissociation doesn't have to be confusing or frightening. There are reasons the brain reacts the way it does, whether it's the physical makeup of a person's brain or due to traumatic experiences it needs to keep the mind safe from. Either way, the path towards acceptance-based healing comes from meeting these symptoms with understanding rather than fear. The more we understand our own minds, the more we can live with compassion for ourselves. Psychoeducation didn't erase my symptoms, but it softened my fear of them and gave me a shame-free way to speak about them. Dissociation will likely always be a part of my life, but it is no longer a stranger.

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## Louise Beyea

### *The Shelter of Stories*

What makes some bend and bounce back, or bend and stay permanently disfigured, or bend and break?

I'm thinking about trees and children as I snowshoe the snowy forest trails near my northern Wisconsin home. It's New Year's Eve, and I play as a child in the waning daylight of 2025, trying to make smoke rings with my breath in the frigid air. A recent late winter storm brought six inches of sticky, wet flakes a few days ago. The trees are plastered with a thick blanket of extra weight, but no warmth. The snow is beautiful and deadly at the same time.

The storm did not discriminate. Every tree of every species, from young deciduous saplings to ancient pines, received a blast of winter's wrath, but some fared worse than others. The small trees—birch, poplar, alder—suffered the brunt of the storm. Immature and prone to damage, their slender, supple bodies lean to the southeast, like swaying members of a choir, frozen in unison. The evergreens, in contrast, are stately and majestic. The snow drapes their thick boughs in a cloak of royal ermine.

Two popple trees, victims of a previous winter's drubbing, form an arched bridge over a portion of the trail. When the trees were ten years younger, the weight of the snow forced them to bow in parallel supplication, creating a perfect double arc over the path. Back then, when I did my annual spring cleanup of the trail with loppers and a chainsaw, I decided to spare the deformed trees to see if they would gradually straighten. They never bounced back from the heavy insult and remain a deformed duo.

One of the two misshapen trees will not survive many more seasons. Its upside-down canopy has broken away, leaving ragged



Photograph by Louise Beyea, *Shelter of Stories*

shreds of torn wood. The other member of the arched pair is thriving and has turned into a work of art. A lateral branch reaches upward like an arrow about to be released from the curved bow of the trunk. The twin trees are the same diameter, rooted in the same earth, drinking in the same sunlight, but only one is thriving.

The second graders in the public elementary school, where I volunteer, share some of the traits of trees. They are young, susceptible to forces that bend and shape them. Like the trees, they have no agency over the winds that buffet their lives. Some are supported and shielded; others are as vulnerable as a sapling in an open field. Who will bounce back, who will stay permanently affected, their psychic structure altered by the weight of what they see, hear, and feel in their small bodies?

Certain types of trees are more vulnerable to winter damage than others. Black willows, silver maples, and quaking aspen pay for their vigorous growth by producing brittle wood, prone to breakage under an icy load. The laws of nature that make a pear different from a pine are not exclusive to botany. I'm no child psychologist, but I can recognize inherent differences in the second graders when I read to them. Some are like Sophie, as sweet as a sugar maple, eager to follow the teacher's instructions. Roger is a dark-haired little boy who reminds me of a white oak, deeply rooted to his seat by his absorption in the story I share. This youngster is behind in his reading skills, but is making great progress, his teacher tells me. I'm glad he's seeing how enjoyable reading can be. Other children go their own way, like tamaracks that don't follow the rules of most evergreens and release their needles each fall. They fidget and whisper, and sometimes need to be reminded that it hurts my feelings when they act rudely. When I'm done reading for the day, one of the inattentive girls gives me an apology and a hug.

A quick detour from the trail takes me through my small orchard which borders the forest. I snip an armload of pesky water sprouts from the apple trees' branches and stash them under the porch, for the benefit of the cottontail rabbit that has made her winter residence next to the house. The seven apple trees have survived despite my inexperience when I planted them as skinny, bare-rooted twigs almost two decades ago. Just like children, they require support, feeding, and gentle shaping. Each variety has characteristics I cannot change. Some are prone to producing abundant water sprouts and need extra pruning every year. The Royal Court's purple-red fruits ripen first and have pure white flesh. The Honeycrisp tree boasts the largest and juiciest apples. The tart Haralred waits to be picked until after the first frost. They all share a dislike of "wet feet," need plenty of summer sun and protection from winter sunscald, and live surrounded by a firm barrier against deer.

Some of the trees I planted didn't survive, a combination of environmental stress and my mismanagement. The errors I made with the trees are easier to forget than the mistakes I made as a parent because dead trees don't goad me about my errant ways. But I know my children remember how we gathered at bedtime when they were young, one child on each side of me as we traveled to Hogwarts and Narnia and visited a barnyard that housed a spider named Charlotte and some pig named Wilbur.

Nature and nurture. Trees and kids. The mix of children in the reading group is as varied as the trees surrounding me. Some of the second graders I read to will go on to become star students and gifted athletes with their pictures in the newspaper. Some will never develop a love of reading, will struggle in school, and may not graduate from high school. Others may make the news for reasons that aren't so stellar. At this point in the lives of these human sprouts,

I hope to serve like an old, sheltering evergreen, my stories transporting the children to a safe place like the deer and rabbits find in the forest, protected under snow-mantled boughs, out of the biting wind.

## Elise Lawton

### *My Car Can Feel Pain*

My car can feel pain. When I turn the steering wheel it whines, agonized, and when I turn it on the engine rumbles louder than it used to, the groan of something that should have been put down a long time ago. It's not a growl or a purr. It's something in pain mustering all its effort to make that hurt known.

You don't believe me. *Get some WD-40 for the steering wheel or something*, you're saying. Shut up. I'm not going to do that. Not because I don't care about something of mine being in pain—if it was my cat, you know, we'd be having a completely different conversation right now—but because my car is an inanimate object. It's old, and old things hurt sometimes. I'm going to drive this thing until the engine explodes and we both die in a fiery inferno.

It could be worse, I tell my car at times. You could be that Subaru that got its battery exploded by the back corner of a pickup truck and somehow still got me home that night. You think a little ache in your steering wheel is anything compared to that? The belts under your hood used to screech and squeal—at least we got that fixed. You never thanked me.

Believe it or not, I do feel compassion for it. My car: the minivan my family has had since 2006 when we first moved to Wisconsin, that became mine in all but name as soon as I turned sixteen. It's sort of like a pet, if a pet was a several-ton hunk of metal whose feelings you could completely ignore. I worry for the future date when I'll have to say goodbye to it. I bet I'll cry. But nothing lives forever, right? At least it will finally stop hurting.

You're still stuck on the first part, about my car feeling pain. *That's not how that works*, you're telling me. *That's not how anything works*. Please try to keep up.

The truth most people don't know is that every inanimate object desires humanity. Craves it, you could say. Every object, though, comes to these pieces of humanity in different ways. My car does not love or hate, but it feels pain. It can't perceive the press of my foot on the gas pedal, can't feel the tap of my fingers on the steering wheel or hear my voice as I sing. It only hurts, every time I turn the key in the ignition and spin the steering wheel into and out of narrow parking spaces. Its existence is agony and I don't know whether it's better to have that or to have no sense of humanity at all. The car certainly can't tell me, but who am I to take away the only bit of sentience it has?

You're thinking about it now. You still don't quite believe me. *So... every car feels pain?* No—what are you talking about? Of course not. That would be ridiculous. Every object feels *something*. It starts with a yearning to be real, to be alive, and turns into a single feeling. That is all they get. Maybe your office printer is in love with your coworker, or maybe your couch is aware of the inescapable passage of time.

The objects can never literally become human, of course. But then, even humanity is just another construct. Did Ted cease to be human when AM turned him into a mere blob? What was it that *made* him human in the first place—was it his physical form or his desire to scream? If you haven't read Harlan Ellison's work, go do that right now. I can wait.

Humanity is not inherent. Humanity exists only as it is ascribed by others. Every stuffed animal I've ever had has had a name and a personality. They are alive enough to me. When I was a kid, my mom and I held a mock-funeral for a favored pair of shoes that had finally grown too damaged to wear. Laughing, she asked me if I was crying; I said no, like a liar. If I'm being honest, I don't think I've ever truly let go of anything.

*You're just 'ascribing' humanity to your car and other objects, then. It's not real.*

Isn't it, though?

I wince when I'm driving and the steering wheel squeaks and whines. The car is hurting, and I hurt along with it. There is no need to care for the feelings of a car—and yet, I do, with the same empathy I allow everything in the world.

There is solace in that pain, too, I am sure. It is the reminder of the humanity I have allowed my car to have. The same humanity my car so desperately desired, finally offered in an outstretched hand. The dull throb of the engine reminds the car that it still lives, that I am here, someone who loves it dearly and will be sad to see it go. One day I will shut the car off for the last time. That will be both the end of its pain, and the end of its semblance of human feeling.

**Sara Valentiuk***Staircase to the Stars*

My daughter's sixth birthday was eight days ago.

Today she said "Mom, I can't wait to be seven, can't even imagine how cool it'll be to be ten or eleven!"

I smiled at her through the rearview mirror, her eyes glittering with the belief that life could only get better with each passing year and I couldn't stop myself from saying the same thing my mom used to say to me—the words that activated my automated eye rolls and stirred up the familiar feeling that she just didn't understand.

But now I know she did.

I understand her earnest plea for me to slow down, just be a kid just a bit longer, because I hear it in my own voice, in my own version of her words:

*Don't wish this time away, baby girl.*

Even as I hear them slip from my lips, I realize they were never words of misunderstanding, but rather ones steeped in experience.

Because it's true when they say life goes too quickly. That one day you'll wake with the heavy weight of the world pressing down on your shoulders and find yourself wishing for even a glimpse of the ease and buoyancy of six.

A precious time in life when war is nothing more than an abstract concept. When words in history books are like hieroglyphics to a mind just starting to read, and pictures of armies lack context and could be, for all you know, friends at a birthday party.

I wish I could pinpoint the moment when innocence leaves the soul. When the crushing weight of realities and atrocities bursts the bubble of childlike wonder. If only I could, I would stop time from ever passing that point and let my little girl live in a world free from ever growing up.

But I also long to see the woman she will one day be. I find myself wondering at the things she'll believe and the places she'll see without me. I reflect on how friendships deepen with the passing of time, and the way healed scars tend to glisten in the sun.

Because it's true when they say life goes too quickly, but would it even be life if it didn't?

And so, as I drive us home from the grocery store, I ask what she thinks life will be like at eleven or twelve. I listen to her dream of owning a house with portals to all the people she loves, and an attic with a staircase to the stars. Instead of trying to freeze time, I step through that portal and walk with her in the glittering galaxy of her mind and forget, for a time, the darker side of life.



Photograph by Jordan Rader, *Midnight Research*

## Jayson Iwen

### *Windshield*

By the end of the shift, it was pitch black outside. The glow of the restaurant lights seemed to struggle against the darkness beyond the windows. It was down to the last two of the night crew, herself and Josh. After they locked the doors, she told Josh he was free to leave. She'd close.

While putting on his jacket, he asked if she was interested in grabbing a drink.

"Are you old enough for that?" she asked.

He grinned. "Close enough."

"Thanks for the invitation, but I'm wiped out. Remember, I covered two shifts today."

"Living the dream, huh?"

"You know it."

"Well, if you ever feel like it, let me know."

He tipped his BK hat to her and left. He was cute and pleasant to work with, but she wasn't ready for that now.

She closed out the cash registers and made sure everything that was supposed to be off was off. Then she took her backpack to the restroom and locked the door. She took a toothbrush and toothpaste from her backpack and brushed her teeth at the sink. Then she took out a washcloth and soap, got the water running warm, and washed her face and underarms. She'd take a real shower at the truck stop tomorrow night, but this was good enough for now.

When she was done in the restroom, she went back to the kitchen. She tapped a pill out of her medication bottle and looked at it lying in her palm. It was so small yet so expensive without insurance, but it made all the difference. Without it, she didn't know if the

things she saw were really there. With it, she still saw them, but she knew they'd ignore her, if she only acknowledged them and moved on. She knew they were only "real" if she let them be real. She would never want to relive those years before her father was able to find a doctor who actually helped.

"Thank you, Dad," she whispered and popped the pill in her mouth and washed it down with a swig of water from the tap. Then she put on her jacket, shut the lights off, locked the employee entrance behind her, and went to her car.

The old blue Chevy Caprice sedan was the only thing left of her father, after the heart attack took him and the probate court took everything else. Thank God for the car.

No one else was in the parking lot, so she opened the trunk and placed her backpack in it, beside boxes of neatly folded clothes. She removed a clean pair of socks and underwear and a shirt and pants from their respective boxes and closed the trunk.

She got in the driver's seat, put the clean outfit on the passenger seat, and started the engine. The grumble of the engine was familiar, as old as her earliest memories, even before her mother left them. This grumble, like someone clearing their throat, had been with her literally as long as she could remember. Once it was more of a purr, but it aged like everything else.

She pulled out of the parking lot onto Eden and headed toward her favorite night spot, about two miles away, between a residential neighborhood and a warehouse district. There was an abandoned house there with an overgrown yard and a partially concealed driveway that she backed into, killed the lights, and turned off the car. There was no streetlight near, and the block across the street was an empty field, so no one could see her.

She took off her jacket and shirt and shivered as she reached behind her to put the shirt in a canvas sack on the floor in the back

seat, next to a bag of snacks and a jug of water. Then she put on the clean shirt from the passenger seat. Next the socks, then pants and underwear. Like that she redressed, so she was never completely naked. She imagined she was a magician doing some kind of contortion act in a box, until, voilà, she was fully dressed in a new outfit.

Even with her jacket on, it was chilly in the car, so she reached behind her again and grabbed a blanket from the back seat. A pillow too, a pillow as old as the car. Her pillow. Then she reclined her seat, put the pillow behind her head, spread the blanket over herself, and looked up through the windshield at the night sky. Despite the dim, perpetual glow of the city, the stars were clear and bright. The luminous haze of the Milky Way was even visible, spread across the sky. A shiver of awe passed through her body, and she felt something like optimism.

"Don't worry about me, Mom," she whispered, "wherever you are. Don't worry about me, Dad. I'm doing alright. I'm working hard, and I'm saving up. I'll have my own place soon. A few more weeks. I love you both. Thanks again for the car, Dad. I miss you. I wish you were still here with me. But I'm okay. I'm doing okay on my own."

The wind picked up and shook the trees around the car, and she looked back up at the stars and was filled with exhilaration. The whole universe, all of creation, was right there, just on the other side of the glass.

## Victoria Smith

### *Detour*

In 1969, Cecily's choices evaporated when she opened her legs on a dare and a desire to shed her virginity. She had tired of being labeled square or frigid. She was told: It's the age of free love. After two months, she suspected. At three months, she failed a pregnancy test at the college clinic. Failed. Failed at choosing the right boy to have sex with for the first time. Failed to finish college. At four months, her dying father learned she was pregnant. She stood in his hospital room and watched a green line zigzag across the monitor as it recorded his waning life while she married Stanley Karl, a man she didn't love. A good man, a kind man, a man willing to be a father to their baby, but still a man she didn't love. "You'll learn to love him," her father said the day before her marriage, but not until her mother left the hospital room to have a cigarette in the lounge.

What if Cecily had gone to secretarial school instead of college? What if she hadn't believed she couldn't get pregnant the first time? What if the baby's father had been a jerk with a family that labeled her a whore and shut the door in her face? What if she'd gotten pregnant after *Roe v. Wade*? Any one of those could've been a detour in the road and saved her from a husband who loved her, but whose love she couldn't return. Saved her from several affairs with other men, convinced that she had loved each one and that each one had loved her. But each tryst had only been a rest stop alongside a highway of couples who actually traveled through life as one.

Then forty years later, her husband sat on the couch, elbows on his thighs, hands dangling between his legs, head bowed. His voice cracked, "I want a divorce."

She couldn't believe it. He'd been devoted, a family man, a Catholic. They had children and grandchildren and a champagne-

colored goldendoodle named Fizzy. They belonged to the Grand Lodge of the Elks, served on the church board, and volunteered at the homeless shelter. They belonged to the bicycle club and swam at the YMCA on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. For God's sake, they were learning to ballroom dance.

She had stayed with him out of guilt because he had been good to her, because he had loved her, because of the children, because of the dog. Cecily's female friends envied her and wished their husbands cared about their happiness like Stanley cared about hers. Some of them would delight in the demise of her marriage. They would dissect it like a biology-class specimen soaked in formaldehyde, poking its un-beating heart, cutting its stomach open to view the contents, and probing its brain for abnormalities. It's what they did last year when Dora's husband left for a younger woman and the year before when Madeline's husband left for a man.

She asked why and he spoke to the floor. "There's someone else."

"A woman or a man? How old?" Her voice scratched like a turntable's needle shoved across a vinyl record.

**Brianne Scrudders***Many Men*

The morning was quiet and quaint, much like her, much like her clothes, much like her voice. There was no need for her to use her voice today, though. There was no need for her to dress up and impress anyone. There was no need for much.

She sat on the front porch, with its withering white paint, and stared out at the field covered in morning dew and decades of memories. Sitting there, she had a memory, many of them in fact. The memories spoke, reminding her that she had loved many men in her lifetime. Yes, many men she had loved, indeed.

The man whose face was covered in motor oil and dirt when they first met. He reached out his motor oil-covered hand to shake hers, and she shook it. Her hand was now covered in the oil he passed on to her.

There was a courageous man she loved once. He went off to war and never truly came back.

And then there was the man who lied. She wondered if he had ever learned not to lie. She hoped he did. He said he did. But maybe that was a lie too... that is the conundrum of lying, after all.

She loved a father. He was a man who had a baby boy. That man loved that baby boy dearly. She often felt that he loved his boy more than her.

She loved a church-going man. He had never missed a Sunday. A verse from Proverbs was inscribed on the gray matter of his brain. One day, the glue from his Bible's spine dried up, releasing pages. By that time, he had stopped going to church, but she did not fault him for that.

She loved a man who tried to love her back, but he was simply no good at it.

She loved a man with a thick grey beard. It suited that man quite well. He was so very attractive to her because time mixed well with his soul. He learned from his past, and what a privilege it is to have a past to learn from.

She walked herself to the edge of the fields, just over the small hill. In her left hand, she carried a small mason jar filled with motor oil. A headstone, covered in moss and dirt, stuck out from the dead grass. The headstone's hollow words read: Father. Husband. Veteran. A Bible verse from Proverbs, eloquently inscribed in the stone.

She poured the mason jar of motor oil over the headstone, smearing it around with her hand. Now, the headstone, covered in dirt and motor oil, was left just how she had found him. Leaving every version of him right there. She had loved many men in her lifetime. Yes, many men she had loved, indeed.

## Ursula Charles

### *Door Cracked Open*

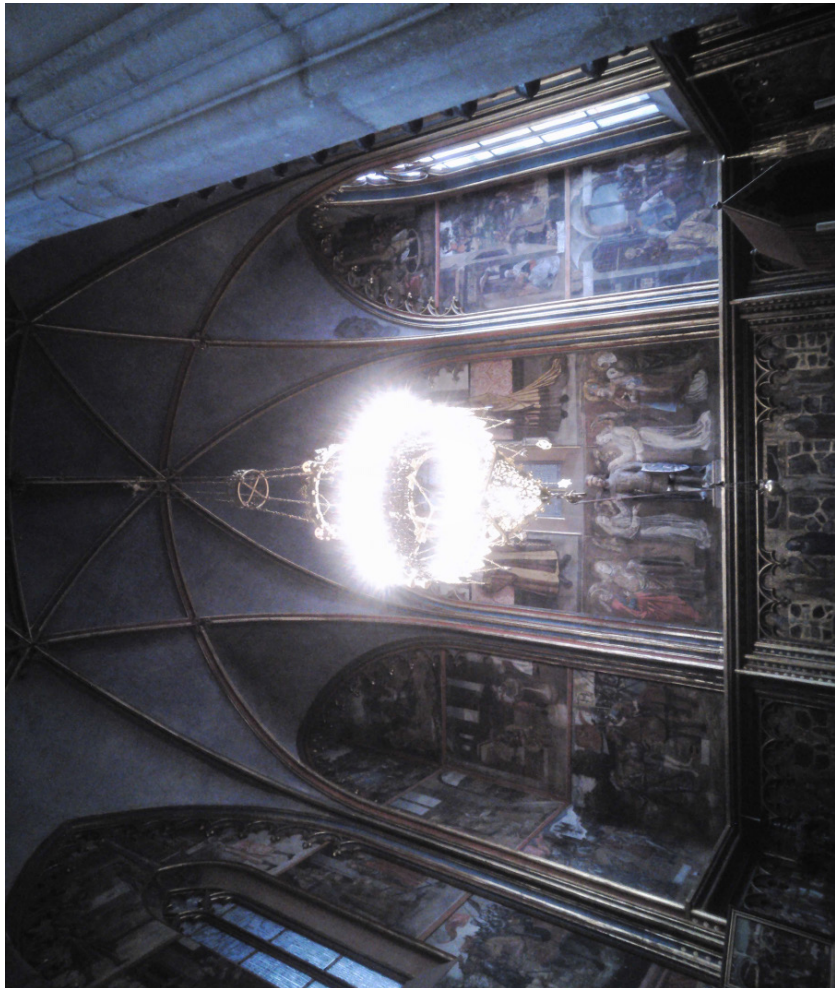
Cigarette butts were scattered around the room in various stages of dust collection. The next living specimen was held between Cass's thin fingers as she smoked cross-legged on her bed, soon to be preserved on the nearest surface come time of death. There was the same hodgepodge of spiritual items: a bundle of white sage, some half-melted candles, and scattered oracle cards, all snuggled between empty cans. It was like entering a run-down metaphysical shop that held White Claw and Marlboro as powerful deities. In the one religion class Anna had taken, they never covered anything like this, probably due to it being sacrilegious, or at least in no way organized. Through her shallow breaths, Anna realized that even the smell was the same. It was the same smell that encompassed the whole house. A kind of moldiness that, for a second, before her conscious brain could associate it with mold, associated it as simply just familiar, and comforting. In Cass's room, it was paired with an intense cigarette smoke, so that comfort was nearly absent. Just a few breaths, and it was suffocating.

Anna stood in the doorway, stiff and awkward, feeling more like an anthropologist than a sister; it felt easier for her that way. It made more sense that way, less complicated.

"Do you still talk to Bunny?" Anna asked, gesturing to a dimly lit photo of two teenagers, both glaring at the camera.

"Oh fucking God no. She turned out to be a total bitch. You know how hard it is for me to be friends with girls, like it's always something, like they're just always worried about stuff I'm not worried about or they—"

"Yeah. Right," Anna interrupted, halting a rant she had heard before. Anna noticed the slurring of Cass's speech. It used to take her



Photograph by Elise Lawton, Chandelier

a while to realize when Cass was drunk, but back from college, she was wiser; now she would just assume, drunk until proven sober. She took a sharp inhale of mold and smoke and scanned the wall for more familiar faces. "What about Sylvan and Emmanuel?"

Two young men stood on either side of Cass, all flipping off the camera and exuding teenage angst. The photo was taken in their basement. Anna wondered what she was doing at the time of that photo. She had probably been studying at the library, where she spent most of high school. Even back then, it was as if she were barely a part of the story.

Cass let out an honest laugh, looking almost at the picture, but somehow past it, eyes and mind going to another place entirely.

"Nope. They turned out to be bitches too!"

Anna scanned the rest of the photos. Sylvan in the backseat of a car, holding a bottle and smiling maniacally. A Polaroid selfie of Bunny and Cass, with Bunny pursing her lips and Cass turned towards her, looking nearly in love. All the same photos were up. It was a gallery of people no longer spoken to. Most of them curled at the edges, jutting away from the paint as if even they wanted to come down. Anna's mouth curled down at the edges too. Each photo was a memory, brought into the present and lived again in every captured offhand glance.

The smoke from Cass's cigarette paused in the air, suspended. Time was suspended. Nothing had changed. Anna felt nauseous. She thought about opening a window. She thought about grabbing Cass's shoulders and shaking. Even just a "Clean your fucking room!" It didn't have to get deeper than that. But she pushed that down as she stood in the doorway, beginning a slow-motion retreat into the hall. That wouldn't be very anthropologist, that would be sister. She concluded she would keep pushing it down, get through the next couple months and by then she would get a job in her degree and could go back to living alone. Clean, simple, alone. It's what she preferred.

"Ok, well, I'm going to sleep. Do you want me to close the door?" Anna asked, already having gripped the handle, and began closing.

"No, that's okay, leave it open."

Her feet, with shoes still on from when she had arrived, rarely reached the floor. Garbage sprawled out from the walls, not even anything characterizable or meaningful, just garbage. Maybe in the daylight there was more to it, but under the flickering fluorescent, Anna was no longer studying, no longer trying to come to a thesis. Now she was trying to go to bed. And so it was garbage; detestable, burdensome garbage. She tiptoed by Mom, asleep on the couch. The TV cast a glaring halo behind an assembly of cans, another white-claw worshipper. She didn't know why Mom slept on the couch. Why that started happening, why people do that. She paused, watching, before reaching for the remote. In her movement, she knocked a can to the floor, and it wrung out a pale ding. Mom jostled and let out a confused sort of whimper. Anna felt suddenly overcome with a feeling of pity. A wave of shame quickly followed.

At this point, she had grown very tired. Her head was near silent now as she looked down at Mom. With her mouth slightly ajar, her previous look of concern faded back into a peaceful expression. Anna wasn't even thinking, not about all the cans, or why Cass didn't take down the photos, or clean her room, or clean the house, or how long it had been since Mom slept in her own room. She just felt this sort of tenderness in her heart, something she couldn't, and didn't, care to define. She turned off the TV and put the remote down. When she lay in her bed that night, before she fell asleep, she blinked slowly at the empty walls. And one wall glowed with a sliver of light coming in from the door she had left just a crack open.

**Lynn Watson***The Homeboy*

Cain insisted he be the one to secure his end of the rope to the rusted truck axle. He grinned his toothy grin. "You've got to go down, Jacey, if you want to be our homeboy. Good enough to be our class president. You'll use our lucky rope. We've used it and we're still here, right guys?"

"Yah!" Six red, brown, and blond-haired boys nodded like bobbleheads.

"Hope you can tie a rope as good as me," Cain smirked. "See these, Jacey? These are markers. The fluorescent tape will show up with your flashlight. You only have to go down fifty feet, so count off five."

Jacey figured fifty feet was as tall as the courthouse clock tower. He adjusted the end of the braided rope to tie a knot confidently under his arms. He lay on the ground, wiggled backwards in the dust, and flattened halfway under the cement cover that capped the old copper mine shaft. With his cheek and black hair on the dry grass, Jacey looked sideways at Cain, and at the half circle of sweaty boys. They had all grown up all together in the old copper mining town, like their parents, grandparents, and a few more generations back. Jacey's tribal relatives had dug for copper in the area for centuries to trade.

Cain squatted to peer at Jacey's face. "What are you waiting for? Are you stuck or just scared? Peed your pants yet?"

Jacey inched deeper into the opening. His black eyes looked up at Cain. Jacey tossed off a laugh. "Give me a second to work this out." He pushed himself backward a little more by sucking in his stomach that was plump from fry bread. He searched with his feet

and found a ladder rung with the toes of his high-tops. He scanned the old mine site and checked on Sonja, who lounged with her girlfriends by the derelict head frame.

Sonja was the one who had organized the write-in campaign to make him class president, instead of the always-elected Cain. It was supposed to be a joke to get back at Cain for demanding too much from her, too soon. The joke was on both of them when Jacey won. That's when life had changed between Cain and Jacey. That's why Cain made sure Sonja and her popular friends were there today, to watch. Sonja arched her back and lengthened her figure like a sleek cat. She lifted her long-streaked hair with both hands and knotted it into a messy ponytail. Sonja wasn't like any girl Jacey had ever known before.

Sonja turned in his direction. "Are you going to do it or not?" she teased.

Jacey scooted back a few more inches to quell the nudge in his groin at her attention. After the election, Jacey had asked his big brother if he thought Sonja might be the girlfriend who came with the office of president.

His brother had cautioned, "Better take it slow. Sonja will let you know if she's interested. Then keep listening."

Jacey's brain had agreed, but his lower body parts sure hadn't.

Cain snarled, "Stalling around for time isn't going to help. You don't want to be left alone in the dark."

Retreating further down in the mine hole, Jacey held a ladder rung, and checked the back pockets of his jeans. The Mini Maglite was there. He double-checked the other pocket to be sure about his cell phone.

A sly smile from Cain. "Pull on the rope when you want to come up. We're all here for you." His blue eyes lied.

Jacey looked around at the expectant faces. Maybe he was being conned into doing something no one else had dared. He tugged on the line to make sure the knot Cain had tied was solid.

Cain walked over to stand on the square of concrete Jacey was wedged under. "The mine shafts around here were capped after some pets, and even a kid, fell in and died. Me and the guys dug this one out for initiations."

"How deep is this shaft?" If Cain talked, he wouldn't notice Jacey not moving.

Cain grimaced. "500 feet down, and 500 feet up, to work for three dollars a day. Men did it 'till age fifty. So, you can do this, Jacey." Cain snapped his fingers. "One more thing. Groundwater flooded the bottom of this shaft when they stopped pumping it out. Don't slip and fall in."

Sonja hollered encouragement. "I've seen you, Jacey. You're a good swimmer."

Cain countered gleefully. "Jacey will go round and round like a rat caught in a water bucket until he drowns." He kicked the cement cap, and a snake shot out from under its cool hiding place. Cain jumped back. "Holy crap!"

The brown and yellow snake stopped and coiled. Jacey tried to inch further into the shelter of the mine shaft. The snake flicked its black, forked tongue and hissed at Jacey's face. Afraid to blink, Jacey's eyes burned. Puke rose in his throat. The snake raised itself like a hooded cobra. The head struck as swiftly as lightning. Jacey's eyes automatically snapped shut, tensed for the bite. Instead, Jacey smelled a funky, musky smell. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. When he opened his eyes, the snake lay upside down, white belly exposed. It looked dead.

"Oh, for cripes sake!" Sonja grabbed a forked stick and hustled over to Jacey. She used the stick to swiftly pin the snake to the ground. Using two fingers, she grasped the snake behind its head and

lifted it straight up. With nothing to wrap its weight around, the snake hung like a long sock. "Ewww!" Sonja exclaimed. Jacey saw that the snake was almost as long as Sonja. She threw the snake toward the creek, into a thicket.

As he stepped up to Sonja, Cain blustered, "Yeah, yeah, a Hognose. Look, I'm sick of this taking so long. Jacey? You go down, or we're dragging you out. Wait until the rest of the school hears what a sissy-wimp they've elected as their president!"

Jacey hesitated a moment longer, glanced at Sonja, and said, "I'm going."

Sonja twiddled her fingers. "Have fun . . ."

Had she said "Sweetie"? Jacey squinted up at the blue sky and dropped completely below the lip of the opening. Sunlight became a spark that snuck under the heavy lid as the autumn heat above ground disappeared. Dank, moldy air welled up from below. The silence, except for his breathing, was complete.

The safety knot around his body was good when Jacey held the rope with one hand and took out his flashlight. Its strong, narrow beam revealed a wooden ladder scabbed to cribbage timbers with rusted bolts. The rungs were scooped thin from years of hobnailed miners' boots making their daily journey into hell and back. Jacey aimed his flashlight down. Dust twinkled into a darkness that swallowed all light. He stuck the Mini Maglite in his back pocket, so the beam shone up, above his head. He leveraged a rock from between the shaft wood and dropped it. He didn't hear it splash.

The ladder sides caught at his hands as Jacey descended rapidly. A gentle bounce tested each rung. Some rungs were sturdy, some were missing, some had a spongy spring. He looked up, and his flashlight showed the top of the shaft as a smudge above the glow of two markers. Relieved to be almost halfway down, Jacey became aware of how cold from below clutched at him. The cribbing walls gleamed with moisture. He went down many more steps, looked up,

and didn't know if he was at the third or fourth ten-foot measure. Cain could tell him. Jacey pulled out his cell phone, hands clumsy with cold. His cell phone showed no bars. That was worse than the snake. The cell phone really was dead.

Jacey's ankles ached, his calf and thigh muscles cramped. He clutched the ladder rails and didn't feel wood splinters needle into his hands. When he leaned out to stretch, he banged his elbow on the shaft's side.

He jerked back, and like a fading meteor, his Mini Maglite somersaulted away. Jacey suffocated in darkness. His tears of fear and anger were fueled by his own stupidity to let Cain push him around. Maybe he was a wimp, but his big brother could take down that bully Cain, and his gang, in a few minutes.

The restricted space, the constant pull of gravity, and the invisible gullet of stagnant groundwater were three terrors that fought to take Jacey to the bottom. His thirteen-year-old adrenaline surged, tightening his blood vessels, and his heart raced. Sweat popped out all over his body. His teeth chattered, and his jaw ached. Jacey's hands were so cold, and no matter how hard he squeezed, he couldn't hold the ladder. In his dizziness, he violently jammed his arms between the ladder rungs, but the rotted wood broke away. The knot slammed up under his arms, the rope stretched, and Jacey knew he slowly spun over the maw of the mine pit.

Jacey peed his pants.

The warmth animated him to move. With arms tight to his body, Jacey swung his feet. The arc, once established, thumped him back and forth hard. He bumped, swung, bumped, swung, and then the rope caught on cribbing timber and stopped. He hung there, panting, completely disoriented.

The voice Jacey heard was his Anishinaabe mother's voice at bedtime. He heard his mother whisper, "The body can be broken. The soul can be lost. The spirit is always present. Remember the wisdom

of *Aakodone'ewin. Aakodone'ewin.*" Jacey knew this teaching of The Seven Grandfathers was for bravery, a bold heart. Strength like the Spirit Bear. It would rescue him from the obscurity of this copper mine. The ugliness blasted into the earth by the greed of white men.

In the utter blackness, Jacey's arms were suddenly bear-strong when he wrapped the rope around them until it cut. He swung sideways and clawed his numb feet onto a ladder rung. He inched his way up with his elbows and knees. Then, the rope pulled and jolted him off balance. "Hey!"

A voice called down, far above his head. It was Sonja, "Jacey? Are you okay? We're pulling you up right now."

Jacey turned around a few times to loop the rope around his chest, then hung on. When he reached the top, the sunset was a glimmer. The air was a sweet, warm caress after the deadly clamminess of the mine. He clung to the ladder, under the roof of cement, where no one could see his wet jeans.

Cain's voice sounded scared. "Hey, Jacey, we've got to go. Come out, and we'll call it good. You're the president, even if you didn't make it to the fifty-foot mark. And Jacey? Don't tell anyone we were here today. We'll get in trouble with Officer Johnson, and my dad will whip me again."

Before she left, Sonja bent close. "You're better than Cain or any of them, Jacey. They're all chicken-hearts. You made it to forty feet. No one ever went down past ten. I'll see you at school. Wait 'till the kids hear about this!"

When everyone had gone, Jacey crawled out, lay on the grass, and rested while his jeans dried. As he looked up at the stars, more wisdom from The Seven Grandfathers arrived. *Zaagi'idiwin* the Eagle Spirit, messenger of love, counseled Jacey to release all anger. Instead, Jacey could be a real class leader and offer peace to heal relationships with Cain, his followers, and the school.

## Gretta Sokup

### *Through My Father's Lens*

My father handed me his glasses.

I furrowed my brows in confusion, but the look my father gave me was an answer enough, and reluctantly, I put his glasses on.

My eyes didn't hurt, not at first, as I looked through the lens. Something light, rainbow and reflective, trembled before my eyes. It was as though his lens were made of crystal.

"Look," my father said. "Look."

So I did.

Through his lens, I saw the crystalline of his life. Every refraction of light emitted his colorful memories, some bright, others nearing a shift to darkness.

In primary colors—solid reds, blues, and yellows—I saw speckles of his childhood. A diamond of yellow light radiated on memories of his loving mother, emphasizing her quiet, affectionate nature. His father glimmered in a bold blue, highlighting his devoted spirit. Encircling his family, a vivid red twinkled, composed of love.

Then, in a flash of white, a memory of his wedding day appeared. Delicate shades of pearly white outlined my father and my beautiful mother. Smiles shone, cameras clicked. The brightened colors surrounded him with innocent hope.

I blinked to find splashes of baby blues and pinks shadowing my brothers and me. His early memories of us dotted with crazy, fantastical colors. My brothers ran around, leaving tendrils of neon yellow and green. An image of myself passed before my eyes, encircled in a bundle of soft periwinkle and lavender.

In a flicker, the colors shifted to deeper, complex colors. Blotches of grey hung over him, like a cloud. Faded blues rained down

upon him, amplifying his tired eyes and overwhelming stress. Years passed, spent in the heaviness of muted colors, expelling any shift of light.

Through his lens, I saw his hidden despair.

I reached to remove his glasses, the images almost too much to bear.

He stopped me, and simply persuaded, "Look."

The crystalline lens shifted to the present moment, and I found my father outlined in loving shades of delicate pinks and reds. His family radiated the colors of hope and joy—purples and delicate greens. Every moment he spent in the greyness of hopelessness, he refused to lose sight of the light of joy that surrounded his family.

Slowly, I removed his glasses, tears replacing the lens. I immediately wrapped my arms around him, noticing his eyes, eyes that had seen a fair share of the colors life had to offer.

"At times, I believed I'd never again see the joyous colors I had once experienced, but that changed when you and your brothers reintroduced the rainbow of colors life has to offer." My father said, pausing for a moment. "I am so thankful for what I have experienced, and even more for what is to come."

Through my father's lens, I was transformed.

Amidst an experience of shifting colors and beaming memories, I had witnessed a journey of life. From then on, I knew I'd carry his crystalline lens within my heart as a reminder that life was filled with color, and it was up to me to not lose sight of them.

## Bailey BeBeau

### *Kaleidoscope*

It's so still beyond the door.

The black void yawns before him like a great maw, bidding him to traverse farther in; to disappear into its dark embrace. Silence sends a shiver down his spine where the cheerful voices of his mother and father normally occupy.

But not tonight.

No, tonight there's only the hush of the softest breeze, the huff that snuffs out the last candle. Nervously, his dirt-encrusted hands clench the little object; its chipped exterior sapping all warmth from his fingers.

He blinks desperately, wrinkling his stinging nose at the acrid scent of the stone-cold hearth and mildewed, mudbrick walls. Then he catches it, the glint of the metal coiling along the man's frame. Like a jointed snake, it effortlessly slithers along his arms, down his spine, before disappearing beneath his beltline.

Yes, there, back against the wall; face burrowed in his knees.

When the man stiffens, the boy's hair raises, an image of a cornered animal rushing into his mind, dipped in adrenaline.

In fear.

Fear of someone he's never been frightened of before.

"Father," he says, the word sucked from his mouth by the endless expanse, leaving it unsure and hollow, dangling vulnerably in open space. His father inhales deeply and, in one quick motion, wipes his face—dropping a knee to peer up at the boy with foggy, washed-out green eyes.

"Son. You should be asleep." His voice is distant, empty where that rich assertiveness once resided, the usual neat, graying red hair sticking out at odd angles over his early-wrinkling face.

Maybe mother was right.

Maybe he should have just gone to bed.

The boy fidgets, his mind longing to leave, but his feet remain rooted, locked in place by his father's calculated gaze. Time ticks slowly, laboriously, stuck in muck until the stare softens, and his father pats the straw-covered ground beside him. The boy obeys, settling himself at his father's elbow, back straight and stark rigid.

Everything is wrong.

Wrong.

Those orb-like alien eyes, sickly ice-silver skeleton, even the very warmth radiating from his father's pale skin.

Neither speaks.

The minutes flit away as the distant wind licks longingly through the upper floor nearest the surface, nothing but grassland to stop its flight for thousands of desolate miles. And still, beyond that, lie only the charred lands—or so the stories go.

Up there, that was supposed to be the lonely place.

Not here.

Leaning his head back against the wall with a thud, his father speaks, his mouth the sole thing that moves—words from a forgotten fading land.

He's become a statue with a voice.

"A long time ago I was very different, son. I was a soldier."

A soldier.

This the boy knew, for no one else in the village had steel fixed to their body. A vague, blurry photo of masked men hums in his memory; wearing uniform, holding strange sticks, one eye glowing on their featureless faces like the reflection of rats' eyes. People lying about along the edges, blanketed in crimson.

"Soldiers kept the peace," his father continues, fidgeting with his fingers, running them over each other as if slick with soap.

"Similar to our own watchmen who keep the beasts away. At least,

that's what I told myself."

The boy struggles to place his father—the most reliable, steadfast, and humble man of the village—alongside those men in the picture.

Alongside those terrible stories.

But, father, you've never done anything bad, he wants to say but, deep down, he wonders. An ebony shadow gradually grips his father's sight, eyebrows lowering in a glare lacking any heat.

"Son, you've known me your few short years—seen me live a redeemed life. But, as a young man, I did unspeakable horrors with these hands of mine—horrors found only in nightmares and the darkest pits of fiction. Sure, I can wash my hands of atrocities, but the stains never leave my mind."

So, that's why then.

Why the fire has gone out.

Why the light has ceased to exist here. Perhaps some memories only survive in the dark.

Slowly, the boy nods, scenes both strange and terrible flickering behind his retinas. Skulking shapes that ensnare him, creatures looming beyond the village walls, phantoms howling to get in once the red sun dips beneath the horizon.

That knot in his stomach aches bitterly.

But...

The boy sucks in a breath and presents it before him; the object he's been holding. His father merely raises an eyebrow, plucking it gingerly—pinched between thumb and forefinger.

"Found it while digging below the ash layers today," the boy says, watching patiently as his father peers through the cylindrical tube. He squints with that focused, bloodshot eye, trying to make sense of it until he finally points it toward the last ray of light seeping through the doorway.

A near-insignificant amount, hardly anything compared to the weight of the deep pressing down on their shoulders. And yet, it laces the thatch grass door, tickling its edges like delicate feathers.

Glittering.

The boy doesn't need to see it; can simply imagine what his father observes through that glass lens. Countless colors and shapes colliding—splintering, fracturing with an illumination so intense it sends the mind spiraling with splendid worlds of wonder.

There's a pause. A long, quiet pause.

Then, a small smile plays on his father's lips, and he looks at the boy clearly for the first time.

Nothing needs to be said.

Only the wind whispers wordlessly as the boy snuggles his small self against the older, scarred, metal-fringed frame of his father.

## Casey McGill

### *Baseball Years*

I'm told my dad dropped the ball in my arms while I was still mewling and wet from the womb. A dirty thing plucked from the bucket in the garage, signed by a friend of a friend who played for the Twins years ago. It sat in my room, faintly smelling of the delivery room, but I hadn't heard the story until my granny made the trip to watch me on the field for the first time. I hated every day in the out-fields, digging rocks with my toe until a pop fly prompts my hollering father to turn red in the face. Later he'd explain the virtues of being engaged, paying attention, respecting the team. I never wanted to be on the team. I never wanted the ball. The soil it came with, the bucket it came from.

I took it with me, as you do the paraphernalia you're told has sentiment, and carried it. A burden I couldn't shed until my first wife shed it for me. Just some box into some bin into some dump.

I didn't notice until after the funerals. Clearing the house out I noticed the truck felt lighter and only realised it wasn't an emotional relief when I couldn't find the box of baseball cards my dad told me to never sell. I could've used the money to give them better boxes.

Wife three brought her dogs into the house, cuddling things with sweet eyes that never let me just sit down or stretch my back out on the floor. So I drive around with the radio off and pray no one decides to do the same. Occasionally God hears me, gives me an empty street.

Driving down a busy avenue, my eyes fluttering from some sleepless nights in October, I pull into a strip mall to rest and maybe have some quiet. I park next to a car with windows glazed in fog and lean my seat back as far as it'll go. Dick's Sporting Goods shines in my

mirror. I haven't been to a Dick's since I was a kid begging to get the blue bat instead of the wood one.

I can't even sleep in my bed, and I doubt the parking lot will prove to be more comfortable, so I shake my head to make my hair look nice and get out of the car. The windows of the car next to me are rolled down and a girl, a teenager, says, "Thanks asshole," while a boy rubs the condensation off the windshield. I shrug.

Dick's doesn't smell like sports, unless sports smell like plastic and fluorescent lights, but the store tries its hardest to look like sports. An indoor track, interrupted by shelves and the mulling shoppers, tries to circumnavigate the square store, but probably disappears into an office or bathroom here and there. I follow it having nowhere else to go and trail my hand through the carousels of sports bras and sweaters until a wall of baseball bats takes me off the track. The colours are nothing like I remember. The solid blues and blacks and greens now blended into cotton candy swirls, confetti carbon fibre dipped rosaries, and burning sunsets with logos like *Blaze Hype* and *Combat Big*.

Triple digit price tags might've saved me from playing when I was a kid, but then the colours might pull me right back into it. To my eye someone made it legal to fool the pitcher into throwing every ball right at the bat or maybe the sport needs the extra colour to stay on televisions longer. I pick up a pink one and spin it in my hand. It clatters to the ground when I can't catch it and an employee in a golf shirt shoots from the aisle with the tee ball gear.

"Can I help you find anything, sir?"

Does he really want to help me or is he worried I would drop another bat? "No, I'm alright. Just buying a bat."

"That's a great bat. One of the newer models with the reinforced Duraplex barrels. That grip is sticky. Some people like that, but I think I like the pine tar better, so I just peel stuff like that off."

Has my dad been reborn as a Dick's salesperson? "Oh, cool. I just want something I can put by the door."

"Oh yes, good choice for that! Remember to put a sock on the end." He stares at me with a smile like I know why I need a sock for a baseball bat. I decide to stare back until it's clear he's waiting for me to say something.

"Oh, you know what, where can I find baseballs? Or just single baseballs. Like a pack of one." I know where I can find them.

"Of course! Those are right behind you there. The cheaper ones will be closest to the floor."

"Thanks," I say, walking away. He gives me some kind of assurance of service and a name, but I don't listen. I've decided that Dick's can give me a bat and a ball and nothing else.

The ones closest to the floor are only the second cheapest while the cheapest ones are on the top shelf where only the most optimistic or penitent would find them. I pick an expensive one with the MLB logo on it. Thankfully there are no fancy colours or brand names to confuse me, but there are a few normal balls in plastic cubes that claim to be official league balls. I scoff and follow the track to the cash register where I spend too much. The sun set sometime between me walking in and walking out and the parking lot lights hum a nasty tune into the ground. It hurts my teeth like I'm holding a pee.

My car is alone where I left it, but in the dirt on the rear window someone, probably those teens, scrawled "dumb fuck" with a swastika. It wasn't even drawn right. The bottom is an "L" and the top spoke faces the same way as the bottom making the entire affair look like someone drew a spaceship for a *Wolfenstein* game. A pastiche of hate glinting through the lens of some teens who didn't pay enough attention in history class. Their fingerprints should be on it and maybe there's a camera with a view of their plates. Insurance will find out.

I drop the bag with the ball and pull back into a form my muscles forgot years ago. A twist in my leg, elbow up, and push all the tension through my core ripping across my chest and shifting weight from one foot to the next following through into the back glass of my car. The dumb fuck swastika cracks into a fine web but doesn't break. My back feels torn and my knees and elbows pop like a crab leg at the sea food boil. I don't fall, but I sit down on the bag, my ass shoving the ball out between my legs. I pick it up and stare at the fine stitching weaving over and around until I'm dizzy from the pain and motion.

I get up with a grunt, protest and then revolt against the creak in my joints, the yelps in my muscles, and I rip the ball through the air towards the street. It barely makes it past my parking spot, but at least I got to throw it away this time.

## Contributors' Notes



Linocut Print by Ash King, *Emotion Underwater*

**Rochelle M. Anderson** lives in Minnetonka, Minnesota. She loves to canoe in the Boundary Waters, attend Twins games and see plays. In 2007, she had a severe stroke. In 2020, Dr. Hoepner, a speech professor at UW-Eau Claire thought that poetry could help a support group of people with aphasia. Rochelle was in that group and learned new words. It worked! She has been published in *The Nemadji Review* in 2025 and 2026, multiple poetry books, and online poetry journals. She published her first book in 2026: *Stormy Road: Reawakening From Stroke and Aphasia*.

**Bailey BeBeau** is a junior at UW-Superior pursuing a degree in writing with a minor in art. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with friends, crafting, and being in nature. Through her work, Bailey enjoys discussing challenging Christian themes in ways that promote civil discussion. Her preferred genres of choice are: dystopia, sci-fi, and dark fantasy.

**Louise Beyea** is writing a memoir based on her thirty-three years as a veterinarian, primarily in emergency and zoo practice in Duluth. She was a newspaper journalist before becoming a veterinarian, and now provides citizen journalism at <https://louisebeyea.substack.com/>, covering the Town of Superior where she lives. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction, and was a winner in the Lake Superior Writers' nonfiction contests in 2024 and 2025.

**Bud Brand:** Cozy Valley farm boy. Thankful Christian. Son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather. UW-Superior graduate. Dedicated family man. Retired government worker. Member of Superior Athletic Hall of Fame. The Wisconsin Wordsmith. A friend to all.

**Jessica Bresina** is a writer from Wisconsin whose work focuses on poetry and short stories rooted in personal experience. She is deeply drawn to the art of writing and the way words can transform

emotions and life experiences into meaningful expression. Writing has long been a creative outlet for her and a way to explore reflection, storytelling, and honesty. While this is the first time she has shared her work publicly, her passion for writing continues to shape her voice and artistic expression.

**Ursula Charles** writes from Ashland, Wisconsin. Their work has received the Barbara Bretting award for Fiction and Poetry and has been published in *Great Lakes Review*. Their writing is driven by the beautiful and messy stories that are everywhere life is, with themes of family, gender, justice and nature often arising. They see writing as a way to detangle these stories, in an attempt to make sense of the world, before going on to do the work of healing it.

**Jan Chronister** is retired from teaching English at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College where she founded *The Thunderbird Review*. Jan has authored three full-length poetry collections and twelve chapbooks. She also serves as editor/publisher for the work of regional poets under the imprint of Poetry Harbor (Duluth).

Born in Iowa, a teenage city girl fled with her crazy family to a Minnesota farming town and learned to run a dairy farm! During college, **NJ Deever** fell in love with Duluth and her first sight of Lake Superior. After many years of wandering, ministry, teaching and always writing, she returned home to North Shore life in 2012. NJ eventually found a wonderful, supportive local poetry group, who greatly helped in discovering her true self: Back Home with a pen, again!

**Hailie Evans** is a 2025 graduate of UW-Superior and a current J.D. candidate at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. Creative writing is her passion, and Hailie finds inspiration for her work in analyzing people, literary characters, relationships, and the world around her. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with family, listening to a rollercoaster range of music, and working on her in-progress speculative fiction novel. Her work has previously appeared in *The Nemadji Review*.

**Paige Evans** is a freshman at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. Drawing has been her favorite hobby since she could hold a pencil, and she is thrilled to have her second piece published. She specializes in colored pencil and does her best to capture and convey emotion in her art.

**Angela Fulghum** writes multiple genres including poetry, fantasy, sci-fi, and creative nonfiction, often exploring human connection, social justice, natural landscapes, and everyday experiences. In 2009 she traveled to Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the UW-Superior Political Science program. She enjoys gardening, traveling, learning, and being outdoors. She lives in northern Minnesota.

**Sara Ann Fulton** is a first-time poet living in Superior, Wisconsin. Though she has never published and never considered herself a writer, the current political and social climate stirred in her a need for a positive, creative outlet. She turned to poetry as a way to center herself and to celebrate what brings her the most joy—love, family, and the quiet beauty of everyday life along the shores of Lake Superior.

**Jack Gilbert** is a sophomore at UW-Superior studying Theatre and Digital Filmmaking with a Political Science minor. When it comes to writing most of his time is spent writing scripts and screenplays, but sometimes he writes poems as a therapeutic process and he tries to journal daily. Jack is from North Branch, Minnesota.

**Gavin Glen** writes poetry and stories about the parallels of city happenings, the great outdoors, and social commentary. He graduated from the UW-Superior with a BA in Psychology and Writing. He had blogs and poetic works published in the *Odyssey Online*, *The Nemadji Review*, and *Pure Slush Books*. He now resides in Superior, Wisconsin, performs music and stand-up comedy while working as a personal care aide. His debut book of poetry, *Dreams, Letters & Fears*, came out in November 2025.

**Kimberly Hodgman** is a writer, dramaturg, director, and performer from Saint Francis, Minnesota. She is studying English, Theatre, and Creative Writing at the University of Minnesota Duluth. She primarily writes poetry and explores the memoir genre, fiction, and zines. She is an editor for The University of Minnesota Duluth's *The Roaring Muse*. Her work has also been published in *The Thunderbird Review* (published by Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College) and the University of Minnesota Duluth's *The Roaring Muse* and *The Bark*.

**Brian Hunt** is a lute maker for Gamut Music in Duluth, Minnesota, and regularly attends meetings of the Duluth Poetry Chapter and open mic events.

**Jayson Iwen's** *Roze & Blud* won the 2020 Miller Williams Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Poetry Series. His other books, in multiple genres, include *Gnarly Wounds*, *A Momentary Jokebook*, *Six Trips in Two Directions*, and *You Contain Multitudes*. He co-translated Jawdat Fakhreddine's *Lighthouse for the Drowning* and Salim Barakat's *Come, Take a Gentle Stab*, which was a finalist for the 2022 Sarah Maguire International Poetry Translation Award. *Eden Street*, the manuscript from which "Windshield" was excerpted, is scheduled for publication by Cornerstone Press early next year.

**Meridel Kahl** retired in 2013 after 45 years of teaching. She spent the last 27 years of her career at The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. She discovered poetry late in life and is grateful for the daily inspiration she finds in the many moods of Lake Superior and for the friendship and support she receives from fellow poets. Her poems have appeared in *WritersRead*, *The Talking Stick*, *The Peninsula Pulse*, *Amethyst and Agate: Poems of Lake Superior*, *The Thunderbird Review*, *The Avocet*, *Bramble*, *Leaves of Peace*, *Tales of Migration*, and *Bringing Peace*.

**Ash King** is a multimedia artist and art education major living in Northwest Wisconsin. Specializing in colored pencil animal portraits and landscapes for years, printmaking was an unexpected fascination

in the last year. This has resulted in many new relief prints and aspirations of printmaking SURF projects. Ash focuses on nature-based themes and spiritual connections between us and our world.

**Vyacheslav (Slava) Konoval** is an Ukrainian poet from Kyiv. Vyacheslav's poetry focuses on and is devoted to the most pressing social problems of our time, including poverty, ecology, relations between people, and war. His poems have appeared in more than 90 foreign and international literary magazines and have been translated into Spanish, French, Scottish, and Polish. Slava is a member of the Federation of Scottish Writers and was invited to be a judge for several poetry contests.

**Elise Lawton** is a recent graduate from UW-Superior with a degree in Writing and Computer Science. She currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin and works for a small software company. Elise enjoys creating many different forms of art, including written, visual, and musical. She primarily writes fiction, with an emphasis on fantastical settings and unusual perspectives.

**Rachel Linder** is a 40-year-old mother and wife who moved to Duluth, Minnesota from the south 14 years ago. During the day, she is a psychotherapist in private practice, and her love of humans and curiosity about human nature is often a catalyst for her writing. Her poem "The Many Faces of Grief" will be published in the April edition of *The Thunderbird Review*.

**Christel Maass**, who lives in southeastern Wisconsin, frequently writes poems inspired by nature. Previously published in *The Nemadji Review*, her poetry also appears in *Bramble*, *The Solitary Plover*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Third Wednesday*, *Common Ground Review*, *Creative Wisconsin*, the *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, and other publications.

**Jade Marielan** is a member of Superior, Wisconsin's Commission on Communities of Color and is a proud member of the Twin Ports Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Collective (TPAC). Jade is a Superior Public Arts Grant recipient and will host a writer's event, "Frame It" in Superior in May 2026. Jade has been a member of the Duluth Poetry Chapter since 2022 and has begun hanging out with the Duluth Failed Poets Society! Jade teaches piano at Jade Piano Keys LLC. Her fiancé Ian's photos are featured in *The Nemadji Review*! They have one old man dog, Shadow.

**Casey Somnus McGill** is a blind writer from the deserts and mountains of the Southwest. They are currently gazing upon the shores of Lake Superior as it is big enough for them to see.

**Preston Meys** (he/him) is a current student at UW-Superior majoring in Writing and English, and he hopes to become a publisher in the future. His poetry often draws from his own lived experiences, especially as they relate to his queer identity. His poetry has been previously published in *The Nemadji Review*.

**Liz Minette's** poem 'Diner' came about by listening to a sound effects track on an LP of diner noise. It also made her hungry. She has work forthcoming in *Chiron Review* out of St. John, Kansas. She loves taking walks with her dog along the Lakewalk—both of them report love for Lake Superior.

**Elijah Molina** is a photographer and visual artist from Superior, Wisconsin who focuses on capturing moments in the natural world. Much of his work centers on birds, exploring their movement, color, and presence in everyday environments. Through photography, he aims to highlight small details that are often overlooked and encourage viewers to look more closely at nature.

**Wylder Moriarty** is a queer transfemme writer and poet from the Bayfield Peninsula area. Her writing and poetry can be best described as unapologetically political reflections on the trans experience in

21st century America. Wylder is currently doing dual enrollment classes at UW-Superior while in high school, and will be attending UW-Madison in the fall.

**Jenny Ostazeski** is a sophomore from Duluth, Minnesota, majoring in Art Therapy and minoring in Theatre. In her free time, she enjoys acting, embroidery, painting, and spending time with animals. This piece was inspired by a special moment in time, following a play rehearsal spent with friends. The Northern Lights dancing along the campus sky reminding them that they are here on Earth at the right place, and the right time.

**Sarah Packa** is a queer multidisciplinary artist, poet, and writer who believes in creation as a healing medium and revolutionary act. Her methods follow an intuitive process; her work often incorporates upcycled materials and centers themes that grapple with womanhood, identity, and the human longing for connection. She finds inspiration in stillness, nature, and unique perspectives. She currently lives in Northern Minnesota with her three children. Her poetry won third place in the student division of the Hibbing's 2005 Dylan Days creative writing contest and was featured in "Talkin' Blues: The Official Bob Dylan Days Program and Journal."

**Troy Peters** is on a journey, finding himself step by step with the passing of each day. He hopes to create space with his writing where others may see a reflection of their world as well. He is grateful for each opportunity to share his work in local zines and publications here at home in Northern Minnesota.

**Jordan Rader** (they/she), a recent UW-Superior alum, now finds themselves more of an educator rather than a student. They spend their days as an environmental educationalist at a Park District, exploring any and all themes nature-related. She's picked up birding, cross-stitch and crocheting, and disc golf to fill their post-grad free time. Their work has previously been published in *The Nemadji Review*, Volumes 12, 13, and 14.

**Deborah Rasmussen** retired from her nursing career in Florida to Duluth, Minnesota, where she enjoys the welcoming community of poets and the stunning natural setting. Her poetry has appeared in various journals including *The Thunderbird Review*, *Barstow & Grand*, *The Talking Stick*, *Rattle Poets Respond*<sup>®</sup>, and in a variety of anthologies. Her stories for children have appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Cricket* and *Chicken Soup for the Kid's Soul*. Rasmussen's first chapbook of poems was released in July 2025 by Finishing Line Press.

**Sarah Royer-Stoll** (they/she) is an award-winning Queer, disabled, genderqueer and neurodivergent writer who weaves diverse themes into their work including grief, trauma, intersectionality and marginalization, spiritual orientation and practice, queer love, and the quest for radical healing. A nominee for the 2025 Pushcart Prize for their poetry, they are published in various anthologies including *Tales of Travel*, *Tales of Migration*, *Freshwater Feral*, *Peregrine*, *Duluth-Superior Pride*, and more. Their work has been featured by Poetry Safari and Sherburne History Center. A Minnesota native, they have also established roots in Tucson, Arizona and Portland, Oregon. Sarah currently resides in Duluth.

**Brea Ruddy** started writing at the age of fifteen when she wrote a memoir for her twin brother. Among other things, Brea writes dystopian fiction, fantasy, self-help, and short stories. She has nine books and many short stories published under her pseudonym, Brea L.R., and is represented by the Purcell Agency. Brea lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with her husband, two children, and their cat Voldemort.

**Sophia Sagerer**, originally from White Bear Lake, Minnesota, has focused her studies on painting and ceramics. She plans to pursue a future in Art Therapy. Sophia's artwork is a reflection of her day-to-day experiences and conversations with friends. This guides her work on subjects such as homophobia, transphobia, and poverty. She aims to create familiar feelings often depicted in films and memories, placing the viewer in a first-person perspective. These themes are reflected in featured artworks such as "Wisconsin Point," "Good-Looking," and "New Year's."

**Brianne Scrudders** is a U.S Marine Corps Veteran, and she is currently in her senior year at the UW-Superior, pursuing a bachelor's degree in Writing with a minor in English. Brianne draws on her military background in hopes of creating pieces that are thought-provoking, ominous, and emotionally gripping. She enjoys writing in a variety of formats and genres, including screenwriting, creative non-fiction, and short fiction. In her free time, Brianne enjoys taking her Australian Cattle Dog, Patrick Swayze, on long runs and hikes.

**Ian Seefeldt** is a photographer who finds the hobby relaxing and reflective. Ian particularly enjoys capturing nature, preserving a single perfect moment and bringing it inside. While he is drawn to macro photography, birds present a satisfying challenge, positioning yourself correctly and timing the picture for the best results. Ian resides in Superior, Wisconsin.

**Callisto Shanafelt** is an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota Duluth graduating in Spring 2026 with a B.A. in English and a B.A.Sc. in Psychology as well as a Creative Writing Certificate. She enjoys both poetry and fiction writing, and often explores the natural world, human emotions, and the delicate and complex connection between the two in her creative work.

**Annie Showers-Curtis** is a jack-of-all-trades writer, editor, and artist from southern Wisconsin. She is a writer of poetry, essays, and fiction; a photographer; and an artist across various media. Her work has been published in *The Nemadji Review*, *The Rock River Review*, and *Hedera Helix*. She earned her bachelor's degree in writing from UW-Superior in May of 2025, and remains a community volunteer editor with *The Nemadji*. Much of her free time is spent with her family and engaged in creative projects.

**Victoria Lynn Smith** writes short stories and essays. She also writes for *Northern Wilds*, an outdoor magazine serving communities along the North Shore of Minnesota. She is a Hal Prize fiction winner. Her work has appeared in *Brevity Blog*, *8142 Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Persimmon Tree*, *45th Parallel*, *Rathalla Literary*

*Review, Bullshit Lit, and Mason Street Review*, among others. Her first short story collection will be published by Cornerstone Press at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in February 2027. She earned a BA in English from University of Wisconsin-Superior. More at: <https://writingnearthelake.org/> and Instagram: victorialynnsmith\_writing.

**Gretta Sokup** is a UW-Superior student from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, majoring in Writing and minoring in Multimedia Journalism. This is her first time publishing her work. She enjoys writing fictional stories and poetry. In her free time, she enjoys journaling, spending time in nature, and playing with her dogs.

**Amy Jo Swing** (she/her) has lived in Alaska, Indiana, and Texas and made her home in Minnesota thirty years ago. She lives in Duluth with her family not far from Lake Superior, which is a major source of inspiration as are the trees, rocks, animals, insects, and people. Amy Jo has an M.F.A. in poetry from Texas State University, San Marcos and teaches all manner of English classes at Lake Superior College. She has published in journals such as *Plainsongs* and *Freefall* and was the recipient of a Loft Award in Poetry/McKnight Foundation fellowship.

**Virgil Teal** is a freshmen at UW-Superior going into a biology major in hopes to pursue veterinary science. They do art largely as a hobby but hope to build their audience and make some money on the side with it someday. The piece featured is an official work for his art series in the works “Twisted Stars” and features one of the dragon gods in his story line. He is very excited to share it with everyone who sees *The Nemadji Review!*

**Pat Thomas** loves to observe and photograph insects and plants in her yard and near Lake Superior. She teaches classes on gardening for insects and birds and is writing a book to help people create habitat for insects, wherever they live. Pat writes about gardening, but loves those moments when a haiku comes to her.

**Sam Tunan** is a conservation ecologist and published writer. Often citing field experiences, her work is typically flowery with frequent edges. Henry Miller, Sharon Olds, and science fiction tend to be influencing sources. First published at age twelve, Sam tells herself stories that hopefully speak to universal poetic narratives. Working in ecological restoration and wildlife conservation across the country, Sam lives in Duluth, Minnesota, with Australian shepherds and loves drinking genmaicha tea throughout the day.

**Evan Tungate** is a member of the Duluth Failed Poets Society and an editor of their first anthology, *Murder Your Darlings*. When he is not working as an engineer, he writes love poems about people, places, and things. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Periwinkle Pelican, The Hyacinth Review*, and elsewhere.

**Sara Valentiuk** is a nontraditional undergraduate student at UW-Superior studying Writing and English. She spent most of her childhood with her nose in a book or putting pencil to page. Over the course of her academic career, she has been involved with *The Nemadji Review* at various capacities and will be forever grateful for the experience. Her words often manifest in poems and creative nonfiction essays and explore the topics of motherhood, transformation, and healing. You can find her work in previous editions of *The Nemadji Review* and the Wingless Dreamer anthologies *Mother’s Reverie* and *Petals, Pebbles, and Passing Hours*, available on Amazon.

**Lynn Watson:** Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, and Poetry. Inspirations are nature, people, and spirit. Lynn was the Wisconsin Writers Association Jade Ring 2025 winner in Creative Nonfiction. The Lake Superior Writers Contest, *The Nemadji Review, The Roaring Muse*, and *The Thunderbird Review* are literary venues that have published her works.

**Betsy Westlund** is a UW-Superior student from Ashland, Wisconsin, majoring in psychology with a minor in behavioral neuroscience. She was recently accepted into the international honor society of

psychology, Psi Chi. Westlund plans to pursue graduate study as she works toward a career as a mental health therapist. Her interests in mental health are informed by both research and lived experience, and she is passionate about supporting others in their healing and well-being.

**Robert Wildwood** creates stories, poetry, ink and brush work, public art, and performances while raising two children with his partner and working as a nurse in Duluth. Wildwood serves as Secretary in the Duluth Poetry Chapter of the League of Minnesota Poets. Wildwood has been awarded an individual artist grant from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Board and from the Minnesota State Arts Board to publish and distribute books of poetry at public performances and through public art installations in Duluth.

**Leisan Amelia Yusupov** is an Art Education major in her third year at UW-Superior. Her work has previously been featured in UW-Superior's Juried Art Exhibitions, but this is her first time being a part of a publication. Her passions lie in printmaking, poetry, and capturing the love that surrounds her life. She has two cats (Pumpkin and Fibonacci) and loves to spend time outside, which is where she finds a lot of her creative inspiration.