

Millpond Mosaic

2024

Millpond Mosaic 2024

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elcome to our Readers!

In the 2nd edition of HCC's *Millpond Mosaic*, you'll find a collection of essays, short stories, poetry, original artwork, and photography that reflect the talent and creativity of our community of students here at Haywood Community College. While we are, in some ways, a diverse community of learners, when we share our writing and art, we discover common themes and shared inspiration.

A recurring thread that seems to run through this year's writing and artwork is finding hope and courage, sometimes even beauty and inspiration, in unexpected situations. Growth through loss and letting go, pride in one's heritage and homeland, exploring the depths of betrayal and deception, the "catch your breath" moment when encountering a wild creature, all these ideas and more are examined by our student writers and artists.

We are fortunate as a community here at HCC to experience the enchanting beauty of our campus each day, with its woodland scenes and tucked away trails. Upon entering the campus gates, one is greeted by the millpond with its reflective and calm water and the mill itself, a comforting reminder of simpler times.

Like the changing moods of the millpond on

campus, depending on the seasons and ever-changing weather, our student publication, *Millpond Mosaic*, reflects the struggles, insight, and sometimes the beauty we encounter in everyday experiences. Take the time to enjoy and appreciate the ripples, swirls,

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and reflections in the writing and artwork from our talented community of students.

Thank you to the writers and artists whose insights, experiences, and perspectives are collected here. And much appreciation to HCC faculty and staff who've lent their time, talent, and expertise to our 2nd publication!



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MARLEyna ALVAREZ

First Place Original Artwork
"Self Portrait"



Two Kings

You awake to the sounds of distant terror.
You spring out of bed.
You rush to the windows.
Fire.
You need to get to the armory.
You trip as you run to your wardrobe.
You need your under-armor.
An explosion rings through the halls.
You grab your sword from under your bed.
A soldier bursts through the door.
It's time to go.
You sprint to the armory.
Followed by your loyal soldiers.
Your handcrafted armor hangs at the end.
Another explosion and the aftermath.
You suit up.
You scream a commanding rally cry.
Your soldiers are behind you.
They believe.
You get to the gates.
The sound is nearly unbearable.
They open.
It is so...much...worse.

You awake to order.
You take your time getting up.
You walk to the window.
Peace.
You need to get to the dining hall.
You yawn as you walk to your wardrobe.
You need your armored tunic.
The morning bells ring through the halls.
You grab your sword from under your bed.
A soldier walks through the door.
It's time to go.
You walk to the dining hall.
Followed by your soldiers.
Your commanding seat lies at the end.
Another bell signals breakfast.
You eat up.
You call for everyone to eat as well.
Your soldiers are behind you.
They don't.
Behind your gates.
The sound is nearly utopian.
You're dying
It is so...much...worse.

Someone I Love

The smell of overcooked green beans with an undercurrent of urine made me gag each time I walked through the doors. Which wasn't as often as I should have, my conscience said. I signed my name in the book at the entrance, and wrote my mother's next to it.

The lobby was mostly empty, though a few staff members in scrubs hurried through. A cheap carriage clock on the mantel above the fake fireplace told me I was five minutes early. I unwound my scarf and settled into one of the chairs clustered in a conversation area. Bussing myself with my phone, I kept one eye on the door and tried not to notice as our appointment time came and went. I'd been sitting there fifteen minutes when a tall woman breezed through the door, greeting one of the aides as she signed herself in.

She glanced around. When her eyes found me she gave a wide smile.

"Lucy?" she asked, walking toward me, her curly hair dotted with snow.

I stood, "Yes." I shook her hand without returning her smile.

"I'm Margo," she said, sliding out of her coat as we both sat. "I apologize for being late. I was walking out the door, and got a call," she waved a hand. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I just need to get back to work in time for a meeting," I said, which was not untrue, but that meeting wasn't until the afternoon.

"Well, let's get to it, then." She pulled papers and notebooks from her bag, and launched into an explanation of what to expect from hospice, what her role as the social worker would be, and how my mother would be evaluated every two weeks to see if she continued to meet the criteria for hospice care.

"A dementia diagnosis by itself is tricky," Margo explained, crossing her hands in her lap as she looked directly at me. "It's not often the cause of death, per se."

I flinched at the word "death."

"I'm sorry," she reached a hand to my arm. "You've been dealing with this for a long time. But it's still always a bit of a shock when someone you love starts coming closer to the end of life."

Someone I love. That was how daughters were supposed to feel. My mother was supposed to be my best friend. I should have sepia-toned memories of making cookies, shopping for my wedding dress, hanging Christmas ornaments. Not, instead, a lingering sense of disappointment and shame.

"It's okay," I shook my head and sat back so that Margo withdrew her hand. "It has been a long journey for her."

She nodded, and turned back to her paperwork. We went over Mother's diagnosis, and Margo asked questions about what might be meaningful to Mother during this time, suggesting a few ideas—music, a volunteer to read to her. I didn't know, and it was easier just to say yes to them all.

"Actually, before you sign," Margo sat back and looked at me. "Let's go see your mom." She stood and gathered everything back into her bag.

My shoulders slumped as I glanced at my watch, then the door.

"Sure," I said, pushing myself up to follow.

The memory care unit was locked. Margo pressed a doorbell that sounded a jaunty ding-dong on the other side.

A voice came through the intercom asking who we were there to see.

"Hey Joanie, it's Margo, from Duluth Hospice, with Lucy Wright."

The door buzzed.

“Why don’t you go on in to your mom’s room,” Margo tilted her head in the direction of Mother’s wing. “I’ll be right there. I’m just going to check in with the staff.”

My stomach clenched, as it always did on entering this section of the facility. Looking over my shoulder at the door we’d just come through, I decided Margo would notice if I vanished. And I hadn’t signed the papers yet.

Resigned, I walked down the hall.

Mother’s room looked out over the parking lot. Today the view was shades of grey and white; even the cars were rendered the same color by salt and snow. There was a bright quilt on her bed that I hadn’t seen before. Underneath it, my mother slept, her body a husk of what it had been when she’d towered over me, when her clipped words had cut me off before I even began to explain a skinned knee or a dirty sneaker, a lost pair of glasses, a B rather than an A.

The room was warm, the air stale. I fanned myself with the hospice brochures and sat in one of the two chairs, glancing around the room as I did. It had not changed since last I’d been there, a couple of weeks before. A framed photo of my parents from their wedding day sat on the bedside table. Pinned to the bulletin board on one wall were Mardi Gras beads, and popsicle artwork that Mother might have done as an activity.

Shifting my focus back to the bed, I said, “Hello, Mother.” I kept my voice low, in hopes that it would not wake her.

Her eyes fluttered open, cloudy with cataracts, their once-brown color now a mottled blue-grey. The smile she gave me was sweet. It was not my mother’s. She snaked a hand out from under the blankets and reached toward me. My chair was far enough away to avoid it.

Her hand came to rest on top of the quilt, and she gave a contented sigh, closing her eyes again. Mother had been a teacher for thirty years, in the days of actual chalkboards and erasers that had to be clomped together to clean. Her fingers curled now as though around a piece of chalk, and they moved almost infinitesimally, perhaps writing on a board in her mind. My mother’s cursive was exquisite and I remembered long summer hours spent inside practicing my letters for her.

Margo came in and drew the other chair to the side of the bed opposite me. She put a hand on Mother’s leg with easy comfort.

“Hello, Virginia,” she spoke directly to her. Mother opened her eyes again, giving Margo the same smile

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she'd given me. "My name is Margo, and I'm here with your daughter to talk about how we can best take care of you. Okay?"

Mother's expression did not waver. Nor did she look in my direction.

I watched how Margo interacted with her, saw how Mother responded to the kind words, the touches that Margo offered. I scooted my chair closer and imitated Margo's touch, placing my hand on Mother's leg the way she had.

I thought it might engender tender feelings in me. It didn't.

Therapy had helped me let go of most of the anger that had sat like a backpack on my shoulders most of my life. I'd gone some distance beyond it, but not all the way to tenderness.

Still, I left my hand there. For Margo.

In Mother's room we signed paperwork, and she became a hospice patient. More than anything else, I felt relief.

As we walked back to the exit, Margo went over again what to expect. She told me things to look for on my visits, what would be important to communicate to the hospice team. I didn't know if the expectation was that I should visit, or just that I would. I sighed silently.

Near the locked door was a large common area that was probably used for activities. A few residents sat on a sofa or in wheelchairs. My eyes were drawn to a woman in a red sweater in front of the window. Her wheelchair faced out, so the woman's back was to me. She pointed outside and turned her head toward the room to giggle. I tried to see what was making her laugh, but couldn't find the source of it. Neither could I look away as she did it again and again, clearly delighted with what she'd found.

"Lucy," Margo said, bringing my focus back with a hand on my shoulder. "We're going to take good care of your mom, and make sure she is comfortable in the time she has left."

I nodded, "Thank you."

At the door, I looked again at the woman in the red sweater. She sat back in her chair, hands folded under her chin, still watching outside.

That evening, John and I worked on dinner in the silence that comes after twenty years of marriage.

"I got Mother signed up for hospice today," I said, throwing onions into a skillet.

"How did that go?" he said from behind me, where he was forming meatballs.

I lifted a shoulder, "Fine, I guess." I pushed the onions around in the pan.

"I'm sorry," he said. I heard the water running, and a moment later he put a hand around my waist in a hug. "No matter what, still hard."

I bobbed my head.

Annie called from down the hall, "Mom, did you put my uniform in the wash?"

Giving John a half smile, I handed him the spatula, and followed her voice. "Did you put it in the laundry room? Or leave it in your hamper?"

"I don't know, but I need it for tomorrow!"

I found it, balled and reeking, under another pile of dirty clothes in the corner of her room. By the time I'd started a load of laundry, John had dinner almost finished.

We ate at the table, Annie talking about her game the next day, the drama of who would be replacing Jen at shortstop, and the math test she thought she'd bombed.

A normal evening, but my chest ached with an emptiness I couldn't define.

After dinner, Annie disappeared to do homework, or, more likely, to watch YouTube videos, and John sat in front of the TV. I stood at the kitchen sink, my hands in the dishwasher, tears dripping off my chin into the greasy suds.

"Hey, hon," John called from the den. "If you think about it tomorrow, call the dealer about your Explorer. I got another email on that recall."

I used my shoulders to wipe my cheeks, "Yep."

That Sunday, Margo's voice in my mind and a subtle sense of responsibility to the hospice team compelled me to drive over to the facility. I had rarely visited on weekends, and was surprised to find the feel of the place different, more relaxed.

Pressing the doorbell of the locked unit, I was buzzed in without anyone asking who I was there for.

Mother was asleep under that same bright quilt. I pulled a chair closer to her bed, and sat. Her breathing was a half-snore that caught on the inhale. I counted them. When I got to one hundred, I abandoned it, sitting back in the chair. From down the hall, I could hear clinks of cutlery and a TV with the distinct sounds of Family Feud playing.

Looking again at my mother, I put a hand on her leg, as I had the other day with Margo. I tried to see her as she was: small, gentle, frail. But my conflicting memories of her loomed too large to be displaced by her current state. Her expectations, implied and direct, bounced back to me, along with the ways I had not met them.

I withdrew my hand and blew out a breath.

The clock above her TV told me it had been fifteen minutes. I pushed myself up, moved the chair back to where it had been.

“Bye, Mother,” I said, then bent down and pressed my lips to her forehead, as I had with Annie when she was a child.

Pulling my coat on, I walked out. When I passed the common room, the woman in the red sweater was sitting where she had been the other day. Same sweater, same expression as she looked out the same window. Without knowing why, I went over and sat in a chair next to her.

She turned, her blue eyes bright, her smile peaceful, uncomplicated. Turning back to the window, she sighed and folded her hands in her lap.

Some small bird pecked around on the frozen ground, came up with a seed and flew off. A squirrel jumped onto a branch, sending down a cascade of snow.

As I watched with the woman, something loosened in me and I exhaled fully for the first time in several days. I could not have said how long we sat there. An aide finally came and rolled the woman off to some activity or another. As they left I lifted my hand in a farewell. The woman’s placid smile did not change, but she met my eyes for an instant.

Standing, I pulled out my phone and saw three texts. I tucked the phone back in my pocket without replying.

The next time I visited Mother, I did the same thing, sitting awkwardly with her as long as I could before finding the woman in the Day Room. We watched snow fall that day in big clumps, landing wet and heavy on the tree limbs.

When the aide came to get her for dinner, she called the woman, “Penny.”

“Are you a friend?” The aide asked me, as she released the brakes on the wheelchair.

I looked at Penny, who kept watching out window for as long as she could before the aide turned her chair. “Sort of. I visit my mother, and I’ve just seen her

We ate at the table, Annie talking about her game the next day, the drama of who would be replacing Jen at shortstop, and the math test she thought she’d bombed.

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here,” I gestured around the room. “And she’s always alone. So...”

“Oh that’s nice,” the aide was working the wheelchair free of something it had stuck on.

“Does she have family? Or anyone that visits?”

She glanced over at me with a neutral smile, “Oh, you know. The folks here can always have more.”

HIPPA answer.

I nodded and wrapped my scarf around my neck as I stood.

Over the next several weeks, the view out the window went from snow to chunky rain. The mounds of snow in the parking lot took on the icy, gritty look of spring thaw. I sat with Penny in silence and watched these changes. Though we didn’t speak, and only occasionally made eye contact, the time was peaceful in way that nothing else in my life was at that time. Penny needed nothing from me, and did not try to give me advice, or make me feel I should be doing something more.

Margo called often to check in and to update me on Mother’s status.

“The doctor feels she’s still appropriate for hospice, but she seems to be fairly stable,” she said one day when I called her back on my lunch break. There was an apologetic tone in her voice as she said ‘stable,’ as though it were something to be avoided. “As I said, we’ll just keep evaluating. But let us know of any changes you are seeing.”

Mother had seemed the same on every visit to me. Sometimes she woke, sometimes she would give me that stranger’s smile, but most of the time she slept. Since stasis did not appear to be what hospice wanted to hear, I said nothing.

By mid-May, Margo had, in our phone calls, begun mentioning the possibility of discharge from hospice.

The next Wednesday, I noticed Mother had a cough. At first, I felt a thrill of excitement that I would have something to report to Margo. I would have some proof of my vigilance. I was also aware that this might not have been the reaction a daughter should have.

When I asked the facility nurse about the cough, she said they would get in touch with hospice.

Margo called the next day and asked to meet. She brought the hospice nurse, Jen, with her. We met in the same lobby area where Margo and I had first talked.

“Your mom has what we believe to be pneumonia,”

Jen said, as we settled into the chairs in front of the fake fireplace.

Margo reached a hand to my arm and said, “Jen heard fluid in her lungs. And your mom is not strong enough to clear it.”

“On hospice, as you know,” Jen said, leaning sideways to cross her legs. I noticed her practical shoes, and the cuff of her pants which was wet from the melting snow. “We don’t treat aggressively. That means that we would not give antibiotics to treat the pneumonia.”

“If you feel that your mom would want to have antibiotics, then you could revoke, take her off hospice, and have her treated,” Margo said, her hand warm on my forearm, even through the sleeve of my blouse. “And we would absolutely be here to re-evaluate her if you would like her to come back on after that.”

“Just know,” Jen watched me with a steady gaze. “That at her age, the antibiotics themselves could cause problems. Even if they work, and get rid of the pneumonia, they might trigger other things for her that could be more difficult to deal with.”

Jen paused, still watching me. She didn’t fidget or struggle for words. “Or she might not be strong enough, even with the antibiotics, to fight it. We don’t know.”

“We just want you to have all the information you can, to make the best decision,” Margo said, her curls bobbing as nodded.

The carriage clock ticked a backbeat to my decision-making. When I was young, I had longed for a sister, someone to whisper with, swap clothes and secrets. That familiar longing came over me again. There was no one else.

“How would it be for her?” I brought my gaze up to Margo’s, then Jen’s. “If we don’t treat it?”

They exchanged glances.

“If we don’t treat the pneumonia?” Jen watched me as she spoke. “That doesn’t mean we would do nothing. We have medications to suppress her cough, to make her comfortable. She might be able to clear it herself. But, more likely, this could mean end of life for her.”

I turned my wedding ring on my finger as I took that in.

“It would be peaceful. We can give her that,” Jen’s voice was soft.

I nodded, my eyes on the floor as staff bustled by and a set of visitors came in the door, bringing traffic noise and a waft of cigarette smoke.

“Even if we treated it this time, something else will

happen,” I said, nodding to myself. “Later, I mean. Nothing will change that for her.”

Margo’s expression was gentle as she shook her head.

“Let’s just make her comfortable, then,” I said.

Both women’s shoulders relaxed in tandem.

“We will do that,” Jen’s expression was somber, but confident, assuring.

Margo squeezed my arm and nodded.

A week later, I was sitting by Mother’s bed, my hand resting on the quilt above her ankle. The morning sun was bright outside and the open window allowed for a little breeze in the stuffy room.

When the on-call hospice nurse had called the evening before to let me know that it seemed Mother was “close,” I texted my supervisor, asking for the day off.

John and I talked about whether I should go over then. But the inertia of being in for the evening was strong, and I wavered back and forth.

“Will you regret it if she goes and you’re not there? Or if you didn’t get to see her one more time?” he asked.

My head was on his shoulder so he couldn’t see my expression. I chewed my lip.

“She’s not going to know one way or the other,” I sat up straight, tugging at the frayed cuff of my sweatshirt sleeve.

“Do you want me to go with you?”

If Mother was indeed dying, I wanted to see Penny at least once more. I would not feel comfortable doing that if John was with me.

“No, I’ll be okay,” I said.

“You should see if Annie wants to go.”

I sighed and sat up, “You’re right.”

Mother had never been one of those cookie-baking grandmas, even before the dementia, so, although they had spent some time together, they weren’t close.

As it turned out, Annie had a history test in the morning and an English paper to turn in.

“Is it bad that I want to go to school instead of seeing Grandmother?” She leaned into my shoulder in a way she hadn’t for some time.

I smoothed her hair, “Of course not. You’ve been over there, you’ve spent time with her. I have to believe she knows that. So it’s about what you need at this point. Choosing to have a normal day is always okay. And if you change your mind, Dad or I can bring you by later.”

She nodded, still pressed against my shoulder, “Thanks, Mom.”

The next Wednesday, I noticed Mother had a cough. At first, I felt a thrill of excitement that I would have something to report to Margo. I would have some proof of my vigilance. I was also aware that this might not have been the reaction a daughter should have.

"I love you," I said.

"Love you," she shifted to hug me.

Sitting with Mother the next day, I conjured that moment with Annie, with its simple love. Focusing on my hand against Mother's leg, I tried to project that love to her, willing her to feel it in that moment, even if it was borrowed.

Her breaths were uneven and shallow. I tried exhaling with her, but it was too irregular. Sitting back in the chair, I closed my eyes and drifted, having not slept much the night before.

The time of her death was nearly indiscernible. I became aware in a gradual way that she had not breathed. I sat forward again and watched her still form. Unsure whether her spirit still hovered nearby, or whether I even believed that, I nevertheless spoke to the empty room.

"I needed more from you, Mother. But maybe it was a more that you couldn't give. Maybe it was whatever you never got yourself. I don't know. It doesn't matter, I guess." I rubbed the edge of the quilt between my fingers. Two fat tears fell onto it. "I hope you're at peace now."

Jen came in a few minutes later. She listened to Mother's chest, watching at the same time for a rise and fall that did not come. After some time, she looped the stethoscope back around her neck, and gave me a small nod.

Pulling a chair over, she sat beside me, both of us looking at Mother's body on the bed. The bright quilt had settled around her shrunken body as if to hold it there for a moment longer. Outside the room, shoes squeaked, and carts rattled past. A man's voice drifted in, loudly asking about his glasses.

Not lifting my eyes from the bed, I said, "We weren't close." My voice sounded small and shaky, even to my ears. The words were a relief, but still brought tears. "I only came because..." I lifted a hand in a helpless gesture, and finally looking at Jen, expecting judgment. "Isn't that what daughters do?"

Jen didn't say anything at first. Then she turned to face me.

"I don't think there's a right or wrong," she said, her eyes honest and serious. "You did what you could do. We," she put a hand to her chest, "did what we could do. In the end, your mother had the care she needed to leave this life peacefully. From my perspective, that matters." She took a deep breath and exhaled with a

sigh. "Approaching death doesn't magically erase all the history you have with someone. Even someone you love. Complexly." Her lips lifted in a wry smile at that.

As I walked away from my mother for the last time, I stopped by the nurse's desk to let them know I was leaving and to thank them.

"Oh honey, it was our pleasure," Denise, an aide I had met a few times, turned away from the computer to speak to me. "Your mom was a joy. I'm so sorry."

Bone weary, I forced my mouth into a brief smile, and said, "Thank you," again.

Passing by the activities room, I saw Penny stationed in front of the window, as usual. Her bulky red sweater had been exchanged for a lightweight yellow one.

I took up my spot in the chair next to her. Today she glanced at me, and smiled. Her blue eyes registered me, as they sometimes did. They were bright and her smile reached them before she turned back to the window.

Spring had arrived in a flash, as it did in Northern Minnesota, and the day was sunny, turning warm. Outside, a lilac bush by the parking lot was starting to bloom. I closed my eyes and my memory brought up the distinctive fragrance that signaled late spring for me. With it came an image of my father pruning back our lilac bush every summer. My eyes had tears when I opened them.


Next to me, Penny watched as birds congregated on a feeder that someone had put up. Perhaps just for her.

A cardinal glided in to land at the feeder, his bright red vivid against the dark trees behind. Penny's shoulders lifted as she gasped. When she let her breath out, a small noise of satisfaction came with it. The bird pecked around at the feeder, selected a sunflower seed and worked at it. Penny brought her hand to her mouth, tracking the bird's movement with her eyes, then pointing. When the cardinal flew off, Penny looked over at me and smiled.

For the hundredth time, I wondered about her family. Did she have someone who loved her complexly the way I did my mother? Or someone who loved her simply and deeply, but was gone?

Standing, I put a hand on her shoulder, feeling the bones through her light sweater. She patted my hand, then let hers fall back to her lap.

"Thank you," I said. She glanced up at me, holding my gaze for a moment.

When she looked away, I squeezed her shoulder gently, then turned to walk out. 

MELLANIE HENSLEY

Garden Scene



SOPHIA STEELE



First Place Photography
“Rough Green”



Sanctuary in Blue Halos

It was April 2022 when my long-awaited six-year Coast Guard contract ended. Fresh out of the pandemic era of being treated like the government's prisoner, I was finally free. I had high hopes transitioning back into the civilian world. I was able to do all the things that the military prevented me from doing. I was able to come and go as I pleased and be my own man once again. It was soon after the move that my ex-girlfriend's alcoholism gave me no choice but to move back in with my father to Hudson, NC. After a series of changes and disappointments, my whole world seemed to be crashing and burning. I felt as if my accomplishments meant nothing, and my hopes and ambitions were lost in the chaos. I had no choice but to start fresh and find myself again. It wasn't long after my introspection began that I found myself back in a familiar place where I spent most of my childhood.

Everything I have ever experienced throughout my life led me back here to this moment. There I was knee deep in a heavenly place known as Wilson's Creek, the cold rushing water deflecting off my waders, the brisk mountain air filling my lungs as I gazed down at this prehistoric-like creature thrashing in my net. "How did I wind up back here?" I asked myself. I felt as if mankind didn't deserve to witness the beauty of such a magnificent specimen. The brook trout had a pattern unlike anything else in this world, a striking vibrant orangish-red belly and dark red fins edged with a streak of black followed by white. Specs of golden orange and hot pink wrapped in rings of blue halos like a bowl of fruit loops spread across its body. Perhaps I am the first person this calico-like fish has ever seen. Nothing else mattered in the moment; nothing felt so real in so long. A sense of peace and gratitude came over me like a cloud of fog laying heavily on the earth's surface after a long rain in the early morning dew. I had found something that I had been longing for, that seemed nonexistent. I found sanctuary in the blue halos.

The past couple years I have had the opportunity to take a few of my friends on my wild trout adventures. Having the ability to teach and share the beauty and inspirations in my life that keep me going from day to day with the ones I care about is something special.


Everyone has that special thing, that quiet place, their very own haven. People need a place to get away and escape reality, escape life's struggles and stress. For me, my haven is in chasing blue halos or widely known as trout. It's the wild, aggressive trout I am after. I would ready my fishing gear, load my hiking bag with snacks, first aid, and survival equipment. I would top my CamelBak with water and electrolytes. I woke up before dawn and drove high up in the desolate mountains of the Pisgah Forest. Many times, it was just me, my side-arm, and my fishing gear. I would be miles deep in the forest until I found the river. Once I found the river, the trail was nonexistent. I waded the river for miles and miles rock hopping and climbing over the moss-covered rocks and fallen trees. For me this isn't only the pursuit of a wild vibrant trout, or the long-isolated hike. To me this is living, my therapy.

There is something spiritual about being out in the wilderness away from society. I remember last sum-

mer of 2023 wading and climbing up stream of Queens Creek. I listened to the water rush and fall over rocks and trees cutting through the earth asserting its dominance. I filled my lungs with untainted mountain air and felt a breeze brush through my hair and the gentle warmth of the sun kissing my skin. Feeling the chiseled stones from the creek's aggression between my toes and the ice-cold water pushing against me. My 2nd great grandmother was full blooded Cherokee. I sometimes wonder if that is the root of my spiritual connection to mother nature. Being out there allows me to clear my mind, reflect on my past and present, and make amends with my demons. On the way out from the hike, I was far from any trail, a thick and very steep mountain stood in my way, keeping me from the road. I could hear cars driving by so I knew I couldn't be too far. If I just cut up the hillside through the dense vegetation, then I would be back on the road and homeward bound. I cut up through the brush about 20 yards when suddenly I got a gut wrenching feeling and quickly looked over. About three steps to the right of me laying under a fallen tree was a mature black diamond back rattlesnake coiled up and motionless. Its dense body appeared to be as thick as a soda can with a head the size of my fist. My adrenaline began to rush. I quickly and carefully scurried back to the creek where I would continue to walk down and find another path to the road. I was a little shook. Through all my adventures I had never witnessed a black diamond back rattlesnake as they are rare and endangered. The fact that it was motionless stumped me. Being so close to it, it did not rattle or sense danger, it didn't see me as a threat where I stood. I began to do some research and seek answers for the symbology behind this rare occasion that I had just encountered. Some of the Native American tribe's beliefs suggest that when a rattlesnake comes to you as a totem guide, take heed. You must stay ready and act decisively when necessary. It signifies transformation, primal energy, and shedding of old patterns. The symbology urges embrac-

ing change, facing fears, and tapping into instinctual wisdom for personal growth and development. Maybe it was all just a coincidence or luck encountering the powerful yet calm viper. Perhaps I thought too much into it and was allowing my imagination to get the best of me. But I don't think it was a coincidence, or even chance. With the things I have faced and overcome in recent years and the years that have yet to come this meant something more to me. It described my character, my instincts, and aligned perfectly with my life. The more I began to reflect on it, the more understanding I became.

Too often we get caught up in the hustle bustle and lose sight of the little things in life. The past couple years I have had the opportunity to take a few of my friends on my wild trout adventures. Having the ability to teach and share the beauty and inspirations in my life that keep me going from day to day with the ones I care about is something special. Now I love catching trout as much as the next trout enthusiast. But guiding and teaching someone to cast a fishing rod for the first time and seeing them progress and get better until they hook into their very first trout is a whole different joy. I witnessed the adrenaline rush through their body and saw a smile spread across their face. They too had the opportunity to look down and gaze into the beauty of the blue halos with such satisfaction and gratitude. I don't know if this practice will become routine throughout their lives. But I do hope when they reflect on this unforgettable moment, it will bring the same joy and smile across their face, as it did that day.

Sometimes you must be still, open minded, and accepting. So many things in life are simply out of our control. The signs that we seek come in many shapes and forms. We can't allow life's stressors to bind us down and lose sight of who we are. Keep a clear and conscious mind and find your haven. Enjoy the little things in life, take heed to your instincts, follow your heart, acknowledge your wisdom, and always trust your gut. 

ELIZABETH BENOMAR

“Mountain Stream”



A Ten-Sentence Short Story

He geared up in the front hall, dark on this dismal day.

Down came the thick yellow slicker hanging stiffly from its peg, then the oil skin sou'wester, wrinkled and stained from wear.

After checking his watch, hoping to make the round trip in record time, Owen pulled on his rubber Wellingtons, waiting patiently in the boot tray by the door, and voted himself prepared.

He could hear the rain before he stepped onto the porch, watched it pelting the sidewalk, bouncing in puddles along the curb, flooding the front lawn; a real gully-washer his father would've said.

The air around him smelled earthy.

Owen hunkered into the slicker, snapping up the collar, tied the sou'wester firmly under his chin and stepped off the porch into the avalanche of rain.

Jamming his hands deep into the pockets of his coat, and clutching the ChapStick he found there, Owen began the ten-block trek south to the small superette on the corner.

Head down, eyes squinting into the biting rain, water dripping off the tip of his nose, Owen walked on, agitated, discontent.

He was out of cigarettes.



KINLEY GILLIAM

“Bird Sketch”



KINLEY GILLIAM

“Leaves Paint”

Serpentine Searching

Misconceptions veil a lot that's not to be missed out on. For instance, needing a re-appraisal are snakes! Serpents aren't anything to scoff at. Their true nature is locked away by common fear, but there's an infinite supply of fascinating encounters to be had. Searching for snakes, known as "herping," really has it all. Snakes are excellent subjects of observation and admiration, will test your mettle in your travels, and allow for making snake-loving comrades. Whether in the field or manual, herpetology is a vast universe. It's made my days much more interesting.

Snakes' qualities are mesmerizing. An unusual pattern, uncommon behavior or beautiful color captures me. Feisty black racers give you a taste of dodging a martial arts attack as they launch and snap their jaws. Eastern worm snakes are coated in rainbows in even the slightest light. Corn snakes are placid, sunset-infused beauties, and classic pets the world over. A non-venomous but fierce snake is the northern water snake. My first large, adult northern water snake I caught lived up to the reputation. On inspection though, I saw its previously obscured qualities. Pastel and glossy, its mint belly was decorated with an orange line. It was one-of-a-kind, and I haven't seen another with such an underside since. My first "in-hand" heavy-hitter had a porcelain underside. Not negated by that were his six bites. Ornerly as expected! It was surprisingly painless, and it was a rite of passage to have an archetypal member of the genus *Nerodia* deal out his bite. Soon, he calmed down in my arms. Plain was a bright pink between his scales, despite drabness from afar!

Snakes aren't confined by human expectations. They aren't ugly or unremarkable. It's a marvel that eastern hognose snakes play dead to avoid predation. The coachwhip is bright pink out west. The eastern coral

snake can easily have a mutation in which it lacks the characteristic red. Occupying this world are deceptive snakes, romantic-hued snakes, snakes who don't abide by human words...well, none do. Or maybe they can abide by a few; "snakes are worthwhile," "snakes are intriguing," "snakes are beautiful."


The hunt is half the fun. A collector of trading cards, a treasure hunter scouring a beach for old coins, an urban explorer combing an abandoned hospital; all know the nail-biting gratification of the chase! The excitement doesn't run dry. Always something to look forward to. A new destination. In herping, the first individual you've seen of a species is called a "lifer." Bit-by-bit, you rack up your lifers, but there's no need to try and get a high score; just take your time and work hard. A small baby or elder behemoth, worse for wear or one sleek specimen; it's your first. On the other hand, walking miles only to find a common species you've seen before, or nothing at all, is a regular occurrence. Herping is about the months, miles, and the mystery of where your favorite species is, and the exhilaration of uncovering it.

I won't forget my first rough green snake. It was a sizable one suspended on a tree branch serving as its body-length balcony. I pulled the green puzzle piece of the forest image out of its place, leaving behind no gaps though. He looked just like a vine in the first place. The well-sought after rough green, finally in my palm. My dad was looking forward to finding our first, and we found the "X", the treasure. To present him with the "R.G." is one of my best herping memories. Whether you set out on a search for snakes or are looking for a legendary artifact or a rare game console, the chase is too fun. The blood, sweat and tears are the half of it.

On my travels, it follows that I've met others with a passion for snakes. I've also had the privilege to show snakes to those not familiar with them. On top of that,

I'm glad to have given my family something new to enjoy. Spotting a snake was at most a once-a-year affair for us, yet that's now a regular day. Plus, my family is less afraid of snakes now. My dad enjoys reading about snakes and herpetologists, and even held his first wild snake: a rough green. I frequently visit a park overflowing in rough greens. I've been able to introduce these snakes who look straight out of the jungle to many passersby. I hope they will find another on their future walks and remember the first one they saw. Most of those I've struck up conversation with had never heard of the species, but become curious. People have a slight passion they don't know. By far the best time at the park was running into two herpers looking for the rough greens like myself. They weren't having any luck, until I was able to find a small one coiled above in a tree for them! After following each other on Instagram, and browsing other herpers, I had the motivation to begin posting my snake finds.

Herping is enjoyable alone, but the combination of expertise and enthusiasm is all the better. My neighbor even turned out to have been a snake-catcher in Florida for a serpentarium. I would never have known if snakes didn't capture my heart too. Snakes make great stories, great motifs, and the real thing together with your herping company is the grand prize.

Searching caves and mountain peaks for dragons isn't relegated to fiction. Well, these "dragons" are smaller, barring anacondas and the like. Snakes tend to evoke surprise, but it doesn't have to be unwelcome. A snake in an unexpected spot is a lovely surprise for a herper. The photos and memories of the snakes you've accrued don't fade. Neither do the miles trekked and months spent searching disappear. And certainly not ever to go missing are the fellow snake-searchers the world over. 

Snakes' qualities are mesmerizing. An unusual pattern, uncommon behavior or beautiful color captures me. Feisty black racers give you a taste of dodging a martial arts attack as they launch and snap their jaws. Eastern worm snakes are coated in rainbows in even the slightest light. Corn snakes are placid, sunset-infused beauties, and classic pets the world over.

KINLEY GILLIAM

"Owl"



Overcoming Anxiety

The use of art can change your life and create better expressions of your personality. Ever since I was a child, art has created a pathway for me in the darkest moments. For example, when I was seven years old my grandfather died. Due to this and a mixture of other things, I developed generalized anxiety disorder at an early age. Despite how rough things were, I always looked to art as an escape route. My parents would buy me art kits with multiple types of materials so I could let those rough feelings go. Due to me over-using most of the materials, I would be left with short pencils and dried-out markers. I remember how hard it was to draw with the dried-out markers, and how the watercolors I used as a last resort would bleed through the paper I was using. Despite how messy and horrible my art looked; it was a distraction. It made me happy.


My parents were always supportive of everything I wanted to pursue. I started coming out of the shell that was created when I was young. Even though I was only ten years old, they would attempt to buy the best art supplies there were. I would always show them horribly made drawings, yet they'd say it was amazing. I would attempt to draw animals, which realistically only looked like blobs. A specific animal I would always attempt to draw was a Blue Jay. Blue was my favorite color growing up, so I would draw the same bird over and over mostly because the color made me happy. I knew that my anxiety would never just disappear and leave my life forever. I had to find ways to cope with it and evolve as a person. I had to show who I was in ways others may not understand. You may be thinking it's just anxiety and I should've just gotten over it, but it's not that simple. When you get the feeling of your heart dropping to your stomach and instant nau-

sea, you would attempt to find a distraction too. When this happens to me, I turn to art.

My art has grown with me throughout my childhood. The older I got, the more my art style evolved and changed. Art had become a hobby of mine over time, and eventually, I began trying to actually be good at it. As people say, “practice makes perfect.” With lots of practice, I’ve gotten to where I am today. When the pandemic started, my anxiety worsened. I started having panic attacks going in public, even if it was just to the grocery store. I always knew that the moment I was home, I could distract these feelings with art. When there was nothing else to do during quarantine, I looked to art. For example, after being out in public for so long I would daydream about my next art project. One I did over quarantine was a painting of the ocean. Even though I have a fear of the ocean, I guess art even makes me overcome my fears.

I started learning anatomy so that I could make my art more advanced. I wanted to do realism and feel professional. Due to this, I learned my interest in the human body and the medical field. This created the pathway for me to pursue an associate in science. It’s kind of odd looking back and realizing how art has weaved itself into my life. I now create realism art. I constantly

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have smeared graphite on the sides of my hands, and sometimes I’ll find pencil shavings around my room. I find myself staring at Pinterest for hours, trying to find someone I want to attempt to draw. I’m obviously not over my anxiety. I’m on medication for it now, which seals the deal that I can’t cope with it alone. The important thing is that I’m coping. But I’m never alone with art. It stayed with me throughout the deaths of family members, my childhood, and quarantine. I admit, I’m not the greatest artist ever. However, my journey isn’t complete yet. 

To Momma About Graduation

What a glorious day for me
When I receive my degree.
Across the stage I'll proudly go,
Shining with an inner glow.

Friends will share in my joy that day,
Yet, I feel compelled to say,
"I wish you could be here with me.
This wonderful, glorious day to see."

Yet, you live too far away.
You've had your graduation day.
You've finished your course and won the race,
And I'll see you in that heavenly place.

MARIAH PUTNAM

Poetry

Red Spider Lilies

Though many fear you...
I look through you and feel how
similar we are.

KINLEY GILLIAM

"Bouquet of Flowers"



KINLEY GILLIAM

"Dress Sketch"

Untitled

The moon is the only thing stopping the vacant parking lot from being swallowed in total darkness. As I lean back in my seat and pull a blanket over me, I stare through the sunroof. The night sky quietly looms above me while the stars dance and paint me murals of mythic figures. Streetlights hum a lullaby and gently flicker as I drift closer to sleep. Wishing myself a happy eighteenth birthday, the only thing on my mind is how I got here and what it takes to leave.

High school was only marked by my truancy and anti-establishment sentiments. Stellar test grades did little to combat the lack of effort brought about by my naive escapades. It wasn't for lack of effort, either. School wasn't a priority because my only real interests were smoking and making music. To no one's surprise, constant meetings with administrators, teachers, and, on rare occasions, police strained my single mother's patience. Despite her best intentions, I got kicked out of the house sometime before graduation. I packed a duffel bag of clothes, my guitars, and my pride.


My father was a peculiar man. Mental illness takes its toll on those who are afflicted. I spent much of my childhood tiptoeing around him. Couch surfing and house-sitting had left me with no real options. Living with my estranged father was the only natural alternative to a park bench. Reviewing the list of promises my extended family fabricated made it seem ideal. Once I had a car worthy of cross-country travel, I left my hometown in search of opportunity.

With the remainder of my savings stuffed into a Robert Johnson CD box set, I traveled the country looking for other options. I refused to live the life others had envisioned for me. I-80 took me to Kansas. As I turned on cruise control and stared at the 200-mile stretch of flat, barren countryside, the choices that got me here began to sink in. It wasn't that I didn't value education, and I always knew my performance wasn't indicative of my potential; my hubris put its required effort beneath me. I had always planned on attaining a higher education and utilizing my various passions to create a better life. But I had never imagined it would be under these circumstances.

I spent months seeing all the sights this country had to offer. Arriving in Boulder, Colorado, I met up with old friends and wasted

even more time. While I smoked and drank away the previous months, I saw myself slip from my original vision. The Rockies weren't a place I wanted to call home. Traveling on to Utah, I had already regretted my decision. Before I had even arrived, I was applying to colleges, employment opportunities, and help wanted ads. Shortly after, and following a fistfight, I turned around and returned to North Carolina. At no point did I have any intention of changing my goals.

When I returned home, I got a job at the first place that would hire me and applied to HCC. I would deliver pizza at night and attend classes in the day, sleeping in my car in between. No place in Haywood was willing to rent to a homeless teenager. After months of cold calling apartments and property owners, I had heard nothing. While almost destitute, I searched the local newspaper for job opportunities and potential housing. Once my larger-than-life personality won over a local landlord, I had my own house.

Despite my struggles, I have managed to keep this house and my livelihood. With no exception, I have remained a straight-A student ever since. I was never willing to compromise on my vision and never let other's expectations drag me down with them. Currently, I am a semi-chef at an incredible restaurant and am on the path to owning my own Cybersecurity firm. Without the help of those who remained close to me and my own healthy amount of stubbornness, I would not have made it this far. 

It wasn't that I didn't value education, and I always knew my performance wasn't indicative of my potential; my hubris put its required effort beneath me. I had always planned on attaining a higher education and utilizing my various passions to create a better life. But I had never imagined it would be under these circumstances.

ELIZABETH ASHCRAFT

“Tiny Moon”



The Textbook to a New Path

“**D**ad, I do not want to be a nurse anymore.” I stared at my father who sat across from me. His eyes widened as he tried to form the right words. All I could see on his face was shock, confusion, and panic. “Why not? What will you do now? What about all the courses you took already?” These questions had swirled in my mind for years as I contemplated if nursing was the right path for me, but my father was right. What will I do now? Out of all my 20 years alive, I did not expect to find my answer in a textbook. My whole world and reason for living shattered and became something new. My microbiology textbook, the book I expected to hate and despise, became the catalyst for my renewed excitement for the future.

It was the beginning of the spring semester in 2022. I fidgeted in my seat anxious to get out of class. My professor assigned us the pages we had to go over before the next class began. I did not look forward to reading that night, but I forced myself since I did not want to fall behind. After dinner, I locked myself in my room and broke out the monster that had been sitting in the corner of my desk. I opened to the chapter we were assigned and read the big, bold letters at the top of the first page: Morphology. What was so fun about the shape of bacteria? I sighed and decided I would barrel through the section just to get it over with.

What I thought would be the most boring topic became the highlight of my day. I found myself re-reading paragraphs, looking over every footnote, analyzing every small blurb under the pictures. I was excitedly tracing the rods and spheres as I burned their names into my head. I loved doing the practice questions that had you identify what organism it was based on its morphology. A section describing the different shapes was more interesting than the novel I was reading. The next thing I knew, I was past the section I needed to read. I did not realize just how much fun I was having for something so simple. I was genuinely enjoying my time studying, something I never thought would hap-

pen. When people ask me now why I love microbiology, I always tell them the same thing: “It is just fun!” I finally found an academic subject that was exciting and showed me a career can be fun!


My textbook not only presented a fun career, but it also motivated me to study and learn more about microbiology. Just like how I hated reading textbooks, I hated studying for academic subjects that would bore me. When it came to complex subjects like organic chemistry and biochemistry, I hated studying even more. Research papers weren’t hard to write but reading articles for whatever topic I was doing felt like a chore. I never felt motivated enough to invest in a subject, not even nursing.

With microbiology, something clicked in me. “Do you guys want to hear about what I just read in my textbook?” My parents became accustomed to hearing that phrase every day, but they would sit patiently while I rambled about whatever I had read. I no longer wanted to simply just pass the class; I wanted to understand everything and learn even more. Reading research articles and journals became a part of my study routine. For example, our class reviewed the mechanisms of antibiotics and antibiotic resistance. The topic was so fascinating to me that I began researching the preventative measures healthcare professionals were taking to stop further resistance. I had this new hunger that burned in me, like a stray dog after it was given a taste of a well-done steak. That hunger persists to this day, and it will drive me to research beyond the course material. The drive for knowledge will guide me in the future to fight against antibiotic resistance and save hundreds of people.

In the end, everything this textbook taught me culminated into the biggest change in my life which was my decision to completely drop nursing. For as long as I could remember I always wanted to be a nurse. My mother was an ER nurse and would tell me stories every day from the ones that made me laugh to ones that made both of us cry. I looked up to her, and I wanted to follow in her footsteps. I would read the random med-

ical journals she had lying around and the textbooks she still had. Everyone in school knew I was going to be a nurse someday, and they would always ask me for advice when they would get hurt or were sick. My mind was set on nursing, and nothing was going to change it.

However, as the years passed, I started to have doubts about my chosen profession. I convinced myself this is all I wanted to do, that there was no other path I could take. I was on the waitlist for the nursing course in college, and I already had some experience as a tech in the hospital. Yet deep down, I knew I no longer had that passion. I knew it was dangerous to go into nursing without that passion, yet what other choice did I have? After cracking open that microbiology textbook and seeing this new world, a path opened up to me. I felt the rush and the excitement of learning something new. Simply reading the words on the page felt fun to me. My whole plan for my future was scrapped, and a new one was in the works. Now when people ask me what I want to be I can say with a big smile, “I want to be a pathologist!” Even though I cannot help patients directly, I can still support the doctors and nurses with my knowledge. Rather than becoming a nurse without a spark, I will become a pathologist with a passion.

Nursing had been my whole life, but now microbiology and pathology are my future. My microbiology textbook showed me there was more to my future than I thought. It showed me I can have fun with a career, gave me a drive for knowledge, and made me realize I can pursue another path. Even though I will not be by the bedside, I can still help patients in ways they could not imagine. I can provide the puzzle pieces their nurses and doctors need to treat them. I still remember my response to my father’s questions. At the time, I was not sure if I was making the right decision, but I knew I wanted to do it. “Dad,” I said with a slight quiver in my voice, “I am going to med school. I am going to be a pathologist.” To think that my whole future changed just from a textbook. I always hear about authors who found their passion for writing after reading books. Now I can say with confidence that I understand how they feel. Without this textbook, I would have never found my passion. 

Now when people ask me what I want to be I can say with a big smile, “I want to be a pathologist!” Even though I cannot help patients directly, I can still support the doctors and nurses with my knowledge. Rather than becoming a nurse without a spark, I will become a pathologist with a passion.

STEPHANIE TELFER

Poetry

Girl in a box

A girl in a box.

Entrapped, or living happily beyond the infinite?

Where possibilities are endless, and the unknown is vividly clear.

Where the truth shines brighter than the sun's rays.

The intensity of it jolts through your soul like electricity.

Where dreams come to fruition,

Because you create your own reality.

If there is a will, there is a way.

And you are going to find it.

You've been through the depths of hell,

And made it to the top of the highest mountains.

Out of the darkness and into the light.

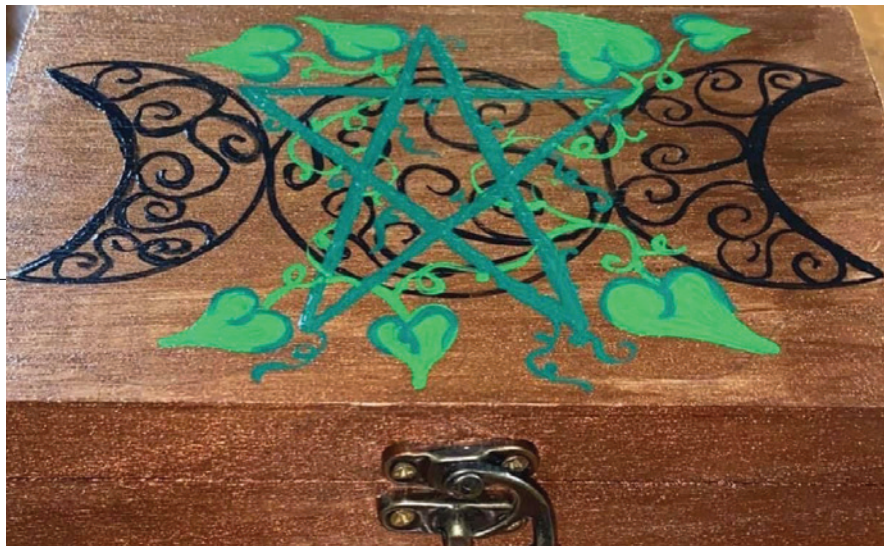
You would do it all again, just to be where you are now.

Girl in a box

Living the dream.

STEPHANIE SALES

Artwork





ELIJAH LEDLOW

“Untitled”



SHERI CONNER

“The Dragon with Copic Markers”

Dare to be free!

In loving memory of Angela Charlene Bridges, My Stepmother, Rest in Peace.

Substance abuse is a significant challenge in America today. As cited by Comer & Comer, 2022 p. 316), according to (NITA, 2022) "... Combining cost related to crime, lost work productivity, and health care, it is estimated that the overall cost of substance misuse is \$740 billion each year in the United States alone." A drug is defined as a substance other than food that affects our bodies or minds (Comer & Comer, 2022, p. 306). A substance does not have to be a medicine or an illegal chemical to be deemed a drug. Drug use is so prevalent today that thirty-two million people have used illegal substances within the last month, and almost one quarter of all teenagers have used an illegal substance (Comer & Comer, 2022, p. 316). Many college students use stimulants such as speed. Two favorite drugs for most young college students are alcohol and marijuana. Unfortunately, cocaine is also gaining more popularity.

It is dangerous to experiment with drugs. Anybody can develop an addiction or accidentally overdose at any given time. When a person tries a substance for the first time, he or she never imagines the course that his or her life will take. Many people who start using substances are trying to fit in or gain acceptance with peer groups. Others who abuse drugs are using them as an unhealthy coping mechanism for stress. People in such circumstances who continue to use substances often develop a substance use disorder. A substance use disorder consists of patterns of maladaptive behaviors and reactions brought about by the repeated use of substances (Comer & Comer, 2022, p. 316). People who have a substance use disorder have an intense need for a certain substance, depending on it to function. This always wreaks havoc on the user's family, social life, finances, work productivity, and so much more. If a person with a substance use disorder becomes dependent on the substance that he or she is using and

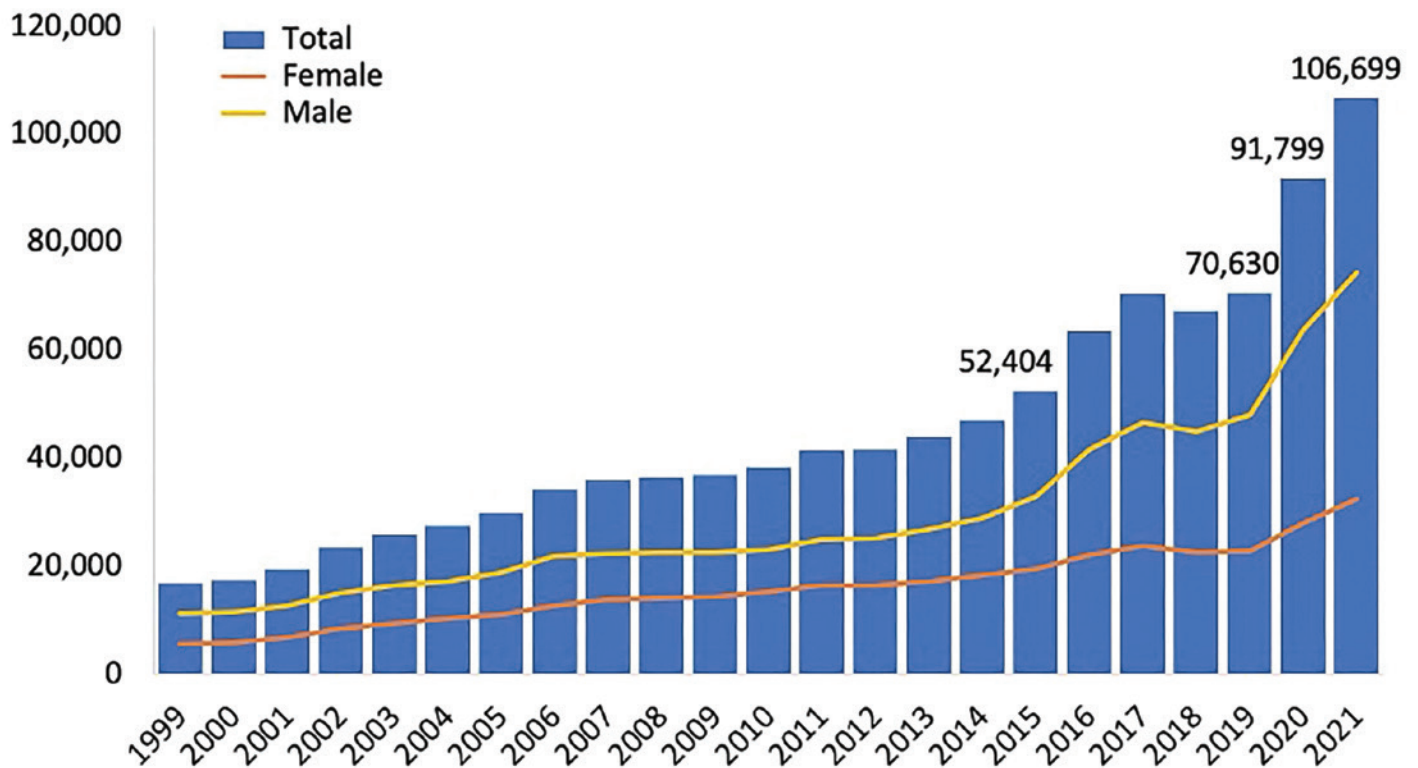
continues using it, his or her tolerance of the drug will increase. He or she will need more of the substance to maintain his or her addiction. This is because the use of substances affects the way that the brain's neurotransmitter's function (SciShow, 2012) (CNN, 2012). This explains why it is so hard to break free from addiction's vice. Substance use disorder is truly a disorder of the mind and body, causing too many casualties. There were over one hundred and six thousand lives lost due to addiction in 2021 alone (NIDA, 2022). These people

People who have a substance use disorder have an intense need for a certain substance, depending on it to function. This always wreaks havoc on the user's family, social life, finances, work productivity, and so much more.

are all somebody's mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, partner, or friend. They are so much more than just statistics in a database. For example, here is the story pulled from the drug overdose deaths from the year 2008.

Angela Charlene Bridges was a smart vibrant woman who suffered with substance use disorder. She started using drugs in her youth while she was with her first husband who was extremely abusive to her. The drugs helped her cope with the physical and emotional hell

Figure 1. National Drug-Involved Overdose Deaths*, Number Among All Ages, by Gender, 1999-2021



*Includes deaths with underlying causes of unintentional drug poisoning (X40–X44), suicide drug poisoning (X60–X64), homicide drug poisoning (X85), or drug poisoning of undetermined intent (Y10–Y14), as coded in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.


that she was enduring, but they nearly ruined her life. She loved her son, did not want to lose him, and genuinely wanted to be a better mother. Charlene took a bold step, the right step and got help with her addiction. She also broke free from her ex-husband's abuse, learned to live again, and got a job at the Richmond County Sheriff's Department. She even found a new love in time. The man that she married had four children. His youngest two children were twin girls blind from infancy. They were determined to hate her because they did not want anyone to replace their mother in any way. Charlene had the wisdom to address the issue with love and gentleness. She never tried to replace their mother, but she loved them unconditionally. She won their love and respect with her love, friendship,

patience, and good southern cooking.

Charlene's story almost had a fairy-tale ending. However, one day, she was in a horrible wreck. She was rushed to the emergency room. The doctor that treated her did not read her medical history and gave her the medicine to which she was addicted. That careless act started her life on a downward spiral. The addiction took a toll on Charlene's physical and mental health, and it nearly destroyed her marriage. Charlene had serious communication issues with her husband. If he asked about her drug usage, she thought he was accusing her. She would lie sometimes about her drug usage because of feelings of shame and worthlessness. She felt as though her husband did not trust her every time that he asked her about her drug usage, but what he was

really saying to her was “I love you. I miss us. You can kick this.” He just did not know how to express that correctly because of the stress that the addiction placed upon the family. They filed for a temporary separation, and she sought counseling again. One January evening in 2008, her husband went to visit her at her apartment. She did not answer the door. So, he just went in, and he found her unresponsive. He tried to resuscitate her but was unable to do so despite his experience with the Columbia County Fire Department. Doctor Chris Shepherd, the family’s physician, pronounced her dead at the hospital in Louisville GA. There is a chance that her death could have been avoided if her husband had access to naloxone. Therefore, family members of individuals who struggle with a substance use disorder must have access to that drug and be educated in administering it. It is also extremely important for physicians to screen all patients for any history of substance abuse. A simple screening would have prevented Charlene’s fatal relapse. Also, if a patient with a history of substance abuse is injured and needs something for pain, he or she can be given a drug that is less addictive and be monitored closely.

...

Whitney Houston was a famous singer with an extraordinary voice. She won six grammies and recorded several albums that became number one hits. One Moment in Time is one of her best songs. Whitney Houston tragically died of an accidental drug overdose on February 11, 2012. She was only forty-eight years old. If you, dear reader, are suffering with a substance use disorder, do not be ashamed. Take the first step toward freedom from the shackles of addiction while you still can. Whitney’s tragic death does not have to be in vain. The one moment in time that she sang so passionately about was not when she recorded her first album. It was not when she sold her first number one hit. It may not have been when she won her six grammy awards either. What if her one moment in time is a moment in eternity when people say, “No more!” to the chains of addiction? What if you could be a part of that moment? 

Charlene’s story almost had a fairy-tale ending. However, one day, she was in a horrible wreck. She was rushed to the emergency room. The doctor that treated her did not read her medical history and gave her the medicine to which she was addicted. That careless act started her life on a downward spiral.

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KENNA LAWING

“Beach Scene”



Stuck In My Own Mind

I long to be understood the same way that I've been able to understand other people. I have feelings that others can't ever seem to grasp, nor can I explain; these feelings can be so intense and can't easily be destroyed.

I can even feel what others are feeling; if someone is having a bad day, I feel their negative energy tenfold—if someone has a good day or positive energy, I start to feel manic and highly carefree.

I'm so easily affected by those around me that I often forget who or what I am.

My thought process tells me so many things; logically, I'm told that I'm only human and nothing from humans is perfect; on the other hand, I'm crying and yelling at myself that I'm a monster for not being able to do things the "right" or "normal" way like everyone else.

Eventually, I've learned that I'm completely misunderstood by others and myself—for reasons I still don't understand. How ironic, I think to myself; the person who can understand almost everyone can't be understood nor understand a thing about herself.

I have often repeated to myself that an outcast like me has no place in this world; I'm practically as good as dead.

But you know what? I know that I'm not "normal," but there's nothing that can be done about it; I have to suffer, as does everyone else on this planet. But that doesn't mean that I, or anyone for that matter, should mope around and hurt over and over until there are no tears left.

I've learned that I'm completely misunderstood by others and myself—for reasons I still don't understand. How ironic, I think to myself; the person who can understand almost everyone can't be understood nor understand a thing about herself.

I may not know the answers; no human or machine can know every single thing. It's impossible.

But I do know that even if I don't belong, I still have people who support me as if I do belong, even if it's just a few. And that's what matters most to me, knowing that someone still believes in me, even when I can't believe in myself.

At the end of the day, all I know is that I am my worst enemy, and I'm completely stuck in my own head with no way out. I'm tired of running, so I'm going to face everything head-on regardless of the dreadful feelings. **H**

SHERI CONNER

Runner Up Original Artwork
"Time Will Tell"



ALISSA HOLMES

Poetry

Insight From the Dirt

I am not understood.

I am treated as one who has little value.

People brush me off their hands and feet with no thought.

Organisms urinate and defecate on me with no consideration.

People spit and vomit on me,

I cradle the dead like a cocoon.

However, children love me if adults give them the opportunity to know me.

The sea covers me.

Yet, how could the world function without me?

Without my existence, plants and crops would not be planted.

Then, they could not grow or flourish, and the earth could not be fed.

From dust you were created, and to dust you shall return.

STEPHANIE SALES

“Blue Box”




Dandelions

In a land unknown there was an elderly woman who lived deep in the woods, surrounded by towering pines with whistling branches. Completely secluded, but not lonely. She had her luscious gardens. The gardens that she lived by, that was never untamed. It was her craft. She had family, but her lover was long dead, and her only daughter off in the city with her own family. So she constantly tended to her garden, as it was her only friend. She hadn't had to come out of the woods for years, because she'd learned how to sustain herself. Her pantry was lined with canned, dried, and preserved goods she'd grown herself with care. One day as she was weeding her garden, she stopped to notice the dandelions that had begun to grow underneath some of the vegetables. She thought to herself, thought how beautiful and how much she hated to pull them. With a bout of rebellion in her mind, she decided to let them stay. Just this once, she told herself. But days turned to weeks, weeks to months. Day by day, the dandelions grew wilder, inviting wildflowers to turn her garden to a collage of colors she had never seen. Her food seemed to dwindle down, but something inside her seemed to tell her to let it be. As summer faded into fall, the days grew colder and food scarcer. But the flowers were too beautiful to disturb. She spent her evenings watching the sun set, a golden blanket over her now wild garden. She began to grow in love with its look, seeing it as a wonder of nature to appreciate. Winter grew near, and her supplies were barren. But she kept that garden the way it was. The holidays were near, and she expected a visit from her daughter and newborn grandchild.

Her daughter waited patiently for the days to pass, so she could leave for her childhood home she had loved so much. Winter break came, and she headed on the journey to her mother's. She spent two days driving down winding roads, past tall buildings that faded into small country homes and rolling green hills. She came to the end of her journey and started the trek to the house. She made her way, slow and steady as the excitement built

in her heart to see the place she had long awaited, and to feel her mother's soft warm touch once again. She eventually arrived at the gateway, and dropped her bag, exhausted yet satisfied. She opened the gate, and in a breath of surprise realized that her mother's entire yard had grown over. There was no longer a clear pathway to

One day as she was weeding her garden, she stopped to notice the dandelions that had begun to grow underneath some of the vegetables. She thought to herself, thought how beautiful and how much she hated to pull them. With a bout of rebellion in her mind, she decided to let them stay. Just this once, she told herself.

the front door, and she hacked at leaves, and vines, and a few lone flowers when she eventually found her old withered mother on the front porch, in a rocking chair. She greeted her, but there was no response. She then rushed to her mother, asked if she could hear her and began to panic. Grabbing her in her hands she began to cry as she realized she was gone. She sat there for a few hours, taking it all in. Her beloved mother was gone. She eventually called for her mother's body to be taken care of, and out of morbid curiosity asked the coroner what her cause of death was. "Starvation. But one odd thing, her pockets were stuffed with dandelions." 

KIRA CAHOON

“Portrait”



MICAH STIGGINS

“Self Portrait”

Drawing for Joy

I possess a skill which is a talent for many people. It's nothing out of the ordinary as far as gifts go, but I'm extremely grateful for it. After all, it saved my life. For 5-6 years now I've been dealing with all sorts of medical issues, mainly chronic abdominal pain, which meant for a majority of that time I couldn't do normal things. I couldn't walk around, couldn't run, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep without this aggravating constant pain. This experience would change almost everything about me, including my mood and emotional state. I was an extremely bubbly child, but after being locked in a state of pain I forgot how to express feelings or even how to bring joy to other people. Drawing gave me a way to share joy with people, whenever I was at this low point.

Backing up a bit, I first started drawing because of my older brother. Instead of buying a bunch of plastic toys, my brother created tv characters out of paper. His favorite to draw and make were the Wild Kratts from PBS kids. Whenever I wanted to play with him I would normally see him drawing, so naturally I tried it myself. I wanted to help my brother so I asked him "can I help you with your drawings?" to which he replied "no, your going to ruin them." (If you were expecting an uplifting message, forget it.) Now drawing was to prove I could do what he could do. However, I couldn't do what he could do. I couldn't draw the way that he could, and to make matters worse he deemed me a copycat! The audacity. For a while though, this would be the end to my drawing.

Around age 9 was when I became more or less immobile. I didn't wanna run around because my tummy hurt. Thus came the first trip to the doctor. "Try this medicine." "It's a virus it should go away in a few days." "Maybe it's hereditary." "Have you tried.." months go by filled with these assessments. I could see my parents were desperate to make me feel better, which only made me feel worse. "You're the problem." said the stupid voice in my head. Then one of the worst moments I can remember happened. My doctor since birth looked me in the eyes and said "I can't help you anymore."

*Emily.*

When I finally put down the pencil the graphite covered my entire hand. I was so happy. When my parents came to check on me I showed them, and they smiled. I had finally done it. I brought them joy instead of misery!

I didn't stop crying that day. My parents told me we were going to see a new doctor now, and my only hope was it wouldn't end the same way. Everyone would now look at me with a certain disparity. "She shouldn't have to live like this. She should enjoy her childhood, not be stuck here." was a common response from people. Even though my parents put on a brave face, I knew they were sad. "And it's your fault."

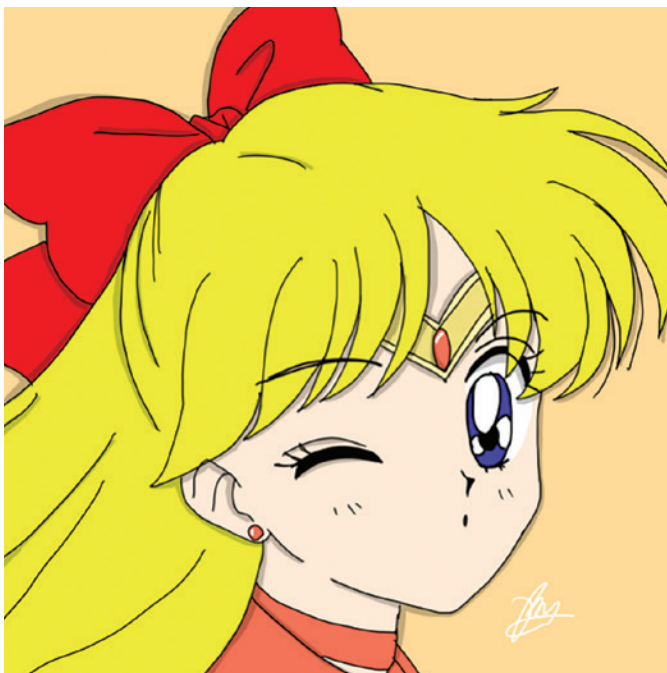
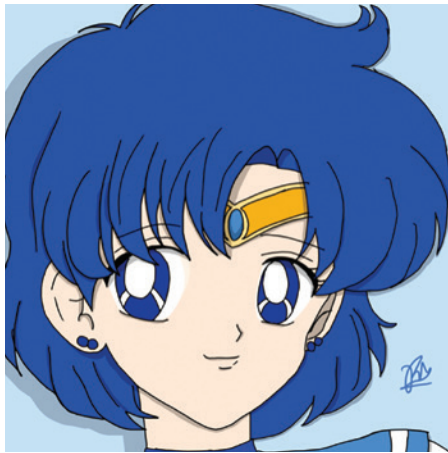
My stomach had completely taken over everything that I did. I take medicine and lay still until the pain subsided. I can't remember how long I was still for. I was anxious about everything. I thought that I had somehow brought this upon myself, and I couldn't stand seeing my family. They all looked with such pity at me, like a dying rabbit. "Please don't cry. This is my fault. It's my fault." Everyday felt similar to the last. I could barely move. (Don't worry dear reader, it gets better here.) that's when I found a small sheet of paper. It's odd how such a small and useless piece of paper can become important. I started drawing the character on my tv screen, and she actually looked like the tv. I was stunned. I did something, and it didn't affect my stomach. I began to draw things like cartoons and movie characters, then soon I was a drawing machine. When I finally put down the pencil the graphite covered my entire hand. I was so happy. When my parents came to check on me I showed them, and they smiled. I had finally done it. I brought them joy instead of misery!

Going forward in time a bit, I still struggled to do many things but I slowly made it out of the bed and around this time a small family moved in next door. There were three little girls and their great grandmother to care for them. The oldest girl, we shall name her Emily, was an extremely sad child. She never felt like she deserved anything because she wasn't cared for properly. She was also struggling with illnesses, making her feel worthless. The thing about me is that I had a loving and supportive background through my struggles, but she didn't. She wouldn't talk to many people is what her great grandmother (who's around 60 years old) had told me. She said that it seemed I was the only one who she would talk to. I found out that she loved to draw because she had come to my room and saw all the artwork I had hung up on my walls. "You did all this? Woah. I draw too, do you wanna see?" From here

I'm so glad that my talent could reach another person, and like me create joy for those around her. I'm glad that I finally made it "out of the woods" and am now doing a whole lot better and am able to attend school. I'm so thankful for all the people and the care that they give me.

on in she would find me to be an inspiration, which I didn't know how to respond to. I still got so sick I had to stop doing things and lie still, but there was this kid that found me incredible. That really made me happy, and increased my mood. I was an example for her and that made me feel good. Sometimes we just hung out and played video games while other times we would talk about our drawings and different styles of art we enjoyed. She opened up to me a lot and is doing quite well, and I even drew her, which I've attached in this document. I'm so glad that my talent could reach another person, and like me create joy for those around her. I'm glad that I finally made it "out of the woods" and am now doing a whole lot better and am able to attend school. I'm so thankful for all the people and the care that they give me.

To you my "superpower" might seem like a talent or a skill not a superpower. Maybe you would be right. It might not be powerful and it might not help me defeat any criminals, but it helped me defeat sadness. Sometimes I can't even imagine myself laying in that bed. Sometimes I wonder if I never found that piece of paper, where would I be now? Probably lying in that bed. The good thing is that I picked up that paper and chose to fight and refused to lay still and die. Although I can't fully take credit, some goes to a small piece of paper. ✚



The latest set of portraits, the Sailor Guardians from Sailor Moon.



KINLEY GILLIAM

Donkey Sketches



SHANLIE MORGAN

Cat



KINLEY GILLIAM

Bulldog Sketch

GABRIELLA MARQUEZ

Photography & Poetry



Ay Mi Abuelita, you never got to see me break the generational cycles that harmed you. Photography from Toluca, Mexico

I am an American Citizen.
Yet,
I hold the same fears of an Immigrant.

—The Reality Lived by the Children of Immigrants

Never Give Up and Keep Your Head High

When you were young, have you ever felt like you were different from other kids? You would see kids stare at you and point fingers. Why did they do that or what did I do to make them stare? My mom has always said to “Never give up and keep my head high”. It does not matter what life throws at you; you keep your head held high. You can and will do great things. She would see me coming home from school or after practice and see how sad I was. She would look at me and say never give up and keep your head high. My mother has taught me so much in life since my father passed away when I was only two years old.

It was a warm day at the beginning of the summer. My mother and I got into the car, and she asked me what sport I wanted to do. I looked at her and said football. She said OK and we drove off. We pulled up to Bethel field and we walked to the building to sign up. When I entered the room, I could feel all the kids looking at me. My mother looked at me and said head high. At every practice, I worked hard at what the coach was teaching us. I would ask about each move if I did not understand how it went. During one of my games, I was on the side lines and was waiting patiently to be put in the game. Looking around at all the people on the bleachers yelling and cheering on the players made me nervous. Then I looked and there was my mother smiling at me and all I heard was never give up and keep your head high. Fourth quarter ended and I was still on the side lines waiting. That was a feeling of hurt because I did not get to play. I have learned to never be left on the sidelines ever again.

At one practice I was learning to kick the football and my coach looked at me and said we had found our kicker! There was a feeling I could not explain, but I knew it had to do with the words my mother told me. I was over excited and joyed. I knew for sure I would play the next game. That Saturday was the game. Even though I was scared and excited, I was not sure that

What would have happened if those words were never said? As I sit here and write this and think about it, if those simple words were not said I would have quit a lot of things that I tried.


I would get to play. We scored the touchdown in the first quarter, then I heard it, my name was being called. Sentilina I am putting you in as kicker, I looked at my mother and smiled. From then on, I played in every game that season and the rest that came because of the words my mother told me. “Never give up”.

Years passed and it was time for middle school and me being me I wanted to try something new, even knowing I never did it before. Cheerleading signups for Canton Middle School were posted on the bulletin board in the

hallway. When I looked at the bulletin and the sign ups, there was that feeling again that I remembered when I played football. I rushed home and told my mom and she said remember to “never give up and keep your head high”. The day came for tryouts. I walked in and the whole gym stopped and looked at me. The whispers and talking all over again brought me back to the first day of football signups. I can hear my mom’s voice in my head saying keep your head high and never give up.

All the stunts and cheers I practiced and practiced until I knew them by heart. I worked on them every day, doing them over again until I was so tired, I could hardly feel my legs. Tryouts went on for three days and today was the day I would find out if I made the team. Wanting to know if I made the team or not felt like the day I was on the sidelines. It was the last hour of the day, and the clock was moving slowly. My eyes were watching the second hand of the clock and all I heard was Tick Tok, then my name was called. My eyes looked at the door and it was the cheer coach. My heart sank but I stayed positive. I stood up and walked to the door and I knew the whole class was looking at me. The cheer coach handed me an envelope and walked away. I went back to my desk and sat down. When I looked at the envelope it said CMS cheerleading. My mind went in all directions, so I waited till my mother opened and looked at the results.

I handed the envelope to my mother, and she seen my face. “Remember what I told you, keep your head high and never give up. We looked at each other and smiled, then we opened the envelope. Congratulations! You made the CMS cheerleading team. That was one of the happiest moments of my life. It was like I had been shocked by 100 volts; it was an amazing feeling. As the years went by, cheer was the one thing I did all through high school. I even became captain of the cheer squad my senior year. I graduated high school and started college but one thing that got me through all of it was remembering what my mother said.

My mother has always encouraged me from the beginning and just those little words she said to me “never give up and keep your head high” changed the way I see things. What would have happened if those words were never said? Would I have made the cheerleading team? As I sit here and write this and think about it, if those simple words were not said I would have quit a lot of things that I tried. As I go to work and to my little sister’s practices, I know my mother is right behind her telling her the same words she once said to me. I want to make a difference in others’ lives by saying and helping others like my mom did for me, so now I am a cheerleading coach at Canton Middle School, and I tell my girls every practice and game to never give up and keep your head high. 

STEPHANIE SALES

Sunflower Box



STEPHANIE SALES

Phases of the Moon

Curses Twice Removed With a Roll of the Dice

My Dearest Love,

I pray this letter finds you well. I have been under considerable strain as of late due to the extenuating and tragic circumstances in which we have both felt substantial despair and solemn apprehension. My only and truest wish in life has been, since the earliest days of my infancy, to remain within your good graces and charms and, in adulthood, to fulfill the wishes of our relations by consummating our relationship in a lifelong sharing of dreams through our marriage. I conceive that our sorrows are at last come to their final act, and we shall be united once again in an expeditious fashion. Even now, as I traverse the rugged terrain of my youthful and woebegone enterprises, each passing moment brings with it a lightening of the heart and me a little nearer the place of my birth where you and all my hopes for the future reside. I have distinct reason to believe that we may begin our life anew once and for all. My further dispatch from melancholy relies on imparting an account of the fresh release from an evil that has sought to ruin my and the lives of those dearest to me. Forgive the manner in which I convey my message of abomination and subsequent deliverance from the poison that has threatened to wrest the very essence of all our souls from this living earth.

As you will remember, from early childhood, I have found solace in the world's natural wonders, evidenced by my change in demeanor to one of joy when exposed to the beauty of the creatures that ramble unencumbered throughout the countryside and the majesty of the earth's features, from tumbling cataract to valleys painted with scented blossoms stretching to the horizon. The mountains of our homeland have brought me innumerable pleasures and opened my heart in ways

that give me undoubted faith in the kindness of humanity and the continuance of a life filled with love and adoration with those whom we are most acquainted. To preface my fantastic tale, though it hardly bears repeating, I must remind you of the extreme duress and heavy strain that has played upon my spirit in a most desponding manner. I will endeavor to only touch upon the origin of this misery as necessary to lead you to understand the conclusion of my narrative and our longstanding grief.

As I am wont to do, I sought refuge in the mountains of my heretofore philosophical playground in order to escape the workings of my depressed mind and find refreshing solitude with nature as my invigorating backdrop. At the outset of my journey, my mind was put at ease by the chirruping of all the winged creatures busily preparing for the expansion of their species and the springtime greenery in full bloom. My perambulation found me eventually at the mouth of a cave above the district wherefore I commenced. As I was weary from so many restless nights and the day's walk, I perceived a dry and mossy ledge in the grotto's interior, which could afford me a moment of intermission from my ambling. The secluded respite from the blustery winds, coupled with the inactivity of my fatigued frame, soon led me into a delicious dreamland where I communicated with those who had prematurely left this world and were mutual treasures within.

My extraordinary reverie was cut short by a slight rustle, barely registering in my sleep-induced state but rather on the peripheries of my conscious thoughts. At once, though, I was desperately frightened, as I expected the specter who had followed my tormented steps had come to exact its final revenge upon my head in my

place of retreat. Oh, love of my life, you cannot imagine the scenes that passed before my eyes as I awaited my assured destruction. Your serene face and loving smile were the focus of my attention as I contemplated my own demise at the hand of a brute that my machinations animated and promptly abandoned to traverse the earth alone and in misery. However, my anxieties somewhat abated as I detected a gnarled hand of what could only be a human being feeling its way into the relative dimness of the cavern. I exhaled a sigh of relief at the sight of a fellow mortal sliding into the shadows before me and beheld a man of advanced years with gleaming eyes and ashen bristles draped from his chin to his chest. Startled as I was, the stranger presented himself with likewise affect. The visitor approached my resting place, apparently not detecting my personage, yet when he began to speak, I knew that he directed his words to my ears in order to relieve his own suffering.

The stranger began to confess the error of his ways and the subsequent evils he endured due to his wanton foolishness. He, like myself, became a victim of an entity that sought revenge for a stolen life by surrounding the old man with realizations of death. With little exception to my own circumstances, all that he relied upon for his sanity and welfare were snatched from existence yet remained within his vision to haunt him. He illustrated the tragedy of his fellow mates that left him alone, adrift, without the means to steer away from his own extinction. He further declared a loosening of time that transported his colleagues to a condition of suspended death, with neither the air nor the great cleanup crew of corpses, such as the flies and minute organisms tasked with transforming flesh into its basest atoms, having their way with the dead. I know all too well how exposure to a multitude of cadavers can wreak havoc upon a person's psyche and cause the tearing of the soul and a disorganization of the faculties. The man seemed bent to his purpose, however, of sharing these supernatural events as much as I felt compelled to attend to his speech. As the traveler's story

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drew to a close, I wondered at the meaning of his memoirs and how it came to pass that the grievous mistake he made determined his persistent brush with agony in the necessity of retelling his tale. The following occurrences led me to believe in the goodness of humanity and a higher power, as was the intention of his autobiography.

When the timeworn pilgrim concluded his chronicle, I was still puzzled about the means of the strange happenings I had been an audience to for the previous hour or so. I inquired thus, and his reply was one of the most fantastical portions of his rendering. He led me to know that when he witnessed the mystical suspension of his peers, arriving on a ship of doom, two figures appeared with the power to give and to take away. In his report, the pair of beings were engaged in a game with the life of the journeyer as the wager by which one stood to lose and one would be victorious. By his reckoning, he dubbed one the personification of that which he escaped from – death. The other he feared more, as she was the manifestation of a greater malevolence and the mastermind of his fate to roam the earth and proclaim his allegory. Just as he began to explain her role in his condemnation, as if summoned by a likewise call to torture the spirit of its recipient, my progeny and abhorrence incarnate, the monster I feared would follow me to the mountainous cave, filled the entrance with his enormous physique.

What came next was the arrival of an apparition phantasmagorical in the highest degree. Presently, in the confines of the den, which already held two cursed men and the fulsome beast who controlled my destiny, entered two ghastly fiends with motives villainous in the uttermost. Death was upon us all with his companion, Life-in-Death.¹ Yet they paid us no heed, and it became evident that the game begun long ago in the pres-

ence of the stranger was in another round of betting, for the silence of the dice was deafening as they were launched in the air, awaiting the future of the inmates of our natural chamber.

What happened next was so abrupt that I can hardly believe it was more than a dream fabricated by the long-time strains upon my body and brain. Yet, I can assure you that at long last, our seemingly interminable heartache is finally at its end. Within a moment of the dice striking the sediment of the cave floor, two developments immediately unfolded. With Death winning the dice roll, he promptly seized the ancient stranger within his grasp and carried him away while the storyteller glanced in my direction with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his lips. At last, he was released from his curse, and his penance was done. On the other hand, my repulsive creation and Life-in-Death had spied each other and drifted toward each other with a look of admiration to put new mothers gazing upon their newborns to shame. I can still scarcely believe our good fortune that the demon birthed from my own hands has ceased this world and is content to make his home with a female with whom he can share the meagerness of his life. She is a sufficient match for his dreadfulness and with their union, ours is secure.

With the roll of the dice, you and I are left with our burdens of death behind us, and the curse of years has been broken for both I and the elder one who brought his versions of devastation to the inhabitants of the cave. The weight around my neck has been lifted, and I shall return to your loving arms a new man, ready to share a future free from the malignancy that has ruled over our lives since our first tragedy. God willing, you will receive this letter only days before my return, and I fervently wish with all my heart that our reunion will be blessed with all the happiness that we deserve tenfold.ⁱ †

¹ Line 93 from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

ⁱ *The piece that I have written is inspired by two works of British literature from the early 19th century. I have taken liberties with the content by rewriting and inventing a (monster) mashup of the novel Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.*

MELINA D. STRIVELLI

Runner Up Photography
“Church in Clouds”



Untitled

Jarad Higgins once said “Never been afraid to die but I always been afraid to die before I get where I’m going,” Jarad Higgins, commonly known as Juice WRLD, died December 8th, 2019. Before he died his net worth had reached almost 4 million; he had a dream and he chased it. Every day people are influenced by music, and even the influencers started somewhere. Music can change minds and hearts little and small. I write and sing and record music; music is my superpower.


When I was born my biological mother didn’t make the best of choices; by the age of 4 I was adopted. For the longest time I was upset with her because I wasn’t mature enough to grasp the harsh reality of how cruel the world can be. Every conflict has two sides; I failed to see my mothers side until I heard Snuff by Slipknot. The lyric that stuck out the most was “if you love me let me go” and “run away before I know,” it took time for me to understand that love is hard. My mother wanted me around but she couldn’t take care of me and sometimes loving someone means letting them go. Music can help someone to see the other side of a situation.

I thought I knew everything as a 8th grader, but little did I know people would change. When I got to Early College a lot of my friends either left or turned out to be a different person. The worst part about high school is that people change; some change for the better and some change for the worst. A big part of music is giving the people something to relate to, something that says you aren’t alone. The song Changes by XXXTentacion really spoke to me; one of the lines is “I don’t understand this, you’re changing I can’t stand it, my heart can’t take this damage and the way I feel can’t stand it” this made me feel like I was heard and that my feelings were validated. People change and that can be really hard but there’s always someone out there that has felt what you felt; that has given me a sense of comfort through change.

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Recently I learned that sometimes change can be good. I have always been the person to overlook things that bothered me and give one too many chances. I learned to let go of people that hold me back and to limit the chances I give out. A lot of people disliked this change to the point where I wasn’t sure if I had made a mistake or not. The song No Heart by YNW Melly says “I’m not playing fair with my love no more” and I really connected to that line. Some lessons can be taught through music, I was taught that it’s okay to be cautious about who you love.

When I write music and when I record it’s like stepping into my own world.

There’s mixing and editing and cutting and enhancing and presets and so many things that add up to your sound. Music has given me a world of my own, a book of lessons to learn from, and a list of validations that give me confidence. Life is a journey, a hard yet rewarding journey, it can be full of heartache and beautiful moments. It’s not about who reaches the finish line first or who’s better at what; it’s about what makes you special and music makes me special. 



I am a soul

I am a soul natured in Malawi's embrace,
from the shores of Lake Malawi, where life
moves at its own pace.

I am from the rhythm of the local music, and,
the warmth of the African sun,
From the vibrant stores, where the day's work
is never done.

I am from community gathering, under the
mighty baobab tree
from the stories told at a dusk, a part of
our life history

I am from the cycle of seasons, each
with its own tale.

From the place I call home, where friendships
never fail.

A place where mountains, reaching for the
the sky is too high.

For in Malawi memories are made, to last
forever.

In the next decade, here's my vision to
be working on my dream job, and to bring
balance near.

To explore the world and its beauty.

I am from the warm heart of Africa.

ELIZABETH ASHCRAFT

Summer Rizer



Art Connects Us

I remember being little and always coloring. I loved coloring books and the drawings in the books. As I was drawing over the lines in a coloring book, I imagined myself as the one who created them. Growing up surrounded by other people who drew, I strived to be able to create my own art. Joining social media I always saw these amazing drawings done in pencil that blew my mind. Girls in my class that drew anime or their own little characters made me feel jealous. I wasn't creative like that. Being a child you are always asked what you want to be when you grow up. I was never able to come up with an answer that felt right to me. I always said "a doctor" or "a veterinarian" because I wanted to help people or animals. I knew I wanted to make a change. I just didn't know how or what I could even do to help.

Always drawing in coloring books ended up not being enough for me. That's when I started to learn to draw on my own. I moved to a different school called Shining Rock. I was a part of the first students going there. I sat next to this girl with long blonde hair and saw her drawing. She showed me this beautiful drawing done in the anime style. It was a woman sitting in a pond with lotus flowers falling around her. Her hair was draped around her with a tree in the background. I thought it was so beautiful and cool that she could create something like that. She inspired me to start drawing in the anime art style. I created little characters that I would copy from the internet. I never claimed I created them from my own imagination, but I was proud of myself for being able to look at a picture and copy it. During middle school I had this amazing teacher named Ms. O. She taught me all kinds of different perspectives and art types. During these years I started perfecting my realism in drawings. My favorite was a

drawing I called Spring, which depicted a woman with brown hair and freckles painting her face. I put flowers all around her, and she had beautiful blue eyes. In high-school, my freshman year was cut off during covid, and I spent a lot of my free time drawing. I started painting abstract works. I was testing how paint moved and the texture I wanted to achieve. I've perfected looking at a picture of someone and drawing them in 10-15 minutes. I have since then started mixing realism with abstract portions to create an impact.

Ms. O had a drawing board where we could put our drawings up. I had made a drawing of a girl with a blue background and blue eyes to match. She had brown hair and pretty earrings. I put it up feeling very proud of myself. Three weeks later, a girl messaged me asking if it was my drawing. She told me that every time she walked into the art room she would look at it with admiration. I felt recognized. I also had my spring drawing in the local art exhibit, which showcased students' artwork. I visited when they opened and stayed for about an hour. It was filled with art works done by my peers. There was so much talent in the room. They also had cookies and drinks on a table that was next to my art work. I received so many compliments on my art piece. A lot of people who were attracted to my art work were so shocked by how young I was. I competed in a state wide art competition with Scholastic. I entered two art works, which included one about how I felt during covid. It was a self-portrait about how I felt like I had lost my identity. The other painting was two women facing away from each other. They were painted green to represent mother nature. I chose to do this piece about the racism that was on going in our country during this time. The painting was to represent that even through the ongoing turmoil that as women we

had each other's backs. I was the runner up in this competition. I felt so honored; even though I did not win, I was still recognized for my art.

Unknowingly I started using art for my therapy. I grew up with split parents which in itself is difficult. I also struggled with my identity for a long time. I was always wishing I was someone else, someone better than who I am. When I started doing abstract painting, I was able to just throw paint and my feelings at the canvas to let it out. My mom is older and struggled understanding my mental health issues. With my mom not understanding and going through a very toxic relationship at the age of 16, it became very hard for me to express my feelings in a healthy way. I was able to escape into painting for hours at a time. I had started releasing all the pent up emotions I had that I was able to let go through painting. I also had a friend who was trying therapy, and it did not really help her. Even though I am not a professional, I did not mind her leaning on me for support. Thinking about her failed attempts at therapy and about how much art helped me. After I suggested for her to draw her feelings out she took my advice, and it helped her a lot. Then I learned that art therapy is a profession that I could do. I have since started thinking about all my friends who have had failed attempts at therapy, who don't have a safe space to express their feelings. At one point I was also in that situation. Art has increased my confidence, and given me peace in knowing who I am. Bringing me healing while being creative, art became my safe space.

Not only struggling with my own mental health, but being around friends and family who also face challenges I noticed that traditional therapy doesn't help them. My friends and I have a difficult time being self aware but not knowing how to help ourselves. I found coping

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through my art helped me a lot. My friends who also drew found out it helped them as well. Going through a lot of tough challenges, art was my escape. Being a little kid with art all around me, I found something more than just art. It suddenly became not what can I create next for others to praise me. It became what I will make that shows who I am. Since I can remember, I have always seen the pain in others, pain in the world that can't be fixed alone. Art is a way to show that pain, to show emotions. Art connects us in more ways than we can imagine, not only to showcase our emotions, but to also feel heard and seen through other people's work. ✚

KENNA LAWING

Portrait



To Have a Brother's Back

A brother is to have a brother's back
No matter where we may go
Whether it is together or separate,
The 2 of us may never know.

Brothers will always stick together
Whether we laugh or fight
All I know is one little phrase
“Everything is gonna be alright.”

We each have our own hobbies
Some that we two may share
I'm into wrestling, you're into Magic
Yet inside us, we have love, support,
and care.

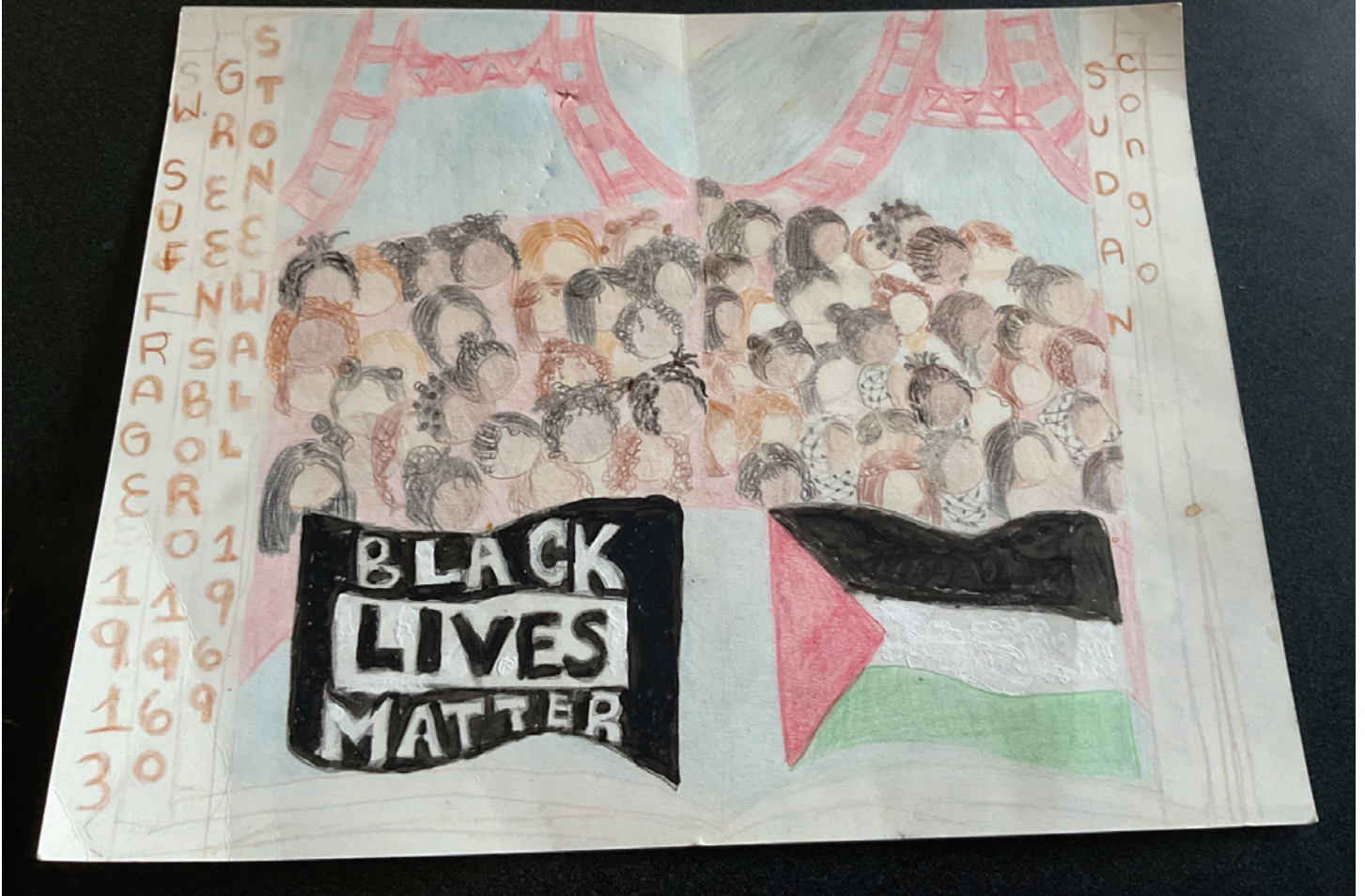
No matter what may keep us down
We'll do our best to keep looking up.
Our futures ahead are looking bright
Cheer for each other, and raise our cup.

Raise our cups in future's delight
For wonder and mystery of what it'll bring
One's journey is for art and design
The other's is for inspirational teaching.

Our paths may be tough ahead
Together or separate, we attack
Whatever walls hold us, I'll always know
A brother is to have a brother's back

CAROLINA HERNANDEZ

Black Lives Matter



STEPHANIE SALES

Orange Box



MELINA D. STRIVELLI

Pink Sky



KINLEY GILLIAM

Colosseum

DAD: A Ten-Sentence Short Story

Nine-year-old Ben had begged for a puppy for months and having seen a small ad in the back of the Sunday paper, his father finally agreed.

The next Saturday, on the forty-mile trip to the rural farm, Ben was given, in detail, the expectations, duties and responsibilities involved in the acquisition of a puppy.

He had heard it all before.

The puppies, taffy-colored cockers six months old, were playing in the straw of a filthy stall as the farmer opened the wire gate for Ben, allowing the boy his pick of the litter.

Standing aside, foot on a hay bale, Ben's father was impatient, and, finding little to engage the farmer mucking out a nearby stall, he swore into the fetid air, "Good Christ, it stinks to high heaven in here."

"Let's wrap it up, Ben; just pick one, for God's sake," he said, batting at the horseflies that caught in his hair.

Scooping up the little one nipping his pantleg, Ben handed the pup to his father and, as puppies will do, it peed all over the man's shirtfront.

Ben's father reared back roaring, dropped the pup to the floor and smacked Ben upside the head, knocking him sideways, hard against the barn door.

He turned, gave the farmer a ten-dollar bill, jammed his hands in his pockets and strode toward his truck.

"I need a drink."





KINLEY GILLIAM

Flowers Sketch

KINLEY GILLIAM

Woman Profile





MELINA D. STRIVELLI

Tree with Spanish Moss

My Life-Changing Experiences with Challenged Adults

Throughout childhood and as a younger adult, I was never educated about intellectually challenged individuals. I am ashamed to say this of myself, but I looked towards those individuals as if there was something wrong with them because they walk, talk, and act differently than us. Being raised the way I was, being different was not acceptable. I was not to associate with individuals that were “different”, and “unacceptable” as my father would say. Julie walked beside me at work and spoke of how rewarding her job is. That conversation sparked my interest, so I applied to be a Development Disability Trainer and got the job. After only months in my new career, I started to realize my views and feelings began to change drastically for the better. I grew to enjoy my job. By showing me how much of an impact a person can have on another’s quality of life, my clients taught me that patience, perseverance, and positive dedication are helpful tools to have when working with disabled adults. Who knew these tools would help another adult through their daily lives?

Speaking of perseverance, Lisa is one of the mild cases I work with daily. Lisa struggled with learning and comprehending life skills, such as retaining the value of money. No activities seemed to help relate the value to the piece of money shown. Her way of learning was misinterpreted! I decided to use my inner child method by relating to Lisa like I would a child. We made a matching card game to learn this memory skill. We printed cards with all the paper money and values then did the same with each coin. Lisa can now count back change and subtract what she owes. Lisa taught me that perseverance is a great tool to use in life, even with other adults. Sometimes the way we learn, others learn using different techniques.

In my experience, a lot of patience is required with Chris, he was diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome. He speaks out of turn whenever the urge strikes and uses inappropriate language to the extent of demeaning his peers. Some of his favorite phrases were, "Put a sock in it!" and "Ah, shut up!" To correct this behavior was a big goal in his daily tasks. His concentration levels are noticeably short and focus on one subject at a time until another completely offsets the first! Multiple reminders were needed to display appropriate behavior.

During his day, he would fall off task thousands of times. Relocating him was even unsuccessful. Details of things he enjoys arise as I am listening to Chris's hyper-impulsive outbursts. I was then able to introduce a reward program to enforce positive behavior. He was rewarded for his good behavior with a cup of coffee and a trip out in the community wherever he chose to go. That reminder in the morning of his reward system made positive changes throughout his day. Chris listened and stayed on task more often! As I got to know him, I realized Chris connects on diverse levels of understanding. Chris taught me that patience is very useful in life to understand others.


In profound cases of intellectual disabilities, persistence can go a long way. The individual cannot self-advocate and has challenges with physical activities. Andrew's vocabulary consists of three words: ride, roses, and horse. Other than communication he struggles with anger. For example, Andrew makes a "shush" sound when he is upset and starts punching and kicking like a horse at the other cap workers. With an angry expression, he would growl loudly. In my observation, different faces tend to offset his aggressiveness. Andrew had never shown his aggressive side toward me! In aiding him through his daily tasks, it was noticeable that if I repeated structured words, Andrew would respond by eye contact. Professionals in his disability case said, "Andrew could not be taught any further communication words." When Andrew used his limited vocabulary, he was rewarded with his needs through his own words. By example, Guns-n-Roses was his favorite band, so you can guess what "roses" meant. Watching his reaction to the things going on around him in the community, I would point out different objects repeatedly. The butterflies would flutter by and land on a

flower beside us and he seemed interested in them. The next time we went to the park, I took a net to catch the butterflies so he could observe them closer, meanwhile I am repeating "butterfly."

A very enjoyable treat for him was ice cream. Andrew started associating the ice chips and coldness to the word ice cream. I would repeat the word ice cream while he was enjoying his cone. He started to famil-

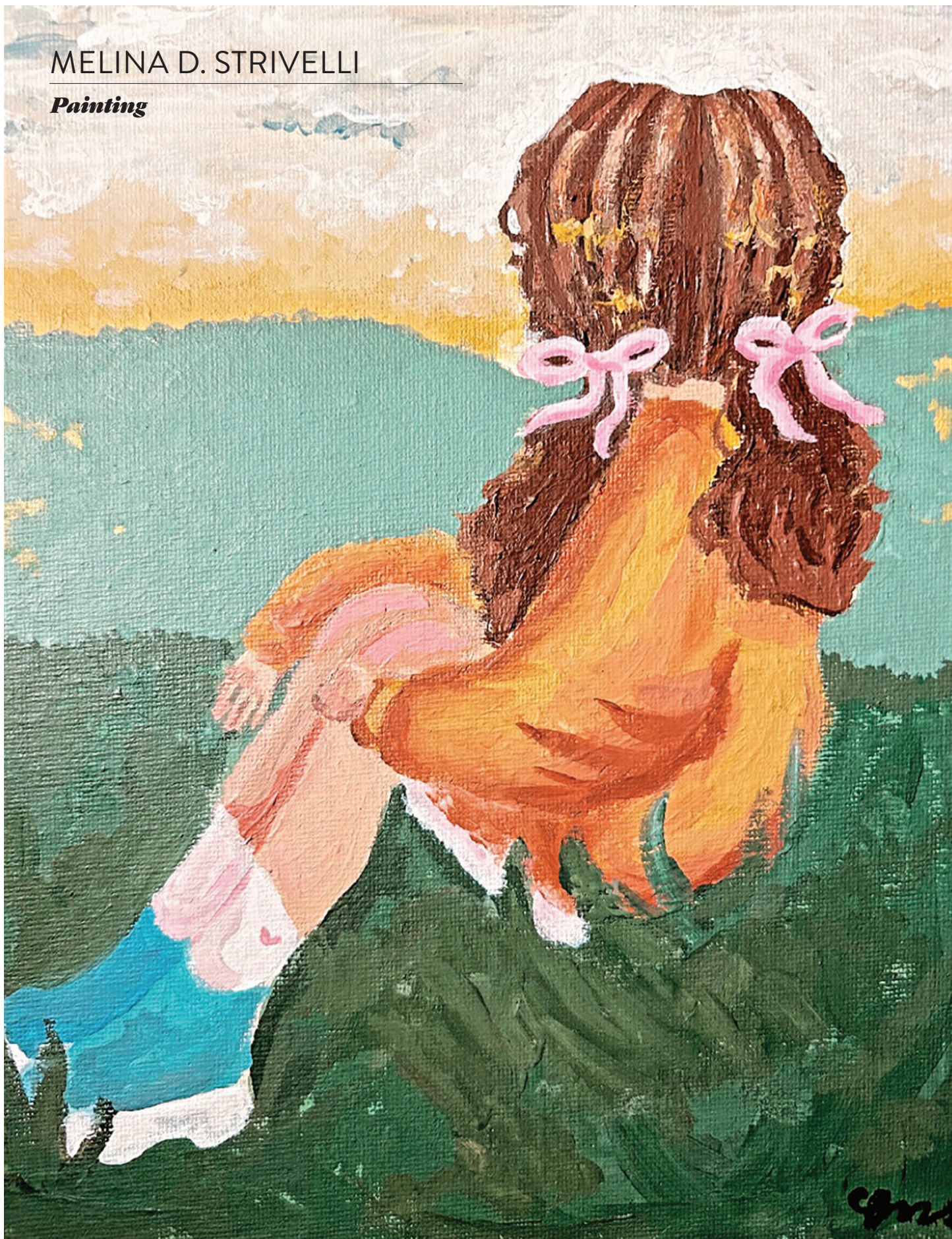
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iarize himself with objects that were spoken in consistency. It took a while of being persistent on these few objects and Andrew could advocate three more words. This was a huge accomplishment! I realized this man looked up to me and knew that I was focused on helping him become more independent. Andrew taught me that positive dedication can make all the difference in the lives of others.

In conclusion, working with intellectually challenged adults has opened my eyes to a whole different view on life. Things I had been taught in childhood; I now view in a whole new perspective. The mentally challenged are people, too. What they taught me will be forever cherished. Never view life as a difficulty you cannot overcome or defeat. We should view life as a challenge to grow from rather than an obstacle holding you back. These were the moments in my experience with my clients that enriched my life and solely made life better through the rewards and happiness helping others succeed has to offer. Patience, perseverance, and positive dedication will take you far in life. 

MELINA D. STRIVELLI

Painting





STEPHANIE SALES

Musbrooms

STEPHANIE SALES

Sunshine



ELIZABETH BENOMAR

Swan





Millpond Mosaic 2024



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