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# Millpond Mosaic





# Millpond Mosaic 2025

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Many thanks to the HCC Foundation for their generous support for *Millpond Mosaic 2025* student awards.

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# A Message

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**From Janine Dalton**

elcome to our readers!

Our 3rd edition of *Millpond Mosaic* marks the end of an academic year that challenged our WNC and campus communities to find a resolve and resiliency we may not have thought possible before September 2024. After witnessing and experiencing the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Helene and the worst flooding our beloved mountains have seen in over 100 years, we have faced the physical and emotional trauma following what scientists call 1,000-year flood events like record river levels, landslides, and widespread flooding that took many lives and destroyed homes, businesses, and infrastructure that connected rural communities to one another and to resources. Landslides and flood waters rearranged riverbeds, left barren, red clay scars where vibrant forest beds and stately trees once graced our view. An intangible pain comes from reorienting our daily views to accept the unfamiliar where it seemed the familiar would always be, waiting to greet us.

There is a physical and emotional weariness that follows...and lingers. There is, however, also an air of gratitude and grace that has always woven together communities in WNC, draping us in comfort like the “smokey” fog we see drifting among our mountains on a brisk fall morning.

As a campus community, after Helene’s impact, we were not physically together for weeks; however, we were nearly immediately checking in on one another: students, staff, and faculty—accounting for needs and reaching out with support. What do you need? How can we help? How can we heal?

The Ways We Heal is a theme that connects much of the writing and artwork in this year’s edition of *Millpond Mosaic*. Our creativity and art hold and express moments in time that are profound and that change us, that remind us of our humanity, of our vulnerability, of the exquisite and breathtaking beauty of a simple

gesture of hope. Memories and stories shared set our feet on solid common ground with a resolve to care for one another: those who lost loved ones, who lost homes, who need help with recovery and healing. And it is happening, recovery and healing, slowly...surely, a process with no time limit or certain “end date.”

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**There is a physical and emotional weariness that follows...and lingers. There is, however, also an air of gratitude and grace that has always woven together communities in WNC, draping us in comfort like the “smokey” fog we see drifting among our mountains on a brisk fall morning.**

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Thank you to the student writers and artists who have shared their talents and insights with our campus community in this edition of *Millpond Mosaic*, with a special expression of gratitude to a group of tenacious and gifted students who collaborated on the inspirational collage pages found in the middle of this edition of MPM. My brilliant ENG 125 Creative Writing students chose “The Ways We Heal” as the theme for their collaborative expression of the grace and resiliency they have witnessed in their home and campus communities over the past several months. We are weary but grateful for the persistent hope we share in WNC and on our campus here at HCC.



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# Naomi Hatcher



**Runner Up, Photography**  
**"Tree Canopy"**





## A Short Story of Stories

I believe the art of storytelling is the embodiment of the human experience. It is the thing that separates us the most from our animal brethren. Rather than passing generational knowledge through instinct, we document our lives through a written and verbal history. Stories connect us to our past and provide wisdom for the future. Storytelling is significant in every facet of my life, especially how I relate to the world around me. Most importantly, telling stories helps me stay connected to my departed loved ones.

My cousin and I spent our childhood summers exploring the several acres of wood that comprised our grandparents' property. Beneath the cool shade of the towering trees, our fantasies came to life. Sometimes we were dinosaur-hunting time travelers or ferocious space pirates; slingshots became our rifles, and sticks turned into sabers. Our tiny clubhouse transformed into a mighty ship that sailed upon a vast sea of sticky brown pine needles. We reluctantly left our forest playground for the shelter of Nanny and Papaw's little brick house when night crept in. Most times, we made it to the porch just before darkness fell. However, if we arrived even a minute past eight-thirty, they would greet us with a stern look and nanny's familiar warning:

"C'mon and get in this house before a booger gets ahold of yinz!" Mention of the booger man was all it took to put a little haste in our step. The booger man was a silent unknown hiding around every corner, waiting to steal wandering children who stay out in the dark. When we asked what the booger man looked like, Nanny gave us a different answer every time. Sometimes it was a pale, faceless monster who lived in the treetops, descending upon the valley under the cloak of night. Other times, it was a massive, ape-like creature, stronger than a bear and meaner than a bull. Our imaginations would fill in the gaps. Whenever the temptation arose to stray a little farther into the forest than Nanny allowed, visions of us being dragged away and ripped to pieces kept our heads straight. Of course, I now know that these stories served to keep us from getting lost, hurt, or kidnapped. Yet, her fables left an imprint on me that I can still feel to this day. It was through my nanny's horrifying fables that I came to understand the power of a good story.

Part of being a good storyteller is being a good bull-shitter. My father was one of the best storytellers in the family, well versed in the art of yanking chains. My dad always had a new story to tell, ranging from country gossip to absurd tall tales. No matter what outrageous path these stories took, he always managed to convince me, or some poor sucker at the gas station, that they were real. His success was due in part to his explosive mannerisms; his expressive demeanor served to convey genuine fear or excitement, reflected also by his tone and cadence. He, too, would often tease me about the booger man, his eyes flashing wild with fright as he spoke in a low, hushed voice: "He's real; I saw em' in the woods behind our house the other night!" Eventually, I learned to use his tactics to add ammunition to my own tales. This usually got me into trouble since these

old tricks could hardly work on anyone in my own family. However, when we started swapping scary stories at sleepovers, I saw the perfect opportunity to put these new skills to good use. This was especially thrilling when we had someone new over, who was not yet privy to my foolery. I would set the mood by shutting off all the lights and drawing the curtains shut, taking care to leave a sliver of the window still visible. Pulling from my father's facade, I spoke in a low, foreboding

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**Time does not so much as mend the heart as it does put distance between you and the pain. Stories, however, provided us with much needed cushion from grief.**

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voice and contorted my face to match the fear I was hoping to instill. Every now and then, I would pause and peek over my shoulder at the crack in curtains. When I noticed my friends compulsively doing the same, I knew it was working. If by the end of the night I could convince them that there was something peeking in at us through the window, I would consider my story a success. During a few of these sleepovers, my dad even became my accomplice. He would do things like flip the breaker or tap on the second-story window with a rake. I look back on these nights as some of my fondest memories with my father.

About a month after I started ninth grade, the unthinkable happened. My father suffered a massive heart attack and died without any warning. He was only fif-

ty-three. Six years of heavy drinking had taken their toll on his body and our relationship, which had grown cold and distant. The memories I hoarded of our better days together provided a barrier between the sickly, grief-stricken shock that poured into every corner of my daily life. My nanny, his mother, took it the hardest. The tenacious, affable woman who once filled my head with such vivid stories became a shell of her former self. Her plump figure shrived to half its previous size. Her eyes became sunken and red from the constant crying. She looked like a completely different person by the time a year had passed. Some wounds never heal, and the void left behind when a loved one dies is one of them. Time does not so much as mend the heart as it does put distance between you and the pain. Stories, however, provided us with much needed cushion from grief. I began visiting my grandparent's house more often, where nanny and I would sit on the back porch swapping stories for hours. I listened intently as she divulged vivid details about my father's childhood, what he was like when he was my age, and all the ways I reminded her of him. These stories were far from depressing, instead tending towards his love for practical jokes and making trouble at his schoolhouse. One story that stands out in my mind was from his sixth-grade year: Having developed a feud with most of the school's faculty, my dad decided the best way to intact revenge would be to steal the principal's car keys and hide an open tin of sardines in the trunk of his Buick. Looking back on those nights, I am incredibly grateful I had the opportunity to know my father better through my nanny's silly stories.

Several years have passed since those sweet summer evenings, and unfortunately my Nanny has passed with them. All that remains now are the stories I share in her honor, which keep her memory alive. The influence of my father and my grandmother made me into the writer I am today, for which I am forever grateful. When I miss them the most, I remember the wisdom left in their wake: In the absence of a life, a story is eternal. ✚



# Sean Schneider

Runner Up, Artwork  
"Summer Night"





# Mary Kathryn Oberg

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**Runner Up, Poetry**

## **Sleepover**

*Bunk beds reach to the ceiling,  
but you lean over the edge to share  
your secrets and stories while  
peals of laughter careen through the air.  
Now I take to memory  
the sound of your youthful voice so dear,  
and I'll recall when we're old  
what a joy it was to be right here.*

# Naomi Hatcher

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**"Full Moon"**





## The Souvenir

**B**efore Jack could catch it, an old glass paperweight fell from yet another battered box marked SAVE. It banged onto the attic floor, bounced once, stirring up a puff of gritty dust, and landed with a thud beside his wife's feet. Startled, Grace jerked back. And there it was. Embedded under a thick glass dome was the faded photo of the Algonquin Hotel, that historic limestone landmark, off Fifth Avenue, near Times Square.

Jack was stunned. He'd thought of that weekend seventeen years ago dozens of times, those three secret days he and Frannie had shared there, stolen from their mates. But somehow, he'd forgotten the paperweight. He'd bought two of them at the hotel's tiny gift shop on the final day of their tryst, before she left for the parking garage, and he'd hailed a cab to Penn Station. He had asked that hers be wrapped, tied with a rose velvet ribbon. He'd slipped his own paperweight deep into the bottom pocket of his saddle leather duffle. After that, he couldn't recall. He'd just forgotten about it.

Grace and Jack were cleaning out the attic—making room for the boxes and bins from their grandson's room now that he was off to college. It was a generous old house, the rooms large and welcoming, the climb to the attic steep. It had been his parents' and then his and Gracie's for all these years. They were happy in Fairfield, the commute to Manhattan acceptable for them

both. There was much to be done, but when the paperweight fell to the floor, progress stopped. Grace squatted down, retrieved the paperweight, held it out with a question in her eyes.

"Where'd this come from?" She dusted it off, rubbing it along her shirt sleeve.

"Well, let's have a look." Jack reached for the paperweight, but Grace moved it out of his grasp.

"Someone's written a date on the back." Grace turned the paperweight in her hands, squinting for a closer look.

Needing to gather his thoughts, have a story to explain this treasure, Jack sat down heavily on the pile of suitcases behind him. He cleared his throat, wiped his forehead, shuffled his feet. He was shaken.

Aside from his memories, all Jack had of that Algonquin weekend was this one souvenir. It wasn't right that Gracie should be holding it. He grabbed it roughly from her hands, bending her ring finger painfully. Grace looked up, surprised, stricken. She made a little mewling sound in the back of her throat, tucked her left hand protectively under her armpit, took a few unsteady steps backward. He hadn't meant to hurt her—not now, not then.

Frowning a little, Jack stood up, wrapped an arm around Gracie, pulled her to his side. She'd been at work in the attic all morning. Her graying auburn curls, now stiff with attic dust, poked from a faded bandana. The still, mothy air hung on her. She smelled a little musty; old, really. He brushed her cheek.

"I think we both need a break. I'm going down and make coffee. I'll give a shout when it's ready." Jack turned and dropped the paperweight into the pocket of his sweatpants, where it hung heavily and smacked his thigh with every step to the attic stairs.

After two cups in the morning, Jack wasn't an all-day coffee guy, but as he went about grinding the beans, finding filters, and measuring water, he thought back to when he was nearing 50, more than 17 years ago. He'd been lonely. Gracie, God love her, didn't touch him for weeks. He understood, though, or he tried. Kitty, their daughter, had returned home, newly divorced and dragging her two-year-old. Gracie had given herself up to the drama, the demands, the physical work, emotional strain. And she still had her job at the bank. By the end of the day, Gracie had nothing left for him. So, Jack kept busy. He hung new gutters, cleaned the eaves, calked the tub in the guest bath. Every Saturday he washed his truck, then hosed down the driveway, forcing fluffy suds to the street. He followed Bobby Flay, bought a big smoker, mastered BBQ; he weeded the driveway, painted the fence, sprayed the apple trees out back. And every Tuesday night he made tacos for dinner. When he finished cleaning the basement, he did the garage. On a few trips to Goodwill, dropping off donations, Jack would park, go inside, wander around. He wasn't really a shopper, but the jigsaw puzzle section always drew his eye. He'd taken home half a dozen boxes, some more beat up than others. His favorite was the 500-piecer of trucks. He'd worked on it by himself every evening for more than a week, rendering the dining room table off limits for dining. Gracie was annoyed that they had to eat in the kitchen. He was running out of things to do. When a co-worker talked about joining their church choir, Jack thought "why not?" He wrote down the address and showed up for rehearsal the very next Wednesday.

He'd met Frannie that night. An alto in the center of the choir loft, she sat right next to Jack. If anything, Jack was still a full-throated tenor, with college glee club to his credit. And Frannie. About his age, slightly tousled, with a surprising smile, little laugh lines, and quick blue eyes. He mumbled an introduction. She patted his thigh. She had long fingers, beautiful hands. Right then Jack knew he still had a song to sing. The next day he found a new barber, got a better haircut, bought the expensive aftershave on his way out. Gracie never noticed, never said a word.

The following Wednesday, after rehearsal, he asked Frannie to coffee. And so it began between them, both eagerly awaiting time together on Wednesdays. Frannie

managed a mid-town art gallery, and her days were full, even though her son was grown and gone. Her husband of 22 years was a busy, rather stiff CEO, she said. Beyond that, neither of them talked about their mates. Neither of them wanted that intrusion. This was private. Theirs. Every Wednesday at the Parkway Coffee Shop.

One Wednesday night Jack was unusually quiet.

"There'll come a time, Frannie. You know that, right?" Jack's throat was husky with his thoughts.

Frannie looked into her coffee cup, added another creamer, stirred it all around and around. She couldn't look at him. Jack bounced his foot under the table and waited. Finally, laying her spoon alongside the saucer with a little clink, Frannie reached across the tabletop. She found his hands, held them gently, pulled him toward her.

"You pick the time. We'll pick the place together." And when she raised her gaze, she saw tears were starting in Jack's dark eyes.

The possibilities of a weekend together left them both a little giddy. Jack quickly suggested September 22nd, one week before his 50th birthday. The planning took several Wednesday meetups in their booth at the Parkway, heads together over Frannie's tablet, finding just the right place. And there it was. The Algonquin Hotel. Built in 1902, a few blocks from the Harvard, Yale, and New York Yacht clubs, in the heart of the theater district. Its history as a magnet for literary, music and theatrical types appealed to the artist in Frannie. When she read that an oilman bought the hotel in '46 for his wife who'd fallen in love with it on their honeymoon, Frannie was convinced. Jack loved the opulent rooms and luxe ambiance he saw on the website. He'd heard of the hotel's allure: discreet service, hushed dining room, fine wine. Jack and Frannie agreed it was kismet. Jack booked their room the very next day.

Drawn from his memories by the gurgling coffee pot and the smell of slightly burned beans, Jack snapped off the burner, set the pot to the back of the stove. He got out the cream, poured it in a small yellow pitcher, and found the sugar packets. Thinking to make it a little fancy, he pulled a pair of linen napkins from the kitchen breakfront. Gracie liked hazelnut syrup. He found that, too, then her favorite mug: Limoges, pink porcelain, gold around the rim. Finally, he grabbed two small spoons, put everything on a rosewood tray and set it



on the kitchen table. He remembered his story to Gracie all those years ago, explaining the weekend away. His management team had booked the Algonquin for a three-day planning session, a seminar and retreat; Friday to Sunday, September 22, 2006. One week before his 50th birthday. As a corporate perk, each attendee got a paperweight for his desk to mark the occasion. He was pretty sure Gracie would remember. Jack breathed deeply, finally letting his shoulders relax. He turned from the kitchen and went up the back stairs, feeling steadier with every step.

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**And Frannie. About his age, slightly tousled, with a surprising smile, little laugh lines, and quick blue eyes. He mumbled an introduction. She patted his thigh. She had long fingers, beautiful hands. Right then Jack knew he still had a song to sing.**

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Down the second-floor hallway, he passed his grandson's almost empty room, stopping briefly to inspect what was left to be done there. Brady had become a fine young fellow, on his way into the world as a freshman at Swarthmore, Gracie's alma mater. Jack hadn't contributed much to the boy over the years, but there hadn't been room for him. It was The Gracie Show right from the start, and Jack's part was backstage, at best. Jack turned at the end of the hallway; the door to the attic staircase was open, and he leaned in.

"Coffee's ready. Come on down now." He put his hand firmly on the handrail and started up. He could see dust mites dancing in the air at the top of the stairs. He couldn't see Gracie.

Grace was, in fact, in another part of the attic, lost to herself, trying for composure. Her head was thudding,

her finger ached. The date on that paperweight. Something inside her had snapped, sent her back to somewhere she shouldn't have been, made her breath come high in her throat. September 22, 2006. She couldn't speak. It felt fresh, immediate. She was grateful Jack had gone downstairs. Unsteady and needing to sit, she sunk into her grandmother's wing chair, motheaten and lumpy, behind a pile of fabric bolts at the far end of the attic.

Jack had been gone that weekend, in the city for a corporate seminar mid-town.

As Senior Loan Officer at North American Trust, Grace was always the last to leave the bank on a Friday. Everyone else, officers, tellers and staff, were gone by late afternoon, cutting out early for a start on their weekends. Grace was the bank's steady hand, its trusted servant. She'd been there fifteen years. Making a final check of the cash drawers in the tellers' cage, she saw a familiar figure push through the front door. Grace looked at her watch. It was just 4:20. Roland Barnett, one of the bank's prestigious accounts with a large portfolio of loans, all under Grace's watchful eye, was striding through the bank lobby. He was a frequent and popular visitor to North American Trust, and he always found his way to her office.

She waved. "I just need a few minutes, Roland. I'll be right there."

Making short work of the cash drawer count, Grace ducked into the ladies' room to freshen herself. Every encounter with Roland Barnett set her astir. A few years shy of 50, Grace knew she was holding together well. She owed her looks to her parents: auburn curls, a square jaw, even smile, creamy skin, but she'd lost reasons to pay attention to her looks. By day's end she was too tired to care, having given everything she had to everyone who asked. Grace washed her hands, patted water on her eyelids, fingertip fluffed her hair. She carried a favorite lipstick for times such as this, a deep peach to compliment to her hazel eyes. She was ready.

Roland was waiting in her office, stood up, gave her a hug, then held her at arms' length. "End of the day, end of the week, and you still look lovely, Grace." He made a point of scanning her from top to toe. She blushed. He chuckled.

"I've just come from the closing on those commercial lots on lower Park Avenue. I'm grateful for all you

did to facilitate that loan for me, Grace. Come celebrate with me!”

She was taken aback, but just for a moment, and steadied herself on the edge of her desk. The idea suddenly had enormous appeal. Jack was away; Kitty had taken Brady to Vermont for the weekend. She was responsible for no one, accountable only to herself. Her cheeks went hot, flushed. It was hard to swallow. Grace felt like Roland Barnett had offered her candy, and she was suddenly very hungry.

“I’d love to,” she said. She couldn’t think of anything she wanted to do more.

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**She looped her arm through his, and they strolled away, the warm September afternoon wrapping them together, as New York glittered in the early autumn light. Grace couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this light, this lifted up. And she gave in to it, not really knowing where she was going.**

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Grabbing her purse and jacket from the coat tree, Grace locked her office, set the bank’s alarm to away, and followed Roland out the front door, locking it behind her. She looped her arm through his, and they strolled away, the warm September afternoon wrapping them together, as New York glittered in the early autumn light. Grace couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this light, this lifted up. And she gave in to it, not really knowing where she was going. Roland Barnett knew. He’d had his eye on Grace Dickerson for more than a year. They were headed for the cocktail lounge at the St. Regis hotel, a dozen blocks down Fifth Avenue. He was known there, recognized. Roland Barnett

was hard to miss. The grandson of Irish immigrants, a bear of a man with silvering black hair and a blinding smile, he’d grown up in South Boston, rough, without privilege, determined to have wealth and position. He had succeeded, but that struggle showed in his face. At 56, Roland Barnett was among the notables in New York. His real estate conglomerate impressed the right people, brought him power, favor. Very few people said “no” to Roland Barnett. The St. Regis was a landmark, one of the most important buildings on Fifth Avenue. He was comfortable with that. Built in 1904 by John Jacob Aster, its marble lobby, antiques, and tapestries told Roland he was among the wealthy and famous who, for more than a century, had been welcomed there. Cocktails in the hushed hotel bar started at a swanky \$26. Roland Barnett was comfortable with that, too. As he and Grace slid into his usual corner booth, heads turned. Grace knew something magic was happening to her. She felt glamorous on the arm of Roland Barnett, special, chosen. She was a little dizzy, light-headed, her breathing thin and quick. She felt beautiful, a little rascally. She had a feeling she wouldn’t be going home that night.

“Coffee’s ready. Come on down now.” Jack started his steady climb.

“I’m back here, Jack, behind the fabric bolts,” she called. “I needed to sit a bit.”

“How’s it going up there?”

Grace recovered herself. Her memories these days, when they came, were guarded and precious. She no longer told herself it was shameful, and she smiled.

Grace stood up, stepped carefully over the bolts of linen and chintz, and headed toward the attic stairs.

“Come on down, Gracie. You’ve done enough for now.”

She met him on the landing, and there was a look about him Gracie hadn’t seen in a while: tousled, a little smile in his eyes, pink polo shirt hanging untucked. She thought for a minute he looked younger and felt a quickening of joy. She could smell the coffee.

Jack gave her shirt sleeve a tug. “How’s your hand? I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s all better now. Really.” She reached up, cupped his cheek tenderly, closed her eyes, and put her arms around his neck.

“Let’s go dancing Saturday night, Jack.”





# Elizabeth Ashcraft

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## *"Rain Lights"*





## **Broken Symphony**

*The clock ticks a constant rhythm  
A never-ending song.  
My heart cannot fall into the same harmony  
It beats too fast, beats too slow  
It changes too much  
I've long since wrecked this ship.*

*The tick and the tock  
Of the eternal clock  
Created by hands much like mine.  
Yet its music is uninterrupted  
By the silent killer that looms,  
Looms right over my heart.*

*The orchestra of my practice  
My world has become gray and toneless.  
I've lost a step  
Maybe two  
Perhaps I made a mistake  
Did I take on too much?  
Did I let the corruption of others in?*

*The fire inside burns the instruments  
Burns the orchestra of my life.  
The damage has been done  
And now I wonder  
Was my symphony broken from the start?*



# Hannah Hackney

*"View from the Rock"*





## **A Spring Scene**

*Solace no longer  
when the blooms  
reach their peak*

*nostalgia by the river's shore  
spring's the newest comfort of the week*

*As the wind blows  
our sullen loneliness of  
frost  
quickly dissolves*

*Soft calls of birds invite skips in the park,  
the sun offering warmth in the breeze*

*Until then, the blossoms await  
the eternal peace  
gifted by the ground below*

*and adoration  
from us tranquil beings  
who wish for*

# Wyatt McDevitt

**First Place, Photography**  
**"Little Brother"**



## Naomi Hatcher

**"Hawk in Branches"**





## Singing Hands

**F**rom as early as I can remember, I have always been fascinated with music, specifically guitar. I held the dream of being a rock star close to me for many years, only to later realize it isn't something I want to do. Rather, I find solace and refuge in my private life with guitar. We all start somewhere with our art and through all my years of dedication, perseverance, patience, and practice, I have been able to use my ordinary hands to create something extraordinarily beautiful.

How can a musical instrument impact someone's life so dramatically when they choose not to share their art with the world? How do skills of muscle memory mastery translate from an isolated, quiet bedroom to the real-world obstacles we encounter? For me, playing guitar helps me connect to others and gain a sense of accomplishment, seeing my practice and hard work pay off through not only playing but in the life skills I learn along the way.

My first "real" guitar was a dreadnaught Takamine. It had a bright spruce top contrasted with a dark mahogany neck, and shiny brass tuning knobs. Although this guitar couldn't compete in sound or playability with some of the fancier guitars my grandfather had, it was the perfect guitar for me at the time. I would spend a

month during summertime at my grandparents' house down east and learn as much as my grandfather was willing to teach me. At nine years old, sitting in my papaw's grand, chlorine-scented pool room—surrounded by a vibrant jukebox, guitar cases, and amplifiers, among his collection of antiques—he finally started to teach me guitar. He had no rubric to his training; it was simply, "Here, listen to this!" as he would rattle off guitar licks from long before my time. His big, sausage-like fingers were impressive as he slid and hammered them against the strings of his guitar. Meanwhile, my little fingers would do their best to mimic the licks he was demonstrating. After some time, I was getting the hang of it, and to my surprise, I was impressing a man who had played guitar for over 50 years! My papaw would tell me with a kackle in his laugh, "When you're a famous rockstar, just remember where you picked up your skills ... And your first million goes to me!" I spent an enormous amount of time playing in the 11 months of the year I didn't have my old papaw to guide me. And after a few years, I was playing on a level that took him his entire life to reach. This began my journey into the world of guitar, leading me to explore various guitars in the future. Each new guitar provided me with a different tone, playability, and inspiration to delve into a different genre.

As I've gotten older, I've acquired a myriad of guitars, including Fenders, Washburns, Gibsons, and more. I would always find new songs, licks, and techniques to master with each new guitar I got. My Takamine taught me the foundations, my Fenders taught me sophistication, and my Gibsons taught me feel. Each guitar provided new inspiration for my journey. As diverse as each new guitar was, my skills in playing became just as assorted. I would spend hours upon hours confined to

my bedroom listening to the hum of the amplifier, flipping through the pages of guitar tablature I printed off, and trying to decode the musical value the pages were said to have held. So many times, I wondered how my fingers hadn't coiled up into a knot when putting into practice what the black and white pages were telling me to play; until eventually my hands would sing out the complicated song I had been working on. This is where my dedication and perseverance in practicing began to take shape. As my fingers would glide effortlessly over the worn-down silver and sapele fretboard and my other hand alternated between the dirty, grime covered strings with precision, I found myself acquiring a skill set not only in music, but also in determination, patience, and perseverance.

As I reflect back today, I don't get as much practice with my guitar as I would like to, but I know on any given day I can pick up one of my benevolent wood-body creatures and my hands will make it sing. Opening one of my guitar cases to have the aroma of maple or mahogany, or the pungent stench of cleaning chemicals and oily worn-out strings hit my nose puts me in the mindset of dedication and hard work. For me, playing is more than the notes; it's about the determination, perseverance, and patience I have learned. These skills are easily relatable to my current goals of becoming a nurse, and to have been practicing them for years through guitar is incredible. I've applied my determination and patience from playing difficult songs to learning Greek and Latin terms for anatomy. At first, the terminology in anatomy was a foreign concept, but understanding that sticking with it and practicing, the terms would soon become as easy to recall as a song on guitar I learned years ago.


Playing guitar has been more than just the ability to

learn an instrument; it has been a journey of self-discovery. I've learned how practicing guitar can allow me to connect with others and develop skills such as perseverance, dedication, practice, which I can apply

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**As my fingers would glide effortlessly over the worn-down silver and sapele fretboard and my other hand alternated between the dirty, grime covered strings with precision, I found myself acquiring a skill set not only in music, but also in determination, patience, and perseverance.**

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to other aspects of my life. As I continue this journey, I recognize that music gives us the ability to not only connect with others, but ourselves as well. With each practice session, I have unknowingly been building my character alongside playability. I have connected with people through guitar, overcome great feats in learning to play, and have adapted secondary skills I've learned outside of playing guitar itself to other aspects of my life. When I choose to share my art, others can tell that I make these hands sing. 



# Hannah Hackney

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***"Blue Ridge"***





Jackson  
Yeargin

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*"Dancing Crane"*





In Mrs. Dalton's Creative Writing Class, we students have collected artworks and writings that illustrate how we have healed from Hurricane Helene, which has devastated Haywood County and WNC.

# Natural Beauty

## Blue Heron

By: Reese Pifer

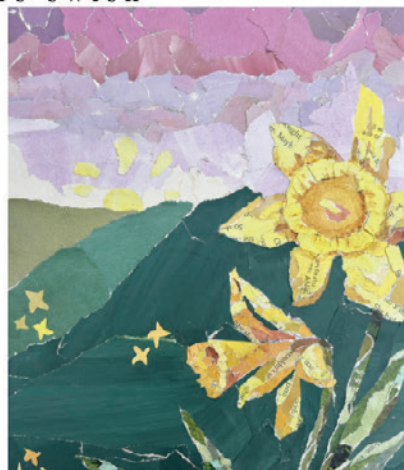
I stand still as a tree  
On the end of this dock  
Trying to see  
The rest of my flock

My feet pierce the water  
As I step down in  
The water feels hotter  
Than it's ever been

The wind makes my feathers swish  
Around my feet algae flows  
I catch sight of a fish  
Just past my nose

My long neck slowly rises  
As I ready to strike  
Fish of all different sizes  
In the dazzling sunlight

My beak catches with precision  
I unfurl my large wings  
To fly causes visions  
Of when I would sing



Photographs:

- Mary Kathryn Oberg
- Mia Harper

Collage:

- Melina Strivelli



# THE INDOMITABLE HUMAN

## Spirit

### Arts Matter

By: Reese Pifer

Art and creation is one of the most wonderful things we as humans have. All forms of art are a celebration of human life. From the first cave wall drawing, to the latest action movie. Yes, a lot of artists' creations are shared and sent out into the world, but ultimately, art is for the artist. Art of any form always has a meaning. The meaning can be anything a human can imagine, to highlighting the shortcomings of man to proving some things are meaningless, but no art actually is meaningless. Art serves many functions, both for the artist and for the audience. It can be a way for a person to express a part of themselves they cannot put into words, and another person may see this creation and feel deeply seen and understood by it, without the two ever meeting. A work of art can be a beautiful depiction of a tragedy to get a person through something, or it can be a horrible depiction of a tragedy to raise awareness and start a conversation about a topic. An artist creates because they need to let something out, and express a part of themselves they are not able to in any other way. Art, in any form, is what humans have always lived for, because art is ultimately a celebration of humanity.



Photo: Mia Harper

### Heart of Appalachia

By: Mia Harper

The river is docile and clear  
In tandem with the breeze.  
I stand strong and at ease  
While thunder clouds near.

The rapids thrash with fear,  
Ripping from the ground its  
trees.  
My heart tense and fingers  
squeeze  
As I watch with horror—my  
land, dear.

Hopelessness surges sincere  
And people abandoned pray  
and plea.  
Roads and cliffsides  
transform into seas.  
Desolation finds sanctuary  
here.

Now only streams appear  
And tensions decrease.  
Those trapped slowly free  
As the community gathers  
to volunteer.

Tender hearts and giving souls steer  
Mountains brought to their knees  
Back to a steady heart of ease.  
To Appalachia and its people, we revere.





# Finding Joy

## *In The Little Things*



Photographs By:

- Mia Harper
- Elizabeth Benomar
- Melina Strivelli



### Time in Turmoil

**By: Mary Kathryn Oberg**

Time stops  
everything goes quiet  
waiting for what matters  
to return

Applications are due  
in a short span of time  
but they won't make it through  
if I can't get online

No social media and no TV  
all my days are now long  
no more screen time on which I can lean  
but distractions are gone

Hours spent with just my family  
retelling memories we share  
back to watching childhood movies  
on our old DVD player

Minutes put to meaningful work  
as people gather with willing hands  
our duties we do not shirk  
and we restore our beautiful land

Time stops  
everything goes quiet  
remembering what matters  
has returned



# Calm After The Storm

## Open Heart

By: Elizabeth Ashcraft

Through the rush  
Open the gates

Destroy all in its path  
Left in ruins

Under the fallen trees  
And lost friends

We find hope  
In those around

Those who help  
Those who hold  
Those who provide

We see a light after the clouds  
The clouds that once blocked the way

Split to show the warm and open hearts  
Of the community within



Photo: Elizabeth Ashcraft



Photos:  
Elizabeth Benomar





# Taryn Shick

## *"Everything I Wanted"*

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# Mia Rivera-Sanchez

***"Life is Art"***



## Skirts Or Shorts?

**E**w! You are wearing a skirt!  
I could never wear that!”

My much cooler and to me clearly wiser friend proclaimed. At eight years old I had never questioned myself, but all that changed as those words penetrated my heart, soul, and mind. That short sentence still sticks with me, lingering around my deepest understanding of self. No one had ever attacked me for something so personal before. I felt like I had been pierced through the heart. I had never questioned what other girls expected of me as a woman. Those few words have caused me to change and grow in my strength of being a girl. I have learned to hurt as a woman, what it means to be woman, how to cope with the pain it has caused me, and how to be the true version of myself unashamedly.

I woke up at the crack of dawn bursting with energy and excitement. I rolled out of bed drowsy from a night of dreams. My little feet pattering across the chilly hard wood floor. The crisp air smelled like late autumn. Today was the day I had been looking forward to all week: I got to play with my best friend in the world at The Biltmore House, a magical place full of wonder and beauty. This wonderful castle is where I went to become a princess, living out the fantasies in my little girl head of a life of royalty and finding Prince Charming. This special occasion called for a beautiful outfit. I ran to my closet to pull out my pretty pink princess skirt. I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was still a tangled mess, and my shirt had a small stain from the ice cream I had enjoyed the day before. But none of that mattered to me. All my eyes saw was my princess skirt. It made me feel proud; more than that it made me ex-

cited to be myself. After the long drive to the Biltmore Estate, I spotted my friend and eagerly twirled over to her. Before I could say a thing, she pronounced,

“Ew! You are wearing a skirt! I could never wear that!”

My little heart sunk. I had looked forward to this day, but now I felt ashamed. I wanted to go home. My friend, my role model, used eleven little heart-breaking soul sucking words about the way I looked. I felt I was an outcast, looked down on as a human. The skirt had not changed, but rather I had. From that point forward, I swore to never wear a skirt or dress again (except to church on Sundays). That was different. Even my friend who mocked me wore dresses on Sundays. That short but earth-shattering sentence, starting with “Ew!” not only changed the way I felt about myself, but also how I viewed my mom. She would wear dresses all the time and, in my eyes, always looked beautiful (like a princess!) While I admired her, insecure thoughts would nag at me: “What do the other girls think of that? Will they dislike me?”

The hurt started to move its way into every inch of identity. I could not look at myself in a dress or skirt without feeling I would be laughed at. I could see I looked pretty, but my still developing brain told me I was not enough. Finding a style my peers approved of became my goal. But how would I do that? The only logical conclusion to my impressionable mind was to change my identity. My wardrobe went from flowy floral dresses to restrictive uncomfortable blue jeans. Baggy gender-neutral T-shirts became a must. Deep down in the pit of my heart I hurt, as I ached to see my princess world float away. It was as if my little girl self-had never existed. Pain, and fear of judgment and rejection had a stronger grasp on me than the sorrow of



losing self. That summer, I begged my mom to buy me athletic shorts and tank tops. I would admire myself in these new clothes and think to myself, “Wow, everyone will really like me now.” My friend’s comments (“Ew!”) ever echoing in the recesses of my mind. Still, I did not feel right. I was the same little girl with tangled hair and dreams of being a princess. But my clothes were no longer expressing who I was inside. I did not feel like myself. My conscious urged me to dress up and feel like me again, but I knew if I did that all my friends would reject me. I was learning that self-acceptance can be costly. I did not let my mom do my make-up on special occasions. I did not want my sisters to paint my nails anymore. I started to reject all things that felt feminine. My identity changed from a girly girl to a Tom boy. It hurt me and I felt wrong. I was not being true to myself. Why couldn’t I dress in skirts and still run around and play with my friends?

Through most of my teenage years, my heart did not change; I chose peer acceptance over being true to myself. I slowly started to accept the fact I would never be the same. I still could not leave the house in a dress or a skirt without feeling heavily judged. I would make new friends, and they would be wearing dresses and makeup, and I would think, “They look lovely! I wish I could look that pretty- But I just cannot.” One day my friend Ivy started to talk about how great my mom’s dresses looked. That simple comment broke part of the pain from the past. As a little girl, I had worried I would be rejected for something as simple as what my mom wore. Now, light started to shine through to my boarded-up heart; my friend thought my mom’s style was cool! But, still, the past pain from being judged for looking “too feminine” was overpowering.

Going into my senior year at high school, my friend Lauryn always wore dresses and skirts. She would tell me how comfortable they were and how much she loved them. I concluded it was time to change...to overcome the hurt; I wanted to feel like myself again. I slowly started to learn that what I wore did not define who I was as a person. Clothing can be a form of self-expression and self-acceptance, whether it’s through flowy dresses or shorts and T-shirts. I realized that other people’s negativity should not affect my confidence; only I had the

power to do that. On a fresh summer morning at the age of seventeen, I apprehensively put on a brand-new white skirt. It was a different cut than my princess one and a bit more grown up. The familiar thoughts started to run through my mind again: “What if no one likes me because I look more feminine?” Examining myself

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**I could not look at myself in a dress or skirt without feeling I would be laughed at. I could see I looked pretty, but my still developing brain told me I was not enough. Finding a style my peers approved of became my goal. But how would I do that?**

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in the mirror, I no longer saw a little girl. I saw a woman, who had endured self-doubt and was now a victor over negativity. I felt myself again. And to my surprise everyone complimented me. I felt like a version of myself I could be proud of. I learned it does not matter how others expect me to dress or look. This also meant that I should not judge others for their appearance or for wearing what makes them feel comfortable.

Over the years, I have changed and grown in my feminine strength and self-confidence. I may not wear dresses and skirts every single day. But when I do, I do not feel crippling fear of judgment. Instead, I am proud of who I am; I have learned it is okay to be me. I am happy to be who I am. I know I may not have the vocation of a princess, but wherever I go in life, my feminine strength and self-confidence will follow. I have learned to focus more on my view of what it means, for me personally, to be woman, and how to be the truest version of myself.



# Mae Swartz

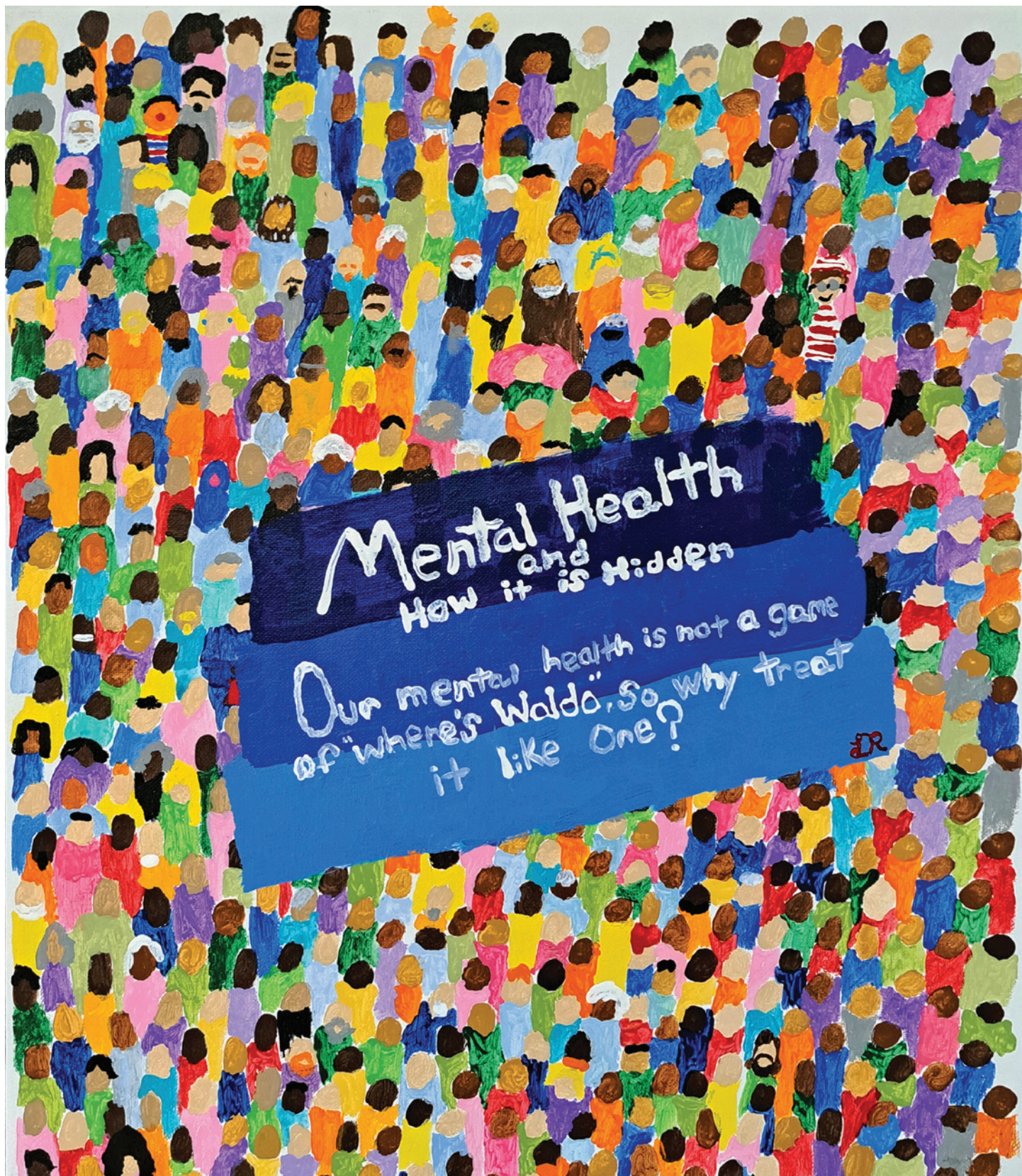
## **"Self Portrait"**





# Lawson Reeves

"Searching"





# Naomi Hatcher

***"Doe with Fawns"***





# Naomi Hatcher

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## ***"Frost"***



## My Journey with Death

**D**eath can happen to anyone without notice. My first experiences with death was when my father committed suicide in 2009. This was a pivotal moment in my life; before this, I never imagined losing anyone I loved. The same year as my father's passing, I lost multiple people I cherished: my grandfather a month after my father, then my aunt Harla, two good friends from high school, and both of my childhood dogs. All of this happened within a short period—some losses only weeks to months apart. For so long after this, I disdained the fact that everything dies and constantly feared who would leave my life unexpectedly.

As time passed, I descended into numbness towards death and chose to use the numbness to my advantage by facing my fears surrounding it. I leaned into the concept of death, learned to have a healthy respect for all that encompasses the ending of life, and began to see beauty within it. Death became more of a teacher than an enemy. This is how I began my journey of working

with death in many different aspects of my life.

Fast forward to 2018, I decided to relocate to Portland, Oregon. I saw a job listing on Indeed for a funeral home removal technician. This meant I would be the person who came to pick up decedents and bring them to the funeral home, where their bodies would be prepared for funeral services or cremation. This job was not for the faint of heart. You enter people's lives when they are most hurt and vulnerable. You see things that aren't pretty, but you still show the deceased as much respect as you would in life. I worked as a removal tech for a little over a year. During that time, I witnessed people experiencing the worst moments of their lives. Some reacted with anger, others with tears, hugs, prayers, or even songs as we took their loved ones from their homes. No matter how the family reacted, we were there to bring comfort to them in their time of need. I remember one gentleman who was furious that he wasn't allowed to ride in the van with me to the funeral home. He yelled stating that I didn't understand what losing someone felt like and insisted he needed to make sure his wife treated with dignity and respect. I explained to him that I started working in this field to pay forward the respect shown to my father after his passing. I wanted to support others going through the depths of grief, just as I did when I was a child. After our conversation, I told him he was welcome to follow behind me in his personal vehicle, but I would lose my job if I allowed him to ride in the van. He finally understood and agreed.

During my time as a removal tech, I discovered that our crematory also had a pet section that received



strays euthanized by vets. These strays were cremated, and their ashes were simply discarded. That never sat right with me, seeming almost as an injustice to their lives. So, I asked if I could take the strays home to taxidermy. I felt this was a more respectful way to

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**Not having a fear of the concept of death and learning how to find beauty in the process means everything to me. Whether it be in a funeral home, doing taxidermy, or being a part of a necropsy team, there are many aspects about death that tie into every aspect of life.**

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preserve their beauty and give them a new life with meaning. This would allow others to see them up close while they rested in eternal sleep. They always looked so peaceful. I started with preserving animals in jars of formaldehyde, called wet specimens, then moved on to cleaning bones and using them for art, and finally taxidermy mounts. At first, my friends found this odd and didn't understand what I found appealing. I always tried to explain that this was giving the animals life after death—honoring them instead of discarding them like trash. Now, I do taxidermy as a work-study for the wildlife program at Haywood Community College. We need these animals to learn how to identify them up close. It gives people a better perspective and understanding beyond just looking at pictures. Most people don't get to hold a bear's head and see the magnitude of its muscular structure or examine its teeth up close and

the strength behind them. Taxidermy is both beautiful and necessary for preserving animals for future generations. Without it, we wouldn't be able to appreciate the physical beauty of extinct animals like the passenger pigeon. It helps us keep physical records of the animals that once roamed the Earth.

Before attending HCC, I didn't realize there were wildlife jobs that required a proclivity for dead things. For instance, I can become a field necropsy specialist. This position is fascinating because it involves animal autopsies, requiring you to dissect animals carefully and look for abnormalities that may have caused their passing. I had the opportunity to perform one last year at a school event. We conducted necropsies on a Canada goose and a barred owl. The goose had clearly been hit by a car and had decomposed significantly, but the owl was a different story. It still seemed fresh with no evidence of blunt force trauma. While performing the necropsy, I found a small yellow spot near the lungs. I brought it to the professional's attention, and she was extremely interested. We cut the tissue and placed it in a test tube to send to a lab. She believed I had discovered signs of West Nile Virus, which was likely to have been the cause of death. It was a gratifying and surreal feeling to uncover what took the life of such a magnificent creature. It felt like a superpower, especially since most people would shy away from this kind of work. But it's incredibly rewarding to see and understand things others might dismiss as gross.

Death is something no one can be completely numb to, but having a healthy respect for it and understanding its importance has shaped my life. Not having a fear of the concept of death and learning how to find beauty in the process means everything to me. Whether it be in a funeral home, doing taxidermy, or being a part of a necropsy team, there are many aspects about death that tie into every aspect of life. I know most people don't see it the same way, but I strongly encourage others to take a chance and step out of their comfort zones and lean into the unknown because sometimes, that's where you find the most profound lessons and beauty.





M. Hensley

First Place, Artwork  
"Skeleton with Flowers"





# Naomi Hatcher

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***"Moon Over Landscape"***



## How Mario Kart Shaped My Childhood

**M**ario Kart is a widely known collection of racing games, renowned for their creativity and fun for all ages. The premise is simple: pick one or more of your favorite Nintendo characters from the roster provided, pick your favorite kart combination, and then race, with every new installment of the series adding a unique gimmick. These qualities of consistent yet exciting gameplay make Mario Kart a title that is known worldwide and beloved by millions, including me.

For years, Mario Kart has been at the core of my fondest childhood memories. No other piece of entertainment or media has been a staple of my growth like Mario Kart has. This is mostly because I would take any excuse to stay up late or spend time with my dad, who was always busy or at work.

As a toddler, I would sit on the carpet and gaze at the screen while my dad played Mario Kart: Doubledash on the Gamecube. Before long, I would find myself sitting on my dad's lap and 'helping' him play by holding the acceleration button. No matter how inconsequen-

tial my presence was, I still remember the utter joy and satisfaction I felt whenever Dad placed first at the end of a Grand Prix.

These first experiences were crucial steps in how I would relate to my father and how our bond would grow and morph as the years went by, influencing my perception of what close familial relationships should look like. Truly, this was our thing, our way of connecting and spending time with each other that no one else in our household would understand. That connection would later take the form of other things, but I will always be most impacted by our laughter when Dad accidentally launched himself off the edge of the road, or when I would get distracted and let go of the acceleration button on the last lap of a race.

One such experience went as follows: Dad would set up the controller for the Gamecube and plug in a lamp, all other lights in the living room dimmed or turned off. Once the console was set up, he would place me in his lap and turn on the TV. I was entrusted with taking care of the controller while he picked our characters—the fastest ones with the best stats, he claimed—and then he would ask me what Grand Prix I wanted to play that evening. Four races later, we would cheer together as the shiny gold trophy appeared on the television screen.

Before long, sitting on the couch in the afternoon and assisting with the controller turned into playing against Dad with my blue Wii remote on late-night weekends. It was during this period of learning how to play by myself that I developed some of my core personality traits: the two most prominent ones being competitive-



ness and determination. I am positive that if I had not learned the values of ambition and tenacity at an early age, I would have more trouble committing to other, more critical areas of skill.

The first time I won a gold trophy was when I was eight, and I still remember abandoning the TV screen in my room in favor of squealing with delight and dragging Dad upstairs to see my accomplishment. He was just as excited as I had been, high-fiving me with a grin before picking up a Wii remote of his own and asking if I could do it again. I would beat him many times in the following months, inflating my sense of pride and perfectionism.

I am not someone who takes failure lightly, and this fact was no different when I was little. If I found something that I was good at, I would get insecure and doubtful of my abilities if someone else seemed more skilled than me. As a result, I would become hostile and emotional if someone surpassed me in something I deemed my area of skill.

Playing Mario Kart and failing many, many times to reach my standard of perfection helped me to learn that pouting or crying about not being the best does nothing to achieve my goals, and that with a desire to improve comes dedication and practice.

An example of this happened during one of those typical Saturday nights, playing Mario Kart on the Wii with my dad. I lost horribly in the final race, and it frustrated me to an irrational degree. I remember tears of anger welling up in my eyes as I ran to my room to cry after shoving Dad out of the way, and I remember his stern but completely warranted lecture about why throwing a tantrum over something so trivial is unnecessary and pointless. I realized my father was right, and this motivated me to push through my disappointment in favor of getting better.

I owe a lot of my best qualities to Mario Kart. This

game gave me many important life lessons and was the foundation for my relationship with my dad, who would become the most consistent source of parental wisdom in my life. Most importantly, my learning experiences stemming from Mario Kart helped

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**These first experiences were crucial steps in how I would relate to my father and how our bond would grow and morph as the years went by, influencing my perception of what close familial relationships should look like. Truly, this was our thing, our way of connecting and spending time with each other that no one else in our household would understand.**

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me to better myself and grow as a person. If there is something to reap from my deeply personal experience with a video game of all things, it is that there are always lessons to be learned in things you are passionate about. Little hobbies from your youth can say a lot about who you grow up to be, and I find comfort in the fact that I have so many of these memories to cherish and reflect on.



# Erin Greene

## *"Night Before the Final"*

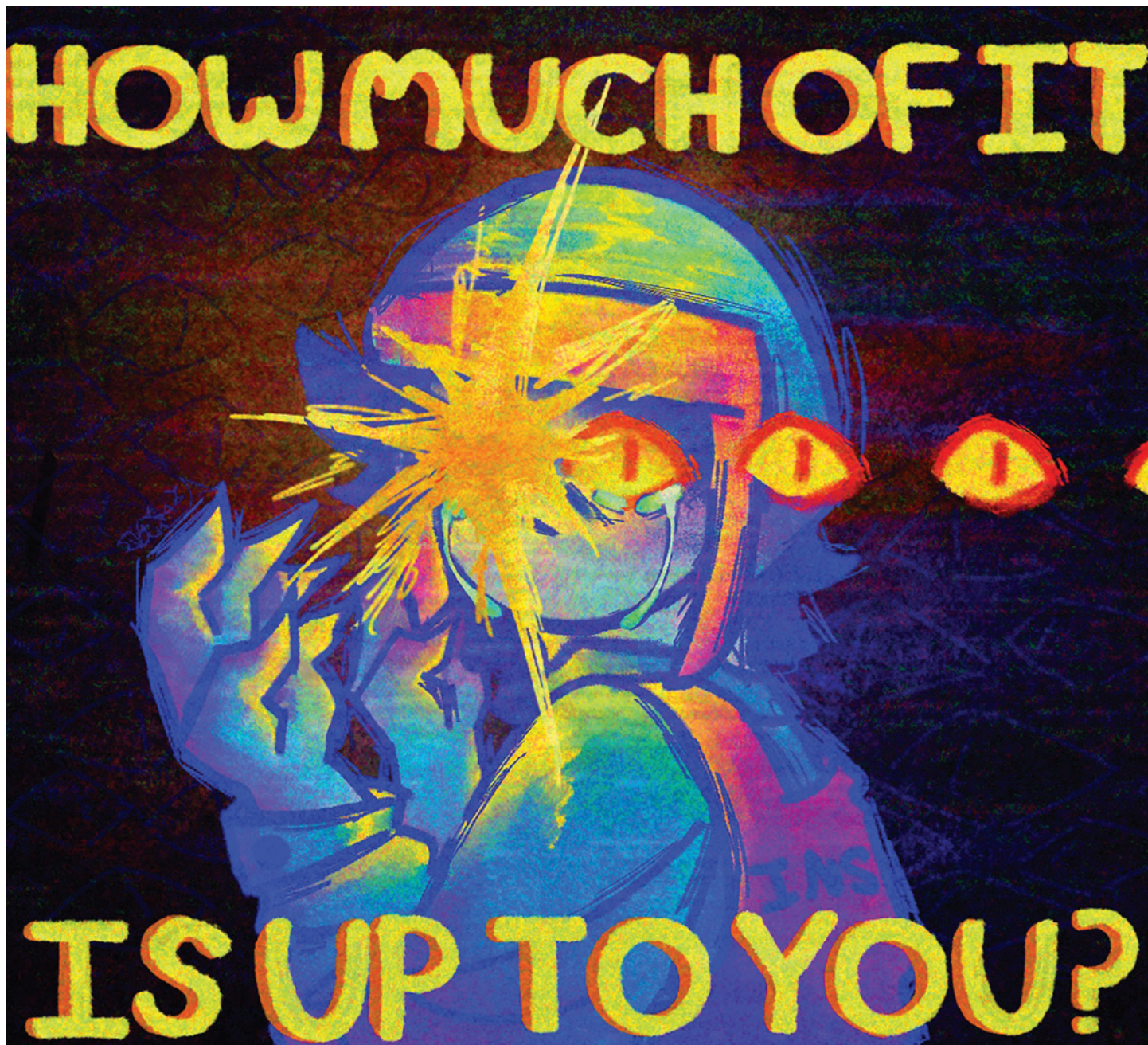




# Vin Sims

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*"Nightlight"*





# Mackenzie Henderson

## *"The Magic of Storytelling"*





## **Peace still haunts**

*Circles run around the warm room  
Slithers chasing me near  
Fleeting moments consume*

*Velvet cushions bring fume  
Life enlightens with fear  
Circles run around the warm room*

*Naive young spirits cry: gloom  
Wonders drain, replaced by tears  
Fleeting moments consume*

*Scaling twists and turns loom  
Holding cherished loves dear  
Circles run around the warm room*

*Biting, lastly, grudge blooms  
Bright white vision blinks clear  
Fleeting moments consume*

*Falling quaintly in tomb  
Adolescence awakens with drear  
Circles run around the warm room  
Fleeting moments consume*

# M. Hensley

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*"Mountain Views"*





## **The Rain Falling Down**

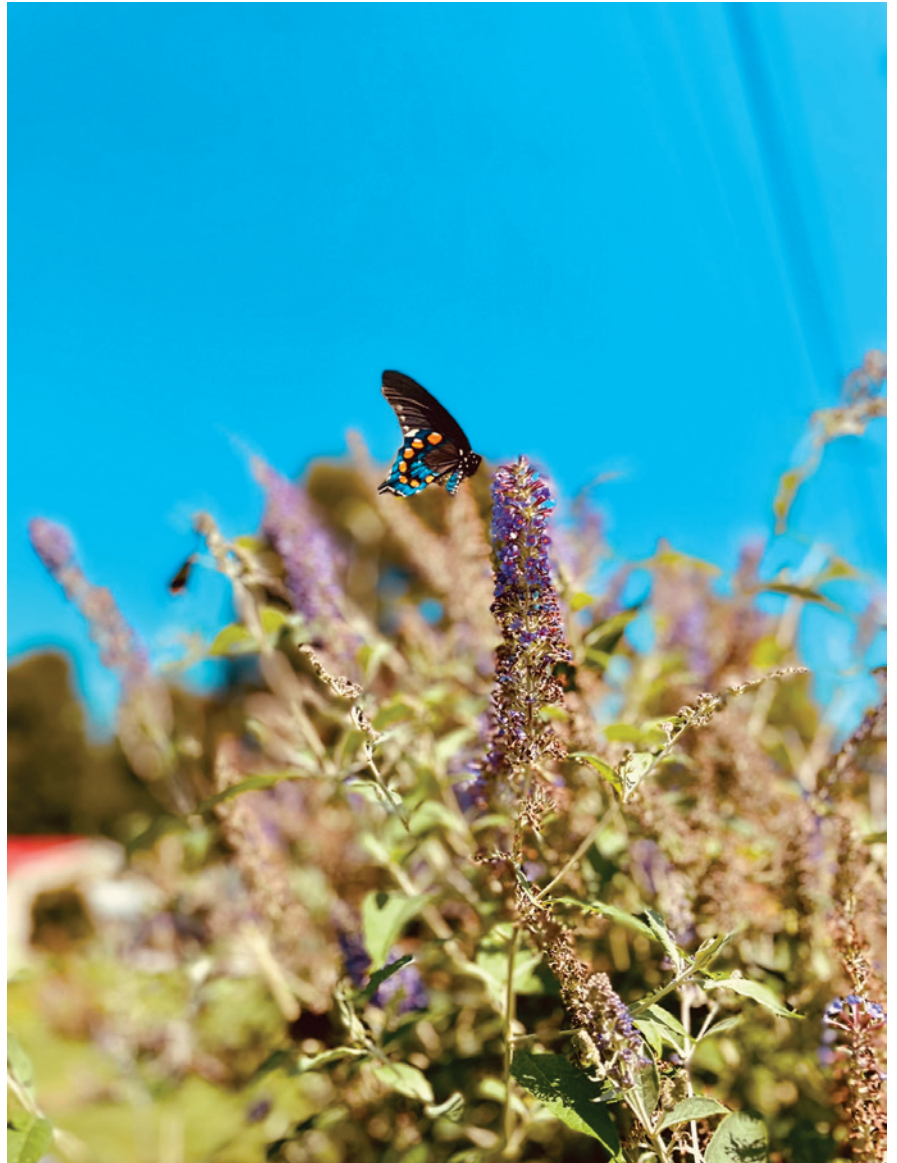
*So much depends  
upon  
the rain falling  
down  
onto the flowers  
gently  
allowing their future  
growth*

Written with inspiration from  
William Carlos Williams' poem,  
"The Red Wheelbarrow."

## Hannah Hackney

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**"Butterfly Landing"**





# Veronica Steele

*"Frog and Flowers"*





# Tiffany Collins

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*"Horse Peeking"*



# Elizabeth Ashcraft

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***"Clarity"***





# Millpond Mosaic 2025



HAYWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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