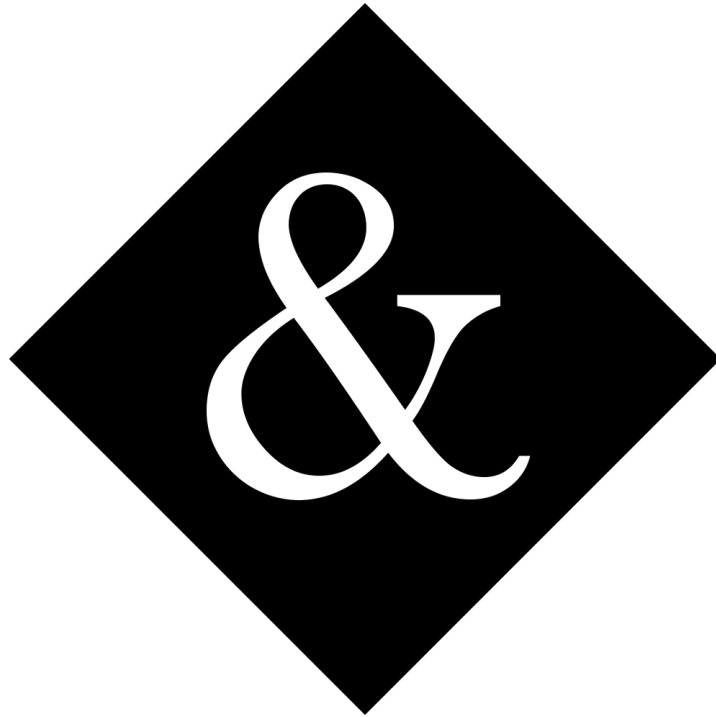


AMPERSAND PAGES
VOLUME 4
2019





**AMPERSAND
PAGES**

vol. 4

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FROM THE EDITORS

Throughout the creation of Ampersand Pages Volume Four, we often asked ourselves if a team of twelve creators could successfully put together a literary magazine that met professional standards. We also aimed to meet, and possibly even top, the standards set by last year's volume of Ampersand Pages.

We are happy to announce that we were successful in our endeavors, and very proud of what we have created for your reading pleasure; we couldn't have done it without the lovely community of artists in Kettle Moraine School for Arts and Performance (KM Perform), who submitted their work to be edited and eventually published in this very book. None of this would have been possible without our incredibly talented staff.

Marian Cramer and Alex Sheppard were quick to step up as fiction editors. Hunter Weber and Rachel Czystler fell easily into the role of creative nonfiction editors. Emma Kuehn and Charlie Blue functioned as this year's poetry editors, while Rob Colon and Hannah Pfaff worked hard on the layout and graphic design. Klaudia Rixmann created a beautiful website, that brought the magazine together. Led by Paige Kuhn and Riley Haller, the team was able to effectively create what would soon become the fourth volume of Ampersand Pages.

We would like to thank you for your ongoing support of the project over the past few years. Without you, none of this would have been possible. We hope this volume will inspire budding artists to submit their artwork in future years. Though the project is finished for this year, we had a great time creating it for all of you, and look forward to hearing your thoughts.

~Paige Kuhn & Riley Haller, Co-Editor in Chief

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FICTION	5
Charlie Blue — <i>The Diner That Was Always Open</i>	6
Ashley Bonestroo — <i>Fort Penson</i>	8
Rachel Czeszler — <i>Waltz of Memories</i>	10
Gabriel Hagedorn — <i>Light and Dark</i>	11
Quinn Jensen — <i>Four Works</i>	13
ART	14
Josefina Benavides	15
Ashley Bonestroo	16
Nadia Hernke	18
Gabrielle Kalix	20
Grace Provan	21
Asher Schleich	22
Krystal Stoltenburg	25
Nicole Wartgow	26
NON-FICTION	27
Marian Cramer — <i>A Dark Place</i>	28
Rachel Czeszler — <i>Last Christmas</i>	30
Asher Schleich — <i>Polka Dot</i>	32
Hunter Weber — <i>Breaking the Mold</i>	35
POETRY	37
Desirea Alexander — <i>Time</i>	38
Alexandra Brusko — <i>Life</i>	40
Gabriel Hagedorn — <i>Nature</i>	41
Chelsea Rowley — <i>I Look Up</i>	42
Klaudia Rixmann — <i>To The Man Who Lost His Shoe</i>	43
Asher Schleich — <i>Three Poems</i>	46
Hunter Weber — <i>Tinted Glass</i>	47

FICTION

THE DINER THAT WAS ALWAYS OPEN

by Charlie Blue

Shined tile floors, fluorescent lights, metal tables with vinyl seats: it was something I always knew, the old diner that kept this town alive. The countertops didn't glisten like they used to, and the steady stream of hungry customers had diminished to a few lonesome stragglers. Even after years spent away, I knew this place. Everything else could change, and I'd still come running back here like it was home. Maybe it was.

The people in that diner were as old as the man who owned it. The younger generations didn't appreciate this place, didn't like this place, didn't grow up coming to this place. I didn't, either, in all honesty. I only knew this place because he did.

I stepped through the threshold, out of the rain and into the familiar atmosphere where I had spent so many nights.

My umbrella closed with a snap, drawing the attention of the man at the counter. His face was considerably more wrinkled, but the laugh lines were the same as they'd always been.

I surveyed the room, and my eyes fell on him. He sat in the furthest corner, his face illuminated by the old laptop in front of him. I looked around at all that had changed, and I knew that I didn't know this place, not anymore. But I knew him.

He looked up from the coffee he'd been swirling, and our eyes met. Years of memories flooded through me: memories of late night dining excursions, of walking hand in hand into the diner, of teasing each other over coffee, of falling in love and thinking it would last forever. Judging by the look in his eyes, he remembered it, too. He remembered everything that wasn't here anymore, everything that I used to know.

My feet were on autopilot, carrying me over to him. Walking over to that table felt so natural, like I didn't know how to be here without him.

I sat down after a moment of analyzing him the way I knew he was analyzing me. Here I was, in the unfamiliar diner in the unfamiliar town across from the unfamiliar boy, but somehow I knew him, and I could tell that he knew me.

We knew each other's orders at the diner, the way we walked, the way our hands fit together like puzzle pieces, the way we could make each other laugh and cry and yell and scream. We knew each other's mannerisms, each other's likes and dislikes, the scents we couldn't stand and the foods we couldn't help but love.

We didn't know what had happened over the last four years.

He didn't know why I cut my hair. I didn't know why the stickers on his laptop had been replaced. We didn't know what had happened in this town. Most of all, we didn't know where we'd been without each other. I looked around at everything I didn't know anymore, and then I looked back at him. He didn't smile at me like he used to, didn't take a sip of coffee and regard my wet shoulders, didn't say, Well, look what the cat dragged in.

I didn't roll my eyes at him, didn't swipe a fry from his plate, didn't say, Oh, aren't you hilarious? We didn't share a meaningful gaze despite our clipped voices, didn't smile at each other, didn't say I love you at the same time and then laugh about it.

Instead we leveled each other with an equally emotionless gaze, and said nothing at all.

We knew that we were both hurting, that we both wanted something different, that this was a long time coming but neither of us wanted to admit it. We knew that I was not meant to come back, that he was not meant to stay, that we weren't meant to know each other anymore, but somehow we did.

We knew everything and nothing all at once, even if we were never supposed to. He closed his laptop. He stood. He gave a curt nod. I watched him walk out the door I knew so well. I considered leaving, considered going after him the way he'd never gone after me, but I didn't. Nobody chases after a stranger.



FORT PENSTON

by Ashley Bonestroo

The convenience store stood in all its glory, yards away from the boys who were standing atop the hill.

“No way,” Lonnie said.

“Go. Go now, before he comes back,” whispered Dieter.

“But I’ve never stolen anything before in my entire life! I don’t even know how--” “Go.”

Lonnie’s chin dropped to his chest, and he stared at the ground. Stealing from a convenience store wasn’t some sort of leisure sport. It took effort, strategy, and most of all, practice: something Lonnie did not have. He knew darn well that this was much more than just juvenile troublemaking, but the fact that any kid should ever need to steal didn’t sit well in his stomach. But that was the life of a homeless kid: a life he couldn’t understand. He also couldn’t understand why his so-called “friends” were pressuring him do something they did on a regular basis. Were they using him? Was this some sort of initiation ceremony to become one of them?

Either way, he didn’t like it. He hated stepping out of his comfort zone. He hated doing anything that was considered immoral. He hated having to live with a ghost of guilt lingering about. But most of all, he hated the fact that all his friends were depending on him. Granted, he did owe them a favor.

But time was running out, and the cashier could return at any moment. Rowan shoved him from behind. “Quit being such a wuss and do it!”

“I’m going! I’m going!” After releasing a sheepish exhale, Lonnie staggered down the hill, arms loosely extended beside him to keep balance. He looked like a newly-hatched penguin. When he reached the bottom of the hill, Lonnie quickly darted to the side door. His trembling hands grasped the doorknob, and he let himself in. Inside, arrays of packaged and non-packaged goods stood in parallels, displaying a museum of merchandise. Unsure of what to snatch first, Lonnie stood frozen in the middle of the store. He could hear his heart pounding heavily in his ears. He was shivering, even though it was a humid summer day. Where to start?

What to take? How much of it? How to go about it?

What am I doing? He thought. *I'm no thief! I have no right to be in here right now.* He turned to leave, but he could almost feel his three friends watching him, the heat of their eyes burning through the walls of the store. There was no way he could let them down. He was no thief, but also not a coward. Wait. Scratch that. He was most definitely a coward, and as of that day, he would also be a thief.

He began to survey the shop, looking down every aisle for something small and practical to take. He found a package of nuts that fit easily into his pocket. Done. He could get out of there. But there was still more room in his pockets...

Lonnie swiftly snatched more items and stuffed his pockets completely. But he wasn't done. He was caught up in adrenaline. He had started a stealing succession, and he wasn't going to stop now. He filled his arms until he could hold no more.

Now I'm done.

He pushed the door open with his foot and ran back up the hill without looking back. When he reached the top, he divided the load of stolen items between the four of them so he didn't have to carry it all by himself. Then, they ran, the sound of eight feet erratically thumping the grass as they disappeared into the woods.

He had done it. He had successfully committed a crime before he was even old enough to drive. Was he guilty? Yes. Was he ashamed? Oh, absolutely. But did he regret it? Not at all. He hadn't done it for himself. He'd done it for the less fortunate, which might be him one day, if his family doesn't turn things around. His friends would be thanking him forever. He was a hero. Or was he? A hero who steals. A bit counterintuitive, he thought. That aside, he felt sorry for the poor cashier who had no idea he had just been robbed. He also felt sorry for himself, for betraying his own values. Feeling sorry was something Lonnie was particularly good at, but as his father had always told him—feeling sorry makes you the victim.



WALTZ OF MEMORIES

by Rachel Czesler

When the king stepped into the ballroom, it was swimming with light. It bounced off the many facets of the crystal chandeliers, reaching every corner of the room and causing the golden embellishments on the walls to glow with an otherworldly light. The room was filled with people who swirled across the floor with the lilting rhythm of the waltz. There were men in elegant suits, some adorned with diamonds and other jewels to show their status, and ladies wearing every color in the spectrum. The edges of their skirts swept across the floor as they danced. A string quartet was nestled in the corner of the room, accompanied by the regal twang of a harpsichord.

The king remained at the edge of the room, far from the swirling circle of dancers rotating through the center. None of the guests seemed to have noticed their ruler's arrival. With his elegant but understated clothes, it wasn't very surprising. One would expect a ruler to be the most dazzling figure at a fancy ball, but the only hint to his identity was the sparkling blue jewel set in silver that was pinned to his lapel.

His advisors may have been disappointed in his choice of attire, but he felt no need to flaunt his status. As a child, he preferred to read in the royal library or practice his swordsmanship alone. In a way, he was like the books he adored: closed and full of secrets from the outside, but teeming with unspoken words on the inside. With only himself and the teachings of the distant past for companionship, he came to learn that a ruler's true purpose was to unite the people. When his father passed away, it was his duty as the king's only son to assume the throne, despite being a young man. As much as he would have loved to spend his life as a scholar, fate had its own plans for him.

The king's fingers flew to his lapel to adjust his blue jewel, an action born of a nervous habit he never managed to shake. His stormy blue eyes scanned the ballroom, stopping when he saw the many figures twirling across the dance floor. A sudden feeling of longing rose inside him. He remembered evenings spent dancing with his mother, long ago. He frowned, forcing the memory back down. His current life had no time for frivolity.



LIGHT AND DARK

by Gabriel Hagedorn

One night, I was sitting under a dark tunnel, trying to sleep. I had a pounding headache. I closed my eyes, trying to focus my attention on something other than the pulsating pain, but it intensified nonetheless. It was noticeably worsening by the second. My head throbbed, and I felt as though my skull would crack.

Then, as quick as a lightning bolt, it was gone, just like that. I frowned. *That was weird*, I thought. I shrugged as my eyes began to droop, and then I rested my head on the brick wall.

I woke up the next morning: my headache still absent, though I did feel a little woozy. Even so, I got up, took a bath in the river, and wandered towards Baxtin, the closest village. An assortment of people always crowded Baxtin's village square. A wild dog ran through a group of lords, their glistening badges and floating crowns signifying their title. I wanted the freedom that came with titles. They were free to roam the streets, buy whatever they liked, eat whatever they pleased, and sleep in a beautiful, poofy bed. I knew because I'd tried to break into one of their mansions just to get a bar of their sweet-smelling soap. There were many buildings that surrounded the square: most were small, hole-in-the-wall souvenir shops or exotic smoothie stops. A man with a beard down to his shoeless feet walked into me.

"Sorry there, laddy. Didn't see ya coming," he said in an odd, Scottish accent.

"It's fine," I mumbled, moving through the crowd. There was a dancer in the middle of the square, surrounded by a crowd. I struggled to get a good view, but I could see the tendrils of light magic flying around her. I wished I could do that.

I got to my regular stop, Daniel's Grocery and Flowers. It was a small shop at the edge of town. I pushed open the wooden door, listening to the bells attached to the other side. A second after the bells' jingle, Daniel came out of the back room. His wrinkled face lit up when he saw me, deepening the creases around his mouth. He hobbled over and gave me a small hug. Then, he grabbed a loaf of bread from the counter.

"Still warm." He handed the bread over. "Where are you going today?" "I don't know."

Daniel smiled, but couldn't mask his obvious concern. I gave him another hug and then waved. He waved back. Just as I was leaving, I suddenly felt angry. White hot, pure anger. I wanted to kill something.

"Are you... okay?" Daniel asked, cautiously stepping towards me. My body didn't move a muscle.

He touched my shoulder, and a jolt of adrenaline shot through me. I spun around and punched him in the nose, which promptly started to bleed. My knuckles hurt, but I didn't care. I stomped out of the shop, fell on the ground, and began to cry.

A figure walked up to me. It was draped in a long, thick cloak, its hood concealing its features, face covered by the shadow from its hood. It hovered over me for a second, and then bent down to where I was on the ground. I sniffed and looked up.

A man with a smooth, white face stood over me, smiling. "I know the answer to your problems. But," he held up his finger. "you have to trust me."



FOUR WORKS

by Quinn Jensen

Anger

The test was clutched in her hand as she walked out of the dim classroom. Her face was set in a permanent scowl. As she passed the garbage can, she shoved the test in it. With a furious rage, she glared at the pages sitting at the top of the can, wishing it would combust.

Fear

The door swung open and hit the wall with a thud. She rushed out, tears streaming down her face. Her purse was clutched in her hand. She rushed out into the pouring rain. Her car was just a few feet away; she could make it. She glanced back at the school, but she was only met with darkness.

Hurt

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mara? After we do this, there’s no going back.” He looked down at the tools in front of them. Mara’s smile turned into an evil smirk.

“I’m sure.” She grabbed the nearest tool and plunged it deep into the figure on the ground.

Red

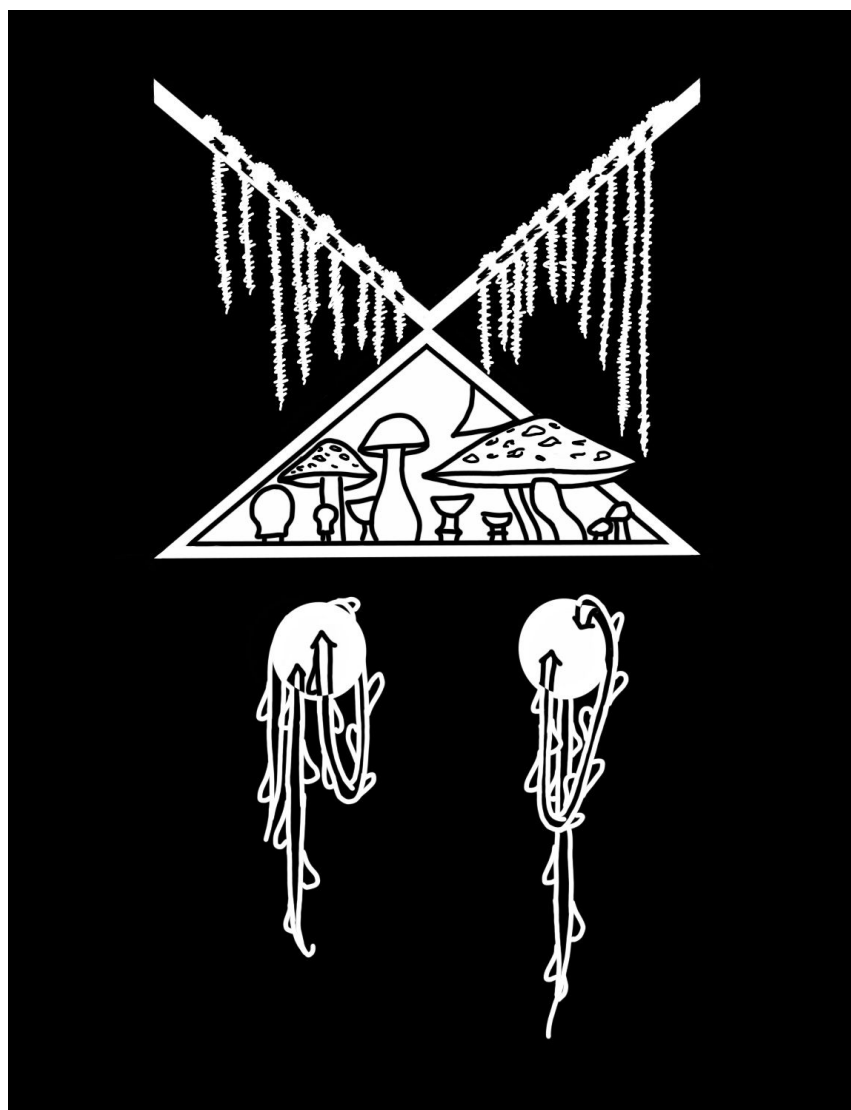
The red was overwhelming. It was becoming too much. She grabbed her head in desperation.

“Make it go away!” She shouted. The girl only smiled and dug even further in. She screamed in anguish.

“Please make it stop!” The girl’s smile turned to a smirk and continued on. Red began to pour over the sides.



ART



Growth — Josefina Benavides



Adelaide — Ashley Bonestroo



Tree Branch Mosaic Mirror — Ashley Bonestroo



Color of Emotions — Nadia Hernke





Bipolar — Gabrielle Kalix



The Northern Downpour — Grace Provan



Nachi No Taki — Asher Schleich



Samurai Gate — Asher Schleich



Voices — Asher Schleich



Scarecrow's Unmasking — Krystal Stoltenburg



GG — Nicole Wartgow

NON-FICTION

A DARK PLACE

by Marian Cramer

I searched for my “happy place” for a long time, but it always seemed just out of reach. Happy places only seemed to exist in the minds of characters on TV. Stressful situations would cause them to whisper the same words over and over -Go to your happy place- and it always seemed to work. The characters would breathe slower and smile. I could see the stress melting off of their shoulders like a blanket falling to the ground. The places they described were always imaginary, always fake. I sometimes wondered if life was really so bad that there wasn’t any real place on Earth that could provide the same sense of comfort. I couldn’t replicate those same calm feelings without an actual place. I needed something tangible.

My first time on stage, I felt completely awkward. Despite this, I thought acting was my happy place for a long time. The show was *Guys and Dolls Junior*, and I was in sixth grade. I wore a three-piece bright green suit, complete with a matching green fedora along with big mens dress shoes that made it almost impossible to dance. I played a gambler, and I was so short that they had to put me in front for every dance number. I was awful. The lights were too bright, and I felt exposed. I couldn’t dance, and I was too anxious to do anything other than smile in a way that probably looked like a grimace.

My older brother, who was in eighth grade at the time, had gotten the lead part of Sky Masterson. He was amazing. He sang and danced with more emotion than I could ever dream of, and I saw how happy it made him. People would come up to him afterwards, and shower him with so much praise, that it was practically worship. His smile was always the biggest after a successful show. For him, the stage was his happy place, and I wanted it to be mine, too.

I tried out and got into several more shows after that (six to be exact). A good portion of them were with my brother. He continued to get colorful parts and grow as an actor. I continued to wait for the day when I, too, would get a lead. I went to audition after audition, and watched the other girls in my grade get bigger and better roles. I always got in, but only as an ensemble member, until one show; I forgot to turn in my audition packet. When the cast list came out, I wasn’t on it.

The show was *Roger and Hammerstein's Cinderella*. It would be the first summer since sixth grade that I wasn't in my school's annual musical. It was also the first year my younger sister was also old enough to be in the show. Tears streamed down my face when I realized what had happened, what I had done. It was my own fault, and there was nothing I could do. My stomach boiled with self-loathing. Looking back, it seems childish to have cried, but in that moment, I was heartbroken. I thought I had lost my happy place. As it turns out, being in the spotlight was only a step on the way to finding my happy place.

I ended up signing up for the set crew with two of my good friends, who ended up becoming my best friends. It wasn't my first choice, and I still felt pangs of longing almost every time I heard the actors singing from the choir room. However, I quickly discovered the satisfaction of building. I learned to use a drill, paint sets, use a jigsaw, and many other tools. The pride I felt when we finished a part of the set was something I had never experienced before.

My best friend and I constructed, painted, and hung an entire row of double-sided castle windows virtually by ourselves. We bragged about our work to anyone who would listen.

On opening night, we were bursting with excitement and anticipation. When the cue came, and the curtain rose, all I could do was watch in awe. Of course I had seen the performance many times before, during our rehearsals, but it had never been for a live audience before. It had never felt fully real before. The actors danced around in their beautiful costumes. I could feel their joy and energy in waves as it floated across the stage. Standing there, in all black, in the shadows of right wing, watching my little sister dance her heart out, I had never felt more at peace. Backstage was not where I expected to be during *Cinderella*, but it ended up being one of my favorite places. I started that summer with a devastating mistake, but I ended up with two best friends and a sense of belonging.

I auditioned for a few more shows after that, but I mainly stuck to working set. I realized that happiness is less about the physical place you are in, and more about how you choose to view the situation. For me, that meant turning an unfortunate circumstance into something so much better. By the end of that summer, I realized that I didn't need to be like the characters on TV, or anyone else for that matter. I had found a small piece of myself backstage, and for once, I didn't feel like I needed to act.



LAST CHRISTMAS

by Rachel Czustler

When I was little, I saw Christmas as the most magical time of the year. The falling snow, festive decorations, and colorful presents all added to the intangible sense of wonder. However, my favorite part of Christmas was by far the music. Every year, as soon as the radio started playing Christmas songs, I would practically drown myself in classic carols and seasonal ballads. There was one song I loved more than any other, but there was a problem: I had no idea what it was called. This song stood out among the rest for many reasons. It was upbeat and catchy, unlike the ballads, which were sweet and beautiful, but quickly overstayed their welcome. It wasn't like the cheerful refrains of "Jingle Bells" either; underneath the layers of music, there was an intangible feeling of sadness. There really was no other song like it. Every time I heard it, I felt like I was transported to another world, where the only thing that mattered was the singer's voice, soaring over the instruments and dripping with soul.

As the years came and went, I would forget about the song until December, where I would be met with that sense of wonder once more. At first, I didn't care about the mystery surrounding the song, but as I got older, my curiosity grew with me. Eventually, my curiosity pushed me to finally ask what this amazing piece of music was called, and I got my answer: "Last Christmas" by Wham!

I was satisfied with this answer, at least for a while. Every once in a while, my mom would point out other songs by Wham! along with a name that would slip from my memory as soon as I heard it. At the time, I didn't think that name was important. Looking back, I know that I was completely wrong.

I wouldn't think about Wham! or the mystery name again for a few more years. It was mid-November, and my mom and I were getting ready for a long car trip. She told me she got a CD from the library to listen to. I shrugged it off, since I didn't recognize the artist or any of the song titles. As soon as the first song started playing, I felt like I'd been electrified. I'd heard that song hundreds of times before, never knowing who sang it. All of a sudden, a name that had meant

nothing to me moments ago was everything. I had loved George Michael's music for years without even knowing it was his.

From that moment, it was like I'd stepped through a portal into a new world, just in time for Christmas. I listened to that CD, Faith, over and over again. I waited and waited for 'Last Christmas' to play on the radio, just so I could hear George Michael's voice and revel in what a foolish child I had been, not being able to appreciate its beauty. I even placed that library copy of Faith on top of my Christmas tree, right where the star would have been. It seemed ridiculous, but at that point, George Michael was my star.

Christmas morning came and went exactly as it did every year. The excitement of opening presents quickly diminished as the day went on, until I found myself relaxing, surrounded by the colorful glow of Christmas lights. I never expected my mom to walk up to me and ask a question that would derail my entire holiday.

"Guess whose last Christmas it was?"

I immediately knew who she was talking about. Suddenly, I was caught up in how unfair it was. Even though I'd only known him by name for a month, losing him felt like losing a part of myself. It was the same sadness that I'd neglected to notice in "Last Christmas" for all those years. The most I could bring myself to say was a disappointed "Oh."

After that day, my admiration for George Michael only grew. His music has affected my life in so many ways that I can't imagine a world without it. Though I didn't know it for a long time, that music had been bringing me joy for years. Every time I listen to it, I feel like I'm being transported to another world, where nothing matters but the music. It's such a magical feeling, and it's only grown stronger since that fateful Christmas day.



POLKA DOT

by Asher Schleich

Part One

This house is painted yellow, and has a big backyard. There is an old oak tree with the swing set nestled below it, an overgrown garden that no one can care for. The grass is mowed, but the shrubs need attention. The shutters are dark plum and they are always open, though the blinds are always closed.

There is a family that lives here, but no one really knows who they are. They shut down, grinding to a halt like gears rusting together. The sun rises but never really touches the yellow house through all the trees. The woman cares for the house and sometimes her father has to come help because she cannot do it all by herself.

She has children: a toddler, a first grader, and a third grader. This is where I live, but I won't walk through the kitchen. Or, I'll avoid going out the back door and passing over the spot behind the table. This spot is not my friend. Only a few months into the first grade and I have already earned a stain for my name.

The family is not really a family at all. All broken pieces. They all stay to themselves. My older sister pretends nothing is wrong: shuts in on herself. My little brother is too young. He cries over a dirty diaper, but not the heavy reality that has settled like a suffocating blanket over our home. My mother tells us everything is fine, but she lies.

There are too many guests in our home now. Too many cards and dishes of food. My mother tells us everything is fine, but she lies. I know. I know. The walls of the yellow house are closing in. And she lies and lies. Because nothing is fine. That spot in the kitchen is not my friend and I will not walk out the back door.

"Everything is fine," her voice coos. But I know because I saw, and she is lying to me. The little yellow house is cast in shadows and its occupants have stopped working. This is where I live, but this is not my home.

Part Two

Late at night, I cannot sleep. My brain is only seven years old, but it is far too full. I cannot sleep so I watch. My room is in the corner, just to the right when you walk up the stairs. My mother's is to the left. I like the stairs. They are right underneath a dusty chandelier. Right below them is the hallway to the kitchen, the doorway that opens into the living room, right next to the table.

The doorway is framed in dark wood, and it blocks what I can see, but I press my tiny body into the carpet. I can feel the stair digging into my ribs with every breath. I still watch, from the shadows on the stairs, through the doorway to the table.

She sits in her pajamas, yesterday's makeup still there. A basket of photos and letters: a green basket, with a Santa Claus wrapped around like he's hugging all the words, making them hurt less. She rustles through the basket, pulling out a card, glancing over it, then staring at the spot before dropping the card back.

It isn't Christmas anymore, but it was when it happened, so the Santa on the basket seems mocking. It looks over the room, over the spot, but never sees me. I always disappear before they can see.

Part Three

The fridge is always full of Saran-wrapped food with notes on top. They are hardly touched. Some have fork marks on them from someone picking at them, but no one really eats them. They often have to be thrown out because they've gone bad. When they show up on the counter, they always have notes with them: some long, some short.

I don't know where all the food and letters come from. They just sort of appear. After school, they are all lined up on the counter or tucked away in the fridge. The people come back for the trays after a week or so.

Every time I see them collecting their platters or tins, I get angry. How dare they offer us food as if it can replace him? Give us letters when they don't know what it's like to suffer this way. It's like torment.

They try to be nice, but it just makes me angry. I don't want to eat their food because it tastes like grief and pity. It tastes like decay and as if it's been in Saran wrap for far too long now. And if I

sit down to eat, I have to stay in the kitchen and share the space with that one spot. I can no longer force myself to do it. I can't choke down the gross casseroles surrounded by letters of regret and an air of emotion. My throat won't swallow and my eyes can't miss where I am. I no longer want to be here.



BREAKING THE MOLD

by Hunter Weber

As a fifth grader, if a teacher would do so much as ask me a question in class, I would have to fight back tears and choke out the answer through a tight throat and gritted teeth.

Sixth grade was no different. The fact that I was in a program not suited to my educational style didn't do me any favors either, seeing as I was falling behind in traditional classes such as math and science. I was average in classes I used to be above and beyond in, and by seventh grade, I was fighting against two years' worth of mathematical and scientific mental degradation.

I was stuck in fifth-grade math by the time I was in seventh grade. I used to be told I was smart, that I could do anything that I wanted. But in seventh grade, I knew I wasn't smart. I didn't think that I could do anything I wanted. I had decided that I wasn't worthy of anyone else's time, and that someone like me who struggled with basic functions in school was worthless compared to my peers. I lived my life as someone who waited to be told what to do, rather than setting my own goals. I wasn't the someone I thought I would end up being. I didn't realize that what I was doing was destroying my potential to mend the past. I wasn't pushing myself to become better. I was letting myself fall further and further into the hole I had been stuffed down, as a sign of my languid content with being average.

I remember the very moment I decided to fight back against myself. I was lying in my living room on a hot summer's night. I had on only my underwear, and the rough carpet was digging into my sweaty back, causing me to itch and turn red with irritation. Cars were flashing by the window, their headlights bouncing off of the dark red walls, sending shadows dancing across the ceiling. I watched them. I don't know what came over me, but I decided then that I would stop myself from falling down this ridiculous, melodramatic hole. I decided that I would push back. That I would be someone who I could be proud of, not someone who was scared to answer questions in front of class out of fear of being wrong. I wanted to be able to ask questions and get them wrong and be happy to learn something. I wanted people to know that I wasn't afraid of knowledge: that I wasn't afraid of them.

In the beginning of eighth grade, my entire grade took a math test. I aced my fifth-grade math test. That same day, I took the sixth-grade math test. I aced that one, too. Shortly after, I took the seventh-grade math test and blew past it with flying colors. Eventually, I took the eighth-grade math test and fulfilled my goal of coming in at above average. How did I do it? I made the conscious choice to shift my mindset and study math over the summer. I took time and made an effort to change what I didn't like, in order to become more and more of someone I was proud to be. I pushed myself to do something that I needed to do, and by doing so, I became someone that I had wanted to be for the longest time.

I went from being terrified of my teachers to feeling as though they were trying to help me. This change completely transformed my outlook on school and the way I saw my educators. I started to see them more as my friends, rather than people who were constantly on my back. I went from being a slacker to a class act.

That was when I was given an opportunity that changed my life forever. I joined the forensics team. This decision, as I would soon come to find out, was one that would go on to shape who I was as an individual.

I arrived at the first meeting and made the decision to go into "Impromptu Speaking." This was a category in which I would receive three topics, and have to perform a two-to-five minute speech, completely off the top of my head, prepared with only one minute of thinking time and a single notecard to jot down my thoughts. The first time I did it, I had no idea what I was doing. I rambled on and almost cried in front of the student who was helping me develop my budding skills. At that point, I wasn't even able to make it to the two-minute minimum. This experience reinforced something inside of me. It reminded me that nothing is simply achieved: it is worked for. Nothing happens overnight.

Over that year, during the weekly Wednesday practices, I spoke in front of the few people who I chose to be my friends. It was slow, clunky, embarrassing work, but as the year progressed, I felt like a blooming flower. I had fought so hard, and during my final performance, I was happy. I didn't even have to use my minute or my notecard. I just stood up, in front of the judges, and eventually won second place in the statewide forensics "Impromptu Speaking" category. How? I worked. I didn't just sit back and lie in my self-pity. I didn't wallow in my own pit of despair. I worked and bloomed. I became who I wanted to be, and I've gone on to do amazing things. I still have issues with who I am today, but who doesn't? I know that the only solutions to my deepest problems are self-determination and a confident attitude.

POETRY

TIME

by Desirea Alexander

Over a year of waiting for agony to take his course,
the pacing in my room during the ungodly hours of the night,
the quick breaths toppling over the gloomy droop of my shoulders, tumbling down the hills of
despair in my hands,
and colliding with my hopeless fingertips, becoming too heavy to move.
Never catching up to my lungs
making it improbable to untangle--to replant my roots into someone new or into different
floorboards of someone else's body
yet, I was too restless to flourish into what I assumed was supposed to be my "awakening" but see,
my nerves were too messy, too jumbled--some even missing.
I was patient
so I let the wires undo themselves
or should I say waited for them to unknot, because it never happened
so more and more nerves connected and collided
creating a construction of clumsiness and clustered words isolation was becoming me.
All the while I was becoming isolation.
It came about from sitting in my room for far too long, I have wounds on my hands and scars on
my mind from too many antipsychotics and psychedelics
soon enough, I was melting into my bed
with sorrow sitting next to me, patting my back
leaving burn marks on my upper right shoulder—they still ache from time to time and leaving my
body bloody and lifeless.
And if I was really up there,
my heart would talk to me about the agony
and how it's always picking pieces from my ribs and throat causing me to speak less and think more

but he did say that it was passing,
that I must be patient—that was several months ago.

A week after that talk,
I began traveling further past that state, trying to talk to agony himself I was so out of it
my bones weren't bones, they were jello
and my feet were tingling, and my legs were sore but I had to keep traveling.
Tired of waiting;
I couldn't keep up with the pacing, growing weak I prayed for a break
but, I never got to him, and I never got that break.
That's why I have bags under my eyes
because the sadness ran out of places to hide so it hid under the deprivation—
agony was coming
but it was just passing through,
he told me that he would be back very soon.

LIFE ITSELF

by Alex Brusko

When the sun kisses the western mountains goodnight,
she leaves a blazing, fiery sky behind her,
making us miss her even more.

When the sun rises again in the morning along the eastern horizon,
she provides a cool entrance by showing us shades of lavender and peach,
making us warm again.

Once she rises,
she gives each cactus flower its pedal and each bird its song.

My words serve no justice
to the blue and white rushing rivers
that course through the veins of the fortress of mountains.

Its sound is refreshing and its drink is vital.

It is life itself.

My words cannot describe its anger and chaos during a storm,
nor can they properly speak of its gorgeous calm as the sun rises in the east.

I am unable to explain how the fast waters smooth rocks to create art,
and feed animals to create life.

Because the rivers are life itself.

NATURE

by Gabriel Hagedorn

Flower

Flower.

First bloom to fall.

Seasons.

Fruitless Running

The Sun shines bright.

With an open door.

Fruitless running.

A Blue Sunflower

A blue sunflower.

Grows in the wrong spot?

Among the field.

I LOOK UP

by Chelsea Rowley

I Look Up and see the infinity,
Staring back at me with a grin.
Day and night there is a grin.
Black and white there is infinity.

Where we are small we are mighty
Compared to the infinity,
But not because it is infinity.
The earth has much farther than mighty

When we look we see the color.
We study the “wow” that is mighty.
We love the “wow” that is mighty.
Each and every is a lovely color.

TO THE MAN WHO LOST HIS SHOE

by Klaudia Rixmann

I was driving down the highway
out of a dark city of uneven scales
at 75 miles an hour past your shoe.

The glow of fateful foreshadowing
came from a street lamp,
a spotlight on your shoe.

Black and brown,
it did not choose rejection
from the company of other shoes.

Were you the man
with the cardboard sign at the red light?
Does this shoe belong to you?

My grandmother once told me,
“The homeless look funny because
they’re wearing our old clothes.”

Clothes cover the skin,
but the skin only covers the soul.

Yet skin isn't fabric -
it can't be exchanged.
And the soul is worth so much more.

To the man who lost his shoe...

I'm sorry for almost writing a poem
about your shoe
and not you.

I'm sorry for seeing
melancholy beauty in its leather,
but only a statistic in your skin.

I'm sorry for seeing
the sadness
the loneliness
the undeserved shame
of your lost shoe.

But at that red light,
when you walked up
and I looked to the side,
I had missed the humanity in you.

That shoe. Your shoe.
Dark and wrinkled and lost.
This is what I saw.

But I've seen this before.
That's why I know it's your shoe.

The moment before
I shifted my gaze,
I saw this all in your eyes.

The light on your shoe
the light in your eyes
A small but essential awakening in mine.

75 miles an hour, a five-second encounter,
an enlightened sight of an ominous skyline
moving back in the rearview.
To the man who lost his shoe...

I've seen your soul,
and now I must find mine.

THREE POEMS

by Asher Schleich

A Message for Those Strong Enough to Hear It

You cannot crawl on your knees And cry forever
You must get up
And do something about it Otherwise stay still
And drown

Anonymous

Your fists have always been closed Whether to hold on tight
Or to fight
They have always been clenched White knuckle hold
Of desperation
But slowly you will learn To uncurl
To let go
To stop hurting what you love And to stop letting what you love Hurt you

For Him

Know what you have
And appreciate it
Know what you've lost
And accept it

TINTED GLASS

by Hunter Weber

Earlier today, my mom and I tried to figure out what God is by having a healthy argument about our own separate beliefs. Interesting, I know. Teenagers *think* they know what God is! But we aren't experienced enough to know the world around us and form opinions of our own that can be cast out and recognized by thousands upon millions of strangers that won't judge us by what we say and what we think but by what we wear and how we look.

Maybe that's what God is.

A society of anger. A people, united under one sun, stabbing each other in the backs just for laughs, killing friendships just to watch them die, betraying trusts of great value and taking advantage of the kindness of others for their own benefits.

Maybe God is real.

I went to the park today.
I went to exercise, but found myself
staring up at the biggest cloud I had ever
seen. It dragged itself across the sky like
a dog with a limp leg.

It split
Into pieces, tearing like the old, cheap
Halloween spiderwebs your mom used
to put on the front door when you were
little. It was beautiful. It seemed to fall
down to me, getting closer with every
passing second.

Maybe that's what God is.

"God is good," some say. If God is good,
does he always take the right side?

Is he perfect? The irony of *perfect* is
held in the flawless support and
simultaneous spectacular failure as a
young girl cries on the anniversary of
her older brother's overdose on heroin.

What God allows for one of my best
friends to grieve and mourn so?

Maybe that's what God is.

A killer.

Teaching us all that if we take a wrong turn we deserve what we get and not a second chance.

So I have to ask. Why is it that the outnumbered have to cower down and swallow poisonous words from old white men with red hats who voted for the annoying orange?

God is good, that's what they say. God is what you make of him, I say.

I think that God represents twisted freedom.

The exemplary sense of freedom for all Americans, me, you, the one resting contempt next to you, is derived from a religious figure that protects, and destroys, causing fires in the middle east, while fueling that same flame in the hearts of young men who go door to door spreading their beliefs while across the world, their best friends are kicking down doors and spreading bullets.

It feels distorted, doesn't it, how we all can't live under one roof of unapologetic happiness and forever absent grief, as one race, *not* stabbing each other in the backs just for laughs, *not* killing friendships just to watch them die, *not* betraying trusts of great value and *not* taking advantage of the kindness of others for our own benefits. What kind of place do we want to live in? Who in the hell believes that in a paradise like heaven, there won't be jealousy? There won't be greed? There won't be places that people want to take over and conquer? Who the hell believes it'll be any different than what we have now?

I'm not apologizing for this ironic sense of disconnect that breaks reality from the current situation, our blissfully unaware families and inexperienced, young attitudes that can't even begin to comprehend the secrets, the darkness, the sickness of our very own neighbors. Maybe.
That's.
What God is.

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