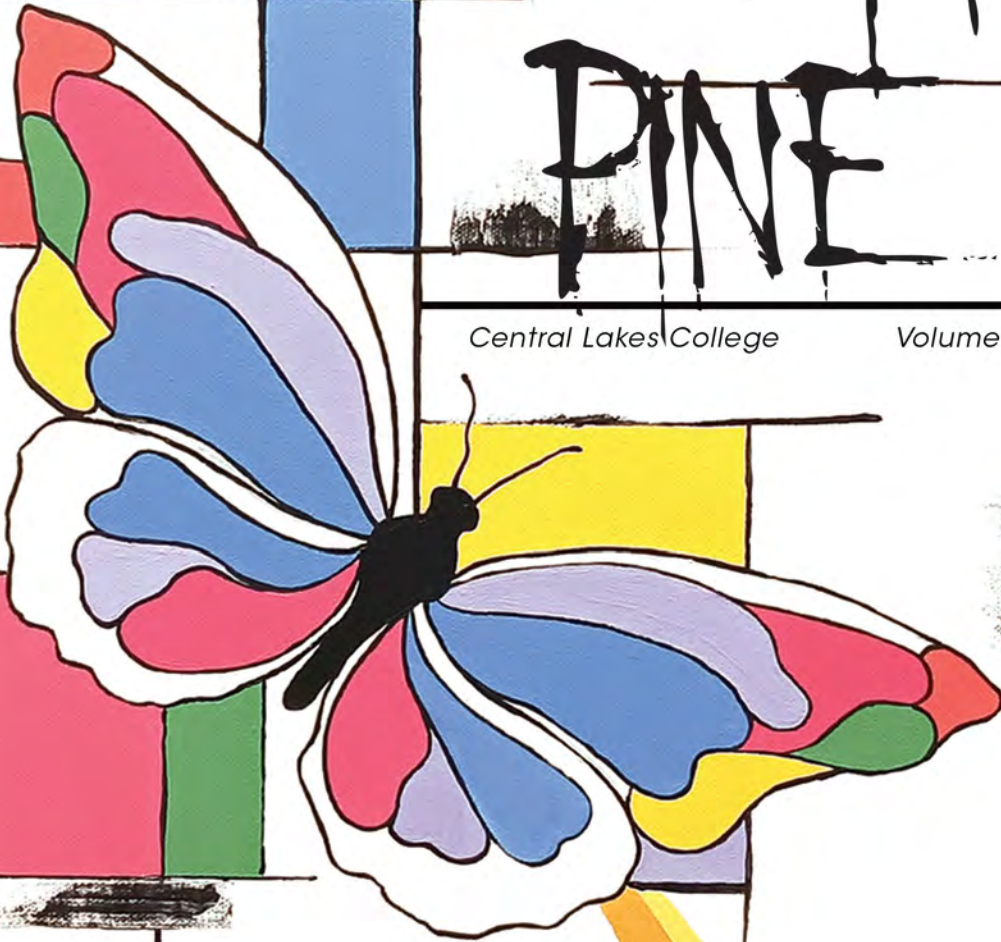


BENT PINE

Central Lakes College

Volume 6 2025





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BENT PINE

A Journal of Art and Writing

CENTRAL LAKES COLLEGE

Brainerd, Minnesota | Staples, Minnesota

The ideas and opinions expressed in Bent Pine are those of the contributors and do not reflect the attitude of the Board of Trustees, administrators, faculty, or the staff of Central Lakes College. Content for Bent Pine was submitted by students, staff, and faculty. The pieces selected for inclusion were chosen through a blind selection process carried out by the Bent Pine Journal Club's team, using Submittable.

A NOTE FROM BENT PINE'S STUDENT PRESIDENT

This is my first year being involved with the *Bent Pine*, and to say that I had a blast would be an understatement; I was excited to start receiving submissions, and I am very happy with the art and writing that we have received this year. I was a little surprised with the amount of submissions but I enjoyed looking at everyone's work, even the ones that didn't make it into the journal. It is an honor to be able to create *Bent Pine* for the student body, faculty, and staff.

Offering people an opportunity to share their art and writing in our small community has been a heart-warming and eye-opening experience, and having the chance to have my own art published has been an exciting process. I believe that art is part of what keeps the world spinning. To see the world through other people's eyes is always enjoyable—even if you don't completely understand it, you can still appreciate it.

As the president I have had to step into a leadership role and I would like to express my thanks to Brandy and the other club members for making this role so special and fun! Our club has put many hours into this project and it has paid off. I hope as you read this journal you feel as inspired and happy as we felt putting it together.

Jordan Eastman
Bent Pine Journal Club President
Associate of Arts Degree Student
Central Lakes College



Bent Pine Journal Club: Taylor Koons, Eileen Borg, Brandy Lindquist (Faculty Advisor), Jordan Eastman (President), Dashiell Moreland, Emma Watson, and Jesse Engen (Treasurer). Not pictured: Jenna Jensen (Vice President), Hannah Ellstrom, and Carolyn Nix.

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

President: Jordan Eastman

Vice President: Jenna Jensen

Treasurer: Jesse Engen

The Bent Pine Journal Club Members: Dashiell Moreland, Eileen Borg, Taylor Koons, Emma Watson, Carolyn Nix, and Hannah Ellstrom.

Faculty Graphic Designer: Leon Dahlvang, Graphic Design Program

CLC Print Shop Guru: Jeremy Goddard

Club Faculty Advisor: Brandy Lindquist, English Department

Printed by: Central Lakes College Graphic Design PrintShop

Bent Pine Logo on back: Mary Sawin

Tree on Inside covers and font (also on cover): from original 1969 *Bent Pine* cover, Rose Austin

MISSION STATEMENT:

We are a team of creative students with backgrounds in various mediums of art. Our mission is to shine a spotlight on the artistic spirit of our CLC community. The *Bent Pine* is an outlet for any shy artist, developing writer, or proud poet. We want to celebrate and publish the imaginative works of students, staff, and faculty to illuminate the Brainerd Lakes Area. Together we hope to create something that encourages self-expression and a shared sense of belonging—through Art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't believe this is the sixth *Bent Pine* since its revival in 2020. I've shared with many of you that it was a serendipitous stop into CatTales Bookstore downtown Brainerd that led to the return of *Bent Pine*. I discovered a single copy from 1969, saw Brainerd State Junior College stamped inside, took it as a sign, and enlisted all of the folks mentioned below to bring it back to life. I have stored my single vintage *Bent Pine* carefully away because it was the only one I knew of, aside from a small box of archives in the library. But this year, CLC's Amy Matter-Hines—who has been published in every recent volume of *Bent Pine*—unearthed a stack of ten additional 1969 copies (from some secret Foundation location) and gifted them to me one day in the hall. I was delighted. Those old *Bent Pines* are hard to come by—rare gems.

I hope you experience the new *Bent Pine* in your hands as a gem, too. This humble publication holds the art and writing of our community at this moment, celebrating this lovely college that has been serving students since 1938. We plan to keep it going for many years to come. (And hey, if it's, say, 2076, and you've just come across this 6th volume of *Bent Pine*, take it as a sign—to collect the art and writing of others, and get it all in print.)

Bent Pine is a collaboration of students, staff, and faculty. On behalf of the Bent Pine Journal Club, I offer a big thank-you to each of the following contributors:

Leon Dahlvang's Graphic Design Program and our CLC PrintShop who design the layout and print 100-plus copies of our substantial full-color journal. Thank you, Leon and crew, for all you do to make Bent Pine happen. BP wouldn't exist without you.

CLC art instructors Casey Hochhalter and Bruce Fuhrman, for encouraging students to submit their art, choosing faculty selection awards, and supporting this project.

The English Department—Jeff, Leane, Ryan, Kate, Julie, Matt, Adam, Lori-Beth, James, Laurel, Steve—for nudging students to submit writing, choosing faculty selection awards, and cheerleading this project along.

The Lakes Area Writers Alliance and their Board (TJ Jones, President; Theresa Hartenstein, Vice President; Joe Prosit, Treasurer; Anthony Anselmo, Secretary; and David Liebeg, IT) for reaching out to support student writers at CLC and donating funds for all student writing awards this year. We look forward to collaborating more in the future. Thank you for the generous gift!

Bent Pine depends on the additional support from all of the following: CLC Student Life Committee, Erich Heppner (Student Life Director), and Student Senate, for continuing to back this project. President Hara Charlier, Vice President Cheryl Norman, Liberal Arts & Sciences Dean Anne Nelson-Fisher, and all of the administrators at CLC who have been so supportive. Chris Bremmer, for updating and maintaining our webpage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS Continued

Megan Bistodeau, Accessibilities Services Director, and Andrea Carlson, Instructional Technology Coordinator, for helping to make the journal ADA compliant. Kenn Dols, Marketing Director, and Jessie Perrine, Communications Coordinator, for generous help in promoting the *Bent Pine*. Jean Hale and Barb Villwock, CLC Information Specialists, for verifying student contributors and distributing journals at the information desk and to Heather Reynolds, Informational Specialist on the Staples campus, for hanging up posters.

Matt Hill, Theatre Technician and Videographer for live-streaming our event in the spring. The Honors Program, Adam Marcotte, Kyle Brown, and Kate Porter for encouraging students to lead. The originators of the *Bent Pine*, including former advisors Joseph Plut, John Hassler, Evelyn Matthies, and Verne Nies. And to Bent Pine Journal Club's previous members and officers for providing the student voice and leadership in this project.

A special thank you to Desirae Rhodes, who served for two years as the first student president of Bent Pine Journal Club. Desirae, you were the first student to say "yes" to Bent Pine in the 21st century, and we will always be grateful. And a big thank you to current club president Jordan Eastman, for stepping up to lead the club this year—your commitment, encouragement, energy, and positivity are *everything*.

As always, I thank the current student members of the club for their time, commitment, enthusiasm, and belief in this project—Jordan Eastman, Jenna Jensen, Jesse Engen, Dashiell Moreland, Carolyn Nix, Eileen Borg, Taylor Koons, Emma Watson, and Hannah Ellstrom. It has been an honor to work alongside you. What excellent contributors you've been!

Brandy Lindquist
Bent Pine Journal Club Faculty Advisor
English Instructor, CLC

FACULTY SELECTION AWARDS

LITERATURE:

Charlie Smart

The Garden of Mary-Beth

Ella Hautala

Sister of the Forsaken

Andrew Stone

The Sanity of Man

VISUAL ARTS:

Olivia Laxen

Near Escape

Della Koep

A Fall Morning

Ashlyn Stroot

Starry Night Airplanes

COVER:

Kara Hoffman

La Metamorfosis Del Alma

La Metamorfosis Del Alma is a painting I created for my final project for Introduction to Painting at CLC. It took about 17 hours total to paint, and it is the biggest painting I've ever done (also, *La Metamorfosis Del Alma* is an oil painting). This piece was inspired by Piet Mondrian. Mondrian expressed the movement and rhythm of objects in their simplest forms using straight lines and the primary colors. My intention with this painting was to visually express the profound journey of transformation, capturing both the subtle and dramatic shifts that occur within and around us. This piece also represents my journey of learning and bettering my artistic abilities as I used oil paints for the first time.

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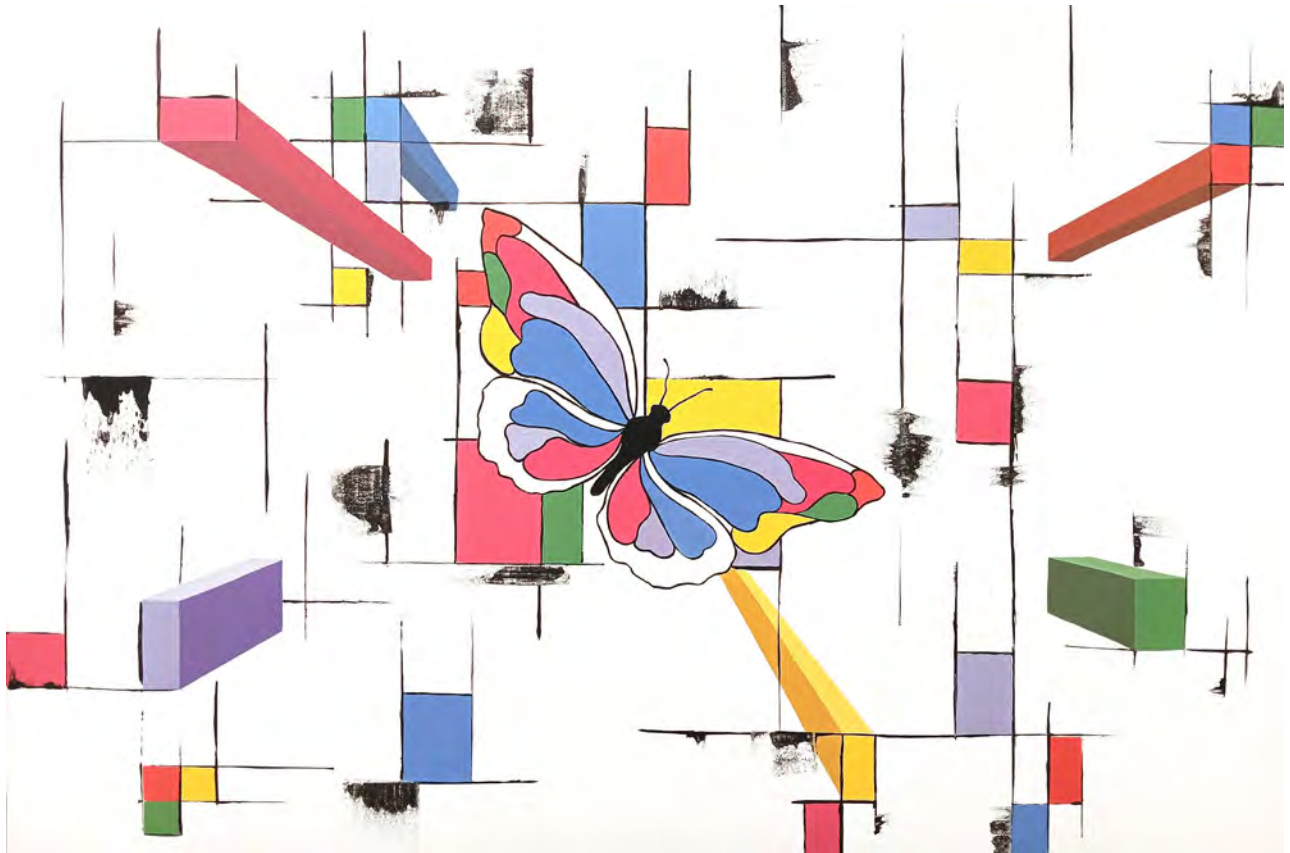
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KARA HOFFMAN

LA METAMORFOSIS DEL ALMA



The Garden of Mary-Beth

I'm not particularly religious, but I do believe heaven was real—and that it's been destroyed. At least my heaven, which was made of seeds sown and bricks laid by the hands of the previous center point of my family, my grandmother. Her name was Mary Beth Eunice Carlson Montplaisir, or as most of us grand and great grandchildren knew her, Grandma Mary-Beth. My grandparents lived well past the middle of nowhere in a log cabin surrounded by trees and fenced fields with galloping horses—as well as Dot the pony, who always thought herself the biggest of them all—and a garden. Grandma's garden, a half-acre of beauty that every grandchild knew as the greatest playground in the world, and a playground no one knew about. It was the sanctuary of the family. That garden was where all the good things happened, and all that happened was good. It was love, family, and peace all carefully cultivated from seed to sprout to towering tree.

A Hero's Journey

Even the journey to visit felt magical. After hours of sitting in the car, watching the forests and fields of Minnesota pass by, shifting to and from cities and towns until we reached the hilly formations surrounding Winona. We would drive through brick laden tunnels, my mother telling my brother and me, in a conspiratorial tone, to hold our breath . . . or the tunnel trolls might collapse the ceiling. When we inevitably failed, she would assure us the trolls were asleep that day. When the roads twisted along the sides of the mountainous hills, she'd tell us about how glaciers had formed them, the vast masses of ice that moved inch by inch to form the landscape around us. Rivers wound through valleys, and sharp stone cliff walls shifted into the faces of the past around me as our old orange car pushed onwards.

You always knew you were close when you saw the swamp, boggy greens and browns, the roadsides sloping downwards to murky waters. The swamp was our dragon, blocking the way to a happily-ever-after among watermelon snacks, river side picnics, and the garden that felt like happiness and love. We would weave through

The Garden of Mary-Beth *Continued*

trees that looked more like monsters in my young eyes, towering branches that I felt were stretching closer to try and grab me every time I wasn't looking. My mother, of course, knew exactly what to do—she would tell us it looked scary because a great green ogre wanted people to be scared and run away. Then she would tell us it was because he was so scared of people, and that he wouldn't ever bother us because we were the scary monsters to him.

After the end of the swamp, there were fields of crops. Somewhere along those vast fields, there is a small hidden turn onto a dirt and gravel road. On that dirt and gravel road, a few miles down, is another, and another, eventually they all took us to one place—my grandparents' house. The first thing we would see was a bright red barn, horses milling about or galloping over fields. Then the garden, trees, and flowers paint the landscape in a feeling of serenity that surrounded the little log house in the back. There was no greater moment of excitement than when my brother or I spotted the first sign of their land, excitedly waking from the napping dazes we fell into over the hours to fight over who had seen what first. Then, we would be there. Raspberry bushes waiting for us to snack off, trees to climb, little red wagon to use as a race cart down the steep driveway in a dangerous game of fun. When we wriggled out of our seatbelts and tangles of blankets and stuffed animals, we knew everything was perfect.

A Paradise of Gold Green

The garden itself was vast and housed many plants. In hindsight, it's even more impressive to me now. There were weaving grassy paths through the oddly shaped garden beds, and none grew the same. Tall grasses and broad leaves surrounded oxeye daisies and tiger lilies, there were violets and blue bells, lavender to marigolds. Flowers whose names I didn't learn and will never know. Between the flowers were bushes and shrubs that grew just right for a small child to sit underneath and hide—the perfect field for hide and seek. There were small stone statues that moss would creep over scattered around, as well as the stepping stones that had the footprints of each of us children, made with cheerful laughter and awe as my grandmother showed us how to gently make the perfect footprint in wet cement.

The Garden of Mary-Beth *Continued*

I remember playing endless games in that garden. In the morning, many of my cousins and I would set out blankets and sneak woven wicker baskets out, pretending nightgowns were ballgowns as we had breakfast—the fanciest tea party—and plotted our fun. There was a log shed at the top of a hill, which had a metal red wagon, and an old steal trash can. Watering cans, lawn clippers, and shovels would be bypassed as we sought our shining chariot and the shield to brace ourselves for inevitable landing. Trash lid in hand, three small children in a wagon, we would careen down the hill with shrieks of excitement. Inevitably, when one of us found ourselves hurt and waiting for our grandmother to find the right herb in the garden to make something that seemed to magically fix all our cuts and scrapes, we would begin to gather branches of willow and yarn from the walls of crafting supplies. We played war, bows and arrows of twigs—competing over who could shoot an old soda can off the branch of a tree. Eventually evening would come, and with it, the fireflies that made it seem the stars themselves had descended to join in our fun. Then came the challenge to make the best home, a house for the stars. Plastic and paper cups with holes and doors, delicate windows—filled with flowers and grass we found while running around. Capturing bugs to prove whose home was the greatest until it was finally time for us to release our new friends back to the fields they called home, as children were herded to tents and cots. We would sleep easily—camped out in the grassy paths of that garden—always knowing the next day would be just as great as the previous.

Guardian of Gardens, Guardian of Us

My grandmother was also a part of the garden itself; it wouldn't be her garden without her. She left out food for stray cats, who guarded the land from rodents and snakes. She held my hand, gentle and warm, guiding me as she told me stories of the life she grew herself—whispering secrets about my mother as a child, that she had been just like me. My grandmother was the one who taught me how to tie my shoes, as I sat on the counter, and she sang about bunny ear laces as I giggled. I rarely sat still, never one to be quiet or calm—that would be something I wouldn't have to learn

The Garden of Mary-Beth Continued

until I was older, until she was fading. But for her I would listen—perhaps a lifetime of teaching and loving gave her the ability to handle the most energetic of children, so that she could show endless love. You could be wrong, misbehave, yell scream or cry and she would still hold you with gentle arms and say that everything would be okay, chiming in with “Don’t be saddish, have a radish” that always left us children giggling or groaning at the silly joke, as tears were dried and cries softened. The garden was a part of my grandmother, my grandmother a part of the garden. Her love was part of each plant, each blossom. The grape vines twisting over her garden bridge made fruits that tasted like home, her berries tasted like summer. The garden my grandmother grew was the happiest place I have known. It was my childhood, my sanctuary, and heaven. Each person has places they seek and long for, and that had been mine.

It’s been just over a year since my grandmother passed, and six since she started to die. She had Alzheimer’s, something I think must be the most torturous way to die. I remember when my grandfather sold that farm, the house with the garden, to move close to my mother, brother, and me. When my grandmother was too sick for him alone to help, especially so far from any medical care. I remember the day she would stumble over remembering who I was, then the day she forgot who I was. When I became a stranger—and invader in her home. I remember when she stopped cooking, eventually when she stopped smiling. She stopped singing, telling stories, or holding and hugging her grandchildren. She was not granted the mercy of a quick or painless death; she died over the course of years, bit by bit and day by day. It was dragged out in the most painful of ways, and when she was finally gone, our family was not the same. We don’t gather as we used to, with no kind Mary-Beth who will settle arguments and weasel the most stubborn people into apologizing. Children don’t gather and make new crafts, play with cousins or ride in wagons. There is no more garden—it is gone. But it lives in memories and hearts.

The Garden of Mary-Beth *Continued*

In the absence of what had always been my favorite place, I find myself often reaching for the things that are lost—we cannot bring back what has been lost, but *lost* does not mean *gone*. My grandmother's raspberry bushes have been transplanted, just before the house was sold, when she still had parts of herself present. We have her berry bushes in our backyard, just as so many others do. My mother taught me what my grandmother taught her, and named plants litter our home. Our backyard overflows with life in summer, pumpkin vines twisting over the lawn, sunflowers and brussels sprouts, broccoli and rosemary. When I find myself chasing chickens from the squashes—my cat prowling around the grass hunting butterflies, my mother digging in the soft earth to make room for new sprouts—I am reminded of the place we lost, and that it still exists. In love within our own garden. Despite the change in place, size, and people, what truly made my grandmother's garden was the fact that it was somewhere we loved, and we can still be loved here as well. My grandmother is gone, but she lives in the way that no one in our family feels quite right unless their home is filled with plants, windowsills and shelves overflowing with life and green. She lives in the love of music her grandchildren hold onto, and the spring that comes each year. Her garden is gone on earth, but it lives in my heart. It lives in my mother's heart, my uncles', my cousins'. It lives in the memories she so generously gave us; in the hand-sewn trinkets she left to us in the time when she could. My grandmother is gone, her garden is lost, but her love is still strong in my heart.

In loving memory of my grandmother, Mary-Beth.

This writing award was funded by the Lakes Area Writers Alliance

OLIVIA LAXEN

NEAR ESCAPE



Bent Pine 2025

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Sister of the Forsaken

Oh, sister I grieve for you
standing now alone—
Those you loved, now gone,
Proclaimed never to be mourned or missed
By the means of power and progress.
Oh, sister I mourn for you
left to stand alone,
forced to do so tall—
The severed remains of a tainted memory buried beside you.
The absence of the hum you're oh, so used to,
The life of what had been,
Oh, sister I mourn for you,
Left on your own,
forced into a life with only your isolated roots.
So now, sister, I stand beside you.
I shall mourn with you,
your fallen shall be mine.
I shall grieve with and for you,
Not because I must—
Not because you ask—
But so, you will not be forced to do so alone.

This writing award was funded by the Lakes Area Writers Alliance

ASHLYN STROOT

STARRY NIGHT AIRPLANES



Bent Pine 2025

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

The Sanity of Man
La Santé Mentale de L'Homme

Beneath the flickering amber haze,
A cigarette burns in a poet's gaze.
Wrapped in white paper were thoughts, or dreams
It does not matter now what they mean

A life story can rest between a man's knuckles,
Set upon lips, yet falling to an ashy ruffle.
Puff, puff—smoke swirls in curls,
Thoughts unravel in a finger's tangled whorls.

A café hums in twilight's breath,
Espresso kissed with the scent of death.
A man bows low to pour his drink,
Tipping a caffeinated balance on the fragile brink.

Oh Lord, I surrender to this frailty,
To the madness of life's duality.
Pain and joy, wound and balm,
Screaming chaos, whispered calm.

Steel and sinew, flesh and bone,
Mind unchained, yet not alone.
A symphony of my fevered thoughts,
Sparks ignite what time forgot!

Puff, puff—
Puff—
puff—
Tssssssh—

The poet snubs out his cigarette,
For his white paper wrapped dream,
is only an incense of regrets,
Whose scent seems to make one's head scream.

The Sanity of Man Continued

With a wave of his hand,
His visions made of smoke glide in the air.
Maybe one day they can find a place to land,
But their story is not one of which we care.

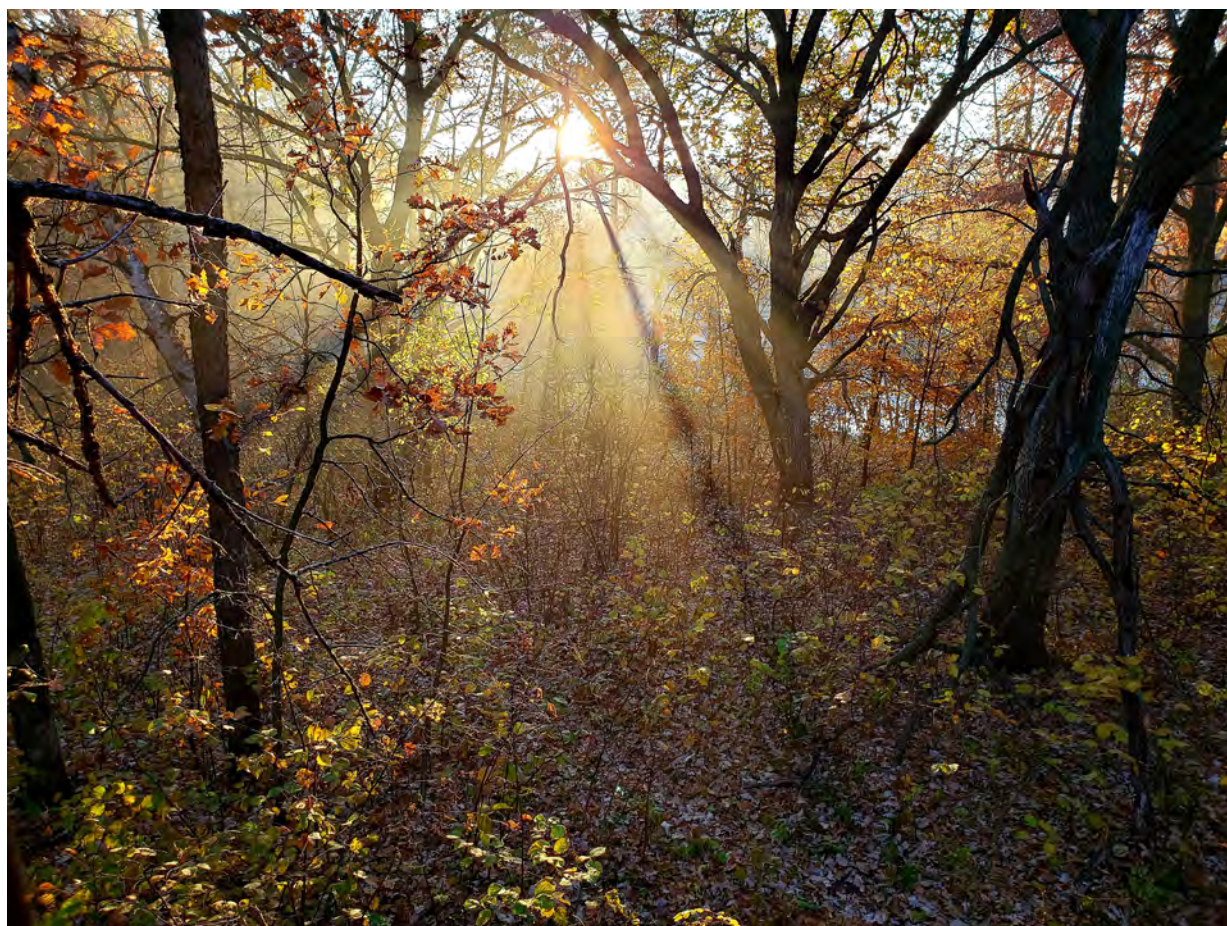
In swirling madness, he raises his glass,
To the ghosts in his watery looking glass.
To dreams that slip like sea and sand,
Now here I'll drink to this strange strange man.

As together we
toast to a Man's health found in a Man's insanity.

This writing award was funded by the Lakes Area Writers Alliance

DELLA KOEP

A FALL MORNING



FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Bent Pine 2025

Bent Pine 2025

ENTRIES

Middle Ground

My brain and my heart are roommates
They have been since before birth
Twins
They look like me
Hair so brown it's almost black
Hazel eyes
On the taller side with a slender build
Smart and funny
Bubbly and full of dread
Two peas in a pod
They make me whole
But
They fight like hell and keep me on my toes
They fight about what we should do the most
Brain wants to do what she knows is right or for the best
But
Heart likes to push her around to try and get her way
But
Sometimes she doesn't understand when to let go
Heart developed first, so she's technically older and likes to remind brain of that
She says,
follow your heart
Brain replies, *you may be older*
But
It's mind over matter, remember
So, they both sit there
Arms crossed
Ignoring one another
And

When they try to talk
They talk over each other
Arguing
Unable to find middle ground
Leaving me feeling uneasy
Unsure of what to do
So
I sit them down
Tell them they are sisters and shouldn't fight like this
I remind them we all have to get along to make life easier
And with that
they sit down
talk it out
To try and find middle ground
Two peas in a pod
They make me whole

MEGAN BISTODEAU

CHRISTMAS AT THE NEW YORK
BOTANICAL GARDEN



Bent Pine 2025



Used Books

Reggie Hollander made a habit of not gawking in storefront windows, but what he saw inside the used bookstore pulled him closer until his nose nearly touched the glass. Cool spring sunlight spilled across a cluttered tableau of books. Leaning towers of paperbacks blocked most of the view inside—save for one dignified bookcase near the window's edge. It was handcrafted—not made from particle board, but something an artist had built to last. Visiting a used bookstore was not on Reggie's to-do list that morning, but he felt a gravitational force drawing him inside to see if he was right about the bookcase.

He moved toward the door and paused to read a handwritten sign:

Oh, now.....SOME days we're OPEN from 9AM to 5PM. BUT.....some DAYS we like to SLEEP in! WE're Old. SO, if you get here and WE'RE not here. Try again later in the AFTERNOON. Or NOT. WE're CLOSED on Sundays.

Next to him, a library cart crammed with books had a neon sign: 50% OFF – Going OUT of Business SALE.

When he opened the door, a drowsy bell jangled against the glass. The air inside felt cooler and smelled of mildewed paper compounded with the scent of lumber. A narrow cinnamon-colored runner, worn thin from foot traffic, ran in a straight line and then took a sharp left, disappearing from sight. As he continued, Reggie had to step around stacks of books piled on the floor until he reached the bookcase he'd seen through the window.

Up close it revealed its treasures. The tell-tale mortise-and-tenon joinery, exposed as it was in Craftsman-style furniture, looked flawless. The wedges in the joinery had always reminded Reggie of sentinels guarding a fortress. His fingers followed the grain, gliding over the warm-colored finish. The contact transported him back to his grandfather's shed—that sanctuary where he'd spent time watching and learning as a boy. His grandfather had built Craftsman-style bookcases. When young Reggie asked him why each one took so long to build and why he didn't just buy them, his grandfather set down his hammer and said, "It takes time to make something beautiful, something that will hold all of my treasures."

A voice broke his trance and he followed its sound until he reached a counter where a woman, hemmed in by stacks of books, tapped away on an adding machine. When she stood, her head barely cleared the top of an old-fashioned cash register on the countertop. Her sweatshirt said "World's Greatest Grandma!" A coffee stain that resembled the shape of Maine appeared just underneath the lettering. Her hair was a shade of merlot—the kind of dye job that comes from missing a critical step or two. While her appearance was as equally disheveled as her store, there was a unique order to both. The clean lines and sturdiness of the bookcases tamped back the store's chaos. The woman's smile, joyous and beautiful, gave her a symmetry the rest of her lacked.

"What can I help you find, dear?" she said.

"Good morning. When is the last day?" Reggie asked.

"It can't come fast enough," she said, sighing. "There's so much left to do. It doesn't always look like *Sanford and Son* in here . . . well, actually, it has always looked like this. You're probably too young to remember that show."

"You don't see many bookstores in small towns anymore. Then again, you don't see many bookstores."

"The owners jacked up the rent again," she said. "They want to put a café here, so they keep trying to squeeze me out. And truth be told, the wife never liked me. Her husband, I have no problems with, but she's a piece of work. She's a real piece of work. But, truth be told, I'm tired. I've been at this for too long, and I need a break."

"My grandfather used to make bookcases like that. Are you selling them too?"

"You'd have to ask Stan about them. They're his treasures."

"Stan?"

"My husband. If you wait long enough, you'll hear him sawing and hammering away back there." She motioned toward the far wall to her left. "He stays in his sanctuary. Well, most of the time. Keeps him busy. It keeps him from wandering off." It seemed an odd thing to say, more than just filler for conversation with a stranger. The whine of a circular saw in the back interrupted. "Right on cue. Well, he's still here, at least. You can go back there and talk to him, if you want. Don't expect a reply. He's not very chatty these days, though. Not very chatty at all."

Used Books Continued

A customer entered the store with a question, and Reggie didn't have an opportunity to ask her what she meant. He continued, following the warrens of Craftsman-style bookcases that brought him into the biography section where names like JFK, Richard Wright, Eisenhower, Howard Hughes, and Grace Kelly appeared in captivating letters on spines. Like following a highway through different regions, biographies turned into science fiction. He thumbed through a Bradbury novel, returning it, absently, to the stack. As Reggie ran his fingers along one of the shelves, the saw's piercing whine started up again. It seemed—for a moment—that he heard, from deep inside himself, the noise of a distant memory bringing some ancient prophecy to bear.

The bookcases in the store were taller than the ones his grandfather built—perhaps wider too, but certainly taller. At least eight feet, and even with their height and width they couldn't contain all the books. Reggie wandered past the history section, past true crime, stopping in front of a shelf of oversized art books stacked horizontally. One caught his eye—a black, clothbound coffee table book with silver lettering along the spine. He ran a finger over the title: *Lost Towns*. He pulled it free and flipped through the pages. Factories with shattered windows. Empty shopping malls overtaken by ivy. A high school gym where the floor had warped into a sea of wooden waves. Towns suspended in time, their citizens long gone. He thought again about the going out of business sign outside, about all the places he'd driven past, the hollowed-out buildings left behind when the highway rerouted. He slid the book back onto the shelf and continued.

The sound of a hammer striking in steady rhythm overtook the conversation at the counter, until Reggie could no longer hear a word of it. He followed the percussive sound until the store narrowed into a cluttered alcove, where hardcover novels stood in uneven towers and a single chair sat buried beneath a heap of yellowed newspapers. The hammering stopped. Then the high-pitched whine of the Skilsaw cut through the quiet again.

The door leading into Stan's workshop looked older, its paint brittle and chipped, as if it had been opened and closed a thousand times.

Once inside the workshop, the air felt cold and thin, edged with the damp chill of concrete. Compared to the bookstore, the workshop had the solemnity of a cathedral; the sound of the door closing ascended and echoed off its vaulted ceiling. Dozens of empty

bookcases stood like church pews. He had entered what felt like a private sanctuary.

Reggie exhaled slowly and rubbed his hands together. He admired the Spartan order of the workshop. A pair of sawhorses rested neatly next to an L-shaped workbench on his right. Even an orange extension cord that snaked from the wall outlet to the saw appeared to have an order to it. Most of the bookcases were stained the same honey color as the ones in the store, the rest still raw and waiting to be finished. Everything before him seemed untouched by time, waiting for its owner to return and breathe life into its design.

It reminded Reggie, on a much larger scale, of his grandfather's shed: clean, orderly, and solemn. The same could be said of his grandfather's appearance. He came from a generation that dressed in Harris Tweed and wore starched shirts and ties, even in the comfort of their own homes. His grandfather would don a denim apron over his shirt and tie when the two of them went into the shed. There, little Reggie would sit and watch for hours as his grandfather worked and talked, his calm voice drifting over the sound of chisels and saws. Each sentence, spoken with a wisdom young Reggie wouldn't grasp until much later, settled quietly between them.

As he reached out to inspect one of the bookcases, he heard the scuffle of footsteps on the concrete floor. Stan—Reggie presumed—appeared, wiping his hands dry with a stained tea towel. Unlike his regally dressed grandfather, the man standing before Reggie was sturdy, built like one of the bookcases—plain, solid, and without ornamentation. He had long, white hair that he wore in a ponytail. Long gray strands curled from underneath the edges of a baseball cap. A Vietnam-era army jacket hung from his shoulders, the outline of a missing patch still visible on the sleeve.

"Hello," Reggie said. "You must be Stan. Your wife said I would find you back here. I'm sorry to bother you."

Stan stared at him, his face serene and tormented.

"I was admiring your work," Reggie continued. "My grandfather used to build bookcases like these—Craftsman ones. True works of art."

Stan nodded. A slow, heavy nod. He held out his coffee cup as if he wanted Reggie to take it from him.

"They're beautiful, really. They remind me of my grandfather. I just wanted to see if you had plans to sell them, since you're going out of business."

Used Books Continued

Stan blinked, his brow furrowing as if translating the words. His lips moved slightly, shaping a word that soon disappeared. Then, his eyes flicked to Reggie, then past him—somewhere beyond the room, as if their meaning had arrived late, slipping through the cracks like sunlight. His fingers curled slightly around the cup's rim. It seemed, at that moment, that Stan heard, from some undetermined point, a familiar song that trumpeted a brief note of clarity. Then, without a word, he turned and walked behind a row of shelves.

Reggie wondered if he had somehow offended him. But there was no mistaking the look he'd seen on Stan's face—it reminded him of his grandfather in the final years, when the man Reggie had always known seemed to recede behind a polite, confused smile. First came the memory lapses, then the silence, then the far-off stare, as if he were always watching something only he could see.

Reggie knew that he could turn and reenter the bookstore before Stan returned. No one would know the difference. After all, he owed this man nothing. He had done something similar during one of the last visits to his grandfather's house. Sitting in his recliner, his grandfather held out a thin, blue-veined hand, his watery gaze motioning for Reggie to take hold. Instead, Reggie, confused and embarrassed by the gesture, ran outside into the backyard, until he reached the shed. He felt a spot of guilt—no bigger than a quarter—burning away inside his stomach.

Stan reappeared and motioned for him to follow. Reggie felt that spot in his stomach burn again, but he followed.

As they moved deeper into the shop, the construction lights, at their backs now, made their shadows appear long and thin. Stan stopped at one of the unfinished shelves. From a nearby tray, he picked up a sanding block and handed it to Reggie. Then, wordlessly, he took a second block for himself and began working along the grain.

Reggie watched for a moment, then mirrored the motion. The technique came back to him easily, the same one his grandfather had taught him—gentle, even strokes, always with the grain, never against it. A lesson, not a comfort.

Stan's eyes stayed focused on the automatic, rhythmic motion of final sanding. The steady rasp of sandpaper filled the silence. Reggie had been holding his breath and let it out slowly.

Stan's shoulders sagged, as if something inside of him had settled—or given way. Tears welled, then slid in slow, steady trails. But his hands never stopped moving, still tracing the grain as if smoothing out something no one else could notice.

Reggie looked away, his gaze landing directly on the mortise-and-tenon joinery at eye-level. The two sentinels, permanently fixed, would remain at their post, guarding whatever treasures one day filled their shelves, long after this moment had passed. Humanity—the thinnest of bonds—required that Reggie acknowledge this.

"It's okay," Reggie said now to Stan, though he wasn't sure if it was.

Stan nodded, his breath hitching. He kept sanding, as if the motion itself could keep something from falling apart.

Matthew Fort is an English Instructor at Central Lakes College and a published fiction writer. His story "Your Favorite Shirt," was just accepted and published in October Hill Magazine (New York City) in spring 2025. It first appeared in Bent Pine (2023).

KARA HOFFMAN

FISHING IN THE FOG



Bent Pine 2025

ELENA UHLENKAMP

TASTE OF SUNLIGHT



Bent Pine 2025

The Bottle

In the cannon ball eye, It will follow me,
In the cannon ball eye, It will come after me,
Through the fields, Through your dreams,
The cannon ball eye, Will strike down on our tree,
With our minds so high, The cannon ball eye,
Will parish thee, Forever weak,
Inside this geek, Inside of me,
Holding us down, Lost but not found,
The cannon ball eye,
Will wreck the spirit of goodbye, Will peck at your insides,
Oh, the cannon ball eye, Always dressing in disguise,
Causing pain to fold up and leak from your eye,
The cannon ball eye, Inside our mind,
Is the darkest pain, That leaves no shame,
Whenever you fly high, You must come down,
For the cannon ball eye,
Will never leave you be, It will crush your dreams,
Will flatten your family tree, Taking away the choice to be forever free,
Cause the cannon ball eye, Will redden your lies,
Leave you lost from all, Leave you with no goodbye,
Wile slipping hands that won't look back, Makes you wish your heart would attack,
That cannon ball eye, That cannon ball eye,
Oh, that cannon ball eye,
Stray away from the attack, Never look back,
Oh, that cannon ball eye will surrender your pain and leave you to die.

JAIME LAW

ECHOES OF NOSTALGIA



Bent Pine 2025

DANIEL SIPPRELL

OCTOBER HAZE



Bent Pine 2025

The Collection of Doomsday

You're here to take my collection, but my story must be told.
You wonder why things went this way, and I must say,
My reasons will make your blood run cold.

The crack of bone, the gnash of teeth, his throat in stranglehold.
Red from his eyes, there he lies, below the stairway.
You're here to take my collection, but my story must be told.

His death was in self-defense; he was nasty black mold,
Ready to suffocate me. I needed to study him, that red dirt and decay.
My reasons will make your blood run cold.

Kidneys, muscle, liver, eyeballs, teeth, his organs I behold
In separate jars of glass. All I collected and studied, down to the smallest white vertebrae.
You're here to take my collection, but my story must be told.

Don't be deceived, his dirty blood has horrors untold.
He spat on my face, and I could see the end of days, one I must relay.
You're here to take my collection, but my story must be told.
My reasons will make your blood run cold.

OLIVIA LAXEN

COLLAPSE



Bent Pine 2025

MEGAN BISTODEAU

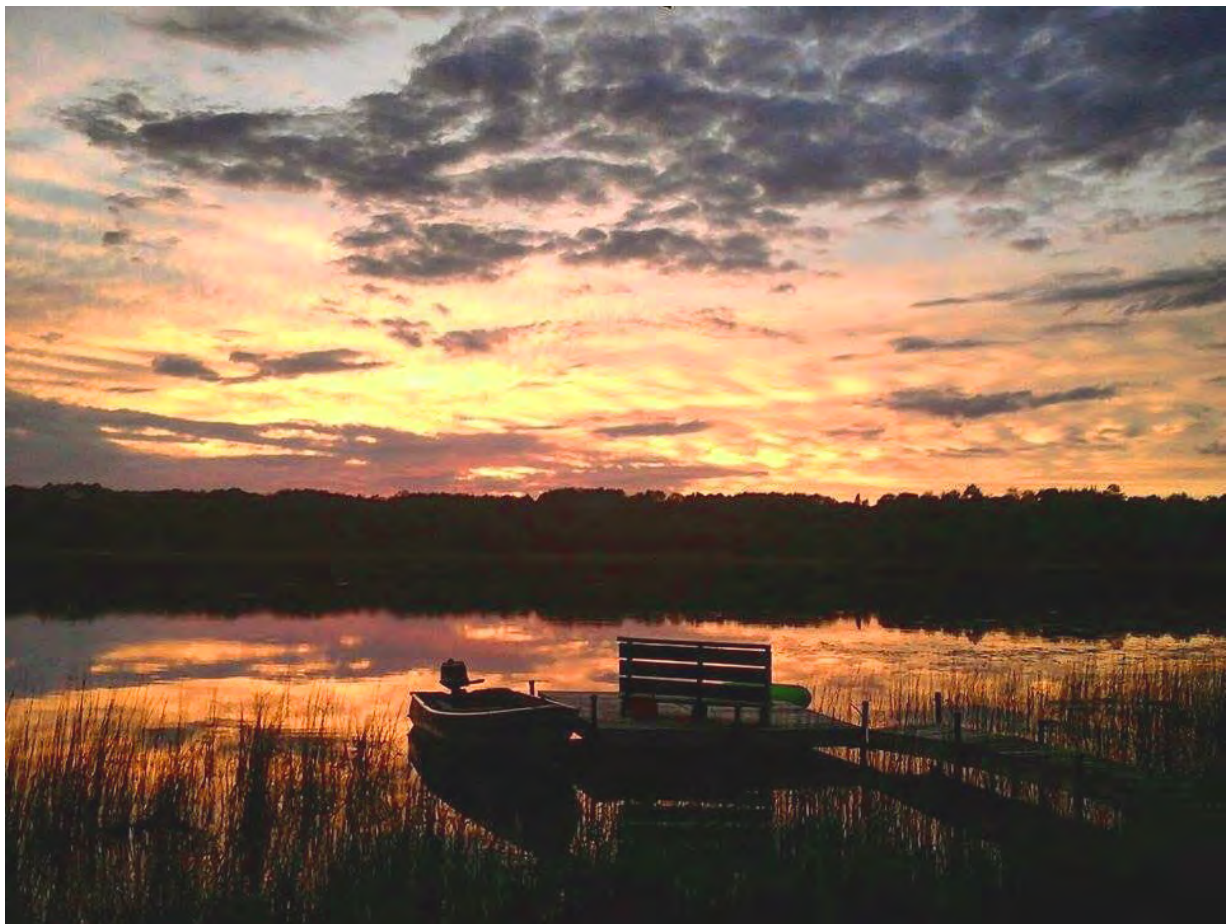
LARGER THAN LIFE,
CALIFORNIA RED WOODS



Bent Pine 2025

JAIME LAW

EVENING SYMPHONY



DANIEL SIPPRELL

TEMPERAMENTAL KITTY



Bent Pine 2025

J A I M E L A W

AGATE BEACH



Caretaker

Among grass of green,
lavender towers stretch towards the sky.
The soft breeze makes them sway to and fro.
Work is to be done, this summer day.
A steady buzz. A caretaker!
Away they go, in
safety yellow and bands of black,
into the rooms of those towers of purple,
filled with sweetness and fertility,
ready to be gathered.
The busy caretaker's wings
brush the petals as they gather each room's
powdered shipment and the necessary nectar for home.
One by one, the caretaker diligently works
from one tower to the next,
gathering and
delivering until
darkness
comes,
when
the
caretaker
departs
those
lavender
towers.

I AM Enough

They tell me to do one thing,
So, I try my best.
I do the thing they tell me,
Then they get upset.

What am I doing wrong that
They would treat me so?
All I do is not enough.
I'm not loved anymore.

I tell them how I'm feeling.
They explain to me:
"We try our best to help them."
"They need more healing."

So, I'll keep doing one thing,
Giving best effort.
Because I make a difference,
And I'm loved all the more.

ELENA UHLENKAMP

FISHING IN RED



Bent Pine 2025

SAGE LAUER

SOFT MORNINGS



Bent Pine 2025

DEANA BOBZIEN

SANTORINI



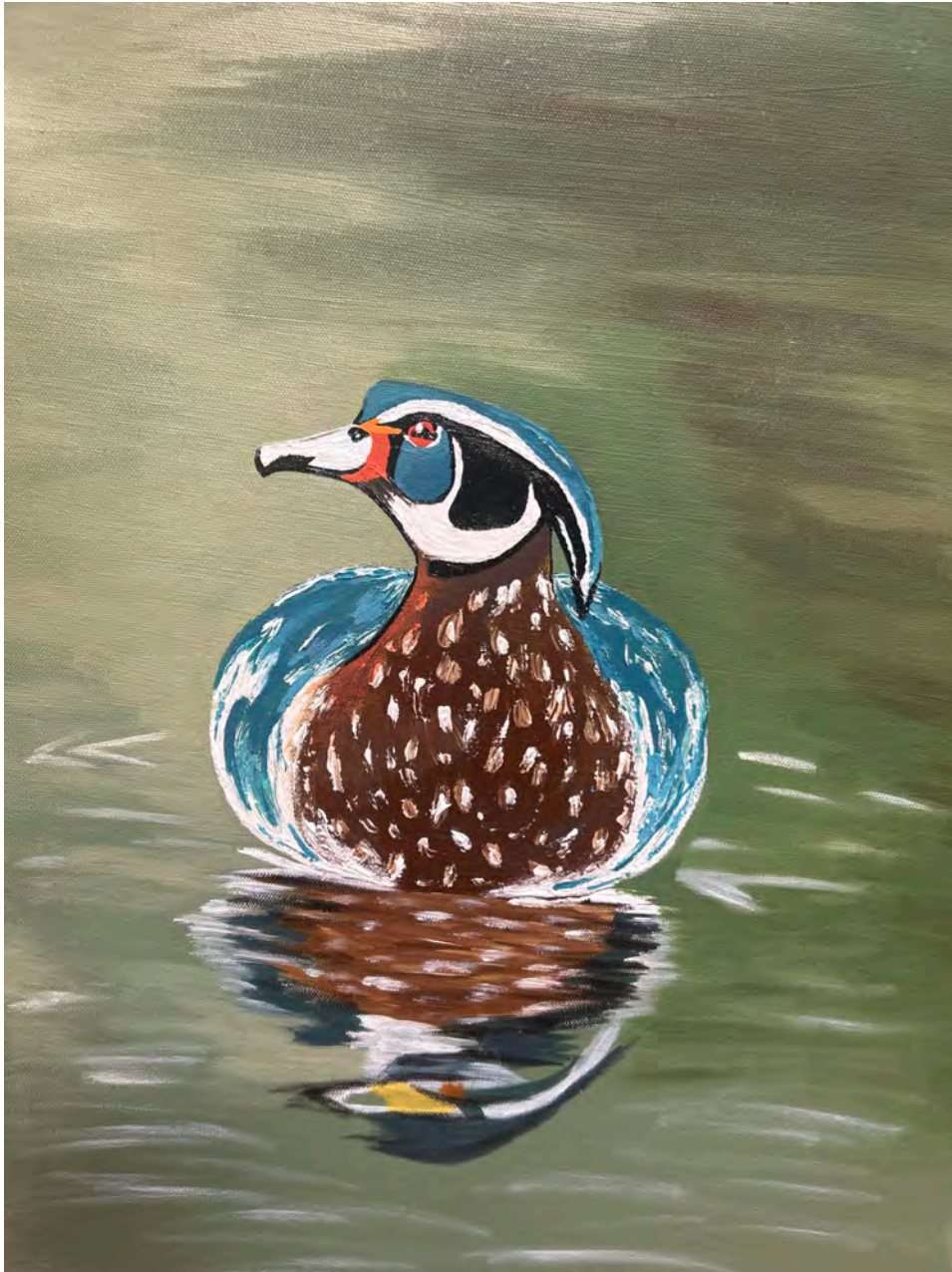
Bent Pine 2025

The Crazy Little Kids

A crazy little kid laughing at a dove,
A crazy little kid laughing just because,
Head flowering into the breeze,
Picking up everything he sees,
A crazy little kid laughing at a falling crumb,
A crazy little kid laughing at the beat of a drum,
Picking up energy along the way,
An ocean wave that lasts all day,
A crazy little kid laughing at a gorilla playing,
A crazy little kid laughing at puddles while it's raining,
Lacking the sense to be lazy,
The things they say always amazes me,
A crazy little kid laughing at a red-nosed clown,
A crazy little kid laughing after they held a frown,
An imagination that will occupy them for hours,
Falling asleep on their cauliflower,
A crazy little kid laughing at a jumping toad,
A crazy little kid laughing at a finger that has been pulled,
Never should let them feel cold,
It won't be long before they get old,
Hold them tight and never let go,
A crazy little kid laughing should be all he knows!

SAMANTHA JACKSON

WOOD DUCK



Bent Pine 2025

JESSE ENGEN

SHUSH



Bent Pine 2025

KARA HOFFMAN

WHISPERS OF COLOR



Bent Pine 2025

JENNA JENSEN

BLEEDING HEARTS



Bent Pine 2025

ALISSA HOLMGREN

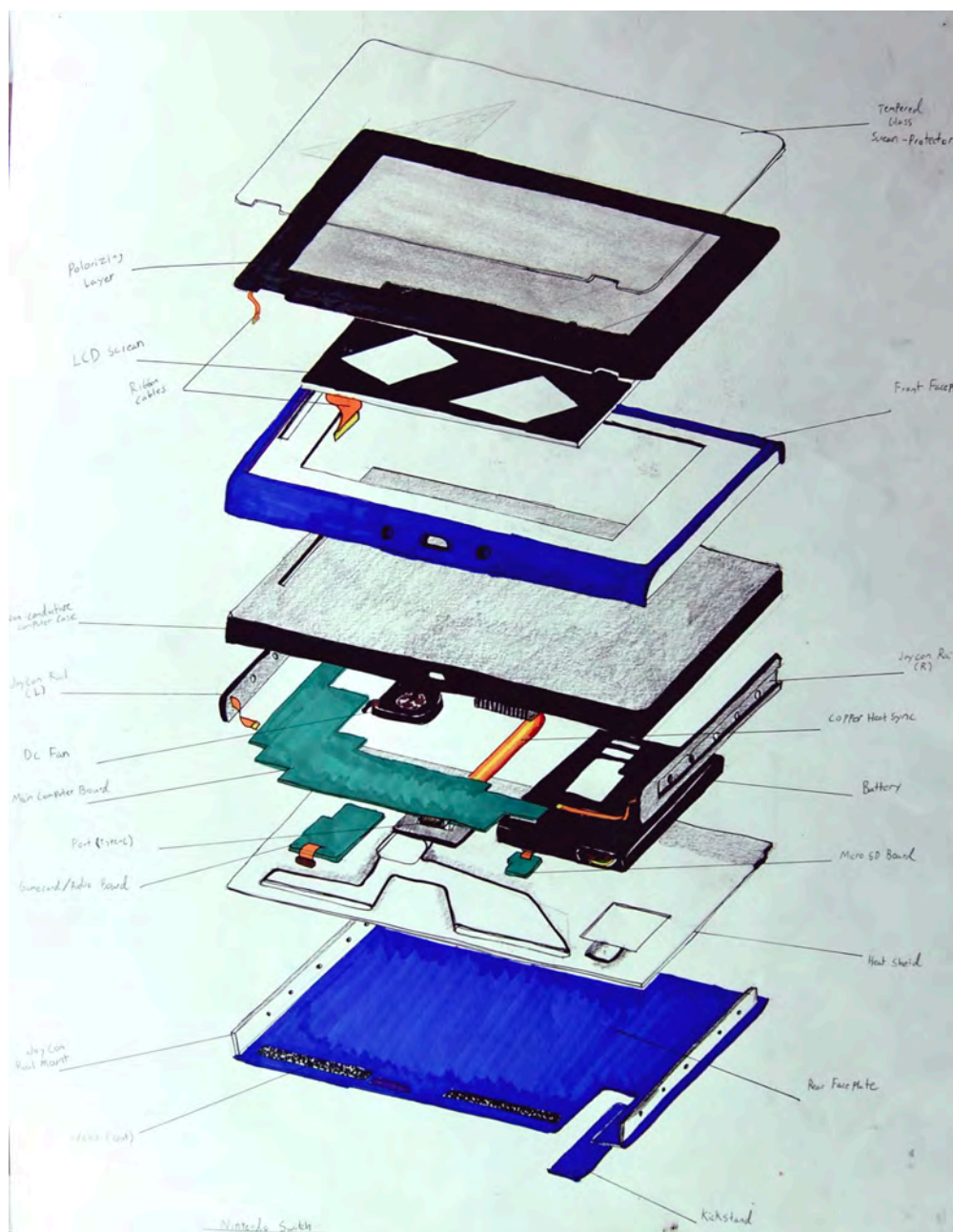
FLOWER'S PARADISE



Bent Pine 2025

EVAN RASMUSSEN

NX DRAFT (EXPLODED VIEW)



I Do Think People Are Capable of Change

I do think people are capable of change.
My friend's father, for instance, I think is capable of change.
But will it ever be enough?
She would ask herself as she watched him drink his sixth beer of the night.
Of course, it's enough.
He only drinks on the weekends now, doesn't he?
It's not the nightly routine he was once as accustomed to as brushing his own teeth.
"I've been good," he will defend himself.
"My drinking doesn't hurt anyone,"
he says almost as if he had forgotten all the times he's made her cry
while beer bottles decorate his desk.
When the morning comes, the scent of alcohol will dissipate,
and he will have no memory of her tears.
But she will remember, and she is left to carry it alone.
"I don't see myself doing that," he told her; as if that erases the truth of it.
As if that excuses years of trauma, even if it was unintentional.
As if it makes her a liar trying to paint him as a bad father
just to have something to be upset about.
"But he's not a bad father. Not really anyway.
He does try to change. But it's never long enough."
Addiction is more than just the substance.
Going back to drinking also brings back the mindset that went along with it.
I do think human beings are capable of change,
but sometimes it's not enough.

AMY MATTER-HINES

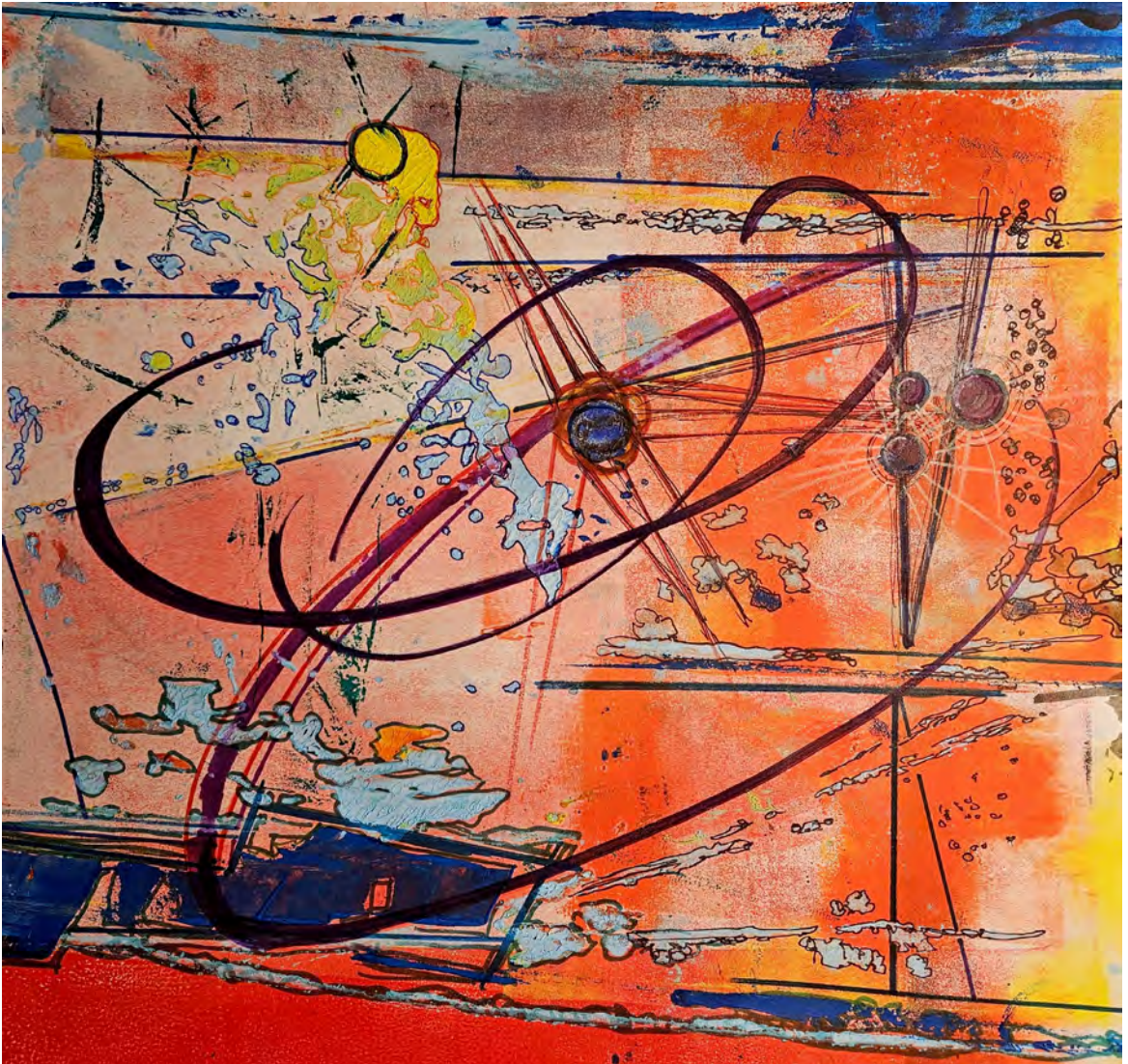
PRIMROSE - MAKES YOU SMILE!



Bent Pine 2025

CASEY HOCHHALTER

THROUGH ANOTHER'S EYES



Casey Hochhalter is an Art Instructor at CLC and Artist, working primarily in ceramic sculpture.

Bent Pine 2025

Santé

Idée et souci, chair et esprit, mon cerveau et mon corps,
Oh Seigneur je me rends à la vulnérabilité,
Et je trouve la santé dans la folie tourbillonnée.

Thought and worry, flesh and soul, my mind and body,
Oh Lord I surrender to vulnerability,
And find sanity in the swirling madness.

JACQUELINE BELIN

THE DEAD ARE
NEVER FORGOTTEN



Bent Pine 2025

Wooden Creatures

Within the dusty halls of my tiny home
crawl creatures made from driftwood.
My blood smeared over their monochrome
bodies as I carved out their eyes in my destitute.
Wood crack, tendons snap, they fly and walk 'round.
Tip tap, scritch scratch, kill the silence.
I watch my lovely creations, spellbound.
They skuttle 'round. I welcome their presence.

But then they come to destroy my wooden creatures,
rip them away, make my house a clean sheet.
"Let me go!" I scream. "Leave them alone!"
Wood crack, tendons snap. The men in white were heedless
to my pleas; they left my creatures to decay. They maltreat,
those bastards, breaking my mind and carving my very headstone.

1985



Bent Pine 2025

How Many Foxes Have You Led Astray?

How many foxes have you led astray, Goat?
How many have you cast down the well?
How many have you lied to?
How many swore they heard you laughing as they fell?

You do not know who you are, Little Goat,
You have gaslighted everyone and everything,
To the point that you cannot see that your lying to even yourself,

You have hurt them, Little Goat,
I can hear them screaming in pain, knowing it was your fault and folly,
That left them there,

There is blood on you and it stains everything you touch,
There can you see their pain,
Reverberates in the wind,
They have died because of you,
And some have given their lives for you,
But for what cost but a meaningless goal,
For they have heard your pain,
And tried to rescue you from yourself,
But when it came to their pain,
It wasn't yours so you refused to understand,
And they could never be you,
For you are a prey animal and they are predators,
To things smaller than them,
So, you might as well have pushed them over the cliff yourself,
Instead of leading them to the edge,

You were going to do it eventually anyway,
Because foxes are an outdated breed.

LEVI TRYGSTAD

CITY NIGHT



Bent Pine 2025

TATIANA COLON

BORICUA ROOTED IN MINNESOTA



Bent Pine 2025

SILAS WRIGHT

STEEL AND STONES



Bent Pine 2025

AMELIA BISTODEAU

HOPE



MAXWELL ERICKSON

BUBBLY/ANXIOUS



Bent Pine 2025

JODY KRAMER

PILLARS OF PURPLE



Credit for the title goes to Isaac Kramer, son of Jody Kramer

KAYDENCE ZUBKE

TWO GIRAFFES



Bent Pine 2025

JODY KRAMER

RAINDROPS OF RENEWAL



Bent Pine 2025

Memories

That time in your life when everything made sense
Filled with clueless happiness and joy
That time in your life when you didn't have a care
Oh, to be a little boy

My only care in the world was playing with friends
And getting that brand-new toy
I wanted to be older, taller, and strong
But now I only want to be a little boy

I wish I could go back
To that sweet young age
To turn back the clock
To flip back a page

That time in my life when everything made sense
Filled with clueless happiness and joy
That time in my life when I didn't have a care
Oh, to be a little boy

COLTON BERMEL

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER



Bent Pine 2025

SIENNA FARRELL

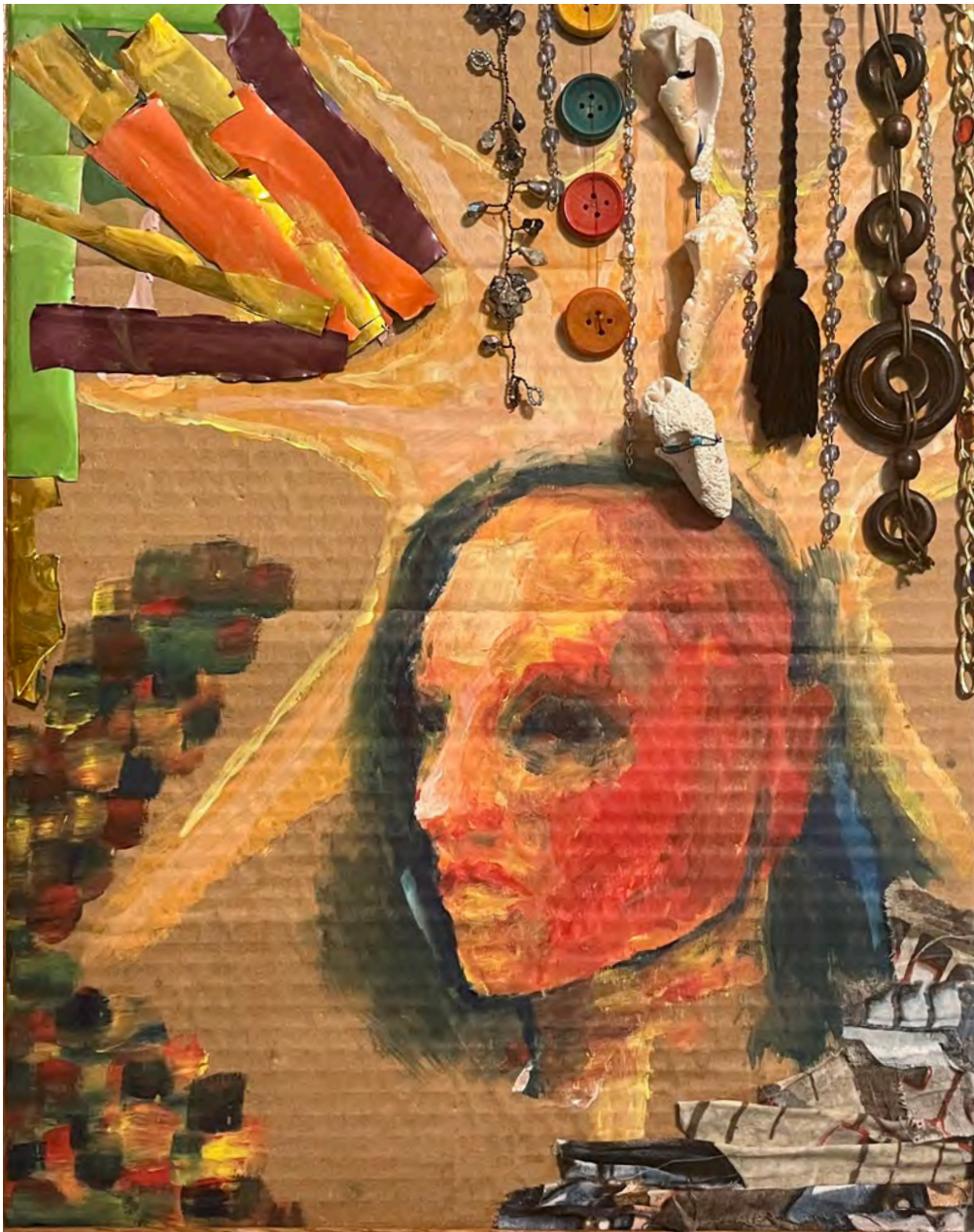
FLANAGAN JR.



Bent Pine 2025

ANAKA SCHROEDER

OPEN MIND



Bent Pine 2025

Oh, Nonsense My Nonsense

"Nonsense remains nonsense, even when it comes from the mouths of famous scientists."

—John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford

Oh, nonsense my nonsense, why do you whisper to me,
Of scholars and sages and philosophical minds running free?
The poets have spun it in lyrical might,
And scientists claim it with their charts drawn in light.
The scribes and theologians, with ink-stained hands,
Map out the cosmos, the soul, and the sands.
Yet nonsense remains, in robes, lab coats, or in rags,
Paraded in wisdom or sealed within Latin name tags.
If Newton and Dante and Lennox divine
Have muttered the same, then what fate is mine?
Are my dreams but echoes, absurd and untrue?
And yours? Just a ripple in infinite blue?
To be, or not to be, that is thought's equation.
To thine own self we shall be doubtful,
and it must follow, as a dream's crucifixion,
thou canst not then be heard by any man's council.
Yet pause—oh, nonsense my nonsense—what more could it be,
Than a pointless meaning we carve in the vast, shifting sea?
For real is the laughter, the sorrow, the song,
The love we have built, though fleeting, though right or wrong.
So nonsense, my nonsense, if nonsense we be,
Then let it be ours, wild, boundless, and free.
For if it is lived, if it pulses, it's true,
Not nonsense at all, but a world shaped by me and you.

My Pillow

My pillow is a symbol
of how it used to be,
when I wrapped my arms around you
and you wrapped yours around me.
The linen that it's in,
well it's just a plain old white,
but I can see your long blond hair
shining in the moonlight.
The smell is clean but dull,
and once again you're there,
the sweet scent of your perfume
still lingers in the air.
But the most depressing feeling
and I know I sound a fool,
is my pillow doesn't answer
when I say that I love you.

All alone tonight I'm finding everything I see reminding me, of you.
But I know that when the morning comes without my one and only love, I'll be alone and blue.

The rain upon the windowsill,
takes me back to afternoons,
you sashaying across the floor,
humming those happy tunes.
The smell of baked banana bread,
so sweet and all too real,
and flour on your dimpled cheeks,
it just adds to your appeal.

My Pillow Continued

At the same time dealing with the kids,
as they scurry through our home,
my dear I can't compare to you,
or raise them on my own.

All alone today I'm feeling emptiness.
I pray that I see you real soon.
But I know that once again tonight,
it will just be my pillow and the moon's cold light,
please tell me Lord what to do.

All alone in life I face the days and nights without my wife, it's sad, but true.
You see an unexpected accident took the one that God had blessed and sent to me,
And now my pillow is a symbol, of how it used to be,
when I wrapped my arms around you, and you wrapped yours around me.

JENNA JENSEN

TANGHULU



Bent Pine 2025

MEGAN BISTODEAU

WHERE THE CITY MEETS THE SKY
MINNEAPOLIS, MN



Bent Pine 2025

JORDAN EASTMAN

CRIMSON CYCLE



Bent Pine 2025

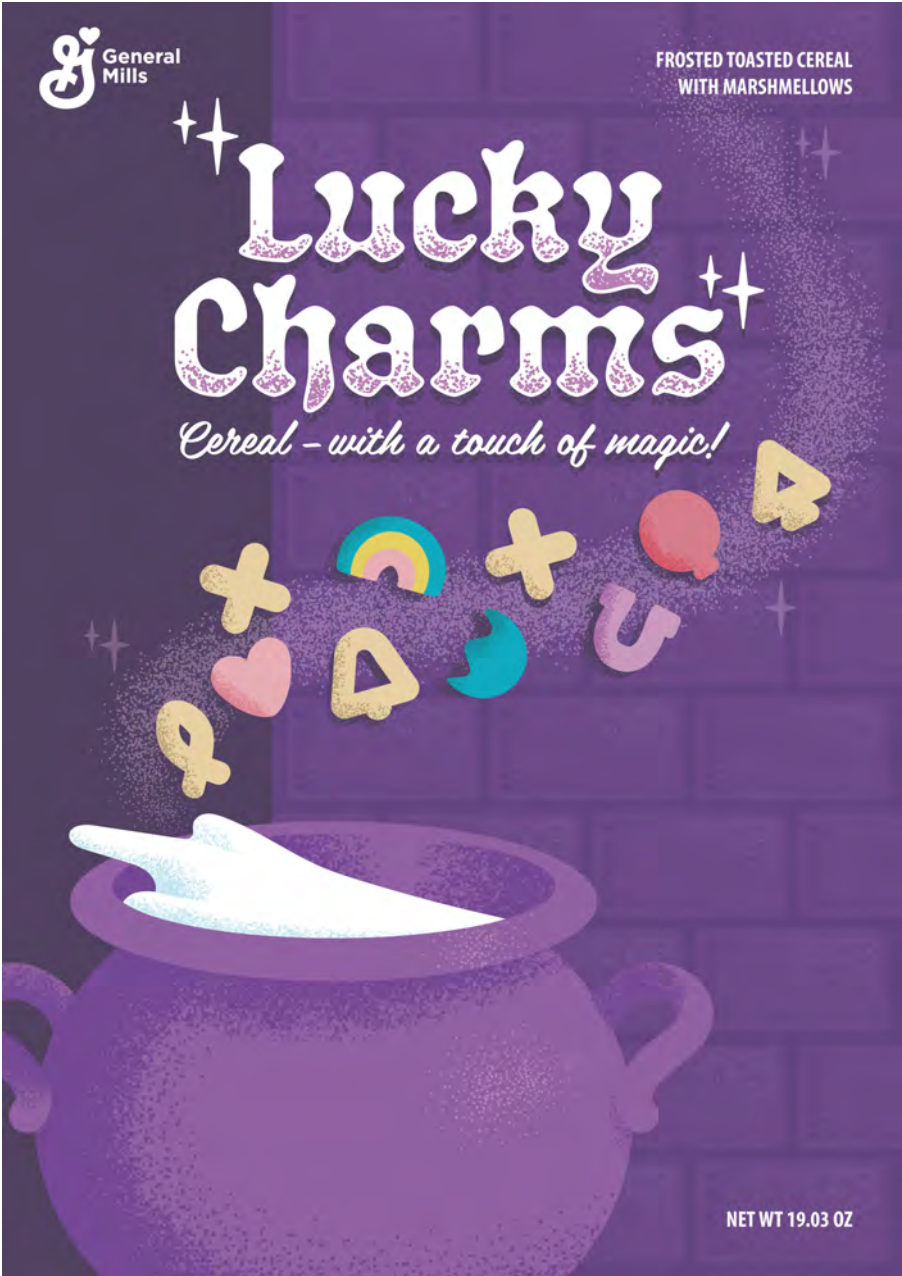
JERMEY GOOD

BANANA REPUBLIC



Bent Pine 2025

LUCKY CHARMS REDESIGN

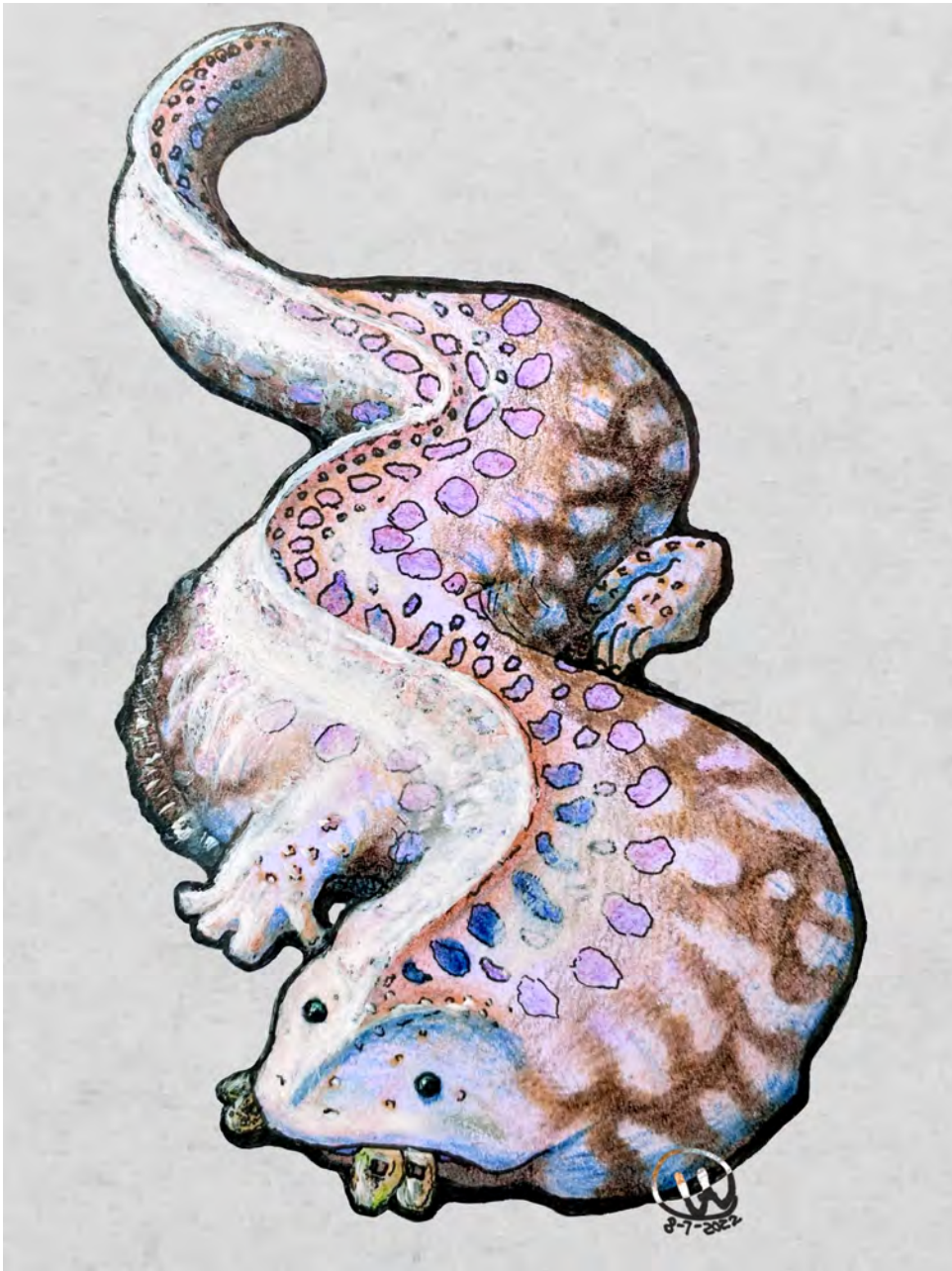


Hidden Masterpieces

Beautiful artwork is never forgotten
Shown off for its brilliance and cherished for its magnificence
All of it different in some way
Some abstract and unique, some simple and plain
But all art tells a story
Fine lines and bright colors on a snow-white canvas
Brushes floating and leaving behind trails of color
Like a thin blade gliding over my arm and leaving a tiny hint of vibrant red
Patterns of crimson lines covering my white skin
Dissolving into a faint white line that blends in with the others covering the canvas
Each one telling a story
Long nights and hard fights
Losing my sanity in a fight with myself
The story of who I am and how I came to be
All the battles silently fought in the darkness of my mind becoming visible marks of pain
And even when the battles cease, the decorated canvas still remains
But does it?
The patterns grow fainter day by day
Slowly disappearing back into my mind
The artwork no longer seen by anyone because there's nothing more to see
It feels like the stories are being torn apart and forced to be forgotten
All the fighting useless
Because what's the point of battle if there's no battle scars?
There's nothing to prove it happened
No stories to tell, no art to be seen
But you can't forget because beautiful artwork is never forgotten
It's just hidden where no one knows and where it will not be found
Just an old memory that's another hidden masterpiece

VANESSA ARNESON

THE GREEDY SALAMANDER



Bent Pine 2025

OLIVIA LAXEN

TIGER LILY



Bent Pine 2025

CAROLYN NIX

DANDADAN FANART



JODY KRAMER

THE FEAST OF THE
BUMBLE BEE



Bent Pine 2025

ALISSA HOLMGREN

MAKE A WISH



Bent Pine 2025

Apostle and Apostate

A young boy walks the halls of a palatial villa on the coast. A few days past, he had been called to help tend to his uncle, who had begun to slip further and further away from the mortal plane. His uncle had conquered the civilized world over his lifetime, and that life was soon to come to an end.

An old man lay dying in the villa overlooking the sea. Across the water the outline of a massive, newly constructed city loomed large in both the landscape and the mind of the dying man. The city that bears his name. But these days—his last days—those around him have begun to call him “Apostle.” Friend of The Son. They called him so because of his most recent PR stunt: getting baptized. Long had he been the champion of the Christians, that odd cult from Judea that, according to his supposed “peers” in the senate, worshiped a crucified donkey. In the end, that’s why he had waited to be baptized on his deathbed. Because he could not stop himself from taking drastic action—murderous action—against dissenters of their nature. Rivals for power too. But the priests and the tutors that raised him insisted with all the certainty of a man who had been there himself that baptism wipes away all sin, leaving the body and soul purified and ready to enter heaven. He prayed they were right.

All of the blood was behind him now. The murders. The usurpations. The wars against enemies from within and without. All of that was supposed to be behind him. But it haunted his thoughts. He had killed his first son in a fit of rage spurred on by a false accusation made by his step mother. When the old man realized his wife’s deception, he killed her too. His whole life had been a string of attempts to cover up his past mistakes with pious acts and recasting his personal foes as enemies of the people. He began to wonder now if it had been enough.

His grip on his body was slipping, he could feel it. He gazed out across the water one more time, and saw *that* boy. His nephew. Standing a dozen or so yards away, watching. Always watching that one. The old man began to wonder if that boy realized what had happened to his father a few days past. If he did . . . no. He’s only a boy. Not even the savior would forgive the old man for *that*.

Apostle and Apostate Continued

Across the water in the city loomed so large in the mind of the dying man, the son of that old man wanders palatial halls, plotting his rise to power. His stride is impatient, allowing little time for the myriad of bureaucrats buzzing about him to read their reports. Each of them wears armor made out of self-importance. Each is convinced of their own eminence and each thinks that *their* business is somehow more important than any other of the nearly faceless drones of the senate and imperial staff.

As he begins to ascend the steps of a tower leading to the imperial quarters, he gazes across the water—across the narrow strait separating him from his father. He had received news about a week past that his father's health had begun to fail rapidly. It was not likely that he would return to the new capital that he forged for the empire before his death. All the same. It would allow the son to solidify control over his father's empire.

One of the drones begins to buzz again. His brothers have divided the western empire between themselves, leaving the entirety of the east to be his domain. His father's city is his. He bears his grandfather's name. Although he is not the eldest, and does not hold the old capital for himself, his position is nearly unassailable. With his younger brother still barely a teenager and taking territory that buffers him from his older brother, he would have free reign to bring the resources of the east under his command, and begin to do exactly as his father had done. He would soon be the sole ruler of the empire, family be damned.

The old man was dozing off now. *That man*. There was good reason to suspect that he was involved in the death of my father. His own brother. Just a few days ago almost every adult man in the family turned up dead. What an incredible mystery to solve. I wonder if the man already known for kin-slaying had decided to help his sons secure their inheritance with a bit of blood. They're calling him "*the Apostle*" now. What an incredible joke. He had pillaged his way all across Europe and Asia minor, slaughtering any and all who stood against him and still there are those calling him a hero. You spend your whole life destroying the world and rebuilding it in your image out of pure ego and lust for power and now the cult you used to do it is telling common folk that you're a saint. A personal

friend of their God. Already his three sons, all of whom the old man named after himself were carving up the empire. Each had selected which bits of the carcass the old man was about to leave behind they'd like to inherit. And of course, they view everyone with a drop of their own blood as rivals for power, possible claimants to the imperial throne. Lucky me, I'm only a child for now, a few years off of manhood. They'll have to wait a while yet before they can justify my disappearance.

But if I do make it to adulthood, if the sons of The Apostle don't have half the stomach for violence, I'll make them regret it. The Galileans have corrupted this country. If I get the chance I'll rip all their newly gained power and influence from the hands of their priests and return the country to the old ways.

As I walk towards the old man to say something to him—I don't even know what—I notice the lack of . . . anything in his eyes. I wave. Nothing. A smile spreads across my face. I only have a few moments alone with the corpse. I kick the lifeless thing. As hard as my legs will allow me. After a few more, I stop. Too much of that will make his passing more suspicious than need be. After catching my breath, I run for the nearest guards to tell them. Constantine the Great is dead.

Autonomous

I want
I need
To be autonomous
That space
That freedom
To be autonomous
Pervasive it may be
It's the driving force
Behind what makes me
me
It yearns and it writhes
It rolls and it flails
To lead the way
To be all that it entails
Autonomous
My very nature
It does exclaim
Proud
Without shame
To be the heavy blanket
That covers every desire
Every inclination
every choice too
And with it
Empowers me
To stand on the top
Where all can see
A separate me
Who makes her own choices
Calls her own shots
Dances
To the beat
Of
Her own drum
To music
So unique
So beautiful
That it had to come from
The hidden spot inside
Right in the same spot that
Autonomous does reside



MAXWELL ERICKSON

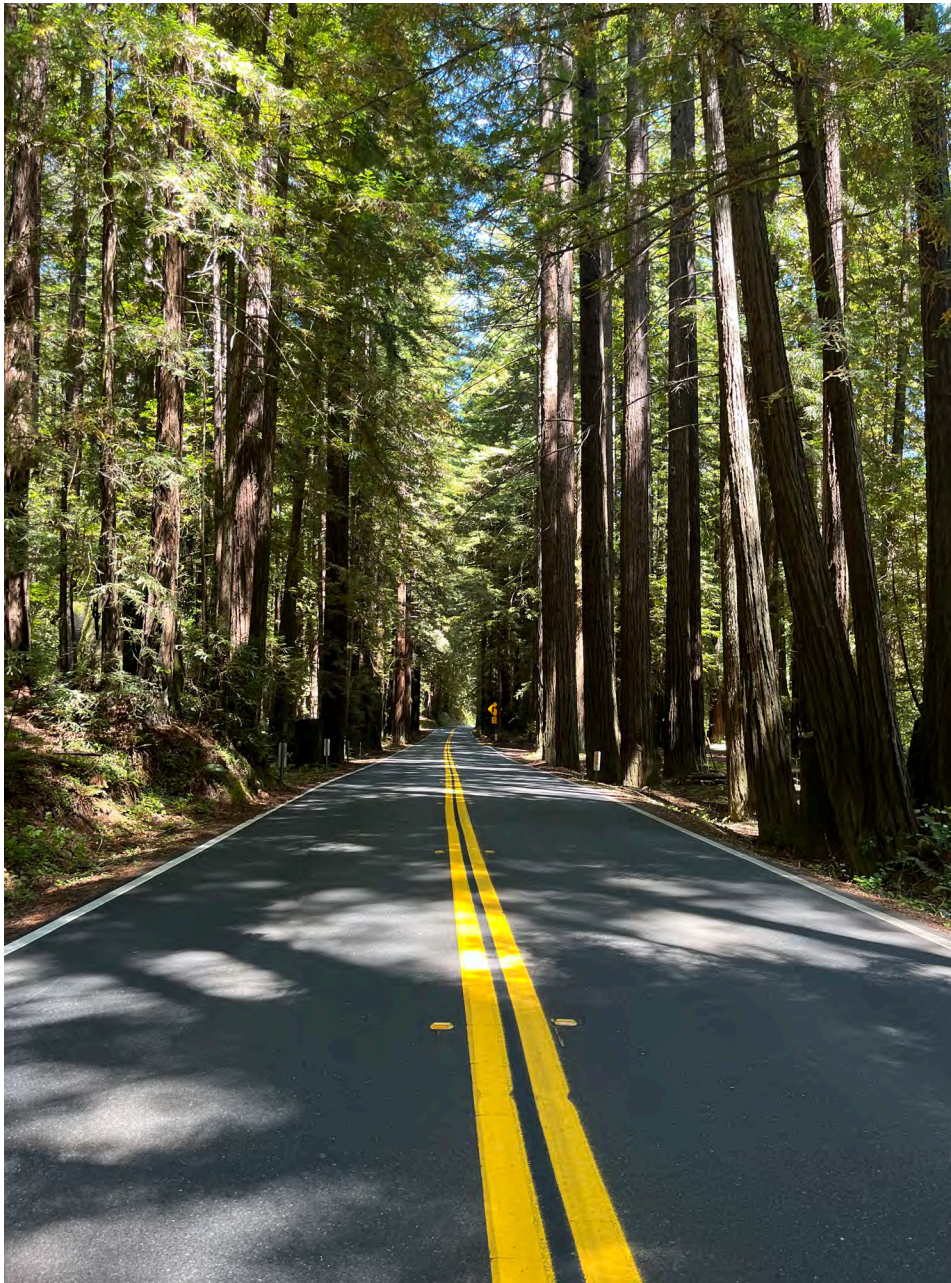
THE VIEW FROM THE RIVER SEINE



Bent Pine 2025

AMELIA BISTODEAU

WOODS DEEP



Bent Pine 2025

Cry for Help

Hidden deep down within,
There's a lost pair of eyes,
I want to cry,
A grown man who never cried,
Looking for a place to hide,
I want to cry,
My mind won't escape me,
It's shy,
I want to cry,
Would if I fell from the sky,
Would you cry?
I want to cry,
The tin cat keeps talking to me,
Should I end this letter with sincerely?
Come on! You need to talk to me,
No, just let me be,
I want to cry,
Nobody waved goodbye,
I want to cry,
No!
I just want to die,
Now will you say goodbye?

MEGAN BISTODEAU

PEACE IN NATURE
NORTHERN MINNESOTA



Bent Pine 2025

DELLA KOEP

MAGNIFICENT MOSS



Bent Pine 2025

JENNA JENSEN

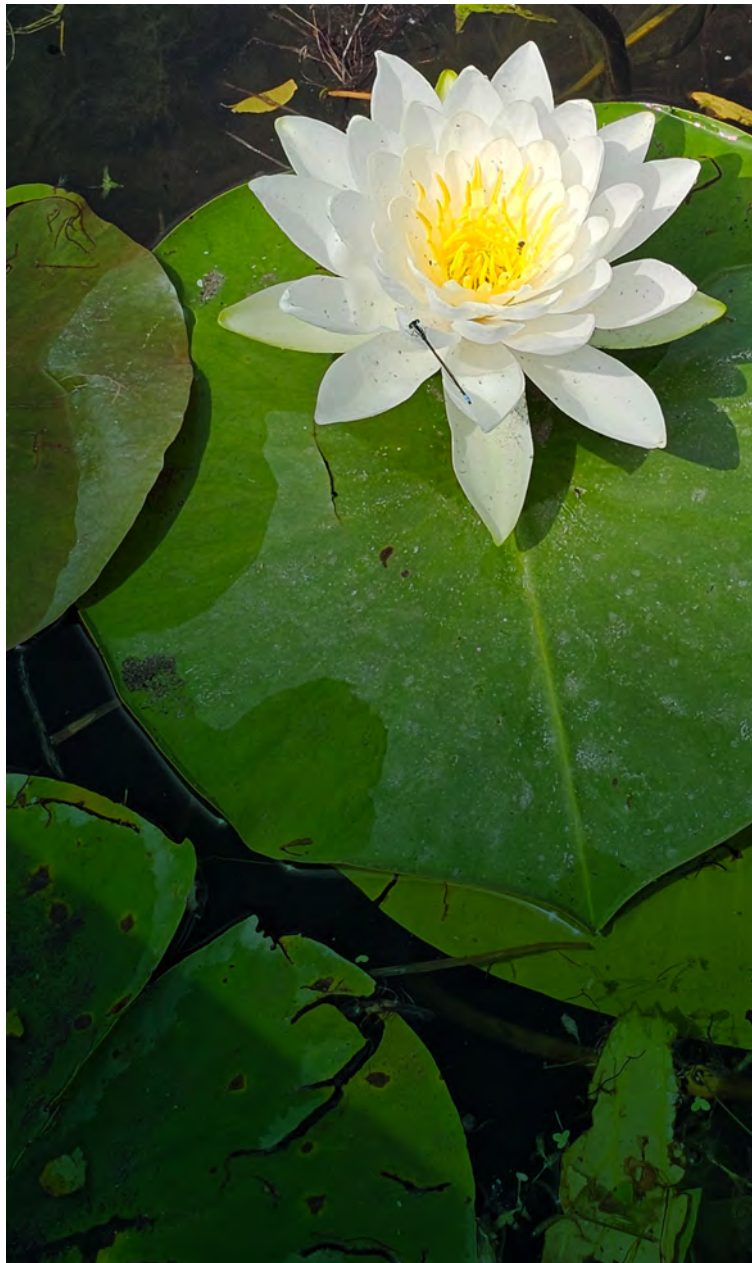
ANGLER FISH



Bent Pine 2025

ELENA UHLENKAMP

RESTING SPOT



Bent Pine 2025

Madame Grès

This piece is part of a collection of flash fiction stories and poems told from the perspective of a woman named Rosemary Malone: a morally ambiguous, middle aged woman trudging through the thicket of her own muddled past to reach a place to rest within herself.

I closed my eyes and rested my head against the train window as I watched without allowing my eyes to focus, the gray haze as it flashed before them. Closing them, I tried to conjure an image of my mother. It had been twenty-seven years since I'd last seen her face. I wondered if I would recognize her, as an old woman. Would I know her frantic gait as I watched her cross Nicolette and 11th, on her way to Bible study, her back to me, her petite frame holding the presence of seven giants, her bolero tails flapping with each hurried, now trembling step. When she turned to me, would I recognize her face with its olive pallor, fine features, and piercing black eyes? Would I recall the faint scent of her rosewater perfume and her Dove body bars? Would my ears perk to the hiss of her voice calling my name, telling me to hurry it along now, I am making her late? I cannot recall any of these things on this train, with my head resting on the window. I can only place the sensation rumbling in my gut, which is not caused by that of the train, and the feel of the bile as it pools in the back of my throat.

She's dead now. Finally. My mother. I got the call and I needed to sign the papers. She'd been a meticulous and orderly woman in her day, but remembering to remove me from her healthcare directive was apparently a detail she'd overlooked. Though, knowing what I did of my mother, I suspected that she had plotted this as some sort of petty revenge. Me, as her decider of all things. Whether she lives or dies. She now the petty annoyance. The full fucking circle absurdity of it all. She will die. I'll see to it. Not so much in a way of not wanting to see her suffer, but more so from a place of *I had a lot of other shit that I needed to get on with*. The last part is a lie, and probably the first part too. Her suffering now, though warranted if I had desired it, would have brought me no tangible solace at that point. She'd been dead a long time to me. I could no longer even smell her rot. I had suffered enough for the

Madame Grès Continued

both of us by then and I only carried with me a sack of essential fucks to give. In it, I carried concerns of my ever-expanding flesh and the need for larger clothing to get me through the harsh northeast winters, which left only a scant little pocket for fucks to give about my mother and Black Friday sales.

I was thinking about new clothes and all that I might hunt for in the dank thrift shops I planned to investigate once this train brought it's rumble to a roll and I was able to hop off—fleet of foot unto the sidewalk just before the train car was able to screech to a complete halt. I would scour the cluttered racks and find the truest of treasures: a silk Madame Grès, in *citrine*—like my birthstone. I find a Spiegel tweed dress with matching bolero of my own and a pair of vintage Sam Edelman corduroy heels. A wool navy pea coat with old stamps in the pocket and a long lost letter to someone once loved.

With thoughts of corduroy shoes in my head and a dread down my spine, I drifted to sleep and dreamt of a dance and all the people gathered around a boy who couldn't stop laughing and he couldn't stop spinning and everyone danced and spun around him until he had come all undone and lay in a pile of loose yarn at the feet of everyone who had not yet stopped dancing.

When the train lurched to a stop, I realized I'd never find the Madame Grès, the Spiegel or a single corduroy thread. No, I had work to be done. I sifted through my bag and pulled out my reading glasses. Three more stops. I fished deeper in my bag for my lip salve after first finding an old uncapped matte rose lip rouge, and slathered it on in one thick swipe of my finger across my pierced lips. I pulled out my tartan scarf and wrapped it once, then twice around my neck that reminded me of my dead-to-me mother who, because of me, was soon to be dead to *all*. I felt a twang of something unrecognizable in my gut and swiftly and effectively swiped it clear from my conscience. I peaked at the address on my phone one last time, folded my glasses, smacked my lips, and waited for the rumble to turn to a roll.



GEORGE SCHMIDT

HUANUCOENSIS



Bent Pine 2025

EILEEN BORG

IN A TREE TRUNK



Bent Pine 2025

My Mother Made for Others

Permission to share this essay with Bent Pine was granted by Taylor's generous mother.

3am and it was a school night, yet She was still awake. When was the last time She slept? Was it at the dinner table when She kept planting Her face in the food She had provided us? It didn't matter; I needed rest. Her mowing the lawn at 3am wasn't anything new anyhow.

There were always strange people at Her house, but the lady who hit walls had been by far the most annoying. Why did She allow these strange people into the home? Shouldn't I be allowed to feel safe in the home where I had grown? Locking my bedroom was normal, but sometimes my sister and I slept in our brother's room. I slept better knowing they were safe.

It was Christmas Eve. I remember how the flames licked at the sky, dark smoke choked the yard. Or did I imagine it? They say the camper in the back yard was a lab, and that might explain why we were never allowed in there. However, She told us that a couple jealous bitches started the fire. I still do not know what happened, but years later that burnt rubble still clings to that small piece of the Earth's flesh.

I was 16, a child yet, and felt responsible for my siblings. I brought home food, cooked, and made sure they were fed and up and ready for school in the mornings. School, work, siblings, repeat. She resented me, fighting with Her was expected, daily. I did not choose this. I know I am not their mom; I'm their big sis. I resent Her—I too wanted to be a child, at least for a little while longer.

Another fire, a new fear. Candles... Her and fire and candles. All things I valued burnt and worthless. Whatever remained the next morning I brought out and burned too. My art from a college art class once framed and adored, gone. My diploma, ashes. My certificate from the A.S.L. National Honors society? No. Just the dog who saved my life once upon a time and my car. I slept in that car, drove it into a cemetery and tried to sleep anyways. Suddenly 18 and homeless with a dog who deserved so much more than me. A choice made to be free of the fear, the lies, and what I might've become had I stayed.

So many stories, many of betrayal, grief, and greed. While I was not innocent in all that happened—the fights, the lying, learning how to be deceitful—at least I survived that version of myself. I didn't want to; I remember those thoughts—the plan I had made and came so close

My Mother Made for Others *Continued*

to following through with. Apparently, trauma is associated with memory loss. Why is it that I remember all these horrible events but cannot remember any of the good? I'd rather remember the childhood I had before She took it from me.

Five years She's been sober now. I wasn't there for Her in the beginning. The first time I shut Her out was six months, life moved forward. I learned to cook something that didn't come from a can or box. I found someone to love and who loved me back. Oh, so very slowly he walked me back into the light. The second time I shut Her out was nearly two years. When I called Her, She didn't recognize my voice. How could She forget Her daughter's voice? I was still mad, but She was sober, and Her life too was moving forward.

My mother, not perfect, but mine, and I am proud She made it out. That we made it out. In a weird way I'm glad it all happened. Don't get me wrong, sometimes I still despise Her, but She is something so much better now than She would ever have been. She is someone you can tell your stories to, and She will never judge—or at least never show it. Now, She is a mother any child can depend on. A woman who helps others by any means She is capable. She is the woman who fell, and climbed out of a pit of sorrows that would make Heroines tremble. No, not perfect—but something new and shiny. A marvel, a role model. Maybe not to you, but to women who are lost and confused, She sees you. And because of Her, I do too.



MACYN MCBROOM

COMPANIONS



Bent Pine 2025

TATIANA COLON

SYMBOLS OF BORIKÉN



Bent Pine 2025

JODY KRAMER

AFTER THE STORM



Bent Pine 2025

MEGAN BISTODEAU

FLIGHT OF THE LOON
CROSSLAKE, MN



ALAINA LARSON

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED BIRD



Bent Pine 2025

AMY MATTER-HINES

WHAT'S INSIDE?



Bent Pine 2025

Lakewood Drive's Surprise Visitor

My knight in shining armor will have to come in on a skid loader or Babe the Blue Ox if he's going to find me deep in the woods. And guess what? He did. Well, he might have shown up in a Feller Buncher, which is a machine that uses a large rotary saw or claw to hold the trunk of the tree, cut its base, and—in the same swift move—get all the branches cut off.

Pulling into my parents' driveway one afternoon close to the end of summer, I noticed these large deep tire tracks in the dirt. I parked my car in-between the 3-story white house on the left and the 3-stall tin garage on the right.

The woods had come to life at that moment. I could hear birds chirping and the many squirrels that invaded the birdfeeders just scurrying along. The smell of wood burning in a small woodstove in the first stall of the garage mixed with the sweet scent of flowers blooming all over the yard in the many flower beds. The wind blowing through the trees and bushes made everything sway in a rhythmic way.

My dad created a woodshop wonderland as we like to call it sometimes. He creates his wood works of art all year long there. When you walk through the door, you are greeted with the smell of wood burning and I absolutely love that smell. Wood Chips cover the floor everywhere you walk. Beautiful handmade furniture and knickknacks line all four walls.

He has created some magnificent pieces over the last two decades and counting. Beautiful handmade tables of all sizes, from the dining room to a bedside table that takes up the space of two walls. On some of his larger pieces, he cut and placed every single piece to create a sinking illusion or to look like a beautiful rustic rose.

He has created things like walking sticks with faces and leafy vines all the way through, "Family Trees," which are cut and sanded down branches holding little cedar shelves. For gardens, he created wooden mushrooms, sunflowers, and homegrown hand painted gourd birdhouses. The ceiling is covered in wooden airplanes and some helicopters.

He also makes these beautiful ribbon boxes and clocks. The ribbons look so real in detail, and they just flow smoothly like a regular ribbon. The clocks have American Indians standing above the time or a cute little cabin sitting on top.

My father stepped out of the shop in his gray and white plaid button up, his dirty old baseball cap, and his saw dust covered jeans and loafers. He said to me, "I have someone I want you to meet." Walking in, I was greeted by a gentleman with a big smile partially hidden under a full beard, two blue eyes that looked like clear bodies of water, and a gentle hand

Lakewood Drive's Surprise Visitor *Continued*

to shake. He was wearing a gray shirt and dirt covered jeans with a dark pair of sunglasses resting on top of his head. His name was Tom. He was cutting down some trees just down the road for a neighbor and my dad wanted to hire him to cut a few on their property.

Tom and I exchanged handshakes and names. He started to explain, "You have a beautiful piece of property here. Your dad wants to open it up a bit and there are some trees I'd like to get back to and take off your hands." I smiled and asked, "Do you mind if we watch you take a few down while you're close by? My son would love that."

With a big smile returning to his face, he said, "Absolutely!"

Just then, my son came running down the steps from the house and wanted to play catch for a bit before we had to leave again. Tom's Feller Buncher was parked at the edge of the property before it turned into woods. About half an hour into catch, we watched Tom hop into his machine before slowly taking off into the woods.

We watched him cut some trees before he came back to our property to cut down a few areas for my dad. Before he started on all of that, he stepped out of his machine and asked, "Does your son want to ride with and watch up close?" My boy jumped as high as his legs could take him and he yelled, "I can't believe I get to ride in that thing!" The excitement just radiated off that boy. My son was ecstatic to say the least.

After the cutting was done, Tom pulled back into the same spot he was in earlier. He opened the door, and he helped my son down the steps while I waited at the bottom ready to catch him.

I shook Tom's hand and said, "Thank you for creating a core memory for my son. You made his whole week I think." He smiled warmly and told me a little about his own son. We found out our kids were about the same age. My dad walks up and without hesitation, asks Tom, "Are you married?" I couldn't help but laugh and just walk away. My son and I had errands to run.

As the guys talked in the Shop for a bit, I took that time to ask my son about his experience. "That was so cool! It was also scary at times when he could cut the tree and run it through. It felt like we were going to get hit but it was so much fun. He's super nice."

"That was cool to watch. I can't imagine what it was like up close. How cool is that! Tom is very nice for doing that."

Lakewood Drive's Surprise Visitor *Continued*

We got back to the house a couple hours later and the Feller Buncher was still parked but Tom was gone. I made my way to the back of the 3-stall garage and into the garden.

Trellises of beautiful flowers hang over the entrance. Beyond that from left to right are wooden boxes growing flowers and garden goods. You are just surrounded by the fresh smells of cut grass, wood smoke, fresh flowers and dirt.

I found my dad watering some flowers and as I walked up to him, he broke out into a huge smile. He starts laughing and tells me, "I pretty much got you set up with Mr. Tom." I started laughing, denying he did that because that's not like him. He proceeded to explain, "We had quite a bit of time to talk after you left, and Tom was showing interest in you." Dad took it upon himself to inform Tom about my love life. Thanks, Dad. I spend the rest of the evening thinking about how that will go.

The next morning, Tom showed up to collect all the wood he had cut down and chopped up. I walked out to the garden where he was talking with my dad and younger brother about future plans for cutting on the property. He turned around and we both smiled and said, "Good morning."

Tom explained, "I'm just going to be forward and ask you out on a date. You can say no, or you can say yes and give me a chance. No pressure." I smiled so much my face started to hurt a little. Of course, I said yes! I don't normally like going anywhere with a lot of people and my dad must have informed Tom of this because he asked me what I thought about a picnic in the evening at my parents' house. It was a cute idea and if anything was needed, I could just grab it. I was so excited.

Later that same day, Tom showed up again ready for our date. It wasn't anything formal, but it was so cozy. Sprawled out on the lawn was a big yard blanket with beautiful flowers all over. Sitting upon that was an actual wicker picnic basket that comes with the dishes and utensils. As we sat, he started to pull out all this delicious and colorful looking food. And a beautiful little cake for us to share. He even put a small bouquet of flowers in the middle of it all.

"It's not much, and I'll be honest. I haven't been on a date in years. So, I apologize if this isn't what you were expecting." Tom was so shy and nervous saying this. Instantly pulling at my heart strings. I told him, "When I woke up this morning, I wasn't expecting any of this.

Lakewood Drive's Surprise Visitor *Continued*

Everything is so beautiful and just picture perfect. I feel like we are in a movie!" He laughed and seemed to finally relax, knowing he did a job well done.

For the next hour and a half, we talked and laughed so much. We managed to have some food and drinks in-between conversations. It was all so wonderful and I really didn't want the evening to end. It started to get dark, and the bugs were coming out.

We had a few moments of silence as we both sipped on our drinks. I looked over into the woods and asked, "Have you ever cut a tree down and had to rescue an animal?" He said, "Surprisingly, yes, but not too many. Mostly squirrels. And yes, I do save them too." I laughed at that part knowing they really are pests but adorable ones at that.

As we watched the sun setting behind the trees and shining its last bit of light through the branches, we both sighed at the same time, which made us both laugh. He quietly told me, "I always feel so at peace here in the woods whenever I come to do a job. I love my job, and I meet a lot of different people. I've never had the guts to ask anyone out until now though."

He looked like he wanted to kiss me, but I felt it wasn't the right time. I hardly know him. I laughed and quietly said to him, "I hope you'll be around for a while. I think just one date wasn't enough." The moment of him wanting to kiss me was ruined and replaced with a deep laugh. He replied, "I plan to be around as long as you'll have me." Oh, I could kiss him.

The conversation wound down and we cleaned up all the leftovers and dishes. He walked me up the steps and to the front door. He thanked me for saying yes to him and I thanked him for his kindness. He asked, "Could we do this again?" and I said "Absolutely!" with a big smile on my face. He gave me a light kiss on the cheek and said goodnight.

I walked into the house to find my parents both standing in the living room, waiting so patiently for me to tell them how it went. With a smile I told them, "We have another date coming up." They were happy about that, and we went to bed looking forward to something new every day now.

I called my sister, Shari (we're identical twins) and had to tell her everything. "He seems pretty wonderful. What do mom and dad think?" she asked.

"I think they are just happy that I'm happy right now," I replied with a giggle. "I can't help but think dad wants him around because they are both wood guys."

Lakewood Drive's Surprise Visitor *Continued*

We talked for about an hour just talking all the what-ifs and maybes. I try not to stay in that way of thinking and focus on the now. He could turn out to be Mr. Right or just a new friend. A family friend at that. The future is unclear, but it looks like happiness and adventure for me. I'm okay with that.

Who knew that the end of a cut job would be the beginning of a love story.

JODY KRAMER

FIELDS OF GOLD



Bent Pine 2025

EILEEN BORG

TRUNK AND SKY



Bent Pine 2025

GEORGE SCHMIDT

CORYPHANTHA MELLEOSPINA
AMONG *TRICHOCEREUS*



*These were grown from seeds gifted to me by my girlfriend's aunt in Mexico.
All of the cacti in this photo were started from seeds indoors.*

Pizza for Jim

Like almost every scary story, this happened one dark and stormy night.

Thunder rumbled outside as I swept the kitchen floor of KJ's Brick-Oven Pizza. It was unusually slow for a Saturday night. Barely any pizza orders were made since we opened. It could have been because of the summer storm happening outside. My last coworker left for home half an hour ago because of a medical emergency right after cleaning the dining area.

So, here I was: 45 minutes to close, left with cleaning the kitchen, taking out the trash, and counting the till by myself. Not ideal, but it kept me from scrolling through Facebook.

I bobbed my head to the music spilling from the jukebox as I swept the kitchen. The usual pop rock playlist made the cleaning much more entertaining. I quietly sang along to Disturbed's version of "The Sound of Silence." I probably looked like an idiot dance-cleaning my way through work, but no one was around as I swept dirt and dropped pizza toppings into a pile. Lightning flashed outside.

"...and no one dared disturb the sound of—"

Ka-BOOM!

I screeched at the thunder. The entire building shook on its foundation. The dining chairs rattled on top of the already shaky tables.

Then the power went out.

I froze in the darkness, the jukebox cutting out. Rain pounded on the windows and roof, with thunder rumbling in the sky. Lightning gave momentary light in the dark. Chills crawled up my spine. I wasn't even done with the kitchen. I still had to sweep the dry mud up off the floor in the back pantry. Then mop, count till, and do garbage. I didn't want to do any of that in the dark.

I set the broom to the side and pulled out my phone, swiping to get the flashlight on. The burning gas of the bottom brick oven shining through the gaps of the door flap wasn't nearly bright enough. In fact, it looked more like hellfire. Why my mind went there, I wasn't sure. But I was creeped out with the timing of the power outage to the song. I needed to check the breakers. With my luck, one of them went off on me. Either that, or one of the powerlines were knocked out.

As I moved towards the back, the power flickered back on. The jukebox began to play

again, having moved on to a different song. I vaguely heard it from my spot in the back. I couldn't tell you what song was playing.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I clicked my phone light off. Power's back on. We're all good now.

"Greetings," a raspy, throaty voice of a man called from the front.

My head jerked up, the hair raising on the back of my neck. The man's voice made me think of the gravelly growl of a supernatural beast. Something that would come out from under the bed in the dead of night, ready to eat your soul. I *definitely* watched too many horror movies.

I shoved those thoughts aside. I was thinking crazy. It was probably just an older man who smoked a bit during his life. I turned to see who it was. I swear my heart was ready to jump out of my mouth and plummet to the floor with a *splat*.

Living up to the sound of the voice, a dark silhouette of a man stood on the other side of the counter. Behind him, the dining room light flashed ominously, threatening to pop. The shadowy outline was fuzzy, like wisps of smoke. Eyes glowed a cold white, stark against the blackness of his face. Dying twin stars in the night sky. They stared straight into my soul. Those cold eyes were the only discerning features on his face, if that was his face I was looking at.

I couldn't help it. I screamed.

Or, I had tried to. My mouth may have been open, but no sound escaped from my throat. The thing was going to kill me. I just knew it. He was going to phase through the counter, plunge his hand into my chest, suck out my very soul, and—

"Young mortal," the shadowy entity asked, no visible mouth moving, "is it possible for another order to be placed at this time?"

I stared blankly at him, unsure how to react. My mouth gaped like a dying fish. With effort, I finally swallowed and hesitantly glanced at my watch. **9:32**. I studied the abysmal... *thing*. He didn't move. He didn't even blink.

"...sure," I said timidly, walking up to the counter and waking the till. I was sweating, but not from the ovens' heat. The smell of old mothballs and old, bloody meat coming from the shadow figure almost made me gag. I wanted to run, but if I didn't give him what he wants, he'll probably kill me. "What would you like?" My voice couldn't help but tremble.

"What I believe you mortals call a 'medium pepperoni.'" He said the statement so

Pizza for Jim Continued

calmly, like it was normal for some dark entity to be ordering pizza near closing time.

I punched the order in on the till, shaking like a dead leaf in the wind. "Alright, will that be all?"

The figure nodded ever so slightly that I almost wasn't sure he *did* nod. I gulped, clicking to another page. "For here or to go?" My heart pounded hard in my chest.

"To go." The words rumbled in his throat, if he had one.

"Can I have a name for the order, please?" I asked with a shaky smile.

"Jim," the figure growled quietly.

I paused before typing it in. It's such a normal name for the dark, supernatural silhouette standing in front of me. To be honest, it wasn't what I expected at all.

"Alright," I squeaked. I quickly cleared my throat. "That will be \$14.73."

He reached his hand out instantly. It was all I could do not to scream or faint. Or both. I flinched, but he didn't reach for my throat like I first thought. Instead, he set a smokey hand on the counter. Coins plinked faintly on the wood. He removed his hand, and I gathered the crumbled cash and counted it out. \$20.73.

"You may keep the additional coinage," he said.

I looked up into those dead, glowing white eyes. "Thank you," I said in a small voice. I punched a few more buttons, put the money in the till, and printed out a kitchen ticket. "It should be about 20 minutes."

Without a word, the lights flared. Jim had vanished in the split second of darkness.

I stood there, adrenaline coursing through my body. It was a minute before I collected myself and made the pizza. I was so, so thankful that it was a pizza I could make quickly. I finished it in no time and had it in the oven. I then swept and washed dishes, using all my built-up fight-flight energy to get done in half the time. The storm continued outside, each boom of thunder making me about jump out of my skin.

Finally, I glanced at my watch. **9:51**. I checked the pizza. Another five minutes or so, then it should be done. I rushed to get the mop bucket filled. The lemon Pine-Sol made my stomach unusually queasy as I scrubbed the floors as fast as I could.

I finished mopping the floors just as the lights flickered. I involuntarily shrieked at Jim's sudden appearance at the counter.

"Uh, hi again," I said in a squeaky voice. I dropped the mop back in the bucket with a *splooosh* and hurried to check the pizza. I thankfully didn't slip and fall on the wet floors and break my neck in the process. The oven door opened with a creak. The pizza's cheese was nicely browned, along with the crust. Like a well-oiled machine, I grabbed a box, put the pizza in, and cut it into neat triangles. I shut the box and brought it over to Jim.

"Here's your pizza." I held it out for it. My hands were trembling so badly, I was surprised the pizza didn't jump out of my very hands.

Jim's wispy hands brushed against mine as he took the hot bottomed box. The touch was cold, like what I imagine a brush with death would feel like. That night probably was a brush with death, one I don't want to experience again.

He held the pizza close to him. "Thank you, kind mortal. What is your name?"

I swallowed. "Ash." My voice cracked a little.

"Thank you again, Ash." The lights flickered and Jim was gone.

"You're welcome," I said to the empty space. I looked down at my watch. **9:58**. As fast as I could, I took out the trash, counted the till, and locked up.

I kept asking myself what the hell happened. I didn't have an answer. I refuse to be in KJ's by myself during closing time anymore. I've barely slept. The worse part is that I don't get paid enough to deal with stuff like that.

I'm sure you don't believe me, but I had to tell someone. I've been holding this in for *weeks*. That Jim thing is real, and he apparently likes medium pepperoni pizzas.

ALAINA JENSEN

ON THE PROWL



Bent Pine 2025

DANIEL SIPPRELL

WOODLAND ADVENTURE



Please Be Well

I am your host. Come into me. Stay a while. I hope you find it warm and peaceful here. I hope you get some rest. Tell me everything. Tell me of your day, your dream, tell me of your mama. I will make you some tea. Would you like a dumpling, dumpling? I can steam some fresh. Look here, let me show you something. It's beautiful, it's for you while you're here. I will tell you a story. I hope it makes you laugh and think of your dream and think of your mama. I've put out fresh towels and fresh linens and fresh fruit. Please, let's sit. Have some soup, I made it for you. Have some wine. Tell me everything. I'll hate them too. I'll love that for you. Pet my dogs, snuggle my cat. Yes, they're warm and friendly, just like here. Come in. Stay a bit. As long as you wish. Tell me everything. It's been a good stay. Off you go, now. Please be well. Please be well.

JODY KRAMER

SWEET ENCOUNTER



Bent Pine 2025

AMY MATTER-HINES

LONE TREE



Bent Pine 2025



Porch Light

He stood in the doorway, yellowed by the porch light. I'd need the light, to make him out, even at four in the afternoon, now that the clocks had been set back, and the grey mists of November had rolled in. He shivered as I opened the door, sending the droplets from his shoulders out into the haloed glow. The sight of them like tiny embers, bursting out of their desperate atoms, until at once they are nothing at all. The embers now gone, I stood barefoot, waiting, just inside the shadows of my doorway.

He had nothing to say. He parted his lips, took in an audible breath, tight—through his teeth—and exhaled so quietly, I strained to hear it. He said not a word. I would have said the cat had caught his tongue, but Mr. Fat Black was a pescatarian with a penchant for dog kibble, and was dozing on his ratted afghan on the back of the couch. The thoughts of the dog kibble and the dampness around me, sent the phantom scent of wet dog through the air, and I scrunched my nose. A curl started in one corner of his mouth and as he tried to hold it back, his dimple betrayed him and he looked eight years old again.

I hadn't known him in his childhood porch light; sitting on the painted stoop, rubbing the tips of our fingers raw where the concrete had chipped and left its crater in our square, flat world. We hadn't sat with our raw fingers and Kool-Aid grins talking about the plans for our summer tree fort, or how we might ask our teachers for a trip to space next year. We never spoke of our fears of the house on the corner with the overgrown yard and broken fence that the cats got through, or our fear of our mothers. I hadn't known him when we would've run in torn up sneakers without socks, wild, through what remained of the rolling pastures after the land was bought and a subdivision built up against its hills. (I swear I could still hear the ground moan out its cries of grief, same as the cows that grazed out amongst its remaining grasses.) The crowns of our heads never touching as we lay on our backs, limbs spread wide, as we silently fell into thoughts well beyond the clouds we tried to make shape of.

No, in this light, on this night, the yellow glow revealing only irreparable harm, the wounds inflicted upon the heart, now seemingly drained down to the liver.

Oh, how I wish, in this porch light that I could have known him in the pastures and the tree fort, gashes on our shins, blistered feet, wounds that would heal, sun kissed, careless, still

a glow within; long before the world ravaged all it could, tarnished all that ever shone. Now, lit before me in this light, I could see him for the child he could have been—and the man he'll never be; creases and lines now imbedded deep into his thickened skin, exposing only depths of his soul. The cruel winds of time had stripped him bare and raw.

I held his silent gaze. As I listened to him with only my eyes, he spoke of his pain in riddles and tongues, from behind curtains I could not draw, hidden from me, encased in shame, captive by regret. I could not find a word in my mind to describe him and me. We would never have each other and there would never be another.

Trapped in a maze, sought and never found, not even before my own weary eyes, on a late afternoon in mid-November, when thoughts of dogs, and the ones now lost to me, ran like blood hounds through my mind; the darkness, the dampness and the glow from that porch light, telling our eyes, all that we could never be. The grin and the words which couldn't come, revealed a man whom I had always known. I took my own breath in, tight, through my teeth, closed the door and turned out the light.

ELENA UHLENKAMP

TIRED FROG



If you're *tired*,
let yourself *rest*.

The Angel Dust of Childhood

The first step—forward, falling, flying—mobility,
Life begins with fulfilling adventures ahead.

The tickle of grass whispering against bare soles,
A connection to roots once unseen.

The cold kiss of paint on miniature fingertips,
A masterpiece budding.
Your mother's warm smile—warmth, approval, a sense of home.

The dread of daycare—tears, and delicate hands clutching the doorframe,
Time sprawling endlessly,
Until wrapped up in familiar arms once again.

The scent of baked delicacies curling into the hot air,
A buttery aroma wafts—pulling, tempting you closer,
Mmm . . . a taste close to heaven.

The first rush of winter wind,
Sled skimming across an open snowy sea—
Is this flying?

The world wobbles beneath two wheels,
Fear grips, knees scrape—a brave heart steadies,
Suddenly, you soar.

TAYLOR KOONS

UNTITLED



Bent Pine 2025

KAYDENCE ZUBKE

APPLE BRANCH



Bent Pine 2025

RYAN MARTINEZ

INNOCENCE



Bent Pine 2025

The Unintentional Consequences of Being a Critic or a Fan

I find what I want and rip off the pieces I like to build my empire,
I shred the rest that are meaningless and discard the remains,
My eyes seek and saw,
If I sink my teeth in,
And find the taste faulty in any merit,
I will deface it and mangle it more,
As though it were fraudulent or misguided,
Even if it tasted bad at least it had a taste that I could make sense of,
Still discarded and burned,
But never buried,

It could live without me,
It can live without me,
Be if a flaw shows its ugly face,
An easy fix,
I latch onto it with my talons,
And bring it forward,
Asking its name and why and what purpose it served,
For it is easily spared,
I ask,
No,
Beg for it to either fight for itself or for the one who brought it into the world to fight for it,
Or expect or fix its minor flaw,
For I do not want to kill but to let such things thrive within their own being,
But their own maker turns away or takes it in their own hands,
To smite it,
Just because one couldn't understand its own being,
And ask for why,
Just to answer their own questions of self and purpose

ANAKA SCHROEDER

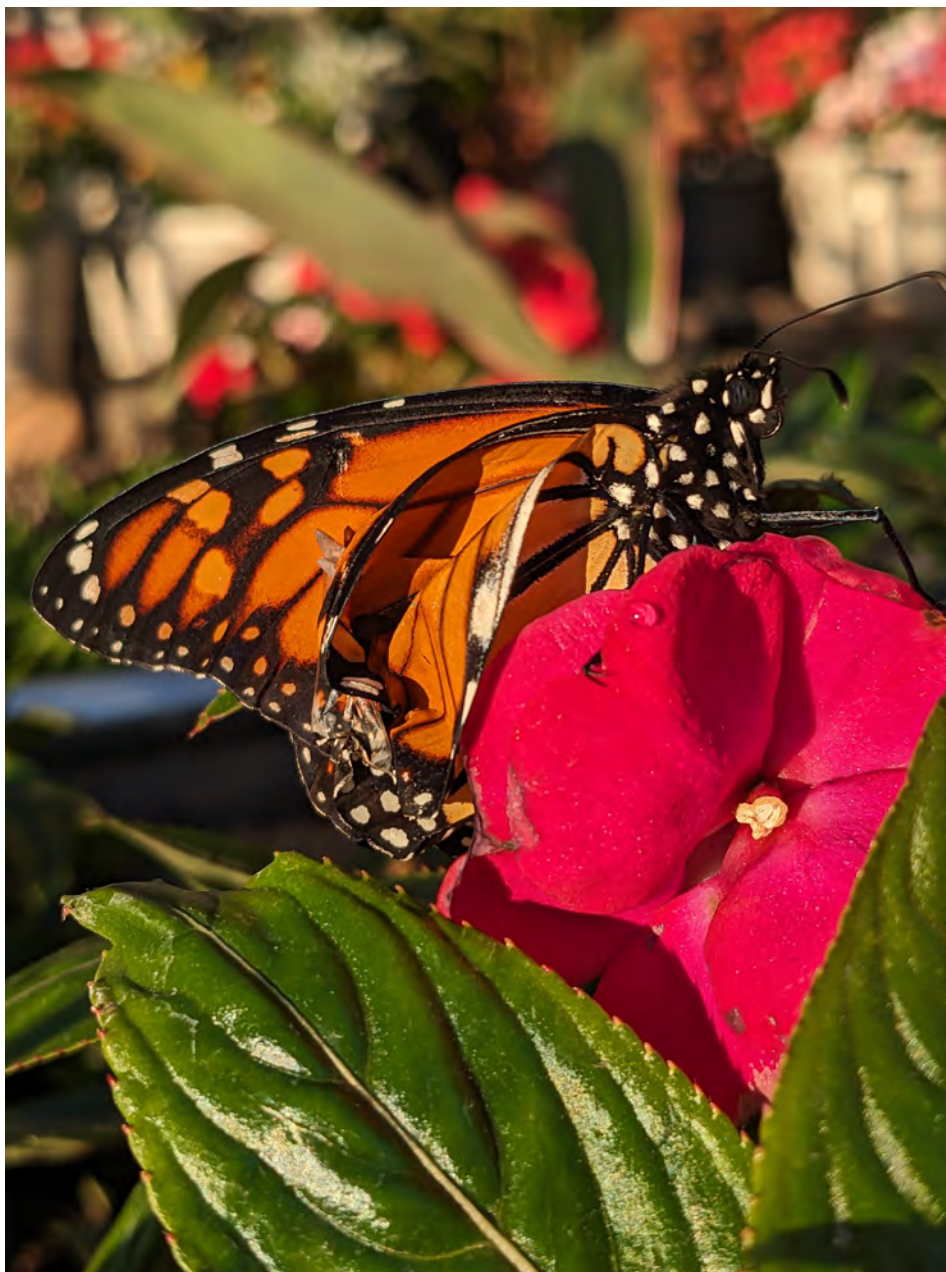
TEA PARTY



Bent Pine 2025

JODY KRAMER

PATIENT TRANSFORMATION



Bent Pine 2025

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler

The following short story is an excerpt of a longer not-so-short story trimmed for publication in the Bent Pine journal. Bits may be paraphrased, some completely cut, but the full story is out there if you know where to look.

Trains are nice. A leisurely ride. The air was perfectly pish-posh with passengers to match, the train trod along serene seaside scenery separated from the train by a steep cliff face, and the food and wine were a fine dine, but not everything was quite as it seemed. I was on the train to strike a deal with the head of the Scarlet Rails Co, James Johnson, regarding premium diesel provided by my company, Jensen's Oil Company. However, not even that seemingly innocent trade deal was what it seemed either! Prior to the meeting, a waiter with an outrageously thick French accent attempted to serve me a special cocktail on the house, but I ultimately refused it. (Trust me, this detail comes back.)

The meeting took place in the fifth passenger car from the front of the train in booth 6B at 2:35 pm, but all you need to know is that it was suspiciously specific. I arrived at the booth at 2:30, and lo and behold, James Johnson was nowhere to be seen while the rest of the car was bustling with activity. Perhaps it was to be expected if he was so particular about the time and place, so I decided I would simply pass the time by enjoying the cliff-side ocean view and jazz I could hear from the next car over. It was a pretty view indeed, but the booth itself was nothing to be scoffed at either. It had two velvet seats on opposing walls with a quaint little table in between and the suave Scarlet Rails logo hanging above the ocean-view window like a trophy.

I watched the calming waves ebb and flow in the fancy booth until I heard the door to the booth click open behind me almost five minutes later. I turned around and there he was: James Johnson! He wore a heavy black trench coat and fedora that hid his face in a mysterious shadow. Was he trying to hide his face from his own associates? If so, he honestly could've been a lot more discreet about being discreet. He took his seat across from me just as the clock struck 2:35. Seemingly the less inward of the two of us, I attempted to break the ice.

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler *Continued*

"Ah, James Johnson! For a second there, I thought you would be late!"

"I'm never late," he replied in a deep, intimidating tone.

"Never early either, apparently... Nevertheless, you're here now, so how about we discuss business?"

"I'm a very busy man, remind me what this is about again?"

"I'm here representing Jensen's Oil Company in Pennsylvania. Not only do we drill oil, but we've been experimenting with a new type of premium diesel designed specifically for use in Scarlet Rails trains."

"Intriguing. What makes it so special?" he asked, leaning back into his seat with curiosity.

"Well, sir, Scarlet Rails trains are famous for their luxurious rides—an aspect I've found does not disappoint—but we've also heard they have especially powerful engines that go through extraordinary amounts of standard diesel, making them quite expensive to operate. However, we think you'll be pleased to hear that our new diesel has power and efficiency to match your engines! Our diesel is too powerful for normal engines to handle, but we're sure that your engines would benefit greatly from the use of our product. In fact, to assure you that our product is the real deal, we're offering you a six-month free trial period to make sure the diesel works like we say it will."

"Tempting... What's to stop me from continuing to use standard diesel?"

"Well, sir, one does not stay rich by spending recklessly. Once your free trial is over, you'll find that even though our product is more costly than standard diesel, you will burn through much *less* of it, so in the end, you'll be spending less on our product than standard diesel! It's just that standard buyers can't handle the stuff, but you're no standard buyer, are you, James Johnson?"

"I must say, you drive a hard bargain, Borris."

"Borris? How do you know my cover name!?"

"So I suspected! You were a conniving agent all along! Well, no matter. It's only a matter of time before you drop dead from that poison!"

"Poison!? James Johnson would never! What kind of man would do such a thing!?"

"Questions, questions... but you're right: James Johnson *would* never. That is if James Johnson was ever real in the first place!"

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler *Continued*

"No!"

"Oh, Yes! You didn't think you were the only one playing dress-up here today, did you? Like trading queens in a game of chess, the jig is up for both of us. Allow me to cut to the chase, agent!"

In one swift motion, the man I had assumed to be James Johnson removed his trench coat and fedora to reveal himself as the Nefarious Mustache Twirler! Gasp! There was no mistaking him. He had an evil white lab coat, facial hair glorious enough to name himself after, and his famously eccentric ego.

"Yes, it is I, the Nefarious Mustache Twirler," he revealed, in a voice far more comically devious than his impersonation of James Johnson.

"You! Oh, when I get my hands on you—"

"Get your hands on me? How are you supposed to get your hands on me when you're trapped in your seat!?"

Right on beat, a pair of curved steel bars protruded through my seat and slammed together around me, confining me to my seat and giving the Nefarious Mustache Twirler opportune time to monologue and deviously twirl his magnificent mustache.

"Poor little lamb, you're too new to this game. Unfortunately, you're a lamb to the slaughter! It's only a matter of time before that poison does you in!"

"Poison... I don't recall, when did you poison me? Was the whole drink menu poisoned!?"

"What? No! It was the drink I ordered for you! You know, the almond surprise? 'Sure to be a bitter delight?'"

"... Nope, not ringing a bell."

"NOT RINGING A- Hold on one second." He pulled out a dinky flip phone from an inner jacket pocket and dialed somebody. The man on the other end picked up in an outrageously thick French accent.

"Yes, monsieur?"

"Louise, you're fired." The Nefarious Mustache Twirler pulled out a comically large one-button remote from inside his jacket and pressed the button. An outrageously French scream and thud could be heard from the other end of the phone before the Nefarious Mustache Twirler hung up and started dialing a different number. He turned to me as he dialed. "This is

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler *Continued*

why you always make a plan B.” He immediately turned his attention back to the phone and spoke into it. As it turned out, the number he dialed was to the intercom for the train itself. As he spoke, the intercom played back his message for the whole train to hear.

“Attention, everyone! We are initiating plan B! Get to your stations pronto!” As he hung up, everyone from the other passenger booths started filling up the halls and leaving the train car.

“I don’t understand, what is the meaning behind all of this?”

“Don’t you get it, agent? This train is property of Mustache Co, and all of its passengers and servers were my servants!”

“Mustache Co? But this is a Scarlet Rails train!”

“Why don’t you guess again, agent?” He pulled out a second comically large one-button remote, pointed it at the Scarlet Rails logo above the window, and pressed the button. The wall behind the Scarlet Rails logo flipped around to reveal the Mustache Co. logo: the Nefarious Mustache Twirler’s iconic mustache. Thick metal bars came up through the windowsill and booth door, shattering the glass of the window and barring the door shut. I had been duped yet again, and the Nefarious Mustache Twirler was enjoying every second of my confounding.

“Plan B is great, you’re gonna love this: Just as plan A stood for ‘Almond surprise,’ plan B stands for ‘BOOM!!!’ This train is headed full speed towards a bridge rigged to the teeth with explosives! And what happens when the train reaches its center? Kaboom! The train will go plummeting down to its demise, and yours along with it! Nyeheheheh!!! It’s such a good plan my mustache just might twirl itself!”

“No, it’s not, you’re wasting such a good train! Why not just shoot me now and avoid wasting such a good train?”

“Because I’m rich. If I’m going to be eliminating the agency’s assets, I’m damn well going to make it flashy! Besides, I was really hoping the poison plan would work so I could use the train trick on someone more... experienced... My, you can’t even remember whether your cover name or real name was supposed to be a secret!”

“That may be so, but that poison plan of yours was never going to work on me. Unfortunately for you, I have always hated almonds! It tastes like cyanide...”

“You must be mad! Almonds are scrumptious!” Before he could continue defending the

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler *Continued*

opinions of almond lovers worldwide, his watch beeped. "Oh, would you look at the time: it's dying time! Good luck getting out of this one, agent! Nyeheheheh!!!"

The Nefarious Mustache Twirler pulled out a third comically large one-button remote and pressed the button, laughing maniacally. The ceiling opened up above him and his seat shot him directly into the sky, snapping off its springs with the force of the launch, leaving a pair of bent springs. The Nefarious Mustache Twirler and the chair flew off into the sky together. Who knew these booths doubled as ejector seats? Powerful ones at that. He and the chair disappeared into the sky together and the ceiling shut behind him, leaving me alone to wallow in my foolishness. I had been completely and thoroughly had!

This was not the mission. The Nefarious Mustache Twirler was right about me only being an amateur. I am a new agent for The Agency (TA for short) an undercover organization separate from but allied with the governments of the world to neutralize international threats that conduct their evil underground to protect the world. (I mean underground metaphorically. That is unless we find out that they do indeed have an advanced underground network from which they conduct their evil, but that has yet to be proven.) I was only here on a training mission to boost our income from our side-company, Jensen's Oil Company. Spy work pays well, but having extra income always helps. If I was successful in my mission, I would be one step closer to earning my official license to kill, but little did we know that the Nefarious Mustache Twirler himself would be running the train, so the entire mission was a bust.

Escape wasn't likely, given the Nefarious Mustache Twirler's flawless track record, but I still had an ace up my sleeve: the stash coat. It's a stylish vest on the outside, a bulletproof vest in the middle, and on the inside, a genius device designed with shrink-and-grow technology so powerful that the coats were essentially their own pocket dimensions. They hold an almost endless supply of gadgets for any situation—just reach in and grab what you need. That being said, such an invention was too powerful (and too snazzy) to let fall into the hands of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler, so I had to use it to keep myself alive and the stash coat out of evil's hands.

My steel confines were tight enough for me not to be able to squirm out of, but they were loose enough for me to be able to use my hands. I reached into the stash coat and pulled out what I could. A file? A classic solution to a classic predicament, but I didn't have

The Terrible Plot of the Nefarious Mustache Twirler *Continued*

enough time. A hot glue gun? Ineffective. A full-sized jackhammer? It could work, but it would be far too blunt to break me out effectively. Unless... of course! I held the handle of the file to the tip of the jackhammer, hot glued them together, blew on it so it would dry faster, and my grand invention was complete: The jacksaw! I used the hypersonic chisel on the steel trap and I was freed in no time flat. I chiseled the bars off the booth window, put the jacksaw back into the stash coat, and climbed onto the top of the train. The train was moving so fast that the still air outside felt like high wind in comparison, making it difficult to climb. I made it out of the train, but my troubles were far from over.

To be continued...

JACQUELINE BELIN

THE WOLF AND THE MOON



Bent Pine 2025



Twitching Right Leg

I'm part of a small newspaper team in my hometown. In early February, I had to photograph a wintertime crash. I've driven to scenes of minor accidents and various fires before to take pictures for the paper. I've always been nervous about getting in the way of the emergency vehicles, and of pulling over to take pictures. Documenting crashes was usually someone else's job at the office, but I was the only one available this time. I hate doing it, but I begrudgingly go. After taking pictures and starting the return trip to the office, I found my right leg twitching. I've always had the anxious shakes, but never an aggressive twitch in my legs. The only thing that I could come up with to explain it was my unique experience with this specific location of the 2-vehicle accident.

My first accident happened here.

The lady didn't see me coming over the hill...

In June 2023, I was back home from college. It was a Saturday afternoon, around 4:20 pm or so, and there was not a cloud in the sky. I was on my way to work at the pizza place in town.

I've taken this 15-minute route hundreds of times. It was the one I took to high school every day since I could drive my sister and myself. I knew it like the back of my hand. As far as my 20-year-old memory could recall, the road was relatively safe for travel. However, there are crosses on a set of S-curves that marked where people have died in accidents. I've never seen those accidents in person.

I've never been in a car crash before. I've never even hit a deer. The biggest creature that I had hit with a car was a pheasant rooster that was dumb enough to recross a road when it was already safely on the other side. The car didn't even get a scratch from that incident.

I was north bound on the county road. She was south bound. I was a house length away, going 55 miles an hour, when the lady took a left-hand turn right in front of me onto the township road.

I slammed on my brakes, my arms and body going as stiff as 2x4s. I was told that if I had not hit my brakes when I did and slowed my car down to 30 miles an hour in a short amount of time, things would have been much, much worse. In the span of about 3 seconds,

my front end collided with the right side of the oncoming car. I didn't even feel the airbag in the steering wheel go off. I just remember seeing the lady's green Mini Cooper being pushed sideways by my maroon Ford Taurus. The Mini Cooper then went into the ditch, knocking over a stop sign before coming to a halt.

I stopped just beyond the entrance of the township road, in the middle of the right lane. I was shaking, my brain trying to process what had happened. My hands were still gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles. The smell of the deployed airbag was the only thing in my nose. I watched the white smoke twist out from my steering wheel's airbag. I remember that the white smoke smelled chemically, but I can't easily describe it. Either it was the shock of the moment not letting me remember, or it was just long enough ago for me to forget.

I expected a broken nose. Maybe a broken set of glasses. But my nose didn't break. The only sign that the airbag hit my face was the soreness of the bridge of my nose. The radio was still playing, but I couldn't tell you what I was listening to at the time. I just had a plan running through my head: get the car off the road, put on hazards, and shut the car off before it exploded. The car never did explode, but forgive me for thinking that way. It was my first accident, and I have watched too many action movies that showed exploding car crashes.

The next thing I did was stumble out of my car and down to the lady's car to see if she was alright. She had managed to open the door to her car. I couldn't see the right side of the Mini Cooper. With how the car ended up in the ditch, the crushed doors and deployed side curtain airbags were hidden from my view.

"Are you okay?" I asked, voice shaky. I wasn't crying quite yet.

She had nodded. She hadn't stepped out of the car. I wasn't sure if she had unbuckled yet.

"Who—who do we call?" I managed to ask. My brain couldn't remember that for incidents like these, 911 was the obvious answer.

The lady said, "I called someone."

I sat in the dirt and grass. I couldn't stand anymore. I was trembling too badly. The people who lived in the house on that corner came to investigate what happened. They were in their backyard when they heard the bang of two vehicles colliding. I held back tears as I

Twitching Right Leg *Continued*

worked on not hyperventilating. I had calls to make. I certainly can't drive to work anymore. And my parents needed to know what happened.

I almost dropped my phone when I grabbed it out of my back pocket. I finally calmed down enough to contact some people. 4:25 pm: called the home phone and got ahold of Dad. He and Mom left home right away. 4:26 pm: texted my boss and let him know I just got in an accident. 4:27 pm: called Mom's cell twice as she and Dad were driving. We talked for a minute before the deputy sheriff showed up. He talked to the Mini Cooper lady first, taking pictures of the cars and took our driver's licenses. 4:28 pm: I called the work phone twice. There was no answer, which surprised me. They may have been in the bathroom. 4:29 pm: called my boss, since he didn't answer my text earlier. I'm sure he didn't expect me to say, "Hey, I can't come in. I got in a car accident."

By the time I finished my calls, I was crying badly. The woman from the house hugged me to try and calm me down. I think she was hugging me until my parents arrived. I was able to give my statement clearly to the deputy. It did help that the entire time we were waiting, I was remembering all the details of the accident as I watched my car leak fluids over the broken headlight and bumper pieces on the ground. After giving statements and exchanging insurance information, the Mini Cooper lady offered to give me "good karma." I accepted. I was too shaken up to say no.

At some point, I found out that the lady in the Mini Cooper had a dog loose in the car. The dog was okay, thank goodness. It wasn't the cause of the accident, but I felt way worse that the dog was in the car. The main cause was that the lady didn't double check the blind spot over the hill before turning. Knowing that still didn't make me feel any better. I was the one who crashed into her, even though it wasn't my fault.

We were lucky. A T-bone accident can end up much worse. My car was totaled, but I walked away with minor bruising on my face, a blistering scrap from the airbag on the back of my left thumb, and possible whiplash from the impact. The lady also walked away without any apparent injuries. No ambulance or firefighters were called. No little blurb in the newspaper. My parents were able to tow the Taurus home on one of our trailers. Only a few people knew of my accident, and that was because I was comfortable enough to tell them.

I went to the chiropractor once a week for the next month. I also decided to go to a therapist to help me get more comfortable driving again. I only had 2 sessions before I felt “normal.” I felt that I mentally and physically recovered well from a “minor” car accident. I get nervous driving by that spot sometimes. Even now.

Fast forward to early February 2025. The location of a 2-vehicle crash was texted on the newspaper group chat. I hesitated on going, but I punched in the township road on Google Maps and made my way to the county road. Come to find out, as I came upon the flashing lights of an ambulance, the accident was on the same corner that mine was.

I slowed down, studying the two ambulances and two firetrucks that were sitting by a pickup and a large grain truck that were in the ditch, the same one the Mini Cooper went in. I couldn’t tell if the stop sign was knocked over again. I turned into the opposite township road across from the scene and quickly parked. Camera in hand, I took 5 pictures total. In and out, my job was done.

I set the camera back on my passenger seat and got my car back on the road. Right away, I noticed the twitching in my right leg. Not simple nervous shakes. Twitches that violently shoved my heel down, up, and down again. I was surprised that my car didn’t accelerate with how aggressively my right leg was twitching. It was 5 or 10 minutes before the spasms finally stopped.

To be honest, I’m not sure this was a true PTSD moment. My accident wasn’t nearly as bad as the one that I witnessed. A part of me may have been thinking that my accident could have ended up like this one, with firetrucks and ambulances, both cars ending up in the ditch. Maybe it was a minor experience with my “not-as-bad” trauma. I didn’t have the sudden smell of the deployed airbag. No flashback of the crash happening before my eyes. Not even a faint ache in my hand, the worst injury I had received.

All I had was a twitching right leg.

JODY KRAMER

HOPE ON THE HORIZON



Bent Pine 2025



JERMEY GOOD

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JODY KRAMER

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW



Credit for the title goes to Isaac Kramer, son of Jody Kramer

Bent Pine 2025

JENNA JENSEN

ORANGES



Bent Pine 2025

Why Live, When Our Lives Mean Nothing?

There are countless reasons I could list as to why each and every life on Earth is completely and utterly meaningless—that much is easy: the minuscule amount the entire human history takes out of the span of the universe, the curve of people forgotten against years after their deaths, the dreams we have all given up on. What is much harder, however, is to prove any form of meaning for life—for humanity—for everything we as a world and as individuals have done. Yet something being difficult to articulate, a challenge to communicate, does not mean it is untrue.

When I was 13, I lost what had been the meaning for my life up until then. My only goal, what drove me into every action I took, was the desire to make my father proud, to be considered *worthy* of his love. Then I learned that all my effort was futile. I was inherently flawed in his eyes. Nothing I could do could change the fact that my father did not want me, and my entire life's purpose revealed itself as an unachievable feat. In my state of despair, I had wondered if any of the grand goals people reached toward had been worth achieving. I studied the universe, seeking some grand meaning or drive hidden in the stars. All I found was the vastness of it all, learning that the entire solar system is less than a single grain of sand in all of Earth's oceans, and that we are so significantly insignificant that humanity is nothing. Worthless, useless, *nothing*. I understood how little my life was, how nothing I could do would make me have meaning to the universe.

But years later I learned that my entire perspective on the question of why I exist—why any of us exist, why we should continue to struggle to be better, wiser, or stronger each day—completely wrong. Cosmically, we are nothing. Less than a blip of the universe makes up mankind's entirety. Humanity as a whole is nothing. Despite that, as individuals we are *everything*, filled with meaning and value.

Many spend their lives trying to be remembered, to hold onto life in a way that keeps their name spoken long after death. A dedication of life to others, for others—others who may never come to exist. They attempt impossible feats to try to ensure they can overcome an inevitable end, dedicating the entirety of their lives to the approval of people they will never meet, for a goal that is inherently unachievable. For a few years, maybe even centuries,

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sure, your name could be remembered—until it's forgotten. Be it a war or a disaster, or the end of the human race. Every memory of every living being will fade; given enough time the earth itself will end. Which made me wonder why we bother to learn or understand more. I had been told we study science and medicine to help the lives of those who come next, but every life is destined to the same fate. Everything ends, everything learned and studied will be lost. That is the inevitable truth.

Flowers wither. They all will—it's part of their life to die, just as it is for us. Despite the fact we know they will die, that cutting their stems will hasten it, we still collect them for the sake of a moment of joy. My mother doesn't plant a garden because it will outlast her; she grows beds of flowers and herbs that she knows will die, she knows that in a year she'll have forgotten about—because, in the moment, beauty is something that brings her joy. It is easy to think about the vastness of everything and forget the smaller moments, the fact that the world doesn't function on logic alone. Animals do not fear a year from now, they observe the present and exist within it. Flowers will wilt; humanity will die. I'll be forgotten, you will as well. Despite that, we are here at the present time. Maybe the only reason we do things is for momentary joy, so what? The end only means there's no reason not to live as such.

Momentary joy is only a part of life; we also have memories. I personally have always valued stories above all else and consider each experience in life to be a new story I have collected. Those are my stories, ones I am the sole holder of—at least when it comes to my perspective. *Everyone in the world*, yet I alone know of them, just as you alone know your memories. Everything happens only once, and with each day, you become the holder of new stories no one else can tell.

I remember one morning in particular. The sun was still rising, painting the sky in soft pink and orange. It was fall, and birds were starting to migrate south. There is a type of bird called starlings, who fly in large flocks that seem almost like one entity with how well they act as single living beings. That morning, the sky was filled with starlings. Their names made sense to me then, the shadows of their bodies on the light morning sky no different than the light of stars in the night, the flock spanning horizon to horizon—it was a sight that left me awestruck. I've never seen such a large flock before, or since, but I did that day. Perhaps that was one of

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the things that helped me understand a new meaning for myself. No one will ever see what I saw that day again, not like I saw it, because everything happens once.

That led me to conclude that I could not be pointless if I had been the only witness to so much of the universe. It reminds me of a prank that a boy in a book I read did, telling a girl he'll show her something no one has ever seen before, only to cut an apple in half and show off the inside. She had claimed everyone's seen the inside of an apple, but he laughed, because she was the first to see the inside of *this* apple. There's something deeply meaningful about that to me, knowing that when I find something beautiful, or mundane, I am one of the few out of everything in the vast seas of the universe to view it. Those memories are mine to treasure, flaunt, or hide. If each person is the sole witness of the universe through their eyes, then it's simple to realize that no one is capable of being *nothing* no matter how mundane they may claim their life to be. They were alone witness to their life.

There are many reasons existence is terrible. There are always new bad things happening, never a lack of sorrow or pain, and we are statistically insignificant to the point of irrelevance to the universe. Perhaps that's disheartening to hear, but I planted an apple seed in a coffee cup when I was 4 years old. That seed moves houses with me, cup to pot to the soft earth of the house my mother bought when I turned 11. When I was 16, it bloomed, roots finally beginning to take hold and grow strong. Since then, it has blossomed every year. It hasn't yet this year—the cold still keeps it slumbering. In spring, I will witness if it survived another year, to grow stronger again. If it does, in the fall I will watch the chickens picking at the fallen fruit and remember how I once planted a seed in a coffee cup. I was one of the few people who knew that seed; now it will never be known again, because it has grown and changed—you wouldn't look at the tree and think of the seed, but each time I do. I might be forgotten after I die, and with that the seed will as well. That's okay, because life is more than being remembered or achieving greatness. More than statistical evidence of insignificance. Life has a meaning more than that: the meaning is one I find each day in something new, in experiences and feelings and myself. The reason for my life, as I see it, is myself: each day, the person I was and will be and am. I am my meaning, as you are yours, for why we continue to live.

Why Live, When Our Lives Mean Nothing? *Continued*

The hardest concept for me to decide on—whether or not to stay alive—was much more difficult for me. I liked to live by an idea of logic, and in accordance with logic, life was not ideal. It made sense to let it end, as to live is to suffer, but to die would be an end to suffering. I can't say I chose to live because I found some grand driving force—it's much simpler than that. Two words, really, is all it came down to. *Why not?* Why shouldn't I live, why should I stop? To reach an end that will come regardless? Truth be told, it was that simple. I'm going to die anyway, that's part of being alive. There is no need to desperately chase something that will find its way to me anyway. I know that idea is deeply morbid to many, and can seem unsettling, but I have found peace within it. On a day where there seems to be no end to difficulties, I remember that whether I try or I don't, I will die regardless. It is grounding, in some dark sense, to know that no matter how long my fears or doubts last, there's a definable end to it all. To know that I can just wait around, take time to smell the roses, as they say, and exist as I choose, because there's no reason not to.

Once, I spent every day desperate to be as exceptional as possible, striving to achieve the unachievable. Now, in recognition of the fact that my achievements meant little in eternity, I find it easier to take the time to appreciate smaller things. There is no need to race, we all end up the same. When someone asks me why I waste time taking a nap in the morning sun or seeing how many stones I can stack while sitting by the riverbank, I've found a simple and honest answer. *Why not?* I only live once.

RIGHT BRAIN ARTS CLUB

JAZZ DAREDEVIL



Inspired by "I Can't Play Piano, Pt. 1 - Pt. 4,"
H. Jon Benjamin

The shaping of the sculpture resembles the Treble Clef symbol, while evoking the rhythmic melodies of the backing track; the sharp colors used strongly contrast the calm blues, similar to how the pianist's striking notes stand out from the otherwise eloquent songs.

This piece was a collaborative effort by the club members, and features our handprints spread across the surface. The frame of the Treble Clef is constructed from a warped metal gutter, cardboard, bubblewrap, and paper mache; the piece has broken musical components incorporated throughout, inspired by the way the piano "breaks" through the songs' harmonies.

The Bent Pine Journal Club would like to welcome and thank the brand new Right Brain Arts Club for their support of the journal and enthusiasm for the visual arts. They created this piece together and we are thrilled to share it in the pages of Bent Pine.

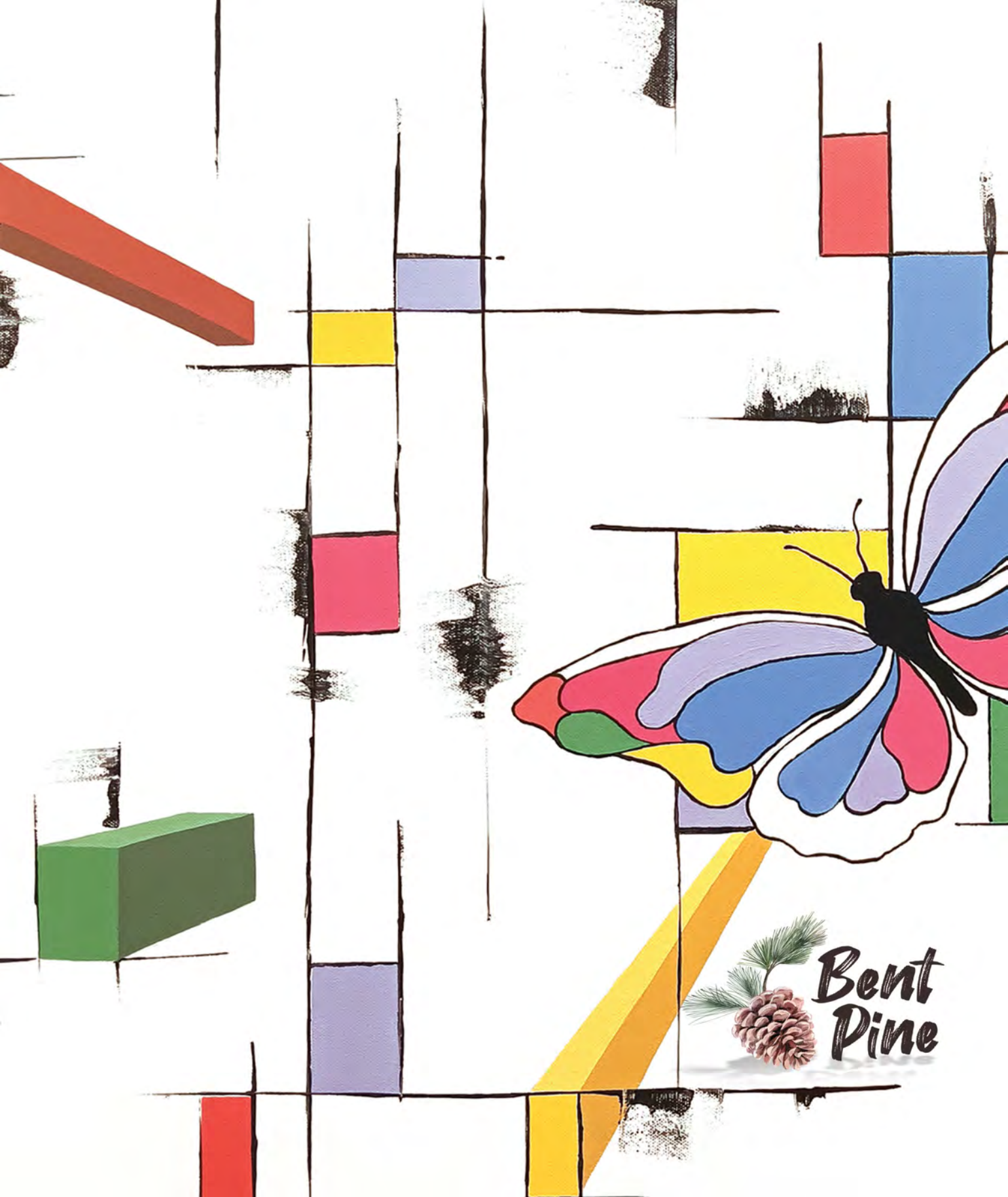


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