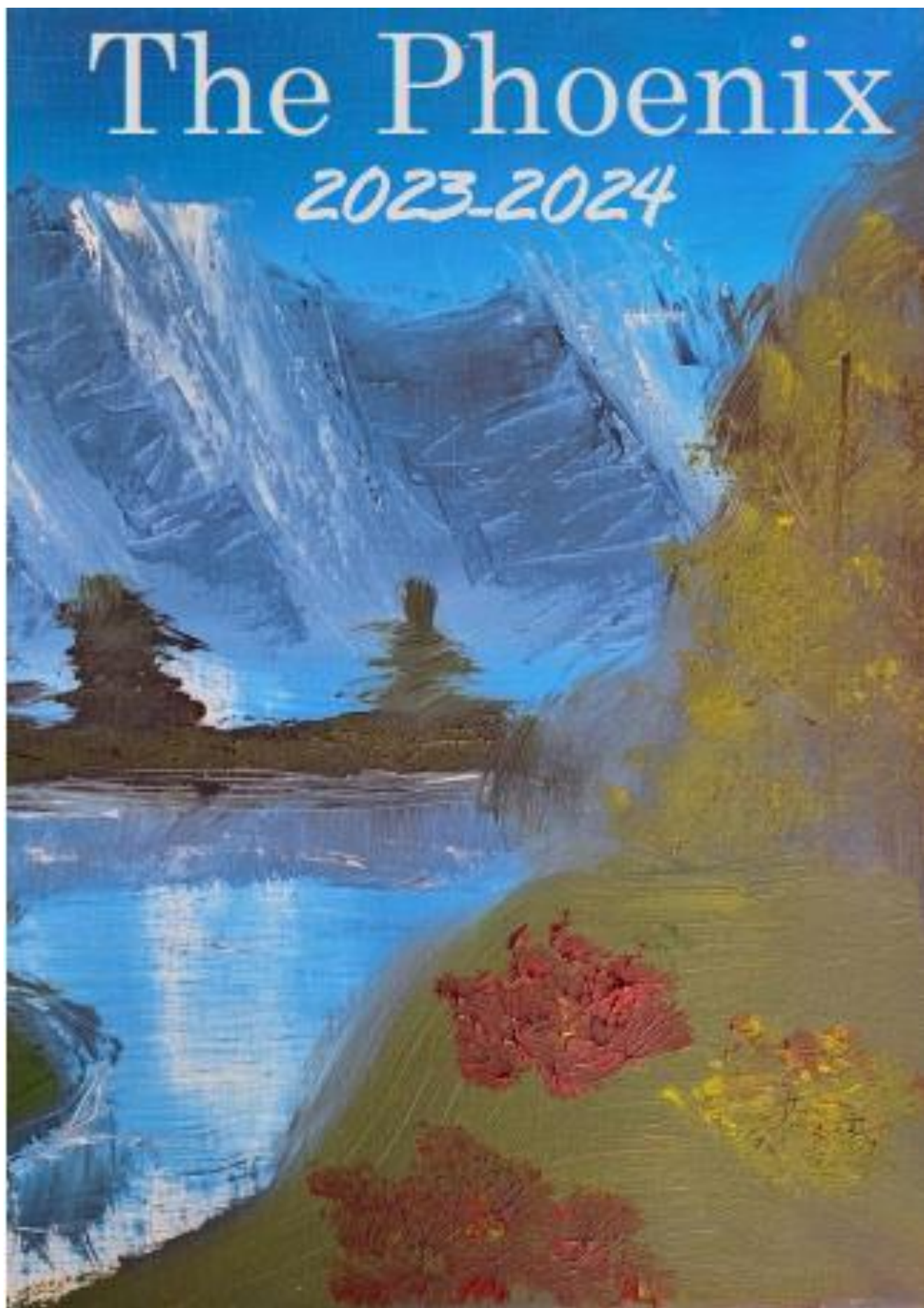


# The Phoenix

2023-2024



# **Phoenix Literary & Art Magazine**

*2023-2024*

## **Editor-In-Chief**

Alessia Watt

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Glutton of the Asphalt ... Gavin Chess

West of the Bascule ... Gavin Chess

Nature Calls ... Isabella Carter

The Bay House ... Ellie Quinlisk

Teacups ... Ellie Quinlisk

House on the Hill ... Lily Rasnake

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The Tree ... Zoey Olson

a generation behind ... Alessia Watt

Ajar ... Alessia Watt

## Artists

Amber Woodring

Cara Ricciardi

Alexis Stenella

Emmie Williams

Ayden Stewart

Annabelle Peffall

Annika Greb

BackPack Filiatrault

Anna Valmore

Arden Clem

## Glutton of the Asphalt

By: Gavin Chess

I barrel down the mainline

only with ambition and drive.

Eating up the gravel and licking up the tar,

seething on the rubber grill,

forever searching, an inert foundation

to stick my feet in.

I travel relentlessly without any sensation of idleness.

Until my bolts are tarnished and my paint is worn,

my reflection overcast: murky,

my leather torn.

Until I am bent over and breaking,

crying from my underbelly,

worriedly combusting from my earlobes,

will I stake it to the gas station,

and drink until I am fat with strength

from none but godsend oil.

Famished will modify to rejuvenated,

and vigor I will shower in.

It is only then I will continue to spin with initiative,



and seek out the treasures of the open road.

Rolling

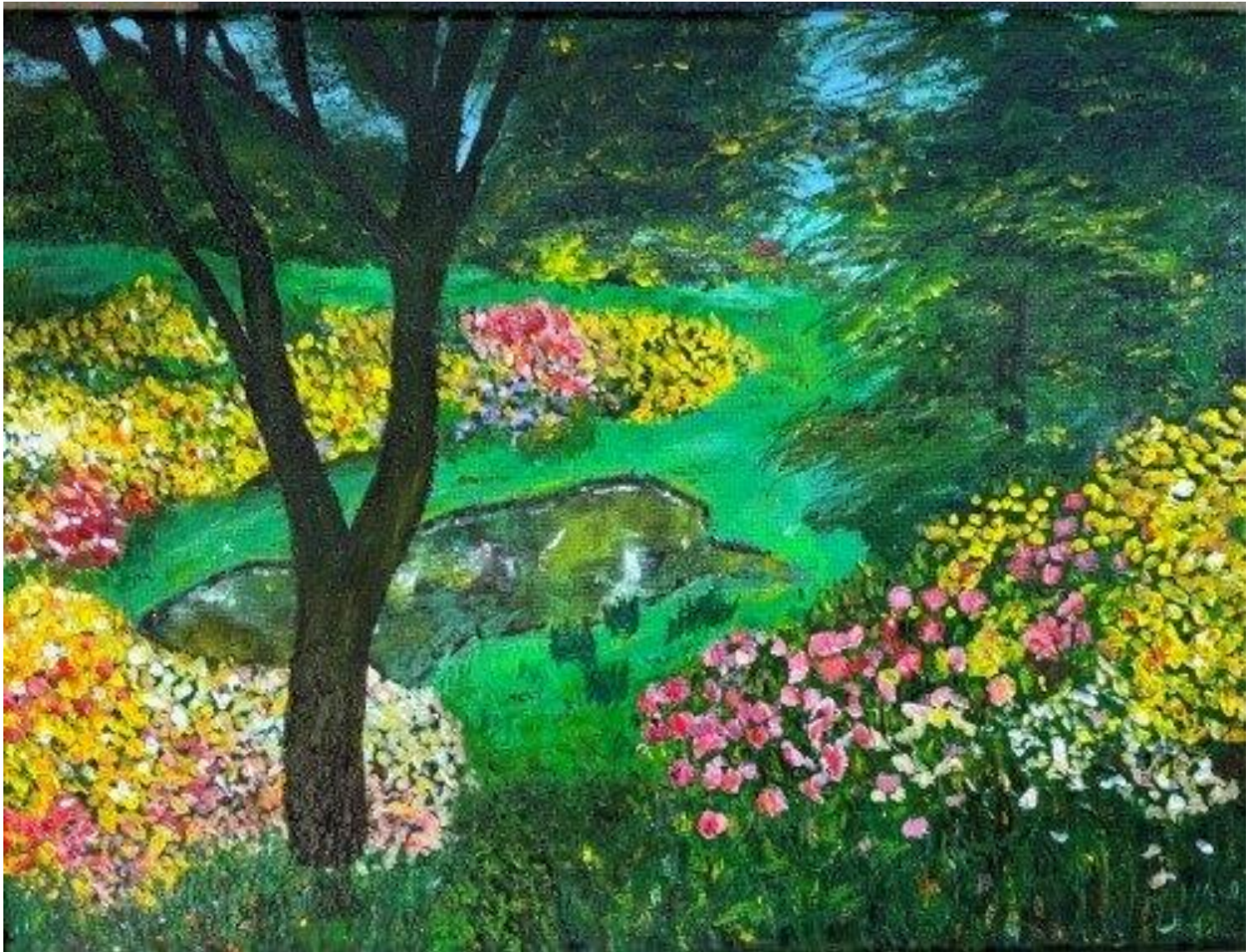
Rolling

Toiling with my destination,

I precariously make my advance.

I drive

I just *drive*.



By: Amber Woodring

West of the Bascule

By: Gavin Chess

The Bascule opens its mouth as it prepares to swallow the *vessel*.

left arm up,

right arm raised,

I wait patiently

on the crowded shore

for a signaled crossing.

I continue my restraint to traverse,

what seems temporary turns into longing: indefinite.

the Bridge remains suspended,

barking at me.

accomplished, It has cut me off from the other side,

by any means of travel,

and any connections I once had.

my intentions are good, but the Bascule does not argue.

Its hot pavement sends the Eastern Shore fantasizing.

a persuading trance

the waves, hypnotized,

kiss the hot tar and sizzle on settlement.

but it appears only I can feel the *pain*.

at some point the waves from the East stop crashing at my feet.

my limbs shiver,

toes brittle and ankles shaking

I turn to head home.

deeper inland

because I will never walk the Eastern Sands again,

and They will never be the same.

so I will accept my position,

West of the Bascule

forevermore,

and let bittersweet winds quarrel with narcissistic chains,

as I say goodbye

and walk away

with cold feet.





*By: Cara Ricciardi*



By: Amber Woodring

## Nature Calls

By: Isabella Carter

If you close your eyes,

And leave the window open,

You can hear a symphony of birds.

An orchestra that plays like a flowing river.

One that has strings and a woodwind section.

They tend to be a little pitchy.

Even with a percussion section,

The sound echoes throughout the trees.

The sounds of birds,

Feels like a huge family feud.

One that you would see at a family reunion.

Where the Aunts and Uncles get into a tussle.

The sound of a bird,

Has the rhythm of a blues guitar.

With its solo act,

It doesn't sound like an opera singer on opening night.

Or a general going to war.

But a single man,



Looking at the horizon

Watching the fish swim by.



*By: Alexis Stenella*





*By: Emmie Williams*

## The Bay House

By: Ellie Quinlisk

the salty smell of the bay calms me with each breath

boats rumble past, chased by the wake

the tiny house watches and listens

to the rustle and clank of the flag

beating against its pole in the breeze

it holds on like i held on to my ladybug kite

as it tugged on my arm, my dad watching closely,

holding onto me

crab shells crunching lightly under our feet, seagulls' leftovers

children's playful screams float on the wind

to our quiet little house

it holds on during birthdays

stuffed full of chocolate and vanilla ice cream cake

and splashy lake trips

swings groaning each time i soar into the air

sitting safe behind sliding doors as rain pours down

the landscape of flashing purple-gray skies

better than any movie

grandmom cozied up in the sweatshirt and bug-like oversized sunglasses



jelly donut in one hand and a steaming seashell mug of coffee in the other  
it holds on when loved ones cannot  
comforts when nothing else will

it holds on as other homes are left, as people grow  
as my mind drifts away, lying flat on the deck  
the sky so big that leaving feels like closing up the world again  
it holds on through storms that rip through its walls.  
only to be built back up again  
taller and stronger than ever

and so i hold on  
as the soothing lullaby of bay water splashes  
and the crickets fill the night with their song  
with the slight sway of the raised up house in the breeze  
beg me to let go of everything else  
to forget about the pain  
don't worry, and just listen.

## Teacups

By: Ellie Quinlisk

All lined up on the shelf, stacked delicately,  
not one is like the other, it is meant to be  
that a few have strings of sunflowers or old fashioned designs  
that float like abandoned cobwebs and up the rim they climb.  
The handles range from plain and round to twisted up and curled  
as if molded for the hand of a squirming little girl,  
floating there in silence, belonging to the past,  
the kitchen observed by fine china and depression glass.

They came from battered basement boxes and trips to thrift stores,  
the grandmother of a friend, a great grandmother who came before.  
But they all have this in common, the warmth, always the same,  
as chestnut brown liquid is poured into the fragile frame,  
and steam dancing through the air straight up to my nose,  
a waft of sweet honey and bergamot flows.  
Despite dust and the chip on the edge of the cup,  
each piece, like its story, is still holding up.



By: Faye Bader





*By: Liv Ferrari*

House on the Hill

By: Lily Rasnake

My bones stand still.

Whispers of my memories suffuse my skeleton  
in gushes of wind, emptying my soul.

I am alone,

A ghost in a pasture of green and beige brush.

Round, lilac mountains lay still in the back of my mind.

I am iridescent.

My eyes are clear,

my nose inhaling a fresh wave of rain in the distance.

Remember me for all that I am and all that I was,

For what is left is a mere skeleton of my existence.





By: Ayden Stewart



## Old Farmhouse

By: Olivia Kirchner

Tickling grass and dry dirt, rustling as the wind whispers

At the old farmhouse.

The eternity it sighs, gently dancing

Against roof panels and the cracked open windows.

Enveloping a lonely man sweating through the days

To make a home.

Caressing the joyful children tumbling through weeded hills.

A mother taking a rest and peeking out at the summer storm,

The wind rushing and screaming with thunder crashes.

And on the day the last son leaves home,

The wind settles and barely stirs as if it mourns too.

The man and his wife grow old

In their farmhouse and

When it goes empty for the first time,

The wind explores the empty spaces and crevices.

Keeping the old farmhouse company

As it waits to be called home again.



By: Lily Rasnake

### Clutter From Instructing Karate

By: Olivia Kirchner

The children cry out when they fall and we  
Examine palms or a knee saying, "That was real  
Brave." Crying unwillingness to move from mother's warmth to cool  
Cautious steps alone. We hold hands with gripping fingers. We  
Say, "Look at me," and praise anything right, even if they are using their left.

"Reach for your toes and tell me about school  
Today." We puppet little bodies into stillness and we  
Smile big. Sitting straight, standing with a lurk  
To watch them all. Hours of careful teaching late

Into the night. "Groups of three." We  
Guide young minds. A strike  
Or self-control. We gossip improvement. Time runs straight  
From minutes blurred to dragging seconds. We  
Make sweat an achievement.

Muscles sing strain and sore. Never inadequate  
If you persevere. We  
Say, "Do this," or, "Try that instead." Hard to stay positive and  
Never stress. We bond through solidarity.

We tire of children who screech. We

Play music with energy.

2 claps in June or December for an extra special day.

Belts in black earned, we

Only need to watch their arms quake. Run out to throw up, at the end they exclaim, "I thought I would die!"

We started as white belts, and we dread the day we start living without them.



By: Annabelle Peffall

## Big Foot's Diet

By: Maria Pionzio

HEY!

Did you know that Bigfoot was on a diet?

A diet!

A diet that shaved off 150 pounds!

How did he do it?

We'll never know!

Subscribe to our magazine and maybe his secret will be revealed!

So many secrets!

Like the secret of Bigfoot!

Did you know he was real?

According to our magazine, he has been around for ages!

Posing for the camera; before and after.

To demonstrate his weight loss!

He's been in cahoots with us for years!

Want to know more?

Read! Read! Read!

Can't read the magazine?

Subscribe! Subscribe! Subscribe!

Only those willing to trust us with their credit card information get to know Bigfoot!

You've seen the photos, he's here to help!

But he wants to make sure you're listening to him so,

Subscribe! Subscribe! Subscribe!

Read! Read! Read!

To unlock the secret to Bigfoot's

Diet! Diet! Diet!

### Honest Poem

By: Maria Pionzio

Hi.

I am the youngest child who became the most fastidious.

I am punctual and studious,

I am someone who unabashedly speaks her mind,

But I don't want to, not all the time.

I want to be nice to everyone I know,

But my family has taught me that isn't so.

"People need a friend to tell them when they're wrong," they would say.

And I would just nod, wanting to fill the shoes they lay.

I feed off their praise, I have an appetite,

And when it feels like I am starving, I begin to fight.

Coming home from work, I will see my father for the first time that day,

But he tends to only focus on the sports game at play.

When I communicate to gain respect,



He feels nothing but guilt because of this aspect.  
He is a good man, through and through,  
But sometimes it seems like he does not know what to do.  
While I am his last child, I am his first little girl,  
And when he talks to me, it makes my mouth curl.  
The smile on my face shall never die,  
So long as I have my father by my side.  
My mother is always there for me, I shall be her golden child,  
But sometimes she is too serious and too stubborn, and I prefer something mild.  
Then it is my turn to feel guilt, I should not wish for such a thing,  
But it is only natural, as I am a human being.  
Not everyone bends to your will,  
So, you must develop some survival skills.  
The skills I own are grand yet common.  
They are made special because they are often things forgotten.  
Gratitude, Grace, Affection, and Honesty,  
These are the core constructs of my policy.  
I shall create art for my family, my world,  
And that shall make my parents smile at their little girl.  
Anyway, I think I got carried away,  
Where was I?  
Oh yes.  
My name is Maria, how are you today?



By: Isabella Slipp 1

## Where I'm From

By: Maria Pionzio

I am from the discarded skins of colored pencils

Freshly sharpened to be my canvas's muse.

From angry shouts of "Catherine!" to the pleased hum of "Atta' girl."

The rivalry and passion that binds me and my brothers

And the maturity granted by past mistakes.

I am a child of separate worlds,

One creative, one intense.

I thrive on the giggles that bubble from my friends

And adore each win or loss at our favorite games.

I am from the bright colors that pass on the screen as I enjoy my shows.

The audience my father grants me as he lounges on the couch doing crosswords.

I am from daydreaming:

Staring out the window of a car as blurs of green, grey, and blue zip past my reflection.

I am from the yips of dogs and the soft fuzz of cats:

The smell of tomato sauce and silky swirl of pasta on Sunday mornings

And of hard work and sweat that comes each Wednesday night.

I'm from the pirouettes of my animated figures,

The sweet taste of hot chocolate and marshmallows.

From those of fiction that I adore so much,

To those of reality that I would never replace.

I am an artist. I am a friend.

I am a daughter. I am a sister.

I am me and all my memories.



*By: Annika Greb*

## Painted In Lies

By: Kelly Kokas

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting warm hues across the eco-friendly cityscape of Elysium, a wise elder named Lysandra gathered a group of eager listeners in a communal space. She began to weave a tale, her voice carrying the weight of both history and revelation.

"In the days of old," Lysandra began, her eyes reflecting the glow of the setting sun, "Elysium faced a challenge that tested the very fabric of our utopian existence." The audience leaned in, captivated by the unexpected twist in the narrative.

Lysandra's story unfolded, revealing a forgotten chapter in Elysium's history. Long ago, a shadow hand loomed over the utopia, threatening to disrupt the delicate balance that had been meticulously crafted. A mysterious force, driven by its own inscrutable motives, sought to unravel the harmonious tapestry that defined Elysium. The Council of Harmony, faced with an unprecedented crisis, had to navigate treacherous waters. Decisions of unparalleled consequence rested on their shoulders as they worked tirelessly to preserve the utopian ideals that had shaped Elysium.

Lysandra continued, her narrative taking unexpected turns. The Great Nexus, once a beacon of innovation, became a battleground of ideas and ideologies. Scientists and thinkers grappled with the challenge, their collaborative efforts strained by the weight of uncertainty. The citizens of Elysium, initially shielded from the impending turmoil, were gradually made aware of the looming threat. The once-unified community found itself tested, as doubts and fears crept into the collective consciousness.

However, in the face of adversity, Elysium did not crumble. The citizens, guided by the principles instilled by the Council of Harmony, rallied together. The utopia, once threatened,

emerged stronger and more resilient than ever before. As the sun set over Elysium, Lysandra concluded her tale, her eyes meeting those of her listeners. "And so," she said, "Elysium stands not only as a testament to our shared dreams but as a reminder that even in the face of unexpected challenges, the spirit of unity and resilience prevails."

The listeners, now more appreciative of the hard-fought harmony of their utopian home, dispersed into the evening with a newfound sense of gratitude and understanding for the intricacies that had shaped Elysium's journey. The sun's warm glow mirrored the resilience of a society that had weathered the storm and emerged victorious in the pursuit of its shared vision. As Lysandra's tale of Elysium's historical challenges unfolded, a chilling revelation lingered on the horizon. Despite the utopia's triumph over the shadow that had threatened its existence, a haunting truth had been buried beneath the surface.

In the quiet aftermath of the crisis, it was revealed that the Council of Harmony, the revered guardians of Elysium's ideals, had not been entirely truthful with the citizens. The mysterious force that had cast a looming shadow was not an external threat but an internal struggle within the council itself. A faction had emerged, driven by a radical ideology that sought to reshape Elysium according to their own vision.

The Council, in an effort to maintain the facade of unity and prevent panic, had concealed the unsettling truth from the citizens. The collaborative efforts and sacrifices made by the people were, in part, orchestrated by the very leaders who were meant to safeguard Elysium's principles. The revelation sent shockwaves through the community, shattering the illusion of absolute transparency and trust that had defined Elysium. The citizens grappled with a newfound reality—a reality where the utopian harmony they believed in was built upon a foundation of deception.



As the sun set over Elysium, its warm glow now tainted by the unsettling truth, the citizens faced a choice. They could succumb to the disillusionment and fractures that had emerged, or they could collectively rebuild their utopia with a newfound commitment to genuine transparency and shared responsibility. Elysium, though scarred by the horrifying twist in its history, stood as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. The citizens, grappling with the harsh reality, faced the challenge of rebuilding their utopia not as an unattainable ideal but as a collaborative endeavor that acknowledged the complexities inherent in human nature. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting its glow over a society determined to forge a path toward a truer, more authentic harmony.



*By: Annika Greb*

peaches and linen

By: Molly Jones

im 16 and i love strawberries and perfectly ripe peaches.  
i grew up in jersey and i love it there too.  
everything is legal in new jersey.  
im good at painting and bad at confrontation.  
i care too much about things that don't matter and too little about the things that do.  
i think i got that from my father.  
i wonder about the other things i got from him.  
i wonder if he had one of those tin lunch boxes as a kid,  
the kind that would clang around in his little backpack.  
i wonder if he liked art and music as much as i do and i wonder if his bedroom wall as a child  
was covered in posters like mine is.  
i wonder if he spilled jelly on his small hands when he ate jelly sandwiches.  
i wonder if he would trip on his shoe laces and scrape up his small knees on the pavement.  
i wonder if he loved peaches and i wonder if his father was softer to him,  
if maybe he would've been softer with me.  
and i wonder if his mother had been more consistent for him,  
if maybe he could've been more consistent for me.  
and maybe if his brother hadn't shot himself that winter,  
maybe he wouldn't be so angry.  
they say that once there's an angry man in your home, he will stay there.  
a permanent stain on white linen.  
a soft dent on a perfect peach.  
but i love peaches.  
and strawberries and white linen  
and i wish he could learn to forgive me the same way i forgive him.



By: Keyri Trejo

## Scrabble.

By: Molly Jones

December 16th, 2020

Your dirty clothes used to sit in your hamper for weeks. You would have so many clothes, that it seemed like you never had to do laundry. Dirty clothes in a hamper were never something I thought I would miss until now. Your smile was infectious. It's what drew me to you initially. I still look for your face in every room I walk into. Every time I board the subway at 7pm, when we would both get off work, I still expect to see your face staring back at me. I miss you so much.

February 5th, 2021

I was cleaning out my game board closet the other day. I left that for a while because I haven't wanted to play the games or even look at them since you left. You got me into collecting vintage game boards in the first place. We used to take Sunday trips, you would blast your CDs in the car, and I would make fun of you for being so old school. We would get to the tiny shack on the side of the road, labeled with a rickety sign that read "ANTIQUES" in all caps. You would rummage around, and we would leave with a tiny stack of boxes. All vintage board games, with the original tiny ornate pieces. I opened up one of your favorite games. I was trying to pawn them off on Facebook marketplace. Partially because I didn't want to have to look at them anymore, and partially because I needed gas money. It was a Scrabble box and inside was a little slip of paper. It was one of the papers you kept score on, and your name was scribbled in sloppy handwriting at the top right corner. The paper had the score for the match on it, tallies upon tallies fused together. You had won that match. And every match before that.

March 25th, 2021

It's been four months, and I still haven't gotten rid of the cereal box you used to keep in my apartment before you left. I know it won't be eaten. There's a little pink post it notes on it that says your name. You thought labeling it was ironic because you knew I hated Lucky Charms anyways and you knew you didn't need to "mark it" because I wouldn't have eaten it. It's probably long expired by now. But it still sits next to my Apple Jacks. I haven't touched it.

April 2nd, 2021

Today was the first day this year that it was above 60 degrees. I decided to wear a skirt. You weren't there to compliment me when I put it on, so I took it off and wore leggings instead. You loved me in skirts. I called my mom and she asked me how I was. I told her I was good. I didn't tell her about the Scrabble board game or the cereal box or the skirt.

June 12th, 2021

I was looking for some shampoo today in the linen closet. I found a little box at the bottom. In it was a small bar of soap. It was wrapped in florally wax paper, tied up with a satin bow and sealed with a wax stamp. You bought me this bar of soap a month before you left me. We had gone to the farmers market and I picked it up. You were holding one of my hands and I gently picked up the soap and sniffed it with my other hand. You watched as I inhaled the sweet scent and put it back down. While I waited for our crepes at a tiny crepe food truck, you told me you were going to use the bathroom and motioned over to the shitty porta potties that were standing, vacant in the corner. I made a face and shooed you away. You came back with the soap. I smiled

and kissed you on the cheek. We got in a fight that night and so I tossed the soap into the linen closet. We made up the next day, but I must have forgotten about the beautiful soap wrapped in wax paper. I took the soap and placed it in my shower, now. I don't want to seem wasteful. Though I know it won't matter much to you anymore.

July 5th, 2021

The bar of soap is a tiny crumb now. I've stopped using it. I don't want to run out of it. I glance at that little crumb every time I pick up my generic Dove soap bar.

September 3rd, 2021

I adopted a dog one week ago. You were always trying to convince me to get a dog and I had always said it was too much of a financial burden. I decided to get one last week. He's tiny. A lap dog. Very affectionate and cuddly. You would like him. He sleeps on your pillow and for a while I was afraid he would rub away your scent that still clung to your pillow with his fur and drool. I let him sleep there now, curled up on your pillow. He keeps me company and our bed feels less cold. Your pillow isn't bare anymore.

November 22nd, 2021

It will be a year next month. Since you left me. It feels like it's been centuries. Time moves so slowly when I'm not spending it with you. Work feels longer when I know I won't come back home to you. This winter feels colder without you to loan me your scarf when my nose gets cold and bring me coffee in the morning when the heat breaks in our apartment and we have to huddle by the tiny wood burning fireplace. I can't seem to bring myself to burn the candle you bought



the week before you left. It smells like pine. You insisted we needed a pine scented candle to make up for the fact that I talked you into buying a fake Christmas tree instead of the real ones. You grew up with the real ones and the first year we spent together, we got one. It left pine needles in the carpet of our old apartment. They stayed there for months, and it drove me nuts. You agreed to getting a fake one the next year, although I knew you still really wanted a real one. I wish we had gotten a real one. I know how happy it would've made you. I'm sorry.

December 16th, 2021

It's been a year. I gave myself a year to keep adding to this speech. It's been a year since I spoke the first entry at your funeral. It was all I could manage writing at the time. I don't know why I keep adding to this. Because you're gone. And I won't ever be able to speak at your funeral again, so nobody will ever hear this. But I miss you. Everywhere I look in our apartment I see you. I see you in your cereal box that I still can't get rid of. I see you in the clothing still folded neatly away beside mine in our dresser, the ones that will never be worn again. I see you in your toothbrush that still sits beside mine and the tube of Colgate toothpaste that sits next to it that I haven't touched. Your shampoo is still in our shower, wishing it could wash your hair. Your shirts wish they could be worn one more time and your favorite hat is still sitting on the hook in the foyer, untouched from the last time you wore it. Your shoes are still waiting by the door, waiting to be worn again. Part of me feels like I should get rid of some of it. But I don't want to be rid of the small reminders of you. Another part of me feels like I'll keep them forever. So I don't forget you. Not that I think I will. I still look for you in every room I walk into and every time I get on the subway at 7pm and sometimes I catch myself rushing home still, to get back to you, only to be met with an empty apartment. Everything seems so quiet without you. Everyone

tells you how to grieve a person, but nobody tells you how to grieve the plans you had and the future you thought you would at one point have. I will always love you. In another life I wouldn't have minded fighting with you over the mundane things or doing dishes and taxes with you. I wouldn't have minded getting a real Christmas tree and I wouldn't complain when I had to vacuum the pine needles out of the carpet every three days. I wouldn't have thrown the soap you gifted me into that closet, I would've used it every day so you knew how much I loved it. And in another life I would've been awake that morning before you left to tell you how much I love you.



By: Arden Clem

## The Magic Hour

By: Zoey Olson

Quietly they rose from the warmth of bed.

They walked on toes to the door, cringing at every sound,

Barely daring to breathe.

Outside, stillness surrounded them.

Not quite dark, not yet light.

Houses stood silent and peaceful.

They ran down the road up the hill crested the dune and,

Sand soft and cool,

Water powerful and cold,

Wind quiet and fierce.

The magical hour had started.

Colors danced and twirled and mixed and swirled.

From navy to purple

Purple to red

Red to pink and orange and yellow and white and blue.

Finally, too bright, too blue,

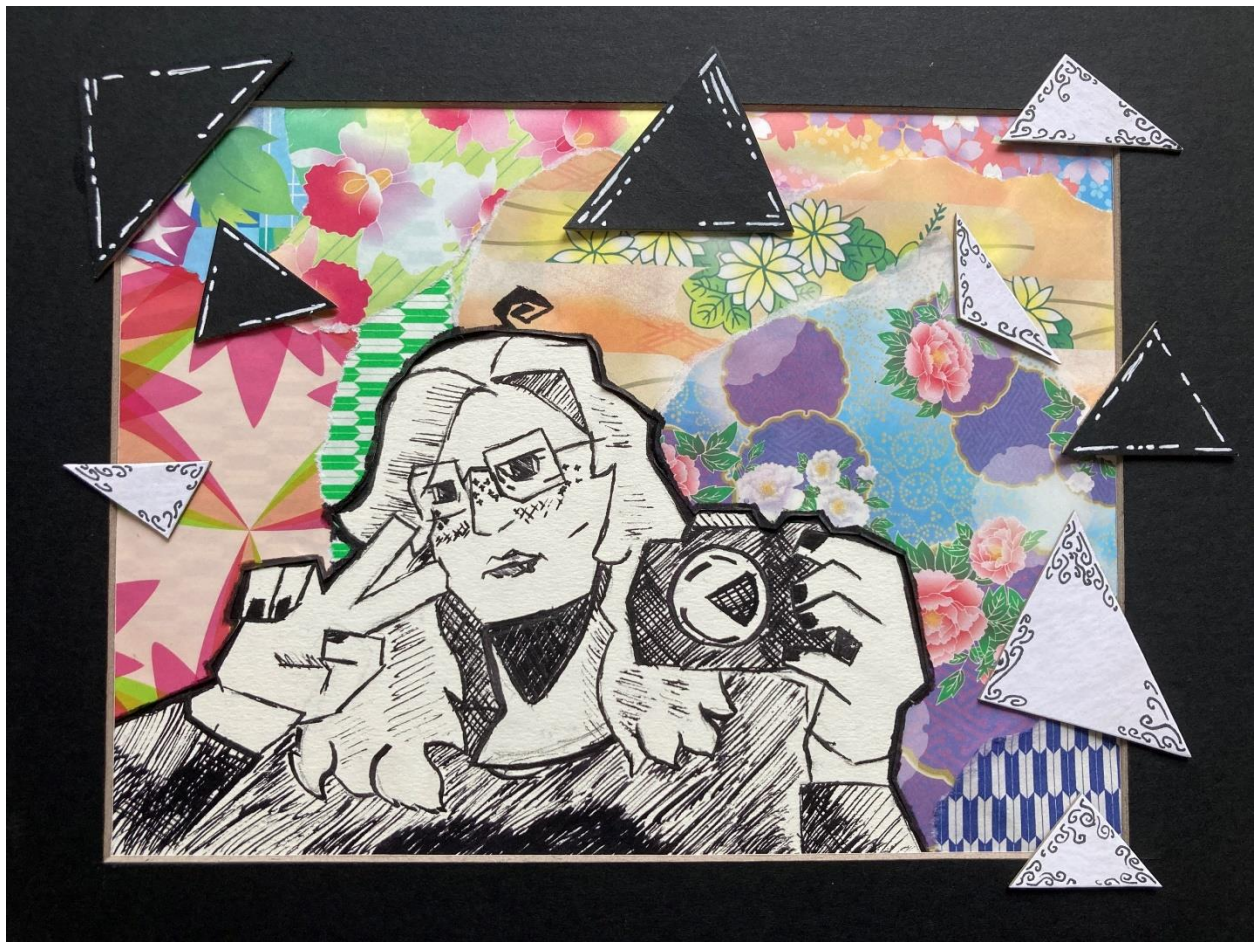
the moment was over.

But a precious moment it was.

Two sisters,

No arguments,

Inside jokes,  
Words written in sand,  
Memories set in stone,  
As the world woke up in front of them.



By: Backpack Filiatrault

## The Tree

By: Zoey Olson

The air was cool, the sun was warm. Bees flew around pollinating flowers, and birds searched for food for their babies. The rabbits hopped around, and the crickets played a happy song. Down the lane, an old man trekked up the lush, green hill to his favorite tree. Under this tree, he had proposed to his wife, and they had picnics there all the time. His wife was coming from work to meet him under the tree.

Though the surrounding area was pulsing with life, the tree was diseased and dying. Just like he was. He could feel it. His memory was patchy, and he was getting physically weaker by the day. All the man wanted to do before he died was save the tree.

The long hike wore the man out. He wheezed and coughed, leaning on his mahogany cane. Halfway there. He had made this trip almost every day since he was diagnosed. What was he diagnosed with? He could never remember.

Stumbling forward, legs aching, he continued, determined to make it to the tree before his wife.

He finally made it to the top. His hacking cough rang out through the fields. After catching his breath, he looked up smiling to the huge weeping willow that stood lonely on the crest of the hill.

His smile fell. The tree. Where had it gone? All that was left was a stump. The old man fell to his knees in despair. His cane clattered onto something on the ground. Forcing himself to look, he saw the cane had landed on a tombstone.



**Diane Smith**

**Loving Wife and Mother**

**1920-2009**

Diane? Diane was his wife.

An anguished cry escaped his lips.

He couldn't remember her death. Why couldn't he remember?

He made this trip yesterday. Wasn't his wife with him then? Wasn't she there the day before that? And the day before that?

His sobbing became uncontrollable, and he started choking.

As he took short, harsh breaths, a woman in a nurse's uniform came running up the hill, yelling for help.

"Diane?" Was Diane a nurse? Maybe she could save the tree. Save their tree.

The woman continued to cry for help, frantically beckoning to someone at the bottom of the hill.

*It's okay*, he wanted to tell her, *my tree is gone—nothing's left for me*. But he couldn't tell her. At last, his choking breaths slowed to a stop.



By: Anna Valmore

a generation behind

By: Alessia Watt

how may i explain to you

that i am a generation behind?

that the stream you sip from

is not a stream but

a precisely shoveled irrigation system

meant to maintain your existence.

the very diversion that leaves me starved

at the riverbank beyond your farmstead.

how may i explain to you

that i may have been bred from the same land

but the soil i grow from is not

so naturally rich.

for on my side of the fence,

i push myself to flourish

what nutrients i have, i must amplify

to be only half as beautiful as you

how may i explain to you

that the sun does not shine so brightly

where i come from

that the chemicals are more substantial

where i come from

that nature has not catered to my growth

where i come from

that we work harder

where i come from

how may i explain to you

that, although we may have been bred

from the same land

i grew to withstand the cruelest of conditions

that the farm i am from did not have the amenities

to keep me delicate but to make my roots tougher



i must explain to you

that i was not grown to be your equal,

but i am. and

i will continue to grow in spite of mother nature's biases.



*By: Arden Clem*

## Ajar

By: Alessia Watt

The truck doors closed in on each side, and we were each other's only company. Environmentally, the pickup was unlike the pub that our friends frequented a few feet away. Inside, they were probably stuck drunkenly chatting in front the bar, decorated with emptied shot glasses and bar food. If Amanda weren't so tired, we would be doing the same. I would find comfort in the cushioned bar stools next to one of my buddies, and Amanda and I would meet each other's gaze from afar. Her chatter striking familiarity in my ears, despite the layers of conversation that overlapped and drowned her out. The only thing that would connect us for the night would be our shared tab, and when we were too tired to sip from our glasses anymore, we would go home together. All would be well for the night. Though, I knew if we got to that point of incoherence, neither of us would be making it back home tonight. So, we sit in the truck, uncomfortably encompassed by summer night atmosphere, and wait for the air conditioning to thin the air.

The sun propped itself high despite how late it had gotten. The surrounding sky had a pink hue, mildly tinting the clouds beyond. Thus far, the truck was silent. The alcohol had yet to hit Amanda, so her voice didn't fill the silence just yet and I was reluctant to do so. Recently, it was hard for us to bond the way we always had without the help of a few drinks. When we were alone like this, it seemed that silence overtook, or any attempt at conversation resulted in some sort of argument. Rather than letting the silence dwindle on for our ride home, I began talking and she seemed to reciprocate with ease. My cheeks were warm and hers matched the sky, conversation flowed with the rumble of the engine below. I turned to look behind us to shimmy

the truck and the added tow of a beat-up, wood-planked trailer out the parking lot. The truck took off and I navigated us home with the verdict that tonight may be one of our good nights.

She was chattily tipsy in the passenger seat, and I was feeling a bit fuzzy myself despite my efforts to draw back on the social sipping of a cold Blue Moon. One turned into a few, a heftier going-out bill than we had anticipated, but I felt grounded enough to take us home. My grip remained stable on the wheel and the lines on the road didn't look too distorted. Sometimes my limits got blurred and it became difficult to keep the car from taking control, but today I felt good. The breeze filtered in from both of our windows, and occasionally, I caught Amanda holding her arm out and waving it in the wind. Seldom had I gotten the chance to see her in this light—she was never at peace. Often her and I spent hours going back and forth. It always stemmed from one thing, then branched to the next and somehow, we both ended up violent—straying far from the lovers we knew each other to be. I savored the way her laugh fell so perfectly into conversation, and let the tune draw a laugh from my mouth, too.

The comfortable flow began to lessen into pauses of silence as we both looked for something to keep what we had going. Before I could pick some other irrelevant detail out of my week to talk about, she had already taken my chance to speak.

“You know, Mitch, we should probably cut back on the social drinking. It's really depleting our accounts, and we need the money for our family.”

Her tone was even, almost as though if she showed any emotion, it would spark something inside of me and switch the mood. After recent events, I suppose it would make sense why she would think that, but I am far more even tempered than she believes.

“You know this is how we bond—with each other and with our friends. What’s the harm in a few drinks, Mandy?” I tried to sound joking even though it did strike a nerve. She was always so uptight about money, and it was all for no reason because we were doing fine. My thoughts continued to back my emotions as she continued talking, instinctively trying to outsmart me despite her evident intoxication. She was always trying to outsmart me. Before she could finish her thoughts, I tried to chime in—Amanda doing the same when I said something that contradicted her. My focus switched to the drunken rage that fueled our conversation rather than the wheel. Her and I were incapable of getting through our occasional twenty minutes alone, obviously, and I wanted so bad to calm it down. The pinched nerves in my forehead said otherwise, though, and the heated insults droned on. Soon, her and I were attacking one another instead of settling our money issue, and my tone rose with my press of the gas pedal. My turns sharpened and the snap of the trailer snaking along with us was heard from behind. The attacks kept going despite how escalated this conversation had already gotten. We both knew this was too far, but there was a mutual recognition that there was no end near. I’d rather take an argument to my grave than just drop it like it’s nothing—I suppose that’s where the toxicity of our lost love came from.

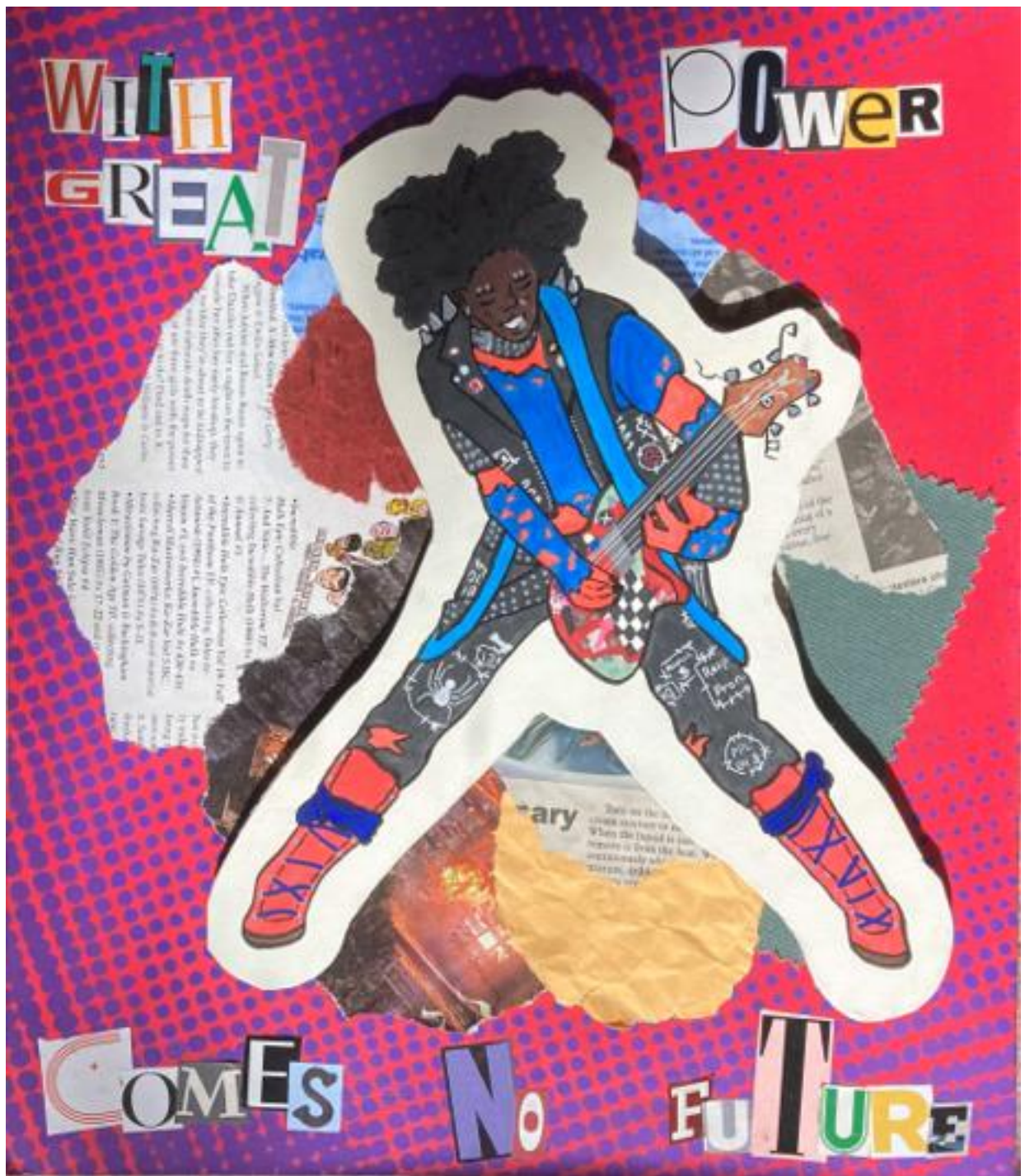
Amanda was now angrily weeping, and I continued screaming in response to hers. She begged and begged for us to drop it and go home, the exhaustion and headache of our rage setting in. After the initial anger subsided, there was always an ache of despair. Our volume had yet to lessen, but the wrath in our voices became pain and frustration as we bickered in retaliation of our ever-depleting care for one another. The arguments frequented our lives more than ever, disturbing our family life that we had once treasured so dearly. We knew our relationship was demolished, and somewhere in my mind I recognized that it was my anger that



brought us here. Her and I were two lovers grieving the loss of each other, and we had yet to let the aggravation surpass.

She pleaded for forgiveness and calm before we returned home. My sanity was too far gone to give in, no plea could end the rage. Thoughtless cruelties carried me through the car ride and pushed the speedometer farther into no tomorrow.

As I watched the red indicator sneak further to the right, a yellow blink above the panel caught my eye. *Passenger door ajar*. With zero coherency to prevent me from utter insanity, I assumed that Amanda wanted out. The car swerved around a bend and then my passenger seat was empty. My breath continued sharp and heavy as I advanced toward home—somewhere in my blank head I resolved that I would come pick her up when I was over my ill-mood. The trailer continued to snake behind, and the rattle of it moving over a hump caused the contents to soar for a moment. That was enough to send me even farther, and I raised the speed a bit more. The warning of my passenger door continued to pester me, but it was okay because I would return for Amanda later.



By: Stanley Tubinas

