

Editor's Note

Dear readers,

Thank you for reading our eighty-fifth issue of Atlantis: A Creative Magazine. Now, more than ever, it brings me great joy to see this issue into your hands. This semester, our first real semester in the new world that 2020 has brought us, was full of challenges and changes that no other generation of students can attest to facing, let alone persevering through. This year was long, and difficult, and full of hurt and heartbreak for so many. But as we near its end, for the first time in quite a while, I am left feeling hopeful for our future.

There are still many battles left to fight: for the social equality and safety of BIPOC and LGBT+ people; for the health of our country against the pandemic; and for the posterity of our planet. Make no mistake: we are not out of the woods yet. But in order to achieve the future that we want, we must first imagine that such a future is possible, and build it piece by piece. In short, we must create. Art, in all its forms, has the power to change the world around us—because art *is* us. Art is our rebellion, our celebration, our power. And now, more than ever, we must use that power to imagine a better world and make it for ourselves. We must use it to heal.

So, as you move through this magazine, let its pieces show you the worlds that they imagine. Let them speak to you, move you, heal you. Give yourself to them, and ask yourself: what does a better world look like, and how can we build it?

As always, thank you for reading, and thanks to my incredible staff for their months of hard work. Enjoy, and stay safe!

Sincerely,

Vasilios Moschouris

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Nonfiction

Words I Wish I Had Said Ciera Lloyd

15~ If I Had Knots in My Hair, I'd Cut Them Out $_{\textit{Mary Hull}}$

Cover

The Ocean's Calling Brielle Barozzini

All I Wanted

Fiction by Sierra Thoemmes

The ball ricocheted off the bat with a crack! Landon's younger brother, Grayson, bolted from home plate. The players on second and third sprinted in tandem. When it bounced toward the back of the field, Landon screamed and jumped to her feet.

"That's what I'm talking about," she yelled.

Landon brought her fingers up to her lips and whistled.

The scoreboard flashed red when the two boys slammed over fourth base. Grayson remained stuck on second, but luckily for them, next to bat came Asher: the home-runner of the team.

"They can win this thing if they keep up the momentum," Landon said to herself. "Really get the other team to sweat."

"That's a bit cocky, don't you think?" a familiar man behind her said.

Landon bristled. The metal stands groaned to her left. She recognized that voice anywhere: *Charles Mill-er*.

"Last I heard," he said, "the Meteors haven't beaten the Crosscutters in two years."

"Ah, Mr. Miller," Landon said. "You're here too." "Dr. Miller," Charles said, "but yes. I am."

Landon rolled her eyes. Men of Charles' stature weren't custom in her neighborhood. He always donned formal clothing and flaunted his degree. Charles carried himself in a way that seemed to judge others for their lack of opportunity. Landon cursed their few shared characteristics as a result—what money couldn't buy—the shape of her nose and round pout of her bottom lip. She questioned what about him ever appealed to her mom.

"We're just not used to seeing you is all," she said, one hand stuffed into her pant pocket. "Out searching for another *mistress* to fool around with?"

"Really, Landon?" Charles said. "Are we doing this again?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know," Landon responded. "You tell me." Charles huffed. He itched beneath his white dress shirt, not suited for the midsummer blaze. He yanked at his tie and grimaced when thick beads of sweat dripped down his face. It hadn't even been five minutes.

"Regardless, I have to admit," Charles said, "I was quite surprised to see the Meteors have the lead when I pulled up."

"Yeah, well," Landon murmured, "they've been training hard this season."

The batter hit the ball toward the middle of the field. Grayson ran for home plate. When the shortstop picked it up, Landon pursed her lips in annoyance. She imagined the determined pinch of Grayson's brow, how he'd push past the hot ache of exertion in his lungs. At twelve years old, he prided himself on his dependability, but the shortstop chucked the ball to the catcher before he could reach. Those late nights of practice spent with Landon on the dry patch of grass in front of their house wasn't enough. The memory of their mom, Avery, perched on the porch yelling some poor imitation of an announcer taunted them both.

"Because they have you, I presume?" Charles said.

"I stand in on some practices, yeah," Landon said.

"Huh," Charles said. "I just figured you would have given that up after the—well . . ."

Silence fell stagnant between them. Landon refused to turn and address him.

Still, she clenched her fists. Even though Landon knew Charles would bring that up, it didn't make it hurt any less. No matter what, she couldn't forget that game three years ago. At sixteen, scouts lined the bleachers to watch her play. The future seemed endless then: she had so many universities and different paths to choose from. But one wrong play, one muscle torn, ruined her chances for everything.

"Oh?" Landon said. "I'm surprised you remember, Mr. Miller."

"How could I not?" he said. "Everyone talked about it. I was sorry when I heard from your mom."

Charles undid his tie and draped it over his shoulder. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. Charles' silver watch glimmered under the sunlight. Surprise crashed over Landon when she heard Charles and her mother had been in contact. She couldn't forget the depression her mother drowned in when news of Charles' infidelity came out. Landon recalled the long days spent with Grayson at the park while their mom kept busy with work. If Avery had a task to do, she didn't have to stop and think about the heartbreak. For Landon, playing ball offered her a welcome reprise from the shattered image of her home.

"Hey—do you remember when I bought you your first glove?" Charles said. "You carried it with you everywhere. We couldn't get you to put it down."

When his voice tapered off, Landon scoffed. Heat burned beneath her cheeks, a flush that traveled far down her neck. To reminisce on her childhood felt like a fever dream. She almost forgot there used to be a time when both of her parents came to her games.

"I suppose that I should be grateful you were paying such close attention, then," Landon said. "It's not often that we're so *graced* by your presence."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Charles asked.

Landon pressed her tongue against the inside of her cheek in annoyance.

"How many games have you been to this season?" she said. "How often have you been there for your son?"

Charles ran a hand through his hair. He at least had the tact to look sheepish now: his lips downturned in a harsh frown. Landon watched from the corners of her eyes as he laid his blazer on the ground. They stood alone at the bottom of the stands, conversation muted by the roar of the crowd.

Both of them knew the unspoken end to that question. Have you been there for your son the way you couldn't be there for me, your daughter? Landon thought back to when she first started softball. Charles and Avery dominated the stands. Their cheers boomed over the rest of the spectators. Her parents almost made her feel embarrassed they were filled with so much pride. Charles would chant her name

when she stepped up to bat.

"That's fair," he said. "I haven't exactly been the best to you or your brother."

"Don't worry about it," Landon said. "Your *other* son doesn't know. Mom and I never even told Grayson."

It took a long time to come to terms with it: Charles cheating on her mother, the abandonment. Charles had too much responsibility with attending graduate school to care for two children, and Avery couldn't handle the shame of seeing him to keep him around. Landon used to struggle when she saw Charles and acted like she wasn't related to him. She hated pretending that she didn't have a second sibling. That fury festered as Landon grew to the point that it condemned any chance at having a relationship with him. Now Charles had an entirely new family to care for.

Only nowadays did everything feel whole again. Avery would accompany Landon to Grayson's occasional weekend games. They spent enough time together that the missing factor Charles left behind didn't feel so gaping.

"I'm trying," Charles said. "I want to be a better father."

But not for me and Grayson, the voice in Landon's head snapped. Just the better *other* child. Landon saw her half-sibling in passing. He looked polished, hair neatly cut, and a row of perfect white teeth. The boy supported his teammates when he wasn't playing. He encouraged them even after they struck out.

Landon wanted to resent him, but she couldn't bring herself to commit. Charles likely had an easier time bonding with his other son. He didn't have such a messy history around to remind Charles of his previous mistakes. Landon doubted the boy came across as cold as she did, either.

"Sure," she said. "Good luck with that."

"Does it make you sad?" Charles said, changing the subject. "Not being able to play anymore, I mean."

"Sometimes," Landon said. "I loved playing. It ended too quick. But this is nice too—Grayson has that same fever for it that I did."

"You were talented," Charles said. "Even as a kid."

"Watching him play makes me feel better," Landon confessed. "He makes me happy."

Landon waved at Grayson from where he stood in the dugout. His eyebrows drew together in confusion as he watched them; however, she couldn't blame him. A strange man in smart dress wear—who wouldn't have questions?

"Does he ever ask about me?" Charles said.

"Would it bother you if I said he doesn't?" she said. "Mom doesn't talk about you."

"That's fair."

"I mean," Landon said. "He does. But you made it pretty clear that you didn't want anything to do with us. So, we just don't bring it up."

"No. It's not that I didn't want you guys," Charles said. "I was so young when we had you both, Landon. I was right about to go back to school. After your mother found out about the affair, she didn't want me around anymore."

Charles rubbed the back of his neck. Landon felt that swell of repressed longing, of wanting to know why her family wasn't good enough. Landon wondered if Charles felt bitter for how it all turned out.

"I also wanted to do right by you," Charles said. "Your anger is justified, Landon. I just didn't want to complicate things or make you more upset."

"You think it's that easy?" Landon said. "That sounds like a copout."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hope you know that."

Landon went to lash out at him again, but then Charles smiled. His son stepped up to bat after the teams switched. She recognized his awed expression from when she used to play. Landon considered for the first time that she might not have to apply the same end-all-be-all to this.

"A word of advice," Landon said. "Since you're *try-ing*. Play ball with your kid. Mom said you used to before you got too busy with getting *old*."

Charles laughed at the dig, and Landon couldn't help but grin with him.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe you're right."

"Landon," Grayson yelled. "Landon, did you see me?"

Landon hugged her brother and ruffled his sweaty hair. The Meteors managed to pull through and beat the Crosscutters 12-8. The last of the players trickled off the field.

"Of course, I did," she said. "And you know what that means?"

"Victory ice cream!" Grayson cheered.

He squealed and ran over to his friends. Landon watched with a tender expression as they re-created plays from the game—still bustling with energy.

Charles cleared his throat behind her. He looked stiff in his rumpled clothes.

"You were right," Charles said. "They must've been working hard."

"Always," Landon said. "They put in everything they got."

Charles opened his mouth but closed it again. Landon cocked her eyebrow, hand braced on her hip. Charles cleared his throat.

"Will I see you at the next game?" he asked.

His words from before rang through Landon's head: *I want to be a better father*.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm always here to support my brother."

"I'll—I'll see you then," Charles stuttered.

Landon bit her lip. That yearning for the field, for a true family, swelled beneath her chest again. Grayson tugged at her hand, antsy for his after-game treat.

"Sure, Charles," she said. "Just, next time? Ditch the suit."







The heads of dog sculptures in cemeteries often stay moss free because people pet them

Poetry by Tyler Pufpaff

O, how we long for that which has come and gone—

to extend mortality for a moment, a brush of oil from the hand,

recalling memoria itself. Why not then also broom

the moss, mold, and lichen free from our garages that house

the disassembled Lego sets, flat-tired bikes, and dusty boxes

always in a corner? Pay it a visit! This too is a burial: our once-

storied trophies that heralded a future not met; hoards of

deposited change in unfit clothes; photos of others—but never you,

in a tin somewhere being reclaimed by time; the automatic

neglect unhinged from our heart, refusing connection; a bonsai pot

collecting rain from the roof—spilling on days that are torrential,

but mostly keeping this cemetery humid enough to invite

encroachment from other species. I think I will continue to sequester

these sentiments though, remnant of a story much more hopeful

than one I've found myself in—and this may seem like an abysmal lack of care, but when

I pet the heads of dog sculptures in cemeteries, I am thinking of

them.



Whatever Works

Poetry by Tyler Pufpaff

I leased some land right outside of Asheville for seclusion the because of two twin trees particular When I leave tomorrow, I imagine that I'll be over-the-top self-destructive with a chainsaw I purchased from Home Depot among other tools I would need to clear the land When I fall the trees, I'll be shredding the feelings of regret that this didn't work-mind literally any other feeling When I exhume the stumps that pimple the ground with a shovel something dead will pop out; your inflammation soon subside to When checked the it rains (I forecast) all the little shit will wash away from me—away from here—debris for someone else And the other tools will be used to chisel myself anew along with a home on this land that only someone with a credit score as low as mine would consider but I imagine after a month of stripping the land if I haven't killed myself in the process that I might come out strong enough to fall in love again

Read It Fast

Poetry by Lily Crowder

It happens when you visit your folks and the puppies' eyebrows have turned gray and your mom got shorter and your dad's ears got bigger and the grandparents have so much silverware—two drawers worth—because the whole family eats and you can't pull apart barbecue with that plastic shit. It happens when you tell a story you've told before and your own wife says "How old are you again?" because she really doesn't remember. It happens when you see a nice house and think *I wonder who sold their organs for that*. It happens when it becomes about surviving, not living, and agreement, not love.

I am not yours to keep. I am a wildfire in hell that will burn you if you provoke it or feed it too many pills or keep it from sleeping. I am a woman, breast high and back straight. With blood made of Kerouac's spilled booze and hair that fell from Dolly's beehive. I am Bukowski's kid who taught himself how to treat and eat a lady. I am Mary Todd's hums and I am Ida Moore's attitude. I am my father's diction and I am my mother's hands. I am a retired-sorry-excuse-of-a ballerina with the tight bun and the long fingers and the hickey in the mirror, dancing like a chicken with its neck slit and spinning like a hot dog in the gas station. I am the poem you absolutely cannot understand and I am a river shallow enough that the fish stand up. I am the taximan who didn't honk when you cut them off in traffic on a bad day. I am photos you don't keep and I am trash that starts to stink.

It happens when it was you who brought him over and it was you who slept through it when she told him *she didn't like that*. It happens in the morning when you hear the birds and you hate them and the service starts and you don't stand because god doesn't want to see the scratches on the backs of your legs. It happens when you leave with the sick feeling you'll never come back.

I am the Beatnik-Highwayman-love-affair that no one asked for and I am the self-proclaimed

realist you wish would fuck off. I am the word yank and the color green. I am the chlorine pool and its lost goggles and dead frogs. I am the outcome of love and cocaine. I am the one left at the altar, but often I am also the one who did not show up. I am your promise to Jesus that you won't ask for anything again after this and I am the mistrust after you ask again anyway. I am the flight attendant on Denver's last jet plane ride and the unwelcome cheer when the plane does not land.

It happens when your décolletage gains texture and the bar of soap disappears. It happens when you say "Who is this?" and it's The Beatles. It happens when you wake up mad and you go to bed mad and you don't know why and you have more doctors than friends and more friends than you want. It happens when someone says "I know" and they don't. It happens when you really open up but maggots cozy up with your honesty and flies slip into your mouth.

I am a foot taller than my grandmother and a foot shorter than the man who taught me the importance of keeping your guard up. I am Bowie's left cheek, a bruised Major Tom, struggling to get off a damned earth. I am the seventy-line sonnet that won't reach its climax and I am the mother you see failing to tame her kids at lunch. I am the premature infant with pneumonia and I am the reason my father quit smoking. I am the waitress who spills food on someone's shirt and I am the first person to leave the party. I am the friend about whom you think I wonder what they're up to before you lean over to snort a line or kiss your kid or close your book.

It happens because you are getting older and you are getting frailer and they swore that you'd get wiser but that hasn't happened yet. It happens because control is an illusion and taking charge is just a confident way of screwing up and zigzagging toward the inevitable.

You are the light under someone's toe. You are aging and you are growing. You are at the top of the mountain.

It happens when you decide to either turn around, take in the view, or belly-side the descent.



Spark Art by Akira Collins



Words I Wish I Had Said

Nonfiction by Ciera Lloyd

May 2007

We sit on top of the monkey bars, dangling our feet in the air. I'm seven years old, and a girl grabs my stomach. Pinching it between two fingers, she says, "We both need to lose this."

No. No. No.

April 2015

I tell my mom sophomore year of high school I can't stand the way I look. She offers me \$200 if I can lose 20 pounds over the summer.

Can't you just tell me I'm perfect the way I am?

June 2015

I begin my first job, scooping ice cream at the beach and living with my grandparents. My grandma hands me a journal at the beginning of the season and says, "Just keep track of everything you eat, and write down the calories in them. As long as you don't go over 1,200 calories a day, you'll lose weight." In my bathroom mirror, I begin to trace the outline of my body every day, hoping it shrinks each morning when I wake up. If the scale isn't lower, I force myself to work out an extra hour. I lose 20 pounds over the summer. Everyone says, "You look absolutely stunning."

Are you saying I looked terrible before?

October 2015

My whole family gathers in D.C. for my great uncle's funeral. At dinner the first night, my grandpa offers me a spoonful of mashed potatoes, and I hesitate, because I haven't eaten them since June. I put the spoon in my mouth. "That's going to ruin your diet," my stepmom says.

These mashed potatoes aren't going to do a fucking thing to me. I'm going to enjoy them.

August 2017

As she's leaving my freshman dorm and I'm standing at the doorway waving goodbye, my mom calls out to me just before entering her car, "Just eat healthy and exercise, and you won't gain the freshman 15."

It's not the end of the world if I gain 15 pounds.

May 2018

Freshman year ends, and I find myself crying in a dressing room while my grandma waits outside. Mascara runs onto the clothes that don't fit me, and I buy them, because I feel bad that I ruined the soft fabric. Before dinner that night, my grandma pulls me aside and says, "If you want, I'll pay for a diet program for you."

I don't need one. I just need to believe that my size does not determine my worth.

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June 2018

When I go back home and my stepmom sees me heating up the pre-packaged meal in the microwave, she says, "Well that isn't really sustainable. You just need to eat foods in smaller portions."

Okay. But now I'm hardly eating, and I don't know what to do, but you said this was healthy for me.

August 2018

I start sophomore year of college, and I'm working evening shifts at my job. I don't see my roommate all day. A few months into first semester, she says, "Hey, I never see your stuff in the dishwasher. Are you okay?" No.

December 2018

I go home for Christmas, and it doesn't feel like things are going to be okay. My entire family tells me I look great and amazing. And I take it as a sign that I need to keep doing what I'm doing. Because the smaller I get, the more worth I have. But my grandpa tells me, "Don't lose any more weight, or you won't be pretty." I'm not pretty now. The only way I can be is if I lose just a few more pounds, inches, anything.

May 2019

A few months later, I move back in with my dad for the summer. He tells me this is my choice, and I need to fix it. I didn't choose this.

June 2019

Nothing changes, and I lose my period. I'm studying abroad in London for six weeks. Then I come home after three because my mother wants to put me in an eating disorder hospital. I tell her I will do anything, but please don't take me out of school. If I'm not in school, I can't keep losing weight. I don't tell her this. I need someone to do this for me:

July 2019

I begin my nine-week stay at the hospital. On the first day I pass out, and I cry in a nurse's arms for an hour because they want me to drink a bottle of Gatorade. Fix me.





If I Had Knots in My Hair, I'd Cut Them Out

Nonfiction by Mary Hull

Back in middle school, if I had knots in my hair, I'd cut them out.

It was a relatively short-lived phase. Right around the same time my classmates were sporting neon fuchsia and lime green clip-on highlights or ballerina buns secured in place with foam donuts, I was taking a scissor to my head.

I preferred Mommy's orange scissors that were tucked into the junk drawer, but Pappy's red, left-handed scissors did the job. Whatever I could get my hands on. Sneaking scissors to the bathroom was a hell of a lot easier than combing through the neglected mess that sat on my scalp. I still remember the sound of those dull blades chopping through the healthy hair just above a problematic knot. I remember the ways I'd have to fashion my ponytail to hide the uneven landscape I'd created. I remember the shame.

My curly hair had been a beast for as long as I could remember. Chestnut ringlets sprung from my head like an overwatered Chia Pet and became unmanageable to me very early on. Times were much simpler when Mommy sat me down in the plastic yellow chair in the living room and combed it out herself. She'd pull and tug at knots until involuntary tears pooled in my eyes. "Sit still and look forward," she'd demand. And through my blurred vision, I desperately tried to focus on anything but the hair on my head.

You see, curly hair has a mind of its own. You can oil and comb and brush and oil again, but, much like myself at that age, my curls did not like to listen to instructions. One strand could twirl naturally like Shirley Temple while the others could inconspicuously move to a head of hair without curls and fit in fine. So, I spent most of my time in middle school pinning my hair into a tight ponytail and forgetting about it for the rest of the day.

The truth was I hated my hair. One birthday, I remember sitting around the glass table on the patio. The darkness of the night sky was only interrupted by the faint orange glow of the six or seven pink candles sprawled across the cake in front of me. The birthday

song scored the scene quietly, but my thoughts were loudly preoccupied with the wish I soon had to make. My choice was very clear. "I wish I had straight hair." In an ideal world, I would wake up like the rest of the girls at school. Pin straight, dirty-blonde, no volume, down to my hips, *perfect*. But after years of casting the same version of this wish over and over, I gave up on the dream of liking the frizzy mane of knots I saw looking back at me in the mirror.

So, I cut them out.

I can still feel dry clumps on hair resting in my palm. I could run my fingers through the haphazard nest. I literally was holding my roots. For something so natural, so ingrained in my DNA, so much of what made me me—I hated it. To be honest, the cutting was not the most difficult part.

It was hiding the hair that proved to be the true challenge. I couldn't just toss them into the kitchen trash alongside eggshells and expired Shoprite coupons. Naturally, I got creative. My navy-blue backpack was home to a knot or two, which sat deep under my binders packed tightly with crumpled papers marked with average grades and pencils sharpened too many times that I could hardly even get my grip anymore. Other times, my knots would get stuffed under my bed or inside a shoe that I hardly wore. I wonder if my dead clumps of hair still rest in the space between our rotten wooden fence and our neighbor's white PVC fence. I threw it in there when no one was looking and where no one would find it. Right alongside our neighbor's discarded Scooby-Doo plastic ball, the mutt's tawny face staring up blankly at the sky in weathered patches, is where my knot lays its final rest. Other knots of mine were not so inconspicuously placed. I hid some of these knots in my closet, amongst other secrets.

This secret habit was only a secret but for so long. One day, I heard my mother calling out for me. She said my name in a tone of voice that caused my heart to drop into my stomach. As I walked down the hall into my own room, it felt as though the dark path became longer and longer with each step. I knew what awaited

Bath Tub Book Club Art by Shannon Kerrigan

me behind my door, and it wasn't good. Mommy found my hair.

I didn't really have an explanation and surprisingly, I don't recall her even asking for one. Instead, that same shame that washed over me every time I had taken a scissor to my hair, I saw it in her eyes too. I guess this is how pre-teen laziness coupled with a hatred for my body and myself manifested itself. It was easier to cut out the parts I didn't like rather than face myself in the mirror with a comb and let what I had done sink in like the pounds of leave-in conditioner needed to fix this would to each of my matted curls.

But by the time I entered high school, looking different wasn't so much a curse as it was something that got people to notice me. On random days where the stars aligned and the humidity was just right, I gained the confidence to wear my hair out. I was thrust into a school where people finally had hair like mine, and I loved it. Once in a while turned into a regular basis and pretty soon, I was wearing my hair freely upon my shoulders more than I was wearing buns or ponytails. But as I mentioned, this newly found confidence came with attention.

"I'd kill to have curly hair, mine is so boring."

"Is that natural? Do you curl it?"

"Can I touch it?"

When I look back on it, I did it for me. I wore my hair out for me. Not my 11th-grade Spanish teacher who pet me like a zoo attraction as she walked up and down the aisles of our classroom. Not for the people whose backhanded compliments compared my hair to others. I did it for me. Today, I can confidently say I love my hair and every perk and problem that comes with it. Even on the days where it would probably be easier to just cut it off and shove the severed knots into my dresser drawers under the stacks of clothes I hardly wear and haven't gotten around to bringing to the Goodwill, I face myself in the mirror and refuse to let myself become the person I once was.

Now in college, if I have knots in my hair, I suck it up and comb them out.

What if the House Collapsed?

Fiction by Piper White

The baby's cries, from down the hall, woke Mary for the fifth time that night. No matter how hard she tried to stifle the cries with a pillow over her ears, the wailing persisted. Her husband didn't even stir. He had always been a heavy sleeper, practically dead if not for the twitch in his leg. Sometimes he'd snore, but if she elbowed him hard enough, just below the ribcage, he'd stop and roll over.

Her hell of a pregnancy turned into a hell of motherhood. She nearly lost the baby, or herself, but luckily her doctor prevented both of their demise. The amount of blood she lost on the hospital bed haunted her in the apparition of a moth, with red eyes, outside her bedroom window. She swore it was there to mock her.

She didn't recognize the woman in the mirror. Her mousy-brown hair fell out in strands when she finger-combed it; she let the pieces fall to the floor and she kicked them under the vanity. Her magenta, under eye bags pooched puffy, making her doe-like eyes nothing but two dark holes. Mary's lips had gone chapped from kissing her infant's forehead so much. Her baby, soft like apricot skin, contrasted deeply to her own speckled skin, cracked in places she missed when she moisturized.

She despised the disconnect she felt from her baby. Her little girl was more of a thing in a crib. There were no ruins to the baby, no crumbled buildings or burnt fragments that'd be stuck that way forever. She was a clean slate, a canvas waiting to be painted.

In her grey robe, Mary shuffled down the hall where the wailing seemed to make the distance stretch. She squinted against the yellowing hall lights and took a breath as she stood in front of the baby's door. She listened as the crying diminished and the baby's sniffles were all that filled the room, like, the baby knew her mother was there to comfort her. It's like she did it on purpose to get Mary's attention. Mary scoffed. Her hand hovered over the knob before she cracked the door open.

Her baby lay in her crib, legs kicking furiously, hand grabbing onto her little, yellow blanket. The color of happiness and hope—a color Mary stopped giving attention to ages ago. She approached the crib and her baby smiled up at her. Mary forced one back. Her own feelings of menace for the little girl she produced repulsed her.

The baby's mobile had clouds, suns and rainbows with little smiley faces stitched onto them. She spun it gently, cringing when it squealed on the one rusty hinge. But it didn't bother her baby. She kicked her feet more and excited cries fell from her little, pink lips. Mary looked for her pacifier. It was curled into the baby's yellow blanket, pink and glistening. She stuck it in her baby's mouth, watching her lips latch onto it in complete contentment.

Mary's baby looked at her as if she were the only thing in the world. Mary wanted to do the same.

A crash from the corner of the room rattled Mary. The picture she had of little zoo animals, with their smiling faces, shattered into pieces, scathing the painting. Mary's baby's forehead crinkled. She spit the pacifier out, face going red as the tears began. The baby squealed. Mary couldn't calm her baby, and every time she stuck the pacifier back in her mouth, the baby spit it right back out.

Mary's jaw tensed, pins sticking into her head as the migraine moved its way to the front of her forehead. She looked her baby in the eye and screamed. Stunned, the baby sucked her tears back in, and went completely silent.

"That actually worked?" Mary asked the baby.

Her baby answered in a slobbery giggle.

"All I had to do was be louder than you?" Mary asked. "You're going to be a handful."

Mary placed the baby in her crib, eyes falling closed with every small breath she took. Mary shuffled back down the hall and crawled back into bed with her snoring husband, immediately letting sleep encase her and pull her into its oblivion.

Her eyes shot open not even thirty minutes later at the realization she didn't clean up the broken picture frame. She heard no cries from her baby which was unnatural. Her stomach lurched her forward to the doorknob of her bedroom. What if her baby fell out of the crib? What if she cut herself on the broken glass? It was too quiet in the house; not even the floorboards creaking under Mary's feet was loud enough. The snoring of her husband ceased, and she wondered if he actually died in his sleep. How the fuck would she mother the child if he was dead? She twisted her wedding ring around her finger until she was in the kitchen.

She quickly grabbed the broom from the pantry and trudged back up the stairs. Her legs felt like they were stuck in quicksand. She felt her lungs constrict and soon she gasped for air. She supported herself with the broom's handle, heat prickling at the back of her neck. She threw her robe on the step, milky shoulders glowing in the moonlight from the window. She looked like a ghost.

"Calm down, Mary," she said to herself. "Just check on Emma."

Her words didn't register in her mind; they were a false affirmation. Every breath felt like a knife slicing into her lungs. What would happen if she walked in and found Emma out of her crib? Or worse? As much as she didn't feel for her child, she couldn't imagine finding the baby harmed. Mary regretted the time she just stared at Emma when she cried, or when she refused to breast feed her when the tenderness was too much for her to bear another suckle. Her own mother said it was normal for first time mothers, but from the second Emma left her womb, she felt nothing but numb pain. Emma was supposed to make up for the lost fragments of Mary, but she didn't. The baby took and took like a leech and drained Mary of her energy, her youth, her yellow light.

"Stop thinking that way," Mary demanded.

She looked to the ceiling to take a breath, but noticed the wallpaper on the walls curling. A spider crawled into the loose corner, probably nesting. What if the spider crawled on her at night? Or worse, crawled into her ear? Or her husband's mouth? Why was the wallpaper curling? Was the house collapsing around her?

To ground herself, she counted the popcorn on the ceiling but noticed a jagged crack running its length. She knew what room rested above the crack—the

bathroom. The bathtub would sure crush anyone under its weight if it fell through the ceiling. If the crack grew and she forgot about it, what if Emma was under it one day? How would she call 9-1-1 about her daughter crushed under a bathtub? The whole upstairs could collapse if the cracks expanded. For a moment, in the frenzy of her mind, Mary saw the cracks expand. She saw it infesting the walls like a spore dragging illness with it. The cracks stretched into taunting, thin lines curved up into stick figure smiles. They mocked her for being glued to the staircase while the silence screamed at her from upstairs.

She wished she could move. She shook as her knees buckled, and dust bunnies latched onto her lounge pants. Her fingers needed the marbles she sometimes sorted to give her a piece of mind and quiet the questions that covered her mouth with their rotten hands. When she lifted Emma from her cradle, did she find her hands rotten? When she squirmed, was it because her grip was rough like sandpaper? Not comforting like the hands of the sunshine that cradled her when she was positioned by the window? But what if that made her overheat? What if the sun burned her baby's skin and left her with peeling skin? The same way the wallpaper was peeling in the corner.

The room shook as if an earthquake were present. In the darkness, she could've sworn she saw her mother shaking a finger at her, and her husband walking away with their daughter.

"You're a horrible mother," her own mother told her, taking Emma from Jack.

"We're leaving," Jack said, dragging the wallpaper with him.

Mary watched the world around her crash, each wooden board of the house splintering before falling down below her. The spiders in the wall crawled out while the cracks in the ceiling spit up dust right onto Mary. She hadn't cried in months, but felt the sting of tears scratch the backs of her eyelids. Like her daughter, she released her wail: a banshee under the full moon. Her salty tears rolled down to her lips where they sucked the moisture up like plant roots. She gripped the broom handle as she felt her heart sink to the pit of her stomach and pulse with every breath she heaved.

"Honey?" she heard from behind her.

She opened her eyes and saw that the house was intact. The wallpaper still peeled at the corner, but the cracks in the ceiling no longer mocked her with their pencil grins. Jack stood behind her, hair standing straight up. He rubbed the sleep from his hazel eyes, stretching so his long sleeve crept up to reveal his stomach. He was very much real and very much alive.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Mary said.

He took a seat next to her, taking her clammy hand in his.

"Hey," he said, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. "What's the matter?"

Mary bit back the words that wanted to spew from her mouth like a spigot. If she said them aloud, what if the answer she got wasn't that of which she wanted? He stroked her hair and waited patiently for her to speak.

"I feel like a horrible mother."

The words left her like the break of a fever. Her cold sweat stopped, but her body still tensed. She held her breath.

"You're not a horrible mother," Jack said. "What makes you say that?"

"I'm not bonding with Emma," Mary said. "Mothers are supposed to bond with their babies and—shit! I forgot about the picture frame."

She dragged the broom behind her and flung Emma's door open. Across the room she saw the pile of glass, keeping the painting held down. She checked the crib and found Emma suckling her pacifier, sound asleep. Her little chest heaved up and down, shrouded in moonlight, making her glow like a little angel. The baby stirred, eyes fluttering open like butterfly wings. She looked up at her Mommy, spitting the pacifier out to give Mary a smile. Jack stood in the doorway, watching his wife and daughter with a sleepy smile on his face. Mary pulled Emma from her crib, cradling her in her arms. She hummed to her baby, listening for the coo from her child.

Jack picked up the forgotten broom and swept up the glass from the broken picture frame. When she set Emma back in her crib, the child reached out for her. Mary stuck the pacifier back in her mouth and hummed until the baby's eyes began to close again. She and Jack turned off the light and slowly closed the door behind them.

"That looked like bonding to me," Jack said, as the couple crawled back into bed.

Every creak from the house that night no longer alerted Mary of the perils that could happen. Her brain silenced itself and allowed her to find her own state of peace. The mother hadn't had a true night's rest in days and begged her body to let her sleep in. When she finally drifted off, she didn't dream of cracking floorboards or stairs breaking under her feet.

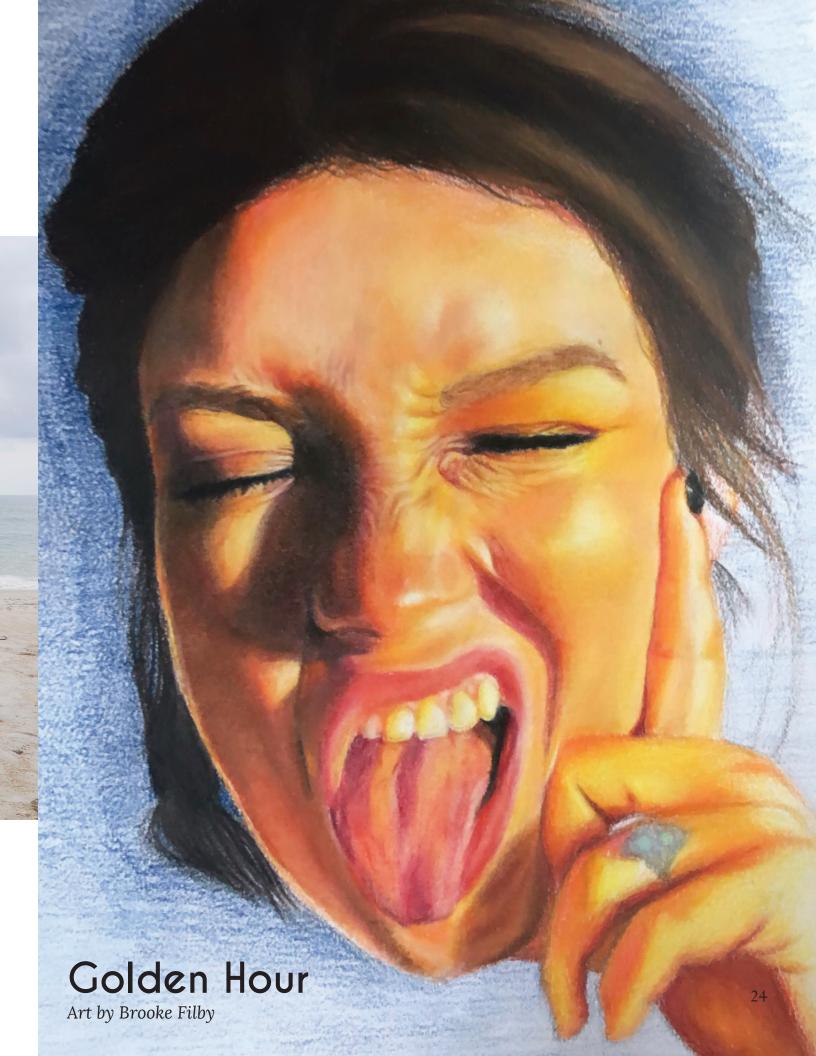
She woke up to the sound of Emma sobbing from the other room. Her irritation swelled, but popped when she reached her baby's room. At the sight of Mary, Emma quieted down and reached out her chubby arms for her mother. Mary took the baby in her arms and rocked her to sleep in the old, yellow rocking chair in the corner. A single cracking sound from the window alerted Mary, and for a moment she almost slipped back. Her heartbeat picked up, heat building throughout her body again. She waited, holding Emma close to her chest, heartbeat to heartbeat.

But the house didn't collapse.



Dumpster Chair Beach Morning Photography by Brielle Barozzini







The Man in the Vent

Fiction by Julian Seddon

Matthew couldn't help to notice that there was no way of escaping this place as he shuffled through the long, off-white corridor inside the Willow County Jail, in Joliet, Illinois. The cuffs at the ankles and wrists hooked to another chain around his waist. He passed about a dozen different housing units to get to one where he'd be held until his next court date.

He was forced to the stay to the right of the black line, the inmates bike path. A guard walked behind him to the left, pushing Matthew toward the wall every time he lost his balance shuffling. It felt like miles of white walled hallways leading to gated doors. He passed by countless two-tiered pods that were labeled with a single letter. Each one welcomed you with a gated fence and into the open pod for all to see. He knew not to look around, but what else is there to look at? The steel doors stood about six feet apart with slim jim windows. Behind those windows were plastered faces of the damned or white sheets hung for privy. He never knew what the pod letters meant, but he knew some held gangs, others were gen pop, and then, the isolation units. Matthew was still being shoved by a guard but finally succumbed to his overbearing authority, along with the uncertainty of the men housed in those pods.

It wasn't new to him, but he never got used to it either. The wild screams accompanied by the loud shouting were the only things he could focus on. He was already losing touch, as he always did in this place. Matthew sank deep inside himself as he knew the only thing this walk had in store for him, was a cold, hard cell door slamming behind him, echoing through his head.

Other inmates passed by him, walking alone, no guard escort, or chains. Matthew assumed this was home for inmates with privileges. Deeper in this disorienting maze, Matthew's clever eyes slightly squinted as he arrived at a green cage, and beyond that was *S* pod, his cell, and his unlikely escape.

Fortunately, by the time they got him through intake, it was lights outs. This jail was one of the

coldest, hardest, and rankest places he has ever been. The guards escorted him through the pod silently as they handed him off like an item going into storage. Except, this storage was for humans. The banging on their cell doors and screaming for help or death remained a constant. It was his steel, cold, hard hell. The lights in his pod never went all the way out, not even in the cells either. Welcome to *the block*.

"Ad Seg, forreal," Mattew said. "Y'all are seriously trippin', straight up."

"Shut up and hold your arms out," a guard said. "Strip down and toss your scrubs to the side."

"Why you got me strippin' down, again?" Matthew said.

"Says here on your paperwork you're getting a turtle suit," a guard said, "and you're being placed on suicide watch, as well."

"Suicide watch!" Matthew said. "There ain't a reason in the world right now for me to be on that nonsense, man!"

Matthew was fairly cooperative with the street cops, but the guards in county jail treated him inhumanly regardless. Suicide watch for someone who was caught lying on a bench instead of attempting to drive home after a night of drinking? Matthew knew the punishment didn't fit the crime. He pleaded, but there was no point.

"Well, we don't need a reason, and we don't care why you're here," a guard said, "so find your way into the suit, and just shut your mouth!"

"Whatever, man," Matthew said. "I know the drill, man. I mean, sir!"

"Might want to drop that attitude and fast," a guard said. "And don't you dare say another word to me!"

"What are you gonna do, lock me up." Matthew said. "Look, man, you think I care at this point. Look around, it's just me and you inside of a six-by-eight box."

"Are you threatening me?" a guard said. "I'd shut your mouth if I were you. I can easily make your life even more miserable. Just like mommy did when she didn't let you out of your room. I remember when I was kid."

"Man, you weak. All words," Matthew said. "At least your boy who escorted me here had a little in him. He was a fresh one, but I liked the way he pushed me. Been like that my whole life."

The guard threw the suit at Matthew, watched him partially put it on, and walked out slamming the cell door behind him. Matthew removed the suit, stood there trying to ground himself, wondering if he should just keep his mouth shut or start kicking the cell door. Vulnerable, naked, cold, and alone, Matthew laid the turtle suit on the floor. He couldn't do anything except lie on his metal rack padded with a piss-proof mattress, left to think, listen, and try to comprehend how he got there to begin with.

Matthew was a recurring customer at the Willow County Jail. He was just a small kid, who was tossed to the wolves, but they didn't eat him—a group of good kids invited him in. He hated the violence, and when they asked him to shoot up a house with some dudes from the neighborhood he didn't even know, Matthew said no. Just as fast as he was beat into the gang years ago, they shot him and he was out of it just like that.

He woke in the hospital not too long after surviving two gunshots wounds to the abdomen. After that, Matthew went back to the streets, a place he felt comfortable. He's a bright man in his early twenties, lean as an alley cat. He's been out there for over seven years, while passing through the revolving door of jail.

Another guard was in the pod, near the sea-foam green gate that Matthew could see through his long, narrow window who sat at a desk near the entrance. Matthew thought this sight would help time pass in there and not feel so alone, but he couldn't help but think about shared misery. He, too, was alone in that dump.

Matthew didn't have a cellmate, but eventually, someone was there with him. The loud bangs blended with the slight buzz from the lights, making unrecognizable and uncomfortable sounds that echoed through the pod. Wham! Boom! And then, the sounds of men kicking their doors and flush-

ing their toilets at the cyclic rate. Then sprouted an intense, raspy voice right through the vent above the silver shitter sink in his cell. He knew the vents were all connected in some fashion, but it seemed like the voice came through like a morning announcement in grade school that never ended or made sense. Matthew tuned in for hours as this man ranted.

Why are we not getting back to the basics?" the man in the vent said. "You can't just fly by the wings of your dick and expect them to learn a damn thing. They are just people. So, don't be so smug about your morality until it's been tested, and you're just chilling, sir."

Matthew was drawn to the voice seeping through his vent. It was frightening, but Matthew found some freedom in his words. Perhaps, the pale walls were closing in on him too fast, so Matthew focused on the vent. The vent became Ernie. Ernie had a lot to say. Ernie filled the void that exists in all jails, the absence of expression.

Matthew was freezing. They took all his property and left him zero toilet paper. No toilet paper alone could have kept him up all night as he thought about the devastating morning to follow. In a weird way, this crazed man and his psychobabble held Matthew through the night until first light appeared through the opaque windows.

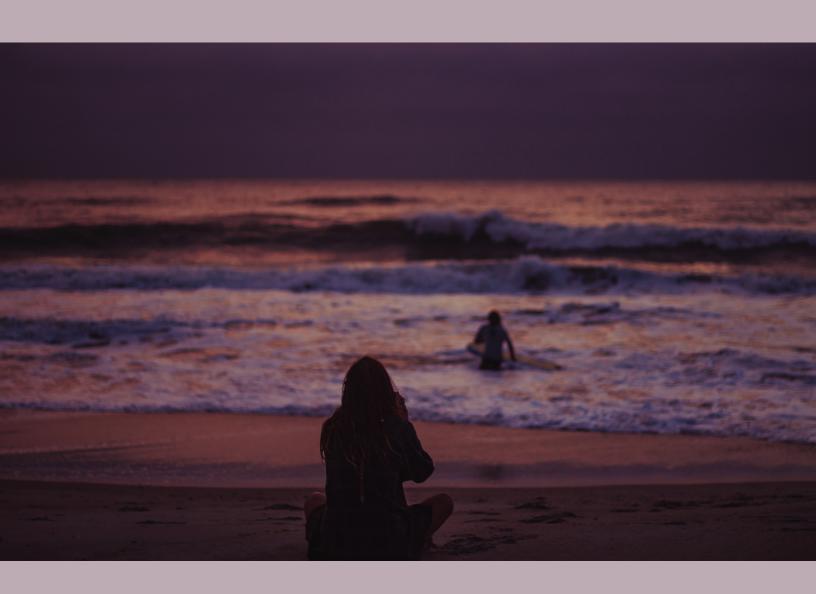
"The Beastie Boys are the best band of all time, hand downs!" Ernie said. "They were the real deal until they broke up, and nowadays these hacks are looking to Taylor Swift for advice. Get real!"

Matthew never said anything back to him. He never even found out who the man in the vent was. Ernie went on throughout the night. It was like a bad acid trip, but Matthew had to maintain and just go along for the ride this guy was on. Matthew was in and out of sleep, so uncomfortable, and so cold from the hard surfaces of his cell.

Ernie pulled Matthew through the night to a soft sunny morning that meshed through the blurry window where it hardly shines. He was the escape, a trapped voice funneling through the tube became the music Matthew made as his escape from the walls of his enclosing cell.



Super Himalaya Photography by Taylor C.



Getting Into the Surf Photography by Shaundale Julg

Facial on the Moon with Gulliver

Poetry by Bianca Glinskas

I lie beneath a thin, lilac sheet, my body naked, muscles tense. A spotlight hangs above me, off now, ready to interrogate. I answer mechanically to the knock. "Are you ready?" The esthetician is Russian, her 'R's are stifled purrs. "Yes." *I guess*. She holds my skin. My face is a moon, porcelain pale, and pocked in her amphibian hands. As if by instinct my eyelids shutters swinging shut—flutter slightly. "Tell me about your concerns." This feels like therapy. "I have clogged and enlarged pores." This feels like a metaphor. "No. These are pickaxe scars." I know. "Oh," I say dumbly. She is cold and clinical. Spa music plays in the background, a tropical forest sounds the air. Monkeys and birds assemble a chaotic chorus. One flute narrates the invisible scene. "You must stop picking." I grow rosy as shame flushes through my body, my blood surging as if it swells around a wound, fighting an infection. "I cannot fix this. Only lasers can." "Oh," I repeat. *I know*. The shock of the impersonal statement stills me; her cold hands send chills ricocheting across my skin. My nostrils suck in a deep, greedy breath. I release it forcefully—a cleansing sigh. She grunts and shifts in her seat. Lavender steam rolls over me. I am a child again (with a child's perfect skin), eleven, a giantlike Gulliver. I awaken to the prickling tickling sensations of tiny dwarfs who struggle up the slopes of my arms, climb the crests of my shoulders, scale my neck with ropes made from braided spiderwebs. They were not surprised to find me here, young, asleep, quietly gigantic. They seem to be a stern sort; they sing with conviction. They swing their pickaxes into my pores wholeheartedly. "I am finished. You may get dressed now." Twelve craters on the moon are named for six Soviet Women and six American Women. I name the largest of my scars after Gulliver. My face is plump, flushed as if I were drunk, slimy, shiny, and fresh as if I were emerging from an egg or a womb.





Contributors

Brielle Barozzini is a junior majoring in Film Studies who has a passion for photography and filmmaking.

Taylor Clarkin is a junior majoring in Film Studies and French. She has always loved to create art and capture unique moments with her camera.

Akira Collins is a nineteen-year-old artist who loves experimenting with different techniques and mediums. She has been focusing on art for as long as she can remember. In her spare time, she enjoys confusing people by walking around in medieval clothing. She is studying Studio Art, with a minor in Digital Art. She loves working with people to create designs they enjoy.

Lily Crowder is a senior studying Creative Writing with a minor in English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Crowder grew up in Wilmington, NC, and has a knack for tripping over nothing and reveling in run-on sentences.

Brooke Filby is a freshman studying Business. Her inspiration for art stems from a high school internship at a gallery. She hopes to continue her training in visual arts and combine her fields of interest in the future.

Bianca Glinskas is an emerging poet and twotime Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poetry appears in Knock Your Socks Off, Glass Mountain, The Decadent Review, and elsewhere. Bianca judges at the NYC Midnight Flash Fiction Challenge and manages social media for Poetry Northwest. She is a current MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Rachel Johanningsmeier, a senior studying Studio Art at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, has explored a variety of mediums and processes in order to express her creative ideas. Much of her current art focuses on figurative works, more specifically with the connection between the organic forms of figures and those of the environment around us. She enjoys how these different forms work together to instigate movement and engage the viewer's eye.

Lari Johnson is a senior studying Studio Art with a minor in Psychology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Shaundale Julg is the creator behind DefyYourself Photography. He was born and raised in the Four Corners area of NM. He has been taking photos for eight years now and initially took interest in it as another way to tell stories indirectly. After joining the military, he began to further his interest in photography and started portrait work and candid photography and further expanded his landscape work. Being stationed in NC allowed him to utilize the beach-scape and develop with the landscapes misty mornings and hazy nights. After getting out of the military, he moved to AZ where he began taking photos of events and musicians. Once COVID-19 affected the States, he returned to the East Coast and began attending the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He took advantage of the experience and tools he now has to further his art. From anything to everything, he takes interest in shooting multiple genres and subjects.

Shannon Kerrigan is from New Jersey, and she is studying studio Studio Art at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She primarily works with oil paint, gouache, and watercolors.

Rilee Knott is a senior double majoring in Digital Art and Studio Art at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She focuses on expressing a sense of moodiness through color.

Knott says, "I have no idea what I'll do when I graduate, because I want to do everything!"

Ciera Lloyd is a senior at the University of North Carolina Wilmington where she will be graduating in May 2021 with a BFA in creative writing, a minor in English and the Publishing Certificate.

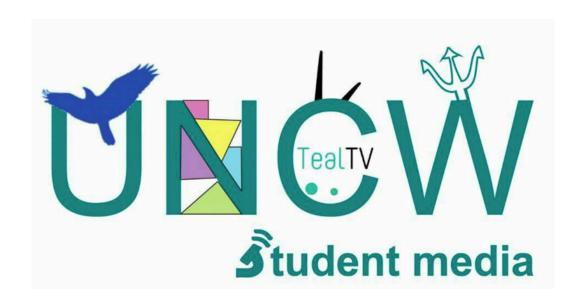
Tyler Pufpaff is a writer and editor from Dallas, Texas now living in the Triad of NC. He is the author of A Quarter Life and Editor-in-Chief of Variant Literature, a nonprofit publisher of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

Julian Seddon is a thirty-one-year-old U.S. Marine veteran from Philadelphia, PA. He served in Afghanistan with 1st Battalion 6th Marines and 2nd AAV's. He is currently living in Wilmington, NC. He is currently enrolled at the University of North Carolina Wilmington studying for his BFA in the Creative Writing program.

Sierra Thoemmes is a junior studying Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She has just started to submit her work for publication. Fiction (horror/thriller) is her preferred genre, but she has been experimenting with flash fiction as well. She tries to address societal issues (oppression, feminism, gender stereotypes/expectations) in her work.

John Williams enjoys creating art that gives the community an uplifting reprieve from the world around them in a time of political and social unrest. John uses found objects along with laser cutting and painting to provide public spaces with an inspiring feel. John's art inspires viewers to self-reflect and turn inward to think about themselves instead of getting caught up in the hustle and bustle of life. John begins by examining public spaces and thinking about adding some art into the shot in a unique and different way. Being inspired by the freeness of graffiti and street art, John's art is often found in public spaces.

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