

Pioneer Pen



2018

Pioneer Pen
2018

Volunteer State Community College
1480 Nashville Pike
Gallatin, TN 37066

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Pioneer Pen is an annual student publication produced by Volunteer State Community College every spring. The magazine, founded in 1995 and originally called *Squatter's Rites*, features student creative works, including art, poetry, photography, fiction, cartoons, monologues, and more.

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Pioneer Pen

Mission Statement

To pioneer is to create and lead the way. To be a pioneer is to be one who establishes, evolves, and is the first to blaze a trail. While Pioneer Pen seeks to be a professional quality literary arts magazine, we also aim to foster a creative community so that Volunteer State Community College students have a platform to express their creativity and originality. To create any work of art is to be brave enough to take a risk. Our magazine strives to provide an inclusive publication in which students may take those risks and pen their artistic freedom.



Girl With The Gator
Amber Nicole Kittrell

2018 Fusion Art and Design Award Winner

Through this Pair of Eyes

Sara Reynolds Cox

I grew to love the missing stone from my ring made of sterling silver
and the way my bed sits at an odd angle in my room,
the gap where my closet doors won't close all the way
and the chipped paint on my right bumper.

I grew to love how my freckles become darker with every new sun,
and the way my laughter bursts though my chest like an ignited cannon,
the way my fingernails are always uneven in length,
and the pea-sized birthmark on my right thigh.

I grew to appreciate my constant need for human interaction,
and the way my soul feels things that are beyond my own comprehension,
the way my deep love has sparked a thousand unique connections
and the way my heart feels so trampled when one of them die out.

I grew to appreciate the fading scars throughout my body,
and the bottle of pills that I worked so hard to obtain,
the hundreds of hours spent in dim-lit and tissue filled offices,
and those who turned their faces from my impending illness,
because it taught me that I can be okay on my own.

Above all

I grew to recognize the unique privilege
of experiencing the world
through this pair of eyes.

2018 John MacDougall Literary Award Winner

The Fall

Taylor Farrell

It's just this seasonal thing
A switch is flipped and everything must break
As the sky gets sad and the trees fall apart
So does my mind, so does my heart
I expect too much, want too much
It's never enough
So I'm crying, driving, lying
To keep everything from dying
It is what it is, it all has to end
Times are changing again
And even though I never change
I can't ask the same of you
We sway in the direction of the wind
Every new beginning must start with the end
Maybe it's not you or me; it's just the fall
Floating, spiraling, waiting for a call
Fiery red and pale orange against a grey sky
That's what it's like to want someone unattainable
Passion is of no use, no matter how wonderful
If your lives are so deeply misaligned
So I'm embracing the monotonous days
Walking around in an autumn haze
As leaves on the ground absorb my fire
And wilt away, along with my desire
I'm numb, a zombie, a scarecrow
Jagged edges and a half broken soul
I guess it is me, it's the fall, it's the cold
Above all it's you for leaving me alone
I'll be on my way now, sorry to be a nuisance
I'm in search of shelter that I can't find in you
I know none of this makes sense
But it's the end of a season, and it's just what we do
We fall, we spiral, we burrow into the ground
Until we bring the world crashing down
It is what it is, it all will end
Just hold on, the times are changing again.



Starry Night
Haley Bennett

My Boyfriend Wonders Why I Smoke

Sarah Callahan

My boyfriend hates it when I smoke.
He loves the cool menthol
He loves the smell of hot burned tobacco
He loves taste of it all on my lips.
He does not love that it hurts my body.

My boyfriend hates it when I smoke.
I don't tell him that when I was young, stressed
Constantly striving for physical perfection that
Seemed so difficult and remains impossible to achieve.
That because I was not perfect, I was worth nothing.

My boyfriend hates it when I smoke.
I don't tell him that there were times
When my head, filled with anxieties,
Would ram against my skull.
I imagined them as demons, living inside me.

My boyfriend hates it when I smoke.
I don't tell him that the demons still fester
Inside of me. I feel them in my stomach, my lungs
My head. If I can't get rid of them
Then maybe I can choke them in smoke for a while.

Now, my boyfriend does not mind when I smoke.

It is not forever
Hover long I wish it too last
I know soon I will need to grow, move on,
Leave my demons in my past.



Perspective Tunnel
Garrett Wilkinson

Changing of a Decade

Sarah Callahan

Scott flips through the vinyls sitting on a shelf in his room, dusty old Chuck Berry albums mixed with a new Stones record and everything in between. There's a few odd ones, like the Beach Boys and Shirelles, more of his mom's music than his own, but they act as a nice break sometimes from the regular Hendrix riffs or gruff vocals of Black Sabbath. His parents are gone for the next few hours, giving him the perfect amount of time to blast his music uninterrupted for a while. He pulls off a 7" "Stairway to Heaven" single he found back when he was probably ten or so with his dad. The album art is relatively bland, but the song definitely made up for it. He also picks off Road to Ruin to listen to as well, especially considering his dad's hatred for the Ramones meant he couldn't listen to them when he was at home. He finds them dirty, ill-mannered, and unkempt with their matching shaggy hair and ill-fitting jeans.

Scott places the 7" on his record player and moves over to his bed to lay down. The beginning static fuzzes in the teenager's ears and warms the air surrounding him. He grabs a Camel Clove from the pack lying on his night stand, and lights one as the song starts. He draws deeply from the cigarette, lets the smoke cool in his mouth, and inhales using every part of his chest to savor the sensation before slowly exhaling through his nose. Every so often he flicks the ash collecting on the tip into an old can filled with sand lying next to his bedside. He stays there, chain smoking throughout the entirety of Zeppelin's eight-minute masterpiece as well as the Ramone's vinyl he starts after. When the music's over he remains on his bed, staring at the Beatle's poster on his wall, a 3'x3' image of their Revolver album. The members are drawn somewhat realistic, but at the same time cartoonish. They look as though they could be caricatures that are unexaggerated. The lines look like pen marks in someone's sketchbook, so impersonal. It's nowhere near Scott's favorite album, but he could look at the artwork for days and never grow tired of it.

The smoke in the room begins to turn into more like a fog, so Scott stands up to open a window. His head feels lite and his vision turns a bit dizzy, and he stumbles around carelessly to get his bearings. The window feels like ice on his fingertips as he opens it, but the crisp early December breeze feels nice on his chest, and helps cool his burning lungs. The change in temperature relaxes him even more, and when he reaches his bed again, Scott falls asleep within seconds. It's not until his telephone rings hours later that he wakes up.

The shrill bell startles Scott upright and he feels confused and dazed. He can't remember falling asleep, or being asleep at all. The only way he could tell that time had passed was the clock that sits on his nightstand next to his pack that read 11:19 p.m. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and reached for the phone.

"Hello?" He sounds groggy, with his voice cracking with the "ll" part, making him sound more frog than person. His mouth is dry, as if he hasn't had water in a week, so he smacks his lips to add some sort of moisture.

"Scott? Are you watching the news right now?" the rushed voice sounded like his friend Patty.

“No. I’ve been asleep. What are you talking about?” Scott assumes she’s exaggerating something, it’s what girls do. There was probably a small fire at a church or some shit. He doesn’t watch the news anyway, all if it doesn’t even matter to him. Half the stuff’s about Raegan now anyways, since he got elected the month previous, and Scott hates that son of a bitch. His parents can adore him all they want, but to Scott, that bastard doesn’t care about the little folk, only the big guys that give him money.

“You need to turn it on. Stay on the line with me though.”

“Why, what’s the big deal?” Scott chuckles a bit until it turns into a slight cough. “I’m a big boy, I can handle it.”

“Scott, trust me on this. Turn on the news right now.”

“Just tell me Pat!” Scott begins to get annoyed. Why is she so cryptic about everything?

“For Christ’s sake Scotty, turn on the goddamn ne-” she stops talking and Scott can hear someone yelling in the background. Even though she tries to muffle the receiver, Scott can still hear her apologizing to someone. Her step-dad must have gotten on her case about her “un-lady-like” language. It was about half a minute before she comes on the phone again. “I am extremely sorry for using foul language at you. Will you turn it on-please?”

“Okay, but only because you asked nicely. What channel?”

“Three.”

Scott turns on his television, and an old western’s playing. He’ll have to come back to that, once he gets Patty off his back. He flips down through the channels, 12, 11, 10, before hitting 3. The screen was showing a city street, with police cars all around. He was watching the scrolling caption, and it looks like he just missed the juicy part, because all he could read was NON SHOT DEAD. Scott must wait now for the “who” part until the caption rolls around again. “Where is this Pat, New York? Chicago?”

“Do you know who it is yet?” Pat inquires. DEAD AT DAKOTA APA

“No, but even if I did I’d still ask.” At this point, Scott assumes it’s a well-known politician. Everything’s political. APARTMENT COMPLEX.

“It’s in New York City,” her tone sounds extremely flat. LEX. BREAKING NEWS

“Oh, okay.” Scott barely pays attention to their conversation anymore, he was too focused on the screen. He just wants to figure it out. NEWS: MUSICIAN J

“Are you good?”

“Yeah, hold on.” SICIAN JOHN L. John who? “It’s saying John...”

“John.” Patty sounded patient.

“John Le...n.....n.....o...” Scott doesn’t even finish spelling it out. He knows. Patty knows. There’s no point. It won’t change the fact that his favorite musician, favorite idealist, his role model... That he’s dead. He preached peace, and died through violence.

BREAKING NEWS: JOHN LENNON SHOT OUTSIDE
DAKOTA APARTMENT COMPLEX

Scott quickly tells Patty goodbye, that they'd talk at school the next day. He doesn't even wait for her to respond before he hangs up the phone. After watching the banner run through four, five more times to be certain, he shuts off the television.

He lays back down on his bed, feeling as if an eternity has passed since he answered the phone. Gazing at the poster, the image seems so much farther now. Revolver. Revolver. Revolver. He falls asleep analyzing the drawings on it again.

Scott refuses to get up when his alarm rings, so he hits the snooze button again and again. The sun is too bright. The snow's too blinding. He wants to curl up under the covers and pretend it's a dream. His mother comes in, tearing off his comforter like a Band-Aid that was shielding him from the world. Scott begrudgingly gets up, still in the tobacco-stenched clothes from the previous night, and only has the energy to change his shirt. After all, he never really changes out his jeans daily anyways. After slipping on a pair of Chuck Taylor high tops and slinging a backpack across his shoulder, Scott slowly makes his way to school.

He catches a glimpse of Patty in a long green army coat standing next to a few of their other friends, talking solemnly in the school's courtyard. When they saw Scott approaching, they all gave a half little wave, like no one had the energy to even lift their whole arm. Glancing around, Scott notices that it's not just his friends that look downtrodden.

Freshmen girl's eyes are swollen, as if their boyfriends had just broken up with them not 10 minutes previous. The shoulders of Senior guys slump more than usual as they trudge on to class. In fact, it seems as if only half the student body even bothered to show up. Scott puts on a stone face, and lights another cigarette as he approaches his friends.

"We're ditching today," Patty announces. "No one should have to even be here. It's, like, a national tragedy." The grape flavored gum pops in her mouth as he smacks it openly inside her right cheek. Scott can turn away as he smells it, reminded of an unfortunate night three days prior when he caught a taste of it from her first hand.

"So where are we going?" Scott takes a puff and blows it into his friend Meek's face, laughing when his nose and eyes scrunch up, resulting in his glasses sliding down his face a bit. Everyone needs some humor, so he feels relieved when a few of his buddies chuckle.

"The records store downtown. 12th street sound, I believe. It's the most fitting now, considering... Plus, I think some local bands are going to play a tribute later on at the bar nearby, too. Ya know, some Beatles covers and stuff from his solo career, mostly songs from Double Fantasy I guess. For John."

Scott's stomach turns. Everyone knows. She doesn't have to mention it. He shrugs, trying to brush it off as no big deal. He knows he doesn't have to pretend, everyone was affected. It just makes him feel better, to act above the

shock. "I'm okay with that, Pat. I'd rather be with you guys than here right now anyways. Anything the teachers are gonna say won't even matter to me. To anyone really. I mean it usually doesn't anyways, but they are probably even just as fucked right now as we are. Hell, they probably got a cherry popped listening to him." Pat looks at Scott in disgust at his last comment. She was no lady, but even she knows when he crosses a line. Scott caught the glare and quickly shifted gears. "Who's ride we takin?"

The group of teenagers begin to walk off into the parking lot together, climbing into a busted old four-door wood-paneled station wagon that their friend Jace drives, and make their way into the city of Detroit.

You Could Say I Knew Her

Sarah Callahan

You could say I knew her.

I knew the color of her hair on a sunny day, and the way it changes on a rain-soaked afternoon.

I knew the look of her face in deep concentration, with a furrowed brow and graphite indent on her left cheek from where she let a pencil's backed eraser burrow into her skin.

I know her by the waft of perfume that encompassed me when she walked past with books in hand as well as a toothy grin, not more manila like an average person, but pearly white.

I know her by the footsteps that reverberated from underneath the soles of her shoes as she walked in the hallway with a straight back, confident, acting as if she owns the place.

I know her by the cackle and sneer she would emit when poking fun at the kids in our grade who were not as rich as she was.

I know her by her father, the headmaster, who could never punish his daughter.

I know her by the stench of alcohol on her breath from partying too much instead of focusing on school like the rest of us.

I knew her by the White Mercedes she drove with the top down at 50 miles an hour into my younger sister's school zone.

I knew her by the red stained Mercedes that drove 80 miles an hour out of my sister's school zone.

I knew her by the crocodile tears she cried when she "found out" that she must have hit a dog.

Do I know her name? No. But I know her as a concrete person in my mind. As someone who will never leave.

Why do you ask?

Has there been a problem, Officer?

Muse

Ethan Keene

On a night that started drearily bleak,

I have come to find the Muse which I did seek.

Providing clarity beyond compare

My Muse can take me anywhere.

And though we do not stand face to face,

My Muse has brought me out of my haze.

I know that she is mine by fate,

For only I can relate.

My muse gives words to my soul,

And fire to a heart made whole.

For what can my Muse come to fear

When in the thoughts of one so dear?



Looming Limbs
Taylor Farrell

Untitled
Sophia Sharp



Life and Death

Sarah Callahan

Life created all sorts of beings on earth; crafted the tree's veins and formed humanity's organs out of equal parts stardust and earth. All animals are made part celestial and part organic, fueling everything's need to be a part of something greater. Life watched after all her creatures with seemingly eternal bliss, breathing new oxygen into every lung and bleeding water into every stream. A time must come, however, for all diverse creatures to end their days on this earth- to make room for more, some must leave this realm. This was a lesson Life was about to be taught very soon.

Life walked along the bank of a river, her bare feet feeling the soft grass as moonlight peered through the treetops onto the water's surface and reflected back at her. She listened to the soft breathing of all the woodland creatures as they slept in their nests, bunnies dreaming of carrots and butterflies dreaming of flowers. She peered into the distance and saw a tall, black figure walking through the trees. Peculiar. I don't remember making you. Life decided to watch the figure as it walked-no, floated- through the forest. It moved slowly, casually, like it was looking for something. At one point, it bent down on the ground, and did something Life couldn't quite see, her view was blocked by brambles and bushes. As the figure stood back up, a bright light shown through where it's hands could have been...

"HEY!" Life shouted, "THAT'S MINE!" Life reacted as soon as she saw the light in its hands- it was a creature's life essence. Without that, a creature couldn't live in its body- the essence was its spirit, its soul. The being looked up, or looked as if it was looking up. Life couldn't make out a face- the being wore a dark cloak that covered its whole face and body.

"Don't shout, my child," a slight raspy, older voice, spoke to Life through the cloak. "You'll awake the animals in slumber. Come here." From the cloak came an outstretched hand, bony and thin. Wait, no, not bony- just bone! Life did not know what who this was, but followed their instructions nevertheless. She wanted that spirit back.

"Who are you?" Life inquired, not just concerned at this point; she was beyond curious. "What do you want?"

"I was you once. I was given the duty to create my own world, just as you have. But we decay my child, we grow old, just like they do," The figure motioned to the sleeping fox hidden in its den, and to the fishes in the stream. "Unlike them, we don't die. At some point, however, they must. That is my duty now. I once was Life, but now I am Death." They took in all of Life's features at once, and remembered when they were as care free as her. Life's skin glistened

in the pale moonlight, as if small pieces of a pixie's dust were sprinkled all over her. She wasn't so much white as translucent, that if the sun were fully shining Death would only be able to make out a faint outline of her. Life's hair glows and floats through the air, as if she just dove into a crystal clear lake and was gliding through the water. Death missed living as she did, but cannot reverse time- that's not their job. "Do not be afraid of me. I am your counterpart, your equal. I am not a rival, but a friend."

Life was skeptical, her curiosity suppressed, but she still was not finished. "What do you think you are doing with my spirit though, and why must you kill my creatures?" Life looked at the glowing light in Death's hands, and her eyes welled and she choked back the tears. "That's not yours!"

Death sighed, shook their head, and placed the essence in their cloak. "You cannot claim ownership of what is not yours, child. You, me, everything, belongs to the universe, to a greater place. I am merely returning the essence back to it."

"But why mine! Why not someone else's creations."

"If you want it back this much, you can have it, but first I need to show you something." Death turned and floated through the forest, and motioned for Life to follow. Life lightly walked behind them, trying best not to cry. When she cries, it creates thunderstorms, and that scares a lot of her creatures.

They approach a clearing, and in the middle a small mouse laid. Life almost squealed with joy, as she usually does when she sees one of her adorable creatures. Who was she kidding though- all of them were cute. As they approached the mouse, however, Life noticed something- this mouse was not breathing. She collapsed on her knees and started quietly weeping.

"My child, I know it is difficult to see," Death rubbed Life's back as she mourned the mouse. "He was captured by a cat, and the cat bit him. He was injured extremely bad."

"You can fix him right? Please fix him. But his spirit back!" Life cried at Death, while a soft rain began to fall.

"My dear, I can, but it would not be good for the mouse. He would be in a lot of pain for the rest of eternity. Do you want that for him?"

Life's crying slowly turned into soft snuffles as she began to understand what was happening. "No, I don't want that. Please just go." Death abided by

Life's wished, and disappeared into the night.

Life stayed there in mourning until the earliest rays of the sun streaked through the trees. She decided that she could not bear to see her creature like this, lifeless, and with a wave of her hand, the mouse turned back into the star-dust and earth that it was made of.

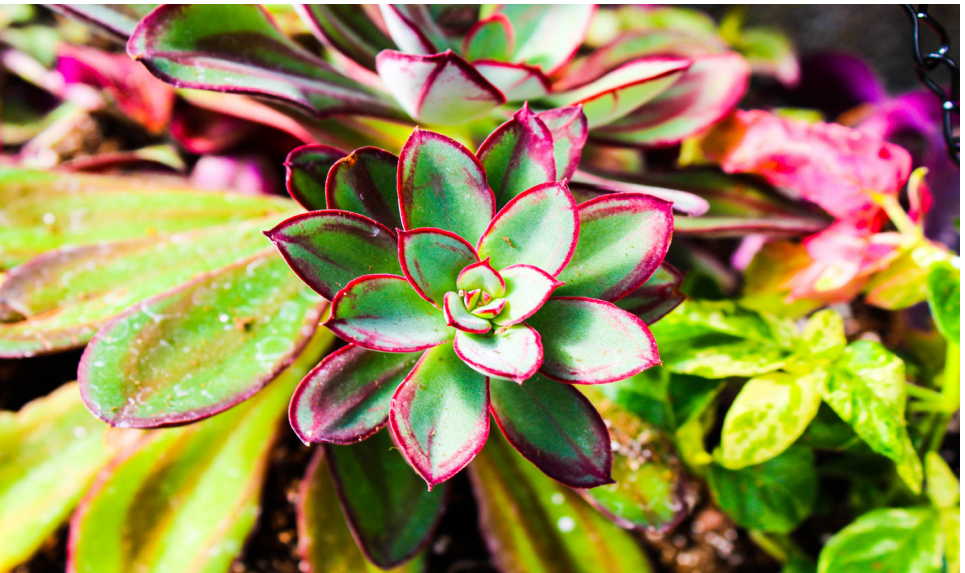
It has not become any easier for Life now, seeing her creatures like this, she just hides it better some days. When the sun shines, she did not spend long in mourning. When a thunderstorm rolls through, however, it might be in our best interest to mourn with her.

END



Memorial Roses
Brianna Mia Shaffer

Untitled
Sophia Sharp





Untitled
Sophia Sharp



Frozen Falls
Haley Bennet

River

Graceanna Hickman

Running through the field
and trying to keep up
my siblings and me
are bursting with anticipation
all summer long the river is where we'll be

Sun baked banks
and mud caked feet
no need for pool manners
and no need for modesty
the river bank is where I like to be

"You are sick" Momma says
and throwing up every time I eat
losing weight
and losing sleep
she says "you can't go to the river, baby"

Brother says "come on, get up"
and "you have to see"
he helps me out of bed
and we sneak down the bank
it's the river that he urges me to meet

Orange purple oily surface
and thick black water beneath
floating dead fish caught in the brush
and feeling the greasy mud under my feet
the river is sick like me

I can't get better
and the doctors can't do anymore
"it's the poison in the river"
and "all you can do is let it run its course"
I'm dying because the river is inside me

The papers say "the factory's chemicals
and oil contaminated the water"
it banes the banks
and makes the water stink
the river is dying just like me

I close my eyes
and let the black canvas hold my memories
on the healthy river bank
on the healthy river bank
and with my family
that is where I want to be



Mischievous Monkey
Taylor Farrell

Gothic
Victoria Feldser



Watchful Eyes

Hannah Levering

You are sitting in the corner of a coffee shop in the heart of New Orleans. You notice a girl drinking the blackest of coffee. She seems to be looking at everyone, but no one all at the same time. Then, she seems to look directly at you, but you can't be for sure, because like her coffee, she has on the blackest of sunglasses. You see her coffee get refilled five times within a thirty-minute span. "She's odd." You say to herself silently. Why would a girl sit in the back of a coffee shop and stare into nothing but everything all at once, for so long. You realize you will soon be late for work. But you still don't understand the girl, and are very curious about her still, and you intend to curb your curiosity. You act as though you are getting up to leave, but you ask around to others that are local to this place. They simply shrug you off, and tell you to go ask her for yourself. You become a bundle of nerves while making your way to her table. "Why won't the locals tell you about this girl?!" After what seems like an eternity, you have finally made your way to the girl's table. She makes no intention that she knows that you're there. You do that fake, dry cough and before she can even say hello, you boldly with a hint of anger ask her if you know her from somewhere, and why she has been staring at you for the past thirty minutes, you keep rambling angry like a fool, saying that you just wanted to enjoy your coffee before work, and how you hate your job for sending you here to New Orleans and how this is such a strange place, and how she's just really added to it all. You thank her in a sarcastic tone, and begin to saunter off, feeling confident and somewhat tough about yourself. Then finally, the girl speaks quietly, but it is amplified to your ears like an echo, one that you'll never forget as long as you live. "I'm sorry, that I was seemingly staring at you, for you see I am blind." She says softly. You turn around to look just in time for the girl to remove her sunglasses. Her eyes are indeed the "cornflower blue blind" and look like marbles, you also notice that they look severely damaged. You're suddenly very sick to your stomach, and are at lost for words. The whole coffee shop is staring at you. There is suddenly a dense, eerie feeling in the air. The girl stands up and gives a sly, coy smile as she begins to unfold her cane. You hear her high-heels and cane click against the floor as she approaches you. She stops as soon as she is ear-level with you, she whispers to you in the calmest voice you've ever heard. "Maybe next time, you'll learn to hold your tongue." She says no more, and continues to walk towards the door. The only noise you hear is that of the bell on the door, as it chimes, it is as if it is telling you, "she's leaving." You feel your throat began to tighten, for some odd reason you feel as though your swallowing your tongue. You never get to work that day, instead you are rushed to the

hospital, and they can't explain how or why you swallowed your tongue. You still feel sick as you go back to your hotel room that afternoon. You are greeted by the front desk concierge, "You had a letter dropped off earlier for you." She says. You get that eerie, cold feeling again. You take the letter quickly, and rush upstairs to your room and lie down on your bed. You open the letter, but only after locking both locks on the door, and shutting the curtains tightly. This letter is an odd one, for all it says is, "Welcome to New Orleans." In beautiful handwriting, along with six red rose petals in the bottom of the envelope. You know immediately who it's from. You feel your throat beginning to close up once more.

Re: Produce? Justin David Goolsby

Goodbye, my sweet Clementine...
I'd never known love so divine.
I peeled you a layer at a time
 until one day you ran out of rind.

Farewell, my plump Georgia peach...
Most succulent fruit on the tree;
I still feel your skin in my dreams but
 your branch has now grown out of reach.

Adieu, my little citron...
Never have I felt so wronged.
You soured when once you were fond
 and left a bad taste on my tongue.

Yeah, I Know

Airraca Lee

My heart— my heart-- it aches.

I miss you— my heart-- it breaks.

Yeah,

I know.

They say you're in a better place.

Yeah,

I know.

They say you left with God's grace.

Truthfully, I miss you terribly.

TRUTHFULLY, I'd rather have you here you with me.

It's been almost eight years,

I can't stop tears—

But

Yeah,

I know.



Naked On A Beach
Victoria Feldser

Be Alone, Be Free

Taylor Farrell

I love the honeymoon phase of a relationship when you're falling in love and learning about a person and blending your life with theirs.

However, I've learned the blending kills you in the end.. You lose sight of your individual dreams. You start thinking about the sacrifices you can make to keep that person in your life, to make a life with them. Then you break up and you realize all of "your" dreams were actually dreams you made together. You have unconsciously tweaked little parts of your soul so that you fit the mold of their lover more perfectly.. You're still you, but there are so many layers of him and his influence covering you up.

Love is blinding, and breaking up is like walking out into either blinding white sunlight or into the darkest night. You can't see anything and you're kind of stumbling around with a soul full of pain. It's hard being alone after being one with someone else for so long.. Then the passing days bring truth and insight; pain morphs into denial before turning into rage and finally acceptance and indifference. Piece by piece, you rediscover yourself. There's a depression we have to fight through after a breakup because it seems that all our hopes and dreams have been crushed, but they weren't. Only the dreams we created with our partner are eradicated. Deep down we have our own dreams that we dreamed once upon a time on sunny afternoons underneath clear blue skies.. After you decide "enough" you become you again. It takes a lot of fighting and clawing to dig through the blinding sunlight or the darkest night, but eventually you can see again.. You take in all the beautiful trees and birds and the never-ending blue skies and you're happy again.. You're free again.

What we don't realize is that in a relationship, we're constantly weighted down with expectations and the responsibility of making sure our partner is okay and well-supported. Then we're free and we don't know what to do, we miss that weight but we shouldn't because now the world is wide open again. You don't have to compromise, you don't have to wait on your partner to make a decision such as where to live or what hours to work or whether you can get a dog. You are completely and utterly free.. You're you again, without someone else's needs mixed in, being combined with yours. No more blending..

While the honeymoon phase is beautiful, I think that finding yourself after so much time of dilution is even more beautiful. It's like the re-discovery of a long lost friend; it's like taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out, realizing that all the pressure is gone for there will be no more complications, no more miscommunications, no more arguments. You don't have to share the sunlight with anyone else... It's all yours.



Lucy Projected
Joshua Crow

*"WE ARE WHAT WE REPEATEDLY DO.
EXCELLENCE, THEN, IS NOT..."*

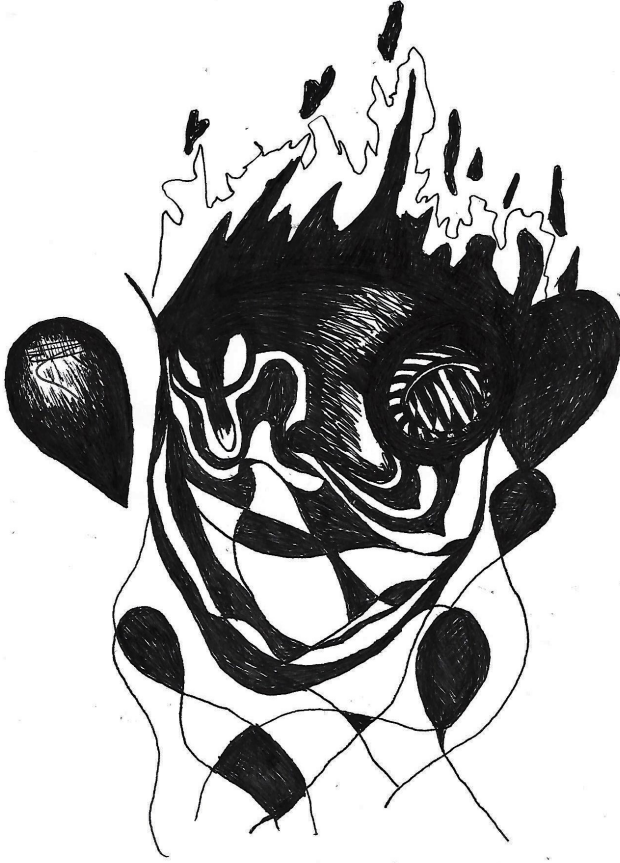
An Alley Off 12th Avenue
Joshua Crow





Dallas PD
Dalton

X
Dalton



My Old Friend

Matthew Nowak

Our friendship was rocky as best
Eventually it was put to rest
Perhaps I owe you an explanation
As to why I chose to be in isolation
I didn't leave out of hate
I needed to get my life straight
Don't think it's all your fault
I'm the one who deserves the assault
All you were trying to do was show me the light
But I kept pushing you to fight
I left without giving a reason
Leaving you under the impression of me committing treason
You wonder why I vanished from your life
Hurts you like the heart being stabbed with a knife
If only I could've handled the situation differently
Instead I refused to look at it intently
A lot has changed since we last spoke
And that is no joke
Maybe we should reunite
When the time is right
All you were trying to do was show me the light
But I kept pushing you to fight
I left without giving a reason
Leaving you under the impression of me committing treason
All you were trying to do was show me the light
But I kept pushing you to fight
I left without giving a reason
Leaving you under the impression of me committing treason
Years go by, I am not forgotten
Despite what I did to you was rotten
At least you seem to care
When I was never fair
I didn't want us to split
Although everything has been great I must admit
We'll patch things up some day
I just need to figure out the words to say



Untitled
Sydney Story



Untitled
Adriana Sanchez-Xalate



Untitled
Caroline Milam



Box of Pleasure
Jonathan Lopez



Scan the QR code to view the cartoon depicted above!

Fog

Sarah Callahan

The clock reads five o seven as I make my morning drive to work. Under the bypass, hop a hill, and over a lake. The lake. The goddamned lake. It creates the thickest fog probably ever created. Almost impossible to see through.

Every day I turn on my lights. Every day it doesn't help. It's a bear, really. An annoyance. The lack available seeing distance does not bother me, as I can make out when a car is approaching by their lights shining through the mist. It's the lack of clarity. The fuzziness. the steamed up goggles from swim practice that seemed to have grown live sized and surround me.

That damned fog.

I was too busy thinking. He didn't have his lights on either.

It was so unclear.

That damned fog.

The ringing escalates. The brightness penetrates my thin eyelids.

I open my eyes. I can hear the beeper. I hear the nurses. I can make out figures running around but...

Fog. Its in my eyes. It attached itself on to me.

That damned fog.

(13) From the Headbox Dalton

The appropriate place to listen
is going up and down on a yellow swing
where the air is warm and dark
sounding a lot like death.
fingers in your pants
flag-looking sweater
sad, old thighs
scraping gut
searing pin
rolling into you
like a little cigarette.

early onset
time to cry

phone calls
(still face and the others are screaming)
tell me did you tell your doctor about what I did?
She says: Fuck off.

emotional
ascetic

a blur
a highlight
a curve, a movement
a facial expression
a scrotum

in the hate incubator
she says to herself
I will.

(52) From the Headbox Dalton

Catching occasional glimpses of ourselves,
seeing how quietly time moves,
suddenly lonely beyond anyone's years,
everyone remembers everything.
Sees how everything was always fleeting,
a subtle change in the face
wondering: Do I look like I feel?
Rehearsing,
manipulating the image,
your reflection,
everyone remembers everything
then spits.

Foster Falls
Haley Bennet



To Have, To Hold

Amber Kittrell

There he is... waiting for me

Here I am... wanting to not go

There he is... saying his vows

Here I am... regretting every word

There he is... kissing his bride

Here I am... feeling regret

There he is... taking his bride's hand

Here I am... wanting to let go

There he is... building a life

Here I am... secretly destroying it

There he is... asking where he went wrong

Here I am... lying next to the guy who cost it all



Tribal Eloquence
Bella Hanges

(53) From the Headbox Dalton

Repeating a wall to the end of its life
using elephant fists, cannabis, three years of raw fish,
hitting, hit, hit.

Curving down on spiral doors,
black dot floats,
repeating shoes on drywall floors,
sick, high and everyone stares.
It doesn't know so
it doesn't care.

Repeating a window chipped in
flaking glass on carpet skin
still beating the wall with my elephant fists,
hitting, hit, hit.



Michael and James
Jonathan Lopez



Scan the QR code to view the cartoon depicted above!



Serenity
Bella Hanges

Through The Eyes of The Monster

Alexandria Mullins

He comes and goes and comes and goes. He takes everything from me head to toe.

I can't believe what's happened to me. The highs are great but lows make me shake.

Children with their parents walking to school, and I am that girl you see under the bridge.

To see my children, pass through my dreams, trying to catch them although I only go in circles. I wake up and then one single tear begins a stream.

The little girl inside me promised so much more to herself, a home, a family, and addiction free life.

But that life was sucked out of this little girl and so was her family and dreams.

No longer in the mirror did she see herself. She saw a frail monster with black eyes, and skin as grey as the night skies. Death was only a breath away from taking this little girl to a shallow grave.

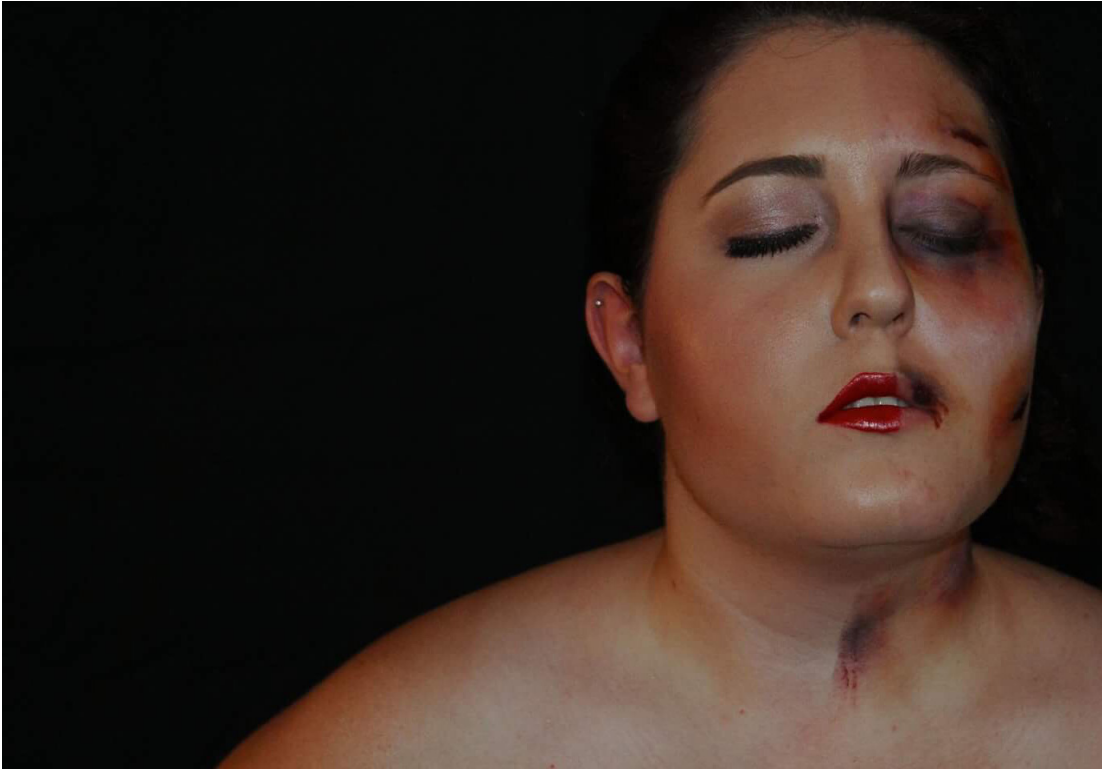
Years and years went by till she finally broke down and cried. I can't do it! The hands of strangers, the needles, and crippling need of hunger and love. I just can't do this anymore.

She took a hard look at the monster and saw everything that she had lost. Her kids, her life, her whole being was gone. Then this little girl inside decided to be who she really was and she is not the drugs. She stomped on the needles, screamed at the monster, and her revenge was coming for the monster. The one thing the monster hated to see the most was her being sober. And every day she continues her revenge till this day and gained back everything the monster took away. This little grew up into who I am today.

I am Given More than a Warning When My Life Begins to End

Aiyanna Carver

I am given more than a warning when my life begins to end,
When he starts to walk away from us,
I am given insults and belittling words,
Trying so hard to break my trust.
But I know him so I keep my grip,
Because my heart is as strong as an ox,
And worn from working hard for so long,
And weathered down for all that I've lost.
So despite his warnings and hurtful words,
I hear everything he refuses to give,
He tells me I should just leave,
But really it is my life to give.
And so I fall,
His words wrapping around me,
Like knives and ribbons,
Beautiful and terrible as only he could be.
As I drown in his world,
He whispers more to me,
He's captured my heart,
Do I want to be set free?
I can set you free, my darling,
You don't have to love me,
He speaks, and there are his ribbons,
I can't be free if I don't want to be.
The knives set in,
As he once again grows cold,
Oh, you stupid, stupid girl,
Why couldn't you just let go?



Double Sided
Bella Hanges



Eyes of the Beholder
Bella Hanges

For A.F.M.
Camella Littell

I love him, I love him, I do
He makes me laugh, and he's kind
I love him, I love him, it's true
So why are you on my mind?

It's been a year, I'm happy
Most of the time
In between fights
Why did you leave me?

He's moving in soon
Our lives are blending together
We begin and end the days with "I love you"
Why did you go back to her?

He pulls me in close after a fight
Says he's sorry, he'll do better next time
Says he doesn't want to lose me
You made walking away look so easy

His kisses are sweet, his touch is nice
His arms are home, his eyes are bright
Still just a candle flame to your wildfire
I'm so tired

Electricity, chemistry, mystery
I remember the first kiss
The discovery of a long-lost friend
Do you still think of me?

I do, I do
I think of you
All of the time
All damn night

How soft your hair felt between my fingers
The sweetest taste of whiskey on your lips
It's been two years, and your touch lingers
I can't stop thinking about you; I need a fix

Weekly ritual: he's coming over tomorrow
He doesn't know he's sharing our bed
He has no idea, but how would he know?
You knew me better; you're in my head

I thought I was over you, over the idea of you
But in the last two months, I remembered us
I was so sure he was the one, until I lost trust
In the future and my determination of him, too

I make excuses for him, but isn't that what I did for you?
I said you were afraid of loving me, of being loved
Wasn't it too strong, too real, too much?
You would say no, but we both know the truth

We had forever in our hands; there's still so much love
Soulmates in the past life, the one prior, or all of the above
So why not this lifetime?
Why is the universe messing with my mind?

Why can't these reminders leave me alone?
I'd be yours again in a heartbeat
But you won't even acknowledge me
A lost love or a delusion; maybe I'll never know

You told me to never stop writing, but I had to
I was happy, and I only write when I'm in pain
Who knew my inspiration to start again would be you?
Everything is lost, and there's nothing to gain

He loves me, he loves me, I know
He'll be there when I wake up tomorrow
He loves me, he loves me, it's true
But I love you.

My BEST FRIEND

Kristian Custard

You lied to me, you stole from me

But still I called you my

BEST FRIEND

You hurt me, you abandoned me

But still I called you my

BEST FRIEND

Together through thick and thin

From our poorest, to our richest

The hours we spent lusting in sin

Our struggles didn't matter, we had us

I still called you my

BEST FRIEND

I gave you everything, you gave me hell

But still I called you my

BEST FRIEND

Wrapped around my heart you had me at every command

To travel apart was never a part of our plan

Distance broke us, hurt shaped us

But I still called you my

BEST FRIEND

Words split us apart more, apologies meant nothing

But I still called you my

BEST FRIEND

That fateful night I got that heartbreaking call, to pray it wasn't true, to pray my ears lied

That faithful night things were left unsaid

My heart broke, my eyes filled with tears

Upon your last breath You were My

BEST FRIEND

To wonder how you felt

To wonder if our love was true

Did you ever whisper BEST FRIEND

I need you.

Found

Sara Reynolds Cox

I found a hero
in a beloved teacher
who recognized potential
and believed in me.

I uncovered the most suitable life vest
in a genuine friend
who held me- in protection from myself,
through my darkest night.

I discovered incandescent beams of hope
in the brilliant voices
which acknowledged
and affirmed
mine.

**Dedicated to Dr. Leslie Lachance*

Heart Ripped From Chest

Justin David Goolsby

I've found a new flame.
Strike up the band!
She doesn't talk much,
But loves to dance.

Proposed a late night,
Which made her laugh
—a little too hard—
So, I left.

I stare down my ceiling,
Yet I digress...
Describe my feelings?
"Heart ripped from chest."

Met with an old flame.
We never fight.
She's kind of needy,
But I don't mind.

One thing in common,
We oft opine—
Is our lousy luck with
Love and life.

She's got a tattoo
Upon her breast,
Writ in dark blue:
Heart Ripped From Chest.



Lavendia
Rachel Keyes



Brief Euphoria

Taylor Farrell

And the sun sets again, as it has for every night since the beginning of time. I think of how many people have waited for that magical moment when the sky is aflame, bursting with reds and pinks and purples and blues.

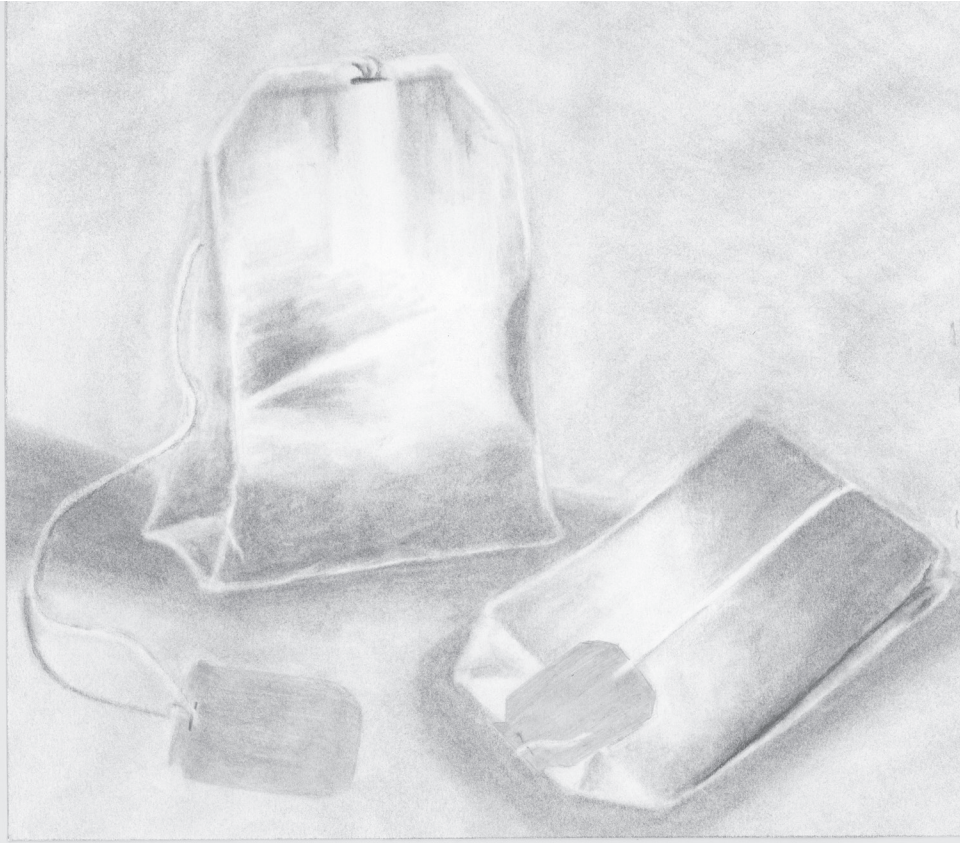
I think of you and how you're gone now, and how my heart does yearn for you. So I wait; the sky explodes and the beauty leaves me stunned, awestruck, and breathless. For just a moment, I forget you. I forget the loss. I remember how beautiful the world can be and what peace feels like.

As the purple replaces the orange and red, my brief euphoria is replaced with an air of melancholy. You burst back into my mind and take up residence. Maybe tomorrow will be better; maybe each day I can forget for longer, until the memory of you disappears with the setting sun.

Let the Good Times Roll

Matthew Nowak

Distanced myself from those who opposed me
As I began building my family tree
My brothers and sisters who I love so dearly
Makes me see the day so clearly
Up and down the road to many places
Brings smiles to our faces
The memories will be engraved in my mind
We all have something to leave behind
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
From day one, they were all about respect
Something my old friends neglect
My family has never done me wrong
They have a place where I belong
Because of them, I'm the person I am today
Leaving the world that was full of gray
Now I see my former brethren fall
Expecting that I return their call
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
Let the good times roll
So many people I've lost
All for a good cost
I know the ones who are real
When my body starts to heal
They are my ride and die
When one day we fly high
That's what love is all about
Without a doubt



Tea Bags
Victoria Feld-

The Language of Coffee, Psychiatrists, and Secret Tunnels

Bianca Riddle

Dr. Copeland Lunn had seen her.

He watched as she walked the length of her driveway in breezy pajama bottoms and coral pink flip-flops. He could see the thin band of her headphones hiding on top of her hair, which was tied in a messy bun. With a cassette player in one hand and a mug in the other she forcefully pours the remainder of her cold coffee out, a light brown splat webbing against the asphalt. Juggling her items Emma opens the mailbox. She collects the letters and catalogs in her opposite hand, holding them and her music player to her chest and away from the wind.

Something glitters in her peripheral vision, causing her to stop suddenly. It shines like the pinwheels the neighbor kids put next to everyone's mailboxes last Easter; but it instinctively feels more important.

Emma puts the mail back in the metal box along with her mug. She looks in both directions of the traffic-empty bypass. The asphalt- as sleek as the day it was poured and rolled over; void of the worn gritty grey that was typical with all other heavy tourist-y areas. This particular stretch of road was treated as a shared secret kept between the residents in the mountains.

She slips the cassette player into the left pocket of the baby blue butterfly print pajamas before bending down to roll up her pant legs. Emma makes her move to glide across the smooth surface, unsure of what's luring her over to the wooded area.

She stops for a moment in front of the larger-than-life weather worn fireworks billboard. She can't see the shine from here. She sways from side to side, chin up, trying to catch a glimpse of it again. No such luck. She looks back at her cabin before turning and stepping down further into the tall wet grass.

Dr. Lunn watches as she disappears deeper into the woods, swallowed whole by the frosty Spanish moss.

He moves away from the towering window to haphazardly throw the hunting rifle scope back into the box of junk on the kitchen island.

His champion, not a day too late, had completed the first phase.

She mouthed the lyrics to her favorite Modest Mouse song while she navigated the forest; her brain telling her legs to hop over the dry rotted logs and buttercups that coat the floor.

I ran my mouth off a bit too much, ah what did I say?
Well, you just laughed it off and it was all okay
And we'll all float on okay
And we'll all float on okay
And we'll all float on okay

She moved deeper into the belly of the beast, not sure what she's looking for anymore. But had effectively clothed herself in poison ivy -a mischievous vine she wasn't allergic to. Bits of a deflated aluminum balloon? Scrap metal someone tossed down here? Whatever the thing that caught her eye was.

**Bad news comes, don't you worry even when it lands
Good news will work it way to all them plans
We both got fired on, exactly, the same day
Well, we'll float on, good news is on the way**

The Ballad of Macon County Shape

Justin David Goolsby

Macon Shape shot a man
Outside of Cheyenne.
He wiped his brow and let a grin
And tipped a shovelful of sand.

Heading south through Colorado,
Macon made for Arizona;
His steed was bred for climbing,
Mountaineering was her calling.

The rocky trails and freezing gales,
She and he both faced them, fearless.
Onward, upward, plodding toward
The jagged, looming zenith.

Then, bivouacked near the summit,
Macon gathered twigs and kindling
To spark a flame with knife and flint
While Starfire neighed and whinnied.

He ate stale bread, drank ale and read
A note writ by his mother.
Starfire dined on underbrush,
While snow stood in for water.

The note was short and gave report
Of vandals, thieves, and rapists
Who'd plundered, pillaged, looted, sacked
And razed his tiny village.

In her own hand, she'd named a man
Who'd bound and nabbed Camilla.
Whose kerchief, loosed by flailing fists,
Had failed to hide his visage.

The note read: *My Dear Macon,*
Five men took Camilla.
They beat and tortured both of us.
One was Wilson Silva.

She'd left the note, abandoned hope,
And promptly kicked the bucket.
Battered, bloody, lifeless;
Macon's one and only mother.

He'd laid her in the family plot;
Near husband, John, and son, Augustus.
Then blotted tears before he veered
To never-tiring justice.

Within two weeks he'd found his mark
And sneaked up with a hatchet,
Chopped his knees, made Wilson plead, and
Burned him on his mattress.

Before he burned, his morals turned
Repentant for his actions.
Were Macon God, he might have cared,
But Macon lacked compassion.

With leaky eyes and trembling hand
Was then put forth a sonnet.
Scrawled scratchy, crumpled, bloody,
Were the names of those who'd done it:

*Through Missouri surely pass two men.
Both tall and tan; Born of the same ilk.
Suckled at the same tit in the same den;
Reared by grifters, they learned to bilk.
Next, in Wyoming, the devil resides.
To naught is the sum his compassion goes.
The scourge and sorrow of the countryside.
El es el guardián de los muertos.
Then, finally, "Him." No one knows his name.
Atop the Sierra Madre he stays.
Fear and viscera are his claim to fame.
Alone, bereft of any human ways.
The Culvers, Lincoln and Ted, in Mizzou;
Diablo in Cheyenne; "He" will seek you.*

Macon folded these with a careful crease
And placed them in his pack.
Then focused on the task at hand:
To find the final unnamed man.

He then withdrew another page
He'd had since Converse County;
Where he'd executed "death" himself
And claimed Diablo's bounty.

Contained within this cartograph, an “X”;
Where—were he lucky—
He’d find the captor of his love
Ashore the Rio Truckee.

Diablo'd said, “At harvest moon,
He’ could be found wading;
Snaring frogs and polliwogs
To feed the kidnapped ladies.”

Diablo gulped and offered up
One final word of warning.
“See him first, for if you’re slow,
You’ll never be returning.”

Macon—chuffed—then straightened up
And drew forth his revolver, and
Aimed betwixt Diablo’s eyes,
Then scarlet sprayed the countryside.

Returning from his daydream,
Macon cursed him, “Motherfucker!”
Then he yawned and stoked the flame
And stiffly stooped down tuckered.

The unnamed man would surely be
A challenge, he had gathered,
But given his devotion to his family
Naught else mattered.

His was the blood
Which would paint the land;
With pistol as brush
And Macon, the hand.

With this thought, Macon drifted off
Into slumber dark and dreamless.
Starfire lay beside him
Like a large platonic mistress.

Tomorrow they’d achieve descent,
And weeks would find them ambling,
Toward their fateful meeting with
Pure malice north of Verdi.

The sun rose on another day:
Fire-red, dappled with cirrus.
Macon breakfasted on coffee and
Brushed snow from Starfire’s withers.



**Untitled
Sydney Story**



Total Eclipse
Taylor Farrell



Mysterious Moon
Taylor Farrell



The Family Secret

Kalyn McConnell

I pulled into the narrow driveway of my mother's house. Today had been a good day. I had a day just to myself. But I knew once I got out of my car that my life would start again and the responsibilities of finishing my homework, paying bills, and all the troubles that plague a college student would flood my mind. So I sat in my car, prolonging my peaceful day. That little red Dodge had turned into my dented sanctuary. It gave me freedom to escape, even for a day. Every time I stepped into that car, I was given a chance to try something new: a chance to make new friends, to find new experiences, and to be taken away from my troubles. I enjoyed the peace I felt at that moment and I wanted it to last just a little longer.

I turned up the Led Zeppelin III CD I found at the bottom of a dingy bin in a record store and opened up my phone to scroll through the newest posts and to check for any new messages. My eyes were drawn to the little notification at the corner. It was from Messenger. I carelessly pushed the notification. I didn't recognize the man who messaged me. The message icon showed an older looking man who was unkept. His long dark hair and beard hid his entire face, except for his eyes. The only emotion I saw from him were from his eyes. I could tell that he was smiling, but there was pain behind those hollow eyes. His name was Jones. I didn't know a Jones. I clicked the message bubble and read the first few lines of the message: that was when everything stopped.

The howling vocals of Jimmy Page faded away; my breath quickened, I felt like my body was plunging into an abyss, and I was falling through my car seat. My frail hands shook with terror. I could feel my tiny heart knocking against my rib cage, begging to run away. The first line read: "I'm not even sure how to say this...I've been looking for you for 19 years. I know you don't know me, and I can't make up for that. I am your biological father"

Biological father

He sent me a long message that stretched for paragraphs, giving me explanations and urging me to seek out evidence and to find the truth; but this can't be true. My father has been dead for 18 years! This stranger is lying to me! He's a stalker! This is just a horrible joke! My throat tightened, and my

mouth was suddenly dry. I couldn't breathe. The heart beat ringing in my chest was the only thing that reminded me that I was alive.

My father had been dead for 18 years. I was raised by a single mother. He died soon after my 1st birthday. I never knew him, and I had accepted that. I was told many stories about him. He was a charming man who adored his family. He was great at his job and was loved by all. Anyone who met him respected him. I mourned the chance of ever knowing this great man everyone worshipped. He was the perfect father figure I never knew: I idolized him.

But was this all a lie? Could my entire family keep a secret from me? If this were true, that would mean my mom, my grandparents, and my sister would have lied to me- No, this message has to be fake. This is a horrible prank. A cruel joke. There is no way that an entire family could keep a secret that big. I'm 19, if I had been adopted, my mother would have told me by now!...right?

I clicked my phone off and swung my car door open. I sat there for a minute, gathering my thoughts. I had to pull it together. I took a deep breath and walked into the house and greeted my mother with a smile, but my mind was spiraling with fear and confusion.

Later that night, after my mom had retired to her room, I read the message again. I read the message over and over, studying every sentence, every word, and every punctuation. He pushed me to check my DNA, to ask questions, to try to find the truth. But was there a truth? Was there an answer that I'm supposed to be seeking? My father was dead and my mom loved me. I hadn't spoken to my sister or my grandfather in years but that was okay; my mom was the only family I needed. I was going to school and making friends. That was my truth: I was happy to live my life. I went to bed and shut my eyes but didn't sleep. My mom would never lie to me...My mom would never lie to me...

The following day I went to school, listened to lectures, took notes, and I tried to go about my normal day. But my mind wandered to the words that were sent to me the day before. Was it true? Or was it just some crazy man trying to prey on me? Before my last lecture, I opened up Messenger to re-read that message that had been plaguing my mind all day. My body tensed,

and I gripped my desk in fear: A new message was sent by the man, along with seven images. The newest message read:

“This is evidence to prove to you that what I say is true.”

I clicked the images, but they wouldn't load immediately. The little circle spun around and around, taunting me. I took a deep breath as the pictures loaded, but before I could see them the professor walked in. I had to shove my phone away before I had the chance to see the images. Every second ticked by painfully. My feet fidgeted underneath the desk anxiously as I counted the minutes. An hour and a half; An hour and twenty; An hour and ten; An hour. Every time I looked at the clock on the wall time seemed to slow down even more. Father Time was playing a sick joke on me. My nails dug into the desk as I sat through the lecture. Jesus Christ, how much longer?! The class was finally dismissed. I scooped up my back pack and ran as fast as my legs could carry me. Fight or flight had kicked in, and I flew. I had to go to my safe place: My sanctuary.

I leapt into my car and cranked the ignition. My car groaned to a start and I veered out of the parking lot and into traffic. What were those images? I had to know. I had to know now. My only thought was to go to the safest place I knew: a secluded park I found last summer. I drove onto a back road and my car recklessly swung around every bend and leaped over every hill to get me to my destination. I flew into the park and my car grinded to a halt on the pavement. I threw on the parking gear.

With trembling hands, I reached for my phone. Was this just a prank? Was this man a murderer? Was I his next victim? Or was this even real? A thousand thoughts rushed my mind at once as I opened the message. And then I saw the truth of it all. It felt like a jagged knife had been driven straight through my chest, grinding against my bones as it twisted into my heart. The images were screenshots of a conversation that took place between two people over the course of the past five years. I saw Jones' image, and in horror, I instantly recognized the other person's image as my sister. I stared in shock as I realized the truth. The secret that has ripped my family apart. Every mystery, every secret, and every memory that I buried deep within my subconscious was suddenly awakened like a sleeping dragon. Tears freely streamed down my cheeks as I read on. I covered my mouth to muffle my screams of horror as I began to accept the truth: My life was a lie. Every-

thing I had ever believed was an illusion.

As I read the messages, everything around me faded like a darkening theatre, and the events that were described played like movie in my mind.

My sister met Jones while in high school. Both were outcasts drawn together like magnets, both loved to rebel, both worshiped Kurt Cobain as their grunge god, both were madly in love: and both were far too young to be parents. They tried to make it work. She wanted a career and he wanted to settle down. She graduated, and he dropped out. She became responsible, but he couldn't grow up. Jones's mother died, and he went home to West Virginia to recoup. He was sent a letter telling him to stay out of my sister's life and my life as well: he did.

My father never saw me, and he never held me in his arms. The only evidence he had of my existence was the ultrasound that he kept in his wallet. The messages that I read between the two started in 2013 and ended in 2018. He asked for a picture of me in 2013, and it took five years before my sister gave in. One of the pictures that was sent was a polaroid of him when he was younger, about my age. That was when I snapped: we looked just alike. I've never seen anyone who looked more like me. Same long blond hair, same eyes, same crooked nose, same dimpled chin: we were disturbingly similar. I read on and saw that he had been in a terrible accident that crushed his face, so his look changed completely: That's why I didn't see it before. I continued to read, trembling in fear as I realized how real this was. My mind couldn't handle it. I could feel my psyche fraying away.

I realized the sadness that burdened both of their hearts. He spent years in solitude, living in regret and despair. While she saw me every day but could never call me 'daughter.' Both lost a child. Both had been through hell. My heart broke for them. My family fabricated a lie to protect me, but that lie tore my family apart.

I finished reading the messages. My phone slipped out of my quivering hands and onto the floorboard as I covered my face. I took in a sharp breath and screamed. I sat alone in my car and wept. Everything in my life was explained through screenshots from a stranger. I finally learned the family secret. My mom was my grandmother, my sister was my mother, and my father was not dead. The father I idolized had crumbled away and was now a mortal man.

A Grave Site

Cary DiDomenico

“What are you doing here? You know, it is about to get dark.”

“Yeah, I know, but I wanted to come here for some peace and quiet.”

“After what happened earlier at school, I can see why you need some peace and quiet.”

A solemn look was given back, “I know, just don’t remind me. It has been a really hard on me.”

“What do you mean ‘hard’? I’ve seen you around the halls, but you don’t seem to be out of it.”

“Well, I have. Why are you asking so many questions?”

“I guess I’m wondering why you brought a gun to school. Everyone was talking about it all day, you know. Was it really loaded like everyone said and did you kill someone with it?”

“NO, I didn’t kill anyone with it. It was my Dads’. He doesn’t care anyway. He ignores me. Stop asking me so many questions.”

“So you’re for real, you never killed anyone with it?”

“Nope. Didn’t kill anyone with it, yet.”

They really didn’t see much of each other in the school halls this year. Maybe a passing once a day, but that was about it. They exchanged pleasantries of “Hi” and “What’s up” from time to time. It was mostly a smile and a nod from each of them. They knew each other last year being in the same homeroom. Both didn’t like their homeroom teacher, Mr. Montgomery. He was always talking down to them and making fun of their names. Both took their names seriously, but he decided to consistently mock them.

“Who are we today, young ladies and men? Why can’t we just have normal names like Mike and Alice? Why do I see more syllables in your names than brain cells in your heads?” he would say. “Asshole”, several of the students would respond in unison.

“I’m glad you’re alright, I’m glad, I followed you.”

“Why did you follow me? You have no business following me at all.”

“You’re my friend. Friends do this type of thing. You know, making sure each other is alright.”

The day was turning to dusk at this point. The bright, yellow sun was giving way to orange streaks as the sun was fading from view. The now grey clouds, that were once white, are darkening as the sun dips below the horizon. The air was still this afternoon, almost leaden, because of

the days' earlier incident involving the gun.

"So, you are considering being my friend? After all that has happened? I didn't realize that you cared so much" a sarcastic tone was reached.

"As much a friend that as you may need. I remembered what you said last year. You said that Montgomery was a racist and needed to be part of the biology dissection list. That was pretty funny at the time and we shared jokes about the rest of the year. I said he'd be better as a dog, but you kept at it about a frog. Something about bumping his ass every time he walked with his short legs. That was really awesome."

A half smile emerged, "That was funny. His shins were really long weren't they? His top portion of his legs was really short and when he walked fast, his heels were close to his ass almost hitting them. He should've been a frog." That half smile started becoming a smirk.

"Yeah, I think they did when he hopped, I mean, ran to get to his car in the rain."

Both shared a laugh that downgraded to a snicker. It, then, became an awkward moment. Both were staring at each other, then the ground.

They both were now kicking up the dirt with the tips of their sneakers.

"So what brought you here? To a cemetery?"

"I just wanted to. It was quiet and I was wanting to be alone."

"Yeah, you're alone here. Only dead people are here, you know. They kinda don't talk back."

"Sometimes I wonder what happens after you die. I mean, do you still hang around the Earth and help other people in the family or become an angel and go to heaven? Is there really a heaven or hell? I have been wondering about these things. Do you?"

"Not until now, thanks for that. It seems a little scary. Do you think they become monsters and zombies? I always wondered that."

"Not zombies, butthead. I'm not talking about zombies. Not like eating brains and stuff, you know. I'm talking about do you know where your soul goes after you die? Does it go to heaven or hell, or even, stay on here on earth and haunt houses and stuff. I am been doing some looking into this lately. Ever since my Mom died, you know."

"How did your Mom die?"

"Does it matter?" a vicious response was made. "Does it really matter? She's gone. That's it. It's over and done with."

“Don’t bite my head off, I was just asking, Geezus.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bite your head off, it’s just that it doesn’t matter.”

Dusk was starting to give way to the night. The orange sky was fading and the blackness of night was not far away now. The light grey clouds were floating downward like apparitions waiting to pounce. It was going to get foggy soon enough. The headstones were becoming long shadows on the ground reaching toward the not so sturdy metal fence about 50 yards away. Their feet were still kicking the dirt up with their sneakers wearing a good trench in front of Mrs. Abernathy’s filthy white monument.

The monument stood up in the middle of a dilapidated old cemetery on the outskirts of Gut Factory Road. The epitaph was partially corroded off and “devoted ... in death” was all that could be read on it. The graveyard hadn’t had a new occupant in at least 50 years or so, at least. The headstones were weathered, tilted off center, and overgrown with weeds instead of flowers. The bushes and fallen trees along the outside of the metal fence pretty much kept the fence erect. There was not much attention and respect given to this graveyard from the historical society.

“Are you getting ready to leave?”

“Naw, I’m gonna stay here just a little while longer and just think. You can go if you want to.”

“I think I want to stay. I have never stayed in a graveyard before after dark. It seems spooky, but I don’t know, pretty cool. It’s something different.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered about what’s on the other side? I mean, Heaven and Hell type of things?”

“Not really, just what the movies say. But I did watch a program on angels and demons, though. It was interesting that some of the people said when they die, they see a bright light or dark red light. I guess when you see the red light, it’s all over with.”

“Really? I never thought of that. I always thought you’ll join your family and friends. Seeing the light and the people that died are waiting for you to join them. I really want to see my Mom. I miss her so much” the tears were now careening down the cheek. “I want to die and be with her.”

“You want to die? What about your Dad and stuff?”

“He doesn’t care. All he does is work and doesn’t come home until late. When I do see him, he doesn’t talk to me. He says I look too much like

Mom and starts to cry. He goes to his room and closes the door. I can hear him crying saying that it should have been him like that helps.”

“Maybe he misses her too.”

“Stop taking his side. What about me, huh? What about me missing her too? Doesn't he think I miss her? That sack of shit. That's why I'm out here. That's why I brought the gun. I want to kill myself. I came out here to see if my Mom will come to talk to me and to see what I need to do to join her. I don't care what they think about me at school. Fuck them.” As the angered voice replied and the voice carried throughout the graveyard, something was listening.

“You want to kill yourself? Are you nuts? Suicide is an unforgivable sin. I learned about that at church. You'll go straight to Hell. That's what Preacher Dan said. How are you going to meet your Mom in Heaven, if you're in Hell? Answer me that?”

The leaves on the ground started to bristle across the gravesites. The night was in full force now and the eerie branch outlines from a fallen large oak cast their shadows across the cemetery. The moon was full and blood red. It was the second full moon this month. Instead of it being a “blue” moon, it had a reddish, evil haze to it.

“I have issues with my parents all the time, but...”

“Not like losing your Mom, right? You don't know how that feels, do you?” The gun came out of the school backpack. “This will solve all my problems. I know it will. I just need my Mom to know that I will be coming to meet her so she can be ready. She will be able to talk to God and tell him why I am doing this. If he is as forgiving as they say, he'll understand.”

“I don't think it works that way. What if he doesn't allow it after you do it? What then, huh? You would never see your Mom again. Is that what you want?”

“No, but he'll listen. I heard that God listens to everyone. I want him to listen to me.”

“What about all the people that will never see you again? What about me? We're friends, right?”

Before another word was mentioned, a cold breeze floated by with a whiff of brimstone on it. Both turned toward the back of the small cemetery away from the road. As they both looked in the same direction of the breeze, a faint outline of a figure seemed to appear just beyond the fence. It was just standing there, watching and listening.

Both hopped down off the monument and started squinting in that direction to make out the outline.

“Maybe we need to get out of here?”

“No, I want to wait for my mother. I came here to be with her and I am going to wait for her.”

“It doesn’t look like your mom, I don’t think. It looks like something else.”

“I have a gun, so I’m good.”

“I don’t. Come on, let’s head over to that shed over there and we’ll wait for your mom to show up there, away from whatever that is.”

“GO AWAY and leave us alone, you bastard. I have a gun and I am not afraid to use it if you don’t leave us alone.”

The figure jumped the fence without moving any body part. It just ‘hopped’ over it like a frog. Once it cleared the fence, it stood there motionless right inside the barrier. Watching and waiting.

They looked at each other and started toward the shed slowly. Their eyes never leaving the figure.

“What the hell is that?”

“I don’t know, but it looked like it had fur on it. Did you see that?”

“No, was it fur? How could you tell?”

“It was kinda moving in the breeze, I think.”

Both were becoming more terrified by the moment. As they were making their way to the shed, the figure was slowly following them. They weren’t sure what it was, but there was something there that was becoming more menacing. The two accelerated their pace to a fast walk now. As they approached the shed door, the figure started to pick up speed and headed toward them. They could now see that it had fur and ...several rows of teeth. There were no eyes, just teeth. They glistened in the moonlight like water on a lake in the full moonlight. Shimmering and shifting with every step and dripping with glittering, black ooze.

Both were almost out of breath when they reached the shed door. They forced open the shed door and slammed it shut. The planks of the wood were not butted together leaving separated spaces by at least a half an inch. The moonlight was piercing through these slits and illuminating the shed inside.

“You hold the door tight and I’ll find something to prop up against it.”

“Okay. I found a shovel.” The shovel was really a spade and they angled it against the door. The creature hit the door with such force that the

spade fell away from the door, but the door did not give an entrance for the beast. The spade was re-anchored and pressed against the shed door once again before a second strike of the beast. They both were breathing heavy and cycling thoughts in their minds of what to do next.

“What are we gonna do?” A whisper filled the air inside the shed.

“I dunno, what do you think, you have the gun. Do you think you can kill it?”

“I only have 3 bullets in my Dad’s revolver. I wasn’t expecting to use all three if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, killing yourself and going to Hell with this thing, you can’t be serious.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? Nobody will miss me, so what does it matter? My Dad won’t. The school won’t. I have no friends, so no one will miss me.”

“I thought we were friends.”

There was a silence between them. Each of them looking at each other with a moonbeam crossing their eyes. It sure seemed that they were friends. Together in this horrid cemetery together. Facing a demon creature together. That meant the ‘no friends’ comment no longer held water. The beast hit the door again with more force, but the spade held fast. They could both see its teeth more prominently now. Three rows of teeth that protruded with a horrible under bite on its jawline. The teeth were slightly bent back to interlock with each other when the jaw closed. This would maximize the amount of shredding that the creature could accomplish to its victim. There was fur that covered its eyeless face.

“How does it know we are in here if it has no eyes?”

“I dunno, maybe it can sense movement. Maybe if we stay real still, it might forget we’re in here.”

“Okay, let’s be still, but I have the gun if we need it.”

“Okay, shhh....”

The creature rattled the shed door to get to the two. After a few minutes, it ceased its rattling and paced right outside the door. The spade was still holding its own against the door, but for how long was the question. The two stared at each other with the slivers of the moonlight shining through the planks. The creature again hit the door with a loud thud. This time its claws were trying to gain traction to open the door inward. The two huddled together and the gun was pointed at the shed door.

“If it comes in, I’ll shoot it and you run past it and go get help.”

“I’m not leaving you. We’re in this together. If you shoot it, we’ll both run past it and get on the road together, understand?”

“Yeah, we’ll both get past it.”

The claws were now tearing into the shed door creating splinters everywhere. The spade was not going to hold much longer. The silvery claws were finding their way between the slots of the separated wood and both saw what they were dealing with.

The creature had executioners mask on with its eyeholes fused shut. The eyeholes of the mask were melted over the eyes. The fur was dark, but the moonlight gave it a red, hideous glow. The claws were small in size, but still efficient at ripping anything apart. Now, it wanted the shed door ripped apart to get at what was inside.

The two took a rather long look at each other and decided that it was almost time. The spade started to shutter from the mauling the door was receiving. It would not be too long now.

The shed door burst open and the two had their backs to the far wall. The gun was held up and pointed at the creature and a loud ‘click’ followed by the pulling the trigger.

“Where’s the shot? Did it misfire?”

The gun clicked again.

“We’re going to die, I don’t want to die. I don’t want you to kill yourself either. Pull the trigger again!”

The gunshot rang out and it was music to their ears. The creature staggered back and fell backward a few feet. “Shoot it again!”

Another shot rang out and hit the creature in the mouth. “DEADSHOT, BITCH!”

The creature fell further backward. Black ooze was coming from its mouth. It was flowing with a steady stream. If this was its way of bleeding, the two were ecstatic. The two stood up and cautiously walked toward the shattered shed door and looked at the beast. It wasn’t moving. They slowly walked out of the shed with their backs directly scaling a broken cement wall keeping as much distance as possible from the beast. Both of them thought that it was dead enough to make a run for the road. As soon as they started to run, the creature reached out to grab the closest foot. It grasped and tripped one of them up, falling face first into the dirt. As the creature started to rise the third shot rang out.

“You’re not going to get my friend tonight, you bastard. I wanted to die tonight, not my friend. But I decided that I am going to kill you instead.

So take that, you son of a bitch!”

The creature fell backward again writhing on the ground knocking over the Weatherly tombstones. Shattering them with the destructive strength left in its claws.

They both rushed to the road away from the cemetery and fell just shy of the ditch before Gut Factory Road. They turned back toward the cemetery and didn't see the creature anymore. They stood up staring in that direction to see if either saw it. Neither did. What they did see was the return of the orange sky. Dawn was breaking and the welcomed daylight was destroying night.

“You, okay?”

“Yeah, I am. Great shot. Thanks for helping me out back there. I could have died with that, that thing. What was it?”

“I dunno. But I hope it died. It's in the right place for it. The fuckin' Graveyard.”

“Yeah, the fuckin' Gut Factory Graveyard.”

They both shared a smile looking at each other. They climbed the short ditch and stood on the road, staring back at the graveyard. The light was now engulfing the entire cemetery and there was no sign of the creature. Both turned around and started walking toward home, shoulder to shoulder. If they had turned around to the graveyard at that instant, they would have noticed a female figure floating near the entrance with a smile on her face.

Not another word was spoken between the two during the walk back down the road, but their thoughts were very apparent to each other. Who saved who's life last night?

THE END

Awards

Each year, *Pioneer Pen* chooses two winners from the submissions received from Volunteer State Community College students. The 2018 recipients of the literary and art awards are as follows:

John MacDougall Literary Award

The John MacDougall Award for Literary Excellence is awarded each year to a student writer who is published in *Pioneer Pen*. The award helps us remember a beloved teacher who set very high standards for both his students and his colleagues. This year's winner is Sara Reynolds Cox and her poem *Through This Pair of Eyes*, which is featured on page 3 of this issue.

Fusion Art and Design Award

The Fusion Art and Design Award is awarded each year to a student artist who is published in *Pioneer Pen* who portrays excellent use of the elements of art and design. This year's winner is Amber Nicole Kittrell and her piece "The Girl with the Gator", which is featured on page 2 of this issue.

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Pioneer Pen

2019 SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Volunteer State Community College students interested in being featured in the 2019 edition of *Pioneer Pen* should submit art, photography, poetry, fiction, cartoons, short films, animations, and excerpt from longer creative works to pioneer.pen@volstate.edu by March 1, 2019.

All entries should include contact information, a brief biography, as well as the title and medium for the work. Creative writing should be submitted in a .docx file format. Works of art should be submitted as high-resolution .jpg. All submissions are automatically considered for the John MacDougall Award for Literary Excellence or the Fusion Art and Design Award.

Students interested in volunteering as an editor or taking *Pioneer Pen* as a 1, 2, or 3 credit hour practicum/humanities elective class should contact the Humanities Division Office at 615-230-3200.

Class Information: ENGL 290P (may be listed as English Practicum). Practical editorial and/or layout experience while producing literary publications. The amount of required work varies with credit hours. Emphasis on soliciting, reading, and critically evaluating submissions, copyediting, layout, arrangement of material for literary effect, and collaboration with staff to meet publication deadlines. Designated primarily for vocational and career programs. This course may be accepted as transfer credit by some colleges and universities, but that decision is made by the receiving institution. This course is collegiate level work but has been developed with a purpose, other than being a university parallel course. Prerequisites: Permission of Instructor. Credits: 1-3.

For more information, contact *Pioneer Pen* advisors, Professor Emily Andrews (emily.andrews@volstate.edu) and Professor Laura McClister (laura.mcclister@volstate.edu).



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