



Pioneer Pen
2021

Pioneer Pen

2021

Volunteer State Community College
1480 Nashville Pike
Gallatin, TN 37066

© Copyright 2021 by Volunteer State Community College

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.

Volunteer State Community College does not discriminate against students, employees or applicants for admissions or employment on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, ethnic or national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age (as applicable), status as a covered veteran, genetic information and any other legally protected class with respect to all employment, programs and activities sponsored by Vol State. The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the College's nondiscrimination policies: Manager of Employee Relations & Equity, 1480 Nashville Pike, Gallatin, TN 37066, 615-230-3592, eeo@volstate.edu. Visit volstate.edu for full policy.

Cover art "Serene" by Evie Herndon
Background photos by Evie Herndon
Pioneer Pen logo by Jeff Wilson
Text set in PT Serif
Printed by Smartpress

Publication Number 15723-1836



SMARTPRESS

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.

Editor's Note

2021

Turmoil, Perseverance, and Moving Onward.

A year full of uncertainty has been fuel for the creators featured in this magazine. They allowed the turmoil of the world to inspire their art. Through perseverance and the ability to keep working onwards, we have been able to put together an issue of *Pioneer Pen* that reflects the biographical context of the creators during this past year. The pain and the hope present within this issue is felt by our world today.

Table of Contents

Still Life #1	7	Elizabeth Myers
The Decision - A Tale from The Dead Lands	8	Timothy Rose
The Art of Hate	14	Cassidy Towe
Tend to The Sunflowers	15	Elizabeth Zhukov
The Tears of God	19	Cassidy Towe
Study #1	21	Lee O'Kelley
Study #3	22	Lee O'Kelley
Craving	23	Nicole Shelley
Greed	25	Ethan Johnson
Cloudy Night	31	Kimberly Shields
Anxiety	33	Hannah Levering
5:30 am	35	Melody Watson
Footsteps on The Stairs	39	Jenna Rowe
A 21 st Century College Education - Chaos	41	Lee O'Kelley
Disguised as Progress		
Love in War	45	Victoria Long
Defiance	46	Ethan Johnson

Girl With a Pearl Earring: Doodled	52	Elizabeth Myers
Show Your Teeth	53	Melody Watson
Bare	55	Carolina Cardona
Other World	56	Carolina Cardona
Elixir	57	Victoria Long
Chic	58	Victoria Long
Forgiveness	59	Cassidy Towe
Carry On	63	Nicole Shelley
Heavens	65	Evie Herndon
Point	66	Evie Herndon
Striking Scotland	67	Carolina Cardona
Is That a Rabbit?	68	Lee O'Kelley
That's Why I Love You	69	Melody Watson
Mr and Mrs Darcy	72	Kora Grammer
Don't	73	Nicole Shelley
MME Ps GARDEN AT SUNRISE	76	Lee O'Kelley
Sing Me a Song of a Better Us	77	Wendy Davidson

Turmoil

“Turmoil is a call for awakening. Every challenge, great or small, is moving you to look deeper and draw forth the highest in you. You’re never given a challenge beyond your ability to meet and master. You’ll rise above every circumstance because you’re greater than any circumstance.”

Alan Cohen

Still Life #1 by Elizabeth Myers

Graphite Pencils, Drawing Paper



The Decision – A Tale from The Dead Lands

by Timothy Rose

They holed up in a city. They thought they would ride it out. The virus couldn't spread faster than containment. The wife pled with her husband to simply stay put and to not be so dramatic. He broke and agreed. They boarded up the doors and windows after making sure they had plenty of food. The first two months went by without them thinking twice about rationing their supplies. The news reports kept saying, "...stay indoors. Lock or board up your homes. If anyone you know has recently been in contact with someone infected, quarantine them in a locked room." This went on for some time, but the food ran out for the little family.

The husband, the brave husband, decided that enough was enough. He would go out, get more supplies, and be back in an hour or two. The wife and husband removed the boards from the back door, and the husband went out into the chaos. It was five hours before he returned. He banged on the back door, and the wife quickly unlocked it to let him in. While he was out a man had attacked him and bitten him.

"It was the craziest thing," he told his wife.

She spent time cleaning his wound before they decided that he needed to be quarantined. They cleared out a small interior room they had been using for storage.

They had been too lazy to pack their seasonal decorations to the attic. Desperate times though. They went to work moving the heavy boxes, and once it was cleared, he made sure he had enough food and water for a few days. He went into the room and locked the door.

Two hours passed before the wife and daughter laid down in the upstairs bedroom. The wife had been comforting their daughter, telling her to not be scared.

“Daddy can come out in a few days, we just need to make sure he isn’t sick,” she told her, while worry distorted the wife’s face. The wife woke up a few hours later after they had drifted off to sleep while listening to music.

The wife didn’t wake to music however, the CD had already stopped playing, instead, she woke to the sound of shuffling and groaning coming from downstairs. She gently got up, making sure to not wake their daughter, and she crept through the darkness, down the stairs, and gently knocked on the door to the interior room. The shuffling stopped, and all that was left in its place was silence.

“You woke me up,” she whispered against the door. “Why are you still awake? Nightmares?”

But all she heard was silence.

Then, suddenly, a bang against the door! The wife cried out and jumped back, but the banging didn’t stop.

“Mommy,” screamed the daughter from the top of the stairs. “I’m scared! Why is daddy banging on the door?”

The wife stood still and silent. Tears welled up in her eyes. The clawing and groaning continued as the wife collected their little girl and brought her back to the bedroom. She comforted their daughter as best she could. After a while, the clawing ceased. The wife sighed with relief while she held the sleeping little girl, and the wife too fell asleep.

Over the next few days, anytime the wife went downstairs to get water or food the noise would start all over again. Slowly, the sound wore on the wife’s mind. She heard the sounds even when they had stopped. She heard the sounds in her sleep. Her mind had created an image of what ghastly creature could make those sounds, and she saw that image every time she closed her eyes.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks of her daughter asking when daddy could come out. Weeks of empty words in reply. In the end, the wife couldn’t bear the sounds. She could not bear the image of the monster her husband had become that haunted her day and night.

One night, she woke up from a nightmare fueled by the sounds and imagined of the horror that was her husband. She crept over to their closet, unlocked their small safe, and grabbed the cold item they had bought when they first moved to Boston.

“Just a safety precaution,” the husband had assured his wife.

The wife sat and stared down at what she held in her hands. She was sweating, though it was cold. The electricity had gone out a few days ago. Autumn in Boston wasn't like the Autumn in Alabama, where they had lived some years before. Frost had built up on the window, but she was still sweating. She checked and it was loaded.

“We keep it loaded in case of an emergency,” she heard her husband's voice say through the lips of the creature in her mind.

The morning sun broke through the window while the wife sat against the wall underneath. She heard her daughter stir first, then saw her look over.

“What's wrong mommy?” the little girl asked.

“Nothing sweetie. Come sit on my lap for a while. It's warmer in the light,” she beckoned her daughter to her.

The wife took their child in her arms. She brushed her hair with her fingers then reached down for the gun behind her back.



The Art of Hate

by Cassidy Towe

The ivory canvas
Has been displayed for you
Along with a palate of colors that range from red to blue.
As the electric bristles brush across the color of crimson,
Your eyes begin to radiate the incandescence of a prism.
The portrait will speak of my pain,
Which is demonstrated through the art of hate.

A thousand strokes leave a thousand scars,
But a star is eventually presented in a glass jar.
Over the years, God has shown me that ideas can paint
themselves
When you pluck a new color from the top shelf.
While the earth sits still, I only stare at the darkness of
the night
Because all my ideas appear in black and white.
However, I have discovered that the art of hate
Has given me the voice to create.

Every night I have prayed for a purpose,
But every day I am denied for my acts of service.
I can only hope I am deemed worthy
To stand before my king at the end of this journey.
Our hearts of clay will always be wedged by the hands of
hate,
But that only leaves more space for new stories to be
made.

Tend To The Sunflowers

by Elizabeth Zhukov

The wind blew through her hair as she sat near the window looking at the remnants of the sunflower field. The sunflower field, once deeply beloved, now stood as a memory of old times. The once bright and cheerful flowers stood solemnly bowing their heads in mourning. Never again would they shine like the sun that gave them their name. Never again would they see the two women running gleefully through the field living their best dream never once thinking of the evil that would happen. She sat near the window looking at the field, remembering.

She thought about the day her wife ran up to her, eyes shining, her whole being radiating happiness. They were leaving the city that seemed to drain the entire essence out of them. There was a farm, a field, a woodland house, a large field, and an empty field. She never liked flowers. She never saw the beauty in them, unlike her wife. The large and empty field would be covered in sunflowers. Her wife loved sunflowers, but she never did.

The childlike excitement, the pure happiness, the unbelievable feeling that their dream finally came true. She wanted to preserve that, so they planted a field of sunflowers.

She smiled, solemnly, remembering her wife's words upon seeing the field bloom for the first time.

“No matter what happens,” she said, wrapping one arm around her waist. “I will always be there, in the sunflowers.”

She never liked sunflowers. She loved her wife. She loved seeing her happy. Countless times had they had breakfast at the edge of the field, with the warm morning sun slowly warming their bodies, melting away the sleepiness and waking them. Promising them another perfect day. Just remember to tend to the sunflowers. She sat near the window with wind blowing through her hair. Her tea was getting cold, remembering.

Her mind wandered to that dreadful day when she learned of her wife's sickness. They fought, they screamed at each other for the first time since they met. Of course, they had arguments, disagreements, times when they didn't talk to each other, times when they slept apart, but never like this. Never had she felt so betrayed. She thought they were living their dream. Never did it cross her mind that their best dream would soon become their worst nightmare. She loved her wife. She cared for her wife. In sickness and in health, in happiness and in sorrow.

They still ate breakfast near the sunflower field, bathing in the sun's warmth, and in the warmth of their own bodies. They talked more than ever before.

No longer was it enough to hold hands or to lay beside each other in the depth of the night. Nor was it enough to snuggle up near the fireplace watching the dancing flames. So they talked. She had so many questions. Why didn't she know about the illness sooner? Why was she lied to? These thoughts raced through her mind as she looked over the grieving sunflowers. She cared for her wife, now more than ever.

It started small. She couldn't walk. She had trouble holding up her teacup. Soon, she even needed help getting out of bed. She loved her wife. It is painful to see a person wither away. What kept her going was how her wife's eyes lit up when she saw her. They didn't need words anymore. They understood each other perfectly.

Tend to the sunflowers. She didn't like sunflowers. She shivered. The sun went down. The wind grew colder. Her tea had gone cold. She didn't notice because she was too deep in thought. She wasn't angry at the end. She did everything she could. She wished she could've done more. As she set down her teacup and looked out to the horizon, she thought of all they had done. Of all they could have done. Of all they did not have time to do. She looked at the field. Her eyes wandered over the lone grave at the edge of the field. She loved her wife. She loved their farm. Tend to the sunflowers.

Never again would the sunflowers see the two women lying beside each other on that old, quilted blanket while holding one another close and looking at the clouds. Never again would she feel the sun's warmth the same way as they did. Never again.

She didn't like the sunflowers. She didn't want to stay on the farm. A single wasp crawled up her cold teacup. She wiped away a stray tear. The entire farm felt like it was in despair. The sun mourned. Nature mourned.

She closed her eyes to picture her wife near her, with her hand on her thigh, and a loving smile on her face.

"Promise me, promise you will take care of the sunflowers when I'm gone," her voice echoed through the empty house.

She couldn't leave the farm, no matter how much she wanted to. She loved her wife. She never cared for the sunflowers.

The Tears of God

by Cassidy Towe

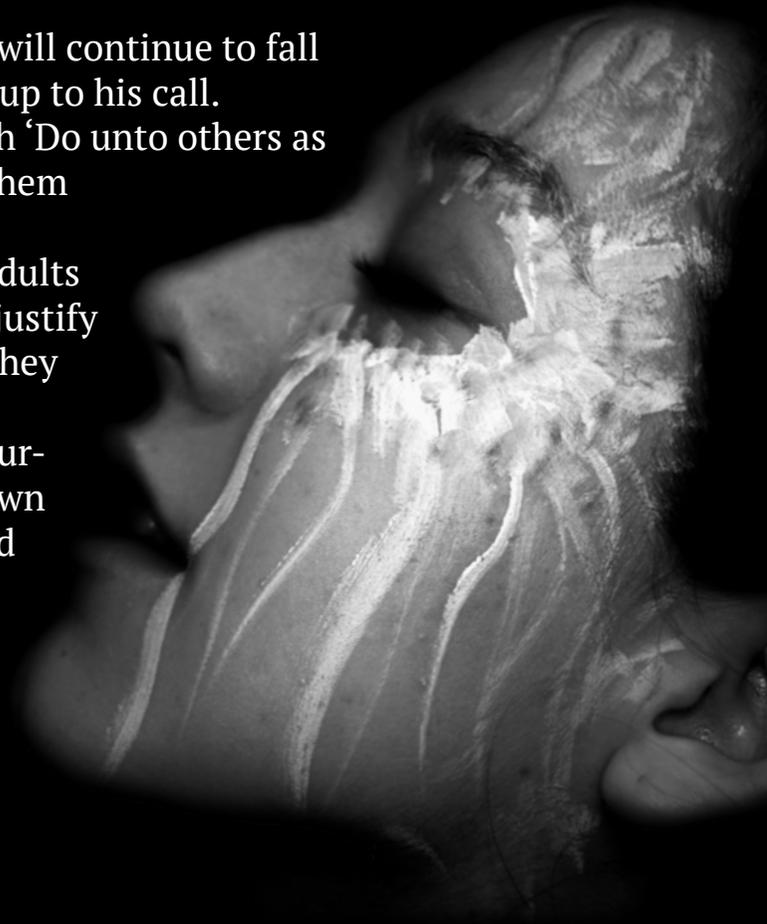
God sheds tears every day
Due to the hatred that has come out to play.
While the echoes of laughter soar like the wind,
They are plagued with a touch of sin.
The weeds of bitterness flourish
As our love remains malnourished,
Which allows our words to leave nothing but scars, cuts,
and bruises on the surface.

God is weeping from the clouds above
Because we are not growing in his love.
The ability to share opinions and beliefs with the upmost
respect
Has been dominated by our alpha wolves instead.
We are threatened by which we don't understand
And feel inferior to those who do not support our stance.
How have we become entangled in the devil's dance?

We are more divided now than ever
Because the bonds of compassion have been severed.
Pride has blinded our eyes
From breaking down the walls of one's mind.
Envy has deafened our ears
From hearing one's cries throughout the years.
Hate has paralyzed our hands
From pulling our enemies out of the quicksand.
The balance of our world is hanging by a strand.

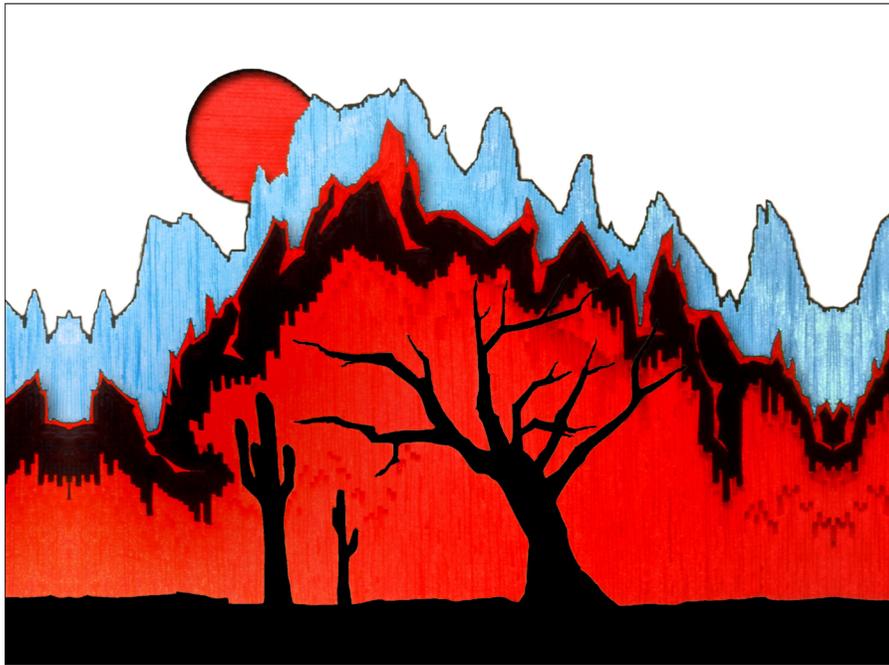
However, it is not too late
Because we earn a new chance with every breath we take.
A chance to unveil the mask of lies
And discover the pain that is hiding inside.
A chance to restore the broken pieces of fragile hearts
With words of compassion rather than harm.
You will never know if those who stand against you
Are being followed by a shadow that only dances to the
blues?
Unless you are the first one to ask, "who has hurt you?"

The tears of God will continue to fall
If we do not step up to his call.
Why do we preach 'Do unto others as
you would have them
do unto you'
When there are adults
who continue to justify
the trouble that they
brew?
Therefore, I encour-
age you to get down
on your knees and
pray
For your foes
that may need a
kiss from
heaven today.



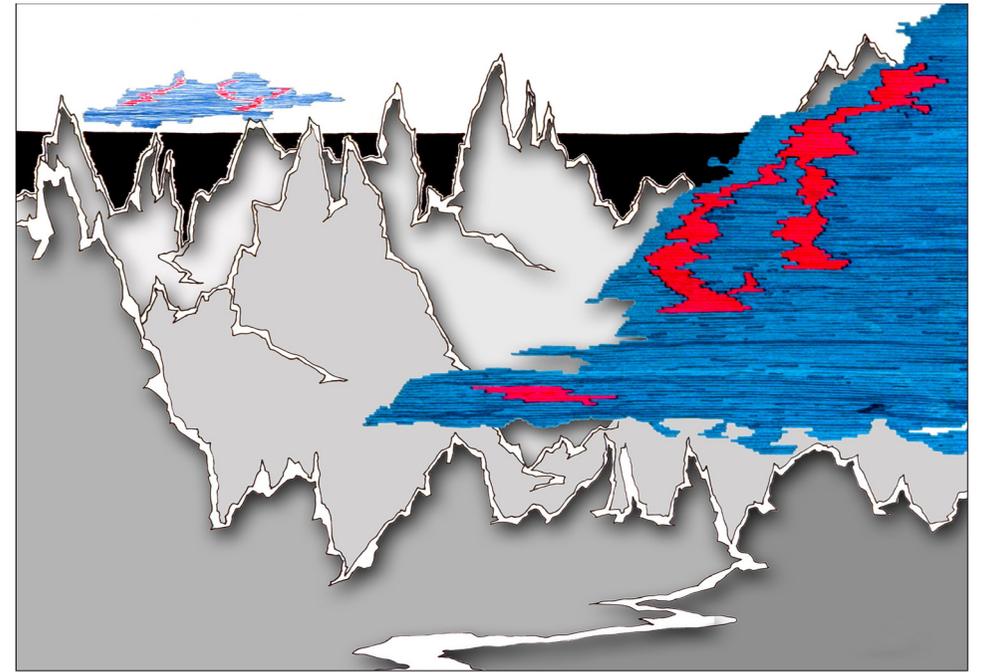
Study #1 by Lee O'Kelley

Ink Pen, Water-Soluble Markers, Digital Enhancements



Study #3 by Lee O'Kelley

Ink Pen, Water-Soluble Markers, Paper, Digital Enhancements





Craving

by Nicole Shelley

From all tasteful pleasures I abstain
Despite cries from my gut, I ignore the pain
Every sweet smell and decadent dessert I do refrain
Because less is more; I lose to gain.

A glass floor on which she lies prone
A broken princess on her shattered throne
The world left her isolated, she's all alone
Traveling down a path where the light has never
shone.

Imperfect perfection has kept me enslaved
To every self-constructed misery that for years I
have braved

I want to eat, to enjoy the things I once craved
Now I am left wondering: can I be saved?

Greed

by Ethan Johnson

All was quiet in the 10 seconds it took for my life to become what it is today, except for the steady stomps and harsh breaths from a gang of thoroughbred beasts at full tilt, 40 mph. The horse in the front wasn't the one I bet on.

After my misgivings with the horse race, I was beaten in a back alley by Chino. I lost a tooth. Which is better than having a broken arm, but still... I headed to the nearest bar to stop thinking. Davies has a blackjack table.

After I drained our saving accounts a year and a half ago, my wife left me. That was just before I lost my job at the BLB Law firm. I was caught sleeping during a few meetings. The "high-value clients" didn't need to see a lazy, incompetent employee handle massive amounts of critical information. I was fired. Whatever, I get to gamble full-time now.

I am 35, 5'9, 90 kg. My life has no point except for the next card, number, beast, or fight. Right now, my legs are numb from sitting for the past five hours at the best game of my life. I started at the table with \$155.00, now I am up to \$25,455. The buy-in at Davies is \$100 for just ten chips. I haven't left the table at all, not even for the bathroom. I am scared it will change my luck. My feet went numb two hours back. I literally can't walk away. It all feels so natural.

To my left was an olive-toned man with yellow hair, he gripped on a fist full of kings. Next to the yellow-haired man was a middle-aged slender woman. She had sharp intelligent eyes, with many cards in front of her. She was a mystery. To the woman's left was the random dealer. He always had a maniacal grin and an eat shit attitude. The last person at the table was a black-eyed man, not from a fight but his iris's. He had the face of a fox. His coat was black and so were his pants. He was either the devil or a Harley rider. Anyways, he was scary-looking.

At the beginning of the three hours, the scary man was beating everyone at the table. I was relying on the folds of the old man to guide me in those hard games. Eventually, I was in the zone. I wasn't just memorizing the cards I was feeling and seeing them even before they were in my hand. Someone like a psychologist might have said it was precognition. All people like me, at this level of addiction, feel it.

It is the feeling you get when you ace the test you never studied for or the time you brought flowers to your partner before you knew they were feeling down. Midway through the night, I was ten times richer. I kept wanting to leave but each time I saw myself winning the next round. So, I stayed. Totally numb from the waist down. Thankfully, I don't drink alcohol anymore.

That's thanks to my wife, Kathy. She's the one who left, not me. I don't drink because at Davies the drinks aren't free, and I need all the money I can for when I'm low on funds.

Long before I was ever at this table at Davies, I was a Civil Rights lawyer; life was good. I owned 3 cars and a large swimming pool (the yearly bonus was 3x what I have on the table at this moment). My wife was honest in bed. I felt happy, but there was always this feeling of a missed adventure. Perhaps it was a lack of true purpose. Then I was invited to a local horse race one weekend. A client of mine owned a pure-bred black stallion, named Zeplin. That horse was twice my height. Phil, my superior in most cases, wanted to spend a few hours taking some time off a high-risk contract. I followed his lead and watched the race for a while. Then Phil asked me to pick a horse. I chose Zeplin the tallest, black horse. Phil pulled \$500 from his pocket and said, "Here Don. Go for the entrance and ask to bet straight up on number 14."

"Do you want me to put all of it on the horse?" I said questionably.

"Yes, don't forget to keep the ticket after you place the bet."

"Okay," I said.

I stood, stuffed the cash in my left pants pocket, and headed up the stadium stairs. The day was sunny and warm. I felt beads of sweat pool on the back of my neck and roll onto my jacket. I finally found the betting counter before the horses were out of the gate and I asked the attendant, "I need a straight-up bet on number 14."

"How much?" said the attendant.

"\$500."

The attendant sighed. "It's your first time betting here?"

"Yes. Is \$500 too much?" I said.

"No, that is fine, but you can triple or double down and up your chance to make more money," said the attendant.

"Lets.... double down."

In my mind, I could feel the horse crossing the finish line many paces before the others. Nothing yet had come close to that first plunge into the depths of luck.

"Here is your ticket. Don't lose this. Because without it you will not be able to receive your winnings."

Then the attendant closed the mesh window.

I stood fixated on my vision. Then I heard the trumpets toot or was it, buglers? The doors holding the flood of giant horses flew open like wings. So quick, so fast. I couldn't keep track of them. Pat, thump. Pat, thump. Pat, thump. Pat, thump. Like a hijacked rocket. The number 14 horse sprinted ahead of number 4 and crossed the line at 12.04 seconds which was a fraction of a second before losing. My mind along with the crowd rumbled and urged for more. I went back to the counter.

"I need to get the cash for this ticket," I said.

"You can keep betting with that receipt."

I glanced to the leader board and asked, "who's running next?"

5 minutes went by of me looking for another grateful horse to appear in my wishes then I finally said "give me 5 on number 72. With the red and white colors."

"You got it. (clicks of the register) Here is your ticket."

"Thanks."

I went back down to the mid-level seats and sat next to Phil.

"You just won \$500, Phil," I said.

"No way!" Phil said enthusiastically.

"Yes way!" I said laughing.

"Where's the cash at?" Phil asked.

"Ha," I scoffed. "We're going big on this one, my friend," I said while I gave him my biggest grin.

"What did you do Don?"

"I mean, this one is for \$10,000.00 pal. Better hope number 72 busts out of the gate with no hesitation and that the check doesn't bounce."

"What the hell, Don. You're nuts. I can feel it this time," Phil said.

"I bet you can," I said reluctantly.



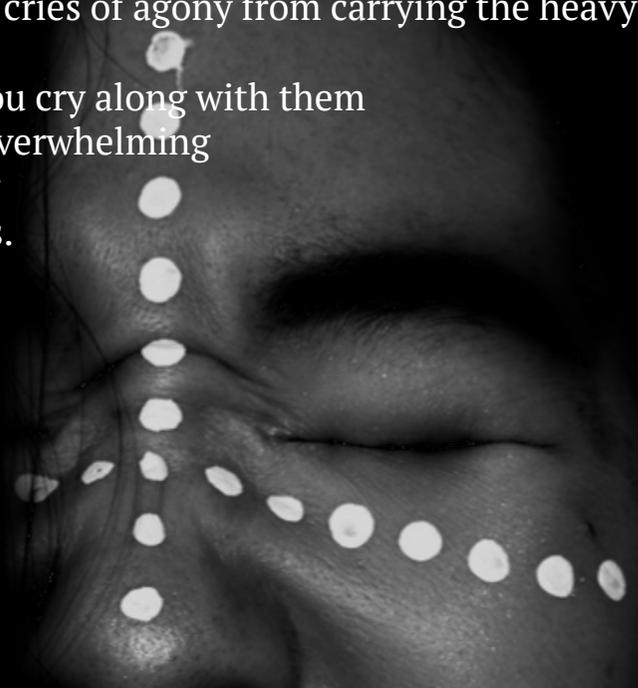
Cloudy Night by Kimberly Shields
Gouache Paint, Paper Canvas

Anxiety

by Hannah Levering

All consuming
Sometimes life-taking
Life changing, but not in a good way
Like blood being drained for a transfusion
You wish there was a transfusion
For your pathogen
That of which courses through your veins
Your mind
Your heart
And it makes you hate to walk by the mirror
Makes you hate to answer that question in class
Even when you know for sure you know the answer
Makes you hate talking to new people
And even though you hate to admit it,
Sometimes it too consumes your conversations
With even your very best friend
It makes your hands sweat
Sometimes so much that you have to wipe
The keyboard your shaking hands are typing on
It makes your leg bounce when the roll is being called in
class
Because god forbid you say “here” wrong
What will others think of you if you do?
What if while you are ordering at the coffee shop
You get whole milk
You didn’t want whole milk
You wanted almond milk in your latte

But your heart is already beating against your ribs like a
butterfly trying to be free from it’s too cramped cage and
fly to safety
So you drink the coffee with whole milk, even though
later it makes you sick
You couldn’t risk making the person behind you think
you were taking too long with your coffee order, or for
the barista to think you were being too complicated
You can’t risk much of anything
The biggest risk that you choose to take is to exist.
Even though all day, every day
You live in what feels chains
Every day they feel heavy
Other days it feels as though your whole body will snap
from them
Your bones creak and cry out for freedom
They shake and rattle begging to be free
You hear their cries of agony from carrying the heavy
chains
Often times you cry along with them
Because it is overwhelming
All consuming
Anxiety that is.



5:30 am

by Melody Watson

I thought it was a joke, but when I heard my dog viciously barking at the door, I knew it was real.

“Get the gun,” my boyfriend said, holding a cell phone in his hand. “Someone’s trying to get in the house. I’m calling the police.”

My heart dropped, hoping it was all a practical joke. I flipped over and grabbed the gun from a box under the bed and made sure it was loaded. In my pink baby ducky pajamas, I snuck around the corner down the hallway.

When I saw the door, my fears became a reality. The doorknob jiggled back and forth. It stopped for a few moments before the BOOM! The door bent under the strain of the person slamming against it on the other side.

“Shut up!” the man screamed outside the door at the barking dog. I looked down to see my shaking legs but kept the gun pointed at the door.

Fainting was not an option. It was time to be a grown-up. If he got through that door, he would kill both of us, and it would be my fault for not having the guts to take care of the situation.

BOOM! He rammed the door again.

I was not tall enough to see out the peephole, but my boyfriend said he was trying to break the door down with his head.

“Tell them to hurry,” I whisper yelled.

“They’re sending their officers as fast as they can, they’ll be here,” he said, still on the line with emergency services. Every second felt like an hour.

“Tell them to get here faster! They never come when you really need them! He is going to get in before they get here,” I said, shaking in my pink baby ducky pajamas. My arms began to hurt under the weight of my .45.

“If he breaks in here before they get here, we are going to shoot him,” he said to the 911 operator.

“Do what you have to do to protect yourself, sir,” she said. I prayed the cops would get here before he broke in. Every time he rammed the door I watched it flex under the impact. It was all real. Life or death. Mine or his. He could break through that door any second.

The longer I waited, the more my legs shook. Suddenly, blue lights flashed through the window.

Two police officers burst from their car, drew down on the bad guy outside, and tackled him to the ground.

“They got him!” my boyfriend said watching through the peephole. The bad guy’s head was covered in blood. His head was on top of the patrol car and his hands were cuffed. He was probably drunk or on drugs.

They spoke to him for a moment.

“He says he lives here. Have you ever seen this man before,” the officer asked once they got around to us.

“I’ve never seen that man before in my life!” And we never had. He wasn’t a neighbor. I don’t know what he wanted. The officers laughed at that fact and made sure to let the bad guy know that he was about to be shot by a 4’9” girl in pink baby ducky pajamas. Then they took him back to the squad car and drove away. We never heard anything after that.

I’m grateful that they came when they did, although, I was ready to protect my family if it came to it. But I’m glad I didn’t have to. What lasted maybe thirty minutes felt like hours. I hope I’m never faced with a situation like that ever again.

I know there are a lot of people who want to ban guns, but had he gotten in my house before the police did, and had I not had a gun to protect myself, I would be dead. It’s better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it. I’m glad I had it and didn’t need it.

I laid in bed, adrenaline pumping, and exhausted. I thought about what just happened. Things could have been different. Thank God they weren’t. Thank God for dogs.

Footsteps On The Stairs

by Jenna Rowe

He used to yell
at the footsteps on the stairs.
Everything was wrong
with the footsteps on the stairs.
Out of his control
the footsteps on the stairs.
“You’re too loud” and “stop that stomping”
to the footsteps on the stairs.

Each step taken on eggshells, fragile moods like
cracking ice.
It never really was about
the footsteps on the stairs.

Soft and quiet
became the footsteps on the stairs.
Trying so hard not to be heard
were the footsteps on the stairs.

Just like that the yelling ceased. Frustration gone.
We all could hear that beautiful sound
of footsteps on the stairs.

No more eggshells,
no more cracked ice,
just the loud and happy tapping
of the footsteps on the stairs.

The tough times they taught us
they weren’t in vain
not taking it for granted
that beautiful sound
of the footsteps on the
stairs.





**A 21st Century College Education -
Chaos Disguised as Progress** by Lee O'Kelley
Pen, Paper, Digital Enhancements

Love in War by Victoria Long

Gouache Paint, Ink Pen, India Ink, Digital Enhancements



Defiance

by Ethan Johnson

Math Class was ending, but I was busy with my own calculations, adding five quarters, two dimes, and three nickels. That should be enough to play Donkey Kong all afternoon.

(Tick. Tick. Tick)
(Bing. Ring. Ring)

Everyone rushed towards the hallway exits. I ducked out of the door on the east side, away from Tony and Brian. The two meatheads who always stole my milk money. It's only because they're bigger than me. Hell, most of the girls in my grade outweighed me by thirty pounds.

By going out on this side, I have a straight shot across the ball fields towards Fancy's Franks and Pizzeria. This is where I spend all of my afternoons when I save quarters throughout the week to either play Mrs. Pac-Man or Donkey Kong. I loved the ladder. Most of the people that get their pizza and dogs don't tend to stay around to complete the full storyline of Kong. So, I don't have to wait to play. Especially on Mondays, today. Each day last week I saved a quarter so I could have five tries at the complete game. I have only gotten close to beating it once before, and it took one hour and thirty minutes of total playing time on one credit. That was three weeks ago. Bob is still number one on the high score list followed by:

-
2. Don
 3. Ben
 4. Jax - that's me.

Pushing the double doors on the east side of school I took off running full tilt toward Fancy's.

Even the teachers piled into their cars, eager to leave this abyss. As I rounded the bleachers of the soccer field a leg shot out and clipped my ankles. I flew through the air for a few moments. Then gravity kicked in. Luckily, I caught most of the fall with my face.

"Where are you going in such a rush Jackson," Tony said somewhere behind me.

"I know you still have something for us. I missed you next to your locker for the past few weeks. So, just give me everything you have, and I won't have to kick the shit out of you," Tony said, spit flying from his lips and sticking to my bruised cheeks.

"No... I have a better idea, Tony, why don't you and your idiot friend go back under those bleachers and take turns spitting on each other." The last bit was cut off from Brian's kick to my stomach. Tony swung a left hook into my right ear.

They kicked and threw their fists at my body while I covered my head and waited in silence. Tony reached his hand into my pocket and took all of my precious change. I tried to stop him, but Brian kept hitting me.

"All of that for a measly \$1.35, damn Jack. Don't be so fucking stingy next time," Tony said.

"Fuck you," I said while getting kicked and hit again.

After the second beat down, I just laid there on the ground for what felt like hours. Just trying not to think about what my dad would say.

"You should have kept your head up," or more like what he would really say, nothing.

Eventually, I could sit up a bit. No one was at school now. All of the buses were gone. The parking lot was empty. I took my backpack off and still wondered if I had any of my hidden money left. Shoving my hands in the big zipper pocket, I only pulled out old gum wrappers and crinkled papers. I rechecked my pockets and found nothing but lint.

Taking my pride with me, I stood up wobbling feeling a little woozy. Mad, I began walking home.

I turned around to see if they were waiting for me. There was a white twinkling in the grass where I was laying. Turning fully around I walked back to the spot, sure enough, there was a 1981 generic quarter worth more than .25 cents. I took off, tried to at least, running east towards Fancy's. I had a date with Kong.

The fastest route to Fancy's was to cross the ball fields, hop the perimeter fence, then jump on some wobbly, ass rocks to get to the horse field. Those fences were electrified, so they were not too bad to get through.

Instead of tip-toeing across the creek, I splashed and dashed my way across. Then I threw my back over the low voltage fence and crawled under the bottom row of wire. I didn't care who saw me or who was watching. I kept running due east, hopping the gate to the horse field, then veered right to stay fast on Windy Way Road.

This led to the crowded neighborhood that backed up to Fancy's. I would've normally walked on the sidewalk, straight through, but time was of the essence. Squeezing between homes seemed better. I ran parallel to Windy Way until the first street opened up. I didn't slow down. The blood dripping from my right ear and the constant pain from my kidneys wouldn't keep me from Kong.

After getting yelled at by multiple, responsible adults, and barking dogs, I made it to Fancy's. Once I reached the door, I felt the phantom pains from earlier and opened the door.

"Good afternoon, Jack... woah what the hell happened to you? Want me to call your folks?" said the owner of Fancy's who was behind the register already reaching for the phone.

"No... no. Please, Don, don't call them. I will go home in a minute, please." Tears were swelling in my eyes and I could feel the pressure building.

"Okay. Okay. Come have a coke and some ice cream on me," he reached behind him and opened the 50's style fridge and took a bottle of Coco-Cola, and threw a few ice cubes into a plastic baggie. He then opened the top of the coke and slid the drink toward me. Don looked into my eyes.

"Jack if you got hurt coming here then you should only come here with your parents," he said, very parent-like.

"It was just some kids earlier today on my walk to school. No need to sweat about it. Ok? Seriously. Anyway, you should've seen the other guys."

Girl With a Pearl Earing: Doodled*

by Elizabeth Myers *Graphite Pencils, Drawing Paper*

This made us both laugh which felt nice.

“Thanks for the coke, Don,” I said quietly.

“No problem, Jack.”

I took the ice pack and coke. Then I walked over to the closest table and slid the drink on it. Grabbing the ice pack with my right hand I moved it between my left elbow and rib cage. Then, I inserted my only quarter and squeezed the pack with my elbow.

The red game cabinet made its signature sound and started.



*Inspired by Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earing*, 1665

This is not the end
I am weak
But I am strong
I will not break
But I may bend

This is not where
I give up
I claw and gnash
I will Prevail

I am drowning
But I can swim
I'm sinking
The Worst
Has yet to come

I don't die
It'd be too easy
These times pass
Smile, Bite
Show Your Teeth

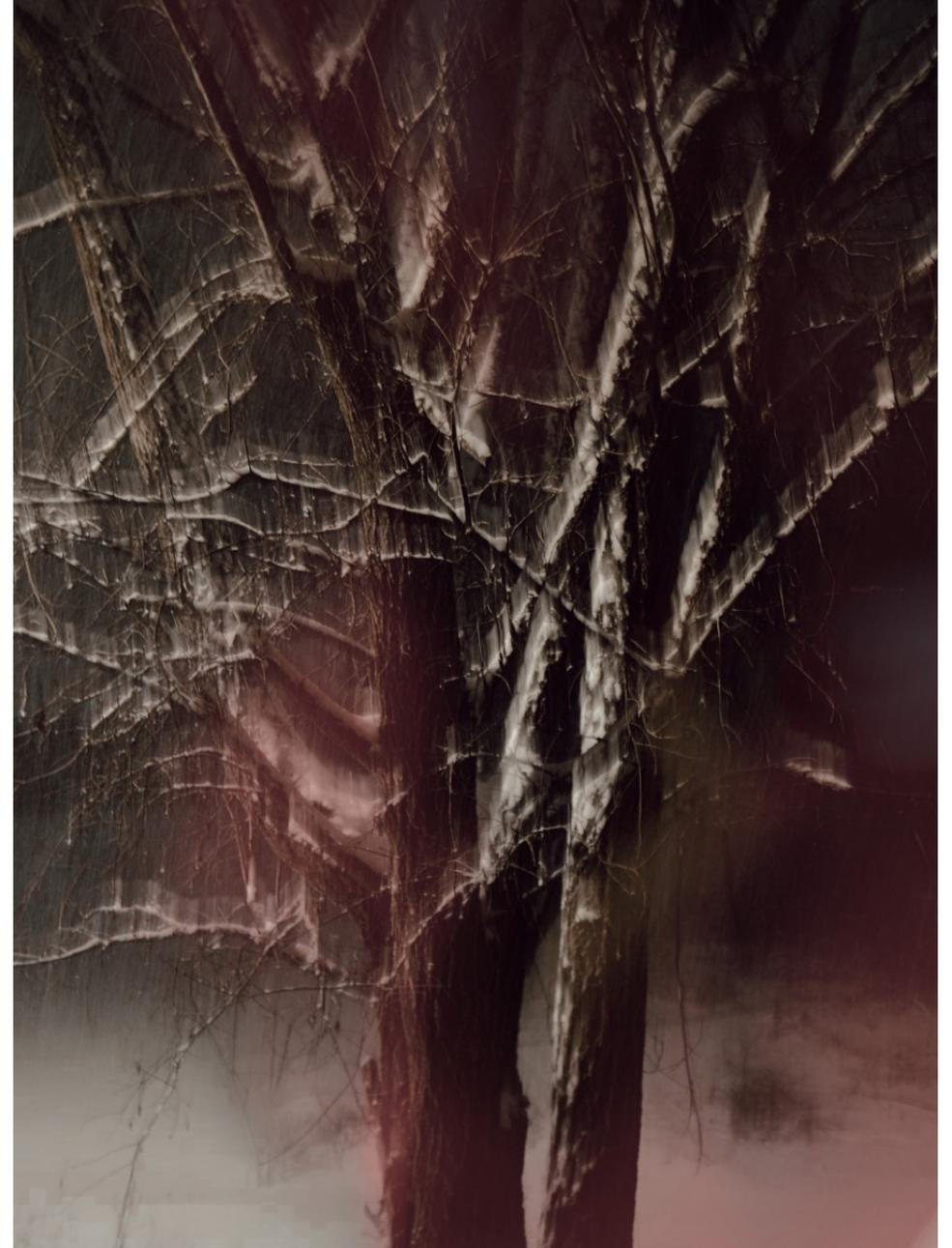


Show Your Teeth
by Melody Watson

Bare
by Carolina Cardona



Other World
by Carolina Cardona



Elixir by Victoria Long

Water Color, Ink Pen, Marker, Magazine Scraps



Chic by Victoria Long

Water Color, Ink Pen, Marker, Magazine Scraps, Sequins



Forgiveness

by Cassidy Towe

We must carry the swords of forgiveness to sever the bonds
Of hatred that has painted the streets of our nation with blood.
At first, our eyes contain the warmth of a summer dawn
Until our innocence is buried underneath several layers of mud.

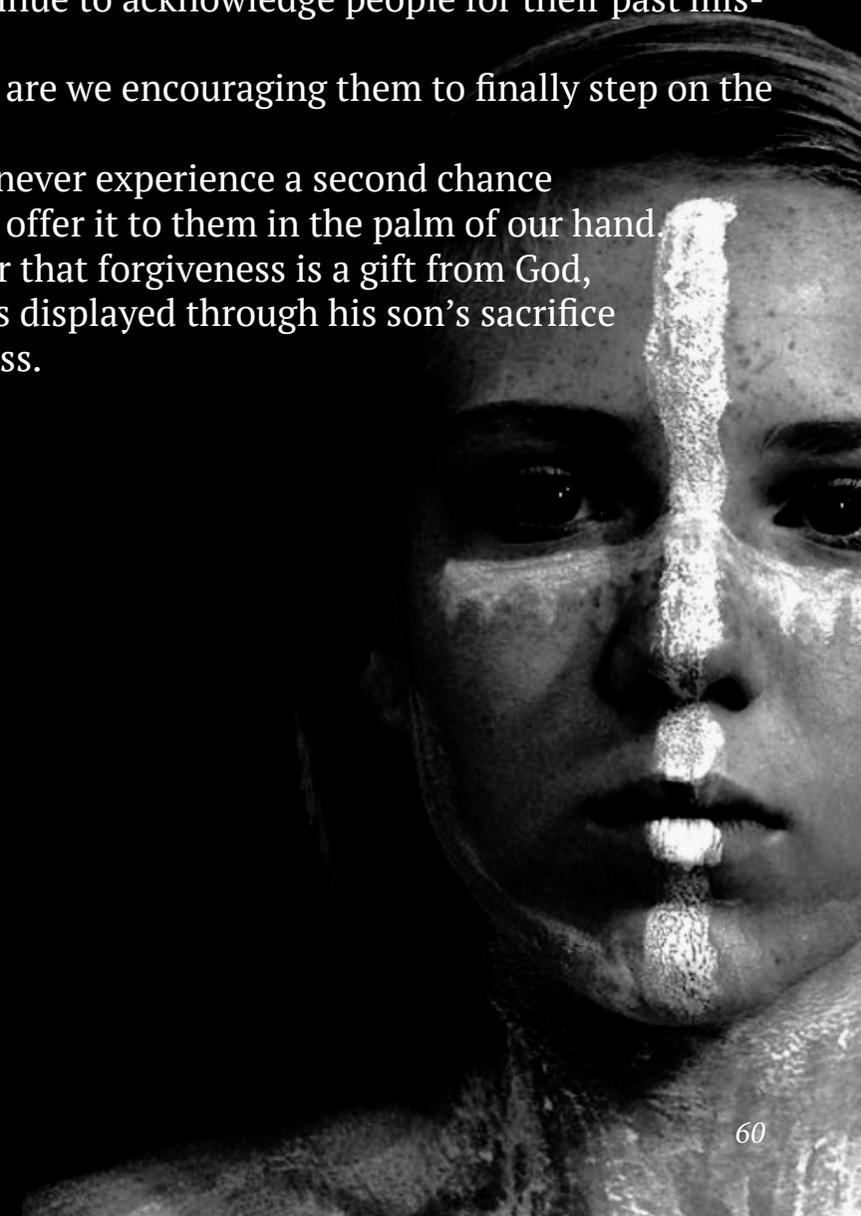
Once our hearts have been shattered like glass,
The beauty of humanity becomes memories of the past.
We spit on each other's graves,
And call our enemies names,
While the devil smiles in the background thinking, "I have won the game!"

I understand that cruelty has built a stone wall around your heart
Since your trust was fragile enough from the start.
You tell yourself, "I can't go through this again!"
Or "I can't forgive them!"
Yet, what good would it do if you just kept it all in?

Bitterness is usually seen as a silent weapon
To punish the guilty party for their transgressions.
While we live by the motto: "Words cut deep,"
Neglect haunts our dreams
Since we would rather have insults thrown at our face
Than be left alone in empty time and space.

I have felt the pain of being stabbed in the back,
Especially if you trusted them with everything you had.
But we do not know if they are facing torment as well
Or if the guilt is eating away at their every cell.
They even mask their pain with a face of hell.

If we continue to acknowledge people for their past mistakes,
Then how are we encouraging them to finally step on the brakes?
They will never experience a second chance
Unless we offer it to them in the palm of our hand.
Remember that forgiveness is a gift from God,
Which was displayed through his son's sacrifice on the cross.



Onward

*“We will move forward, we will move upwards,
and yes, we will move onward.”*

Dan Quayle

Carry On

by Nicole Shelley

Oftentimes we lose ourselves in the wake of tragedy. We think we have life under control. We think bullet-pointing every waking moment and cataloging each memory will bring us closer to personal harmony. But that's not true, is it? We realize it the moment devastation crashes down like frozen rain on our heads; we've lost control.

We let ourselves drown in the fear and inhale the depression of the situation like the sweet smoke of a citrusy cigarette. Anxieties seem magnified by one hundred under the lens of isolation. Our ugliest traits, our deepest regrets, they haunt us in the early hours of the morning when nobody can hear you scream. Our tears burn like napalm across the scarred jungle of our cheeks.

Worse yet is the numbness that follows. The agony of mere existence in the burning sun of catastrophe is enough to make you scream for nothingness, for an infinite void to devour you until all is none. Then you're granted the nothingness, and the hollowness inside you is somehow more unsettling than the plethora of pain. You'll wish for the suffering. You'll wish for any feeling at all because you can't handle the empty space inside your soul, but there is no reply.

I get it. I've lived through it. The world can't seem to take much more from our lives or our sanity.

When everything crashed down around us, despair seeped into our skin like acid rain. There's no denying that what we had can never truly be replaced. Life can't go back to the way it was before; that's just how war works. In a sense, we've all been fighting ceaselessly for the past year. There is no doubt many have seen unspeakable horrors firsthand, while others were haunted by living nightmares despite having to get up every day and continue the battle. I have nothing but respect for you, those of you who have protected us all.

Life does not end just because tragedy strikes. That's not to say we can be reckless in the middle of a minefield. We cannot give into despair. Connections grow deeper than physical contact. If you need proof, just look at the constellations. Today, we are the stars, lone specks far apart from one another yet close enough to form a picture. We are not truly alone. Our normality may temporarily be gone, but right now all we need to do is carry on.

Heavens

by Evie Herndon



Point

by Evie Herndon



Striking Scotland

by Carolina Cardona



Is That a Rabbit?

by Lee O'Kelley



That's Why I Love You

by Melody Watson

(Verse 1)

Sometimes things ain't easy to see
You make me wanna be all I can be
Better for you
Better for me too

We were made for each other
Fallin in love over and over
My fantasy
My everything

(Chorus)

That's why I love you
Everyday with you feels brand new
You make me smile
Everyday with you makes life worthwhile

Honey you are amazing
Just lookin at you makes my heart sing
Everyday, Everything, whatever you do
My happy thoughts are because of you
That's why I love you

(Verse 2)

You're always goin' the extra mile
You'd do anything to make me smile
You're beautiful
You're magical

You make me feel so Alive
Both of us somehow survive
We've seen the rain
And got through the pain

(Chorus)

That's why I love you
Everyday with you feels brand new
You make me smile
Everyday with you makes life worthwhile

Honey you are amazing
Just lookin at you makes my heart sing
Everyday, Everything, whatever you do
My happy thoughts are because of you
That's why I love you

(Bridge)

I would never give you up
You're the one i want
We've already seen our darkest hour
and here we are
Here we are

(Chorus)

That's why I love you
Everyday with you feels brand new
You make me smile

Everyday with you makes life worthwhile

Honey you are amazing
Just lookin at you makes my heart sing
Everyday, Everything, whatever you do
My happy thoughts are because of you
That's why I love you

Mr and Mrs Darcy* by Kora Grammer

Water Color Paint, Ink Pen, Water Color Paper



**Inspired by Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, 1813*

Don't

by Nicole Shelley

Why do you sit here alone at night
Staring at the sky like Icarus before the flight?
Don't treat the bottle as a ruse
To run away and hide from life's bruise.
Please—for me—don't flee
And listen to my plea:

Don't cry,
Don't cry.

The concrete is not your bed,
Nor the road a pillow for your head.
Step down from the edge, look me in the eye.
Gaze deep and ask me if I lie.
Please—for me—don't turn away
And leave me screaming in dismay:

Don't die,
Don't die.

Let me brush away your tears
And rid you of your fears.
Your burdens you will never alone bear
Because I will treat you with the greatest care.
Please—for me—listen at my behest
Because I have only one request:

Just try,
Just try.

The healing process will take a while
But soon you will be able to smile.
I will be by your side every day
Until you can easily find your way.
You fought your way through Hell
But now it's time to say farewell.

Now fly,
Now fly!

Award Winners

Each year, *Pioneer Pen* chooses two winners from the submissions received from Volunteer State Community College students. The 2021 recipients of the literary and art awards are as follows:

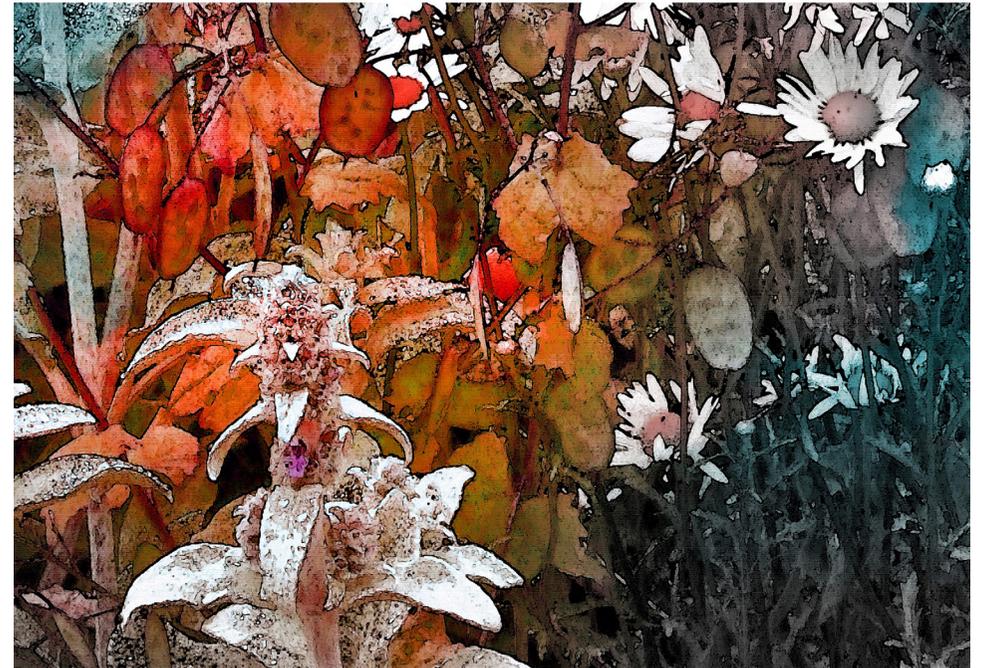
Fusion Art and Design Award

The Fusion Art and Design Award is awarded each year to a student artist who is published in *Pioneer Pen* and portrays excellent use of the elements of art and design. This year's winner is Lee O'Kelley and their picture "MME Ps GARDEN AT SUNRISE."

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 Wendy Davidson and her poem "Sing Me a Song of a Better Us."

MME Ps GARDEN AT SUNRISE by Lee O'Kelley *Fusion Art and Design Award*



Sing Me a Song of a Better Us

by Wendy Davidson *John MacDougall Literary Award*

I'm just a poor little girl
who lived in a shack
made of a cardboard box
with rags on my back.
Me and mom and Grandma
Siblings numbered three.
No, there was no space
for the concept of "me."
Catching rainwater to wash
the dishes and ourselves,
using empty crates
for drawers and shelves.
We couldn't call
the vegetables fresh or
our bellies full,
we didn't know of air-
conditioning or of
playing in a pool.
Little corn silk dolls
in the corner by the "door,"
a rusted old laundry tub
sitting on the dirt floor.
A mattress of rushes,
or maybe nothing at all.
Lying there cold,
hearing the night creatures
call.

Sometimes a scary fever,
or a frightening 'bout of flu,
After all, when there's no
doctors and no medicine,
what can you do?
Praying to a God
I'm not sure hears us,
knowing very little school
and never having seen a bus.
Are we not human?
Aren't we people, too?
Don't we dream and cry,
and laugh and bleed,
like you?
Don't we bury our dead,
With the same
hollow grief?
Do we eat when starved
with the same desperate
relief?
Do our shoulders
not bow
with the weight
of our world?
For what reason
are these insults hurled?

Do we give birth and rejoice,
Do we wish our children
to have a choice?
In what language
does the soul speak?
Our hearts grow weary,
but our spirit is not weak.
Both like you, and not,
but we're still people,
not just wind-up robots.
Sing, sing! Sing to me
of a day!
Sing to me chorus
of a better ,
more beautiful way....
A way across the span,
that divides me and you;
a way across the rift
that separates anew.
And in that song
I will see you,
and I will see me,
and I will dream
of all the wonderful
creation
the human race can be.

Contributors

ARTWORK

Elizabeth Myers
Kimberly Shields
Kora Grammer
Lee O'Kelley
Victoria Long

PHOTOGRAPHY

Carolina Cardona
Evie Herndon
Lee O'Kelley

LITERATURE

Cassidy Towe
Elizabeth Zhukov
Ethan Johnson
Hannah Levering
Melody Watson
Nicole Shelley
Timothy Rose
Wendy Davidson
Jenna Rowe

SENIOR EDITORS

Carolina Cardona
Evie Herndon
Victoria Long

ADVISORS

Emily Andrews
Laura McClister

PROMOTERS

Tiffany Zwart
TheSettler.Online



2022 SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Volunteer State Community College students interested in being featured in the 2022 edition of *Pioneer Pen* should submit art, photography, poetry, short stories, fiction, cartoons, short films, animation, and excerpts from longer creative works to pioneer.pen@volstate.edu by March 2, 2022.

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 a 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 615-230-3200

Class information: ENGL 209P (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 the 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 receiving institution. This course is collegiate level work but has been developed within a purpose, other than being university parallel course. Prerequisites: Permission of Instructor. Credits: 1-3

For more information, contact *Pioneer Pen*, Professor Emily Andrews and Professor Laura McClister.

