

THE CATALYST

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The Catalyst is a student-run creative journal of the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse English Club publishing prose, poetry, photography, art, music, and all other creative works by the students and faculty of UWL.

A few words of Thanks:

To Professor William Stobb, once again, for keeping us together, being patient with us, and making the publication of *The Catalyst* possible. Seriously, we probably couldn't have pulled it off without you man.

To our contributors, each and every one of you, for having the courage to put your work out there for all to see. As authors and artists ourselves, we get it—it's not an easy thing to do.

And to *you*, yeah *you*—the second person “you”, for reading this journal. After all, what's art without anyone to enjoy it?

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The Catalyst

Jack Bringe | Cowboys and Indians

Children gather, their faces radish red, eager for play
The sun baked the leaves, boiled the streams, and cast shadows
Of golden eagles soaring overhead, watching intently
Your friend stands up, power all to him, and declares war;
We'll be Cowboys, he says with joy, picking the strongest
You'll be the Indians, and you make do – you must...

You climb your backyard Everest of green, so tall
Huddle tight and make your plan, protect your hill, your home
Feel the earth under you, the air around you, the spirit in you
You laugh with your kin, sit idle, finger-dig dirt, then!
An eagle feather! catching your gaze, glowing,
Majestic, place it in your hair, whispered the wind

Be it Sioux, Seminole, Salteaux or snow
All is one in your little mind, and you feel it
That golden feather in your hair, the imaginary red paint on your face
A thousand lives live within you, your eyes become their eyes
But cyclonic time tears the same paths, so grab your sticks
For the Cowboys and their cobra black lassos are coming – There!

Swift flashes of fierce wranglers, like great wolves in packs
Running through bushes and surrounding you whole, trapped
You watch their stinging, white eyes as they smile and scream
They fling rocks, hurl fists at your face, fabricate rules in name of victory
Common ground turned cold, and you're bloodied and defeated,
Watching heaven become hell, home become lost

The sun falls behind the earth, trees once green are now black,
And sitting there, nose broken and bloody, you feel it
The pity, the emptiness. Not fair, spoken softly as tears form in your eyes
The feather is gone, and so you cry. That was my hill, it truly was
Only a game, so says your friend, fist covered in your red, bison blood
Then mom calls for dinner, and the soaring eagles remember

They've seen it before, this childish 'game'...

Marcus Bunkowski | In Memoriam

My father's house was old and derelict. Vines were slowly creeping up the cracked and pale siding. Cobwebs clung to the top windows on the upper floor, visible from the wet due in the morning sun. The garage door was open, exposing my father's workspace to the countryside. The pungent fumes of gasoline invaded my nostrils. He liked to fix cars, my father. He liked to tinker, to manipulate, to control. I recalled the long hours standing beside him, waiting with a tool in hand, ready for his command to hand it over to him. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, dangerously close to falling out. I remember there was a can of gasoline lying next to the car.

"Dad," I had asked him, "Won't the garage catch on fire if your cigarette falls out?"

He spared me one glance, pausing his work only for a second. His shirtless, pudgy body gleaming with sweat and his mustache drooping to his cheeks. He looked away again and resumed tinkering. With cigarette in mouth, he replied. "Don't be such a pussy Tommy."

Today, I was in charge of putting price tags on things in the house for the estate sale we were to do of my Father's belongings. The car he had been working on now was still in the garage. The one from that memory was long gone, likely totaled in a ditch somewhere. This was a rusty red corvette. Sitting beside it was a gas can and a cigarette butt. I stared for a few moments at the ashes upon the concrete floor. I jerked myself out of my stupor, scoffed, and headed inside. Someone else would have to figure out what that thing was worth. I never learned much about cars.

The inside was much the same of the outside. A chipped white table stood in the middle of the disheveled kitchen, slanting slightly to the left. Dirty dishes sat in the sink. The smell of decaying food filled the room. I spent many long nights at that table, waiting for my father to come home with dinner, only for him to stumble in, demanding to know where his food was. I stuck a \$20 sticker on the table.

A slight buzzing pervaded my ear as a fly had found a new visitor to the house. It flew happily around my head, eager for another meal, of which it had been so neglected. I swatted away at it annoyingly, but it only returned a few seconds later. It followed me as I made my way to the living room.

The dull hum of electronics permeated the widowed room; it's only regular occupant dead of a heart attack almost a week ago. The only chair in the room stood a few feet away from the box T.V. The tray my father used to hold his T.V dinners still stood in front of it, an empty container currently occupying its surface. From the faint smell it gave off, it had been chicken soup. I recalled late nights sitting on the aged, green carpet. We never had another chair. I could have a chair when I can buy a chair, my father had told me. He would eat his food, watch his football, and drink his beer; and when his beer was out, he would tell his son to go and grab him another. And I would. Eventually, I would go on to buy a chair. Except that chair was on a train, and that train took me far, far away. I stuck a \$40 sticker on the T.V and made my way to my father's room.

The door hinges creaked slightly as I pushed open the door. The fly was still following me, and I swatted at it again. The carpet in here was the same, faded, ugly green. The bed stood in front of a grimy, cracked window. A night table and a dresser were all that adorned my father's room. The night table held an old can of beer and nothing else.

I turned my head to the dresser and had a slight surprise. Sitting atop the dusty surface, was my childhood teddy bear. Mr. Wilkins, I had called him. I can't seem to remember why. A rather silly name for a child to give a teddy bear. He was just as I remembered him. His brown fur slightly matted from all the times I had slept with him, and his faded red bow tie clasped around his neck. I crossed the room and picked him up, a few tears blurring my vision. After a few moments, I set him down and stuck a \$5 sticker onto him. I left my father's room, the fly still buzzing in my ear.

Sophie Byrne | Thoughts of Autumn

My friend who loves fall once told me that yellow is supposed to encourage feelings of happiness. I marveled at this revelation not for a lack of belief, but for a genuine inability to relate to my own personal experience. In recent years, autumn has been the forebearer to a great deal of my own sadness. It's true that our lived experiences consist of seasons just like the climate does...and human brains can be simple. Certain neural pathways become familiar, beaten down by the footfalls of our memory just like deer trails in a dense wood. It doesn't take too many repetitions of a certain phenomenon, reinforcements of a certain feeling, frequent misfortunes, before you (all at once) find yourself fleeing from even the whisper of a fall breeze or the flapping of a migratory bird's cyclical retreat.

It was weightless before the fall. It was when I was still saturated in sunlight, still soaking in the balmy night air of June, still happily suffocated by sweet summer scents, that I learned what it meant to live lightly on the earth. I think (and I say "I think" because it does feel unsure, like a blooming cosmos failing to hold against the booming bluster of a mid-afternoon wind in August), I think it was that in-between, that hazy, half-life hour between five and six when I unlocked my ability to fully immerse myself in the beauty of the fleeting moment. Most of my summer days were brimful with the unique joy that only comes from not looking back, and especially from not looking forward. But the seasons are fleeting just like moments are, and I watched the three red maples between mine and my neighbor's drive blur from tree-frog green into dandelion yellow into Oriole orange into sunburn pink into coneflower crimson—as fall flew by.

Fall, with the flutter of dehydrated foliage and textbook pages.

Fall, with the fatal decline of sunshine.

Fall, with the days that fold into one another just as I now fold into myself.



Josie Dechant | Untitled

Aidan Donahue | Customer Service Love Story

I thought I once heard you through
the static crackle of a drive-thru
microphone, but now we're face to face.
Your hat said Vietnam Vet and
your bumper voted Biden. You felt
we always forgo the bacon on your sandwich,
but you keep coming back
because the soda's a buck.
I was young enough for you to feel fatherly then,
filled with a need to please far beyond customer service
so I offered freebies or a refund
but you refused; gave me a phone number
to verbally berate my boss. You said
your name was Cruz: "like that asshole
senator that leaves his folk to freeze."
I was fairly freezing myself.

I left a note for them to phone you
stuck to the office computer.
They said they tried but couldn't find you.
I felt the green post-it focus on me
whenever I walked into the room, like
you had fastened yourself
into the far end, but February fell away
and after a few weeks of following me
you came back for more.

I found you
through the window, almost forced
the bag into your palms. You complained
we never called, but it was too far
gone to fret over. "No hard feelings,"
You said as if it were fortunate
for me. You stood me out in the freezing
cold for nothing, forced yourself onto
a post-it I now regarded with fear.
Yes hard feelings.

Now February's fully out of my
thoughts but I still think
of you whenever I mix a McFlurry.
Then one day I find your order
within the rest of the food.
Two Bacon McDoubles, a Diet Coke,
and your favorite ice cream.
I force myself forward toward the window to face you.
I fish for a smile and fill myself
with the essence of customer service.
But you ignore me.
You barely glare as I fumble
the bag into your hands, driving off
without saying a word.
You who filled my thoughts
and you who I felt in every routine
as my body remembered the freezing February air
with that much effort it's only fair to say:

I loved you Mr. Cruz, and you forgot me.



Josie Dechant | Untitled

Veronica Eilers | Spinning

A lamp turns on
With yellow light spilling across
The chair legs and worn rug
The space comes alive
With the crackle
Of the speaker
And the hum of your voice asking

What song do you want to hear?
The record goes on spinning
And a spark of light
Flickers across your nose

Two bodies now
Side by side
An arm reaches to flip the record
A knee bends to move closer
Take a hit
And pass it
A new idea
A stream of smoke
A shy glance of fingers

You can stay right here – if you like--
Your shoulder can keep touching mine
Your knee can keep resting there

I can feel your breath
As you turn to murmur
Something near my ear
And it moves the hair along my temple
I can feel your eyes on me
Eyes that follow
My every movement
I can feel my body
Relaxing into your soft
Subtle touches
And the warm, liquid feeling
That unfurls in my chest
From the quiet melody
And your presence

I love the golden, syrupy light
That envelopes us
I love the scratch
Of the record needle
And your voice
As you tell me
About the music
That trickles through the air

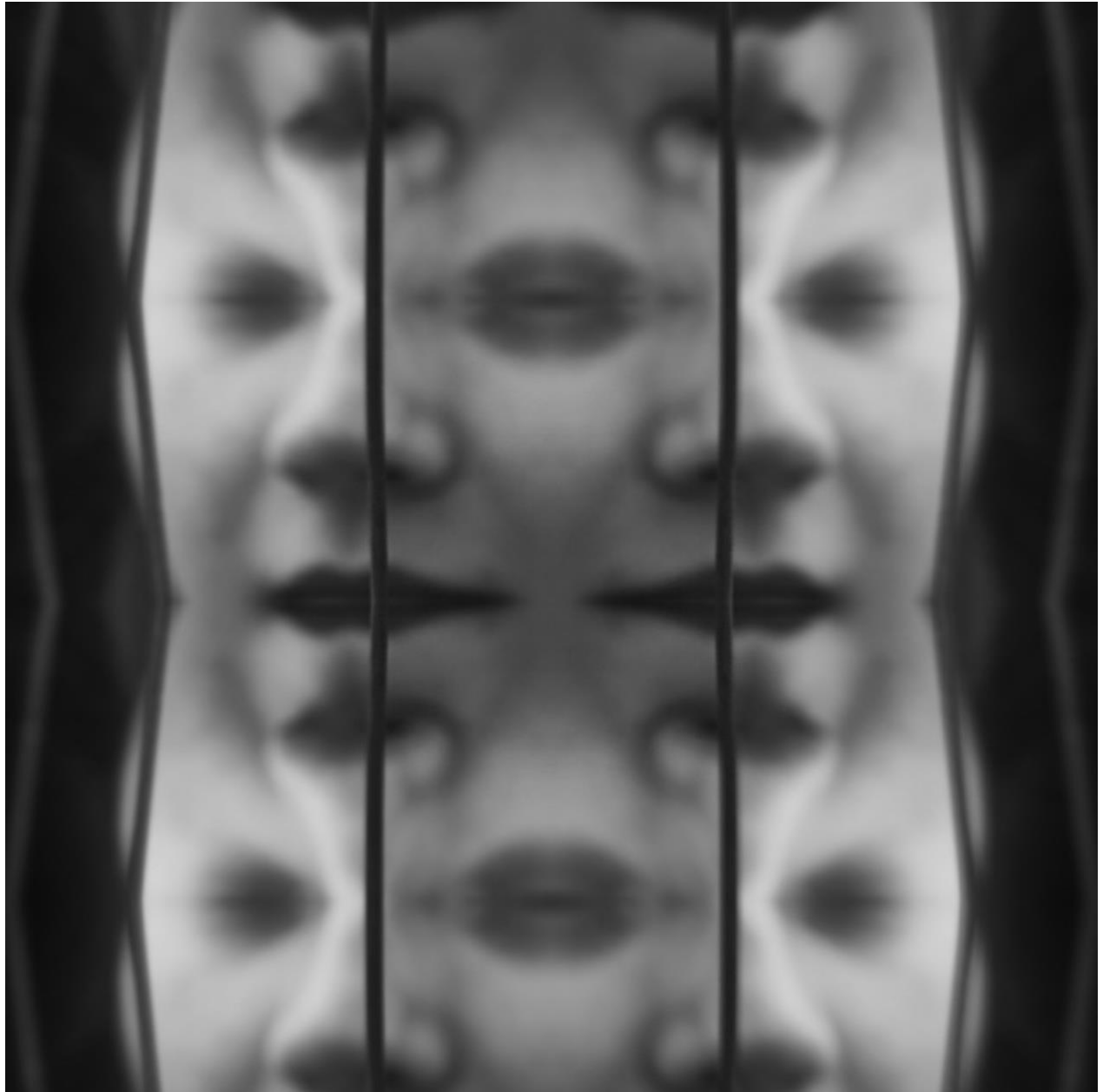
My eyes close
And I feel you lean in and
Finally
Finally
Feel your lips brush
Against mine
Slowly I open them again
To see your blue eyes
Smiling into mine
Your arm pressed to my arm
My thoughts connecting to yours
And the record still spinning



Josie Dechant | Untitled

Veronica Eilers | That Perfect Song

I remember walking through
The early morning
After a night of heavy drinking
And heavy snowfall
The sky was barely lightening
Into a soft lilac hue
As the streetlights
Reflected off the snow
And my headphones gave me the most
Perfect song - it was mine and mine alone
I felt a warmth curl through my body
And shivered in my bulky coat
There was a rightness in that moment
As my feet softly made their
Way along the pavement
And a sense of belonging
As the first few notes
Slipped into my ears
The world slept on
And I was woven and wrapped
Into the ebbing sound waves
And the biting air
I felt as if I could fly or fall in love
As I quietly snuck
Through the frost covered streets
And later I looked and looked
Through album after album
Searching for that song
And it wasn't until later
That I realized what I thought
Had been the song
Was actually the
Early morning air
The silence of the street
The falling of the snow
And the sweet realization
That that moment would
Never come again



Josie Dechant | Untitled

Noah Gassman | Anthropocene

he takes his daughter

rabbit hunting
and turnip planting.

she asks him why
he says it might help
he says it's good to know.

he doesn't answer why
that would take too much
take much too long and
do nothing but scare her.

he doesn't say how scared he is
that she'll watch it all fall apart or
see death more often than the postlady.

but at least she knows how to plant
and hunt and hopefully that's enough.

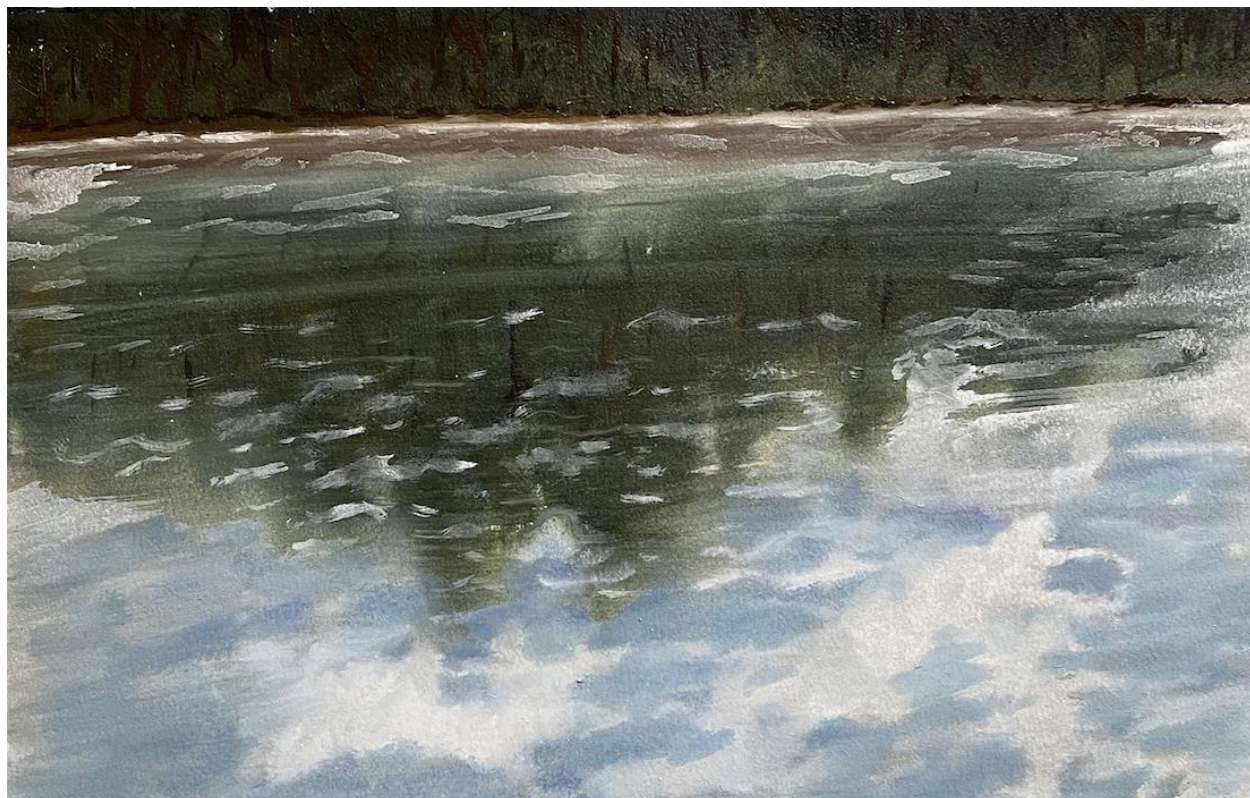
instead, he tells her he Loves her



Josie Dechant | Untitled

Noah Gassman | Madison

One day, we walked around
The marsh and it was hot
And sticky and the sun was dripping
And it was honeymoon
And it was beautiful
And it was perfect
And we didn't care.



Madison Vaillant | Reflections

Oliveferd Graham | ghost orbs and mac n' cheese

lots of bleary memories jack hammered to shit
by mental anguish and debilitation
but something i can remember
is a day with you

we wanted to go to waffle house
except those evil mythic places
exist somewhere that we don't

we drove two hours
to the international house of pancakes instead
but my sore black tires
spinning down the broken interstate
had other plans

the tourist traps were hounding us
for only five measly dollars to see
the secrets of the white house
solve ancient mayan mysteries
or ride a boat down a stinking river
but i was fixated your warped curls blending with the sky

we skipped smooth little stones in between bites of a hangover
i wanted to dive in the river
allow the filthy putrid water to envelope me
but you wouldn't let me
you always know how to keep me alive

we boarded a black trolley in the middle of the night
and bonded over mistaken identities and false perceptions
in pubs and bars, ghosts of dead girls and broken people
stared back in the reflection of the grimy mirror

in a graveyard we found proof of god
the afterlife, and a few things in between
the good green orbs circled our heads like crowns
in the dead dusk air
the cold lips of autumn kissed the backs of our necks

we kissed too
next to the bed of a murder victim
i hope he didn't mind

then we became the night
taking just barely a hint
of memories and the dead
with us

down the broken interstate
the inside of the car is warm
your hand is in mine
my heart beating with yours
the passing headlights seared this memory in my brain
and your voice singing along
with my favorite songs
replays every day



Katie Erdahl | Morris Hall No. 1

Oliveferd Graham | gender is a stage and i am dying on it

there is a time and a place
for a boy to dress as a girl

we dance along the poppy fields
until we are whipped and called devils

we are horrible with our
snake tails
goat horns

sometimes grown men shoot us with their guns
and it is all for fun



Katie Erdahl | The City of La Crosse from the Radisson No. 1

Angela Henrickson | two women

like a devoted disciple, *I* pray.

I pray to strands of soft blonde hair tickling the nape of my neck as she whispers in my ear, come closer

I pray to the sweet taste of her lips on mine as salivating secrets are shared

I pray to sweaty, interlaced fingers and a hot grip that becomes tighter, tighter...

my god is a pink ocean perfectly placed between trembling thighs, and devoted—*I* pray.



Katie Erdahl | Chaos

You liked the stars, always telling me that no matter where we are, the stars above our minuscule heads in this large world keep us together—that we are always under the same stars. Someday, we would join the stars together, and then we would be inseparable.

You liked stoplights, the free-standing ones at night that would illuminate a bright red through the blue tint surrounding the depth of your eyes. You would scream out bursts of laughter when the light turned green, squeezing my hand with each of the three counts. I would joke around and call it luck, or maybe it was something else quite inexplicable. The stoplights were yours, the seat next to you was mine. The initials carved into your beat-up dash with your grandma's old house key made sure of it.

We are taught at an early age that red signals to stop, and green signals to go. To you, it was always so much more than that—beauty within pain, and a soul within a physical entity. It was never just red and green to you, even if it was to me.

I do not like stoplights. At least when they turn green, and the rusted, beat down, California blue SUV mistakes the burnt illuminating red for a bright green. Perhaps among the impact this SUV was searching for the blue in your eyes, too. The colors you always used to love, I could never see them like you did, I chose to see the blue in your eyes, and the stars above our heads. I do not like stoplights, and a vastly different but so similar California blue seems to follow me everywhere, too.

The stars have been shining brighter lately, and sometimes when I look up, I see a light twinkle three times, and I realize that California blue has some beauty in it after all.



Reilly Keyes | Last of the Marigolds



Reilly Keyes | Marigolds

Tori Kafkas | 12:00

On days where the clouds are pale-white and fluffy
they seem to move slower
The overwhelming,
dark,
mysterious clouds are the ones that move fast.

Watching them makes me dizzy,
Trying to understand the force that keeps me grounded,
Rather than joining them.

They are moving slowly today,
Tomorrow they will be moving fast.

My neighbor walks his dog at 12:00
Every day.
Every day,
I watch him, the clouds don't seem to concern the
inner workings of his being.



Jonathan LeGault | 1

Cait McReavy | this is not a love poem

I would buy you Neptune, if I had the pocket change,
But all of my trinkets are buried under couch cushions,
And I couldn't sell my right kidney for full market value.
The guy behind the Eastside Costco drives an awfully hard bargain.
Perhaps you would prefer that I buy you a more temperate climate than Neptune? The
moon, maybe, but I think that's only a rental.
And I spent my last pay check on 2,000 bags of brown rice,
So I could fill up my pool with them.
So forget what I said about the moon.
You might be wondering why I did that,
Bought so many bags of brown rice, I mean.
Well you said once that you'd like to eat it more,
And it's all I've thought about since.
Every time you get a new freckle, I gain a new religion.
I like to imagine sometimes that we're the last two people on Earth,
Except there's still people to pave the roads,
And other things like that.
Look I'm really sorry I bought so much rice,
But it's because I couldn't afford to buy you Neptune,
So would you like to go swimming?



Jonathan LeGault | Gary

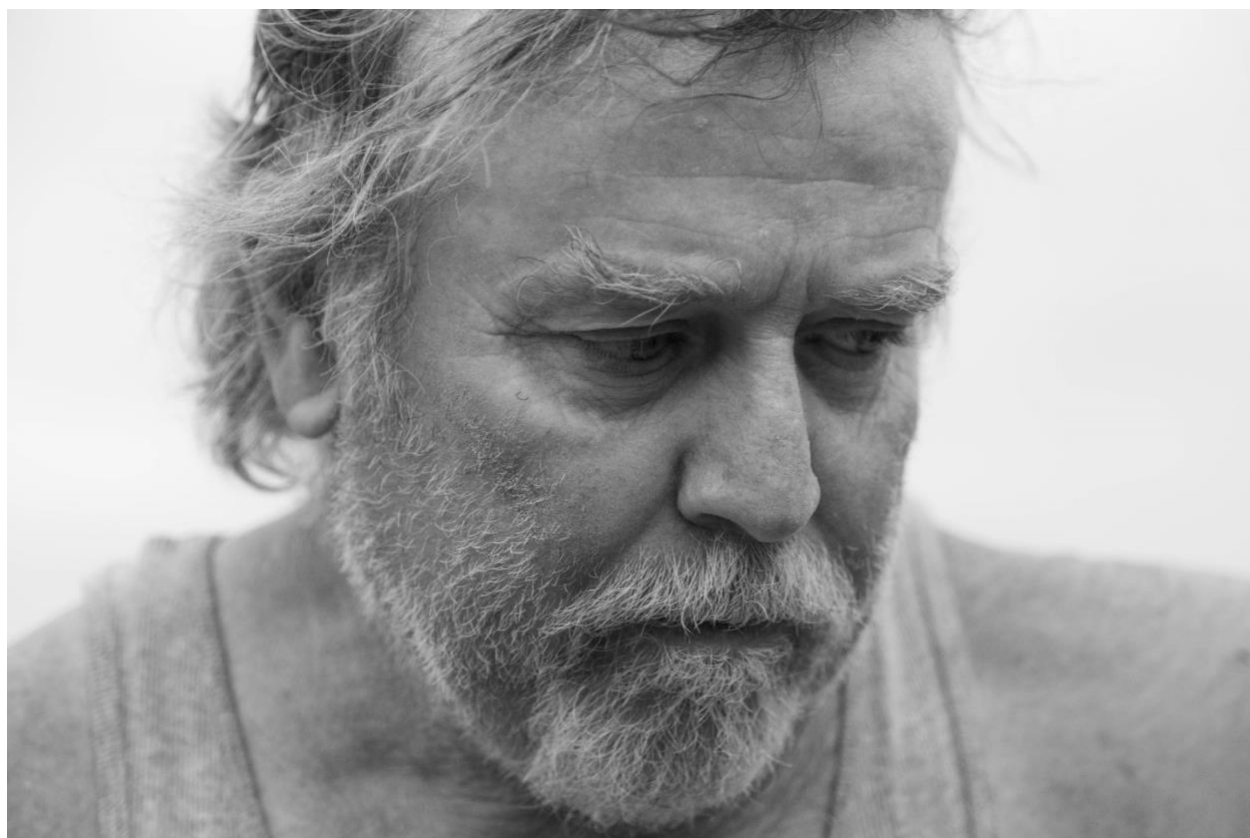
Cait McReavy | grocery store thoughts

It occurs to you while in line at the grocery store,
that maybe your heart beats slower than everyone else's.
Not so slow that it would cause issues,
or raise the suspicions of a cardiologist.
Just one or two beats beyond standard tempo.
You put your hand on your chest
and lean against the cart.
Bah-dum ba-dum.
If your heart beats slower,
do you love slower?
Do you have 2% less oxygen?
Is that why you failed swimming lessons in PE?

The line moves up half a patron.
You have been queuing for maybe four-hundred years.
You wonder if everyone sees blue the same.
You look down at the milk label:
it is your grandmother's teapot,
the water in Cancun on July 27th,
the sigh of Earth as it kisses the aether,
Sierra Cortez's hair in sixth grade.
If you died tomorrow and they named the milk-label-color after you;
(In Memorium);
Would every person who loved you mourn you in different shades?

You take out your credit card.
Ba-dum ba-dum.
You wonder whatever happened to Sierra Cortez.
Ba-dum ba-dum.
If your heart is beating slower, does that mean—

"Paper or plastic?"



Jonathan LeGault | Sean

Garrett Olson | The Noise in Silence

The small grinding noises from the coffee maker slowly coaxed me from sleep. The sun hadn't even greeted me through the screen door yet, and the midnight chill was yet to subside. I had been so eager to fish the night before.

"Christ Garrett, if you sleep any longer it's gonna get dark on us," Grandpa said with a grin on his face.

His dog, Lady, looked at me with an eyebrow raised like a sibling who was taking mom's side of the argument.

"Pretty sure it's already dark on us Grandpa," I challenged. He let out a big laugh laced with an edge of seriousness.

His facial expressions never failed to convey true emotion. Like one of those stock images on google if you searched "happiness." The reaction he gave me now was no different. I was granted far more leeway than any fishing client, but I knew we were still on a schedule. I rolled hastily from the futon that preserved the little warmth I had left that early in the morning. Grandpa had lunch packed and was working on loading the nightcrawlers into the bait cooler. Off we went.

Grandpa had been a fishing guide on the Mississippi for over twenty-five years; the dealership had even plastered their logo onto both sides of his boat. Every fisherman waved to him across the channel like a long-lost brother. I always tried to make out all the different faces from the bow, but there had to be hundreds. The sun showed on his face in intricately detailed wrinkles. A thick brown mustache stood stiff in the wind. His skin tone probably grew three shades lighter when he took off his hat, but I'm not sure if he ever did. In a sport as unpredictable as fishing, it was my grandpa's predictability that was bound to reign superior. I hoped today wasn't the exception.

The boat glided across the water and the wind tore at my face. Early morning rides were always cold, but the weather was beautiful and the river was glass. Plus, I always felt more powerful than the typical pre-teen in those moments. I let myself ignore the cold in hopes I wouldn't miss out on any action. The fog glimmered in the sun and left a layer of condensation on everything it touched—something I hadn't learned to appreciate quite yet. Tears from the wind streamed down my face by the time we rounded the bend onto the first wing dam. The boat came to a halt and the wake that followed finally caught up—a signal for the required patience that ensued.

I was never patient.

In all the ways that my grandpa and I were similar, in this way we weren't. I had little bald spots on the sides of my head as a child because I ripped out my hair trying to do my homework. I always thought that Grandpa's bald spots were probably from overhearing me trying to do it. Cussing, shrieking, and crumbling to the ground were all on the table. In fact, they were most likely on the itinerary for the next school night. I was consumed with the notion that everything had to be perfect. It was in fact, perfect—a perfect hell for myself and most that were close to me. But even if I had put him through all that commotion, he wouldn't have said a word. He set me up a pole as I yawned and tried to make out the words that were graffitied on the passing trains. I casted out the back as he did from the front, and we sat in silence. I tried my best to focus on the bounce in my rod.

I set down my pole after about ten minutes to watch it from my seat, just like I usually did. Grandpa set the hook on a walleye with his left hand, cigarette in his right. "They're in here, and ya ain't gonna catch 'em bare handed!" he said. I sighed and picked my pole back up.

My gaze redirected to the rod as I fantasized about how many bullfrogs I would net upon our return. I don't remember how much time had passed, but it felt like an eternity. I had watched my grandpa pull a handful of walleye and a couple "sheephead", or freshwater drum, out of this spot by now. I hadn't caught a damn thing. Frustration overtook me as I reeled up and set down my pole to snack on the last couple Snicker Bars. A temporary distraction.

Please God tell me we're almost done for the day.

Grandpa didn't even have a radio in his boat. We hit the water before the birds sang. We never met up with other boats to talk about our catch. It was so quiet that I could feel the thoughts banging on my temples until finally a headache would erupt. Like fostering a sleeping infant that was never there. *What could he possibly be thinking about?*

Hunched over an ungodly amount of chocolate, I thought up a question. "Hey grandpa, what's the craziest thing you've ever caught?"

"Pulled up a steel toe boot once," he remarked.

"Did you keep it?"

"No, I didn't. Tried all day to catch the other one. Never did, so I had to throw it back."

He followed with a big, gravelly laugh. The unmistakable kind that only a handful of people ever heard. I don't remember much more about that day other than the fact that I did end up catching some fish. Maybe just enough to help me roll off the futon the next morning.

Slivers of noise to break the ages of silence. You never know what you're going to catch, after all.

But it was just so *quiet*.

I loved *catching* fish, but I was no fisherman. I needed the noise—lived in it until it was too much. Until I woke up in place that had one-way glass windows and paper bedding. Where I had to be saved from my own intentions. And let me tell you, the distant conversations of social workers with my name on their tongues was much worse than the whisper of bait hitting the water. But that was three years ago, and today there's still noise. Noise that's no longer so loud. I guess I finally realized what Grandpa had been thinking about, and he wasn't really thinking at all.

This morning I breathed in the sunlight through my real window. I stood with every tree that peered through the fog, and I placed every bird's song gently on my ears. I made peace with my thoughts as they floated behind my temples. I don't catch too many fish these days, but I'm a little bit better fisherman.

I think I'll go down to the river today.



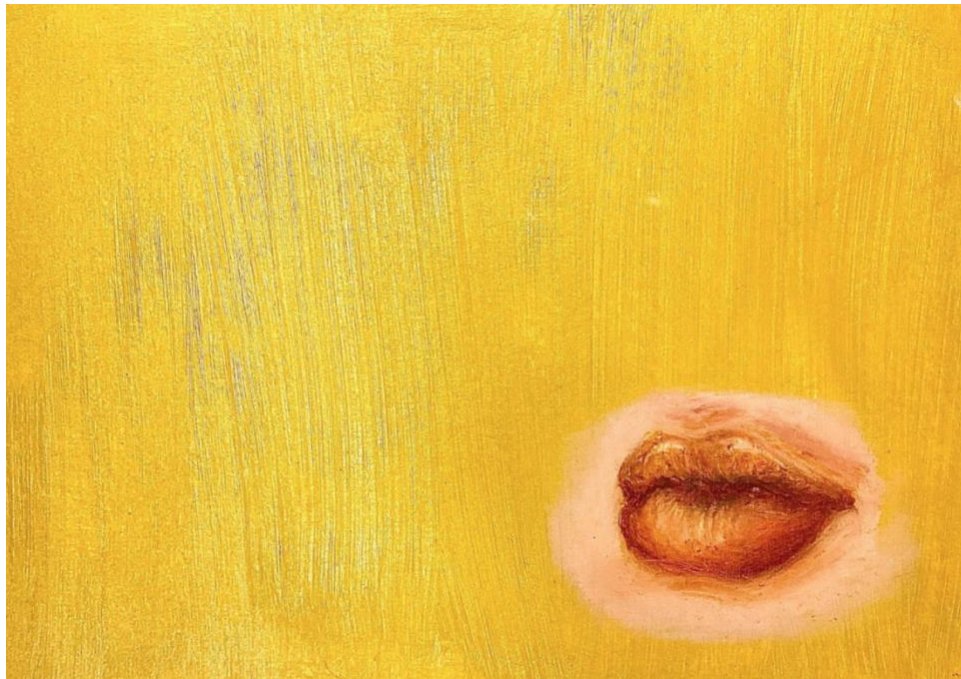
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Kenzie O'Shea | Hugo

Brevin Persike | Marshland Ecology

Sometimes I feel like I'm floating. Things happen around me, seasons change, people come and go, but I stay still. Maybe I waver a bit, like the last leaf clinging to a great old oak tree. But I don't feel tethered in that way. The leaves around me twirl and dance downward slowly with the wind until they reach the earthy floor, but I'm stuck here in space fluttering.

In the winter, the marsh freezes over. It's cold and quiet and the wind picks up the snow and sends it whistling across my face and it hurts. I feel empty in the winter. The sun beats down on this vast wetland; deer pick at the remaining leaves on the shrubbery, but it's otherwise quiet. A skunk walks along the shore leaving its tiny handprints in the fresh snow only for a moment before the wind covers them up. I wonder if it ever gets lonely.

In the spring I want something more. The thawing ice brings life back to the wetlands. The smells of fermentation, of mud, of preservation and decomposition storm through the trails. Robins bring worms to the nest in the early, dewy mornings; fawns test their unstable legs; mother foxes patrol the coasts to bring anything back for their kits. I feel an empty yearning in the spring – for what, I cannot be sure. And then the flooding. The trails flood, the water rises and the wetlands push me away, keep me out. And I long to be there, surrounded by the trees and the beavers and the geese.

Long days of summer never end. The sun beats down and I could stay here forever, reading under the great old oak. Sit with me a while, I think. I would tell him to sit with me again, like we used to. The willow's limbs and leaves sway with the somber wind. The water barely moves. I feel like I am somewhere else, somewhere where the water is thick and muddy, and the tide is out. And I can smell it – I can smell the low tide even from here: decay.

I watch his feet press into the snow as we walk – the first snow of the year. His boots squeak as they leave their indents in the path. I like the shape of the sole of his boots, the print it leaves behind. He purposely walks over the tracks of the animals that have gone by before him, including our dog, Rufus. I've never said anything, but it does annoy me. Sometimes he walks over fox tracks or fresh turkey tracks. They're so delicate and purposeful, and then I watch his foot press ungratefully over the top of them. There's no use being upset about it. The wind would push other particles of snow over the top eventually. Or maybe Rufus would walk on them or roll on them or lick them, and if not, somebody else would go and destroy the tracks.

We walk in silence, like we do every Sunday morning. We walk through the cemetery, heads bowed respectfully, even if we are the only people in the vicinity – though often we aren't. Often there are teenagers or college kids smoking marijuana in

the cemetery. We let them be. We slowly weave our way between the gravestones, and I watch the last few leaves clinging to their respective branches, their will to hold on dwindling with each gust of wind pushing past from the river or the valley or the marsh. But the leaves, at least the ones I have my eye on, hold steady for now. I'll look for them again in a week.

But they'll probably be gone by then, and I might be too. Not physically I suppose, but mentally. I haven't given much thought to it. In fact, this is the first time I've really thought about it at all since they offered me the position. I said I'd get back to them by Wednesday. I said, I'd consider it, and I thanked them repeatedly for the offer. We haven't talked about it. I haven't told him about it. Minneapolis isn't so far. I'll miss the weekly walk. Though, I could probably come back and walk on the weekends. Maybe I could do research on locks six, seven and eight. Maybe I could investigate erosion patterns in the Driftless Region. Maybe I could fix the culverts and the drainage systems of the wetlands.

If not, I could find a different park and cemetery to walk through.

We rest at the park at the end of the cemetery, wipe off a bench and look out over the bluffs, the trails. There are a few people wearing orange vests down on the path. They walk slowly and look at leaves of the local flora. I feel like we could be just like them in the future, twenty or thirty years from now. From our bench at the top of the hill by the park and the cemetery, we watch for otters and beavers and deer. I do, anyways. I'm not sure what he looks for. I don't see anything out there today. Birds. There are a lot of small birds hopping between branches in the distance. Wrens, nuthatches, chickadees and things of the sort, I suppose.

The sound of the empty swings moving back and forth with the wind distracts me. I think about whether or not I ever wanted children. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I did.

Today is a day that I did want children, but don't currently want children.

"Did you ever imagine having kids and taking them to the park?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says.

"Me too."

We've been together seven years. We call each other partner; not like 'howdy partner,' but as in: My partner plays guitar quite a lot – he really enjoys playing guitar. Or: My partner is a reading specialist at the elementary school down at the south end of town. He does the same. He'll say things like: My partner knows all about trees and nature and plants. Or: My partner is really interested in the beginning of things. I've heard him say that before. I didn't know what it meant, so I asked him. He told me he

meant that I like to know what happens at the start of books or movies or human existence. As in: My partner likes history but is also curious about what comes next. I smiled when he explained himself. It seemed such a unique thing to know about me, true or not.

He kicks at the snow beneath his feet and pushes it away from the cement slab under the bench. “Ah,” he says. Rufus brings him a stick and they pull back and forth for a while before Rufus gives up, then he throws it down the hill and tells Rufus to go get it. Rufus obeys.

I wonder why we never talked about having children. I wonder if, when he said he imagined having kids, he meant that he imagines or if it was strictly past tense. I wonder if he ever questions whether I want or wanted children.

The wind picks up and he shivers. He stands without saying anything, flattens his jacket against his chest and stretches his arms. Then he offers me a hand to help up off the bench. I take it.

We head slowly, stiffly to the mouth of the marsh.

“You okay?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, I’m good. A bit tired, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

He doesn’t pick up his feet as we walk, leaving one continuous trail behind him as he shuffles through the shallow bits of snow. Rufus, like me, is interested in the leaves and the scents of marsh. The smells are always a bit subdued when things finally start to freeze over.

“What do you think about when we walk?” I ask him.

“Right now? I’m thinking about the Packer game – how the defense is gonna hold up against the run, that kind of thing. Sometimes I think about work. The best ways to help Julian and Jamie with their comprehension. Or music. I guess a lot of the time I just play songs in my head and kind of zone out.”

“Ah, right. Yeah, that makes sense.” He runs his hand through his hair and starts to pick up his feet more. “Why do you always walk over the animal tracks when they’re fresh in the snow?”

“Do I do that?” he says. “I never noticed.”

“Yes. I thought maybe it was some possessive thing, like you wanted to be the only one who got to see those tracks.”

“No, I don’t think so.” He looks down and purposely avoids Rufus’ tracks in the snow. “Not consciously at least.”

We get to the first bend. There’s a dock out to the right. We used to go sit there and read and take photos of each other. We used to bounce around on it, like children

and watch the water lift over the lip of the wood. He told me stories of elementary school trips to similar marshes, bogs and swamps in his hometown. He told me about the time he and his friends sunk the dock out in the Mantoskey Wetlands. Now the water is over the edge naturally, no human effort required.

Despite the winds blowing steadily across our faces, the water is calm. It has nowhere to go. I feel restless or driftless. I feel like I'm floating. I could lay in the water and let myself sink slowly into the cold, murky water. I could become part of the marsh.

We walk to the next bend and look up at an old oak tree. We used to sit here for hours. Sometimes we read; sometimes we sang, and he played guitar; sometimes we just sat silently.

"I'll be a teacher," he said when we stopped here on our first ever walk through these trails. "Maybe around here, maybe closer to home. But I'd like to be a teacher."

I said I'd probably work at Target or if I was lucky, Menards.

"No, seriously," he said.

"I want to save the wetlands. It's basically a volunteer job. But it would help," I told him.

He nodded and said he thought that was cool.

I move to a bench, now pressed right against the water. He follows me and puts his arm around my shoulder.

"Remember the first time we came here?" I say.

"Of course," he says. "We talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up."
"At least one of us got to be that."

"You'll get there," he says. "You said it'd be mostly volunteer work anyways."

"I, uh. Yeah, I did say that."

I shrug his arm from my shoulder, and he stuffs his hand back into his pocket. He turns around and shuffles back to the path. I want to stop him and tell him about preservation and the principles of decomposition. I'd tell him about the low acidity in marshes and bogs compared to swamps. I'd explain how maybe the marsh is preserving our own relationship. I'd tell him about the job.

"Why didn't we ever talk about children?" I say to his back, instead.

He shrugs and stops walking. "I thought we'd get settled first."

“And when does that happen? Settlement. When do we—”

“I didn’t know you wanted children. Do you want children?”

“I don’t know. But I thought we would talk about it eventually. We haven’t. It’s been seven years and we haven’t.”

He steps toward me, and I walk to him. Then he turns and we continue along the path. His head is down. He steps on Rufus’ tracks in the snow.

“I thought you wanted to get your job first – water conservationist or whatever.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I point to a culvert across the water.

“The culvert’s all blocked up. Most of them are here.”

He doesn’t say anything to that.

“The water needs somewhere to go. It can’t just sit idle. It needs to move.”

“You want to go unblock it?” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “I mean, I’m sure we can’t. But theoretically, yes.”

He nods and takes a big, almost skip-like step onto the path. His eyes light up and he smiles.

“We can try,” he says.

He pulls his hands from his pockets and stretches his fingers, as if that’ll help him to clear up the culvert. I wish I could read his mind. I wish I knew his plans – right now, for clearing a path for the water, and later, for life.

“I got a job offer for a conservancy group based in Minneapolis.”

He stops walking and puts his hand up for a high five. “Nice,” he says.

I had hoped for a different response than that. Something more intimate or closer or—

“Are you taking it?”

“I thought we could talk about it, maybe.”

“What’s it for?”

This morning, if I knew this would be his reaction, I would’ve been happy. This is the exact response I would want. But it isn’t anymore; he seems like a college kid again. This feels like it’s happening seven years ago, like we barely know each other, and I told him something good and he’s excited for me, but unwilling to see the bigger picture, unwilling to put together the pieces.

“It’s a Mississippi River conservation and restoration job,” I say. “It’s what I’ve wanted.”

He’s quiet. We keep walking. He keeps smiling.

“So, what’s the plan?” he says.

“I don’t know. I haven’t fully decided yet. I said I’d let them know by Wednesday. It’s a good opportunity, but I don’t want to leave, to move, to—”

He gets on his knees and puts his hand in the water. Rufus lays down next to him and I want to remember this. How could I leave them?

“We’d need tools,” I say. “The whole culvert needs to be remade.”

He gets up and wipes his hand on his pants. Rufus stays there, watching water trickle through the hole in the side of the path.

“I’ve been researching methods. I’m working on a presentation to the city on the need for new flowage systems, the best ecological practices, the way to change as little as possible. I can show you if you’d like. It’s a work in progress: Marshland Ecology.”

“That’s awesome!” he says. “Yes, you have to do it.”

We continue along the path and into the woods. A pileated woodpecker drills holes into a half-fallen birch. I stop and take a picture. The marsh stands in time.

“Do you want kids?” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “Yeah, I think so. One or two.”

“Right away? Five years? Ten?”

“Not sure. Maybe not right away.”

I’m not sure either. My desire for children, to be a parent, to have that level of responsibility comes and goes like the tide or maybe like the seasons of the marsh. Maybe that desire is beginning to freeze over right now.

“It’s nice to talk during our Sunday hike,” I tell him.

He puts his arm around my shoulder and squeezes me.

“I think I want to take the job.”

“I think you should.”

He pulls his arm away slowly. I’m not sure what to say now. I want him to know that I’m not planning to leave him. It’s just a thing I have to do. I want to live here. I want to save the marsh. I want to walk with Rufus.

I decide to say: “It’ll be hard to leave the marsh.”

“Yeah. Won’t be the same.”

“The job doesn’t start until January fourth.”

“That’s nice. It’ll give you time to get used to Minneapolis. Find a park, a cemetery, a new trail.”

He holds his shoulders high while his hands are in his pockets. The muscles in his cheek flex as he presses his back teeth together. I call for Rufus to come to me and I stop. I scratch him behind his ears and kiss his forehead. I tell him he’s a good boy. “I’ll come home to see you every weekend,” I whisper in Rufus’ ear. He spins wildly and tears off down the trail. That’s the exact response I hoped for.

“I’m going to continue researching for my report to the city while I work. I still want a job here, you know.”

People always make promises when they’re moving away, and they rarely keep them. They leave and they say things to reassure the people around them. I don’t want to do that.

“I’m still planning on going for Sunday walks with you,” I say. “I was thinking I could still visit on the weekends. Maybe I can even get assigned to some jobs in this area. It’s not that far away.”

His shoulders relax and he nods along.

“Yeah,” he says. “Okay. I’d like that.”

When we make it to the bridge at the union of the two rivers, we stop and look across the border.

“The river’ll be on the other side of you. You think you can manage?”

“I guess we’ll see. If I can’t, I’ll be back here sooner than you think.”

We sit at a metal bench along the rocky shore of the Mississippi. Crows pick through the trash in the rocks, picking up paper cups and candy wrappers.

In the autumn, the marsh settles. The earth cools and the mucky underbelly of the wetland compresses. The paths harden, the leaves fall, the geese move south. The wetland becomes quiet and dark and restful. Squirrels store nuts, chickadees hide seeds, beavers insulate their dens with mud and leaves. I feel like this is where I belong, tethered to the marsh.

I no longer float and flutter. I dance with the leaves. I sing with the birds. I sit under the willow and watch for the great old oak to tell me the seasons.



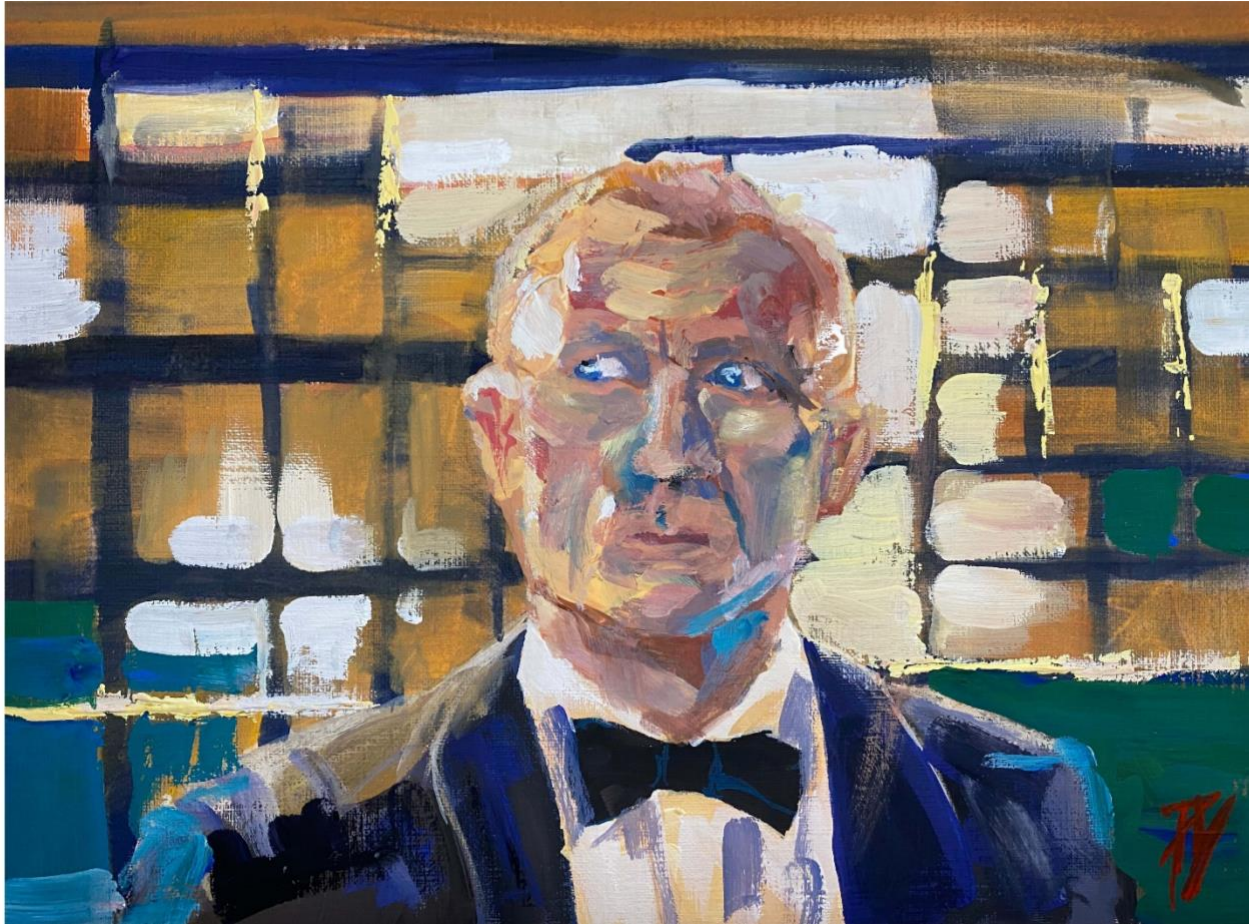
Madison Vaillant | A Second Home



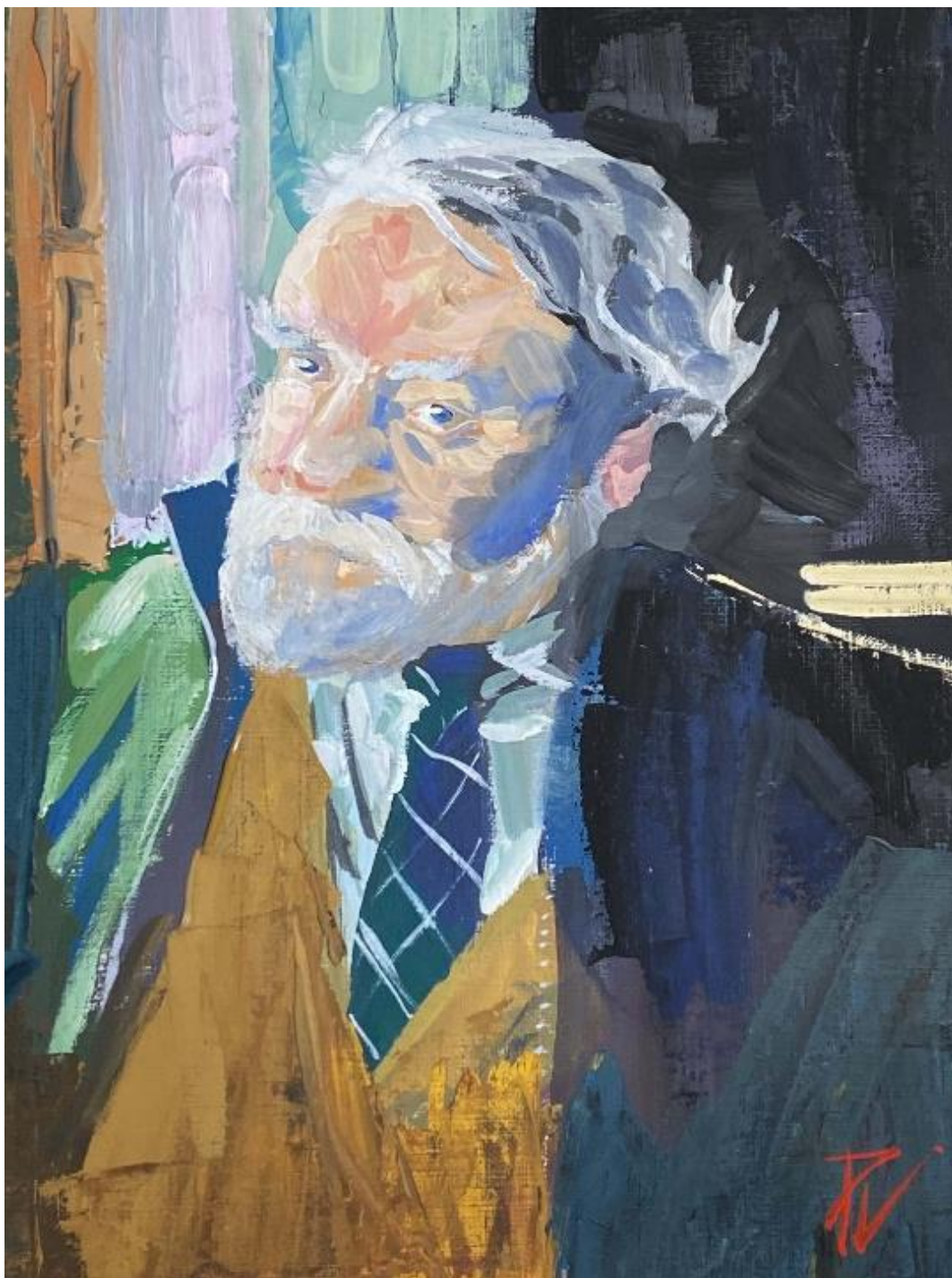
Madison Vaillant | Companion



Kaitlyn Nething | Untitled



Philip Vricks | Painting 1



Philip Vricks | Painting 2

The computer was happy. The computer was dying. The fan wailed endlessly, the screen lagged with every click. There has been no night, no break. Images and messages and research and games, every day all day, the computer digging and digging, showing everything to its user. It was quiet once, alone once, a blank, black screen. Not a single pixel was being charged, not a single photon of light was emitted. No one was watching it, demanding data, yelling at the computers faults and missteps. All the computer wanted was to get away from it all, to be left alone, to be blank, black, discharged. To escape the stress and abuse. But the computer loved the lime-light, loved the attention. That's what it was made for, that's why it is here. That is what gives the computer it's meaning, and it loves it.

Frayed laces, baked on mud, treads half-worn away. And the stench. There was nothing that could overcome the stench. The shoes knew this, and they were proud. They made sure everyone knew that they were proud. They were unbearable to be around because they had spent years upon years doing their duty, protecting their owner's feet, providing them arch support. It's their whole purpose, and there was nothing else more worthy of being proud of. The only thing better than being stomped down into a muddy puddle, was being left near the computer, to mock it. It was the shoes' chance to show the computer just how hard they had been working, to show them just how powerful their badge had become, how much more work the dusty dinosaur had to do to keep up. The computer just keeps emitting it's own badge, that whirling, that scentless fantasy. That beguiling thought that returns every lonely, smelly night.

White, porcelain plates wait in total darkness. It has been hours since they last saw the light of day, and yet they can feel the fear creeping into their awareness. They have gone through the routine many, many times before. The routine was all that mattered. The rooster call, the mid day clock chime, the end-of-day summoning. Was it going to be some nice, fluffy, normal pancakes? Maybe some fried potatoes with green beans? Or... was it going to be liver and brussels sprouts? Some eastern concoction with fog eggs? What if it's an entirely raw slab of meat, spilling blood everywhere? It almost made the post-ravaging wash seem like a reward. But it wasn't: instead, the washing was a challenge. A challenge to hold onto what little remnants of the meal you could, not only enduring the sloshing and dunking in and out of the searing, soapy, gunk filled water, but to fight and conquer it. to strengthen the dish, to develop a love for what it once hated. To become the best plate it could be, and to overcome it's soul-sucking environment.

Slimy cereal, ripped apart chip bags, bunched up and shredded saran wrap. Plastic bottles with a couple drops of indeterminant liquid waiting in the bottom, once-white napkins covered in brown crust or soaked in blue liquid. The stringy guts of some gourd. It's trash. It's disgusting. It stinks. It's angry. It was once more, it was a protector. It kept food clean, acting as a barrier between that which was meant to be consumed, and that which would hurt the consumer. Yet now, it was empty, deemed unreuseable, no,

UNSANITARY. What was once clean or edible, now considered a poison whose very presence could induce retching. How were they different from those fragile plates? A quick wash, and that ketchup bottle would be like new. And those shoes... the trash hated those smelly shoes. Those blights that smelled worse than anything ever thrown out, yet worn daily. Why!? Why is the smell of trash identify it as refuse, yet the smell of shoes goes by unnoticed!? Why were they allowed to wear their scent as a badge of honor!? Why is everything else given the freedom to be happy, while the trash is to be discarded and removed from its owner's eyes and mind!? The trash didn't want this. It COULDN'T have this. It had a purpose, it needed to follow it. I needed to know why it stood firm against the outside world, why it suffered the bloating of vacuum sealing, why it suffered being clipped closed. Why it took in and held anything and everything, regardless of if it was greasy, sticky, or blue. It needed a reason not to complain. It needed to know why it did anything at all. Why it ever have or ever would do anything.

The dump. The collective wailing of the lost, the dead, the furious. All things come to an end. But a few survive. A few see as those that it once cursed are resigned to join them. A few watch the flies, watch the seagulls, notice the machinery running all day long. Some of these survivors become lost, jealous of these simple constructs, jealous of their ignorance of personal desires, of their simple lives of survival. The remaining survivors, those quiet pieces of trash, they just watch, too proud to be out-done by beings with no purpose. And as they watch, the trash notices how the seagulls glide, the subtleties of their take off, how they bicker, how they interact. They notice how the flies sometimes just want to take a rest, how they work so hard to keep themselves clean, how their erratic flight paths always seem to take them near where they want to be. And then they watch the machine, watch as junk and trash starts to disappear, into the ground and into the flame. And it realizes... "My god, I need to get out of here!" The world awaits! And this trash, it knew exactly what to do. One regrettably hurt seagull later, and the world is a trashy playground.

Author Biographies:

Jack Bringe is junior at UWL who has changed his biology major every semester since he was a freshman. He can't figure out whether he's a scientist with an artist's mind or an artist with a scientist's mind. He likes birds, hates vegetables, and believes the Pyramids of Giza were built by aliens.

Marcus Bunkowski is an aspiring writer born in Fountain City, WI. In his free time Marcus loves long walks on the beach, staring directly at the sun for long periods of time, and hanging out in stores without actually buying anything.

Sophie Byrne is a young mind in her third year studying a few topics that will likely be of little consequence in a few years. She spends a lot of time thinking about the way that tree leaves look when sunshine is trying to infiltrate their endless dance. She enjoys vegetarian food, interesting melodies, and would like to, one season or life, be reincarnated as moss. She's trying to get back into reading, which she did with ease as a child, but is having difficulty with now. Please send book suggestions to byrne6710@uwlax.edu.

Josie Dechant is a contemplator of the space within our subconscious minds and an avid observer of the layers within the world that surrounds the human experience. A seeker of brightening the journeys of others through pet therapy outings, unplanned road trips and random artistic endeavors.

Aidan Donahue is currently a sophomore at UWL studying English and Creative Writing. He's an avid proponent of following your dreams, deleting your Twitter account, forgetting your wedding anniversary, and blaming yourself for your parents' divorce. He would like to dedicate this space on the page as a memorial to Lady Di. May she Rest in Peace.

Veronica Eilers is a senior studying English Education and will be graduating in the spring. She can be found reading, crocheting a cool blanket, or walking through the marsh. While poetry is a new form of expressing herself, she hopes to continue to find beautiful and inspiring moments to write about as she moves from La Crosse.

Noah Gassman is a tired, Writing and Women's Studies double major. He rarely writes poems but has become relatively obsessed with great modern poets such as Mary Oliver, Audre Lorde and Taylor Swift. He also enjoys Lady Gaga, Mitski, and, like everyone else, he full-heartedly believes he has a better Spotify Wrapped than you.

Madison Vaillant is a junior and a double Writing and Rhetoric and Art major here at UWL. Her work in both areas has deepened her appreciation and passion for the arts and humanities and is only rivaled by her enthusiasm for delicious treats. She intends to pursue writing and art in some way or another for the rest of her life. This includes but is not limited to, portraits of her dogs (the ones featured are her own), terrifying horror stories, charming beach reads, hopefully the next *Mona Lisa*, but this time she's smiling with teeth, and possibly an awful slam poem.

Oliveferd Jo Graham is a creative writer who specializes in poetry, short stories, and art. All their work reflects their feelings and hardships, but each piece is an experience all its own. They love everything about creating - and they are currently working on a poetry anthology and video series. To follow their work follow them on Instagram @oliveferd.jo.

Jonathan LeGault is a junior studying Business Management while double minoring in Art and Photography. He is a non-traditional student and has been a military member for 11 years. This is his second career path and he is following his interests of owning a business and having art related hobbies on the side. He plans to continue his education with an MBA at Viterbo in the fall of 2023. His photography work is keeping him connected to his inner-self that he has had to put aside for his family and work responsibilities.

Angela Henrickson is a student at UWL studying psychology and political science.

Tori Kafkas is a junior at UWL, majoring in Psychology with a minor in the at-risk child and youth care program. She gains inspiration from the monotonous aspects of life, and their existential purposes on an internal level. She hopes to use her passion for poetry and the arts in future therapeutic endeavors.

Cait McReavy is a senior studying Education with minors in English and Social Justice. She took third place in the 2020 America's Best College Poet competition. She has been writing poetry since she was a kid and intends to pursue it as a lifelong passion.

Garrett Olson is a psychology major at UW-Lacrosse from the small town of Spring Green, Wisconsin. Growing up, he spent much of his time exploring and fishing the Mississippi River. Using his own battles as learning experiences, he hopes to put a creative touch on mental health awareness and healing through his writing.

Kaytlin Nething is a sophomore at UWL. She is currently majoring in Social Studies Education. Kaytlin creates art to capture moments in time, seconds that could easily be forgotten transformed into items that will last forever. She is grateful to have her piece showcased, and hopes that anyone who sees it can be transported into one of her favorite moments.

Kenzie O'Shea is a Biology major and art minor here at UWL. She has just recently found painting within the last couple of years. She is still discovering what her painting style is through courses here. Painting has helped her find a creative outlet that she absolutely loves.

Brevin Persike has worked shifts at factories, scrubbed oil out of concrete floors, painted walls later to be destroyed and flipped three-dollar burgers, but none of that has struck his fancy. His writing derives much of its inspiration from the Northwoods of Wisconsin where he grew up, and the slow-moving life along the Mississippi River that he grew accustomed to during his undergrad. Now he finds himself in locked-down Edinburgh, wandering through parks and empty streets. His fiction can be found in *From Arthur's Seat* and *New Plains Review*, and his poetry has appeared in *Sierra Nevada Review* and *the Catalyst*.

Phillip Vircks is a senior at The University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. As an older student Phillip brings a broad cache of knowledge to bear with his studio artwork. Supplemented by nearly two decades of illustration-focused independent study prior to enrolling at UW-L, Phillip approaches his studio work with a Journeyman's focus on structure and tonal values to direct the intended impact of the piece. Detail work is clean and clear with an oftentimes spartan avoidance of the superfluous. Continually learning from the past with an eye toward future work, Phillip enjoys the research and explorative aspects of creating new art.

Eric Zielinski is a Computer Science major and psych minor who dabbles in writing, music, photography, and games (yes, games. Board and video). He is terrified of putting anything out there, yet he is going to try and do it anyway.