

THE CATALYST



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

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The Catalyst

Anonymous | Holmes

One of Holmes's few claims to fame is that the town was briefly mentioned in Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippi. Twain would've had the benefit of seeing Holmes long before the international highway system birthed the "Great River Road," a road that runs uninterrupted for 3,000 miles along the edge of the Mississippi." Twain wrote, "Ten miles above Wayfield we come to Holmes, nestling sweetly at the feet of cliffs that lift their awful fronts, Jovelike, toward the blue depths of heaven, bathing them in virgin atmospheres that have known no other contact save that of angels' wings." Funnily enough, I've only ever met one person who knew that Twain wrote about Holmes, and that was the person who told me. I like to think that Twain saw a different Holmes then the one I grew up in; a virgin village that still had the potential to blossom on the frontiers of the industrial revolution. In reality, Holmes remains the same way as it was when Twain laid eyes on it; the town destined to be "near Winona (whose bars are open an hour later than Minnesota's)." Nowadays, when I take a rare visit back to my hometown, the pale, faded, chipped green population marker still reads "859," as it has all my life.

I suppose I remember my time in Holmes fondly, albeit with a bitter aftertaste. I still hold many, wonderous, lifelong friends that somehow managed to exist among a mere 859. I learned enough to make it into a nice college, and people in the community always have a nice word for me on the rare occasions that I do go back for a visit. When I came to La Crosse for school I was overwhelmed and out of my league. There was more than one stoplight, multiple scary inventions called "round-about," and the population sign had a comma in it. In classes, I felt forced into muteness because I was no longer with the same 40 classmates I had known all of my life (yes, my graduating class was a robust 40 students). I didn't know the names of the people next to me, let alone their families, where they lived, what sports they played, who've they dated, and anything else that is deemed important in a small town. I didn't know how to exist with others on a level that was not intensely personal.

Life in Holmes moves slowly like a meandering river. People don't come and go, but stay, and often never leave. My old bus driver, Dan, worked at the local grain mill when he wasn't driving bus like he's done since he was 15. My neighbor, Ray, picked up a job as a fry cook the day he quit his paper route. Connor is one of my friends from my graduating class. He was born with severe autism, but is one of the most gentle, caring souls I've ever met. He has an

uncanny ability to tell you (with perfect accuracy) the results, time, channel, and announcers for any Packers football game that he's ever seen. He loves to keep the stats of his favorite sports (baseball, basketball, football) for Holmes's high school team, the Pirates. There was another special needs kid who recently passed away that had the job before him. It makes me sad to think Connor will never leave.

Like most rural Wisconsin towns, Holmes is overwhelmingly white (97% to be exact). Every family owns at least 7 guns, mullets somehow never went out of style, TRUMP signs litter lawns like cans after Oktoberfest, and mufflers are a myth from the big city. "Family values" haven't changed since the 1920s and racism isn't so much hidden as shouted from the rooftops. The "n-word" was as common as "bro." "Queer" and "fag" were used for a laugh among friends or hurled across the street from the front seat of a pickup truck, spit flying from the corners of the mouth of the one yelling.

"I love you boys, but if I ever catch y'all getting high I'll kick your asses."

That was one of the first things I ever heard the first time I got high. I was at my best friend Troy's house and, until this point in my high school career, (junior year for those who are curious) I was strongly against the evil, gateway drug marijuana. Old VHS tapes had warned me that it was more addictive than heroine, and worse for you too. Troy dipped his toe into that water before me and we argued about it more than once. "Are you trying to ruin your life?" I would ask him. I was convinced that Troy was rapidly developing into one of "those" kids. Well, it turned out that the first time weed was offered to me, all of my "principles" went out the window and I gladly accepted. It turned out I wasn't angry at Troy for smoking weed, I was just upset that no one offered me any. I had to be taught how to second inhale ("no Marcus don't blow it out right away. Like *thissss*. There you go), and I was floating away into the nebulous place in the mind that exists between thoughts and time. I had the wings to touch Twain's virgin bluffs and go *beyond*.

Everything was great until Troy's dad came home. Normally, I loved when Craig (Troy's dad) would return from the bars; he'd sit with us and give us all sorts of "life advice" on how to talk to girls and how not to be a pussy. We'd laugh as he slurred his words and normally, he'd let us have a beer with him as long as we didn't tell our parents. At some point during his drunk soliloquies, he'd proclaim us all great kids and tell us that he was sure we were going to do big things in life. Then he'd wander upstairs and pass out. However, tonight was *distinctly*

different as Craig was *vehemently* outspoken against weed. Did I mention he used to be the head of a biker gang? He was a big guy, his skin was filled with tattoos, he was *hammered*, and I was sitting at his island having just indulged in the one activity that he told us never to do.

Anyways, he had just uttered the above threat at us and proceeded to join in our game of cards and for the first time I felt the paranoia of weed kick in. I was no longer floating but falling far too fast towards reality. I was sure that Craig would somehow find out that we were all stoned, and I had no idea what the consequences might be. Austin and Troy took over the conversation as they had more experience with this than me and they found the whole thing to be quite funny. Overall, it seemed to be just another drunk sermon from Craig, and we were the disciples to whom he was preaching; except for this time, I was stoned and paranoid.

At one point, the card game finished, and Craig got quiet for a few moments. I figured the time had come to bid us adieu for the night, but he looked up at us all instead. "I saw an old buddy at the bar tonight," he said. "Hadrn't need him since high school." Craig had graduated from Holmes as well (he always told us he would've went to play college football if he hadn't been in that motorcycle accident). "Well, we were catching up, having a few drinks, and he gets real quiet and comes out as gay to me. Says he has been all his life but just never knew how to tell anyone. Said he didn't think people would like him anymore and that's why he moved away."

"What did you say to him?" asked Troy?

"Jesus Troy! What do you think I said to him? I was pissed! This fucker's been gay all his life and he let me be friends with him? Had he just been hitting on me the whole time we were friends? I bet that fucker just wanted to get in my pants, probably thought I was cute or something! Nah... I took that fucker by the beard and slammed his head into the bar and left."

I think some people may be beyond anyone's help to be rescued from the clutches of "tradition."

You can't really afford to be picky about who you like in Holmes. At the 2010 census the population stood at 859 and only 16.9% of those people were under the age of 18 (the population estimate for 2019 was 861). 16.9% of 859 does not leave a whole lot of options available for "friend-making." Crossing a few people off of the list because you don't really like their vibe isn't really an option. On the darker side of that, you have to be careful with what you say and do in Holmes. Small towns aren't bred for second chances or new beginnings. If

you manage to really piss off one person in a grade of 40, it's reasonable to assume they have a good 4-5 friends who will back them up. All of a sudden, 20% of the entire grade doesn't like you.

Cats may like boxes, but growing boys and girls shouldn't be forced into them.

We were drinking beers around a fire on someone's land, their parents oblivious to our presence there, when another car pulled up the gravel road. Now as we were in the middle of the woods near an abandoned farm, it was unlikely that it was the cops but there was still a certain apprehension about the newcomers. However, since their car didn't have those blue LED lights that always seem to be too bright, we did not rush to hide our beer cans. It turned out to be a group of students from another school that I didn't know. They were friendly but seemed a bit out of place. They must've been invited because there's no way they would've found us without *very* specific instructions. The backroads of Holmes are a labyrinth not easily navigated and road signs pale in comparison to experience.

They joined us around the fire. No one rushed to greet them or seemed overly enthused about their arrival so again I was left wondering who invited them. I could hear my friends whispering behind me, so I leaned back to hear what they were talking about.

Have you ever heard of the "penis" game? It's not really as bad as it sounds but also requires no intelligence or wit to play; simply a bit more "daring" than your friends in a fairly low stakes environment. The objective is to get a few friends together and each take turns saying the word "penis." The catch is that each person has to say it louder than the person before them. Theoretically you do it in a situation where, if said too loud, that person will get in trouble. For instance, we used to play on the school bus. Our driver, Dan, would begin staring at us in the back through that huge mirror that the bus drivers have up there and eventually yell at us to be quiet when one of us finally dared to yell *the word* and we'd break out into giggles.

It turned out that my friends were conspiring to break out the childhood game again, but with a dramatic twist. You see, one of the newcomers was a young African American woman and they were planning to play "the n-word game." The same general rules apply; I think you get the idea. Well, they started their little game and I wish I could have a better role in this story. I did not join but I also did not stop them. I sat in my chair and hoped with all of my might that they would stop before someone heard them. I felt like it was not my place to

say something to them because they were the “older kids.” These were juniors and I was but a lowly sophomore. Who was I to say something? What nerve I must have to intervene and prevent someone from having a traumatic experience. The gall for me to stop something I knew was *intensely* not okay.

Essentially, I pulled the high school version of sticking my fingers in my ears and saying “lalalalalalalala.”

I am no hero in this story, but I’m glad to say that someone else was. I forget who exactly stepped in, I just remember that he was in their same grade. He did not call attention to their slurs that were growing in volume, instead he went up to the bench that they were sitting on and tipped it over. The occupants, newly introduced to the grass, erupted into fits of drunken giggles, complaining feebly that their beers were spilled, and they’d require fresh ones. He got them new beers only after he was given a hushed promise that they would abandon their new game. At some point shortly after that, the boy whose land we were on decided that he didn’t like the newcomers and he shot off a shotgun into the air. The boom shattered conversation and echoed into the suddenly silent night. The echo sounded like how dropping a pebble into the water looks, rippling, smaller and smaller, until finally the water is still again. The silence that followed seemed louder than the almighty boom. After a grand total of somewhere around 30 minutes, our visitors were back in their car, speeding in the opposite direction back down the gravel road.

Looking back, I can’t say that I abandoned those people as friends either. Should I have? Obviously, we don’t talk as much anymore as we’ve made our separate ways to different colleges, jobs, and lives in general, but I would still consider them friends. It’s hard for me to judge them so intensely at such a young age. And honestly, I feel kind of bad for them. They grew up in Holmes; home of a grand total of 859 (possibly 861) people. 859 is a great turnout for some slam poetry but a pretty abysmal turnout for a D-1 high school football game. I know that what they did was wrong. *Very wrong*. I mean the man shot off a *shotgun* to scare the visitors away. I cannot say with certainty that that action was related to race, but the signs say probably yes? I am not claiming ignorance of forgiveness for that violent (or at least violently symbolic act) but perhaps the motivations behind can at least be examined. Should we expect young people to automatically figure out for themselves that racism is wrong when so many “role models” show them every day with words and actions that it’s okay? Towns like Holmes were exactly the type of demographic that got Donald Trump elected. Doesn’t that show them that the world thinks it’s okay? It’s as if Holmes’s ideologies were suddenly put into the spotlight and the world said *we agree*.

Who's bringing the youth "new" ideas? Who's coming back to Holmes after a trip to the outside world to tell us all that, *hey guys! The world is sort of moving on from racism and you all can too!* People don't "move in" to Holmes; they leave or stay forever. Sure, we have the internet like everyone else, but racism thrives even more behind a screen if you know where to find it. Plato tells us that if you return to the cave after seeing the light, there's no way those guys chained up down there are going to believe you. *There's light out there? Man, you have to be crazy the only thing "out there" is these shadows on the walls.* Living in Holmes is like getting a business degree from only playing Monopoly. Sure, you may learn some valuable lessons about bargaining *but there's more out there.*

What strikes me as one of the most profound moments from that night at the fire, is that my friends were still playing their game in a low-stakes environment. What's the difference between yelling "penis" on a school bus and yelling the "n-word" in white, rural, small-town Wisconsin? Forgive me for saying this but I don't believe that my friends are really racist, they were just never given an opportunity to know better. And you know, if they've really grown up and held on to that ignorance filled hatred, I'm reluctant to say that it's their fault. I hope with all of my heart that they've moved past that part of their life, and if I ever hear them engaging in those types of activities again, then the time has come to truly say our goodbyes; they will have had time to learn and the option and opportunity to grow. But I will miss them with a heavy heart because I still believe that they deserved better.

It makes me angry that I have to worry if my friends have grown up racist. It makes me angry that I'm afraid to ask because I don't want to know the answer. It makes me angry to think that if they told me "no" I might not even believe them. It makes me angry to think that if they said "yes" I would believe that it's not their fault. It makes me angry that the people that I grew up with and learned to love were confronted with an environment designed to turn them into exactly like everyone around them. Racist, small-minded, and stuck.

I saw one of those boys from the story last weekend, visiting La Crosse for its many bars. Would it surprise you if I say I saw him at Broncos? We hugged, he bought me a beer, and we chatted about old times. Side by side, we belted out country music that we've sung along to a hundred times. I felt like we were back in Holmes, only this was better because we weren't in Holmes. Home is where the heart is, right? But then he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the door. Three African American men had just walked in. "Who let the n*****s into the country bar?" he whispered in my ear, like it was some sort of inside joke.

I am no hero. I simply had the benefit of having parents who taught me to respect everyone, regardless of the color of their skin or who they love. Not everyone has that, and some people have to take that journey on their own. I think it's a lot harder without a guide.

No one deserves to grow up in a town where they are hated for who they are from the moment they are born. No one deserves to grow up in a town where they could be irreparably damaged from a disease of ignorance that has persisted long before they were born. No one deserves to grow up in a town where they can't *spread their wings and learn to fucking fly*.

Megan Alaimo | Death Roe

Time travel without consent,
Because of the judges that god sent.

They say they care about life,
They care about life like a knife.

Uterus is a pink prison cell,
Full of rights they think are ok to sell.

“Home of the free”
Try telling she.

She who never wanted this,
Who has to carry the burden of his.

Female factories we are,
Bodies to the babes we are.

Our lives of less worth,
Than a life that hasn't yet seen birth.

Megan Alaimo | No body

Rip me apart
Into red ribbons and
Marble bone.

Leave me be a
Mess on the floor,
Passerbys can step on
and slip on
My blended body.

Then I would have more power.

More power than I have with
My Breast
My Flesh
My Voice,

With no body I
Stay silent
Unmoving
but with
No body I
Burst with rage

I hope
One day I
regain
and I
reclaim
More than I had

Before.

To
Fight without
No body for
My body.

Matthew Ballesteros | A Sour Relationship

Look,
I have to be honest with you
This relationship has been pretty BRUTAL
I understand why people say
Roses are red and violets are blue
I've been blue as you have grown cruel
And I've been thinking about this for a couple days
But I don't want to give anymore roses to you

A TRAITOR,
That's what you are
You told me we were ride or die
You should get your DRIVERS LICENSE revoked
By the way you made me jump out the car

Cool,
Every day was the same, DEJA VU
I would be hurting on the inside, but you had no clue
I would try and throw you kisses, but you threw me your shoes
It led me to the realization that I don't want to be your boo

Like God damn,

I gave you my heart in the palm of your hand
It is clear that you wish for more on demand
What is GOOD 4 U I do not understand
Because ENOUGH FOR YOU is not who I am

Sex,
That's the only way we take 1 STEP FORWARD,
But then we manage to find ourselves 3 STEPS BACK
Consequently, for our words
Communication is a skill we lack
I try and tell you about my problems,
but they just go over your head
Everything I say to you enters one ear and comes out the next
And then you come in and yell at me instead
This is exactly why you're gonna become an ex
If you still manage to misunderstand this dialogue
Maybe you'll understand it if I said it in Tagalog

Honey,
(Honey,)
Nakikita ko ang lahat ng mag-asawang ito na nagmamahalan
(I see all these couples in love)
Na sila ay puno ng pagmamahal sa kanilang mga mata
(And that they are full of love shown in their eyes)
Hinihiling ko na sana naging MAS MASAYA tayo

(Makes me wish we could've been HAPPIER)

Pero lahat yan SELOS, SELOS

(But that's all JEALOUSY, JEALOUSY)

sa pamamagitan ng pagiging mag-isa sa isang bote ng Tequila

(By being alone with a bottle of Tequila)

Nagsisimula akong maramdaman ang nararamdaman ng mga mag-asawang iyon

(I begin to feel how those couples feel)

Ganon pa man

(However,)

Hindi tayo normal na ganito

(We weren't normally like this)

May panahon na in love ako sayo

(There was a time I was in love with you)

Gagawin ko ang lahat para maging ganoon ulit ako

(I would do anything to feel like that again)

Kahit bawal

(Even if it's illegal,)

Magiging PABORITO kong KRIMEN ang gagawin

(It would become my FAVORITE CRIME to commit)

Ngunit hindi tayo nabubuhay sa isang pantasya

(But we don't live in a fantasy)

Tunay,

(Reality,)

Iyan ang mundong malungkot nating ginagalawan

(That's the world we sadly live in)

I HOPE UR OK pagiging single

(I HOPE UR OK BEING SINGLE)

Dahil ganyan ka na ngayon

(Because that's who you are now)

Devany Bauer | Inspired by Grandma

A lot of people say blue is their favorite color
and I think what a silly thing to share.
Then they say it reminds them of the ocean or perhaps that it's a great color to wear.

But there's so many hues, I'd reason.
Which *one* do you like?
Cobalt or denim?
Or maybe something more bright?

Favorite implies one, most loved, a first choice.
So "blue" never cut it
and yet I'd try to be nice.

Maybe sky blue, I'd suggest
or the navy of an Air Force soldier's breast.
For whatever reason,
I couldn't let it rest.

You never gave me a distinct answer
before your life gave way to cancer.
So I sit with the hope that in heaven,
that's where blue is best.

A lot of people say blue is their favorite color and I think that's fair,
because now,
when I see blue, I see you there.

Devany Bauer | Princess

Late December, I received my Christmas card written in Grandpa's handwriting instead of Grandma's for the first time. "Thank you for holding me the day of the funeral," the card read. "Much love for my Princess, Grandpa."

In October I had sat beside my grandpa, in a church pew for the first time in years, as he mourned his wife of 57 years. I'd always been closer with Grandpa than Grandma and I didn't cry at the funeral until we were following the pallbearers out of the church. I was walking behind Grandpa with my younger brother, assuming my aunt or my dad was walking alongside him. When I picked my eyes up from the shuffling feet, my mom shot me a look from a few rows ahead and motioned at me to come forward closer to the casket. I realized then that Grandpa was walking alone, cane in his right hand and his left hand empty for the first time in 57 years. I dropped my brother's hand and rushed forward, sliding my arm through my grandpa's. Tears streamed down his face and his wrinkled hand clutched onto me. He looked up and whispered, "hi, princess."

His words brought me back to my childhood. On visits to Grandpa and Grandma's house I'd request to be awoken from my fake slumber by my grandpa's whistling, just like Cinderella is awoken from her sleep by the birds. Once awake, I'd position all of my stuffed animals along the top of the davenport in the living room and request my grandpa drive the couch, which I imagined being a yellow school bus full of all of my animals and myself, to Valley Fair. The ride was always incredibly bumpy, and Grandpa routinely had to swerve for deer. I don't remember ever actually arriving at our destination. For me and Grandpa it was really more about the journey.

I also don't remember growing taller than Grandpa, but suddenly outside the church in the crisp fall air his powdery gray hair was pressed against my chin and his plaid covered shoulders were underneath my arms. I held him like that, his round body shuddering with sobs, until the hearse drove away.

Marcus Bunkowski | The Butterfly

Last summer I spent a day at the park. It was afternoon, and the sun was at its peak. Its rays meandered through the leaves of trees to find me laying on a blanket on top of the cool, green grass. I switched between watching clouds, imagining all sorts of fantastic creatures they could be, and closing my eyes and letting the sun wash over me. Once, when I opened my eyes again, I saw a butterfly. It was drifting along lazily on the wind, flitting this way and that. It was slowly drawing nearer to me, and I held out my finger in hopes that it would land on it. I had seen my grandpa do this once. He had stayed still for several minutes, patiently waiting, until the butterfly finally graced his finger with its presence. He gazed at it for several more moments, then gently shook his finger and the butterfly took flight again. “Beautiful,” he had whispered, mostly to himself.

This butterfly was orange, with a hint of red artfully blended along the tips of the wings. It draped side to side, this way and that, in a seemingly random fashion as only butterflies can do. It came closer and closer, and I began to pick out more of its spots. I’ve heard sometimes their patterns mimic owls to ward off prey. There were a few yellowish spots near the corner of its wings that might have resembled eyes. Still closer it came, but just before the butterfly kissed my elongated finger with the tips of its thimbly legs...it drifted off again. Slowly, it floated back away out of sight. I forgot my brief euphoria and went back to watching the clouds.

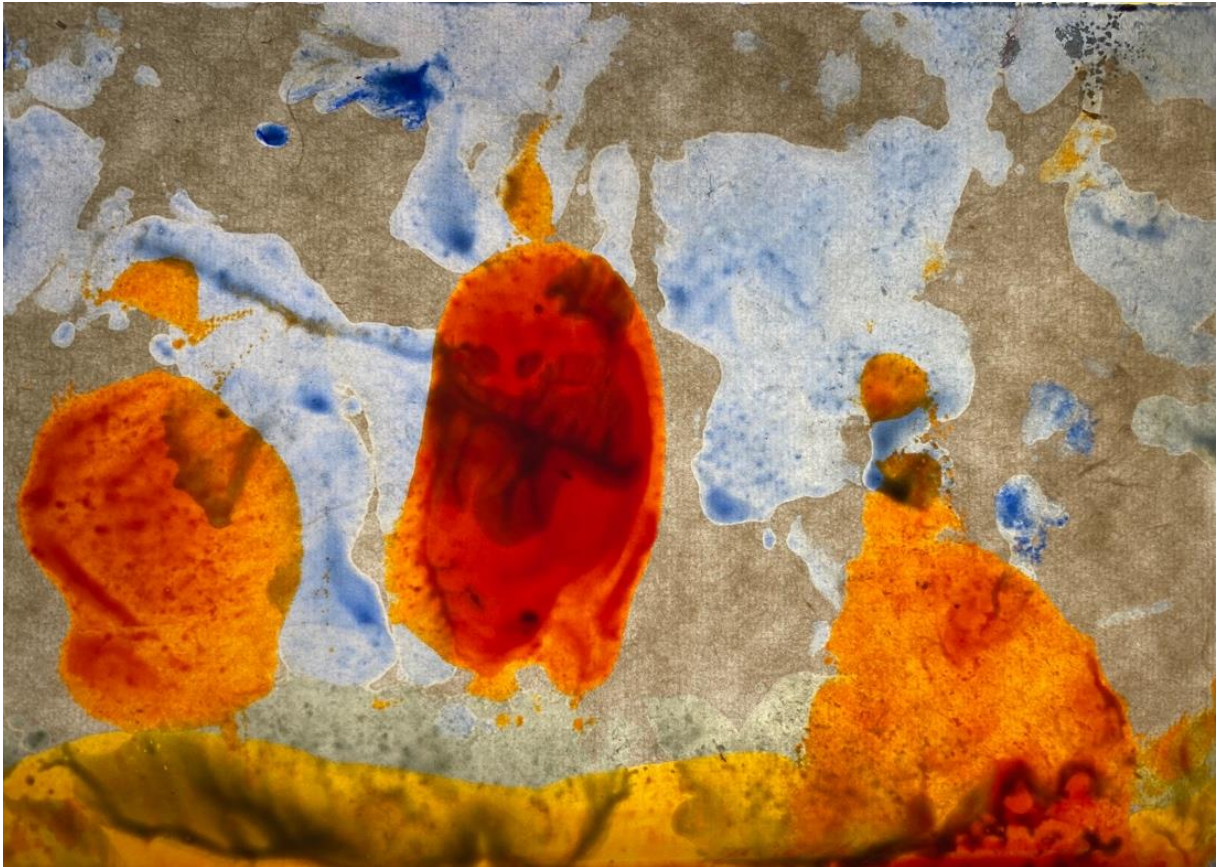
Butterflies will often do this. They drift in slowly at the edge of your view, beckoning for your attention. Once they have it, they may meander this way and that, all the while coming closer. They may let you observe them at this distance for quite some time and perhaps you’ll be able to guess what type of butterfly it is, but you certainly won’t know for sure without further investigation. The butterfly appreciates your attention very much. It might even, in fact, need it. But more often than not, the butterfly will not land on your finger, no matter how still you stay, or how intense your gaze may be. The butterfly simply does not wish you to see its most intricate spots because it knows you have better things to do than watch it flit side to side all day. If the butterfly lands, your curiosity will end in a culmination of clarity, and you will see clearly all the butterfly has to offer. You will see its spots, learn its pattern, and move on with your life. You’ll give your finger a little shake and the butterfly will be forced to move on too. No... much better to fly away at the last second than to stay and let you realize the butterfly for what it truly is.

Sometimes I feel like a butterfly.





Lydia Bergerson | Three Fools



Judy Crook | Weathering the Storm



Ellie Davis | Growing Pains

When you get older you go grocery shopping. You buy all the conscious health choices but still grab sour patch kids when you pass through the candy aisle. You barely can stomach the price of groceries, but you still buy everything because you need to eat. You go home and make food, but it doesn't taste as good as your mother's. Sometimes you turn on the news, but you also find yourself playing a familiar game on your phone. You love the summer, but of course, you mean summer six years ago.

You take your vitamins every morning, attend cycling classes, and drink green juice because you read that it has good probiotics and although you don't fully understand what a probiotic does for you, you just drink it. That's just what happens when you grow up. You think of your old lovers like diary entries. Sometimes you get curious wanting to open the book back up, but you know you can't do that anymore. You leave places early to go home and make a late-night snack, in your underwear and an oversized t-shirt dancing to random songs you've known for years. You prioritize a skincare routine and buy makeup that's way too expensive.

You move out of your hometown but a part of you will always feel pulled back to it; your pride is too big to move back. You lose touch with people from high school, but every once in a while, you think about them. When you do though you feel an empty pit in your stomach, that will never feel the same again. You meet new people, and relationships now feel almost transactional, everyone trying to see what they can gain and from who.

You forget things: butter at the grocery store, getting your mail, taking your garbage can to the street, replacing your water filter. These are the new realities growing up has given you. You look at old pictures of yourself and although you barely recognize the person in your reflection, you still see the girl in the pictures and feel familiarity. You start doing new things: cooking more, paying bills, buying stamps and ink for your printer but most importantly you discover you find joy in mundane activities alone.

As you get older you grasp at control, and it happens without even knowing it. You're still scared of bad guys hiding in your closet, but instead of boogie monsters, you fear real people. You still miss your childhood bedroom being bright blue and being late for 4th period because you got coffee with your friends and got yet another tardy. Now you are all halfway across the country living separate lives. However, before you even realize it, you find that things around you change, and *you do too*.

Aiden Donahue | At the End of the World

I stand before
wide sprawl Best Buy
brown stones climbing
architecture ripping above and to all sides
letting slip only gaping holes of sky.
Nothing beyond—

Road gashes cornfields that
slather and lick against its side,
tumble and roll with arms
wide
reach out and touch bluffs
across the expanse—

Two houses down from my aunt's place
soaked woodchips fumigate a
ding-metal playground
before a single story school
next to a graveyard. We've never seen
the other side.

Aiden Donahue | I'm Just a Poor Boy

I needed
gas three exits ago

But stopping means I wouldn't
get to hear you
sing along with your highest
Galileo

Aidan Donahue | Utter

In the utter black I
whisper wring a secret from vocal cords
pulled taut. I utter to another
words I cannot
pry from a stone jaw
clenched for the utter excess makes me retch.

Glacial syllables puncture,
crack with the utmost importance
in confidential
lip-slip tango. Utterly deranged,
I dare not utter the range
of blistering banality onto page
or formal engagement.

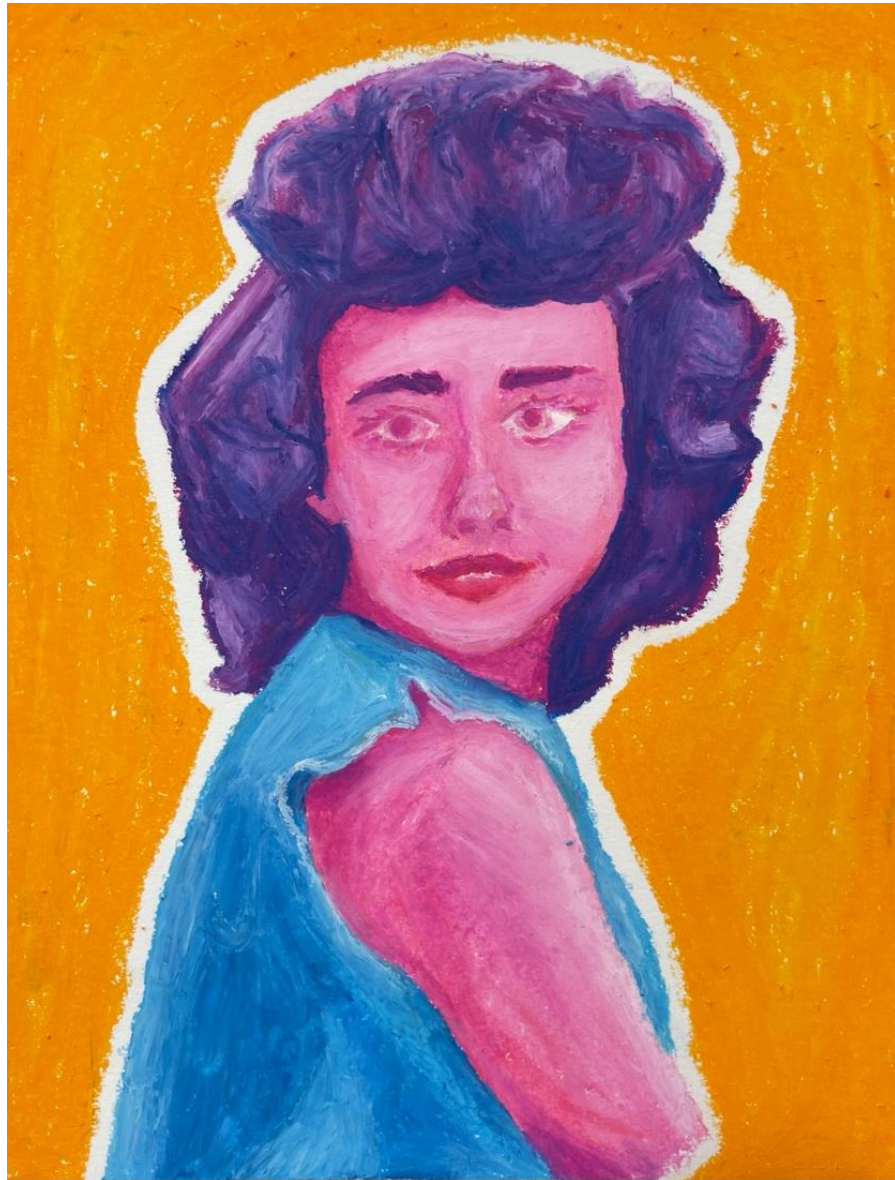
The cliché of which I dare not
say but must utter with the utmost.

I am utterly desolate and console myself with quick witted
pleas. Please, oh please
let me return beneath the sheets and
utter to another the utter utmost unlimited me:

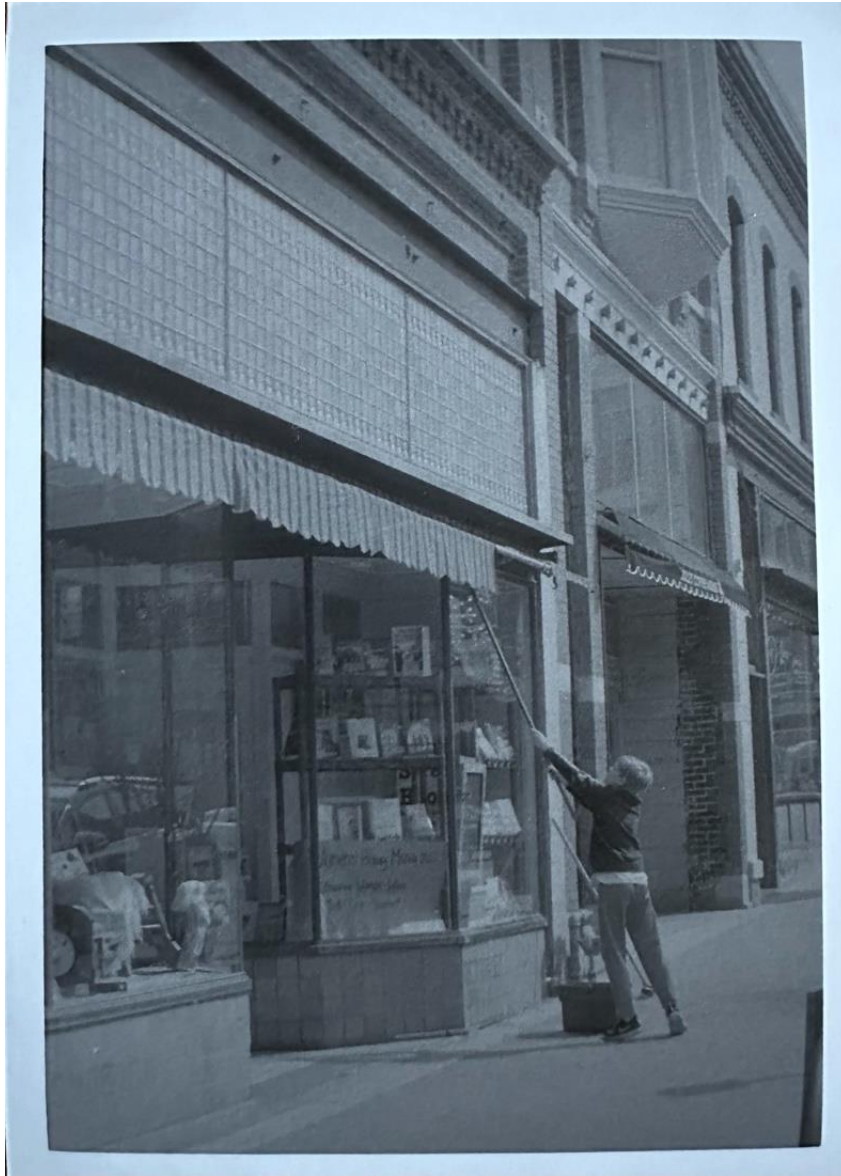
"I love you."



Sawyer Goff | Marion



Sawyer Goff | Window Cleaner



Grace Guyer | a love letter from my late best friend

i know you don't understand,
but someday i hope you will
forgive me.
it took me a long time too,
to figure out why i was taken
from the earth so soon.
i guess that's why my age is measured differently than you humans.

is it selfish that i send you things
each day
to help you remember me?

i send the rain to remind you
how much i love the water

i help nourish your love for chocolate
to remind you of the color of my coat
and the item in which my breed received its name

and i sent you Luci
to replace my presence
as a terrestrial guardian
whose duty was not only to protect you,
but to love you,
comfort you,
 ease your loneliness,
 relieve you of anxiety,
 and help you find your place in the world

i'd say she's doing quite well,
wouldn't you?
well i would hope so,
i'm the one who trained her
before i sent her to you.

i taught her that
when you're biting your nails
it means you're nervous about something

and need some soft ears to caress
to bring you back to reality
and give you someone to talk to

or when you're tapping your foot on the ground
it means you're about to start crying
and need some slobbery, wet kisses—the ones that make you squeal with laughter
to put a smile back on your face

being able to witness your homecoming from China
10-month-old you in mom's arms, giggling with red, rosy cheeks
shape your childhood
giving me your table scraps while dad yelled at us both
and watching you thrive
graduating high school, going to college, making friends, finding love, etc.
is a privilege i will never take for granted.

i loved spending
every second i had with you.
but now, you're all grown up!
 clever, humble, and kind
just like i always knew you would be.

i agree that our time together was short-lived.
but,
my job is done when i know you're ready
to do life on your own.
and when you do need me,
i will always be right by your side:
 as the warmth of the Sun's rays
 or as the familiar jingle of tags on a collar

whatever it is,
i know that you love me,
and
i hope you know that
i will always love you.

Grace Guyer | untitled

i used to hate *the bachelor*
and *the sun is also a star*.

i couldn't stand the thought of
people falling in love so quickly.
 "it's so unrealistic" i would contend to my friends
 "just wait until you fall in love" they'd respond
 i would roll my eyes,
 knowing that would probably
 never happen

but,

it did.

i waited

for eighteen

years.

i had heard the theories surrounding soulmates:

 "there's an invisible red string connected to the pinky of each person.
 no matter the circumstances, they are tied to and will find each other."
 or

 "humans were originally born with four arms, four legs, and two faces. as a punishment for
 our pride, the greek god zeus split us in half to search for our other half."

i never doubted the concept of a soulmate,
but "whoever he was," i used to think,
"he was sure taking his sweet time to reveal himself."

i went to college with one goal in mind:

grab my diploma and never look back (and, maybe make some lasting friendships along the
way too, i suppose).

i wasn't looking for a husband

honestly, i didn't care if i married or not.

 a husband, kids. settling down wasn't a priority—it was a setback.

that was, until i met you.

we shared two classes our fall semester of freshman year

one class together is ironic, but two is just destiny

i introduced myself

and you very politely stuck your hand out for me to shake.

 i had never met a boy

who made such a respectful gesture without the probing of his mother
but, here we were.

a week after exchanging contact information,
we quickly became close friends and,
after me having (accidentally) friend-zoned you
we became lovers a month later.

it was an accident, really.
i had no intention of turning you down,
but when you texted me apologizing for your delayed response my snapchat, i
panicked. i didn't know what to say. i didn't want you to feel guilty for anything nor did i
want to tie you down to a relationship that i really wanted but didn't know if you
wanted.

hi! no apology necessary; we're not really dating
so it's not like you're "obligated" to anyway haha
as soon as i hit send, i realized my mistake. but i couldn't really do anything about my
relationship problems while i sat in a three-hour chemistry lab.
so, after successfully proving boyle's law, i read your short, defeated message about
overthinking the concept of "us."

i responded instantly, explaining that i wasn't trying to friend-zone you and finishing with
i was actually trying to do the opposite ;)

i chewed off any last remnant of white on my nails while awaiting your response, letting out a
sigh of relief and allowing myself to smile after reading your reply

You know that was actually really relieving to hear. I feel the same way haha :). *I*
really appreciate your presence more than anything.

the past sixteen months i have learned more about myself from you
than i had in the seventeen years prior,
we are so similar it's terrifying.

but,

with every similarity,

i can't help but think it is the universe

giving me the middle finger

and saying it is possible to fall in love

and quickly at that.

so, while i lay here in your bed, listening to the shower faucet turn on and adele's "set fire to
the rain" begin playing on your phone i inspect my pinky, looking for evidence of a red string. i
laugh to myself and look out at the dark sky as i wonder how we were able to defeat zeus'
game and find each other. us. two scared-shitless kids who know a lot about a little. two
nothing-special 20-year-olds who mean nothing to the rest of the world and everything to
each other.

i still hate *the bachelor*
and i really didn't enjoy *the sun is also a star*,
but,
one thing's for certain:
you and i both know
that
i love you.

G	O	B	A	C
K	T	O	C	H
I	N	A	V	U
L	C	A	N	I
M	M	I	G	R
A	N	T	S	!

A	T	O	I	N	A	V	U	I	M	R	S
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I	A	M	N	O	T	A	V	I	R	U	S
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I AM NOT A VIRUS

Brevin Kruse | Untitled



Brevin Kruse | Untitled



Sidney Mitchell | Tied Up

The two of us don't have fights
instead we call them knots
just kinks in the road
hurdles to jump over

some are easy to fix
a tug here
as I apologize

a pull there
to think over the situation

just one slight maneuver
to get the job done

sometimes there are harder
knots to work with

they take more deliberation than others
a bigger change in course is needed

flipping everything on its head
or a complete lifestyle change
all in order to get untangled

but at least together we don't fight
instead we tie each other up

Laura Pacheco | I Cannot Let My Kids Exist

I cannot let my kids exist because they deserve more than I could even give myself.
I cannot let them exist because the world is big, and they are small, and I am even smaller.
I have let the world make me into something I fear I can never undo,
and I won't allow the world to do the same to them.
I cannot let my kids exist because I was born selfish even though it's a learned trait,
and I will be damned if I let it be a trait they learn from me.
I cannot let them exist because I could be a parent, but I cannot be a Mom.
I lack the kind of love a child needs to flourish.
I cannot let my kids exist because I refuse to let my food go cold while heating up theirs.
I cannot let them exist because I would prioritize my own naptime over my child's.
What makes you think I could be responsible for another human's wellness
when I am barely conscious of my own?
I cannot let my kids exist because I would like to live.
I cannot let them exist because it is cruel to imply they would prohibit me from life,
and I don't want to be a cruel person.
I don't know if I could teach them goodness.

Laura Pacheco | Oat Milk & Queer Identity

i only drink oat milk
if i'm copying a friend's drink
when i'm too anxious
to come up with my own.

"that sounds good,
i'll do the same."

i was *that* bitch
who bought out all the rainbows
as soon as i came out,
and became president of the gsa
in my uniform: a flannel
and a fresh pair of vans,
because otherwise
i wasn't legit.

i don't think they took me seriously,
anyway.

i am constantly a fraud,
even when
i'm hiding nothing.
my pride is always shameless;
i am unapologetic.

but i still like men,
and i like my milk whole.

Sam Richardson | dad

actually, dad
it's one of the most banned books
in the US
i tell him
not just
"some Muslim countries"
i guess some Christians
object to the depiction of witchcraft
i guess if it's illegal to burn
people
then Harry Potter is a good
substitute
he goes quiet and
immediately i
feel like an asshole
i kick a stone down the sidewalk

thank you
for sending me Animal Farm
i really enjoyed it

i order a water so that he will too
because i worry about
him
his heart
i tell him how interested i am in my new major
the same major as my mom who
works as a secretary
and hosts a book club on
the weekends
his dark rimmed eyes
shine
when i tell him
how much
i enjoy my new classes
and i am reminded how glad i am

but
i am a part of his world
and to him the only thing
scarier than the world changing
in front of him is the world changing
behind his back
we say our goodbyes
and before he rolls up the window he says
 love you, kid
and i don't hesitate
 love you too
as he drives off
i can't imagine a more perfect
dad because i can't bear
how it would make him feel

Emily Tokarski | pov: you're in my living room

it's a friday night
and the girls are out on the town
and by that i mean,
my roommates and i threw on cute, skanky tops
and sweatpants
and are sitting on the couch, wrapped in blankets,
sipping wine with slippers on our feet

screaming about boys and school and climate change
and how the whole world is fucked up and how we
should try communism again and how expensive
our electricity bill is

but hey
at least we look hot
and we have alcohol,
and we're in college,
and we're lucky
to be where we are,
but *god*

what if we never find love and what if everything
we're working towards is pointless and the planet
dies before we do and we never have babies or
grandbabies or get to retire or what if we die
before we even get old

but damn,
this wine is working
i am feelin
drunk

we should take cute pictures for instagram
to make it look like we have a social life
when, in reality, our social life is
us doing *this* every weekend
but for real

what if we all end up alone forever and everything
goes to shit but really everything is already going
to shit because our bills are getting higher while our
hours are getting cut and school is just too hard right
now and going to class feels optional and life is just
too much to handle and we need a break and all i want
to do is just lay in bed and until life becomes
quiet and simple and joyful again

oh hey
our doordash order is here
i forgot i ordered that
hell yeah
we sit and we eat
and sing along to the music
and suddenly
life really doesn't feel all that bad
right now, at least
it feels

quiet, and simple, and joyful again

i sit here with my friends
and a toppers pizza paired
with a glass of cheap, aldi wine
to give me comfort tonight
and even if the world goes up in flames
i'll go peacefully
knowing i'm going

down
with
my bitches

Emily Weseljak | You are the Universe

Sometimes, (always late at night) I'll stretch my hand up towards the ceiling. I'll close my eyes. And from where I lay on my back, I can feel time bend. The universe snaps and shudders until she's able to pull your hand into mine. Her energy shifts between my fingertips while yours dances along my palms. I can't see you. But I like to imagine getting a glimpse into your eyes would be like seeing the way her stars puncture holes into the thick blanket of obsidian sky. I feel your presence in the way her air crackles around me. It rushes across my skin like the tendrils of a solar flare, causing goosebumps to rise in its wake. I hate the way it makes my mind wander. I crave a different kind of big bang. One where I can count her constellations in your starlight-warmed skin.

I can feel the pull of our hearts reaching out to one another. Two binary stars entangled in each other's trance. I wish her nebulas would curl around me, pry me from the sticky confines of space and deposit me gently into your arms. I want her to crinkle time and push galaxies aside for our meeting.

The universe envelopes me in her embrace. I pretend her weight is you. And I can only hope – wherever you are – that you're holding your hand out, too.

Contributor Biographies:

Megan Alaimo is not a writer at all and she totally doesn't have previous works published. If you ask her, she won't tell you that she has four published poems that can be found in two separate editions of UWM-Waukesha's literary magazine: The Windy Hill Review. She wouldn't dare touch a pen, let alone publish poetry. If she was a poet, she wouldn't even know it. When she is not writing, which is all the time, she likes to ponder nature (NOT to figure out story ideas), chill with her cats and play video/board games with friends.

Lydia Bergerson is trying their best to make art organically, thinking with their heart. Their brain is needed for their biology major, and heart needed for lovely, weird paintings.

Matthew Ballesteros is a junior who is a wannabe songwriter and loves to write bars. His goals are to make people smile and promote creativity.

Devany Bauer keeps adding majors and minors so she will be a super senior in the Fall. Her favorite thing to do, as of recent, is dance the night away with her girlfriends. Remember when you love to love hard and "reap the benefits that follow when you take pride in yourself."

Marcus Bunkowski is a junior at UWL studying Political Science and English. He often likes to wander and wonder about things he doesn't quite understand. His favorite hobby is staring at the sun for long periods of time and getting lost in big places. His greatest ambition is to one day come up with a perfect 3rd person bio that everyone will talk about for years to come.

Judy Crook is in her junior year at UWL as an archaeology major, and an art minor. She enjoys spending time with family, anything related to archaeology, creating artwork, and hobbies in photography.

Ellie Davis is a sophomore at UWL pursuing a communications degree with a minor in creative writing. Her piece Growing Pains focuses on the changes that happen when growing up and living on your own combined with both humor and emotion.

Aidan Donahue is currently a student studying English, creative writing, and legal studies at the University of Wisconsin in La Crosse. When not writing, he can be found playing table-top games and procrastinating.

Sawyer Goff is a first-year student from Milwaukee, WI and is studying art at UWL. She primarily works with watercolor but also explores other material such as oil pastel and film photography. Her work often contains subject matter relating to humans and nature, especially birds.

Grace Guyer is a second-year majoring in English on the Pre-Law track. She is currently in ENG 305 with Dr. Stobb and created these pieces as part of her short texts portfolio. As a proud Asian American, she hopes to increase minority representation in both the field of English and practice of law.

Brevin Kruse is an art and theatre student who just likes making things. Sometimes these things serve a purpose, but often their purpose is their making. He frequently forgets he doesn't know what he's doing but will pretend he does until it's true.

Sidney Mitchell is feeling hopeful and you should be too.

Laura Pacheco is a freshman student who has been writing poetry for six years, but recently reignited her love for it when taking a creative writing class this semester. She is an English Education major and plans to involve poetry as much as possible in her future classroom.

Emily Tokarski is a sophomore here at UWL, majoring in English Education. She's always had a passion for writing, and decided to take a creative writing course this semester, where she wrote this piece, "pov: you're in my living room." The piece is based on herself and her roommates, and reflects their experience as college students in the year 2023. She hopes to continue writing and improving her skills as a writer, and will hopefully submit more work to future issues!

Emily Weseljak is currently a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. She is pursuing an English education degree and is involved on campus with the Competitive Dance Team and the Aspiring Educators club. In her free time, she enjoys watching movies and trying new foods.