

THE CATALYST



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Cover image: *A Yooperlilte at 365* by Seth Polfus

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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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Forest Thoreson / Orange Sherbet Sky

“Thoreson!” yells a man in a short-sleeved polo, unblemished khakis, and a highlighter-yellow safety vest, “Put your head down, and get back to work!” The safety vest that he wears over his polo gives him the appearance of ‘factory worker,’ but he’s really just another office monkey stuck in middle management. Right now, he’s pissed off that yet another supervisor quit and that he was delegated the unfortunate task of babysitting the night shift.

Pretending to follow his orders, I step back toward the line, filled end to end with dusty tube televisions, and put my head down. I’m supposed to unscrew the backs off the TVs as they roll down the line, but there are three overflowing Gaylords behind me filled with the precious-metal-lined television guts that we harvest, and those on forklift duty are nowhere to be found. I set down my drill, scout out a spare forklift, and hop on, all while wondering why I ever decided to learn how to use one despite receiving no hourly incentive.

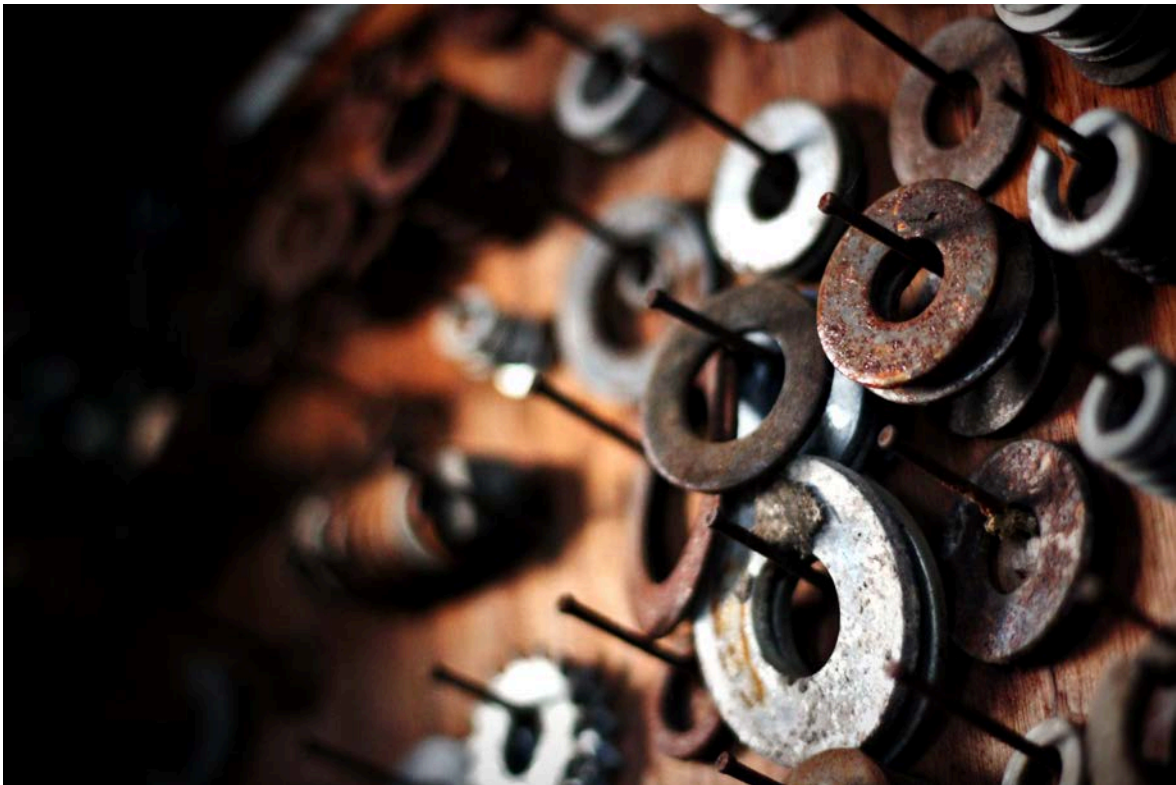
I drive cautiously, slowing down and honking my horn as I come upon blind corners, staying vigilant of any stragglers in the forklift lane. I insert my prongs into the pallet on which one of the Gaylords rests and raise it about a foot off the ground, giving it a couple strong bounces to ditch any loose material. I press the button on the garage door fob, put the gear in reverse, and contort my body so that I can see behind myself. I watch the garage door rise, letting a vibrant orange glow seep into the building, highlighting millions of aimless, floating dust particles in the process.

The ceaseless humming of machines and crunching of television backings in the plastic baler begin to dissipate, replaced by the chirping of morning birds and the occasional car zooming down the highway. I make it about halfway to the Gaylord storage building before the tank on the back of my forklift runs out of compressed air, rendering it immobile. I hop off the forklift, my steel-toes clunking as they meet the ground. I should replace my tank; but instead, I pause to admire the orange sherbet sky and the chirping birds, and for a second, I wonder if there’s more to life than standing on

a production line for twelve hours a day, harvesting precious metals under the guise of 'recycling.'

"Thoreson!" yells the man with the highlighter-yellow safety vest once again. I turn around to face him. "What the hell are you doing out here? Get back on the fucking line!" He leaves before I can tell him that the forklift ran out of compressed air, or that the Gaylords were full and that the forklifters were nowhere to be found, so I just leave it there. After I reach my station, I hear the garage door activate once again, and I turn my head to watch the vibrant orange glow slowly disappear behind the garage door. Then, turning back around to face my station, I pick up my drill, put my head down, and get back to work.

Trinity Rietmann / *Washers*



Trinity Rietmann / *Volt*



Maddie Brunner / i would take hits of you if i could

i would take hits of you if i could
lengthy blinkers from the pen
creating fat clouds that linger
in the air, so people walking by
pick up hints of old spice and
eucalyptus.

i would take rips off
the pipe or the bong or joint
that shatter my sense of being,
numb my senses entirely,
but light each nerve up;
electrifying, vibrating fingers from

hits and drags and rips that
infect me with a joy so strong
it almost makes me cry.
they tear apart my reality,
create an aura, a glow
that surrounds me, encapsulates me
until I am nothing
but high.

Maddie Brunner / I'd Rather Not Talk Anymore

We're no longer friends,
so, I don't blame you for being fake.

But we used to be,
therefore, I know you-
how you laugh,
how you show your anger,
even how you fucking speak.

And I know you think you're
being nice,
talking to me,
but I can tell that
we're strangers
just by the way you say hello
because like I said
I know you
and I know the way
you used to greet me.

Maddie Brunner / Ribs by Lorde

In that long beginning,
I see an older woman.
She walks to her nightstand,
finding a book full of
pictures from college,
pictures of us-
I mean, of her
and her college best friend.

Before the singing can even begin
she's dropping the book,
sprinting to her car,
racing across state lines,
to arrive at that far away stoop
because she couldn't stop
craving their youth.

I cry when I hear the line
"you're the only friend I need"
because there will be a day
when you don't live right next door.

But then, on a grocery run,
we are driving together

listening to Ribs by Lorde

and you say,

“this song always makes me think of you.”

And I smile, and respond,

“yeah, it always makes me think of you too.”

Maddie Brunner / It Gets Better?

Yesterday, in psychology,
the professor began to talk
about suicide, and young people
who end their lives
before they understand how much
better they can be,
and I have to leave the room.

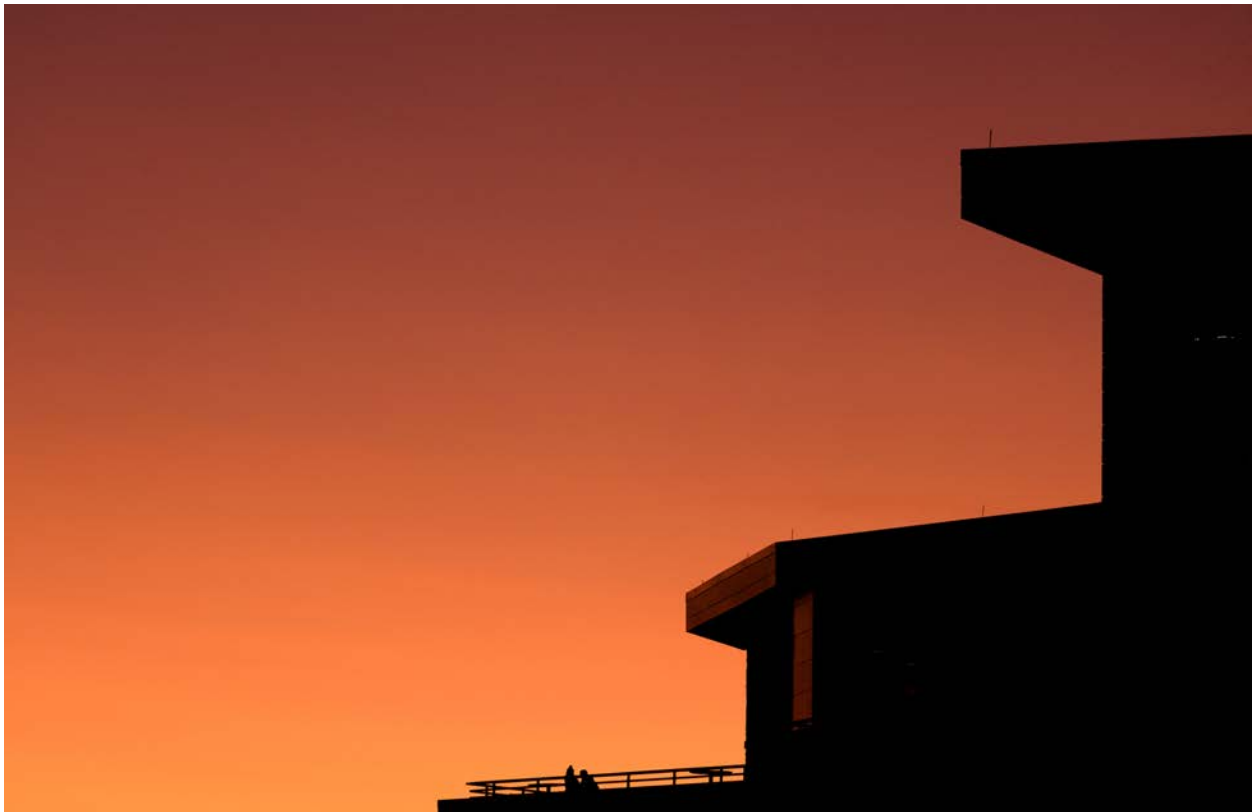
I have to rush home and tell you
it'll get better
because that is what they told me
and that is what they were never able to tell
the young people in those statistics.
You'll see, trust the adults spreading
this notion, trust us and you'll see.

But deep down, deep deep down,
I secretly wonder if this isn't true.
Because Mr Schuler killed himself last month,
and he was old,
real old,
with a wife and children
and a nice job and a loving home.
He laughed in classes loudly

and announced his presence with
a happy boom.

I like to think that you are going to stay
but it haunts me to lay awake at night and think
about a wife whose husband left her too soon.
I can't help but ask, did she tell him
all of the things I try to tell you?

Seth Polfus / *Union Utopia*



Kaytlin Nething / banana nut allergy

When you offered me a muffin
laced with bananas and walnuts.
I wouldn't hesitate.
My tongue would scratch and bleed later
but without remorse
I took it.
Even when I saw the grooves of the walnuts
carefully mixed amongst the rest of the dozen.

I would've hurt myself a thousand times
if you would have gazed at me in return.

When I found your checkered flannel
in the back of my closet
I told myself it wasn't once a gift
bestowed to me of the highest honor.
Saved from countless laundry loads,
to hold the last aching scent of you.

Your scent is hidden in items that only live in the back of my closet or under my bed, for
archeological digs to discover what they believe to be a long-lost love. They will write
about messy loops of letters strewn across love notes, posed angles and smiles, shared
sheets and bathroom sinks. But those are all the artifacts they will find.

When I stand in front of the bathroom mirror,

you are still there.
Glued behind me,
with flannel checkered arms
wrapping around my rib cage,
and your eyes are locked with mine.
But your brown eyes
no longer remind me
of chocolate chips,
warm labs,
fresh soil.
They are just brown.
You stare at me
until I am forced to
break your gaze and
spit into the sink.

And I look up and your just brown eyes no longer cloud my dirty mirror.

Walnuts and blood splatter my sink.

Seth Polfus / *Radiant Reverie*



Kaytlin Nething / Stale

I sit cross-legged behind the front desk, snacking on the, now stale, cookies I made last week, because butter and sugar are my independently prescribed antidepressants. I find myself staring at every broken backpack strap, slicked-back ponytail, microwaved lunch, untied shoe, and bitten nail because maybe today I will miss something. I stare at everything but my computer screen, which I am conveniently stowed away behind, shaking the mouse every two minutes so the darkness can't find its way onto my Microsoft haven.

I am met for the fourth week in a row with a large bumbling group of mighty high schoolers and willfully ignorant parents, playing follow the leader on a campus tour. I give a tight-lipped smile and a pageant wave at the foolish bunch just as I am told to do, then I wipe away the stale cookie crumbs that line my mouth with the end of my sleeve.

No one smiles and waves back. They never do. They glance, but they refuse to hold my gaze. Sometimes I like to compete in staring contests with them. I always win. They move on from my easily forgettable pitstop and continue their game.

I wonder what is missing from the perfected script of their leader.

"Our campus is safe."

Well, that is a lie. Because I remember it all.

I find myself staring at every beer-stained t-shirt, cheap cologne, dimly lit bedroom, and unwelcomed goosebumps. I stared at everything until I could fold every whisper, every misstep, and every tragedy into a tiny origami crane that could fly away while I forged a

diversion of bawling on the dirty linoleum tiles of my freshman dorm. But the wings were broken, and I was still on the bathroom floor.

I shake my mouse.

And take another bite.

Seth Polfus / *Frost Kissed*



Ellie Klingner / Spring Fever

As I am walking to my 7:45am Biology class this crisp Friday morning, my mind is occupied with the thought of going home for summer. Can I survive my freshman year of college for the last two months? Spring is my least favorite time of the year. While the falling of leaves allows Autumn to symbolize death, I associate Spring with the loss of someone I loved. This irony bites me each time I see the snow melted away by the bright sun and replaced with the budding of unblemished flowers. Every time I see a new sign of Spring life, I think of my cousin taking away her own life in the Spring of last year.

My classes lately have included concepts that seem foreign to me such as the process of Osmosis and linear equations. Memorizing this information makes me wonder if I am meant for this type of academic content and makes me yearn to feel more human. My mind continues to whirl nonstop about what I want to do with my life. I glance at my phone as a new song comes on and realize I have four minutes to get to my class on time.

While eating my last dinner as a freshman, I wonder how I have made it this far. The leaves in my salad are wilted and the cup leaks water creating a small pond over the table. I gaze out the window and see a new patch of yellow tulips. I despise this arrival of new life. As I am bringing boxes of clothes down to my car, beads of sweat form on my forehead from going up and down the four flights of stairs. Staring at my empty room feels as if I am staring into the abyss of the great unknown. I see my neighbor in the hallway and say a quick goodbye. My 2006 silver Honda CRV is filled to the brim with boxes, and I slowly pull out of the parking lot, thinking of a quick manifestation of my old car making it home without breaking down.

As I start my two-hour drive home, I quickly realize what a blessing it is to be alone with my thoughts. As I drive over the Mississippi River Bridge, I think about my grandmother's house which sits on the river. My mind wanders to the memory of my cousin, Sylvie. Our childhood was spent together at my grandma's house. When I was

six and she was nine, we picked out pillow pets together – I got the ladybug while she got the bumblebee. I still have this ladybug, which is yet another reminder of spring and death. Two years later, Sylvie came up with the game “before and after Grandmas house weighing,” where we would weigh ourselves before and after eating all the baked goods we made. My mind keeps spinning while I drive, and I start to feel dizzy.

My thoughts move forward to Sylvie in the teenage years. We had grown slightly apart. In my grandmother's words, Sylvie had “gone astray.” While my grandmother was the one to vocalize this, it was thought widely across the older relatives. However, the younger generations in the family just acknowledged that she had characteristics of a hippie. Sylvie was an advocate for a variety of causes, often going to rallies and posting about different fundraisers. My grandmother did not agree with the causes. After the annual family summer volleyball tournaments, my mother always mentioned on the ride home, “Did you see Sylvie’s armpit hair?” If “gone astray” means opposing violence and being comfortable with refusing social norms, then I personally don’t see the problem. I was sitting in choir class senior year of high school when I found out Sylvie had died. I received a text message from my dad that read “Did you hear the news? Sylvie died.” Without asking the teacher for permission, I left the classroom, struggling to walk. I staggered to the bathroom, knelt in front of the toilet and puked.

A few days later, at her funeral I found myself in front of her casket. I looked at her glasses which had always been too big for her face. Her beautiful brown hair was placed perfectly down her shoulders and her face was painted white, without flaws. My uncle attempted to sing a song in memorial but was unable to finish. My aunt sobbed on the floor. What could have caused her intelligent and beautiful daughter to commit suicide?

A car almost merges into me and I snap back to reality. I am listening to Noah Kahan's album when the song “The View Between Villages” plays. He sings about loss and anger and the emotions that follow. Reminders of the past overwhelm me, and I think about my cousin and

what more I could have done. It's getting dark, and I look up and see a few clusters of stars in the sky. I think briefly about how people compare the souls of dead people to stars. Then I stop myself because this is a corny thought and one thing I will not be is cliché.

I am thirty minutes from my house and decide to stop for the view and look at the river for a while. As I lean against my car and look out at the vast water, my life seems too small and insignificant to be here. I reflect on the life my cousin lived. She lived in a nonchalant way that I had always admired. She didn't care what others thought, but also was kind to all and worked for social change. I realize this is the kind of work I want to do.

I am sitting here many months later, admiring the first signs of spring. My major is now Sociology and I have hopes to work in a helping profession, to carry out the work that my cousin was doing. I reflect on my past self who renounced the arrival of Spring because of the sad memories attached. But I am now able to rejoice in the memory of someone I love and acknowledge the act of starting over.

Meg Alaimo / Nothing

What will be your last thought before you die?

What last image will hang on the tendrils of your brain's nerves?

Most people believe they will think of their loved ones, and
bless one last silent "I love you" to them.

If one were to die young they may worry about the life they will miss before they die
and think of how their final visage should have been one they wanted.

If one were to die old may reminisce about the joys their long time on earth brought
them and let the thought of them finally becoming one with the dirt relax their
dying panic.

Everyone is supposed to think of some last thought before they die.

No matter how worthless or profound that thought is. No matter
how unpleasant or pleasant.

No matter, only thought.

However, when I was

close to dying,

the fiery hands of Death about to close on my throat
and burn me away, I thought of nothing.

Nothing.

Not of my life before,

the love before,

the hate before or the death that may as
well have me now.

I thought of a nothing that was
almost blissful and yet unkind, not

quite soothing, not quite not

soothing me either.

If my thoughts were of nothing before my death,

then what in my life had wronged me?

—, I thought, —

Lauren LaLiberty / I Want to Believe

On the days Louisa gave tours of the Cedar Bay Library and Historical Society, the glass donation jar at the circulation desk remained mostly (if not entirely) empty. Every so often she received some pity change, but she had the sense that today would not be that day—unless she somehow procured a revolver and shoved it into the skulls of her guests, which, she assumed, would likely breach the library’s weapons policy, and threatening to shoot a random Canadian point blank if they didn’t cough up some change might make her feel bad.

Moral code and lack of a handgun notwithstanding, Louisa still had her charm.

“When I was seven I got stuck in a cedar tree, which was pretty impressive considering I was on a branch only five feet off the ground. But my dad thought it was funny and refused to help me, so I stayed up there for over two hours until our neighbor got sick of my yelling and gave me a ladder. Then the next day I climbed straight back up the tree and got stuck again.”

Her tour group, a disgruntled-looking family of four, said nothing.

Louisa offered a weak laugh. “Right. Well, not all cedar trees are bad, and over time I even learned to like them. It was about time too, you know, since I live in *Cedar Bay*. Even after spending years in New York for school, the cedar always had a special place in my heart.”

False, every single word. Louisa’s lying abilities had gotten *good* over the past few months. She was starting to sound like a bona fide nerd for the north shore of Minnesota.

“Do any of you have a favorite tree?”

Silence.

“You’re from Canada, right? How about a maple?”

The smallest member of the tour group, a little girl, began to chew on her sleeve. The mother was preoccupied with her son (who was busy making racecar noises) and

the father's eyes were turned upwards, as if it was of the utmost importance to count every single wooden panel on the ceiling. Not a single one of them spoke—not English, anyway, for the little boy was surely speaking *a* language, something that reminded Louisa of the whirring and growling of her father's old Ford.

So not a maple, then.

Louisa crossed her arms over her chest. "Alright. What can you tell me about the white cedar tree?"

The father, whose name tag read *Mike* in a messy scrawl, raised his hand in the same lazy, I'd-rather-be-anywhere-else manner of a concussed high school football player. His beer belly swelled beneath his t-shirt printed with the faded logo of some brewery from Winnipeg, which proclaimed, in bright orange block letters, "the best microbrewery in Manitoba!".

She'd become far too familiar with his type and their pretentiousness, whether it be about beer or hockey or anything else that entertained that strange population of Upper-Midwestern-Canadian men. Growing up in Cedar Bay had given her first-hand experience with them, of course, but leaving for five years and coming back had made her realize how truly *awful* they were.

Louisa asked herself every day why she'd chosen to return here after graduating college instead of remaining in New York. There, the concepts of *Minnesota* and *Lake Superior* were only dreams, the faintest memories that disappeared the instant she gazed at Manhattan's high-rises towering far into the sky, glowing as the sun rose over the Atlantic. And the men in New York! They were *cultured*—they knew things, like why Chopin was superior to Liszt, or how Godard's *Breathless* might be the most influential French New Wave film of all time. They chose craft cocktails over Miller Lite. They wore *loafers*.

Mike's voice, saturated in that awful Canadian accent (which really wasn't so different from her own Minnesotan one), brought her back to the present. "Is this entire tour going to be about trees?"

If possible, he seemed to care less about the tour than Louisa did. The small part of her that wasn't busy despising him could respect it—credit where credit is due.

She adjusted her tortoiseshell glasses on her nose. "Well, the white cedar is where Cedar Bay's name comes from, then we will move on to the French pioneers, then—"

"How much longer?" said the little boy, who wore a Batman shirt so long it reached his knees. Their snout-nosed little girl was busy folding her paper brochure so many times it threatened to tear apart.

Louisa looked at her wrist (which was empty) then glanced back up at the family.

"Half an hour, give or take a few minutes," she said.

The mother of the family (whose face was stuffed with so much filler it looked like someone had tugged her skin over a lumpy pillow) heaved in a breath, as if she would rather be stranded on a paddleboard in the middle of Lake Superior on a windy day instead of standing here, in the heart of an air-conditioned library, listening to a talk on Minnesota's trees.

Louisa's brain switched easily to automatic—she'd given this spiel so many times she could have recited it in her sleep. "Alright, then. Well, the white cedar was the very first tree the French pioneers saw..."

Mike sent his wife a poorly concealed look of disappointment, and the little boy audibly groaned. Louisa couldn't blame them. Nobody—besides the occasional tour bus of retired folk—actually wanted to tour the Historical Society, but in a town as small as Cedar Bay, what else was there to do?

Drown yourself in the lake, she supposed, but that might suck the excitement out of a wholesome family vacation.

—

After an excruciating twenty-three minutes of delving deep into the history of pioneer-era Minnesota, Louisa shoved a brochure into Mike's unwilling hands and fled.

Upon reaching her cubicle in the back offices, she was accosted by the IT assistant, Nathan, who planted his hands on her desk to loom over her. His name badge swung from its lanyard, nearly hitting her in the face.

“That sounded fun.”

“Come to my next tour and take a shot every time I say *white cedar*.” Louisa collapsed into her cheap desk chair and spun herself around. Her feet collided with Nathan’s bony ankles. “Oh, sorry.”

“No you’re not, but it’s okay.”

Nathan, who was three years older than her and had an entire wife and infant at home, was the closest in age to Louisa at the library. Her own measly age of twenty-three had solidly cemented her as the baby of the staff, which, to her irritation, Nathan found tremendously funny. With such a recent update in status he’d begun to think of himself as wise—wiser than her, at least—and had begun to offer advice where she just didn’t want it. Today, apparently, was one of those days.

“You can quit tours, you know,” he said thoughtfully, spinning his name badge on its cord. He let it go and watched it fling itself around for a moment, then added, “Gloria would be more than happy to take Mondays and Tuesdays from you. She’s retired, it’s not like she has anything better to do. And the archives look terrible, I don’t think they’ve been touched in fifty years.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Then why do you keep giving tours? Weren’t you hired to organize the archives anyway?”

Louisa wadded up a piece of notebook paper and lobbed it at his head. “Why don’t you go full-time at Sorenson’s? Because you would be bored out of your mind if you spent every hour of every day writing software.”

“So?”

“So, you need something different, same as me. I hate those archives more than I hate tours. If I was in that basement for eight hours straight five days a week, my brain would melt into ectoplasm.”

Nathan frowned. “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“It’s a metaphor.”

“If you say so, Lou.”

He pushed away from her desk to study her cubicle wall, where a poster of a blurry UFO accompanied by the caption *I WANT TO BELIEVE* stood out conspicuously amongst the smaller photos. Its corners were torn to pieces from all the times she’d tacked it up then removed it again, bouncing between college dorms and dingy apartments until it finally landed here, in this dismal corner office, reminding her that anything was possible if only she put her mind to it.

After five months back in her hometown again, that sentiment was starting to feel hollow. It was so *boring* here. If only an alien would drop from the sky, laser up some unsuspecting child into their ship, cause a mass panic—and then she could hunt the alien down, flashlight in hand, accompanied steadfastly by the Mulder to her Scully. Only then might she enjoy her return to Cedar Bay, but something told her that Lake Superior would dry up before that happened.

Aliens didn’t typically invade Manhattan either, to be honest—but there *was* that David Bowie impersonator from her subway route, which was close enough.

“My wife loves that show,” Nathan said mildly as he inspected the UFO poster. Louisa ignored him, suddenly consumed with an overwhelming feeling of dread—it roiled in her chest like there was a beast trapped within her ribcage, pounding at her sternum, trying to escape.

She didn’t want to look at it anymore. *That* particular poster on *that* particular wall held a sense of permanence, as if this library was the final resting place of the both of them: her and that poster. How many tours would she give before the ink began to fade? How many hours would she spend huddled in the basement archives before the

text, which became increasingly more sun-bleached as the days marched on, disappeared completely?

In one fluid movement Louisa stood, elbowed her way past Nathan, and tore the poster off the wall.

“Louisa, what—”

“It was crooked,” she said, suddenly feeling quite ridiculous. The paper corners of the poster remained stuck to the pins on the wall, leaving her with what looked like a massive cut casino card. She idly wondered what suit the UFO might be. The David Bowie impersonator seemed like he would know something like that.

Nathan picked at the pushpins. The faint scratching of his fingernails against the wall paint made her wince. “I don’t think it looked crooked,” he said, dropping a pin on her desk. Louisa watched it spin on its head, orbiting an invisible anchor point, before it settled on its side beside her journal. It took effort to ignore the urge to grab the journal and stuff it away so Nathan wouldn’t be able to snoop on that, too.

Yesterday’s entry was particularly embarrassing. She’d written it while sitting at the kitchen table of her apartment late last night, halfway through her third homemade strawberry margarita. Already in that strange liminal space between tipsiness and full drunkenness (she’d over-poured the tequila, of course), her current life circumstances had struck her in full force, and the abrupt burst of whimsical nihilism that followed resulted in what was quite possibly the worst poem written in the history of humankind:

*The stars above will keep on spinning no matter what I do,
Nothing matters, so I’m feeling a little blue,
I’ll die here, I know that, it’s true...*

“There’s been UFO sightings here in Cedar Bay, if you like that kind of stuff.”

Louisa glanced up, torn from her reverie. Her skepticism came far too easy for comfort. “Anything’s a UFO if you have shitty eyesight.”

“Good thing I don’t.” Nathan tapped his wire-frame glasses knowingly. He gave her one of those vacant, almost pleading smiles that she’d come to expect from men when they thought they’d made a joke and were waiting for her to laugh. She indulged him, albeit awkwardly, wondering if he’d be mad at her if she slapped him upside the head.

“But you know about the UFOs, of course,” he continued. “Growing up here and all that. I only found out when Jackie told me, and by then we were already married so I thought it would be rude to tell her she might be missing a few neurons.” He shrugged. “If she believes, then I believe.”

“People have been seeing UFOs over the lake for years,” Louisa said, rolling up her poster and slipping a hairband around it. She thought of her dad, who was likewise convinced. When she grew old enough to realize that the episodes of *The X-files* she watched with him were more fiction than fact, she’d begun to think he—like many other residents of Cedar Bay—were simply just off their rockers.

Somehow, she thought that was the wrong thing to say. “Me and my dad used to stand on the docks at night and look for them. I was convinced that there were UFOs everywhere, but I think I had only just discovered the stars.”

Nathan considered this. “There’s a UFO watch party on Friday if you’re interested. Jackie really wants to go. You can bring your friends, if you want.”

Friend, Louisa corrected mentally. “I’ll think about it,” she said, already committing herself to Not Go. “I might have plans—” the plans in question being another lonely night at the table with a drink and her journal “—but I’ll let you know.”

Claire Tjelta / Monet's Casting Call

after *Water Lilies*

I didn't make the cut, but I was there. Hopping from pad to pad, exploring the depths of the murky pond, admiring the dancing light on the water, drinking in the humid summer breeze. The painter was there for hours, examining my home. I thought he noted every detail: the trees in the water, the purple in the sky, the lilies and lily pads in all their delicate glory.

But I didn't make the cut. Perhaps it was because of how I looked. But the lily pads he painted were green, and the water's surface was bumpy and uneven. Perhaps it was because I bounced around too much. But the trees he painted swayed and moved in the breeze.

I don't know why I didn't make the cut. Perhaps I was too great a detail to include in so great a masterpiece. Perhaps I would have distracted from the magical serenity of the swirls. Perhaps I would have evoked laughter instead of marvel. Perhaps children would have shouted out my existence, pointing at me in those grave-like halls of silence and offending other somber reflectors. Perhaps my presence would have overshadowed everything else that was beautiful about the painting. Or perhaps *that* was the point: I did not fit the painter's definition of beautiful.

I sometimes wonder why I didn't make the cut. How someone with so big a brain could think so little of me. But I guess I *was* smaller than the painter, and he couldn't see the world like I could. So perhaps it doesn't matter that I didn't make the cut. He was, after all, only a painter.

Claire Tjelta / A Letter in Autumn

Good sir,

As I'm sure you've noticed, your beloved has left and will not be returning. Not ever. Due to "pressing time constraints," which seem to have arisen all of a sudden, she has asked me to deliver this to you:

She requested that I return to you this yellow flower – now dried by a hellish heat – as a token of reassurance of her undeniable and passionate love. Apparently, you picked this blossom from the wild field on the west side of the cliff upon which you kissed your beloved.

She also requested that I tell you that she "most ardently loves you." She says you are "the only one who has ever made her feel the way she did." She says she "regrets" that she has to leave you at this most "delicate" period of your courtship. And she says she wishes she could have at least enjoyed one more of those "dramatic sunsets" with you.

Her mother, too, is heartbroken. I am sure that is of little concern to you, seeing as you have never met her, but I say it because of that old proverb "misery loves company." You do not suffer alone, and I hope that fact calms the agony of your spirit. But then again, I suppose her mother will see her again, whereas you will not.

Suffice it to say, I regret that this news must come by way of me. Please recognize, however, that I am only the messenger who delivers the news of my kin.

*If you have any questions, please appeal to my Father. He will connect you with the appropriate services.

Yours respectfully,

Hermes, Messenger of the Gods | Mount Olympus

Division of trade, thieves, travelers, sports, athletes, and border crossings
Guide to the Underworld

* On a personal note: I feel inclined to tell you that I never very much liked your beloved. Despite her refreshingly delicate beauty, she has always been rather impetuous and selfish, and always finds a reason to feel sorry for herself. She, of course, knew – even on the day you confessed your love for her – that her first love must reclaim her upon each autumnal anniversary. I only say this to give you comfort. Typically, I would offer you a chance to challenge the man who has claimed your beloved. It is such great sport to watch mortals vie with their superiors! However, seeing as you are a decent fellow, perhaps the most decent of all her suitors, I have determined to pass up this opportunity. Most of the time, such men to whom I extend my offer experience a most horrendous fate beyond mere heartbreak. The fools who do try end up damned, and the fools who don't try end up wallowing in their cowardice and self-pity forever. But I will spare you the temptation and, thus, certain demise. I am only sorry I could not come up with a better trade: Her flighty heart for your steadfast soul seems a rather unfair exchange. For what other man could ever love her as you did? But now I have probably said too much.

Sarah Herrmann / *Mittens in Boots*



Hephzibah Ohihoin / The Unanimous Feeling of It

I

There's a feeling to it
But we can't place our finger on it
There's an emotion that is yet to be named
When corruption runs rampant in our mother

The unanimous feeling of dread
The radios are calling
Voices grainy to the ear and itchy on the skin
The TV screen dark enough to see the pre-ordered gloom
Before it lights up the room and tells what no one wants to hear
It will cast daylight on our faces
but bring night to our hearts

The men will grunt and the women will hiss
Two hands on her head to show our abyss
Our children will whine, say this mother is not theirs

It's the unanimous feeling of dread
When feet that carry bad news
Stare from our screens

II

The unanimous feeling of sorrow
The breath of life
Becomes the last heave of slaughter
Souls violently separated from body
Brothers and sisters beheaded
Like the fowl on Christmas day
We bleat like goats and buckle like cows
We are all animals to the heavy-handed kings

Terrorists prouder
Reporters somber,
Death is simply a number
To the arrow that flies by day

It's the unanimous feeling of sorrow
When dry tears leave a rash around the eye
And hungry throats squeeze in pain
Because the loss the another
Is as common as the tin in our mines

The unanimous feeling of anger
The taste of bile in our throats

III

When babbles of uncompassionate driven words
Are forced out in false condolence
News spirals that stagnate the mind
Stuck in the sinking sand of powerlessness
Leaving us to grasp at nothing but hot air and feel-good curses

We are angry
And though our anger has substance
It births no result

It's the unanimous feeling of anger
When our presence means nothing
But manpower and votes
And even when we play into their games
Our humble requests are not obtained

There's a feeling to it
And it always drenches us with bitterness
But like cold water to dry skin
We awake to the truth
Nothing has changed and nothing will change
The powerful will remain powerful

IV

And our mother, adorned with red trumpets will run its course

Julia Bright / Constellations

Scars are specked constellations, a map of your worst days. We buy creams to heal them faster, to make them disappear. Yet, I can't let go of mine. The one on my hand practically gave me PTSD, flashbacks, nightmares, I didn't touch scissors for months. Accidentally getting stabbed in the palm of your hand at 10 years old might do that. Visions of the impact and the searing pulling out, the overflow of blood pooling in my palm. But my sister took care of me, panicking because it was her day to babysit and yes, she called the ambulance. But she took care of me. She gave me a red popsicle, my favorite flavor, and put on "Dolphin Tale", my favorite movie.

Then there is the long, thin, white one on the inside of my knee. Barely visible but I sit, I poke, and I prod, just to make sure it is still there. The only mark remaining, created by an over- excited, nail-trim needing dog. The garage door sounded the alarm that mom is home from work, my lap becoming the victim of his joy. The scar, my only physical reminder that he existed. Twelve years of memories never seems like enough. A dog that made me forget what life was like before him, made a hole in my life after him.

Switching legs and going lower, I can still feel an indent in my bone underneath the two neighboring scars on my shin. Just a younger sister that was tired from walking around Dick's Sporting Goods waiting for her older sister to find the perfect pair of tennis shoes. Always waiting until the last minute to say I have to pee, wearing crocs, and for some reason feeling like escalators and crocs don't work together. The need to pee, however, overwhelmed the sixth sense I should have listened to. Running and tripping up the escalators, my shin went right into the prongs of the step above. My mom instantly picked me up and took me to the bathroom, placing me on the edge of the sink, my pale shin under cold water. The scared, teenage boy employee was panicking, frozen, he stood in the doorway staring, mouth wide open. His panic was not helping mine, and yet, I still had to pee. In the end my mom was the saving grace. I was bandaged up all happy for ice cream and my sister found her shoes.

My elbow, home to a nicely healed, gnarly one. Being out of my vision, this one is easy to forget. Although, how I got it will always remain in my memories. I was excited to show my best friend my new RipRider 360, I pedaled down the sidewalk and attempted the 360, when my neighbor's uneven driveway, thought otherwise. She ran faster than I have ever seen her run, straight to our parents. Their vision blocked by two towering pine trees. She cared and made sure my 'ouchie' was healing every day when we saw each other at recess. My protective, taller, best friend was my temporary savior.

While I remember a lot of my scars, there are some I don't remember but have almost instead become birthmarks. Having them for so long, it would feel wrong if they weren't there. Two sizes, shapes, and knuckles but both on the same finger. Being paired for what I know to be my whole life. The diagonal, inch long scar on my chest, created because four-year-old me really wanted to reach something and just didn't know how to operate the step stool. The childhood innocence that doesn't need help, staying with you as you become the adult that still doesn't know how to ask for it. Scars are speckled constellations, a map of your worst days to remind you of the best things in life.

Astoria Wichelt / Twenty-one

This girl in my class skips class to go to New York fashion week,
I skip class to go to court.

I wonder what you skip class for...

do you skip class to sleep in or darty?

Or do you not skip class at all because you're on probation?

Guilty.

The school found you guilty.

Does your mom think you're guilty?

Or did she take your side like our friends?

I remember a time when I thought you'd change,

I thought my love would take away your anger,

I would be soft and do whatever you'd say.

Run myself into the ground with a smile on my face,

if I could grin and bear it for even one more day

maybe you would've felt my love

maybe you would've changed.

But no,

I sacrificed myself for a man who could never be saved.

I killed a plant because I gave it too much water,

I worry love is violence.

Is that why you hurt me so bad?

Because you loved me so much?

I'm not sure my mom would call this love.

Maybe you aren't a terrible person...

maybe you were just 21.

Jacinda Hickey / *Ash*



Nadia Czahor / Loud

"She's **loud**". Those two words have deteriorated me all my life. I'm not always meant to hear it and I'm sure I always don't. It's not like I need to. I can feel it in the looks, eye rolls, and murmurs around me. They never mean I'm **loud** like someone yelling "Surprise!" at someone's party. Or how a High School Football team cheers after a big win. They don't mean **loud** like a 3 a.m. drive in late July through the backroads of a small town. Or like the fireworks on the fourth. No, not like the kind of **loud** that follows a college acceptance letter from your dream school or an uproar applause after the high note in the National Anthem. So, why, if all of these so grand, is it so bad to be **loud**? Am I not allowed to take up a few extra drops of laughter in the great sea? Why should I quiet my emotions because they feel a little more than yours? But they'll call me **loud** and I'll bite my tongue. I'll try and quiet down like a fall day without wind. Like a black coffee or an audience at the symphony. All because I'm **LOUD**.

Contributors

Meg Alaimo was an English major at UW-LaCrosse and has probably graduated by now if all went well. Her poetry can be found in Volume 27 & 28 of *The Catalyst*. When she is not writing – which is rarely – Meg likes to play video games and read sci-fi books. She is currently residing in Rochester, MN with her loving partner and hopefully, some pets too.

Julia Bright is a writer's block loving writer. She has been writing for years and has found her passion, oddly enough, in writing poetry, even though she never enjoyed reading it. Julia started as a pre-medicine track but due to her realization that she is better with words than numbers, fortunately switched to English. Spending her little free time listening to records, reading, writing, or learning a random new skill, including crochet, embroidery, and flooring, she jokes that she is becoming a true jack of all trades.

Maddie Brunner is a sophomore at UWL whose dream is to become an author. Her biggest fear has always been others judging her work, until one day she realized that she would never achieve her dreams if she kept everything in her journals. She promised herself she would go to college and do something with her life and believes that submitting some of her favorite poems she has done over the years is a good first step. She's excited to get her work out there, even if it only gets to those rating the pieces!

Nadia Czahor is an English Writing / Rhetoric major with a Creative Writing Minor. Writing poetry has always been something she loved as an escape, something personal to her that only existed in the late hours of her room. Until recently, she was never encouraged to share it with anyone, and when she was, it was a big step. Steps turn into leaps, and leaps turn into bounds. Start stepping.”

Sarah Herrmann has created a CMYK Monoprint in her Print 1 class. This print is inspired by Sarah's cat Mittens. He is seen in this print inserted into the fairytale Puss in Boots although Mittens has been having some tummy troubles therefore he is vomiting into his boot.

Jacinda Hickey is a senior majoring in Public Administration with a minor in International Studies. She enrolled in a ceramic for non-art majors course in her last semester at university. She was bewitched by the arduous process and craftsmanship that goes into creating a single piece. Her work is heavily inspired by the confluence of flora and fauna, often using more abstract forms and painterly designs.

Ellie Klingner is passionate about living her life with compassion and making the world a better place with her actions. She hopes to use her degree to enter a helping profession. When she concludes her final years at the university, she aspires to join the Peace Corps as learning about new perspectives and cultures is another part of life which she holds close to her. Ellie is passionate about living her life in an advantageous manner that will lead to contentment.

Lauren LaLiberty is a junior at UWL studying English, French, and Linguistics. She has been writing stories for as long as she can remember, her very first one titled "Mini Selena Gomez". She still isn't sure what it is about. Since then, she has been working towards a full length novel, and has even begun dabbling in French translation. When not writing, she can be found watching The X-Files with her roommates.

Kaytlin Nething, a senior at UWL, is a Communications major with a minor in History. Despite being a newcomer to creative writing, it's already having a profound impact on her life. Writing has quickly become a joyful journey of self-expression and discovery for her. Kaytlin finds comfort in crafting narratives that reflect her experiences and

imagination. Kaytlin wishes that as you engage with her writings, you'll encounter them with empathy and a willingness to embrace complexities.

Hephzibah Ohihoin is a Nigerian-born writer based in the United States. She is currently studying at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse, majoring in English and minors in legal studies and creative writing. She's very passionate about her country of origin and thus much of her works draw inspiration from that passion. Her short story, 'Boarding School Waters' has been featured on the Charger Press.

Seth Polfus has had a passion for taking photos since receiving a disposable camera for Christmas when he was ten years old. Even today, the photographs he took back then tell a story and the timeless value of photos is what has propelled him to take up photography. An appreciation for nature and a love for adventure was implanted in him while growing up in the wilderness paradise otherwise known as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. His work is reflective of his passion for photography, love for variety, and longing for adventure.

Trinity Rietmann is an artist based in La Crosse, WI. She is currently studying art education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and looks forward to her future as an art teacher while also growing her photography business. Throughout her college career she has enjoyed experimenting with various subject matters in her photography and has explored various other art mediums, too. Her camera can be found in her hand as she uncovers the beauty of La Crosse with the click of the shutter.

Claire Tjelta first discovered her passion for writing at eight years old, and over the years, she has developed a deep appreciation for the power of the written word. She is currently a Sophomore at UWL and is pursuing a degree in English, with the goal of one day becoming an editor and published author. Claire lives in the Driftless area of Wisconsin and enjoys spending time with her family, working on her various creative

writing and sewing projects, volunteering at her church, and savoring an iced maple latte with a healthy dose of honest conversation.

Victoria Wichelt is 21 and a senior at UWL majoring in communications and minoring in digital media studies and design. She was born and raised here in La Crosse but hope to move to Chicago or Minneapolis after graduating!