The Catalyst

Volume 31 / Spring 2025

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Cover image by Evelyn Van Ess

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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 photographs in this issue were taken by Evelyn Van Ess and Drew Vlasak. The images highlight the creative process by featuring the spaces where visual artists make their work.

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Josie Rush / Glasses

It's cold when I return to my apartment. Too cold.

He always complains it's too warm.

No, *complain* isn't right—he wouldn't do that. But he would make suggestions, words he doesn't mean anything by, probably isn't even thinking of, and I wouldn't hesitate to crank up my put-upon little air conditioner, even as its eager humming ticks my electricity bill up cent by cent. Just like shuttling him back and forth between his house and mine wrings the gasoline from my car.

You ungrateful bitch. He just listened to you talk for six hours.

Well, I had to listen to him too.

Yeah. Because that's what friends do.

I turn off the air conditioner, even though its cool rush washes the scent of him from my room. Its last rattling breaths give way to silence. I let it ring in my ears.

Even in the blissful quiet, the apartment is all wrong, the little inconsistencies he caused drawing my eye like the shadow your mind tells you is there when you're alone and the night presses hard against the windows. If I had ravaged the room myself—*Only you would call a few flattened pillows "ravaged"*—then I might enjoy putting it right. But I will not enjoy this. This is the heaving stomach that purges the body of bad food. This is the shower you take after a one-night stand, at least like they do in the movies.

I tidy the rug he mussed while walking out the door. I straighten the candle he insisted on touching. I take his water glass, and I set it in the kitchen. One more dish to wash later.

He used the bathroom; splashes of water dot the sink and counter in a way I have masterfully learned to avoid when I wash my own hands. These droplets are him—still in my apartment, still in my space, itching across my skin. I wipe them up, then switch out the bathroom rug with another, so I don't have to stand where he did.

The kitchen counter, too, saw his touch, clumsy palms galloping across it while we laughed about a book we'd recently read together. I want to laugh again at the memory, but my jaw is sore from maintaining a pleasant expression—*This is what humans look like, right?*—for the duration of his visit. My face stays blank as I attack the counter with Lysol.

In the front room, the couch cushions are still crooked from his weight, pulled out to expose dark, hungry cracks. I'll get to that. First, I vacuum, going over each inch of floor twice

to catch any stray hairs. Only then, when my footprints alone indent the carpet, does the couch get scoured for any remainder of him, the cracks pillaged with the vacuum's wand. The pillows get shaken, the blanket brought back out from where I stashed it—too hard to clean properly—and a heavy mist of Febreze inundates the air. Once I'm certain the coffee table is again parallel to the couch, it's like he was never here.

Are you happy now? Imagine if he knew you did this every time he came over.

It's not his fault. He's my friend. I had a good time today.

But now I'm perfectly empty. Now I can breathe. I'll get out of these jeans, make myself dinner, and eat in the front room—in the armchair, where he didn't sit. Even though I usually eat on the couch, it's too soon to rest where he rested. I turn to leave.

His glasses sit on the ottoman.

They leer up at me, forgotten—sprawled wide open, not even folded, tossed to the side as though they have every right to be there. My tired jaw throbs. I don't know when I'll see him next. They'll sit here until then; I'll have to look at them every day. They're greasy with his fingerprints and the sweat of his face, watching me like a hidden camera snuck into my home, guilty in their innocence, dirty and foreign and *not mine*—

My blank face crumples.

Evelyn Van Ess / Painting Studio

Alex Schraeder / The Mushroom Queen

I knew her when she was lost.
I knew her before the found the rope
to hold onto while leading her to her niche.
She had her interests then,
foraging for mushrooms in the woods
and posting informational videos of her finds--
it was something
but not what it is now.
Now she is The Mushroom Queen.

The local head of the emergency department
in a small town nearby,
who my clients saw and got prescriptions from,
lost his mind on mushrooms—
walking through the forest rambling
about the interconnectedness of the mycelium
high on psilocybin,
welcomed her to his cottage last winter
hoping her videos and views
would bring occupancy to his properties.

I rented from his parents,
an apartment I once shared
with my first real love
who left me and stayed “in”
with the most affluent family
in the small town nearby,
I wonder if they know.
But I knew her better than anyone,
before the lost doctor asked her to be

His Mushroom Queen
in what he openly deemed a cult,
with ritual gatherings of like-minded individuals
on the land he got from his parents.

I knew about her cheating
on the boyfriend she still has,
that gave her an STD—
about the abuse she suffered at his hands
and those of the adults who were supposed
to protect her from things like that.
She never recovered from the trauma
at least not when I knew her.

This was her second cult,
the other being WELS Lutheran—
they gave her books on fertility and
her duty to procreate
but she never wanted children.
Always too trusting,
I still think she deserved better.

We were close, I was in her life,
was in the monetized videos she would post
on Facebook and Tiktok.
I was happy.
I think she was happy, too.
I wonder who watches her dog now,
when she flees to the forest to find
Hen of the Woods, Morels, and Pheasant Backs.

Now I am blocked,
on all sites—by her,
the girl with eighty-seven-thousand followers,
cared enough to block one—
to block me.
I know too much of The Mushroom Queen.

Macy Kennedy / Rebirth

Size suddenly
doesn't matter
the second you feel threatened.
You're scared now, huh?
Scared I'm gonna leave.
Scared I'll see through your opaque facade.
You're helpless.
As I begin
pulling the trigger ever so slightly
closer,
you begin to stutter.
"I n-never meant it,"
Never meant what?
How I'm stupid?
Or ugly?
Or fat?
Or weird?
Or fat?
Yeah, you might've helped me toughen up,
gifted me some thick skin,
but *fat* still stings.
"I don't want you to leave me,"
I like your panic.
You've watched me squirm,
but I'm smarter now.
Now it's your turn.
After your void vows to leave me,
just when I am comfortable again.
Simply to instill fear *in* me and power *over* me.

I can’t help but smile.

Who has the power now?

Sweat drips from your forehead,

“Please,”

I remain calm.

Ever so slightly pulling the trigger closer,

and closer.

There is a slight change in our eyes.

You notice mine,

and I notice yours.

We’re finally taking turns.

It makes you choke.

Terrified, now you've lost me.

You're losing that sense of self you had throughout;

All of that confidence…

Was that a performance, too?

My last straw I remove from your grasp with a quick bite.

I spit it onto the ground.

This is it,

The barrel held to your pleading heart.

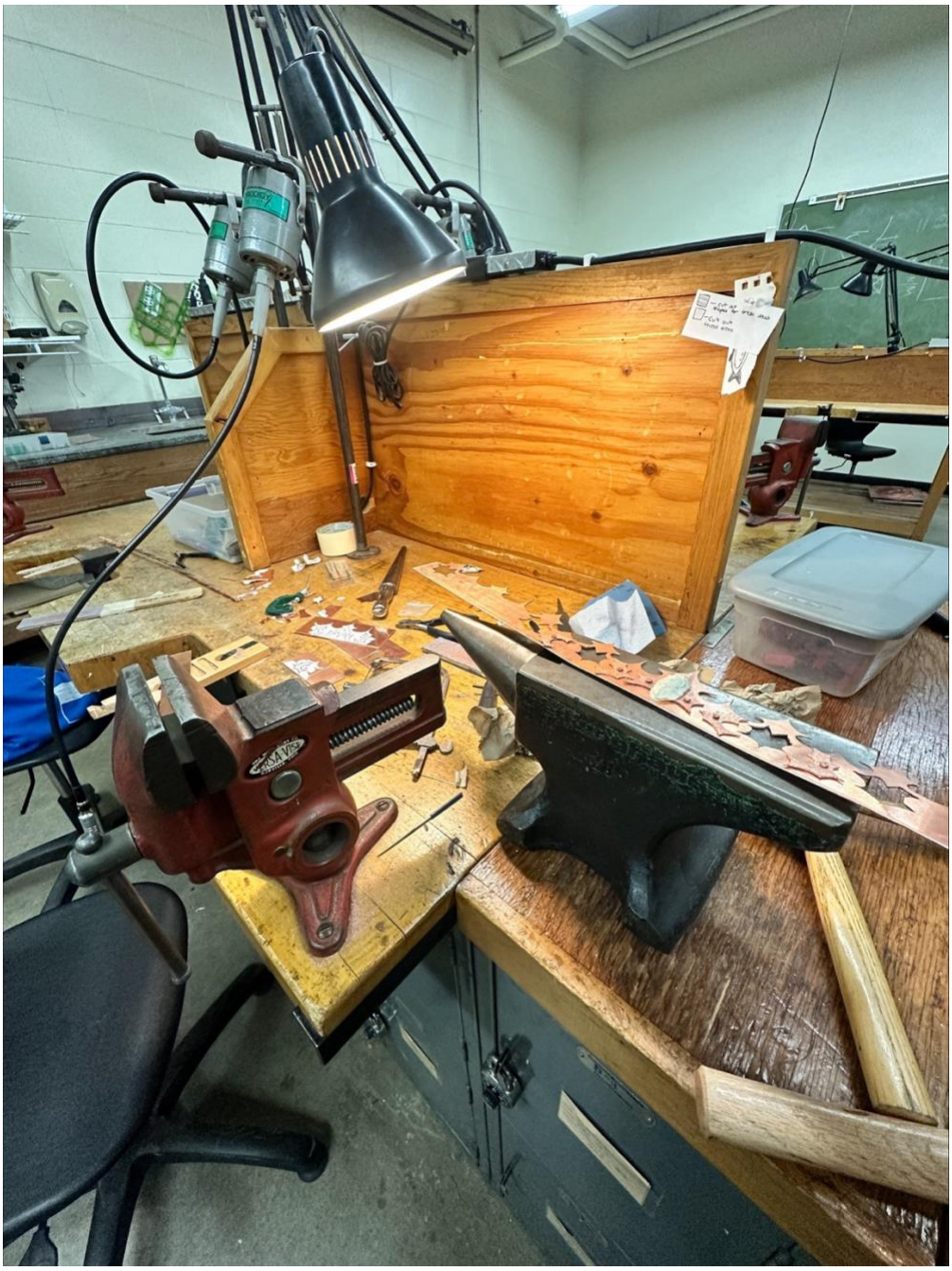
I am escaping you.

One pull and I’m free.

For me a rebirth, for you a reminder.

It’s not you, and it has never been you.

Drew Vlasek / Metal Smithing Studio



Macy Kennedy / Suzy

sunlight drapes through the small kitchen window above the porcelain sink and that humming noise coming from the silo drones softly in my ears. i stand at your feet as you make me the sweetest raspberry iced tea i've ever had, and you let me have as much as i want. everything i do makes you smile. you pour me a glass and start walking to the living room. the peeling tile sticks to my sweaty little feet as i march after you. walking past the fridge it is clear how loved i am by all of you. my first school portrait hangs, sturdily held up by a bright green c. the rest of the alphabet is scattered across the fridge, with random pieces of me and my sister's artwork being held up, too. My sister sits on the loveseat with a cup of chocolate milk and it's so nice here because we can watch as much spongebob as we want. it's only ten in the morning but we are ready for peggy to make us mac and cheese. we sit and color until you try to sing me to sleep for my nap.

a bushel and a peck
a bushel and a peck
and a ring around the neck

i don't fall asleep because i never do and because i don't really want to and you don't make me. you giggle as you sing and you say it's bad but i wish i could go back in time and listen to you sing anything you want.

Vienna Tomkalski / Rules

I happen to like rules.
Say what you want about
me, I've heard it all.

Goody-two-shoes,
snitch,
couldn't you keep quiet for once—

But it's fine.

I won't let you
cheat off my paper.
Nor will I let you
get credit for
what I've done,
my hard work.
And no, I don't
want to slack off and
gossip when the work is
due at the end of the hour.

Rules give me
structure, something to follow,
in a world where
I can't read minds. How I wish I
could, because then

I would know

exactly

what you want to hear,

exactly

what you want

from me.

But all I have

are rules, so

I happen to like rules.

Vienna Tomkalski / [untitled]

two and a half hours left
until I'm home
in my safe space
watching the scenes go by
Wisconsin 'mountains'
low clouds, far away
bring me back to
South Dakota
Germany
the only places I've ever been with
real mountains
wandering those slopes and seeing the incredible
creatures sights natural beauty
able to survive all around us in these
most wild places.
not many of those left
deforestation over-hunting global warming
leaving very few safe spaces left
but there's not much I can do
at the moment
sitting in a car
two and a half hours left
until I'm home

Evelyn Van Ess / Blacksmithing Studio 1

Katie Brenk / Woman with No Words

She has no words,
No letters,
No sentences.

She sees the world with no words,
No signs,
No labels.

Why?
She sees no words,
Only shapes and colors.

Words expand and shrink in her mind,
They dance around the page and turn to mush.
The words in her head turn to shapes on paper.
The pencil turns into a paintbrush.

She has no words, only visions.
Her words become butterflies and flowers.
Her words become paint on the walls,
Charcoal on canvas.
Spray paint on brick.

She has no words,
Just raw human emotions,
Made of markers and pastels.

She sees no words,
Just people walking down the street.
Just birds chirping and wind blowing.

She sees no words,
But she sees shapes and colors.

Origami birds flying,
Child-drawn crayon flowers,
Clouds of cotton balls
Sunsets turn to oil paintings,
People to clay figures,
Puddles to ink

She has no words,
No letters,
No sentences

But she does not care,
Who would want to live,
In a world of black and white?
Structured and desolate,
Void of color and light.

She has no words,
No letters,
No sentences,
But that's okay.

She would rather,
Sing with the whistling wind,

Run down the sidewalk chalk streets,
And dance in the watercolor rain.

Blacksmithing Studio 2 / Evelyn Van Ess

Katie Brenk / To Fly

I wonder what it's like to float,
To drift,
To fly,
To become weightless and go into the sky.

Not like on top of buildings that scrape the sky,
Or stuffed in a tin can with babies that cry,
Out like the birds that go way up high.

I wonder what it's like to become untethered from the earth,
Knowing me, I'd become fearful and close my eyes until it's over.
Being high up makes me feel sick,
Looking down below makes my heartbeat quick.

But I wonder what it would feel like,
Suspended in midair,
Nothing holding you down.

Would I gather all my courage to open my eyes?
Even if it is just to stare at the horizon line?

Oh, what would it be like?
To see the world from up in the sky?
The green forests and blue rivers, farms and towns.
The big cities and peaceful seasides.

And all the things that have been chaining me down?
All the responsibilities and commitments that make me feel like I'm drown?

When I open my eyes, will I forget my anxieties and fears?
And finally feel peaceful after all these years?

Oh, I wonder what it's like to fly,
To float over the mountains and valleys
To waft over the seas,
To sail above the clouds,
To glide among the stars,
Forever flying above and never coming back down.

Isabelle Connelly / Her

Her jet-black hair, nothing like mine—
A halo of tight, coiled curls,
Juxtaposed to my stick-straight vines of brown.
Her small stature, compact legs,
Contrasting my willowy length
And unearned elevation.
Her monochromatic outfits—black or gray—
Deviate from my bright pinks and blues.
But a stranger once said my laugh sounds like hers,
And our golden-oak eyes resemble one another's.
To be compared so slightly to her
Is like watching trees dance in the wind.
I've noticed my voice echoes hers—
On the phone with my father, he thinks I am her.
Some might question their dad's perception,
But I thank mine for the compliment.
As I grow, she reminds me never to settle:
"Find a man who treats you like the princess you are."
And so I take her whispered words,
Lock them in my heart,
For I am fulfilled by her simple guidance.
Once, we went to the West Coast, just the two of us.
The ocean hummed secrets only we could understand.
Her hand in mine, a comfort so deep—
The salty air planting kisses on our foreheads
In those quiet moments, we simply are—
No need for promises, just understanding.
My sister is the kind of connection
That doesn't need a name or a title.

She’s the one who stays
Even when words run out.

Drew Vlasek / Sculpture Studio 1

Isabelle Connelly / Again and again

I check the lock, then again, just to be sure, and then once more, because what if I missed it? My brain keeps whispering that maybe I didn't get it right, so I check again, even though I know it's locked. I know it is, but somehow, knowing doesn't always feel like enough. I walk everywhere with my heartbeat lodged in my throat, and every conversation from the day feels like a puzzle with a thousand wrong answers; I wonder if I said something weird, if they meant something else, if they hate me now. My hands burn from washing, the soap swirling down the drain, but I still feel the dirt clinging to my skin, an invisible weight that I can't scrub off no matter how hard I try, so I wash them again. Numbers have a way of making me feel safer, the even ones at least, but the odd ones make my chest tighten, and I can't shake the feeling that if I don't do everything just right, something bad will happen, though I can never pinpoint what exactly that something is. People tell me, *Just let it go,* like it's that simple, as if my mind isn't a loop I can't find the exit to, one that keeps spinning over and over without ever stopping. At night, I lie awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying the day in my mind, every word, every look, analyzing for mistakes, and I can't help but feel that I must have left something undone, that something is bound to fall apart. I check the time, 11:59, but if I don't wait one minute to close my eyes, my entire life will fall apart. Or at least that's how it feels. It presses against my ribs, keeping sleep just out of reach, so I get up and check the lock again, one more time, as if the act will somehow calm my racing mind. It never does.

Emma Breuer / Earth's Slow Goodbye

As I take a quiet walk
on the marsh,
I gaze at the trees that are parched,
and dying with their
brittle dying limbs in
the heat of June.
The squirrels look lost
looking for the food I know the
trees can't produce.
The birds are chirping wildly in alarm.
The clouds look like they're going to cry,
as if they are aware of the
fact that the Earth is losing
itself to humans.

This has been a long time coming,
the Earth has been laboring
for hundreds of years
to save itself
and its inhabitants, but
to no avail.

Earth once saw itself as
vivacious and generous.
Now Earth is struggling
to hold on to a
dead strand of life.

Can Earth really forgive us,

after everything that we have done?

We have turned the seas
into poison and plastic
We have turned the once beautiful trees
into gray skeletons,
a far cry from the life
that used to sway from side-to-side
in the wind.

It's funny, isn't it?
How humans have
started the path
of destruction
and still deny
its
existence.

Emma Breuer / The Silent Attacker

Loneliness consistently sneaks up on me.
This feeling of loneliness catches me off guard
the most when I'm alone.
When I'm alone it sizes me up
like a lion sizes up its inevitable kill.

The lion with its thick, tuft fur along its face and
striking yellow cat eyes had been
stalking me for a while now.
attempting to catch me in a vulnerable state.

The lion is quite strong, but
what this lion doesn't realize is that
I'm clocking him while he watches me.
Not only do I look vulnerable, but I look
innocent... a perfect target.

I have been anticipating this lion's
attack for a while now,
my friends and family tell me they will
be by my side, whether I try to fight back or not.
It may be hard to outsmart this lion,
but I have the strength and determination
needed to survive this attack.

As I watch the lion step into the trap,
I hear a "clink" of the trap snapping
into place on the lion's leg.
This lion has ended up underneath

a tree, a place of refuge for those
who are weary from travel
all animals and humans alike.
Meeting it's end peacefully,
even though this lion
has caused me
so much pain.

It may be hard to say goodbye
to my silent stalker,
but it will meet its end
because it has followed
me through every phase
of my life.

It's taken years to give
this lion a name;
always whispering sentiments like:
"You're meant to be alone,"
"You don't need anybody,"
"You're not good enough,"
"You're nothing,"
"You're a horrible person,"
but now that I have lived if
for years
this lion finally has a name.

Its name is
Depression
and
Anxiety.

They constantly worked
side-by-side
to exhaust my mind and body
till there was nothing left...

Already a vacant shell
trying to live life.
Always questioning the
lions' motives.
Why was this lion always
following me if it knew
how much suffering
I endured from its persistent gaze
and presence?

Always watching,
always finding ways
to make me cower.
Finally, I realize that
this lion does not
intimidate me
anymore.

Evelyn Van Ess / Sculpture Studio 2

Emma Breuer / Storm-watching with Grandpa

I used to be so afraid of storms, especially when I was away from my parents. I remember this fear occupying my childhood like the way a snail occupies its colorful shell.

I was never able to fall asleep by myself, especially when I heard the thunder booming, the lightning crackling, and the rain downpouring. So, I would hide from the storm underneath my covers, as if the covers could shield me from the terrifying storm outside of my windows.

One night stands out to me when I think about my fear of storms. This one night, I had been staying over at my grandma and Grandpas and a storm had been on its way. I could hear the rumbling of the thunder in farther bluffs.

I couldn't sleep because of that one simple fact, and I didn't have covers to hide under like I did at home. So, I decided to walk around their house, and while I was walking, I found my grandpa sitting on the wooden dining table.

Upon finding me wandering around the house, my grandpa asked me, "What are you doing up, Em?" I replied hesitantly, as if he would make fun of me for being afraid of a storm, "I couldn't sleep because of the storm coming". I don't particularly remember how he responded, but I remember where we ended up.

We had ended up at the screen door leading to the porch. I had been so hesitant to look out the porch door because the incoming storm had looked so turbulent. It was then that the cacophony of the storm had finally approached us.

I remember the rumbling of the thunder and how its strength shook the house with its might, how the lightning blazed with its immense light, and the sound of the heavy rain drops hitting the pavement.

As I peered outside the screen door, my grandpa talked about how beautiful the storm was and how the storm was nothing to be afraid of.

It was like a glass wall had broken after hearing his reflections of the storm.

The frightening feelings that had normally accompanied my mind during storms had literally gone out of the window of my mind and turned into fascination.

It was the very way my grandpa had described the storm that made it something to admire, instead of fear. I don't quite remember how he described this storm, but it had a lasting effect on my attitudes about storms.

This fear hadn't completely left me, but that encounter made me less hesitant to face the things in life that I had feared.

Instead of remembering a horrific and sleepless night, I simply remembered spending time with my grandpa storm-watching.

Kayla Knaffla / Panic

I sit in the depths of my mind
locked in the echoing chamber
It is desolate but yet so crowded
the overwhelming sense of the world
comes crashing down
The walls of my innermost thoughts push
Those walls start to crumble
The rubble piling up around me
suffocating me
The air being ripped from my lungs
My chest tightening and twisting

I can't see
my vision is spotty
I feel as though I am watching the world
in eyes that are not mine
I see my body from outside of it
as if I had been locked out
I'm scared
I can't breathe
Count, they said, *feel the objects around you*
Do anything but think about how you feel
How can I do that
when my thoughts are racing one another
The thoughts of panic are winning

I slide down the wall
feeling the plaster beneath my fingertips
It feels foreign

my body sags onto icy granite tiles
I am enveloped in a wave of cool water
trickling into my body
Cooling the boiling core within me
I feel air start to fill my lungs again
I realize tears have been streaming down my face
My wet hands land on my chest just to make sure it's over
I don't know why this one happened
Sometimes I feel it building and know when it will snap
other times, it catches me
and chases me making me
no longer feel like I have control over
myself

I long to be a person who has never experienced the terror
I yearn to feel so incredibly carefree
wishing to never feel that pressure in my chest
The elephant sitting on it
weighing me down
I want to be free of the chains tying me to limitations
but that is not the case

I stand slowly
Roughly wipe off my tear-stained cheeks with a Kleenex
I run my hands beneath the water letting it glide over my skin
to ground me, to steel me
I glance up
Gazing into the mirror, I practice my smile
before drying my hands on the soft towel
and with one last final breath I open the bathroom door

Evelyn Van Ess / Sculpture Studio 3

Kayla Knaffla / Night Sky

I hate waking up early
I am not a morning person
but we must get up this early
to get a parking spot and beat the rush
my mom ushers all of us into the van
I grab all my stuff and grumpily buckle myself
It's a freezing Utah morning, air crisp and cool
I shiver, trying to cover myself with my sweatshirt tighter
I stick my headphones in and press play
the music slowly lulling me back to sleep as my dad drives
through the snow-covered mountains

an hour has passed, and the car starts to slow
It is still pitch black as we wind through the switchbacks
The car pulls over and halts on the shoulder
What are we doing? I ask
My brother points to the sky
and that is all it takes
to have my breath stolen from me

I have always loved the night sky
the stars, the moon, the sky that envelops our world
I have never seen so many stars and so many colors
Colors of emeralds, purple hues streak across the sky
speckled with bright shining stars
I can't stop staring
the hundreds of constellations connecting
I am in awe of this place we call home
I take a deep breath and revel in the beauty

I don’t want to stop staring but
I know we should probably keep going
I resent to wake up early, but this has made it all worth it
my mood has been lifted, and I am more ready to hike
Seeing the turquoise slashed across the piercing black
the stars shining through, burning brighter and brighter
There’s something about the sky that makes you feel
so small in the grand scheme of the universe
That it makes you stop and admire it
to take it all in while you can

Contributors' Notes

Katie Brenk is a second-year student at UWL studying English Writing and Rhetoric with minors in Chinese Studies and Creative Writing. They enjoy doing puzzle games like Sudoku and word search. They like listening to bands like The Crane Wives, Florence and the Machine, and Paris Paloma.

Emma Breuer is a second-year student at UWL, studying Psychology and Literary and Cultural Studies. They enjoy reading, painting, going to the gym, and spending time with friends and family. Most importantly, they use their writing as a way to influence how others see the world, inviting readers to pause, reflect, and question their thoughts and emotions about various aspects of life.

Isabelle Connelly is a second-year Secondary English Education major from Byron, MN. She's passionate about all things reading and writing, which makes her love for English a perfect fit. When she's not buried in a book, she's spending time with family and friends.

Macy Kennedy is a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. She is an English major with a minor in legal studies. In her free time, Macy enjoys spending time with friends or being outdoors.

Kayla Knaffla is a sophomore majoring in Communication with an emphasis in Media Studies and double minoring in Professional and Technical Writing and Digital Media and Design Studies. She is a member of the UWL Swim and Dive Team and enjoys reading, writing, and visiting National Parks in her free time.

Josie Rush is a junior at UWL studying English Education and Creative Writing. She loves all things fantasy and science fiction and spends her time reading, writing, and crying over kids TV shows. Her life's ambition is to own a gray tabby cat named Moby.

Alex Schraeder grew up in central Wisconsin and has called the coulee region home since 2015. He spends his time fishing and hiking, often accompanied by his dog, Ande. He writes poetry, drawing inspiration from life's challenges, and is graduating in the spring of 2025.

Vienna Tomkalski is a second-year student at UWL studying English Writing & Rhetoric and German Language. She is a Milwaukee native and enjoys sailing on Lake Michigan when the weather finally warms up. She also enjoys reading all sorts of things and crocheting all year round.

Evelyn Van Ess is a 2025 graduate of the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse Art Program. Her work was featured n the recent exhibition *Exit Strategies* and she collaborated with the UWL Psychology Department to promote peer mentorship and accessible mental health resources for all students. Committed to using art as a means of support and connection, she will pursue graduate studies in Art Therapy after graduation.

Drew Vlasak believes that kindness matters.