

The mission of Elysian Magazine is to inspire the students at Aurora University to create unique works of art and to provide an outlet where creative voices cannot only be shared but also admired.

“A print keepsake symbolizing creative voice and college memory.”

Dedicated to new beginnings.

# Elysian Staff

Editor-in-Chief  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*

Assistant Editor  
*Caitie Zwirek*

Graphic Designers  
*Ryan Zielie & Samadhi Diaz*

Digital Graphic Designer  
*Sydney Breitenstein*

Writing Editor  
*Kimberly Leslie*

Photography Editor  
*John Shippy*

Secretary & Media  
*Saray Lopez*

Treasurer  
*Madelyn Dittmann*

Organization Advisor  
*Andrew Prall*

Organization Advisor  
*Meredith Harvey*

# Staff Biographies

## **Ximena Torres Ramos - Editor-in-Chief**

I am a Junior at Aurora University majoring in both Graphic Design and Communications, and minoring in Museum Studies. Though my work has appeared in Elysian various times before, this year, I am grateful and proud to be serving as its Editor-in-Chief! I hope that one day, in the future, I will be able to design for big film studios or museums, or perhaps travel the world with the help of my photography. In my free time, I enjoy reading a good book or watching a good show, going to the movies, hanging out with my friends, and getting a chance to sleep in on the weekends. I hope you enjoy this issue, and I can't wait to see you in the next one! :)

## **Caitie Zwirek - Assistant Editor**

I am a junior majoring in graphic design at Aurora University. This is my second semester with the Elysian team, this time as the new Assistant Editor! I absolutely love art, and I am so grateful to be part of an organization that celebrates individual expression across many mediums. I hope you enjoy Elysian's Fall 2025 Issue, and thank you so much for reading!

## **Ryan Zielie - Graphic Designer**

I am a mixed-media artist whose work moves fluidly between traditional, digital, and experimental techniques. From oil pastels and acrylic textures to glass painting and layered color, my art explores bold contrasts in style and mood. I use this variety to capture both raw and vibrant emotion, creating pieces that feel alive in their experimentation.

## **Samadhi Diaz - Graphic Designer**

I am a first-generation college student here at Aurora University. As a young Hispanic woman, I take pride in my heritage and honor this by seizing every opportunity that allows me to move forward in a world where being a woman means having to fighting tooth and nail for everything that we are.

## **Sydney Breitenstein - Digital Graphic Designer**

I am a sophomore majoring in marketing and graphic design here at AU and I serve as the Digital Graphic Designer. I am also on the Women's Lacrosse team and I am a Dunham Scholar. This is my first semester with Elysian and I'm so blessed and excited to get to work alongside such driven and talented people.

## **Kimberly Leslie - Writing Editor**

I am a senior at Aurora University majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. This is my first and, sadly, last semester working on Elysian, but I have pieces accepted in three previous editions. I am a member of Sigma Tau Delta: the International English Honors Society, and the President of Aurora University's Creative Writing Club. Teaming up with Elysian for events this past school year has been amazing. I am currently preparing for graduate school to obtain an MFA in Creative Writing to become a college professor. I earned my AA at Waubesa Community College and am a veteran after serving six years in the Army National Guard as a Military Police officer.

## **John Shippy - Photography Editor**

I am a Junior at Aurora University majoring in Graphic Design, and this is my first year at the Elysian as the photography editor. I am a photographer and graphic designer who loves all kinds of art and media. I especially have a passion for animation, video games, and comics, and would love to even work in one of those industries as a creator one day! Since I was a child, I have always had a curiosity for the arts and in high school, when I found graphic design and a passion for it, I found much more appreciation and love for the arts. Since then, my love for art has only grown and has expanded to areas like photography. Art is what keeps us moving, what inspires us, what influences us, and allows us to share our perspectives in life to the world. With this magazine, I'm so glad I'm able to help the team with allowing students at the school to share their own perspectives of life. Thank you to Ximena, Caitie, and the rest of the Elysian team for letting me join them!

## **Saray Lopez - Secretary & Media**

I am a fourth-year student majoring in Marketing at Aurora University. I serve as the Secretary and Media Coordinator. It's my first semester with Elysian, and I am honored to be part of a fantastic group of artists, writers, and designers. It's also my first semester helping a student organization run its social media accounts. I am grateful to be in a position that allows me to gain experience in digital marketing and see incredible works of art.

## **Madelyn Dittmann - Treasurer**

I am delighted to be serving as Treasurer of Elysian once again for a second semester, and am excited to see what everyone has created this semester! I am currently a sophomore majoring in Therapeutic Recreation and minoring in Neurodiversity Studies, and also serve as the Vice President of our disability club, DREAM AU. I've been writing ever since I was young, and also enjoy drawing, reading, and spending time with family and friends.

## **Dr. Andrew Prall - Organization Advisor**

Dr. Andrew Prall joined Aurora University in 2021 as its Vice President for Academic Affairs and now teaches creative writing, composition, and literature courses. This is his first year serving as faculty co-advisor for Elysian. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, yoga, spending time with family, and taking care of his two cats, Oliver and Desmond.

## **Dr. Meredith Harvey - Organization Advisor**

Dr. Meredith Harvey has been teaching for Aurora University for fifteen years, and started co-advising at Elysian last year. She enjoys teaching about writing and literature, particularly that which focuses on colonialism, gender, and the environment. In her spare time, she enjoys writing fiction, riding ponies, and hanging with her family.

# Submission Guidelines

Elysian welcomes quality online submissions of short stories, one-act plays, poetry, and art from all students, graduate students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Free speech is welcomed and encouraged, but we will not publish hate speech, gratuitous violence, or pornography. No hard copy submission, please. Specific guidelines are detailed below, and we are excited to hear from you!

## Short Fiction & Nonfiction:

- 3,000-word maximum
- One submission per person
- Attach as a Word document

## Poetry:

- Four-page maximum per poem
- Up to five submissions per person
- Attach as separate Word documents
- Use Times New Roman, 12pt. font, double spaced

## Art & Photography:

- Five submissions per person
- Must be 1 MB or larger
- Attach as JPEG files

## One-Act Play:

- 3,000-word maximum
- One submission per person
- No excerpts from longer plays
- Attach as a Word document

## Music:

- One submission per person
- 3 minute maximum recording
- MUST be submitted as an audio recording. Videos will not be accepted.
- MUST be your own original work. Covers will not be accepted.

*Email [elysian@aurora.edu](mailto:elysian@aurora.edu) to enroll.*

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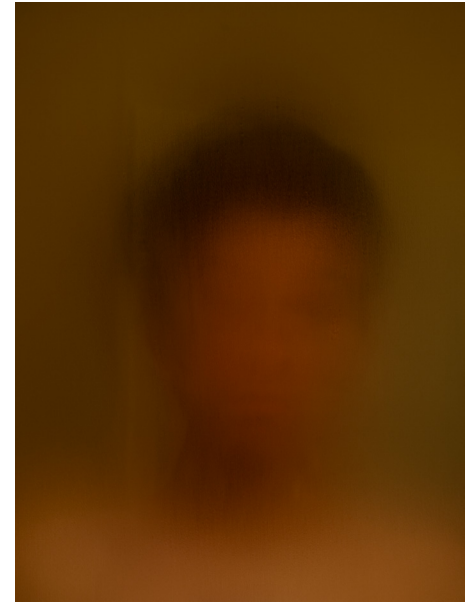
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Content Warning: Some pieces in this issue may be sensitive to some readers.

Despite Everything,  
It's Still You  
*John Shippy*



Golden  
*Caitie Zwirek*

# The Secret Truths of Morning Larks

*Kimberly Leslie*

No, you're not dreaming, I promise you. If you can read this pretty clearly, I can guarantee you're plenty awake. Yes, I'm a morning person while being a part of a demographic known for their night owl tendencies: a fulltime college student. I generally wake up somewhere between five AM and six AM, occasionally sleeping in until six-thirty AM, and I collapse for the night within the nine o'clock hour. Sometimes, I'll fall asleep before nine PM like an elementary schooler, and once in a blood moon, I'll survive to ten PM.

Morning people, or otherwise known as morning larks, are everyone's envy and capitalism's goalpost. From YouTube videos where young adults chronicle their experiments with larkhood to articles detailing how to become a morning person, it's safe to say that they're well-liked, so well-liked that society has adopted their schedule virtually everywhere and deemed them the pinnacle of health and productivity. Most school districts, particularly middle and high schools, have the audacity to start their days before eight AM, forcing hordes of night-loving adolescents to drag their sleep-addled selves out of their cozy sheets at six or seven AM, or sometimes even earlier than that if they're riding the bus, and skip breakfast daily. Most traditional offices follow a nine-to-five schedule, which may not sound too bad before you consider the long commutes through cramped interstates. Then you've got a similar situation to K-12 schools, only instead of sleep-deprived adolescents, you have interstates crammed with sleep-deprived adults running on coffee and panic.

But the real question that not enough people ask is: should you really be going for the morning bird lifestyle? Is being a morning bird the solution to all your problems and woes? As a morning lark myself, I won't deny that it has its perks, but it's also not your ticket to success and wealth, despite what the billionaires waking up at the unholy hour of three AM might tell you.

However, I do have to say that not needing an alarm is a pretty sweet benefit. I have never, in my life, had to set an alarm. No, I don't count the times when my parents had to yell from the hallway back in sixth grade where I went to a middle school, fifteen minutes away from me, that started at 7:25AM. Those days, where I struggled to adjust to middle-school's fast-paced mornings and the many days of frantically stuffing my folders, notebooks, and binders in my bag as I raced out the door with my mom, were the exception. Once I managed to learn my daily routine, my parents never had to wake me up for most of middle school and all of high school. I had been sufficiently trained by societal expectations that every person should be working producing before eight.

For me, alarm clocks are just pretty decorations. I've never known the sound of a song or a loud buzz demanding me to open my eyes and scramble out of my bed. In my room, I have a petite shiny blue clock with a green screen displaying the time. It can be used as an alarm, but I've never used it for that.

To be honest, it's probably for the best that I don't depend on one. Setting an alarm would do a far better job of waking my parents and my little sister on the second and third floor,

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*Kimberly Leslie*

respectively, than me. I sleep through virtually everything: thunderstorms, my little sister's cell phone conversations, football, and three of my family's four dogs tramping down the stairs with my bleary-eyed mom for a bathroom trip. The only thing that can drag me out of my sleep is the weather radio blaring in my parents' room, and even then, sometimes they'll have to rouse me from my slumber.

And besides, is it really natural to follow the wake-up time society has deemed best and follow the whims of an alarm clock instead of your own body? I'll admit I'm in a privileged position because of my larkhood. However, my original wake-up time back when I was in elementary school was anywhere between six o'clock and six-thirty, and to most institutions, that's sleeping in. Why have a reasonable schedule and breakfast when you can get started earlier and cram more things to do in your day? The alarm clock may be incredibly convenient for helping maintain a morning lark schedule, but it doesn't know if you've been sick or emotionally stressed or injured. And if your alarm clock is your phone, that shiny square can tempt you to just scroll the hours away while your body rots in bed instead of actually living. Whereas with your body's circadian rhythm and natural clock, it knows your needs. It may not understand that the morning-loving world needs your body, whether in sickness or health, to produce money or things, but it damn well understands when you thrive and when you need more rest.

So what do I wake up to if it's not my phone ringing or an alarm clock buzzing? It's either one of the five cats that reside in my room or the sun streaming in from at least one of my three windows. The sunrise truly is a lovely thing to wake up to in the spring and the summer. All those golds and oranges and pinks and blues are just so joyful. The sunlight streaming in warms my face and is better than any cup of coffee in that it doesn't make me jittery and hyper. It also adds a golden glow to my room, which pairs nicely with my carnation pink walls and gray-biege dressers.

The sunlight isn't the only pleasant part of my early morning view, though. I live just outside of my local small town and close enough to nature that I have trees, at minimum, as tall as my three story house and a pond just a short golf-cart down my gravel driveway and through a weedy grassy area not confined by fenceposts, which I can view through my two south-facing windows. My driveway is surrounded by two neat columns of different trees: on the left, oak trees with poison ivy sprawling up the trunk and on the right, pine trees where the barn cats will sometimes crawl under. In the morning, they'll stand stark black against the marigold and blue sky when the sun is just starting to come up, and then when the sun is higher up, they bask in warm yellows and oranges that make them shimmer like emeralds.

With a bedroom view like that, how could I honestly enjoy rushing a morning in pursuit of punctuality and productivity? Whoever said that morning larks are more productive and like to work as soon as the sun peeks above the horizon is lying. I'm a lazy morning lark. I may like to wake up at the first peek of dawn, but that doesn't mean I enjoy rushing out the door for morning college classes at least an hour early to compensate for my thirty minute commute

and have a fighting chance at finding decent parking.

My ideal morning looks like this: I wake up and I lay in my bed or my lounge chair, contemplating life and the sunrise for some minutes. Usually, I'll have at least one cat curled up on my bed. Nothing is better than having a purring little ball that loves you unconditionally curled up by your side. If Star, a petite black and gray tortoiseshell cat who has claimed me as her person, is there, it's not uncommon for her to physically greet me by shoving her face in front of mine and breathing in my essence. She has even greeted me by tapping one of my eyes with her dainty paw. Even if she's far from subtle and even if she's occasionally scratched my nose or ear in glomming onto me, it's very cozy to have her tiny, furry body on top of my chest. Her burying her head into my neck or body is the purest form of love there is; to her, I'm a blanket she can furrow herself in.

If I'm feeling unusually productive, I'll even get dressed or hang up clothes in my closet. Then I'll head downstairs, mingle with my mom and dad, either on our living room couch or at the countertop in the kitchen, and eat a light breakfast. Then I'll futz around a bit on my phone, peeking at Goodreads and Discord for status updates and reading people's comments on the internet. If I've got the energy and motivation and I really want to have an amazing morning, I'll do something creative like write or draw. Sometimes, I'll open my day with some light reading or a jigsaw puzzle if I have one in progress. All of this, although usually not all at once, takes place before eight or nine AM, which is when I start my college work in a similar tradition to my parents starting their work at around seven AM. Yes, even on the weekends. I really am my parents' daughter in some ways, although in all honesty, I am a tinge lazier in that I start later, but I've found that to be more beneficial productivity-wise.

While morning larks may appear to be more productive in their earlier start, that doesn't mean that energy lasts the whole day. Morning larks are like introverts in that they're wired like batteries. Whether it's social interaction or the hours of the day, introverts and larks start out refreshed from solitude and the morning sun respectively, and then they lose more energy the more they socialize or the longer the day stretches on. In other words, morning larks basically become more incompetent as the hours widdle away (perhaps that's why night owls are said to be more intelligent since they experience the inverse effect—starting out slow early and peaking at the day's end when the sun falls).

I'm at my clearest and sharpest in the morning, which makes it ideal for cranking out essays or mowing through readings. However, starting in the mid-afternoon, I begin to slump in cognition. Especially if I've had a long day or have had to do a lot of peopling, I'll get the most pounding headaches or feel numb in my limbs. This is usually when I'll fight to keep my eyes open and want nothing more than to collapse on my couch in a haze.

By nightfall, forget about me being a functioning human being. I can usually make it to seven, eight is questionable, but nine and later, I'm about as useful as someone who's had several shots of alcohol. Late afternoon classes are survivable, but night classes? Between the thirty minute commute home I would have taken in the dark while half-asleep and their hours

potentially extending to nine or later, no thank you. Night classes to morning larks are what eight AM classes are to night owls.

Being a morning lark is often touted as this wondrous lifestyle that will cure your depression, anxiety, and any other mental ailments you can think of. Study after study claims that morning larks are inherently happier people. On one hand, I can kind of see it. Sunlight is an excellent source of dopamine, and with sunshine, there's smiles and laughter. Spring and summer have more sunshine, and people generally love those more than the colder seasons, especially the maligned winter.

However, if being of the lark chronotype is supposed to inoculate me against mental illness, then that has failed miserably. I am a morning person, and I have also struggled with anxiety. As a high school senior, I woke up early of my own volition, yet I was in one of the darkest mental places of my life between COVID-19 induced isolation, the constant school switching every year, and spending two of my high school years in heavily Christian schools as a nonreligious outsider. I was so anxious that I virtually never spoke to anyone outside of class in my senior year and gave most of my speeches for my public speaking class to my teacher, Mrs. Sunday. I may thrive in the morning, but that does not change the fact that I panic over social interactions (although it's improved, not due to loving the morning, but because of therapy and friendship).

My best friend Anxiety sure hasn't cared that I'm a morning lark and crave early morning sunshine. What good would being a morning lark do for social anxiety? She just harasses me during the day about all my mistakes in social interactions and how annoying and burdensome I am; when I'm too exhausted to function or think clearly at night, then she leaves temporarily.

Having a love for the morning also can't protect you from emotional hurt or trauma. At best, it's a temporary oasis. During a turbulent period in my family life, the early morning sun rays and the golden hue the world takes in those early light hours were a balm. Since everything was so quiet and still, I could forget the fracture in a once-close familial relationship because of another relative's foul play and manipulation (don't worry, it's repaired now). I could almost pretend we were still close, still like best friends. However, that peace—the birds' innocent chirping, the world's joyful glow—only lasted for so many hours. I could explain why being a morning person didn't protect me from toxic relatives outside my household and the resulting fallout, but, you know, I'd rather not dissect one of my biggest wounds for entertainment and cry at my computer the whole time. So I'll finish this little shadow in my sunny essay with this, and this goes for any lifestyle decision deemed mentally beneficial: being a morning person won't fix your mental health because waking up earlier ultimately won't solve the problems causing you to hurt in the first place.

Similarly, larkhood is often hailed as the solution to all your sleeping troubles. If only you'd go to bed just a few hours earlier, you'd be able to obtain the Holy Grail of sleep, or so goes the common wisdom larks like to spring on night owls. Of course night owls would struggle with their sleep in a society that favors morning larks' circadian rhythm. They're chronically

## The Secret Truths of Morning Larks

*Kimberly Leslie*

sleep-deprived five days a week and spend their weekends trying to repay their sleep debt. There's no definitive proof that night owls have unhealthy sleep schedules because they're forced to live outside of their natural schedules.

Similar to how being a morning person won't protect you from mental health struggles, it also isn't a cure for sleep troubles. One sleeping problem unique to morning larks, from my experience, is the inability to sleep in. Not only can I wake up as early as five thirty or six in the morning without an alarm, I perk up without any coffee or other stimulants as soon as I open my eyes. While this is useful for classes or work, that's about where its use ends. It's not so useful when I wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I'll have good luck and return to sleep relatively quickly. However, if I'm thirsty or suffering from stomach issues, then I'll usually be awake for a while, and I'll still wake up at my usual scheduled time because of how my body is wired.

If I do miraculously sleep in after six-thirty, it's usually because I'm feeling so unwell that my internal clock is malfunctioning. In an odd sense, this is a blessing because I'm not forced to disregard my body's needs in a morning-loving, workaholic society. Generally if this happens, then I don't fight it, and if I have an early morning class, I don't frantically hurry out the door with a granola bar in my mouth and my bags loosely hanging off my arms. Instead, I'll stay home and email my professor.

Finally, larkhood doesn't really benefit your social life. This goes double if you're a college student or part of any community that really loves the stars and moon. As a college student, I may as well live in a different time zone from across the world than my friends and peers. I'll either sleep through entire conversations and sagas occurring late at night or I'll be itching to text my friends something at seven or eight AM before realizing they're probably not awake yet. Yes, I will scrunch my brows at you if you tell me, unironically, that eight AM is way too early in the morning. What do you mean that eight's too early? The sun's up by then in all seasons, and in the warmer seasons, it's been up for at least a couple hours. But, to be fair, any night owl would react the same way if I told them that nine PM was way too late to do much of anything.

Despite what society may say about larkhood being the best chronotype, there's no real proof that larkhood is inherently superior. Ultimately, the idolization of larkhood is based on a need for more money and more bodies to produce it. Demands for money and produce don't always consider the diversity of human biology, both good and bad. For all the culture clashes between morning larks and night owls, neither are that different in the end. One just thrives in the morning while the other thrives in the night; they both have the same capacity for innovation, brilliance, and health. Morning larkhood is not some superfood, nor is night owlhood junk food. At the end of the day and night, they're just chronotypes.

## Coffee Cup *Maria Vazquez*

Hospital coffee has been my salvation,  
my comfort, my one thing  
in this icebox of a place  
where grief rings every other door,  
and sadness peeks around every corner.

This hot cup  
has become my place to hide,  
a small, steaming silence  
in the chaos of beeping machines  
and whispered prayers.

I hold it in both hands  
a warm embrace  
while tears echo softly  
through the halls of my chest.

The world is cold,  
but this coffee is not.

I love this cup  
for keeping me sane,  
for holding the darkness back  
if only for a minute  
just long enough to breathe

## Crickets

*Natasha Leclercq*

Is it enough to hear crickets from that  
Great White House?

*the nymph lays on the Lawn, watching as her egg begins to crack*

Enough of the baiting and bleeding—  
do you grieve when the Cardinals  
Stop calling?

*released is the Mormon cricket, ready to leap away*

Enough of the glaring and beer glasses—  
did the manifestation of death cease to  
Mar you?

*native to North American sagebrush*

Enough of the venomous truffles and syringes,  
Is it Cricket season—always?

*it eats its mother and sister*

## The Hypodermic Needle

*Natasha Leclercq*

...is but a falsified bacteria  
microbes traveling through the  
inner workings of rotting misconduct  
sham pathogens a visor for deteriorating carpet fumes  
make-believe tracking mechanisms a guise for genocidal mania

but blitzed is the Devil Syringe,  
the only tool letting you sunbathe—  
and warp the skin surrounding ligament nothingness

so rare is the Anthrax psyche without distortion—  
wherein filtered capsules relay truth and  
the life-sucker feeds on lies deforming the self

is the self  
thriving or  
writhing?

what soul can tell the difference—  
it plunges in like a demon  
sent from the Pearly Gates—  
halo already enveloping petrified fools

and when your grandparents,  
siblings,  
parents,  
you,  
lay there in a pool of internal  
blood  
know it was the  
absence  
of

## Teeth

*Tessa Danko*

My teeth feel strange  
Like the crispness of Velcro.  
If they were to fall into  
A bloody pile at my feet  
I suppose I might  
Make them into a necklace and  
Give them to my lover.  
I would place it around her neck  
And move her beautiful tree trunk hair  
I would tie the thread  
In a knot nowhere near as  
Lovely as she is.

## Just a Burning, Dying Feeling

*Kimberly Leslie*

Papers piling on me.  
I can't breathe,  
can't sit for a moment.  
Rest is illegal.

I can't breathe from  
the relentless books and essays.  
Rest is illegal  
when deadlines prowl.

The relentless books and papers  
control and cling onto me like an obsessive lover.  
They prowl behind me—  
stealing seconds, minutes, hours.

Clinging onto me and controlling  
my hands by chaining them to academic essays  
they steal seconds, minutes, hours  
imprisoning me away from the words I want to read and write.

My hands chained to academic essays,  
I type nonstop and try to outpace the deadlines.  
Imprisoned from the words I want to read and write,  
I forget how to live because living is a crime.

## Just a Burning, Dying Feeling

*Kimberly Leslie*

I type nonstop and try to outpace the deadlines  
until my hands burn.

I forget how to live because living is a crime,  
and my glowing flame is extinguished.

My hands are burnt,  
fingers scorched black from constant typing.  
My glowing flame is extinguished,  
and I collapse from omnipresent books and papers breaking my back.

Fingers scorched black from constant typing,  
my hands are completely numb, too numb to bleed.  
I collapse from omnipresent books and papers breaking my back,  
and I'm nothing more than disintegrating ashes.

## Left Behind

*Percy Schulz*

the fireflies blink  
like tired streetlamps as  
we floated through  
the flickering streets

we held each other  
arm in arm  
as if not to float apart  
among the starry night.

even though  
none of us have left  
the missing  
has already begun.

the four of us, laughing off the cold  
each of us grabbing a glass  
soda and apple juice turn cold and stale  
we warm up with whiskey and wine

*is this what growing up is?  
all reaching hands and yearning hearts?  
knowing every second spent together  
will turn into an eternity apart?*

love, I tell you,  
is felt most  
when it is

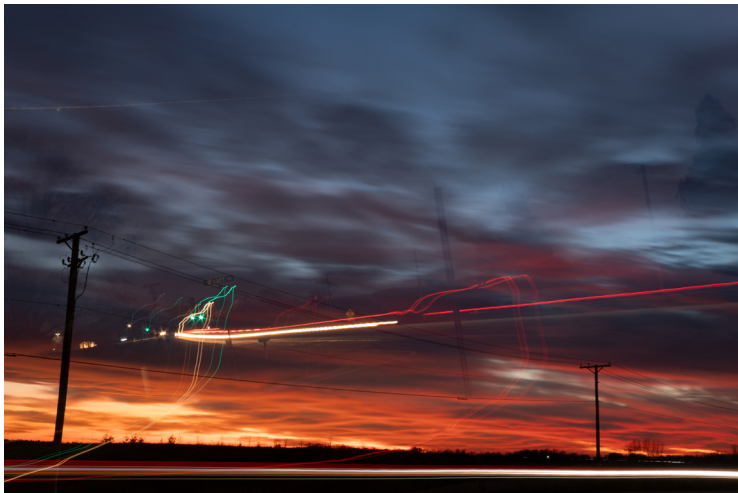
leaving.



The Crimson Shadow  
*Kevin Garcia*

Pacify  
*Amy Duskheart*

dripping with malice, she stalks the bars of her cage  
every step, another barb in her paws  
every moment, another wicked urge burning in her maw  
honed daggers find home in her eyes, desperate to gut the next fool she sees  
until finally  
She finds her  
beckoned by Her light, she slips through the bars  
and runs into Her waiting arms  
claws retract  
rage subsides  
the beast melts away in Her midnight eyes



Memories  
*John Shippy*

# Ten Minutes After the Flashback

*Percy Schulz*

Ten Minutes After the Flashback  
*Percy Schulz*

*five things i can see.*

*four things i can hear.*

*three things i can smell.*

*two things i can feel.*

*one thing i can taste.*

***go outside.***

V.

i wished for the snow to hold me

like the night cradles

the moon.

face up, locked eyes with the branches

who covered my vision like tangled hair

IV.

the winter tried to convince me it was quiet.

i lived for the crunching of snow.

i longed for the distant cars.

i fought for my beating heart.

III.

the coat smells like bonfire still

laced with the scent of evergreen,

slowly being taken over by the musk of wet earth.

II.

my socks marry themselves to the snow that soaks them.

exhale facing the sky: my breath turns to ghost the second it leaves my lungs.

I.

a snowflake melts on the tip of my tongue

*i'm alive*

*i'm alive*

*i'm alive*

*i'm alive*

*i'm alive*

In War's Arms  
*Ewa Lupyvovk*



Rapture  
*Percy Schulz*

before dawn, you stand  
outside your picket fenced house,  
leaving your clothes, your stitched heirlooms  
the marvel being that you had possessions  
to leave behind.

meanwhile, bethlehem is still burning.  
the messiah, lost under rubble.  
you know only what your false god tells you.  
the angels will remember your silence.  
did you really think all those trumpets  
will sound for you?

how often has the sound of a war plane  
been mistaken for the final trumpet?  
how the last day's rain of fire be seen  
in worldly invention?

you do not get to decide what is beautiful.  
tomorrow, the sun will rise.  
the dust will settle, the earth will forgive.  
the world will move on  
with                    or without you.



Old Man  
*Ryan Zielie*

# The Landlord In My Mind

*Maria Vazquez*

Living in your mind rent free  
They say it like it's common, easy,  
But mine demands a fee.  
Every thought is taxed,  
Each breath a currency exchange.  
Nothing is free here,  
Only traded for pieces of peace.

I pay daily,  
With sleepless nights and silent screams,  
Sacrifices to simply exist  
Within the confines of myself.  
I've been paying for years  
A long lease signed in anxiety ink.

And I wonder...  
How do others stay untouched?  
Why aren't they swept into chaos  
When they miss their dues?  
Do they have a kinder landlord  
One who offers grace,  
Who lets them live without fear  
Of eviction from sanity?

But me  
I'm thrown out regularly,  
Into swirling dreams and crashing thoughts.  
A missed payment means no rest,

# The Landlord In My Mind

*Maria Vazquez*

Just fists pounding on the walls of my mind,  
Telling me to leave  
Or face the consequences.

I remember the old days  
When living up there was soft,  
When rooms were wide,  
Windows open,  
And imagination ran wild, unbilled.  
I miss that peace.

Now,  
Each day is a negotiation,  
A battle with the landlord I never chose  
She wears my face,  
Speaks in echoes,  
Demands quiet while making noise.

I beg her for stillness,  
For lights that don't flicker,  
For walls that don't bleed memories.

I live in a home  
That fights back.

And I ask myself,  
Every damn day  
When will the torment end?

## Rehearsal

*Amy Duskheart*

I thought I saw you the other day  
An afterimage of your fiery hair, your mouth hanging in disbelief  
Lips contorting as you invent a new way to gore and brand me  
I try to raise my voice over you  
but i stumble  
four feet tall  
in the clothes you bought me  
too small to escape your shadow

again and again, i try  
still, my words catch in my throat  
with the hesitation of a hand twisting a handle  
but not yet pulling  
ear to the door, testing the air to see if you're awake  
once i pass the gate, my feet will find solid ground  
once again dancing over every creak in our hardwood floor

i'll escape  
and i won't hear you  
You'll open your mouth  
but i won't hear you  
You'll brandish your teeth  
but I won't hear you  
you'll call me a liar  
But I Won't Hear.

## scared to die alone

*Cory Williams*  
“Hovenn”

[Verse 1]

Is yo heart up for purchase?  
Easy buy, garage sale?  
Is it pumping, still working?  
I'm tryna see if it's worth it.

This circlely thing that go around yo finger a lil cheaper  
It's made with love not dinero  
You the best pick 'cause you been with me since cero  
You been with me since ×6

[Chorus]

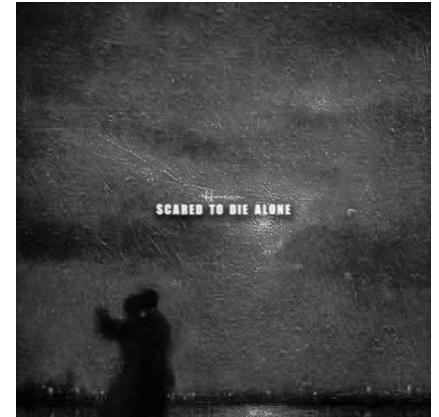
I'm way too indecisive  
It's getting hard to commit  
But it's really time to admit  
I'm scared I'm gon' die alone, so—

You believe we can try again?  
And give another attempt?  
I'm shooting, hope I don't miss  
I know you've seen how much I grown, so—

[Verse 2]

Why you holding back?  
Ain't no intermission  
Call for attention  
What these lyrics is  
My mind beyond simplistic  
I'm a lyricist, while we mentioning  
Baby, take my phone, put yo number in, getting intimate  
So I can drown in that later, getting baptized, this a christening  
Bring everybody else joy but myself  
If the earth spinning then I'mma hold still  
Think I ain't leaning, I'm already tipping  
He choose to play with you, give him the belt

You might be perfect, you everything that I was hoping  
We been knew each other since kids  
I trust to show where I live  
How sad we ending



scared to die alone

*Cory Williams - "Hovenn"*

[Chorus]

I'm way too indecisive  
It's getting hard to commit  
But it's really time to admit  
I'm scared I'm gon' die alone, so—

You believe we can try again?  
And give another attempt?  
I'm shooting, hope I don't miss  
I know you've seen how much I grown, so—

[Verse 3 / Outro]

Is yo heart up for purchase?  
Easy buy, garage sale?  
Is it pumping, still working?  
I'm tryna see if it's worth it

This circley thing that go around yo finger a lil cheaper  
It's made with love not dinero  
You the best pick 'cause you been with me since cero

[Chorus]

I'm way too indecisive  
It's getting hard to commit  
But it's really time to admit  
I'm scared I'm gon' die alone, so—

You believe we can try again?  
And give another attempt?  
I'm shooting, hope I don't miss  
I know you've seen how much I grown, so—



Ghosts in the Alley  
*Amy Duskheart*



Still Life  
*Amanda Ramirez Garcia*

Quiet Grandeur  
*Paola Corona*



Walking on Sunshine  
*Andy Salazar*



“Do you always look like that?”

April is showering in Batavia and I am trapped inside a slide. My knees knock against one of my shoulders and the knee of my companion in misery, a girl with round eyes and more bone than muscle. Her right hip is already digging into my left in this small space, but I scoot closer anyways. She smells like vanilla.

“Look like what?” I ask, although I can usually guess where she’s going anyways.

We’re sitting at the foot of the slide, limbs jigsawed together, just barely protected under the edge of the roof but close enough to the end to have soggy sneakers. Close enough to see the plastic of the slide reflecting soft cyan on her freckled cheeks.

“It’s graduation, not a funeral. You know this isn’t goodbye, right?” She’s always been fearless for as long as I’ve known her, but when she looks like that, curled in and small and with that look in her eyes, I could swear she’s known fear before. I can almost hear the echo perched on her lips: “*This isn’t goodbye, right?*”

I want to reassure her, but a hangnail on my left thumb calls for my attention instead and I bow my head to tend to it. Besides, what do you even say to a Bug about to be squished?

“You know I haven’t passed yet, right?” I settle on deflection. “The final or otherwise.”

Bug doesn’t laugh. She shies away from her own question, skittish hands probing at squishy soles and lips fluttering soundlessly before settling on a kind of awkward half-grimace. It’s like a decade without her never passed. She’s an open book.

Nail still hanging and begging for attention, I interrupt, “I know.”

She continues anyways. “You were accepted already. UIUC wants you and decision day is tomorrow.”

Hangnail now gone and pink new skin pulsing, I flap my fingers and let the damp air kiss away the sting as I repeat, “I know.”

I still have nine other nails that could use inspection. Bug interrupts my scrutiny with a bony nudge to my ribs, and I know it’s wrong but self-directed anger appears as irritation tickling the back of my throat. That snaggle-toothed smile stays put, though, and I find myself staring at the dimple her canine creates on her bottom lip. I swallow my bile.

“You’re doing well, Bub. You’ll pass.”

The clouds grow and another cascade of droplets sink into my already rain-soaked sneakers and suddenly we are six again. Speaking around new front teeth, she can’t pronounce my name and instead creates a new one for me.

“Bubba! Can’t get me, Bubba!” Bug titters as I chase her down slick plastic, screeching joyfully when the puddle at the end soaks her overalls. I’m wearing the same outfit, blue denim scuffed with play and several shades darker with mud.

One day not-strangers, Bug wormed her way into my routine. Every week, rain or shine, is the same: we play *Escape the Monster* on the blue swirly slide at Memorial Park. Every week, we switch who plays the Monster. It’s my turn today.

Even at six she still looks the same, wide caramel eyes and licorice hair and long, bony limbs. She smells good as ever, sprayed down with that Bath and Body Works mist her mom gets at their semi-annual sale.

With a gummy roar I tumble down the slide after her, clawing at the Warm Vanilla Sugar air she leaves behind. A strand of her hair gets twisted around my knuckles and yanked free from her scalp and immediately she stops, plops down on the wet mulch, and wails.

Bug looks just about ready to cry again, now, twelve years after I’ve pulled her hair. She knows my decision before I can even tell her. Eyes an ocean, she dribbles out all her liquid hurt into four small words: “I won’t miss you.”

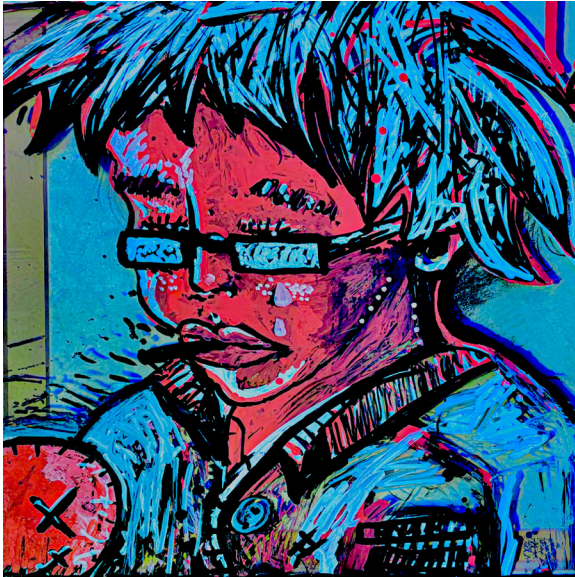
She’s still running, I realize. It’s still my turn.

April is still showering outside our slide and all my nails have been sufficiently un-hung. In this small space, just like twelve years ago, I catch her in my arms and squeeze the tears away. When her head falls to my collarbone, I press my lips to the crown of her head and she weeps for all she hasn’t yet lost. Four years away isn’t forever, but it might as well be in a Bug’s eyes.

Her real message is shorter, only three words. It’s okay that she can’t say them now.

“I know.”

Colors From  
My Youth  
*Ryan Zielie*



i know only the red-yellow-purple of your life  
*Maia Deguzman*

sharing tastes  
like the last green skittle  
placed precariously in the pocket of my pants  
i am newly grown and anti-apple  
but you love the tang  
you were shaped by sour  
acidic abrasions across your knuckles  
puckered lips and puckered fists  
you only ever learned to fight  
but sugared peacetime is where i grew up  
shaped by saccharine, i  
know only the raspberry wrinkles of your laughter  
can feel only the honeyed mead of your embrace  
you wish i had more green but i don't  
i am red-yellow-purple like you, now  
so i will unpocket my skittle  
my last green skittle  
for you to have



Dark Cacao  
*DaQuan Finley*

## Inner Child

*Maia Deguzman*

There is someone inside my skin.  
She can't be very old,  
voice a quavering violin,  
forming the vowels of my name even when  
I pretend not to hear her.  
All day she weeps,  
salting the ocean of my veins,  
fingers scrabbling for purchase on my windpipe  
as she tries not to dip  
below the waves.  
All day she squirms,  
wriggling just beneath my ribcage,  
desperately seeking attention in the crevices  
of my bloated organs.  
Someday she will quiet,  
settle her hiccupping cries,  
and as she waits in baited silence—maybe, just maybe,  
I will finally love her.

## Lost Peacock Feathers

*Kimberly Leslie*

Back when the sunlight was lavender,  
I used to know the swaddle of baby's breath—  
the cotton of a white blanket, untouched by dirt,  
cocooned around me as I slept,  
oblivious to car crashes and stress shaking my parents.

That baby's breath smelled of summer lemonade—  
the lemonade my parents used to make  
from cups of white sugar, ice-cold water, and lemon juice.  
I would guzzle down glasses with my toddler sister,  
both of us in colorful shorts and easily-stained pastel shirts.

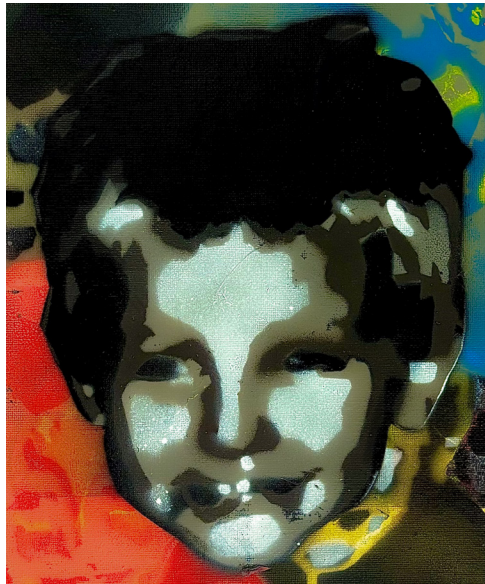
Prancing in my vast verdant yard,  
I waved my ivory wishbone around,  
dreaming of peacock feathers  
that shimmered on my back  
and glimmered in sunlight and applause,  
that peacock feathers were my destiny.

I still search for peacock feathers,  
those emerald green wisps adorned with diamonds,  
I used to see my reflection in them before  
those quills rotted away from the mold of fear.  
Maybe those peacock plumes were a childhood fantasy,  
a fantasy blind to my pigeon reality.

Perry Maysun  
*Ryan Zielie*



Emilia and the  
Hotel Window  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*



Self Portrait  
*Ryan Zielie*



On the Side of  
the Road  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*

## Harbor

*Amy Duskheart*

You held me as the cracks in my skin spread  
And my bones trembled under that weight  
That growing threat in my throat  
I know far too well  
Time and time again, you hold me  
As tears threaten eyelid dams  
It's in this gentle warmth that I find myself rocking  
Back and forth, safe and sound  
Floating in a gentle harbor, ever tied to your haven shore



as calmness stirred  
*Amanda Ramirez Garcia*

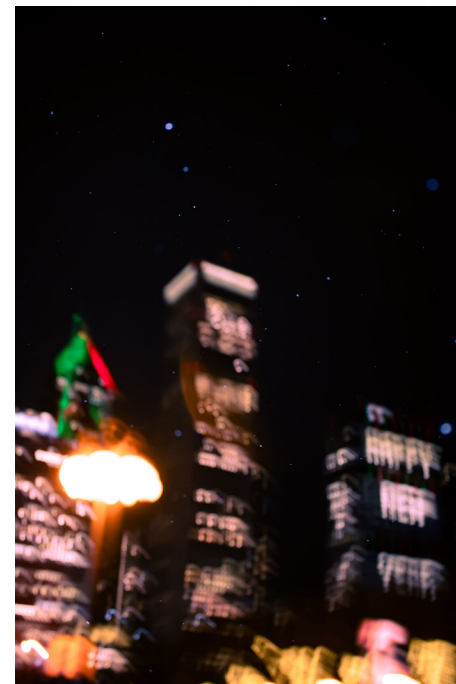
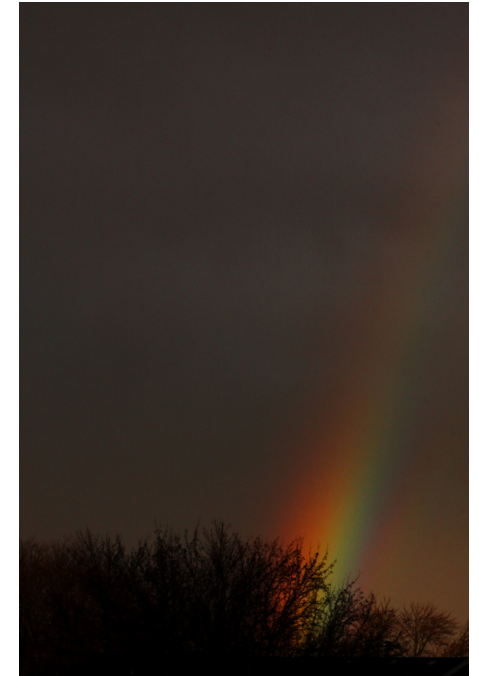
a mile in my socks

*Maia Deguzman*

i'm sorry i  
dropped the paints but you were yelling  
wet kaleidoscopes on my white socks (dad's white socks)  
stubbornness has always been our birthright  
you would rather i change into something else  
something pink but  
mosaics bleed unapologetically  
between uncalloused fingers  
grayed water washes away  
crimson cheeks and lungs laden with hurt  
mother you told me not to wear these socks but  
i did anyways  
i am not a girl.

After the Storm

*Caitie Zwirek*



Happy New Year  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*

# The Mercy of Becoming

*Percy Schulz*

it started  
with  
us trying to find  
the  
and not just  
shed upon our future  
supernova  
light  
self.  
peace within  
of transition

*“little girl, to not be a  
girl anymore even if it means  
she needs to break  
to be born again,”*

a phrase some other version of me  
would say.  
and maybe it is true  
that to change  
is to break  
dysphoria *s h a t t e r* into an explosion of euphoria  
now i believe something different.  
i know pain will be with me every step of the way  
but so will joy,  
so will peace.  
so will the endless  
expanse of the universe,  
and all of the mercy  
of becoming.

## Contributor Biographies

### **Amanda Ramirez Garcia**

Amanda Ramirez Garcia is a freshman at Aurora University majoring in Graphic Design. Passionate about the fine arts, she is involved in the choir and is also a member of PREMSA and the Art Club. She looks forward to contributing to the school musicals and Elysian throughout her academic journey. Outside the classroom, Amanda enjoys playing tennis and watching anime.

### **Amy Duskheart**

Amy Duskheart is a poet and photographer based in the southern suburbs of Chicago. Her work explores her experiences of love and life, of sorrow and desire, and she would love to share it with you.

### **Andy Salazar**

Andy Salazar Aquino, a first-generation college student, is a senior majoring in chemistry secondary education with a minor in biology. He spends his free time immersed in both art and photography and hopes to incorporate these aspects into his future classroom. His work reflects the connection between people and nature.

### **Cory Williams**

Chicago Heights native Hovenn (Cory Williams) began his musical journey at just 3 years old, when his grandfather first introduced him to the drums. Immersed in music throughout his childhood from school bands to instrumental lessons, Hovenn initially had no plans of becoming an artist. His early passion leaned toward visual storytelling by a camera he bought for YouTube that led him into photography and videography. But everything shifted after the loss of his best friend, channeling his grief and dreams into sound. His debut EP, *Para Los Caídos*, is a heartfelt tribute to Seyi, marking the beginning of an artist unafraid to turn pain into purpose.

### **DaQuan Finley**

DaQuan is an African American first-generation freshman majoring in actuarial science. He has created over 50 characters for his comic book *A Tale of Quadria* and continues to expand upon the world, telling it to any who will listen. He has always hoped to share his art and comic books with other people who are enamored by fantasy.

### **Ewa Lupyvovk**

Ewa is a first-generation Political Science and Public Policy major from AU with a heart for art, she comes from Ukraine where a majority of her artwork is inspired from and wishes to spread awareness of the war at home through her work. She is also a big fan of anime which is the main style she follows for her art pieces, alongside painting, crafting figures and writing.

### **Kevin Garcia**

Kevin Garcia is currently studying Graphic Design and planned to transfer to earn his bachelor's degree, aspiring to become an art director. Growing up in a Mexican household, he discovered the opportunity of passion for the art and the creative freedom it brings. In his free time, he enjoys photographing his dog Luka, drawing, and connecting with others who see the world through many lenses.

### **Maia Deguzman**

Maia is a student, a daughter, a lover, and a wary optimist. Outside of studying Environmental Studies and Sustainability and Museum Studies, you can usually find Maia daydreaming about the small worlds within our larger one.

### **Maria Vazquez**

They are passionate about writing to express themselves and share their voice. As a political affairs advocate, they are dedicated to making a difference and find inspiration through volunteering and exploring the great outdoors.

### **Natasha Leclercq**

Natasha Leclercq (she/her) is majoring in English and History, with a minor in Environmental Studies, and anticipates graduating in May 2026 from Aurora University. She plans to attend graduate school for Environmental Science and pursue a career in Environmental Studies.

### **Paola Corona**

Paola Corona is a photographer based out in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. She is currently a junior at Aurora University studying Business Administration and Marketing. Her goal is to become a full-time photographer or social media marketer with a well-known business. Paola lives a busy life juggling two jobs and school but enjoys her spare time spending it with her two cats or watching her comfort shows.

### **Percy Schulz**

Percy Schulz is a 22-year-old poet from Dundee, IL. He's been writing and performing since he was in high school, where he first focused his work on poetic activism and queer identity. He currently works as a barista in Elgin, and is pursuing a degree in secondary education to teach English.

### **Tessa Danko**

Tessa Danko is a junior at AU, majoring in social work. She loves going on walks in the woods and writing poetry.



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