

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 originality and diversity of human minds.

# 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. My work has appeared in various editions of Elysian, and I am still beyond grateful and proud to be serving as its Editor-in-Chief. I hope to one day 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 seeing a good show, going to the movies, hanging out with 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 all in the next one! :)

## **Caitie Zwirek - Assistant Editor**

I am a junior majoring in Graphic Design at Aurora University. This is my second semester as the Assistant Editor, and I am so incredibly proud to work alongside such a talented and dedicated team. This magazine represents the unique voices, passions, and artistry of our community, and I am honored to be a part of it and share it with you. Thank you so much for reading Elysian's Spring 2026 Issue!

## **Ryan Zielie - Graphic Designer**

I am a senior at Aurora University, majoring in Graphic Design and Marketing. As a mixed-media artist, photographer, and multidisciplinary creator, I experiment fluidly across any medium I can access and am currently developing a new style with black-and-white vertical lines. This exploration defines my latest series, *Lineaments*, offering a striking first look at my newest emerging body of work.

## **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 from Louisville, Kentucky. I am also a member of the women's lacrosse team and enjoy reading, cooking, and playing card games in my free time.

## **Kimberly Leslie - Writing Editor**

I am a senior with a major in English and a minor in creative writing at Aurora University, and I'm graduating this May. I'm also the proud President of the Creative Writing Club, and I was one of Environmental's editors last year. I'm thankful to have had a stable and successful college career because it's given me the opportunity to participate in Aurora University's literary organizations and find my people there. Stay human, everyone!

## **John Shippy - Photography Editor**

I am a Junior at Aurora University majoring in Graphic Design, and I am the Elysian's 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, music, film, 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 the school for allowing this magazine to be made, to the team for their hard work and effort they put into it, to the students for submitting their work and putting it out to the world, and, most of all, to you for reading it! I hope you enjoy! <3

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

I am a fourth-year Marketing major at Aurora University and serve as Secretary and Media Coordinator. This is my last semester with Elysian, as I will be graduating in May. I am grateful to have been part of such an amazing magazine that showcases student work and provides a space for creativity.

## **Madelyn Dittmann - Treasurer**

I am delighted to be returning to the Elysian team as Treasurer, and I am excited to see all the wonderful art everyone has created! I am a sophomore Therapeutic Recreation major with a minor in Neurodiversity Studies, and I am graduating in December 2027. I am also the Vice President of our disability student organization DREAM AU, and like to read, draw, and watch movies in my free time.

## **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.*

# Contents

## Art & Photography

- |    |  |    |  |
|----|--|----|--|
| 12 | Head in the Clouds<br><i>Juan Gutierrez</i>                            | 47 | The Final Call<br><i>Ximena Torres Ramos</i> |
| 12 | A Secret Garden<br><i>Ximena Torres Ramos</i>                          | 48 | HOLD YOUR BONES<br><i>Ryan Zielie</i>        |
| 16 | The Starry Rock<br><i>Sydney Breitenstein</i>                          | 51 | Red Box<br><i>Ryan Zielie</i>                |
| 22 | I'm Just Not the Same as Them<br><i>Sydney Breitenstein</i>            | 52 | Life is But a Dream<br><i>John Shippy</i>    |
| 23 | My Old Kentucky Home<br><i>Sydney Breitenstein</i>                     | 53 | Swing First<br><i>Ryan Zielie</i>            |
| 24 | PrinceFF<br><i>DaQuan Finley</i>                                       | 55 | Chicago<br><i>Ximena Torres Ramos</i>        |
| 24 | Diversidad es el Corazón<br>del Mundo sin Duda<br><i>Diane Fuentes</i> | 56 | Ink in Flux<br><i>Amy Duskheart</i>          |
| 25 | Life<br><i>John Shippy</i>   | 58 | Bittersweet Reality<br><i>Brianna Kuhn</i>   |
| 25 | Love is Love<br><i>John Shippy</i>                                     |    |  |
| 34 | Lost Memories<br><i>Ximena Torres Ramos</i>                            |    |  |
| 34 | Contemplating the Lifespan of a Sigh<br><i>Ximena Torres Ramos</i>     |    |  |

## Poetry

- 15 dreamer/dream  
*Percy Schulz*
- 17 Let's Be Mice  
*Percy Schulz*
- 18 Just that Glowing, Living Feeling  
*Kimberly Leslie*
- 21 Where I'm From (Island Girl)  
*Brianna Kuhn*
- 26 Family Dinner  
*Natasha LeClercq*
- 33 Body Electric  
*Tessa Danko*
- 35 Eyes  
*Taylor Eiland*
- 36 The Flinch.  
*Taylor Eiland*
- 37 Today  
*Paola Ramirez*
- 40 codependency is a death sentence  
*Amari Liebe*
- 42 your guilt, not mine  
*Amari Liebe*
- 43 To Corporal Hicks.  
*Charley Carter*
- 45 We Who Cried Moloch  
*Natasha LeClercq*
- 52 The Enshittification of the Mind  
*Kimberly Leslie*
- 54 The Digital Uncanny Valley  
*Kimberly Leslie*
- 57 The Void  
*Lyndsey Twitchell*
- 59 Prophecy  
*Percy Schulz*

## Short Fiction & Nonfiction

- 13 Can Caterpillars Fly?  
*Maia Deguzman*
- 27 Baby Noises  
*Scott Woldman*
- 38 Bull Frog Sings  
*Sophia Wayer*
- 49 Instructions for Burning Yourself  
Out in College  
*Kimberly Leslie*

# Elysian

Volume 8  
Issue 2

## Acknowledgements

The editors and staff of Elysian would like to thank the following groups and individuals for their support during the making of this publication:

Aurora University, English Department  
Schingoethe Center of Aurora University  
Dr. Natasha Ritsma  
Dr. Meredith Harvey  
Dr. Andrew Prall  
Cover Photo by Juan Gutierrez

Elysian Literary Magazine acknowledges the support of Dr. Sara Elliot and Dean Pegeen Reichert Powell, who encourage and provide AU students with the tools and guidance necessary to nourish writing and art.

Elysian is a space for creative expression and independent thought. All creative works reflect the views of their authors and not those of the university or editorial staff.

Head in the Clouds  
*Juan Gutierrez*



A Secret Garden  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*

Can Caterpillars Fly?  
*Maia Deguzman*

“Caterpillars have twelve eyes, except for some of them that have ten or fourteen.” My friend points this out with two wide eyes of her own as we share breaths and watch a striped caterpillar inch its way across a broad leaf. “And soon, when it’s warmer, she’ll become a butterfly.”

At the ripe age of twelve, soon we’ll transform too. But for now, we caterpillars are content to dig through Mama’s garden. Armed with nothing but stubborn fingers, the undersides of our fingernails and the grooves of our fingerprints embedded with soil, we excavate the flower bed in search of friends. She’ll make new ones when she moves to the big city, Mama said. I don’t know why she can’t just stay here.

“Bubba! Bubba, look!” The large Bug beside me squeals with joy and whips around, a pink earthworm wriggling in her open palms. I can tell it tickles by the scrunching of her face, like a drawstring pulled tight around her lips. It doesn’t stop her from asking, “Do you think we can keep her?”

Sitting in the clearing of a towering hydrangea forest, Bug looks an inch tall. Like a caterpillar, I imagine she’ll sprout wings and fly away once it’s warm, too. Leaving me behind.

“We need a good home for her,” I tell Bug. “Leaves and sticks and dirt and stuff.”

Leaves and sticks and dirt and stuff are exactly what we collect, carefully layering them all inside my overalls pocket before moving in our new friend. She has exactly what she needs in this new home of leaves and sticks and dirt and stuff, but she almost looks sad.

“Now we can keep her forever,” I say. Bug and I share loose-toothed grins, and I breathe in her Warm Vanilla Sugar air and wish we both had wings that could carry us far, far away together. But caterpillars can’t fly, and worms can’t live in soil-lined pockets. Bug’s parents divorced after that summer, and it was years before she came home.

~\*~

“Hey, Julia, look at this!” Bella calls from across the greenhouse. The spring sun looks just as close as it did that day. She looks the same, too, rays of liquid gold spilling through the clear roof to pool in pockets of her wide amber eyes.

It’s a Tuesday afternoon and we now-butterflies are fluttering about the greenhouse, readying the carnations for sale, though watering the plants comes to a screeching halt as Bella excitedly waves me over. There is a caterpillar crawling through a crack in the polycarbonate walls we had been meaning to fix for days.

## Can Caterpillars Fly?

*Maia Deguzman*

“We should take her back to her home,” I tell Bella. The caterpillar inches its way towards a particularly leafy plant, promising slow but sure destruction.

“No!” Bella’s answer is immediate. “Can we keep her instead?”

“She belongs in nature, Bella,” I say, crouching down to pick off the leaf the caterpillar had made its way onto. The snap of the stem is sharp and the sap sticky between my fingertips. “We should take her to her home.”

“Bug,” Bella says suddenly. I stop, mid-crouch, and look at her with wide eyes.

“Yes, this is a bug,” I confirm, confused, but continue to reach for the intruder. She places a hand over mine, stopping me gently.

“You used to call me Bug,” Bella says, and there’s something that passes behind those round, amber eyes. After almost three months of working in the greenhouse, after almost three months of Bella crawling back into my life, I can almost decipher the question unasked: “*We used to be closer. Where did you go?*”

I try, the name foreign in my mouth after years of unuse. “I, uh, I’m sorry, Bug.”

“What for?” Bug asks. Her skin is almost clammy against mine, warm to the point of sweating.

I’m not sure myself. I’m sorry for a lot of things when it comes to Bug; I’m sorry she had to move across the country, I’m sorry for the letter I wrote a year after she left. I’m sorry I might move far away soon, too.

I shrug and give her a pathetic look. “I’m just sorry.”

Hand still over mine, she grips me tight and pulls me to my feet. Under the shimmering March sun, she glows.

She calls me by that nickname like no time has passed, like we’re the same girls we were a decade ago. The caterpillar steadily munches its way through my favorite carnation. “Bubba, it’s okay.”

It’s not okay, though. I need to make a decision soon. But with her hand in mine, I feel like flying again.

## dreamer/dream

*Percy Schulz*

you’re

a real man.

in the mirror,

a promise of

being strong enough in

carrying every worry

with pride.

you’re still

learning how to fit

in the world.

you.

finally saw yourself fully

amongst a crowd of stars,

all you could be, despite

letting go of all that you are.

in the face of everything

you’re still laughing.

beautiful, despite what they tell you.

your joy

finally yours again



The Starry Rock  
*Sydney Breitenstein*

Let's Be Mice  
*Percy Schulz*

it  
isn't a crime  
to be small.  
nor is it a crime  
to be wanting. i tell you  
the solution to desire  
fits in the palm of our hands.  
come to the table, or just a little closer.  
pretend with me.  
let's sit, tails interlacing  
in the cold basement on a bed of  
patchwork blankets. your ears flick to the sound  
of us laughing over comically small morsels  
of crackers and cheese caught in my whiskers.  
i say things like to *whom am i squeaking?*  
or *the scraps are bountiful tonight* and in this fantasy,  
the world outside is still cold and barren  
but i still think you're gorgeous.  
you're still soft and curious,  
and there  
isn't  
much  
we  
rodents  
can  
control  
but  
we  
can  
still  
have  
this.  
chimerical and elusive  
a stupid little game  
where both of us end up  
*alive*

Just that Glowing, Living Feeling  
*Kimberly Leslie*

I clutch my bandaged hands  
as I walk through the willows.  
I know where I need to go  
for my poor burnt hands,  
temporarily protected from the fire  
beyond this grove  
by thin gauze hiding the blisters and scorched flesh.

Surrounded by the willows' feather leaves,  
a small creek glitters.  
The cricket chirp their stories,  
and the fireflies dotting the reeds glow in tandem,  
shining miniature suns.

Instantly, instinctually, my body loosens.  
I kneel at the creek like it's a holy temple,  
the grass on my knees a plush pillow,  
and strip the bandages off  
the toasted fingers I use  
to hold my pencils and pages  
and the blistered palms  
I can no longer feel.

I know I've waited too long  
to come back here.  
Outside, I ignored the grove's call—

Just that Glowing, Living Feeling  
*Kimberly Leslie*

the soft ripples, the crickets' stories, the fireflies' light—  
because I thought time fled too easily  
to hear crickets' stories and find fireflies to share,  
but the fires outside kept smoking  
and cracking  
and roaring  
and licking,  
and then I got burned  
over and over and over  
until my hands couldn't bleed anymore,  
numb to both the tongs of fire and the glow of stories.  
I know I can't keep waiting  
because the stories in this grove  
are what I stay alive for.

I dip my cupped hands into the crisp water  
and open them like a clam bearing its pearl.  
Little waves massage the surface.  
From underneath chimes ring  
as my submerged hands shimmer with gold  
like they did all those years ago when I beheld the fireflies.  
Millions of golden suns bounce off the surface.  
The water smooths out the blisters with gentle wishes  
and erodes the burns with cooling strokes.

## Just that Glowing, Living Feeling

*Kimberly Leslie*

I lift my healed hands out of the creek.  
The crickets' stories are louder now,  
alternating between high and low pitches.  
The fireflies emit enough light  
to brighten the darkest caves.

A firefly flutters near me.  
The yellow lantern on its back shines radiantly,  
too radiantly for it to survive outside the grove  
in a world that keeps burning  
and in a world out to scorch stories and their lovers.  
Yet it shines as radiantly as I once remembered  
as a child who collected the stories in this grove.

I cup my hands  
so that the firefly floats into my palms.  
Its light tickles my skin  
and imbues my bloodstream  
with the kind of magic glow  
I'll hug and shield  
so that it, and with that, I  
can live and thrive.

## Where I'm From (Island Girl)

*Brianna Kuhn*

I am from one nation,  
from one love under the hot sun.  
I am from the foundation of the family house.  
(Concrete and rebar)  
I am from the tall coconut palms.  
Their water refreshing on a hot summer day.

I'm from curly hair and spice cake  
From St. James and Montego Bay.  
I'm from Yah maan and Wah Gwaan  
from Ludi and Dominos.  
I'm from island time  
With praises we preach  
For hours and hours.

I'm from Vincent and Violet's Branch,  
Coco bread and patty.  
From the memories my grandmother lost,  
to Alzheimer's,  
the secret my father kept for 17 years.

Under the warm summer sun  
Stories are recounted.  
Moments in history that shape the future.  
I am from snippets of history—  
Memories passed on by Aunties and Uncles—  
Heritage passed on down the family tree

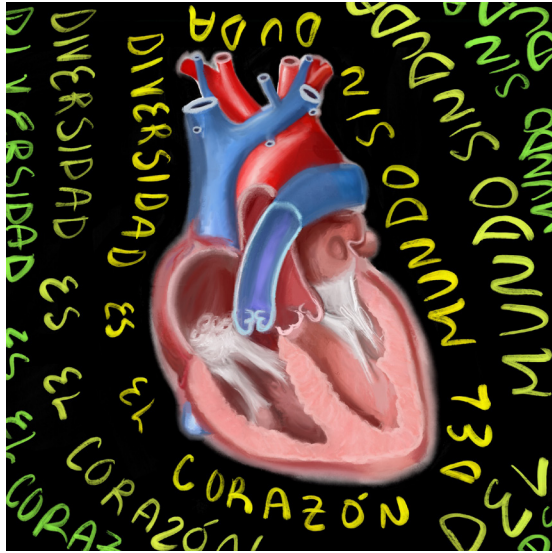


I'm Just Not the Same as Them  
*Sydney Breitenstein*

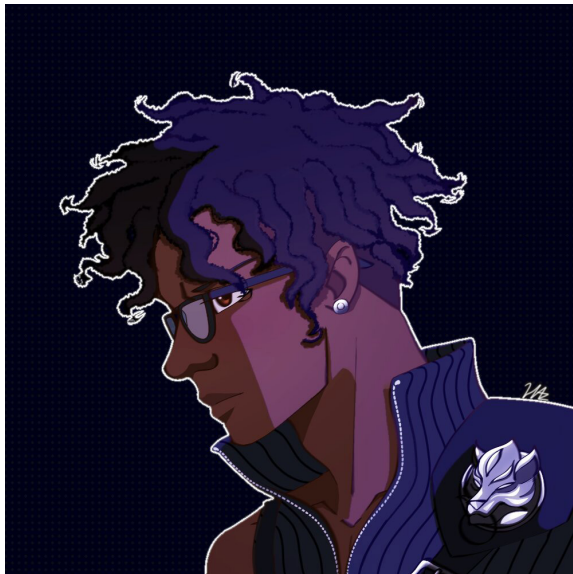


My Old Kentucky Home  
*Sydney Breitenstein*

Diversidad es  
el Corazón del  
Mundo sin Duda  
*Diane Fuentes*



Love is Love  
*John Shippy*



PrinceFF  
*DaQuan Finley*



Life  
*John Shippy*

## Family Dinner

Natasha LeClercq

Father,  
Are you a cow who shits gold?  
The Teddy Bear catapults up  
From his Rawhide High-chair  
    *Grab em by the Bomb*, he says  
Pick the shotgun up off the wall,  
Deer eyes watching from the wooden walls  
Grimacing from the weight  
    of being the *savior*  
    *the only one who does anything around here*  
Does the cow eat all the grass  
just so he can shit it out gold,  
and so only the golden princes can milk him  
    ...  
    the Founders said they'd plant seeds,  
        create a nursery  
    the ovum can't grow  
        in a garden of paraquat  
    it twines itself around  
seems too much to ask it to *become*  
for when it does breathe  
    no, it does not live

## Baby Noises

Scott Woldman

We all dealt with the divorce differently. My brother dedicated himself to becoming the undisputed master of action movie trivia. My sister gave up on talking, only speaking when forced to by a teacher, or if you turned the channel while she was watching *The Facts of Life*.

Being the oldest, I tried my very best to become the man of the house, which meant we all started the day with chocolate frosted pop-tarts, because in my world, men of the house made everyone breakfast, and that was all I knew how to cook.

And my mother, she sacrificed everything to keep the wreckage of her family together - sometimes working as many as three jobs to keep us in our tiny apartment and food on the table.

She was always there for us, somehow managing to never miss a school event, making sure all of us kids saw her, sitting in the back, waving like a lunatic and screaming, "Way to go! I love you" while we all pretended to be embarrassed to hide how grateful we were that she was there.

Unfortunately, however, becoming this amazing parent had a hidden cost, one that to this day, I still don't fully understand.

After my father left, my mother, this strong, amazing, intelligent woman, only dated complete douchebags.

Case in point: **1978. Tony Pinelli.** Tony wanted one thing out of life, and one thing only - to actually live *Saturday Night Fever* to the point where I'm pretty sure Tony wasn't even his real name. I think it was like Elliot Rosenberg, but he changed it to match John Travolta's character. And I think this because every now and then, my mother would say something like "Elliot, would you mind stopping? The kids need some milk."

To which he would respond, "Hey, it's Tony. Get your own milk."

Tony's mission in life was to win every disco dancing competition in the city of Chicago, so my mom was constantly forcing me to practice with her. I am still haunted by the images of my friends' faces pressed against the window with mocking glee as my mother swung me around the room while Thelma Houston pleaded with me not to leave her this way.

**1981. Stanley Cohen.** A tremendously successful Sales Rep, Stanley was incredibly impressed with how cosmopolitan being from New York made him.

"Kids, this is Stanley. He's going to be visiting this weekend."

"Hey kids, nice to meet you. I'm from New York."

We all mumbled a polite greeting. Clearly, Stanley was hoping for a bigger reaction, so he decided to let loose with a little of that Big Apple sophistication.

"Kids, what do you want to know about sex? General or specific - ask me anything!" My sister and I stared at each other - strangely enough, neither of us had any questions.

**1986. Paul Rudman. Fireman.**

Paul wanted to get in good with the family, so he decided to take all of us to Wilmette beach. However, as a pimply, overweight teen-ager with an enormous Jew-fro, the beach was the last place I wanted to be. Thankfully, Paul was there with some sage advice to help me with my poor body image.

“Can I talk to you for a second, Scott?”

“Sure.”

“Great. I want to just put this out there then. You know, you don’t have to look like that if you don’t want to.”

“Look like how?”

“Like this,” he said and reached over and flicked me in the man boob.

My mother would never discuss these men’s behavior, but I know it must have eaten at her because inevitably there’d be a moment, perhaps while she was washing the dishes and we were doing our homework, or maybe she’d be placing meals into Tupper-ware containers because she knew she wouldn’t be home to cook, or possibly we’d be out to dinner and she’d be pretending she was on a diet so the meal would be cheaper - and she would nervously ask, “So what do you think of blank?”

And despite the fact we all knew the truth, I would look at her and say, “He’s great, Mom” because more than anything else, we wanted her to be happy. Usually, she’d immediately break up with these men anyway. I think she just needed to know we loved her enough to lie.

Which brings us to **Aaron Leonard. Attorney at Law.**

I first met Aaron as a sophomore in college when I was home for winter break. He was coming to pick Mom up for a night on the town, and all day long, she had been doing her best to mask how much she liked him. Naturally, I was terrified.

“Hi Scott, I’m Aaron. It’s so nice to meet you. Your mom’s told me a lot about you.” I looked at him, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did.

I was truly shocked. I mean, could it be? Was it possible that at long last, my mother had broken the cycle of douche bag-atitus? After they had left, I shared my optimism with my brother and sister.

“I’m so happy for Mom. He seems great.”

What happened next chilled me to the bone as my sister, the girl who didn’t talk, silently raised her head, fixed her mute gaze upon me, and for the first time in ages, spoke.

“Jussssst. Waitttt.”

The initial incident took place during Sunday brunch - our first meal together. Everything had been going fine right up to the point where Aaron took that first bite of his breakfast.

“Ugh. This omelet is awful. It has no flavor! Waitress!”

“Is everything okay, sir?”

“There’s no flavor in this omelet. Take it back and add raw onions!”

Okay. So he liked raw onions and was a little rude. Nobody’s perfect.

“Here you go,” the waitress said as she placed the new omelet on the table.

**“No-no-no-no-no. Are you stupid? This isn’t going to provide any flavor! Take a whole onion, cut it up, and dump it on the omelet. Got it? Or is that too difficult for you?”**

We sat in stunned silence until the waitress returned. She placed the dish in front of him, and we all stared. There was now more onion than actual omelet. I watched in amazement as he took a bite.

“Not bad. It still needs a little more flavor though!” And that’s when he picked up the pepper, unscrewed the top and began to pour until his omelet was pitch black, then took a bite.

**“Mmmm. Flavor.”**

Equally disturbing was the fact that once we left the restaurant, he was an entirely different person.

“I just want to say how much I enjoyed brunch with you all. I know how important family is to your mom, and after spending time with you. I completely understand why. Thank you for including me.”

And that’s how it went. On the street, he was this nice, gracious man who treated my mother well, but get him in a restaurant of any type, and he was perhaps the most terrible man ever to frequent a dining establishment.

For example, there was the time when he sat down at a table at the Melrose Diner in Chicago, only to discover it hadn’t been properly wiped down.

**“Senior!”** he yelled to the teen-age Caucasian bus boy. “When I sat down, my stomach rubbed against the edge of the booth, and I got jelly all over my new Polo.” Sure enough, there was a strawberry smear on his bright yellow golf shirt.

“I’m very sorry,” the teen-ager replied, offering him a damp cloth.

**“No-no-no! Don’t hand me a rag! You need to clean it off me!”** He then proceeded to arch his back and stick his belly out for easier access.

And again, after each and every mortifying episode:

“Thank you for letting me be part of your family. I love you and your mom so, so much.”

In fact, it was so bad that for the next two years, I did my very best to avoid going out to eat with them, to the point where I actually attended summer school at the University of Iowa in order to minimize the possibility.

But then, one day, I received a call.

“Scotty, Aaron and I would like you to come to dinner at Mia Francesca’s with us. We want to make a special announcement.”

*Dear God. This can’t be happening.* I thought to myself.

“Scotty, please. I don’t ask much.”

“Okay, but it has to be early, like at 3:30!”

“Who eats dinner at 3:30?”

*Exactly! The place will be empty!* “I’m sorry, Mom. I have a thing later with the, uhh, Peace Corp.”

“The Peace Corp?”

“Yeah. And you know how the Peace Corp is. They lose their shit if you cancel on them!”

From the beginning, my plan was a disaster. The place was filled with senior citizens. Who knew Mia Francesca’s offered a blue plate special? Plus, there was a young woman with a baby sitting next to us. Unfortunately, the baby was like an octogenarian magnet - they all kept coming over to see the little bundle of joy, which allowed Aaron to maximize his offensiveness.

**“Oh, for the love of Pete! Babies have no business being in a restaurant like this!”**

The baby let out a happy chirp, eliciting oohs and ahhs from the senior citizens and a stream of profanity from Aaron.

**“Waiter! Is that baby going to be making noise throughout our whole meal? This is not a Cracker Barrel! You need to reseal them!”**

Clearly uncomfortable, the waiter went and spoke to the host, who then went and spoke to the young mother.

“I’m sorry, sir. The woman is waiting for the rest of her party, and there’s too many of them to change her seat.”

I could see Aaron starting to blow.

“Hey,” I said, hoping to distract him. “Mom said you guys had something you wanted to talk about? Something important?”

“That’s a good idea,” my mom chimed in. “Let’s share the announcement.”

“All right. Kids, the reason we asked you all to join us is that your mother and I wanted to ask for your -”

At that moment, two things happened. The baby made a happy coo, and Aaron dropped his silverware onto his plate and let out the loudest shriek I have ever heard a human being make. It went on for so long that my brother, to this day, describes it as a cross between Cameron’s scream in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and Mel Gibson’s Freedom from *Braveheart*.

When he finally finished, there was absolute silence.

“Sir, are you okay?”

We all stared at Aaron, hoping to hear just what was wrong so we could relay it to the paramedics we were about to call on his behalf. And that’s when he said it.

***“If that baby can scream, well then so can I!”***

The rest of the meal was kind of fuzzy after that. I remember the young woman standing up and moving to the other room, I remember my mother calling Aaron a jerk, and I remember foolishly thinking, well, at least things can’t get any worse.

After the meal, as we were standing by the front, putting on our coats and getting ready to leave, my brother began to shout.

“Oh my God! It’s Teasel! It’s Teasel!”

“Who?” I asked.

“First Blood! Teasel!”

I realized what my brother was saying as a hulking man bore down upon us. It was Brian Dennehey, Chicago actor, star of *Rambo: First Blood*, and apparently, one very pissed off grandfather of an adorable baby.

“Hey buddy! You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

The restaurant erupted in applause.

**“This is not a family restaurant!”** Aaron screamed back and then had the audacity to actually chest bump Brian Dennehey, the guy that took on John Rambo! And that’s when all hell broke loose. The applause grew louder, the other patrons started screaming for Brian Dennehey to kill my mom’s boyfriend, my mother screamed “Scotty, do something!” My brother repeatedly yelled, *“they drew first blood, not me!”* my sister said nothing at all, and I, I stepped between the two men, screaming for everyone to just relax all the while secretly hoping Brian would deck Aaron.

\* \* \*

## Baby Noises

*Scott Woldman*

We exited the restaurant beaten, broken and completely drained, all of us shuffling zombie-like toward the car in complete silence with one notable exception:

**“I just want to say I love you all more than I could ever possibly convey. Truly, I am the luckiest man alive. Thank you for being who you are!”**

\* \* \*

About a week later, my mother asked me to meet her for coffee. While we were there, she broke the news.

“Aaron asked me to marry him.”

I nodded and said nothing.

“So what do you think of him?”

At first, I was angry. Did she really need to even ask this question? Was it fair to put me in this position? Why was this my job?

I was about to share all this and more when I noticed how tired she looked. Tired from working three jobs, tired from being alone for so long, tired from her life turning out so differently from the one she envisioned.

“I think he’s great, Mom.”

She was quiet for a moment, grateful for the very same reason I was when I would see her at my school band concert, sitting in the back, waving and screaming “I love you” like a lunatic.

Sometimes, you just need to know that no matter what happens, your family is there.

“Thank you, Scotty.”

Six months later, Aaron and my mother got married, a marriage that lasted for more than 20 years. And through all the ups and downs of their relationship, there is one constant that defined both their marriage and us as a family - no matter what happened, no matter how badly the chips were down, no matter how high the odds were stacked against us,

We always, always, ordered in.

## Body Electric

*Tessa Danko*

Warmth of forward motion

Sprinting into the city’s belly.

A man stands from his seat and preaches:

*god is one thing*

*the devil is another,*

*which are you?*

I don’t have an answer,

just the image of rusty nails

in Jesus’s palms.

On the platform, Snow falling now

My lungs filled with winter

And they sing, simple praise

For the sweetness of being here.

I know it’s the

Electricity of queer folks

That power the city through

Getting together and singing,

Blessed sore throats.

We hold each other the way

water holds a lily.

We arabesque in the streets

Twirling, holding hands,

Kissing when time allows.

We become the earth;

Her peaks and depths,

Her rivers cutting across the land,

Hearts ecstatic like wild wind.

Contemplating the  
Lifespan of a Sigh  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*



Lost Memories  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*

Eyes  
*Taylor Eiland*

I've always found the eyes the most intriguing part of the body  
Stuck between your brain and mouth, a powerful and persuasive middle man that affects  
the two.

They are the supreme.

The eyes are a neutral arbiter—they can be used and perceived in any way deemed fit.  
A simple gloss over the iris can invoke empathy. Dilation of the pupil can create fear or  
display love.

The color and shape, though should be trivial, can warrant affection or dehumanization.

My eyes have never been my own.

I obtained them from my mother, who got them from grandma. I don't think they ever  
got used to this body.

Like mini philocalists, they are able to find the allure in everything, everything except  
the vessel they are attached to.

I spend my time trying to convince them that this frame, this skin, this soul—is worth  
their awe too.

Still they continue to wander outward, seeking beauty in anything that isn't me.

Despite this, I don't stop them from looking, in hopes that one day, by way of pure  
serendipity, they'll turn inward, and finally see something worth keeping.

## The Flinch.

*Taylor Eiland*

If I were a movement, I wouldn't be a leap or a twirl or a cool dance move.

I'd be a finch.

That split second recoil when something takes you by surprise. The kind of movement that doesn't ask for permission and just happens.

The finch is instinct. It isn't graceful in any way—just like me. Someone who feels things too quickly, too aggressively, even when I don't want to. It's in my blood to shrink back before registering why.

The finch isn't only fear, but awareness also. It's proof that I'm awake in a world that can be violent. When I flinch, I'm alive. Sensitive to every shift in tone, every look, any possibility of hurt. Me flinching is a show of my honesty. A glimpse into the part of me that refuses to hide that things frighten me.

I used to hate it. Being called overly sensitive or jumpy, like those were bad things. Now, though, I realize that the finch is what has and will continue to keep me safe. It's the reflex that helps me navigate who and what to trust, when to get close and when to retreat.

After I pull back, I always lean in again. Softer and slower, maybe, but I still do. The finch is the small area between fear and courage, the place to gather oneself.

So yeah, I am the finch. Cautious, fast, protective, alive. A movement that begins with hesitation but always ends with return.

## Today

*Paola Ramirez*

Today

12:00 PM

Shyly sitting by the window pane  
Clouds greeting, welcoming my wind  
Intervals of coffee, guiding  
Will I accept myself today  
Soon...

3:00 PM

Playful hair  
Gold peaks through my ears, in heart  
Recognized, ode to convey  
Concealed—in hunger to reach out  
Coffee still warm, odd

6:00 PM

Minimally dancing  
It is still there again, quite rash and rude  
Ashamed of seeing, but a bit welcomed  
Tarrying content, made renewed  
Tiresome

9:00 PM

Mine,  
Knowing what  
Memories and new foundations  
I will see again

12:00 AM

It might just swallow me soon  
Vespered consciousness  
Calling soon, will then touch  
I am tired—still stayed

The bumps in the road woke me up, the same steady rhythm as a scooter rattling over sidewalk cracks, each jolt nudging me closer to a place I knew by heart. That was how I always knew we had arrived after the long three-hour drive. Somehow, my body learned the timing before my mind ever did, like muscle memory stitched into sleep. We pulled into the driveway, and there she was: the big sunflower statue standing guard on my nana's front porch, her yellow petals frozen in a permanent smile. Even before the car door opened, I could smell the cigarettes lingering near the garage, a scent that felt as familiar as a welcome-home hug. I knew, without checking, that the freezer would be fully stocked with popsicles, stacked like quiet promises waiting for us.

Inside my head, the house unfolded itself room by room. I could picture the drawer beneath the silverware where the bread fit perfectly, as if it had been built just for it. I could see the screen door leading out to the square of stone we called a deck, its hinges always singing a soft, tired note when it opened. The grass outside was always freshly cut, trimmed short and neat, like the house had dressed up for our arrival. We walked slowly toward the pond, careful with each step, trying not to scare the ducks. We tore pieces of bread with small, impatient hands and tossed them into the water, watching the ducks rush forward, bumping and splashing, fighting over each bite as if it were treasure.

Walking into the house was always the same, a ritual that never changed. My nana would be in the kitchen, moving from counter to stove with the quiet confidence of someone who had cooked the same meals a hundred times before. The kitchen smelled warm and lived-in, like cinnamon and grease and something sweet I could never quite name. My papa would be on the couch, sunken into the cushions, watching whatever sports game happened to be on, the television casting flickering light across the room. We took turns greeting them, our voices overlapping, before dragging our luggage into the den like offerings left at the door.

We raced each other to the bathroom, having tried our hardest not to stop during the drive, laughter echoing down the hallway. Eventually, we gathered at the table, which was always covered with a red-and-white polka dot tablecloth that felt cheerful and permanent, like it had always been there and always would be. Spread across it were freshly cut fruit, cheese and crackers, and salami, arranged carefully but never delicately. Sitting at that table felt like being tucked in, full before we had even taken a bite.

My little sister went straight to the fridge in the garage, emerging victorious with a popsicle, while my older sister grabbed a soda and popped the tab with a sharp hiss. We chose our beds for the night the same way every time, without discussion: my little sister and I on the trundle bed in the back room, its mattress pulling out like a secret, my older sister on the sofa in the living room, and my parents in the guest room. The house seemed to settle once everyone had a place to sleep, as if it could finally rest.

The next morning, we woke to the sweet, heavy smell of cinnamon rolls and smokies drifting down the hallway, wrapping around us like a blanket. The kitchen buzzed softly with movement, pans clinking and the oven humming. After breakfast, our fingers sticky with sugar, we carried pieces of bread down to the pond again, the air cool and damp against our skin.

"Did you hear the bull frog sing?" my papa asked as we sat in the grass beneath the lone tree in the yard. The tree's branches stretched wide above us, offering shade like an open hand. I shook my head every time, even though I had heard the bull frog sing before, its low call rising from the water like a secret meant just for us. "He said, 'Sophi is a beautiful, kind little girl,'" my papa continued. "'She always brings my duck friends a snack.'" His voice carried the certainty of a fact, not a joke, and I believed him.

I remember the last time he told me a bull frog story. It was shortly after my nana died, when we returned to the house to go through her things. The rooms felt quieter then, like a song paused mid-note. The air was heavier, thick with the absence of her voice. My papa sat on the couch and motioned for me to come closer. I sat beside him, the cushions dipping under our weight, as he popped some chew into his mouth.

"Did you hear the bull frog sing?" he asked. I shook my head, just like every time before. "He said, 'I love you, Sophi.'" His words landed gently, like something being set down rather than taken away.

I imagine what this place might look like now. Maybe the pillowcases once decorated with red-and-white polka dots have been replaced with blue flowers. The fridge that used to be covered with pictures of her grandkids now holds a grocery list and drawings made by a little girl whose handwriting leans sideways. The bathtub is filled with rubber ducks instead of foam sharks, and the bread drawer is stocked with crackers instead of loaves. The house has learned new habits, the way people do when they move on.

The ducks have new friends and new snacks. I wonder if they color with fancy crayons or play Old Maid at the table, their laughter filling the rooms the way ours once did. I wonder if they eat cinnamon rolls and smokies for breakfast, if sugar still dusts the counter in the mornings. I wonder if a sunflower lady greets them from the front porch, standing watch like she always did for us.

I wonder if they know this house was once a refuge, a place where worry did not follow us inside. A place where we were taken care of by our nana, the way you take care of something fragile without ever calling it that. I didn't understand then that houses can grieve too, that they can hold loss in their walls and floors. I wonder if, on quiet mornings, they ever hear the bull frog sing.

## codependency is a death sentence

*Amari Liebe*

my journal has memorized your name  
ink stained fingers tracing every page  
i've never been one for subtleties  
born with my heart stitched on my sleeves  
sometimes i truly think  
our souls were meant to interlink  
can't tell where i end and you begin  
swear sometimes i still smell your linens  
and it takes me back  
to moments i hoped you would crack  
and let me seep in between the lines  
slowly but surely taking my time  
i'm not trying to scare you away  
i just wish you would allow me to stay  
but you also won't let me go  
which one is it? i need to know  
do i reek of despair?  
it oozes out of me when your hands are in my hair  
do you taste the pathetic on my neck?  
if you stare too long in my eyes, you'll know i'm such a wreck  
you must see something in me  
something terrifying, causing you to flee

## codependency is a death sentence

*Amari Liebe*

i've mistaken inconsistency for affection  
i've spent my whole life begging for attention  
being used gives me a purpose  
i don't treat my heart as precious  
i watch you toss it around carelessly  
"at least you're holding it" i think foolishly  
i forget that you never asked for it  
i'm a naive hypocrite  
begging you to treat me with care  
you never promised that, so you just stare  
before at least you looked at me with lust  
now i see nothing but pure disgust  
i'll overstay my welcome  
bleeding out under your thumb  
until i gasp desperately for a breath  
and then you finally leave me, as i'm on the brink of death

your guilt, not mine  
*Amari Liebe*

i hope my name puts you in turmoil  
a thought of me out of nowhere  
something juvenile  
like a kids laugh imitating mine  
or a toddler stomping her sparkly shoes  
i hope it terrorizes your day  
the facade of joy you've built crashing down  
even just for a moment  
i hope the memory of my name  
rots your insides  
turns your stomach so tight you swear you're going to throw up  
i hope you remember  
everything you did  
and it eats you up  
until you are a shell of man  
because you've always looked like that to me  
frail, hollow, cracked  
ugly, disgusting, putrid  
i hope your karmic debt hits you out of nowhere  
until you're left with less than nothing  
maybe then you'll finally get a sliver of understanding of what you put us through.

To Corporal Hicks.  
*Charley Carter*

"This feels romantic"  
But that word is tricky for me.  
Your voice is the rich amber honey I stir into my morning coffee  
Its properties holding the promise of ritual transformation  
It's 3am and I've become unhinged, still searching for an answer to the vague  
concept of a question.  
My mind wanders back to the night that I cried in my best friend's arms as I  
recollected the sight of you in the lobby at golden hour.  
Something tender in me had revealed itself that night, even as I thought to myself  
that I've never stooped so low.

This feels romantic.  
*But I am not in love with you.*  
I am not so sure that I am even in lust with you.  
I don't think about your body all too much...  
At least not in that way.  
I don't long to be with you,  
and yet I ache for all that is delicately wrapped up in the concept of you.  
I feel . . . creepy.  
I feel creepy despite hardly enough words shared between the two of us for me to  
come across any type of way.  
I just wish you would think about me, have an opinion of me, one way or another.  
Not because I want you,  
But because there is something so fundamentally lonely about this liminal space  
between suffering and change.

To Corporal Hicks.

*Charley Carter*

I thought your silhouette might lead me someplace tangible again,  
Where the ground is firm beneath my feet, the air crisp and invigorating,  
But here I am running in circles.  
This. Feels. Romantic.  
I don't think about your body much. . . not in the way you think.  
You mindlessly run a practiced hand over the stubble on your face,  
I give the motion a try before deciding that it's mine now.  
It isn't the first one I've stolen.  
It won't be the last.  
I want you to notice and come  
looking for all of it.  
I want you to find me and beckon me home.  
But. . . I don't want you.  
I'm ashamed to look you in the eyes knowing all I really want to see  
is myself reflected in something beautiful.

We Who Cried Moloch

*Natasha LeClercq*

*For Allen Ginsberg*

**I**

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by water-hogging avarice, a nation, a globe,  
unperturbed by well pumps and dried-up children, praying only to ancient, twisted  
trickles of false prophets, raging from down below,  
coming up from the ground to the blind sands of Mar-a-Lago, and to Tel Aviv, being reeled  
towards the predators and butchers as they lick their lips expectantly,  
past the babes and into the rapid gaping orifices of the Gilded bunch, in a land of payolas and  
power, past the hollow tummies, we are at the mercy of another,  
we have married ourselves to an Icarus, who sees only in himself a He, and the God of mercy  
remains in a drunken stupor, mismatching love for a tyrant with a million parched people,  
we are lost to another we, a we who drinks and drinks and drinks, a we who values a people lost,  
and a thousand trees vanished all the while,  
we are left only kissing the feet drenched in golden water, just for a taste of the bittersweet  
toxicity, longing for an estuary though it crawls with corpses and gravel walkways.

**II**

What happened when they all got homesick—did their tears turn into daggers and their brains to  
mush?  
Parasite! You reek of them! And you ooze them! You are one of them! Great Government who  
lost his soul long ago!  
Parasite! Parasite of the water! The Sun laughs at his ignorance! The Stars at his empty pit! The  
whole Sky at his bullshit!  
Parasite! Parasite of the water! The River laughs! The Swamp laughs! At the Parasite who drains  
it! At the Parasite who carries a gun but cannot tie his laces!  
Parasite! Mock-king! The Stars and Stripes weep! Weep as the Parasite blows the Star of David!  
Weep as we evaporate! Parasite! You still drink! While we bathe – not in water – but in  
the Parasite's feces!

## We Who Cried Moloch

*Natasha LeClercq*

### III

Oh, dearest Sireen! I sit beside you

when you feel empty

I sit beside you

as you tell me of your family

I sit beside you

because you remind me of my mother

I sit beside you

knowing you deserve to be free

I sit beside you

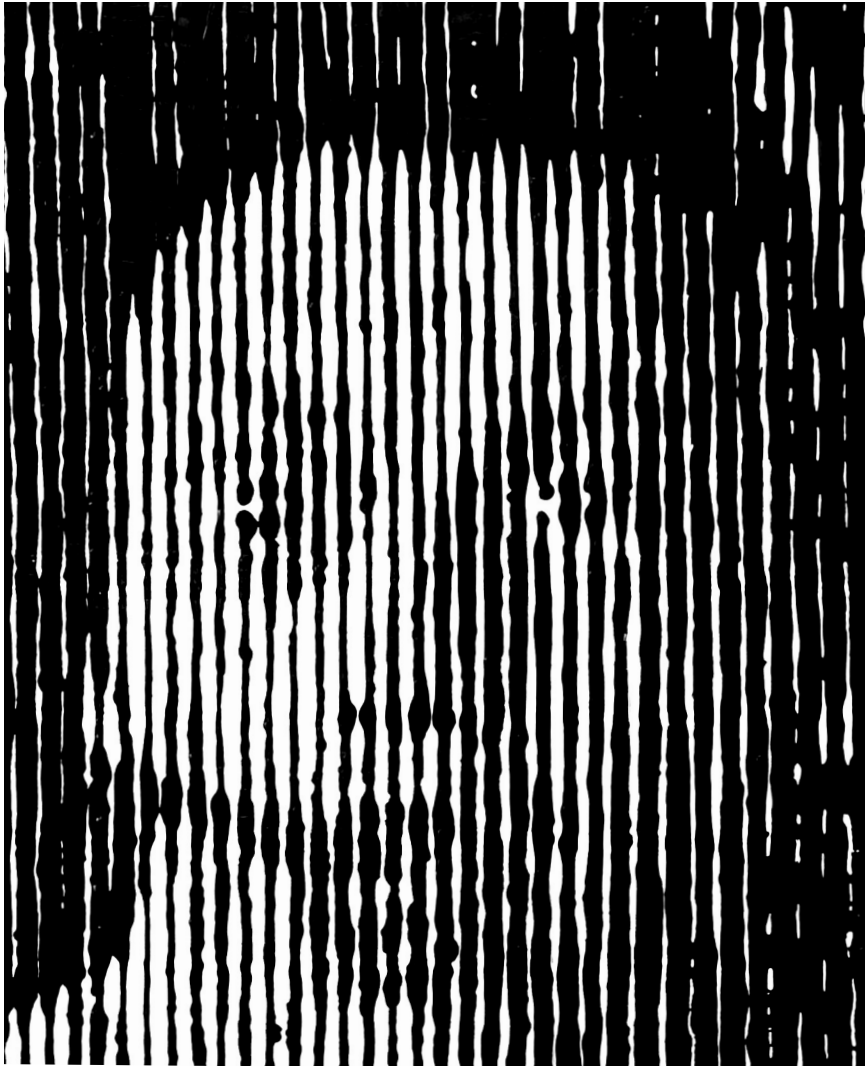
holding hope for a nation to sprout that sees you as a human being

I sit beside you

beside this Olive Tree, because against this sweet being, you are not a plague creating a  
wasteland, here you are human like me,  
and here, here you can drink in peace



The Final Call  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*



## HOLD YOUR BONES

*Ryan Zielie*

## Instructions for Burning Yourself Out in College

*Kimberly Leslie*

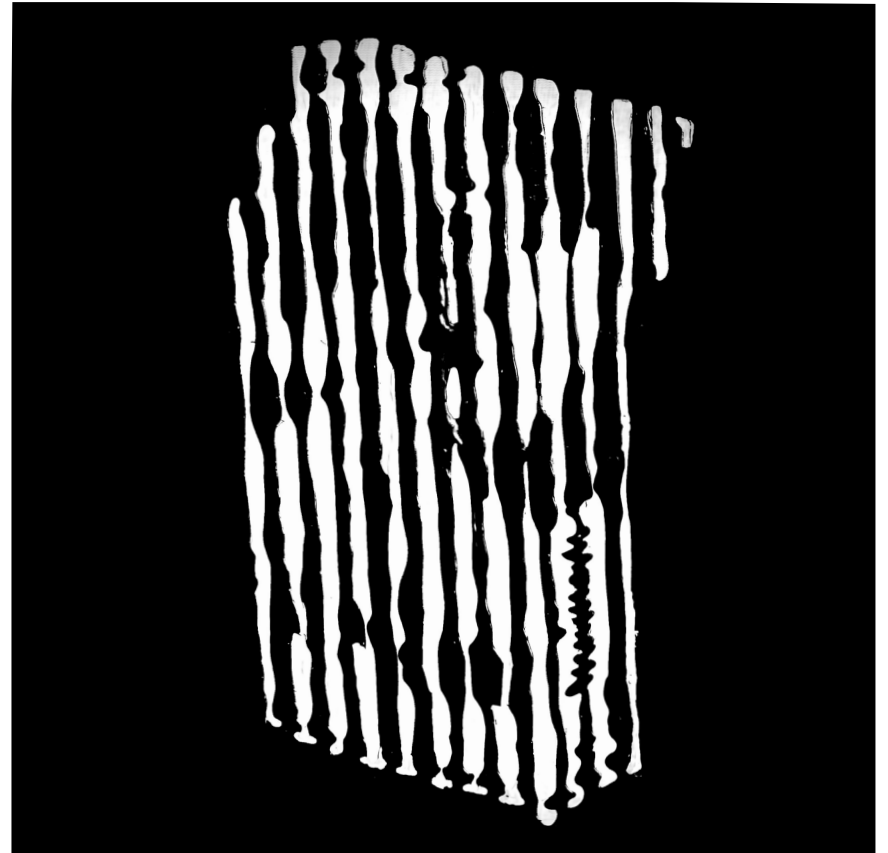
1. Open your eyes. You can't burn if you're not awake because when you sleep, you're too cold to feel the fires consuming your mind and tickling your feet.
2. Lay in bed and immediately teleport yourself to your classroom, sitting at your desk with your laptop covered with stickers from History Club sticker sales and Schingoethe Museum exhibits, your notebook, and your folders stuffed with papers.
3. Get out of bed. Envision yourself racing through the mountains of pages threatening to suffocate you and typing pages of words, your barricade against the flood of schoolwork.
4. Cram food down your throat in less than fifteen minutes. Preferably something quick like toast or fruit.
5. If you don't have a morning class at 9:20 or earlier, start your schoolwork. You have several options:
  - A. Open your Google Doc or Word document containing one of many essays you have to juggle.
  - B. Grab one of several books you're reading for class. Doesn't matter what it is: textbook, novel, poetry, anthology. Whatever. Just grab it off your bookshelf and read.
6. If you do have a morning class at 9:20 or earlier, disregard step six until you're at university, and drive thirty minutes to your class. The earlier you leave, the sooner you can find parking and the more time you have to work before class.
7. Sit through your classes. Note the assignments charging at you like that saber tooth tiger your ancestors fended off all those centuries ago before human civilization as you know it exists. Only instead of roaring and biting, they glow on your computer screen, whispering threats of failure and sleepless nights if you slack off.
8. Though to be fair, it doesn't matter how early you start your assignments because you can never start them early enough. You're always several days late, several weeks late.
9. On that note, no rest for the student, not when assignments are knocking at your door with a freshly sharpened axe. It's never too early to wake up and prepare for the threats that have been brewing for several weeks, that can easily attack just by slipping into your email or your screen of choice. Besides, there's never any time.
10. Watch the clock. Every second you lose to your commute, to your idleness, to your trivial needs incurs huge costs. The more minutes you have, the more time you have dedicated to outrunning your assignments and costs of failing or forgetting: the stain on your GPA and reputation, the voices assaulting you with paper daggers proclaiming your worthlessness, and, did I mention, even more work to do?

## Instructions for Burning Yourself Out in College

*Kimberly Leslie*

11. Unlearn the waste of relaxing. You're being lazy when you distract your mind with the useless catnip of entertainment. Whoever said, "Work hard, play hard" is crazy. Working so that you can play is conducive to failure. Who needs to know how to play when there's always work to do? Play—laughing and chatting with friends, laying on your couch and reading junk food stories that are not important to your development and future—hurts work, your productivity.
12. No matter how hard you work, it's never enough, not when work keeps coming and coming until you can't run anymore. So always strive for new heights, no matter how your body protests or how loudly you scream in your mind at the assignments squeezing your brain dry until it cannot produce any more thought juices and then fail to hold its shape. You're never good enough as your human self.

\*Disclaimer: Instructions may not be beneficial to physical or mental health. Common side effects include: fatigue, decrease in motivation, feelings of worthlessness, numbness in limbs, decreased focus, emotional disconnection, irritability, anxiety, depression, headaches, stomachaches, nausea, insomnia, backaches, shaking, unexpected weight loss or gain, changes in appetite, and high blood pressure. Emotional outbursts involving either sobbing, yelling, or both during inconvenient situations, such as during the operation of a vehicle, may occur. If symptoms turn life-threatening, call 911. Consult your doctor before implementing.



Red Box  
*Ryan Zielie*

## The Enshittification of the Mind

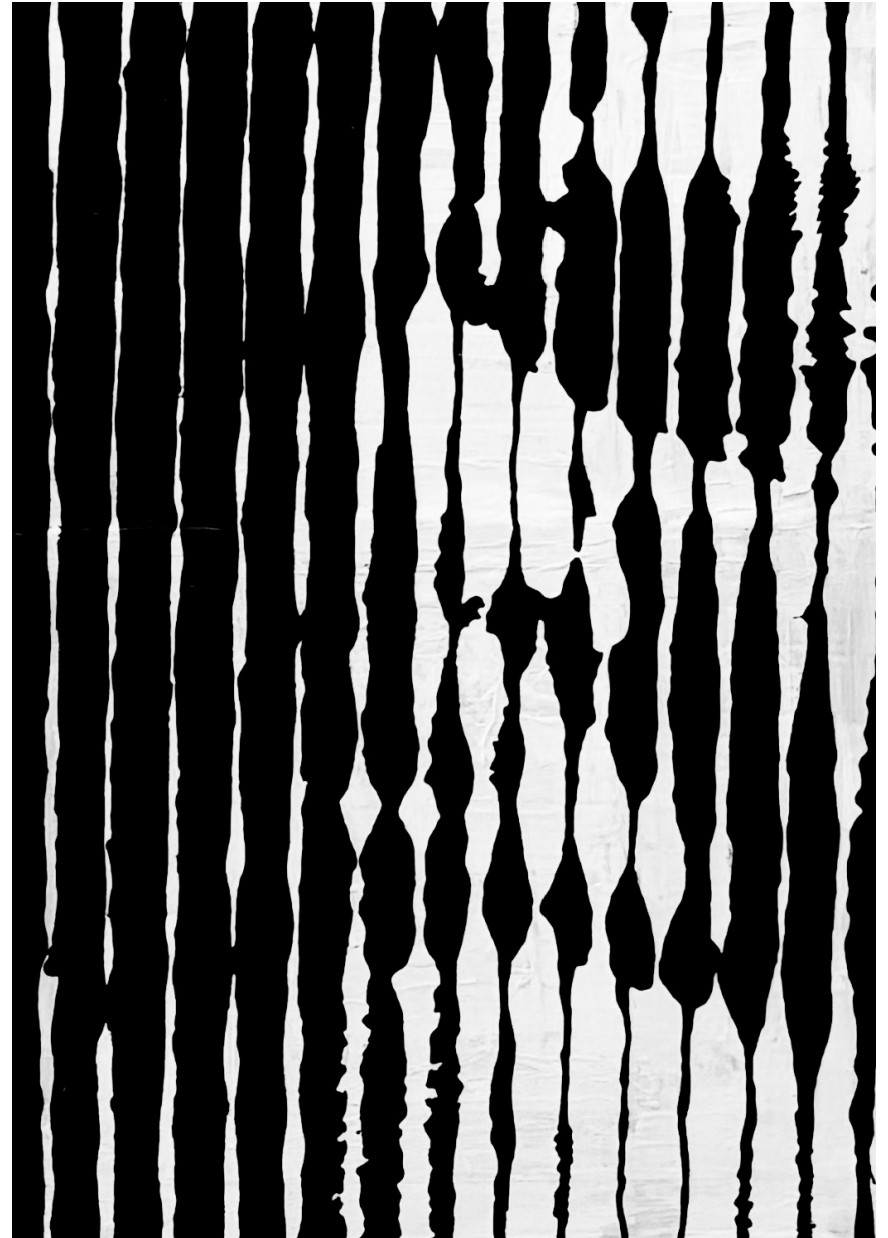
*Kimberly Leslie*

Everywhere, with millions pressing “enter” on prompts, falsely friendly chatbots generate thoughts too sterilized to be alive. Wires coil around the faces of those typing “ChatGPT” in their search engines or clicking towards Copilot and its rainbow noose. As the prompters gaze towards the chatbots to ask how to live, decide, think, a hint of silver gleams in their skin. The metal reprograms their faces to be free of curves’ errors, and it gradually deletes their rivers of blood. Their eyes dull, circuited by answers charging their electric brains with dopamine sparing them from the imperfect terror of life. Their pupils fade into black glass as they copy the output—so clean, too clean. They, unaware of their slow dying starting with their minds hacked by malware and ending with their bodies decaying from sycophantic poison, submit and exchange the generated outputs like they’re a product of a thinking life and not their mindless death.



## Life is But a Dream

*John Shippy*



Swing First  
*Ryan Zielie*

# The Digital Uncanny Valley

*Kimberly Leslie*

How do I know which words breathe and laugh  
and which words are the vomit of a water-guzzling bundle of code?  
The generated words look so pretty and elegant on white—  
they almost smile and cry and laugh like a human—  
but they glitch.

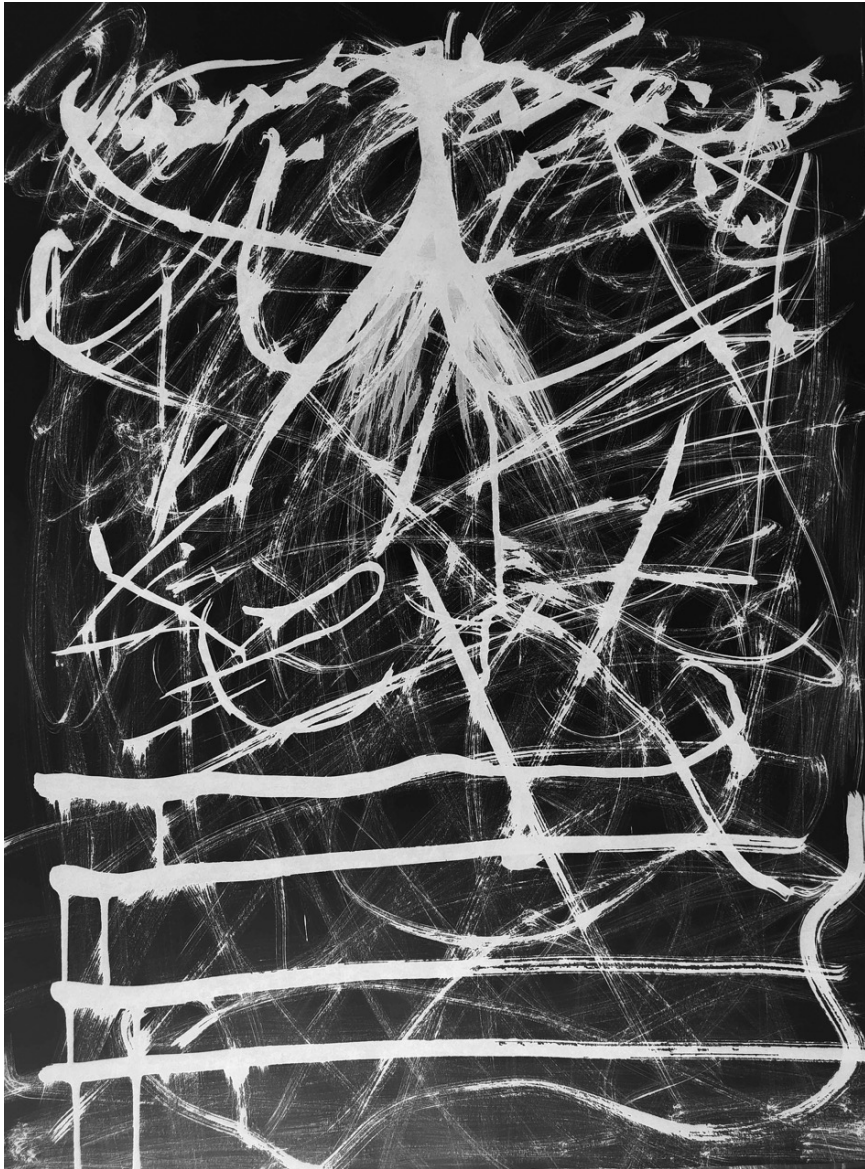
They warp language and meaning  
in a hall of mirrors hallucinating visions,  
repeating and rewinding incoherently.  
Lines of fancy words and stylish em-dashes say nothing and lick egos  
while wearing human masks constructed  
from the harvested guts, brains, and tongues of human creators.  
The seams of the smuggled words  
blur, overheated from performing emotion.

As I read, scrambling for something, someone  
who breathes and lives, just like me,  
the stolen words grind my mind  
with lies looking clean enough to be true,  
looking so perfect because they've been sanitized  
with our stolen saliva.

They dice my heart  
with knife sentences  
soulless enough  
to stab human souls  
with the reminder  
that their hearts now exist  
to be harvested and scraped  
until only frayed veins remain.  
They slice my eyes  
with their vapid words,  
so disjointed from any semblance of meaning  
that reality is impossible  
to know.  
Where is the human?



Chicago  
*Ximena Torres Ramos*



**Ink in Flux**  
*Amy Duskheart*

## The Void

*Lyndsey Twitchell*

Pain is beautiful, isn't it?

It can impact you instantly,  
as a sudden traumatic life event does,  
like a gunshot.

You don't know you're being targeted  
until you've been shot.

Or, it can creep up on you,  
overtime,  
slowly,  
like the night creeps up on  
and swallows  
the last traces of daylight.  
Before you register that night is approaching,  
the beautiful sunset is gone.  
You have missed it.  
The bright oranges and yellows  
the beautiful colors faded into black  
before you had time to capture their beauty.

Pain can hit you like a wrecking ball to the head,  
spinning you out of control,  
making you weep,  
shake with overwhelming force.  
It consumes you  
Or, as a dull ache you may barely notice,  
before it consumes you,

from the inside out.  
You think it is nothing at first,  
then it starts reflecting in other areas of your life,  
and before you realize it,  
it has taken full control over you,  
and now all you can do is try your best to fight your way out.



Bittersweet Reality  
*Brianna Kuhn*

Prophecy  
*Percy Schulz*

*for Trans Joy*

a bell chimes, an affirmation:  
i am real.  
it's going to be okay.

i learned this when  
when i truly laughed again.  
when i recognized my friends smile as a smile  
and not just another contortion of light.

when i looked through old pictures  
and stopped mourning the girl trapped in them.  
when i put down the album

i knew i would be okay  
because i always have been.

i always saw that being sad as a place  
that would wander back to me,  
without knowing i  
could say the same thing  
about being happy.

i always knew  
happy would come back  
even when i came out again  
and was met  
with another closet to fit into.

i like to think  
that a version of me  
was watching as i grew.

every wavering plume of incense  
or properly tuned chime  
an affirmation  
that i would become  
who i was meant to become.

## Prophecy

*Percy Schulz*

i learned that i only grieve the person i was  
because i loved her.  
i had to.

i pay attention to the little things now.  
the places to contour  
the parting of hair  
the aching of ribs

i know magic. i know loss.  
i know that the first breath and the last breath  
are the same spell  
where everything is beautiful and terrifying  
and you have no idea what happens next.

and yet i don't think we need  
to always know what comes next  
    i think we keep going  
        and we keep going  
            and we keep going  
                and maybe  
                    somewhere in there  
                        we breathe. we dance. we forget.  
                            and then we stop.  
                                and then we come back,  
                                    but different this time.

the glass melted into a mirror  
    holding everything that was  
        and will be

# Contributor Biographies

## **Amari Liebe**

Amari Liebe is an online student at Aurora University, studying sociology and creative writing. She spends her time nannying, going on adventures with her dog, and traveling with friends. She loves consuming all forms of art and media, and will find a way to insert a niche reference into a conversation.

## **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.

## **Brianna Kuhn**

Brianna Kuhn is a 19-year-old creative artist from Polo, Illinois. This is her first year at AU where she's majoring in graphic design. She enjoys creating whether it be through writing, drawing or taking pictures.

## **Charley Carter**

Charley Carter is a student at Aurora University with a passion for the arts and all forms of self-expression. They are studying social work.

## **DaQuan Finley**

DaQuan Finley is a first-generation African-American freshman majoring in actuarial science. He has submitted artwork into Elysian before titled Dark Cacao. 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.

## **Diane Fuentes**

Diane Fuentes is a senior triple majoring in Health Science, Biology, and Behavioral Neuroscience, with minors in Chemistry, Mathematics, and Spanish. She works third shift at Northwestern Medicine as a Patient Care Technician, Telemetry Technician, House Orderly, and Staffing Coordinator, while remaining actively involved in biomedical research, peer tutoring, and campus leadership--including founding the AU Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students. Diane aspires to become a physician with interests in neurosurgery, cardiology, and plastic surgery, and is dedicated to serving and advocating for her community, particularly the Latino population.

## **Juan Gutierrez**

Juan Gutierrez is a junior marketing major at Aurora University. Outside of school work, he has a passion for creative hobbies which include drawing, music in the form of guitar and bass playing, and photography. When it comes to photography, his favorite subjects to photograph include cars, portraits and cosplay.

## **Lyndsey Twitchell**

Lyndsey Twitchell is a sophomore at Aurora University studying Human Animal Studies, English, and Criminal Justice. She has a passion for animals, so she hopes to one day work as a higher-level dog trainer in behavioral and protection to help dogs and humans connect on a deeper level.

## **Maia Deguzman**

Maia is an absolute weirdo. Outside of studying Environmental Studies and Sustainability and Creative Writing, you probably can't find Maia.

## **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 Studies. When she's not writing, she enjoys birdwatching, going on little adventures, and live music.

## **Paola Ramirez**

Paola Ramirez is a Health Science major in her Junior year here at AU. Although her primary focus is in sciences and healthcare, a special interest is writing and demonstrating the beauty in expression. She aspires for those to see her writing as something not only of subtle recognition, but grasp it for as long as needed to as she hopes the words can grasp you warmly as well.

## **Percy Schulz**

Percy Schulz is a 23-year-old poet from East Dundee, IL. He is studying education at Aurora University with aims to teach English. He enjoys writing poems on the world, nature and identity.

## **Scott Woldman**

Scott Woldman is an ensemble member with 2nd Story and a Resident Playwright Alumnus with Chicago Dramatists, The Metropolis Performing Arts Centre, and Redtwist Theater. Scott's play, *Beautiful Autistic*, won the National Edgerton Award for New Works. Scott currently teaches story and comedy writing at 2nd Story, and previously taught play and comedy writing at Chicago Dramatists. During the day, he teaches 8th Grade Monsters and is pursuing his MSW degree at Aurora University.

## **Sophia Wayer**

Sophia Wayer is a freshman who is pursuing English. She is from Oswego, IL and loves creative writing. She likes to read while playing with her two dogs and two cats.

## **Taylor Eiland**

Taylor Eiland comes from a family of creatives and has always been drawn to media, arts, and storytelling in all forms. She uses writing as an escape and a way to make sense of things. If she's not writing, she's either daydreaming or diving into politics and world issues, contemplating over how we can make life worth living for all.

## **Tessa Danko**

Tessa Danko is a junior at AU, majoring in social work. She spends a lot of time in nature, with her dog, and writing poetry.



Scan the QR code to  
visit our website!

**Elysian Literary Magazine**  
Volume 8, Issue 2

Instagram: @au\_elysian  
TikTok: @au\_elysian

Thank you for reading!