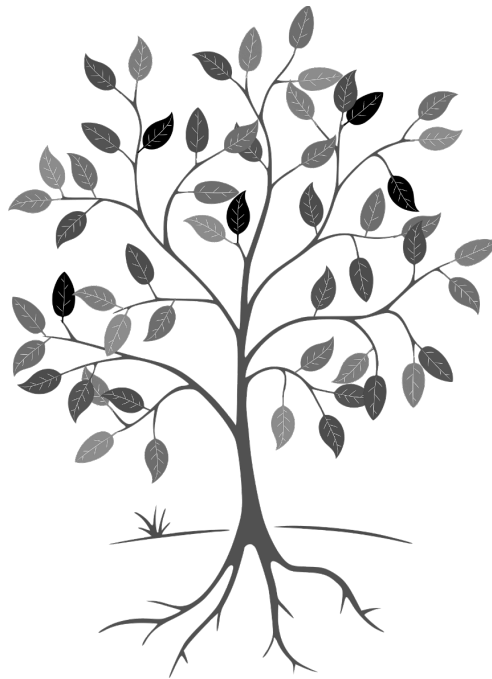


root and branch
volume XIV



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April 2021

The name *root and branch* was chosen as a symbol of students' lives at Ivy Tech: they come with solid roots but grow and branch out – intellectually and creatively – through their college experiences.

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Silence in July – *MacKenzie Melvin*

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Wings

Neil Frederick

Fully spread wings are something to see
The most beautiful thing I saw
Driving north on SR-135 today
Two hawks
Probably red-tailed
One alighting the highest point
As I drove by
One I saw later
Relenting and hungry
Close perhaps to carrion by the road
This other earth
Of other creatures, this sacred show
Our iconic images
Holy things we grasp to know
Geographical ways to theology
Eastern and Western imagery
Birds true to themselves
The graceful movement
And awe of
Wings.

Anniversary – A Love Letter

Heather Perry

In the map of your body I see the boy I met and the journey of the man you've become. How could I not love you? How could I not love every line that may come to your face, every bit of padding that comes to your tummy? How could I not fail to see the strength in your hands and broad shoulders, always?

I'm fascinated, watching you sleep. I'm a little humbled that I get to. That I can be here with you, curl into your body, and watch you breathe. You're so open. You are when you're awake – you take extra care to include me. But it's a different openness when you're asleep. You are so beautiful.

When poets describe women, they always compare us to fruit. We're rounded or firm – we're succulent or sweet or tart. The Poet's desire is slaked like a thirst – a hunger. How then do women write of men?

Shall I cast you as passive? Prone and inviting – the curve of your hip beckoning a kiss?

Shall I cast you as active – even sleeping? The line of your jaw thrusts into the morning air, as you arch in a stretch?

As something to eat? Your muscular butt is rounded and taut under your pajamas, like an apple I want to bite?

Of all the joys I find in your body, which to highlight? Is it strange to talk about chest hair? That I burrow my face in it, like I rub my face on one of our cats, to catch your scent and theirs? Is it strange that both comfort me when I am hurting? If you were a woman, I'd talk about perfume, I suppose. Instead – there's the spicy sweet scent of your skin that I remember under my lips. You don't wear cologne, this is the scent of you, of your sweat and the salt on your skin.

Do poets talk of sweat? Or of watching the play of muscle against bone, of admiring the curve of your skeleton, the neat sweep of the back of your skull?

Should I stay with poetic imagery – your hands, your eyes (closed now, sleeping), your strength? Shall I hint always at what these are capable of, how I react to them, or what qualities they imply about your heart/soul/character?

Or should I highlight the erotic? Your penis but in less clinical terms? We can't talk – none of us poets – about the word "penis." We can only compare it to things or give it pet names. Shall I reveal you, naked, in writing? Or is that too personal?

In the whole of you, this can't be left out and I feel that couching it in coy language cheapens it. Say simply then – I find joy in you and your body and hope to give you joy in return.

Even if I have to stretch first, getting older myself.

And, of course, I worry. Moments outside of this, when I am feeling my own age, my own grey, my own weight. Fears of illness and accident and pain – but how can any of that touch us now, in this moment? What does any of that matter to our hearts?

Sleeping or awake, I see you as I hope you see me. And as we grow older and closer, I can't help but revel in the richness of that becoming, the safety in that vulnerability, and the comfort of being so thoroughly known.

Even if I do fart in my sleep. (Sorry about that, by the way.)



Germany Window Box – Annie Gray

then, now, always

Sofia Machado

tell me the story
of how we met again

how oceans and hours
were meaningless
and friendship blossomed
into affection
an unyielding,
never-ending
downpour
of faith

the moon
is in the backyard –
that means that it's morning,
that means that
it's time for laughter
and conversation,
observation

you pour cinnamon
into your coffee
and I listen to crickets
in the dark,
a summer song that
our hearts can dance to
when the miles
stretch into infinity
and tomorrow seems
a lifetime away

tell me the story
of how I came to love you

as the sun starts to rise
on the horizon
and
your voice
whispers secrets in
the cadence of music

the days are purple and blue
apples
and
leaves

tell me
that it will be like this forever

tell me that we'll never forget

S'mores and Smoke

Lisa Kwong

In the pumpkin patch
air, a fire snaps as
speared marshmallows
glide in and out. Flames
catch these delicious clouds,

smoke-kissing them
until they melt, perfect
between the snug hug
of graham crackers
and milk chocolate.

The man with hazelnut hair
and a sunshine heart
kneels and roasts
the perfect marshmallow.
A toasted blush,

it plummets.

Wearing a boyish frown,
he rubs away phantom tears
with his right knuckle
as the perfect marshmallow sinks
into its dry grass and dirt demise.

Gone quick as a leaf twirl,
its loss lingers like smoke-smell
on our jackets, like daily heartbreaks
we carry on a roasting stick.

My Curly, Brown Home

Taylor Thomas

My hair is curly. I say curly deliberately, with emphasis, because it has been called a variety of other names that do not fit, do not match, do not connect. Frizzy is one of those words, usually coming from white people who would never warmly refer to their own hair as such but think they are bestowing me with a compliment. My hair is curly and I need you to know that. I hate that this is important to me, but my hair has been a significant point of insecurity. When I was in 5th or 6th grade, I got my first relaxer. I wanted every single curl to be stripped from my head and in its place only silky, straight locks – like the other girls, the overwhelmingly white children in all of my classes. For a short, blissful time, my hair was exactly how I dreamed – long and straight. I never stopped touching it, it felt impossible because for once I could put my fingers through it and they would not get stuck. What they don't tell you about relaxers is that they are temporary and require routine appointments to continue having straight hair. They also don't warn you that relaxers are damaging. By the time that I caught on my hair was falling out in my hands. It was brittle, it was weak, it was frizzy. My hair is curly and I need you to know that and remember because when we try to destroy an essential part of ourselves, even something as simple as hair, it leaves a mark.

If you Google “Black hair,” your results will be white women. White women with black hair, straight and silky, almost no curls in sight. It takes a while before you get a Black woman to pop up and even then, they will be scattered throughout the search results like a diversity team at a predominately white college. So, I try again – “Black girl hair” – and there it is: an assortment of Black women with a variety of hairstyles. The first article that pops up is “8 Things You Always Wanted to Know about Black Women's Hair.” It tells me that the Black haircare industry is worth \$774 million. I am not surprised by that number. Simply cutting my hair is close to \$75 while many of my white friends and family members spend \$40 with tip. They won't always tell you, but white hair salons will upcharge you for having “textured” hair. “It is difficult and harder to deal with,” I have been told by white friends who work in the industry. What they won't say is that most of their programs simply did not teach them to work on Black hair. Once, when my sister and I got haircuts at Walmart, the white woman doing my sister's hair said, “Wow! I feel so bad for you! I couldn't imagine

having hair like this.” She repeated this over and over throughout the appointment, reminding my sister and me that we were the “other” and that we, and our hair, were the burdens.

Currently my hair is a couple inches past my shoulders, wet or straightened. When dry, it grows upward and outward, so length is hard to determine. I guess you could call this “medium” length if you are talking to a professional stylist or Googling types of hair lengths. To my little sister my hair is considered long as hell. To me my hair is short. It does not grow any longer than this, no matter what I do. When I look in magazines or social media at other Black women showing off their natural hair, I can only see how my hair is lacking. It doesn’t get big enough. It doesn’t dye to other colors well enough. It doesn’t curl enough. But most of all, my length irritates me. The Black community is often fixated on length, partly because of Eurocentric beauty standards (i.e. white) and partly because of American standards of what a woman’s hair is supposed to look like (i.e. long). I keep thinking if I grow it a couple inches longer I’ll finally be happy. I’ll finally look the way I am supposed to look. I’ll finally be pretty enough, Black enough, right enough.

Women’s hair has always faced high scrutiny. For white women, this battle is about what it means to be a woman. For Black women, this scrutiny has always intertwined race and gender politics. “Conform or die,” they whisper, urging us to strip our hair of its natural tendencies and shape it into something that will make them happy – and make us happy too if we buy into their systems and societies. We do, of course, buy into it because how else could we survive? We are fined and fired from jobs that tell us that we don’t understand “professionalism.” But white coworkers who do not apply combs to their hair and don’t know that dreads have to be washed and cleaned are safe in their lives, in their jobs, and in their ignorance. Even the word “relaxer” has connotations that make me wonder why I allowed it to happen. To relax, as if the coils that make up my curls are stubborn fighters, too. They don’t want fighters. They want me, and my hair, to be silent. In college, I straightened my hair in basement bathrooms meant for staff. My roommates didn’t like the smell of my hair when straightening and didn’t like how long it took. I was an inconvenience, so I moved out of sight. I wish I had remained seen.

Going “natural” was not a decision I chose for myself. As a high school freshman, I had gone to my usual stylist, a white man who was comfortable with textured hair, to get a short bob haircut. The day I went, my stylist was

out of town. I decided to let one of the other white stylists do my hair, despite my worries and concern with letting someone new touch my hair. I should've trusted my instincts because she cut my hair horribly. When I eventually straightened my hair, it was lopsided and uneven. I cried in the mirror while my sister's white friend, with perfect blond locks, laughed at me. My mother, fiery, fierce, and impossible to calm down, took me back and demanded I get a free cut to fix the damage. My stylist was back at this point and looked sadly down at my hair. He told me he would do his best but that I would have to go far shorter than I had planned. By the time he was done, my hair was above my ears. I was disgusted and ashamed. "At least all of the dead ends and damage is gone. You can start fresh," he told me softly. He was trying his best to comfort me, and I will always appreciate that, but at such a young age, I could only cry. He was right though – cutting off all of that damage changed me in so many ways.

My hair is a deep brown color, almost black to the untrained eye, with rare wisps of burgundy red when the sunlight shines on it. The red comes from my Irish roots, as many of my family members on my mother's side were redheads. But mostly my hair is just brown, which used to upset me. Brown everything – eyes, skin, hair. Brown was the bane of my existence. I wanted to wipe myself clean of it – like dirt – because the world around me was blindingly white. When I was able to, I dyed my hair in the hopes that the brown would never grow back. But like everything in life that is meant for us, it came back. Since then I've tried to embrace it by picking highlights that accentuate it instead of hiding it. Lots of reds and blonds have touched my strands, but brown is its home.



Years Gone By – Jeff Grounds

The Tea Probably Isn't Poisoned

Heather Perry

It wasn't so much that Baba Yaga liked the skulls,
It was the light they gave – the burning of naïve girls come begging
Scraps of knowledge, thimbles of advice, teacups of action.

*Grandmother. How can I make him love me?
Why would you want him to, Granddaughter?*

She always asked, even though she knew they could never tell her.

So – yet another heart broken, yet another skull on the pike fence when
they failed.
Oh, not so much that she killed them, no – she was a Crone with a heart of
gold, after all.
Long and deeply buried but it shone no less true for that. Gold never
tarnishes, after all.
But not many were able to reach it, so these girls, these rejected,
wounded, wizened youths came back to her.
And their light – the light of lost dreams, of frustrated desires, of foolish
wishes burned sulfur in the skulls.

As to the wisdom they gained thereby
– she couldn't say.
She hoped it served them better but didn't have much faith in mankind.

She kept hoping the light would discourage them.
But they still came, begging.

*Grandmother, I want him to notice me.
Grandmother, how can I be pretty?
Grandmother, he loves her – he must love me – tell me how.*

And on, and on.
She – who with her mortar and pestle ground time and death, with her nose
could sniff out truth
She – the dark and stormy Crone
Reduced to this.

Grandmother make me pretty....

She herded the Chicken Legged Hut deeper into the wood.

They still found her.

She hung the skulls – don't ask where they come from – and filled them with the fire.

They still found her.

She gnashed her iron teeth, stomped her bony feet, glared hard enough to split rock.

They still found her.

In the end, she grew tired of the relentlessness. It was easier to dispense tea as poison, after all. They brewed the same way.

So – a tired old woman with grey teeth, a dab hand at herbs, and a penchant for chickens opened her house at the end of the lane.

Her picket fence was yellowish white, like bones left to bleach in the sun, and the fireflies were always in her garden.

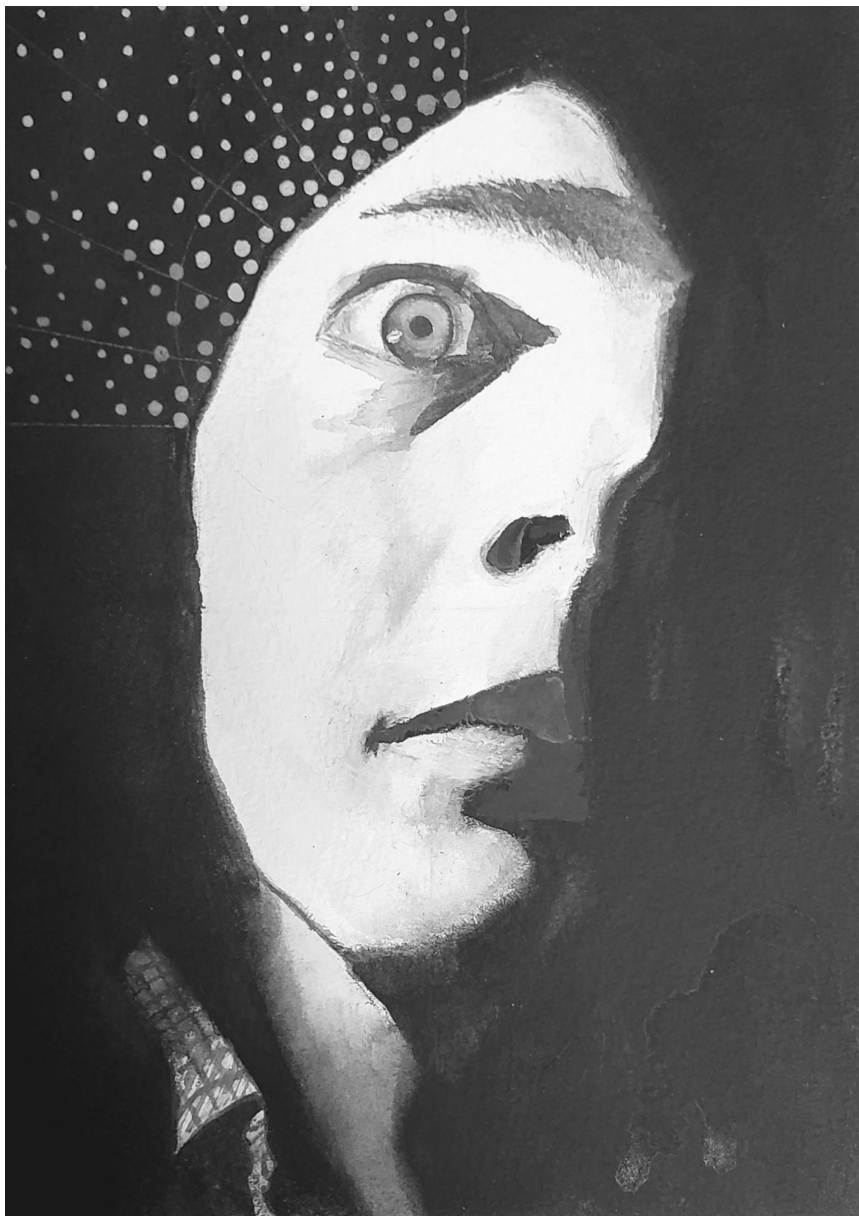
And they came to her – girls, boys, men, women.

Grandmother – Grandmother, how can I make him see me?

Grandmother, does she know I'm alive?

Grandmother...

She gives them all tea, now. She listens. She waits – as patient as death – for the end of the stories and then she sends them on their way with advice she knows they never understand.

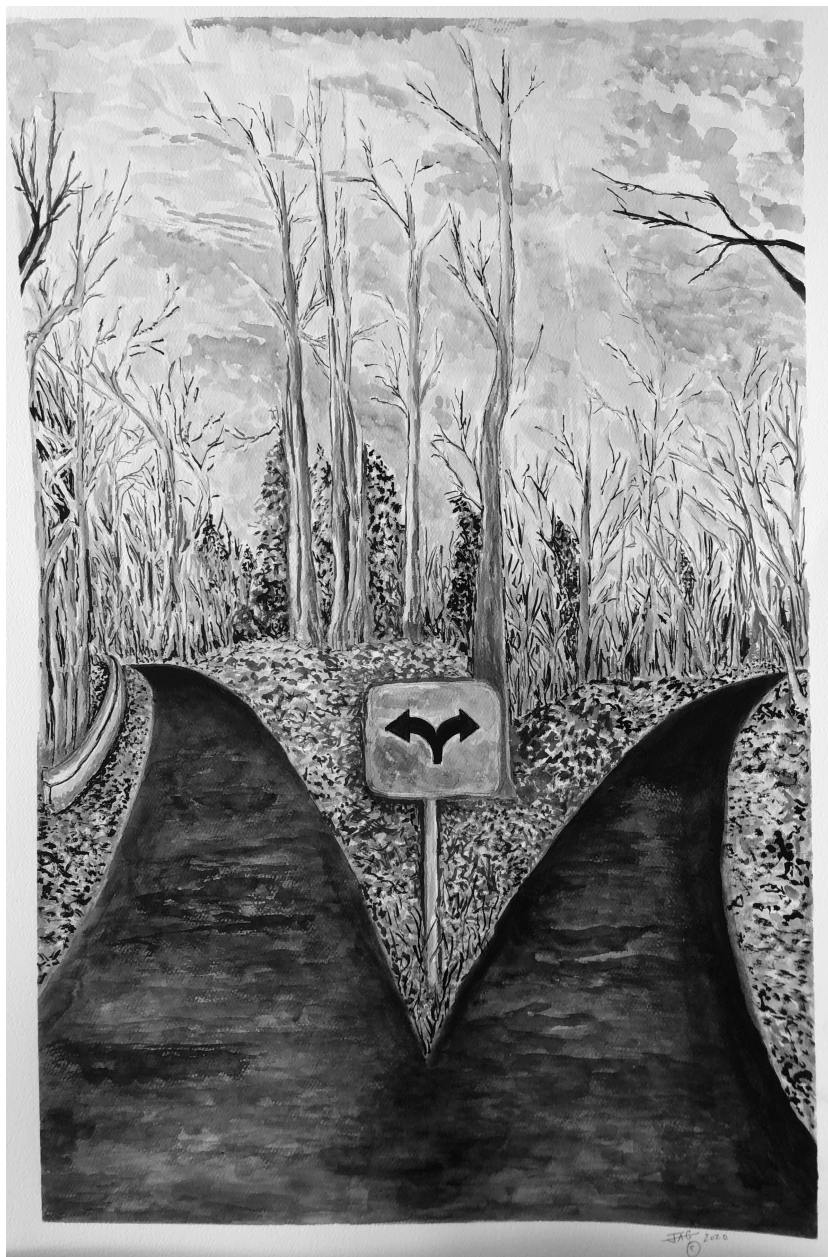


Gayze – Fitz Simmons

No Whispers

Skyla Abrams

Do not mistake my silence for something that is weak
Silence is my understanding of the situation before me
The understanding that you do not understand me
Do not think my silence is obedience
My silence is my last contribution
You won't know I'm gone
Until it's too late
Without a noise
You'll know
silence



There Are Two Roads – *Jeff Grounds*

Red

Josephine Espinosa Reynolds

Once I danced, and
that dance was dark.
Once I loved, but
that love was flawed.

Now shame retires, like
pitch, slow in time, and
Death's poison lies (still)

inside.

Once it leaves, leaves
that I may be free, and
Once I wait, wait
that weight of seven:

I may shed your mark of red –
I may of myself be forgiven.



Nymph of the Woods – *Myca Naylor*

A Message from the Ghost in the Armoire

Shiloh Lane

So I died last week and now I'm haunting my own home.

There's not much else important to say besides that, but I'm sure you'll want to know the whole story. It's my own fault, really, but it's still sad, I suppose. They didn't find my body until a couple days ago. You know, that's something you rarely consider. If you died right now, how long would it be before someone found your rotting corpse? For me it was about five days. I didn't come to pick my dog up from that boarding place and after the second day, they started calling around. Eventually someone contacted the police, and that's when they came into my apartment and found me, dead on the floor, pool of blood and all. It had been a pretty hot five days, too. I wasn't looking too sharp, unfortunately.

It was traumatic at first, dying, and realizing I was dying, and all that stuff. But after a couple days being stuck in your house with no corporeal presence and nothing to do but stare at your own decaying body, I got pretty bored. People think ghosts are stuck in the places they died because they're reliving their death or something, but that's not true. We just can't open doors. Because we don't have hands. Because we don't have *anything*, not anymore. Once the cops came, I lit out of there pretty fast. I figured I'd go find the big Earth afterparty or whatever I'm supposed to be doing for the rest of eternity. I was a pretty good person. Not a *really* good person, or else it wouldn't have taken five days for someone to find my corpse, but a *pretty* good person for sure. So I figured I'd have earned my way to Heaven or whatever nice place there is for the pretty good people to spend forever in after they die. It's been two days now, and if there's an afterlife, I haven't found it. Maybe the afterlife is just this – life, but worse. I tried making some ghost friends, but they're not that talkative. Maybe I smell like new money. So anyway, I died last week and now I'm haunting my own home.

It's funny, I feel like I've said that before. *Before* before, I mean. When I was alive. "I'm haunting my own home." Is it possible to haunt someplace if you're still alive? Is it possible to be alive if you're a speck of rot?

I never felt real when I was alive. I mean, as a kid, maybe. As a kid, I was happy and I ran everywhere. How nice it was to run as a kid, how nice to

run until I was tired. There's no sleep better than summer sleep, with the legs burning from the day and the taste of wind and laughter still on your teeth. When I got older I slept because I didn't know what else to do.

I didn't do it to myself, though. The dying. I wouldn't. But, god, was it stupid. It was a total accident. I would probably laugh about it if it hadn't killed me. Maybe I'll laugh about it anyway. Ha.

I'm not sure where to go from here. There's no one to tell me what to do or anything. Maybe this is why ghosts moan and cry and rattle their chains. I'd scare some humans too if they were here. God, wouldn't that be fun.

"According to these newspaper clippings, someone was murdered here named..." and they'd say whatever creepy vintage name I'd scrawled on the mirror. And then they'd look at each other knowingly and the music would swell and then stop and I'd make the floorboards creak and they'd whip around real fast and shout "Who's there?" but like who's gonna respond to that? I don't have vocal cords. Remember, I don't have *anything*. I can't even creak floorboards or write creepy names in the mirror because I don't even have a body. This is going to be so boring. If I'd known how much of a drag death was gonna be, I'd never have let myself slip away. I don't know what other ghostly activities I could do, realistically. Maybe it's like that one movie with Patrick Swayze and I can be taught how to do stuff or something. Maybe I'll meet Whoopi Goldberg. That'd be nice.

But I've been trying, you know, to fill the time. I've been *wanting*, so hard, and I *want* at my hands and at my legs and at the furniture, and yet I just can't move anything. I'm stuck.

And so I sit here, with the blood stain where my head used to be, and I try to think really hard about something happening. I don't know what I want. To dissolve? To come back to life? I just need some sort of motion. I hate this in-between, this seeing and hearing and tasting and knowing but not living. I scream at my body. I beg it.

But there is nothing.

So I died last week. And now I'm haunting my own home.



Icon – Fitz Simmons

Delirium of an Infidel

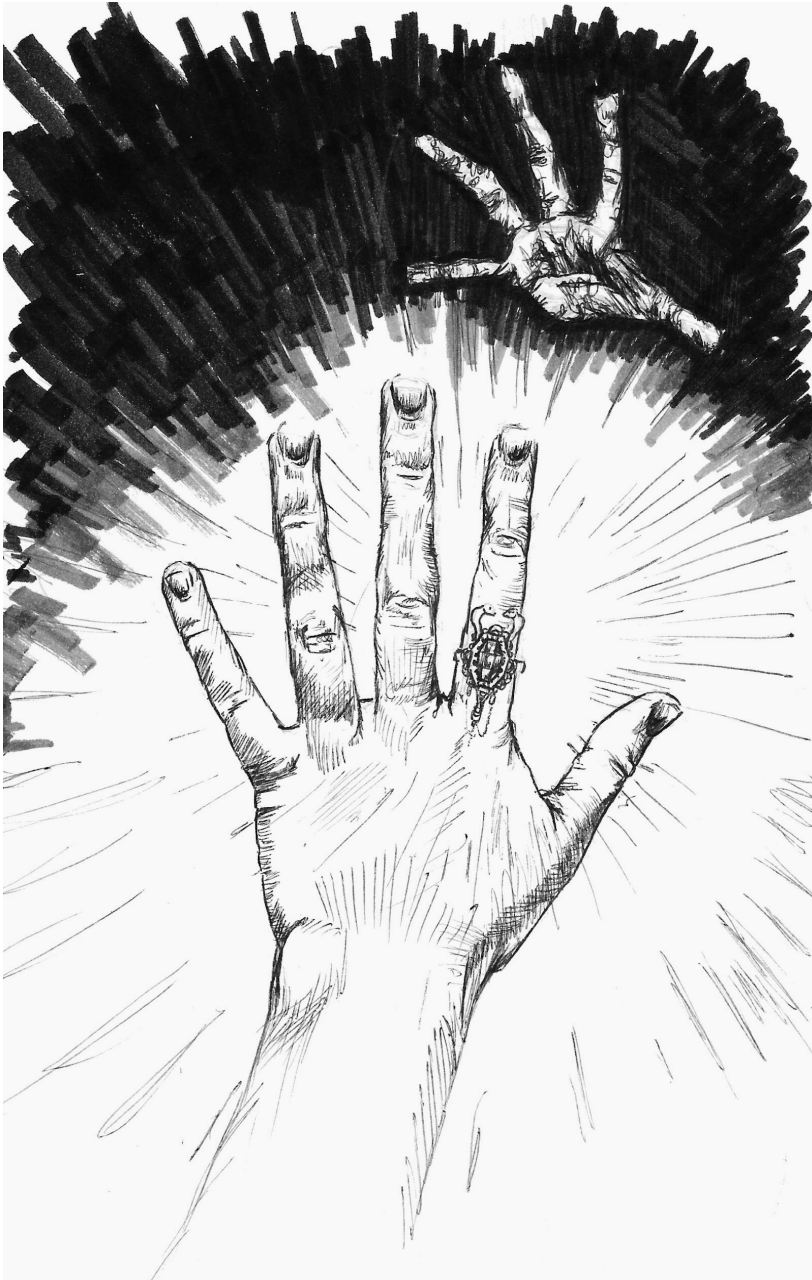
Emma Richey

A pendulum tolling death's final note
Sheets of water enfold a hewn oaken tomb
Seeping through the cracks of
A veneer, a mask
Slipping into the deep
The reek of death and decay permeates the air
Choking, suffocating
Quivering words scrawled
I's undotted, T's uncrossed
A ship in a bottle bobs, sifting among relics of stolen lives
Its crossed flag hanging limply from the mast
A tarnished locket, a dismembered compass, a string of pearls
A figure carved on a cross displaying peaceful resignation
Crosses, religions, idols
Idle men have no cares 'til death

Bishops, popes, cardinals
Parades of pearls, flashes of pearly whites
Ruby, crimson, vermilion
Robes like blood
Kneeling and standing
Up and down
Bobbing in waves of scarlet
Chants, chorales, monastic vows
Torrents of words, cascading
One
After
Another
Reverent tones,
Placating, soothing
Unison so sweet, so whole
Father, brother, son
Mother, sister, daughter
A family
Crowns of downy fluff
Venerated heads, creased brows, folded hands

Spread palms uplifted in peace
Steepled fingers
Modest, meek humble servants
Creases in aged skin, pressed and folded, crinkled in corners
Unspotted, unblemished lambs
Standing in a heart,
Pure, cleansed
Sanded pews, Solomon's cedars
Faded carpets worn with age
Reliefs, mosaics, stained glass windows
Glimpses into the pulsing heart

Lucifer's unfurled wings
Fall
Falling
A splash in the inkpot
Cesspools of ebony churning
Foaming and gnashing
Fangs, incisors
Devourer, destroyer
Feast, flame, fire
Amid the tempest,
Quivering scrawls forgotten
The men squeal and shriek
Banshees' sage predictions made manifest
Hell will be full tonight
Cavernous pits of souls
Tortuous passages impossible to navigate
The compass spins, taunting
Deceivers and devils
Lost and drowning in the deep
The deep teems and swarms
Sharks rolling eyes
Silently gliding in murky depths below
Visions chatter and grin
The devils are knocking
Grimace, moans, wails
Terror taking hold
Pearls sinking into the deep
The abyss yawns
Sheets of water enfold a hewn oaken tomb



The Ring – *Myca Naylor*

Just Only Jane – Really

Heather Perry

Tuesday evening, and nearly time to close up and go home. Jane wanted to finish the file she was working on, but it was too much to do in too little time. Past seven, the office was dark and just a little creepy. No matter that she was the only one there, she swore she could always hear typing.

The file was being particularly difficult; she had to copy edit a grant proposal for her boss, and he abused commas like a maniac. She had a headache, and the hand was acting up again. The Hand. The Left, and not hers.

This time it was a paper clip. It had been bent into a strange angular shape, triangular, and she didn't understand how there had been enough wire for all the turnings. She looked at her hand closely, the Left, and it looked fine. Normal, just a left hand, same rings, same small scar between the webbing of her thumb and index, plain. Except it wasn't hers. Oh, it did a fine job of pretending to be hers, most of the time. However, when she wasn't paying attention, when she was focused on something else, or looking the other way, it would not be hers anymore.

She didn't quite know when it had started. There didn't seem to be any definite moment when she looked down and thought “that is not my hand,” nothing dramatic. Just over time, over the last few years, she had begun to notice it doing . . . things. Candies in her pocket, small pebbles. Acorns. Paper clips, bent out of functional shape. String. Bits of glass, of mirror. At first she just thought she'd absentmindedly put peppermints in a pocket for later. She'd been fond of picking up acorns and bits as a girl, but it was a little too often to be really dismissed as random.

So she'd clean out her pockets. She'd put the acorns in the trash. She'd put the mints back in her purse, the other bits and pieces she would clear out as she found them. The next morning they'd be back and she never knew how, or why. After a year or so, she left it alone. If she paid attention, and she did not, she found that the things would find their own way gone in a few days. Actually, if she paid attention, which she did not, she would find that the rotation from her left-hand pockets was really quite astonishingly brisk.

Jane wanted her life to be simple. She disliked noise. She disliked fuss. She disliked drama. She wanted her life ordered, and quiet and predictable. She dressed plainly, she had a plain job, she came to work and went home. She had few friends – mostly just nodding acquaintances; people overlooked her. She grew plants. If she thought about it, and she did not, she might have been lonely. Or sad that no one really cared to breach the walls she'd put up years ago. But on the whole, she was content. Her life, grey as it was, was precisely what she wanted. Quiet, predictable, calm, drama free.

Except for the hand. The Left, that wasn't hers.

It was coming on eight, and Jane was more tired than she thought. She saved her work, started closing down the computer and ordering her desk to go home for the night. She didn't think about how the paper clip got swept into a pocket as she straightened up pens and note paper. The computer finished shutting down, so she gathered her bag, purse, and coat and started off for home.

Home was a small apartment filled with plants. Jane had always loved cats, but the lease would not allow one, and she didn't think she could afford one anyway. But the plants livened up the place nicely. She'd been there about three years now and had settled in to the point where she'd forgotten where she'd unpacked a few things. Dinner was simple – soup and a sandwich. Then reading until bed. Jane kept a simple schedule, early nights, early mornings, peace and quiet. The Hand waited.

At 34, Jane had a nice life. She worked for a nice business, she had a nice apartment, a nice enough car that was running, a nice manageable debt. Nice people didn't have problems. Nice people didn't have weird things happen to them. Nice people, she knew, didn't have limbs that didn't belong to them attached to their bodies. So she didn't think about it. If she didn't think about it enough, it would probably go away, just like everything else unpleasant. The question of what she should do with her life, the disappointment from her parents that she had “turned out” the way she had, the well-intentioned young man who insisted on a date or three – all of these things had simply gone away after a time of not thinking about them. So much so that she didn't notice.

The paper clip was gone from the coat pocket before the end of the week.

In its place, there was a small ball of string and a butterscotch candy. That

was gone by Monday next, to be replaced with a shiny bit of stone – a favorite. Somewhere or other she (or it) had picked up a “worry stone” – one of those smooth bits of rock you were supposed to rub when you were feeling tense. She (or it) would fiddle with it, turning it over and over and feeling the slick surface of the rock. If she'd noticed, which she did not, she would have probably also appreciated the purple-blue color of the stone. It was fluorite. Fiddling with the stone would have interfered with typing, though, so for the most part, when at work, the Hand was just as good as her real one had been.

Proofing sometimes took longer than the copy edits, and it was during bouts of reading that she'd find the Hand fiddling with something on its own. If she had any friends to stop by to chat, and she did not, they wouldn't have noticed much out of the ordinary. Just Jane, just only Jane, fiddling with a shiny stone while she read. Charlie Four-Cubes-Over had play dough at his desk, Alice Three-Down-to-the-Right had bubbles she would blow when she got too frustrated, and at least half the office pod down the hall colored. They were currently working on a He-Man coloring book and only just missing an HR citation for Skeletor's off-color remarks, penciled in between meetings. It was a stressful job, and each of them had ways of dealing with that stress.

Fall was coming on colder and darker when the Hand started being harder to ignore. Most of the time Jane drove to work, but there had been a few mornings lately that seemed too beautiful to miss by driving, and so she'd walked. She lived fairly nearby – a pleasant walk though nice residential streets. Except there had been someone lurking in a doorway, just in the shadow of the building. She had barely noticed him – slouch hat, slouch coat, slouch posture – but the hand had . . . gestured. And the man had straightened, peered at her closely, and then left. Perhaps. She didn't like to think of it. Most likely, the Hand had fumbled that damnable stone and scurried to catch it. Probably.

By the week's end she was working on another document and missing three more paper clips. Her philodendron needed pruning. A small ball of string – when had she bought red string? – found its way in the coat pocket and out again. She decided to repot the ivy. Try as she might, it was harder and harder to distract herself from the Hand. It seemed less and less inclined to pretend to be hers and continued doing Not-Her-Hand things.

If she'd had friends, which she did not, she might have asked someone. But

even she knew that it was a chancy thing at best to talk to anyone about This Sort of Thing, whatever this sort of thing was. Likewise, she knew that talking to a doctor could have unintended consequences, like drama. And being committed. She subscribed to no religion, went to no church, and rarely called her parents. This wasn't something that she thought she could spring on her mother, in any case. Her mother had two perfectly normal children – children who were not disappointments, children who still went to church and called every week. Her father had a paper to read, most of the time. Or coffee to drink. Or work to go to. She just couldn't imagine sitting down to talk to either of them about the Hand.

So, she did the only thing she could do – she researched. On weekends, at the library, or after hours at work – mostly online. The first thing she found was the Phantom Limb Phenomenon – people sometimes woke up believing that their limbs were not their own, or they were extra, or a combination of the two. Sometimes, the Wikipedia article said, these people actually went to the lengths of having the limbs removed, to feel normal. She didn't think that was the way to go – full of drama, expensive, and rather horrifying, if she were honest. Also, the article said nothing about the limbs doing things. She kept looking.

It was slow searching, but she learned quite a bit about chakras, auras, angel orb guides and past life deals. Also, herbs and stones – but nothing that might relate to the Hand. Nothing about string, shiny stones, or bent paper clips. She decided she would try taking a picture of the next paper clip shape the Hand made and do an image search on it. There was a program called Tin Eye that would search images to see if they had been posted on the internet somewhere before. Mostly it was useful for determining copyright infringement, but maybe she could find something out that way. If she cared to notice, which she did not, one squiggle pattern seemed to be reoccurring. She'd start watching for that one and then do the search.

She shortly found her chance.

It was November, and she was rather mindlessly working on another proposal, when a loud bit of giggling from two-down-three-over caught her attention. Cindy had gone to Florida for a week and was regaling Laurie with tales of bar-hopping, beach-sitting and tan lines. Sometimes, Jane reflected, it was to her advantage that she was largely overlooked. It wasn't as though she disapproved of tan lines or drinking, it was mostly that she didn't care to hear the insipid recounting of the same. Jane shook her head

and reached for her water. The Hand obliged, first putting down the paper clip. Jane stared at it as the Hand carried the water bottle to her lips. She drank. The Hand put the bottle down and picked up the bit of wire, deftly finishing the few turns left. She was grateful it never seemed to know what she was thinking.

As it moved to put the finished wire squiggle into her pocket, she reached across her body with the hand that was still hers and took it. The Hand made a furtive movement but allowed her. She examined it and then placed it to her far-right side, out of reach of the Left. Then she fished out her phone, found the camera function, took a few shots. When she finished, she picked up the wire squiggle and passed it back directly to the Left Hand. Like it was normal. Like she was anyone else just passing something from hand to hand, in the midst of putting something away, or tidying up.

She imagined the Left was puzzled by this, but it took the squiggle, swiftly turned it over in its fingers, and then made it disappear into a pocket. Jane snorted softly; she didn't imagine what the Hand would do if she didn't have a habit of wearing things with pockets. Good old cardi, the best friend of Monstrous Limbs everywhere. Suppressing a giggle, Jane decided that some coffee was in order. She felt a little too giddy at her successful picture foray and some grounding was needed. She passed Cindy in the hall and smiled at her warmly. If not for insipid Florida tales, she would have missed the opportunity.



The Lure of Flight – *MacKenzie Melvin*

I Am Looking

Shiloh Lane

My name is Cricket and I live in the forest.

I live in the forest because I was born there. I don't really know why I was born there because I can't remember it. But I'm pretty sure I was.

My name is Cricket and I live in the forest and I have so much fun. I swing on trees and collect acorns and berries and things. I'm alone most of the day but I think it's fine because I have so much fun. Sometimes at night I see something. But mostly I'm alone.

My name is Cricket because I decided to name myself that. I don't remember exactly when I named myself Cricket but I know that I did because it's my name and I'm alone most of the time so I don't think anyone else named me. I'm alone most of the time except at night sometimes when I see something but I don't think it named me.

I like to make up friends for myself and then I name them so that they know what their names are. My best friend is Stone and my least favorite friend is Stick. Stick is okay but he can't keep secrets. I think he's the one who tells that something where I am. I used to move around a lot so it wouldn't be able to find me but I got tired of that because Stick always tells it anyway so now I just live in a little tree stump. It's very nice and I spent a lot of time making it soft and pretty so I like living there. I wish that I didn't see the something but I guess it's okay because my home is soft and pretty and I have so much fun.

The something doesn't even really do anything but I don't like looking at it because it's scary and I don't like that it watches me. I don't know why it's there or why it watches me sometimes at night. But it doesn't really do anything so I guess it's okay.

Last night it came up really close and I was kind of scared because it's scary. It's like when it's getting dark and you can see yourself in the lake a little but then you touch the water and it gets all messed up and it looks kind of like that. Its mouth is twisted around on its face and its eyes are too too too bright and its body is all wrong and I just don't like it at all.

But mostly I'm alone.

Except that it's been coming more often and last night it came up real close and said something to me in a bad voice. Its voice is like the trees creaking in a storm or like the distant thud of something breaking or falling and you don't know what it is so you try not to think about it because you're supposed to be alone. That's what it sounds like.

And anyway it said something to me that I thought was kind of strange and so I haven't been home yet but it's getting dark. I think it will come out soon but I hope it'll show up at my tree stump so that I'll be okay out here. I'm waiting on a rock to see if it comes.

Oh no.

I can see it now behind a tree looking at me in the eyes. It isn't moving yet but I know that it will. I know that if I try to run it will get me. I wish I hadn't heard what it said. I wish I was still alone. But it is looking at me.

It is looking.



The Boy with the Owls – *Myca Naylor*

Prince Charming

Shiloh Lane

I am not a prince. If you kiss me, I will continue to be exactly what I am, which is not a prince. Although I have not been alive for very long, I know this to be true. Some other things I know to be true are as follows:

1. I was born in a small creek which wound serenely through a patch of untamed woods until lazily spilling out into a river some five miles or so away.
2. I have no idea what “miles” are or how far they are.
3. I’m very good at making myself sound knowledgeable.
4. I’m also very good at making lists.
5. I’m most definitely no longer in this small creek winding serenely through a patch of untamed woods.
6. I am, however, in water. There is a stone near me, and plenty of grass and flowers strewn about. It’s actually quite cozy.
7. I must escape.

I was collected by someone called “Maggie” who now insists on calling me “Prince Charming” and is constantly trying to kiss me. My name is not Prince Charming. My name is Frog. I gave it to myself, thank you very much. It captures all of the most important parts about me: my froginess, my frogativity, my frogination, and, of course, my frogutory frogutativeness. “Prince Charming” says absolutely nothing about me.

I’ve managed to avoid any smooches so far, but I don’t know how long I can keep this up. She often comes close to my glass cell and just looks at me, sometimes for minutes at a time. I’m not sure why she does this. It is, to be honest, rather flattering. I am quite exquisitely frog, after all. I am the most frog out of anyone I know. But she clearly does not understand this, as she is still going on and on about turning me into a prince, and it is very insulting. If I could speak, I would tell her this.

Shh . . . she is coming.

She flings open the door and marches right over to my jar-jail. “Hello, little Prince!” which is still not what I am. “How are you today?” Obviously I can’t respond, but, if I could, I would tell her that I am rather peeved.

“Jenna B. was mean to me again today, and I don’t know why. She pushed me on the playground and ran away. I didn’t tell the teacher though ‘cause I didn’t want her to get in trouble ‘cause she was my friend before.” I haven’t heard of this Jenna B. I suppose it won’t hurt to listen for a bit.

“It’s sad because she’s friends with Jenna S. now even though she’s mean. I don’t know why she’s friends with her and not me but when I came back to school this year they were sitting together at lunch and so I asked her to come sit with me and she said she was sitting with Jenna S. and I said that Jenna S. was mean and then Jenna S. started crying and Jenna B. got mad at me and I got in trouble with the teacher for making Jenna S. cry.”

I can’t speak, of course, but, if I could, I might say something like this: *Jenna B. doesn’t sound like a good friend. I’m very sorry about all of that trouble, it can be so hard to navigate friendships sometimes.*

“I still have Morgan and Maggie M. and Lydia and Lucas P. but Jenna B. used to be my best friend and she lives right down the street so we used to play all the time but now she’s mean so I have no one to play with unless my other friends’ parents will drive them to my house. I really want her to be friends with me again but she won’t even talk to me so I don’t think we’ll make friends with each other again.” Her lower lip starts to tremble.

Maggie, sometimes people just need space and time to figure themselves out. Maybe Jenna B. isn’t sure who she is or what she wants, and this is why she decided to try out being friends with Jenna S. Maybe by refusing to support this exploration, you inadvertently pushed her away. Have you tried apologizing to Jenna S. and being friends with the both of them?

“You’re right, Mr. Prince.” This startles me a bit. Did she really hear me? “I’m so lucky to have a frog friend like you.” She smooshes her face against the glass and grins at me.

I take a pause. Then, *I wish you the best, dear Maggie.*

She smiles at me as one fat tear loosens itself from her eyelid and rolls down her cheek. “I love you, Prince Charming.”

I am not a prince, of course. But perhaps I am one to Maggie. Perhaps that is okay.

The next day, Maggie and her momma take me out to the small stream which winds serenely through the untamed patch of woods and they gently set me down amongst the grass near the bank. “Goodbye, Prince Charming!” calls Maggie as she waves at me through the window of their car.

Goodbye, Maggie. It was a pleasure knowing you.

THE YEAR ALONE TOGETHER

Nothing brings people together like shared struggle, and this last year has been a struggle for us all. Even when we could not physically be together, we were all trying to survive in the same scary world. Expressing this – to show we know what others are going through and to connect us through the written word – has never been more important, so we felt this year’s *root and branch* would be incomplete without some acknowledgement of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The librarians at our Joan Olcott Library also recognized the importance of creativity as a way to unite people during rough times. Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, they ran a contest asking students, faculty, and staff to write “Covid-19-iku,” nineteen-syllable poems about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the pandemic. The Library featured the poems on their website, and we wanted to include some in this volume as well.

Here we offer you a few small snapshots from our community. Some you might recognize, and we hope they all will make you feel a little less alone.

Thank you to all who participated and to everyone at the Library who worked on this project.

Confusing, wondering
Why I almost feel relieved
Staying stuck in my home
Kelly Hammond

Watch a leaf swirl by –
Enjoy a warm bowl of soup,
Masked and distanced.
Chapla Verma

I have not hugged my mom
Over seven months have passed
I blow a kiss through space
Sheila McDermott-Sipe

Who's essential now? Kids.
Working at the grocery store.
Low pay, no benefits.
Carol Parkinson

Resuming normalcy
Alas, that was a false start
Rezooming normalcy
Kurt Messick

We are unsure of “next”
will the loneliness linger –
perhaps we will soon see.

Lily Schumm

dull leaves float to the ground
caskets buried in the ground
the alive, now silent

Sarah Ranger

And, the Grim Reaper rhymes,
“Mind the gap and wear a mask.
I weary of my task.”

Brett Pfingston

A change in our lifestyle
A chance to show empathy
How many can do it?

Shalee Rybolt

The introverts are fine
Check on your extrovert friends
We will celebrate again

Leah Rayl

About your Total Gym –
I listed it on eBay,
I hope that you don't mind.
Laura Buttery

Wear a mask or you might
catch a case of virulent
right-wing extremism.
Brett Pfingston

They said, "Flatten the curve."
Did we? Yes! But only if
You turn the chart sideways.
Carol Parkinson

When life feeds you the truth
It is a bitter, foul brew
I take mine with honey
Brian R. Kleinschmidt

In sickness and in health
I would prefer the latter
Come back, ordinary
Kayla Law

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

As a person who struggled in an abusive home through childhood, **Skyla Abrams** wrote her poem as a response to those who hurt her and for those who have been hurt by abuse.

Laura Buttery is a student at Ivy Tech Bloomington and will be transferring to Indiana University to study graphic design. In her free time, she avoids social interaction by sculpting miniatures, painting, and watching anime. She is currently working on a comic book about an avocado. See her art @freshhandpicked on Instagram.

Neil Frederick started at what was then Indiana Vocational Technical College, Bloomington in January of 1988. It has been a wonderful ride to still be at Ivy Tech after thirty-plus years and always having an opportunity to learn from and to assist our students. He wrote for his high school paper more than a day or two ago, and he has always loved writing and feels honored to have his piece included in *Root and Branch*.

Jeff Grounds is a student at IU in Bloomington, currently working on a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. He works in many different mediums when it comes to art. He also writes songs and is a recording artist. He loves to travel and enjoys the outdoors. He always tries to have a positive outlook on life.

Annie Gray is an English faculty member at Ivy Tech Bloomington, an avid hiker, and an amateur (very amateur) photographer. She lives on the edge of Morgan Monroe State Forest and frequently hikes the roughly 4-mile Rock Shelter Trail (which is aptly named for the rock overhangs along its creek bed) and the 10-mile Three Lakes Trail (which is a misnomer because it only has two lakes).

Kelly Hammond is a current student at Ivy Tech Bloomington. She enjoys drawing, casual gaming, and listening to music like MCR, Three Days Grace, and iDKHOW. She also enjoys watching Marvel movies and TV series, and anime. Kelly also plans on pursuing a career in animal behavior.

Brian R. Kleinschmidt is fifty years old. His poem means that life is hard, but rather than reject it, we should go with the flow. We all end up in the same place. Why exhaust ourselves with denial?

Lisa Kwong, MFA, a native of Radford, Virginia, is an AppalAsian writer and educator who currently teaches Asian American Studies at Indiana University and English and Student Success at Ivy Tech in Bloomington, Indiana. Her poem “Searching for Wonton Soup” is the winner of Sundress Publications’ 2019 Poetry Broadside Contest. Her poems have been published in *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, *A Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Best New Poets 2014*, *Still: The Journal*, *Pluck!*, and other publications.

Shiloh Lane has been reading and writing all their life and hopes to publish their first novella soon. Outside of writing, Shiloh likes to figure skate, yell at fictional characters on TV, and slowly come to terms with the fact that they and all their belongings will forever be covered in cat hair. You can commission a poem or short story at ShySapphic, their shop at Etsy.

Kayla Law is a soon-to-be graduate from the Ivy Tech Madison campus. She’s a mother to two precious babes and works as a Special Education Instructional Assistant. Kayla also loves God and is a devoted servant to Christ, trying to spread His love and the gospel to everyone.

Sofia Machado is a former art school student who specializes in portraits and is a self-proclaimed poet at heart. After being diagnosed with a chronic illness and suffering a traumatic spinal injury, she now spends her time hoarding books, writing research essays for fun, and advocating for disability equality. She is currently pursuing a General Studies degree at the Ivy Tech Madison campus and lives in North Vernon, Indiana.

Sheila McDermott-Sipe is an adjunct instructor at the Ivy Tech Bloomington campus and a high school English teacher at Bloomington High School South. A perfect day for Sheila includes hot coffee, a long trail run, short stories by Lauren Groff, and time by a bonfire with her dogs and family.

MacKenzie Melvin is an introvert who is interested in capturing life’s most precious moments in whatever way she can, mostly through photographs or writing. She is a chaser of light, always weaving to find the right spot.

Kurt Messick, who teaches astronomy at Ivy Tech, spent much of the Covid-19 time in isolation with his ex-roommate’s cat, Wilford, who has his own book on Amazon (which sold more copies than Kurt’s books). Born in England, he lives in Bloomington now until he can retire to Iceland.

Myca Naylor is a student at Ivy Tech Bloomington. She is the president of the Art Club and a part of the pre-nursing program. She has an adorable cat named Buffy and hopes to continue to do art while pursuing a nursing career.

Carol Parkinson is the library director at Ivy Tech Bloomington. She enjoys helping library patrons find things and watching students walk across the stage at graduation.

Heather Perry is a second-year graduate student at IU Bloomington, having gotten there via two and a half years relearning math and science at Ivy Tech. She comes by strange roads when she comes, usually covered in cat hair. Ambitions include saving the world in the most egalitarian fashion possible but also fleeing to the woods and fen never to see mankind again. Good thing we've got Zoom? She is kept by three cats and a most excellent husband.

Brett Pfingston has been with Ivy Tech for 14 years in various roles, primarily at the Bloomington campus, and is currently the Director of Educational Technology Support and Operations at the College's Systems Office. His favorite pastimes are reading/listening to science fiction and playing multiple musical instruments.

Sarah Ranger is an Ivy Tech student at the Greencastle campus.

Leah Rayl is a first year student at Ivy Tech Bloomington. She has been writing poetry for 27 years and enjoys reading and science fiction.

Josephine Espinosa Reynolds is currently a student at the Terre Haute campus of Ivy Tech Community College. She grew up in a small town called Sulphur, Oklahoma and moved to Indiana when she was 14. Most of her work is inspired through personal experience, and she is studying to attain a degree in English to continue growing with her work.

Emma Richey is a student at Ivy Tech Community College Bloomington and Indiana University Bloomington where she studies Psychology and English. She is a devourer of books who is notoriously passionate about animals of every sort, plants that can survive any catastrophe, and the intricacies of the human mind. In her writing, she seeks to portray the beauty and meaning inherent in even the most transient of life's moments.

Shalee Rybolt is a current student in the Optometric Technology Program at Ivy Tech Bloomington. With her Associates Degree in General Studies, she graduated both Summa Cum Laude and was awarded the Outstanding Student Award for 2020. She continues to enjoy her pursuit of higher education.

Lily Schunn is a student in the accelerated ASAP Program at Ivy Tech Bloomington. She is graduating in May of 2021, earning her Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts.

Fitz Simmons is a creator residing in Bloomington, IN. Their background is in Brain Science, Language, and Animal Behavior. Their foreground is in writing, drawing, and making puns. Fitz likes comic books, conversations about cosmology, and confabs concerning cats. Expertise in doodling.

Taylor Thomas was born and raised in South Bend, Indiana. She is the middle child of seven and never lets her family forget it. She has a Masters in Counseling Psychology and currently works as an Academic Advisor for Ivy Tech Community College South Bend/Elkhart and a therapist at the University of Notre Dame. In her free time, Taylor enjoys obsessing over Jane Austen and trying new foods with her partner, Herschel, and her dog, Bella.

Dr. Chapla Verma is a professor of philosophy and religion at APUS. She has been associated with Ivy Tech for a long time. She did her PhD in Zen Buddhism. In her leisure time, she loves playing golf, doing yoga, and meditating.

