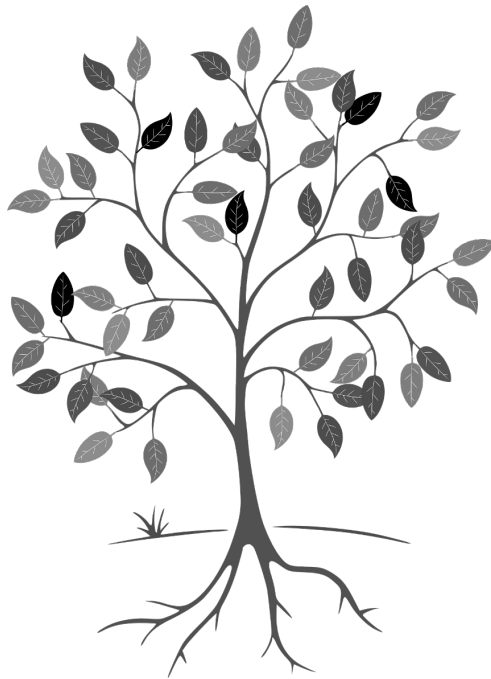


root and branch  
volume XIX





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.

**Special thanks to Dr. Emily Bobo and the Ivy Tech-Bloomington English Department and Foundation.**

Cover Art: **Big Plans** – *Bert Gilbert*



Views expressed by the contributors do not necessarily reflect those of Ivy Tech Community College. Contributors retain all rights to their original materials.

*root and branch* is free to Ivy Tech students: print copies are available while supplies last, and everyone has access to a digital version via our website.

For submission guidelines, please visit  
**[www.rootandbranchmagazine.com](http://www.rootandbranchmagazine.com)**

April 2026

## MISSION

*root and branch* magazine publishes quality writing on any subject in any genre and in any style by members of the Ivy Tech community. Our volumes acknowledge and showcase our students' own genuine voices and experiences, which is why the magazine prefers works that are not AI-generated. *root and branch* serves as an archive for the creative lives of the Ivy Tech community.

## EDITORS

**Alexys Ingram** is a student at Ivy Tech. She plans on completing her associate degree in general studies before transferring to Purdue University to continue her education in veterinary medicine. A ten-year 4-Her, Alexys has spent several hours with her beloved animals and continues to show her horse and dog in open shows whenever the opportunity arises. In her free time, she continues her work on a novel and writes for a small web game. After her education, Alexys plans on making large animal care more accessible across southern Indiana through her dream of opening a livestock hospital.

**Amanda Krone** is a non-traditional General Studies student. She enjoyed working as the Anatomy & Physiology tutor for the Bloomington campus throughout the 2024-2025 school year. Amanda is also enrolled in the Diagnostic Medical Sonography program at Caris College, where she serves as a student representative. She will complete both programs in the spring of 2026. After graduation, Amanda intends to continue her education at a four-year university; her goal is to someday teach Anatomy & Physiology at the college level.

## ADVISOR

**Christine Brandel** is a writer, photographer, and teacher. She is a Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College-Bloomington. Her first full-length poetry collection, *A Wife Is a Hope Chest*, was published by Brain Mill Press in 2017. Her writing portfolio is available at [clbwrites.com](http://clbwrites.com).

## SUPPORT ROOT AND BRANCH

Please consider supporting our magazine. Your donations fund production costs and scholarships for the editors.

In person donation:

Ivy Tech Foundation, Room A102, Ferguson Academic Building  
(cash/check).

By mail:

Ivy Tech Foundation, Room A102, 200 Daniels Way,  
Bloomington, IN 47404 (make checks payable to Ivy Tech  
Foundation and designate English Program Fund in the memo  
field).

Online:

Visit [ivytech.edu/giving](http://ivytech.edu/giving) and click Give Now; then click  
Bloomington and select “English Program” via the dropdown  
designation menu.

Gifts to the Ivy Tech Foundation are tax-deductible as charitable contributions and qualify for a special Indiana state income tax credit.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Petrified Lightning</b> <i>Thia Andis</i>	1
<b>Words</b> <i>Bert Gilbert</i>	3
<b>Cog Stream</b> – <i>Ben Ramsden</i>	4
<b>Prism Mirror</b> <i>Jeanette Harper</i>	5
<b>Corrupted Salvation</b> <i>R. Will Keboe III</i>	7
<b>A Ghost Story</b> <i>R. Will Keboe III</i>	8
<b>Dream Catcher</b> – <i>Bert Gilbert</i>	10
<b>Lessons</b> <i>Bert Gilbert</i>	11
<b>An 11-Year-Old Read My Palms Today</b> <i>Charlie McQuinn</i>	13
<b>My Grandmother's Hands</b> <i>Paula Davidowicz</i>	15
<b>Baking a Mess</b> – <i>Ryleigh Slone</i>	16
<b>Cookies</b> <i>Emma Steele</i>	17
<b>Who Is She?</b> <i>Paula Davidowicz</i>	18
<b>Elements</b> – <i>John Fisher, Sharon Fullingim, and Amy Brier</i>	24

<b>Words</b>	25
<i>Grayce Wojciehowski</i>	
<b>String of Pictures</b>	28
<i>Charlie McQuinn</i>	
<b>Quiet Pain – Walden Gonso</b>	30
<b>Lullaby in the Rain</b>	31
<i>Thia Andis</i>	
<b>The Cloud</b>	32
<i>Bert Gilbert</i>	
<b>Bank of Mitchell – Walden Gonso</b>	33
<b>On Life's Terms, Chapter 1</b>	34
<i>Freddie Huntington</i>	
<b>Three in a Row – Jeffrey Grounds</b>	40
<b>Haiku</b>	41
<i>Chris Tann</i>	
<b>Supper</b>	42
<i>Jeanette Harper</i>	
<b>Pheasant Back of the Woods – Jeffrey Grounds</b>	43
<b>A Lovely View</b>	44
<i>R. Will Keboe III</i>	
<b>Dream Shadow – Bert Gilbert</b>	46
<b>Writer's Lament</b>	47
<i>Walden Gonso</i>	
<b>When the Curtains Close</b>	48
<i>Thia Andis</i>	
<b>Sunset Through the Blinds – Jeffrey Grounds</b>	49



## **Petrified Lightning**

A stiff hand, eager to write but unsure how to create,  
becomes more statue-like as time stills,  
in a sun-filled room with the hush of falling dust

popping of an artist's not yet frozen wrists  
creates a graveyard melody.

The writer's mind wanders through seasons, decades  
through blank pages of bound stationery,  
eyes traveling up and down a kaleidoscope of sticky notes

searching for inspiration to strike like lightning.  
A desert mind yearns  
for storms to come, enveloping  
her core in a revitalizing spark.  
Waiting for worlds made of glass to be created,

for valleys, the best secret keepers,  
to open up and swallow her whole,  
for mountains, heights of expression,  
to rise within her chest.

Waiting to hollow out cold  
concrete jungles, to propose  
room for homes of nurture,  
the writer hopes to captivate hearts

with a thousand whispers, to tickle  
souls like dandelion puffs,  
desiring to pull into a hug  
strangers from off the page,

believing an embrace  
can become a home.  
She sits at her sun-warmed desk  
in her sunlit cube she touches

ballpoint pen to blank paper,  
beginning with a stiff hand  
eager to write

and then lightning strikes sand.

**Words**

So where do  
The words we speak  
Go?

Singing aloud  
With headphones  
On

Bellowing in the shower  
Murmuring on  
That walk

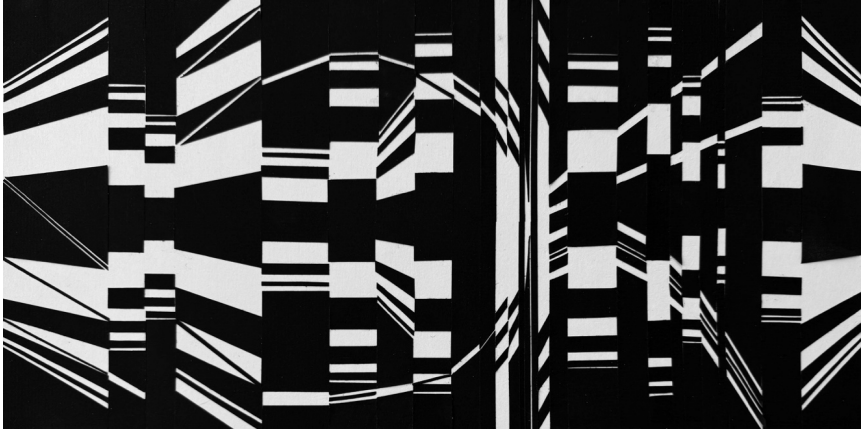
Or when our worst angels  
Seize our  
Tongues

We seem to think  
They need to be written  
To last

Or digitized and uploaded  
To the always available  
Cloud

But aren't those sound waves  
Just bouncing around the  
Cosmos?

Waiting for us  
To learn to listen  
More carefully



**Cog Stream** – *Ben Ramsden*

**Prism Mirror**

I don't know who I am,  
I just know I am a girl with a dream.  
The world around me is falling apart  
And nothing is as it seems.  
You say you know who I am,  
Know my name,  
Yet I am still asking myself what makes me, me.  
I ask the pictures of the past,  
Memories framed in dust,  
But I let go of the past a long time ago...  
So I thought.  
Still, I am still living in my regrets,  
Wishing that one day, I could ask myself  
What changed my point of view.  
I wake up every morning,  
Winter into spring,  
And I wonder why  
I still can't see my soul through the mirror  
When it should be reflecting my very being.  
Yet the glass still fogs from my breath,  
Showing I am still painfully alive,  
Showing I haven't disappeared yet.  
It should be showing the colors that make me who I am,  
But I don't even see the rainbows hidden in prisms.  
The Darkness stole my sight,  
Still searching for that light,  
For that spark of hope,  
And I swear it is still there.

Years have now passed,  
I see colors of greens, yellows, blues and reds  
Not as often as I would like,  
But enough to know they are there.  
I now know who I am,  
I am broken,  
I am a disaster,  
I am an artist,

I am the master of my reflection,  
I am the being that carries my imperfections.  
They are jagged, crooked, and cracked,  
Yet mine all the same.  
My life is full of grays,  
Not full of perfect rhymes,  
It is full of challenges and strife.  
I am the hero of my own battles.  
I am a prism that has colors hidden,  
Waiting to show, waiting to spill  
My light  
When the moment feels okay.

**Corrupted Salvation**

He sleeps to remember a time he wasn't human.  
A cowboy who saved the town,  
An alien who traveled so far,  
so wide,  
He saw every hardship,  
broken, bruised, then braved.  
A time when sinners like himself could be saved.

He worships the bruises,  
proof that something deep inside  
still fights, still aches, still knows how to hurt.  
But he wonders  
Could he ever have been that savior?  
Or was it only ever a mask?

Now his holy water is Popov,  
cheap faith,  
cheap communion for the damned.  
Burning the throat of a fallen angel  
Too tired to rise again.  
He dreams so he won't remember.

The man who wakes each day  
to nothing.  
From a glass vial,  
he finds the flow of life,  
tracing venom back to his heart  
Until it beats no longer.  
And for the final time,  
he dreams of when he wasn't  
human.

**A Ghost Story**

They found him in a room that reeked of dust and cheap vodka,  
Arms spread wide,  
As if asking for a forgiveness  
No one cared to grant.

The bruises he worshipped bloomed purple,  
Then yellow,  
Then nothing,  
Like smoke rising from a dying fire.

The blood, once rushing with venom,  
Sank into the carpet-  
Soaking deep, unseen,  
Forgotten  
As quickly as it fell.

No candles were lit,  
No prayers whispered.  
Only his mother sat stiff at the edge of her bed,  
Tracing her hands over the phone  
But never calling anyone.

An old friend heard the news,  
Stood stock-still at the kitchen counter,  
Staring into a half-empty glass.  
For a moment, they swore they'd quit.  
Then they tipped the glass back,  
Letting the burning holy water  
Cleanse their conviction away.

A neighbor passed the room and saw the coroner's van.  
"Shame," they muttered,  
But they didn't ask his name.

The world spun the same the next day.  
The sun rose, the mail arrived,  
The bartender at the corner dive wiped down the same stools,  
Left his usual brand in a double glass at his usual seat

Someone might have said his name over drinks that night,  
But not like a hymn—  
More like a ghost story:  
A man who tried too hard to be holy  
And died proving he wasn't.

And by the time they cleaned the room,  
His shadow was gone from the wall.  
The dirt swallowed the rest.



**Dream Catcher – *Bert Gilbert***

**Lessons**

I'm learning a new language  
Language without words  
Without letters  
A language I first learned  
With my dog  
Or I should really say  
From my dog  
A language of glances  
And body postures  
A language of thoughts  
And intention  
Of inclination and friendship  
Of presence

This Autumn  
A different dialect  
Is taught to me  
By the lazy path  
of falling leaves

By the wind rustling  
Across the treetops  
Whistling over the ridges  
Whispering through the hollows

Through the dappling  
Sunlight dancing  
Patterning the leafy quilt  
Of the Forest floor

A syntax of  
Rustles  
And chirps  
Creaks  
Groans  
And pops

The cacophony  
Of silence  
Revealed  
In  
Presence

## **An 11-Year-Old Read My Palms Today**

“This line means love.  
This line means a happy marriage.  
And this one means a good career.  
None of them are broken, meaning you will be very successful.”

She grabbed my hand to tell me this.  
Hands getting grabbed is something you get  
Used to when you're working with 11-year-olds.  
Usually, though, this specific girl did it to tell me  
My hand was too hairy or oddly big.  
It was her last week at camp  
And the first time she had said something so nice to me.

The second time was her final day.  
When she tried to hug me, and I turned away  
Into this sorta awkward side hug.  
Legally, I cannot hug these children.  
She seemed sorry for doing it.  
But I wasn't angry.

Aside from a letter I wrote her, telling her how amazing  
Her drawings were, how I thought she'd do great things,  
And how proud of her I was for showing so much improvement  
Over this short summer, that hug was her final memory of me.  
The first in what I'm sure will be a long line of anticlimactic memories.  
I wonder if she'll look back at that note or think of the weird hug.  
I wonder if these small memories will change her,  
The way so many insignificant events changed me.

Because 11-year-olds are weirdly grown.  
They know grown things but don't understand them.  
They just want to show how they feel  
Until they're told it's not okay.

When they tell you they hate you, they love you.  
And when they tell you they love you, they love you.  
They're wiser than most adults, despite their lack of experience.  
They know that Good is good, and Bad is bad.

Sometimes they grab your hand to read your palm,  
and leave you with something you will remember forever.  
Sometimes, they just want to get your attention  
so they can call you ugly.

## **My Grandmother's Hands**

Ten children's diapers washing in scalding water,  
twelve souls' clothes cleaned with lye,  
garments taken in from others to earn pennies,  
scrubbed, dried, ironed, folded, returned.

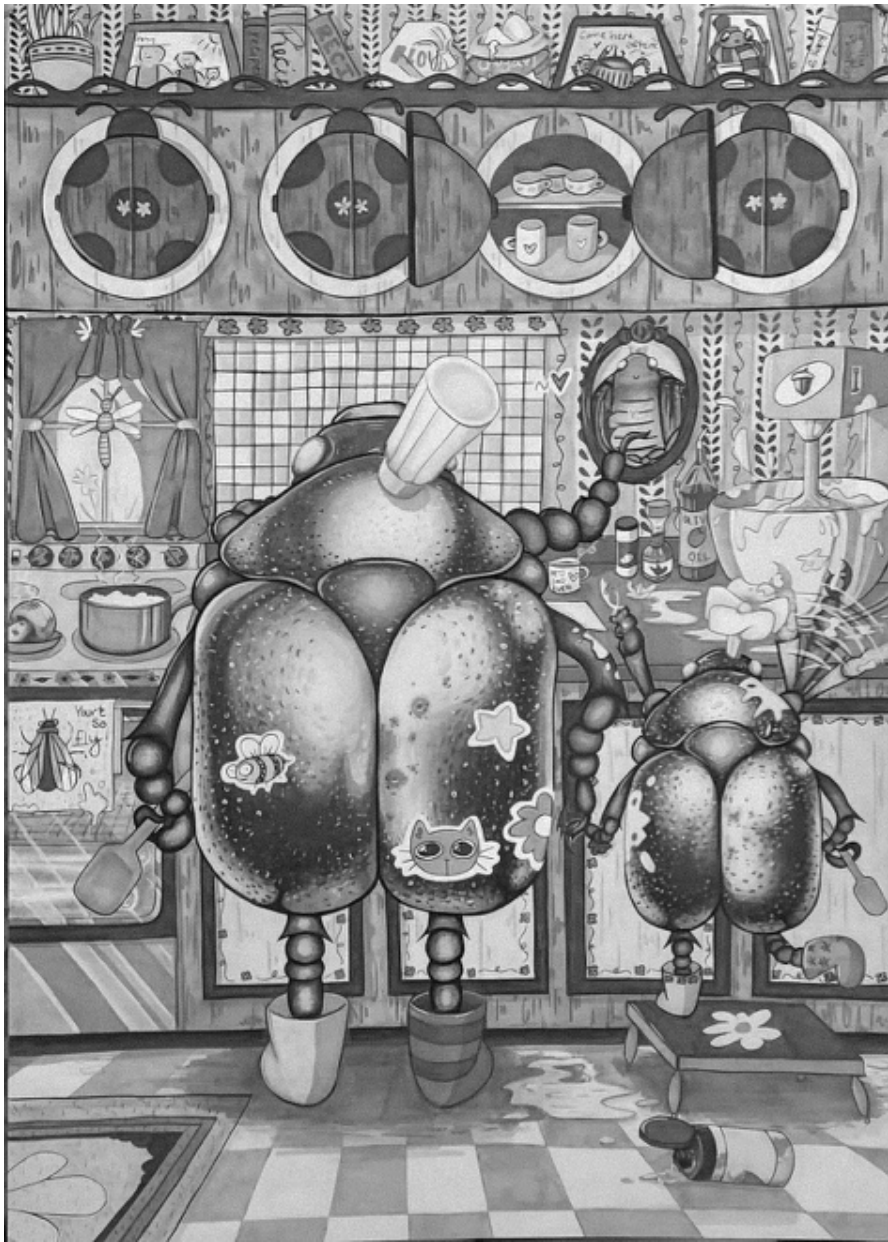
Chickens' fresh-twisted necks,  
hot-water-loosened feathers plucked before cooking.  
Fresh dough, kneaded, beaten, shaped.  
Spitting grease burning cooking-scar crevices.  
Caustics, rose thorns, slipped knives,  
muscles strained, bones rubbed, swollen.

Hard-fought life reflected in aged hands,  
gnarled joints, bent fingers mangled  
from endless lifting, carrying, scrubbing,  
from use without respite, from...  
life.

My grandmother's hands,  
badges of honor,  
of unwavering courage,  
of love  
records of life lived hard and,  
through all the challenges  
death, famine, pestilence, poverty, crippling pain  
of life lived well.

I saw them today tipping my arms,  
my grandmother's hands;  
not my mother's manicured,  
polished, oiled, gloved, pampered,  
but my Grammy's careworn, life-marked,  
well-used, love-blessed,  
life-giving hands.

I frowned. I sighed. I smiled.



**Baking a Mess** – *Ryleigh Stone*

**Cookies**

A warm treat from the oven  
With a glass of milk  
Full of Grandma's lovin'  
And gooey chocolate silk  
A taste of home  
In my heart  
With a warm dome  
Baking them is a part  
Of what makes me happy  
And eating them with others  
Makes me even more happy  
To share with my mother  
The best have chocolate chips  
And we might have evidence left on our lips

### Who Is She?

He strode into the high-rise, the cool air assailing him as the door opened then closed behind him. He'd planned this trip for almost a week. His third date with Jenny had gone well, but she hadn't committed to the fourth he'd suggested for this evening at his chosen upscale restaurant. She'd begged off for family obligations for the week, but what could those be? If he wasn't proactive, he might lose the chance to see her again. He wanted an opportunity to meet her family, to get closer. He needed to convince her she was *the one*. If he could just meet her when she was getting off work, he could make sure she didn't give up on them as a couple.

He scanned the list of companies on the wall in the building. The tenth floor held several investment firms. He smiled. He'd found the right place. He positioned himself near the welcome desk and watched the elevators. Drove of people had begun exiting them, and he couldn't risk missing her in the crowd. All he had to do was wait.

About five minutes later, his patience was rewarded as Jenny exited with a group of women. As he approached, he heard one of the women talking to her. "So, Jackie, how do your displays in the new gallery exhibition look? Can you get me free tickets to see them as usual?"

He stopped in his tracks. *Jackie? Gallery exhibition? Jenny works for an investment firm. What is this woman talking about?*

Jenny smiled. "I have a few pieces I love there. I'm anticipating some nice sales. You know, there's even going to be coverage by several art magazines this time . . . if it goes well enough, I should get offers for a couple of other exhibitions." She paused, winking at the woman. "Do you want the tickets to be for opening night, or do you want to come a few days later?"

"When is the official opening?"

"Next Thursday at 6. What do you say?" Jenny tilted her head, listening.

"Thursday works."

"Okay, I'll drop the tickets by your office in the next few days." She winked

as the women parted.

He scratched his head and closed, then opened, his eyes. *What's going on?* He looked around. *How had she slipped past him so quickly?* He rushed back into the heat outside, scanning the crowd for her, and spotted her walking down the sidewalk to his right. He hurried after her.

“Hey, Josie, how are you doing?”

Jenny’s head spun around to look at one of the women crossing the street nearby, and she waved. “I haven’t seen you in forever! I’m okay. How are you doing, Sue?”

He moved closer so he could listen to their conversation. *Who is this woman I've been dating? Jackie? Josie? How many identities does she have?* He matched his step to hers and heard Josie, or Jenny, ask. “So, Sue, what’s new on the work front?”

Sue smiled back. “Not much. Everything’s going pretty well. How’s the research going?”

“We’re just hunting for a group to finish up a new drug trial. It’s kind of exciting!”

He grimaced. *Drug trial? What the...? Jenny had trouble mixing the dressing into her salad the last time we ate out, ending up with clumps in some spots and bare lettuce in others. What is she talking about?*

The words jumbled together as the two women stood discussing proteins, lipase, and other terms that meant nothing to him. *How could she understand all that? We've talked about her college days, and she'd admitted she squeaked through chemistry and biology. How could she be involved in this scientific research?*

Just then, the two women stopped talking, and Jenny—or Josie, or Jackie, or whoever she was—started walking again, this time in another direction. *Who is this woman?*

Two blocks later, she turned left and entered a jewelry store. He stopped just outside the door to listen as the woman behind the counter looked up.

“Josie! It’s great to see you! Are you here to pick up the bracelets?”

Jenny nodded. “Yup. Did you have any trouble getting them to match?”

The woman behind the counter smiled. “Absolutely no trouble at all. All in a day’s work.”

Jenny pulled a wallet from her purse and handed the woman a credit card. The cashier ran the card, gave Jenny a bag with everything in it, and waved goodbye as Jenny left.

Two stores later, she stopped and entered another shop. *What is she doing now?* He watched her pick up three matching sweatshirts. As she left, the woman yelled, “Jackie, make sure to come back again! We loved this design. I’m hoping you’ll let us print your next sweatshirt line.”

By this time, he’d grown dizzy. *Artist, researcher, investment banker, sweatshirt designer. What would be next?*

After following her for another fifteen minutes, she arrived at the Regency West Hotel. *A hotel! Is she meeting a man?* A pit began to form in his stomach, threatening to swallow him as he collapsed into it. He had to convince her she wanted to stay with him! His fists clenched and teeth ground as he felt sweat form on the back of his neck.

He followed her in, hugging the wall, expecting her to walk to the front desk and register, yet feeling disappointed when she did. *What is she saying?* He craned his neck to hear better as she handed the young man her credit card and identification. “Have you got the reservation for our suite taken care of?”

“Yes, ma’am. Here’s your key.”

The exchange took only a few minutes, but for him, time seemed to have stopped. After she finished, she walked toward Chez Louis, the hotel’s upscale ground-floor restaurant. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. This was the restaurant where he’d planned to take her! *Who is she going to meet here instead of having dinner with me?* He stopped just outside the door as she entered, peering into the entrance as the maître d’ approached.

“Sir, are you here for the multiples event?”

He gasped. “The what?”

“The multiples event, sir. I’d ask if you’re a twin or a triplet. But if you don’t know about this event, the fact that you aren’t goes without saying. I’m sorry, but the restaurant’s closed for this event now.”

“Closed?” he croaked.

He spotted Jenny at a table with two other women, both brunette with their hair worn the same way, sporting the matching sweatshirts he’d just seen Jenny—or Jackie—or Josie buy. “I just want to say hello to my girlfriend. Can I do that?” he whined as his eyes darted between Jenny’s table and the man barring his entry.

“I’m sorry, sir...”

“Jenny! Jenny, can you come here for a minute?” His voice boomed, drawing all three women’s eyes to the door. In unison, they stood and approached him, accompanied by a tall, dark-haired man.

The Jenny to the left began, “Harry, I told you I was busy this week.”

He started to open his mouth, but the woman next to her spoke before he got out a sound. “Why can’t you respect my wishes?” His eyes shifted to her just as the woman on the right spoke. “All you’re doing is proving why I shouldn’t see you anymore.”

*Which one of them is Jenny, and why is this happening?* His mouth opened and closed several times. *What should I do now?*

“Jenny, uh, Jenny...which of you is Jenny?” His eyes shifted to each woman, trying to decide.

“I am,” all three answered in unison.

He moaned. “Jenny, I came here because I want to spend more time with you. You’re special and important to me. Why are you doing this?”

A hand wrenched him away from the door. “Harry, or is it Mr. Raymond Jones? What are you doing here?”

He swallowed, looking into the hardened face of the man accompanying

them. “It’s Harry, and I’m here to see my girlfriend, Jenny Smythe. Who are you, anyway?”

The man’s cold smile chilled him. “You can call me John Smith. I ask you, is it Jenny you’re hoping to see, or are you hoping to wheedle time with her so you can get the inside scoop on a government contract for your employer?”

His eyes snapped to the man’s, probing. *How does this man know about my interest in government contracts?* “Who are you? What are you talking about?” Maybe he could feign ignorance.

One of the women spoke behind him. “He’s talking about you stalking me.”

“Yes, stalking me,” said another.

“And me,” said a third.

“Will you three stop doing that?” he blurted as he looked around. “I came to see my Jenny. She’s special to me.”

They laughed then all asked, “How am I special?”

He shook his head. *This unison thing is getting old.* “Why are you three doing this?”

“Oh, this old game? We’ve been doing this since we were kids,” smiled woman on the left.

“Yeah, we all know about each other’s lives,” said the middle woman.

“That’s what being multiples is about,” grinned the woman on the right.

“And this isn’t our first rodeo with someone trying to use Jenny. When you control that kind of government money, there’s always some cockroach trying to crawl into her hemisphere,” Mr. Smith smirked.

“When you did your despicable research on Jenny, you never noticed our birth dates were the same? You’re worse than most of them have been!”

clipped the woman on the left. “You really have no idea who you’re spying on, do you?”

“What’s the matter?” asked the middle woman.

“Can’t handle the heat?” said the woman on the left.

“Then stay out of the kitchen, you liar!” hurled the woman on the right.

He swallowed. “What...” He coughed, trying to calm the sudden tremor in his voice. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Smith placed his arm around the woman in the middle. “They mean you’re a corporate spy trying to get insider information from my *wife* for your employer, Harry or Raymond, or should I just call you Stephen Brooks? We caught onto you when you started investigating Jenny a month ago and flagged your connection to one of the companies bidding on the government contract for the new bomber.” The man’s eyes bored into his. “Using Jenny—not a new idea, nope, not at all, and these women hate that kind of underhanded garbage the most. That’s where my day job as an investigator comes in.”

Stephen shrugged, his smile rueful as he addressed Mr. Smith. “Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I’ll have better luck next time.” He looked around. “But since you can’t get me arrested...”

He started to turn toward the door as John Smith tilted his head, assessing him. “You do realize you’re now flagged on every corporate and government watch list as an industrial spy, right?”

He paused, sighed, then swallowed. “I guess I’ll just have to find a new line of work. Still, you can’t keep me here, so I’ll just gather up my pride and leave now.”

Mr. Smith and all three women smiled. Each word the woman in the center bit out pierced his skin as she looked toward the uniformed man now standing behind him. “Officer, thank you for coming. I want to report this man for stalking. We have video to support it.” Her smile was acid. “We’re all witnesses, and we’re ready to make a statement.”



**Elements** – *A Collaboration by John Fisher, Sharon Fullingim, and Amy Brier*

**Words**

They sit on your tongue,  
like a bug that won't jump off  
into the wider world to be heard.

They burn in your chest,  
in your throat,  
scorching  
like wildfire,  
but you don't have the courage  
to speak.

They make up  
everything you see  
smell  
touch  
taste  
because someone  
had to speak them before,  
and someone after them  
decided to write them down.

You think with them  
because you've known them  
your whole life.  
You heard them before you could  
talk.  
Maybe you learned to use them  
before you could  
walk.  
But you know them  
all the same.

You build with them,  
stumbling  
stuttering  
trials in and out of class  
in speech  
in writing

in videos spoken by people  
who are not there talking  
to you,  
but you hear them  
all the same.

Do the birds speak like we do,  
telling of how the nest  
is holding up?  
Do the squirrels talk about the  
deer they saw,  
or of the rain that  
approaches?  
Do elephants have them,  
ones that mean  
colors and sounds,  
dangers and safety,  
tales and history?

They are just jumbles  
of sounds,  
some longer  
some shorter  
some that stand alone  
some that are changed  
by what is around them.

They can be shouted  
whispered  
screeched  
sighed  
barked  
babbled  
giggled  
and simply said.

For all we know, we are alone  
in using them as we do,  
these sounds that we  
have given meaning.  
But we have filled all around us

with so many words  
that we can never  
think outside them.

**String of Pictures**

As I look at pictures of you wrestling my brother to the ground  
The final one, you embracing him as you both laugh  
I can't help but be jealous I never got to know you

It's been thirteen years, and we still spend every Thanksgiving  
Looking at pictures of you, my father  
In one, you flip off the disposable camera  
It's almost like you're still alive  
Most of my memories of you are in these photos  
I don't remember much else

Sometimes it's hard for me to remember anything but your last moments  
Grams and Mom hold your hands as you pass along  
My brother, freshly eighteen, going crazy with grief  
My mom looking for another man to fill the void  
The rest of my family shunning her because of it  
A child stuck in the middle

I'm on the couch at 3am, thinking I am alone  
I see your spirit and know that for now, I am not  
Fifteen minutes of peace before I fall asleep  
And return to my isolation

I have a few other memories  
The two years you spent in prison  
You coming home high or drunk, punching holes in the wall  
Covering under the table with Mom, eventually finding a moment  
To flee through the back door

Christmases we spent giving food to the homeless  
How you always taught me to be kind  
To respect those around me and use table manners  
How you assured me you would love me no matter what happened

But how could I believe that?  
When that virus attacked you, it got to your brain  
And you forgot who I was  
I cried for you, and you were confused

I remember sitting with you in the hospital room  
Telling you I loved you for the last time  
I prayed that you would go to heaven, the man you were  
Not before the meningitis rendered you braindead, but before everything  
Before the drugs, before the alcohol  
Before you had to watch your father die, at the same age my brother had to  
    watch his  
Before everything

I think back to that night on the couch  
The final time I saw you  
I was only nine years old  
I knew that God answered my prayers

Sometimes I still wonder how different my life would be with you here  
I wonder if you would be proud of the man I have become  
I wonder if you are in the crowd tonight



**Quiet Pain** – *Walden Gonso*

**Lullaby in the Rain**

Lavender grows on your eyelids  
Dust fills your lungs  
The roof leaks from a spot in the corner  
Where your bookshelf stands below

The dog sleeps belly on the rug  
Holding his favorite blanket  
Tail wagging in his sleep  
Because he's in a field of daisies

The fish tank runs dry  
So you place it outside your window  
Bubbles form, waves begin crashing  
Without a shore to catch them

The fish, back in, rests his head  
On a piece of purple coral  
You say goodnight, sorry for the fright  
But the sun will be back tomorrow

Your lungs decompose without its rays  
And the dust turns to seafoam  
The lavender on your eyes stays the same  
Because it's waiting for the rainbow

**The Cloud**

He had figured out a way  
to create  
a localized cloud within the gallery  
Approximately five  
by seven feet  
A couple feet high

An actual cloud  
Hovering  
Suspended on its own  
cloudiness  
about head height

Stopping short of the ceiling  
it would change  
twice an hour  
from cuddly cumulus  
to nefarious nimbostratus

Producing about a cup of rain  
with each cycle  
which splattered  
beneath it  
across the wood floor  
to the great dismay of the gallery owner



**Bank of Mitchell** – *Walden Gonso*

## On Life's Terms, Chapter 1

THUMP!

Kenny awoke on the hard wooden floor of a run-down, abandoned building. He coughed as the sheets of dust clouded around his body.

He glanced down at his wristwatch; the hands were rapidly moving backward. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but nothing changed.

He stood up to explore the strange building. The floor creaked with every step he took. The windows were obscured by dust and cobwebs. There were two rooms lined with dining booths with an old-timey lunch counter. Kenny wiped his finger against one of the tables, drawing a line and pushing the dust into a tiny pile.

The front of the building had men's and women's restrooms with small shutter doors, like in an old western saloon. The front door was white with peeling paint and large, cracked glass panes. The front and sides of the building were lined with large windows. He noticed a brown leather knapsack at one of the tables. The buckle was undone, so he approached it to investigate. A cloud of dust emerged from the bag when he opened the flap, sending him into a small fit of coughing. He peeked inside: a Swiss Army knife, a pack of American Spirit menthols, and a Zippo lighter.

*Weird*, he thought. *It's like someone left this specifically for me.*

He pulled the knapsack over his back and opened the front door. It creaked open with no resistance, even though a gust of wind nearly knocked Kenny off his feet. He let go of the door and it slammed shut, awakening more clouds of dust within the building. He opened the door again, and outside was nothing but an empty desert plain with clouds of dust blowing in the wind. He stood on a small porch area adorned with more dining tables.

The wind began to clear, and between the dust clouds, an abstract path leading forward formed in Kenny's vision. Curious about the path, he stepped out the front door, holding up his arm to block the wind from his eyes.

Kenny walked for miles. The dust crept into his boots and stung his eyes as he pushed his feeble body, one foot at a time, against the overbearing wind.

Every time his body forced him to gasp for air, a handful of dust whisked into his mouth.

He collapsed to his knees in utter defeat. This must be the end. He looked up and could barely make out an image up ahead: a red brick house sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the barren wasteland. He sank further into the ground in exhaustion, his frail body beginning to fail him. His forehead was covered in sweat, where dust stuck to his face and crept into his shaggy hair.

“Need a hand?” a female voice asked. He looked up. A thin young woman wearing a white cropped tank top and cargo pants stood above him. He took her hand. She pulled him to his feet with a surprising amount of strength. He wiped the dust from his eyes and looked at her more closely. She had brown hair that was tied back in pigtails and a thin silver chain around her neck.

“Wow, you’re sure dressed for the winter,” she laughed. “You from Alaska or something?”

“Washington State. Seattle.”

“Close enough,” she said. “Come on, lean on my shoulder, let’s get you inside.” She led him forward. “It’s not as far as it looks.”

Kenny limped alongside her as they inched toward the house.

“Here’s the porch. Watch your step.”

Kenny lifted his sore legs carefully over the porch steps, and the girl nearly dragged him inside the door. They entered a room full of all types of misfits—the exact type of people Kenny would be hanging out with.

“Take a seat, kid. I’ll get you some water.”

Kenny sat on a lounge chair near the door. All eyes were on him, but it wasn’t the threatening gaze that he was so familiar with. These people looked at him with curiosity, empathy, and concern. These were safe people.

“What’s your name, kid?” asked a large man with an undersized denim vest and a torn polo shirt.

“Kenny,” he said timidly. “Kenny Talbert.” His palms were sweaty despite repeatedly wiping them against his torn jeans.

“Cool meeting you, Kenny. I’m Gary Curtis, but everyone calls me Big Dog. This place may seem scary and unfamiliar to you at first, but I promise we have a lot of fun here. We’re playing blackjack if you would like to join.”

“I’ll pass this time,” Kenny said. “I’m a little worn out,” he added, as the woman with the pigtails emerged from the kitchen with a glass of water.

“I’ll bet you are,” she said. “Drink up!”

Kenny took a long gulp of the water, and the relief he felt was unmatched. He chugged the glass happily. “Thank you,” he breathed.

“My pleasure,” she said. “You’re probably wondering who we all are. I’m Crys, the fat guy is Big Dog, the kid with the shaggy hair is Dan, the kid by the TV is—”

“Cool it, Crys. Save the introductions for later,” Dan said. He was wearing a button-up sweatshirt, light blue with a grey hood and sleeves. “This guy probably has a lot of questions. Let him talk.”

There was a long silence, until Kenny finally blurted out with frustration, “Where the hell am I?” He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

“You’re dead, Kenny,” Crys said calmly.

“Uh, that can’t be right.”

“Why do you think so?”

“I- I don’t know,” his voice began to crack, “I’m too young to die.”

“Kenny, we’re all dead. How old do you think most of us are?”

“I don’t know... I guess a lot of you seem pretty young, too.” He took a breath and calmed himself, then spoke softly. “So, are we just stuck here?”

“Not forever. I’ve seen some of the people who came before me get out. I think all of us are supposed to get out or at least have a purpose here. Most

recently, our old buddy Fred disappeared like an angel. It was magical.”

“So how do we get out?”

“We’re all still trying to figure that out,” Big Dog said. “But don’t be in such a hurry. We don’t know what’s on The Otherside. It’s not bad here once you get used to it.”

“We’re a really tight bunch,” Crys agreed. “It’s scary to be stuck with a bunch of strangers, but we bond after a while. Give us all a chance—we’re a family.”

“If you like leaky pipes and mildew,” a voice said. Kenny identified the source as a man in the corner with a blond buzz cut and a spiky chain necklace.

“Malcolm, don’t scare the new kid!” Dan scolded.

“I’m just being real,” Malcolm shrugged.

“I’ve seen worse,” Kenny told them.

“Well, not everyone’s used to trash.”

“Malcolm—we are trash. Deal with it,” said Dan.

“This place is a luxury to most of us,” Crys said. “I don’t think the universe wants to make kids like us suffer.”

“Are we supposed to suffer?”

“Does this look like heaven to you?” Dan asked sarcastically. “It’s no paradise here.”

“So we’ve all done things wrong in life?”

“Well, you know how things go. You resort to bad choices when you have little else to lean on. We’re a bunch of broken misfits. We’ve lived lonely lives.”

“I guess so.”

Crys gestured to a woman who was sitting idly on a lounge chair. The woman had her black hair spiked up, and the tips were dyed soft red. She wore a dark purple sleeveless top, and a spiky leather jacket rested on her chair.

“This is Kelsey,” explained Crys. “She’ll give you the grand tour.”

“Hi!” Kelsey greeted Kenny confidently as she turned off the boombox that sat on the table next to her. She stood up. “So now we’re in our little common room, living room, sitting room, whatever you prefer to call it. It’s pretty neat. Even though we’re in semi-hell, there’s a lot of stuff to do here. We have board games, TV, movies, music, books—that’s more than I had at my house. There’s even more stuff down the hall.”

Kenny listened silently.

Kelsey gestured to a room just in front of them. “This is the kitchen. The food isn’t the best, but it’s good for whatever this is. And it helps that you can’t die, so you don’t have to worry about starving. You will still *feel* hungry though, unfortunately.”

Kenny didn’t say anything.

“Just to the right is the bathroom, and there’s another one at the end of the hall. Two bathrooms with this number of people is definitely some level of hell, especially because they are not big bathrooms. Now, let me show you to your room.”

Kenny followed Kelsey down the hallway. She stopped next to a door on their left and knocked. No one answered. She opened it to reveal a small room crowded with bunk beds and an end table riddled with clutter near the window.

“This is the men’s bedroom. Looks like this top bunk is open,” Kelsey gestured to one of the beds. “It’s all yours.”

Kenny noticed a young man, late teens maybe, just like himself, sitting on the bottom bunk in the far right corner of the room. Kelsey must have seen him, too.

“Oh, that’s Dave. He’s a nice kid. Doesn’t talk much.”

Kenny nodded and slung his knapsack onto the bed. He noticed there was a pair of blue-grey pajamas laid out nicely at the foot of the bed.

“Whose pajamas?”

“Yours,” Kelsey said, “They’re complimentary.”

“Oh,” Kenny said, a bit puzzled. He turned to Kelsey, waiting for further instructions.

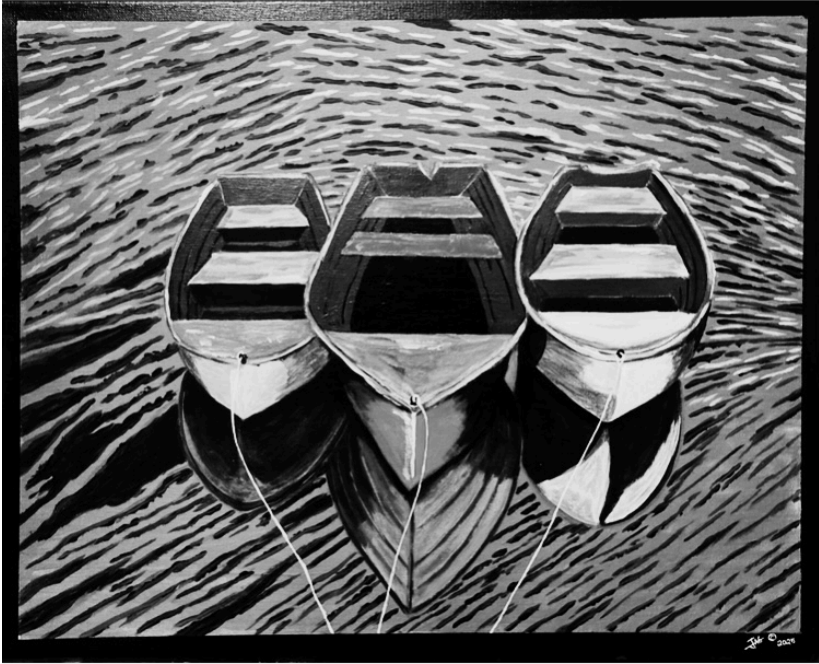
“Now right across from here is the girls’ bedroom. There’s no rule saying we have to be separated by sex, but I guess we just naturally gravitated towards that. I guess even in death we are still puppets of society. Anyway, right there is a room with more quiet activities—reading, drawing, what have you—and then the other bathroom is the last door on the left. And that’s about it.”

“What’s that door?” Kenny pointed at a door at the end of the hall.

“Never open that door.”

“Why?”

“Just trust me. There aren’t many rules here, but that’s one of them. We don’t know what happens if you break that rule, and we don’t want to find out.”



**Three in a Row** – *Jeffrey Grounds*

**Haiku**

Ripple

Ripples run away  
Their crescents curl and crisplike  
Raindrops griddle cakes.

Watching

Branches, limbs to move  
Sticks, leafy grass, arms legs lift  
A fawn springs away

## **Supper**

Once upon a time there was a tortoise and a hare. The hare was overconfident but was really just a simple, egotistical bunny, while the tortoise was a wise old man in a reptile's body. The hare constantly caused trouble for the tortoise and the surrounding animals. They all found him incredibly annoying, referring to him as "Sir Richard." Unbeknownst to the hare, who thought the animals were praising his speed and agility, the surrounding animals were really just calling him a royal dick. The animals finally decided to plead with the wise tortoise to solve their problem with the hare.

The tortoise agreed to the pleas of his neighbors. The tortoise convinced the hare to race. The winner would forevermore be seen as the hot stuff and the center of attention. The hare, of course, quickly agreed to whatever terms the tortoise wished. The terms were simply whoever crossed the finishing line closest to a certain time wins. Both competitors had to start at the center of the woods and get to the edge by the farmhouse by noon. The race would start in seven days, at dawn. The hare was excited.

The tortoise used the time to go to the farmer's house. The tortoise knew the farmer would never hurt him, since the farmer and he were good friends. The farmer had even painted a design on his shell. He finally reached the farm and talked to old MacDonald, saying "Just a heads up—there is gonna be a hare coming in seven days, at noon, right outside the farm. Seems like a perfect season for rabbit stew."

Old MacDonald smiled widely.

The day of the race, the tortoise and the hare were both at the starting line, with the surrounding animals watching. As the race began, the hare laughed it off and took a nap. The tortoise told the mosquito to wake the hare at 11:30. Then the tortoise was off; he wanted to see the final results, mawhahahaha. At exactly 11:30, the pest woke up the hare; the hare ran with all his might and passed the tortoise, who was just feet away from the edge of the woods. And right as the hare turned to celebrate, he felt a tug on his ears. The farmer had his supper.

The hare never bothered anyone in the woods again.



**Pheasant Back of the Woods – *Jeffrey Grounds***

**A Lovely View**

I found a dead body on the side of the road,  
Limbs sprawled from point to point,  
Head toward the sky with half a smirk.  
A button-up shirt with rolled sleeves and two buttons undone at the top,  
Shirt done in a French tuck.

The grass had started to grow around it,  
Weaving around its fingers,  
Holding it up with a sigh under its weight.  
Its skin was pale, a bit blue under the dark sky.  
I wish I could tell you that I called the cops,  
Signaled to other passersby that something awful had happened,  
But I never intend to tell a lie.

I stepped down the little gutter that separated us,  
Overrun with mud and debris,  
And sat with it.  
A little chat:  
Your "How do you do's?"  
And  
"Lovely weather, isn't it?"  
But it knew all the answers—  
Answered the moment I finished.

I asked it,  
"How long you been here?"  
And it replied,  
"Since you've looked."  
Asked,  
"What made you choose to stay here?"  
And those cold dry eyes just seared into the night sky.  
"A lovely view."  
In retrospect, I didn't know whether it answered or asked.

He invited me to lie next to him.  
Moments of silence passed between here and there before he started again.  
"I wish I could let my family know I'm happy, but I can't seem to gather

whether I left them or they left me, or if they were there at all."  
In return, I asked him his name.  
"If you tell me yours, I'd be able to tell you mine."  
His only retort.

He invited me to root through his pockets to find his ID.  
But I didn't.  
The answer mattered little in the moment.  
He was no more than there, and I was no more than there with him.

"Stargaze or people-watch, whichever deals you best,"  
He stated calmly.  
"They almost never see us over here, but I've seen them all pass by.  
Sweet nothings whispered when there is naught but the stars and I."  
So we sat, until the grass gripped my fingers,  
Until the cold air nipped my skin near blue,  
Until the grass beside me let out its sigh.

I saw a corpse on the side of the road.  
Button-up shirt,  
Rolled up sleeves,  
Two buttons undone.

I watched him as he watched above.  
I wondered if he was guarding the night from the day,  
Making sure the sun kept its heat from the field where he lay.

I watched the people pass by, whispering sweet nothings  
to sweet someones who promised the world—  
Promised all it could offer, except the area beyond  
the gutter they never viewed.  
I watched as a young man with a button-up shirt  
slightly untucked in the back saw me,  
Watched as he watched and eventually made his way down to where I lay.

"How do you do?" and "Lovely weather" behind his slurring lips.  
He asked me how long I'd been there, and so I answered,  
"Since you've looked."  
"A lovely view?"



**Dream Shadow – *Bert Gilbert***

### **Writer's Lament**

I am a writer. I sit on my imposing armchair; it's colored and aged, blood-red with a crisscross stud pattern that causes the chair to bulge, as if it is about to pop and spew actual blood. I stare at everything and nothing at the same time. The room rests in a dim haze, lit only by flickering firelight. My fireplace, its gaping maw, holds flames that lick at wood whose skin has now blackened and cracked. They hunger for more, but I am trapped in my chair and in my trance. My room is chock-full of strange objects and forms that twist and fade into the darkness. The firelight casts eerie and distorted shadows, so that everything feels alive, stimulating my imagination.

The ruby eyes of an ornate Phoenix statue catch the light perfectly, as if it's glaring at me. The Phoenix's cycle of Death and Rebirth reminds me of the countless times I've wasted away nights rewriting stories and tearing up pages in frustration. Paper must be afraid of me now. The entire surface of my expansive desk is covered with piles of parchment: each page, a thought. The yellowed and crinkled stacks are illuminated by the glow of my two ancient candlesticks. The candlesticks, elegant, brass figures, are nearly enveloped by the slowly accruing melted wax that drips and flows in beautiful chaos. The candles remind me of the passage of time, of how finite it all is.

I was put into this world to create, to be a vessel for the Angels and Demons that lick at my ears. The Angels whisper about the beauty in this world and how it's my divine purpose to capture that beauty in words. A tranquil scene in nature, a hero's perseverance. Angels love stuff like that. But the Demons don't ask such things of me. They remind me of the freedom I have to spill chaotic epithets about the dark and crude nature of life. Demons are welcome here, provided they don't stay for very long. But my muses have abandoned me.

This room is my world, of my design: the perfect conditions for greatness, beauty and horror. And yet, despite all my efforts, I simply sit glued to my chair, surrounded by paper and shadows. Not a single thing to write.

### When the Curtains Close

Like pixie dust raining down,  
little specks of light filter through a gray sky  
creating crepuscular rays.

I thought I was in Neverland  
until my sight veered to the steel flat  
beneath my feet, atop waves  
that could swallow my whole vessel  
into their black stomachs.

An adventure comes with risks;  
stories should come with storytellers.  
Death may come with peace—  
one last gift for *"you did well."*

The gilded surface of ocean  
appears like meadow, rippling of gold,  
a brilliant sunlit zone above sunless depths.

Center stage, the spotlight  
raining down upon my visage  
glows with the *"my life flashed  
before my eyes"* kind of hue.

The world never looked more radiant,  
even as my existence becomes engulfed  
by the salty absence of fear.

Perhaps when the curtains close,  
smiles do not drop as quickly as believed.

Certainly, they go on forevermore  
as the heart finds itself fullest  
in the radiance of the silence  
after a long-awaited applause.



**Sunset Through the Blinds** – *Jeffrey Grounds*

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Ben Ramsden** enjoys studying Fine Arts as a Senior Scholar at Ivy Tech - Bloomington. Recently retired from a college science career, he uses his foundational Color and Design Theory learning to explore composition, expression and perception of abstract shape representations via black paper cutouts pasted onto white paperboard. For him, Ivy Tech is a terrific venture evoking unanticipated interests ahead, already stimulating new creative adventures using acrylic, watercolor, and oil paint media.

**Bert Gilbert** is a lifelong Hoosier who lives west of Bloomington in an 1860 farmhouse with his wife, two cats, and a dog. He enjoys learning and exploring new ideas.

**Charlie McQuinn** (he/him) is a 23-year-old multidisciplinary artist, originally from Indianapolis, Indiana. He moved to Bloomington in 2023 to begin work on a degree in creative writing at Ivy Tech; since then, he has become a member of the Bloomington Writers Guild and frequently collaborates with local poets and writers. His work mostly explores love and human relationships and the struggle to find meaning in one's own life.

**Chris Tann** is an Assistant Director of Financial Aid with Ivy Tech - Bloomington. Chris attended his first poetry writing class at Penn State, where he graduated with a degree in English. He enjoys the seasons in Southern Indiana and being on the road.

**Emma Steele** wrote the poem "Cookies," based on her love of cookies that she used to make with her late grandmother. Her grandmother and mother helped build her love for baking through teaching her when she was little, and she still bakes today in her grandmother's memory.

**Freddie Huntington** is a 21-year-old Ivy Tech alumnus, having graduated from the Bloomington campus in 2024. He took a gap year and now studies Graphic Design at the University of Indianapolis. While he was a student at Ivy Tech, he was the editor for the 2024 volume of *root and branch*, after having worked on the literary magazine at his high school. Other than writing, Freddie enjoys art, music, and performing stand-up comedy.

**Grayce Wojciehowski** is a 19-year-old Pre-nursing student at the Ivy Tech - Sellersburg campus. Oldest of five and homeschooled throughout most of

her childhood, she has been writing short stories for several years. The poem “Words” is based on some ideas she had while trying to write a paper.

**Jeanette Harper** is a writer and Special Education student who blends introspection with a love of classic horror, poetry, and heartfelt storytelling. She often explores themes of identity, resilience, and hope. Her work reflects a lifelong fascination with the shadows we walk through and the light we learn to keep.

**Jeff Grounds** enjoys art, music and nature. He is a graduate of Ivy Tech - Bloomington.

**Paula Dawidowicz** is 69 years young. She’s been a student at Bloomington’s Ivy Tech periodically since her children took classes here years ago because learning is one of her passions, there’s too much she still doesn’t know, and Ivy Tech is a great school. She’s also evolved to teach English here, which she loves. With her seemingly permanent service-dog-in-training, she lives in Bloomington, enjoying life, writing, spending time with her two adult children, and looking for new adventures.

**R. Will Kehoe III** is a Bloomington-based Ivy Tech student writer studying philosophy. He serves as Treasurer of the Student Government Association and is a member of Phi Theta Kappa. Known to say he simply “does things,” his greatest ambition is to become the future king of Nowhere. You can find him on Instagram @Th3rdWill and streaming on Twitch as TheTh3rdWill.

**Ryleigh Stone** is a traditional artist from Charleston, South Carolina, now based in Bloomington, Indiana. She has been making art since childhood and has publicly exhibited her work since middle school. Working primarily in painting and drawing, she uses oil, acrylic, gouache, oil pastel, charcoal, graphite, and conté crayon. Her work explores portraiture, landscape, and still life through traditional methods while seeking fresh perspectives within these genres of observation and representation.

**Thia Andis** is a Business major at Ivy Tech - Bloomington. Outside of that, she is a poet, an artist, an admirer of blue, and a lover of flowers. She dances and plays with her cats, listens to the birds sing outside her room, and spends time with her parents. She is an introvert who appreciates the little things and hopes to acknowledge them through her writing.

**Walden Gonso** is a student at Ivy Tech- Bloomington. Walden is president of Campus Pride and a founding member of the Art Club. They've been writing stories and drawing comics for years and are working towards a Fine Arts degree. Walden was homeschooled on a homestead and took care of animals and trees. This love of nature led Walden to be a mentor at White Pine Wilderness Academy, teaching outdoor survival skills to kids.





