

Prairie Ink

A literary Annual



Issue Thirteen



Fall 2022

“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

From the Editor

Dear Readers,

As we look back on the previous year, we're incredibly grateful to the hard work and dedication of the editors, writers, artists, print shop, and every other person who worked to make this happen. Thank you all.

This year's issue is an incredible compilation of the talent and passion latent, or perhaps dormant, in Barton's community. We have submissions from many backgrounds with diverse experiences and perspectives; something that we continue to value in this annual. This art is a further testament to the need for the human experience to express itself in things that are difficult to put into words, but that through the use of stories, images, and language we find we are able to approach the indescribable. As we look forward to the next year, we can only hope that this tradition of providing voices to our community continues to grow and thrive.

-Scott McDonald, Editor

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Kill Her with Kindness

By Whitney Hammeke

With every stroke of my brush, the anger inside of me spread like a firework lighting up a black sky. My studio was supposed to be a sanctuary. My safe place. Cramped full of boxes and half-finished projects, the organized chaos felt like a blanket sheltering me from everything outside of its clay splattered walls. As I glazed the mug in my hands, I tried to take a few deep breaths. I couldn't let this happen. She has ruined every other aspect of my life; I cannot let her ruin this one too.

I have never been great with anger management, but the rage that had ignited was a different kind of fire. It was untamable, so hot and wild that all of my attempts to extinguish it only resulted in failure. My mom had always told me the best way to move past a problem I have with someone is to kill them with kindness. Her sunny disposition made her the kind of mother that broken children would dream about while drowning out the inconsistencies in their own homes. Kill them with kindness, she would repeat. Kill them with kindness.

Day after day I returned to the studio, and I couldn't focus because of my anger. I pushed my skills to the limit creating projects that grew more challenging with every passing hour. I stared at my most recent creation, a two-foot vase the color of a robin's egg. It had taken hours of concentration and had turned out exactly how I had envisioned. I should have been proud of

myself, but all I could feel was that rage telling me it wasn't good enough. I took one last glance at the vase before gently nudging it off the edge of the table. I didn't hear it shatter, the sound of my heartbeat drowning it out. I thought about my mother's words. I tried out every other method to calm myself down; I was running out of options. Setting my trimming tool over to the side, I grabbed my pencil and a piece of scratch paper to begin planning a mug. This piece had to be perfect.

After countless nights of planning, I had created a flawless design. I had decided on a yellow and red glaze separating the top and bottom with a waltz swirling brilliant orange in the middle, a fire equivalent to the one roaring inside of me. The mug itself would be slightly larger than the average coffee mug with a curvature that was wide at the bottom, and grew gradually narrower towards the lip. It was not hard to get this design perfected while throwing on the wheel, the form itself so simple a beginner could do it easily. After letting it dry, I began the trimming process. Taking multiple deep breaths to still my shaking hands, I took off as much excess clay as possible. One of the best ways to tell if a mug is crafted well is to see how heavy it is. My mug was like a feather. After firing my creation, I added the glaze mixture and fired it again. Nothing can be done once the mug is in the glaze firing except crossing fingers and praying that it's what I had envisioned. Reaching into the kiln to retrieve the finished piece, the fire inside of me flared. It was perfect.



The mug burned my hands. Maybe this was a bad idea. For the first time in a long time, I made myself sit down and think about these past few weeks. One moment my life was moving steadily along before she grabbed it and wrung it out like a towel after a long day at the beach. It was time that I let my world start spinning again. I had to do this. I knew that I had to deliver it now, or I never would. She wouldn't mind if I stopped by at this hour. She couldn't. Grabbing my keys, I rushed to the door. I've only visited her once, yet I knew the way like the back of my hand. Driving through the empty streets, the realization hit that I have been in my studio all day and into the quiet hours of night. If this didn't work, if even this couldn't stomp out the emotions eating me from the inside out, I didn't know what to do. My vision blurred as angry, hot tears began racing down my face.

Parking haphazardly, I hopped out of my car. The gravel bit at my bare toes. Autopilot took over as I began rushing down the path. "Turn around," my bones screamed. "Turn around." "Turn around!" And just like that, I was standing in front of her. I couldn't help as the tears grew into a river, the red that spread across my vision. She left me. My rock, my mentor, my person. My mother.

My anger continued, strong as ever. This wasn't going to work. The mug slipped out of my hands, shattering as it made contact with the spotless gravestone at my feet. A sob pried my mouth open as I sank to the ground.

The trees shook with laughter, the surrounding ghosts watched unblinkingly.
You cannot kill someone with kindness if they are already dead.

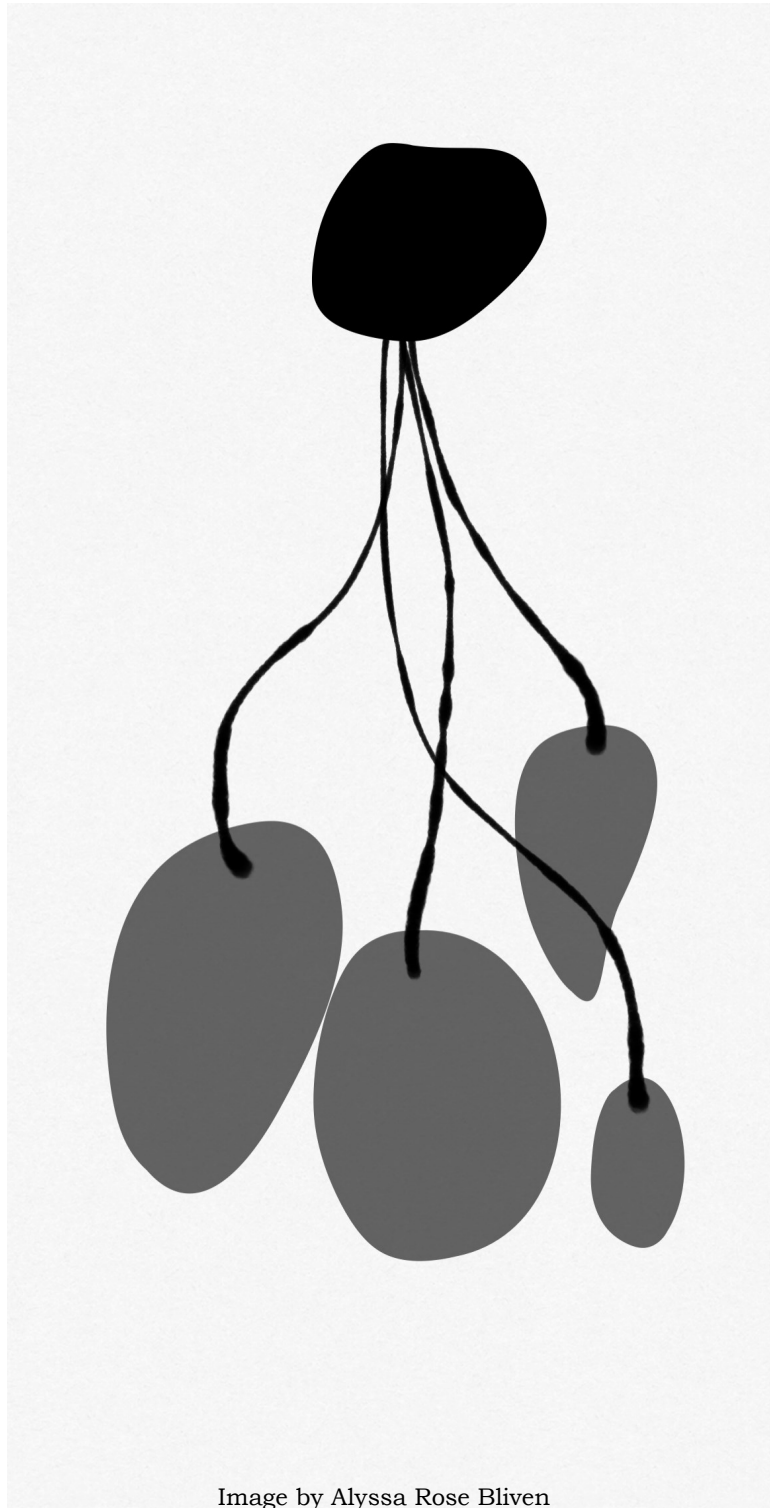


Image by Alyssa Rose Bliven

You're Just Like Me!

By Vanessa Thomas

As a small child, my mom always gave me words of affirmation. She constantly instilled in me that I had a beautiful skin tone. She was also fascinated with my hair, always telling me it was gorgeous and curly. My mom loved to show my hair off and forced me to wear it down or in ponytails. Her favorite hairstyle was two ponytails on the top of my head, but they transformed into two afro puffs hours after I made it to school.

As the school day progressed, my hair would become a relentless monster. I was a tomboy, so my hair would be filled with grass, sticks, and dirt from me rolling around outside after recess. Every night my dad would overhear us going to war in the bathroom. Washing and conditioning my hair was the easy part. My mom would comb through small sections of my curls one by one with the patience only a Buddha could have. I'd sit in the bathtub for what felt like hours and screamed bloody murder while she would detangle my unruly curls. My mom's superpower was how she could get my hair back to normal no matter how knotted it was. Every morning, my classmates would surround me in awe, asking if they could touch my hair. Some loved it, and others compared me to a poodle; it was devastating.

No matter how much I prayed, my hair wouldn't change as time went on. I didn't understand why my mom's hair was so straight, smooth, and manageable; I envied her. My hair would dry and turn into frizz, and I didn't

want it to be fluffy anymore. I couldn't stand the texture and volume of my hair; I grew to despise it. I constantly cried in defeat despite my mom's words of comfort when she styled it. The attention I received--positive or negative--was mortifying. I felt like a freak show, and everyone was always staring at my hair.

I usually only received compliments from teachers and staff, but one boy named John always complimented my hair. When my parents would take me to school events, he would come up to me and compliment my hair with his toothless smile and runoff. After my parents met John, my mom always pointed out that he had a crush on me. My dad would roll his eyes and smirk, and I would brush it off because I didn't care about boys. John and I became good friends; we had a lot in common. We both were overweight, had freckles, and loved video games. We were in different classes, but we talked every time we saw each other. He was the only person who always had something positive to say about my hair even though I thought it looked like a tumbleweed ready to take off in the wind.

One day after school, I stood on the playground finding any little reason to delay walking home. Kids ran past me, screaming and laughing, scattering off like cockroaches. I dragged my backpack across the blacktop with the sun was beating down overhead. While standing on a kickball base, I started kicking at the rocks beneath my shoes. Suddenly, John approached me with the usual friendly pat on my hair.

"You're just like me!" he randomly pointed out.

"What?" I asked, puzzled.

Swiftly he brought his arm up to mine, "We're the same shade of brown!" Then he pointed towards his hair. "My hair is curly too."

Fascinated, I poked through his dreadlocks; they were long and tightly wound, but in-between each dread was curly hair growing from his scalp. I was fascinated by his dreadlocks because I had never seen anything like them up close before. He then mentioned his parents were the same color as my parents. I thought it was so cool, but I didn't realize where he was going with his statement. Suddenly came the question that changed my life forever.

"When were you adopted?" he asked with a straight face.

I stood there looking blankly at him. "Adopted?"

"My mom and dad are both white, and your mom and dad are both white, and we're black," he pointed out.

"BLACK? I'm brown."

He laughed so hard he fell to the ground, "We're African American. Our race, that's called black."

I stared at him in confusion. "What?"

"Haven't you noticed you are a different color than your mom and dad?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't know I was...."

"My parents adopted me when I was five," he explained. "I wonder when your parents adopted you."

As we continued to talk, I noticed all the children were long gone. We stood at that empty playground for what felt like hours but was probably no more than twenty minutes. He told me all about his birth parents. I was astonished, overwhelmed, and excited. As we walked out of the empty schoolyard, he mentioned that my hair was different from my mom's because I was African American; I had no idea. My hair was always my worst enemy, and I thought something was wrong with it. Finally, we said our goodbyes and parted ways on the sidewalk.

My mind was racing as I crossed the street on my way home. I contemplated who my birth parents were and wondered how they looked. I anticipated telling my mom all the amazing things I learned. My excitement grew as the cars passed me. Halfway home, it felt like the longest walk of my life. I couldn't wait to tell her I was black and began sprinting home as fast as my legs could take me.

Backpack flailing about, I burst through the door. "MOM! MMOM," I shrieked, tossing my backpack on the living room floor.

My mom flew around the corner and out of the kitchen, Diet Dr. Pepper in hand. "What, Honey?"

"I'M ADOPTED, and I'm BLACK!" I squealed in excitement. "John told me I was adopted, and he has white parents too."

My mom stared back in absolute horror. She stood there in silence with a perplexed gaze holding back a story she thought she had years before explaining. "Vanessa, you aren't adopted," she said, bursting into tears.

I looked at her confused and disappointed, "But you're white, and dad is white, and I'm brown."

My dad came up from his television in the basement, but he went right back downstairs when he overheard the conversation. Taking my hand, my mom sat me down on the couch. She began telling me a story I was too young to comprehend. Years later, we would have this conversation again, and then I would understand the details. She explained that my father was black, but she was my mother. She told me my dad was my stepdad, but my stepdad loved me very much.

"Wow," I thought to myself, "this day keeps getting better and better. I'm black, AND I have two dads!"

Looking back on that moment of my life, I remember the veil of disappointment that cast over me when my mom told me I wasn't adopted. It wasn't that I didn't love my parents; it was just that the thought of being adopted excited me. Children are innocent, and I had no idea what was going on. I was just excited about new information, but I didn't realize what it meant. It wasn't until I was a preteen that we would have this conversation again; she told me that my birth father had been in a car accident. The moment my friend and I had the adoption conversation, it was a huge turning

point in my life. It significantly impacted me and is imprinted in my memory like the day I found out Santa Claus wasn't real. Realizing I was both black and white filled the blanks in about things I was curious about but hesitant to ask my parents.

Now that I'm older, I think back on this story, and it makes me laugh. I know firsthand from my experience children don't see color. My mom always bought me the brown barbie dolls and admired how pretty they were. I loved that my dolls had similar characteristics, but as a small child, color meant nothing. I knew they were my skin color, but I didn't know anything about the origin of skin color. Learning I was half African American helped me understand why my hair was so fluffy and texturized. As I aged, I was immediately accepted by the black community, and they taught me things my mother couldn't. Eventually, in middle school, I discovered the ethnic section of hair products in the stores. Though this experience was life-changing for me, I am grateful that my first experience with skin color was positive and not a negative experience, like being discriminated against by a classmate. After I found myself and understood my ethnicity, I learned to love my differences.

Behind the Curtains

By Sarah AppleGate

Generous, bragged friends.

Jolly, described coworkers.

Respected, boasted the community.

Murderous, printed the Newspaper.

Angry, screamed the holes in the walls.

Disruptive, uttered the scattered rooms of the house.

Wicked, asserted the blood-stained kitchen knife thrown on the floor.

Irrational, agreed the blood splatters on the wall.

Paranoid, declared the ten deadbolts on each door of the house.

Disgusted, alleged the shattered mirror sprawled across the bathroom tiles.

Nervous, muttered the wall with tally marks covering from ceiling to rotten floor.

Desperate, trembled the silent telephone.

Rejected, wailed the overturned bookshelf.

Lonely, cried the torn lampshade.

Misunderstood, mumbled the tear-stained pillows.

Lost, whispered the piled cigarette butts in the ashtray.

Joseph

By Jennifer Suarez

After 20 hours, I could feel the fluorescent lights of the hospital lobby burning my skin. I had traced and retraced the patterns on the linoleum floor over a thousand times. The once dizzying smell of the janitor's mop bucket had begun to be appealing. I had gotten up just once to use the restroom and once to get a snack from the vending machine. I was too fearful that I would move from my seat, and I would miss the doctor. Several family members had come and gone with no news from anyone.

As I sat there with the world moving around me, I felt the weight of several emotions upon my shoulders. I sat in guilt. Guilt over all the terrible things I had said leading up to that day. Things that still haunt me today and which I dare not repeat aloud. I sat in fear. *What if my mom didn't make it out of the hospital? What would my brother and I do?* We had no one else. I sat in anger. *How could my mother have been so stupid? What was she thinking at her age and the other losses?* As for my stepfather, I could have killed him then. My relationship with him had been volatile since the moment he and my mother began their courtship when I was nine. He was a vicious drunk masquerading as the most helpful and well-liked man in town. Egotistical, narcissistic, and extremely controlling--and yet my mother chose him. She even chose him after he lied and cheated--and then blamed her for *his* infidelity.

After what seemed like an eternity, a call came down from my mother's

quarters. Someone would be down momentarily to escort me upstairs. But then, silence. Deafening silence.

The next call about two hours later was from my grandmother. “Jenny, there’s a problem. She’s on oxygen. Her hands, her lips, all turning blue.” My grandmother spoke no English but understood the doctors repeating the words “emergency” and “not good.” While my grandmother was on the phone with me, the hospital staff came running in to get my mother out of her room and into the operating room.

There I was, only 17, standing in an empty hospital lobby imagining a life without my only parent. That day was the one and only time I turned to religion. I dropped to my knees and offered an exchange: my life for my mother’s. And then more silence.

After more than 24 hours in the hospital, the phone rang once more for me. Through tears and fear, I did not know what to say or think. The only word that came shooting out of my mouth like a bullet in a barrel, was a very curt “*Que?*” It was my stepfather; he was coming down to get me. I would not be allowed to see my mother, but I would be allowed entry into the nursery. I wanted to scream. *I could care less about going to see that child, the one who almost took my mother from me. I do not want to see him; I want my mom.*

The elevator ride felt like we had gone up a hundred stories when it was only about two or three. My stepfather, his face sunken and pale as if he had returned from a war overseas, looked like he had aged a decade or two. There were no congratulatory remarks, no questions or details of the birth, just si-

lence. As it turned out, the umbilical cord had been wrapped three times around my brother's neck and his getting stuck in the birth canal caused my mom complications. Had the doctors waited any longer to get my mother into the OR, they would have both died.

The doors of the elevator finally opened, and my stepfather motioned to the left as his eyes welled up with tears.

"He's in there. I must go back to your mother; the nurse will bring you down when you're done." With that, he turned and left me standing alone in the entranceway of the nursery. It was late at night and there was no one around me, not even any nurses. I stood there for at least 10 minutes, debating if I wanted to go in.

Inside the dimly lit room sat three translucent-looking totes, or rather, three hospital-grade bassinets. Two tiny alien-like creatures kicked and whined, one on the left and one on the right. They were the smallest babies I had ever seen. My eyes bounced from left to right multiple times before landing on the creature in the middle. He was almost double their size in length, with his crown and toes meeting the edges of the bassinet. He was heavier too. As the other two caused quite the commotion, he was just lying there, taking in the new, cruel world he had been released into. Without reading the nameplates, I knew that this creature in the middle was my brother. His eyes, two ebony diamond stones, gave him away. Those were my mother's eyes. All of us who share the trait jokingly refer to them as the devil's eyes as they show no hint of color other than pure blackness.

The heaviness that earlier weighed me down came rushing out of me. An unstoppable tidal wave of unadulterated emotion. I had never in my life felt connected to anyone before, and here was this creature, not even an hour old, whom I felt had been the missing piece of my entire existence. Everything inside of me changed on that 19th day of July. Over the course of his hospital stay, I made promises to him that he would never be left wanting for anything, that he would know more love than he could ever imagine, and that I would protect him for as long as I lived. They were the promises of a girl head over heels in love with the boy who would wind up saving her life on multiple occasions.

Joyce Carol Oates once wrote, "People come into your life for a reason. They might not know it themselves. You might not know it. But there is a reason. There must be." I have the craziest feeling that my brother came into my life through some cosmic intervention to save me from myself. He is 17 now, the same age I was when he was born. Past the cruel teen angst that came on like a terrible thunderstorm overnight and the many extreme mannerisms of his father, I still always see that baby from the hospital, my baby. Or rather, the baby who prepared me for my own kids. Seventeen years ago, I was unable to envision what my future held in store for me. It was my brother Joseph who made the future a possibility.

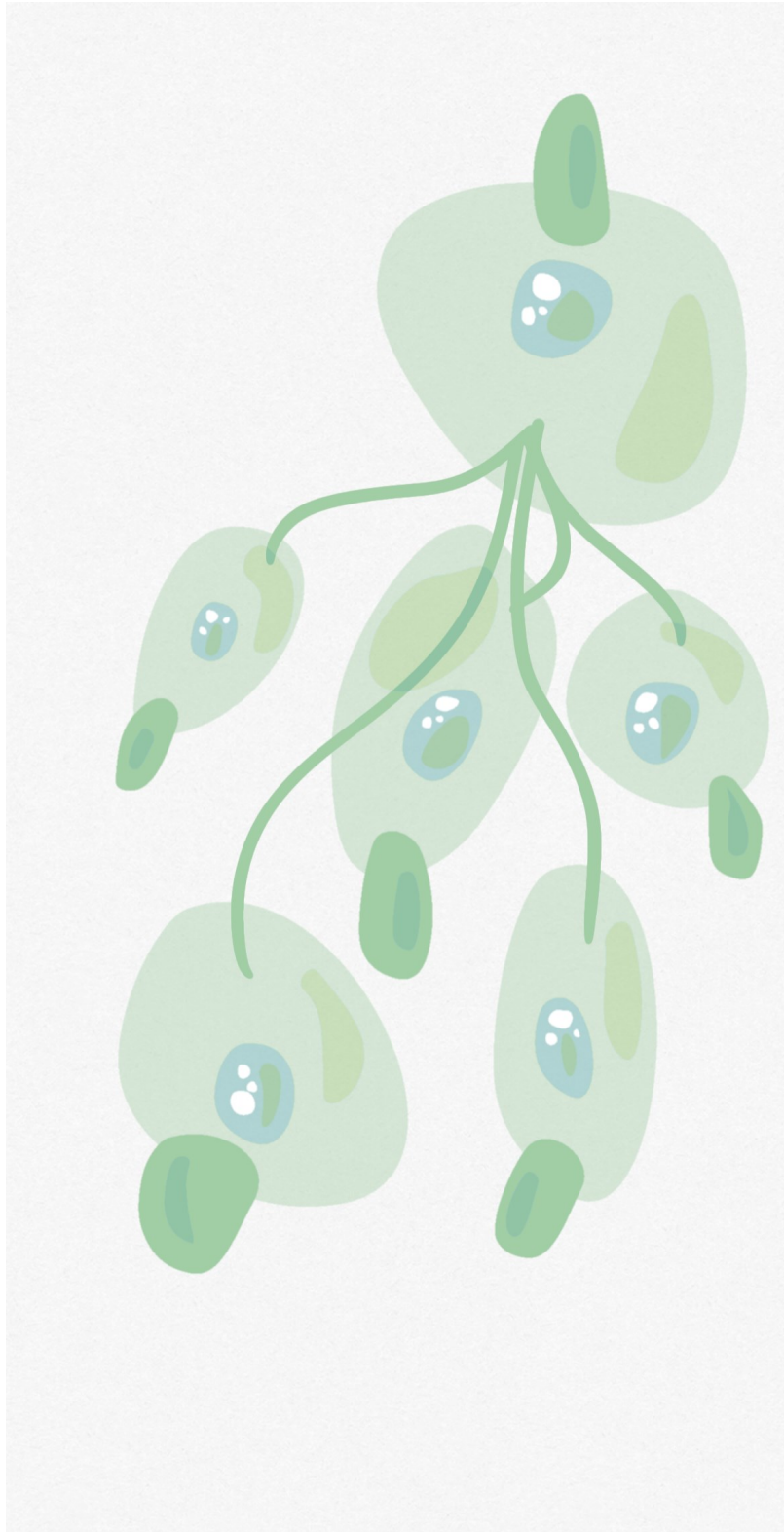


Image by Alyssa Rose Bliven

Anhedonia

By Esther Saylor

April slid silently into May—

Without fanfare.

Daffodil petals, once sunny,

Drooped, tissue-thin, toward their death.

The old woman sat.

Silent.

Her piano sat.

Silent, tuneless.

Her writing journal dusty, blank.

Hobbies gone, hidden.

She, once intrepid, bold—

Like a flower in the Kansas summer.

Now fluttering, weak,

Afraid of one hot day, another arid day,

Stretching silently.

Memories of old failures, old shames—

Etched themselves below the topsoil—

Eroding, gouging gullies of grief,

Deep, deep into decades of Aprils and Mays.

Traumas had rained down—

Like the sudden burst of hail storms,

Pelting endless summers.

Winds of loss moaned through the window screens—

Old tunes, heavy with tears, rested,

Rooted in the heart,

Discordant on the keyboard of life—

So she sat—

Quietly.

April to May.

April to May.



The Anniversary

By Landon H. Winkler

A half-eaten hamburger leaned against the side of a red plastic basket with ketchup and pickle juice dripping onto the wafer paper flavoring the greasy neighboring fries. Alfred's wrinkled fingers curled around the handle picking up his coffee that had nothing but a single packet of sugar in it. He brought the cup to his weathered face and sipped, smelling nothing but pure fresh coffee. His thick white bushy mustache made up for any lack of hair on the top of his head, but it still came away with a few drops of coffee. Like his mustache, Alfred took on more coffee than he could reasonably drink. Gulping painfully, he coughed trying to clear his throat.

It was then a man dressed in all black placed a gentle hand on Alfred's shoulder and asked him if he was okay. His voice was soothing, low, and whisper-like. His touch cleared Alfred of his cough, and he was able to focus. He then saw the man cross the checkerboard tiles that had been freshly mopped with barely a squeak from the floor. He sat like a royal atop the grimy, bright red booth cushion across from him. It let out a tired sigh.

Alfred squinted at the man, searching deep inside the crumbling library of his mind for any reference of him. Familiar though he seemed, Alfred could not place the face. He knew the man, but it was no one he'd ever met.

"Do you mind?" the man said, his voice, like a long-lost friend's, dismissed any worries Alfred may have had. He shook his head.

“My memory ain’t what it used to be. Do I know you, sir?” Alfred said, wiping his face free of coffee and ketchup with a reluctant napkin.

“I know your wife, and she simply talks about you all the time.”

“Oh, so you’re a friend of Eleanor?” Alfred said, and hearing a passing siren, he turned to see the origin. The man paid no mind.

“I’ve known Eleanor for about 23 years now. She mentions you in every conversation I’ve had with her. You’re one fortunate man Alfred.”

“Did she send you to remind me of an anniversary? It’s so much like her, you know. I’d be helpless without her.”

“An anniversary of sorts I suppose,” the man chuckled, a smile creasing his smooth alabaster face. “I’m your chaperone. An escort if you will.” His teeth were as white as his skin, and his darkly thin lips punctuated the separation between the two. Another siren passed by. The man’s smile faded slowly and left no mark though his gaunt eyes carried his years beyond reason.

“It’s mighty kind of you Mr...”

“Eian Pier, but my friends call me Eian.”

“Alrighty then, Mr. E. Pier, pardon, uh Eian. Where do we go from here?” Alfred said, hunched over his half-eaten burger and formerly warm fries. Another siren blared, but this time outside of the restaurant.

“There’s no rush Alfred. We have all the time in the world now,” he paused. “Well now that you’re done with your meal,” Eian said, sweeping any stray dirt, salt, and crumbs off the counter and leaning against it with great

hesitation, careful to avoid any grease. He tried smiling once more, but this time the creases of his eyes did not smile alongside his mouth.

Alfred didn't care to linger in the awkward moment any longer. Instead, he drew his attention to the young waitress carrying a pot of freshly brewed coffee, ready to refill any cups. Upon smelling the robust brew and seeing the waitress's focused trance, he was transported back in time where the red-topped cushions and checkerboard floor were new. Back to when he met his to-be wife Eleanor when she rushed to give customers their coffee. His stomach grew in knots yearning to return to the good ol' days. Back when he could lift himself and his wife with little effort as opposed to now where he could barely lift himself.

"One of my favorite memories, that I can still recall anyway, is when I was a nervous young lad, er I suppose a man, with a ring in his pocket and dreams of being a husband. I sat exactly where I am right now, except I had an angel that I would soon have the pleasure of calling my wife, sitting across from me. She would be on break and I'd get her a milkshake and we'd be dipping our fries in it. I know it sounds a little strange, but it had the best mixture of sweet, salty, hot, and cold that I'd ever had. One day, I slipped the ring into the milkshake, thinking it'd be all romantic, but she nearly ate the damn thing!" Alfred said, chuckling to himself.

"That sounds like a fond memory indeed!" Eian said, smiling for real this time. "She told me that you nearly had a heart attack before she spat it out. Can you tell me more? It's refreshing to hear the other side of the story."

The siren had become more obnoxious, lights flaring, red and blue, red and blue.

“I would love to, Eian, really, but I just want to go home now. I miss Eleanor something fierce. I know my memory ain’t that good anymore, but I can’t remember the last time I saw her.” Tears formed little by little in his eyes. Red and blue continued to flash as the sirens blared.

“Don’t worry Alfred, after all, I’m here to take you to her,” He said, standing and placing a gentle hand on Alfred’s shoulder. It comforted Alfred and gave him the strength to stand with his escort. Red and blue. Blue and red.

Alfred didn't hobble out as he had entered. Instead, he walked with the ease that he had 60 years ago. He was nearly blinded by the lights alongside Mr. E. Pier. Red and blue. Blue and red.

We are not so different you and I

By Moriah Adolph

We are not so different you and I.

There are moments we laugh and moments we cry.

Some days we are proud and stubborn,

other days when were humble and meek.

At times we feel strong

and others when we feel weak.

We have strong emotions,

with our heart we can love.

Days we fit in and days we feel judged.

There's times we've been truthful

and times when we've lied.

Yes were not so different you and I.

We are all fighting battles,

some we win some we lose.

There are times we feel torn up, beaten, battered, and bruised.

Times we have it all together

and times when were puzzled and confused.

There are times when we panic,
palms sweating and heart racing fast,
because we thought it was love
and didn't know if it would last.

There were times we didn't know if our broken heart would mend.

Times we reached out
because we needed a friend.

So the next time your feeling lost and rejected,
there are so many ways we are connected.

We have much more in common than we may think.

So lets help one another recognize our strengths.

Cause were not so different after all.

Though some of us short and others are tall.

We need each other, though at times it hard to see.

Were not so different you and me.

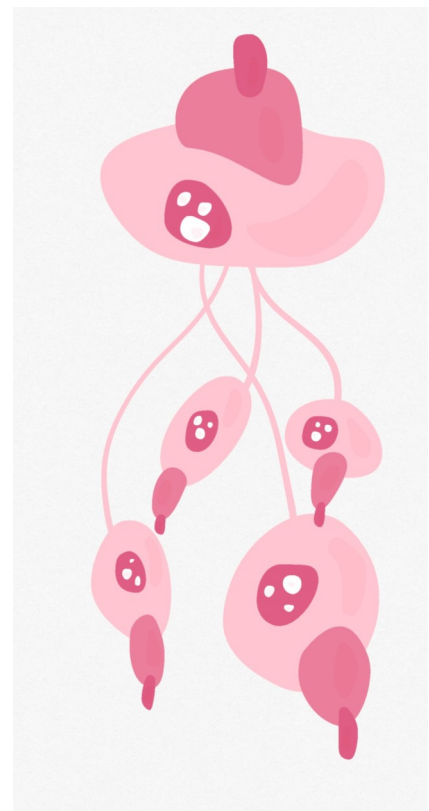


Image by Alyssa Rose Bliven

Dusk on Turon Kansas

By Sarah AppleGate

I remember every feeling.

The collective summers of my childhood, the same moment repeats year after year. The day starts like any other day in the summer. My internal clock pushes me out of my bed by nine in the morning. Chores become my immediate priority as time ticks towards freedom. I hear the noon chime on the grandfather clock signaling the call to mom or dad to get money from the quarter jar for the pool. An interrogation of the days chores proceeds any authorization for myself and my siblings. Finally, we finish, the house, reaching my parents standards, and we locate our swimsuits, still damp with the pool water from the day before, put them on, and start the nine-block walk from our house to the city pool.

The day is so vibrant. The sky has a gradient of deep blues and the sun contrasts its colors in such fascinating saturation. I feel the heat from the asphalt through my worn base of my flip-flops. The intensity from the sun, aware that sunscreen had not been applied yet, already began to burn my soft skin. The wind has a gentle breeze to keep the flow of heat traveling and delivering a satisfying break from the scorch of the beams. With each foot, one step after another, my siblings and I pass friends' houses, joke around a bit rudely, practice our balance on the curbs, and apply sunscreen in the middle of our walk. Well, my sister and I do fully - Davey only ever puts the minimum

amount on his cheeks, ears, and shoulders. We plan the rest of our day only at the start of it. As we turn the corner of the street, the pool's parking lot is already full with parents and teenagers' cars, and the sounds of children's screams and laughter carries through the summer atmosphere. While our hopes and main goals of being the first to the pool are a bit dimmed, we pick up our pace and close the distance.

We catch our friends' attention through the gates, and while paying our admission, they stand impatiently at the threshold waiting for us. I sign my name in a hurried manner, marked the "x" over in the paid column, dunk my feet in the black rubber tub, and rush to meet my friends. We find an empty bench and swiftly discard our clothes. Finally, the hidden spots of our skin are tickled by the warm rays of the sun.

With mighty courage, I walk straight from my bench to the deep end, 9ft deep, and walk all the way to the painted wall. My hand touches the cool, shaded cement, right on the palm tree's center. The pool's walls are painted with a basic summer beach theme. The paint is fairly new, and the designs pop from the painting, alive and active in their own way. As I push off the art, I send myself full speed towards the edge of the pool. I stop about a foot away, planting my feet and leap up and out into a perfect dive.

My hands feel the cold water first. My eyes shut, and within seconds, I am submerged and protected from the sun in a capsule of chlorine and cold water. The water floods my ears and senses. The pressure changes around me

as people kick and jump nearby. My dive sends me towards the bottom, and I open my eyes and let the chlorine assault my awareness to my surroundings. The pressure of the water slows my descent to the bottom of the pool as I let air out of my lungs. Soon, my body sways, barely inches between me and the pool floor. I close my eyes once more, savoring the feeling, but another person crashes into the water above me. Their movements set my heart pounding. I look for the safest way up, careful to avoid the little kids playing nearby.

I emerge and inhale a deep breath of warm air. I push myself out of the pool as the cement scrapes my chins. I search for my friends, and we begin our innocent pool games. The only thing taking us away from our small paradise is the whistle followed by a dreaded shout, "Break! Everyone out of the pool please!" My friends and I sulk out of the once fluid water, and we watch as the adults invade our paradise.

The grouchiness doesn't last long for the children, as the pool staff sell drinks, candy, and food, giving us energy and keeping us busy while we wait. With the money our couch-cushion and pocket money, we buy all sorts of food. My go-to is always a Hershey's Cookies 'n' Cream Hershey's Bar, Xtreme Sour Belts, a blue popsicle, and a small bag of Funyuns, and occasionally water for hydration. I take my food and lay out on my huge new beach towel that I chose while shopping with my Nana and Papa before the summer started. This year, I chose a black towel with a tiger on it. My sister chose a black towel adorned with two macaws-one red and one blue- and set her camp

right next to mine.

Unaware of just how much the pool drained us, we fuel up quickly on our treats. The Funyuns flavor mixes well with the droplets of chlorine water on my lips, and the sourness of Xtreme Belts. The meal is perfect to keep me playing for another 30-minute round of sharks and swimmers. Eventually, the snacks are not enough, and we agree that we should walk two blocks to my Nana's for a real meal.

As we reach the most beautiful house in the town, my papa rounds the corner on his riding lawn mower; shirt off and beer gut hanging over his pants with sweat dripping down his arms and back, showing all the work he has put into the garden and yard. Nana, barefoot, walks out of the front porch door, onto the hot cement slabs, and asks us about the pool.

Like magic, we enter to find hot dogs already cooking on the stove, and Nana pulling freshly made Kool-Aid from the fridge, our favorite: Black Cherry Kool-Aid with extra sugar. My brother and sister grab a plate of hot dogs cradled inside warm buns. Mine in a small pink bowl chopped up so I don't choke with lots of A1 sauce on the side to drown the meat in. As the day is still nice, I take my food and enjoy the feast in the protection of the porch.

After I'm done eating, my siblings pack their clothes and shoes. My brother goes back to the pool and my sister decides to go home and rest there. As for me, my choice is made. My nana thinks it is best that I take a nap in her bed, and if I feel up to it afterward, I can return to the pool. I watch as she

preps the bed and turns the old loud fan on. I use all my strength to hop onto the huge bed, right in the spot that Papa usually lays in. My eyes take time to adjust, but when they do, I study all the room.

I start with my head turned towards all the collectibles that cover my Papa's side of the room. His gun shelf standing tall, and the glass had beautiful deer emblazoned on its side. As my eyes trail the wall, the bald eagle decorations take over. My eyes trace over each one: the glass statue of the bald eagle wrapped in the American Flag, the old illuminated picture with a bald eagle flying off the wall. I travel down the aisle of collectables until my gaze reaches the two French doors. I notice the DVD case, completely full with a healthy mix of horror and action shows, and my Papa's dresser. I realize I have never seen that dresser cleared off before. The clothes sat there waiting to be put away, but inevitably they would just stay there and be used in a routine manner through the week.

I flip on my back and begin my ritual of tracing the intricate old black iron bed rest. The way the iron welds together reminds me of a huge queen with her bosom showing her authority and pride. I desire to trace every bit of the scene sometimes switching from my index finger to my pinkie finger and sometimes almost managing to get it stuck in the cooled iron frame. Often, I trace till I fall asleep, but today, I am satisfied after tracing the section my little arms can easily reach. I smile and turn myself to stare at my Nana's side of the room.

She too has a gun cabinet on the other side of the bed although hers isn't as full as the latter. Her bedside table has less clutter as well. It holds up a dolphin figurine and one of the home phones. Her dresser is closer, and the top of it is usually always cleared off. The nail polish and gardener gloves keep the space on top of the dresser untidy. Beside the dresser is the shared closet of my Nana and Papa. It homes a lot of clothes and shoes, all worn through but still worn daily. Finally, I look again at the French doors, my favorite doors to ever exist. The bustling life outside the door is covered by thick blue curtains on the outside of the doors, so I look through the glass boxes at the covers, occasionally spotting a small ray of light from the outside. At last, I turn back to my papa's side and let the left side of my body be engulfed by the huge bed. The fan blasts its white noise melody, and my body, weak from energy spent at the pool, uses the melody to drift into a resting sleep.

I wake up from a dream and quickly roll myself out of the bed. The sky's still blue, but the sun is setting over my little town. The air cools a bit because of it. When I open the French doors, my mom calls for me from the kitchen table, and I give myself whiplash by how fast I turn and run to her. She hugs me, asks me about my day, and hands me clothes to change into asking me to put my swimsuit in the plastic bag after I am done.

The kitchen is lively as preparations for dinner hit their climax. The aroma is delightful and a little greasy. My brother is outside playing football with my dad, and my Papa is just now putting the lawn mower back in its

shed. My sister, nowhere to be seen inside the house, is most likely out on the porch reading a book.

I quickly run to the bathroom and change out of the damp pool clothes and replace them with the fresh outfit. I put on some flowy shorts and a cute flowery white blouse that stands in beautiful contrast to my tanned, freckled skin. When I face myself in the mirror, freckles speckle almost every inch of my face, and my eyes shine a bit greener contrasting the red irritation from the pool's chlorine. My hair is a light blonde, the dark hues from winter finally replaced by the sun's natural bleach.

I leave the bright yellow bathroom and head straight for the porch. Before I can cross the threshold, mom yells to tell my sister and the boys that supper is ready. I journey to the porch to let my sister know. Then, I run outside to seek my brother and dad. The cement is still warm with the sun's heat, but my feet find the security of the grass quickly as I make my way to the backside of the house. I reach my hidden grove, covered and protected by huge bushes, a pathway in the dirt made by hexagon stepping stones. I speedily leap over each one. A few more bounds and I successfully find them. I tell them that food is ready, and we all return to the house.

The table is set, and the plates and silverware are out and ready for us to use. Before any of us start grabbing, my sister says grace over the food and blesses the people that prepared it. After grace mom helps get grandma a plate full of mashed potatoes and a side of diced up hamburger. As everyone grabs

a plate and fills it with all of the greasy, feel-good food, I sit at the end of the table by the window dangling my feet waiting for my plate to arrive. Finally, mom sets my plate before me, and I eye the contents with hunger and satisfaction: a hamburger diced up and smothered in A1 sauce, French style green beans with a few dashes of salt and pepper, and a generous serving of the buttery, milky mashed potatoes complete with a roll.

The night flows on, the kitchen is loud with discussion about the day and future plans for summer. A possible trip to the lake is mentioned, and the whole family begins to create scenarios of how the weekend trip will go. I get my points in here and there, but the conversation takes a more grown-up turn, and I can't be bothered to stay and listen, so I take my plate to the sink and rinse off the crumbs and sauce. After that, I sneak out of the kitchen and to my safe haven of the house.

The porch.

The atmosphere has changed; the birds have gone quiet, and crickets and June bugs now occupy their song. Their melody is unique and fascinating in its own right. I throw my regular glance to the left side of the porch with the broken bed swing, a couch, and a plethora of plants. The porch around all the pots is wet, evidence of being watered earlier that evening. I take myself to the right side of the porch with the working yellow floral swing. I touch the metal, still cool even as the day was hot. The metal is coarse, not ever sanded properly but not enough to leave a cut. The radio on the table is playing '70s

rock and roll quietly. I usually keep it on, but tonight I want to hear the June bugs and wind. The breeze that flows through the mesh porch is cool but warm. My skin relaxes as the breeze engulfs me gently.

I finally plop down into the swing and kick my feet up off the ground. The ashtrays on the coffee table are filled and the aroma is a mix of the smoke and pollen from the garden. A comforting scent.

I lay on my side and reach my arm out to the metal. I grab it, pull myself towards it, and then, I let go. The swing is small and steady, but I gather momentum with each return to that coarse gray metal, my hand scraping against it rocking myself to the peace of my lovely home.

I don't know how much time goes by as I sit there swinging, stopping, and almost drifting to sleep, until I become still and begin the cycle of swinging myself again. Eventually my mom comes out to find me and tells me that it is time to go home. The crickets take over everything now; their voices echoing through the space, signaling the true beginning of night.

As we drive home, my mom rolls the window down, and I stare up at the sky. The stars shine brightly, and the galaxy softly makes an appearance. The town is asleep, and all the stores-both open and abandoned- sleep too.





Image by Mollie McReynolds

Submission to Prairie Ink

We are a literary annual that welcomes fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, drama, literary criticism, and graphic narratives.

We serve as a vehicle for emerging writers who attend Barton Community College or reside in one of the seven counties within Barton's service region.

The editors of Prairie Ink encourage submissions from Barton students, alumni, and community members from Barton's seven-county service area: Barton, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Ellsworth, Russel, Stafford; and from students enrolled at the Barton Fort Riley Campus and Grandview Plaza Outreach location.

To check out submission guidelines or to submit your work, please email the editors at prairieink@bartonccc.edu.

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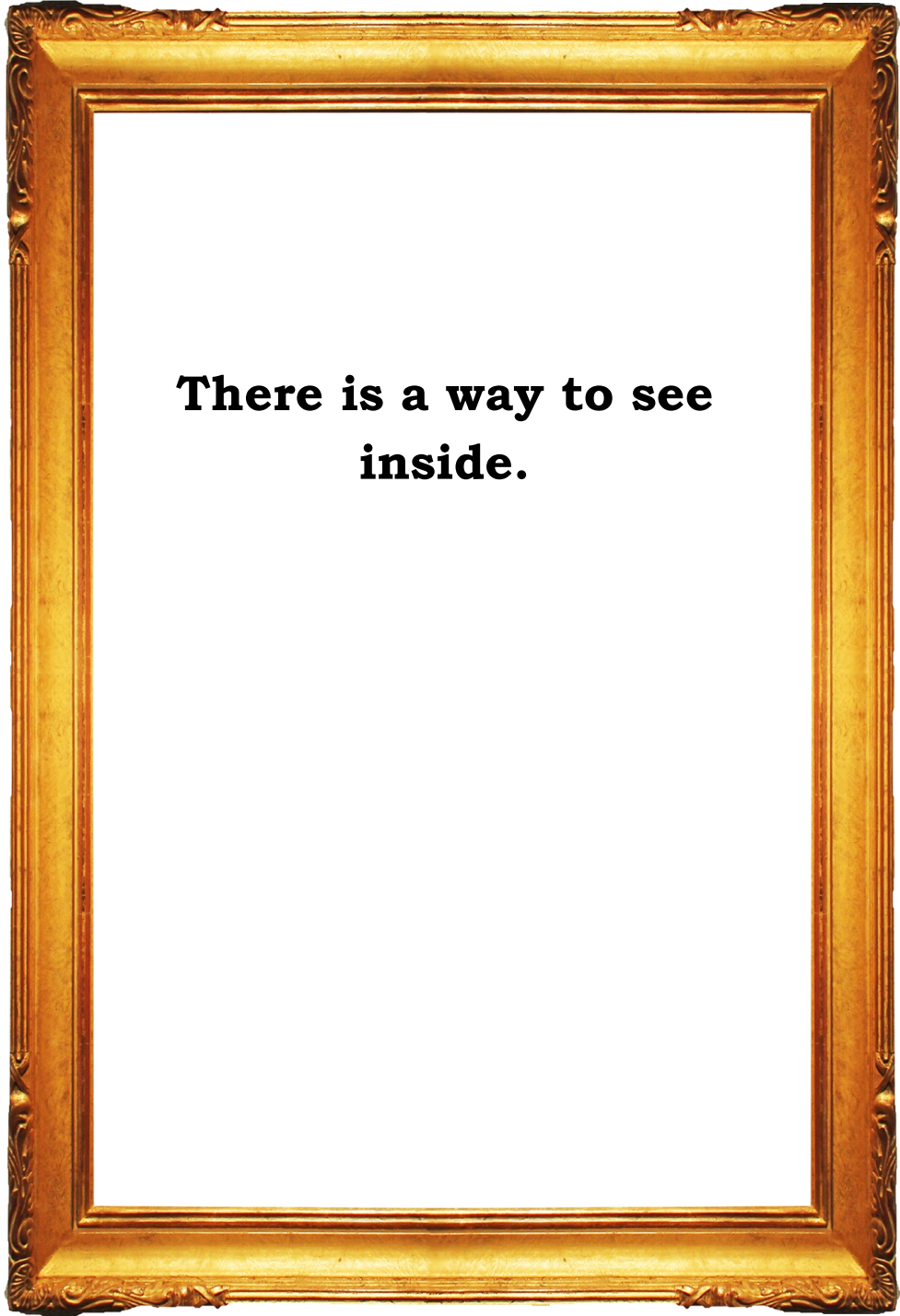
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inside.**