

Spring
Thaw

2024



Spring Thaw

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Table of Contents

Book Colors	L. L. Kelly	5
<i>Coneflower</i>	<i>Emily Tischbirek</i>	5
<i>Coneflower</i>	<i>Michael Hanley</i>	5
Never- Ending Imagination	Jillian Wakeman	6
Blackbird Chorus	<i>Elizabeth Merrigan</i>	7
Well, Hello, Autumn	<i>Dawn Loeffler</i>	7
Shabby and Not Chic	Teresa Alto	8
<i>Flowers for Richard</i>	<i>Kelli Lien</i>	9
Stage Fright or Spot Light	Glen Key	10
My Journey to Self-Love	Peyton Skelly	11
Art	<i>Paige Patterson</i>	12
Taconite Girl	Jacqueline Troumbly	13
A Student’s Life: On Leaving	Evan Bruemmer	14
<i>Grandpa Drawing</i>	<i>Kaylin Rivard</i>	14
School of Tears	Melanie Howick Erickson	15
<i>Little Things</i>	<i>Chelsea Johnson</i>	15
Bad Poetry	Robert Jevne	15
Sibling Strife	Allie Pagel	16
<i>Spring Peeper</i>	<i>Vicki Lessard</i>	17
Just a Drive	Lily Saccoman	18
<i>Sunflowers</i>	<i>Holly Duester</i>	18
The New Horse	Melanie Howick Erickson	19
Art	<i>Jayden Swenson</i>	19
Izzy’s Blueberry Wish	Lynn Moore	20
<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Vicki Lessard</i>	21
I’m Sorry	Aunna Nubson	22
<i>Tulips at Mayo</i>	<i>Kelly Lien</i>	22
Unexpected Connection with a Stranger	Teresa Alto	23
<i>Buddy at Sunrise on Wolf Lake</i>	<i>Michael Hanley</i>	24
A While Away	Teopa Reve	25
<i>The Miracle and The Whitniss</i>	<i>Chris Tolman</i>	25
Senior Year	Alexa Scholl	26
Heart Pains	Teresa Alto	28
<i>The Heart of Nature</i>	<i>Holly Duester</i>	29
Again Young for Just a While	Keys Allen	29
The Woods	Aunna Nubson	30
<i>Day and Night</i>	<i>Jillian Wakeman</i>	30
Cranberry Bog	Diane Morey	31
<i>Grasshopper</i>	<i>Dawn Loeffler</i>	33
Building	Robert Jevne	34
Art	Adreonna Bittner	34
An Island of Many	Sam Connelly	35
<i>Torres del Paine National Park, Chile</i>	<i>Cate Belleveau</i>	35
Managed	Robert Jevne	36
Preacher Bird	Elizabeth Merrigan	36
Contributors		37

Book Colors

LL Kelly

Have you ever wondered
why books don't come in colors?

The text, the pages, or anything in between
All inked in monochrome, nothing else to be seen
No starry silver for sci-fi
No midnight blue for mysteries
No sepia brown for historicals
No emerald green for fantasies
Not even trademarked shades for the royalty of writing
No Shire Green for Tolkein
No Carrie Red for King
No Dracula Black for Stoker
No Gryffindor Gold for Rowling

There could be shades for suspense, shades for fear
shades for when the climax is drawing near
shades for romantic moments, and
shades for sad moments
and lots of ombre mixtures between them all
Every book would be its own palette,

inspiring styles across the globe
uniting fans with a color show

Have you ever wondered
why books don't come in colors?

Imagine a library of rainbows inked on each page
Where opening a book is viewing a work of art
not just the art of world-building
but also the art of book-building
Where printers have more to play with
than fonts and layouts
Where the world is their oyster of color
Where publishers compete to have the best shades
to have the best access to ink
to have all the necessary trademarks
For a truly perfect "classic lit" experience

Have you ever wondered
why books don't come in colors?



Coneflowers by Emily Tischbirek (left) and Michael Hanley

Never-Ending Imagination

Jillian Wakeman

When I was little, a good friend of mine and I loved to play in the woods. I live in a place surrounded by a thick forest. The forest surrounding my house has many trees and plants, and there are a few ponds scattered throughout it. We liked playing all sorts of games, like pretending to be top secret spies, hunters, people surviving in the woods, etc. Our favorite place to play was where a tree had fallen in a clearing almost as if it was meant to be a bench in our house in the woods. In the clearing, next to the fallen tree was a stump with a flat and smooth surface, which was our dining table. We made little beds out of leaves, or snow depending on the time of year. Previously, while exploring the forest, I found a tree branch with a knot at the end that looked like an axe (surely a gift from the forest), so naturally, the axe hung on a short tree nearby, which was our pots and pans/utensils rack. My mom let us use an old, rusted pot that she hadn't used for a long time.

One day, as we realized our own boredom, we decided to pretend to be witches. We made a little structure out of branches, which we said looked like a castle (although it looked more like a tent). Using the old pot my mom gave us, we collected muddy water from a pond, and we started mixing all sorts of ingredients (mushrooms, tree bark, rocks, leaves, bugs, etc.) with a stick, to make a potion to cure our pet dragon from an illness. We found sticks and used them as our wands for our magic to complete the potion. We imagined magical lights streaming toward our target: the terrifying werewolf, or my old dog. As clouds covered the sun and it got darker, the atmosphere became spooky and very quiet. We imagined that the stick cracking sound we heard was not a bird or a squirrel, but of course a vampire that could finally come out since the sun was covered. We cast spells with our wands to protect ourselves from such an evil creature. Then, we teleported (or ran as fast as we could) back to the safety of the house, where we would tell my mom about our adventures.

We never saw a werewolf, nor did we see a vampire, and we certainly didn't live in a castle, just a little tent made of sticks. The stick that snapped was probably just a small animal, and the things we mixed into the pot were more of a sludge than a potion. But my point is not what we saw, but what we didn't see, because we had so much fun, no matter how silly it may seem. Sometimes, I look back at the times when we got so lost in our imaginations, and I yearn to feel that deep sense of lightness and freeness again. However, there

is never a time when I can't have a choice: I don't ever have to stop dreaming, even if I can't feel that light feeling again. I may have visualized magic and castles when I was younger, but just because I'm older doesn't mean I have to lose that side of myself, it doesn't mean that has died in me, and does not mean it will die in everyone as we age. We don't always have to fit into the clean-cut boxes that we create as a society. A little bit of creativity doesn't necessarily hurt us in the long run. I think that many people are so stuck in the thought of being like everyone else that we lose ourselves and our true nature. Over time, however, I've learned that life is all about setting ourselves free from other's opinions, and letting ourselves be who we are. I don't ever want to lose the side of myself that can set pen to paper and create a story, or the side that can put my paint brush to the canvas and make a cool painting. The creative side in all of us is what life is all about—it's what makes us human, and what makes life worth living.

Blackbird Chorus

Elizabeth Merrigan

Having sipped from Spring's
Verdant ale, the blackbird chorus
Swoops down on the lawn, a drunken
Bunch of feathered wonder, pecking
And chirping, trilling and milling
About in a symphonic rise
That rattles the kitchen window
And shakes awake the gathering
Joy of April's breezes drifting
Through the grove.

For a second, there is silence.
And then, the maestro raises
His black baton, the grass quivers
In anticipation, and they
Lift in flight, so quick and orderly
Across the road, a surprise
Orchestra for my neighbor's delight.

A year will pass.
And then I will hear them again,
The blackbird chorus choosing
My land to perform their new arrangement
Of Nature's blessed song.

Well, Hello, Autumn

Dawn Loeffler

There was great anticipation of her arrival
many peeked through closed curtains
stared out passing car windows
glanced down the road when opening the
mailbox

However, she arrived
unscheduled but not delayed
with the mist
on a cloud covered day
when no one was watching

Her trail ablaze through the docile green
all flit and flutter
as bright as a nova
against those chalk grey clouds
blushing shades of orange
from her golden curls to her painted toes
with Hello and Goodbye on her lips

Then she stood silent, expectant
as the atmosphere cooled
Breeze blew into Wind
that familiar rhythm set
and she twirled, little tornadoes
sprinkling a tangible sunset of confetti
within that space between heaven and earth



Eskimo Kisses by Chris Tolman

Shabby and Not Chic

Teresa Alto

When a new person comes to my house, I have to fight the urge to say something apologetic about our mismatched table settings and shabby furniture. Three decades out of graduate school, my furnishings still look like “college student furniture.” In fact, my husband and I recently realized that we had not ever purchased a single piece of new furniture besides a mattress some 15 years ago and an office chair about the same time. And it’s not like we’ve scoured Facebook Marketplace and estate sales for special pieces. We’ve simply continued to lounge on a saggy couch with the now faded magenta and teal geometric shapes of the 1980s, squeeze together on a half sofa whose smooth paisley print is ripped, and catch toppling pepper grinders and salt shakers when we wipe off the wobbly dining room table. Even that mattress that was once new now sports the shapes of our sleeping bodies.

But a major spring broke in the Lazy-boy recliner Aaron’s mom handed down to him sometime in the 1990s, leaving a listing seat. Aaron had limped this chair along, screwing the footrest back in place and shoring up other supports, but this problem proved unfixable. Maybe it was finally time to replace this chair and its mate, which had not reclined quite right for many years after one of Aaron’s repairs.

Even so, we didn’t go shopping with the plan to replace these chairs. Middle-aged back problems had Aaron thinking the divots in our mattress might be to blame. He doesn’t care about appearances, but Aaron prizes his health and vitality. So we went mattress shopping and ended up with two chairs.

One was a full-size recliner, wedged tightly in a platoon of recliners at the discount furniture store. Aaron maneuvered openings to try out sitting and reclining in various chairs, looking for lumbar support. The other new chair is a type I think of as Scandinavian design but at this price point is apparently known as an RV recliner. It was dust-covered and bereft of a price tag when we spied it off to the side of the full-size chairs. This recliner could have been a cousin to the selected full-size one but from the skinny side of the family, both of them a sleek soft black vinyl with white stitching. I brushed the dust off and sat in it. It was every bit as comfortable as my mother’s real leather and bent wood chair that does earn its moniker of Scandinavian design. And we got it for quite a bit less than even its discount price because of what I’ve come to find an endearing trait. An artist rendering this chair in perfect detail would be accused of distorting perspective. It lists visibly for the viewer, but not palpably for the sitter, and this distinguishing feature decreased the price by two-thirds but perhaps even increases its value to me.

The RV recliner fit in the back of our station wagon, and the larger chair sat upright on the flatbed

trailer, covered with an old sheet and secured with ratchet straps. My job was to keep watch on it to make sure it was staying put at speed. It looked like a hillbilly throne on a dais, which made me think of what has passed for royalty in the US. “Here she comes, Miss America!” I called, watching the sharp flapping of the sheet in the wind.

The hillbilly look is appropriate. One of the advantages of living just outside the city limits and obscured from the road by 100 feet of woods is that we operate with what Aaron calls “country casual.” One of the old recliners, which still had passable performance, was picked up by Habitat for Humanity’s Restore; the other was put out in a snowbank until it is convenient to take it to the dump. We still haven’t gotten a new mattress. Aaron goes back and forth about whether he needs one. And I wonder whether those body divots could be the equivalent of wearing in new shoes. The mattress is now fitted to us. It’s not like coils are sticking out in the way they were in the mattress this one replaced.

We often marvel how we found each other, my husband and I, mutual freaks in our lack of conventional consumerism. But I wasn’t always this way. I grew up believing my family was poor, and my parents did little to dispel that mistaken impression. We shopped at thrift stores for clothes; the cars were used; we didn’t have a couch or recliner. In junior high, I coveted my best friend’s house and studied fashion in *Vogue* magazine.

Chris, a sixth-grade classmate I thought was cute, told me about the bar in his family’s basement den. I described the golden wall-to-wall carpet, wall sconces, and wood panelling in our house, a complete fiction. My best friend Kristen had the normal house and family of my dreams. They watched TV—a big color console—while they ate. Their den really did have wall-to-wall golden carpeting and fake wood panelling, and the furniture was a soft velveteen with an autumn print.

It goes without saying that my family’s home embarrassed me. It had wood floors, for one thing. I’d loved sliding around on them in socks pretending to be an Olympic ice skater a few years before, but by junior high they seemed the mark of poverty. We lacked big puffy furniture that invites lounging and falling asleep to the television. Our small black-and-white television offered nothing of the sort, sitting in the dining room for the daily ritual of the evening news and little else.

Unlike most teens who reject the world of their parents, however, I adopted their values pretty much immediately upon reaching adulthood. I lived in a coop house, a three-story Gothic home that looked like a haunted house. It was called Anomy

House, aptly named for the sociological concept of a breakdown of order. Anomy House had sagging couches on the porch and mismatched odds and ends of furniture throughout the living spaces. These were rooms you could hang out in for hours, your sweating water glass leaving a ring on the table, your sweaty thighs dampening the faded fabric of the chair you were curled on, as you listened to stories and cracked inside jokes with your housemates, your new family. Because that's what mattered, the people. The place was the place you were together; "context was everything," as one of my housemates used to say.

The thing is, I never graduated from college student furniture to something more sophisticated. There came a time when I had enough money to buy nice stuff. But I didn't need to anymore. I had outgrown something different – that junior high fantasy of elegance and glamor and intense desire for normalcy and the signals thereof. I don't really want anything new or fancy. I don't even really want to be normal. Maybe that's why I like the visual distortion of my new RV recliner and settle comfortably into the cocoon of our old mattress.



Flowers for Richard by Kelli Lien

Stage Fright or Spot Light

Glen Key

“Left! Left! Left, Right, Left!” I yelled as we came around the corner. The lights shone down on me making the old, heavy army jacket even hotter than it already was. As I stood there barking out orders, no one really cared who I truly was. Behind this disguise of Colonel Hathi, I found the confidence to put on a great show.

In the winter of 5th grade my mom wanted me to join the musical *The Music Man*. Since it was community theater it was free to register and participate. Because of that my mother decided she would at least have me try. My mother brought me to a church where they were holding auditions in the dank basement. I was brought to a room that was at the end of a long hallway that was lit with the humming of the yellowish fluorescent drop ceiling lights. Upon entering, it was filled with boxes and old Christmas decorations that were moved aside, lining the walls practically to the ceiling, which already was low to begin with, to create a makeshift dance floor. There were about 15 adults and an 11-year-old me learning choreography that wasn't even established beforehand. I was then sent to a music room back down the hall where they had the singing part of the audition. The woman at the piano began to play and stared at me as I sang a song she had just handed me. They finally said I was done, to my relief. I thought I would be sick if they had asked me to perform one more task. The audition was one of the scariest things I had done, I felt alone, and it was unlike anything I had ever done. As my mother and I left, I begged and pleaded to her not to make me do the show and she agreed. She and I were both relieved to be done, since neither of us had been through this process and it was proving to be more difficult and nerve-wracking than we hoped.

As I approached the summer after 6th grade with nothing to do my mom had scrounged up a plan. My mom had signed me up for *The Jungle Book* and told me after all the registration was finalized, there was no backing out. After I was traumatized a year ago I had no desire to try my terror again. My mother didn't back down; I was sent to summer boot camp for theater kids. The program was about 3 weeks with 2 performances at the very end. I quickly realized this was a little different: it was a program for children with no adults in sight besides the directors. Everyone that would be on stage with me were no older than 15 years old. As we were given the cast list my jaw hit the floor. I would be playing Colonel Hathi who had 10 lines, which was 10 more than I have ever done in front of people. My character was a strong, brave leader of the elephant stampede, and I felt I couldn't relate to him. Those 3 weeks were a struggle to say the least as I had

to repeatedly bark military type orders at new people I barely knew. I kept begging my mom to tell the directors anything to get me out: I had left the country, I was arrested for arson, I will be the first 7th grader to go to the international space station—anything to get me out of this hell. She wouldn't budge as we quickly approached the first performance. The time had come: I could either bow out or be forever embarrassed. As I entered the stage, turned the corner and commanded the other elephant on stage, I realized the audience loved me.

As I survived boot camp it actually opened my eyes to the wonder of theater. Within that standstill moment a lot more happens than the audience knows. Being on stage with your fellow performers who can see through your façade. During a performance, backstage and in the wings is where the real magic happens. This is where all the actors share their love of theatre. It starts with all cast members getting ready together sharing jokes, nerves, and the joy of being part of something. At the end of everything you cherish the friendships that were made and eagerly await for the next show, so you can do it all again.

This was an outlet that allowed me to not just be myself, instead I get to be a different person each time. This triumph led to being in as many plays as I could. I would seek out all types of shows I could be a part of which led to being in about 3 to 4 a year. As I got even more comfortable that's when I started getting lead roles. This entailed more lines to memorize and more of a name in the local community. I would return to shows to have audience members remember me from my other work and sing my praises. I don't usually love compliments because I think they could just be lying to try to be nice, but hearing that many different people loved seeing me in shows opened my eyes to how far I've come.

I would never believe the growth I had accomplished from running from the stage to running to the stage. I love being myself which for me means sometimes putting on a performance to be a different person, or even elephant. The ability to become a new person and feel everything they would feel is something I am so grateful for. I think this helps with empathy and my outlook on others. To be able to actually be in someone else's shoes for a moment helps me be a better person in normal day to day life. Theater is my outlet that I would have never found if my mother let me give up on myself. I will keep marching left, left, left, right, left into any situation that has the potential to be an opportunity to better myself.

My Journey to Self-Love

Peyton Skelly

My middle school years will always be remembered as some of the worst years of my life. The number of issues that no “trusted adult” addressed, are devastating to me. I never felt like there was help for me, or anyone to support me at the least. It had always seemed like no matter how much I would try addressing problems to an adult, nothing would change. At the end of the day, I continued to get severely bullied, without even realizing how much it was hurting me. I was always just told not to be so sensitive. Those four years of middle school slowly sunk me into developing mental health disorders I’m still struggling with today. However, throughout my life I’ve learned ways to help me grow as a person and find my most truthful self.

Seventh grade was my most challenging year of middle school. I was at my most vulnerable state and was taught to brush things off and not let them get to me. One of the biggest obstacles I faced was bullying and body shaming. I was a very skinny girl, and I struggled with severe acne. It seemed like every girl in middle school had crystal clear skin, and as a result, I always stood out. I felt so ugly in my own skin. I couldn’t look anyone in the eyes, as I felt that all they saw was my acne and blemishes. The only solution I had was to cover up in makeup and blend over my insecurities. It didn’t look natural for a seventh grader to wear pounds of concealer, but it covered up my problems at the time. However, it never stopped boys from coming up and rubbing their fingers across my face to wipe off my makeup. Even though I continued to get bullied for wearing makeup, I somehow always felt safer covering up my acne. I started to prioritize taking care of my skin and started using Proactive supplements. Still, no matter what I used to treat my acne, it always ended up making my skin worse.

I started to become insecure and depressed with how I looked. As I struggled with confidence in my own skin, I also struggled with confidence in my own body. I had skinny legs and arms which was not the ideal figure to have at the time. I compared myself to the typical beauty standards of having thick thighs, a big butt, and a small waist. These standards were constantly presented through social media and the platforms of popular beauty influencers. I was called names referring to my skinny legs, and I didn’t have enough self-respect to stand up for myself.

My eighth-grade year we fell into a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, and lockdown officially started. Stores, gyms, restaurants, etc. were all closed due to the pandemic. We were told to stay in our homes as much as possible, so at least for my family, that’s what we did. That’s when I fell into

a deep depression and body dysmorphia hit me hard. Being locked up at home started a toxic relationship between myself and social media. I found myself unhealthily comparing my beauty and worth to unrealistic and idolized beauty standards that were presented through social media. I became very depressed and dissatisfied with the way I looked. To make matters worse, I couldn’t do anything to drastically change my body at the time due to local gyms being shut down. So, I started turning to online at-home workouts throughout lockdown. However, they didn’t give me the self-satisfaction I needed.

I started developing anorexia, as I felt that no matter what I did, nothing about my body was changing. Starving myself seemed to be the only option to make a change in my body quickly. As a result, I began to feel sick whenever I ate, I refused to eat large portions of meals, and I wouldn’t eat food that would risk making me bloated. I remember feeling extremely guilty with myself after eating a bowl of cereal, or any type of sweet snack. I was constantly trapped on social media. Seeing skinny, perfect girls on social media was the root of my negative self-esteem and eating disorder. I revolved myself around society’s expectations of a “perfect body.” This suffering went on for a few long months, until finally, lockdown was over, and I could start living again.

I was now 15 years old, and after that point in my life, I figured it was time to do something about myself. I was so tired of feeling insecure and disappointed with myself constantly. We had now started going back to school; however, it was an online and in-person hybrid system. I personally hated being both online and in-person every week, having an inconsistent routine was hard for me. The hybrid system overall made learning very difficult as well.

I started going to therapy to help treat my anxiety and depression, and later eventually I was prescribed antidepressants. Those treatments started building a base of what I needed, and I slowly started understanding myself mentally and why I am the way I am. In cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), I learned different ways to reframe my distorted thoughts and anxiety. By doing so, I slowly got much better at reframing my negative thoughts. I turned my negative self-talk into motivation to better myself and my well-being. Even though I was still overcoming my struggle with self-love, I found someone who loved me for the way I was. That led to the commitment of my first and current relationship with someone who loves me and inspires me every day.

Even though I had found happiness in a person, I still struggled mentally with my body image. I still felt I needed to look skinnier than I was, and I

needed a healthier way to fix that. I decided I needed to dedicate a part of my life to the gym if I wanted to make changes with myself. My boyfriend inspired me greatly, as he was already starting to grow as a person through the gym. I lacked so much motivation and confidence when I started working out at the gym, but it made things easier having him by my side.

My fitness journey officially began! I started consistently going to the gym about 4-5 days a week. It was a work in progress at the start. I struggled with learning proper form and how to properly structure an effective weekly workout routine. The hardest part of starting was building discipline for the gym. When I started, I relied completely on motivation, and that made getting myself to work out very difficult. I realized that people didn't go to the gym because they were motivated, they went because they were disciplined and

had goals to reach. My starting goals were to build a slim upper body and a thicker lower body, and let's just say that today, my goals are nowhere near that physique. I started truly prioritizing my mental and physical health and began creating a healthy relationship

with food again. I grew to realize that food is fuel. I learned that it's okay to have cheat meals occasionally, that eating isn't a bad thing, and that I needed to prioritize a healthy diet in my life.

Making the gym my priority and lifestyle was a bumpy road, a love/hate relationship. My motivation slowly started turning into discipline, and as months went by, I started to notice more of a change in my body. My upper body became more toned, and I could notice more muscle specifically in my triceps. I didn't see much of a change in my legs right away which was hard on me mentally, but I knew as I kept training, I was slowly becoming stronger. The more I saw results for the work I was putting in, the happier I became with myself. It was a healthy addiction, and to this day I'm still addicted.

I started in the gym wanting to tone up and build a muscular lower body. Today, I am now striving

to become a powerlifter and to eventually compete in a powerlifting meet in the future. That means I will focus on and compete in benching, squatting, and deadlifting. Being able to lift heavy weights makes me feel good, and it's something I want to compete at. I've grown so much as a person physically and mentally throughout the past two years since I've started lifting. It may just seem like a small life switch, but for me, it completely changed my life. I understand myself; I've never felt better in my own body than I do now, and I have the most self-respect I've ever had for myself.

I believe that everything happens for a reason, and I'm grateful for everything I've been through. The hard things in life were necessary for me to grow as a person and I'm so thankful for that. I've grown in love with the gym and bettering myself as a person, and lifting has become a lifestyle and a passion for me. I've

created a new and healthy social life with beautiful, kind people, and I'm so blessed for that. I'm kicking off my senior year and taking things one step at a time. I trust the path I'm headed in, and I'm excited to move on to bigger parts

of my life! I've learned and grown to love myself, and I'm working to create the life I want to thrive in.



Art by Paige Patterson

Taconite Girl

Jacqueline Troumbly

My childhood has grown to become the best years of my life. I was raised in a small town; Taconite, Minnesota (Pop. 311). Nestled off a major highway the road curves like the slither of a snake, and as the road becomes straight the first building you see is made of brick, and has a small, gray sign with school bus yellow words reading, "Bomb Shelter." It was a place my father made me go to every Sunday morning, church. As you continue forward you can see the remnants of the past. Old mine trucks and equipment stretch to the right as far as the eye can see. Tall sheet metal buildings with broken windows stand ominously. We call this site "The Junkyard." On the main street of Taconite and the center of town sits a skating rink. This has always been a hockey town. Adjacent to the skating rink with a gigantic bay window that overlooks the ice rink is the Taconite Legion, a pub that has been there for as long as I can remember. Tall maple trees stretch down every boulevard. It was a quiet place to live, and the connection among the residents was stronger than steel.

Being raised in Taconite in the nineties with a group of twelve girls, known as the Taconite girls, was always an adventure. We would have Kool-Aid stands, perform plays, wash vehicles, make up dances, rollerblade, and explore the outskirts of town. We became one of the best girls' softball teams ever to set foot in the town. Every day I would wake up, eat a bowl of sugary cereal, and go out the door. Across the street from my home was what we called the big park. It had forest green monkey bars, an old wooden merry-go-round, a silver metal slide, and six black rubber swings on poles that could reach the trees. Every evening the girls of Taconite would get together and play games in the big park. We all would put a foot in a circle, and one person would say, "bubble gum, bubble gum in a dish, how many pieces do you wish? Two. One, two, and you are not it, you dirty, dirty dish rag, you." Each word represented a touch of a foot. Around and around, we would go until there was one foot left and that person was it. Hours and hours, night after night, the big park was filled with children playing games, laughing, screaming, and just having pure fun. Now in the evenings the big park is often found empty. Perhaps it's because the Taconite girls have grown.

Just a small walk down a red dirt road away, and through a broken hole in a metal fence is the old Canisteo Mine pit. We Taconite girls spent hours swimming at what we called the Rock. It was a hidden gem for us girls. It was a place where we could cool off from the summer heat and escape the small city streets. A gigantic rock would greet us after a treacherous walk along the edge of the tall cliffs that surrounded the ocean-blue water. As years went by the rock became engulfed by water and the path slowly disap-

peared. The once towering cliffs were minuscule as the water continued to climb.

We weren't alone. There was also a small group of boys that drove us nuts. Every day in some way, shape, or form they would bother us. I remember one time we all went to the rock for a swim. We swam along the cliff edge and soon found a small inlet. We decided this would be an excellent place to explore so we swam up onto the shore. This was not a sandy beach shore; this was a mud hole which we found intriguing. I don't recall whose idea it was, but we decided to use this mud to our advantage and take a mud bath. The next thing you know every one of us was covered head to toe in the thick gray sludge that smelled like a fish tank. Suddenly, as we were drying our bodies in mud, we heard giggling. The boys had been spying on us the entire time. We felt violated and were not happy. As soon as they knew they were found they ran away like cowards. We still talk about this story, not so much about the mud, but more about those stupid boys.

On the opposite side of town is a mountainous hill dubbed, "Taconite Hill." Not far from my home and over a few small red mounds of iron ore was a mossy path that would reach out to the summit of the hill. It wasn't an easy hike for a little girl like me, but when you arrived at the peak the view was breathtaking, making every grueling step worth it. Countless times we Taconite girls tackled this hike. Over the rough terrain, scaling the steep hill, fighting to get to the top. Once we arrived at the crown of the Hill, we would hurry to be the first to gaze at our town. Our small town looked miniature from our view. I would wonder what noise existed along the streets. You could see the soaring smokestacks from Minnesota Power, the ski jump in Coleraine, the water tower over Bovey, the Canisteo mine pit, and the long gray stretch of the meandering highway. It seemed the trees extended forever, and the sky reached out beyond our wildest dreams. It was a place of peace. It was a place where we appreciated what we had, us Taconite girls.

The view is different from the Taconite hill today, but that doesn't mean it's still not breathtaking. When I peer out into the unknown on that hill, I still feel small as I can see the growth of the world around me. The water has risen beyond what I ever thought possible at the pit, but it still has its sparkling blue water and looks beautiful. Even though the big park is much quieter, it too has changed. The merry-go-round is gone, and a new modern jungle gym stands proudly amongst the trees. The junkyard has also changed. The old mining equipment has found its way to recycling and houses have been built in its place. Everything around us has changed. I too have changed; I am not a small child adventuring into the unknown with the

spirit I once had. Taconite will always be a part of me, the memories, stories, and joy will carry with me for the rest of my life.

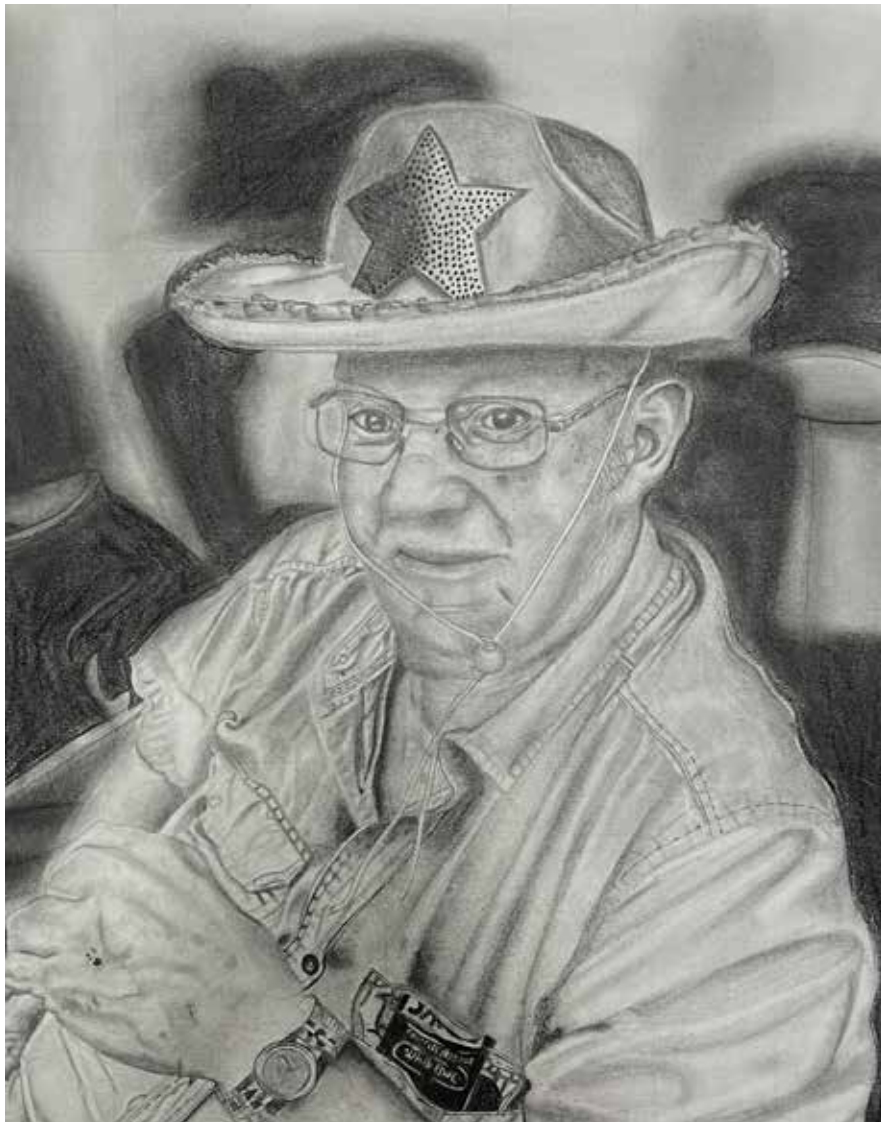
When you grow up and think about all the things that are different now than they were thirty years ago you can only realize that change happens. A whole generation that watched us girls grow has died. All the girls from Taconite have changed. Many of us are married with families of our own, and some of us are broken by the blows that life has dealt, but one thing remains the same, our past.

If I only knew then, what I know now, how not everyone can be born as a Taconite girl, it's something you earn through the ore, dirt, water, and air. People are connected, not only as neighbors and friends but as family. I am a Taconite girl.

A Student's Life: On Leaving

Evan Bruemmer

As the sun gets brighter in the sky, the town wakes up
Busy and bustling, coffee fills everyone's cups
Students pack their bags and begin to head out
Some with broken cars which are loud
Others sleep in without a single worry
Those that are late to class are in a hurry
Lectures takes place either from parents or instructors
Once class is done the students rejoice
Because most of them regret their choice



Grandpa Drawing by Kaylin Riverad

School of Tears

Melanie Howick Erickson

Little Brother,
We left our hearts at home,
A road of sorrow
Brought us here, alone.

Little brother,
Braids thrown on the floor,
Moccasins are burned,
Our language heard no more.

Little brother,
At night I hear you cry,
Aching for our mother,
She dwells beneath another sky.

Little brother,
Don't forget your name,
For we are stronger
Than their shame.

Little brother,
Medicine bags are gone,
Yet still I say our prayers
And hear our mother's songs.
Little brother,
Take my hand and follow,
I hear our mother crying,
We will leave this house of sorrow.

Bad Poetry

Robert Jevne

Showing some of the old man's anger
My oldest brother grabbed the overcoat
I was wearing where it was worn thin
In the back and tore it wide open

It was, evidently,
All the things they disliked about me
At the time, that coat: weird, shabby, arty,
Possibly effeminate and now definitely ruined.

They had a point. I wore all those traits
On my sleeve back then. I've learned
To internalize them since and turn
Them into bad poetry.

I wish I could say the same about the anger
We all got it, us kids. If the anger
Was like that overcoat it would have been easier
One of us could have torn it to ruins



Little Things by Chelsea Johnson

Sibling Strife

Allie Pagel

When all my friends told me how bad it was being an older sibling, I thought they were all joking around. How bad could it be being around a little baby? Turns out I was right; they must have been joking because this was much worse than anything they ever described to me.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back a little bit. It was about the start of summertime; the babysitter had left a little while ago. The warm evening breeze made the curtains dance carelessly as the setting sun shone through the screen door, lighting the room before the moon came out to say hello. My mom and dad had just come home, and with them the scents of the restaurant they worked at together, a mix of steaks, burgers, and cleaning supplies all used throughout their day. I had so many fun things to tell them about, I could barely sit still.

"Mom! Dad! Guess what I did today? I painted a picture, played outside, and I even played dress up!" I was almost yelling by the end of my sentence.

"That sounds like a great day!" Dad said with a smile. "Your mom and I actually want to talk to you about something too. Let us go change and unwind from work for a little bit and then we will talk, ok?"

"Ok!"

My mom and dad smiled at each other as they went downstairs. I sat on our squishy gray couch, waiting for them to return. I wonder what they want to talk about? I said in my head. Maybe we are getting a new kitty! If we do get a new kitty, I want to name her Sprinkles, just like in my story. Wait, what if they are coming to tell me I'm in trouble for reading past my bedtime? Oh no, I hope I'm not in trouble! I started to fidget around nervously as I looked at the clock. 10 minutes had passed and I heard them finally come up the stairs. I anxiously waited for what they were going to say.

"We have some big news for you, Allie," my mom began. "We have to ask you a very important question first. How would you feel if there was a little baby living in our house?"

"A baby? Like a teeny tiny, itty bitty, adorable little baby? I would love it!" I said with enthusiasm.

"That's great to hear, because guess what?" Dad said cheerfully.

"What?"

"You're going to have a baby brother!" they said at the same time.

I could NOT believe it! I was going to have a baby brother? Here in my house? That was the most amazing news in the whole wide world! I was very, very, very excited.

A few months passed, and all the while my mom's tummy got bigger and bigger, I could not believe there was a baby in there. It was also harder for her to do things like grab toys on the floor and put on her shoes, so Dad and I helped her with that. Then one night, at almost the end of October, my dad woke me up. The

baby was coming! I had to pack a bag as fast as I could so I could go to Auntie's house while mom and dad went to the hospital. It was almost two days later when I saw them again. Auntie dropped me off back at my house and Mom and Dad were already there, but they weren't alone.

"Allie, meet your brother Jordan," my mom said warmly.

I went as quick as I could, and when I finally looked at him, he didn't really look like I thought he would. He was super small, had almost no hair, his skin was kind of wrinkly, and he had a black thing on his tummy. As I got closer, I noticed he smelled really weird, almost like, milk? I didn't like it, I scrunched up my nose and backed up before saying,

"Hello, Jordan, nice to meet you." I waited and waited for him to at least say hi back to me, but he never did.

"Well that's not very nice, Jordan. I said hi, you are supposed to say hi back to me."

"He doesn't know how to talk, walk, or even hold up his head yet, Allie. He will do all that when he gets older. What do you think of him?" My mom was smiling, she was very happy with this baby. I didn't want to say he wasn't as cool as I thought he would be, so I told her I loved him.

I really wanted to love him too, but as a few months passed, things only got worse.

It was almost Christmas time, and I noticed that Jordan had a lot of stuff under the tree, maybe even more than me.

Jordan was able to lift his head up now. He was even about to roll over sometimes. That was kind of cool, I guess. With my new brother getting bigger, our whole house had to change too. We moved our squishy couch to the other side of the room to make room for all his clothes, toys, and gross diaper supplies.

Apparently, Jordan can't eat real food, so instead he drinks, not milk, but icky smelly formula. One time, we were driving and he got fussy. We had to pull over and give Jordan a bottle, he drank it really fast, and then threw it all up all over the car! Puke usually smells pretty disgusting, but formula puke almost made me puke. We had to go right back home that day.

I was starting to get bored of my little brother, I wanted to go out and have an adventure!

"Hey, Dad? Could we go for a walk today?" I asked with excitement.

"Sorry, we can't go today. We have to stay home and take care of Jordan. Plus, it's too cold outside today anyway," he said.

Right on cue Jordan started crying in his little chair. Dad went to take care of him. I sat frustrated on the couch and sighed.

Why can't I do things with Dad like we used to?

About 1 summer ago, Dad and I packed a picnic basket, blanket, and a happy attitude as we walked to the Trezona

Trail in town. Dad was wearing his good shoes, as he called them. The trail was a mix of dirt and pebbly concrete, the kind that if you fall skin will most definitely scrape off your knee. I was skipping ahead down the path, the sweet smell of the wildflowers and pond wildlife all around us. I would never go too far ahead; I was so excited for the picnic and to spend time with Dad. We had packed my favorite foods! Peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwiches, carrots, and-

"Allie, can you hand me the wipes? They are just a little too far away." Dad asked while reaching for the package. I sighed once again and got the wipes package for him.

By the time spring was showing its first signs of waking up for the year, my brother had learned to do a lot of new things. He could sit up, scoot himself forward, and he even started eating baby food. Baby food was really weird, it almost looked like pudding, and some of them almost smelled as bad as formula and diapers put together.

Even though my brother had gotten even bigger, had hair on his head (he still looked a little weird though), and could do more stuff, I still didn't really like him all that much. Sometimes he would cry so loud that I couldn't focus on my homework, but nothing was as bad as when I had to watch him.

I was sitting on the couch, watching cartoons and only keeping a little eye on Jordan. I knew if I didn't at least watch him a little

I would get in big trouble. He was sitting up and playing with that very loud, annoying piano toy. He pushed a button, and the toy played a song. He bounced with the music while smiling. I rolled my eyes and turned up the TV.

A few minutes later, he whined a little. I ignored it because it wasn't very loud. Then he whined again even louder. I looked over at him and he crawled over to the blocks. He was trying to make a tower, but it kept falling over. Jordan looked at me. He had tears forming in his little eyes, his nose was starting to run with slimy snot, and he looked like he was about to yell the loudest he ever had.

Quickly before he did, I got on the floor with him. I sighed as I picked up the blocks and reluctantly started building a tower that won't fall. Block after block I placed, and with each one, my brother seemed amazed. After I finished, it looked like it would have been taller than him, if he could stand that is. I was about to get up when Jordan made another noise. I thought 'What does he want now?' He was carefully trying to scoot around the new tower, worried it would fall over. He was making his way to me. I tried to move back but I hit the edge of the couch. He reached me before I could get up again. He started to crawl on me, clawing me with his sharp baby nails. I grabbed him before he could do more damage. I lifted him onto the couch

nicely like Mom told me, and Jordan seemed pleased.

"What do you want from me?" I asked him.

He scooted to me once more, but this time he didn't claw or step on me. He nicely sat in my lap, and then leaned his head on me. I realized what he was doing—he was giving me a hug. I didn't pay attention to anything around me anymore, I was too focused on my brother. In a matter of moments, everything changed about him. He no longer smelled like yucky formula, he now smelled like flowers. He wasn't loud and annoying, he was quiet and peaceful, and now that I was really close to him, he wasn't so weird looking at all. He had everything I have, just way smaller. He reached his arms up again and this time I wrapped my arms around him back, so happy that he was sitting with me.

What do you think you are doing, Allie? This is the baby who is super smelly, the one who puked all over the car, the one who cries so loud you can't even think!

Jordan stirred. He shifted as his once teary eyes started to slowly close. His breath slowed, and he got a little heavier to hold. I smiled as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

He might be annoying sometimes, but he isn't as bad as I thought he was. I am his big sister, and he needs me.

It turns out, I was still right. Having a baby brother wasn't as bad as my friends said. It was better than what they told me.



Spring Peeper by Vicki Lessard

Just a Drive
Lily Saccoman

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be? the Lord took her away from me. She's gone to heaven, so I've got to be good. So I can see my baby when I leave this world. Morbid I know, but I loved the song as a child. I remember my father singing it to me almost every night before I went to sleep. I can still hear the grumble in his voice from the long day and the fact that he could never remember the whole song and relied on me to tell him the next verse. What I never cared to learn until a few years ago was the fact that it was my mother's song which I remember so dearly. My mother's song that she

would sing to me during the summer days while strapping me into the car seat after I begged to go somewhere with her. She was the one to teach it to me and was the reason I could tell my father the oh-so-many words to the 1999 song by Pearl Jam. I spent most of my early childhood in my mom's care, yet I heard my father's voice in that song. I forget that she made me in her image, that I am a piece of her, that she chose me, yet I can not have the decency to remember it. What would her life look like if she was free to drive without me?

I was constantly doing things as a kid. There were so many hours in a day and I wanted all life had to offer. Thankfully I had a mom that I could drag around and force to do activities with. It did not take too much asking to be able to go to the park or join a sport that would cost 50 bucks that I would inevitably decide not to play next year. Hell, I was a kid, it was not my money and besides at that time gas had hit \$2.45 so we were sitting pretty good the way I looked at it. All I needed was an idea and even now my mom was there to deliver. My grad party was, in truth, all her ideas. I had requirements, but it was she who had the guts to create it just right. She has done and continues to do so much that I forget it is not mandatory that she does these acts for me. Yet even with all of that she, like

every mother, can royally tick me off.

I still remember the feeling of my mom embarrassing me when I was younger. I hated when she would go to the school when I had a problem with another student or if I got a grade that I did not deserve. She once totaled up my grade by hand just to tell my teacher that they entered the grade wrong. I can still see the look of pure shock when she whipped out those numbers. Mom always has to make sure they understand that she does not take incompetence lightly. Why couldn't she just email her

complaint like a regular person? Sometimes she has no idea what it is like to be young. What it is like to want to pursue your dreams without someone questioning if it is the right choice. To want to see the world and just live in the warm embrace of youth. Yet, when I sometimes hear my mother sing, I recall that she was a girl.

As a girl who is just trying to live, I forget that my mother was once 18. With dreams bigger than the small town where she grew up. With

friends that I will only get to imagine. In different time-lines, we are the same girl. As a daughter, there is a pain left all but forgotten when pursuing my dreams sometimes at my mother's expense. Thinking of the time, money, and life she has given up for me without me even uttering a thank you. I can imagine my mother doing everything she says she does not have time for now. I am only ten short years away from the age she had me. She was so young when I was brought into this world. When the world no longer saw her as a girl, but as a mother. I know I was wanted, I even knew my mom planned on having me down to the month I was born but I still feel like she deserves to be seen not as just a mother, but as a girl. So when I think of all that I've said, all the fights and hugs and tears and all the laughs, I only come to the same question. Mom, did I ruin your drive?



Sunflowers by Holly Duester

The New Horse

Melanie Howick Erickson

You had to learn the sound of my voice,
to know when I called, I would feed you,
my touch would be gentle, slipping the rope around your neck.
Trusting you, an unknown quantity, not to turn and kick
away, preferring freedom to fences,
I spoke your name softly.
You stood still only because of what I offered;
something sweet and tempting
that you would remember me by.
I want to climb on your back, ride you,
unfamiliar trails, hoof beats marking time
to the rhythm of one.
We may never get there. If I fall, you trample me,
crushing my bones, buried beneath your weight.
Now you are willing to follow, I lead the way,
feel your grass sweet breath on my neck.
You don't resist. Together, parting the tall grass
we weave. Galloping tundra
we find the rainbow herds
grazing beneath nebulous sky,
bridled with glittering stars.



Art by Jayden Swenson

Izzy's Blueberry Wish

Lynn Moore

I rushed past the blueberry patch and burst into the kitchen.

"Did Daddy call?"

"Soon, Izzy. He'll call after Marty's soccer practice."

"My tooth came out! I wiggled and wiggled it!"

Grandma laughed when I wagged my tongue like a garter snake. She wrapped my tooth and put it beside the laptop. Marty calls our kitchen desk Control Central because that's where we keep important stuff like schedules and our globe. Before Daddy left, he wrote on the message board. I'll be home when the wild blueberries are ripe.

While I waited for Daddy's call, I looked through the book which he read every Halloween. Marty rushed in and gulped milk right from the carton!

"Marty...remember when Daddy helped us carve the jack-o-lantern the day he left?"

"Yep. He read us the spooky story."

"When he comes home, I'm going to read the spooky story."

"Why? It'll be summer," said Marty.

"Because it'll be a surprise."

Just like Daddy, Marty chanted in a rumbly voice, "Oooo, how dark...Oooo, how dread."

"Izzy, you were such a 'fraidy cat!"

"No. You were!"

"You pulled the covers over your head," said Marty.

"But I was six! You jumped when Daddy moaned 'Ooooo,' and you're ten!"

Before Daddy called, Marty and I walked our fingers around the globe to the other side of the world.

I shook my hand. "It's so far away, my fingers are tired!"

DING!

Marty flipped open the laptop. Daddy was sitting in his bunk. It was nighttime and Daddy looked sleepy. I stuck my face up close.

"Sweetie, I love your gap-toothed smile."

Marty squeezed in. Daddy and Marty look alike. They both have gray eyes and blond hair. Only Daddy's hair is cut short.

"Hey Dad, I scored a goal in soccer!"

"Way to go! I saw the video and you controlled the ball like a pro."

"Can you make it to our last game?"

"That's the plan. Hmmm, I heard someone is in the first-grade play. I wonder who?"

I bounced in my seat. "It's me! I'm the Town Crier! Wish you were home."

"Me too, Sweetie."

"Nothing's the same without you."

"I'll be home when the wild blueberries are ripe. We'll pick buckets of berries."

"Goody! Grandma made muffins with the berries we picked last summer."

"I can't wait to get home to eat Grandma's blueberry muffins," said Daddy.

We blew goodbye kisses. "Love you all. I'll call when I can."

While Grandma fixed supper, Marty and I sprawled on the living-room carpet with Daddy's book. I murmured words I knew as Marty ran his finger under the sentences.

Marty helped me sound out dread. "It rhymes with red," he said.

Next, he sounded out dumb.

Over and over, I sang, "Here's your dumb hat!" until Grandma asked me to behave.

Daddy left months ago. He missed Thanksgiving and Christmas. For Valentine's Day, he sent a postcard of a camel!

Grandma said Daddy is a citizen soldier. I didn't know what that meant only that I missed him more each day. He missed my birthday and the school play.

But Grandma and Marty were there—right up front. When I saw them, I marched out and cried, "Hear ye! Hear ye!" Afterwards, Marty said I was so loud, he thought Daddy heard me.

The day after the play, I won the school's fun run. Grandma and I celebrated by jogging around the kitchen.

"I swung my arms, because then you run faster."

Grandma planted a kiss on my forehead. "You and Marty remind me of your father."

I had so much to tell Daddy that I wished he would hurry up and call. Marty was busy, so I practiced reading the spooky story. Some words were easy to read. Some words were hard. I wrote couldn't three times with blue markers, blue like blueberries.

Sometimes Daddy can't call like he promised. Whenever he doesn't call, my tummy hurts.

"Isabell, your supper is getting cold."

I pushed my macaroni and cheese around.

Grandma cradled my face in her hands. "Honey, how can I help?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, I could use the help of a good cleaner upper." Grandma carried our plates to the sink.

"No," I muttered.

"Izzy! You promised to listen to Grams. That's why Dad gave you his Regimental pin."

"Who cares!" I kicked the table leg.

When Marty took the garbage out, I snuck into his room and stole his dumb old army cap. I curled up in Daddy's chair to read. I stumbled on a bunch of words, but I didn't dare ask Marty for help. I heard him rummaging in his room... "IZZYY!"

I hid behind the sofa.

Grandma loomed over me with her arms crossed.

"Isabell Emerson, what did you do with your brother's cap?"

"Nothin'."

That night, I tossed and turned. I remembered the

promise I made when Daddy gave me his Regimental pin. I pulled Marty's cap from my toy chest and tiptoed down the hall. I touched his shaking shoulders. His sobs hurt my heart.

"I'm sorry."

He clutched the cap. "He feels closer when I wear it."

Three days dragged by, and Daddy didn't call. A sick feeling knotted my tummy. I crumbled the picture I drew of me winning the race. Grandma looked sad when she pulled me close.

"Grandma, what if Daddy never comes home?"

"He will honey, he will."

"I wish he was home. I wish the blueberries were ripe. He promised to be home then." Grandma lifted me onto her lap. "I'm too big to sit on your lap," I sobbed.

"You are just right." Grandma hugged me for a long, long time.

Grandma's hugs always helped me feel better. I smoothed out the picture.

I sniffed, "Daddy said he missed blueberry muffins."

"We can fix that," said Grandma. "We'll make up a batch for his package."

While the muffins baked, I drew a gold medal on my picture. Soon, the sweet smell of blueberry muffins filled the kitchen.

"It smells like summer," I said.

With all my heart, I wished the sweet smell would swirl around to the other side of the world.

I heard a DING!

"I hope it's Daddy!" I flew to the laptop. His smiling face appeared.

"Daddy, why didn't you call?" I covered my face and rocked back and forth.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry.

Please don't cry. I'm okay. A huge sandstorm knocked out the generators."

I wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"I'm sorry I missed your birthday. Do the cowboy boots fit?"

"Yes! The best present, ever! Daddy, I said my part real loud...and I ran fast... I can read big words now... and..."

Daddy chuckled. "Have you checked for blueberries?"

"Every day! More and more are blue!"

"That's a good sign. Remember, I'll be home when the berries are ripe."

Two weeks after the Fourth of July picnic, Marty raced me to the blueberry patch.

"Rooasted! I win," he shouted.

"So! I'm gonna pick more berries than you." The sun warmed my face, and I twirled around like a whirling dragonfly.

I raked plump berries into my palm. "Yum, yum, yum. Daddy will be home soon!"

Marty popped blueberries into his mouth. "Are you ready to read the spooky story?"

"Yep." In a rumbly voice I chanted, "Oooo, how dark...Oooo, how dread."

Marty jumped! "I'm so scared," he giggled.

"Race you back!" I shouted.

Before Grandma could say Rise and shine, my morning glory, I was out of bed and dressed—ready to see Daddy!

Flags flanked the parade ground. Motorcyclists escorted buses. They roared their engines in celebration. I pranced in my new cowboy boots. Marty waved his army cap.

Soldiers stood in formation. The crowd quieted. A soldier blew a bugle.

Soldiers ran toward their families. Fathers held babies for the first time. Mothers knelt and hugged their children. Big people swirled around me. I couldn't see Daddy anywhere.

"Where is he?"

I jumped and jumped like I was on our trampoline. Above the shouts of joy, I heard our names.

"There's Daddy!" Marty took my hand and we rushed toward him.

I threw my arms around his neck. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy." He twirled me around, then he opened his arms to Marty.

Marty saluted Daddy. Then jumped into his arms. Grandma stepped forward. Her smile wobbled as she put her hand on Daddy's cheek.

On the ride home, Daddy sat between us. I rested my head against

his shoulder.

"We have two surprises for you."

"Two surprises?"

Marty grinned as I held up Daddy's spooky book.

"I'm gonna read to you—the whole story!"

"The whole story?"

"Uh-huh, all the big words, too. Marty helped me."

Daddy ruffled Marty's hair. His smile wobbled just like Grandma's.

"And...the blueberries are ripe."

Marty chimed in, "It's a bumper crop, too!"

Daddy chuckled. "We'll pick buckets tomorrow."

I hugged him tighter. My blueberry wish came true.



Perspective by Vicki Lessard

I'm Sorry

Aunna Nubson

When I found out about your existence in March of 2018, I told my father, "Yay, I'm so excited to have another sibling" but in reality, I collapsed to the ground and our father had to hold me up because in that moment I felt crushed. I felt that I was being replaced and that my father would never see me again because he chose you. I later found out that the sole purpose of your existence was to tie "our" family together. For that reason, I am sorry that you were born with that immense amount of pressure on your small shoulders.

When Kyler told me that Melanie gave birth, I asked for some pictures of you. I did that because I wanted to keep up the facade of wanting to meet you and I wanted our father to believe that I was excited about you. I thought if he believed I wanted to have another sibling, he would start seeing me again. To my disappointment, that wasn't the case at all. I still haven't really seen or spoken to him to this day. I genuinely feel bad that my interest in you was just a facade and I am so sorry that it is.

I believe a year after you were born, I decided that I wanted to at least see you. It took a lot of effort, but I managed to message our father and started attempting communication again. I told him that it was because I wanted to meet you, but that wasn't really the case. The truth is that there were items I wanted back, and I decided that you would have been a good reason to attempt to get them. I never got those items, but they were really important to me. I wish that you weren't just an excuse to get them, but I felt that I had no other options. I'm sorry that I

used you, a person, as an excuse to get those items.

You and I had two Facetime calls when you were about a year old. During those two Facetime calls I said those three words. I told you that I loved you and sadly that was a lie. I will say that I do not hate you though. It isn't your fault that you are here, and I would never blame you for that, but I just can't bring myself to love you. As far as I am aware, you have the love from the one person I have always wanted it from. Our father. He sees you every single day and I haven't seen him in over seven years. I wish it could have been different, but the truth is that it wasn't. The reason why I told you that I loved you is because of the facade I was trying to keep up. I felt horrible when you said it back, so I hope you can forgive me. Just know that I'm sorry that I can't give you the love that you rightfully deserve.

Maybe I will get to meet you someday but until then I will forever feel bad that I can't appreciate, love, and protect you. I know what family you were born into, and I honestly hope that they treat you better than they ever treated me. I hope that you feel loved by them and cared for. I know you were born with the pressure of being the one that ties the family together. I have no idea if you even know who I am, but I hope that you harbor no ill feelings towards me. Just know that I am truly sorry that I won't ever be able to love and protect you in every way that you deserve. I hope you can at least forgive me for that.



Tulips at Mayo by Kelly Lien

Unexpected Connection with a Stranger

Teresa Alto

In ninth grade, I read a title article in Time magazine on the death penalty. A sidebar story about a man sentenced to death grabbed me. Doug had been a star athlete, honors student at a community college, a young husband and father. Honorably discharged for grand mal epilepsy, the Vietnam veteran sank into alcoholism. During a drunken blackout that lasted days, he was implicated in the rape and beating death of a white woman in her sixties. The evidence seemed flimsy, but Doug was Black in Florida in 1974. He'd been on death row ever since. The tragedy of Doug's story struck me, and I wrote him a letter.

A letter arrived back from him: "Although writing most sparingly throughout tumultuous years," he wrote, "I could not allow your beautiful letter to go unanswered." He continued about the importance of hope: "As long as individuals like you persist & cry out in anger against injustice and cruelty—as long as justice reigns ultimately—there is hope for this society."

I sent him a poem in my second letter. In his reply, Doug wrote of "how precious—after only 2 letters—you are to me."

As our correspondence continued, Doug wrote to me of the big moral questions I was just getting my mind around for the first time and he wrestled with from the vantage point of the condemned. In one letter, he described a man who'd just been executed that almost everyone, including his fellow death row inmates, saw as beyond the pale of redemption: Arthur Goode. But of Arthur Goode Doug wrote, "I am musing, now, of possibility of his being sent to humans in order to give us chance to demonstrate unconditional love. That seems reasonable as any other explanation, and if so, we failed miserably, Terry, dismally."

Six months into our correspondence and as Doug himself faced execution dates, I confessed that I now supported the death penalty for some who'd committed heinous crimes. In fact, I said that I would be "smiling triumphantly" (as he quoted me) upon their executions.

Doug wrote back just 35 minutes after receiving that letter: "My dear Terry, before venturing further, know of your enhancing my life immeasurably. For in time of excruciating agony and desiring death's grasp—you appeared with much comfort." He made sure, first, to show regard for me before he pointed out the little regard I was showing: "But 'smiling triumphantly' at executions . . . made me recoil in absolute horror. . . . I respect your feelings," he wrote, "—but ask that you not gloat over any human's execution."

Doug's gentleness and honesty with me then was an example of something he worked seriously towards, unconditional love. He practiced it despite his surroundings, despite a society bent on killing him.

For the next several years, I would read books Doug recommended and started keeping a notebook of quotes that spoke to me from my readings, a practice he suggested. He advised me to study hard and not drink, sent regards to my mom, and praised my mind and heart and held me up with loving support. The unconditional love Doug showed me as a teen was more important than he could possibly have known at the time.

But gradually my letters petered out, our last exchange the fall of my senior year in high school, not quite three years after our correspondence started. I had gotten interested in other things, and his letters accepted my apologies for not writing. I

went to college, then moved across the country to California, then returned to Iowa for graduate school. The box of his letters moved with me. In the summer of 1995 I came across them while packing to move to the Twin Cities. I sat down and read all the letters, and wept. I had been a light to this man I'd never met in the darkness of his life. But I'd turned the light off. I'd forgotten how much he'd also been a light to me.

I contacted the Florida Department of Corrections that summer of 1995 and learned that Doug had not been executed. In fact, his sentence had been commuted to a life sentence in 1991. There was his address. I could write him again. But I shrank from the strange intimacy, from what I thought of as my responsibility for this man's happiness. I could weep for him, but I would not write to him.

Still, I packed that box with me to three different residences in Minneapolis, and then, four years later, to Grand Rapids. A few years into teaching at Itasca Community College, I started doing an assignment that had students use their classmates' and my responses to hot-button issues of their choice as the basis for an essay on the topic. Often, the death penalty was one of the chosen issues, and every time, I would write about my correspondence with Doug.

The last time I did this, one of my students, an earnest young man who was planning to become a lawyer to fight injustice—just as I had envisioned my future when I was his age--said, "You should write to him again."

I was taken aback, but mumbled what first popped into my mind, "You're right. I should."

I didn't that semester, or that summer, or the first months into my official retirement. Then, a series of synchronicities led me to read Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*, a memoir about ministering to men facing execution. Suddenly I had to find out if Doug was still alive.

Now 72 years old, Doug's face stared out from the online inmate search of the Florida Prison System. After 36 years, during which I'd grown from a teenager to a middle-aged woman and he'd become an old man, there he was. I wrote to him.

Of course he remembered me, he said. Later he told me that he called me the "I" girl. The nickname was from another inmate on death row, a man who got no letters. Jerry asked Doug to describe me, and Doug called me "idealistic." It was a new word for Jerry, and he had trouble remembering it, but he would ask Doug if the "I" girl had written until both realized I had stopped writing.

In bits over his first emails of our renewed correspondence, Doug shared with me some of his losses. In the 1980s, starting about the time I stopped writing, he lost two brothers and two sisters to AIDS, contracted by sharing needles. One son was completely estranged. He'd recently lost his other son, who was my age, to a drug overdose. The anniversary of Jeff's death and my first letter came about the same time.

After Doug's death sentence was commuted, he had married a woman who had started corresponding with him after reading an article like I had. They were married 25 years, despite never being able to live together, until her death from cancer in December 2016. Doug still misses Linda with crippling grief. "I loved my wife just short of worship, Teresa," he wrote. Just a

couple months ago, he lost one of his two remaining siblings, his brother Mack. He is not permitted to attend funerals, the only privilege a bereavement call in the chaplain's office.

Compounding these losses, Doug survived gastric bypass for stomach cancer, a debilitating stroke during heart surgery, and suffers from COPD and glaucoma. But in a surprising turn of events, Doug has had a teaching career longer than mine. Since his commutation to a life sentence in 1991, Doug has taught GED classes, with no pay, to hundreds of fellow inmates. Doug writes, "Behind the wall of prison I have found a life, one which touches students favorably, far removed from the violence which ended me here. I gave 25 years of my life in educating prisoners, and in so doing I saved my very own life!"

Stories of teaching and anecdotes commemorating some of the 92 death row buddies who've been executed animate Doug's letters. Some are about people whose imprisonment or passing gets little notice; others offer perspectives on the notorious: his best friend, John Spenkelink, who in 1979 made history as the first person executed after Gary Gilmore, and the infamous Ted Bundy, whom Doug "would tease . . . regarding the massive amounts of mail he received." Doug wrote, "Of the first 7 prisoners sentenced to death in Florida, I am the only one who remains alive. I do so wonder, why?" His stories portray the humanity of these men, even men whose crimes tormented Doug himself.

I have spoken to Doug on the phone once, for about two minutes. His southern lilt and gentle voice sounded like a smile. He is incarcerated just a half hour from a place friends spend two months in the winter, so I

have thought about visiting. But ours is a pen pal relationship, bounded by distance, prison, written communication. Still, with the convenience of electronic messaging, our correspondence is much more frequent than it was when I was a teenager. In the past seventeen months since we reconnected, we've written some 175 messages between us.

What is this friendship with a stranger? For him, I'm a source of hope and life, as I was as a teen, but I'm also a sounding board, a fellow teacher, a friend he can contact for assistance, and something of a repository for memories. I have a picture of him and Linda and copies of letters written on his behalf to the parole board. At first I didn't know what to think when Doug sent a picture of the grave of Margaret Mears, the woman he was convicted of killing. A carnation and a Bible rest on the stone in the photo a friend took in 1982, honoring Margaret Mears at Doug's request. I asked why he sent this to me; he said, "Why not you?" He felt I would understand his atonement and keep the picture and this woman's memory safe.

For me, Doug is an example of, in the words of one of his favorite writers, Victor Frankl, "man's search for meaning." After a half century in prison, with little hope of release, Doug has found meaning in helping fellow inmates earn a diploma, work on their cases, and find the inspiration and wherewithal to make a life for themselves upon release. Like the books both of us treasure, my friendship with Doug also gives me a glimpse into what will always be a world of strangers. But in this case, in Doug's case, this stranger is one with whom I have an unexpected and profound connection.



Buddy at Sunrise on Wolf Lake by Michael Hanley

A While Away

Teopa Reve

I used to write poems
putting together all the little pieces coming apart

simplifying similes
while metering metaphors
wandering in pursuit of a perfect word

too much time on my hands
too much life on my heart

I haven't written a poem for
more than three years

I wrote one today



The Miracle and The Whitess by Chris Tolman

Senior Year

Alexa Scholl

I placed heightened split jumps in rows down the middle of McDonald arena, concluding our high school hockey home games. After we either squashed or dominated the opposing team, the drive to skate still lingered. At this point, I began to express my ideas and voice more, taking the longer road, and becoming more extroverted. In June of 2022, I had just finished my junior year of high school, in search of some standpoint of happiness. I had a strong finish with prom and some parties. Soon after that, I would be headed off to the Cities for a figure skating camp. 5 Finger Death Punch cranked on aux during Power class had me crossing my foot on the ends while holding extensions with proper carriage. This required great strength, including down the highway, which is where I headed next.

When the pedal was to the metal in my parents' 2009 Chevy Tahoe on Highway 494, there was no stopping me. Sure, I took the wrong exit and arrived in St. Paul by mistake, but I drove through each city street where it felt like home, masking its crime-ridden dangers. By the time I made it to my uncle's house in Burnsville, my focus was on how different the scenery and the people were. Hill-like residential roads, authentic brick houses, well-kept yards, and smooth paved driveways. It spoke class, but the closeness made me feel a little claustrophobic since the houses were so close together. New scenery, new adventures, I thought. The time I spent there was minimal. I would wake up at 5:30 a.m. for the week to jump in the lukewarm water of my uncle's outdoor pool; then I would drive to Woodbury for the day. I steered the left curve and tapped on the brakes when a deer was in sight on the freeway. My heart fluttered for a moment. The next 5-minute residential drive had my eyes jumping to the ditch for more deer.

I stepped on the ice. In the next few days, my skates quickly wore out. On the bench, I sat in despair when they no longer supported my ankles as they used to. My jumps, spins, and every other in-between balance coordination were becoming more difficult. I felt my feet ache with pain. I continued to push through and get through the week. Soon, for a birthday present from my parents, I bought a new pair in Bloomington. When the skates were in my hands, my heart raced with love and joy for a new future. It settled a flying camel spin feeling for the sport on other rinks than just the one in my hometown.

When I returned to my parents' house, I got a job as a housekeeper at Sugar Lake Lodge. The first day dragged on, as I was aching to leave that place. As soon as I clocked out, my mind was out the door as we finished cleaning all the rooms. Leaving work, driving over to Hodgins-Berardo Arena, and bawling my eyes out could be the solution. My mom had encouraged me to continue with my housekeeping job, with the agreement that my parents would pay for my summer ice sessions. From the fall to spring, I taught skating before my practices, so having a summer job was what my parents wanted.

Maybe cleaning rooms wouldn't be half bad. This time, a ten-revolution layback spin captivated a moving setting to go with the flow.

Shortly after that, meeting a coworker named Lilly was one of the eye-opening things. She carried the traits of the most extroverted people on earth and was two years younger than me. We would blast music in my car leaving and going to work. Even on days we hung out, we would sometimes drive by the resort. Lilly screamed at people and showed me how to have more fun. In some ways, though, she didn't have a very good influence on me, and making some wrongs opened a new perspective. Our ADHD brains turned golf days into Applebee's runs and we ventured around the town of Grand Rapids. One eighty-degree afternoon, we went to Zorbaz for a swim. After working a shift without her I called her up saying: "Please! Do you want to come? It's so nice out! We could get strawberry daiquiris and tan, too!"

She responded, "Okay, you just need to pick me up at my house."

That night I met a guy named Ty. He was a bartender at the beach, who I got along with right away. We talked most of the time. He gave me a free daiquiri, we played some volleyball, and then pushed each other off the dock. It was a romantic summer fling. We went to Top Gun, a car wash, I'd visit him at work, and we went on Target sprees. I eventually caught feelings and found out that he started dating another girl, which broke my heart. I was shocked and found it hard to cope with since I never considered dating a guy until I met this one. Constantly, I wondered what went wrong. I couldn't find a piece in my mind to work it out. Mercifully, Lilly was the friend to talk to, and my support system even to this day. My feelings hurt for what seemed like forever, as my senior year approached. My self-esteem at a low level, I sat in sorrow. Soon school started and not only did seasonal depression arise, but also anxiety. It drilled an illusion spin with a star entry that made me realize how fast life changes.

When school started, time fell into a continuous cycle. During homecoming week, I endured a struggle to go to school-supported events. I attended bingo, karaoke, the homecoming football game, powderpuff, and the outdoor movie by myself. At first, I'd get someone to go with me, which was a relief, but then they would end up bailing, so I would lose hope. For days I'd come home crying. Whether I was frustrated with people or my life, I'd receive the most peaceful pep talks from my mom. Despite everything, I still went to events, dressed up, and tried to make the best of it. It slowed my journey to a steady-paced twizzle move pattern downward, mending my ways to figure out who I am.

One winter Saturday morning, my passion for skating almost went away. The night before my parents told me I had to skate the next morning, I refused to get out of bed, but my mom forced me to do so. The drive was an ongoing drag. After my skates went on, I proceeded to skip my warmup. Every edge and lap finish was done in

a carefree motion. My body was there but my headspace wasn't. While on the verge of tears, my body was out the door after the first thirty minutes. I thought to myself, where is skating going to get me? Why do I do it? I should quit and find something else to do. There isn't much future in this. I want to just go to sleep and take a break! On my arrival home, my dad cooked his weekend breakfast and I felt comfortable. This part of my life felt like a brutal fall on a double loop that left a scar only in my mind.

At Christmas, I enjoyed my family time at my grandma's. Unfortunately, I was on the edge of having the flu, which made it hard to keep up and have the energy to be present. On the way home, my family stopped to visit my great-grandma, and this is where I broke a little more. I thought if we didn't stop to see her, we could get home sooner to get a good night's rest. How selfish, isn't it? This part provided the beginning of my program, where I swung my hands up, despite not knowing what could happen, but disbelieving in failure.

On a Wednesday in March, I recall not wanting to even attend school. I still didn't feel a part of my class and underwent constant anxiety in school. Like an average high schooler, I often would sit and just listen to many conversations at once that didn't include me, just waiting for a good conversation starter or a way to talk. I felt like I had something to say, but didn't ever seem to fit the moment. This included lunches, sporting events, and dances. This moment felt like a flying sit where I brought myself and others down at a low constant speed.

Later that month, my life went downhill. After putting together an announcement segment for the high school, I freaked out, overly self-conscious about seeing myself on Halk Talk, the school's news channel that films small clips to inform people of the school's events, clubs, and little competitions. As it blasted a YouTube page on the television in the library, I lunged toward the door. Each breath was so self-critical I had no desire to show my face. Quickly, wrapped up the late English assignment, and packed up my notebook and iPad. As a senior I was just done, but much worse. My anxiety took over and my will to come to school no longer existed. I inched to the door to skip lunch, and so be it, the rest of the day. My mom was upset because I didn't just tell her beforehand, so I could get called out and we could talk the issue out instead. This prolonged to the point where I didn't want to wake up. Sleep in. Maybe another day I told myself. My parents and brothers proceeded to wake me up, for school or ice practice, where I was constantly "on edge." Regularly, my mom continued to give me daily pep talks, texts to remember inner calmness, and books with inspirational quotes. She and my youngest brother would tell me each morning before school:

"It's a good day for a good day."

These words would help me find more ways to cope and planted the seeds of peace in my days, but the desire to leave high school and just move on boiled in my blood.

After spending all my time at the rink throughout my entire life, I also had skating friends who would do things without me. Feelings of missing out came to mind

a lot. At a Greenway six a.m. ice session, I felt like trash burned at the dumpster from Toy Story 3. After warming up programs and working on footwork, my mindset of reality was again gone. I began pondering life and explaining my case to my coach. She gave me comfort in who I am, explained all the love I received, prayed for me, and told me to have a good day. I believed it and put my faith in her. The people in my life coaxed more hope within me as I landed a double flip for the first time.

Soon the holiday shows approached, where I skated with passion. My off-ice program practices, which I casually kept up with, paid off. The morning gym sessions, which my younger brother begged for, helped my skating and symptoms of depression. Pep talks I had with my mom and skating coaches brought me to that day. From note cards, flowers, and gifts, this sport proved itself worth it in the end. The cold air calms my senses to this day, and this new hope laid out beautiful performances. When I forgot my dress for the Greenway show, my mom handed me my red sparkly dress with care. During my skating performance in Grand Rapids, my younger cousins made colorful signs embedded with ALEXA. My programs were propelled by grace and power; I finished them by skating my best while soaking in the applause and glory. Performing a camel grab, my favorite spin, my confidence in myself soared.

By the time graduation came around, just this one last time I felt uneasy, my anxiety rising. I didn't want to attend the gym assembly. I met our athletic director Anne Campbell in her office, who told me, "You're going to be alright, it's a beautiful day and the end of a chapter!"

As my class was gathering in the gym, girls whom I surrounded myself with throughout the year and whom I felt most welcome among were collecting photos for their school event and a friend's Instagram page called "ourlittlebluecamera." They were talking about how going up to others is a nerve-racking thing, and I said:

"Oh, you just go up to someone and just talk."

My comment was met with awkward blank stares. Then it hit me. Is that just high school? Are some groups and cliques just scared to talk to each other, afraid of having their possible conflicts and differences? I didn't like it and could hardly wait for it to be done. As this moment flew by, a kick turned into a back spiral fit the scene to explain the cold hard truth of high school.

Next, we were all throwing our caps in the air and I met my family between the parking lot and the football field. Quickly, I captured a photo with my childhood best friend who despite moving to the other side of town, still treasured our friendship. My grandparents on my mom's side were there along with my grandma and her boyfriend on my dad's side. I took some family photos with my two brothers, parents, and a variety of everyone, which captured a clear moment. A pause in time. There, then, a moment in time put focus in play. The time and accomplishments of high school made me appreciate family members over my classmates. It gave me value for who I am and that hope for a brighter future is possible. In the end, it felt like the skating group I taught to hold hands at the end of their program before they waved to the audience.

Heart Pains

Teresa Alto

I was eight when my parents told me they were separating. A conversation with my dad soon after went like this: I told him, "I don't want you to move out."

He asked, "Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to."

Amused as he always was to hear a child's reasoning, even in the midst of emotional upheaval, he asked again, "Why not?"

I answered, more plaintively, "Because I don't want you to!"

My heart hurt, swelling in my chest. I told my parents I thought I was having a heart attack. They drove me once a week to a child psychologist. She tried to get me to talk about my feelings. She asked me to draw pictures of my family or play with figurines of people in a little alcove bathed in afternoon sun. I hated this stranger and refused to talk or play as I looked out on the clipped lawn. I didn't want my dad to leave. My heart was bursting. What more was there to say?

The visits to the child psychologist stopped, but the yearning didn't. My love for my dad was visceral and unbounded. Dad and I licked the sticky orange concentrate off the top of the freezer containers together. We ate spoonfuls of mustard just to see what it tasted like plain. After work sometimes, he would run around the block with me on his shoulders. Dad could catch a fly in midair.

He delighted in me, his firstborn. I was a source of humor and curiosity. How does a child think and feel and learn? When I stuttered, trying to say something, "I . . . I . . . I . . .," he would imitate me, "I . . . I . . . I . . ." How does a child express herself?

A mantra in our home was "Not fair to me!" whenever my brother or I didn't get what we wanted. How does a child develop a sense of ethics?

He would deliver one swift swat on the butt when warranted—like when I tried to give our short-haired cat a haircut and caught the scissors in a fold of the poor animal's skin. But otherwise Dad never seemed angry or short-tempered with me. He seemed to admire my conniving when he and Mom tried to wean me from pacifiers as a young child. I dug them out of the trash bin and crouched behind a bench in my bedroom sucking them furtively.

Dad was always reading, usually in my parents' king-sized bed, where yellow notepads and folders were strewn among piles of books. In a picture of me at three, I am sitting with my legs straight out, a big hardcover book in my hands balanced on my shins. I am looking intently at the book, as I'd seen my parents do, *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* upside down.

One time Dad and Mom were fighting, sitting in chairs facing each other in the dining room. Mom was weeping, her face in her hands. I went to her lap to console her. Dad was grinning, as if amused. But that grin must hide pain. I went to his lap to hug him. But Mom was crying. I went back to her lap. How does a child perceive emotions?

Dad moved to the cheapest house for sale in Ames when my parents separated. It was all the way on the east edge of town, next to a cornfield at the end of a block marked by the hot pink Tip Top Lounge. Lying in bed there, I sang "Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong" over and over. I loved the weekends with Dad and imagined ways to fix up the house. The only bathroom was in the dark, unfinished basement, reachable via a press-board, unheated addition that enclosed the steps off the kitchen. The two bedrooms, one off the kitchen and one off the living room, lacked doors. The yard was choked with tall weeds.

I was an avid reader by that time, and Dad had me sound out the French of an academic book and try to figure out what the words meant. We watched the British comedy show *The Goodies*, which I loved, and *Dr. Who*, which always made me fall asleep.

I thought my dad, an economics professor at Iowa State University, was the smartest person in the world. He knew everything. In high school I would visit Dad daily in his carrel in the university library for help on my physics problems. Dad patiently tried to teach me how to analyze a problem, identifying the variables and which were known and which were unknown, to figure out how to find the answer. I worked harder on that class than any class before or after.

Dad had published his massive tome, *The Economics of Space and Time*, in 1977, a year after my parents' separation. By the time of my high school visits to him in the library, he had started what he was already conceiving of as a much more comprehensive work, one that would provide a new foundation for all knowledge in every field. There were the Greeks and Romans, Francis Bacon and the rise of science, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Einstein—and when Dad finished this great work our time would be named for him. His carrel was lined with library books. Each week, he went through about 70, devouring the new advances in all fields represented in the library's new book room.

Over the decades since, Dad's growing knowledge is recorded on thousands of yellow cards, each a reserve slip for a particular book with notes in inscrutable handwriting. The cards are in bulky stacks based on topics, and rubber bands bundle subtopics. It's a tricky business laying out all knowledge into categories and subcategories, because everything connects to everything. Many times through the years, when preparing to outline his planned work, Dad has instead rearranged stacks and substacks, rubber bands within rubber bands marking relationships among theories and fields.

Now 89 years old, when Dad tries to describe the work he still refers to as his magnum opus, he speaks in categories. I struggle to continue paying attention when he talks of the physical world, the biological world within it, and the human world within that; and time—the past, which can't be changed; the present, which is always be-

coming the past; and the future, which we can't know. And then there are the limits on what we can know, because of bounded rationality, and attitudes, and habits, and cultural environments, and a whole number of other categories that emerge as lists and lists within lists. I pointed out to him that all his subjects are nouns. Is this because he needs to tell us what there is to know, what the realms of knowledge are, before he can get to what we should do with all this knowledge? I asked. Where are the verbs? And why can't he get to the point of all this laying of the land?

Dad is suffering from two forms of cancer, congestive heart failure, and impaired kidney function. I ponder now which variables are known and which are unknown. You can classify the ailments of the body, but how do you figure out what to do when everything connects to everything? His feet are swelled up like balloons as his heart struggles to move fluids against the pull of gravity. The medicines to treat the heart failure damage his kidney function. Like a small child, he petulantly refuses to take his medicines as directed "because I don't want to!" Ejection fraction is mildly to moderately reduced. Left atrium is severely dilated. Patient denies chest pain.

Dad commented to me recently that his father died of a heart attack, "I think his third, after two non-fatal heart attacks." Maybe his mother, too. "I never had a conversation with either of them," he says.

He doesn't mean he never had a conversation about their health. He means he never had a conversation with them about anything. Perhaps he thinks of them, alone in Florida in their declining years, their two sons almost never in contact. "Ah, well," he sighs. "What do you do?"

As Dad's charts attest, "The patient denies pain." But I feel it again, a pressure in my chest, a pain in my heart. I don't want him to go. He doesn't want to go either. "But what do you do?"

Again Young for Just a While

Keys Allen

Lightning on the mountain's knifing through the rain, and though I try I can't deny the memories that remain. Her voice so drawn from disease and pain saying, "There's no cause for fear. The sun'll bring light, sleep release, and I will always be near."

Man and boy, I've worked this land for nigh on eighty years. Of late, I've learned what a man becomes when he's got no time for tears. His thoughts grow hard, his heart grows cold, and, as his eyes begin to fade, the dark seems darker when the sun goes down and brings an end to day.

Long since, I got all I want and many things I don't need, but what I treasure are the visions I see when I chance to sleep. She comes to me from shadows with a loving, gentle smile, and she and I walk hand-in-hand, again young for just a while.



The Heart of Nature by Holly Duester

The Woods

Aunna Nubson

The woods
A mysterious place
Beautiful by day
And scary by night

During the day
Peacefulness fills the air
For the sound of the birds
Fluttering away and chirping happily
Brings a sense of comfort and relaxation

During the night
Fear starts to seep in
For who knows what lurks within
A bear?
A wolf?
The fear of the unknown
Forever haunting our minds
The woods



Day and Night by jillian Wakeman

Cranberry Bog

Diane Morey

"Are you coming over tomorrow?" My friend Donna was on the phone.

"Yes. My mom can drop me off about one."

"Cool. Bring your boots and parka. We might go to the bog or dig up bottles".

It was early November in northeast Minnesota with a couple inches of wet snow on the unfrozen ground. I didn't know anything about the bog, but I knew that a couple inches of snow weren't a problem for trekking in the woods and bottle hunting. One of our favorite past times is to find old garbage dumps and dig around for intact bottles. The real treat would be if Donna's neighbor wasn't home. He had the best dump for miles, but was quick to run off any trespassers. Even if he WAS home, two 14-year-old girls, experienced in the woods, can easily melt away among the trees and disappear. Those disappearing skills have been used in the past.

Donna's older brothers, Steve and Randy were home when I got there. Younger brother Logan was sitting cross legged on the living room floor, mesmerized by the television. Rock music blasted from Steve's back bedroom. In between songs, I could hear conversation between the two brothers. Donna's dad was on the day shift at the nearby taconite mine and would be home later in the day. Her mom was uptown, no doubt buying groceries for this horde.

Donna's family was Finnish, a well-respected but teased population in our home town. Two of the kids, Donna and Randy had the classic blue eyes, blond hair and medium height. Besides the Finns, much of the town's population had last names from eastern Europe or Italy. These names were either unpronounceable anywhere else but the Iron Range, had no vowels or ended in "ski." I found it hilarious when a new teacher would stumble through a class list, butchering everyone's last name. Then there are fragments of other populations mixed in: American Indian, German, English, Scottish and of course, a few Canadians.

My family includes a long line of French fur trappers going back generations. French fur trappers tended to marry and blend in with the local population. There are a few Chippewa mothers and fathers in my background. My two younger brothers and I are blessed with thick dark hair, very brown eyes and we get the envy of our friends for having the earliest and best tan of the summer.

Donna gathered up a small saucepan, a plastic bag with sugar and a couple spoons. After stuffing the items in her backpack, she turned and hollered down the hall in Steve's general direction, "Denise and I are going to the bog!" Pause. "Did you hear me?!" Without waiting for confirmation, she turned to me and with a bit of exasperation said, "Let's go."

We exited the kitchen through the mudroom where we put on our boots, parkas and gloves. We

checked for extra gloves and a cap in our backpacks. A few steps away from the house was the shed. Donna went inside and grabbed a smooth six-foot pole, handing it to me. I stared at it for a moment and said, "What do I need this for?" I didn't want to carry this thing. I saw it as a burden knowing the hike ahead of us, was at least a couple of miles.

Donna said simply, "We'll need these poles in the bog in case we fall through."

Oh. Now this sounded exciting. I was immediately interested. It wasn't going to be a low-key afternoon of talking about boys and listening to the greatest hits on the radio. I didn't say a word, picked up my pole and followed her.

Her parka was a beautiful pale purple, and stuck out easily among the reddish bark of red pines and paper birch. We walked single file (doesn't everybody walk single file in the woods?) on a well-trodden family trail I was familiar with. Traveling southeast, the trail disappeared at the half mile point. This spot marked the boundary of the family's acreage and the start of Minnesota public lands. Donna turned to me, "Watch out for moose. The bulls can get a little aggressive this time of year."

"Yep," I said. While I kept my head on a swivel, checking my surroundings frequently, I was more concerned about crossing paths with a wolf pack. Moose are huge, generally pretty chill, and easy to spot. They're so big, they could be mistaken for a square black fish house from a thousand yards away. A very stealthy wolf could be watching us without us knowing. THAT scenario, I didn't like one bit.

We arrived at the bog about 45 minutes after leaving the house. The air was still and silent, the sky overcast and chilly with that special humidity that early winter can have sometimes. The peat spread in a general circular pattern with lumpy clumps here and there. Strangely, the birds were quiet too. After we both scanned the area around the bog carefully, looking for moose and not seeing any, Donna stepped forward with her pole in front of her. She prodded the peat in a rough semi-circle, checking for depth. After she was satisfied that the peat would hold her weight, she stepped forward again and repeated the prodding process. Step by step she moved further into the bog. I watched her, then started the same process, being careful to stay in her footsteps. The sensation of my first step was unexpected. It jiggled slightly. I raise my foot and stepped down again. Yep, another jiggle. Very cool!

Step by step (or rather, jiggle by jiggle), we made our way further out into the center of the bog. After 50 yards, I started getting impatient and kicked up my prodding speed. I thought I was still in Donna's footsteps, but no such luck. My next left step suddenly met with no resistance, no jiggling. What looked solid, was not. My boot and my left leg up to the knee, immediately

sank in murky cold water. Donna heard the muted splash and turned around. She quickly assessed the situation and relaxed, knowing that most of me was still topside. The second I felt that cold water on my left leg, I lashed my body to the right and whipped the pole over my head and in front. I planted it squarely across the water hole in front of me. I didn't realize that my reaction, built from fear or survival instinct, was a technically skilled move to stay on top of the bog.

"I knew you'd catch on", she snickered. "Now you know what the pole is for. You went down, now you get to get yourself out of the water."

I was wet to my thigh, but in no danger of going completely in the water. I waded my leg in the water, toeing around to feel for a solid bottom. My thought was to push off from the bottom to get my leg clear of water. My boot waded around in the cold water. Now the left leg of my jeans was wet almost to my crotch. The right side of my body, including my right leg was on top of the peat and still dry. I aimed to keep it that way. After a few choice expletives with Donna giggling ahead of me, I hollered "Hey!" "Where's the bottom!?"

Grinning, she said, "Parts of this bog are six to 8 feet deep. You're going to have to crawl out using the pole." As encouragement she mentioned that she, Steve and Randy have gotten wet at least once. And not just one leg. One time, Randy went all the way in, over his head. Logan wasn't allowed in the bog yet. He wasn't strong enough to pull himself out. Donna offered no more advice but stood watch a couple yards away. She didn't want to get close to the water hole and I didn't blame her a bit.

An adult, especially an overweight adult, would've had great difficulty crawling up onto a peat bog with one leg completely submerged, doing the splits as it were. Because I was skinny, flexible and fit, I was able to push myself up using the pole, get my left leg out of the water, roll over and stand up again. My poor boots! I could feel the fullness of the bog water in the thick felt lining. Further insult was added with dripping water from my jeans.

Donna was done laughing, with a hint of concern spreading on her face. I know what she was thinking about: hypothermia.

Standing like a flamingo and using the pole for balance, I removed my wool sock and boot. Damn, it was heavy with all that water! I removed the felt liner and wrung out as much water as I could. I put on my sock and boot. The wet pant leg didn't bother me. It wasn't 30 below and we were going to be doing more hiking. I knew it would dry soon enough.

I turned to Donna, "I'm good for now. Good thing I wore wool socks and long johns. I'm not really cold. When we get back to solid ground, I can dry my jeans over a fire." We didn't have too much further to go. As we moved slowly a few more steps, Donna bent down a couple times to inspect the peat for the little red jewels, better known as low bush cranberries. At last, satisfied with the patch she found, we settled in and focused on picking cranberries. In less than 20 minutes, we picked about two cups of the little ruby red beauties. During our picking, the bog remained very quiet with no moose anywhere.

We didn't return the same way we had come into the bog. Donna took a sharp right from the cranberry patch. This turned out to be a shorter distance to solid ground. We poled and jiggled our way along with no more water incidents. Once we touched solid ground, we travelled up a slight rise in a westerly direction. Donna was heading for the neighbor's property. You know, the neighbor with the best garbage dump around who liked to chase off trespassers. After reaching the property line, she kept to the thickest part of the trees and we angled north toward the paved road used by all residents. We stopped about 200 yards from the road. Donna waved her arm at a spot on the ground and asked if it was a good spot. It was a flat area with conveniently located downed logs to sit on. I told her it's good.

Being somewhat of a "pyro", as Donna calls me, I'm usually the fire starter for our outings. I have many techniques at the ready, to start a fire, even in wet or windy conditions. The key is to never let it get out of control. Last summer, on a family camping trip with my cousins, I created a new technique, more from desperation than anything else. It had rained hard during the night, soaking everything. My younger cousins woke early, the adults were still sleeping and several sets of eyes were looking at me expectantly. We were all standing next to the picnic table wondering how and what we going to eat. Rain still dripped off the leaves of the aspen and birch trees. I noticed the firewood had been moved from next to the fire pit to slightly underneath the wheel of our camper. My dad must've moved it. I had matches already (remember, pyro), but wet wood doesn't work so well. Thank God my dad planned ahead. I selected a birch log that was mostly dry. Cool. When I pulled out the birch log, a bottle of whiskey next to it, toppled over. Very cool. My cousins watched me fill the whiskey bottle cap and carefully dribble whiskey over the birch log, wetting the driest parts of the paper. They thought I had lost my mind, until they saw the first few flames. The rest is history. The fire was started, the pancakes were made and hungry kids were fed. When the adults learned how we kids fed ourselves, they were shocked and highly amused at the same time. My parents trusted my judgement implicitly when it came to campfires and feeding hungry cousins. I guess Donna did too.

I pulled out a sealed plastic box from my backpack, containing waterproof matches and a pen knife. Unlike the challenge of the camping trip pancakes, this one was easy. While Donna got our cranberry cooking supplies out of her backpack, I quickly gathered dry scraps of bark, dry pine needles and small branches. I hastily cleared snow from the ground, not bothering to wipe away all the snow. A fire can handle some snow, melting through it with no problem. The dry scraps were fluffed up, and laid gently but directly on the hastily cleared area. I scraped off a bit of birch paper from a downed log with the pen knife and inserted these scraps among the fluff. I ignored the red pine cones laying around. Too soggy, I thought. The small dry branches were stacked up above the fluff in a jagged pyramid. My plan was to get this baby cranked up quick, to dry my jeans. A curious Blue Jay watched us from the safety of a branch 20 feet up in a red pine. He flew off with a soft cluck that

sounded a little like a baby. Two chickadees told me what they thought of my actions before they too, flew off.

With our little fire gently warming the front of us, Donna scooped snow into the saucepan and leveled off the top. She melted the snow water, added the sugar and stirred. When it was steaming, she added the cranberries, stirring every so often. I took off my jeans and positioned the wet left leg close to the fire. Sitting on a downed log, in my blue parka, gray long johns and boots, I eyed the simmering red berries.

"Damn, I'm hungry," I told Donna. "When do we eat?" The thought that I looked ridiculous never crossed my mind. After all, I was sitting in the woods with my best friend, while we cooked berries that we picked, over a fire. It seemed like a perfectly normal thing to do.

Donna stared thoughtfully into the saucepan. "Almost done," she said. She stirred again, then set the spoon aside, and got up. "Be right back," she said. "Nature call". I grinned up at her, "Nature called ME when I fell into bog water." With a snicker, Donna moved away.

As she walked toward a clump of bushes, I called loudly over my shoulder, "Don't use any poison ivy!" We were at the age when poison ivy butt rash was always funny.

We were both hungry and didn't wait long for the cranberry sauce to cool. It was heavenly! We declared it to be the best cranberry sauce ever made. Too soon, our teaspoons scraped the pan bottom. We both wished out loud that we had picked more cranberries. Donna wiped out the pan with snow. I cleaned the two spoons. We sat for a few more minutes, pleased with our accomplishments of the day, even though it included wet clothes. The warmth of the fire was comfortable, the warm cranberry sauce filled us with energy and our bellies stopped grumbling.

The sun was low in the sky. It was time to go. We'd seen Donna's dad's pickup go by, so we knew he was home and her mom would be starting supper soon. Carefully, I doused the fire with snow, making sure there were no live embers.

As we walked toward the road, we decided we should add fish to our menu next time.



Grasshopper by Dawn Loeffler

Building

Robert Jevne

The cats disappear
When there's work to be done
They don't like the sounds
Of the hammer
The drill
The saw
And least
The somehow
More sudden sound
Of the compressor
Or maybe, they just
Don't like the idea of work.
For my part
I am not aging well,
Not liking anymore
The idea of work either,
My life having been
One project
Not quite
Dovetailing neatly
Into the next
A process
More like compounding
Than dovetailing.
Compounding
Preternaturally, the
Too many years
Grubbing at the foundations,
The exigencies,
Of buildings
Under the pretext
Of solidity

I am bald faced to you god
God of measure
God of angles
God of
Grifting contractors
God of cheap-skaters
Critics and umbrage takers
God of straight lumber
Straighter nails
And found, perfect scraps
God of
Crooked backs
Tendinitis, contusions
Scrapes, blood blisters
Lost fingernails
God of
Paltry ambition
And paltrier labor
God of will
Over pain
And some pains over
Other pains

I have wrecked my knees
Beseeching the gods of
Rough carpentry
Hacksaws, ideation
And architecture

I am at a loss
Now, finally
After all these years

I look at the cats
The cats look back



Art by Adreonna Bittner

An Island of Many

Sam Connelly

By the docks at dusk,
There she sat, all bathed in evening low-light
Her stacks of three, reach up to scrape the sky
 Promised to all, futures that appear bright
Unknown to us, she led where all but I,
would die

Early as the crow,
 We set sail the next morning
 One-Hundred and six of us all,
Smoke, dark as death blown up to the sun
 Leaving bread crumbs of oil and poison
That nature would innocently snack upon
Leaving behind a trail of only mourning
 But, we could not mourn,
for what we could not see

Ahead of us, promise in the future
 Behind us, only death and despair
 Gilded as the tools held in our hands
As an infant has no memory of the past,
 we would forget to see what waste
 we had burdened upon nature
 And in return, she would
 cast her waste upon us

Six days and five hours we had been at sea,
And for the past four nights, our ship was pelted by the hail,
 Flooded by the rains, rocked by the waves, burnt
by the lightning
 All we knew was misery, yet around us,
nature's little fishes happily jumped and splashed

Ahoy! Land!
How we would rejoice on our small island!
 Her forests of lush green to graze
Her lone summit, amid the clouds to play on
Her sandy beaches to relax upon

And after only a couple days, our little island,
 Was left. Left with nothing to her name.
Her forest of green, mowed down to her roots
 Her lone summit, gray and gloomy
Her beaches of sand, left lifeless

We had destroyed nature's child
And like a mother bear with her cub,
Nature bit back

Two days and nights after having left the ruins
unknowing persons of our crew had snacked
 upon nature's fruit
A fruit that hid poison behind sweet taste

Sweet taste that turned into disease
A disease that spread like wildfire

Burning our lush crew from forest to ashes
 First one, then a couple more would die
Men dropped like flies. All would rot
 All would die, until it was only I
And yet around us,
the little fishes happily jumped and splashed

Me and my ship,
 My ship of the damned
We sat and rot alone on the sea
And from my ship, formed a sandy beach
 From the rot of my crew grew a lush forest
And from me, the lone survivor,
grew a great lone summit

All alone I am this rock,
Sitting and watching the horrors of man
Crying unheard prayers for the suffering to stop
My lush green forest, my sandy beaches and me,
 Luring unfortunate men,
to death they couldn't foresee

As I watched, from my lone summit home
Crew after crew, stopped by to be prey
And once they had left, taking the life
 of my isle,
They would eat the sweet death,
And I could finally be free
The cycle, complete



Torres del Paine National Park, Chile by Cate Belleveau

Managed

Robert Jevne

Nearly everything is managed.
Forests are managed,
Large animal species
Living in managed forests
Are managed,
Fish in our lakes
And rivers are managed
To promote certain species
For size and sport.

Flavor is bred out of produce
In favor of shelf life
To manage transport
Over long distances

Most of us are managed
In our work lives
Even managers
Productivity and workplace
Behaviors are managed
Our interactions tamed
By propriety and fear of
Being shamed online

Anger is managed
Grief, time, blood pressure
Diet, cholesterol
Alcohol intake

Our internet presence is managed
Our news feeds
Likes and dislikes
Our favorite teams
Are managed even if poorly

The true end goal
Of manifest destiny
Is to stamp out wildness
But you, however,
You are special
You are free
Because you have
Managed to love

Preacher Bird

Elizabeth Merrigan

He lands softly
On the shepherd's crook
Outside my dining room window.
His congregation of swallows
Gather around him, beating their wings
In a great celebration of July gladness.

Brothers and sisters, he chirps and cheers,
Be glad of morning air, sunshine on our wings,
For flight plans over fields of yellow and green,
For garden seeds that bring us new growth,
For our wings banded together in love,
Our family a nest of hope that soon
Swift flight and faithful air will not forsake us.

Be grateful for this day, this hour that
We are together, do not be weary.
Joy is in our song and darkness we do not fear,
Light will not forsake us, will not desert us.

The sermon over, they rise, a congregation
Renewed, flying away over fields of yellow and green.

Preacher Man, learn a lesson
From the preacher bird.
Do not condemn, do not judge,
Let your words fly away in hope and faith
That heaven's quest is on a sunlit wing of love.

Contributors

Keys Allen has held a variety of jobs from destroying car-batteries with a sledgehammer for 50 cents an hour to writing relational databases for a Fortune 500 company and, later, his own LLC in Michigan. An ICC alumnus, Allen currently resides in Bovey with his dog, composing music, writing stories, and learning to make practical use of the studies involving the Default Mode Network.

Teresa Alto was an English instructor at Itasca Community College (now Minnesota North-Itasca) for 20 years. Before that, she worked as a test writer and editor for ACT, a book editor, and a public relations writer. When she is not writing or reading, you can find her canoeing, camping, and mushroom hunting in the summer, and skiing and snowshoeing in the winter.

Cate Belleveau holds a Master's Degree in Natural Resources/Environmental Education and spent the majority of her professional life as a director of Gifted Education on a local Native American reservation. She co-founded the Bemidji Sculpture Walk with her sculptor husband as well as the Mask and Rose Theater and Belle Thalia Creative Arts Space.

Adreonna Bittner, a junior in high school studying concurrently at Minnesota North-Itasca, loves participating in cheerleading and managing the wrestling team with some of her best friends. One of her favorite subjects in school is science and she can't wait to take chemistry to use test tubes and mix things together.

Evan Bruemmer has lived in Minnesota all his life. Moving away from Grand Rapids to the country in nearby Cohasset has helped him appreciate nature and what it has to offer. He enjoys golf, playing card games, working out, and playing ping pong. He believes writing helps express who we are and maybe gets a message out that readers might want.

Sam Connelly is a senior in high

school from Grand Rapids. He loves exploring and expanding his passion for the outdoors with hobbies including hunting, trapping, and forestry. He hopes to pursue a master's degree in forest science to contribute to the conservation of Minnesota's forests.

Holly Duester is a recent Minnesota North College-Itasca graduate and is currently working in the Grand Rapids area on a gap year. She has loved capturing the beauty of nature through photography since she was a young girl and she fell in love with written creativity in high school. She has continued to explore herself and her abilities in both writing and photography and is excited for her future as an artist in both mediums.

Melanie Howick Erickson was born and raised in England but has lived in Minnesota for many years. After earning her AA from Leech Lake Tribal College and a B.A. and M.A. from Bemidji State University, she has worked with the Boys & Girls Club, Leech Lake Area. She has been privileged to attend Big Drum ceremonies, Sweat Lodge, and Sun Dance ceremonies. A friend made her a jingle dress and she is proud to wear it when she dances at pow wows.

Michael Hanley is an Associate Professor Emeritus of Advertising in the Department of Journalism at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. Prior to teaching, Hanley was a magazine and newspaper photographer from 1978 - 1987. Among other awards, he won a Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting in 1983 as a photojournalist at the Fort Wayne (Ind.) News-Sentinel. He now lives near Bemidji, Minnesota, where he enjoys nature and landscape photography, writing poetry, and traveling.

Robert Jevne is a retired laborer for Minnesota State Parks. He currently manages a small herd of dogs, a handful of chickens and smattering of poetry in the greater Jacobson area.

Chelsea Johnson is an art instructor at Minnesota North-Itasca.

LL Kelly is a born-and-raised Minnesotan with a deep love for both nature and learning. She attended the University of Minnesota, where she majored in Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior (all the while fantasizing about writing). When not reading or writing, she can be found working on new tricks with her dog, crafting, or gardening.

Glen Key has been involved with the arts for years now. Theatre is a passion/hobby for him, and he has started taking dance lessons to immerse himself even more in the arts. Growing up in what he considers a small town, having something to connect himself to the community like theatre has been a joy of his and he wants to share that joy.

Vicki Lessard is a lifelong resident of Grand Rapids, currently living the rural life on Shoal Lake. She has been submitting her photography to Spring Thaw since 2014, and she has been honored to have had two of her images chosen for the front cover. She looks forward to the arrival of the warmer seasons, where days are spent tending the vegetables and flowers, and roaming the countryside with camera in hand.

Kelli Lien was born and raised on her parent's hobby farm in northwestern Minnesota, where she developed her love for nature and all animals. Kelli is a visual artist; a painter, collagist, and book artist. She has been an award winning watercolorist for over 25 years. She is a signature member of the Red River Watercolor Society. In the spring of 2024 she will receive a "Core Certificate in Book Arts" through Minnesota Center for Book Arts.

Dawn Loeffler is a writer and educator from Northern Minnesota. She has been published in *Talking Stick*, *Upon Waking*, *Poetry is Dead*, *Dust & Fire*, and *Rivers Meeting Project*. She has judged the Midwest Book Awards, Poetry Out Loud, and the U. S. Academic Decathlon competition.

Elizabeth Merrigan As one of Liz Merrigan's favorite hymns is "I'll Fly Away," the theme of birds in this year's submission seems appropriate. She spends time in Milwaukee with family and friends and most of the summer at her farm acreage in South Dakota. Her "flight" this spring will be a river cruise from Paris to Normandy with good friends.

Lynn Moore lives in Bemidji, Minnesota. She is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators and 12 x 12 Book Challenge. Her professional work on emergent literacy has appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Diane Morey graduated from Vermilion Community College and Bemidji State University, and worked for 37 years in small business development and business loans, retiring as lead program officer and supervisor at the Northwest Minnesota Foundation in Bemidji. She has volunteered or served as a board member for the Bemidji HRA, the Red Lake Nation Entrepreneur Development Program, the Northwest Minnesota Foundation, and Midwest Motorcycle Club.

Aunna Nubson is a senior at Grand Rapids Senior High School, and a PSEO student at Minnesota North College - Itasca. She is majoring in psychology. In her free time she loves to both read and write. Her goal is to become a lawyer practicing family law, juvenile law, and child protection. Her biggest goal is to help change the child protection system for the better so that it can be less traumatizing for both the parents and the children that have to go through it.

Allie Pagel has lived in the Iron Range her whole life. She has many ideas for stories, but she often doesn't have a lot of time to write them due to her many hobbies, including swimming, baking, building, exploring, and most of all performing. She is studying to work in the medical field. However, if it doesn't work out, she will probably try to become a performer. Either way, she wants to write books on the side as a passion.

Paige Patterson is a student at Minnesota North-Itasca.

Teopa Reve has participated in Spring Thaw many times over the last 15 years. Her favorite form is the haiku and one of her favorites, "insect Zen," is in the sidewalk at Old Central School in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

Kaylin Rivard is a student at Minnesota North-Itasca.

Lily Saccoman is a student at Minnesota North-Itasca and editorial board member for *Spring Thaw*.

Alexa Scholl is currently a freshman at Minnesota North. She plans to enter the teaching and coaching field. She coaches both private and group figure skating lessons for youth ages at Star of the North Figure Skating Club. This year was her first year as the Grand Rapids Head High School Cheer Coach for the Hockey Cheerleaders when the Boys Varsity Hockey Team placed fourth in the State Championship.

Peyton Skelly is a student at Minnesota North College. She has a passion for fitness and living a healthy lifestyle. More importantly, she strives to inspire others to live their healthiest and happiest lives. She will attend Northwest Technical College to start her journey toward her 4-year degree in nursing; after that, she will start training to become an Aesthetic Nurse.

Jadyn Swenson is currently 19 years old. She is a second year student at Minnesota North College - Itasca. She drew a cow for fun and loved the way it turned out! She wanted to express what a cow looks like up close.

Emily Tischbirek is a nature photographer from northern Minnesota.

Chris Tolman and her husband live in Bemidji, Minnesota. A Bemidji State University graduate with a degree in Elementary Education, Chris enjoys the outdoors and started her own non-profit organization called

"The Nature Connection" in 2015, where she provides educational programming with live birds of prey. She currently works full-time at the Forest History Center in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, as the Adventure Educator.

Jacqueline Ollestad is a nontraditional college student who attends the Minnesota North College - Itasca. She is 41 years old and has been a homemaker most of her adult life, raising four children - five, including her husband. She is focusing her studies on psychology, with hopes of becoming a Mental Health Practitioner.

Jillian Wakeman is a junior in high school and a PSEO student majoring in psychology at Minnesota North College. She lives in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. She enjoys writing, reading, and art. She has always loved writing, even when she was little. She likes doing anything that sparks her creativity.

Autographs

