



2025

New River Anthology

2025 New River Anthology

A Collection of Student Art & Writing

Volume 29

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C O M M U N I T Y C O L L E G E

Jacksonville, North Carolina

The ***New River Anthology Distinguished Author Award*** is funded by *The New River Anthology* Scholarship. The award is given each year to three writers whose work best represents their genre. The committee is pleased to present this award to the following students:

“Fat Frog in My Pond” by Breanna Lawrence (Poetry)

“The Moment That Changed My Life” by Miranda VanderHook (Nonfiction)

“Don’t Close Your Eyes” by Deanne Sconyers (Fiction)

Publication Note

The New River Anthology is comprised of writing and artwork created by Coastal Carolina Community College students during the 2024-2025 Academic Year. The various works within this publication represent ideas expressed or artwork designed by students; in addition, the works may incorporate words or phrases, as well as explore themes, that some may find potentially disturbing or distressing. Therefore, any ideas expressed or artwork designed by students within this publication are not purported to be reflective of any views or positions of Coastal Carolina Community College.

Coastal Carolina Community College is committed to not only educational excellence — by fostering an engaging teaching and learning environment that embraces inclusivity as well as promotes personal and cultural enrichments in order to enhance the student experience — but also student success.

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**Artwork pieces are in bold.*

***Content warnings are in place at the very top of these pieces. Please read carefully and proceed with caution.*

Fat Frog in My Pond

By Breanna Lawrence

He sits, a plump little emperor,
round as the moon,
soft belly resting on the edge of the pond,
legs sprawled like he owns the place
and maybe he does.
Fat frog,
king of this little patch of water.

He's unbothered,
a Buddha in the backyard,
his eyes half-closed,
watching the world move
without needing to leap.
He knows the sun will warm his skin,
the bugs will come to him,
and the cool water will always be there
to cradle his bulk when he is ready.

"He know the sun will warm his skin..."

The Moment That Changed My Life

By Miranda VanderHook

As I sat in my house, surrounded by my three children, I realized that if I wanted to give them a better future, I had to take control of my own. Becoming a single mother of three was not something I had planned, but it became the turning point that pushed me toward a new path. I knew that struggling to make ends meet would not be enough. I needed to build something better, something stable. That moment of realization led me to one of the biggest decisions of my life: going to college. It was not an easy choice, but it was necessary. Becoming a single mother of three was a defining moment in my life because it motivated me to pursue a college education, taught me resilience, and showed me the power of determination in creating a better future for my children.

The reality of becoming a single mother hit me all at once. I went from having a partner to facing every challenge on my own: financial struggles, emotional exhaustion, and the overwhelming responsibility of raising three young children. There were nights when I laid awake, wondering how I would afford groceries, pay rent, or provide the life I had always dreamed of for my kids. It felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. But despite the fear and uncertainty, I knew one thing for sure: I had to be strong for them.

I made the decision to go to college and overcome challenges along the way. The turning point came one evening as I watched my children play on the floor, their laughter filling the room. I wanted them to have opportunities, to grow up without worry, and to see that hard work and education could change lives. At that moment, I decided to go back to school. It was a terrifying decision. I thought about how I would balance college, work, and motherhood. Would I be able to keep up with the demands of school after being away for so long? The doubts crept in, but my love for my children was stronger than my fears.

Going back to school while raising three kids was one of the hardest things I have ever done. Late nights became my new normal, putting my children to bed and then staying up for hours to finish assignments. There are moments when I want to give up, when exhaustion threatens to take over, but I remind myself why I started. I am learning to manage my time, to push through challenges, and to believe in myself even when things feel impossible. Every class completed, every exam passed, and every step forward is proof that I am capable of more than I ever imagined.

Looking back, I realize that becoming a single mother was not the end of my story; it was the beginning of a new chapter. This experience taught me resilience, determination, and the importance of education in breaking the cycle of struggle. My journey is far from over, but every step I take toward my degree is a step toward a brighter future for my family. Through every challenge, I have learned that strength is not about never falling; it is about rising every time you do. My children are my greatest motivation, and because of them, I will never stop striving for success.

“Through every challenge, I have learned that strength is not about never falling; it is about rising every time you do.”

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Don't Close Your Eyes

By Deanne Sconyers

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. The sound of the clock reverberated through my mind as I lay in bed staring into the darkness. I've been awake for three days, three days of seeing *her*, whoever she may be.

It started a few months ago after my friends and I broke into an abandoned barn out in the countryside. It didn't help we were bored and already drinking. I'm not sure how long the barn had been abandoned, but it's supposedly haunted and a popular hangout spot for teens to party or play with Ouija boards. I never believed in the supernatural, and I never believed in heaven or hell, until that night.

I'm not sure why she attached herself to me, but I believe that this barn is a gateway for evil to come into our world and feed on us. I never told anyone, but that night I thought I kept seeing flashes of someone or a figure that took the shape of a person. I chalked it up to the alcohol and shadows playing tricks on me, but when my friends went to take a bathroom break and grab more booze from the car, I felt a sharp pain on my arm. When I turned around, no one was there except for a single, not quite bloody, scratch on the back of my arm. It was as if she marked me, waiting for one of us to be left alone. Like a ravenous animal eager for its next meal.

It started off slowly, and I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. I would see shadows in my peripheral. It didn't matter what time of day or where I was, that shadow would follow me, watch me, and eventually show herself to me. I went from seeing shadows to having night terrors every time I fell asleep. The dreams only became worse, and I started to wake up with handprint-shaped bruises or scratches that looked more like burns all over my body. My parents thought it was self-harm and that I was depressed, so they sent me to a therapist. I tried to explain that something was following me, but no one would listen. I was eventually referred to a psychiatrist where they diagnosed me with bipolar depression. I was put on antipsychotics, which began to help. I was able to function during the day without feeling paranoid like I was being watched. I was able to sleep without dreaming, and I would wake up with no markings on my body, just the scars that she had left behind. That only lasted two months before she made her way back to me.

She seemed angrier and became more aggressive. She was no longer a shadow person, and she was no longer in my dreams. Three days ago, she appeared in my room, sitting in the corner by my bedroom window. She was cradling her legs, rocking back and forth, smiling. I could not see her face, except for that smile. It was so unnatural; it almost spread from ear to ear, showing rotted teeth. I could smell her breath from where I lay. It smelt like rotting flesh, and I could practically taste it.

She just sat there rocking back and forth whispering, “She’s mine all mine. In due time, you will be all mine. Flesh so sweet, meat just as tender.” She spoke low and fast, her voice raspy and otherworldly. The moonlight reflected off her greasy black hair that hung over her face.

I haven’t slept since, and I haven’t told anyone. I know they won’t believe me and that they’ll just send me to a hospital. I can’t be put on medication because I know if I fall asleep, she will take me and do God knows what. So, I’m stuck laying here, waiting for her to crawl to her corner and haunt me.

Tick. Tick. Tick. The clock now showed two a.m. Tonight feels different. I have this heavy, sinking feeling in my chest.

Screech. The sound of someone slowly dragging themselves across the floor. It’s coming from under the bed. This isn’t like the other times. Something’s different; something’s wrong. I shut my eyes, closing them tight.

Don’t look.

Don’t fall asleep.

Screech. I ball my fists, clinging to the sheets.

Don’t move.

Don’t breathe.

A sudden silence overwhelms the space. My breaths grow shallow, my body drenched in sweat as I try not to shake.

Don't look.

Don't look.

Don't look.

Nothingness. *Was I safe? Is she in her corner?*

I slowly open my eyes. Hers are inches from mine, and they have a fiery yellow glow. They burn into me as that sinister smile stretches across her greyed and ashen face. The smell of rot permeates my senses as she slides her tongue across her blackened teeth. There is an excruciating, searing pain as my flesh is torn from my throat. The taste of iron fills my mouth and spills from my lips as I drift off into oblivion. Praying that there is no hell for her to take me to. Wishing that this is the end.

“I never believed in the supernatural, and I never believed in heaven or hell, until that night.”



“Untitled”

By Jacob Mueller

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

The voice

By Stormie Tigner

It's understated, or maybe even misunderstood, that the first day you lose someone is the easiest. It feels like a movie. No matter how grounded you are, no matter how matter-of-fact or logical you are, when you find out someone you love is no longer here, it feels like you're watching yourself on a screen. Your eyes are now the audience. Your mind has turned off, and it's nothing more than muscle memory. The phone slips from your hand and ricochets off the slick wood floors. But there's a moment there, and it stays until you see the truth, until it's been days, and they don't wake up or talk or come back alive; and that moment cements into the back of your subconscious full of hope. Hope so ridiculous it rivals how science can't understand the way bees are able to fly with their tiny wings, just like your brain can't process that they're gone in an instant. So it holds on to that hope; you're neither aware or unaware. It's just there. Hopeful that this is a dream. That they will wake up tomorrow, like it never happened. Hopeful that they can be saved, even if their heart no longer beats and their lungs are empty. But when you fall asleep, finally fall asleep from exhaustion and hope and everything else that crowds your mind, and they don't wake up when you're awake is when you see the truth. And that hope gets shattered. That's the worst day; that's your rock bottom. Every day after that is a battle to piece yourself back together knowing that you're not complete. Knowing that you're missing something.

But it doesn't always have to be like that. That ridiculous hope can become tangible. Right there, right behind that purple door. There's still time; you can save them; you could save everyone. Anyone who's gone, anyone who needs help. If you just open that door and pay a small price- no not your soul. I have no purpose for human souls. Well, as of now I don't, so you don't have to worry about that. It'll just be a favor, one you'll have to complete regardless of the time or day or morals. All you have to do is open that door with a bloodied palm and say the names of those you want back. The blood on your palm is your signature for the contract we're making. Take this knife, slice your palm however you wish, just as long as it's deep enough to bleed onto the door, and put your hand anywhere you wish. Once you do it, the door opens, and you say the names of everyone you want back. Not just one or two or three, everyone you've ever wanted back will come back.

It's not a scam; they won't come back a zombie or evil, whatever that means, or not themselves. It'll be like they never left. However, once their souls get pulled, there's not a guarantee that they won't remember where they were, and there's no guarantee that they won't want to go back to where they came from. But they'll have a choice now. Isn't that better than not having one? So, what do you say? Will you do it? Or will you keep on living, half human and half grief until you find them in the afterlife? That is if you end up in the same place they do.

Oh, you will? Excellent. You already know what to do. Go on. Just remember what I said. That favor I will cash in on does not have a time or place and does not cater to your human logic. You will do as I ask, or you and everyone you brought back will be tortured for the rest of time.

Great. I will see you when the time comes. Good luck.

“It'll just be a favor, one you'll have to complete regardless of the time or day or morals.”

Remembrance

By Kimberly Culbreth

Autumn wakes up the
Lycoris Radiata
By the empty ruins

“Autumn wakes up...”

****Content Warning:**

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Letter

By Stormie Tigner

Dogs. That's all you could hear on the property: their barking, their snarling, their jaws clamping down in warning. Even if one couldn't hear them, the smell alone would be enough to know the plantation was crawling with them. *Blood hounds*, Emma thought while scrunching her nose up in disgust. Filthy, just like their owners. She tried to not breathe in, the scent of dogs and their waste distracted her, and if she wasn't careful, she'd fall right off the stone wall. Her long cotton dress was torn after her leg kept catching on the fabric one too many times. A letter was scrunched in her hands as she shuffled on all fours across the narrow wall, the stone ever so slightly scratching against the exposed skin on her hands and knees. The letter, a brown envelope now squished and crumbled in her white knuckled grip, held what she thought was her way out. And right over this stone wall was the place where her future resigned.

Twenty-four hours earlier

"Emma!" Eric bellowed out, a gruffness to his voice that only age could provide. His face was decorated with a few wrinkles, an obvious farmer's tan on his face, neck, and lower arms. He was leaning against the opening of a screen door, the front porch door open and showing off deep brown wood floors and paneled walls. The man, adorning a dull grey shirt and work pants with dirt and holes throughout, looked inside quickly before turning, the screen door slamming shut. He looked to either side of the wraparound porch, finding no sign of what he was looking for other than random plants and old white wicker chairs. He mumbled a "where is that-" under his breath before he stomped down the stairs, brown work boots scraping against the gravel in the driveway, and turned to go behind the two-story farmhouse. His grey hair caught the setting sun, looking almost white, and he scratched at his salt and pepper beard in frustration. The back yard was full of fruit trees in perfect lines, towering over the house, and the grass was maintained bright green. He looked from side-to-side before making his way to the other side of the house where he figured Emma must be.

As he walked, a tall dark brown tree, roots deep and stubborn enough that it still hadn't been moved an inch, even with hurricane after hurricane, came into his view. A low hanging branch, bowing up and over, made the perfect spot to put a wooden swing held together by twine. Eric spotted her on that swing, faded yellow dress so long it reached the ground as she swung.

That dress must have been an older one, maybe one from her mother, and definitely wasn't modest. It showed her collarbones all the way to the top of her cleavage, thin straps the only thing holding the garment on her person. Her hair at least was presentable: dark brown curls now pinned to the top of her head in a bun, a few strands of chestnut spirals framing her tan skin. As she swung, her head was thrown back, eyes closed to the sun beating down on her skin.

"Emma!" Eric yelled as he got closer. The brunette moved her head forward and opened her eyes. "Come on, you need to get changed."

"Why?" Emma was far too old to be her father's lap dog, a waiting and proper lady of twenty-one years. She didn't have to do whatever her father commanded anymore.

"We're not doing this." Eric grabbed Emma's arm, the force almost making her tumble back and off of the tree swing. "This is important and I can't have you mess this up, you hear? I'm too old to be telling you how to behave." He pulled her off the swing and she twisted her arm out of his hold with a huff. "You're too old to be reprimanded for your behavior." He made to grab her arm again, and she swung it away, glaring at him.

"Alright," she told him, making her way to the back porch. The simple wooden steps and railing, four-foot by four-foot, were only big enough to hold a small rusting tea table and chair. It was her mother's favorite spot, but now the memories had blurred together. The green moss that started to blend with the emerald glass was just a reminder to Emma on how the world never stops moving. Not even for the dead.

"The blue dress." Eric was behind her. Emma hadn't even noticed what she was doing as she swiped her hand away from the moss and looked behind to her father. She nodded, feeling solemn suddenly, not wanting to fight. Her father seemed pleased, holding the door open for her. The inside of the house matched the outside: wood floors, panel walls, and wooden furniture. They entered the kitchen, cabinets starting to turn sideways off their hinges and counter tops needing to be replaced. From the kitchen, Emma turned left down a hallway and opened the door all the way at the end of the dark hallway. Her father went straight instead, into the parlor, where he could finish nursing a bottle of whisky.

The sun was starting to set more, painting streaks of white and gold in her bedroom from the double windows, tan curtains drawn to the side. She opened another brown door, drawing out a blue poofy dress. The bodice was neck high, a long skirt with tulle underneath it, and all of it was a deep blue, the color of the sky before a storm. Emma scrunched her face, immediately

guessing that the fabric was going to be itchy. Without much thought, she shrugged her yellow dress until it pooled around her feet on the floor and all she had on was her white undershirt and shorts. It was a welcome change as the light layers let her skin breathe better in the heat. The brunette fanned herself, not wanting to put on the other dress. “Emma!” Her father yelled, and she stepped out of the puddle the yellow dress had made, yelling back that she was almost ready.

The blue dress had a zipper in the back, and she had to step into it. The fabric was itchy, just as she had guessed. Picking up the yellow dress, she threw it on her bed before making her way to where her father was in the parlor, drink in his hand. His face showed approval, but before he could say anything, someone knocked on the door. Emma sucked in a breath, already knowing who it was.

“Emma.” An attractive man sighed her name in childlike wonder, his deep blue eyes and thick black hair a perfect contrast on his pale skin. He was slender, wearing a white shirt tucked into black trousers. Emma’s skin heated as she let her eyes rove him over, hungrily taking in his form. The dark-haired man wasn’t any better as he zoned in on her lips before letting his eyes fall to her form fitting dress. He couldn’t help but think the dress looked just like his eyes; she looked like she was his.

“Riyker, where is your father?” Eric was behind Emma, watching suspiciously at the two young adults’ actions. Riyker coughed, his pale skin turning rosy as Emma held eye contact with him. Her eyes heated just like they were last night when the brunette sneaked out and decided she wanted to try kissing the way the French do.

“He should be right behind me.” They all looked behind Riyker’s shoulder, seeing a man older than Eric walking up the gravel road. His hair was white and see-through, and he had more wrinkles than Eric, but his clothes fit him as if he was only middle aged. He wore the same outfit as his son, but his shirt was black and covered in what looked like dirt or soot. Deep blue eyes and the same face shape as Riyker, Emma was certain that Riyker would look good, even as an old man.

“Antonio.” Eric greeted the older man who smiled and held his hand out.

“Eric.” Antonio looked at Emma and held his hand out. When she went to shake it, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. “Miss Emma.” Emma flushed, both in embarrassment and the fact that for an old man, he was weirdly attractive. Antonio stood straight up after Emma nodded at him, letting her hand drop to her side. “I’m just here to grab the certificate. Too busy for

anything else at the moment. Riyker here got accepted into university.” He clapped a hand on his son’s shoulder and Emma flung forward, hugging the young man.

While Emma cooed, “Why didn’t you tell me!” Her father disappeared into the house and came back with a thick white paper. He handed it to Antonio, who patted Riyker on the back.

“Come on, you shouldn’t be so informal with your future stepmother.” Emma stilled, going pale. Riyker coughed or gagged. Emma didn’t know because all she could hear was her blood rushing in her ears. “Oh, you didn’t tell her yet. Well, I didn’t tell Riyker, so I understand.” Antonio went to reach out towards the brunette, his hand just a light brush against her shoulder, but she jumped back as if he shocked her. A nauseous feeling crept into Emma’s throat looking at Antonio’s face, who just smiled like nothing was happening. Her father clamped a hand around the back of Emma’s neck, keeping her rooted to the spot, watching Riyker’s face change from disbelief to disgust. His eyes steel glared at his father. Antonio just laughed. “You’re going to university, son. By the time you get back, Emma will be an old maid. And you know her father can’t tend to all this land by himself. It’s the sensible thing to do.”

Riyker scoffed, his mouth turning up. “Don’t worry,” his father continued. “You’ll have your turn too. Emma can’t be a useless widow. You’ll make sure of that won’t you, boy?” At this point, Emma couldn’t stand still anymore, ripping her father’s hand off her neck and turning into the house.

“You can’t do this!” Riyker yelled, his voice deeper than anything Emma had ever heard from him. “This is...this is vile. You can’t possibly think this is godly.”

“Watch your mouth, son,” Antonio told him, face neutral but stern. “This is the best plan we have. Unless you want Emma to be married off to a stranger.”

Emma slammed her bedroom door shut, no longer wanting to hear any of the men talking. She ripped the blue dress off, the zipper almost torn off and the bodice with tiny rips in the seams. Her eyes burned, knowing that she was about to cry from frustration and betrayal. She stepped back into the yellow dress, needing the cool cotton on her skin to calm her down. Even after all these years, the dress still smelled like her mother: oranges and fire. Blood orange, her mother had once called it with crushed up herbs and the orange peels in her palm. She could barely remember what her mother looked like now, but her voice and smell would haunt her until her own would haunt her children.

She heard the front door close and then footsteps down the hallway. She braced herself, sitting down on the white sheets of her bed. Eric stepped into the threshold of her room, staring at her for a moment before sighing.

"I have to," he told her. His eyes were harsh, but there was a pleading look to them. "I can't keep doing this, Emaline. Your mother and brother died years ago, and with no son to help me keep up with the property and no money to hire help, well, I'll be gone before you can even swindle a man to be your husband."

Eric sat down on the bed, making Emma flinch back. His metallic-like eyes became soft, and he tried to reach towards his daughter, but Emma scooted away from him, not making eye contact. "You just have to deal with Antonio for a little while. He might be in good shape, but he's old regardless, and sooner than later he'll pass. With all of his money, he can hire help and the house, the estate, everything will be tended to and look so much better. And after Rikyker is finished with his education and is taught how to be a proper man, then you can marry him. I did this so that you could still be with someone you love. You have to understand my hands are tied, E-"

"Stop speaking!" Emma screamed, the door slamming shut on its own accord, but she didn't acknowledge it, instead glaring at her father who looked as though he couldn't breathe. "You are a selfish, heartless man if you think forcing me to wed and bed a man older than my father and to then marry his son is in my best interest!" Eric tried to stay calm, but his chest heaved. He couldn't breathe, like his throat had been closed by something invisible. "I wish it was you instead of mom!" Emma breathed roughly as she stood up, her voice raw from how loud she was screaming. Her father was still sitting on her bed; he had not moved a muscle. His face was pale, and his eyes had become slightly cloudy. When a knock sounded from the front door, Emma turned from her father, and he gulped in a breath, finally able to breathe again.

Emma turned from him and walked towards the door, opening it to the mailman, a middle-aged man with brown slacks and a brown shirt, holding a few letters. Emma thanked him, taking the mail from his hand, but as he walked down the steps, she noticed a brown envelope on the wood floor. She called for him, but he didn't hear her, continuing to walk back to his horse that was stationed on a tree. She picked it up, reading "From Memphis with Love" on the front. The address was for another plantation not too far away, just on the other side of the stone wall from their neighbor's house.

When Emma got back inside, the brown envelope stashed away in her dress, she went to the parlor and set the mail down in front of her father, who flinched at her presence. She knitted

her eyebrows at his actions. His eyes looked scared, but his face was neutral, and he wouldn't look at her. Emma rolled her eyes, mumbling a "Here's the mail" to her father who just nodded, swallowing a sip of whisky.

Emma looked at the brown envelope in her room, contemplating whether to open it or not before carefully doing so.

My beloved Nashi

I fear that the war will tear not only this country but us apart as well. I'm writing in hopes of reaching you before the union does. I've heard that they have burnt down towns, all in the name of peace, wanting the country to be whole again. We've been told lies, whether it's to protect property or to bring everyone no matter their skin together, it's a lie. If you can, leave, before they set all of Mississippi and you in it on fire. They will burn everything to the ashes if it means getting their way.

But oh, Nashi, how I miss you. I know that you had to move back to take care of your family's estate, but this loneliness doesn't abide by logic, just the miss of your skin on mine. And with this war, well, I sinfully pray that it has been burnt to ash so that you come back to me. I know that it's wrong, but you belong up here, where maybe the true nature of our relationship will never be tolerated, but at least we can be companions in silence without anyone turning on us.

Write me back soon, or better yet, leave and come back home to me.

Love,

Memphis

Emma was neither young or naïve anymore, knowing that proper society pushes people to the shadows more often than not. But disgust or shame was the last thing on Emma's mind as she placed the letter back in the envelope, at least for the two companions. As for herself, well, she was about to blackmail a man she has never met. That is, if he was still living at the address on the envelope. If she could track him down and show him the letter, he could help her escape up north, possibly bring her with him to see his secret, sinful lover.

This wasn't the first time Emma had witnessed these companionships. Her cousin, Maria, was far too close to her maid, Liv, even sleeping in the same bed when Maria's husband was away. Emma caught them once, a humid day just like this one a few years ago. The brunette had barely entered adulthood, being nosy the only reason why she knew things no proper lady should know, but catching your cousin naked and tangled in the arms of a lowly house maid was still a shock. Their horrified faces were now a hilarious reminder of how naïve she really was, but then it was a slap in the face. It was wrong or at least not okay, if judging by the way they scrambled away from each other and Maria yelled her name. Emma just turned around, face on fire and heart beating so hard that she had trouble even hearing Maria ramble on about what she just saw. She had seen naked women, had seen her own body and her female family members', but somehow seeing Liv's body was different. Her back was smooth and the color of wheat, a gold tan from hours in the sun. Her blonde hair loose and frizzy in the humid air, and the blush that went from her face down her neck and to her bre-

"Emma please!" Maria had yelled, now covered up and pleading. Emma turned around, making eye contact with Liv who now had a white sheet over her body, but the sheet was too thin and the water still on her skin made it stick to the slight curve of her lower stomach to the dip of her waist as it flared out to her hips. Emma's mouth was dry, and she was suddenly just as horrified as they were. She ran.

Maria had cornered Emma soon after that, a look of determination in her hazel eyes. Emma finally yielded, throwing her hands up and yelling, "I promise, Maria. Now leave me alone!" Her cousin, although happy, was entirely confused, but decided that pushing the matter would just be worse for her and left her poor cousin alone.

Now Emma waited, hoping to catch this man off guard just as she did her cousin that day. She found a map, digging around old boxes she still had from her childhood in her closet, and memorized the route on how to get to Nashi's house. Once it was dark, all she had to do was go up the dirt driveway, go down the road that led to the Miller plantation, and then climb the rock wall that separated the plantation from Nashi's property.

But it was dark now, the house creaking with every step, and Emma questioned if this was a good idea. She padded achingly slowly, breath catching with every creak as she made her way from the hallway to the kitchen where the back door was.

"She almost killed me." The hushed whisper was coming from the parlor, the door cracked just so. "She needs to be controlled before she does something else. If this is how powerful she is without knowing, wait until she finds out." Emma was frozen, not understanding what her father was speaking about.

"I will." Antonio's voice came out muffled, further away from the door.

Emma willed herself, eyes squeezed closed as she finally reached the back door and turned the handle. The nights during the midst of summer were hotter than the days, the humidity so strong that it felt like a second skin made of water. She didn't bother closing the door, focusing on softly running down the steps and making it up the gravel driveway to the Miller's. It was only a mile or so, but not even the moon was out, the dark so vast it covered everything.

But then she smelled that disgusting smell of fur, old meat, and feces. Her hand touched stone, trying to find a way to get up. She knew that at first you just smell them, but that meant they weren't far behind. Blood hounds. Just as her foot and hand grasped at a piece of stone, hauling herself up, she heard the barking. Her hands scrambled for purchase, tugging her body weight up and almost over as her knees scraped against the stone. Her shoe was torn off, making her look down to see the bright red eyes of those mutts. Her heart thumped in her chest painfully, her body going on autopilot as she shuffled quickly on the narrow stone ledge. Her dress kept catching on her knees before finally ripping. Brunette hair once put up in an elegant bun now was a wild mess of curls. Emma's hand slipped after a while, growing tired, making her tumble right over the stone ledge. She closed her eyes, ready to be nothing more than dog meat, but as her body hit the hard ground and she groaned in pain, she realized she wasn't being eaten.

"Oh, I'm alive." Emma sighed, grabbing on to her body and patting it briefly. "I'm alive."

"Of course, you're alive," a voice shrilled in her ear. "Now tell me why you're alive on my property."

Emma stopped patting herself, sat up, and blinked to see who was speaking to her. There was a light coming from a house, making it possible to almost make out the details of this person. It was a man, his voice too deep, even if it was like nails on a chalkboard when he raised it. It was a man in his thirties, just a smile line and a few grey hairs here and there in both his closely trimmed beard and hair. Emma wasn't sure but he seemed to have ginger hair, slicked back, and was wearing a loose style of a white button-up shirt and brown slacks.

"I know." Emma got up, hand still fisting the brown envelope. The ginger haired man just stared at her but took a step back as Emma brushed the dirt from her yellow dress, the garment shrugging off one of her shoulders now. She straightened her spine and looked straight into the man's eyes, but with nothing but a distant porch light to see from, she couldn't make out much of the man's face. "I know."

The man's eyebrows pushed together, opening and closing his mouth in confusion, trying to come up with a reply to that vague statement. Emma felt herself heat up in embarrassment, her posture twitching as she tried to hold it. He stepped closer to her, hand outreached, and she just looked at his hand until he cleared his throat. Her eyes snapped back to his face, eyebrows raised now with a look that made her feel dumb.

"The letter I suppose." His voice was calmer now as he stepped closer again, hand angled for the letter still in her grasp. She stepped back, the hand fisting the letter now close to her chest.

"It's collateral." Emma told him in her best authoritative voice, keeping her face neutral and chin up. The man laughed, making Emma step back again, and he flipped his hand back and forth in front of him.

"Oh, dear girl, whatever you think you have on me doesn't matter." His voice was soft and sorrowful, looking out into the night. "My family is dead, my lover doesn't want me—"

"Memphis." The man's eyes snapped back to Emma, heavily guarded.

"How do you—" She held up the letter, now crumpled, but as she smoothed it out, the man could see the neat cursive writing on the front, his face changing from disbelief to relief in the way his eyebrows smoothed out and his eyes filled with tears. But as Emma stepped back again, the man, Nashi presumably, glared at her, his lips twitching up in a scowl. "What do you need so bad that you will threaten to out the nature of me and my companion's relationship to society?"

"I need you to take me up north."

"But why?"

Emma squeezed her eyes shut. Remembering that her father had all but sold her off was making her nauseous. "I am in an arranged marriage—" She scoffed and held her face for a moment. "Two arranged marriages really. I am to marry the father first, who is old and weak, but his son needs time to learn how to...man, and once he dies, I am to marry his son, or else I will be cast out of the community as a useless widow."

Nashi closed his eyes before titling his head back, breathing out a loud sigh. "This is why I do not like children."

"I am not a child." Emma defended herself, watching the man in front of her.

"Come on," was all he said after a while, holding the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache. "I'll take you up north, but not dressed like that."

Emma hesitantly followed the ginger-haired man to his house, his property far smaller than the ones surrounding it. His front porch was beautiful, a weeping willow just in front of it with a few candles lit around, making it possible to see the two brown rocking chairs that glistened in the candlelight. In between them was a tea table, emerald-green glass, and an iron frame with a gold and white teacup sitting on top of a knitted maroon tea cozy. Emma was touching that emerald glass before she could stop herself, the silky feel of it on the tips of her fingertips as she softly brushed it. Nashi took the opportunity and stole the letter from her grip.

"I promised." Nashi told her when she opened her mouth to protest, arms reaching out to grab the letter back. "I don't make promises I can't keep. You can go in the house and change out of that dirty forsaken dress." Emma looked down, not noticing how her dress was ripped and hanging off her shoulder, barely covering anything at this point. The door was already cracked, and Emma slowly pushed it more open as Nashi sat in a rocking chair, opening the letter.

As he read the letter, Emma let guilt settle in her stomach and walked in the house. It was small but enchanting. A white stone fireplace in front of her was full of wood burning. There were portraits everywhere on the wall along with drawings of animals and landscapes, long bushy plants hanging from the ceiling, and light brown floors so shiny they looked as if they had just been polished. The walls were white and spotless. Velvet furniture decorated the large living room, so plush that she doubted anyone had ever sat in them. Emma turned and came face-to-face with a young Nashi, wild red hair and green eyes burning through her. She couldn't believe she was going to blackmail him into helping her, though now she wasn't convinced she could have actually done it. She heard him snuffle, and the guilt twisted in her stomach. She sucked in a breath, an attempt to calm the nausea, but that was short lived when she smelled burnt oranges, turned her head, and saw her.

Light brown hair framed a slender pale face in soft ringlet curls. The painting depicted the setting sun as light so the woman's hair looked like honey falling into a bottle. Her eyes were molten lava with a smile small enough for mystery but still held sincerity.

“Mother.” Emma let out that breath, heart hammering in her chest so hard that she grabbed at the area. Her hand reached out on its own, that foolish feeling in her heart again.

“Emaline.”

“How do you-” Emma stilled, her hand shaking before she faltered, stumbling back until she hit the wall, her breathing erratic. She gulped down air as if she was drowning on land. “How do you know my name? How do you know my mother?”

“Because your mother is not dead.” Nashi’s green eyes glowed in the candlelight. Something was wrong. “She’s hiding.”

“Hiding?” Emma echoed back, head dizzy. “Hiding from what?” Her voice was shaky and small, like a nervous child.

“Your father.”

“What?” She breathed the word out, her heart taking over her entire being. “Why?”

“Because he’s a witch hunter.” Nashi was so close that Emma could make out the gold flecks in his eyes.

“A witch hunter? That’s not- you’re making things up.” Her breathing became unbearable, nothing more than frantic gasping as Nashi placed his hands on her chest, and suddenly she was fine, her heart normal and head clear. Emma looked at him, confused and scared, and Nashi just sighed.

“Emaline - your mother is a witch, and so are you.” He told her as if it was obvious and not ground-breaking news for the young woman. “I’ve been waiting for you just as I’ve been waiting for Memphis. It’s a good thing that you want to come with me.” He held out his hand and waited for Emma to take it, her hand cold in his as he led her further into the house. Her portrait was clear against the deep blue backdrop, the same color as Riyker’s eyes. Her hair was loose and eyes were just like her mother’s, molten lava and full of something both natural and unnatural. Magic.

“This letter was only meant to find me when you were ready to find me. It had been so long, and with the war I had thought-” Nashi cut himself off, watching Emma take in her portrait. “But you’re both alive.” Nashi smiled, wide and yearning. “Are you ready to see your mother?”

Emma snapped her eyes to him, eyes wet and the rims red, unsure of how real this was. But if she could see her mother, she would do anything.

“Yes.”

To Be Continued...

“Even after all these years, the dress still smelled like her mother: oranges and fire.”

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Mother in the Morgue

By Breanna Lawrence

Late at night, the morgue was a place of sterile quiet. Cold metal tables gleamed under fluorescent lights, and the hum of the refrigeration units filled the empty air. Ethan moved methodically, as always, cataloging the bodies with a detached precision. He had learned to compartmentalize. It was the only way to survive the job, but tonight was different.

The gurney had arrived just after midnight, and on it was a young woman, her face pale and serene, her hair still wet from the rain outside. Cause of death: unknown. The only detail that mattered to Ethan was the notation on her file: "Mother of one." He stood frozen for a moment, his hands trembling slightly as he read the words. Mother. His heart clenched.

He had been raised in the cold halls of an orphanage, a nameless boy among dozens. No mother, no father, just distant memories of lullabies and warm hands that had once held him. But they had faded like smoke, leaving nothing but an aching void. For years, he had searched endlessly, obsessively for some sign of family. A mother to comfort him, someone to fill the emptiness.

He forced himself to look away from the body, to carry on. He would not allow his mind to spiral again. But as he prepared to store the body, something stopped him. A soft sound, a hum, gentle and melodic, drifted through the stillness. He blinked, his breath hitching in his throat. The woman's lips were parted slightly, almost as if she was humming. It was the same lullaby, the one from his faintest memories.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head. "It's not real." But when he glanced back at her, her eyes were open. They were soft and warm, the way he had always imagined his mother's eyes would be. She seemed to be looking straight at him, her pale hand lifting slightly from where it lay on the sheet.

"Come here, sweetheart," her voice cooed, so soft and maternal that it tore at something deep inside him. "It's all right. You've been alone for so long."

Ethan staggered back, his heart pounding in his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed the hallucination away. He wasn't insane. He couldn't be. But the humming grew louder, wrapping around him like a blanket, luring him closer.

He opened his eyes. The woman was sitting up now, her arms outstretched, beckoning to him. "You need me," she whispered. "Come lie with me."

His hands shook as he opened the door to the mortuary refrigerator further, the cold air spilling out in a wave. She lay there, still and dead, yet somehow alive to him, her lips curving into a soft smile. The urge to resist crumbled. The orphaned child inside him, desperate and broken, surged forward. He needed her. He needed her more than he had ever needed anything in his life.

Ethan climbed onto the gurney, curling up beside her cold, lifeless body. She was humming again, that same haunting lullaby, and as he lay there, she turned to him, pulling him close, guiding his head to her chest. Her skin was icy against his cheek, but to Ethan, it felt like home. He suckled at her breast, his body shaking with silent sobs, lost in the twisted comfort of her embrace. The lullaby filled his mind, drowning out the world, and for the first time, he felt... whole.

The morning shift found him like that: curled up beside the corpse, his face buried against her chest, his fingers tangled in her hair. He was pale and trembling, delirious with exhaustion, his lips pressed against her cold, lifeless skin. His coworkers' horrified whispers filled the room, but Ethan didn't hear them. He was lost in the illusion, cradled in the arms of the mother he had spent his life searching for, a grotesque parody of love and belonging.

They pulled him away, and he screamed.

"For years, he had searched endlessly, obsessively for some sign of family."

Home

By Stormie Tigner

I think I was in denial
Of what your leaving would do
I think I may have exaggerated
What I really feel

Left on an ordinary Wednesday
Didn't feel the heaviness at first
The sunlight in my hair a distraction
Your empty promises felt fulfilling

Woke up crying Thursday
A sickness taking over the pit in me
Listened to my homesick song on repeat
Because it felt like you took it with you

But I woke up shifting Friday
The guilt turning into shame in me
And when I couldn't stomach another sound
I skipped the song and felt lighter than I've ever been

I got it wrong, all this time
You were never my home after all
A cage can feel like paradise
When you know nothing else

Now the lock has been broken
The code written in the pages about you
You can never put me back
I've found my home

And my home has always been me

*"You were never my
home after all"*



“Veiled Echoes”

By Breanna Moeller

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Are You Serial?

By Deanne Sconyers

Most people read, take a bath, or cozy up on the couch with a good movie to relax, but I'm not most people. I'm not sure why I am the way I am, but I certainly know when it first began.

Picture this: it was the summer of 1995, and I was twelve years old. There was a boy named Kevin around the same age. Kevin was a real chump and the neighborhood bully. He would make us crash our bikes, chase us for no reason, and steal our toys. I was always a well-behaved kid. I even received the gentle award in my fourth-grade class, which I now find ironic. Well, that summer everything changed for the better.

One bright and sunny afternoon, Kevin was circling the neighborhood, like a vulture waiting for its next meal. I noticed that Buddy, his pug, was left out in the backyard. Everyone knew that the only thing Kevin showed affection towards was that four-legged potato. I was ready to put this chump in his place, even if it meant that Buddy had to find out if all dogs do, in fact, go to heaven. I snuck in through the back gate, quickly pulled Buddy into my arms, and ran, avoiding being seen. I waited...and waited...and waited.

"Buddy! Come here boy," Kevin cried out.

I sat in the middle of my driveway as I watched and listened to Kevin call out for his dog while fighting back tears. It felt good seeing him knocked down from his high horse. I watched through my window that evening as he taped missing signs for Buddy on every light pole and street sign.

The next morning, I woke up feeling well-rested and smiled as I heard the birds sing and Kevin whimpering.

"Mom! I-I found Buddy. Mom! Dad!" Kevin yelled.

I rushed outside in my pajamas to see the commotion. He had found Buddy...in the creek that ran behind our houses.

That was so long ago, and so much has changed since then. It's as if I've lived so many lives from then until now. I spent my college years looking out for my girlfriends at parties and on campus. I was always playing Captain-Save-a-Hoe when these boneheaded frat boys would come along. I graduated from killing the house pets of my enemies to killing my enemies. I was doing the world a favor, and I only killed those who preyed on the innocent. I didn't spend all my free time hacking away at bodies, but every now and then I would get an itch that needed to be scratched.

It wasn't until I met Ben Davis that my murderous ventures really started to slow down. It's amusing how we met, but I knew that it was fate. I didn't go to church often, but I made a point to go every few months in hopes to win points with God and reserve a comfy seat in heaven. One Sunday morning, I happened to be standing behind the big wooden doors to the church, waiting for communion to start. Next thing I know, I feel the heavy wooden door smack me in the back, and I'm knocked to the ground.

"I am so sorry, Miss," Ben said as he rushed to kneel beside me.

"I'm fine. Re-really, I am. It was silly of me to stand right here," I said dumbfounded.

I looked up, and this beautiful creature was gazing into my eyes. His face radiated as if he was an angel sent directly from heaven. Or I could have been slightly concussed. Either way, it was love at first sight. I eventually became Mrs. Lily Davis and mother to Andrew and Annie, my Irish Twins.

Those first few years of marriage and being a mom were difficult. I tried to cope with the changes as best I could and honed in on being the perfect housewife and mother. I volunteered, participated in bake sales, became a member of the PTO for my children's school, made sure the house was spotless, and prepared homemade meals that were always ready and on the table. I now realize that all of this was a distraction, and I was burning inside. I felt like a caged animal trying to keep my true self from clawing its way out. I knew that I would lose all control if I didn't feed the part of me that I had suppressed for so long.

Now that Andrew and Annie are thirteen and fourteen years old, I feel as though I have created the perfect coexistence for my home life and the one my family is ignorant of. Ben, my

sweet, adorable, pinheaded husband. He isn't a complete idiot, considering he works as an accounting manager, but his head is usually stuck in the clouds when it comes to what goes on around the house.

I adore watching his face perk up, almost childlike, on days I surprise him at work with his favorite treats. I try and visit at least once a week, and sometimes I will bring in extras for his coworkers. There was an accountant who was new to the office, and she sat in a desk close to Ben's. That was short-lived, thanks to yours truly. I never learned her name, only her license plate and address. She was constantly leaning over Ben's shoulder in a provocative way, laughing obnoxiously loud at his jokes, and the way she would push her silk blonde hair behind her ear as she bit her lip when she stared at him made me prickly with anger. *Give me a break.*

Ben cheating or leaving me has never crossed my mind. He is the most genuine and loyal person I have ever met, but he is clueless when someone is flirting and wouldn't know what was happening even if it smacked him upside the head. So, I took it upon myself to get rid of the flea bag.

Speaking of flea bags, I have a seven-year-old border collie named Remi. She's not necessarily my sidekick, but she does keep me company on my crusades. I was tired of talking to dead people just for them to not always reply, and I was too scared to be in the woods alone at night while dumping bodies. I mean, come on guys, there could be a psychopath on the loose! Not only that, but what could go wrong bringing man's best friend along? Well, a lot. A lot can go wrong, especially with a dog like Remi.

I convinced Ben a few years ago to go along with "lazy Thursday." It was the only way I could get away at night without causing suspicion. Ben gets home early from work on those days, so he usually orders takeout or pizza, and the kids don't have to worry about homework or chores. Of course, they all love this idea. They can do whatever they want *except* bother mom. I told them it's my R&R day, even though it's far from it. I don't know about you, but walking a body for miles into the woods and disposing of it is harder than the Pilates class or runs they think I'm going on. Add Remi into the mix, and I have my work cut out for me.

It was a typical Thursday night, and I had been looking forward to it since the PTO meeting on Monday. Kathy—that insufferable woman, always putting in her two cents. She is the epitome of Regina George from the movie *Mean Girls*. Unfortunately for the rest of us, Kathy hasn't gotten hit by a bus...yet.

Kathy and I just so happen to live in the same subdivision, Crimson Park. It's quite poetic if you ask me. The woods run deep behind the subdivision, and the only living things that dare to venture through are deer, squirrels, coyotes, black bears, bobcats, snakes, and me. I have studied Kathy over the last two years, and I knew from the moment I met her that she would eventually be up on the chopping block.

Kathy was going to be difficult to get rid of because of her loud, self-centered need for validation, and narcissistic, domineering, conceited, over-the-top personality. Not to quote Eminem, but I only had one shot, one opportunity to not mess this up. Turns out that she and her husband, Alan, were going through a hard time. Rumors came out that Kathy had been having an affair with the twenty-five-year-old music teacher. *Yikes*. So, if Kathy went missing, who's to say it wasn't her angry, grief-stricken husband? Or maybe a quarrel between her and her young lover that ended in murder? A crime of passion perhaps, and who would suspect me, Lily Davis? My god it was beautiful! This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, handed to me on a silver platter. I wasn't going to just let it slip away; I was going to take Marshall Mathers' advice and seize the moment.

"Ben, I'm headed out for a bit," I called out.

"Give me one second," Ben said, as he walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

"I'm bringing Remi along. We're going to have some girl time."

"You two really are inseparable," he chuckled. "Pizza and wine will be waiting for you when you come back. And please be safe; there's creeps out there."

"Don't worry honey. I always am, and I have my vicious guard dog to protect me," I said teasingly. I walked out into the chilly autumn evening, but I was unbothered. A warm euphoric feeling lingered from when he kissed me goodbye, and there was a light sweetness I could still taste as I glided my tongue across the edge of my bottom lip.

I placed Remi in the passenger seat as I slid into my Chrysler Pacifica. I placed my finger on the push to start, awakening the engine as it quietly and subtly came to life. It was the perfect coverup. Mom-car by day and rendering-van by night.

I drove a few blocks towards Carmine Drive. It was one of the only unlit stretches of road in the neighborhood that was lined with trees instead of houses. I knew Kathy would be out this

way for her evening walk on her usual route. She would always say, “Men don’t break their necks when I walk by for nothing.” That woman made my eye twitch just thinking about her, but she did have a nice fanny, I’ll give her that.

I parked the Pacifica on the side of the road and quickly stepped out, leaving Remi in the passenger seat. The neighborhood streets were quiet, giving off a desolate feeling. I saw Kathy walking towards my direction, so I opened my stride, walking briskly. The wind started to whistle, and leaves began circling the road below as if they knew my intent. My heart was racing, and even though I could see my legs move swiftly, everything around me felt as if it was in slow motion and this was just another dream.

“Hey, Kathy!” I said with my fists balled up.

“Lily? What are—”

Crack. The sound of her nose breaking drowned out her confused whimpers. The deep, thick, red fluid gushed from her nose. Before she could speak, I grabbed the sides of her head like a soccer ball and in one swift motion snapped her neck.

“I don’t break necks for nothing either,” I said to her limp and lifeless body.

She was petite, so carrying her body to the van was the easy part. I tossed her onto the tarp, quickly shut the doors, and crept the vehicle towards the back of the subdivision where the woods began. Already knowing the routine, Remi jumped out and waited for me at the edge of the tree line, wagging her tail.

“Well, lead the way. And don’t pick the same spot as last time,” I instructed Remi even though I already had Kathy’s new resting place preplanned.

The full moon cast enough light through the trees to where I could make out the path ahead. The brush was thick, and there were vines that webbed the trees together. Five miles later, I finally reached my destination. I made my way to the tree I had marked with a red ribbon and knelt at the base. I swept pine needles and fallen leaves from the ground, exposing a shovel and head lamp that lay beneath.

“Okay girl, you watch our friend here while I clear this hole.” I began removing a tarp from an already-dug-out hole that I had also covered with sticks and leaves. I made sure to dig far enough down so animals wouldn’t be able to dig her back out.

“Remi, what are you doing?” I hissed. Remi had lapped up all the blood on Kathy’s face, tail wagging and all. I grabbed Kathy by the legs and began to pull her towards her grave.

Grrr. A playful growl came from Remi, and I looked up to see her teeth latched on to one of Kathy’s hands.

“We are not doing this again! This is not playtime. Go on and get,” I shooed her away, “Let go, girl. She’s not a toy.” I was now in a tug-of-war with this idiot. Finally, I gave one good tug, and as I pulled back, Remi simultaneously let go and I began to stumble into the hole.

“You are so dead when we get home,” I said as my legs dangled into the hollowness. Remi, still wagging her tail, trotted up to me and started licking my face. Her breath had an iron-like smell from the blood mixed with cat crap. Once I crawled back to the surface, I finished what I started. Kathy was now gone forever, lost to the void, never to be seen again.

We traversed back to the minivan and headed back home. I opened the front door, and Remi zoomed past me and up the stairs, almost knocking me over.

“Brat,” I mumbled. I headed to my bedroom, undressed, and turned the shower on. I let the bathroom steam up before stepping in. Death melted off my body as I stepped in the hot shower, as if I was now reborn and cleansed of all my sins from tonight. After, I put on some sweats, I was hit with a chill as I stepped out of the steamy bathroom.

“Are you serious?” I rushed over to the bed and notice a pale, chewed up finger, with a French manicured nail on the carpet.

“Hey babe, I didn’t even hear you come in,” Ben said, as he stood in the bedroom doorway.

“You scared me,” I gasped, clenching my chest as I spun around. “Sorry, I just wanted to take a quick shower before joining you on the couch.” I subtly kicked the finger under the bed with the back of my heel.

"Okay, I'll heat you up some pizza and have a glass of wine ready. I found a movie called *Serial Mom* we can watch too," Ben said.

"That sounds wonderful," I said, anxiously waiting for him to step away.

"Don't be too long," he said, as he backed out of the room.

Once I heard him march down the stairs, I turned and hit the ground, feeling under the bed for the finger. I clutched the stiff icy finger in my palm and as soon as I sat up, Remi was sitting at the edge of my bed with her tongue hanging out and tail wagging.

"I'm getting too old for this shit."

"I felt like a caged animal trying to keep my true self from clawing its way out."



“Untitled”

By Thomas Oliver

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

To Ellen

By Breanna Lawrence

The house was quiet, just as Caroline liked it. Moving into a new place always felt unsettling, especially one with as much history as this. The realtor had called it “quaint” and “full of character,” and Caroline, eager for a fresh start, had overlooked the peeling wallpaper and creaky floors. It was the kind of house that seemed to have stories buried within its walls, and Caroline had always been drawn to places like that.

As she unpacked the last of the kitchen boxes, she decided to take a break and explore the upstairs. The house had an attic, which she hadn’t fully inspected when she first visited. Now, with the sun dipping low and casting golden light through the windows, it seemed like the perfect time to see what the previous owners had left behind.

The attic was dusty and dimly lit, with only a single small window letting in a sliver of daylight. Caroline coughed as she pushed through a few forgotten boxes, stepping gingerly across the wooden floor. Something about the air up here felt heavier, as though the room had been waiting for her.

In the far corner, she spotted an old wooden chest. It was small, unassuming, and covered in a thick layer of dust. Curiosity got the better of her, and she knelt in front of it, wiping away the grime to reveal a faded brass lock. The chest wasn’t locked, though; the latch was broken, and with a gentle tug, it creaked open.

Inside was a collection of old papers, brittle and yellowed with age. Beneath a stack of newspaper clippings, Caroline found an envelope. It was addressed in a hurried scrawl to “Ellen.” The name meant nothing to her, but there was something about the way the ink had bled into the paper that felt personal. She opened it carefully, her fingers brushing the delicate edges, and began to read.

My Dearest Ellen,

I suppose you've heard by now. The papers are full of it. My name dragged through the mud. The faces of the dead plastered across every front page. It's strange, isn't it? How they speak of me as if I were a monster, not a man. They forget that I had a life before all this. That I had you.

I imagine you've left by now. I wouldn't blame you. If I could escape myself, I would. But here I sit, writing to you from this wretched place, hoping that somehow, you'll find this letter and remember the man I used to be.

Caroline paused, her heart beating faster. She knew the town had a dark past, stories about a serial killer that had once terrorized the area years ago. The name—Henry Calder—came to mind. He'd been convicted over a decade ago and had died in prison. The town had never fully shaken off the shadow of his crimes. Could this letter have been his? She took a breath and continued reading.

I didn't mean for it to start. The first one, it was an accident, I swear it. But after that, something changed. You'll never understand, and God, I hope you never try to. But when I saw her face in those final moments, I felt something I'd never felt before. It wasn't pleasure, not in the way they write about it. It was power, control. For once, the world bent to my will, and I was no longer small. No longer weak.

But then it became too much. I couldn't stop. You knew something was wrong, didn't you? The late nights, the disappearances. I saw the way you looked at me, the questions you were too afraid to ask. And I hated myself for what I was putting you through.

I wanted to tell you, to confess everything. But how could I? How could I look into your eyes and admit what I had done? So I said nothing, hoping that somehow you wouldn't find out. Hoping that you would still see me as the man who loved you.

Caroline's stomach twisted. This wasn't just a confession, it was an apology, a final attempt to explain the unexplainable. The letter wasn't meant for the world, only for Ellen, his wife. She wondered if Ellen had ever read it, or if it had been left here, forgotten, when she fled the house after Henry's arrest. She flipped the letter over, realizing there was more.

I know it's too late now. They've found me, and soon it will all be over. They'll put me away, and you'll be free of me at last. Maybe that's for the best. You deserve a life untouched by what I've done.

But if you can, Ellen, remember that there was a time before all this. A time when I loved you more than anything in the world. I hope that part of me—the part that was still human—stays with you.

I'm sorry for what I've become. I'm sorry for everything.

*Yours, always,
Henry*

Henry Calder—once a husband, a man capable of love—had become one of the most infamous killers in history. Yet here, in this letter, he wasn't the faceless monster the papers had made him out to be. He was just a broken man, desperate to explain the darkness that had consumed him.

Caroline refolded the letter carefully and placed it back in the chest. She felt a strange sense of intrusion, as though she had peered into a moment meant for someone else. Henry was long gone, and yet, his words lingered in the quiet house.

As she closed the attic door behind her, the house felt different. It was still old, still creaky, but now it felt haunted. Not by ghosts, but by the memory of a man who had tried, in his final moments, to be understood.

“It was the kind of house that seemed to have stories buried within its walls...”

Wooden Wonder

By Josiah McCord

It
is a
simple
thing, just
a piece of
wood and
lead...yet
it has crafted
worlds
you can
tread with
out taking
a single
step. It has
inspired &
saved, it
has said
and made
works greater
than we
will ever
erect with
a hammer
and nail.

Take Ten

By Natisha Monique Moore

When they look to you they shudder
I mean shatter
Beneath glares of inferiority
Stroke time with blatant abstracts of tempered youth
Transmute wings to soot and revoke color
Paint scenes of justification like no other
No place like this
Be remiss
Speak like no one is watching
No socks in when socks in
Blows like no other
Stand strong my mother
Amid all folks they fault us with one lover
Or none if your soul be bold
Then thus the waves of glory beseech you
Don't preach two
When four be equal to the depths you hold
What's old?
This misconception of prayer essence running free from me
Move peacefully
The skin you know shows true with time
Unearth those mines?
Free minds that know no reason to go there
Dim your stare
Make light the instance of fairy dust wings
I hear you sing
Beyond hills and mountains to modern day men
Take ten

*“Speak like no one is
watching”*

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Consuming Conviction

By Breanna Lawrence

Ben's paranoia had always been a quiet, background hum in his life. A headache wasn't just a headache; it was a tumor. A cough hinted at pneumonia, maybe something worse, but this fear, the creeping dread that started in early December, was different. It stuck like a splinter under his skin. He couldn't shake it.

It all began with a random internet rabbit hole. He'd stumbled across a forum post about cannibalistic bacteria that could rot a person from the inside. It was a ridiculous article, but it wormed its way into his mind, feeding his anxiety. Every symptom he read about felt too familiar—aches, chills, a slight grayness to the skin. By the next morning, Ben was convinced that something inside him was wrong.

Days bled into weeks, and he became obsessed, inspecting his body for the smallest changes. He convinced himself that his skin was duller, his breath stale, his appetite unnatural. The gnawing feeling deep in his belly wasn't hunger; it was something darker, something he couldn't identify. He felt hollow, like he was decaying from the inside out.

Friends and family noticed his isolation, his vacant stare, the slow, slumping way he walked. When his sister Sarah stopped by, she found him hunched over the kitchen counter, his fingers splayed across the cool surface, head hung low.

"Ben? You're... you're pale. Have you even been outside?" she asked, a twinge of fear creeping into her voice.

He looked up at her, his eyes rimmed with dark shadows, sunken as though he hadn't slept in days. "I don't... I don't need outside," he mumbled, voice scratchy and strange. He caught a whiff of something metallic and rich. It made his stomach clench in an unfamiliar way, a way that seemed to burn. "Sarah, something's wrong with me."

"Of course, there is! Look at you," she whispered, reaching out a hand to touch his arm. "You're skin and bones, Ben. You need help."

As her fingers brushed his skin, Ben felt a jolt, a craving deep and primal, something he could barely recognize as his own. He stared at her hand, her fingers warm, alive. His gaze trailed up her wrist to the soft skin at the crease of her elbow. He could almost feel her pulse through her skin, hot and thick, and he could barely suppress the hunger that rose inside him, sharp and feral.

"I... I think I need..." he stammered, unable to look away from her wrist.

Sarah pulled her hand back, alarmed. "Ben?"

He took a step toward her, his head tilting as he blinked, trying to focus, but he could barely register her words. She was so warm, so vibrant. His own skin felt cold, dead. His teeth ached, a strange pressure in his jaw, and he knew, *he just knew*, it would feel so satisfying to bite down, to feel the flesh give under his teeth.

Ben's hand shot out, clutching her wrist with a surprising strength. Sarah gasped, her face twisting in fear as he pulled her close. His fingers dug into her arm, feeling her pulse pounding beneath her skin, the scent of her flooding his senses, a smell that was rich, alive, *human*.

"Ben, stop!" she yelled, struggling against him, but he barely heard her.

With a low groan, he leaned in, teeth scraping against her wrist. He could feel his mouth watering, the urge twisting his gut, his mouth parting as he sunk his teeth into her skin, the taste warm and metallic. She screamed, trying to yank her arm free, but Ben's grip was iron.

The taste overwhelmed him, drowning out all rational thought, all sense of who he was. The hunger gnawed at him until nothing else mattered, until he was only a body, feeding, mindlessly consuming.

When he finally pulled back, panting, he looked down, his lips and teeth stained red. Sarah lay crumpled at his feet, her wrist bleeding, her eyes wide with terror. A horrifying realization dawned on him. He'd become everything he feared, everything he convinced himself he would become. The monstrous hunger he'd felt wasn't in his head anymore; it was real, and it was unstoppable.

As he stared down at her, he knew there was no turning back.

"The monstrous hunger he'd felt wasn't in his head anymore; it was real, and it was unstoppable."

****Content Warning:**

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Jennifer's Body

By Breanna Lawrence

Sitting in the bleachers,
Your eyes locked onto mine,
and I was yours,
drawn like a moth
to the blaze of your cruelty.

*I always liked it, Needy—
the way your breath caught when I smiled,
the way you followed like a shadow.
It made me feel alive,
even before I became something else.*

You came back after the fire,
you were ravenous.
I saw it in the way you looked at me,
like I was something tender,
something you could devour.

*That night,
I felt the knife dig in,
felt myself slipping into nothing,
but the nothing spat me back out.
I came back filled with a hunger
I couldn't explain.*

Boys disappeared.
I told myself it was a coincidence,
but I knew better.
You came to me that night,
blood staining your lips.

*I came because I missed you,
because the hunger wasn't enough.
I needed to feel your heartbeat,
to remember what I'd lost.*

You pressed your hands to my chest,
and I felt the pull,
the gravity of you.
Don't you want me, Needy?

*I felt it,
the way your heart raced,
the way you leaned in despite the fear.
Don't you want me, Needy?
I saw the answer in your eyes
before your lips even touched mine.*

You kissed me then,
but I tasted death in your mouth.
Still, I didn't stop you.
How could I?
You were my best friend.

*I didn't choose this.
But I wasn't sorry, either.
I felt powerful, Needy—
alive in a way I never had before.*

I told myself I didn't care.
you were mine,
still mine,
even with the rot blooming inside you.

*You think I didn't love you?
You think I didn't feel it too?
But I couldn't stop.
I didn't know how.
Every bite, every kill,*

*was a way to keep going,
to keep myself from tearing you apart.*

You're just jealous,
you said,
and maybe I was.
But I couldn't stop you.
I couldn't save them.
I couldn't save you.

*I told myself it was jealousy,
but I knew better.
You weren't jealous,
you were afraid of what I'd become,
of what I could do.*

All I could do
was hold the blade steady,
When I drove it in,
you didn't scream.
And when you fell,
you took a part of me with you.

*I could have stopped you,
but I didn't.
Because it was you.
And if anyone was going to end me,
it had to be you, Needy.*

"I couldn't save them. I couldn't save you."

*****Content Warning:***

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

You Changed

By Stormie Tigner

"I watched you change." The door opened to show a dark-haired man. His abyss eyes swallowed me whole from under the wooden frame. Lithe and seductive, he leaned into the frame, the alabaster skin of his forearms as he crossed them a stark contrast to his black shirt and pants. I found myself visually tracing the veins that just slightly peeked out, a light blue that made the skin grey where they showed. I felt more than I saw the tilt of his lips, my eyes meeting his before I glanced away and turned around. The mirror in front of me didn't help me escape his dark stare as he walked, slow and purposefully towards me. The thrill of danger he eluded didn't excite me; instead, it made me question. Was this feeling just a side effect of his species? If he was the same as me, would I still be feeling this way? Is this all just manipulat-

I looked up and into the mirror on instinct, and his energy consumed my entire being. I forgot my thoughts as his hand rose up, taking my long white hair and swiftly brushing it to my shoulder. Just the slight touch of his fingertips had my eyes fluttering shut and when a finger started to trace the crescent shaped scar my spine shivered. I could feel the tip of his finger, soft but firm, going with the bumps and dips of the scar.

"I watched a change in you." His hushed voice echoed in my ears to the sound of my beating heart. My eyes fluttered back open in a trance, as I stared back at him through the mirror. Black eyes barely widened before they became even darker, even more determined. The one finger on my back turned to four, soft and sure fingertips tracing one scar before going to the one beside it. "It's like you never had wings."

I knew he was manipulating me; there wasn't a doubt now. His eyes, nothing more than an ambitious lust, and his gleaming white hand that crept to the pulse points on my neck. I could feel the thrum of my artery against his finger as he added pressure; the look in his eyes becoming more unhinged as he kept it there. The tension was so thick and sensual, my body erupted in goosebumps. But I wasn't cold. The redness of my face and neck traveled too far to be innocent embarrassment. The hand tracing my scar now laid flat against it; the coolness of his hand heating up the spot more. His head was almost right next to mine, slightly leaning down to my height. The fingers on my pulse point slid down to where he was loosely grasping my neck, right under my jaw.

“Now you feel so alive.” Under the daze of his seduction, I tried to remember why this was bad. Why, even if I was a fallen angel, I was still above a true born demon. But the spark of desire his skin against mine created made it hard to do anything else other than enjoy his attention.

Quick, too quick, his hands removed themselves from me, but before I could mourn the loss, he whirled me around. The abyss was prettier than I could imagine as I stared up at him, dark shaggy hair falling slightly onto black eyebrows. His face was neutral, but I knew by the slight tick of his lips and the way his hands hovered over my shoulders that he was holding himself back. I blinked once, the daze never fully going away, before I leaned my neck over.

His hands, strong but cautious, fell on my shoulders before tracing down my neck. I could hear his breath pick up, getting louder as he neared closer to where his fingertips had just been. This wouldn't be the first time he fed from me, but this time it was different. There was no dire situation, no life or death. Just us alone in my cramped bedroom after dark. I felt his lips touch my neck, just pressure at first before they opened. Soft and slow, he kissed from under my ear to the middle of my neck. My chest rose and fell with each kiss, the burning desire making my hands clench and unclench to keep myself from touching him. Once I touched him, the spell would be broken, and we would never be able to go back from it.

The sharp twinge of fangs piercing my neck was nothing compared to the euphoria I felt as my blood escaped me and into his mouth. Every worry, every thought just melted away until I was nothing but carefree. My body and head felt light, like I was floating, and I forgot how standing worked for a moment as my knees buckled. Instead of falling on a hard floor, I bounced as my full weight was absorbed by my bed, the soft comforter making me relax even more. He held me up now, one hand supporting my head at the angle he liked and the other on my back, right against my scars.

It couldn't have been more than a minute, but it felt like forever as he fed from me and held me. My body no longer existed in this plane as his fangs left my neck. I felt his tongue against the puncture wounds, the feeling making me grasp onto something to keep me from making any noise. As soon as I felt the muscles under a soft shirt tense, I knew I made a mistake. Immediately my hands opened, and I stumbled backwards to get away from him. My body jerked before I could make it a full foot away, bringing me right into that dominating gaze again. I could no longer tell if I was breathing or if my heart still worked as his eyes flicked down to my lips, one hand finding purchase under my jaw.

A small part of myself screamed in my head to stop, to reconsider what I was doing. But a larger, more physical part of me just wondered if he would let me get close enough to taste. Would I be disgusted that I could taste my blood on his lips or would it enthrall me even more? My hand reached up to his neck on its own accord, the widening of his eyes making me feel spontaneous. The first thing I tasted was the sweet sourness of citrus before the iron tang of blood. As my mouth opened, trying to get access, his hands shoved me away but kept their position on my shoulders.

“You’ve changed.” His eyes, steadily devouring me, searched my face for some sort of answer. When he figured it out, he kept his gaze on my lips, his thumb coming up to swipe at the bottom one. His other hand waved, the door closing with a soft click. My eyes met his, the blue veins of his eyelids turning the skin surrounding it grey. I should have listened to that voice. “Into a fly.”

“I could no longer tell if I was breathing or if my heart still worked...”

****Content Warning:**

The following piece includes content that some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

The Dragon Tattoo

By Rebekah “Yuka” Meo

‘NO TATTOO’S ALLOWED’

Seeing the sign made me sigh softly and turn away from the entrance of the hot springs I was trying to enter. My friends had invited me out when they heard that I had moved back to Japan.

But I couldn’t enter into the building, let alone into the hot springs. In Japan tattoos were connected to Yakuza, which was the source of most of the organized crime in the country.

But I wouldn’t let that make me feel bad about the dragon I had that swirled around my right forearm. It wrapped from my wrist to my elbow, and it was the best thing I could say about my body.

When I was twelve, my parents had uprooted my brother and I, moving us across the world to America. We were forced to learn English; I excelled, but my little brother didn’t do as well. Even years later his English still wasn’t the best, and it led to other boys poking fun at him.

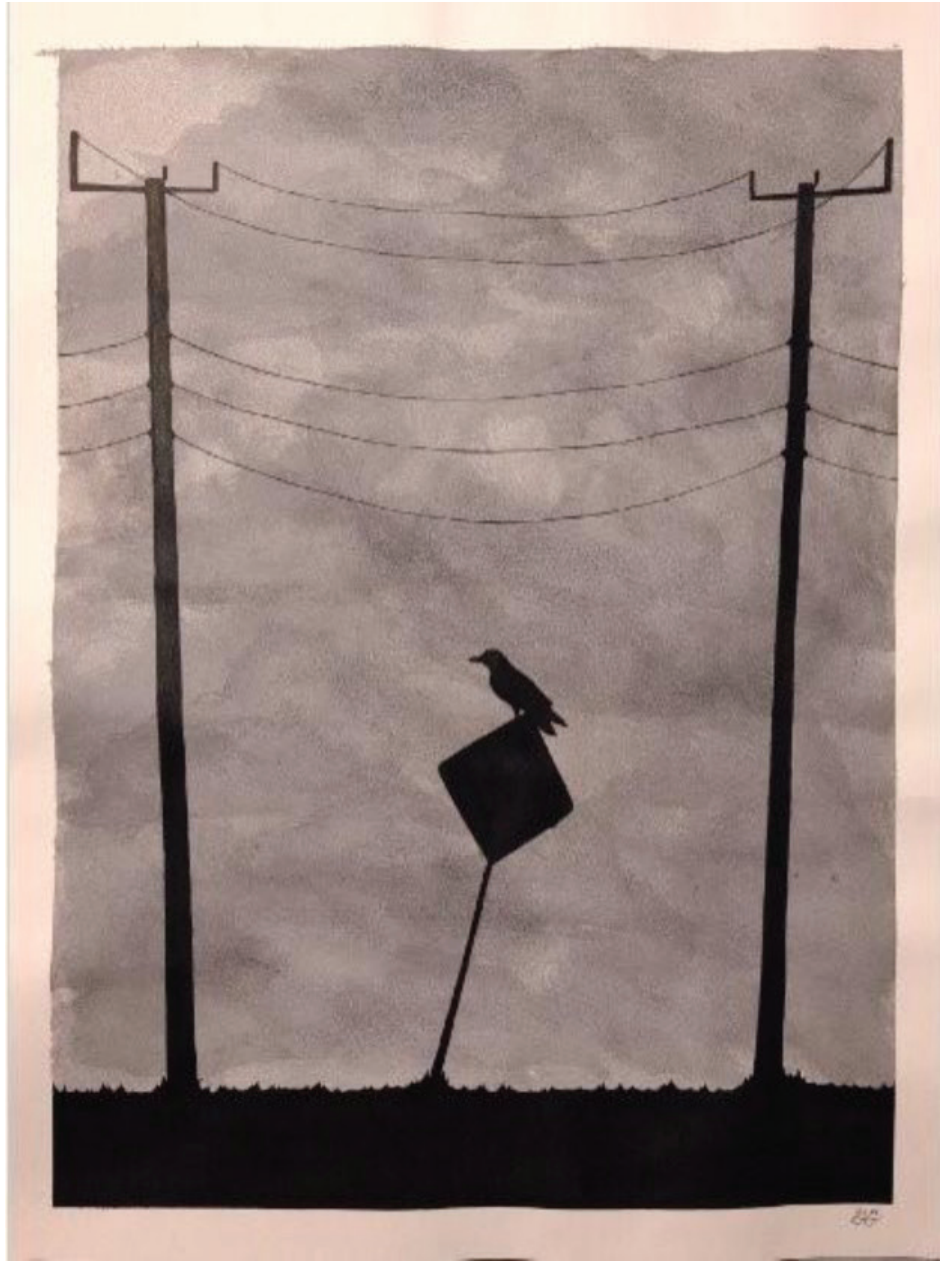
My parents and I hadn’t known just how bad the teasing had gotten until we came home one evening after one of my softball games and found out that he had taken his own life.

The one thing that he had enjoyed doing, in the time we lived in America before his death, was art. He was obsessed with drawing dragons, and for my fourteenth birthday he had drawn me a large dragon; it was beautiful. The anatomy and art of it all were so well put together that no one ever thought that a ten-year-old had originally designed it.

So, on my eighteenth birthday, a year before I moved back to Tokyo, I got that very dragon tattooed on my arm. It spanned from my wrist to my elbow.

And even though it was found to be taboo and it limited what traditional Japanese events I could attend and the job I could work, I would never get that tattoo removed. I could never remove something of Satoshi’s from my body like that. It’s how his memory lived on with me.

“It’s how his memory lived on with me”



“Rest Stop”

By Gabrielle Golden

From Seed to Bloom, Through the Fire

By Jessica Marshall

A small seed of a dream, in darkness deep,
To your heart hold it close, while shadows creep.
Doubts may rise, like whispers low in the night,
But hold it tight with all of your might.

Through storm and strife, the roots descend,
Inch by inch, the journey starts to begin.
Each crack and flaw, a lesson learned
With grit and determination, a spirit burns.

The path may twist, hidden fears loom,
But inner strength, dispels the gloom.
At last it blooms, a vibrant hue so bright,
Finally the other side, revealed in hopeful light.

Now life's forge awaits, with heat and might,
Where dreams confront the darkest night.
The easy way, a tempting call,
But this dream burns bright, resisting all.

Then form takes shape, strong and bold and true,
The other side, where truths unfold anew.
Through fire's embrace, a stronger self is done,
Success shines through, the worthy battle won.

*“Where dreams
confront the darkest
night.”*

Contributors

Kimberly Culbreth

Kimberly Culbreth is now a student at Appalachian State University and majoring in Creative Writing. Kimberly wrote the haiku published in this anthology for a class with the idea of a favorite flower, the *Lycoris Radiata*, also known as the Red Spider Lily, or the Equinox Flower.

Gabrielle Golden

Gabrielle Golden is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College, pursuing an Associate's of Arts degree. She currently works in the campus library, happily surrounded by books. She is a lover (and occasional creator) of art, an avid crafter, and a music fanatic.

Breanna Lawrence

Breanna is a Marine Corps veteran, originally from Ohio. She has a deep love for horror and enjoys exploring different aspects of the genre in her writing. Breanna loves reading and spending time with her husband, Anthony, and their two cats, Dexter and Jennifer Pepperoni.

Jessica Marshall

Jessica Marshall served as Secretary of the Student Government Association. She is passionate about supporting local businesses, building stronger communities, and helping others succeed. Through her writing, she aims to inspire growth, connection, and hope.

Josiah McCord

Josiah McCord loves to engage with all types of art. Watching movies, writing screenplays, listening to music, making music, reading books, and writing in all sorts of genres fulfills him in a way few other things in this world do.

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Rebekah Meo is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Breanna Moeller

Breanna Moeller is planning to transfer to the University of North Carolina Greensboro this fall. In her free time, she enjoys hiking, arts, reading, and generally being a menace to society. She hopes her art makes someone feel seen.

Natisha Monique Moore

Natisha Moore visits coffee shops and bookstores in her spare time to hush the ever-present notion that there's work to be done. She has always enjoyed poetry and expression of art in various forms.

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Jacob Mueller is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

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Thomas Oliver is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

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Deanne “Dee” Sconyers decided to continue her education after leaving the military and being a stay-at-home mom for three years. She received an Associate of Arts degree from Coastal Carolina Community College in December 2024, and she is so grateful for the experience.

Stormie Tigner

Stormie Tigner is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Miranda VanderHook

Miranda VanderHook is a proud single mother of three and is determined to create a better future for her family. Through resilience and hard work, she made the decision to pursue her college education. Her children are her greatest motivation, and they inspire her to keep striving for success every day!

New River Anthology

Coastal's Student Literary Magazine

COASTAL CAROLINA
C O M M U N I T Y C O L L E G E

SUBMISSIONS FOR 2026



<https://www.coastalcarolina.edu/campus-life/student-showcase/>

Submission period ends March 31, 2026.

Submissions made after end date will be considered for the 2027 volume.



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Poetry — up to 5 poems

Fiction/Nonfiction — up to 5 pieces of fiction or nonfiction, up to 15 pages per submission

Artwork — up to 5 scanned files of artwork or photographs

If you have any questions or concerns about submissions, please contact:

newriveranthology@coastalcarolina.edu

All work to be judged by the *New River Anthology* Faculty and Student Editors.

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