



Rogue Currents

RCC's Student Literary Magazine

Volume 1 - 2026

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Greetings and Salutations

Welcome to the inaugural edition of *Rogue Currents*, a celebration of the artistic and literary talents found within Rogue Community College. The creativity of our classmates has been astonishing—from the student who sits quietly in class to those leading discussions, hidden adepts waiting to surface. We invite you to enjoy this selected mosaic of student art representing the ever-changing aesthetic underpinnings of life through emotion, memories, imagination, interests, and transformation.

We have gone from weeks of few submissions, haunting halls, classrooms, and clubs in search of work, to being inundated with an incredible outpouring of poems, stories, visual art, and performance pieces in the final surge before our deadline. The response from students across campus revealed an impressive range of creativity, and selecting pieces for publication became both exciting and difficult. While we could not include every submission, we were deeply impressed by the quality and imagination of the work we received. The pieces collected here reflect our theme of currents as a constant state of motion and change.

Soon the first edition will roll from the press—our final step after a dozen opportunities to proofread and perfect the publication. We have organized *Rogue Currents* into sections reflecting different ideas of flow: Gathering, Surging, Channeling, Merging, and Surfacing. Many submissions could easily fit within multiple sections, creating a pool of artistic works for us to sort through. Soon we will lower our pens, close our laptops, unfurl our sails and drift with the currents into summer.

For those reading now who may be next year's editors—and others not yet enrolled—we invite you to shape your own thematic currents and build upon the foundation begun here. May you find the same inspiration and support from your classmates as we have.

Again, we welcome you to the first edition of *Rogue Currents*, your student literary and visual arts magazine. We hope you enjoy this collection of our classmates' creativity as much as we have enjoyed producing it.



Michael Jewett
Editor, *Rogue Currents*
President, RCC Creative Writers' Club

Cover Art: Cloudy with a Chance of Bubbles Digital illustration by Lauren Lantron

An image that suggests a current in motion, where fragments gather, shift, and emerge. As the cover for this inaugural issue, the piece reflects the central idea of *Rogue Currents*—meaning, beauty, and becoming rise through uncertainty.



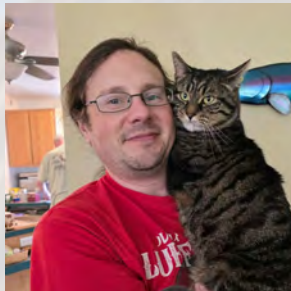
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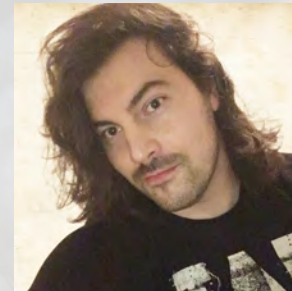
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Meet the Editorial Team



Seth Cooper

Seth is an aspiring writer, a bug enthusiast, and a food explorer. They enjoy hiking, Godzilla, and their cat, Squeaky-cheese. They are often found napping because “life is kinda hard.” Seth is pursuing an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree and plans on earning a bachelor’s in creative writing with a minor in Japanese.



Jade Keglovitz

After rediscovering an old sketchbook, Jade was inspired to pick up the pencil again and pour his imagination onto whatever paper he can find. He is navigating a career in digital media and served as the design editor for *Rogue Currents*. He works part-time as a youth counselor and tumbling coach and spends his free time practicing jujitsu, wandering the wilderness, playing games, and writing.



Robert Felthousen

Robert is a life-long learner who started writing at the age of ten. He is inspired by the works of Matsuo Basho, Jorge Carlos Borges, and David Sedaris. He is currently finishing a long short story called “Some People Will Only Ever See You.” He has previously published a short story called “Questionnaire” in the *North American Review*.



Addison Mosby

Addison was born in Bend, OR, and now lives in Medford, attending RCC in the pursuit of an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree, with a focus on creative writing. He is an aspiring fantasy writer and is working towards actualizing his dreams into short stories and novels. He spends his free time creating and running TTRPGs, playing video games, exercising, and writing.



Danielle Hein

Danielle has had a lifelong passion for reading and writing. She is pursuing an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree, with a focus on art. During her time at RCC, she has taken numerous creative writing classes. She served as assistant design editor for this issue of *Rogue Currents* and created accompanying artwork for "Devoured by the Ink," "On a Tangent," and "Fey Bargains of Hautdesert."



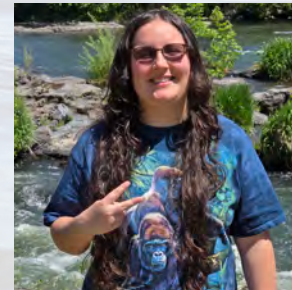
Rhonda Nowak—Instructor

Rhonda teaches writing in the Humanities Department at RCC. She teaches Composition II, Imaginative Writing I, II, and III, and Magazine Writing, Editing, and Publishing. She has written for several local publications, including the *Jacksonville Review*, *Southern Oregon Wine Scene*, *Mail Tribune*, *Rogue Valley Times*, and *Ashland Living*.



Michael Jewett

Michael is a veteran who has chosen to pursue education after a successful career as a chef and in restaurant management. He is pursuing joint degrees in Arts & Humanities and Business, while exploring numerous other interests. He is currently president and co-founder of the Creative Writers’ Club at RCC.



Marina Robello

Marina is an artist, bootleg entomologist, and psych student. When they aren’t frying their braincells from schoolwork, they are working on other projects, like Pokémon GO Club and Ossie’s Cupboard. They own an extensive collection of isopod colonies but despise ticks! They enjoy consuming new foods, inhaling new beverages, and napping. They also created accompanying artwork for "On a Tangent."

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Gathering

Uncertainty, stirring, formation

Okay?

Poem by Kelly Silva

I say I'm okay,
because that is what the world asks in
passing.
A small word,
that fits neatly between one breath and
the next.

But the truth is heavier.
It lives in the hollow of my chest
and spills out in the quiet moments,
when I am alone with keepsake thoughts.

Okay... in the way a cracked vase still
holds water.
Okay... in the way a storm-bent tree still
roots itself to the earth, holding on.

I am lost in feelings I cannot name,
drifting through tides of love and loss.

So to say "I'm okay" is not a lie.
It is just a fragment of the truth,
a thin layer that covers what cannot be
spoken.

I will carry it all—
The sadness.
The love.
The memories.
The moments.

I am both—
Okay and not okay,
fragile but strong,
hurting yet healing,
holding on and letting go,
broken but still whole.

For grief is a weight that I carry each day,
a love that won't vanish, a loss that won't
fade.

So when I say, "I'm okay,"
please know what I mean—
I'm surviving the silence.
I'm holding the unseen.
I'm stumbling, yet still standing.

And maybe,
just maybe,
that is what it means to love deeply...



The Fog

Poem by Shannen Kellim

I couldn't tell who was appearing
through the fog—
you or my past.

Creeping up the rocks
above the shoreline,
onto bare feet.

The air was heavy, full—
I couldn't decide who
I would rather face.

The numbness
settling into my bones
proved that I could still feel.

They were wrong.

I'm not crazy
I'm just hurt.

The waves spilled over in the distance,
compelling me to join them,
tempting me with a salty breeze.

I'm not crazy
I'm just hurt.



Concrete Ship

Photograph by Antonio Barreto



The Hole

Poem by Haiying Zang-Lamphere

At the top of the window,
a small dark hole captivated me,
yet fear stopped me just in front of it.

"There must be something in the dark..."

Finally, one day, I mustered the courage
and reached out. The hole was just big enough
to fit my small hand. I groped inside.

At first, I grasped only emptiness.
Then I touched something soft and slightly cool.

I thought of a snake,
and hastily withdrew my hand.

Soft, slightly cool.

Years later, I still remember
the sensation on my hand.

I write this for my curiosity and my panic,
and even more for what moved me:

Soft, slightly cool.
That was life itself.



Doubt

Chalk on paper by Jade Keglovitz

Sutjimo

Pressure, escalation, fracture



Rural Sunset
Photograph by Tyler Hardman

Devoured by the Ink *Poem by Conner Bowen*

The moon reflects upon the water,
its rippling light entering my eyes with a frosty glow.

Waves crash against the sand, churning the floor beneath my feet.
The dark water batters against my legs.

Cold and unfeeling, relentlessly reaching for me, luring me toward the depths.
I stand my ground, knowing it only feeds me sorrowful lies.

A small crab dashes across the sand to my right.
Quickly it is swallowed by a roaring wave, pulled into the ink.

I sit at my desk and open my eyes.
The expanse of ocean, seen only through the slits in my window blinds.

A cool breeze slips in, carrying the sea's eerie scent.
Salty, pungent—the smell of death.

I close my eyes again and am brought back to the spot I had stood before.
The waves are no longer a soothing sound, but an incoherent cacophony.

Like blood stuck in a turntable.
Thick and rushing against my feet like sludge.

I open my eyes again, slumped in an uncomfortable chair while yellow papers sit atop my desk.
Their crinkled pages are illuminated by the oil lamp beside me and the white beams of moonlight squeezing through the window.

My mind twirls and spins like the ocean's waves caught in a riptide.
My heart beats like ritual drums.

The smell of iron and rust fills the air.
I take up my pen and dip it into the ink.

Words, sentences, thoughts—a mirage of anything and everything—are jotted down without a single thought behind them.

It was no longer I who was writing, but my subconscious, my guilt, my fears.
My drastic attempts to forget the nihilistic reality I lived in.

To be null was a wish.

The ocean's distant attempts at retribution mask the sound of blood dripping down each step.
The haunting image of a life now limp.

Was I like the crab?
Blissfully unaware of the world around me, and all at once pulled into the ink?

Turning my head, I saw atop the stairs their unmoving body.
Hair still wet and clothes stained crimson red.

The moonlight reached out, the white beams a tainted amber glow.
Turning back, I kept writing.

Pen to paper, line to line, I couldn't stop.
Each word gaining more meaning, more emotion, and yet not mine.

Not mine to know or ever understand.
I wrote to mourn.

I wrote to forget.
I wrote to heal.

I wrote and wrote, hoping these thoughts would leave me alone and stay on the paper.
Leave me, isolated on my beach.

The cold sea mist enveloped my nostrils as I breathed in.
The wind swirled around me, waltzing along the shore.

My hair danced with it.
And all at once, as the waves rushed past my feet and the moonlight burned my retinas,

I fell to the sand
and was devoured by the ink.



Tensions

Poetry by Void Grove

Ocean

sinking into
cerulean blue
how do I know
when it is time
to release the air
and embrace
the ever-shifting
waves
all light
filters blue and deep
this impossible
silent ocean
rocking me to sleep
sunken

amidst the kelp

Holding

going to
lose our minds
while you are in the
trenches
beyond city lights
I hope not
one bit of pain
can
find you
how long
since I've seen you
why is it
injury that unites us
this time
is this all that

cradles us, after so many years

Terror

waters no longer bright
or dappled by sunlight
I am too deep
to scream
so I may instead find
my footing on
ocean floor
try to block out
darkness on all sides
how can I escape from
pressure in my lungs
bringing me low
I know what happens to
pirates here

Hovering

pick up gas and
together
hospital
rooms will await us
are you bleeding?
one drop
would shatter me on your behalf
I, will I, be able to
help you?
has it been
a year now?
only a gruesome
scene not painted red
(but only barely)
keeps us together

Officially, I Blame Your Parents

so this beautiful thing
it was never meant to last
creeping up on us
like vines that grew to choke
I couldn't expect you
to be your own person
from all angles
you were breaking down
lacking support
your own spiraling
your own struggles
to keep them at bay
you must see that

you need to go to a therapist

but I guess it's hard
for you—
taking
one day at a time
in this world
your own self
must be most important
trying to love
it can be challenging—

is your fault
gone within moments
or did the decay start
back in February
(you never grew at all)
to stand your ground
you would need love
and maybe a spine
because you were
unable to manage
anxiety
you relied on me
and I tried to say
I can't do this for you

but either way, I still cannot stay.

Jamal's Sunglasses

Story by Parker Warner

October 29th, 2025

Saudi Maternity Hospital, El Fasher, Sudan

Seated on the floor in a supply room, Ali holds his son by the legs and back. The boy's chin rests on his shoulder as the room rattles under RSF artillery fire. It's bad enough that the boy can sleep through gunfire—now constant—but how can he sleep like this? The fluorescent light overhead shudders and swings as the blasts draw closer, each tremor running through the floor, threatening to split it open beneath them. Still, the boy sleeps.

Ali presses his back against a supply locker to keep it from toppling. The cold steel vibrates through his body with every impact.

“Good morning, buddy,” he whispers.

The boy looks at him with enormous dark eyes—familiar eyes. They are his eyes, from before. The boy gives a small, tired smile.

“Where are your sunglasses?”

Ali spots them on the linoleum beside a mop. He sets the boy down, retrieves them, and places them carefully on his face. The wraparound shades—cheap, oversized—dim the already gray room. The boy blinks once, adjusting, then looks back at him.

“I think it's time we get to work, Jamal.”

They step into the hallway. The hospital is battered and broken but not empty—hundreds still remain, moving through the corridors like ghosts. Once, Ali cleaned these rooms after procedures. Now, with the flood of wounded, he assists where he can. The lights sway above them with each concussion, and every blast feels like a hammer to the skull.

As they reach the operating room, the lights cut out. Screaming fills the darkness—enough to guide them forward. A nurse bursts through the door.

“You—Ali! We need you now!”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Inside, the room holds too many bodies. Once, one mother at a time. Now, two or three. A woman wails. A man screams. The sound tears through the air, raw and unrelenting.

“Light,” Dr. Seti orders.

Ali takes the flashlight. The woman is restrained mid-procedure, her skin pale, her voice breaking as she begs for morphine that isn't there.

“This man will die if I don't get light!” Dr. Tairab shouts.

Ali turns to the other table. A young man lies open, his abdomen torn apart by shrapnel, blood pulsing steadily from a severed artery.

“Is there another flashlight?” Ali asks.

“No one to hold it.”

Ali retrieves it and returns with Jamal.

“Jamal, keep your sunglasses on. Hold the light here. Don't move.”

The boy nods.

Ali watches him—steady hands, still body. No tears. He had stood like this before, when their home was destroyed. Ali's own hand trembles.

When the lights return, both patients are dead. Ali cleans in silence as the doctors argue nearby.

“We cannot stay, Seti,” Dr. Tairab says. “You have heard from the patients themselves—the RSF shows no quarter.”

“Obligations to our patients aside, they need us. They have wounded too. They would be out of their minds to kill us. Maybe they will hold us for ransom down the line, but for now we are their only chance.”

“You are still the same stubborn old fool you've always been, and it's going to cost you.”

Dr. Tairab storms out of the operating room.

Ali moves to a gaping hole in the wall and looks out. People scatter through the streets, like rats fleeing a barn fire. He watches as young men toting pistols and machetes tear past in Toyota pickups mounted with Browning machine guns. They shoot down some of the civilians trying to escape.

Then Ali sees a sand-caked Humvee rolling steadily down the street—and a man in a camouflage uniform standing atop it.

He feels it before he understands it—something cold tightening in his chest.

He knows that face. The Devil.

When Ali first saw him as a boy Jamal's age, the Devil was on horseback. He remembers the horizon—warped by heat and dust. His father shouting, gathering the family. His brother stumbling through the sand. Then a sound like thunder—the camels.

They came out of hell—ragged and screaming, kicking sand into the sky, blotting out the sun. Behind them, the riders.

And at their head—him.

Gaunt. Smiling a jackal's smile.

In his hand, a machete—held loose, almost casual—as he rode through the village, cutting down those who fled without breaking his stride. Homes burned behind him, one after another, until everything Ali had known was smoke.

When it was over, the man dismounted and came to where young Ali lay in the sand. He raised the blade to the boy's eye.

“I hope you remember what you've seen.”

Ali grew into a man believing he had faced the Devil.

Ali pulls back from the hole, sweating.

He kneels before Jamal and holds him close. “You're going to be safe,” he says. “You're going to grow up. You're going to have a good life.”

He lowers the sunglasses over the boy's eyes. “Keep these on. It's bright outside.”

Dr. Seti approaches the father and son. “Thank you, Ali. You and your boy did well.”

He rests a hand on Jamal's shoulder, “Listen to your father—he is a good man.”
The hallway quakes as a drone detonates inside the hospital. The men duck instinctively, but the boy does not flinch.

The doctor asks, “Ali, have you ever come across the RSF in person?”

“No, but I have met the Janjaweed.” Ali gestures to his missing eye.

“They are ruthless killers, no doubt,” Seti says, “but they need us. They're willing to take losses, yes—but they won't kill the only doctors left. That would be—”

Another drone hisses overhead and slams into the building. The floor shudders.

Seti steadies himself, then leans closer, lowering his voice.

“You said you've been sleeping in a supply room?”

Ali nods.

“There's a vent above it—big enough for the boy. He can stay out of sight during the day and come down at night. They won't find him there.”

“And us?” Ali asks.

Seti leans closer. “We will find some scrubs for you—tell them you're my resident. If we're useful, we will stay alive.”

Ali glances over at Jamal standing perfectly still, his expression hidden behind the dark lenses.

“It won't be easy,” Seti continues. “I will handle the procedures—you assist. Keep your head down.”

“Alright,” Ali says finally.

“There are scrubs in the OR,” Seti says. “Get changed, then take the boy back to the supply room.”

He turns, already moving down the hall. “I'll meet the RSF when they come in.”

Ali finds the scrubs and pulls them on quickly. The thin fabric clings to his skin. He grabs Jamal's hand and hurries back into the corridor. They round a corner and nearly collide with Dr. Tairab and two nurses.

“You're still here?” Tairab says. “We're leaving. Now.”

“Seti wants me to stay and work with him,” Ali says. “Hide Jamal in a vent in the supply room.”

A drone skids across the floor behind them, metal shrieking against tile before coming to rest.

Tairab and Ali stare at it, holding their breath for the explosion. It does not come.

“Have you lost your mind?” Tairab says. “Hiding the boy in a vent won't save him. The RSF will kill anyone they find.”

Ali doesn't answer.

“Come with us now,” Tairab says. “Or stay here and die.”

Ali looks down at Jamal—his sunglasses are gone.

“His glasses...”

Tairab frowns. “Forget them.”

Ali shakes his head. “I can’t.” Another burst of gunfire cracks somewhere below them. Tairab grabs Jamal by the arm.

“Fine. We’re taking the boy. We’re getting out. If you make it, come find us.”

He turns and heads down the hall, pulling Jamal with him. Ali watches them go.

For a moment, he does nothing. The gunfire echoes through the building, closer now. He could follow. He should follow. Jamal disappears around the corner.

Ali stands there, the chaos pressing in on him—shouting, pounding boots, the distant crack of rifles. Then—the glasses.

He turns and runs. As he stumbles through rubble in the corridor, the gunfire inside the hospital abruptly stops. Then a shot cracks from the street. Then another. Then another.

The glasses.

Ali was not yet old enough to spell his name when the Devil took his eye. He would have died in that village that day if not for his aunt—carrying him for days, blood turning stiff in her clothes. She spoke only once.

“I love you, Ali.”

And now Jamal is out there.

He spots the sunglasses on the floor where they had been kicked into a corner, half-hidden in dust.

Ali grabs the glasses and runs, as gunfire erupts behind him. He bolts down the stairwell and forces open the heavy, steel door.

Heat slams into him. Sunlight blinds him. The street is thick with bodies, the dirt stained deep burgundy. Fighters drag them into careless piles, laughing when one body slips and sends the others tumbling back into the dust.

Tairab and the two nurses sit slumped against the exterior wall, heads fallen forward.

The wall behind them is dark with blood.

Jamal stands in the center of the alley, perfectly still. The Devil stands with him, leaning slightly on his machete, as if it were a cane.

“Hello, Ali! My, have you grown!” The Devil grins ear to ear, his teeth shining as brightly as Ali remembered.

“Hello,” Ali says quietly, his body shaking.

“I knew your boy’s eyes the moment I saw them! Young Jamal was just telling me that he sent you for his sunglasses, yes?”

Ali shows the Devil the glasses.

“You are a good father, and you have raised a good boy here!” The Devil places his machete on Jamal’s shoulder. “He will make a fine soldier one day, Ali.”

Ali swallows hard.

“The boy and I have made an arrangement. Give me the glasses and you will have my escort out of the city, unharmed.”

Ali looks to Jamal. “Is that the deal, Jamal?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Okay buddy.”

He hands them over. The Devil smiles and slips them on.

They ride out of the city in the Humvee, dust trailing behind them, as they pass huge mounds of the dead. The air smells of iron. The dirt roads are stained deep burgundy—roads later visible even in satellite images taken in the days following the massacre.

Ali holds Jamal close—tries to shield him from the carnage. Jamal tries not to look—but he does. He says nothing. Ali begins to sob. Each tear burns in his remaining eye.

“It’s okay, Papa,” Jamal says.

At the edge of the city, the Humvee stops. The engine idles, high and restless.

Ali and Jamal step out, onto the road.

The Devil leans from the window, the sunglasses low on his nose. He adjusts them slightly.

He smiles and winks.



Pizza Raccoon

Acrylic on canvas by Danielle Hein

On a Tangent *Story by Seth Cooper*

Once upon a timeloop—timeloop, timeloop—the Tangent intersected with our observable spectrum for the third time. The Tangent, a continuous line where the edges of timeloops touch, held spacetime together like a compressed spring. If that fragile line were to snap, the universe would lose all familiarity and structure.

The Tangent usually maintained itself; sometimes the Tangent needed a little help. During the current loop, the Tangent guided its thread through the eye of a needle, directing it toward Squeak, a citizen of the Planet of Spool.

At that moment, Squeak looked down at the MetaMod Unit strapped to his wrist. “Running at peak efficiency,” he muttered, “but it requires recalibration. Too much time loss detected.”

He initiated a scan of his living quarters for inefficiencies. In the mirror, his sapphire eyes narrowed on a rogue thread protruding from a seam on the shoulder of his exosuit.

He rolled his eyes. “Perfect! Just in time for—”

Blip. The InfoDump scattered particles into the air. The 1700-hour Piza™ News broadcast began its daily ritual.

“Hello, global citizens! Piza™ News gently reminds you to do your part and maintain proper nourishment.”

Squeak absently pulled at the loose thread.

“Today’s weather is set to normal. Tomorrow, aqua misters activate—prepare your apparel accordingly—”

The thread pulled loose, and the seam tore open into a fist-sized hole. His face flushed red with frustration.

“—Scientists have joked of an unknown shift in the fabric of time—”

He abandoned the seam and turned back to the broadcast.

“—potentially affecting Piza™ assembly, but the punchline isn’t ready yet.”

Unlikely, Squeak thought. The Piza™ Corporatocracy had maintained uninterrupted productivity for a thousand years—since the Food Security Update.

The Food Security Update marked a pivotal moment in civilization on the Planet of Spool.

Scientists stood on the brink of a breakthrough. They had discovered mysterious, thread-like particles at the fringes of the observable universe. Using wormholes, nanotech, and ancient cooking manuscripts, they attempted to harness the particles by bombarding them with proteins, starches, dairy composites, and several regrettable condiments.

The experiments failed. They were abandoned for decades—until a group of fledgling comedians broke into one of the facilities and placed a hot slice of Extra Cheese Piza™ into the test chamber.

For the next thousand years, Piza™ became the Corporatocratic center of the world, feeding the population with a continuously regenerating, totally-not-sentient, cheese-like substance.

Elsewhere, a delivery driver named Namari clicked off the Piza™ News and adjusted their rearview mirror. A sense of wild accomplishment washed over them as the Piza™ Assembly and Distrofacility shrank behind the manufactured horizon.

“What do you think, guys?” they asked, glancing at the passenger seat. “Think anyone will notice?”

A round glass receptacle sat buckled in place. Inside, something small shifted.

Moments ago, Namari had walked past the Piza™ pickup window and into the assembly station. No key was required—there was no door. No one stopped them—there was no security. No one had defied orders for centuries, so those expenses were eliminated long ago.

It took less than a minute to remove the isopod ingredient culture from the unlocked chamber and return to the pickup window. What Namari didn't know was that, during the extra minute, the food containment receptacle's control circuits had overheated.

Those sixty seconds began to unravel a tangled yarn.

Grab your food containment receptacle and deliver it on schedule. No breaks between pick-up and delivery!

The commands had been drilled into each delivery driver's malleable skull over six months of boot camp.

But Namari had other ideas. Save the isopods.

They had always been fascinated by them. Isopods were enchanting, iridescent creatures with countless wiggly appendages and an affinity for spherical transformation. Not everyone shared that enthusiasm.

Live specimens were seldom found in the wild; they were a favorite Piza™ topping.

Namari intended to change that.

Years later, they passed the rigorous testing and simulations to qualify for the lucrative Delivery Driver position—barely. They spent more time studying isopods than corporate policy.

Boot camp ended, and today was Delivery Day One.

Namari glanced back toward the gravi-containment food prison in the rear.

“That was easier than expected,” they grinned, turning back to the road. The glass receptacle in the passenger seat stirred.

In the middle of the Piza™ Assembly building, an unremarkable red light began to blink in a slow rhythm. This light had never blinked before, so when it began, no one noticed for several minutes. By now it was betwixt the curious eyes of puzzled scientists, nestled directly in the center of other flashing bulbs and colored buttons, bisecting a midsection of a wall-sized maintenance panel.

“Knock knock,” one scientist hypothesized.

“Who's there?” inquired another.

“There's a bug,” responded a third scientist.

“There's a bug who?” others pondered arrhythmically.

“There's a bug in the system, or rather, NOT a bug. Well, a BUG and NOT A BUG,” the first scientist theorized.

“How quantum,” they observed, gently stroking their beards and no beards.

Ahead, Squeak's ResiBox—a modular housing unit designed to interlock with its neighbors to minimize space waste—sat alone in a pasture of jade. His home resembled a mechanical Rubik's cube, with a single automated portal at its center. It anchored the yard at the end of a rubberized autowalkway, bordered by a modest swath of Capture Grass.

Replacing the lawns of old, Capture Grass was engineered to “capture” toxic gases and release oxygen with scented floral tones. The air outside Squeak's home carried a blend of roses and burning tires.

A delivery vehicle creaked against the curb, unnecessarily offering rubber to the otherwise pristine cement barrier.

Namari leapt out of their toaster-shaped carapace with wheels and skipped to the rear of the



vehicle. They swung the back door open and unlatched the security belts from the gravi-containment food prison. A breath of hot steam released as they removed the box. They nudged the door shut with their foot and turned to the autowalkway.

At the end of it, Squeak was waiting. Arms folded and foot tapping, he scrutinized Namari.

“You’re obviously beyond the mandated delivery window,” Squeak said. “I’ll have to reduce your rating. And look—” he gestured with his MetaMod unit toward the tardy transporter—“It’s your first official day, too. Namari, you’ve consumed my time—for the only time.”

“WDYM? It hasn’t stabilized yet,” Namari countered.

A yellowish-white, cheesy substance pushed through the seams of the restraint unit, swelling and pulsing. Goopy tendrils spilled to the ground and bonded with near-molecular precision. A visible aura of swirling aromas fought in spirals through the air. Its aggressive duet of salty and savory assaulted the adjacent olfactory systems without prejudice.

“At least it still stinks proper,” Squeak said. “But you know the rules.”

Namari reluctantly followed Squeak into his cold ResiBox to share in the mastication and ingestion ritual. Since the sticky cheese had nearly doubled in size, the delivery driver was required to aid in disposal. They were not required to track sediment into Squeak’s ResiBox, however, as Squeak indicated with a loud, strained sigh.

“Just go to the table and don’t touch anything. I need to—”

Namari dropped the Piza™ box, spreading cheese into the carpet.

Squeak could only stare in horrified silence.

Namari lifted the box. Strings of cheese clung to the floor as they scraped bits from the carpet with their shoe. They blew across the Piza™, sanitizing it with their saliva, then smiled at Squeak and set the open box on the table.

Squeak stared for a moment longer, tapped his MetaMod unit, and added carpet to his online shopping cart. He closed his eyes and let out a breath.

“Now to the matter at hand,” Squeak said, as he approached the open box.

He stopped.



“Where are my bugs? I need crunch in my lunch!”

“Isopods. They’re not crunch. They’re isopods.” Namari was suddenly serious.

“Isopod?! ISOMAD! And what are these yellow bits!?! Is that pineapple? That’s a banned food product! How does someone like you have access to that? They’ll throw you into stasis for eternity!”

“My Grandma White Hair is a HawAIIian ambassador. Plus, it’s tastier than isopods... probably.”

“Oh. Your grandma... I miss my—” Squeak trailed off, softening for a moment, before snapping back. “No! Pineapple is repulsive! Don’t you know the history of pineapple? That product will digest you if you eat it!”

“Well, yeah. But it’s the only way to eat Piza™!”

“Pineapple does not belong on Piza™!” Squeak exclaimed, picking through the toxic yellow bits.

The Piza™ swelled again at the center, as if it had eaten a lumpy star preparing to supernova. Pockets of air seeped through the flaps in irregular intervals. It sounded like burping.

“C’mon, we are mandated to eat this now,” Squeak urged.

“Not without pineapple! Ugh,” Namari complained, gripping their bag.

As Squeak plucked off the last piece of pineapple, he hesitated. Something isn’t right, he thought. Is the cheese looking at me?

The cheese expanded with violent force and burst, flinging sticky tendrils across the dining chamber and launching both of them through the ResiBox’s singular window. Squeak landed in a belly flop, whereas Namari curled into a tight ball and rolled through the impact.

Namari popped up, flashed a double thumbs up, and said, “Tuck and roll. Use your inner isopod.”

Squeak rolled the eyes of his inner isopod instead. He slowly pushed up from the grass, wincing at a sharp pain in his lower back.

“What did you do? My home is ruined! Since you’re obviously in peak condition, think you could find the electrobroom and help me with this mess,” Squeak said sarcastically.

Namari smiled, posed, and pranced toward the injured party.

“Hey, you got it, buddy! My personal policy is that Customer Service is number two,” Namari quipped.

They tripped over their own feet and barreled into Squeak. His face twisted in agony as his MetaMod unit slipped from his wrist and clattered to the floor.

The IdentiScreen blipped on.

“Squeakycheese? Your name is Squeakycheese?” snorted Namari, turning with a smirk.

“We’ve got bigger cheese to fry, you land crustacean,” Squeak groaned. “How are we going to eat all this cheese now?”

A gurgling roar erupted from the shattered window. They locked eyes, then turned together toward the sound.

“Squeakycheese, meet the Bigcheese,” Namari said, holding out a hand toward the opening.

A stream of cheese shot from the window, latching onto Squeak’s arm and yanking him back.

“Help me!” Squeak squealed.

Namari lunged at Squeak, catching his arm as he was dragged toward the window. Squeak flailed, grabbing blindly until his hand closed around Namari’s shoulder bag.

“Let go of the bag! Give me your hand!” Namari shouted.

“It’s got my arm! I can’t!”

They heard fabric tearing. One rip came from Namari’s bag, revealing a gleaming glass jar and a smaller one. The other rip came from Squeak’s sleeve.

Namari braced and gave a last-ditch pull. The sleeve gave way and vanished through the window.

Namari stumbled back, losing their grip on the bag, which flew across the yard and landed in the Capture Grass. They froze—then exhaled with relief when they saw that the glass jars inside had not shattered.

Squeak dropped to his knees beside the broken window glass. In one of the shards, he caught his reflection—and an imperfection on his exosuit.

The rogue thread—still clinging to the seam. It glowed faintly now.

Squeak frowned and tugged at it.

CRAAAACK BOOM!

The ResiBox burst apart as the gargantuan gorgonzola swelled tenfold, shaking the earth as it spilled into the yard. A mozzarella kaiju belched a cheesy war cry, flinging its stretchy appendages in all directions. Hot parmesan burned Squeak and Namari’s lungs as they stood paralyzed in horror.

Looming above them, the mountain of mozzarella stretched its viscous mass wide, then sloppily toppled forward.

Behind them, the rogue thread flared brighter as the cheese tsunami bore down. Squeak turned to run, but Namari reached for him and caught the glowing filament instead. The sudden pull jerked Squeak off balance—his feet still running while his upper body locked in place. As he fell, his hand seized the glowing thread as well.

Time lurched, then slowed to a crawl. Suspended mid-collapse, the kaiju hung above them.

“Iiiiiii thiiiiinnnk...” Namari slurred, “I’m hungry now!”

An image of Namari’s bag burned into their minds as the thread coiled loosely around them like an uncommitted boa constrictor. Its radiating light forced Squeak and Namari to shut their eyes.

The thread drew taut and began to vibrate, its frequency bending into a broken rhyme:

*A meal for you, a meal for beast.
Which one is through, fit as a feast?*

A horrific vision flooded their minds: an ocean of cheese consuming the planet, stretching to the stars—then darkness.

Stunned, they tugged at the filament to free themselves, but the thread snapped loose from Squeak’s exosuit and vanished, pulling Namari’s bag toward them as it went.

Time righted itself. Squeak and Namari stood dazed—until the bag slapped into the cheese between them, snapping them



back to the present.

“Good job ruining my day—and my world, bug brain,” Squeak said. “No isopods on my Piza™, the cheese demolished my home, now it’s eating us, and apparently, the universe is next! How can it get any worse?”

Namari pulled the smaller jar from their bag, unscrewed the lid, removed a yellow cube of pineapple, and placed it on the kaiju cheese. It shuddered.

“Shall we fulfill our obligation with a final meal?” Namari asked, almost apologetic.

“I am NOT eating pineapple!” Squeak refused, snatching the jar of isopods from the bag. Namari’s eyes widened. They slapped the jar out of his hand, sending it rolling into the yard, then dumped the rest of the jar of pineapple onto the muenster monster.

The glutinous kaiju roared and flung Namari free from its grip. They hung in the air for a moment, then landed, tucking and rolling toward the jar of isopods.

“What about my last meal?” Squeak complained. “Is that part of your customer service policy? Give me the isopods, Nama—”

The cheese swallowed him whole.

Namari gasped as Squeak’s form was absorbed into the cheese. Their thoughts fractured.

“No—I can’t—Squeak!”

The mountain of cheese held motionless as the pineapple slid down its surface.

Namari grabbed the jar, unscrewed the lid, and plucked out an isopod. It skittered across their palm, paused, and looked up.

“Oh, don’t give me those eyes. Not now.”

The critter curled into a ball. Namari stared at the paralyzed kaiju, then squeezed their eyes shut, and drew their arm back.

“Fly, my friend,” they whispered. “Save Squeak!”

They hurled the isopod at the cheese monster.

SPLAT!

The monster convulsed and let out a milk-curdling scream, as the isopod chewed through the cheese with a voracious appetite.

Realization struck.

Namari grabbed handful after handful of the determined detritivores, scattering them across the writhing mass. It began to shrink, collapsing from peak to hill—

—then turned, glaring, toward Namari.

Namari glowered back and flicked an isopod straight between its metaphorical eyes.

The blast was immediate. Cheese, fruit, and bugs rained down as the isopods devoured the beastly fromage, and the pineapple digested the processed proteins.

The mass melted, then vaporized.

Beneath a mound of steaming cheese, Squeak lay motionless at the center of the aftermath.

Silence fell over the yard.

Namari dropped the empty jar and ran to Squeak. Tears streamed down their face as they grabbed his exosuit.

“Wake up, Squeak! I’m sorry! I never meant—”

Time seemed to stall, and Namari went still.

A cough broke the silence.

“We... still need to—OW!—complete our mandate,” Squeak rasped. “Have to eat the Piza™.”

Namari let out a shaky laugh. “Here—I have the perfect piece.”

They offered a handful of cheese, pineapple and all.

Squeak wrinkled his nose, lifted his head, and took a reluctant bite. His eyes softened. His body relaxed. “It’s not so bad, actually,” he said. “Thank you.”

The air filled with the scent of roses and cooling cheese as the Capture Grass fed on the vapor.

Squeak reached for another piece—then paused. An isopod frolicked across it. He considered it longingly, then passed it quietly to Namari.

“Now, that’s a hard pill bug to swallow.”



Channeling

Passage, exploration, expansion



The Garden in the Middle

Poem by Kenzie Sells

There is a brick wall.
I don't know when or how it got there;
one day it just appeared.

This was once a garden, so green and beautiful.
Flowers bloomed after the cold winter,
and the sun would shine like it would never fade.

Each passing day, the wall rises taller—
brick by brick by brick,
it continues to grow.

I used to go every day to tend to the garden.
I would pull the weeds and water the soil,
so life would continue on.

Now the wall is too high; I can no longer reach the garden.

Cracks are starting to appear,
almost big enough where I can see through.
Maybe—just maybe—I can break through.

Looking behind the brick and mortar,
I can see my garden.

Once there was life and beauty;
now it is all dead and unruly.

The wall continues to crack and crumble.
It will fall soon enough,
and my garden will be free.

The day has come!
The wall has come down,
and I can now tend to my garden.
I kneel in my once-beloved garden
and feel the dead leaves crunch beneath my hands.

The damage is done.

The garden soil is forever spoiled.
Where once there was love,
now there is none.

Marcus's Journal

Story by Christian Collins

February 3rd, 2027

3:45 PM

My previous journal has been ruined. Months of writing gone because of one careless mistake—a cup of coffee left where it shouldn't have been. Or perhaps I knocked it over myself and didn't notice. I can't say for certain. Either way, it's gone.

I'll start again. I'll record the facts first, before anything else gets... unclear.

It has been four years since Site Agrippa was completed. Built to scan and interpret deep space signals—it never succeeded in doing so once. Not a single meaningful result.

Four months ago, the station was decommissioned. The rest of the staff were relocated. Someone had to remain until final shutdown, so I volunteered.

I remember thinking my work would be easier this way. Quieter.

7:00 PM

I find myself staring out into the snow more often now. It stretches endlessly in every direction—a white expanse without edge or interruption. It doesn't feel like a place so much as an absence of one.

It has been three months since my last contact with the company.

Supplies are plentiful. Excessive, even. My responsibilities are minimal: maintenance, cleaning, antenna checks. Things that don't take long unless I force them to.

The rest of the time... I fill it. Poorly. I try to make the rations taste like something. I've run out of books. I tried gardening for a time, though I don't know why I thought anything would grow here.

Still, it isn't entirely unpleasant.

There is a kind of beauty to this place. The cold. The silence. The age of it. The land feels untouched—ancient in a way that resists explanation.

I didn't have to come to Agrippa. I chose to.

February 4th, 2027
10:00 AM

The station feels different now.

When the others left, they took something with them—not just their belongings, but the sense that this place had ever been lived in. The corridors are clean, sterile, empty. Like a model of a research station, not the real thing.

My room is the only space that still feels inhabited. I've moved everything here—food, notes, anything I might need. There's no reason to use the common areas anymore. No one to share them with.

Sometimes I wonder—if the station could feel anything—would it notice the absence? Would it register that something is missing?

I should stop thinking like that. It's not... helpful.

February 5th, 2027
10:03 AM

During routine checks today, I accidentally activated the main system. I'm not sure how. I don't remember touching anything significant.

The server noise is constant now—low, mechanical, intrusive. It fills the walls. It fills the spaces between thoughts.

I should shut it down. It isn't part of my duties, and I was never trained to operate it.

Still... the sound helps. It makes the station feel less empty. Less like it's waiting.

4:50 PM

I found the system manual. It's dense, overly technical, clearly written for people who already understand it.

I've been trying to work through it, but I keep rereading the same sections without retaining anything. The terminology slips.

I'll keep trying.

February 6th, 2027
11:00 AM

I spent the morning reviewing subsystem operations.

There's no simple way to power the system down—no master switch, nothing immediate. It requires multiple layers of authorization. Which I don't have.

I checked again, just to be sure.

2:37 PM

I've tried everything. Without proper credentials, the system cannot be disabled.

So I'll leave it running. It's not as though it's harming anything. At the very least, I can use it.

I haven't looked at the telescope feed in years. I had almost forgotten what it was like.

February 7th, 2027
3:00 PM

I located Earth today.

It took longer than expected—the telescope's rotation isn't synchronized—but eventually, there it was. A small blue sphere suspended in darkness. Distant. Fragile-looking.

I stared at it for a long time. I wondered if I could see myself. Not literally, of course, but... something of me. A trace. That doesn't make sense.

3:54 PM

I've been thinking about my family. I haven't spoken to them in years. I don't remember when that stopped feeling unusual. At some point it just... became normal.

When I leave this place, I'll find them.

I'll explain.

I'm not sure what I'll say, but I'll say something.

February 9th, 2027
8:55 PM

I may have found something.

At first, I assumed it was another system irregularity. We had them often—false readings, distortions, background noise. Nothing worth noting.

But this is... consistent.

I've labeled it MS-1.

The signal repeats.

11:13 PM

There's no detectable heat signature. No visible light source.

I converted the data to audio.

It is not natural.

There are expected elements—low-frequency oscillations, distant resonance—but layered within them is something else. Rhythmic. Mechanical.

Too regular to be natural.

A steady pattern, like something turning. Or grinding. Or... working. Something like those deep ocean sounds—but wrong.

I don't have the language for it. I don't think language exists for it.

February 10th, 2027

8:05 AM

I've neglected everything else.

The station is in disarray—food containers, notes, spilled drinks. Some of it I don't remember using at all. Pages have been taped to the monitors—numbers, fragments of notes. I don't remember writing them.

There is a cup overturned near the console, coffee dried across the surface. I don't remember doing it.

I've been focused on the signal. I didn't realize how enthralled I had become.

February 11th, 2027

3:05 AM

I can't sleep.

The sound stays with me even when the system is muted. Not loud—never loud—but present. Persistent. Like something remembered incorrectly.

I generated a spectrogram.

The pattern is structured.

Intentional.

That word feels wrong, but I can't find a better one.

February 15th, 2027

I am trying to return to routine.

It isn't working.

I sat in the cafeteria today with a cup of coffee—fresh this time. I made sure. I turned my chair away from the window. I didn't want to look out there. The snow feels different lately. Closer, somehow.

The heat from the mug was almost unbearable, but I held it anyway. It helped. It grounded me, for a moment.

But my thoughts kept drifting.

Even when I'm away from the system, I feel it. Not physically—there's no sound—but an awareness. A pressure. Like being observed from a distance too vast to measure.

I considered reporting it. But to whom?

February 17th, 2027

I disconnected the system.

Pulled the cables. Disabled what I could reach. I was thorough. I remember being thorough.

It made no difference.

I still hear it.

Not through the speakers. Not through anything tangible. It's just there now, somewhere behind everything else.

So I returned to the observation room.

Destroyed what I could.

I know I did. I remember the impact—the resistance of metal, the shattering of glass. The way

it gave under the force. I remember how it felt to swing hard enough to break something that large.

But when I went back later—

everything was intact.

Undisturbed.

There was no damage. No debris. Nothing to prove it happened at all.

Even the axe is gone.

I don't understand how that is possible. I was there. I know I was.

[Date Unknown]

I am losing track of time.

I still write, so it must be passing, but not in any way that feels consistent.

Sleep brings the same dream.

I am no longer here. I am moving—drifting through space toward something I cannot fully see. At first it was distant. Indistinct. Now it has shape:

Angular. Vast.

A structure. Too precise. Too deliberate.

Wrong in a way I cannot describe.

Each time I sleep, it is closer.

[Date Unknown]

The sound is clearer now. Not mechanical—not entirely. It shifts. Layers over itself. What I thought were low frequencies now resemble something else—something like voices stretched beyond recognition.

Calling.

Not to me. Not exactly.

But I am moving toward it all the same.

I don't think I have a choice in that.

One of these nights, I will arrive. Not physically—I know that—but in whatever way this is happening.

I don't want to see what is inside.

I don't think it matters.

Jam Sesh

Music Video by the RCC Jazz Combo



Guitarist

Nicholas Combest

Drummer

Ian Richardson

Bassist

Hayden Blair

In this video, RCC students Nick Combest, Hayden Blair, and Ian Richardson perform during a practice jam session, showcasing both their musical talents and their shared passion for making music. Jam sessions like this provide students with opportunities to experiment, collaborate, and learn from one another in a relaxed and supportive environment.

Music at Rogue Community College extends beyond the classroom. Whether students are learning an instrument for the first time, developing their performance skills, or exploring new musical styles, RCC offers opportunities to grow as musicians through coursework, peer collaboration, and organizations such as the Music Club.

With the support of dedicated faculty, talented student musicians, and a welcoming music community, RCC encourages students of all experience levels to explore their creativity, build confidence, and experience the joy of making music together.



Dreamy Cat

Acrylic on canvas by Danielle Hein

Merging
Confluence, union, flow

Not Just a Local Dive Bar

Story by Shawna Hook

Dwight was a mountain of a man—tall and round, with a full, gray beard. He wore old jeans with a leather belt that was clearly put to the test. His Veterans for Peace shirt, worn with pride, was almost too small. I imagined it was the largest size made. He topped it off with a boater-style straw hat with an American flag bandana fashioned into a hat band. He looked jolly, like an activist Santa Claus.

The bar where I worked in Idaho opened at two in the afternoon. I usually arrived at opening to check email and prepare promotional materials to distribute throughout Boise. The shift bartender would put on music and put away glasses from the night before while I worked in the office. A few early regulars would shuffle in, sometimes shaking from alcoholism.

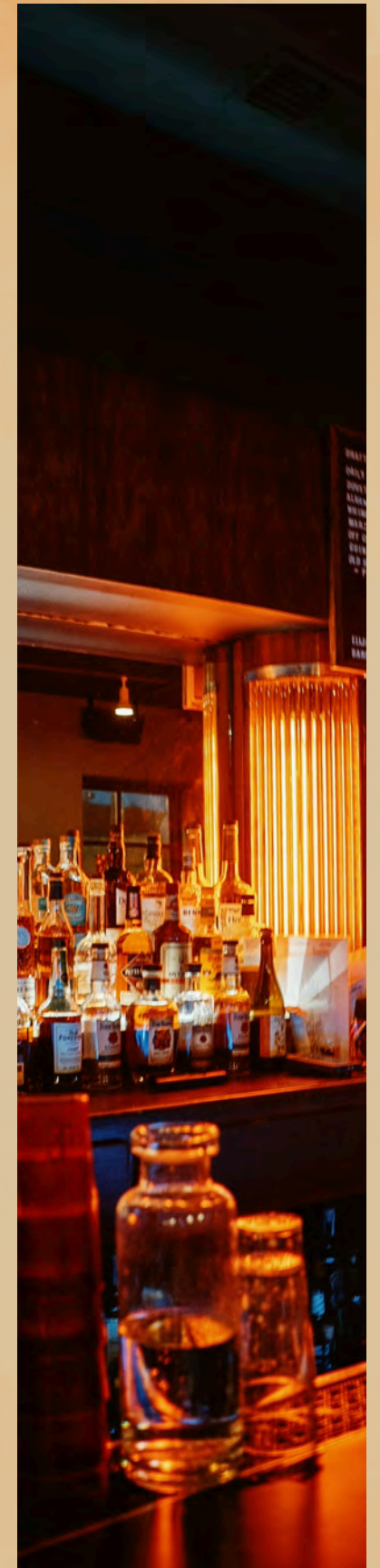
The bar was a dive, smelling of stale beer and cigarette smoke. Even so, it had become a community center for many like-minded people. It was called Terrapin Station, named after a Grateful Dead song, and was the local hangout for a mix of hippies and general weirdos. Dwight was one of them. He was a Navy veteran on a mission for world peace. He came in during the early shift but was not an alcoholic; he was a USDA entomologist. His truck was covered in political stickers. He came for the connection the bar offered.

Talking to Dwight was a welcome change from those desperately counting coins to get the strongest, cheapest liquor available. We talked about politics, economics, community—anything card-carrying activists would discuss over a pint.

Besides booking and promotion for the bar, I also managed a few local bands. I invited Dwight and offered to put him on the guest list for a show that weekend. He asked if he could give out Veterans for Peace merchandise—a true activist.

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” I told him.

He reminded me of a child anticipating Christmas morning.



He began to tell me about the homeless shelter three blocks away from the bar, and how he was trying to help improve conditions there. He mentioned they housed a lot of veterans, a cause close to his heart and mine. He invited me to visit the shelter with him, and I went that day.

I was expecting disheveled Vietnam vets and a sign that said “Jesus Saves.” That is not what this non-denominational shelter was about. I saw about fifty men under twenty-four years old who struggled to look a stranger in the eyes. They moved from cots to a microwave or toaster oven to make ramen noodles or pizza rolls, and back to their cots again. A few guys watched “Judge Judy.” They were clearly broken—their self-worth shattered, embarrassed to be seen like that. I did not stay long. I walked back to the bar, unsure how to process what I had witnessed.

Dwight was smart to bring me to the shelter. He knew I could not see what was happening there.

We discussed a benefit concert for the shelter. I knew I could get a few bands on board and quickly got the bar owner’s blessing to have an event. We planned the concert for a month out—three and a half weeks to get it together. Within the first week, three more bands jumped on board, bringing the total to six bands. We realized we needed to expand the concert into a two-day event.

Dwight got an estimate of twenty thousand dollars to outfit a basic commercial kitchen for the shelter. This seemed daunting—maybe impossible. I was not confident the door cover charge would pay for it all. But sometimes things feel right, even when they don’t seem achievable.

Dwight’s response was to go to every business he could and tell them about the benefit concert, asking them to donate merchandise or funds. We advertised through public television, radio, and grassroots hand bills and posters spread across the city. We talked to anyone who would listen.

Donations began to pour in: gift certificates, baskets of goods, contributions from all over Boise.

The first night arrived, and the bands loaded into the bar. Musicians debated whether the drum kit would be shared or swapped out between sets. Merch tables were set up, each arranged in the most visually appealing way. Dwight was beaming. I made sure everything stayed on track.

People streamed through the doors, some paying more than the cover. Within an hour, the bar was at capacity. The music surged through the room, and Dwight took the stage to remind everyone of the purpose and to thank the community.

The event went perfectly, both nights.

We raised sixteen thousand dollars for the shelter—a remarkable feat for a dive bar full of hippies and weirdos.

The shelter kitchen was finished six weeks later with help from a private donor.

I have seen first-hand the failures of the VA to support veterans after they return home. I have seen family and friends struggle to receive medical care or benefits while dealing with PTSD or other conditions. To me, this is unacceptable. I am still an advocate for veterans’ rights—especially now, as my young cousin faces deployment.

Dwight is someone I would describe as a true American hero. Not only did he serve our country, but he also uplifted others struggling with the repercussions of military service. His kindness was infectious, inspiring others to believe in themselves. I am so grateful people like him exist in the world, and I am grateful for the changes Dwight made in me.

Sometimes it takes a dive bar to realize the power of a community.



RCC Welcomes Student Veterans by Steven Vandever



Each year, Rogue Community College serves hundreds of veterans, service members, spouses, and dependents through its Military & Veterans Resource Center and Student Veterans Organization. More than a place to process VA paperwork, the Military & Veterans Resource Center becomes a home for many of our students—a place where veterans, service members, and military family members can ask questions, find support, connect with others, and know they don’t have to navigate college alone.

We proudly serve all military-connected students, including spouses and dependents using transferred GI Bill benefits.

Beyond helping students access their earned educational benefits, the center works closely with our Student Veterans Organization to create opportunities for leadership, service, advocacy, and camaraderie. Together, the MVRC and SVO help students build lasting connections, find a sense of belonging, and continue serving their communities in new ways.

While we spend plenty of time helping people decipher government forms and military acronyms, what really matters is creating a place where military-connected students feel welcome, valued, and empowered to succeed as they build the next chapter of their lives.

The Fey Bargains of Hautdesert

Story by Sophia Womack

High in the northern mountains, far from the bustle of civilization, where the air was clear and the stars burned bright, there lay a wild forest. Within it rested a lake, deep and dark.

Visitors were scarce. No roads broached the forest, and the nearby villagers knew it to be haunted by ghosts and demons. It was certainly true that those few adventurous souls who—through foolishness, avarice, or curiosity—set out to explore those woods seldom returned.

But no ghost nor hell-demon drifted through the trees or lurked in the water. No—the danger that dwelled in the forest and drew unlucky explorers to their doom was very much alive, and very much (though not entirely) of this world.

She would have taken umbrage at the idea that she “stalked” the forest. She had been there longer than the mountain villages themselves; it was the interlopers who found her, not the other way around. It was hardly her fault that mortals were so easily ensnared by a richly bridled horse or a beautiful woman. Nor was she to blame that most didn’t know the rules of the game they must win to avoid being dragged into the depths of her lake.

Fey and strange as she was, she had to eat—they should have been wariers.

She was solitary, in the way of her kind, and content with the brief entertainments mortals provided, the company of the occasional water faery drifting along the streams, and the passing spectacle of the Wild Hunt: fleeting shadows across the night sky, the baying of fell hounds. She knew the Hunters sometimes sought respite nearby but had encountered none—until she tore into the flesh of a man who had cheerfully been lured onto her back and recoiled from the taste of inhuman wind and wildness.

The Hunter—huge and merry—laughed into the water and swam to the surface.

“Fair kelpie,” he greeted, as she followed him to the shore and took human form. “Though you ensnared me fairly, you have relinquished your claim on my life.

What boon would you ask in return?”

She beheld him in the moonlight: the wild curls of his hair, the slope of his nose, the brightness of his smile—the taste of his blood, the sounds of the Hunt now recognizable in her woods.

He beheld her: the strength of her bare body, the darkness of her eyes, the water-weed tangle of her dripping hair, her bridle transformed into a torc at her pale throat.

They beheld and knew each other for what they were... almost.

She considered his offer and, finding she welcomed the disruption of her solitude, said, “Fair Hunter, though I doubt one such as you could truly be ensnared by my tricks, I accept your boon. Your Hunt will ride on, while you remain—until you correctly name my kind.”

So the Wild Hunt passed on, and the Hunter—who indeed could have resisted her—remained gladly.

They circled one another, both predators and prey, for a year and a day.

Said she, “Do you still not know what I am?”

Said he, “I do. But if I speak it, I will no longer be bound to this place.”

She bared her sharp teeth and traced where she’d scarred him. “You would not be bound to stay—but your departure would not be my will.”

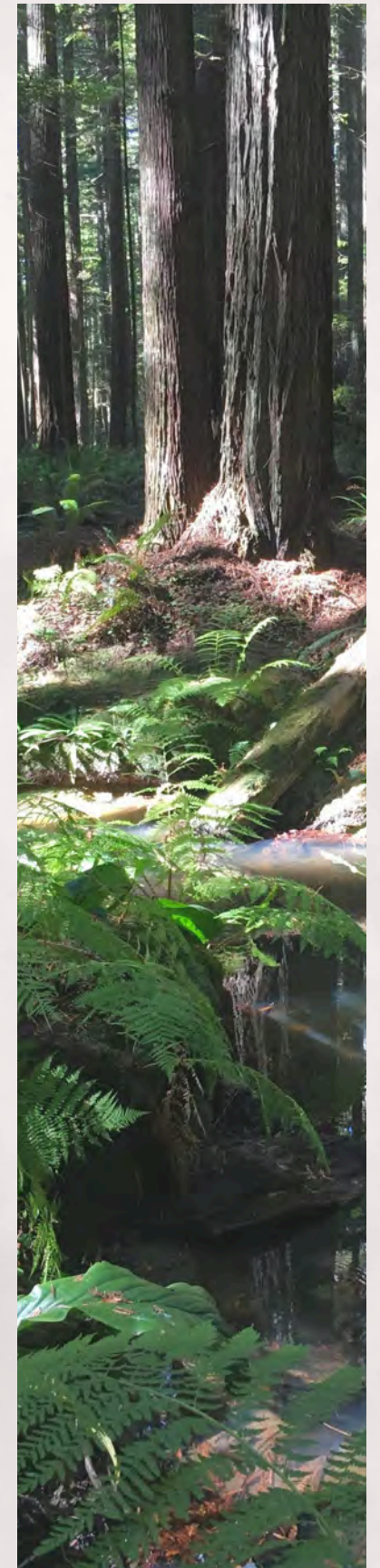
His eyes gleamed red as he caressed her torc. “Then I name you Each-uisge: water-horse of the loch, who cannot stomach liver. And I shall remain with you.”

The Wild Hunt came that night—but not to reclaim their brother. Instead, they gathered on the lakeshore, where the Hunter and the Each-uisge stood beneath the stars.

“My true name is yours,” swore he, “to hide in the depths of your lake. You have granted me a name from your waters—I shall be called Bertilak, until the loch runs dry. I bind myself to this land as you are bound to the lake. I will tend our home and stalk our forest, loving you true, so long as it suits us both.”

“And my true name is yours,” swore she, “to scatter upon the winds you once roamed. You have granted me a name from a twist of words—I shall be called Kiplee, until the wind falls still. I bind you to the land as I am bound to the lake. I will guard our home and drown our foes, loving you true, so long as it suits us both.”

And so the Hunt, the sprites, and the creatures of the forest bore witness to the joining of Bertilak and Kiplee.





Time passed. Mortals found their way into the forest, then perished, or escaped. Eventually one was clever enough, not only to survive, but to negotiate a lasting bargain with the fey. Kiplee and Bertilak suffered a castle to be built upon their land and mortals to roam unmolested. In return, the forest remained whole, and Kiplee had leave to ensnare the enemies of Castle Hautdesert.

This pact held harmoniously for two hundred years, until the latest decedent of the first Lord de Hautdesert fell to age. Kiplee and Bertilak mourned with the castle, having grown fond of their mortals, and invited the new lord, Alasdair, to renew the bargain at the first full moon following the mourning period.

As per tradition, Kiplee went to bring Alasdair to the lake where Bertilak waited. When the moon rose and set with no sign of them, Bertilak bid the creatures of the forest investigate the delay.

At last the forest cried out, "Danger! The new lord has seized our lady's bridle and shackled her in irons, and allows strangers to march upon us with fire! What shall we do?"

A terrible fury ignited within Bertilak, rising with the smoke through the trees, but he paused long enough to consider:

"Alasdair allows strangers to march upon us—he does not come himself? You are certain they are not of the household?"

"We are," the forest answered. "None are familiar by sight or scent; they wear no livery nor bear Hautdesert's coat-of-arms."

This was no sudden foolishness; Alasdair had long planned this treachery. He'd removed the forest's fiercest defender before laying siege—all while keeping to the letter of his ancestors' bargain. Bertilak, therefore, remained bound by his word: he could not retrieve Kiplee without breaking the bargain himself.

Bertilak took up his bow. Perhaps the invaders would reveal a weakness in Alasdair's plan as he hunted them down.

As Bertilak prowled the embattled forest, Kiplee paced the confines of a stable stall. Separated though they were, in spirit they were one: enraged, and confounded at this unforeseen betrayal.

Answers came swiftly: the invaders burning the forest were as eager to boast of their quest as Alasdair de Hautdesert was to gloat over his cunning.

"We've come to purge this forest of your devilry," a bare-shielded knight told Bertilak. "By vanquishing you, demon, we regain honor long-lost."

"I found others to rid myself of the bargain you deceived my ancestors into shackling to our line," Alasdair told Kiplee. "Warriors—who can fight the battle forbidden to my household, and a new priest—who has no qualms in binding one such as you."

"This land will be free," they proclaimed. "The people of Hautdesert will take what game and timber they wish, build where they wish—no longer in fear of monsters."

"You are brought to heel, leaving Bertilak to stand and fall alone." Alasdair brandished her bridle triumphantly. "I will rule Hautdesert, and my family's virtue—centuries tarnished by our dealings with you—will be restored."

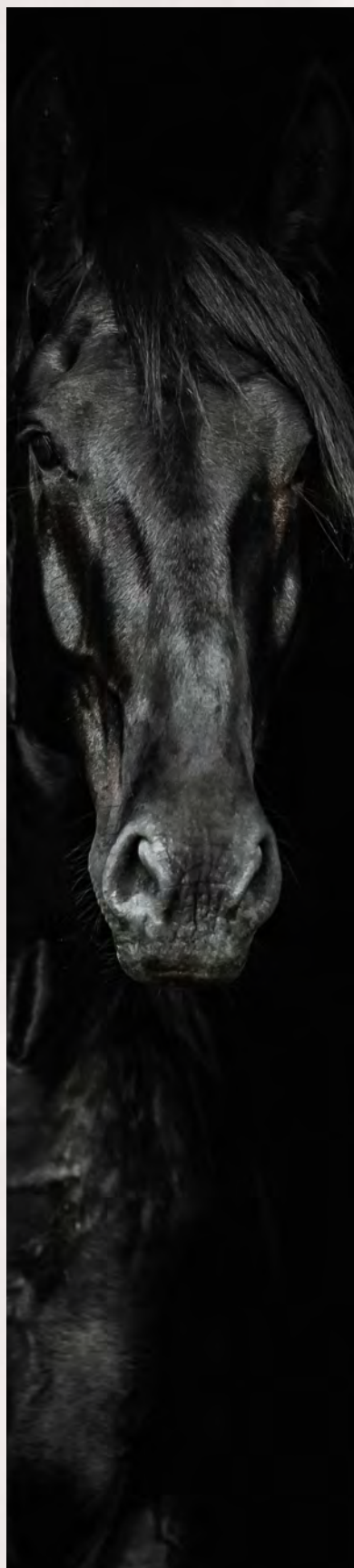
Kiplee had spent myriad days listening to children debate and consider, holding her patience until they devised bargains ensuring them a safe ride around the lake. No sly contract got the better of any raised in Hautdesert.

Had Alasdair not couched his scheming avarice behind words of righteousness, Kiplee could have admired his deft use of her lessons. However, Bertilak had spent untold nights feasting and merry making in the castle, often providing game for their table. No starvation, of body or humor, found any raised in Hautdesert.

Alasdair de Hautdesert was fortunate: he had cunning as well as greed. Had he broken the bargain outright, he would have been dead before dawn.

Bertilak stalked the forest, bloodied and weakening as trees, sprites, and beasts fell to their foes. Every fire quenched by sylphs and water sprites redoubled elsewhere. Each invader felled by beasts was avenged. Bertilak himself bled from cold-iron wounds.

He wasn't accustomed to hunting prey of such peril alone—the Hunt was far, and Kiplee torn from him. Still, though the invaders were many and cunning, they suffered for all the ground they gained and had destroyed nothing beyond recovery. Yet. Bertilak must only endure until Alasdair resorted to attacking directly and breaking the bargain. If he maintained his cowardice, Kiplee would find a way—his Each-uisge was not as easily held as Alasdair believed.



They held until the moon was nearly gone and the invaders began to dam the lake-feeding springs that sustained Kiplee. Then, Bertilak broke from the fighting, intent on finding some undetected stream.

"My Lord, I fear we search in vain," the wind whispered after a time. "What of the sorceress—she who is both mortal and fey? Could we not seek her aid?"

"I know of her power and inclinations," he replied. "She would come if we called, and be less hindered than we, but she could ask any price in return. We could find water; Kiplee may yet have time."

"Even now, you bleed and weaken with the forest," said the sylph. "If we do find water, what will be left when she escapes?"

"We may risk an enchantress's whims and live to repair our honor," Bertilak murmured, "or keep the spirit of our word as we perish. But with water, we can hold long enough. We press on."

Meanwhile, Kiplee bided her time in the stable. Alasdair was certain of his victory—and his right—but not all his people agreed.

The new priest ordered her to be fed only liver—the cook provided kidney instead. Stable-boys groomed her with gentle hands, maids grumbled at the rising smoke, men-at-arms murmured.

Some in the castle forgot and followed their lord. More remembered the truth, but threat forbade them from helping Kiplee, and the contract barred them from challenging her enemies before she did.

Kiplee cursed the shackles and the stolen bridle that bound her, but though Kiplee's capture had been treacherous, she'd still lost the game. Perhaps one of her mortals would risk freeing her; perhaps not. Bertilak would find a way if all else failed—her Hunter would not fall as easily as Alasdair believed.

Kiplee was patient until the moon was nearly gone. Then Alasdair sent out oil barrels to finish burning the forest that sustained Bertilak. To free herself was beyond her power, and enlisting any mortal would defy the basest laws of her kind—she knew not if such a request was even possible for her to make, nor what consequences might ensue. But without intervention, those oil drums would seal Bertilak's fate—

"Please don't blame us," the youngest stableboy whispered as she allowed him to braid her mane. "You and Bertilak are our monsters. If we only knew how, we would help."

—and perhaps she wouldn't have to ask. If they were already willing to risk it, she must only find a way to tell them how.

Acrid smoke rose from the forest, visible even from the stable within the walls of Castle Hautdesert. No more patience: Kiplee lunged over the stall door and caught the bridle of a passing horse in her teeth.

Elsewhere, Bertilak staggered to one knee beside yet another parched creek bed. They'd found no water, and the lake was already shrinking. No more caution: Bertilak turned to the sylph.

"Go," he bade. "Find Morgan le Fay."

The sylph passed from the forest, a startled stable-hand realized he'd never before seen Kiplee unadorned, and the moon that had crowned Alasdair's triumph waned to a sliver among the stars.

The sun had just begun to set on the night of the new moon when a chambermaid slipped into the stable, clutching Kiplee's stolen bridle.

Moments later, Castle Hautdesert welcomed an unexpected guest. The lady arrived with neither guards nor mounts; only a single maidservant accompanied her. Kiplee watched her pass through the gate—tall, richly dressed, beautiful. The guards greeted them with gladness, and Kiplee knew the woman was fey or an enchantress—the strangeness of her arrival would have aroused suspicion had she not used some sorcerous art to suppress it.

As the pair passed the stable, the maidservant met Kiplee's gaze. The wind whispered, "Lady, I bring aid."

The chambermaid left Kiplee's bridle and followed the strangers, the stable hands keeping watch. She returned at nightfall with news that Alasdair was throwing a feast in honor of

Lady le Fay's arrival. Soon after, the blacksmith's apprentice came with hammer and chisel.

"Alasdair and his men all feast," he said. "None will hear before it is done."

The chisel was placed, the hammer fell, and thus Kiplee was freed. Eager to discover how her sylph had come into the company of such an enchantress, Kiplee moved through Castle Hautdesert on human legs, torc-bridle at her throat concealed beneath servant's garb. The cook seamlessly placed her among the serving staff, and Kiplee entered the banquet hall.

Engrossed in the feast and the glamour of their visitor, none perceived the Each-uisge among them, save Morgan herself. The enchantress's sharp eyes found Kiplee's and held them a moment, then beckoned to her "maidservant" to refill her goblet.

The girl did as she was bid but faltered as she lowered the goblet, upending ruby-red wine over Alasdair. He rounded on the girl, his hand raised and fell—

—and shouts erupted as the blow dispelled the illusion like so much smoke, revealing the sylph.

The enchantress proclaimed in unearthly tones, "No harm shall you do to those of the forest who have not harmed you, Alasdair de Hautdesert."

With a wave of her hand, the Lord's allies fell into a deep slumber.

Alasdair cried out and recoiled, tumbling from his chair. Kiplee, having advanced in the chaos, offered from behind,

"May I help you stand, Lord?"

Alasdair, gaze fixed upon the enchantress, reached back. Kiplee caught him, her sharp teeth bared, and wrenched him to his feet.

"The bargain is broken, Alasdair. It is you who will fall alone."

Alasdair fought to escape Kiplee's grasp, but although her dying lunge weakened her, he struggled in vain. One serving woman, bow-backed with age, met Kiplee's gaze.

"He is yours, Lady. Do as you will; no foe will follow you from this place."

The rest bowed their agreement, and Morgan le Fay's laughter rang through the hall, drowning out Alasdair's screams as Kiplee transformed and took him from the castle, with the enchantress and sylph beside her, in search of Bertilak.

In the forest, Bertilak, strength spent, faced the blank-shielded knight. His bow lay broken at his feet as forest-folk fought and died beneath the burning trees.

They had held valiantly.

The knight raised his battle-axe for the killing blow—and then the bargain broke.

Morgan le Fay's doing, Kiplee's, or Alasdair's breach, it mattered not: Bertilak was no longer barred from Kiplee.

With the might of desperate hope, the Hunter caught the weapon in his hands. Heedless of iron's burn, he wrenched it from his foe.

"This land *will* be free," he said. "But you regained no honor here."

The axe swung. Bertilak called the forest to him and stepped over the fallen knight in search of his beloved.

They met beside the lake: Kiplee, stained with Alasdair's blood, and Bertilak, staggering under the weight of the axe he still held. Kiplee caught him and held him, as Morgan le Fay said,

"You called for my aid, and I have answered. Should you wish, I will grant you further assistance against what enemies remain."

They agreed.

Clouds gathered, covering the stars. Rain began to fall, driving back the flames.

At the next full moon, the enchantress presided over a new bargain between the fey and mortals of Hautdesert. Their foes were vanquished, the forest and Bertilak healing, and the streams flowed unimpeded to Kiplee's lake.



The terms remained largely unchanged. The fey added one stipulation: that inciting outsiders to besiege the forest would be deemed an attack by the household. The mortals of the castle—who had imprisoned Alasdair's allies and begun undamming the streams even before the sorceress's storm had come—asked leave to come to Bertilak and Kiplee's aid should they require it but be unable to ask.

"Are all present content with these terms?" Morgan le Fay asked.

"We are," said the fey.

"Almost," said the mortals. "We are without a ruler and cannot agree upon a successor among ourselves. If it please Lord Bertilak and Lady Kiplee, we would name you Lord and Lady de Hautdesert."

Bertilak and Kiplee, who desired dominion only over themselves, replied, "We shall be Lord and Lady de Hautdesert until a successor is chosen."

The mortals agreed. The bargain was struck, and all feasted until dawn.

Then Kiplee and Bertilak found the enchantress. "We owe you a great debt," they said. "Whatever you ask, we will give."

"I trust your word," said Morgan le Fay. "When I require aid, I shall call upon you."

She embraced them and parted in friendship, and Lord and Lady de Hautdesert sat together and watched the sun rise over the mountains.

*Now the board is set:
When Morgan forms her plot,
The Green Knight will upset
New Year at Camelot.*

What Help Looks Like

Poem by Alexandria Raby

They say survival is simple: stay clean,
stay healthy,
stay quiet.

But no one explains “where.”

Where do you wash your hands
when every door says “customers only”?
Soap becomes currency.
A shower becomes a dream.
Clean socks become proof
you’re still trying.

Pain doesn’t care about income.
Infections don’t wait for insurance cards.
A fever can become a funeral
when care is locked behind glass.

And the law
writes your body into a problem:
no sleeping here,
no resting there,
no existing without permission.
Being alive in public
becomes illegal.

People learn to look away,
cross streets,
hold their breath,
pretend this is normal.

But help does not require permission.

Help looks like bathrooms that stay open.
Like free showers and clean clothes
without questions attached.
Like clinics that treat pain
before it turns permanent.

Help sounds like using your voice
when laws punish survival.
Like voting, calling, showing up,
refusing to accept cruelty
as policy.

Help can be small—
a meal,
a first-aid kit,
eye contact that says, “I see you.”

Help can be large—
housing, healthcare,
systems built to catch people
instead of pushing them down.

I don’t live your life.
But I live in a world
that could choose better.

And help begins
the moment we stop asking
why they’re here
and start asking
what they need.



The Quiet Weight of Care

Story by Kori Coble

Working the night shift at the hospital teaches you to be quiet in ways you would not normally notice.

It was dark when I entered Sam’s room. The hallway just outside his room was dimly lit but still buzzed with activity. Inside, the air felt heavy—the hum of machines, the whistle of oxygen tubes, and the quiet sobs of his wife, Mary.

As a CNA, part of my responsibility is to care for the patients—not just as a worker trying to get my job done, but as someone who can offer compassion in even the worst moments—oftentimes the hardest and scariest of these people’s lives. I have to keep patients safe while also keeping them dignified and comfortable.

Part of this responsibility involves managing my own emotions. There are many times when I feel sadness, grief, discomfort, and exhaustion, but I cannot always let these feelings show. It is not because I am not feeling these emotions deeply, but because there are people around me who need me to remain calm and composed.

There is a popular belief that in order to be healthy, you need to fully process your grief immediately. Many people believe that if you are not processing your emotions right away, then you are avoiding them in an unhealthy way. However, for caregivers, processing these emotions right away is not always an option. Because caregivers are responsible for others, denial becomes a way to survive and function during their responsibilities, not simply a way to avoid emotion.

I experienced this during a shift with a patient named Sam, a man in his mid to late sixties, married to Mary for over fifty years. He had been recently diagnosed with brain cancer, and his condition was declining rapidly.

During this shift, Sam slept peacefully while Mary told stories of their time together: the fishing trips, family gatherings, even stories of their grandchildren who they loved so deeply.

She cried as she told these stories. At one point, her voice cracked and she paused, looking at Sam’s face as though she were waiting for his response.

I sat nearby, adjusting his blanket and checking his vitals as needed. I tried not to focus on the heavy weight in my chest as I carried out my simple tasks. I listened to Mary for hours and managed to keep my emotions contained. I expressed my sympathy to her and let her know how strong Sam was, and how much strength she showed in standing by him through his illness.

When the silence deepened, I could almost picture what she was describing: a house full of laughter and warmth instead of machines and hospital staff.

I put myself in Mary's shoes: I imagined what it would be like if it were my husband in the hospital bed, and that thought alone put a lump in my throat. But I pushed the feeling down and continued my job. Why should I feel this sadness? I needed to stay focused on my job and let Mary grieve without making it about me.

As Mary told her stories, I noticed how I reacted—my body language, how I adjusted my breathing, and even how I kept my facial expressions simple. These were small actions but automatic responses I had grown used to. I was not unaware of my emotions, but I was deliberately managing them.

Psychologist Pauline Boss describes this response as a part of ambiguous loss, where grief does not have a clear closure and must be managed over time. She explains how people often delay their emotional responses so they can continue functioning in roles that require stability, such as caregiving. This creates internal conflict that cannot always be seen on the outside. On one side is the natural human response of needing to grieve—to pause and fully feel the weight of what has happened. But on the other side, there is the responsibility to remain stable for someone else. These two forces pull against one another.

This idea helped me understand why denial should not always be treated as avoidance. Sometimes setting emotions aside allows a person to keep functioning. The emotions are not set aside because you do not want to face them, but because you do not yet have space to fully experience them. The tension comes from knowing that the emotions are still there, waiting to be confronted.

This tension became clearer to me when I was talking to a nurse on my floor who had worked in oncology for eight years, so she had experienced a lot of patient loss. She said something that stayed with me: "If you let yourself feel everything so deeply in one room, then you probably won't have enough in yourself to walk into the next patient's room."

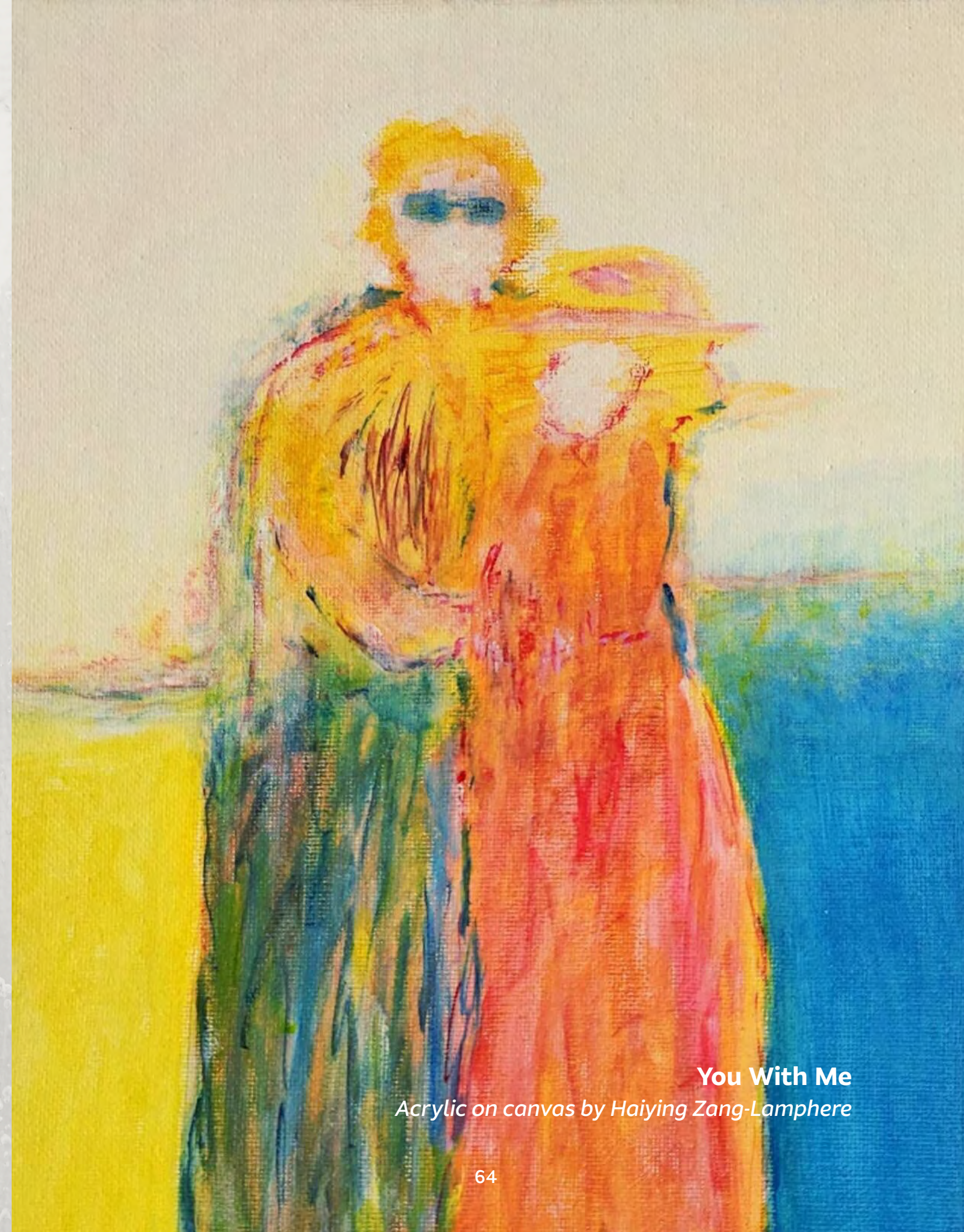
Authors Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter connect long-term emotional suppression to burnout, describing how prolonged strain can lead to exhaustion and emotional detachment. Over time, this pattern can begin to appear in everyday life. When emotions are repeatedly pushed aside, they do not disappear—they accumulate. What begins as a temporary survival tactic can slowly turn into quiet exhaustion.

When my shift ended and I stepped outside the hospital into the cold morning air, the stillness was almost unsettling. The doors closed behind me, but the emotional weight did not.

It follows me into my personal life. Moments replay in my head. I wonder if I said the right things. I question whether my actions helped.

Yet I still do not feel everything at once. Instead, there is a delay—a slow collision between responsibility and reality.

Understanding this pattern shifts the argument. Denial in caregiving is not simply something to be avoided; it can also be a tool. The challenge is knowing when to set emotions aside—and when to finally face them.



You With Me

Acrylic on canvas by Haiying Zang-Lamphere

Surfacing

Emergence, clarity, transformation

Always Returning *Story by Justin Jewell*

The laptop turns on quietly when I open it. The screen flickers to life—an empty sheet of white.

I rest my hands on the keyboard but don't press anything. The cursor blinks at the top of the page, steady and indifferent. I type a word, stop, then delete it. The screen returns to blankness. I try again, then close the thought before it can take shape. The room feels too quiet.

Every project begins this way. The possibilities stretch outward in widening circles. I feel exposed to the sheer number of choices before me—and with that, a quiet dread. Every choice carries the possibility of failure. If I begin and it collapses, that failure is mine. The blank page offers no protection from that.

So I minimize the document.

Instead of writing, I return to something familiar. A 3D model I made months ago: an anthropomorphic snake sitting on a couch on a cold fall evening. I rotate the model slightly, zoom in on the face. The light falls across the cheekbone at an angle I recognize immediately. I remember how long it took to get that right—the slow adjustment of the lamp, the warmth of the glow fading into the cold night beyond the porch.

I adjust the highlight on the cheekbone, just slightly. The change is barely visible. I toggle between before and after, back and forth, watching for something I can feel more than see. Then I move to the curve of the spine, smoothing the transition where it meets the back of the couch. The movements are small, precise. Familiar.

This work does not judge me. It does not suggest failure. It simply exists, waiting to be refined.

Within minutes, the tension in my shoulders eases.

Here, the stakes are lower. I am not creating something from nothing; I am shaping something that already exists. The risk is contained. I can experiment freely, knowing I can return to what worked before.

In revision, time feels different. Everything becomes texture and edge—small decisions layered over one another. The larger uncertainty fades into routine.

This pattern shows up elsewhere. For example, people sometimes go to the movies to cope with stress. A film offers structure: a beginning, middle, and end. It tells us when tension will rise and when it will resolve. We arrive unsettled and leave, if only briefly, feeling whole. Life offers no such clarity. It is uneven, unresolved.

I think the rituals we build serve a similar purpose. They create a sense of place. There is nothing dramatic about them—no transformation, no revelation. Just the quiet act of remaining within something familiar.

Why repeat a task? Because we cannot master anything in a single attempt. Repetition reveals cause and effect.

Uncertainty produces anxiety. Anxiety seeks relief. Familiarity signals safety. Safety reduces stress.

Psychologist Robert Zajonc described this as the mere exposure effect: repeated exposure increases preference. What is familiar becomes comfortable. Likewise, stress intensifies when uncertainty is perceived as a threat. When outcomes are unpredictable, the body responds accordingly. Predictability reduces that response.

Certainty calms the nervous system.

I've written about this before, and I will likely write about it again. The blank page is terrifying. I don't know what lies beyond it, or whether I will reach the other side. The old project, by contrast, is safe. I understand it. I trust it. So when uncertain, I return to it.

But this is where the tension sharpens.

A few weeks ago, I asked a classmate whether she revisited old work. She said yes—often. She pulled up an earlier piece on her screen and turned it toward me, pointing out where she had changed it. The newer version was fuller, more detailed.

"It's like going somewhere I don't have to explain myself," she said.

She paused after saying it, as if reconsidering. Her eyes dropped back to the screen.

Somewhere I don't have to prove anything.

That idea stayed with me.

These returns are not only about reducing technical risk. They protect something else—the self. Within familiar work, I feel capable. Outside it, that certainty disappears.

"What happens to the new ideas?" I asked.

She hesitated. "They wait," she said. "Sometimes I tell myself they're being patient." She gave a small shrug. "Sometimes I think I'm avoiding them."

Her answer felt uncomfortably familiar.

Returning to old work can be useful. It can restore balance, create momentum, prepare us to face something new. But it can also become avoidance—movement without progress.

Sometimes, an hour of quiet adjustment is enough. The mind settles. The noise fades. The blank page no longer feels hostile.

But sometimes, the sequence breaks.

I feel ready to begin something new—and still hesitate. The work I've been developing continues slowly. I compare it to others and feel behind. Their forms feel distant from anything I would make. My own work remains quieter, slower.

Comparison distorts the pace of growth. It creates urgency where none is needed.

This is the real tension: comfort can support growth, or it can contain it. Repetition can expand capacity—or become avoidance.

I am not just working on the project. I am working on myself. The changes are small, often imperceptible, but cumulative.

Still, the desire to "improve" can narrow curiosity. In trying to become better, I risk becoming rigid—closed to new possibilities.

Growth requires uncertainty.

To move forward, I must allow for the possibility that I will not recognize myself at the end.

Safety is not fragile. It is heavy. It steadies the breath, quiets the mind, makes the world feel navigable. The challenge is knowing when it has done its work.

When I return to an old project now, I ask: what is this giving me? Is it preparation—or avoidance?

The cursor still blinks. It always will. The risk of beginning never disappears. But returning to what I know is not weakness. It is a tool.

Used consciously, it anchors me. Used unconsciously, it confines me.

The patterns I repeat reveal where I hesitate. They trace the edges of what I protect—and what I avoid.

The room I know in the dark is not the enemy.

But if I never leave it, I will never see what lies beyond.

Twilight Notes

Poem by Haiying Zang-Lamphere

We went for a walk before nightfall.

The parking lot was still full of cars,
indicating life goes on.

Several plump bees danced around a clump of purple bushes.
Spring had arrived.

Before we even reached the river,
the flowing water filled our ears.

Even more surprising,
a squirrel leaped in front of us.

Everywhere we looked was beautiful,
but I knew some things were hidden.

Until we started to return,
talking about war, plane crashes, rising oil prices...

Darkness quickly enveloped us.

Never Too Late

Poem by Guy Hughes

I grew up poor, no safety net,
Threadbare pockets carried trauma, heavy with regret.

Chains of shame and anxiety kept the blame inside of me,
Wanted to retrain my brain to reframe reality.

Fall '23, RCC open house, parked the car,
Hands on the wheel, heart racing, thinking, "This is too hard."

Drove around the parking lot like I might just disappear,
Fear talking loud like, "You don't belong here."

But I stepped forward—not easy, but I tried.
Didn't know it then, but that moment changed my life.

College didn't just teach me facts—it showed me who I am.
Fulfillment in reach, grasp it to understand.

One class at a time, one assignment, one day,
The bricks were laid in the road faith in myself paved.

It wasn't one subject; it was learning how to stay and hold space.
In the work, in the moment, in the connection I could create.

Coming back older, I had errors in my program,
Now I can rewrite the code with my own hands.

Confronting hard truths I had left unsaid,
Reworking old patterns that kept me misled.

The blueprint to growth may seem mysterious,
But it's adjustment, awareness, and staying curious.

Show up and give it a hundred and ten,
Not knowing is not failure—it's where growth begins.

If there's one thing school finally taught me to see,
Stand strong in your work, earned earnestly.

Stronger student, healthier human, better teammate.
The story is yours to tell. It's never too late.

Going to See the Sea
Poem by Haiying Zang-Lamphere

Going to see the sea,
I walked a very long way.

Like a river winding and turning,
flowing into the sea,
like life itself.

Facing the sea,
I felt how small I was.
I felt myself disappearing.

Not disappearing all at once,
but little by little,
little by little...

becoming a part of the sea.



The Lighthouse
Acrylic on canvas by Danielle Hein

Meet the Contributors



Antonio Barreto

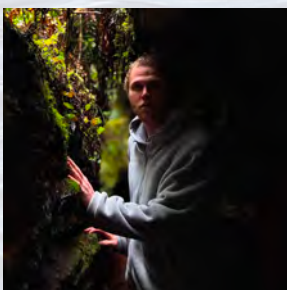
Living in Ashland Oregon, Antonio is currently enrolled in Rogue Community College to gather credits and transfer to Oregon State University. Raised in the Bay Area, Antonio spent many summers along this beach, enjoying the water and watching the SS Palo Alto slowly decay along the shoreline. To reach his creative goals and inspiration in life, Antonio is pursuing a degree in Arts, Media, and Technology.

Concrete Ship is a shot I took of the 100-year-old SS Palo Alto at dusk from Rio Del Mar Beach in California, where I enjoyed many childhood summers. The SS Palo Alto is over 100 years old and, as the name suggests, is a ship made of concrete. It was built as an emergency vessel during World War I.



Hayden Blair

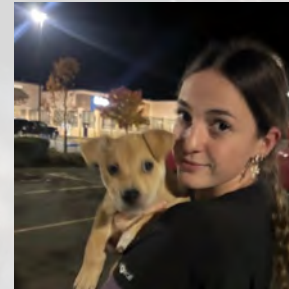
Hayden is in the Auto Mechanic program at RCC. Being a musician, he has taken some music classes to fill elective credits and played for a term in the RCC Jazz combo. He works in the Music Department as an assistant and is the official intergalactic ambassador for the department. Hayden plays guitar and bass, and a little bit of drums and Melodica.



Conner Bowen

Conner is a writer from Grants Pass pursuing a degree in English and a career in ministry. His work explores themes of faith, identity, psychological horror, and the tension between modern life and the meaning beyond it. Outside of writing, he spends his time reading the Bible, exploring the outdoors with friends, listening to horror stories, and watching anime.

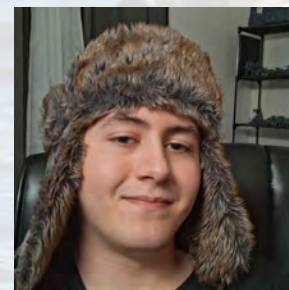
Devoured by the Ink is about a man struggling with guilt and haunting memories, so he resorts to writing. I used the ocean as a symbol for writing. As writers become enveloped in their work, it devours them, just as much as our past can also devour us.



Kori Coble

Kori is a full-time college student completing her prerequisites for a nursing program while working full-time as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). Balancing both school and work has strengthened her dedication to healthcare and deepened her passion for helping others. In her free time, Kori enjoys being outdoors, reading, and values quiet moments to unwind. Her dog named Malibu brings happiness into her life and she truly believes is the cutest ever.

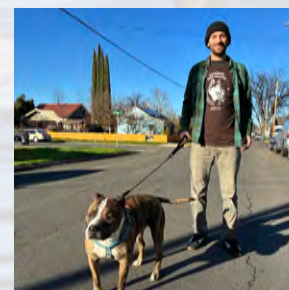
The Quiet Weight of Care is an essay I wrote about the silent struggles that I and other healthcare workers experience and the methods we use to continue providing care while dealing with our own emotions.



Christian Collins

Christian is a first-generation college student coming from a low-income household. With his studies in the field of psychology, and his interest in the genre of horror, he was inspired to write a story with concepts of desperation, insanity, and madness. This is the first publication of Christian's works, as well as his first short story.

Marcus's Journal is a "horror" fiction piece that deals with isolation and discovery. It takes a large amount of inspiration from all kinds of suspense and horror media I consumed growing up.



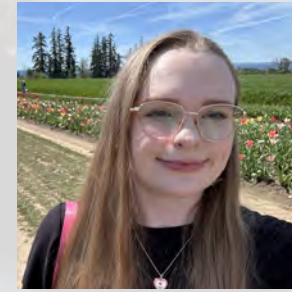
Nicholas Combest

Nick is a music major, music department tutor/assistant, and a guitar/bass instructor. He plays in the RCC Jazz Combo and in his own band. He plays guitar and bass, and a little bit of drums, mandolin, and piano.



Seth Cooper

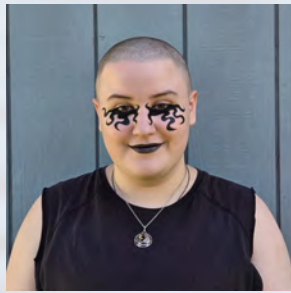
"On a Tangent" was originally supposed to be a pointless story about why pineapple belongs on pizza, even if it's wrong. Though it's still mostly pointless, it evolved into a version that Seth wasn't expecting. To them, the story is about stepping outside of one's comfort zone. As a result, they are taking that lesson and pursuing writing as a lifelong career.



Danielle Hein

Danielle Hein has had a deep love for art and the creative process ever since she was old enough to hold a crayon. She has dabbled in many art forms, some of which have included: painting, drawing, polymer clay sculpture, photography, and jewelry making. During her time at RCC, she has taken numerous art and design classes. A few of her favorites have been painting, digital photography, and Adobe animation.

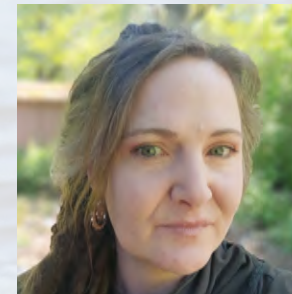
Pizza Raccoon was created while taking Irene Kai's Painting class in 2025. Dreamy Cat is an acrylic painting of a cat enjoying the warmth of sunbeams. Sparkles, stars, and bright colors illustrate the cat's dreamlike state while sunbathing.



Void Grove

Void Grove was born and raised in Medford, Oregon, and is a freshman at RCC. They are currently working towards an AAOT, and they plan on transferring to SOU to pursue their bachelor's degree in English. They've been writing since they were 8 years old, but they first discovered contrapuntal poetry in June of 2025, and they were immediately fascinated by the form. In their free time, they enjoy playing and analyzing video games. "Tensions" is their first publication.

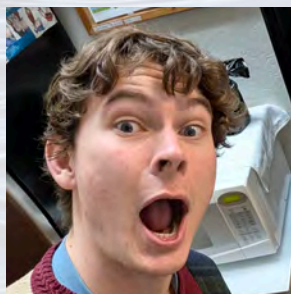
Tensions is a set of three contrapuntal poems written during moments of emotional stress, uncertainty, and personal conflict. Each poem grew out of a specific experience—a fear of drowning, a late-night visit to a friend in the emergency room, and the end of a difficult relationship—and uses the contrapuntal form to explore conflicting emotions happening at the same time.



Shawna Hook

Shawna Hook is a student at Rogue Community College attending Redwood Campus. After years of travel and work in agriculture, Shawna settled in the Rogue Valley. She is pursuing a degree in business technology with a focus on accounting. In her free time, Shawna enjoys live music, gardening, and nature.

Not Just a Local Dive Bar is about a benefit concert I helped produce for a homeless shelter in Boise, Idaho that mainly housed young veterans.



Tyler Hardman

When away from school, work, or the gym, Tyler is typically found reading, caring for his cats, gardening, or in RCC Creative Writing Club (Join it!). Like many others born in Oregon, Tyler has grown up enjoying the beautiful scenery, and while his head is often in the clouds, his eyes are too. His feet remain firmly on the ground all the same as he pursues an Associate of Science Transfer – Business degree to SOU (but Ossies are better).

For Rural Sunset, I ran to get a clear picture of this amazing sunset in Phoenix, Oregon.



Guy Hughes

Guy Hughes is a computer science student at Rogue Community College, returning to higher education later in life with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. Outside of school, he enjoys culinary pursuits, gaming, gardening, playing guitar, and singing. "Never Too Late" reflects his belief that meaningful change can begin at any stage of life. The poem explores themes of growth, resilience, identity, and the challenges of personal transformation.

I wrote Never Too Late in response to an essay question for a scholarship: "What is a challenge you faced, and what did you learn about yourself?" At first, I was answering the question more traditionally but felt inspired to write the poem instead.



Justin Jewell

Justin S. Jewell was born and raised in southern Oregon. He enjoys exploring the outdoors and is an avid gamer. He is currently enrolled in the RCC Emerging Media Digital Arts transfer program. He enjoys pursuing and perfecting interests in graphic design, animation, and digital arts. He creates in his free time and is a true seeker of knowledge. His goal is to have a career that he enjoys so that he will never have to “work” a day in his life.



Jade Keglovitz

In the portrait Doubt, I utilized the dramatic tension of chiaroscuro to explore the internal friction of uncertainty. By submerging half of the subject’s face in deep shadow, the piece reflects a psychological divide, treating light not just as a physical element but as a symbol for emerging clarity. Through a meticulous application of warm highlights against a void of black, I aimed to capture a fleeting, private moment of hesitation, grounding a heavy emotional concept in a stark contemporary aesthetic.



Shannen Kellim

Shannen is a collector of memories, hobbies, and friends. She is attending RCC with the intention of transferring to OIT for medical imaging. Before starting her family, she was a wildland firefighter in Idaho and a fire lookout in Montana. Shannen loves hiking, camping, running, dancing, writing, yoga, music, traveling, gardening, and cats. Shannen is featured in Conde Nast Traveler if you want to read more about her time as a fire lookout in Montana.

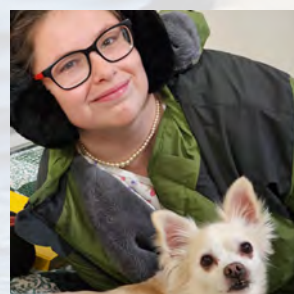
Summer of Solace is a photo I took of the two deer who visited me regularly during the summer I lived in a fire lookout tower. I spent forty-eight nights alone in the forest and hiked ninety-one miles that summer. I was pregnant and knew that this would be my last time to ever truly be alone again. It will probably remain one of the most bittersweet and cherished summers of my life.



Lauren Lantron

Lauren is a multidisciplinary artist and student whose work explores movement, atmosphere, and emotional texture through color and composition. Inspired by shifting environments and personal reflection, her pieces often blend softness with motion to create immersive visual experiences. This publication marks one of her first featured appearances in literary and visual arts media.

Cloudy with a Chance of Bubbles started as me experimenting and seeing what would happen. I leaned into that process, letting shapes, textures, and movement build without overthinking them. The piece exists somewhere between control and randomness, like something forming but never fully settling. It reflects that in-between space where you’re experimenting, unsure where things are going, but willing to let the process unfold.



Alexandria Raby

Alexandria is an autistic student at RCC graduating at the end of the Spring term. Their college journey has introduced them to many incredible people from different walks of life, including individuals who have faced difficult circumstances. They wanted to use poetry to raise awareness, encourage empathy, and reflect the humanity behind an issue that is often overlooked.

I wrote What Help Looks Like to challenge the idea that survival is simple by showing how poverty and homelessness make basic needs difficult to access. I wanted to contrast harsh reality with hope, showing that help begins when we choose empathy over judgment.



Ian Richardson

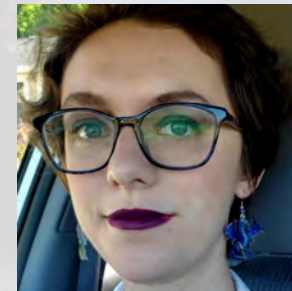
Ian is an English major at RCC. He has taken many music classes as electives and currently plays drums in the RCC Jazz combo. Ian works in the Music Department as an assistant and as a piano tutor. He plays drums, guitar, and piano.



Kenzie Sells

Kenzie is currently pursuing an Associate of Science Transfer degree and plans on transferring to SOU for a bachelor's degree. Growing up, Kenzie was always playing sports, but due to an injury, she could no longer use sports as an outlet. After that, Kenzie started hula dancing, later taking up drawing and writing to express her emotions.

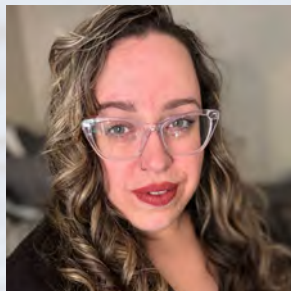
The concept behind The Garden in the Middle is how we can build walls around what was once an open and free heart without even realizing it. It also reflects the damage that can come from keeping those walls up for so long that nothing is allowed in.



Sophia Womack

Sophia is an English Literature major who enjoys walking in the woods and singing in the car. They might be found bingeing murder mystery procedurals, wrestling with their dog, playing D&D, or getting way too into the weeds making writing playlists. *The Fey Bargains of Hautdesert* came from a deep-seated love of fantasy, an interest in Arthurian legend starting at age six (who doesn't love a time-travelling treehouse?), and the author getting well and truly hooked on *Gawain and the Green Knight* after reading it for a class.

The Fey Bargains of Hautdesert is a prologue to the medieval poem "Gawain and the Green Knight" and is accordingly set in the world of Arthuriana.



Kelly Silva

Kelly writes from a place of faith, resilience, and real-life experience. While pursuing her degree, she raises her three children and works in student services at RCC. She understands the beauty and difficulty in balancing many roles at once. She thrives when helping others feel seen, heard, valued, and most importantly, loved.

Okay? is a poem written while in the depths of grief over a loved one.



Haiying Zang-Lamphere

Haiying has published three collections of poetry in her native language: "Tremor," "Leaving the City," and "A Voice Left the Choir." She is working to master English, her second language, to help introduce more people to poetry through faithful translations of both English and Chinese poetry. In 2024, she moved from China to Medford, Oregon, where she lives with her husband.

The Hole chronicles my childhood experiences—those initial, wondrous sensations of life.

Twilight Notes captures the sights and sensations I encountered during my walks—revealing that beneath the beautiful scenery lie various hidden dangers; they exist both in the distance and right by our side.

Going to See the Sea draws from my many journeys to the coast. I feel that every human life follows a similar course: slowly flowing into the vast ocean, dissolving within it, yet continuing to exist in a different form.



Parker Warner

Parker Warner is a paramedic from Medford, OR, who has always had a love for writing. This is Parker's first published story, which he is grateful for the opportunity to share.

Jamal's Sunglasses is about Ali, a survivor of the Darfur Genocide, who is trying to keep his son Jamal alive and protect his innocence amid the 2025 El Fasher Massacre.

Special thanks to RCC's Humanities Department, Marketing & Communications Department, Design & Digital Media Department, and the Creative Writers' Club.

Campus Resources for Creative Students

RCC Majors and Programs of Study

Visual Art and Design

In RCC's Visual Arts and Design Department, you'll find innovative technology with traditional expressions. You can transform your personal creativity into marketable skills to help you launch your career in the arts, graphic design or digital media. Classes include Art History, Ceramics, Digital Media, Drawing, Painting, Photography, Printmaking, Sculpture, and Video.

Degrees include Associate of Applied Science—Design and Digital Media, Associate of General Studies—Art Interest, and Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer—Art Interest.

Music

RCC's Music Department offers classes, performance opportunities, and instrument instruction for students interested in exploring music for credit, transfer, or personal enrichment. Classes include Fundamentals of Music, Music Theory, Class Piano, Group Guitar, Choir, Chamber and Commercial Music Ensemble, and Music History in Classical, Jazz, and Rock traditions.

Students can earn an Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer—Music Interest.

Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer—English Literature

Interested in English Literature and Creative Writing? Students in this pathway may take courses in composition, literature, creative and analytical reading, world literature, Shakespeare, British literature, and American literature. An English degree develops skills in close reading, critical thinking, interpretation, research, writing, revision, and communication. Students can take a full year of creative writing through the Imaginative Writing sequence—WR241, WR242, and WR243, and may even become student editors of the *Rogue Currents* literary magazine in WR246!

Student Clubs

The Gamers Guild (Redwood Campus)

The purpose of the Gamers Guild is to engage with our local community and help create an environment where anyone, regardless of race, age, gender, religion, disability, or financial situation, can participate in tabletop gaming.

Creative Writers' Club (Riverside Campus)

The Creative Writers' Club is a welcoming and respectful space where students can engage in both creative and academic writing. It supports writers of all genres and experience levels. The club hosts guest speakers, writing games, and other engaging events to foster creativity, enjoyment, and a sense of community among its members.

RCC Music Club (Riverside Campus)

The Music Club inspires creativity, fosters community, and encourages collaboration through music. The club provides opportunities for students to express themselves artistically, develop musical skills, and engage with the broader Rogue Community College community through performance and service.

Rogue Art & Design Club (All Campuses)

RAD is a great way for students interested in visual arts and digital media to connect, build portfolios, and collaborate outside of the classroom.



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