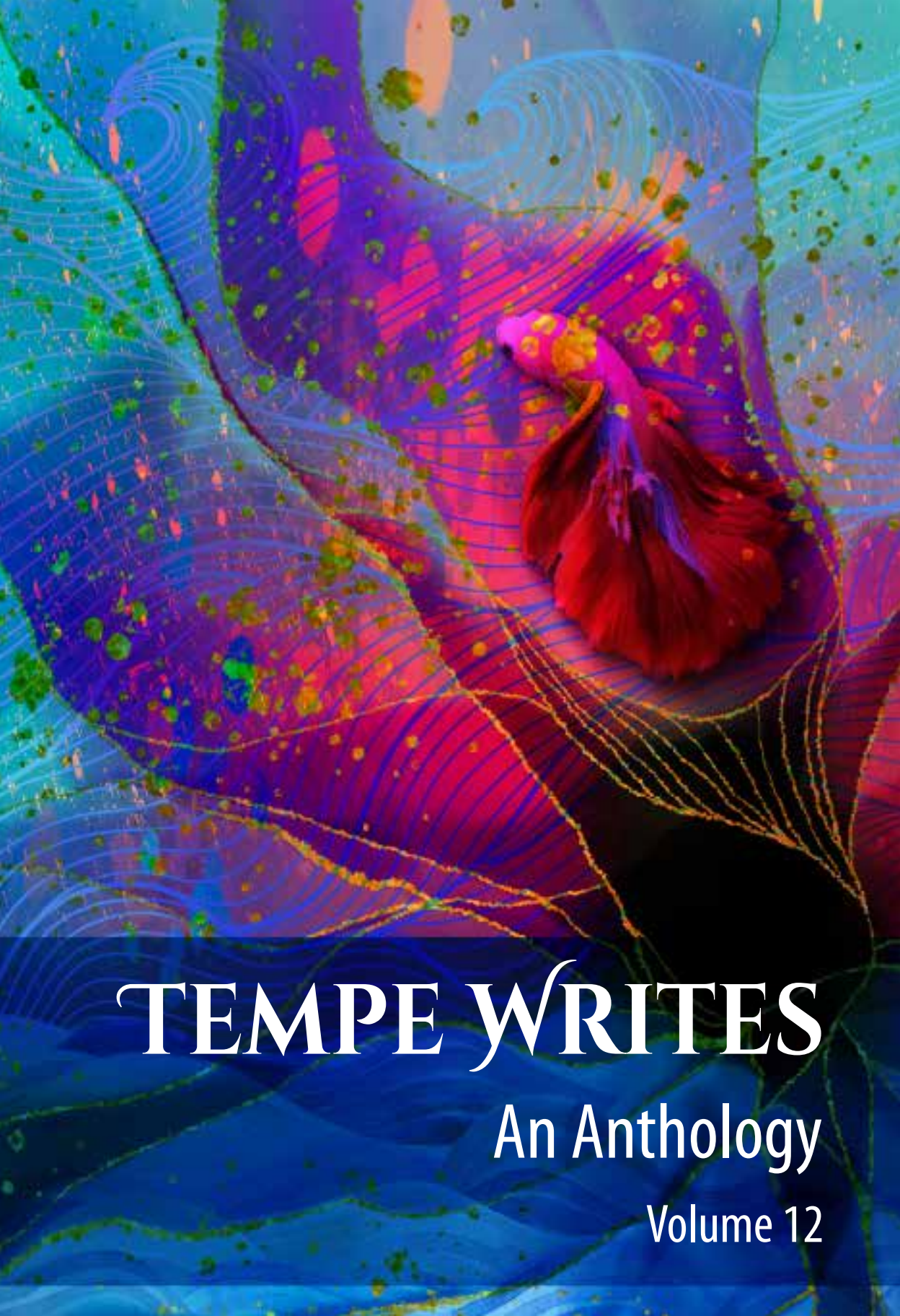

TEMPE WRITES

An Anthology

Volume 12

Tempe
Writes

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An Anthology

Volume 12
December 2025

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FIRST EDITION

Special thanks to Andrea Dickens, Jill Brenner, Blanca Villapudua, the Friends of the Tempe Public Library and our colleagues at Arizona State University including, the English Department of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing for their hard work and dedication to the Tempe Writing Contest and *Tempe Writes: An Anthology*.

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TEMPE WRITING CONTEST 2025 - REVIEWERS

October 19, 2025

Dear Friends,

Congratulations to the Tempe Public Library, ASU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Friends of the Tempe Public Library on this twelfth anniversary of the Tempe Writing contest and this resulting publication—volume twelve of the *Tempe Writes: An Anthology*! It's difficult to believe that it's been more than a decade since the first contest was launched.

I have been involved with the contest in one way or another from the beginning, thanks to my ASU colleague Jeanne Hanrahan, who asked me to support it. I am grateful to Jeanne for all that she did in the early years to forge a strong partnership between ASU and Tempe Public Library to make the contest a success. On a personal note, I thank Jeanne for introducing me to Jill Brenner because it opened the door for me to offer family history writing workshops at the library, something that I'm still enjoying very much today.

During the last twelve years, so many people have worked tirelessly on the contest, the publication, and the celebration. First, so many talented writers and graphic artists have submitted their fiction, poetry, nonfiction prose, and designs to the contest, and reading their work has moved me; it has always made me think about life in new ways, and it has sometimes made me laugh or cry. These writers know how to engage their readers. All of the writing has been solid, but I have been especially inspired by the writing of the youngest writers, and I hope to live long enough to see how they hone their skills in the decades ahead.

I also appreciated the work of my ASU colleagues who have read the contest submissions with expertise and care. Given the quality of the submissions, they have had to make excruciatingly difficult decisions. Nonetheless, they have been passionate about this work in the same ways that they are committed to their teaching and their own writing. I also know the depth of their empathy and compassion for others—important qualities of people who make a positive difference in the world. I am so fortunate to have worked with them at ASU. They are role models for me.

For years, my ASU colleague and friend Becky Byrkit also invested enormous time and intellectual energy in the contest, and almost two years ago, she handed the baton to Andrea Dickens. Just like her predecessor, Andrea has worked tirelessly to organize the ASU faculty who read the submissions, and she has also served as a reader. Staff members at the Tempe Public Library invested much in the contest, the celebrations, and especially the publication. Blanca Villapudua, the library's marketing specialist and graphic designer, has applied her expertise to lay out copy for *Tempe Writes: An Anthology*. She develops online and printed marketing materials and has created the cover design for several years.

I also thank Maureen Roen, an experienced writer and editor, for revising and editing many of the annual publications with insight and skill.

Finally, I offer immense gratitude to my friend Jill Brenner. During the last twelve years, I have witnessed the dedication that she has brought to the Tempe Writing contest. She has approached this work with great commitment and joy. Jill's passion for supporting writers is clear from her work on the contest, and I frequently hear from writers how much they value the writing groups that she has led at

the library for years.

All of this work is important because sharing our stories—and experiencing others' stories through the arts—expands our empathy, ignites new ideas about possibility, and enhances our humanity.

Duane Roen
Professor Emeritus
Arizona State University

October 28, 2025

Storytelling is human nature. Around a campfire, over a tea table, on a long journey—people share stories to connect with one another, to share information, or to entertain themselves. The intimacy of storytelling is expanded when the story is written down to be shared more widely. The community of readers can span states, countries, the entire globe!

The Tempe Writing Contest, co-sponsored with Arizona State University (ASU) and Friends of the Tempe Public Library, is one of the ways that a storyteller might first share their written story in a published book on the shelves of the Tempe Public Library. Thank you to our writers, reviewers, and readers. If you're holding a copy of this book in your hands, reading this introduction, take a moment to imagine these storytellers writing out their stories, essays, and poems to share with you. Please enjoy!

Jessica Jupitus
Deputy Community Services Director - Library
Tempe Public Library

Fiction

A Cottage for All Creatures

by Meg Keenan

Adult Fiction

A Cottage for All Creatures

"Now, how did you get up there?", the calico cat harrumphed. Dappled light filtered through pine needles in the cat's forested grove, a picture of peaceful beauty, if only the human hadn't been stuck in a tree.

The cat squinted up at the tree next to her cottage with a long-suffering sigh. She assessed the situation and then strode off purposefully, her pelt rippling. Her orange and white spots nearly glowed in the sunset, like safety beacons the human *usually* paid attention to.

An aged wooden shed huddled close to the cottage in the woods, glass windows in every direction. The better for the shed to partake in drama.

The shed opened its door excitedly when the cat approached. "I told you, you cranky fur-wad, you shouldn't have let the human get such notions in her soft little head. She thinks someone called Insurance wants her to cut those branches down. Insurance sounds a little nosey for my liking-"

The cat shot the shed a glare, swiping her tail side to side. *I'm always having to do everything around here*, she growled internally. "Shed, I can't very well ask Ladder to come

out with you flapping your door like that. Quiet," she hissed.

The shed had the decency to look bashful, termite lines near its two top windows crinkling as it opened its door wide without another word. Stepping inside imperiously, the cat snapped, "Ladder! The human needs you! She went and jumped from Cottage's roof onto Tree, and doesn't have the hindquarters to jump back! And I've never seen her land on her feet," the cat scoffed as an afterthought, but looked over her shoulder affectionately.

By now, the woman had safely wedged herself between a V in the tree's trunk after she had, apparently, jumped aboard from the cottage's roof with a *saw* tucked beneath her arm. Luckily, the tree had taken immediate offense and snagged the saw with a toasted autumn branch. To the woman's credit, she was no longer trying to retrieve the saw, and was pulling out her phone instead of trying to make the jump back to the slippery wood-shingled roof. But the phone had had a long day of showing the human all the things she liked, and was too tired to call for help.

The rusty ladder sleepily wobbled onto his side, tin rungs clattering as he inchwormed towards the shed's door. "The human needs me?"

The calico led him to the tree's base, where the ladder stuttered to his feet and fell against the thickly barked trunk with a thunk. The human was distracted by a raven, who flew to perch on the branch she'd been trying to cut down.

"Hello, pretty bird," the human cooed, forgetting her predicament in favor of fawning over the shiny-feathered beast.

The calico squinted up at the bird, who occasionally chose to be helpful, especially after the human left shiny objects on the windowsills for him.

"Raven! Tell her to get down from there!"

The raven cocked his head at the cat and clicked his beak, annoyed, as if he was already going to say that, before turning back to the human. "Get down, please. Get down," he croaked. The human gaped at his words and clapped her hands.

"Good birdy! Smart birdy! But oh, I think it may be too far for me to jump back, though…" she replied, woefully staring at the cottage's roof before looking downwards. "Oh! I must've left the ladder here! That's perfect!"

The cat couldn't see the top of the ladder anymore, as he extended up the tree in a hug the tree seemed to barely tolerate. But after a few metallic creaks and a rustle of leaves, the cat heard the ladder squeak victoriously, "She's getting on now!"

The woman climbed down clumsily, nearly twisting an ankle on her dismount from the final rung. As soon as she stepped off him, the ladder folded back into his collapsed size.

"Oh! How convenient!" the woman marveled. She patted the ladder kindly as she stared up at the branch she'd meant to cut down, placing her hands on her hips. The tree secured the saw even tighter, wrapping a few branches around it so she couldn't take it back. The raven glanced at the saw, considered bringing it down, and shook his head dismissively. Instead, he leaned forward on his branch and tilted his head to squint at the human. Then he abruptly took off, flapping hard into the sky's dimming light.

"Maybe I can throw something to get it down…" the woman mused.

But the cat had had enough of her charge's dangerous tendencies for one day. *Throwing something to get a saw to fall out of a tree? Absolutely not*. The raven wasn't here to translate for her anymore, so the cat would have to resort to physical force. She purred loudly, a battle cry, before butting her head against the human like a battering ram to shove her towards the cottage.

The woman broke away from her thoughts, bending down to scratch under the cat's chin. "I'm sorry, kitty, I forgot, it's close to your dinner time! I don't think that branch'll cause a fire or fall onto the roof with just *one* more night attached."

The cat sniffed, satisfied, and led the way into the cottage. The human followed, gently brushing a finger along the cottage's doorframe, which was hand-painted with tiny flowers and vines.

On the stovetop inside, the kettle flinched when the human entered, whistling a scream before cooling himself down. He turned to hide the dent in his side, a source of much self-consciousness, as he called softly, "Wow, Cat, I heard our human got stuck in Tree! Shouldn't have let her outside!" Then the kettle quietly opened a cabinet door, bumping into a box of tea. The antique box tipped, happy to be of service, knowing the human would visit it in the morning to add more dried herbs to its metal belly.

The cat grumbled, nudging the door closed behind her. When she left the door open, the human usually wandered back

outside. “She really likes it out there.”

The kettle shrugged, the motion tipping his spout over, running hot water through his filter, tea leaves catching inside as liquid slipped into a restored mug with thunderbolts of golden lacquer down its mended ceramic sides.

The mug waddled to the edge of the counter, ready for the human to notice her. The woman spotted her almost immediately as she popped a can of food open for the cat, setting it on the floor beside the counter. The cat wasn’t very hungry though, instead leaping atop the back of the couch, settling into the threadbare dip she always curled up in. With a single “Mrow”, the cat called for the woman to hurry over.

The human smiled giddily, obscenely happy the cat wanted her nearby, and grabbed the mug, darting under the quilt on the couch in a motion that spilled her tea.

“Oh no!” the woman exclaimed sadly, patting the patchwork fabric with her shirt, trying to dab up the spots of moisture.

A few flecks darkened the quilt’s cobbled-together surface. “It happens all the time,” the quilt told the woman reassuringly, snuggling closer and tucking herself into the couch’s corners. The couch loved cuddles, and sighed contentedly, sagging under the weight of her occupants as the outdated television turned on hurriedly, nearly panicking when static appeared, and calming when it found enough signal to play the human’s favorite show.

The cat waited until the human had fallen asleep, and instructed the quilt to keep the woman warm as she set about

her end of day tasks. Hopping down from the couch, she patrolled the window ledges, then sprinted to eat her food. A peck on a window's glass caught the cat's attention, and she raced across the cottage, leaping atop the windowsill with a frenzied hiss to catch whoever dared intrude upon her charge's sleep.

It was only the raven, back from wherever he'd flown off to. He tapped the glass again impatiently, a shiny bit of metal pressed between the prongs of his beak. The cat pawed at the window's latch, hissing, "Alright, alright, you'll wake her!"

The window cringed as the cat helped undo her latch to the windowframe. "Sorry, I have trouble opening up sometimes," the window muttered as she tugged herself free.

The cat leaned outside the house, chilled air rushing past her whiskers. "What do you want, Raven?"

With a crooked, haughty look, the raven set down a tiny ball of metal. It jingled as it rolled over the windowsill, fell to the cottage's floor, and tinkled merrily across the wood-planked boards. The cat found herself intrigued, watching the metal's every move in case it decided to become a threat she had to exterminate.

The raven cleared his throat, lowering his voice to a whisper, sounding like their human. "Where'd you go? Where'd you go?"

The cat caught on, and grudgingly gave the raven a nod. "Good idea. It'll help us keep track of her."

The raven shuffled his feathers proudly and took off once more, flying away to his nest in a nearby tree. The cat pounced down from the windowsill as the window reeled her-

self closed. Approaching the noisy ball carefully, the cat whispered, "You'll tell us when the human is in danger and needs help?"

The metal ball rolled towards the edge of the couch, chiming as it went, "Does she play holiday music?"

The cat squinted skeptically. "No?"

The bell's immediate clamor of sound made the cat jump a foot in the air, and she backed away until the bell quieted again. "Then I'll do anything for her," the bell sobbed, its music slowly softening.

The human's subpar ears managed to pick up the sound of the metal ball's loud relief, and she groggily opened her eyes, lifting herself onto her side. She looked down at the cat and crooned, "Did you find me a bell? Oh, kitty, that's so sweet!"

Sleepily, the human plucked the tiny bell up from the floorboards, cupping it between her hands. She tiredly stumbled to her feet, and the cat once again headbutted her calves to guide her in the right direction, this time to bed.

The human didn't seem to mind the cat's blunt efforts, the quilt clinging tight to the woman's shoulders, and the couch yawning as all her occupants got up. But before the human tumbled into bed, she opened the drawer of her side table, filled with her treasures. The human liked to collect shiny things. She wore trinkets around her neck and arms most days, some even dangling from her inefficient ears. The cat understood the need for a treasure trove, having one herself behind the cupboards. The cat's prior human hadn't liked that habit.

The human pulled out a silver chain, already adorned

with other metal bits, and added the bell to a loose link. She started to put it back in the drawer, but the cat meowed, staring at the bracelet pointedly.

"This one? Do you want it?"

The cat growled, hating their language barrier, and jumped onto the bed. *Stupid, sweet human*. She'd be smarter in the morning when her brain worked again. *Or maybe I'll ask Raven to translate*, the cat grudgingly resolved. But the human only frowned, stared at the cat, and then back at the bracelet. Slowly, questioningly, she slid it on.

The cat purred, pleasantly surprised by the human's co-operation. The human seemed to enjoy this praise, and smiled sleepily as she swung herself onto the bed, curling an arm around the cat.

The cat allowed this. *Only because it'll be useful to know if the human gets up in the night*, she assured herself. Not because she felt any sentiment towards the blundering, chaotic creature. I'm just glad she's ours, the cat thought to herself as she drifted off to sleep, letting the human hug her tight.

No, this human was nothing like the human who'd left the cat miles from home.

Or the one who'd dumped the rusted ladder on the side of the road.

Or the one who'd thrown the kettle across a room.

Or the one who'd hit the television to make it work better.

Or the one who'd smashed the mug for fun.

With this human, the cat and the cottage creatures

always looked forward to their tomorrows.

THE END

Meg Keenan

I work in a library, surrounded by new releases and fellow book lovers while I pursue my Masters in Library Science. After my Theatre BA from Arizona State University, an emphasis in Costuming, and a minor in Psychology, storytelling is my favorite way to use my academics, and I'm passionate about whimsical fantasy that readers can both learn something from, and escape to.

The Whistler

by Hannah Palmisano

Young Adult Fiction

The Whistler

The first time it happened, Marianne was in the middle of lecturing, and she thought her blouse had fallen open. It was a bold teal fabric with an artistic fold in the front, near the center of her chest, clipped in place on the side by a tiny metal hook sewn into the material. When the whistle rang out—a short, sharp burst—her hand fluttered automatically to her dress shirt.

To make up for her small nose and chin, which, when paired with her long brown curls and cat eye glasses, made her look much younger than she was, Marianne dressed aggressively professional. This time she wondered if she'd made a mistake.

She migrated from the center of the room back to the safety of her desk as she prattled on about MLA Format. Surreptitiously, she glanced down and confirmed that her shirt was, indeed, still concealing everything it should.

She looked out at her students as she spoke. The whistle had torn through her like a shot, and brought her back to her undergraduate days, when she'd walk back to her dorm from evening classes, hurried along by the catcalls hurled from the frat houses like live grenades—from a distance, and with cover

to retreat behind in the ensuing explosion.

Yes, she'd thought it was a wolf whistle, but she'd been wrong. No one had looked around when she thought it happened, and surely they would have had it been real.

Having finished the last portion of her lecture on autopilot, she directed the class to turn to the people around them and discuss their ideas for project two.

Five minutes later, the whistle pierced the air.

*

"Hello, professor! Fancy seeing you here."

Marianne smiled. Grant always greeted her this way.

Her colleague slid into the seat next to her and unpacked his lunch. He was a little older than her, thirty-four to her thirty-one, and well-traveled—he'd studied abroad in Spain during his undergrad, then Italy for his PhD in English Literature with an emphasis on Cultural Studies.

Because he was her only work friend, Marianne felt a kind of pressure when they were together to keep him engaged, to entertain him with silly anecdotes in the hopes that he wouldn't discard her for one of their more interesting colleagues.

"Something odd happened in class today," Marianne said with a small laugh.

Grant glanced up from his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Marianne described the situation, culminating in an at-

tempt to replicate the whistle herself. Unfortunately, she was out of practice, and all that came out was a hollow "whoo," despite several efforts. Grant chuckled.

Marianne blushed. "Well, I thought it was some kind of mistake, but it happened two more times that same class."

Grant's eyes twinkled as he took a thoughtful bite of his sandwich. This was just the type of student story that he liked. "And you never figured out who did it?"

"No! I swear, it was almost enough to make you think you'd gone crazy."

They both cracked up, and Marianne glowed inside. The whole thing was sounding more amusing the more she thought about it. Maybe she'd bring it up at her weekly Sunday dinner with her mother as well.

As they finished their lunch, Grant took over the conversational baton with a tale about getting trapped in an elevator in Vienna—no easy feat, as elevators on the whole were a rare commodity in Italy—and not knowing enough Italian to communicate to the people on the other side of the call button just what had occurred. He was an avid bird watcher, and had been trying to get to the top of the building to pursue a rare sighting, which he missed when he got stuck.

Grant always seemed to time his stories so that they wrapped up right as Marianne was finishing her lunch. As she moved to toss her salad container into the trash, he rose with her. "I think it happened just to teach the silly American how to use some stairs! Anyway, I have to head to my 3:00 p.m. now, but you keep me updated on this situation with the whistler," he

said with a wink.

"Oh, I will," Marianne said, and was almost disappointed that she probably wouldn't have any updates to give.

*

After her conversation with Grant, Marianne hardly thought about the whistler for the rest of the week. She intended to revive the story at dinner with her mother, but Rose Forster was too busy complaining about Marianne's father to give her daughter any openings to do so.

"—and to run off with that younger woman. What's her name again? Stacey?"

"Lacey," Marianne supplied.

"Even better! After all that time I wasted—"

Allan Forster had left when Marianne was eight, but he'd stayed in contact with "his Mary" and it was only recently that he'd proposed to a woman younger than his own daughter.

Well before her parents had split, the first fracture had appeared when they had to name Marianne. Allan voted Mary, and Rose voted Annie. After months of heated debate, Marianne's grandma had put forth the combination of the two but, to this day, Marianne's parents only referred to her as the name they'd originally wanted. Marianne was perpetually in a state of suspension as a result, torn in both directions. It was only at work that she was able to escape, when students and colleagues were generally made to call her Ms. Forster.

The next day, when Marianne arrived to teach her 2:00

p.m. section, she wasn't thinking about the whistler. Not until she was taking attendance right before class began. Even then, it was only in the back of her mind, and it remained that way for the first thirty minutes, until the whistler struck.

Marianne was mid-lecture again. She paused for a fraction of a second then bravely forged ahead. Then when she split them into groups, it happened again. And when she was going over the homework, again. Each time she scanned the students' faces, and each time saw no reaction, no indication that they'd heard.

A Monday of whistling turned into a Wednesday of whistling turned into two weeks, three weeks, a month of whistling.

For class after class, Marianne ignored it, though each time it cut deeper. It was always the same sharp burst, the note prolonged enough to be pronounced, but not so long that she could locate the source. She feared that to address it would be to encourage it, that if the whistler saw it was affecting her, they would never stop.

At the same time, she couldn't understand which of her students would do this to her. Oh, there were always a few who were off task that she had to address, or those who received a bad grade here and there, but Marianne was not a punishing teacher. Her reprimands were gentle at best, and entirely ineffective at worst due to her soft-spoken nature. And as for the grades, it was an introductory writing course, and her focus was fixed largely on content, not quality. You really had to make an effort to fail!

On one particular afternoon in early October, she'd scheduled a work day for her students. Normally, she'd play instrumental music, but this time she did not, and the silence was punctuated only by the rattle of typing. Marianne was determined to remain vigilant.

At the halfway point, a student in the first row raised her hand. Marianne came around her desk to speak with her.

"I'm feeling a little confused about this section of the rubric," Lucy said, turning her laptop screen in Marianne's direction.

Marianne leaned down to assess the situation, and tried to explain.

The whistle rang out.

Marianne looked around wildly. All of the students were absorbed in their drafts except for Lucy, who was still waiting for her response.

"You heard that, didn't you?" Marianne demanded.

Lucy stared.

"Didn't you?"

*

Marianne let the students go 15 minutes early. She marched to the building housing the English Department, but stopped short of the front door. She turned to the smattering of tables and chairs that paralleled the building, selected a table mildly shielded from the roiling sun by a mesquite tree, and took a seat. She pulled out her laptop and steamrolled through

responses to student email after student email after department email after colleague email, typing furiously as, all the while, a tear beaded at the edge of her sunglasses then dripped inexorably down.

A shadow fell over her. Her stomach rioted. Technically, she was supposed to be holding office hours, but she'd hoped that with the slight change in location her students wouldn't be able to find her…

"Hello, professor!"

Marianne sighed. Grant sat down across from her and pulled out his laptop, as if he meant to stay. For once she didn't want him to. He looked at her curiously when she didn't offer any reply, and she cracked.

"It's the whistler," Marianne said, hiding her face in her hands. "I don't know who it is, and they won't stop!"

At first, Marianne had kept Grant updated on the situation, but for the past several weeks she'd found it too depressing to even bring up.

After an excruciating minute, Grant cleared his throat. "Marianne," he said, his tone unusually serious. She wouldn't look at him. He put a steadying hand on her shoulder and she lifted her head. "I'll come sit in on your next class."

Her hands dropped to her lap. "Really?" She blotted her eyes with her sleeve, and felt silly for her outburst.

"Yes. I'm good at spotting things, remember?" He reached into his satchel and pulled out the binoculars he used for birdwatching. He peered through them at her.

"You bring those to campus?" she teased.

He shrugged with a lopsided grin. "Birds are everywhere, right?" He set his binoculars down and leaned in with an air of gravity. "I'll find this whistler for you, and you can finally put this to bed."

*

They enacted their plan the following Monday. Grant couldn't pass for an eighteen-year-old, but they had agreed that it was best if they didn't mention his presence, and just hoped that the students wouldn't be paying enough attention to spot him.

It was a peer review day, and when Marianne asked the students to break off into pairs, she watched in silent misery as a young woman in the back row eyed Grant.

"Ms. Forster?"

The young woman had stood up and was pointing dramatically at Grant. "That person is not in our class!"

Grant laughed, and Marianne nearly put her face in her hands. "Very observant, Maddie. Yes, we have a guest today. He's just observing me, so you can all go about your business as usual."

Maddie fell back into her seat with her arms crossed. The students around her leaned in to get Grant's attention and started talking to him.

Several minutes later, the whistle cut through the air. Marianne's spine straightened painfully. She looked to Grant for validation, but he was absorbed in conversation with the group

of students who had noticed him earlier.

When class ended, Grant came eagerly to Marianne's desk. "So they've stopped! Isn't that wonderful?"

Marianne waited for the last couple of students to step into the hall, and for the door to slam shut, before she spoke. "They haven't stopped. It happened twice but you didn't notice because you were so busy talking."

Grant's smile faltered. "I did you a favor, coming here. I can't help that your students took an interest in me. What was I supposed to do, ignore them?"

"Yes!"

He looked surprised, then disappointed. "Is it really that big of a deal? It seems like no one heard it but you. If it's not actually disrupting the class, you should just let it go."

Marianne could only shake her head.

The next morning, she was up with the sun, because she had not slept. She had spent the night combing through the class's roster photos, holding a hushed interrogation with each one. Was it Jake or James or Cathy or Sarah? Sam or Mateo or Maddie? Isaac or Sandra or Micah or Juan? Rachel? Liam or Noah? Olivia? Zoe? Bella? David? Lucy? Alex?

Who?

For someone who could hardly breathe without fear that she had done so incorrectly, who already dreaded how people perceived her, who agonized every night over mistakes she had made speaking to someone hours before, the whistler had unwittingly unleashed an acute, personal agony upon her.

When Marianne finally fell asleep around 7:00 a.m., she

dreamed of her father. She hadn't seen him in a few years, and his features had grown fuzzy in her mind. What had not faded: The memories of him puttering around the house, whistling off-key in the predawn light before work, each day, every day, every year of her life.

Until the morning she woke to silence.

*

Another month passed, and the end of the semester was swiftly approaching. For this, Marianne could not be more grateful. Even though it was only one student who was whistling, because she did not know their identity, she distrusted and disliked them all.

It was even affecting her relationship with her students in her other three courses. There was one course she taught immediately before the class with the whistler, and it was hard for her to get out of the mindset, the incessant dread of what was to come, even hours before she had to teach. She spent every moment on edge, her head pounding with the intensity of her disquiet.

A day came when the whistle rang out once, twice, three times, four times. A new record. The students had been free writing when the fourth whistle pealed out. Marianne shoved her laptop away from her, and several of her students looked up at the resulting thunk. She stormed around her desk, her chest heaving.

"Who's doing this? Who's doing this? Who is it?" she

shouted.

The students stared at her in mute horror.

She grabbed at an empty desk in the front row. "Why are you doing this to me?" she cried, shaking the desk, and leaning forward harder than she realized.

The desk toppled over with a crash, and landed on the foot of a boy, Isaac, in the row behind.

He cried out, and the students on either side of him rushed to lift the desk off him. Isaac's face contorted and he reached for his foot, feeling all around it and groaning.

Marianne started toward him and he recoiled from her.

"I think it's broken," he howled, and nineteen accusing faces swiveled to Marianne.

"It was an accident," Marianne said, her voice breaking. She moved toward Isaac again, with a similar result.

The classroom exploded into a flurry of conversation. Marianne retreated to her desk. After several minutes of frantic discussion, Lucy stepped timidly to Marianne, with the soft approach of one trying to calm a crazed animal. "A few of us are going to take him to the nurse's office."

Marianne nodded. She suddenly became aware that conversation had ceased. That they were all staring at her, waiting for the white flag.

Marianne waved it. "Class dismissed."

*

"This is very serious, Ms. Forster."

Marianne trained her eyes on her feet in their neat black flats, one foot tapping furiously against the carpet.

The director of her program sat behind his desk, his hands gravely steepled before him. "You know we are a three-strike program?"

Marianne nodded.

"Your actions counted as two strikes. Certain members of the board wanted to fire you. However…" Marianne looked up. "You've done well here for the two years you've been with us. Your student reviews have been positive. I choose to believe this was a temporary lapse in judgment, not your behavior as a rule. Though you can't expect to ever become an associate professor here, not now."

Marianne bowed her head.

"It was fortunate for you that Isaac's foot was merely bruised, and that his family was persuaded not to press charges. In fact, Isaac spoke up in your defense. He said you'd been a supportive teacher, and he believed it was an accident."

Her eyes welled up. For a moment she was too touched to speak. At last, she dared to whisper, "What about the class?"

"Another professor will take over that course. It is fortunate that the semester is almost complete, as I'm sure you know what a burden it will be for one of your colleagues to have to pick up yet another course when we are all already overworked."

"I can send them my lesson plans," Marianne said in a small voice.

"Yes, that would be something. And for your remaining three courses, we will have an observer sit in on several of your

lessons at random, to keep an eye on things."

The following day, Marianne took her lunch in the break room as usual.

Grant took longer to appear than normal, and when he did, she looked to him hopefully—and he turned away. He ate his lunch at a different table, and when he finished, he paused by Marianne on his way out.

A faint whining filled her head, and from a distance she caught pieces of what he was saying: "—can understand your frustration—but to allow a student to provoke such a reaction—unprofessional—truly disappointed—"

Marianne stood. She walked out.

*

In the weeks that followed, Marianne grew accustomed to her colleagues leaving the room when she arrived, or averting their eyes if escape wasn't an option. The director gave her permission to skip department meetings, which was a small mercy.

She kept her head down right up to the last day of class, when she gathered the few books she'd placed in her department-issued locker, then grudgingly did one last sweep of her mailbox. It was usually crammed with promotional flyers and redundant faculty notices, so she avoided it as much as possible.

When she unlocked the mailbox, something slid off the crammed pile and fluttered to the floor. Her pulse raced and she snatched up the envelope. Had they decided to terminate her

employment after all?

The envelope was flimsy, unmarked, and unsealed. With a trembling hand, she withdrew the letter inside. The following was typed and printed on plain computer paper:

> Ms. Forster,
> It started as an experiment, of sorts. It was just supposed to be a game. I've never been very good at writing, and your class intimidated me from the first. The whistling was a distraction from the—let's face it—tedium.
> I didn't realize how much it was affecting you. It was funny until it wasn't, that day you threw the desk. Your eyes were bloodshot, and you looked not only scary, but scared.
> I hope you can understand why I can't come forward now.
> I hope you can forgive me.
> Yours,
> The Whistler

Marianne's first thought was to take the letter to the police and have them dust it for fingerprints. And in the same instant that this occurred to her, she realized how insane it sounded. How could the scourge on her mental health compare to real crimes, real criminals?

She took out her phone to take a picture for evidence, but stopped. She reread the letter. The most frustrating thing about it was that it proved the student could do well what they'd believed they could not. She wanted to tell someone all of this, to send Grant a picture and see what he had to say now, when

she finally had proof that her torment had been real.

Marianne walked down the hall to the printer room. She hovered over the photocopier for several minutes. Now that she had her proof, she wanted to preserve it, didn't she?

She reread the letter.

Late one night, when she was still very young, she and her mother had needed to run to the store. They were in the parking lot, loading their groceries into the trunk, when a group of young men started whistling at her mother, taunting her. Marianne hadn't understood what was happening, but the discomfort rapidly morphing into fear in her mother's eyes had made Marianne feel small. Helpless. Her mother had left the cart where it was instead of returning it, and she'd loaded Marianne into the back of the car without buckling her carseat, jumped into the front seat, and peeled off into the dark.

For how much longer would Marianne be made to feel small? How much longer would she allow it?

She stepped away from the copy machine and crossed the room.

She fed the confession into the shredder, the shriveled remains pooling at the bottom of the machine like a gentle snow.

Hannah Palmisano

Hannah Palmisano is an MFA student studying fiction at Arizona State University. Her work has been supported by the Maya Smith Creative Writing Endowment Fund and the Aurelie Sheehan Memorial Scholarship. She is an associate editor at *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Although primarily a fantasy and speculative fiction writer, Hannah also dabbles in realistic fiction, sci-fi, mysteries, and poetry. She is one of the winners of the UA Poetry Center's 4th annual Haiku Hike.

The Hand That Held Him

by S. Faine Anderson

Teen Fiction

The Hand That Held Him

"I can't!" she screamed, as if something could reply. "I won't! It hurts too much; it's not worth it."

But if you stay, the room itself replied, *you'll die. Pity only fuels people to visit for so long.*

"They'll visit. He'll take care of me," she asserted.

How could he?

"He loves me!"

Loved.

"He still does."

You don't believe that.

"Yes I do!"

Then why would he abandon you here? Wrist trapped in a claw trap, every shift in your body plunging the steel teeth deeper, closer to the marrow of your bones? That seems awfully cruel of a man supposed to love you.

"STOP! This wasn't *his* doing—it couldn't have been. He loves me. He's happy with me. I know he is."

Was.

"Is."

Who else could have done something like this? Built

enough trust that you didn't notice the trip wire being threaded around you?

"He would never hurt me."

But he did. Didn't he?

"Stop this! He didn't– he *couldn't* have done this!" she cried, briefly forgetting her arm and attempted to raise her arms in anguish, letting the metal gnaw once more on her flesh. She bit her tongue, enough to bleed, as she swallowed down the pain like a prescription.

And for once since she found her hand trapped—how long had it been now? Days? Weeks?—the room was silent. Until she filled it again.

"He didn't hurt me." She sharply retorted, as if the wall's silence was an accusation.

Not…intentionally. The room replied. *Or maybe it was, he never wrote a note.*

"It wasn't intentional."

You're sure.

"Of course I'm sure!"

I was simply observing.

Exasperated, she hit the side of her skull, as if punishing herself would, by proxy, upset the room.

It doesn't upset me.

"What?" Her shock, or rather her confusion, stopped all movement.

I am not real, the room said calmly, *you know that. You have no one to speak to but yourself.*

"What—what does that mean?"

Your hand is unsalvageable.

"No it's not! If-" she stumbled over her words, suddenly aware of the pain once again. "If I get a uh paramedic! An EMT. They'll fix it. They'll get me out. I'll still be able to use it–"

No, you won't.

"You don't know that! You're just a stupid room! You haven't seen the advances of medicine since the—the—whenever…the woodworker building your frame hammered his own thumb! They can save it."

They'll tell you the same thing I've told you.

"I need it! They can fix it."

"They" will help you clean the wound, not remove the trap. You have to do that.

"I can't."

You have to pull your arm out.

"That'll sever my hand!"

You don't need the hand.

"Yes I do!"

Why?

"It's my dominant hand!" She proclaimed. When the room didn't reply, a list of reasons cascaded down the stairs of her tongue: "I- I write my signature with it, I shake hands with it, I hold utensils with it, I open doors with it, I turn the pages of books with it, I turn keys with it," tears began falling, streaming like rivers down her face, tightening her throat and her lucidity, "I brush my hair with it I scrub counters with it I write letters I hold his hand I hug him…"

She fell into the sobs, unable to swallow them; the

inward curling only increased the pain in her wrist and created more tears. The room was not quiet—too full of choking—but it was still. She gradually calmed, her throat relenting to the dolor pills.

"I suppose…" she began when her chest was clear again, "you're going to say I could do these things with my other hand?"

There wasn't a reply.

She didn't bother drying her face, as it was inevitable for the grief to build up in her ribs again in a few hours. "But I can't—it's not the same. My other hand is weaker. It cannot make a pen go straight, it hardly remembers it exists."

You hardly remember it exists.

"Because it's practically useless!"

What did you do before you had your stronger hand?

"That is absurd." She scoffed. "I've had my better hand for as long as I can remember. I can't imagine living without it."

You choose not to imagine it.

"It is unrealistic!"

Most painful things are—that's why they're painful.

"He loves me."

I'm sure he did.

"Then why did you insist he doesn't?"

I didn't.

"Yes you did!"

I'm insisting he hurt you.

"People who love you don't hurt you!"

Sometimes they do, purposefully or not—but it doesn't

negate their love.

"It- it does. People don't—do that."

Why?

She closed her eyes, trying to make the question disappear.

Why couldn't he have hurt you?

"It must've been someone else," she reasoned, quietly.

Why cannot harm and affection live intertwined?

"It could've been a break-in: a robber who freaked. There's no way he'd do it—not without a goodbye."

Why must the opposites of the world repel? Can light and dark not exist in one bedroom? A caress not live in a snare?

"He never said anything…"

Most people in pain don't.

"Yes…they do."

You haven't.

"This is different."

Because there's nothing others can do.

"No."

Then because it's entirely your fault. You've depended too much on one hand.

"Why should I depend on something less useful? Less fulfilling?" She quickly tacked on a supplemental: "why would I want to cut off either hand? I want both of them; I'd save both of them."

Just…this one more.

"This one meant more."

And the other less.

"I can't get rid of parts of me."

It happens every generation.

"I know."

It's not entirely avoidable.

"I know!"

It's not entirely crippling.

"I KNOW!"

The words bounced around the bedroom: over the tousled duvet and mismatching pillows, snapshots of life decorated by borders and hung up like prizes, clothing bundled up past the top of a laundry basket and spilling over the floor like a river, unsentimental gifts from relatives too far away to know better. The sound ran its way through the crack beneath the door and into the hollow rooms and doorways: a mocking echo of her solitude in the room, a reminder of everything outside that lived on without her. Her chest ached to be emptied again, regardless of her ribs' empty shelves; instead, it created a buzzing, an impatience that reached her ears in the silence.

It finally stopped from a voice, the room: *you need to let go.*

"I need my hand."

You want your hand.

"Is that selfish?"

To the rest of your body, yes.

"It's not worth it. It would hurt too much. I'd rather have the longer, mild pain of keeping my hand there than the shorter, excruciating pain of tearing it off."

You'd rather stay here forever than be able to leave?

"It's not worth the pain. Not now. People could help me."

Not yet. Not until you walk to them.

"Medicine advances. I can wait."

You want to wait.

"No, I don't. I don't have a choice here!"

You don't want to have a choice.

"Yes, I do!"

Then pull out your hand.

"No!"

Then you don't want to have a choice: because that could mean you're choosing wrong.

"No, it's not."

The room was quiet for a long while, sitting around the woman as she slowly bled out from the wrist, staining the beige carpet a dark crimson. She wasn't used to the room being so quiet, she almost wanted it to speak once again.

"I don't…" she bit the skin inside her lip, eyes downcast as if there were a real figure to avoid the face of. "I'm afraid…I'll still be in pain if I cut it off. That it'll all be for nothing."

You're afraid nothing will replace it.

"I know there won't be…"

How?

"Well, nothing in here could ever replace my hand."

What about outside this room?

"I don't think there will be…"

You can't be certain.

She whispered, "I'm not. That's why I can't do it."

The pain won't disappear.

"I know."

Your hand won't grow back, not exactly.

"I know."

The room was quiet, somber. *But, if you stay, you'll bleed out. Alone.*

A small smile pulled at the edges of her mouth, but its grip was weak. "I have you?"

You have your hand.

And the room left, deserting her and the steel jaws that gradually ate away at her blood.

"And him…." A sole tear slid down the curve of her cheek, the salty water grazing her lip before falling down her chin. She stared at the metal trap once more, the wrist caged behind its teeth; she stared at each wall of the room, as if it'd pity her enough to visit again.

S. Faine Anderson

After years of doing gymnastics, my mom finally convinced me to join my first competition. I sat there in anticipation, listening to the judges list off each competitor's ranking—but they finished before calling my name. Later, the gym owner told me I had actually won; however, it went unannounced to "protect" the feelings of the other competitors. This simple, ridiculous incident shaped my fear of being openly proud—but also fueled my drive to give people the recognition they deserve. I am in Mountain View High School's class of 2026 and have acted as Editor-in-Chief over four student-run literary magazines. My writing aims to make representation feel real, layer characters until they step outside the pages, and ultimately give people recognition.

Poetry

No News To Good News

by Megan Wer

Adult Poetry

No News is Good News

No, really. It's all bad news.
She builds us a fort
under the table.

Blankets become bricks, the sound
of cries beyond my reach are drowned
in a sea of storybooks.
A flashlight moon overhead,
patchwork constellations
stitched by her grandmother's hand.
We name the dying stars
while the world outside unravels.

I cannot rethread the love
of a mother whose universe
has come apart at the seams.
But I found a color
that matches your eyes. Sixty
percent off, ten days left,
at a store carved up
by men in thousand-dollar suits
who always mind their manners.

You will not inherit
the fabric mazes I could walk in my sleep,
but a planet fraying
in your small, gentle hands.

Megan Wer

Megan Wer is a writer and mom in Tempe, Arizona, with a background in biology. She has been writing since childhood, but in recent years poetry has become a way for her to endure the weight of raising children in a world that feels heavy with both beauty and grief. Her work explores motherhood as a magnifying glass that amplifies both joy and suffering, and is rooted in themes of family, resilience, and connection. She believes that even the smallest act of creation, whether it be a poem, quilt, or song, can open a space wide enough for hope to enter.

I trust you like a carnival in a mall parking lot

by Zoe Violet Lenz

Young Adult Poetry

I trust you like a carnival in a mall parking lot

which is to say everything around you smells sweet,
an old memory we can't place. or maybe funnel cake.
or the waffle cone slowly turning blue and soggy
and painting the ground with splatters
of cookie monster mud. sometimes you scare me. the drop
in my stomach at the top of a roller coaster.
the last moment before we both go over and rattle
against wood that we're at least pretty sure is safe. when gravity
reaches for us, but doesn't quite grasp
us in the same way your fingers lock with mine,
until it does. and the front carriage snakes
down the rail. and our bodies feel the tug
moments before the fall. your bright hair floats, catches
the light around us in a blonde tangle of sun
that turns the whole world gold.

Zoe Violet Lenz

Zoe-Violet is a writer from Arizona. Currently attending ASU Film school, she studies various aspects of filmmaking with the attention to be a screenwriter. She attended Interlochen Arts Academy to study poetry and prose, before shifting her interest to film. She writes about superheroes, magical realism, and boba. Outside of film and writing, she is an LGBT+ grassroots activist, and likes to pretend that she's Spiderman in her free time.

Roadtrip to Slaughter

by Fin Farmer

Teen Poetry

Roadtrip to Slaughter

If I were an artist having an out of body
experience, I would take a red marker and trace
the topography of my hometown across
my shoulder blades, paint the streets racing
down my arms lunging towards my fingertips,
I would superimpose the freeway down
my spine and over the bumps of my vertebrae,
a skeletal mountain range.

I'd map out my childhood like
one maps out cuts of meat.

A bit of neck
        here is where the worst person I know lives.
A bit of brisket
        here is the turn to the park a girl would take me.
A few ribs if you'd like
        here is the exit ramp scarred by my first car crash.
A tenderloin of the highest quality
        here and here and here is where I lived.
A bite of sirloin to finish your route
        here and here and here is where I died.

The lines bleed, the memories blur
covered in red, ready to die
drive me to the slaughter house, I'll
mark a dot on my 51st vertebrae.

I'll show you how to take me apart.
the coroner cuts on the lines at my instruction
while I treat the autopsy room as
an art exhibit, telling the ghosts the stories of
my five course meal.

Fin Farmer

My name is Fin Farmer, I am an 18 year old ASU student currently majoring in creative writing. I have been writing poetry for most of my life and I am working towards becoming a professor of creative writing so I can show others what I've been shown. That you have a voice, and that voice matters.

Nonfiction

Love of Country

by Cameron Filas

Adult Nonfiction

Love of Country

I grew up in the suburbs with a normal adolescence, so it surprised people when I enlisted in the Army. I was short, around 5'7" and just over 140 pounds. I was a middle-class teenager who was expected to go to college, have a future.

I didn't really fit in during high school. I wasn't smart, wasn't in band, and didn't play sports. I was average. The nagging of my father to 'get more involved' led to me joining JROTC, my closest thing to a clique. We wore our pickle green uniforms every Wednesday and sweated through PT on Fridays. I got awards for this and for that.

Mostly though, JROTC kids got made fun of. After all, in band or theater you could blend in, but you could spot the JROTC kids a mile away in their play-soldier outfits. That's what we were doing, playing soldier. We even made our own dog tags, with silly stuff like our graduation year stamped into them. They were cheap, thin aluminum things. Pretend tags for pretend soldiers. Pretending is fine, sometimes. Other times, it only whets the appetite for something real.

About a month or two before my first college semester would've started, I broke the news to my folks. I wanted to serve

my country. I wanted to fight the terrorists.

My mind was chock-full of bald eagles and stars and stripes. Someone had to pay for 9/11. Someone needed to get the job done. I believed that people sleep peaceably at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. I could be a rough man. I could serve my country, make a name for my family, do everyone proud. Being a soldier meant living and breathing the old and forgotten ideals like honor, duty, courage, even beautiful death in the field of combat.

When I sat down with the Army recruiters, they wanted me. They wanted everyone they could get. One of the recruiters, a short guy like me, got me fired up about infantry; door-kicking badasses who carry the big guns and do all the work. I was nervous but didn't want to back down in front of those genuine heroes. So, I signed the papers.

I would leave in less than a month. Fast, just how I wanted it. In the short time before I was shipped off, I did a little bogus online Army training to try and boost my rank. I was ready to go, convinced of my brave and selfless choice. I shaved my head at home, like I had done in high school, with old clippers that left random hairs untouched. I spent one night in a hotel, before leaving for Georgia on a red-eye flight the next morning.

I had researched online before leaving for training. I watched hours of video, pored over countless blogs and threads, and memorized a handful of movies like Saving Private Ryan, Black Hawk Down, Full Metal Jacket, and yes, even Braveheart, to get myself mentally ready. This wasn't just Basic Combat

Training – I was headed to OSUT, One Station Unit Training for 11B (infantry). Fort Benning was the school for boys who wanted to be men.

Georgia was humid. When we arrived, either late at night or early in the morning, I felt strange. I expected I would feel scared, nervous, out of place, homesick, something. I didn't really feel anything. Maybe I was too tired. Or maybe I was so bent on being the best soldier I could be that I put those silly thoughts in the back of my mind. After all, I had done it. I had enlisted and shipped off to boot camp. In a way, that alone was enough to make me proud.

It's very assembly line, the Army. Everybody falls in, everybody sounds off, and everybody shuts up. We got loaded onto buses from the airport, nice buses with comfy seats as I remember. The drive to Fort Benning took ages. Nobody slept, that I could tell. We didn't know what to expect and wanted to be on our toes. There was talk of a 'shark attack' where Drill Sergeants ambush you as you exit the bus.

Chatter on the bus was quiet. People talked about where they'd come from, what rank they'd managed to get, and of course how much they knew about exactly what would happen during training. Nobody knew shit. I kept to myself, peering out the window at the green highway signs we passed.

Daylight was breaking as we pulled up to the Reception building. I think many of us were disappointed to find a lone Drill Sergeant waiting to greet us. Where was the infamous and brutal shark attack? Where was the yelling and screaming and cursing and gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair? We filed off

and were told by the tired and lackluster sergeant that we were now at Fort Benning and would stay in Reception until we were assigned to a company for the next training cycle.

It made sense. You couldn't really expect to get yelled at on day one without even having been fitted for boots or uniforms. So, the next two weeks were in Reception. It was boring. We envied the companies that were in training, that much closer to being real soldiers. We stood out in the chow hall. Our clothes were mismatched, and we looked fresh, unspoiled.

I took my first naked shower in front of other people at Reception. It was memorable. I had a weak young boy's body. The shower room was comprised of an open space lined with shower heads. No curtains, no dividers, just like how I imagined prison might be. I tried to wait until after a lot of people had already showered. I wasn't the only one in there, but we kept to our corners and didn't check out each other's junk.

It wasn't the shower, or drying off afterwards next to two other dudes, which was memorable. What I remember most is a sergeant jumping into the shower room and finding us out of our bunks a few moments after lights out. This, I learned, was not a good thing.

"Why the fuck aren't you in your bunks?!" He didn't hold back on the volume. I guess it wasn't so much that people should be sleeping as they should just be doing what they're told. "Push!"

That meant do pushups. I was naked. The guys next to me had managed to throw on their PT shorts. And so, the hallmark of my first Army shower was thirty pushups where my

dick touched the grimy wet floor with each repetition. That's what it's all about, the Army: dicks, pushups, yelling. And f-bombs, lots of those.

"Permission to recover?" You had to ask if you were done.

"Get in your bunks!"

"Roger." Always roger. Roger this, roger that.

And so it began, not with a bang but slowly and surely. Reception groaned on. We marched to and from the chow hall. The food was mass-produced; sometimes good, mostly bad. Every meal we had to drink one glass of water and one glass of Powerade. People swore they put Saltpeter in the drinks to keep us soft, keep us from getting horny.

Each day we got a little bit closer to actual training. Boots and fatigues, haircuts, dress uniform, running shoes, shampoo, toothpaste. Pretty soon we were looking like soldiers, though we knew we weren't even close. We started marching in step, with matching outfits, matching shaved heads, and matching responses to angry questions.

Getting our dog tags was a small thing, but it carried weight. I felt lame that instead of the basic two-tag setup I was given a third. Anyone with any kind of allergy gets a red medical tag. They never showed that in the movies. But still, my tags were genuine. Only real soldiers wore real dog tags. I wore them with pride and came to enjoy the little jingling sound they made when we marched.

When it was time to split into our actual OSUT training companies, there was a slight boost of morale. We were divided

and packed into buses, like little camouflaged sardines. These buses were not so nice. Not like the airport ones had been. These were cramped, with stiff seats whose padding had long since deflated. We drove for a short while, to the training side of base, and stopped at the bottom of a hill crested by a long sectional building.

We learned this building was called a 'Starship' in which about five or six companies were housed and trained at any given time. Our home for the next four months. But then, at that moment, all we cared about was the red-faced Drill Sergeant who charged onto the bus as soon as it stopped.

"Get the fuck off my bus!" He shouted. His wide brimmed campaign hat rested just over his eyes. Drill sergeants are scary people, with hoarse bellows and sharp eyes and usually several combat tours under their belts. Real bullet-chewing bastards. We scampered off the bus with no idea what was happening.

There were Drill Sergeants everywhere, in wide brimmed hats, shouting, "Hold that bag over your head!" and, "Don't look at me! Keep running!" And we ran. We ran up the hill carrying all our issued equipment on our fronts, backs, and in the air above our heads. We were loaded down like pack mules.

At the top of the hill, we were instructed to set our duffel bags at our feet and stand at attention. Attention was a very rigid position. There was no room for error, and certainly no movement allowed. One kid, standing directly to my left made the mistake of looking around. I caught this out of the corner

of my eye when suddenly he went flying over his duffel bag into the person in front of him. A tall, lanky Drill Sergeant was shouting after him, "Don't move your heads, privates!"

They had corralled us into a large sand pit the size of a football field. We grew close to the sand pit over the next several months. Many a time we had the pleasure of crawling through it, end to end, with our faces nose-first against the ground. The 'low crawl,' as it were.

When the initial panic had died down, we were assigned training platoons. I was in 2nd platoon. Perhaps more importantly I was assigned a number. Being the 13th alphabetical surname in 2nd platoon, my name became '213' for the next several months. It's a funny thing when your name is taken away and replaced with a number. You laugh in your head, at first, at how ridiculous that is. But then you start answering when your number is called, and you stop thinking of yourself as yourself. And of course, that's what they wanted.

Drill Sergeants would even scream, when someone didn't fall in line correctly, "Look at you! You want to be an individual, don't you?!"

"Negative, Drill Sergeant!" And we didn't. We couldn't be. We weren't, anymore.

Being an individual was bad. That gets you killed. You have to follow orders, shoot where they point, and work as a team. We ran together, carried each other, gave covering fire, shared snacks from our MRE's, stood guard at night, dug foxholes for two, choked on CS gas together, and 'embraced the suck' as a unit. We were battle buddies.

But that all changes when someone gets hurt. Training had been going fine for the most part. It was the most rigorous and physically demanding thing any of us had done in our lives. Still, we loved it. We were being forged into killing machines. I, for one, was designated 'Expert Marksman' for my proficiency with my M-4 rifle. We were becoming those rough men.

And then we did IED training.

Despite how that sounds, it didn't involve any dangerous explosions or bomb disarming. IED training was a hot and crowded tent where they showed us footage of suicide bombers and American soldiers getting decimated. I watched recordings of convoys disappearing in large gray mushrooms, leaving behind only craters. In one clip an Iraqi man walked placidly towards some US soldiers, holding an active grenade. They shot him down and he sat there. Just sat there clutching his grenade, waiting for the inevitable boom of shrapnel to finish him. And it did. A nervous lump got stuck in my throat that day that I'm not sure ever unstuck.

Maybe it was fate, or maybe something in my psyche threw me off, but a week later I twisted my ankle on a ruck march and fell off a short hill. My back was wrecked and, though I didn't know it then, my hip had dislocated. I was almost at the end of my training though. So, I bit the bullet and finished the march anyway. That's what battle buddies do. They don't quit on each other. But two weeks later my limp was so bad I was forced to see 'sick call.'

"You shouldn't have waited to come in. Crutches," they said. "No more training. You'll have to go to Delta Company,"

where the sick kids wait to go home. Broke-dick Delta. That's what they called it. "You'll need x-rays and bone scans and MRI's." The Army can't use broken. "Take off those dog tags, Private. No metal in the imaging room."

I think, deep down, I knew when I had to take off my tags for that first x-ray that my soldiering had finished. And I wasn't the only one facing that truth. At each doctor's appointment the soldiers around me often wore casts, crutches, and sat in wheelchairs. Some, like me, were injured in training. Others were fresh back from a deployment cut short by a bullet or bomb. Though I was still young, just old enough to legally drink, there were soldiers younger than me with missing limbs and unrecognizable burned faces and hands. Is that what made us men?

I fought to stay in, trying to recover, for the next year and a half, spending more time in waiting rooms than I had in training, hoping for a second chance. They wouldn't have me though. They don't keep most of the broken ones. I was honorably discharged from the Army at age twenty-one. They handed me a small, folded flag – the kind given to retirees, not the full-sized one handed to next of kin – and a 'retired Army' pin.

My dog tags sit in my nightstand drawer now, shiny reminders of a life I almost had. Or, rather, a life I did have. I was a soldier once. I served my country. But my love of country isn't the blind, star-spangled kind I carried into Fort Benning. It's quieter now, complicated – the kind you feel when you've given something up for it, and it's taken something from you in return.

I used to think service meant proving myself worthy of the flag, that freedom was something you earned in uniform. Now I know it's something you fight for at home, in classrooms, in protests, in conversations. My dog tags remind me not just of who I was, but how easily boys are turned into soldiers by slogans and fear, how readily the state uses and discards them. I still love my country. Just not the way they wanted me to.

Cameron Filas

Cameron Filas has been writing seriously since 2012, with a passion for storytelling stretching back to childhood. A U.S. Army veteran whose service was cut short by injury, Cameron earned both a bachelor's and master's degree from Arizona State University, where he now serves as an academic advisor. His work spans short fiction, creative nonfiction, and freelance writing for gaming, trivia, and AI content projects. Former associate editor of *Vestal Review* and recipient of multiple contest honors, Cameron continues to explore themes of service, identity, and resilience. He lives in Mesa, Arizona, with his wife, dog, and cat, and enjoys nature walks while documenting local species for citizen science projects.

Mia's Maroon Converse

by Abigail McKeown

Teen Nonfiction

Mia's Maroon Converse

They're the perfect shade of red that fits with every outfit. The way they blur to a solid color when she kicks her feet. The way they color the ground she walks on. The way my eyes start to sting from staring at their beauty. They're just shoes. Most people would say.

They were the ones I wanted so badly it hurt. Like how it hurt to not be the girl wearing them. Mia with a strange last name. Like mine. We are the same, me and her. But I think she is so much better. She comes from another side of the world. A world that keeps itself hidden. A world filled with lights and speakers and wires. A world that ties a bow around my world like a present with no card.

And while I sit on my side filled with scats, warmups, and twisters, she enters all swift and quiet in her rusty-blood colored shoes. She tries to make her way around as invisible as possible. But little does she know she leaves a trail everywhere she goes. A trail I will soon decide to follow to that hidden entrance. Away from the credible heroes in spotlights, to their "just another day" sidekicks including Mia and her maroon Converse.

Abigail McKeown

My name is Abby McKeown. I adore artistic things that make you stop in your tracks when you see them. Whether it's the feeling of awe or the want to figure out whatever the maker meant by it. Sometimes both. I have always loved clever movies and books that you have to see over and over again to catch hidden details. In my work I try to include details like that. I like to write and I love to craft, especially in technical theater which I was introduced to only about 5 years ago. There, I also try to create little eye-catching details for the audience. My work is very important to me. It's for people to try and understand something different from what they'd expect. I hope my short story does exactly that!

Tempe Writing Contest 2025 Reviewers' Biographies

FICTION

Roxanne Doty's first novel, *Out Stealing Water*, was published by Regal House Press in August, 2022. Her stories and poems have appeared in *Superstition Review*, *Lascaux Review*, *Forge*, *I-70 Review, Soundings Review*, *Saranac Review*, *Four Chambers Literary Magazine*, *Ocotillo Review*, *Espacio Fronterizo*, *Quibble Lit* and *little somethings press*. Her short story, "*Turbulence*," was nominated by *Ocotillo Review* for the 2019 Pushcart. She is currently working on a short story collection. Roxanne lives in Tempe, Arizona and retired after teaching for many years in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University. She says: "As a reviewer of short fiction, I look for that sometimes illusive thing called 'voice' that creates atmosphere, character and breathes life into the story."

Heather Hoyt is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of English at Arizona State University. She has been a judge for multiple creative writing contests and literary journals including *Hayden's Ferry Review* and *Four Chambers*. Heather has also served as a developmental editor and manuscript reviewer of creative and scholarly works for various presses, such as Syracuse University Press. She has been the Chair of the annual ASU Writers' Place Awards contest since 2022 and was a judge for eight years prior to that. Heather especially enjoys mentoring students, who are developing creative thesis projects in fiction, poetry, art, and music.

POETRY

Ryan Holden received his MFA in Creative Writing from Arizona State University. His poems have been published in *Country Dog Review*, *ditch*, and *Ampersand Review.* He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2011 by the *Hobble Creek Review*. Ryan is currently an Associate Teaching Professor with University College at ASU. On

reviewing poetry, Ryan says: " I want to read poems that engage my mind with language, rhythm, & musicality and my heart with emotion, resonance, & authenticity."

NONFICTION (PERSONAL ESSAYS, MEMOIRS)

Megan Anne Todd is a performance studies scholar and embodied movement practitioner, teaching across the humanities, applied arts, organizational leadership, and project management. She earned her Ph.D. in Theatre/Performance of the Americas and M.S. in Exercise & Wellness (ASU). You can find her work published in the *Journal of Pan African Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, *Journal of Bodywork* and *Movement Therapies* and in the edited book, *The Sonic World of Dance Film*. She is an Associate Teaching Professor at Arizona State University, where she leads the Master of Liberal Studies program and is an affiliate of Humanities for the Environment's North American Observatory. Areas of scholarship include: dance/performance, arts and humanities as public practice, sustainability and health, as well as creativity and/as leadership. Her work centers collaborative, creative and critical modes of inquiry and practice focused on generating pathways and possibilities. Recent projects include an ASU's Humanities Institute-funded collaboration with Dr. Jada Ach, Inter/Desert Dialogues, a roundtable series, bringing together artists, writers, scholars, activists, land managers, and others to explore the concept of the "inter/desert" as a way of understanding deserts as highly complex, culturally and ecologically rich environments.

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