

THE TORCH



LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL | 2025

Editorial Letter

Dear Reader,

You are holding in your hands the 2025 edition of Union University's *The Torch*. As you flip through the pages, you will be delighted by the artworks and moved by the writing. How do I know this? Because these mini-creators are made in the image of their Creator. It has been an inspiring experience for the editorial team to allow these pieces to come to life, and you now get to watch them breathe. So wonder at God's creation with us as you turn the first page.

Lili Pettigrew

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Lili Pettigrew

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Thursday's Laundry

Bria Kastens

I am in my twenties when I find myself
catching glimpses of unspoken intimacies,
craving their glint in my eye.

It wasn't until this age I noticed
I want to watch you fold your laundry.

As a little girl, you taught me to seek and find
with both my eyes and ears.

I am in my twenties when the mere act of
observing molded into a practice,
something meditative, as if some shadowed
part of me were being illuminated and softened.

I savored being let in, invited to observe the mundane,
allowing natural postures of the day
to be born into something more intimate,

as if it simulated the rise and fall of your chest,
a state of hypnosis.

I want to watch you
fold your laundry again and again

and take note on how your fingers smooth out
Pawpaw's worn V-necks with rips in the collar
yet crumple your nightgowns into a wad on
the end of the couch.

I want to memorize what triggers your furrowed brow
and how it precedes a grimace as you bake
blackberry cobbler,

how you step outside to rest in your patio chair,
a moss-covered gift from your youngest son.
How you lean your head back, close your eyes,
exhale, and comment on the trailing birdsong.

I want to sit alongside you on the patio and recall
where the old hot tub used to sit,
before it met its fate rotting in the woods
on the other side of the farm,

discarding into the dirt the memories of you,
shielding your face with your hand as I
splashed around in your nightgown.

Storge

Lydia Stinnett

She carried me,
Knees scraped, mouth wailing
Ever the louder, though the pain
Was already gone.

She carried me
Through the physician's door
As I kicked and screamed my protest
 through a sore throat that somehow wasn't strep,
Mollified only by the fulfilled
Promise of confection on the way out.

She's driven here.
I lie as still as stone in my dormitory,
Fever the rust on the blade of sensation
As she marshals my renegade laundry,
Running errands,
Placing both broth and acetaminophen before my lips.

The Cottonwood Tree

Faith Behrens

Each spring the cottonwood sheds
brown pods, which open to reveal
white fluff, like snow, that's sticky
when you squish it between
fingers. Barefoot girls run,
snatching pods off blades
of grass and opening them to collect
cotton, pretending they are
laborers. Two pairs of eyes cast
sidelong glances to see who has more.

The tire swing was hung
from the tree's long branch—the same
branch where the robin laid her eggs
in a nest she spent time piecing
sticks together bit by bit,
only for those two girls to run
to the tree, bouncing the limb
as they spun the tire. She dive-
bombed them, sending
them running away, their screams
shattering the air like glass.

They came back again
and again, hoping
to enjoy the tire swing without fearing
her wrath. One day, she left,
abandoning unhatched eggs,
and the girls found themselves wishing
they hadn't driven her to leave. They returned,
watching the nest and the eggs
that would never hatch sitting inside.
They came until they stopped
coming, their playground tree
nothing but a distant remembrance.

Luke Smith

Digital Photography



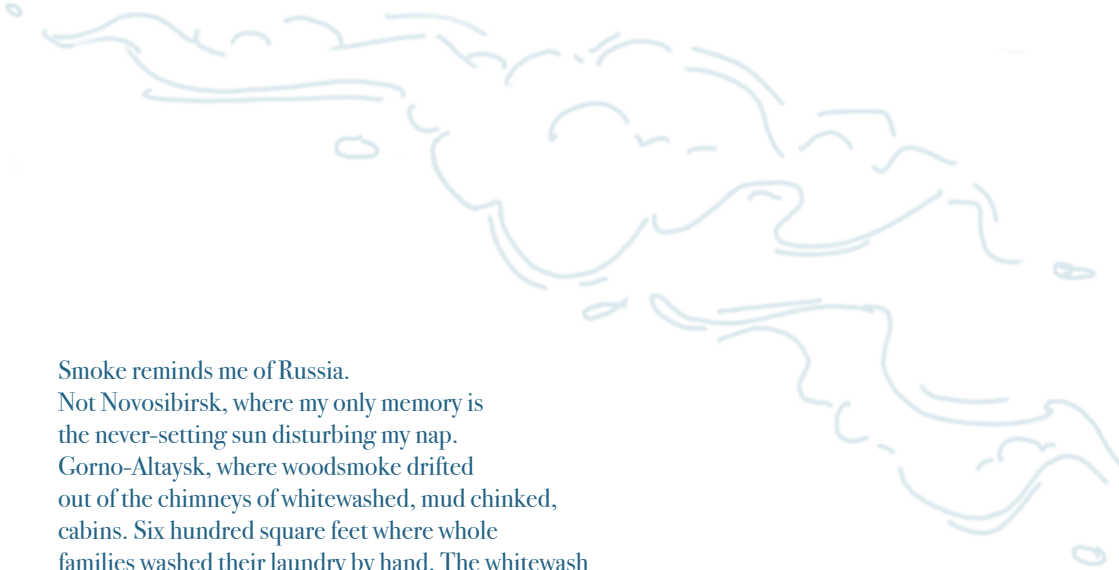
A Day in the Life of a Climber | April 2022



Westfalia in West Canda | April 2022

Smoke

Samuel Stevens



Smoke reminds me of Russia.
Not Novosibirsk, where my only memory is
the never-setting sun disturbing my nap.
Gorno-Altaysk, where woodsmoke drifted
out of the chimneys of whitewashed, mud chinked,
cabins. Six hundred square feet where whole
families washed their laundry by hand. The whitewash
crumbled and fell between cracks in the floor
into the basement, onto an ancient brick stove,
cracked so that the fire that heated the house shone through.
An old potato cellar was filled only with dirt,
crumbling off the walls. Maria-Ra supplied potatoes then,
potatoes and long, uphill walks encumbered with pelmeni and cabbage.
Everything always felt smaller than it was. The city nestled into the mountains
so that I could never see all of it. There was always a new
surprise, or flower, or bigot around the corner. There were plenty of bigots.
They always felt bigger than they were, and they oppressed as they were:
the cold air was Stalin. Even the sun didn't dare shine until winter's
course was run. In April the sun beat back the winter and the snow
turned the roads into mud slides. The tyranny of winter was turned back
yet again. Smoke reminds me of a memory of dead
warmth and new life.



Class C Felony

Jenny Link

Frozen pictures in my mind, *blink*
Once, twice, if you need help, flickering
In and
Out
A moment melting, details drip
Drip
Dripping down the slick hallways of my
Mind, twisting hallways full of deflated
Balloons that I forgot to tie to
My wrist—*she's just a kid*—how old do
You have to be to start to forget?

[A blue room, an old air unit, white and crackling,
With a window and filmy white curtains, my mom
Sitting, new baby in her arms, soft smile on
Her lips, and—*sisters are forever*—I hold the hand of
My grandmother—]

How much of this is edited? How much have
I changed in an effort to make it stay, this
Shiny little first memory I no longer believe
Is real, because a hospital room doesn't look
Like that.

Up and down the halls I spiral just
Like the staircase in the house my
Parents almost bought, was the carpet—
Green? The walls are white here, blank and
Blinking—*once, twice, if you need help*—will I
Remember who I am if I can't remember
Who I was?

[Lying awake, listening to my mom and
Dad paint the walls of my new home, wondering
If it would start to feel like one soon—*pretty*
Sure I made that up, too—]

My childhood is
Cremated, a burnt bridge stinking of reality
Checks and flawed love, ashes of what truly
Occurred, yet still I set the urn above
My fireplace. I smile when I see it, because
Even though it was harsh and strong and
Painful, even though my body remembers
Cold far more than it does warmth, even
Though I'm the one who struck the
Match—*is that arson?*—it was
Also perfectly imperfect, a fire that
Burned but also kept me
Warm.



Regan Sheddan

Oil Paintings



Village Kids | 36" x 48"



Streets of Napoli | 20" x 16"



Home For Four Years | 20" x 16"

Kfar Aza

Sarah Grace Patrick

There was a village
two miles from the Mediterranean
and one mile from war
where bright purple flowers
grew in gardens with peaceful bees.

There was a village
where we jumped a rope
seven feet long
and pointed out kids' bikes
and toys around a red play set.

There was a village
where a woman in her fifties
told us her story
about the goodness of people
and the meaning of *kibbutz*.

There was a village
where they left their keys
hanging outside on rows of hooks
as they ate their meals
at long wooden tables.

There was a village
not too long ago
where the birds sang their songs
and gardens grew
and trees flowered.

There was a village
in the news today
its name buried deep
its people half memory
its streets still and quiet.

There was a village
where they painted bomb shelters
with flowers and sunlight
and reenforced schools with concrete
so the ceilings wouldn't cave in.

There was a village
where they taught children
to listen for sirens
and infants reached up
for someone to carry them to safety.

There was a village
where the people knew someday
their neighbors would come
with their steel-toed boots
and assault rifles in hand.

Now there is rubble
where a village used to be
and streets of ash and dust
suffocate in silence
surrounded by death.

There was a village
where they stayed anyway
because *kibbutz* means family
and family is family
even after it's gone.

Sing Me to Sleep

Sarah Adams

My mother had a restless daughter. She'd pass me, squirming,
into Gram's wrinkled arms. She'd drag the pad of her pinky
around my forehead, down the bridge of my nose,
humming "Danny Boy," soft as the kettle come to a rolling boil
until I was asleep, eyelids fluttered closed.

I never saw her lay me to bed; she was gentle as a swallow
returns home, and I hope this is how death comes—
cradling all my resistance away. I hope she leaves the door ajar
lest I cry into the seamless walls, unheard.
Fill my lungs again to quiet, suspended in wait.

My Father is in Hiding, So am I

Jan Agatha Arosa Thompson



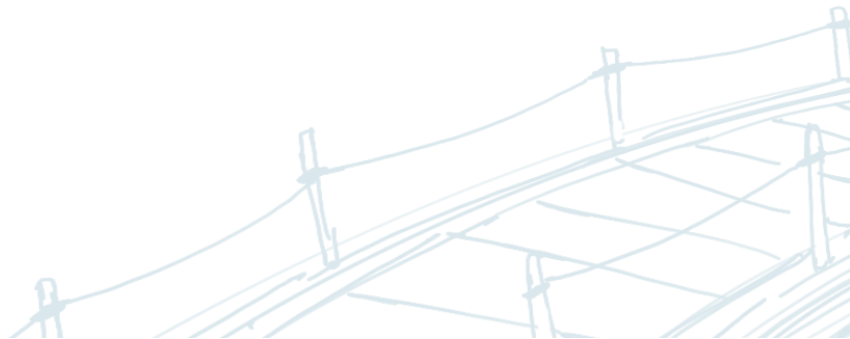
Acrylic and Gouache Paint | 20" x 16"

No Longer

Lydia Stinnett

No longer is he running and wrestling; no longer
Does he strive, does he journey
Across oceans, along desert roads. No longer are his fingers
Stained with the ink of a thousand large letters. But neither
Is he bound, confined in the cold of the Mamertine.
Instead the light that once blinded him is
Now his once and only abode.
Alone (though There, no one is truly alone)
He gently steps—sinews restored, thorn removed—through garden paths.
And then
A face he espies—no longer bloodied
Nor gasping—with an angelic radiance he can't mistake and hasn't forgotten.

For one moment, they
Regard each other.
Can there be any shed tears there?
No words are uttered—no words of shock, certainly—
Words of affection either (they don't need them, and affection is too weak a word to
describe what fills the air There by any means).
Then that face is suddenly close,
Those arms suddenly tight—
Every moment of that embrace
Shot through with the inescapable grace
That envelopes them both.



His Widowing

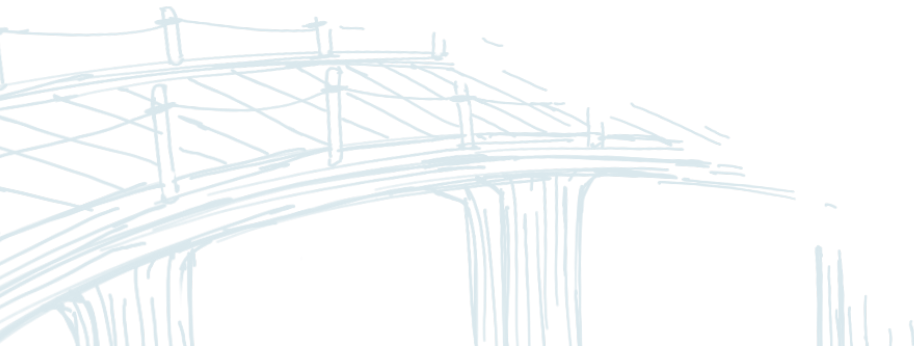
Sarah Adams

In the humid Mississippi winter,
death came swifter than the evening news.
The ambulance window shone like a TV,
showed the medics pounding arms and a still chest.

Death came swifter than the evening news.
His glassy eyes were glued to it,
the medic's palms in her still chest
pressed till the machines hummed low and loud.

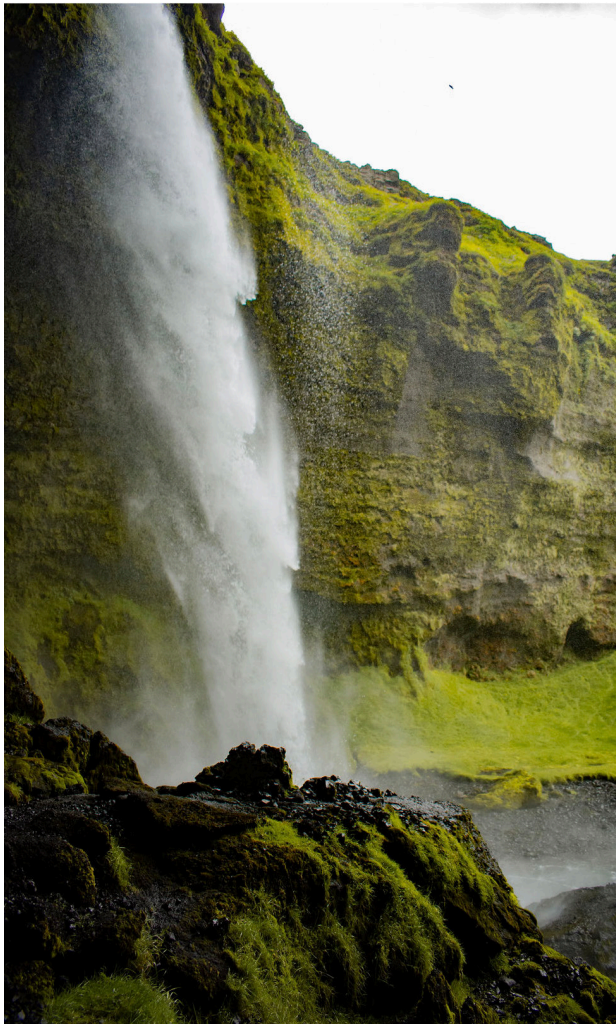
His glassy eyes were glued to it,
the silver box dressed with lilies,
pressed shut as mourners hummed low and loud
over her grave, in the humid Mississippi winter.

The silver bed was dressed with lilies.
She only asked for the Doxology sung
over her grave, in the humid Mississippi.
Winter brought death to our living room.



Alison Keener-Eskola

Digital Photography



Kvernufoss, Iceland | June 2024



Alaska Glacier | July 2024



Slot Canyon, Utah | March 2024



Hveradalir, Iceland | June 2024

The Studio on Battlewood Street

Sarah Grace Patrick

The dance studio is quiet as I enter. It's a little dark—I haven't turned the lights on—but light spills in from the big glass garage door in the corner. The contrast outside strikes me in a strange way. Were the trees always that green? Or do they just appear that way with the gray walls and gray floors? Everything seems gray and black: gray ballet barres in the corner, black yoga mats hanging on the wall, black weights piled in the front from the morning workout class, black speakers in each corner to blast the music. It seems lifeless without the pops of color from dancers' clothes and their water bottles and sweatshirts tossed in a corner.

I'm taken back in time as my memory fills in the smell of Icy Hot and sweat, mixing together in a sharp scent that burns my lungs as I breathe. It was when Renee had shin splints and used the cream to make the pain bearable. She'd used so much that the whole room reeked of it, but we didn't care. It was better than inhaling the smell of dried sweat and feet that clung to the gymnastics mats. We'd rolled them out to make them our beds for the night, stacking them on top of each other to cushion ourselves and piling our blankets and sleeping bags on top. I'd been to church lock-ins before, but this wasn't quite the same. These were people I'd seen nearly every day for four years. Yet, somehow, we'd never had a sleepover all together before. We took full advantage of it. No one slept.

At around nine, after we'd gone bowling and eaten dinner, someone decided we needed ice cream. There was a Sonic down the street, so we gathered our wallets, and the nine of us embarked on our quest. A few went barefoot, but I wore shoes because the road was rough; it hadn't been paved in years. We were a loud bunch, and I'm sure the employees hated us. We danced around the picnic tables and sang Taylor Swift songs I barely knew the lyrics to. Once we'd adequately annoyed the workers and climbed on the play set built for children four, five, seven years younger than us, we went back to the studio and began a few games, some of which involved grabbing people's hands in total darkness and trying to scare them.

It's the only night like that I can remember. We did other things—escape games, movie nights, dinners out after long competitions—but nothing was quite like that night. More than anything else, I remember wishing it would never end. We said we would make it a tradition.

But it wasn't long after that night that COVID hit us. The team fell apart at the end of that year. It didn't end, but as people graduated, busied themselves with school, or simply decided it wasn't worth the time anymore, the original group—the family—went their separate ways.

The memory begins to fade, and I bring myself back to reality as I hear my students coming in the door. I flip on the lights then cross the room to connect my phone to the speakers. Soon, music fills the room once again, and warmth gathers in my chest.

Time

Anna-Asher Baine



Oil Paint, Stained Glass, and Soil on Canvas | 4' x 4'

Iscariot

Samuel Stevens

The house is empty; the church down to eleven,
like the faithful disciples with a dead Jesus.
No shepherd in the upper room,
but they gather because they're nothing without a rod.

The house is a parsonage full of ghosts.
Gary keeps it up, hobbles around the grown-up
yard, like it was before they cut back the underbrush
to welcome the new pastor's family home.

The house is still brown, chipped now,
smells like must, not like banana bread
on Sunday afternoons with
Pastor Steve. It's quieter than the graveyard next door.

The church is quiet before anyone arrives.
Gary unlocks the door and
tries to pick a couple weeds from their good soil.
The eleven saints march in, waiting for resurrection.



Sacrilegious

Sarah Adams

God, I love a little sacrilege. It makes me giggle,
gives my faith a fun kaleidoscope twist,
colors contort in front of my eyes. I know God.

I know Jesus who was God squished
into a circumsizable thing.
And most days, he is glorious.

But he is not fragile.
Hell, the man rolled his own tombstone aside.
What's one more?

The Baptists find me irreverent. I find them boring.
They squirm over Jesus turning water into wine.
Who will tell them he turned wine into urine?

Jesus, the groveling love of God for us.
Deus Incarnatus. God In-morning-wood.

the Incorporation of tuna

Luke Barnard

one last twist and the can lid creaks
up, revealing what it reeks:
a huddled mass of white albacore,
stranger to a galilean shore,
washed “in water,” bought, brought to meet
Bread – sliced, herbed, unbound to eat.

“come taste and see in uncanned fish:
salvation is a slimy tuna sandwich,”

He says, and, to your gnawing disbelief,
the God Incarnate, grinning, picks His teeth.

Squirrel at Prayer

Luke Barnard

“Lord, teach us to pray.”

He said to them:

“Go to your tree and rummage around below
Till you’ve got a good thing. Sit still.
Turn it over in your busy hands. Learn
How to hold things as you should. Now,
Don’t close your eyes. Keep them wide and you won’t
Miss who’s out hunting. This
Will take time to trust. Eat your fill
Of pausing and it will be enough.
For now. Much is better than more.”



Solace

Bria Kastens

Alongside a sidewalk, a faded white blanket had been strewn across the dirt,
hiding frail blades of grass and gravelly patches of dirt.
It beckoned a passing man to lie down and rest.

For the first time, he neglected to overthink
and set his dress shoes aside with care,
leaning them against the base of a nearby tree trunk, perhaps a maple.

He lay shirtless, exposing a tattoo of a woman in a bikini on his left bicep,
resting, longing for solace.
His face was meditative,
as if contemplating philosophical queries,
grounding himself by absorbing the earth's vibrations.

His wrist glistened in the sunlight from the watch he neglected to remove
while the breeze fluffed his hair into black waves tossed over his forehead,
hasty and unrelenting, as he laid his head on a thin checkered cushion,
his only barrier from the earth's callousness.

Pebbles protruded through the cushion, indenting his cheeks.
His protest was silent, his palm firmly against the blanket, his arm in an L shape that seemed
almost like a symbol of disallowance, a silent groan, a preemptive anticipation of being
disrupted.

In silence, he begged,
his palm against the earth,
as if sleeping with one eye open, thinking he could evade the notion that

he could evade himself.

The Adam

Samuel Stevens

A lamppost in the middle of the desert,
where wanders a young man,
three days thirsty and hunting for water,
wondering what hallucination—

His eyes are playing tricks on him.
The lamppost draws him like a promise.

He remembers a lamppost in a tundra, guiding the way.
Or the ones lighting those cool London streets, where water is a nuisance.
No matter that here light is the enemy and fire is a reminder
of the desperate affair of sun and willing sand,
the lamppost carries with it all the things he wants but cannot have.

The metal is hot, like hell.
Scorching fire. Beautiful, mesmerizing.

The young man must die anyway, so he crawls
to the lamppost, burns his hands as he scoops out its roots,
burns his shoulders when he lifts it onto his back.
It breaks his bones, but he drudges onward because
he cannot bear to be parted from his pain.
He carries hell with him, so that he might be warm
when winter comes.

Lit a Fire in Me

Abby Thomas



Digital Illustration | 6" x 4"

Refractions

Autumn White

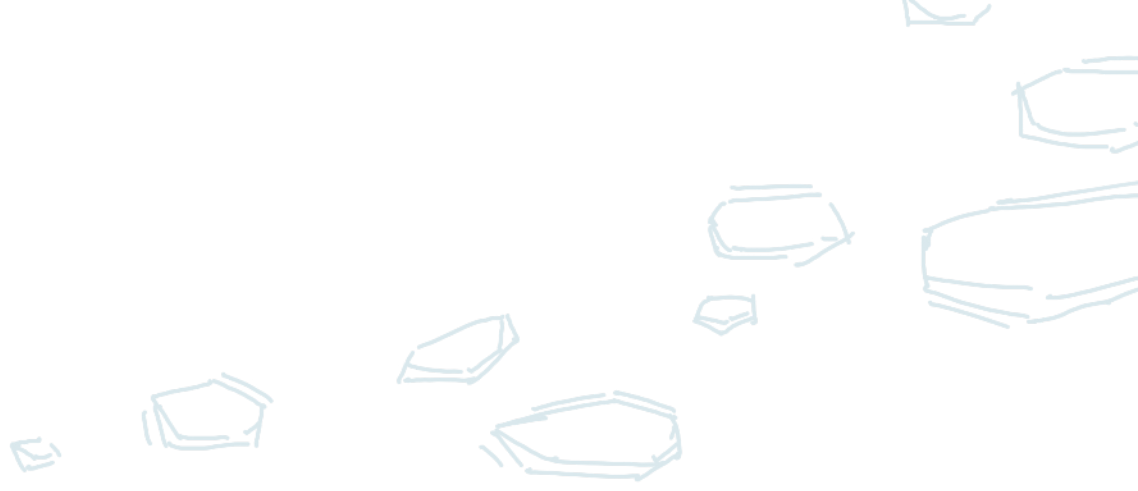
Humans are full of both blessings and curses
toward one another and their Maker.
With my lips and lungs, I praise my God
for salvation and peace and comfort.
Those same lips turn that same peace
toward others so that it may refract off
of even others still, creating a patchwork
of glowing beams of light.

We constantly bless one another
as we go about this beautiful life,
after a sneeze, in “Good morning,”
“Let me get that for you,”
“Sweet dreams,” “Good night.”
How lovely it is to see so many,
like stars in the night, Christian or not,
shining and mirroring
the image of their Creator
toward those around them.

Then, a single foul word,
a hurled insult, a sarcastic mutter,
and the beauty of the refractions
shatters into fragments
of something spiteful.

Something bitter as ash.
Something dark.
More than once, I have been caught
in the crossfire of unkindness.
More often, I have been its cause.
Sometimes the very same rage
or disdain or complaint returns to me,
made ever stronger
by its journey across the beacons,
once of light, now of spite.





How can I hypothetically... hypocritically
judge those around me for reflecting
only what they see in me?
I am designed, chosen, being perfected to be
a daughter of the King, then I turn around
and sing my confession,
like “I’m the problem, it’s me”
with a smile on my face,
because if we’re all the problem,
maybe I’m not the problem.
Maybe then the problem is you, not me.

How cruel and unkind is it
to design a problem, then to pass
the baton of morality to someone else,
as if I was not responsible for what I reflect,
not only as an origin of light or darkness,
but as a natural enemy of respect?

I control what I create, what I consume.
I am responsible for what I reflect and refract.
My parents tried to teach me this when I was a child,
that I am accountable for my actions and reactions.
I have since learned that not only my actions
but words also can cause chain reactions,
which spiral into pain, blessings,
joy, or curses for others.

I should bring forth from my tongue
nothing but praises to my God
and blessings for my sisters and brothers,
pouring out from my lips and lungs
only kindness instead of harm,
because doing what others do unto me is
beneath my sanctified soul, as much as my
flesh—my breath and my sharp tongue—would
hate to remember.

Butter and Salt

Abby Thomas

I scrape butter, four frozen sticks against a metal grate,
catch my knuckles again, and the black gloves tear off—
blood and strips of latex I can't let ruin the batter.

Mix, don't over-mix, the butter came salted again, and I do the math, teaspoons
to tablespoon, add a bit of heavy cream instead, add heavy cream to the list.
The sugar cookie dough isn't frozen enough to keep its shape, and the scones
are frostbitten again. The ovens, Hansel and Gretel, are doing just fine, but
The Witch was set fifty degrees warmer, so now it's piping hot in here.

The cinnamon apple preserves come in a jar with a white lid,
and once, when I was spotted scooping a dollop onto the snickerdoodles,
topped with a swirl of cinnamon cream, the customer winked like it was a secret.

It is true the croissant dough gets delivered in a great big roll to save my wrists from breaking,
rolling butter until my joints crack. Somehow, sinlessly, the graham crackers are from Kroger
and the marshmallows from Sam's. Part of the brownie batter comes in a bag marked
FOR BROWNIES, and we couldn't fit a fryer between the third fridge and the fourth oven,
so the donut dough comes frozen and we bake it, though I don't think it tastes like a lie.

I scoop pan after pan of dimpled snickerdoodle cookies, draw an espresso shot,
cool it, whisk the cream until it thickens, and run to the freezer to make sure
it sets in time for that loud Southern lady who insists she have it fresh.

I was asked to explain why not everything was scratch, facing down croissant-fueled rage:
“What? A small-town bakery can't do this one thing right?” I want to say
I'd manage it in time if I had time left to manage, though I doubt they would pay
the price change, so instead I sit and take it. I get called half a baker, working at half a bakery,
and I press torn fingertips into the lines burned along my forearms and remember
we are out of salt.



Man Drinking Coffee

Josh Kelley



Graphite and Coffee | 12" x 18"

Even Poems End

Sarah Grace Patrick

They were like poetry,
weaving in cracks
between broken places,
making rhythm
and rhyme
like hearts beating,
time going on and on
and on and spilling
over into what
seems like eternity.

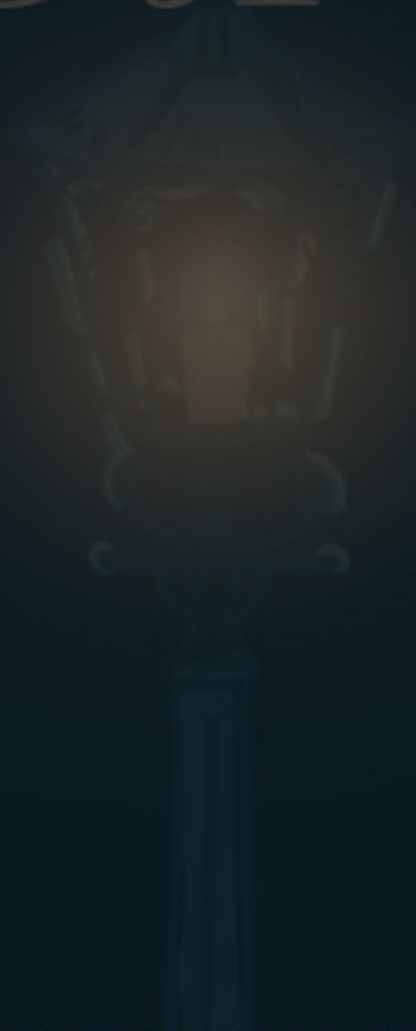
But poets put down
their pens and drum
beats end and eternity
exists only
in the mind of God.



Bios

Abby Thomas, junior graphic design major and creative writing minor, woke up to write this bio and feels appropriately accomplished. **Anna-Asher Baine**, freshman painting major, was adopted by the art department at 16 and is starting to think she'll never actually be able to leave. Senior English major **Sarah Adams** would rather overheat than get an iced latte. Freshman English major **Lydia Stinnett** is a firm believer in the power of chamomile tea to solve most problems. **Luke Smith**, junior digital media communications major, regularly thinks about how great it would be if the United States had high speed rail. Junior art education major **Regan Sheddan** always forgets what language she's supposed to be speaking. Senior public relations major **Bria Kastens** kayaks with her Australian Shepherd to escape reality. You can hear sophomore graphic design major **Josh Kelley's** sneezes from across campus (stupid dogwood trees). Senior English major **Samuel Stevens** used to think; now he is. **Autumn White**, a junior and TESOL major, is confused as to how she got trapped in a poetry book production factory and kindly requests your assistance. If anyone is looking for freshman sociology major **Luke Barnard**, he's probably in McAfee. **Alison Keener-Eskola**: senior, major of art, world traveller, camera-wielder, horse rider, light lover. Freshman psychology major **Jan Agatha Arosa Thompson** comes from Bahrain and a blend of cultures and firmly believes froyo and shawarma are universal problem solvers. Senior social work major **Jenny Link** gaslights, gatekeeps, and sometimes girlbosses. Junior English and political science double major **Sarah Grace Patrick** has to write: inciting a real-life war in order to study society is generally frowned upon. **Faith Behrens** spends more time thinking about writing than actually writing.

TORCH



UNION UNIVERSITY | JACKSON, TN