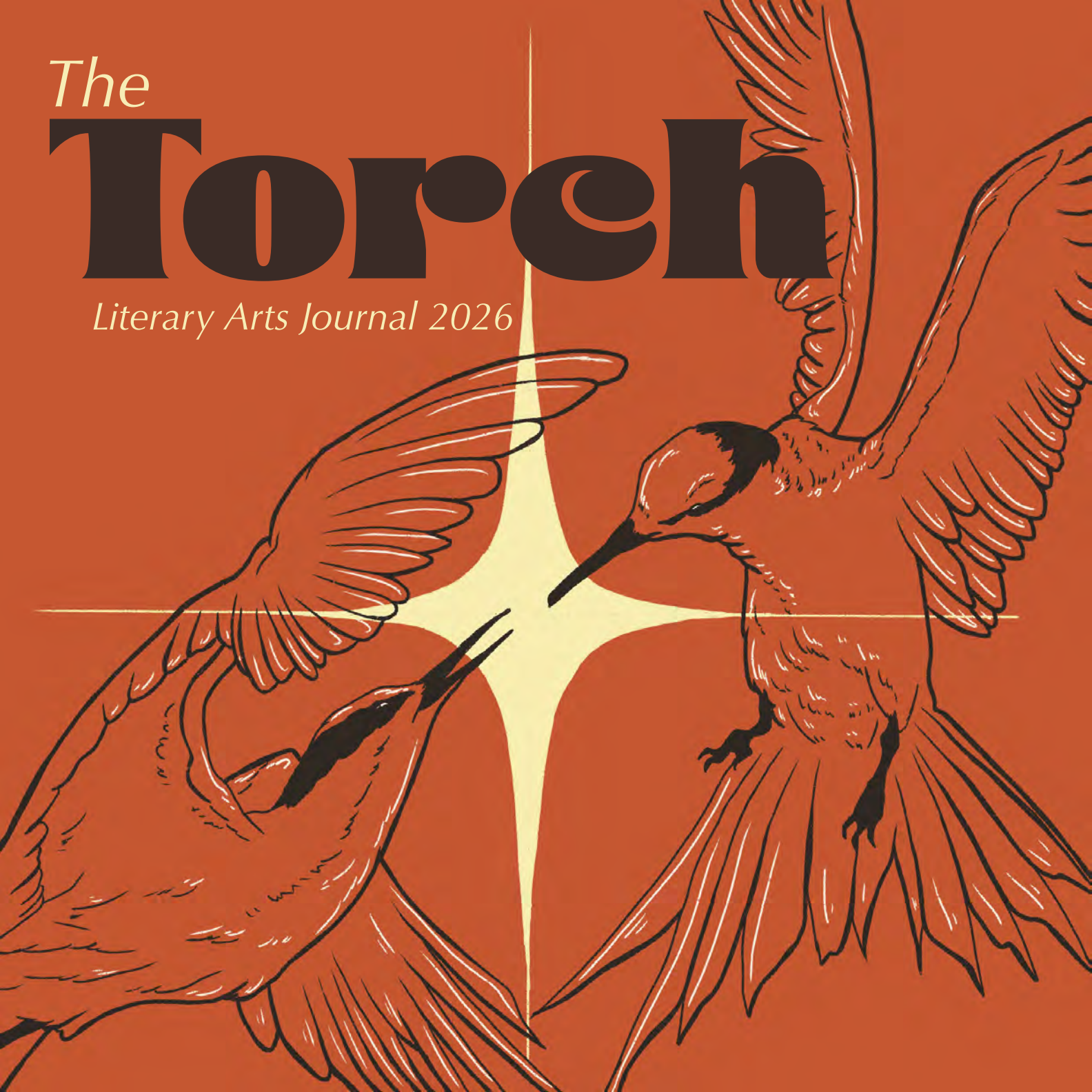


The

Torch

Literary Arts Journal 2026



Editorial Letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this year's edition of *The Torch*. In the pages that follow, you will find entertaining and thought-provoking works. With the increase in AI writing and visual art, I have come to value these authentic expressions of human creativity all the more. Creating art and viewing art is soul-shaping work. Just as our God fashioned us out of the dust of the earth, so we fashion the dust particles of language into poetry and the strokes of a pencil or paintbrush into a masterpiece.

Beginning with fall, this edition takes you season by season through the year, ending in summer. Ecclesiastes 3 says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," that there is a "time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." As you read, I hope you take a moment to sit with each carefully crafted piece. I hope you will laugh and smile, cry a bit, and perhaps even find inspiration of your own.

Sarah Grace Patrick

Editor

Sarah Grace Patrick

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Chloe Benson

Olivia Besse

Eliana Harris

Lucy Meurer

Laura Smith

Lydia Stinnett

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Table of Contents

Poetry

- 2 **The Opening** | *Luke Barnard*
- 3 **The Moon Before Harvest** | *Summer Smith*
- 4 **Insomnia** | *Lily Pond*
- 6 **My Roommate Opens the Door at Night, and I Glance, Nervous** | *Abby Hickerson*
- 8 **Quiet** | *Laura Smith*
- 11 **Snow Day** | *Laura Smith*
- 12 **Until We Are Ghosts** | *Brianna Glynn*
- 16 **productivity killed the cat** | *Esther Noeth*
- 18 **A Wedding in April** | *Lili Pettigrew*
- 21 **To Teach Her to Dance** | *McKenzie Harris*
- 22 **(American) Jesus** | *Autumn White*
- 23 **Christlikeness** | *Eli Isom*
- 25 **Kool-Aid for Communion** | *Autumn White*
- 27 **Missing: _____** | *Kate Rutherford*

Prose

- 28 **Memory** | *Lydia Agee*

Artwork

- 5 **Rehoboth Road** | *Lydia Agee*
- 9 **He Will Wipe Away Every Tear** | *Sadie Schumacher*
- 10 **Caught with a Cold** | *Liv Briggs*
- 14 **4 Penn Plaza New York, NY (Past)** | *Anna-Asher Baine*
- 15 **4 Penn Plaza New York, NY (Present)** | *Anna-Asher Baine*
- 17 **The Tiniest Campus Celebrity** | *Morgan Daniel*
- 19 **Sight** | *Claira Forrester*
- 20 **The Hazel Gateway** | *Liv Briggs*
- 24 **Upheld** | *Reid Pike*
- 26 **Wood-Fired Tree Mug** | *Annabella Wooten*



The Opening

Luke Barnard

He flipped a switch for light and, smiling, saw
A span of dry drop ceiling stretched above
A land of lamination, scuffed and raw
From wooden chairs, grown dense by life and love.
He lit the neon sign above the door
And plugged the "Singing Fish" in at the wall.
He swept the upturned beetles off the floor,
The dusty victims of an early fall.

He took his place beside the flattop grill,
Behind a haze of sizzling oil and heat,
Content to rest his haggard hands until
The first man shuffles in and takes a seat.
He calls across the silent restaurant
A word, always the same: "What do you want?"



The Moon Before Harvest

Summer Smith

It fades this way in autumn,
as a crimson moon bleeds
medicinal light.



Color threatens darkness
in the whimsy of circadian prisms,
ordered into cyclical majesty.

Such is the world that witnesses
me through its primitive melodies
that ease the soul.

Dust stirs in the fields
as the plow tills up granular
scents of autumn.

The warm buzz
of summer's end
and cicada harmonies.

Insomnia

Lily Pond



My mom bought me a tincture
for my sleep. I don't know what a tincture is
(the bottle says it's chamomile and valerian root concentrate),
but I assume it won't work. Nothing does.
I shudder as the thick, sour liquid, another pointless
concoction she claims is a miracle cure, slides down my throat.
Black grows gray as my eyes adjust to the night,
so I close them. And my brain becomes a car careening
down a winding highway, no tincture hitting the brakes.
My mom told me a story once
about a man who fell asleep at the wheel.
He drove off a bridge.



Watercolor and Acrylic on Canvas | 5" x 7"

Rehoboth Road

Lydia Agee

My Roommate Opens the Door at Night, and I Glance, Nervous

Abby Hickerson

"I have no crimes, / But the one of being small." –Kayla Ancrum

"Ew, cockroach," I pointed. My friend laughed, grabbing a tissue.
"That's not a cockroach; it's just a little beetle," She carried it outside.
I dismissed it and frowned.

It's kind of unfair,
it crawls in my space, and must be condemned,
yet I leave the comatose spider in my bathroom unharmed.
Human judgement is partial and cruel.
The bee on the flower is beneficial and cute;
The red wasp is a despicable creature.

I admire the moth: It sits in dusty frozen time
and can't resist its gaze from the light.
But I clam up when it flies towards me,
You've broken our invisible pact,
and smash it against the wall.

I sit on the porch, admiring the light,
and beckon the butterflies to my finger.
Mosquitoes buzz—they float up through

the cracks in the boards—and I'm filled
with dominating rage.

I stomp inside, "Mosquitoes are so stupid, why do they even exist!"
And my sister says, unhelpfully, "They're good for the ecosystem."
I glare at her, considering murder.

I enjoy nature and often think about having a picnic in the summer.
Then caravans of devils from hell start marching
towards my cookies and I snatch them up, horrified.
Why can't you leave me alone?

Once, I had my water bottle sitting on the ground
for a very short time. When I picked it up,
I drank a very small bug that had wormed its way in.
How did that even happen in five minutes?
I was disgusted—outraged—and dumped the whole thing out.

Every day, I try to find it in my impatient and festering heart
not to hate them, and I know I shouldn't.
I think about that poem "The Crime of Being Small,"
and I feel for the tiny, cartoon spider,
but I can't find the mercy inside of me.
Not today, or yesterday, or the years before.
The beady eyes look at me and I think,
you don't deserve death,
but my heart speeds up, and I grab my shoe on instinct:
your life is worth less than my fear.

Quiet

Laura Smith



People have often told me
How I would bond with friends
Through laughter, through talking, through tears.
But they did not tell me
How much we would bond through quiet;

The quivering quiet after laughing ourselves silly,
The gentle quiet of shared work in a shared space,
The ringing quiet of bad news and bad days.
They did not tell me about the quiet of prayer,

Or the instant after someone says,
"I got in"
"We broke up"
"He asked me"
"I failed"
Why did no one tell me about that quiet?

The moment the space between you becomes your whole world,
The silence spooling between us with a thousand words we cannot say.
I have heard more in silence
Than I ever have in words.

He Will Wipe Away Every Tear

Sadie Schumacher



Oil on Canvas | 24" x 18"

Caught with a Cold

Liv Briggs



Digital Photography

Snow Day

Laura Smith

Leave it to adulthood to take all the joy out of snow.
There's a nip in the air,
and all I can think is, "What if the pipes freeze?"
(What if the ground is covered with a million
tiny, glittering pieces of ice, each uniquely made by God?)
What if the power goes out?
(What if we walk with the crunchy top layer of ice
cracking under our boots and smile because it's joy to be alive?)
What if we're stuck here for days?
(What if we throw the first snowball
we've thrown for years, because we're all too old for that,
and laugh 'til we cry, hot, salty tears that melt the snow?)

What if something bad happens?
(But what if we're all alright?)



Until We Are Ghosts

Brianna Glynn

Until we are ghosts
I'll never hold your hand.
The dead will be condemned
because as spirits we have no flesh.
No physical bodies to embrace.
I'll press my fingers to the glass,
imagining my reflection as your complexion.
I laugh softly to myself, how foolish was I
thinking in my arms your gentle frame could remain
when I had told our father I would never regret
not seeing your face, those scars you carried with grace?
You never knew how much I wept, as I wasn't there
for my tears to amass through the NICU glass.
How I was ready to donate all I had
without knowing if we were ever a match.
Now I know it was all wishful thinking
it's only ever been hopeless in meaning
since I learned dreams never loved me back.
Tell me, would you have ever loved me back?

Tell me, would you have ever loved me back?
Since I learned dreams never loved me back,
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When I had told our father I would never regret
thinking in my arms your gentle frame could remain.
I laugh softly to myself, how foolish was I
Imagining my reflection as your complexion?
I'll press my fingers to the glass,
no physical bodies to embrace
because as spirits we have no flesh.
The dead will be condemned,
I'll never hold your hand
until we are ghosts.

4 Penn Plaza, New York, NY

Anna-Asher Baine

Past



Watercolor and Ink on Bristol Paper | 14" x 11"

Present



Watercolor and Ink on Bristol Paper | 14" x 11"

productivity killed the cat

Esther Noeth



we whisper efficiency
into the ears of kids
who shouldn't know
four-syllable words yet.
curiosity is dead.
young grey-clouded eyes wet
somehow, because
poor whiskers was done
dragging in mice to meet
her monthly quota.



The Tiniest Campus Celebrity

Morgan Daniel



Digital Photography

A Wedding in April

Lili Pettigrew

They almost had the ceremony in the closet,
and the groomsmen, shoved in the basement, played Mario,
ties hanging loosely around wrinkled blue suits.
The guests lined the hallway, shivering
in spring dresses, heels on purple
feet. The flower girl's hair was frizzed.
It sounded like World War II
outside, with the thunderous wind
and wailing siren, the devil laughing.
We sang "In Christ Alone," belting
"through the fiercest drought and storm,"
as trees bent horizontally against sheets
of rain, the devil crying.
The Gospel can be painted anywhere if
you have love, some witnesses,
and a closet.





Watercolor, Ink, Gold Enamel Paint on Watercolor Paper | 22" x 28"

Sight

Claira Forrester



Digital Photography

The Hazel Gateway

Liv Briggs

To Teach Her to Dance

McKenzie Harris

Two sisters, fingers interlaced,
skirts flare like peeled tulips,
petals bruised by wind.

Eddies of roseate and cream
turn soundlessly—
bodies folded into one rhythm.

Your hand: a dove humming in mine,
flushed dress brushing your knees,
a note of color against raw air.

Brown eyes gleam—October leaves
pressed beneath quiet water
methodically ticking.

You watch me
as if the map to womanhood
were pleated in my skirt.

How often have I failed you?
Your tattered wings tremor; decay.
My hands full of lesser things:

hours pilfered by chicanery,
squandered in bookshelf prisons,
cobwebs silvering the spines.

You falter, waiting for my step.
Teacups splinter, prisms splatter,
laughter strangled by alarm clocks.

Lace ruptures; the music box
stammers, your arms reach elsewhere.
Sisterhood shrivels at my feet.

Still, we are bound
by wine-stained ribbons;
sprigs of myrtle behind our ears.

Your smile thins—
an ember in my palms
already vanishing.

(American) Jesus

Autumn White



Love one another
as I have loved you
(when it's convenient,
when you've got enough,
when you know
for certain
that someone else
is good enough
to deserve it).

Serve one another
(when you can,
when you feel like it,
when the rest of the church
is serving too).

Live for each other
(but it's okay
if you shout in hatred,
ignore others,
or walk past
those in need
because, really,
you're only human.
Only. Right?)

Give generously
(to members only).
Give to those in need
(only when
the government is running
or when you've got permission
or when you know
it's not a scam).

Give without payment
(when you are certain
they won't use
your kindness for drugs,
because
with enough protocol
we can protect
our church
from bad people).

(What if) Christ
(gave these conditions
when he) hung
on the cross?)

Christlikeness

Eli Isom

Sunday morning, I discover my pocket Jesus
has gone missing from my pants. I got him
in the parking lot of Sam's Club, when
I picked up some clementines. I remember

I pushed my cart and that middle-aged man
in camouflage cargo pants prickled my mind
with the sprawling words on his cardboard sign.

Idling at the STOP, I looked away—
maybe I simply didn't want to feel
guilty, bargaining with God for money
that I didn't really need until

I unzipped my backpack, finding
twelve dollars tangled in wired earbuds:
all the cash I had.

I watched him jog to receive
awkward charity, smile cracking
his shaven—barely—face,
“God bless you,” he said,
pressing his hand to mine.

When I looked down, I grinned because
he had given me Jesus in all Aryan glory
with a little blue sash (blue is my favorite)
proclaiming Jesus loves you.

I wonder if he does,
or if I lost him.





Stoneware Clay and Fiber | 24"x 18"x 48"

Upheld

Reid Pike

Kool-Aid for Communion

Autumn White

He washed their feet

The cleansing, cool stream
from a worn-out garden hose,
you also ought to wash one another's feet
turned toward another,
black sand to the earth.

love one another as I have loved you

A turtle dragging herself
to the cold, littered shore,
greater love has no one than this
painstakingly, agonizingly
digging a nest for her unhatched children.

let us go across to the other side

Windows stuck open on a leaky bus,
their frames held together by duct tape,
peace, be still
inviting the crackle of lightning in the sky,
far too near, but the bus lurches on.

this is my body

Sweat-drenched t-shirts,
hair stiff from layers of salt and dirt,
do this in remembrance of me
blistered hands
digging a septic tank hole.

this is my blood

Long mornings, longer afternoons,
even more sweat flowing in streams,
do this in remembrance of me.
and a vessel of red Kool-Aid:
communion in a small white cup.





Wood-Fired Stoneware | 4" x 4" x 4"

Wood-Fired Tree Mug

Annabella Wooten

Missing: _____

Kate Rutherford

The coffee beans got colds
and the daffodils are sneezing.
The rain keeps pouring down
but still I keep believing
that with time it will get better,
and the days will all be bright.
But now the clouds are rolling
with the turn of blackest night.
I could stand here for hours
waiting for your return,
the days when the kids would cry,
and the stove still tried to burn.
But now we've gotten older
and all that's dead and gone.
Won't you take me sober
back to the great beyond?
'Cause the creamer's gotten weary
and the sugar's disappeared.
The clock ain't tickin' right
and hasn't been for years.
The kids all grown and gone now,
and I alone can find
the keys set on the table,
the ones you left behind.



Memory

Lydia Agee

I am young, and down the road there lives an old, old man. His face when he smiles in greeting cuts into grooves like the bark of his trees. He cares for the orchard—peaches, mostly, and nectarines. Plums, too. And blackberries, sharp as sin. Tiny flying things are everywhere, and he cares for them as well. Each day he refills the songbird's stone basins, shallow tins of water for the bees, and the hanging tubes of clear sticky nectar.

Mama takes me there, on the empty afternoons after kindergarten is over. The old man and his wife teach her to squeeze the orchard down into jars and bottles, distill the flutter of sweetness down into a form that lasts; and, for my part, I learn how to be still.

In church, when I am told I must be still, hands and feet begin to fidget of their own volition, and the urgent need arises in my throat to lean over and whisper silliness with

my brothers. In the orchard, though, the need to be allowed into the tangle of gem-toned flights grows stronger, even, than the jitter of childhood.

You have to be still—as a mouse, as a stone—if you want the hummingbirds near.

After an hour, or something like that (time was not yet cut into hours), of my intense work of attention, they resume their busy lives as they were before my appearance. But they never forget. Now and then, one of the little birds circles, fast as light, round my head to take stock of what I am and what I am doing and whether I might be trusted. The last of afternoon's tawny heat sits down between the blackberries and the row of plums.

One stops, hovers, a solemn flutter of emerald and ruby only a hand's breadth from an enraptured face. And, in a moment that lasts for the rest of my life, he looks back at me.

Bios

Autumn White, a senior TESOL major, is still stuck in the poetry book production factory and kindly requests your assistance. Senior creative writing major and history minor **Abby Hickerson** will always be seen reading, drinking coffee, or both. Junior sculpture major **Reid Pike** takes “to dust you shall return” quite literally—just look at her overalls. **Liv Briggs** is a sophomore digital media communications major who is still looking for her childhood participation award. Junior zoology major **Brianna Glynn** thought too long about what to write in this bio while staring at four dozen rubber ducks. Sophomore history major **Luke Barnard** would prefer to remain anonymous. As with most things in her life, freshman creative writing major **Laura Smith** overthought writing this bio but finished it anyway and is now concerned it wasn’t good enough. **Kate Rutherford** is a psychology major who wishes more people would cry and dance in public. Junior zoology major **Morgan Daniel** would be ecstatic to convince you that pigeons are secretly majestic creatures. Senior English major **McKenzie Harris** believes most of life’s problems can be solved with a Barefoots Honey Bear latte, a long walk, and a square of dark chocolate. Junior graphic design major **Claire Forrester** believes in unicorns. If anyone can take the horror out of horror movies, it’s senior English major **Lily Pond**. Senior English and psychology major **Eli Isom** has found Jesus (pocket-kind and otherwise). Senior sculpture major **Annabella Wooten** is eager to take a nap. **Sadie Schumacher**, a junior sculpture and painting major, is thankful every day for the existence of blankets. If you happen to sight sophomore history and English major **Lydia Agee** crouched by the sidewalk chanting Hebrew psalms to the squirrels, mind your own business. Junior painting major **Anna-Asher Baine** is happily existing off lattes and a lot of unfounded confidence. Junior worship major **Esther Noeth** spends her days in the kitchen (where women belong). **Summer Smith** is a senior English literature major and business administration minor who spends an inordinate amount of time catching whimsies of the homestead she has yet to create. **Lili Pettigrew**, senior creative writing major, grates cheese in her free time.



Union University ✧ Jackson, TN