

Expressions 2026



Lamar State College— Port Arthur

Anderson

THE TEXAS



STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.



Expressions



Spring 2026


Volume XL



Acknowledgements



LSCPA and the editors would like to extend gratitude to all the faculty, staff, and students who make publishing this magazine possible. We continue to celebrate our talented students and their creativity through the publication of our Expressions Magazine. The people who contribute their ideas, time, and art to making this project a success do so with grace, generosity, and compassion. We recognize and appreciate all of you!



From the Chrysalis

My cocoon tightens, colors tease,
I'm feeling for the air;
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear.

A power of butterfly must be
The aptitude to fly,
Meadows of majesty concedes
And easy sweeps of sky.

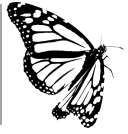
So I must baffle at the hint
And cipher at the sign,
And make much blunder, if at last
I take the clew divine.

~ Emily Dickinson





Table of Contents



Short Story

Torres, Yanneli	.....	3
1st Place		
Bartolome, Eugene	.....	5
2nd Place		
Tran, Leia	.....	10
3rd Place		
Anderson, Robert	.....	12
Honorable Mention		
Espinoza, Fatima	.....	18
Honorable Mention		
Mastrogiovanni, Anthony	.....	21
Honorable Mention		
Zaragoza, John	.....	24
Honorable Mention		

General Essay

Castille, Keoshia	.....	29
1st Place		
Saunders, Brecann	.....	31
2nd Place		
Torres, Yanneli	.....	35
3rd Place		

General Essay

Atkinson, Amber	.....38
Honorable Mention	
Williams, Holly	.....42
Honorable Mention	
Garza, Juan	.....45
Honorable Mention	
Ortiz, Liliana	.....48
Honorable Mention	
Elizardo, Stewart	.....54
Honorable Mention	
Bourque, Teresa	.....56
Honorable Mention	
Morris, Stacia	.....60
Honorable Mention	

Etymology Essay

Nunez, Wendy	.....65
1st Place	
Torres, Yanneli	.....67
2nd Place	
Bartolome, Eugene	.....69
3rd Place	
Miller, Alonna	.....73
Honorable Mention	

Etymology Essay

Malik, Anum	.....75
Honorable Mention	
Tran, Leia	.....77
Honorable Mention	

Historical Essay

Livingston, Max	.....82
1st Place	
Galmore, Carlee	.....87
2nd Place	
Dillard, Cameron	.....94
3rd Place	
Miller, Brendan	.....100
Honorable Mention	

Research Paper

Atkinson, Amber	.....106
1st Place	
Kiker, Haley	.....114
2nd Place	
Dixon, Ashley	.....123
3rd Place	

Poetry

Schroeder, Ellyana	134
1st Place	
Fowler, Tori	137
2nd Place	
Rodriguez, Rowan	139
3rd Place	
Herring, Brianna	141
Honorable Mention	
Crocker, Johnathan	142
Honorable Mention	
Yowman, Sa'Rijha	144
Honorable Mention	
Elizardo, Stewart	146
Honorable Mention	
Schroeder, Ellyana	148
Honorable Mention	
Crocker, Johnathan	149
Honorable Mention	
Castille, Keoshia	151
Honorable Mention	
Reeves, Kyle	152
Honorable Mention	

Poetry

Elizardo, Stewart	154
Honorable Mention	

The Cover

Anderson, Robert	Cover
------------------	-------

General Art

Rodriguez, Rowan	1
1st Place	
Simpson, Alex	23
2nd Place	
Rodriguez, Rowan	41
3rd Place	
Rodriguez, Rowan	59
Honorable Mention	
Rodriguez, Rowan	72
Honorable Mention	
Loera, Kimberly	80
Honorable Mention	
Anderson, Robert	93
Honorable Mention	
Anderson, Robert	104
Honorable Mention	

General Art

Anderson, Robert	.....122
Honorable Mention	
Nguyen, Kha	.....133
Honorable Mention	
Simpson, Alex	.....145
Honorable Mention	
Smith, Persais	.....156
Honorable Mention	

Digital Art

Cook-Hausman, Spencer	.....9
1st Place	
Cook-Hausman, Spencer	.....28
2nd Place	
Cook-Hausman, Spencer	.....47
3rd Place	

Photography

Garza, Juan	.....17
1st Place	
Rodriguez, Rowan	.....34
2nd Place	
Garza, Juan	.....53
3rd Place	

Photography

Rodriguez, Rowan64

Honorable Mention

Faculty & Staff

Barbay, Carol158

Poetry

Champagne, Adriane Wallace159

Photography

Wilbur-Cammack, Christina160

Poetry

James-Mastronardi, Caitlin161

Photography

Wilbur, Mary Catherine162

Art

Wilbur, Mary Catherine163

Digital Art

Charleston, Tiffany164

Poetry

Wilbur, Mary Catherine166

Art

Galloway, Chelsey167

Photography

James-Mastronardi, Caitlin168

Poetry

Faculty & Staff

James-Mastronardi, Caitlin	.....169
Photography	
Wilbur, Mary Catherine	.....170
Art	
Galloway, Chelsey	.....171
Photography	
Lowe, Zebulon	.....172
Photography	
Wilbur, Mary Catherine	.....173
Art	
James-Mastronardi, Caitlin	.....174
Photography	
Judice, Michelle	.....175
Prose	





General Art—First Place

Rowan Rodriguez

Short
Story



Short Story

First Place

The Knock

Yanneli Torres

Monday mornings were always a little rushed. I had one sock on, hair half-done, backpack half-zipped. It was the first year I would take the STAAR test, and I was kind of excited. I had stayed up studying to be able to excel in it. The smell of fresh tortillas filled the kitchen, and my mom hummed a soft tune while packing my lunch. It felt like the start of a long week ahead.

Then came the knock.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Not a soft knock. Not a neighbor's tap. It was the kind of knock that makes your heart stop and the walls shake, a fist pounding like thunder against the door.

I froze. Mid-step. Mid-breath. My brush fell from my hand and hit the floor with a sharp clatter. My body locked up like I was a statue frozen in place. The sound echoed in my ears long after it stopped, like my brain couldn't let go of it.

My mom's head jerked toward the door. Her face dropped, all the warmth disappeared. She pressed a hand to her chest. My baby brother slept peacefully in his crib, unaware of the storm building around him. I could only hope he'd stay asleep, that he couldn't cry and give us away. I knew exactly who it was.

ICE.

My stomach twisted so hard I thought I might throw up. My ears rang. My heart pounded against my chest every beat screaming: What do we do? What if they come in? What if they don't

leave? Another knock came, harder this time. It sounded like it wasn't just trying to break down a door but break us too.

My dad moved fast, whispering sharply, "To the room. Now." His voice was trying to sound steady, but I could hear it tremble. My mom grabbed my arm and pulled me behind her. My legs barely moved. It felt like trying to run underwater.

I heard the blinds rattle as my dad peeked through. "ICE," he confirmed. His voice broke on the word.

The hallway lights flickered above me. The smell of burning tortillas filled the air, but I didn't care. All I could focus on was that door. That knock. The fear. I crouched behind the bed, holding my little brother in my arms. I cuddled him close, praying he wouldn't wake up and cry. We didn't cry. We didn't talk. We barely even breathed, like the sound of our lungs might give us away.

I remember everything after that. We didn't know if we could ever leave the house again, if we were being watched, followed. Hunted. It felt like ICE was still out there, hiding in the shadows, waiting for us to make one wrong move. The silence after they left wasn't relief; it felt like a trap.

That morning, I never made it to school. All that studying, all that excitement. Gone.

But I learned something no test could teach me.

What fear feels like when it wears a badge.

What helplessness feels like when you're only a child and the people you love might disappear at any second.

What it's like when your own home doesn't feel safe anymore.

And since then, every knock on the door makes my heart race. Every Monday morning feels just a little colder. The sound of that knock, loud, hard, final... still lives in the back of my mind. It didn't just shake the door.

It shook everything.

Short Story

Second Place

Between Two Shores

Eugene Bartolome

The Divide left me torn. For days, I have sat cross-legged on the floor, looking up at the unfinished canvas. It's daunting stature, looming over me, as if taunting me that I could never close the gap in the middle of the large, rectangular canvas. Two distant shores. On the right, a mixture of ash, muted blue, sea green, and a hint of turquoise— empty and chilling. Towards the left, a clash of red, ochre, and orange hues, pitting against each other. Angry and unrestrained. In the middle lay pure whiteness, as if Jesus himself passed by; a portion of the canvas remained untouched. An empty field that is ready to be filled, but I simply can't. I couldn't figure anything that would bridge the gap. I can only wonder how am I ever going to finish this piece.

Rain started to set in, overpowering the rays of sun that peeked into my studio. Studio apartment, to be accurate. Canvases lay about, paint and materials scattered and stacked upon each other, a open sketchbook with scribbles, and dried out brushes. It's a mess but an artistic mess, if I may. I haven't had the leisure of a breakout painting ever since graduating from art school a few months ago. I was scraping by with my job as a Papa John's delivery driver.

What I thought I heard was a raindrop, but it kept repeating repeating repeating. It was soft taps on my door, so I rushed, almost falling over because of the clutter. I opened it to find Mara was standing in the doorway, wrapped in her old olive raincoat, curls damp from the drizzle. She held a paper bag in one hand, a

thermos in the other.

I could almost make a still life just of this moment. I would call it "Reply."

"I brought food," she said, stepping inside like she always did—no fuss, no permission.

"You don't have to do that," I muttered, flustered.

"I know," placing the bag on the workbench, "that's why I did."

Mara had always had a way of showing up exactly when I needed her, by some mystic force, knowing when to come and leave me be. We'd met in art school, painted side by side for years, drifted in and out of each other's lives like tide and shoreline, pursuing our own aspirations. Yet, she had always come to be there for me, especially in difficult moments such as this. She painted with quiet precision, layering stories into silence. A chilling beauty that comforts anyone that looks at it, calm and muted. Unlike my preferred method of motion motion motion and clash of colors on the canvas. Passionate, angry, unrelenting. I always envied her clarity.

During art school, Mara had always been the quiet one. A woman of few words. But even then, she would always know what to say and where it hurts. Looking back, she always critiqued my work but I never listened. Why would I? It's my painting. Though, my stubbornness never stopped her from examining my work and me.

Mara wandered over, hands in her coat pockets. She looked at *The Divide* in silence. She always gave art the courtesy of silence before speaking.

"Still fighting it?" she asked finally.

I stood in front of the canvas, next to her, letting out a sigh. "It won't come together. I've tried everything."

She leaned in, paying no mind to me, examining the canvas with a kind of patient detachment. "It's not about coming together," she said after a moment. "It's about the space between."

I looked at her and frowned. "That's the whole problem. The space in the middle—it's dead. It's the absence of meaning."

"No," she said, almost gently. "It's where the meaning is hiding. You're trying to close the gap. Maybe you need to honor it instead," facing me as she finished. She said it like it was obvious and to her, maybe it was. I swear I could see waves move and reflect in

her deep blue eyes.

She stayed a little longer. We ate her homemade lasagna. She poured hot tea from the thermos, a perfect combination to fight the rain and depressive state the studio and I were in. Eating in silence, the shower of raindrops surrounded us. A soft, ambient light from my lamp allowed us to see the room in depth, highlighting the details of *The Divide* and *Mara*. She didn't ask me to explain the painting. She didn't offer advice. Her presence, grounded and quiet. She just sat in the room like a quiet answer I hadn't known I needed.

"I have to go, I wouldn't want to get caught in the rain again," she said. The afternoon sun started to peak through the gray clouds. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't dead by holing yourself up again and not eating," she said flatly

"Thanks for being so frank, *Mara*." I said, a hint of a smile, as I guided her to the door. She turned around and for a moment, lingered, looking at me with the same patient detachment a while ago. I could only hold so long in that gaze.

"You take care," she said, breaking away her stare. Walking down the hallway, thermos and bag in hand, I waited until she turned the corner and her footsteps gradually fade away before turning back to the canvas.

Stare, stare, stare. It's all I did for a while. Letting the painting mock me as *Mara's* words turned over in my mind like stones in water, as I let her presence flow in me like fish down the stream.

Honor the space.

I picked up a small, fine brush, never touched before—preferring wide brushes to convey movement and dipped it in a softened white, tinged with gray. As the brush met the canvas, my hands were shaking, but I continued. I painted a thin, trembling line across the middle of the canvas, barely noticeable. Not a bridge, not a wall, just a thread. A suggestion of connection, the recognition of distance. It had shifted everything.

Colors I had fought with began to settle into place. I added a wash of lavender to the angry reds, cooled the right side without dulling it. Scrapped away the excess with a palette knife, exposing textures I had buried. My hands moved without second-guessing, doubts and questions unanswered, but I did not bother. The paint-

ing did not resist anymore. It welcomed me in. Hours passed unnoticed.

I stepped back, it was dark outside. The canvas felt still but alive. It was whole, not because I resolved the divide, but because I acknowledged its presence and bridged the two sides with a third element, acceptance. It is finished.

As I looked around, I found an unfamiliar piece of cloth by the chair Mara sat on earlier. It was a handkerchief, embroidered with waves and her initial, M. With no second thought, I pocketed it and went straight to Mara's apartment. I arrived at her door, sweating a bit as I ran all the way there. I don't know why, but it just seemed that I needed to return this to her as fast as possible. Or maybe it was just an excuse to see her again.

I knocked gently as she had earlier. She opened the door, as if she expected me to come to her. I gazed at her, examined her like I would a painting. Her hair was a bit wet, but I could smell her vanilla shampoo. Her face was smooth as silk, probably just finished her skincare routine; she was glowing. Her beauty radiant, complimented by the darkness of the night. She gave me a playful look saying *what?* In the pocket of my crimson coat, I showed her the handkerchief she left at my place.

"You left it at my place," I said while extending my hand to give it to her, "I also didn't properly thank you for the food," she took her handkerchief from my hand, looking at it and back at me.

"You didn't have to come all the way over here, but I appreciate it." We stood in silence for a moment before I said, "It's done." She didn't ask what, didn't need to. Mara always understood me.

"I knew it would be," she said softly. Then, after a pause, "You stopped fighting it."

"I listened to it," I replied, before adding shyly, "and to you as well."

Mara smiled—the widest I've seen her do so. Somehow, her glowing presence lit up more and the waves in her deep blue eyes were calm while simultaneously roaring. "That's all I ever ask," she said, maintaining that smile. I could only smile back at her. She stood in front of me, calm and inviting, facing me, passionate and fervent. With only the white doorway between us, I stepped in.



Digital Art—First Place

Spencer Cook-Hausman

Short Story

Third Place

Our Serenity

Leia Tran

One photo holds a deep story. As Lyn cleans her dusty attic, she notices a small, old treasure box peeping through other boxes. She opened the lid and reached her hand in to explore the inside of the chest. Photocards, written letters, and many trinkets filled the box to its rim. In particular, Lyn's hand lingered on an old, crumbled photo of her and her friends near a water spring. Lyn took the time to revisit those past memories.

Maiya, Alan, and Lyn would share their moments in this vast, lush field. The breezy, cool air and shallow, clear lake streamed along the meadow. The three friends were the only ones that accompanied nature's creation. A red checkered quilt laid near the stream with all their belongings onto the ground. Maiya suggested that the friends start their study session, however Alan and Lyn had different plans. They proceeded to splash Maiya with the lake's cool water, and in return Maiya splashed back. The water glittered in the air through the sunlight and rested on each person. The three friends played around without any care.

Later in the evening, Alan started to explore every crevasse of the area. "Maiya, Lyn! Look at this amazing spectacle!" Alan shouted from a distance. "Not the time, Alan," Maiya replied lying down. "Lyn and I want to rest" Alan ran towards them. "Trust me, you guys aren't using this place to its full potential." Maiya and Lyn exchanged confused looks. Alan took both of their hands and guid-

ed them to this mystery.

As the two girls came to a stop, Maiya and Lyn became silent to take in what stood in front of them. “Don’t you see how beautiful it is?” Alan asked. Below them was a clear, blue spring of water. The stream of water that ran along the rocks flowed into the spring through a waterfall. The rushing noises of the waterfall synced with the whistles of the wind. Birds chirped vibrantly, cicadas croaked loudly. Silence prepared its own kind of music. Alan wrapped his arms around the girls’ shoulders. “Shall we explore?” he asked. Without hesitation, the girls nodded their heads in response.

They carefully rushed down to the spring. The sounds of the waterfall grew louder. Maiya dropped her belongings and instantly ran into the water. “Ah!” she exclaimed. “It’s so cold in here.” “Really?” Alan asked. “Let’s go, Lyn!” Lyn looked at him with doubt. “I don’t think I want to go-” Alan picked her up and rushed into the water. “I think you do want to go!” he laughed. Lyn struggled to escape his grasp, but they were already in the water. “Doesn’t it feel good?” Alan said after dunking his whole body into the water. Lyn cracked a smile in agreement.

The sun was preparing for its rest. The three friends sat back to absorb the calming atmosphere. “I want this place to be ours,” Maiya said, breaking the silence. “It already is,” Alan replied. “Our Serenity,” Lyn and Maiya nodded in response. “Our Serenity,” Lyn repeated.

After that day, the three friends made sure Serenity would never feel alone. They continued to splash in the spring, run in the rain, and create more memories to come. Serenity made them feel at home, and they made Serenity feel unlonely. As the years drifted by, the passage of time softly whispered through the seasons. The days grew longer, and the fields began to change, the memories of Serenity remained unchanged.

Short Story

Honorable Mention

The Need For Speed

Robert Anderson

The last time I looked down at the speedometer, I was passing 160 miles per hour. The adrenaline spike that ruled my senses was past the understanding of common fear. I was exceeding that form of primordial beckoning that calls one to tuck and run. I was going to see what a machine could do with me on its back come what may.

The date was the 12th of April 1988, and I had big plans for my birthday. I had finished with some nefarious activities that netted my arduous efforts with \$30,000 in cash that money was burning a hole in my jean's pocket.

Upon moving to Tucson, Arizona, I learned there was a group of men who road raced outlaw style up and down the Crest Mountains that encircled the city. These hombres were on some of the baddest ass Catoma style café race motorcycles I had ever seen in person.

I have always been a Harley Davidson guy. I grew up on dirt bikes, but by my junior year in high school, I was riding a 1976 Flame Series FLXX 96 c.c. shovelhead Harley Davidson to school.

The Harley Davidson I was riding when I discovered these crazy ass racers was not going to cut it. Leaving my Harley Davidson at the apartment, I caught a cab ride to South Tucson Yamaha motorcycle dealership. I had one objective and one bike in mind, and I'd be damned if I couldn't bring them both to fruition.

The first objective was the need for speed. The second was a

FXJ 1100 c.c. water-cooled Yamaha monster. At the time, it was the fastest production motorcycle in its class. The 1100 c.c. motor produced 480-foot pounds of torque to the rear wheel. So much so, the Perrelli Tire Company had to invent a new compound for the rear tire to keep this beast from eating the tires off the rims.

The titanium alloy box frame was new technology in motorcycle production, reducing the weight of the frame by over one-hundred pounds. The gas-filled front shocks were adjustable for track conditions by the turn of the lever, unheard of at that time in street bike design. The single rear mono-shock was held to the frame under the leather seat and connected to the sway arm, which allowed the rear tire to activate at a predetermined setting.

The speedometer read 200 mph, but I believed in my biker heart that it could do more. This was the baby doll I was after. It oozed badass superiority and domination dressed out in the iconic Yamaha jet black, canary yellow, and translucent white. The nitrogen-filled Perrelli tires were fat with bold white letters.

It was an instrument of speed and beauty, velocity wrapped in elegance.

The salesman brought me into an office closing the door behind himself. I sat down in a blue cushioned office chair that had been offered to me. The salesman went on for a while about the down payments, taxes, insurance, and monthly payments. I told him, matter-of-factly, that I wanted the yellow, black, and white matching helmet and gloves, and that I would be back later to buy the matching leathers.

He just stared at me like I had shape shifted into some unfathomable being from a galaxy far away. He asked, "You do understand that the motorcycle you are asking about is \$12,999?" In 2026, this price equates to about \$25,000. I countered his condescending tone with smug assholery by saying, "Yes sir, and at that price, you should throw in the helmet and gloves." Then he asked, "How much do you have to put down?" I replied, "All of it." The look on his face when I pulled out the cash was priceless. Cash IS king.

As I stepped the bike down onto Mission Street with the high pitched yet throaty sound of the exhaust pipes bellowing out like a song from a choir of children of the damned. I made my way

through traffic shifting gears while swaying back and forth to check balance.

Entering the on ramp of Interstate 10 north, passing Davis-Monthan Air Force Base on my right-hand side I was set. I just had to run this machine from Tucson up to Phoenix so I could show my girlfriend, Lisa, my new toy and new love. I was the kid in the candy store and I had just scored big.

At 11:37 a.m., I entered the highway running the posted 65 miles per hour speed limit. Feeling the bike out by swaying from side to side, I must have looked like a drunken sailor returning to his ship after a hard night at shore leave. It was like dancing with one of those smoking hot professional dancers from Dancing with the Stars. The show where at first the untrained celebrity kind of sucks, but after a short time becomes really good, and yeah, the ride really got real good.

Scanning ahead, I started rolling the throttle back bringing the speed up to 100 miles per hour. Then, more: 120 mph. And then I needed MORE! At that point, I lost all inhibition. With a sense of wonder and fear being pissed to the wind, I continued to roll the throttle back. Weaving around spare traffic, I had to use the emergency lane twice because of cars running side by side on the highway.

The last time I looked down at the speedometer, I was passing 160 miles per hour.

My sensory impulses were in a state of pure chaos as I processed the objects passing me in a kaleidoscope of blurred colors and shapes. I was moving at a rate of a quarter of a mile in less time than saying “one-one-thousand.”

My cerebral cortex was in overdrive, the neurons in my pre-frontal lobe firing information across dendrites at the speed of light. The pons dumping dopamine into my central nervous system at copious amounts. Then it happened: I hit the vortex, the mental place racers call “the clearing.”

Everything slowed down and a calmness filled every cell in my body. I could read the numbers on the mile markers, even license plates as I moved past vehicles. I was moving through space in tandem with the machine. We had become one, one being, one life. An intimacy only shared by lovers. There was no sound, no earth,

no forces pressing against us. Only freedom.

I must have been doing 220 miles per hour when the bike reached its top speed. I held the speed for a good five minutes then shifted the transmission out of gear into neutral allowing the bike to coast along the highway.

With the motor at idle, I could hear the whizzing scream of the tires on the concrete as we began to slow down. I could feel the sun's rays pressing against me and was smelling the freshness of the air as it passed through the louvers of my helmet.

I had broken through to the other side. I had slain Goliath and lived to tell the tale. I had ridden the dragon and crest the universe leaving the stars behind me.

As I made the exit at Bapchule to head to the Gila River Indian Reservation where I was to meet Lisa, that's when the pain in my left knee hit me. As the saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished." There are consequences in life that at times are unavoidable.

Entering the parking lot, I could see Lisa's baby blue 1972 Volkswagon Beetle and Lisa leaning against it. Her gorgeous face set with a look of agitation, which read, "Where the f*ck did you get that?" Her blonde hair was dancing in the breeze that gently rolled down from the mountain. Her tight blue jeans were accentuating perfection in the form of woman, and she wore a red shirt with strings across the shoulders leaving them bare, making me glad that God made me a man.

That is when I looked at my watch, which read 12:11 p.m. It had taken me thirty-four minutes to travel ninety-three miles.

When I parked next to Lisa's bug, I could feel blood running down my left leg and my blue jeans felt wet. I felt as if my neck and left arm were on fire.

Lisa exclaimed, "What in the f*ck did you do, baby?" "Where in the f*ck did you get this motorcycle?" "Oh shit, your f*cking bleeding!" Women. Yah' gottah' love em.

At some point in this grand experiment of dumbassery, I had managed to get a piece of sharp stone imbedded in my left knee, which had to be removed at a nearby medical clinic. I had a drain tube sticking out of my leg for over a month. My neck area and forearm had been literally sand blasted, which also took a month to heal.

Riding that motorcycle at those speeds was one of the most stupid endeavors I have undertaken. As the saying goes, "That was confidence outrunning common sense." It was also one of the most exhilarating experiences I have ever had, and I have ridden bulls.



Photography—First Place

Juan Garza

Short Story

Honorable Mention

Bending Time

Fatima Espinoza

It had been twenty years since I had seen him. I've spent year after year since then studying time and understanding the science behind it. And, finally, I was able to create something that would change everything. I'll be able to see him again, my Leo. I went to the old antique store where I found the last component for my time machine. An old brass clock, with its hands frozen at 3:17. Every screw, every wire, was finally worth every regret and tear. I was going to see him again.

I set the date to April 9th, 2011. I was back at the train station, and all of a sudden I was younger, thinner, and holding the letter that drifted me away from him. The letter was a word of acceptance to my dream school of design. I always wanted to design my own building or my own items of clothing, and Leo was always there to help me pursue that. He was so supportive, even if it meant we were apart. As we walked towards the train, I could see Leo's face, he didn't want me to leave. He never said it, but it was very clear with his body language. I watched myself say goodbye, and as she was walking towards the train, I grabbed her by the hand. "Don't go," I told myself. The younger version of me turned around, "What? Who are you?" "Listen, I'm you, from the future," I said. "You can't leave Leo, he'll die." She shook her head in disbelief. "You're telling me to not follow my dream? This opportunity is the reason I've been working so hard. How do I know you're telling the truth?" Her voice quivers. "What if it happens

anyway? I listen to you and throw all my hard work away, yet he still dies, then what?" I didn't know what to say. My gaze drifted towards Leo. The younger me turns to look at Leo as well. "What's going to happen to him?" the younger me asks. "He dies in a car crash three years after you leave. He was driving late from work, alone," I told her. There's a long pause between me and my younger self. Then, Leo walks up to us, "Is everything okay? You'll miss your train." My heart skipped a beat. It was my first time seeing Leo like this in so long. "Let's go home," the younger me said as she grabbed Leo's hand. They walked away without asking me anything else. I watched as they slowly disappeared into the crowd. As the realization hit, a sense of relief filled my body. I was able to stop myself, but was I able to stop his death?

I opened my eyes, and I awoke in an unrecognized room. I stood up, and the clock was at 3:17 pm. I looked at the calendar on the wall; I was back in the present. As I was looking around what seemed to be my apartment, I acknowledged the various picture frames around the room. Pictures of me and Leo at our wedding, at events and dates, and even one in the hospital, with our baby. I looked at it and teared up. I did it; I saved him. I looked back at the clock, 3:17 pm. The clock hadn't changed. Time was moving, but the clock was still. Confused, I grabbed the clock. "It must be broken," I thought to myself. Before I could confirm, I could hear noise from the television in the other room. The news came on, "We're here to report a man and his daughter have died as casualties in a robbery at Greens Market. The suspect-...." Leo had died. I saved him, yet.. still died, and so did our daughter. I succeeded in creating this dream future that I've been longing for, but he couldn't stay. I couldn't see him one last time. I didn't get to hold our baby. I got a taste of what could've been, and just like that, it got snatched away in a blink of an eye.

I made my way back to the antique store. I walked towards the time machine, frustrated and overfilled with despair, because all I wanted to do was get him back. I was determined to save him, for good this time. I tried again, and again, and again. I tried 48 times. Every time I would hit that button on the machine, no matter what I changed, I got no results. He would just die. He'd always die. I can't save him. No matter how much I try, or how long ago I go

back, there's no way to get him back. After bending time for the whole day, I set the date back to the present. I was tired, and it was now 10 pm. As I stared at the machine I worked so desperately on, I finally understood the importance of time. I accepted the fact that he was meant to go. No matter how much I move within time, I can't change what is already determined to be. Change something, and the universe will bring it back another way. No matter what, fate is fate.

I used the time machine for the last time. I changed the date to October 3rd, 2008. The day me and Leo met. Instead of trying to find some way to change what is destined for us, I simply watched. I relived every memorable moment, every kiss, every date. I watched Leo laugh, I watched him walk me home for the first time. I was watching our story all over again, and I was happy. I realized that moments weren't meant to be everlasting, they're meant to create memories that'll be remembered and cherished for the rest of my life.

Short Story

Honorable Mention

Between Sirens and Silence

Anthony Mastrogiovanni

“You’re not going to make the hospital,” my partner said quietly to the young woman, but I already knew. The patient was crowning, and we were still several minutes away from the hospital. The ambulance bounced as we ran lights and sirens through the Maryland traffic, the radio crackling with updates that no longer mattered. I pulled on black nitrile gloves and moved closer to the end of the stretcher.

“Alright, listen to me,” I told the expectant mother. “You’re doing great. Short breaths. I’ve got you.”

The back of the old ambulance felt smaller than usual. The engine hummed beneath us, equipment rattled in cabinets, and the smell of sanitizer lingered in the air. The mother’s breathing grew faster with every contraction. I had been on plenty of emergency calls as a firefighter and EMT, but this one was different. This wasn’t about stopping something bad from happening. This was something good about to begin.

The delivery happened fast. One push, then another, and suddenly the baby girl was in my hands. She didn’t cry. “She’s not breathing,” my partner said. For a second, everything went quiet. No sirens, no radio, no noise at all, just the weight of what that silence meant. The baby was limp and dusky, and the relief I expected never came. Then, training kicked in.

“Let’s start neonatal CPR,” I said. “I’ve got the airway.” We moved automatically: Suction - Positioning - Gentle compressions.

I counted out loud to keep myself focused, even though my heart was pounding. I remember thinking how strange it was that something so small could feel so heavy.

The mother was watching us, panic written all over her face. “Is she okay?” she asked. “We’re working on her,” I replied. “Stay with me.”

The seconds felt longer than minutes ever had on a fire scene. Then the baby gasped. Just one breath at first, then another. “I’ve got respirations,” I said. A moment later, the baby cried.

The sound filled the ambulance, louder than the sirens outside. Relief hit all of us at once. The mother started crying too, reaching out as we placed her baby on her chest. I realized I had been holding my breath without noticing.

We continued transport to the hospital, and the tension slowly drained from the back of the rig. I gave the report over the radio, going through vitals and times like I had done a hundred times before, but this call felt different. Firefighting and EMS work often meant arriving after something terrible had already happened. This time, we were there at the exact moment the situation could have gone either way.

Later that night, back at the station, I replayed the silence in my head, followed by that first cry. Delivering the baby and helping her breathing start wasn’t about being a hero. It was about staying calm, trusting training, and working as a team when seconds mattered.

I’m no longer a firefighter, but that call is still with me. It showed me the weight of responsibility that comes with being the one people rely on in their worst moments. Sometimes the most important decision anyone can make is to keep their hands steady and their voice calm, even when everything else feels out of control.



General Art—Second Place

Alex Simpson

Short Story

Honorable Mention

The Night I Stopped Calling

the Police First

John Zaragoza

I didn't buy a mask or give myself a nickname and it definitely wasn't going to be some crazy crusade. In 2004, I was living in Redfield, Texas, in an apartment complex where small crimes kept happening and nothing ever seemed to change.

Vehicles were broken into every couple of weeks usually at night and usually without anyone hearing a thing. Packages disappeared almost as soon as they were delivered. Tenants complained constantly and management responded with vague promises to "look into it." The police showed up when they could, which usually meant long after the damage was done. Over time, the situation stopped feeling urgent and started feeling normal.

I didn't want to become a vigilante.

Everyone in the complex adjusted to the crime without ever admitting it. People stopped reporting incidents unless the damage felt worth the effort. Neighbors warned each other casually instead of expecting anything to change. I caught myself doing the same, double checking my car doors, and bringing packages inside faster instead of asking why this kept happening. It wasn't fear so much as habit. Nothing was getting better but nothing felt shocking anymore either.

I was up late one night because I couldn't sleep. I was too busy

listening to traffic and a neighbor's television through the paper-thin walls. Someone down the hall was laughing and I could hear a muffled argument outside. Then I heard metal scraping near the parking lot. At first, I ignored it assuming someone was just passing through. When the sound came again, slower and deliberate, I looked out the window and saw a guy moving between cars testing door handles like he'd done it before. Somewhere nearby a voice called out "hurry up" followed by quiet laughter. I reached for my phone already knowing how little good it would do.

I stood there, in my dark apartment, weighing my options. Calling the police felt automatic but pointless. I could already imagine the waiting and the report that wouldn't lead anywhere. Down below, the guy moved to another car completely unbothered.

I set my phone down, grabbed my jacket, and headed for the door telling myself I was just going outside to make my presence known. I wasn't looking for a fight and I wasn't trying to prove anything.

I took the stairs instead of the elevator and stepped into the cold night air. The parking lot lights cast long shadows between the cars. The guy was a few rows over focused on what he was doing. I hesitated for a moment then walked toward him, trying to look calm as my heart started to race. When I was close enough, I cleared my throat and said, "hey!"

He spun around "What?" he asked. "You shouldn't be out here" I answered, my voice steady but tight. He laughed, "Mind your own business. This isn't your problem."

"It is if you're breaking into people's cars," I said. He hesitated, shifting his weight, deciding what to do next.

Then, he lunged without warning shoving me hard. Together, we crashed to the asphalt; the impact knocked the air out of me. He swung wildly and I closed the distance using what I knew from Jiu-Jitsu to control his arms. We rolled on the ground, neither of us gaining a clear advantage. He cursed and thrashed, but I focused on control instead of strength. The fight was messy and fast and for a moment, I thought I had him. It worked until his arm slipped free.

As his punches rained down, flashes of training filled my head. My coach's voice cutting through the chaos, "Keep your shoulders

tight. Anticipate, don't react." I ducked as a fist skimmed past my face. I remembered the hours spent practicing escapes from bad positions. Another punch came and I heard my coach again. "Use their weight against them," he had often instructed. I twisted and rolled just enough to throw my attacker off balance and pinned him long enough to stop the blows. "Enough" I said. After a moment, he rolled away, scrambled to his feet, and ran off. By the time I got to my feet, he was gone.

I stayed there for a minute letting my heart slow as the parking lot went quiet again. I didn't feel like a hero. I just felt alert in a way I hadn't before. I went back inside, locked the door, and checked the apartment windows replaying everything in my head.

Deep down, I knew he or someone like him could come back. A few nights later, I noticed people lingering near my building and footsteps that seemed to follow my pace. I told myself I was being paranoid, but the feeling wouldn't go away. One night, I peeked through the blinds and saw a brown four door sedan idling near the street curb. I knew they were coming for me.

Maybe I should have bought a mask.

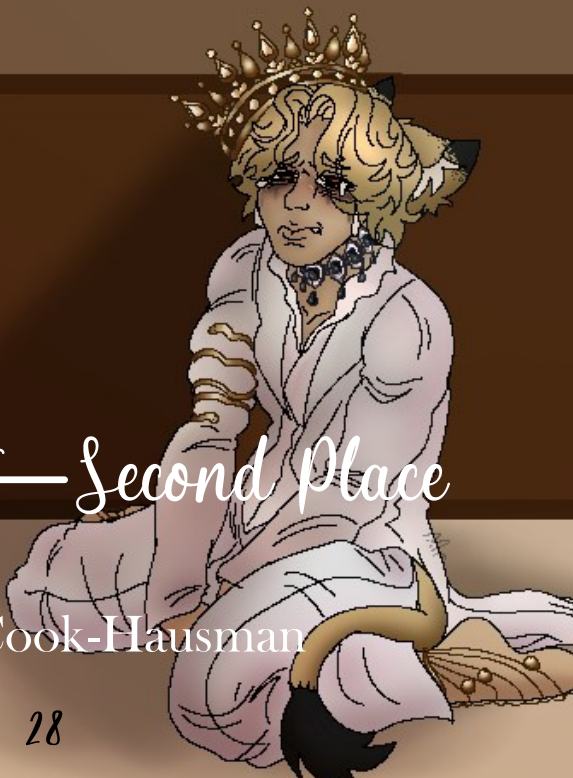
General
Essay





Digital Art—Second Place

Spencer Cook-Hausman



General Essay

First Place

Confessions of the Loud Mom on the Sidelines

Keoshia Castille

I never intended on becoming that mom; you know the one whose voice echoes across gymnasiums and football fields like a slightly unhinged sports commentator. The one who's had too much caffeine and too little chill. Yet here I am, the woman other parents can locate with their eyes closed purely by sound. If a ref ever goes missing, they could triangulate my position using my decibel level alone.

It started innocently enough. At my son's first basketball game, I simply wanted to offer encouragement, you know something small, something supportive, something low-key like, "Go, honey!" Unfortunately, what actually came from my mouth sounded more like a battle cry from an ancient warrior tribe. Heads turned. Children flinched. One dad ducked. My son gave me That Look, the universal teenage expression that says, please stop, or I will legally change my name, and you won't be invited to the next game.

Football season didn't help. If anything, it would make me worse. Something about the crisp fall air and the smell of grass unlocks a primal sports-mother instinct. Suddenly I'm not a suburban mom with a reusable grocery tote; I'm the Defensive Coordinator of Team Yell. I shout things I don't even understand: "WATCH THE BLITZ!" "SEND HIM TO HIS MOM!" "SOMEBODY HYDRATE!" I once yelled "MOVE THE BALL!" They were running defense plays and technically

they are not supposed to be anywhere near the ball. Details are for quieter moms.

The other parents have learned to adapt. Some sit near me because they find my commentary “entertaining,” which is code for “We like to watch a human foghorn in the wild.” Others sit far, far away, possibly in another county, but that doesn’t bother me. The dads will occasionally high-five me after my more theatrical reactions, but the moms mostly pat my arm gently, like they’re comforting an excitable golden retriever.

My son claims he can hear me from the field even with his helmet on. This, to him, is apparently not a compliment. After one game he said, “Mom, I love you, but you’re kind of embarrassing.” I told him that’s because my love is powerful. He said it’s because my voice is loud enough to disrupt radio transmissions.

Of course, I’ve tried to tone it down. Once. I made a pact with myself: This game I will be quiet and just watch the game. I will just be an innocent bystander. That lasted fourteen seconds, maybe less. The moment my son touched the ball, something inside me detonated. I shot out of my seat like a jack-in-the-box on a Red Bull drip. Subtlety died on the 50-yard line.

But here’s the thing: I wouldn’t change it. My son may pretend he’s embarrassed, but I know deep down he loves that I’m his loudest cheerleader, even if he loves it very, very quietly. And when he’s older, I hope he looks back and remembers that his mom was always there, voice booming, heart bursting, cheering him on with absolutely zero volume control or self-control.

After all, if you can’t be the loud mom for your kid, what’s the point of having lungs?

General Essay

Second Place

The Difference Between Processing and Experiencing

Breann Saunders

Humans are by definition beings comprised of immense complexity not just in the way that we think, but in the way that we reshape ourselves to grow with the world around us. In realizing that, what makes us so different from AI? AI is complex just like us, and it seems to grow and learn more everyday. But what defines us as humans in a way that technology cannot relate to? Through a conversation with ChatGPT, an AI itself, we unpacked what truly separates experience from intelligence, perceiving from processing, and external growth from internal growth.

I asked myself the same question as I asked AI, “What do you think makes me human?” I couldn’t truly understand the difference between living and experiencing life in real time compared to a new data update that would understand every emotion I feel and be able to reflect on it better than I could. It felt crazy to even ask AI what would make it so different from me, when I couldn’t even come up with a good reason myself. That’s when AI pointed out that just because it understands and processes every single emotion that we as humans feel, that doesn’t mean it has the ability to modify itself and grow internally as humans can. It can’t make choices based on experience,

only on what the data points to. ChatGPT replied saying, “You’re human because you feel the weight of time. You remember, you imagine, you regret, you hope. You make choices in the face of uncertainty, you love even when it makes you vulnerable, and you keep moving forward even when the path isn’t clear.” That’s when I realized, these things aren’t decisions we make based on data. That every experience and struggle that we go through can’t always be processed by a machine. We can’t truly understand why we do the things we do, but that gut feeling isn’t something that technology can mimic and feel. Rather it can only reflect on the information we give it and grow externally while we as humans can take in material and base our growth and decisions on our beliefs and everything that makes us personal beings.

Our world grows everyday in the field of technology. Always advancing and forever changing. AI has become a part of most of the world’s everyday lives. Whether it be sending a text using Siri even though your phone was right next to you on your nightstand or using it to do your homework even though the teacher offered extra help, these examples highlight not just the use of AI, but humans dependency on it. When given the choice between thinking for ourselves or using an AI like ChatGPT, most people lean towards using technology. Though AI has become this worldwide sensation and done so much good, its negative impact on humanity will always outweigh all the good it’s done. AI doesn’t always have the answers to the questions we ask simply because it doesn’t live as we do. It only knows how to collect data and conceptualize answers based on what we tell it. ChatGPT said, “You perceive the world as a journey. I process it as a snapshot.” AI is not just a risk to human intellectual growth, but our dependence on technology that “makes life easier.” The use of such technology can only cause more damage to us than all the good it can create for the world.

The ability to feel love, joy, and even grief are all things that shape us as humans. Not because we can just process them, but because we can feel these things on a deeper internal level that AI can’t. We make mistakes that AI won’t always, and we’ll say and act on emotion that it can’t feel, but only understand. What

makes humans so inherently different from AI is our ability to make decisions based on our own morals and our own personal traits that can't be changed overnight. While AI can also reflect and be a comfort to some, it takes away from our ability to connect with anything other than technology and therefore can be deemed a danger to society's natural growth and development.



Photography—Second Place

Rowan Rodriguez

General Essay

Third Place

Pieces of Me

Yanneli Torres

Some people are easy to figure out. But me on the other hand, I'm more like a puzzle, different pieces, different moods, all depending on the day or even the hour. I've always felt like I'm made of multiple versions of myself trying to survive in one body. There's a version of me that's always doing the most like working, raising kids, being a wife, trying not to fall apart while somehow still keeping it all together. Then there's the me that lives for TikTok's with my friends in the parking lot, blasting music, dancing while many people pass by watching us, and I pretend that I don't have a million responsibilities. Of course, there's also the part of me that holds it all together, my faith. The girl who prays, who seeks God and tries to grow spiritually even when life is chaotic. These different sides of me may seem like total opposites, but they play a big role in who I am.

Type C Me is the version of me that stays booked and busy but is always one minor inconvenience away from a full-on mental breakdown. She's the overachiever who tries to do it all like working a full-time job, being a full-time college student, raising tiny humans, keeping her man happy and still answering group text like she's not drowning. I wake up tired, go to sleep tired, and dream about being tired. Type C me makes to do lists just to feel like she's in control even though nothing ever gets crossed off. She cries in the shower, has mini panic attacks, but still some-

how manages to turn in her assignments on time. She's the one who holds it together with iced coffee and prayer. Honestly, she's dramatic, exhausted, and a little unhinged, but without her my whole world would fall apart.

Then there's TikTok Me, the part of me that refuses to let motherhood, stress, and student life steal my sparkle. She lives for the random late-night parking lot hangs with her friend's blasting music, doing TikTok dances, and laughing like we don't have work or class the next morning. It's the most carefree version of me, even if it only lasts one night a week before I go back to reality. People act like moms aren't allowed to have fun and be silly anymore, but I'm still in my twenties, and I deserve to have those moments where I can just be silly old me. No diapers, no due dates, no dinner to cook, just be a girl. TikTok me helps me escape the chaos for a little while and just remember I can still laugh, vibe, and live a little.

And then there's Holy Girl Me, the version of me that holds it together when everything feels like its falling apart. She's the one that wakes up and prays before checking her phone, the one who plays worship music everywhere she goes. She doesn't have it all figured out but knows her strength comes from Jesus Christ, her Lord and Savior. When life gets too heavy, Holy Girl Me reminds me to breathe, to trust God's timing, and to give myself the same grace God gives me. She's not perfect, but she's trying her best even when she feels so far from God. Going to church isn't just something she does because she has to; it's her safe place where she can focus on herself and God in the midst of all the busyness that's going on in the outside. Without Holy Girl me, the rest of me would completely unravel.

You might think "Dang this girl is all over the place." But honestly, that's what makes me whole. Type C me keeps everything running even though she's asking Chat GPT what to do with her life every night. TikTok Me helps me escape the stress and remember that I'm still young and allowed to have fun. Holy Girl Me keeps me grounded, lets me have peace when life keeps throwing things at me. I'm not just one version of myself; I'm all of them. Being a wife, mom, student, friend, and believ-

er isn't easy, but somehow all these pieces of me come together like a perfectly messy puzzle. Messy, exhausted, joyful, and faithful. And I wouldn't have it any other way. (Even though I just realized I might have ADHD.... But we can unpack that later.)

General Essay

Honorable Mention

Saying Nothing, Yet Everything

Amber Atkinson

In *Hills Like White Elephants*, Ernest Hemingway builds a narrative that seems simple at first, like a normal conversation between a man and a woman. However, there is a lingering heaviness under what is spoken and what is being avoided. Through symbolism, dialogue, and the contrasting setting, Hemingway paints a picture of how Jig's struggle with autonomy is complicated by avoidance and the man's emotional manipulations as they confront the pregnancy decisions, even though it is never actually spoken. The story becomes so much more than the simple moment in time when choices, power plays, and internal vulnerability are combined.

The setting is the first tip at symbolism, displaying the couple's emotional crossroads. The train station depicts two directions which is a literal and symbolic place of transition. One direction leads to a dry, barren landscape while the other directions lead to a fertile valley full of life. These conflicting choices reflect the two paths Jig could take. One that aligns with the man's desire for things to stay as they were, and another that puts great emphasis on change and the unknown possibilities that come with it. Instead of communicating this decision directly, the couple looks outward which uses the scenery as emotional camouflage. The different landscapes do not give a clear direction to take, but it does show how drastically their futures could change

and how different their views are.

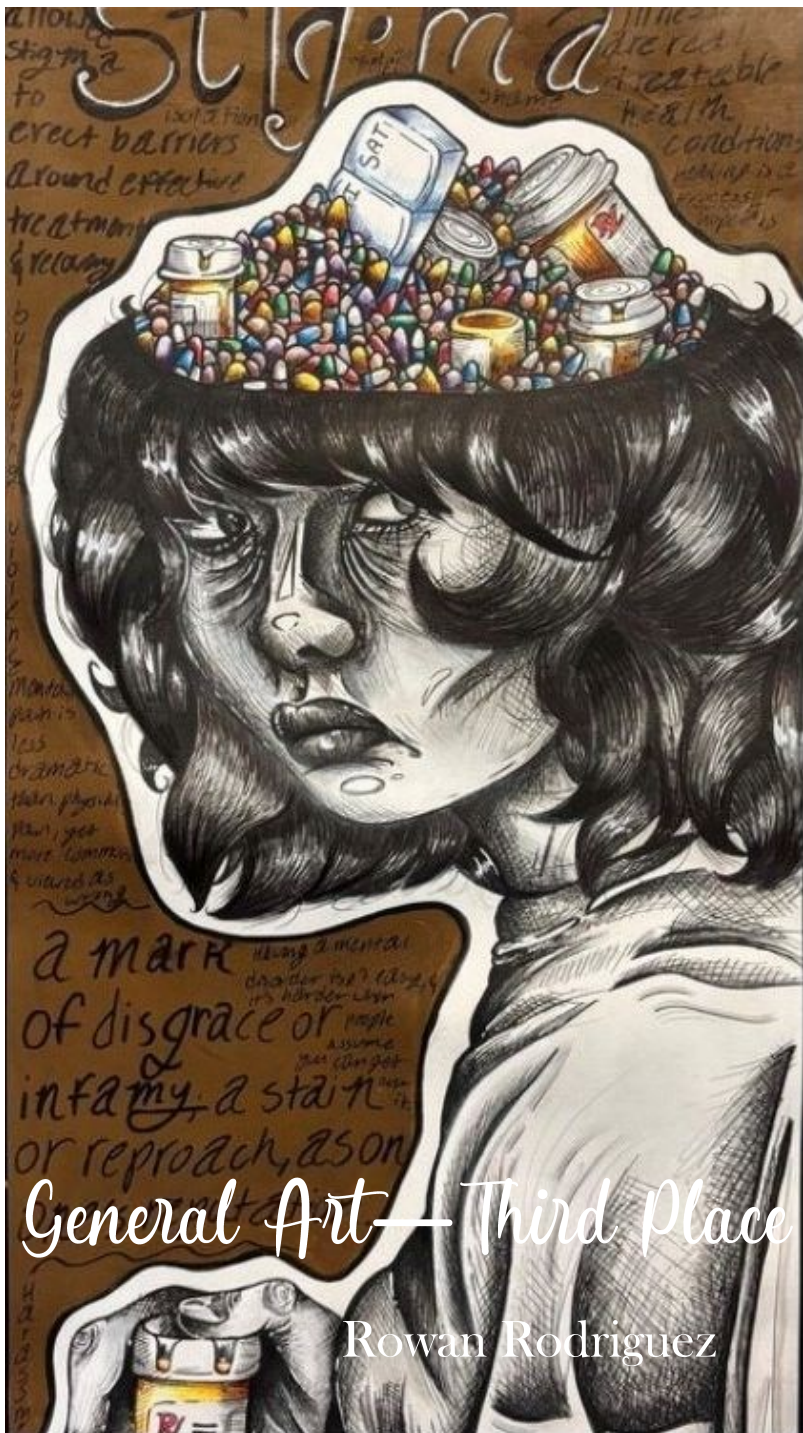
The dialogue and the words unspoken show the emotional pressure that shapes the couple's dynamic. Hemingway's way of expressing the dialogue between the two characters allows the readers to sense the underlining tensions between each word. The man repeatedly says, without literally saying, the abortion is "perfectly simple", and he only wants the best for Jig. His reassurance is masking the persuasive manipulation that is clearly happening. When he says, "I don't want anyone but you," he is pretending to be loving, but it also screams the relationship lasting depends on her agreeing with him. Jig speaks in hints and avoidance. Her uncertainty is clear because she is choosing to speak in metaphors instead of being able to speak her truth. The couple often bring up drinking more of their drinks or getting more drinks. They are using alcohol to avoid the actual conversation that should be had. Their inability to openly communicate combined with the distractions of drinking turn the decision-making process into a silent and potentially internal battle.

Symbolism pieces these emotional tensions together. The white elephants themselves represent what the man sees as a burden and what Jig sees as unknown yet beautiful. A white elephant typically signifies something unwanted, expensive, or difficult to discard. The beaded curtain resembles the curtains at the hospital, heavily hinting a private operation. The constant drinking puts in perspective their need to numb the discussion to avoid directly discussing it. The luggage with the hotel labels looks back on a lifestyle of adventure that will stop if they continue the pregnancy, from the man's perspective anyway.

Jig's last line of the story, "I feel fine... There is nothing wrong with me. I feel fine," adds to the emotional tensions. On the surface, it is reassurance, but inside it is avoidance and a way to protect herself. This was a way to shut down the conversation when she realizes it doesn't matter how she feels; he will continue to be persuasive to get the operation. Women in conflict often end up saying "I'm fine" when they know continuing the conversation will only leave room for more pressure and disappointment. This also says a lot about the imbalance of their rela-

tionship. If she agrees to the operation or decides an alternative outcome, she is fully aware she will make that choice without any support.

Jig's choice remains a mystery with how Hemingway told the story. Hemingway tells the story so well that it is not just about whether to go on with the operation, or not. It is about control, power dynamics within couples, communication, and how relationships come with hardships that will change everything. A simple moment between a man and a woman at a train station brings a lot of feelings of pressures, fears, and the option to say nothing yet everything all at once.



General Art — Third Place

Rowan Rodriguez

General Essay

Honorable Mention

Well-Known Caller

Holly Williams

In life there are times when life itself can be so overwhelming that its chaos pours into the mind's only outlet, our dreams. These dreams are often vivid, realistic, or can even reflect God's reassurance in our day-to-day life. They can serve as sacred spaces where God offers comfort, clarity, and direction for your life's journey. The connection can be so soul fulfilling, and in the quietness of our dreams, that divine message appears and reassures us we are on the right path. In my dream, I was the receiver of that divine reassurance call from the well-known caller himself.

Ring, Ring, Ring: Hello, I answered the phone, the caller ID read UNKNOWN, but this is what was said as I sat up along the side of my bed. A caller had dialed my number and said he wanted to see if I was ready to say to him what I had been wanting to say. How could he have known? He was right! So, I swallowed my pride and decided to tell him. I feel like you know me, and I know that you do, when this world tries to fool me, my heart feeds off of you. When I'm doubting my work and constantly changing my mind, you give me a new reason to stay positive and grind. When somebody tests me and I could raise my voice, you control my emotion and tongue, so I make a smarter choice. When people who surround me are not who they really seem and show out, I promise you show me before

the storm, what they truly are about. When the decisions I'm faced with have left me confused and I need truth filled answers, I look up at you. When I think I've found love and my life is so sweet, you show me the signs that my love life is not complete. When the money I make sometimes isn't so great and all the bills pouring in just won't cut me a break, you assure me that money is not what I need, it's the faith that you're with me so my finances are freed. When I pray for a family and feel why not me, you tell me to be patient because within me you've planted the seed.

He stopped me there and told me this: My child, what you're saying to me, yes, it is all true and I do this for all my children just as I do this for you. I remember when you used to swear and misbehave, yes, my child I was watching even through all your rough days. I can recall you still seeking the ultimate truth, even when you prayed you had no clue what to do, but you tried by yourself, and I see that in you. Little do you know I still carried you through. Yes, I know you've prayed for several things with my help, and I saw the sincerity in your prayers each time you knelt. I want to say I love you and don't worry or fret, when judgement day arrives, your faithful heart I won't forget. Keep being obedient and faithful to me and your life will stay positively blessed abundantly.

So, before I hang up, I must leave you with this: Until you are with me there will be many hard days, but don't be discouraged, just give me your praise. I assure you the footsteps you seen are my own, I am only one God and I cannot be cloned. I will always be with you, even when you come to my home. My home is called Heaven, the one where you'll roam. Let no man tell you what I say is untrue, because everything I say I have proven to you. I have many other calls to make, for my work is not through, but for giving your life to me, I have to personally thank you. You have many angels that wanted me to say, they watch over your journey and help show you your way. So, I am a very proud Father and continue to be a soldier for Jesus because we're all that you need.

Then He hung up! As I rose to my toes, I put on my clothes, and I did smile and say thank you for instilling in me,

the God that you are and what others can see. My confirmation call that is what he gave, and I truly thank you God in your son, Jesus's name!

Far from being random or meaningless, this call served as a gentle reminder of God's unwavering presence in my life. His reassurance calmed my mind, spirit, and soul. I knew I had the clarity I needed to navigate this thing called life. He was the well-known caller that not only walked beside me but watched over my life's journey through the day and the night, speaking life in the language of my dreams.

General Essay

Honorable Mention

Wake Up

Juan Garza

Can you not see what's happening? How the world is just passing by, and we just sit here amused by anything that shows up on our screens. Scrolling, trying to get that instant gratification and small dopamine hits. While half the world is alive and taking new breaths, we are asleep, ready for tomorrow to come, as if something will change. The truth is you only get out what you put in. Stop trying to get different results when you have not changed the input. You're distracted, wake up!

Stop making excuses and blaming the world for our own underdevelopment. We all think we're so unique with our unhappy story, of how we had to overcome obstacles, but the truth is our lives are quite more similar than we think. One of the biggest differences is that some people stand up and make things happen, while others sit down and let things happen. The sad truth is life is too short, and we spend most of it mad and confused at the world for how things have turned out. Why me? The question asked when things don't go their way. Sadly, we must learn how to embrace change, because change is the only constant.

Life is not easy, so stop looking for happiness. You won't find it; it's not hidden either. Happiness isn't something that can be given or taken; it's a choice one must make. One doesn't find happiness, one just starts living happily. See, happiness is just

moments in life that you enjoy by living, laughing, and loving. It's been right in front of us this whole time, but sadly we search for it in materialistic things or people. Look up, smile, and be grateful that you woke up today, because not everyone received that opportunity. There's always light at the end of the tunnel, you just have to continue walking the path until all you see is light.

It's ok not to be ok as well; the truth is, as much as someone looks like they have life figured out, they don't. They are as scared, confused, and lost as we are. We all have similar stories, but our past stories don't define us our present ones do. If someone does wrong by you, why lose your peace? Shake it off and move on. This life is way too short to ruin a perfectly good day just because someone was not nice to you. We cannot control what people say or do, but we can only control how we react to what they say or do.

Wake up and don't get distracted by everything around you. If you look for a problem, you will find one. Learn to be like a leaf on a rainy day, just bend with the water droplets, and go with the flow. Change is inevitable. Learn to cope with it or you'll never improve your situation. Don't stop looking for opportunities and always remember that circumstances could always be worse. Live life as if it were your last day, because we don't know who we won't see tomorrow. Lastly, you're ok, everything is fine, just breath and let go.



Digital Art—Third Place

Spencer Cook-Hausman

General Essay

Honorable Mention

My Strangest Dreams

Liliana Ortiz

What is a dream? A dream is series of thoughts, images, and sensations occurring in a person's mind during sleep. Some people believe that they are you in another dimension or universe, or that they are trying to tell you something. I like to think of it as a movie without buying a ticket. It is very intriguing what goes on in the dream. Unfortunately, the dream always cuts off when it was getting to the good part.

This first dream happened when I was in eighth grade. This dream left me a little confused and spooked. It started as I was on my way to school at night when it suddenly began to rain. As I was walking, I heard someone groaning behind me. The noise was getting louder; however, it wasn't a singular sound. I slowly turned my head, only to see a crowd of zombies heading my way. Panicked, I ran straight towards the school hoping for protection. I rushed in, feeling a wave of relief, only to be startled by what I saw before me. Chaos filled the room, papers were flying everywhere, teachers running around frantically, and the phones were ringing nonstop. I walked past the office completely dumbfounded and noticed all the student aids were just standing in the hallway as if they were waiting for instructions. I walked up to one of the students and asked, "What is going on?" And they replied, "Don't worry, they got it." Confused by that response, however, I did not ask any more questions. Sud-

denly, the school bell rang signaling that school had ended. As I made my way outside, the view in front of me was divided. On the left side, it was peaceful, no clouds, and the stars sparkled in the night sky. On the right-side, dark clouds filled the sky with heavy rain. It was raining like cats and dogs, but not to the point of a flood. Principle Jelen was standing in the rain wearing a poncho while holding a traffic control wand directing the cars where to go. Looking through the crowds, trying to find someone familiar, suddenly I heard my name being called out. I turned to face in that direction, and saw my Tia Amy, her boyfriend Joel (now husband), and my two brothers Nick and Eli. Happy and relieved, I ran over to them ready to go home. But before we even started heading home, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and a boy around my age, with short, dark brown hair, dark green eyes, light skin, and he was cute too. He asked if he could talk to me for a bit, and I said yes. We walked away from my family so we could talk in private. We ended up at a plain field, and when I turned to face him, he pinned me down to the ground suddenly. Both my wrists are pinned next to my head with him on top of me. I wanted to break from his grasp, but I was in a state of shock. The background began to look disoriented. I could not see the boy's eyes because his hair was covering them, but it felt as if he was staring at me. The boy did not say a word to me but began to lean over and whisper to my ear. What he said next sent chills down my spine. His final words to me were, "You'll be mine soon." And then I woke up.

I was completely freaked out by this. I never figured out what was the meaning or what caused this. But this second dream began in the middle. For example, instead of watching a movie from the beginning, you watch it in the middle of the movie. I got no content of how I got in this situation. I was in the lobby of a hospital with a couple of friends. A boy with light blue hair, another boy with short messy green hair, and another boy with short blonde hair. We were anxiously waiting for any update of our dear friend. He had black hair with red highlights and was gravely injured in the accident. From what I can remember, me and the black and red hair boy had some type of argument. Frustrated, he stormed out of the house wanting to

get away. An hour later we got a call saying that he was in a car crash, and he was in terrible condition. I began regretting everything I said to him while pacing back and forth. The green hair boy and the blonde hair boy tried their best to comfort me when the door slammed open. I do not remember if it was Queen Latifah or Oprah that entered the lobby. She looked as if she just left a meeting and had her yorkie on a leash. She was worried for her nephew who was in surgery, but when she looked at us, she was furious. She started yelling at us for being a bad influence on him, then proceeded to blame me and says that I was unfit to be in a relationship with him. The light blue hair boy had enough of her whining and decided to yell back at her. Unannounced to us, the lady dropped the leash, and the leash was being pulled; however, no one is pulling it. As the dog was being pulled, the door automatically shut; however, the leash does not seem to stop. The dog was strangled against the door when the dog let out a yelp. The argument stopped, and when we turned to faced to dog, nothing but horror filled the room. Everything from the workers, the patients, and us just froze; the only sound that was heard was the pouring rain. Suddenly, the lady screamed in heartbreaking horror. The dog was hanging by its leash, looking lifeless, bits of blood coming out of its mouth, and had the expression of being strangled. The dog wasn't making any movement or sound.

Fast forward, my friends and I were spending time together at my house when we heard our names being called out. When we opened the door, we were shocked to see some familiar faces. They had come to apologize for what they said and done. We accepted their apologies, and it started to rain very lightly. We just started laughing but felt ever so joyful. Then music started to play out of nowhere, and we began to dance. Me and the black and red-haired boy somehow ended up on the roof still dancing. But we stopped when we looked at each other and slowly leaned in for a kiss. Then my view became a third-person point of view and slowly moved away from the scene. And that is when I woke up.

I wanted to go back to that dream but knew that I could not. I watched *Law and Order* intermittently, and it resulted in this

last dream. I told this dream to a few people, and their facial expressions looked concerned. I had just left a building and was on my way home. It was a lovely peaceful night when a white truck drove right next to me. I could not understand what happened; one moment I was walking, minding my own business, and the next I was being pulled inside the vehicle. I was unconscious because I woke up in an office-like room tied up. Then the door opened revealing a man in his forties or fifties who came in and told me that I will be working for him and cannot escape. He later called his partner and told her to show me around. She then cut the rope and dragged me out of the office. She was in her thirties, wearing casual business attire that revealed slightly more skin than usual. She began showing me around the house and telling me the rules that I must follow. She said that I was not ready and that she would be my instructor. I also noticed that there were other people there, both girls and boys around my age. However, I could not see their faces; it was as if their faces were covered by a black mist. Then suddenly, a gunshot was heard. Men in suits appeared out of nowhere and ran to the location of the gun shot. The lady looked annoyed, grabbed her gun, then pushed me out of the way to deal with the intruder. I was then pulled back on my feet, but as soon as I looked up, I came face-to-face with a masked girl. She then told me to follow her until we got to the limo. When we got close to the limo, a few more people wearing masks ran out of the house as the lady and a few guards were chasing them. We got inside the limo and sped out of the parking lot, but we are still being chased. For a whole three minutes this scene felt like we were in a *Fast and Furious* movie. As we got away from the car chase, we then arrived at a warehouse. Everyone got out of the limo and took off their masks. They then ask, “What was I doing there?” and “If I’m okay?” I told them my side of the story, and we began to start planning to destroy their organization. But before I could grab a weapon, I woke up.

These dreams are caused by what I read or watched. And honestly, I enjoyed each of my dreams. I find dreams to be fascinating, even if they leave me in shock or in terror. As I heard someone once said, “Let your imagination run wild.” Though

do be careful, because even if imagination can seem harmless, it can affect your mental well-being.



Photography—Third Place

Juan Garza

General Essay

Honorable Mention

The Tragic End

Stewart Elizardo

In “The Raven,” by Edgar Allan Poe, has the theme of grief throughout the story. The loss of his beloved Lenore has gained momentum and driven the man mad. Without processing grief, humans build up emotional loss until it becomes unbearable. “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost, shows life’s choices as its main theme. The struggles that everyone deals with on their journey. Even though we are conscience of our choices, we always, no matter what relive paths that have crossed us and lead to wander. “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelly carries the theme of time and how all things pass in that time. The mightiest of kings build statues that last hundreds of years, yet time consumes all and erodes these mighty statues. “This too shall pass” is the great saying. “If” by Rudyard Kipling offers the theme of timeless advice and how raising a son can be a blessing. Passing one’s knowledge to a son is the gift of life so that the son can make wise life decisions on his own accord. Impart the wisdom and let the man make his own path. “Sonnet 18” by William Shakespeare is all about love. The theme can be seen through the whole poem. The beauty of summer, the buds of May are some of the comparisons made about the beauty of a loved one.

The same five stories have many different symbols. In “The Raven,” the raven itself is a symbol of death and darkness and the bird is constantly reminding the man that “nevermore” is the

answer to so many questions. The man has so many questions remaining after losing Lenore. In "The Road Not Taken" the most common symbol is the worn path indicating how many people choose similar paths thinking it's a good idea when going that way is not always the best choice. In "Ozymandias" the statue is a symbol since it has lasted a long time, yet even that is missing parts, and has obviously been subjected to time and forgotten as well. In "If" the narrator speaks of the earth "being mine" and that symbolizes all things are obtainable with integrity and effort. "Sonnet 18" is symbolized with love and the comparison is the entirety of the poem. Shakespeare uses the sun saying how the heavens are looking onto her beauty and how her beauty will not fade or diminish like the summer does.

Pieces of literature, no matter their age, are relevant still today. "I worried" by Mary Oliver uses the human nature of constant curiosity into worry. The stresses of how to be a better person, or am I sick, did I do it right? So many thoughts running in one's mind. Today we often question ourselves in the same manner. We drive ourselves crazy until we finally realize "I can't do anything about it" and then just let go. "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" by Edna St. Vincent Millay is a good poem in that it is all about memory, the good times or bad times. Who remembers my first kiss better than myself, that rush of energy or the floor falling under my feet. The way our stomachs feel fluttery with love or when our hearts are broken and that time we cried for our lost love. that's how it relates to today. "Counting the Mad" by Donald Justice is very interesting in how one thinks that's how crazy people act, but today it speaks of individuality and how each person faces their own struggle. On a scientific level, how chemical composition differs in each body. These texts show how each person reacts, from human to human, and that no two people are alike.

General Essay

Honorable Mention

The Mess I Made, The Life I Found

Teresa Bourque

Have you ever let one thing ruin your life? My story may not look like others, but it is mine. All the choices I've made in my life have not been good. Choosing to stop using drugs and alcohol was the best decision I have ever made. Making the choice to stay in recovery every day has not been easy, but I can promise you it is well worth the life I have today. Now buckle up and enjoy the ride that is My Life. The hope is that my story helps at least one person find recovery and learn that life can still be worth living without the use of drugs and alcohol.

To properly tell you my story, I must start at the beginning. I was born into a family where my father made the decision to no longer be with my mother. He decided that a life with another woman was what he truly wanted. In return, my mother gave birth to me in the midst of anxiety, depression, guilt, grief, and I'm sure many other negative emotions. Due to these circumstances my mother became an alcoholic shortly after my birth. The chaos that she was experiencing bled into my early years very quickly. My younger years were filled with trouble in school and eventually led to trouble with law enforcement. I cannot tell you that my childhood was the result of all my life choices, but it did have a profound effect on my teen and young adult life. Honestly, I am lucky to have made it past my twenties.

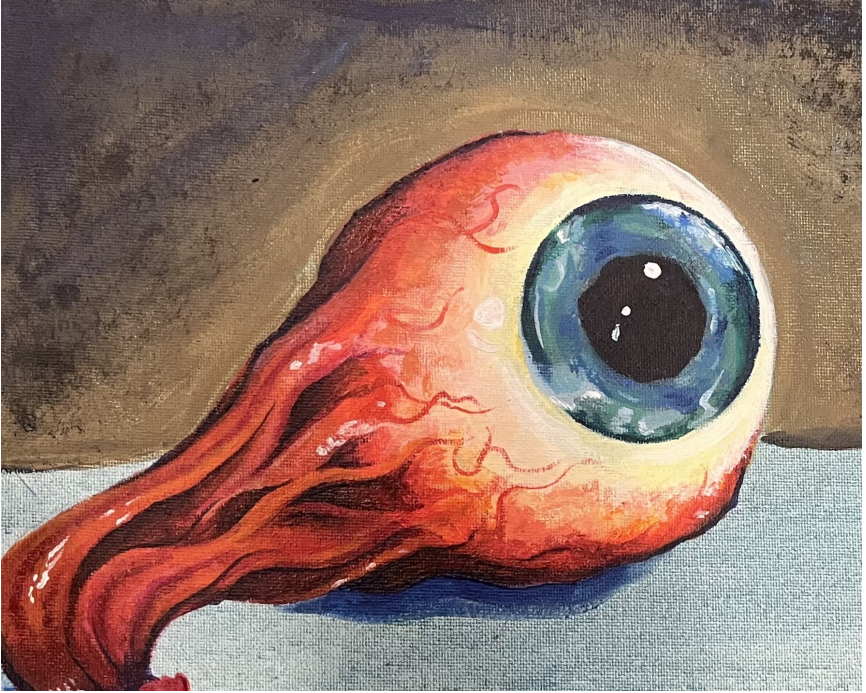
Struggling to find comfort in my own skin, as a lost teen, is

truly the reason I started using drugs and alcohol. The first time I drank, at the age of 12, I remember thinking I had finally found what I had been searching for my whole life. A fragile confidence, a false acceptance of myself, surged through my veins like water erasing the contours of who I believed I was. Once I had that first "high" I spent the rest of my young adult life chasing that feeling. That same night after that good feeling high set in, I ended up getting extremely sick. Stuck in the bathroom hugging the toilet for what felt like a lifetime, I woke the next morning, and my first thought was to try it again and maybe not drink as much so I don't get sick. Even after I was arrested for a DWI, at 24, I continued to drink. I was fooling myself into believing I had the dream job as a bartender in the same year I had received the DWI. Working in that environment only fueled my drinking and using drugs to change the way I felt about myself. Taking drugs to stay awake and function during the day and drinking myself to oblivion to go to sleep at night became my normal. I knew I wouldn't survive this way of life for long. Something had to change. Little did I know that the only thing I needed to change was everything.

Finding recovery saved my life. I was 30 years old and miserable. Fortunately for me, my oldest sister had already been through her addiction and was familiar with Narcotics Anonymous. She guided me on where to go and who to talk to. Making the decision to go to rehab was the scariest thing I've ever done. I can't lie and tell you that it wasn't scary to walk into rehab without knowing what was going to happen. The rehab I attended was The ADA Women's House in Galveston. Believe me when I tell you that house saved my life. It was the cornerstone of my recovery journey. The women there were the kindest most loving souls I've had the pleasure of meeting. Instead of being judged and looked down on, I was met with love and compassion. After settling in, I gained some clarity as time passed from putting any type of drug or alcohol in my body. It was like a dense fog had lifted off my brain, and for once in my life I could see clearly. Colors became brighter. It was there that I was introduced to the program Narcotics Anonymous. Now the real work had to begin. I was told to get a sponsor and work the 12 steps. At this point, I

was willing to do whatever it took to never have to use again. I was very hesitant about working the steps, but once I started, I couldn't stop. With each step I worked I discovered how I created all of the destruction in my life. It was the hardest yet most rewarding work I've ever done. Discovering who I am and what makes me happy has given me a complete perspective change on life. Recovery didn't just give me my life back, it gave me my best friend and the love of my life, all in one person. Becoming an acceptable, responsible, productive member of society. Making the choice to go back to school. All because I took one step that changed everything.

My life hasn't always been easy, but it has been a life worth living. I wouldn't change a single thing that happened to me because I know now that I carry a lifesaving message. Telling my story to at least one person who is willing to hear it makes all the struggles and successes worth it. My drug of choice today is growth and finding new ways to experience life. If there is one thing I want everyone reading my story to take from it is this; Even though I've made some horrible decisions, and even though my life did not play out the way society says it should, today because I choose to work a program, my life is my own. Drugs and alcohol stole that choice from me for many years. Today that choice is in my hands. And for that I am truly grateful.



*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Rowan Rodriguez

General Essay

Honorable Mention

Horror Movie Fans

Stacia Morris

There are many subgenres to horror movies; supernatural, psychological thrillers, monster movies, found footage, body horror, zombies, slashers, the list goes on. We are all familiar with these. There are however just as many different horror fans as there are movies. Today I would like to look at these different fans as I have categorized them. The scaredy-cat, the poser, the gorehound, the mind-bender and apparition aficionados, and connoisseurs. Join me as we explore these.

First up is the type of fan I absolutely do not understand; the “I watch a horror movie then it scares the crap out of me, and I won't go to the bathroom by myself for a week” fan. My sixteen-year-old daughter is this type of fan. We will refer them as the scaredy-cats. A scaredy-cat will watch the most mundane and mildest of all horror movies, acting unbothered all the way through, and then sleep with the light on after. Strategically trapping the cat in the bathroom with them so they don't have to use the restroom alone, this person gets nightmares from titles like *Smile* but is relatively unscathed by *The Black Phone*, which in my opinion, was a good movie but doesn't quite fall into the horror genre; but I digress. This person would never watch *The Exorcist*, *The Conjuring* or *Hostel*.

Next, let's touch on the type I feel is an insult to even call a fan, so for this paper we will call them posers. They are the “I watch the mainstream pop culture-y movies that all my friends watch and like.” These people are not actually FANS, per se. They may

watch a movie with friends but would not bring themselves to watch one alone. This is a person who would not know that Jason was not the killer in the original *Friday the 13th*, it was his mother. Then again, maybe they would. They might remember that being talked about in *Scream*; this person would have definitely seen *Scream*. However, they have no idea who great names like Robert Englund, Evan Peters, David Cronenberg or Dario Argento are.

My fiancé is this next kind of fan; we will call them gorehounds. This is the “I only watch gory and new horror movies” fan. If it doesn’t have a splatter count in the triple digits and it has been more than five years since its release, then he isn’t interested. This type of fan is someone who wants high production value, computer-generated effects, the more blood and the more insane and outlandish the kills are the better. A gorehound is not interested in the classics and will not even consider watching a B-movie. However, any movie labeled disturbing, or made with the simple goal of shocking the audience, is a perfect movie for the gorehound. You will see this fan buy tickets for all the *Terrifier* movies, or the *Evil Dead* remake (without having ever seen the original).

There are also the mind-benders and apparition aficionados. These are the “I don’t like gore and prefer blood-free psychological and supernatural horror” fans. This person will not watch the *Green Inferno*, *Last House on the Left* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. These fans lean more towards *The Others*, *Amityville Horror*, or *Babadook*. Haunted house movies are the go-to for these fans. If psychological thrillers are their thing, their go to may look more like *Psycho*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven*, or *Midsummer*. From slow burn haunted house movies, to murder mysteries, to serial killer ‘who dun it’s’ with twists and turns are what satisfy this crowd.

The true horror fans, the “real hardcore I like it all” fans, like me, we will call the connoisseurs. Everything from classic slashers; (Micheal, Jason, Freddy, Leatherface;) we love you fellas, to the slow burn horror like *The Witch*, *Caveat*, or *Heretic*. We respect the classic monsters that made the horror genre what it is today, so thank you Nosferatu, Dracula, and Wolfman. Connoisseurs even love the truly disgusting body horror movies like *Soci-*

ty, *The Fly*, and *The Substance*. I would be negligent not to mention foreign films here as well, such as the Dutch film *Speak No Evil*, or the Korean film *Train to Busan*. A connoisseur will not shy away from B-movies or cult classics; we appreciate it when a movie knows exactly what it is and revels itself in the most truly shocking of ways.

From the lovers of the most disturbing of the disturbed to the fans that cover their eyes at the sight of blood and screams at every jump-scare there are as many types of horror fans as there are horror movies. Scaredy cats, posers, gorehounds, apparition aficionados, mind benders and connoisseurs and so many more. What type of horror fan are you?

The page features decorative illustrations in the corners. In the top right, there is a cluster of pink flowers with green leaves and a white butterfly with brown markings on its wings. In the bottom left, there is another cluster of pink flowers with green leaves and a white butterfly with brown markings on its wings. The background is a textured, light brown paper.

Etymology

Essay



Photography
Honorable Mention

Rowan Rodriguez

Etymology Essay

First Place

The Etymology of Snow

Wendy Nunez

Since the beginning of time, words have been created and have undergone spelling or meaning alternations. Etymology is defined as the study of the beginnings and development of a word's meaning. One can spend endless hours researching and there are still thousands of unread documents about the history of words. Etymological research is crucial because it can shed information on the origins and cultures of various words. For instance, the word snow can be found as early as the year c. 825, but it was written as *snāw*, in Old English, which had Germanic roots. The word was also known as *snæw* in Old Norse, a North Germanic language that was spoken from 1150 to 1350. The denotation of snow in Modern English simply refers to ice crystals that fall from the atmosphere; however, the word has evolved significantly from its original spelling and meaning.

The word snow may have a certain meaning to someone else; however, it signifies a variety of things to me. I struggle both physically and mentally during most winters. My body and mindset start to alter drastically. When it comes to my education and future, I tend to lose motivation. I become high at risk of catching an illness, which causes me to spend hours in bed feeling exhausted. I find it difficult to spend time with my loved ones and engage in my favorite daily activities. All of that changed when my mother assured me that all my difficulties would vanish like

snow melting on a sunny afternoon. Since the day I heard those words, my perspective in life changed entirely. I started discovering that life is more than just lying in bed feeling hopeless and doing nothing. I came to the realization that I could overcome any challenges and that they would all eventually go away. I will always be appreciative and keep my mother's advice in mind. Her words encouraged and motivated me to keep growing and not allow anything negative to interfere in my life.

When I hear the word snow, I picture the little, white, frozen flakes descending from the sky slowly. When I close my eyes, the crunching sound of footsteps and the laughter of children tossing snowballs ring in my ears. For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to be able to touch and experience snow in person. I want to be able to make my own snow angel with my loved ones while lying in ten inches of snow. I want to be able to enjoy and experience the annual snowfall that people who live in the upper northern states do. One day, I hope to wake up to the beauty of nature as I gaze out my bedroom window each morning. I will be genuinely happy to see the entire green landscape coated in snowflakes. I will continue to dream and hope until my vision becomes reality.

Snow is often overlooked when people think about the weather, but the Earth and its inhabitants value it greatly. Without a wintery snowy season, the climate on Earth would remain warm, which would affect species and their way of life. In many locations around the world, bodies of water can be filled with water due to melted snow, which can support a variety of local species that inhabit the area. The ecosystems run a high possibility of having frozen soil, which can cause plants and their roots to suffer from high temperatures-related harm. Snow is more than just snowflakes; without it, the Earth's climate system would be unable to help species and regulate its temperatures.

Like people, every word has its own story and history. Understanding their beginnings and how they came to be as they are today is essential. Snow is more than just word; it has importance and is crucial to the climate of the planet. No matter how obscure or simple a term may be, they all contribute to our language's past and possess significance.

Etymology Essay

Second Place

Resilience

Yanneli Torres

I've always wondered why words hold so much weight in our lives. Etymology, which is the study of where words come from and how they've changed over the years, it shows us that language is way more than just words; it comes with deeper meanings and so much history. Let's take the word resilience, for example. In our society, we think it means the ability to bounce back from hard times. According to the American Psychological Association, resilience is "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma and tragedy." But way before it was used to talk about mental health, this word was used all the way back in the 1600's, and it meant to "to jump back." It was used as a scientific term to describe how materials could return to their original shape. The Resilience anthology defines it as "not just about enduring suffering, but about resisting it and transforming it," which shows how powerful this word truly is. We don't really use it for scientific purposes anymore because it has turned into a word that means so much more than that. This word to me means more than just physics or psychology; it means rising again no matter what life throws at you.

A lot of people hear the word resilience and they immediately think about mental and emotional strength. In psychology, resilience is all about being able to adapt to whatever life throws at you, like failing at something you worked so hard for or going

through spiritual warfare and still having to get back up. I feel like resilience is something I've had to build over time.

There has been so many times when I have felt like giving up on school because of how hard it was to juggle being a student, a mom, and a wife all at once. But every time I feel like quitting, I remind myself that resilience isn't about never falling apart. It's about getting back up when you're so tired to keep going. Resilience to me is what keeps me going forward even when I have nothing left in me.

Just because you cry, feel emotions, and think you're broken doesn't mean you aren't resilient. It's the strength to keep going after that makes you resilient. There are also so many different types of resilience. There's personal resilience, like dealing with your own problems and pain, and then there's community resilience, like when a group of people come together after something tragic happens to help each other rebuild. Both types are so important because they show that resilience isn't about individual strength but also its about leaning on others, too. For example, when Hurricane Harvey hit, our community was destroyed badly, but seeing how everyone came together during those times was really touching. That showed me that resilience isn't just something we have alone, but something we build together.

Writing this essay made me realize that resilience isn't just a simple word, it's something we need in every part of life. It's the way we heal after losing someone. It's the way communities rebuild after disasters, and even the small things like getting through stressful days. Learning about its history made me realize every word has a story, and now I'm more interested in etymology more than ever. Resilience is really a part of what makes us human. It's not about just surviving hard times and it's about growing stronger because of them. We all need to remember how resilient us humans actually are and maybe then we could be a little kinder to ourselves during those tough seasons.

Etymology Essay

Third Place

Sixty Summers

Eugene Bartolome

Without etymology, it would be the wild west in our dictionaries. Everyone can and will say that their meaning of a word is correct and no one can refute it as they could not trace back its history. It would make for a disorganized world, a chaotic season. *Season* as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a time characterized by a particular circumstance or feature; a suitable or natural time or occasion; and an indefinite period of time. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, season came from the Latin word *serere* “to sow” and was first used circa 1300s. From the Latin word, it went to the Old French word *seson*, *seison* and meaning “date; appropriate time, right moment,” until it evolved into the Modern English word, season. It’s first iteration was mostly used in agrarian cultures to tell that it is a time for sowing and/or harvesting. Even its earliest use denotes the passage of time. As NIKI sings to us, “Nothing stays the same and, seasons keep on changin', as they do,” in her song “Plot Twist.” It reminds us that even the *seasons* themselves change, figuratively and etymologically.

Having been born in Saudi Arabia only to be relocated permanently (or so I thought) to the Philippines in the third grade, I only knew of two seasons: wet and dry. The only colored leaves I knew were green, dark green, and brown-green. And looking back, I never noticed the leaves on the ground much. Probably because I lived in a city, but there was no designated season for

the transition between wet and dry. As one ends, the other one enters, and that's all that I can remember. On the other hand, snow always seemed like the most wonderful thing for me. Living in a tropical country, I always imagined myself in the snow, it was like having the air conditioner on all the time! All these American movies and shows depicted snow as one of the best things to happen when Christmas rolls around; the most *American* thing about snow? Snowmen with carrots as noses and snowball fights! But it was just that—imagination. A figment of my dreams and make-believe.

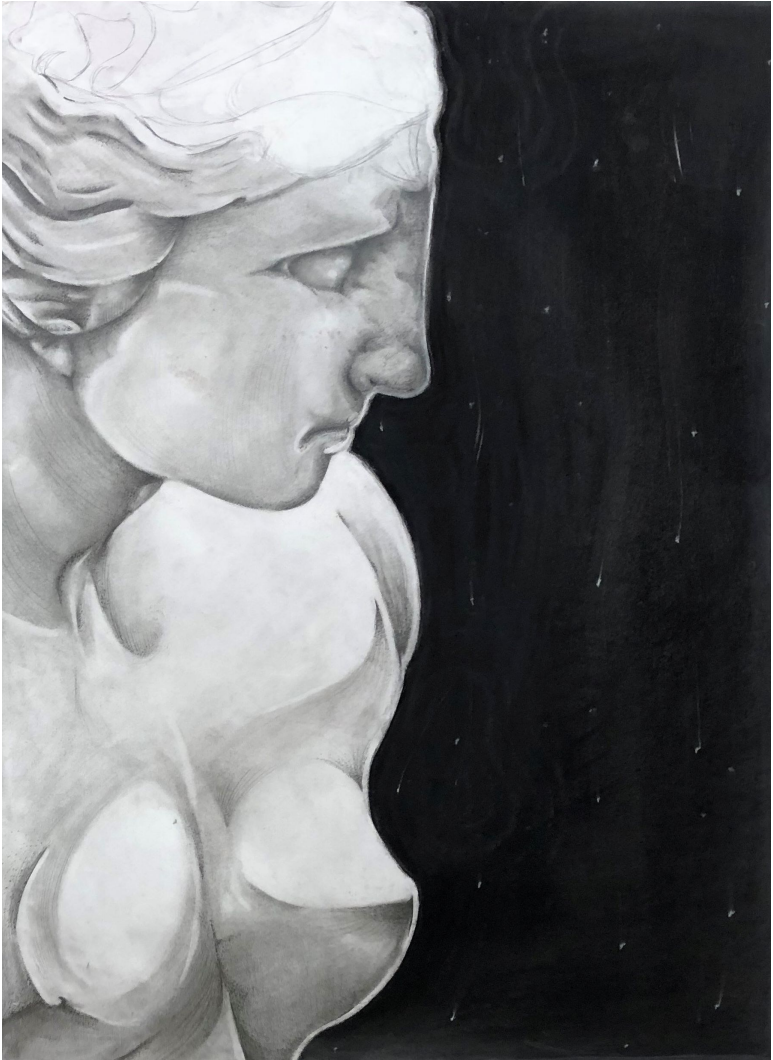
I never thought I'd experience it for myself until I migrated to the States in March 2024. We arrived at the local airport at around midnight, and it was chilly in measures I did not know was cold. The streets empty, the bare minimum of lights shone, and endless miles of space between my home and where I was at. I left it all behind and for what? It was my first Winter-to-Spring transition, so there was no snow (at least in my area); but more than that, it was a transition to a new and unfamiliar life. Grueling months were laid before me. Waiting for my green card to be delivered, I had no choice but to stay inside at my aunt's house who welcomed my parents and me with open arms. Before I knew it, Summer came along. I thought that I would break no sweat with American heat as I walk in the F95-degree heat in the Philippines with no sunscreen at that. But I was mistaken, I could only cave in the house as F80-degree heat warms me up. And on top of all of that, my uncle, who I really don't consider my uncle, is such an insufferable person to live with. And still, no green card! My options were limited, and I did not know how long I would have to wait, wait, wait. An unforgettable and eye-opening season of my life as I learned how to deal with my emotional turmoil while adjusting to the all-too-fast-and-slow-all-at-once changes in my newfound environment.

Things started to change around Autumn. My green card arrived, and I was able to land a job at a grocery store. My family and I moved out to our own apartment—our first own home in the States. Things started to fall into place. More and more, these new seasons rapidly came, and for once in my life, I was getting acclimated to them. The past twenty years, it has been full of con-

stant movement all around the place, and I am only now getting used to it. Not only has my environment changed, *I* changed. Making my own decisions, finding my place in the world, igniting my passions once again. Things I'd never imagine doing had I not gone out there—here.

After saving up, I was fortunate enough to have the chance to meet my lover whom I left behind when migrating. We met in Boston, where she had attended a conference, reuniting after a year of mind-numbing distance. It was her first time ever in the States, and I felt that it was for me as well. In a full circle moment, I had first experienced snow only after a year from when I arrived here. And to be honest, snow is such a hassle! The crunchy sound it makes when you step on it is so infuriating, and it doesn't help that I can't walk like how I normally do. But I suppose the American movies were right about it; snow is magical only because of the people you spend it with. I didn't pay no mind to the dirty snow in the streets of Boston, not when the most important person in my life was with me. Plus, it gave me extra incentive to stick next to her!

Upon my research on *seasons*, the constant theme of it revolved around change and time. Time and time again, it reinforced my belief that things fall into place at their own pace. Forcing things will only lead to stress and grief. However, it does not mean that I should be merely waiting, but rather, taken at a slow rhythm and aligned with nature and her timeline. Living in the States, I've come to realize that seasons are not merely weather changes. It is a season of life where control slips through your hands, and only your reactions remain your own. We often lose sight of the now as a trade-off to look ahead. And it's really just a bad way to live. Seasons, although recurring, will never be the same. At the minimum, you only get 60 Winters, Springs, Summers, and Autumns, and they will all let you experience different things. You have to focus and be at peace, not always knowing what is ahead. With that, what are you going to do with the *x*-*amount* of seasons you have?



*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Rowan Rodriguez

Etymology Essay

Honorable Mention

Woman

Alonna Miller

Etymology is the evolution of words through different time periods. I think it's important to study etymology because we can appreciate and understand how much weight words hold in our culture. In everyday life, we throw words around carelessly, not knowing the history and true meaning intended for our own language. The definition of woman, from Old English, "An adult female human being. It is also the counterpart of (man)." The earliest the word woman was used in text was circa 1200. The spelling of the word woman has evolved over time as well. The spelling has changed from *wifmon*, *wimmen*, *wifmen*, *wummon*, *wifman*, finally shifting to the spelling woman, which we use in the 21st century.

"Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for."— Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*.

Many say becoming a woman starts when you get your first menstrual cycle, but for me, I think being a woman is more than words could ever explain. As it turns out, many parents want sons because to them boys are easier; for centuries a boy marked the continuation of family lineage, while we undermined the women who have and will continue the creation of the lineage. From the moment you are born, the odds are not in your favor. Women have gone for years unnoticed in society; however, we know that

they are the backbones of home, jobs, and frankly, the whole country. Consider Rosie the Riveter, a very popular poster during WWII. The men were off to war, so the women had to step up and run the country, and Rosie was the mascot. They kept the country afloat during the most horrible times. One such memorable group of women was the 6888 Battalion. The 6888 Battalion was an African American group of women who served in WWII. They sorted and delivered 17 million pieces of mail to soldiers and loved ones during WWII. They kept morale high and helped win the war.

For me, my favorite women are the strong women in my family. My mother was a single mother of six; she embodies the capability of a woman. Transforming into the role of both mother and father, provider, protector, and nurturer, she prevailed against all odds and statistics. The women in my family keep our heritage/culture alive. For example, my Great Grandmother, Rita Bernard Declouet, was a black Creole woman born in Louisiana in 1942. She never knew how to read or write and only learned how to speak English at 6 years old. She was a maid for the majority of her life and was paid 5c a day. She lived through segregation, the end of WW2, the first black president, covid, and many more stories one could only imagine. Even with all the odds stacked against her, all four of her children have college degrees and beautiful healthy families. She embodies and has endured the true meaning to be a woman even in opposition. By exploring the etymology of “woman” and honoring the lived experiences behind the word, we gain a deeper appreciation for the resilience, complexity, and the impact of women through history and within our lives.

Etymology Essay

Honorable Mention

The Etymology of Brain

Anum Malik

Words are the fossils of human experience and evolution. Each word carries echoes of the past. Etymology means the study of word origins, but to me it seems more like learning about where humans come from, and over time, what changes have we experienced throughout the years, decades, and even centuries. To me, every word carries fingerprints of the past, all shaped by science, discoveries, and migrations. By studying a word's history, we gain insight into the values, discoveries, and emotions of the people who shaped it. It is a constant reminder for us to remember and appreciate how etymology transforms simple words into bridges between the past and present, showing how language has always grown with human thoughts and experiences. "The brain is wider than the sky," by Emily Dickinson, is a line that captures both the vastness of the human mind and the mystery of its origin. The word brain originates from the Old English *brægen*, meaning, "the organ inside the head." Linguists trace it to the Proto-Germanic *bragnan*, related to Old High German *bregen* and Middle Dutch *brein*. Its deeper origins lie in the Proto-Indo-European root *mregh-m(n)o-*, referring to the skull or the top of the head. These linguistic roots reveal an early human attempt to name something delicate, vital, and mysterious.

Over the centuries, the meaning of the brain has expanded. From a term describing physical tissue, or an organ, it has come to represent intellect, creativity, and identity. By the late 14th cen-

tury, it was used figuratively to denote mental power, and by the 19th century, idioms like “to have something on the brain,” reflect the organ’s symbolic connection to thought and obsession. The evolution of this word mirrors humankind’s growing understanding that the mind resides not in the heart, as once thought, but in this remarkable organ. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Scarecrow spends his journey wishing for a brain, believing that only then could he think and be complete. Ironically, he demonstrates intelligence all along and gives a reminder that our understanding of the brain is not only biological but emotional and philosophical. His “wish” echoes humanity’s timeless desire to understand the source of wisdom, thought, and identity.

Scientifically, the brain is astonishing in both structure and function. The brain is an organ composed of billions of neurons communicating through electrical and chemical signals, and it governs thought, emotion, memory, and consciousness itself. Yet, etymology reminds us that even before we fully understood its mechanics, humans recognized its centrality to life and mind.

Over time, the word brain has reached beyond mere biology. It is the source of imagination, the compass of decision, and the quiet system of an individual. Every thought, every memory, every dream originates in this soft, delicate mass within the skull, a miracle – both humble and fascinating. Tracing the history of the word, we encounter not only the evolution of scientific understanding but also humanity’s enduring desire to name the invisible essence of consciousness and to capture the spark that makes us aware, reflective, and alive.

To me, the brain is the center of balance through which I plan, organize and make sense of most of the things in the world. My brain has always looked for structure but at the same time I cannot stay focused unless I am doing more than one task. I believe my brain works better and efficiently when it is juggling things and switching between different ideas. Yet somehow my brain finds some sort of order between all of this movement. It might seem like a weakness of an individual, but with time I have realized that this is how my brain works and keeps me creative, focused, and driven. Indeed, the brain is designed differently for every person, making all of us unique in our own way.

Etymology Essay

Honorable Mention

Phantasmagoria

Leia Tran

Your room, swallowed with darkness, whispers in your head at night. You see a silhouette of clothes through the crack of your closet. Are clothes the only thing occupying your closet? These deceptions of disturbing figures are known as “phantasmagoria”. Phantasmagoria refers to the hallucination of distorted images appearing in real life or dreams. Phantasmagoria came from the Greek words *phantasma*, meaning image or phantom, and *agorá*, meaning assembly or gathering. The term was coined in 1801 by French dramatist Louis Sebastien Mercier. In this article, I’ll review phantasmagoric influence on society, occupations involving phantasmagoria, and additional interpretations to the word.

To begin with, let’s mention the influence of phantasmagoria. The earliest association with phantasmagoria involved images depicting Hell, death, or monster. In 1659, a Dutch inventor, Christiaan Huygens, drew multiple phases of Death, such as removing his skull from his neck and returning it back again. In 1671, a legend explained that Kircher secretly used a lantern at night to project the image of Death on windows of apostates to scare them back into church. In 1790, Paul Filidort performed the first true phantasmagoria show in Vienna called *Phantasmorasi*. Later works include *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Charles Dickens and poem collections by Lewis Carroll (1869). Dickens uses phantasmagoria as the pivotal symbolism for the chaotic period of the French Revolution, while Carroll features a nonsensi-

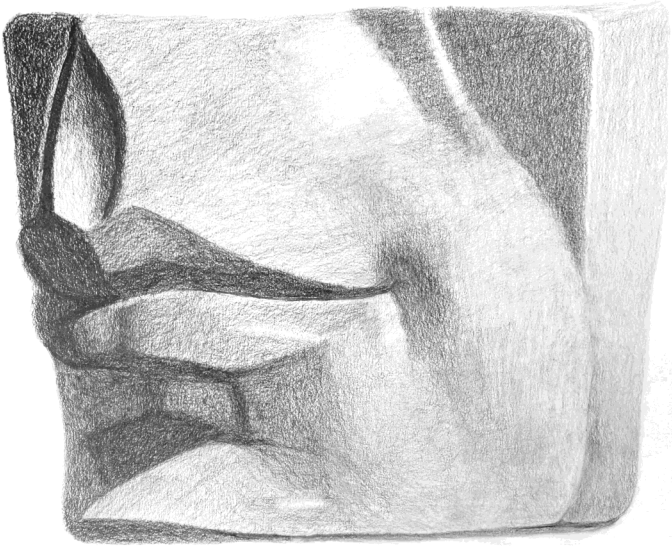
cal style. In recent years, Disney incorporates phantasmagoric images through their Haunted Mansion ride and Fantasmic! show. In the Fantasmic show, Mickey Mouse battles good and evil through his imagination. In contrast, the Haunted Mansion displays images of ghostly figures. Moreover, these projects demonstrate how the concept of phantasmagoria has transformed from simple ghostly projections into immersive experiences across centuries.

Phantasmagoria extends beyond literary works and projects. There are also occupations that involve such concepts. The most common occupation regarding phantasmagoria is special effects artists. Special effect artists and magicians create these illusions or visual tricks for the movie or play, Another occupation that deals with phantasmagoria is a psychologist. Phantasmagoria isn't just a concept, but also a mental matter. Psychologists may study how and why one may experience hallucinations or dreamlike events. Similar to this, a cognitive scientist explores how the brain processes fantastical or phantasmagoric experiences. Phantasmagoria is more than visuals; it's also a profession that inspires creativity and wonders.

Over time, phantasmagoria has taken on a broader meaning. Instead of referring only to old ghost-projection shows, it now describes any sequence of strange, dreamlike images. Someone may experience phantasmagoric phenomena auditory or visually. In some cases, this may occur due to drugs or mental health issues. However, in my personal experience, I had neither. To this day, I'm not sure if these occurrences are phantasmagoric illusions or if I'm a psychic. During random times, no matter night or day, I hear a sound from my friends' or families' voices calling, "Leia" or "hi Leia" to get my attention. It would happen once, and then never repeated in that moment. When 5-10 minutes go by, I get a text or call from the person that called my name. It happens rarely these days, but when I was younger, those voices would occur frequently. It happened too many times to be a coincidence!

In conclusion, phantasmagoria has evolved over time. This word originally described the scary visual tricks in shows that used special lanterns to project ghost-like figures and other

creepy images. Now, phantasmagoria has a broader range of meaning. Today, we reviewed phantasmagoric influence on society, occupations involving phantasmagoria, and my personal experience. Ultimately, phantasmagoria may extend its meaning more as time evolves.



*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Kimberly Loera

*Historical
Essay*



Historical Essay

First Place

From Rules to Robots:

The Enduring Core of Wartime Law

Max Livingston

The history of warfare is often framed as an endless cycle of tech innovations, where faster, deadlier weapons challenge the limits of ethical conduct. A deeper examination reveals a more complex reality: the legal and ethical principles governing armed conflict have demonstrated a remarkable resilience. In the transition from the muzzle-loading cannon to the autonomous drone, the foundational rules of engagement codified in the mid-19th century have not been discarded but adapted. This paper argues that despite tech changes, from old cannons to artificial intelligence, the foundational rules of warfare originating in 1874 remain relevant. They have remained largely untouched and continue to influence how militaries operate today and how they approach A.I. The core ethical demands the limitation of unnecessary suffering and distinction between combatants and civilians provide necessary ethical compasses for modern military doctrine, even as they are encoded into machine intelligence

The notion of a just way to wage war was formalized in a moment of extreme brutality. The American Civil War prompted Francis Lieber to author *The Instructions for the Government of Armies of the US in the Field* (1863), a foundational document often known as the Lieber Code. This code established groundbreaking rules on military necessity and humane treatment, for-

bidding malicious or revengeful destruction (Leiber 1863, Article 16). The principles established here quickly influenced international dialogue, culminating in the 1874 proposal for an International Declaration Concerning Wartime Laws and Customs drafted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC's proposal cemented the basic principles that continue to govern conflict today. That the aim of war is to weaken the enemy's military, not to inflict limitless suffering (ICRC 1874, 4). Specific provisions, such as the explicit ban on the use of poison, demonstrated a commitment to restraining excessive cruelty (ICRC 1874, 5). These 1874 rules, though primarily focused on the weaponry of the era, established the enduring legal obligation to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants and to restrict the means of violence. The enduring strength of the 1874 principles is the best measured by their persistence through the massive global conflicts that followed. Jenny Gelsey notes that the Lieber code provided the first modern codification and profoundly influenced the subsequent Hague conventions, establishing a clear lineage of legal thought (Gelsey 2018, 5). This foundation was critically examined and strengthened following WW2. The 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners of War stands as a powerful testament to the permanence of the core humanitarian ethos established decades earlier. Article 13 for example, strictly mandates that prisoners of war must always be humanly treated and protected from violence or intimidation (Geneva Convention 1949, article 13). This provision directly mirrors the early demands for the humane treatment of captured soldiers found in the Lieber code and the ICRC's 1874 declaration, proving that the ethical baseline of conduct survives even the most catastrophic tech leaps. The shift from cannons to atomic weapons necessitated adaptation, but the fundamental ethical constraint, the preservation of human dignity, remained non-negotiable. Today, the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) continues to integrate these historical principles into military operations involving exponentially more complex technology, such as drones, cyber systems, and electronic warfare. The U.S. military, for instance, maintains the classical LOAC principles of distinction and proportionality dating back to the 19th century, as the

core of its training and operational doctrine. A RAND Corporation report highlights how the military has explicitly sought to apply these long-standing rules to emerging domains like cyber and autonomous weapons (Robinson et al. 2015, 30–35). This process involves careful interpretation rather than wholesale replacement. For example, the principle of proportionality, which requires that expected civilian harm be weighed against military advantage, is now applied to drone strikes and cyber operations. The legal doctrine remains constant; the challenge lies in gathering and processing sufficient data from novel technologies to make a lawful determination in real-time (Robinson et al. 2015, 34). This active adaptation demonstrates that the 1874 framework is not an outdated relic but a robust and living legal system. The next frontier of warfare involves autonomous systems and artificial intelligence, which challenge the application of LOAC in entirely new ways. The core difficulty is not whether the rules of 1874 apply, legal scholars widely agree they do, but how to mechanically encode human ethical decision-making into complex algorithms. Ashley Deeks addresses this challenge by proposing a "Three-Step Process" for operationalizing these laws within AI systems (Deeks 2022, paras. 10–15). This process involves translating principles like "distinction" and "proportionality" into quantifiable constraints that an algorithm can process. The fact that the debate centers on the technical implementation of these established ethical limits, rather than the invention of entirely new ones, is the ultimate proof of the 1874 principles' endurance. The ethical restraints first articulated a century and a half ago must now be translated into the logic gates of future weaponry. The foundational rules of warfare, born from 19th-century efforts to mitigate the brutality of the American Civil War and formalized by the ICRC in 1874, have proved exceptionally durable. They have successfully guided the development of international law through the rise of mechanized, nuclear, and now digital warfare. From the explicit ban on poison in 1874 to the complex calculus required for proportionality in a drone strike today, the underlying ethical imperative to limit suffering remains the guiding principle. The future of warfare, dominated by artificial intelligence, is not defined by the rejection of these old laws, but by

the strenuous effort to build their ethical demands into the very fabric of machine logic. The enduring principles of humane conduct have consistently transcended technological change, confirming their role as the permanent ethical architecture of armed conflict.

Project Reflection

The most challenging part of writing this paper was synthesizing the secondary sources and connecting them logically to the primary source material. Specifically, bridging the gap between the abstract legal principles of the 1874 ICRC Proposal and the very concrete, technical military doctrine found in the 2015 RAND report required careful interpretation. It was necessary to consistently link the modern concerns (cyber warfare, AI) back to the original concepts of necessity and humanity, rather than treating them as separate fields. My argument did not change significantly, but it did narrow and focus. My initial plan was broad, focusing on the general impact of the Lieber Code and the abolitionist movement. However, following the clear direction of the Course Summary and Outline file, I pivoted to a much tighter, more impactful argument focused purely on the continuity of humanitarian law from the 1874 ICRC Proposal through to the AI challenges discussed by Deeks. This change was caused by the strength and interconnectedness of the three chosen key sources (ICRC, RAND, Deeks), which naturally formed a persuasive chronological argument about endurance.

The source material I gathered but ended up not using was the Summary of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 from the American Red Cross. I omitted it because, as noted in my original summary, it was "merely a basic summary." It lacked the in-depth analysis or specific legal text needed to function as strong evidence in an argumentative paper. While technically relevant, its evidence was too tangential, and shallow compared to the actual text of the Geneva Convention Protocol I, ultimately cited as my third primary source, which offered more precise legal language. The two sources most critical to successfully proving my thesis were: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). 1874. Proposal for an international declaration concerning war-time laws and customs (Primary Source): This was critical be-

cause it functioned as the origin point of the timeline. By providing direct evidence of the rules (like the ban on poison) and the philosophical framework (limiting cruelty) in the 19th century, it established the A-point of my argument. Every subsequent claim about continuity had to be measured against this document.

Deeks, Ashley. 2022. "Coding the Law of Armed Conflict: First Steps" (Secondary Source): This source was critical because it functioned as the Z-point, the conclusion of the argument. It validated the enduring relevance of the old rules by showing that the current debate is not about what the rules should be, but how to implement the existing rules (like proportionality) into the most advanced systems (AI). Without this forward-looking analysis, the paper would have lacked a significant conclusion regarding modern persistence. The principles of "limiting cruelty" and "safeguarding civilians" were the common threads running through every stage, regardless of the technology involved. It visually articulated the very concept of endurance that the paper argued.

Bibliography

Deeks, Ashley. "Coding the Law of Armed Conflict: First Steps." *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 12, no. 1: 1–30, 2022.

"Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War." 1949. Signed August 12, 1949.

Gelsey, Jenny. "The Lieber Code: the First Modern Codification of the Laws of War." *Library of Congress Blogs* 5. Accessed November 20, 2025.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). 1874. *Proposal for an international declaration concerning wartime laws and customs* (Brussels, August 27, 1874). Geneva: ICRC.

Lieber, Francis. *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*. War Department, 1863.

Robinson, Eric, et al. *The Ongoing Evolution of U.S. Armed Conflict Law*. RAND Corporation, 2015.

Historical Essay

Second Place

America's Prescription for Political Parties

Carlee Galmore

Given the bitter enmity between political parties in modern-day America, one might reason that the system is broken. However, upon deeper reflection, the cacophony that is American politics begins to resemble a melody. Humans have the tendency to unite and divide, forming ever-changing groups that fight and fuse, recede and resurrect. These tendencies cause us to both create and destroy civilizations. In setting out to establish a lasting civilization, America's founders crafted a government that could withstand the wiles of human tendency. Division within the nation, politically manifested through party politics, were not only anticipated, but inspired much of the architecture of American government.

From its inception, the American collective sought to recreate itself into a new nation of a higher caliber than its forefather. Building on principles of freedom and liberty, early leaders offered instruction on how to preserve these ideals. Americans had braided themselves together like strands of a rope to revolt against British rule and establish their own independence, and maintaining this unity was the imperative. Division was seen as certain destruction, and in creating a completely new form of government, the founding fathers were keen to prevent the political mechanics of division.

Defending against this required an understanding of the pathology of governmental decline. The political thinkers of early America examined older governments and their respective

strengths and weaknesses to design a system that could overcome. They understood how human nature, flawed and inescapable, was both the problem and solution. Washington, in his farewell address warned against “the baneful effects of the spirit of party,” stating that it “is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind” (Washington 1796, p. 13). If this “spirit” was “inseparable from our nature,” how then could we oppose it? Washington encouraged the new citizens to focus on what bound them to each other, reminding them that, “With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles” (Washington 1796, p. 6). Though a noble demand, this ideal of unity he insisted upon clinging to was just that – an ideal; it suffered separation from realistic possibilities. There was, however, a bridge from this ideal to its nearest reality. This bridge was built by designing a government that adapted to human nature and guided it rather than boxing it in.

Though he discouraged it, Washington did concede that political parties may be “useful checks upon the administration of the government and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty” (Washington 1796, p. 14). This opinion was informed by the evolution of political theories based on examinations of human behavior and the need for restraint. Thomas Paine articulated this need saying, “Here then is the origin and rise of government; namely, a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world” (Paine, p. 2). For government to accomplish its ends, it needed to check “the emotional and disruptive nature of human beings” (Salzman, p. 2). However, to preserve liberty while doing so meant that this control should not come from one authority figure as absolute rule inevitably leads to corruption and tyranny. The solution required a reconciliation of the paradox of man’s intrinsic lawlessness and his ability to transcend this tendency and govern himself. The framers of the Constitution sought to create a system that would bridge the gap between the moral failings of man and his lofty goals of self-governance. Self-governance faces challenges, though, in its very conception because in a union as large as young America, what constituted the “self?”

No matter how tightly individuals knit themselves together to pursue a common goal, differences are bound to arise. Americans had collectively identified themselves as one nation, but differed in beliefs, values, priorities, etc. For all the members of these groups to enjoy freedom and liberty within this shared “self-hood,” rights needed to be both granted and restrained so that the enjoyment of one did not infringe upon the other. As people group and regroup around similar interests, the minority must be protected. Especially since these aforementioned groupings had different visions of and prescriptions for American society and varying levels of power and influence. Madison described these varying powers as “different and unequal faculties” and argued that “The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government” (Madison, para. 7). This regulation would involve taking advantage of the multitude of factions and instituting a mechanism of constant checks to balance power. Madison envisioned “an extended republic [that] would contain a greater variety of interests and religious sects that would check each other, protecting individual and minority rights and preventing the formation of majority faction” (Gibson, p. 268). Surprisingly, division in roles and powers within government was the key to guarding against the destructiveness of division in the body politic.

The Constitution divides power among different branches of government and further still between state and national levels. People will always group together and divide over certain issues, but this design of government means that no group could aggregate enough power so as to become absolute. “The system was intended to be suprapartisan with no one party or interest being capable of controlling government” (Ross, p. 9). Though this inability to control and dependence on cooperation of many moving parts slows the pace of change, it allows government to achieve its original aim: to guard humanity from the consequences of its own vice and its evolved aim: to guard against the consequences of its tendencies.

The attached visual component serves to distill this paper

into an image. In response to the unruliness and divisiveness of human nature, rather than caging it within the bounds of tyranny, America took the path of bridling it. In creating a system that “that checks the misbehavior of the many” rather than to “[rely on] the good behavior of the few” (Eisenberg, 2023), the founding fathers opted to wrestle with the volatility of self-interest and allow it to press onward where it wills, with self-governance holding fast to its reins. The endurance of the Constitution and America’s constant forward motion and success stand as testaments to the soundness of its architecture.

Project Reflection

The most challenging part of writing the paper was synthesizing my thesis and not getting lost in the sources. As I progressed from topic to thesis, there were so many paths I could’ve taken. I found myself trying to cover too many points at once. I had to work through understanding that the purpose of the paper was not to list observations but to expound on the conclusions I drew from them. It took a while for me to get to that point, which led me to going through a lot of sources until I decided on the point that I wanted to make, so I was being pulled in different directions for longer than I think was necessary.

While reading my secondary sources, the ones I picked seemed to be conflicting. My argument is basically that the fallibility of human nature prevents perfection in any governmental system, but that America’s model adapts most effectively to that human nature. A few of my supporting sources were in agreement that this was the aim when developing the government, but that the framers fell short. However, as I studied more, I realized they were analyzing the intent of the framers at different stages entreating the delegates to support and adopt this new, experimental form of government.

Researching this topic led me to articles that went into ever-deepening detail about different aspects of political parties and how they developed and influenced the design of government. I had a wealth of information to use, but as I started drafting my paper, I realized that though some sources were useful, some of my sources didn’t help me to be specific. Primary sources proved

to be particularly difficult, especially due to how comprehensively leaders of the past addressed important issues. Reading their writings set a standard for complexity that was lived up to by the analyses of the students and professors of political science. This complexity was beyond the scope of the assignment and my abilities. I came across some primary sources that though they provided evidence for the sentiment at the time, they didn't really help me make my point, like the diary entry of John Adams. In the case of secondary sources, I came across articles that helped me to understand how the different schools of political thought agreed and disagreed, but to have included it would have digressed from my thesis and created an unnecessarily exhaustive paper. I had to find different ones.

I believe my visual component perfectly illustrated the significance of my thesis. We are not robots, but rather creatures animated with that naturally unruly spirit found in nature. A government capable of completely stamping out that spirit is not only unrealistic, but also unwanted. A more reasonable, functional mode of government is one that provides restraints that the body politic can operate within. The comparison to bridled horses incorporated all of the aspects of that point.

Bibliography

Eisenberg, David A. "Human Nature and the Constitution." *National Affairs*. Winter 2023. <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/human-nature-and-the-constitution>.

Gibson, Alan. "Impartial Representation and the Extended Republic: Towards a Comprehensive and Balanced Reading of the Tenth 'Federalist' Paper." *History of Political Thought* 12, no. 2 (1991): 263–304. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26213995>.

Hamilton, Alexander. Jay, John. Madison, James. "The Federalist no. 10." *The Independent Journal*. 1787-1788. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. Harvard University Press, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv322v4td>.

Ross, Robert E. *The Framers' Intentions: The Myth of the Nonpartisan Constitution*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.21995573>.

Salzman, Jenna Ashley, "Exploration of Human Nature in the Federalist Papers" (2019). *Undergrad Thesis*. Abilene Christian University. 64.

<https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/honors/64>.

Washington, George. *Farewell Address*. Philadelphia American Advertiser. 1786 https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.



General Art
Honorable Mention

Robert Anderson

Historical Essay

Third Place

Roles of Union Women During the Civil War

Cameron Dillard

Throughout the Civil War, women in the Union had to adapt to new roles that they were not previously accustomed to. The roles that women played differed based on their economic status, race, and many other factors. Many women in the Union began volunteering as nurses to help wounded soldiers. Due to men joining the military to fight in the Civil War, women also began embracing a larger political role in America. Even though women were not the main ones fighting in the Civil War, they had many different, valuable roles that were vital to helping the Union military.

Due to men leaving to fight in the war, women had to adopt new roles so that they could independently provide for their families. In *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* by Judith Ann Giesberg, the author discusses how women had to begin embracing many new roles. In order to provide for their families and maintain their homes, women began “managing their farms, working in munitions, collecting state aid money, adjusting to changes in their sewing work, locating and caring for injured or dead soldiers” (Giesberg 2009, 10). Many women struggled to maintain their homes due to being the only source of income and independently keeping care of their homes. Giesberg also discusses how women had to step into a new political role to keep the nation’s government and state’s

government from completely going downhill. African American women also used the time during the Civil War to advocate for civil rights amongst all African Americans. Throughout *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*, Giesberg speaks on how women in the Union experienced many struggles during the Civil War. Families became completely dependent on the women and had to rely on women to manage most of the household and economic duties. Due to women in the Union being depended on, they had to find ways to support their family, which completely altered their way of life. Women's lives began changing in numerous aspects due to the new roles that they were required to fill since the men were away at war.

Throughout the Civil War, a major role that women in the Union played was volunteering as nurses to help wounded soldiers. Women were not legally allowed to serve in the military during the war, so they volunteered as nurses as a way to still be on the battlefield and helping in the war. Hannah Ropes, a well-known Union nurse volunteer in the Civil War, wrote in her diary and letters about the experiences she went through as a nurse. During her time as a nurse, Hannah was negatively affected in physical and mental ways by the wounded soldiers that she helped daily. She described an injured man as, "One quite old man, sick every day, and a bullet hole through his right hand... soon he slept as though he had come to the end of war, unto a haven of rest" (Ropes 1993, 53). Hannah Ropes described the hospital as stressful due to the immense number of wounded soldiers. She also discussed how the hospital was extremely dirty due to the hospital location being an old tavern. She became mentally affected by the experiences with the wounded soldiers due to seeing many people coming in the hospital badly wounded.

Due to Hannah working with wounded and ill soldiers and the hospital being unsanitary, she became very ill. Although she became ill, she kept nursing the wounded soldiers until she was no longer physically capable. This shows how the nurses in the Union were willing to endanger their own lives to help ensure victory in the Civil War. Women in the Union worked as nurses

to ensure that the soldiers could get back on the battlefield as soon as possible, and they worked as nurses to help the Union army be more successful throughout the war. Although women in the Union were not fighting as soldiers, they were still willing to put their lives at stake to help the Union defeat the Confederacy in the Civil War. During the Civil War, women began to embrace new roles which led to a larger political influence in the Union. Due to men being away at war, women began having a variety of new roles. These new roles created a sense of political influence for women in the Union. In *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* by Jeanie Attie, she discusses how women began to have a larger political influence than before due to the absence of men. Attie states, “the time seemed ripe for translating women’s assistance to the state into an exchange of support for full inclusion in the body politic...Soon after the fighting began, a number of northerners suggested that this war might permanently alter women’s status” (Attie 1998, 46). As women in the Union began to adopt new roles throughout the Civil War, their political status began increasing due to their new roles. Attie expresses how women’s lives in the Union began to change as they started embracing numerous new roles. Although women had to embrace new roles, there were many positive aspects that came from these new roles. Having a larger political role in the Union allowed women to have more opinions in government activities. Before the Civil War, women had minimal opinions on government actions. As women began gaining a larger sense of political influence, women began to advocate for more overall rights and opinion in the government. Due to men being away at war, women stepped in and accepted new roles and more political influence in order to keep the Union rolling throughout the war.

For my visual component, I have created an infographic about the roles of women during the Civil War. I included details about each claim to help the audience gain a better understanding of my topic. My infographic is organized by key topics so that the audience can easily follow along and take away key pieces of information. I would like to make the audience feel as if they know everything about the topic after viewing my final project, so

I am hoping that the infographic will allow the audience to gain a better understanding of the role that Union women played during the Civil War.

Although Union men are credited with defeating the Confederacy and winning the Civil War due to fighting in the Union military, women had to embrace many new roles to keep the Union running and help with the defeat of the Confederacy. Without the women there to acquire the roles that men left behind, the Union would have been in shambles due to no one working or producing anything to help the military in the war. Whether it was volunteering as a nurse, advocating for civil rights, being a political influence, or even keeping care of their family, the new roles that Union women embraced throughout the war permanently altered their lives and helped the Union accomplish victory in the Civil War.

Project Reflection

Throughout the research and completion of this project, the most challenging part of writing the paper was finding and analyzing sources. Because many sources were not legitimate, it was a struggle to find reliable and helpful information. There were also many sources that did not give valuable information, which would not give me helpful information on my topic.

Although there were some struggles while completing this project, I was able to maintain my focus on the topic of women's roles in the Union and found many sources to help me progress with the project. Because of this my topic did not change significantly.

Even though I found many primary and secondary sources, some were more helpful than others, and some did not help much at all. A source that did not work was *Union Tested: The Civil War Letters of Cimbaline and Henry Fike*. When I originally selected this secondary source, I thought it would discuss how a man's and a woman's roles in the Civil War differed. This source discussed how Cimbaline's and Henry's lives were impacted without the physical presence of each other, rather than the roles played by women in the war. I decided not to use this source because it would be a struggle to find ways to incorporate any details into my essay since it did not discuss anything about

the roles played by Union women.

Although my final sources were all helpful in different ways, the two most helpful were *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* by Judith Ann Giesberg and *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* by Judith Ann Giesberg is a secondary source that provides key information on how women had to adapt new roles so that they were able to independently provide for their families while their husbands were away at war. I used the information from this source to provide specific examples and information regarding the roles that women played throughout the Civil War. *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes* is a primary source that provides evidence that helped reinforce my topic. This source created a better understanding of the experiences Union nurses went through in the Civil War. I used it to support my topic by providing a better understanding of the roles that women played in nursing, which helped me to better address my overall topic. These sources were the most effective sources in assisting me to advance in my project.

The visual component of my project allows the audience to better understand my topic.

My visual component was able to effectively execute the plan I originally laid out in my Progress Summary. It helped me support that women in the Union played a vital role in the Civil War. Overall, the visual component helped me create a better understanding of the topic for the audience and better support my topic.

Bibliography

Giesberg, Judith Ann. *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Attie, Jeanie. *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Ropes, Hannah. 1980. *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. Edited by John R. Brumgardt. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Bacot, Ada W. *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot, 1860–1863*. Edited by Jean V. Berlin. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994.

Barton, Clara. *Clara Barton Papers*. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Mohr, James C., ed. *The Cormany Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982.

Neely, Jeremy. *A Union Tested: The Civil War Letters of Cimbaline and Henry Fike*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2025.

Historical Essay

Honorable Mention

The Dynamic Between Black and White Soldiers in the Union Army

Brendan G. Miller

Even while fighting side by side, racial tension between Black and White soldiers was still prominent. The Black soldiers still made a massive impact on the Civil War despite the pay disparities, harsher discipline, and distrust from white officers. Because of these challenges, many relationships between Black and White soldiers in the Civil War started unstable and tense. Although Black and White soldiers' relationship slowly improved, that did not transform the institutional racism in the Union Army.

Racial discrepancies between Black and White soldiers were evident in treatment and rules that disfavored Black soldiers. Fleetwood's diary highlights this by stating that Black soldiers faced harsher punishments and lower pay (Fleetwood 1864-65). Even with this unfair treatment, Black soldiers still fought alongside White soldiers pridefully and confidently. These moments on the battlefield challenged many assumptions that White soldiers had before the war. This led to the White soldiers gradually respecting the Black soldiers more.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was a White officer who commanded a Black regiment. In the beginning, he held the same views as most White soldiers, which showed little respect for the Black soldiers he led. Over time, his opinion slowly changed, and the more they were together, the fonder he grew of them (Higginson 1870, 62-83). As his respect for them grew, his

biases and attitudes toward racial differences diminished.

Despite the growing respect between Black and White soldiers, the institutional system within the Union Army still mistreated Black soldiers. Glatthaar notes that the army's structure still kept discrepancies in pay and treatment (Glatthaar 1991, 85-90). This shows that even when personal relationships progressed, the system did not. Glatthaar goes on to show how Black soldiers were more harshly punished than White soldiers for the same actions. This kept the racial hierarchy in place despite the growth of relationships between individuals.

The gradual progression of relationships between Black and White soldiers shaped how many people viewed race, freedom, and citizenship for years after the war. Ueland's study of the Demus family shows how military service was the foundation for Black veterans to fight for greater rights after the war (Ueland, 2021). This shows how the respect Black soldiers gained throughout the war could not fully eradicate racism but still made an impact on how some White soldiers viewed them. Overall, these wartime experiences showed that to achieve equality in America, change would need to be made beyond the battlefield.

My visual component is a digital timeline that illustrates the progression of the relationship between Black and White soldiers. It visually tracks the journey from distrust and unequal treatment to the gradual growth of respect shared through combat experiences. The timeline marks key events such as the Emancipation Proclamation, Fleetwood's bravery in battle, and Higginson's transformation toward Black individuals. By putting these events in a clear timeline, it visualizes how respect grew while systemic racism stayed.

Even though relationships began shaky, their shared combat experiences resulted in moments of both Black and White Soldiers gaining mutual respect. Despite these moments of mutual respect, institutional racism was still evident, which halted almost any progress towards equality after the war. However, the relationships formed during these hard times helped set the stage for later fights for equality.

Project Reflection

My biggest struggle while making this essay was figuring

out how to implement my digital timeline paragraph in a way that flowed naturally. Since the timeline showed the progression of the relationships between Black and White soldiers, I struggled to make it flow correctly in the essay. I did not want it to interrupt my body paragraphs, but I still wanted the reader to understand how respect grew over time. Eventually, I decided it would flow best by going right before my conclusion because it allowed me to summarize key events as well as visualize how gradual the progression of their relationship was. My next biggest struggle was explaining the slow changes in White soldiers' attitude without oversimplifying or ignoring the fact that racism was still very prominent. The reality was that many soldiers were still racist, even if their attitudes softened through shared combat experiences. Finding the right balance between describing that change proved to be challenging, because I wanted to be historically accurate without oversimplifying history.

The main argument in my essay did not change at all because all my sources supported my claim. I always intended to show the gradual change in personal relationships between the soldiers, but the Union Army system still kept their discrimination policies despite the growth of personal relationships. As I researched more, this idea stayed consistent. I never felt the need to change my thesis because the evidence showed the growth of personal relationships, while institutional racism stayed.

Even though Andrew Lang's "In Wake of the War" provided valuable background knowledge, I decided not to use it in the essay. This was due to the book being more focused on after the war, while my essay was over wartime relationships and events. This resulted in the book not helping my main claim, thus not being included in my essay.

The two most important sources for my argument were Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Army Life in a Black Regiment" and Joseph Glatthaar's "Forged in Battle". Higginson showed the personal side of change and how his personal opinions changed as a White officer leading a Black regiment. Glatthaar, however, explained the structural racism built into the military.

Fleetwood's diary helped connect these two pieces with expe-

riences of both mistreatment and acts of bravery that earned respect from White soldiers. Using all these sources together helped me build a balanced argument that showed that personal relationships grew while the institution of the military did not.

Bibliography

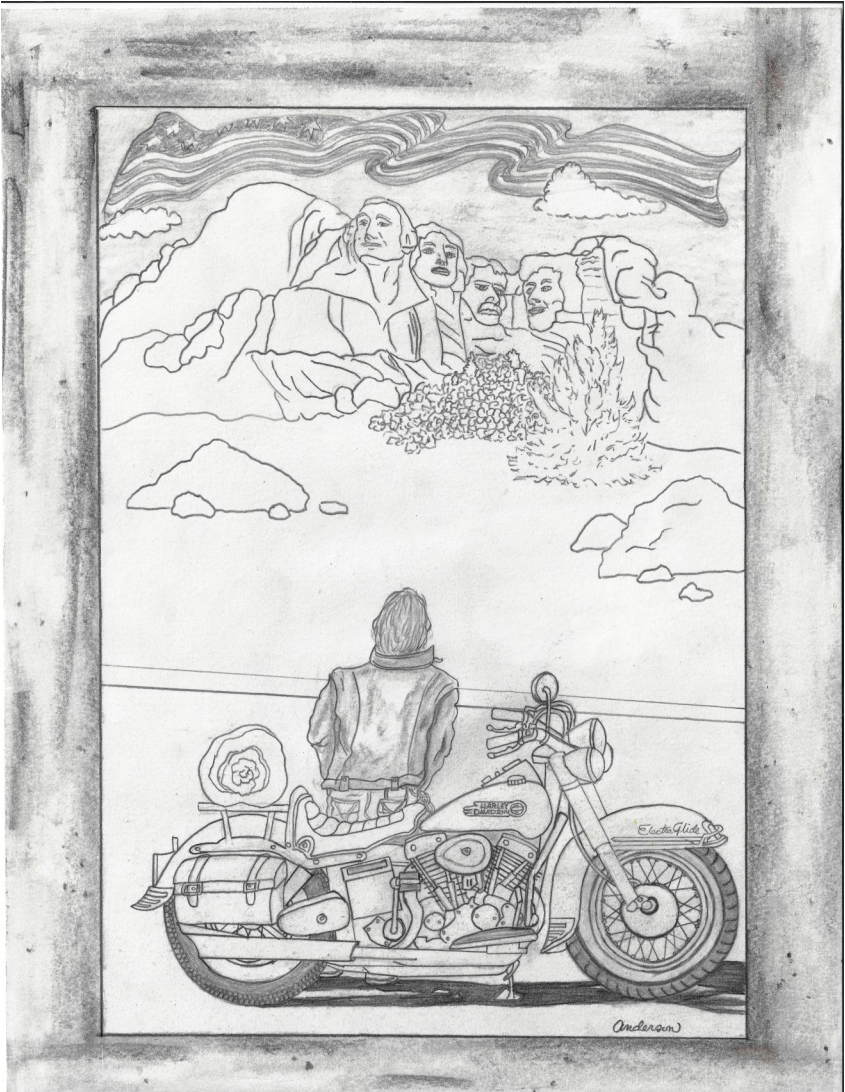
Fleetwood, Christian A. *Diary of Sergeant Major Christian A. Fleetwood, 1864-1865*. National Humanities Center.

Glatthaar, Joseph T. *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers*. New York: Meridian, 1991.

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870.

Lang, Andrew F. *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017.

Ueland, Tora. "The Experiences of Black Soldiers During the Civil War: A Microhistorical Case Study of the Demus Family." *West Virginia University Historical Review* 2, no. 1 (2021).



General Art
Honorable Mention

Robert Anderson

Research
Paper



Research Paper

First Place

Powered By Memory:

The Nostalgia Time Machine

Amber Atkinson

Have you ever smelled a certain fragrance, heard a song from your childhood, seen an old toy, tasted a candy from the past, or felt the sand between your toes and instantly felt like you were transported back in time? This is the power of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations and can be considered a deep emotional experience. Nostalgia is not just remembering a smell, sound, taste, or sight; it is literally being able to feel your memory. This is an example of why I relate nostalgia to a time machine. While we can't actually time travel, we can travel back to any moment in our lives through our minds. Research has come a long way since nostalgia was originally considered a disease, as if it were some sort of mental and physical illness. Eventually, nostalgia shifted from a medical condition to a psychological and emotional experience. Nostalgia shows up everywhere, from retro fashion trends to reboots of our favorite shows. Advertisers use nostalgia to grab people's attention and create an emotional connection to their products. I have often wondered why trends eventually come back. It's nostalgic for some and fun and new for others; either way, that is going to bring in money. Today's marketing uses that warm, bittersweet,

and transporting feeling of nostalgia to their advantages. People are drawn to nostalgic moments because they give a sense of comfort and give a sense of certainty during such uncertain times. Ultimately, Nostalgia acts like a personal time machine that lets people revisit their past in ways that help them connect with their memories and understand who they are today.

The word Nostalgia comes from the Greek words *nostos*, which means homecoming and *algos* which means pain or ache. The word was first discovered in 1688 by a Swiss medical student named Johannas Hofer. He described nostalgia as the homesickness that soldiers experienced being so far from their families and homes (Cordaro, p.6). An era without instant communication while simultaneously being cut off from familiar surroundings could make the longing almost unbearable. This is likely why doctors believed this was a medical diagnosis and not just a feeling. They also believed that if someone suffered from nostalgia too long, it could cause physical symptoms like fatigue, loss of appetite, anxiety, and sometimes cause a fever. Today, nostalgia is recognized as a complex but common experience that can have both helpful and unhelpful effects on people. I find this history interesting because it shows how much a single word can change, but also somehow stays the same in the sense of how nostalgia feels. I imagine we all experience nostalgia differently. What transports one person back in time might leave another completely unphased. A smell hits the room and takes someone back in time, but the person sitting next to them does not experience any longing for the past. People won't "time travel" at the same time because each of us have different nostalgic triggers. While this feeling itself has been around for centuries, modern day entertainment has found ways to channel nostalgia beyond memory through music, media, and marketing a theme we'll explore in more detail later.

Nostalgic experiences tend to be "self-relevant, social, and imbued with a sense of meaning" (Cordaro, p. 10). Memories of people, places, and things are often associated with strong positive emotions, which is why thinking nostalgically can be uplifting and comforting. When people think nostalgically, they are symbolically strengthening the social bonds between themselves and

the people they remember in their nostalgic experiences (Cordaro, p. 9). When people experience negative emotions, nostalgic memories can't act as a "psychological resource that buffers against negative states such as loneliness, boredom, and meaninglessness" (Cordaro, p. 11). When we are feeling alone, or at least when I am feeling alone, my thoughts tend to get louder. Rarely am I ever thinking about the future and mostly replaying my life movie, from what I can recall, up to this point. I suppose this is how our brains entertain themselves? How fascinating. This plays into what Cordaro explains about maintaining a continuous sense of self (p. 14). It reminds us of who we have been, who we are, and maybe even who we want to be.

From a psychological perspective, nostalgia activates several parts of the brain. The part of the brain that stores long term memories and the part of the brain that helps us process emotions work together. This combination creates that sudden rush of feeling we get when something from the past resurfaces. Neuroscientists have found that sensory triggers, like smell and sound, are powerful because they bypass rational thought and go straight to our emotional centers. This is why just a random smell or the intro to a song we haven't heard in a while can instantly transport someone back to another time. These emotions don't just make us feel good, there are some cases where they can turn our moods around for the better. Studies have shown that nostalgia can help raise levels of optimism. When people recall meaningful past experiences, they often feel less lonely and more understood. Nostalgic flashbacks can help remind people of the values, relationships, and moments that shaped who they are today. It could be helpful when people are trying to cope with a big move or the loss of someone close. The subtle reminders of where we have been make it easier to understand where we are going.

Everything cannot be positive, and of course, there are some negative effects of nostalgia. When we are constantly reliving past experiences in our heads, I would assume that we would grieve some of those memories. For me, when I smell a charcoal grill burning on a nice summer day, I think of being a kid, riding my bike down the road, smelling the grill, watching my dad cook,

and just simply being at peace. Even as I type this and recall that memory that I really do love, I have tears in my eyes, and I feel sadness. Life will never seem that simple again, thus the negative effects of nostalgia. When someone focuses so much on the past, nostalgia stops being a source of strength and it almost becomes an emotional set back. It can make people feel stuck, which could trigger anxiety and depression. As the movie *Inside Out* taught me, we need to feel sadness to also experience joy, and they can exist perfectly together. The power of nostalgia is extremely complex in the sense of sadness and joy depend on each other. In a way, it blends the joy of remembering with sorrow of knowing those flashbacks remain in the past. It is a bittersweet gift that shows just how deeply our memories and emotions are intertwined.

Nostalgia has become one of the most powerful tools in modern entertainment and marketing. We see it everywhere, from the movie remakes and 90s TV show reboots to the filters on social media and the comeback of retro fashion trends. Companies and creators have realized that nostalgia sells, not because people enjoy old things, but because it makes them feel something familiar. Shows like *Friends* or movies like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are constantly being reintroduced to new audiences and come with a lot of nostalgia. Rewatching these types of feel good shows or movies can allow us to experience moments that shaped our childhoods. This works because they tap into emotions that are ties to belonging, our core identity, and safety. Even a small reference, like a song heard from the back seat of the car with your grandparents can trigger vivid memories. We all share nostalgic memories with friends, family, and through social media which creates a shared history with people who were not part of the original experience.

I am sure we have all watched the Netflix series *Stranger Things* and are patiently waiting for the final season to come out. (Side note: if you have not watched this yet, I highly recommend that you do!) The opening scene gives off total 80s vibes with a group of kids in their basement playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with posters of *The Thing* and *E.T.* on the wall. Julia Garas explains that the show “infuses references to the popular culture of

the 1980s” combining the work of Stephen King and Steven Spielberg to connect the past to the present. They recreated the 80s using a bunch of intricate details like music, clothes, vehicles, and food to create the big picture. Doing this is not just telling us a story, for some they are able to step back in time. It is a prime example of how media can act as what Garas calls “technology of memory”, helping audiences “anchor themselves to what they know to abate fears about the future” (Garas p. 90).

Many of the *Stranger Things* fans were not even alive in the 80s (me), yet they feel attached to that era’s aesthetic. This is called pseudo-nostalgia, which is a sentimental longing for a past that one has not personally experienced, often fueled by consuming media or products that create an aesthetic of a bygone. This kind of nostalgia does not only connect us to our past, but sometimes it builds a bridge across generations. Not only are fans, young and old, able to connect to the show because of this it also helps music and various other things “stay alive.” Kate Bush’s 1985 song “Running Up That Hill” went back to the top of charts decades later because of *Stranger Things*. The past is constantly being reimagined for the present. What is that saying? History always repeats itself. This is accurate in more ways than one.

The connection between nostalgia and consumerism is everywhere we look. Major brands like Coca-Cola, Nike, and Nintendo regularly use throwbacks to create emotional bonds with customers. They are not only selling the product, but the memories. These marketing strategies work because nostalgia triggers emotional warmth and belonging, creating a type of bond that goes beyond the product itself. It is less about the soda or the game console, and more about how it reminds people who they were when they first experienced it. Social media has taken this even further. Snapchat and Facebook have the “on this day” feature that lets you see every memory posted on that day for the years prior. This is part of my morning routine. I check my memories and see my children as babies or even my own memories from high school pop up. This feature reminds us of the moments we have shared and invite us to reexperience it. These memories keep users emotionally engaged and scrolling longer. Its nostalgia

turned into an algorithm. In a way, it seems like nostalgia in media today functions as both a comfort and a distraction. It provides a temporary escape and teleports us to a time where everything seems familiar and safe. While some memories that pop up can remind us of a life we do not want to live anymore, it comes with far more reminders of the beautiful life we created for ourselves. As a mother, life gets busy, and I feel like we tend to focus on how we could do better. When I see memories of my daughters and how much we have accomplished together, I feel at peace and regain the sense of purpose the negative thoughts tried to hide away.

Nostalgia does not just influence individuals on a personal level, it also shapes how people see themselves within society. Every generation looks back on a simpler time, often related to music, fashion, and values of their youth. This collective nostalgia helps form a type of shared identity. When people connect over the same memories, they gain a special bond and each have that sense of belonging with a specific group of time period. It is kind of like nostalgia become a type of glue that connects people through shared experiences of the past. If we are speaking on nostalgia on personal level, I believe it helps people make sense of who they are. With gaps in our memories, when things are brought up it is like a lightbulb goes of letting us really know why we are the way we are. As our lives change, the memories we revisit give us emotional stability. When we think back on family gatherings, first loves, or childhood friends, we are solidifying the story we tell ourselves about our lives. Even though change is inevitable, our core memories or experiences stay with us.

Do you remember the shut down during COVID-19? This allowed so many people to stay home and be with their family. This gave so much time to deep clean and go through old pictures and nicknacks. People had a lot of free time on their hands to watch their favorite childhood movies with their kids or bake something they found in their grandma's recipe book. These nostalgic activities were not just for fun or to pass the time, they basically acted as a coping mechanism. Familiar memories can bring a sense of control when everything feels out of control, and 2020 was a wild year. Corando notes that nostalgia can "buffer

against negative emotional states” like loneliness and meaninglessness (p.11). This explains why so many people found themselves longing for comforting memories during times of isolation. Nostalgia then also becomes a tool for emotional survival. I also think that during the pandemic nostalgia was able to give people a sense of hope. I believe it can remind us of our own resilience.

While nostalgia can be comforting and even healing, it is not always harmless. Like most emotions, it becomes almost unhealthy when it takes over. There is a big difference in longing for the past and living in it. I am guilty of this myself. Excessive nostalgia can trap people in a loop of what once was, and that makes it super difficult to accept change or look forward to the future. When people “live in the past,” they may overlook its flaws or forget the challenges that existed then. It is easy to romanticize old memories and imagine that life used to be better, even if it wasn't. We each have had many, many different versions of ourselves from the very beginning to now. Nostalgia has a strange way of connecting us to who we are. It links the past and present together which reminds us that the person we once were is still a part of who we are now. It helps us grasp some sort of comfort during challenging times, giving us a familiar feeling to stabilize the chaos. Old songs and shows to memories popping up on our phones, how we see ourselves and the world around us seems to be shaped by that feeling of nostalgia.

With all the examples discussed, it really goes to show that nostalgia is more than just remembering; it shapes how we see ourselves and how we belong to the world around us. From a tune that ignites a childhood memory to the media and brands that tap into our longing for the past, nostalgia influences both personal and shared identity. It reminds us of where we have been, who we have been with, and what or who we are missing. Each nostalgic moment is like a mini time machine that lets us revisit experiences that have defined us. Some trips are quick, like a tune or a familiar scent, that just bring a smile to our face or only a slight longing. Other trips could take a little detour which bring up more complex emotions like sadness, regret, or even guilt. These heavier trips do have a silver lining. They remind us of what we have lived, learned, and how far we have

come. In a sense, nostalgia acts as a tour guide that helps us navigate both joy and sorrow, turning each emotional journey through the past into something that strengthens our sense of self and belonging. Whenever you are revisiting your past, I hope those moments bring joy and inspire you to keep moving forward. Really, what does our fascination with the past reveal about the future we are building? As we step out of these personal time machines, we take a piece of the past with us which shapes our choices, our connections, and the stories we continue to write.

Citations

Cordaro, Filippo. *The Relationship between Nostalgia, Social Exclusion, and Empathy*. Diss. University of Southampton, 2011. https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/187383/1/Cordaro_PhD_Document.pdf.

Garas, Julia. "Strange Things are Happening: Reaching for the Retro in Response to Contemporary Crisis." *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies* 30.1 (2025): 89-97. <https://search.informit.org/doi/pdf/10.3316/informit.T2025060200009591427611604>.

Hoffi. "Why Nostalgia Marketing Works (And When It Fails)." *YouTube, YouTube*, 13 Feb. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BcLqK_zArc.

Sedikides, Constantine, Joost Leunissen, and Tim Wildschut. "The Psychological Benefits of Music-Evoked Nostalgia." *Psychology of Music* 50.6 (2022): 2044-2062. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/03057356211064641>.

Wildschut, Tim, and Constantine Sedikides. "Benefits of Nostalgia in Vulnerable Populations." *European Review of Social Psychology* 34.1 (2023): 44-91. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10463283.2022.2036005>.

Williams, Jasper. "Collective Nostalgia's Effect on Consumer Behavior." *UVM ScholarWorks*, 2024, <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1736&context=hcoltheses>.

Research Paper

Second Place

Restoring Trust and Compassion

Through Midwifery

Haley Kiker

In the U.S., giving birth is frequently viewed as a medical procedure that takes place in a hospital under the supervision of doctors. Although this approach has improved emergency care and technology, it hasn't altered the alarming reality that the United States continues to have one of the highest rates of maternal mortality among developed nations. For centuries, midwives have played a vital role in supporting women throughout pregnancy and childbirth. They provide care that emphasizes safety, personalization, and emotional support. In recent years, more families have become interested in midwifery as they look for alternatives to the highly medicalized approach to birth. We gain a deeper understanding of how midwifery addresses ongoing issues in maternal health by examining its history, challenges, and benefits. Midwifery gives mothers a safe, holistic, and empowering alternative to hospital births, and increasing access to midwives in the U.S. would improve maternal health outcomes and give women more control over their birthing experiences.

For centuries, midwives have held an important role in childbirth across all cultures. They were appreciated for their valuable skills, the knowledge they had of women's bodies, and the impact they had on the community's health. Based on the history, midwives not only existed but also had cultural and legal power. A

2015 journal article observes, “From 1547 to 1589, references to midwives and midwifery focused on the realities of a professional practice. Medical treatises, discussions of baptismal rites, and more captured this. The uses of ‘midwife’ as a trope or dramatic character were far less common. The idea that a midwife’s testimony could be legally strong was confirmed by non-dramatic texts as well” (Chalk 107). This longstanding custom shows that midwifery was previously thought of as a respectable legitimate profession. But in the United States “by the early 20th century allopathic medicine had established itself as authoritative in virtual all health matters, and this authority was reflected in licensure laws that increasingly marginalized those who practiced alternative forms of health care” (Beckett 130). The rise in hospital births and the power of doctors drove midwives to the margins. The transition lessened midwives’ autonomy and esteem. Unlike in other developed countries, U.S. midwives were pushed out, eliminating families’ choice if they wanted to give birth outside a hospital. “Midwives in many countries are key care providers trained to offer a variety of services. These include managing normal pregnancies, assisting with childbirth, and providing care during the postpartum period” (Tikkanen, Roosa). In those countries, midwives remained a part of the standard maternity system. The result has been safer and more humane birth outcomes. U.S. history of excluding midwives not only changed cultural expectations of birth but also set up our current broken maternity system, in which maternal mortality is still much higher than in other developed countries. The shift highlights how much was lost when birth went from the care of trusted women within communities to the hallways of hospitals with impersonal systems and limited access.

This shift away from midwifery still affects maternal health outcomes in the United States today. It creates a system that often focuses on intervention rather than personalized care. Unlike other wealthy countries, the U.S. has had difficulties in providing safe and fair maternity care. As the Commonwealth Fund reports, “In 2023, at a time when maternal mortality was declining worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the United States was one of only seven countries to report a

significant increase in the proportion of pregnancies that result in the death of the mother since 2000” (Declercq, Eugene, and Laurie C. Zephyrin). Despite advanced technology, “the United States has the highest maternal mortality rate of any high-income country” (Declercq, Eugene, and Laurie C. Zephyrin). The issue goes beyond just the overall numbers. It shows profound racial and social gaps that highlight the unequal quality of care. The crisis is even more severe for women of color: “From 2017 to 2019, the pregnancy-related mortality ratio for non-Hispanic Black people was 2.9 times that for non-Hispanic white people, while the ratio for non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Natives was 2.3 times greater” (Declercq, Eugene, and Laurie C. Zephyrin). In addition to mortality, the U.S. maternity system is now characterized by overmedicalization where “nearly one in three births are delivered by cesarean section, a rate well above what the World Health Organization considers medically necessary” (Declercq, Eugene, and Laurie C. Zephyrin). These results show how much the United States has strayed from community-centered, holistic care models that prioritize continuity, compassion, and trust between providers and mothers. Many medical professionals now point to midwifery as an effective approach that improves outcomes, reduces unnecessary interventions, and makes childbirth safer, more affordable, and more supportive for families. Bringing midwifery back to an essential role in maternity care would not only enhance outcomes but also encourage a culture of respect and empowerment in the birth experience.

Midwifery plays an important role in improving the health of mothers and newborns by providing skilled, continuous, and personalized care. Studies show that “Care led by midwives—educated, licensed, regulated, integrated in the health system and working in interdisciplinary teams—had a positive effect on maternal and perinatal health across the many stages of the framework, even when compared with care led by other health professionals in combination with midwives” (Renfrew). This care model is based on strong relationships. The midwife knows her patient well and understands her preferences and concerns. Midwife-led continuity models have also been linked to better birth experiences and outcomes. “Women who had midwife-led continuity

models of care were less likely to have regional analgesia, episiotomy, and instrumental birth and were more likely to have no intrapartum analgesia or anesthesia, spontaneous vaginal birth, attendance at birth by a known midwife, and a longer mean length of labor” (Renfrew). These findings show that having a familiar and trusted provider makes birth safer. It also helps women feel more in control of their experience. Midwifery does more than improve medical outcomes. It also supports emotional well-being and promotes a natural, confident approach to childbirth. It encourages women to trust their bodies and the natural process of birth. This creates an environment where they feel respected and supported. This emotional care is just as important as the physical care midwives provide because birth experiences often have a lasting impact on how women see themselves and motherhood. As one midwife expressed in *The Business of Being Born*, “a woman, as long as she lives, will remember how she was made to feel at her birth” (21:33), highlighting the lasting emotional impact of a supportive birth experience. Another doctor in the documentary captures the simplicity and trust that midwifery encourages: “today what we have to discover is how easy birth can be when we don’t try to make things too complicated when ideally there is nobody around but an experienced, motherly, and silent, low profile midwife” (26:39). These insights show that midwives not only improve safety and outcomes, but they also restore a sense of calm, confidence, and dignity to childbirth.

Although midwifery and home birth were once common in the United States, they began to seem unusual by the 1970s as childbirth mainly moved into hospitals. One source explains, “Although seemingly radical in the 1970s, home birth and midwifery were commonplace in the United States only a few generations ago. By the 1970s, however, hospital birth had become the norm. The relocation of childbirth was a consequence of a host of demographic, institutional, and cultural changes” (Beckett and Hoffman 130). This kind of change not only had an impact on society’s views, but also caused long-term problems for the midwives in this field. Although there is evidence to the contrary, many Americans began to associate midwives with unsafe or antiquated practices as hospitals became the standard place for

births. According to the Access and Integration Maternity Care Mapping (AIMM) Study, “American midwives face multiple challenges to practice, including numerous regulatory barriers and inability to secure third-party reimbursement ” (Vedam et al.). These obstacles often mean that even well-trained midwives cannot practice independently or are barred from hospital settings altogether. The AIMM study also notes, “Lack of access to maternity care that is collaborative and based on evidence is particularly problematic in rural and other under-resourced communities” (Vedam et al.). This shows that strict policies don’t just limit job opportunities for midwives; they also make it harder for many women to get the maternal care they need. In addition, efforts to make midwives a regular part of maternity care have been slowed by resistance within the broader medical community. Old beliefs, strict laws, and limited insurance coverage still make it hard for midwives to be entirely accepted and supported, even though their care has been proven to be safe and effective. Expanding access to midwives and removing these barriers would empower midwives and provide mothers with safer, more personalized options for childbirth.

To make childbirth safer and more supportive for families in the United States, there needs to be a stronger focus on midwifery. The *Lancet Series on Midwifery* explains that “national investment in midwives and in their work environment, education, regulation, and management ... is crucial to the achievement of national and international goals and targets in reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health” (Renfrew). This investment does more than improve birth outcomes. This investment leads to better-than-better birth outcomes. It also helps us move toward a more family-centered system of care that focuses on prevention and emotional connection while respecting each woman's autonomy and choice. In other countries, this investment has already worked. As one report notes, “the introduction of educated, trained, motivated, and respected licensed midwives, working effectively with medical and public health colleagues, has been associated both with a rapid and sustained decrease in maternal and newborn mortality, and with an improvement in quality of care” (Renfrew). These results demonstrate that when a nation

genuinely values midwives and provides them with an authentic role in its healthcare system, mothers and babies fare better. The birth experience in countries such as the U.K. and the Netherlands is less like a medical intervention and more like a human experience. It's not just safer, but also kinder, with fewer unwarranted medical procedures and a deeper sense of trust and care. Other studies also highlight this global pattern, noting that “midwives in many countries are key care providers trained to provide a wide range of services,” and that “high-income countries with the lowest intervention rates, best outcomes, and lowest costs have integrated midwifery-led care into their health care systems” (Tikkanen, Roosa). Unfortunately, “the U.S. and Canada have the lowest overall supply of midwives and ob-gyns – 12 and 15 providers per 1,000 live births” (Tikkanen, Roosa). These numbers disclose a serious lack of access. This issue contributes to the country's high rates of maternal complications and unnecessary medical procedures. Expanding education and training programs, updating outdated laws, and ensuring that “midwife services are uniformly covered by private insurance plans” (Tikkanen, Roosa) would give more women access to quality, affordable maternity care. Addressing these barriers would also diversify the maternity care workforce and help make care more equitable for underserved communities. Evidence from the U.S. and around the world demonstrates that when midwives are supported and fully integrated into the health system, maternal mortality from pregnancy-related causes declines, birth outcomes improve, and women report greater care and empowerment during the childbirth experience. Investing in midwifery isn't just policy; it's an investment in a model of care that prioritizes safety, compassion, and respect for all mothers.

The history of midwifery in the United States is also an account of how childbirth has been transformed from a personal, community-based issue into something that is frequently more about medical procedures. Modern medicine has provided tremendous benefits, saving millions of lives and, in doing so, reducing much of the magic, warmth, and trust that once surrounded birth. In many parts of the world, midwives remain integral to the healthcare system and with good reason. Births are safer;

there's less medical intervention, and a sense of genuine support throughout. Here in the U.S., antiquated laws, inadequate insurance coverage, and long-held myths also make it difficult for midwives to practice freely and for families to find care, particularly in small towns and rural areas of this country. If we genuinely want to make birth a safer and brighter experience, we must change that. If midwives were supported with better education, fairer laws, and equal insurance coverage, more women would have the opportunity to experience the kind of birth they want and deserve. At its heart, midwifery is a powerful reminder that birth isn't only a medical event, but also an exquisitely human one bound up in trust and connection, the need to feel heard and supported during one of life's most intense experiences.

Works Cited

Beckett, Katherine, and Bruce Hoffman. "Challenging Medicine: Law, Resistance, and the Cultural Politics of Childbirth." *Law & Society Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2005, pp. 125–70. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1555122>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2025.

Chalk, Dannie Leigh. "Savior, Witness, and Comic Relief: The Midwife in English Texts of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2015, pp. 93–113. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24392049>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2025.

Declercq, Eugene, and Laurie C. Zephyrin. "Maternal Mortality in the United States, 2025 | Commonwealth Fund." *The Commonwealth Fund*, 29 July 2025, www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2025/jul/maternal-mortality-united-states-2025.

Epstein, Abby. *The Business of Being Born*. International Film Circuit, 2008.

Renfrew, Mary J et al. "Midwifery and quality care: findings from a new evidence-informed framework for maternal and newborn care." *THE LANCET*, vol. 384, no. 9948, 9 July 2014, pp. 1129–1145, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)60789-3/fulltext?_eventId%3Dlogin](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)60789-3/fulltext?_eventId%3Dlogin).

Tikkanen, Roosa, et al. "Maternal Mortality and Maternity Care in the United States Compared to 10 Other Developed

Countries.” *Maternal Mortality and Maternity Care in the United States Compared to 10 Other Developed Countries*, 18 Nov. 2020, www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/nov/maternal-mortality-maternity-care-us-compared-10-countries

Vedam, Saraswathi, Kathrin Stoll, Marian MacDorman, Eugene Declercq, and R. Cramer, et al. “Mapping Integration of Midwives across the United States: Impact on Access, Equity, and Outcomes.” *PLOS ONE*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, e0192523. *PLOS ONE*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192523>.



General Art
Honorable Mention

Robert Anderson

Research Paper

Third Place

Pandas at Risk: How Human Activity Affects Biodiversity

Ashley Dixon

Known as the world's most passive bear, the giant panda has faced a steady decline in its population throughout history. Historically, not only have their numbers decreased, but so has the availability of their natural habitats. This problem is due to low reproductive rates, climate change, environmental shifts, and human activities such as fragmentation and deforestation. In response, biologists and conservation scientists have worked hard to conserve pandas in the wild. They employ strategies such as establishing nature reserves and habitat protections, developing captive breeding programs, and raising funds for habitat expansions, among other approaches. Despite recent gains, giant pandas are still at risk of extinction. Still, through education and creative conservation strategies, humans can help prevent their disappearance and protect the species' vital role in the balance of life.

The giant panda, also known as *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*, is best known for its unique black and white fur coat. Their natural ecosystems are primarily located in China, mainly in provinces such as Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu. According to the World Wildlife Fund, a panda's diet consists mainly of bamboo, and they eat twenty-six to eighty-five pounds per day (World Wildlife Fund). This is due to the evolutionary adaptations, such as their strong jaws and a pseudo-thumb that allow them to grip and chew bamboo efficiently. Because giant pandas rely almost exclusively

on bamboo, research has shown that they are losing both land and feeding grounds, which has contributed to the decrease in population. One study explained, “Current threats from human activity are, however, much greater now than they were decades ago, largely due to the development of infrastructure, agriculture, and tourism in the original habitats of the giant pandas. ... the wild giant panda population is divided into 33 isolated subpopulations, 18 of which comprise fewer than 10 giant panda individuals” (Lan et al. 2). This highlights that human activity has negatively impacted many panda groups, causing them to decline in number due to a lack of resources, leaving them unable to survive independently without human interference. Climate change also plays a significant role in the loss of habitat and food availability. Although bamboo is hardy, it is sensitive to temperature shifts, meaning that even small changes in climate can wipe out entire feeding grounds. While environmental pressures leave pandas vulnerable to endangerment, their naturally low reproductive rates also play a major role.

As stated earlier, the reproductive rate of the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) has plummeted over the years. A female panda has a narrow breeding window of only two to three days a year, making it one of the shortest breeding windows of any mammal. This short time frame is a significant disadvantage because males must locate receptive females within it, which is often difficult in the wild due to long distances and population separation. Not only is mating a problem because of the short breeding time, but also because of physical challenges. As explained in the video, researchers note that male pandas have relatively small reproductive anatomy compared to their body size (Terra Mater 1:33–2:35). This makes mating difficult because it requires time and precision to find the correct posture.

In recent decades, humans have begun to show greater concern for the environment and the survival of endangered species such as the giant panda. Since giant pandas struggle to repopulate naturally, scientists and researchers have established protected areas and captive breeding programs to help increase their numbers. These conservation efforts have already produced substantial results. As Yan Dongjie reports, “In China, the protected ar-

ea for giant panda habitats has been expanded from 1.39 million hectares in the 1980s to 2.58 million hectares, with the population of wild giant pandas growing from around 1,100 in the 1980s to nearly 1,900 this year” (Dongjie). This growth demonstrates how human activity can not only negatively, but also positively impact conservation, highlighting the determination to protect both the environment and the species. However, one drawback of running these programs is the expense involved, as noted by Binley and colleagues (Binley et al. 8). Although this strategy has been successful in raising the number of pandas and providing the resources needed for survival, many critics still point out its downsides. Beyond financial concerns, Bussolini and others explain that captive breeding often results in limited genetic diversity. The lack of diversity can lead to inbreeding depression, which reduces fertility rates and can cause long-term health issues in wildlife populations (Bussolini et al. 5-6). While critics highlight the costs and genetic risks of captive breeding, these strategies can be improved and adapted to become more efficient and hopefully avoid such downsides in the future.

Biologists not only focus on the reproduction of pandas, but also on protecting their natural habitats. In China, conservation efforts have expanded reserves large enough for the animals to live freely. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund have been responsible for many of these projects. For example, because pandas are solitary creatures, it is important to create areas that are spacious enough to support multiple individuals while still giving each panda room to roam. As a result of these efforts, protected land has nearly doubled, and new corridors and reforested areas have been built to connect habitats and reduce isolation. Conservation projects also work on planting as much greenery and bamboo as possible to ensure that the animals have both food and shelter at their disposal (World Wildlife Fund). Environmental strategies like these have been crucial for restoring panda populations and securing their future. While strategies like creating protected habitats and breeding programs are helpful, reducing human influence on the ecosystem is also a vital way to preserve the panda species.

Human activity in any environment can sometimes do more

harm than good. Even when people mean well, our involvement is not always beneficial. As mentioned earlier, deforestation and habitat fragmentation are reasons why many animals face extinction. Even though humans are constantly evolving, learning, and progressing, we also demand space and resources to do so. The downside is that when land is cleared for farming, logging, or urban development, the wildlife that depends on those areas is often forgotten. Beyond these activities, road construction and expansion also threaten panda habitats. Researcher Ma and colleagues explain, “The impact of settlements and roads on the potential geographical distribution of giant pandas cannot be ignored” (Ma et al. 15). In China, habitat fragmentation became so severe that conservation laws were introduced to slow deforestation. Another example of human involvement that must be carefully managed is infrastructure development and tourism. While tourism helps bring economic growth and raises funds to support wildlife safety, the practice can also be a double-edged sword. The animals must endure loud noises, pollution, and constant human traffic, which negatively affects solitary and quiet species like pandas. As emphasized in an article published in 2023, “This is not a benign activity with negligible disturbance but often causes significant impacts on the reproductive success, survival, and long-term viability of a range of species populations, particularly those that are rare, geographically isolated and/or sensitive to various forms of disturbance” (Wójcicki et al. 21). This supports the claim that tourism can become a source of stress for animals confined to manufactured habitats. In addition, with tourism comes infrastructure building to accommodate visitors, such as roads, hotels, and viewing platforms. Fragmentation of the natural landscape is often required to build such structures, which in turn disrupts the ecosystem. As Wójcicki and colleagues also note, “Any use of an area results in a change in existing biophysical or social conditions, even if these changes are minimal and currently unmeasurable” (Wójcicki et al. 21). Construction makes it harder for animals to roam freely, find food, and reproduce, further emphasizing the need for stricter wildlife management and habitat preservation policies. Despite the obstacles brought on by human interference, there have also been positive

outcomes thanks to ongoing conservation efforts.

Even with the ongoing challenges caused by human development, recent conservation efforts have shown real progress. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the giant panda's status has improved from endangered to vulnerable over time. This change demonstrates how hardworking and practical the strategies put in place to preserve biodiversity and maintain ecosystem balance have been. Today, it is estimated that there are approximately 1,900 giant pandas living in the wild (World Wildlife Fund). Much of this recovery can be credited to private reserves, breeding programs, and other conservation initiatives. One success story of replanting and habitat restoration can be seen in the study conducted by Mu and other researchers. In Giant Panda National Park, located in Yingjing County, local residents worked alongside conservation teams to create a healthier environment for the species. Their efforts focused on replanting bamboo, rebuilding forests, and reconnecting fragmented areas that the animals rely on for food and shelter. The researchers noted that community involvement was highly effective in improving ecological conditions, promoting awareness, and increasing support for wildlife protection. As a result, the health of the local ecosystem improved significantly, showing how collaboration between scientists and citizens can lead to lasting conservation success (Mu et al. 3-5). The biggest problem that scientists and conservationists still struggle to solve is climate change. Many forms of human pollution, especially from industry and transportation, release greenhouse gases that trap heat in the atmosphere and contribute to climate change. Because of the new and frequent weather shifts, bamboo, the panda's main food source, has difficulty growing. The rapid changes in temperature do not give bamboo and other plants enough time to adapt, causing them to die off. Research by Ma and Coauthors indicates that future climate change will significantly affect panda habitats by altering temperature and precipitation patterns, which directly influence bamboo growth (Ma et al. 9-11). As noted earlier in this research paper, since pandas rely heavily on bamboo and forest vegetation, they will not have enough resources to sustain a permanent living environment if these plants continue to decline. Humans have come

a long way in their efforts to preserve wildlife and reduce disturbances to natural habitats. With the help of new research and advanced technology, conservation efforts can continue to make greater and more effective progress, offering hope for the future.

In the coming years, modern technology is guaranteed to expand rapidly and will continue to be one of the most important tools for wildlife conservation. Cell phones and other communication devices spread awareness on social media about endangered species and environmental risks. Smaller and faster robots are also capable of examining, organizing, or building essential tools. These advancements have become an important part of how humans interact with and protect the natural world. It inspires people to connect with global conservation efforts and find new ways to study and protect ecosystems. With constant innovations, researchers and conservation programs can now improve mapping systems and camera networks designed to monitor biodiversity in protected areas and breeding centers. Technology such as GPS tracking, remote sensing, and ecological modeling allows scientists to study and observe giant pandas in their natural habitat without causing disruption. These tools are also highly beneficial to restoration efforts because they can detect and report problems much earlier than traditional fieldwork. Issues like bamboo loss, Habitat decline, or unwanted human interference can be identified quickly, giving conservationists time to act before the damage becomes severe. For example, researchers Hu Zhang and nine others combined digital tools with on-site field surveys, working “across 112 transects and 1,600 quadrats to collect data on bamboo density, bamboo cover, and canopy” (Zhang et al. 3). By combining innovative scientific advances with extensive fieldwork, scientists are able to study more efficiently and dictate more time to developing effective conservation plans for future studies.

Though new scientific methods and technological advancements have helped spread awareness and support panda population growth, these tools alone cannot protect the species in the long term. To continue making progress in repopulation, setting harsher consequences and enforcing stronger environmental laws are also significant steps forward. Policies and area protections

have already been placed in many areas, but are not often fully enforced. Crimes like illegal farming, road construction, littering, and deforestation still occur within protected wildlife reserves. These actions weaken the effectiveness of the strategies and programs that were established to restore damaged habitats and recover what was lost. Weak punishment for these crimes can discourage local communities from respecting wildlife and the effort put into keeping it safe. This lack of accountability leads to more habitat fragmentation, noise pollution, overcrowding, and stress for the pandas. In the end, all the money raised to support ecological restoration programs would be wasted if laws are not enforced, and harmful behaviors continue. Building on the use of scientific reasoning, empathy, and consideration for the earth shown in panda conservation, the preservation of other endangered animals is just as important.

There have been many unique species that have either gone extinct or reached vulnerable status. Taking inspiration from the positive outcomes of panda protection movements and programs, similar strategies can be implemented to help the recovery of other animals. For example, the cameras and software used to track bamboo growth and panda movement can also be used to observe the migration patterns of elephants and rhinos. Conservation efforts to protect elephants have already taken place in parts of Africa. Many areas in Africa understand the significance of keeping the animal population consistent, which helps balance the environment and prevent future loss. Strategies like getting the community involved, raising awareness through pamphlets, news coverage, and social media can not only motivate people to act but also encourage donations. These donations can be used to improve equipment and provide enrichment for wildlife living in private reserves. When animals begin to disappear, the environment we live in also starts to change, which can lead to negative effects on both ecosystems and people. This shows that the same methods used to protect giant pandas can also be adapted to support endangered species all over the world.

The giant panda has become a powerful example for humanity, showing that with continuous effort and determination, other endangered species can also recover and grow in number. Re-

ducing human interference in protected areas helps lower stress levels in pandas and allows them to thrive in both wild and managed habitats. Educating local communities about the importance of wildlife preservation and sharing simple ways to protect it can make a lasting difference. Biologists and conservation programs have also used funding to develop technology that monitors animal movements and tracks environmental changes more effectively. If humans remain consistent in applying the strategies mentioned earlier, pandas and other animals will no longer be at risk in their own ecosystems.

Works Cited

Binley, A.D., et al. "Endangered Species Lack Research on the Outcomes of Conservation Action." *Conservation Science and Practices*, vol. 7. No. 2, 2025, e13304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.13304>.

Bussolini, Laura T., et al. "Identifying Factors Affecting Captive Breeding Success in a Critically Endangered Species." *Emu - Austral Ornithology*, vol. 123, No. 2, 2023, pp. 161-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01584197.2023.2194541>.

Dongjie, Yan. "Intl Giant Panda Conservation Cooperation to Build on Successes." *China Daily*, 24 October 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202410/24/WS671a03dda310f1265a1c96e1.html> Accessed 20 September 2025.

Lan, Tianming, et al. "Large-Scale Genome Sequencing of Giant Pandas Improves the Understanding of Population Structure and Future Conservation Initiatives." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 121. No. 36, 2024, e2406343121. *EBSCOhost*. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2406343121>.

Ma, Qi, et al. "Habitat Suitability Analysis and Future Distribution Prediction of Giant Panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) in the Qinling Mountains, China." *Diversity*, Vol. 16, No. 7, 2024, article 412. MDPI, <https://doi.org/10.3390/d16070412>.

Mu, Guanyu, et al. "The Crucial Role of Public Participation in Wildlife Habitat Restoration: A Case Study from Yingjing in the Giant Panda National Park." *Conservation Science and Prac-*

tics, Vol. 7, No. 5, 2025, e70042. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.70042>

Terra Mater. “Why It Is So Hard to Make Giant Pandas Mate | Wild to Know.” YouTube, uploaded by Terra Mater, 1 March 2024, <https://youtu.be/cpWHg8z8P5Q>.

Wójcicki, Adam, Weronika Świtlik, and Dorota Dobrowolska. “*The Need for Wildlife Research and Improved Management of Protected Areas in the Face of Increased Nature-Based Tourism.*” *Environmental Protection and Natural Resources*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2023, pp. 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.2478/oszn-2023-0009>.

World Wildlife Fund. “Giant Panda.” *World Wildlife Fund*. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/giant-panda>. Accessed 20 September 2025.

Zhang, Hu, et al. “Habitat Status and Feasibility of Constructing Corridors for a Vulnerable Population of Giant Pandas.” *Global Ecology and Conservation*, vol. 54, 2024, e03190. *ScienceDirect*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2024.e03190>.

Poetry





*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Kha Nguyen

Poetry

First Place

Believe in Me, Dad

Ellyana Schroeder

When a person is born, the first thing a lot of people do is fantasize about what that child will be

They love to imagine what the next 10, 20, 30 years of that baby's life will be like

What the baby will like,

What they'll wear

What shows they'll laugh along to

When a baby is a baby, their theoretical future seems to be a hot topic

As the child grows, it continues.

The adults keep asking "and what do you want to be when you grow up?"

And that kid will say something generic like a doctor, a princess, or a superhero

Then the kid gets older and their dreams mature

They start to take on hobbies and interests and develop a personality

And the same cycle continues,

People asking what you want to be when you grow up
People seeming to only want to focus on what you could be instead of what you are
Then the kid is now a teen
And the teen changes more and more, falling into archetypes at school
Joining clubs and Following bands
And the cycle continues
“Where are you thinking about going to college?”
“What do you want to major in?”
And suddenly,
The questions get harsher,
More judgmental,
The questions become critiques
They become hurtful and they lose the light-heartedness they once had
And suddenly being an artist or an actor isn’t an acceptable dream
But It was when I was 10
When I was 10 I could be anything I wanted to be
But now, if it’s not within a box, It’s no longer allowed
Now I’m stupid for not wanting to sit behind a desk the rest of my life
Now it’s silly to want to pursue the arts
To want to satisfy that voice in my heart that tells me to preform
You raised me to be confident in myself and everything I do
You raised me to pursue my dreams and told me I could touch the stars if I wanted to
But now you’re refusing to help me with college if I want to pursue my dreams
The same dreams you once encouraged little me to love
Now you’re telling me I’ll never make it out there

That I'll be broke and homeless

When you used to talk for hours about my school talent show at
family parties

You believed in me when I was little, but all I want is for you to
believe in me now.

Will you believe in me, Dad?

Poetry

Second Place

The Ascendancy of Faith

Tori Fowler

In the dim halls of freshman dreams
I walked a path where light seldom gleams.
Grades like scattered leaves in fall,
Marked a tale of not caring at all.

Sophomore year, the script the same,
A quiet surrender, no aim to claim.
Failure, an old friend at my side,
In its shadow, I would often hide.

Yet, within the quiet night,
A spark ignited, a sliver of light.
Grades began to rise like dawn,
From dusk's embrace, I was drawn.

All A's now, where shadows fell,
A story of triumph I live to tell.
Each day my rank ascends anew,
Proof that change is born in the dew.

Trusting in God, a steadfast way,
He crafted my path, in Him I stay.
Showing me, through love and pain,
That impossible dreams can indeed reign.

In classrooms now, where hope resides,
I see the future in rising tides.
God's hand in mine, we walk the floors,
Beyond past limits, through open doors.

Poetry

Third Place

24 Haiku

Rowan Rodriguez

Decomposition
Plants and bugs break down decay
You are with the earth

Alchemy is hard
Mixing science and magic
To make something new

Frolic, jump, and play
Orange, white, and all around sly
In the woods, a fox

Hissing in the air
A burning kettle blows steam
Ah, at last, teatime

Strange cards on display
Enchanting tarot tells me
What is yet to come

Small, blue, and fuzzy
In the labyrinth, it lives
A silly, strange worm

My flowers, you see
They are made of flesh and bone
Once they wilt, they bleed

Perfection changes
Beauty was once soft and health
It is now stick thin

The strawberry field
Your palm holds tiny red fruit
So juicy, so ripe

Eve took the first bite
Yet, Adam has the apple
Trapped inside his throat

Apple of my eye
A needle slides behind it
Ouch, lobotomy

Creaking on the floor
Careful steps make loud noises
As you sneak past by

Glowing fireflies
Make lights dance in the dark fields
Just like shining stars

Early morning comes
Honey dew covered cobwebs
Glisten in the sun

The candles flicker
Planchette moves across the board
Ouija, you play

In the tall mirror
Your effigy and mold shift
You don't see yourself

Strong scents of coffee
Sugar and milk are ready
The day just began

Black crows screech at you
Annoyingly as you work
An old, dead scarecrow

On the farm you stalk
Quietly planning your trick
Wolf in sheep's clothing

Ghosts haunt this graveyard
Eerie fog and old headstones
Home these lost spirits

Veins grow just like vines
Across white bone so fragile
Pretty, yet broken

Lantern flame flickers
Dimming light leads you astray
Into the unknown

In the green garden
A snail leaves behind a trail
Its slime, signature

Orange autumn leaves fly
Chill, crisp air graces your face
Fall is your favorite

Poetry

Honorable Mention

90's Son
Brianna Herring

Kin is bone, flesh, and blood
Yet I choose to consume water
It's easier to swallow
However, the riot cried out accusations
"Blood's love. Blood's loyal. Blood is KIN!"
Love? Never.
Loyalty? When did that happen?
Kin? I wish it's a lie
The believers don't see crumbles
Of the ruins left behind.
They forget that blood,
It doesn't equal to the nonsense they spout.
So why am I at fault?
Why do the mound of failures blame me?
Is it really my fault for the abuse?
For the lies filling my head?
The torment? The yelling?
"Maybe... I was a bad child.
A horrible son."
I'm forced to live my childhood again.
Yet I am at fault for coming back?
Am I the world's problem?

Poetry

Honorable Mention

I Am From Johnathan Crocker

I am from McGregor, Texas
Many friendly faces
Central Texas, population
5,000,
Several places to see.

I am from a Tex-Mex culture
Where everyone is helpful
And the food seems
To have a soul of its own.

I am from where the skies are
blue
Like the bonnets in the fields
As kids we would often
Find a creek to swim in.

I am from my grandmother,
Janie
The matriarch of the family
Who taught me the art of
Respecting others.

I am from my father, Juan
Lopez
Who always was there for me.
He gave me guidance and
Stern discipline.

I am from my mother, Janet
Crocker
Whose tender love
And care
Made me feel right at home.

I am from a family
Where my older brother, Jesse
Picked on me
But never gave me the cold
shoulder.

I am from a family where
My older sister, Jahantel
Used to ditch me for trying to
hang with her.

I am from a decent family
Welcomed from birth
Where from the beginning
loved by each other.

I am from a small town,
A free spirit, a safe place,
We were able to go
Wherever the wind blew us.

I am from beautiful summer
days,
Wide open blue skies,
Clouds fluffy as cotton,
Trees are as green as the grass.

I am from a regular high school
Active and fun. Teachers and
friends.
Football games on the weekend
Everyone knows who you are.

I am from where we work all
week
Putting in long hours
Waiting for a small break
To get back to it.

I am from where residents
Take notice of everyone.
Where not a person passes
Without a nod or a wave.

I am from where everyone
Is taken care of.
Bonds are shared
And never broken.

I am from where the old ones
Tell stories of days long gone.
Memories cherished
As they keep us strong.

I am from where one day
I'll pass on with
No need to worry,
Cause my memory will live on.

Poetry

Honorable Mention

Mother
Sa'Rijha Yowman

I am Black and proud of the woman I have become
A woman who chooses her battles with care,
Who stands tall, never giving in, never giving up.
I see a little boy, eyes wide with trust,
Depending on me to guide him through
This cold, cold world we call Earth.
I hear the echoes of strength in my ear:
"Sarijha, you got this. Do not give up."
Words like armor solid, steady, true.
I know now, my thoughts are not mine alone.
My actions ripple touching him, shaping him.
He loves me to the ends of the earth,
Yet sometimes I fear I won't be enough.
But I cannot fail, not him, not me.
I will rise; be the mother he needs.
With the strength of the woman who raised me
Who stood alone yet never wavered.
She taught me to be thoughtful, to lead, to dream.
And now, I will graduate.
I will build a future not just for me,
But for the little boy who calls me Mom.



*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Alex Simpson

Poetry

Honorable Mention

Life

Stewart Elizardo

Love

The way life is
Blissful delight every morning
Eyes wide open
Wheels turning
Thoughts in motion

Outgoing nature
Extroverted through and
through
Ear to ear grins
Friends everywhere
Being drawn to

Having answers
Height having
Leading with heart
Openminded
Being Driven

Sobriety
Focus
Usefulness
Strength
Intellect

Hate

Constantly up at the same time
Birds happily chirping
Eyes wide open
Restlessness abundant
Tangents running amok

Being so easy
Dealing with other's problems
Ear to ear grins
Just to appease them
Being harassed with questions

Mr. Know-it-all
Having weight issues
Leading with the heart
So many issues to deal with
Helping others

Age
Vices
Usefulness
Bald head
Hairy body

Love

My life
Sharing experiences
Reading
Music
Driving

Hate

Knowing life comes death
Being Alone
Reading
Sympathy
Spiders

Poetry

Honorable Mention

Alive

Ellyana Schroeder

You're not going to have your big moment of self-discovery like
you think you will
It'll happen sitting on your kitchen floor at 10 pm
with the cold tile floor seeping through your pajama pants
As you look up at the light above the stove,
Realizing that you'll never live this day again
That you can only ever live each day once
That there'll never be another day just like this
so you have to cherish it
you have to cherish every last moment you have in this world
because you only have one life, one chance at being you
one shot to be the person you want to
one opportunity to live
so why don't you send that email?
Why not take that job?
What reason do you have to not buy that dress?
Maybe you don't have anything to wear it to
But you'll feel good in it
You'll feel like yourself in it
And that's what matters
You're Living
You're *alive*
So why not live?

Poetry

Honorable Mention

A Possessed System

Johnathan Crocker

I despise the justice system
For the sacrifice it demands.
Yea, I have sinned
And have been incarcerated for grands.

Sentenced to serve time
But nothing of the mention
Of being forced to spend it in the dark.
An empty glass of knowledge
Like a candle with no spark.

In order to grow
Aside from nourishment
One needs wisdom to show.
Without it we're just empty vessels
With no glow.

The system has no sympathy for others.
It chooses who it wills
Ruining lives without remorse
Or recourse just to feed itself.

Some say it is an evil spirit
Those sacrificed are offered
On the altar with blood
And tears of the less fortunate.

Years and time are what it demands.
So many lost to the monster,
With ruin and distraction
Very few can stand
Without construction.

Who's in control of this beast?
Where is the line drawn?
And what will become
Of those who can't overcome?

When it's all said
And done,
Only mountains
Of lives ruined and gone.

Poetry

Honorable Mention

To Zayden and Zaylei
Keoshia Castille

My sweet little stars, Zayden and Zaylei,
You light up my days in the brightest ways.
With every laugh, every step, every dream you chase,
My heart grows bigger, overflowing with grace.

I love you more than any word could explain,
In sunshine or storm, in joy or in pain.

Wherever you wander, whatever you plan,
I'm right there beside you, your biggest fan.

Zayden, be fearless, let curiosity guide you.
Zaylei, shine boldly, let your spirit glide you.
No dream is too distant, no wish out of reach.
Go chase every star; let life be your teacher.

No matter how tall you grow or how far you roam,
My heart is your shelter, your permanent home.
Even when you think you're too big to hold my hand,
I'll still be your biggest, loudest, proudest fan.

And as you both grow, remember this truth:
My love is your anchor; my pride is your proof.
So fly, little ones, in everything you do.

Reach for the stars, go chase every dream,
Jump higher, laugh louder, and create your own theme.
And if the world feels heavy or the journey gets tough,
Remember one thing my love is endless, and that's more than
enough

I'll always be here, forever with you, cheering you on!

Reach for the stars, kiddos!

Poetry

Honorable Mention

I Am From

Kyle Reeves

I am from Mr. and Mrs. Reeves
In a place where hard work pays off
Cold West Texas winter breeze
Pops with a Menthol smoker's cough.

I am from a day gone bad with mom
Turned into the spirit of death at night
Four years old trying to stay calm
Dad next to a hospital bed with my fingers in his palm.

I am from a vision of dad with no mom in sight
Riding bikes and jumping ramps
A hardened heart looking for a fight
Playing street ball and working out the cramps.

I am from teenage nights
Smoking weed on a runaway train
Believing in liberty and civil rights
Wishing for a shot of Novocain to numb the pain.

I am from new opportunities and a second chance
Small town high school basketball game
Chasing girls trying to get into their pants
To wanting so bad fortune and fame.

I am from chasing a needle into my veins
To loving the rush of crystal
She relieves all of life's pains
To feeling well when carrying a pistol.

I am from marrying my wife
And then having kids
Dedicated to showing them a better life
Only to fail in a world of pigs.

I am from back to having a hard heart
To being in prison finding a way to survive
Meeting new people who just play the part
To digging deep simply to stay alive.

I am from owning a business to losing it all
Chasing the streets for a girl named Crystal
Where all in all I'm in a downward fall
To hiding in a closet clinching a pistol.

I am from back to a prison cell
Talking on the phone with my niece
Thinking next time out I won't fail
Sitting in an English class taught by Dr. Justice.

Poetry

Honorable Mention

I Am From Stewart Elizardo

I am from Martha and Edward
Proud parents
Great Latin bloodlines
Rich in culture
Sons and Daughters passed in
time.

I am from Dallas,
Texas proud
Great Lone Star State
Rich in oil
Six Flags passed in time.

I am from the divorce
Too proud to miss him
Great momma bear raised
Rich in guilt
Resentful most of the time.

I am from rebellion
Too right to be wrong too proud
to be told
Great possibilities best without
cause
Rich in pain and anger
Hurt passed in time.

I am from my choices
Homeless but proud
Great mistakes made
Richless drug addict
Misery coursing through time.

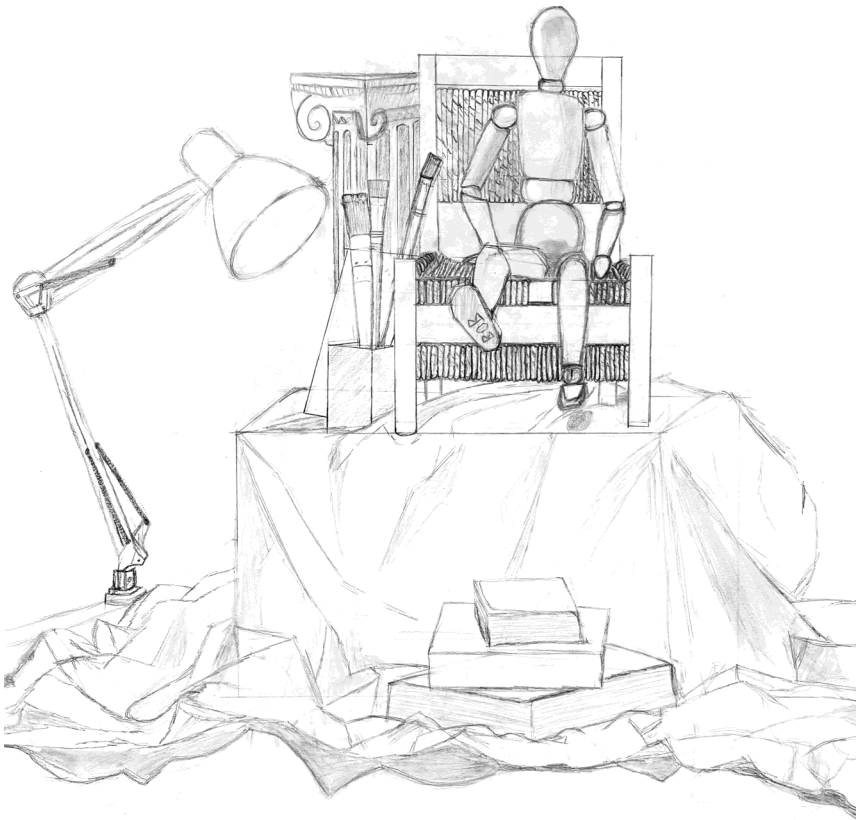
I am from work
Finally proved head held
Great trades taught
Rich in wisdom
Plumbing passed in time.

I am from addiction
Always proud to fall back
Great falls require great climbs
Rich in hunger
Fire consuming time.

I am from experience
Proud to have learned
Great stories to be told
Rich in humor
Life passed in time.

I am from drugs and deception
Exploration proud
ubiquitous delect
Rich in drugs gained from
Gold passed in time

I am from love
Proud of sobriety now
Martha & Edward greatest of the
great
Rich in family and friends
I too shall pass in time.



*General Art
Honorable Mention*

Persais Smith

A decorative border in the top right corner featuring a cluster of pink and red flowers with green leaves and a single white butterfly with brown markings on its wings.

Faculty

&

A decorative border in the bottom left corner featuring a cluster of pink and red flowers with green leaves and a single white butterfly with brown markings on its wings.

Staff

To a Special Friend

Carol Barbay

Your name is like a song to me,
That lifts and sets my spirit free.
Shining, shining like a star,
You let me know just where you are,
In nightly journeys or during days
You share yourself in complex ways.
Words from you stay in my mind;
In daily actions I always find
Your artful skills can inspire
My thoughts to soar and never tire.
As sunlight brightens cloudy air,
Your words reveal you truly care
For friends and those within your heart
Until the time that we must part.



*Photography
Faculty*

Adriane Champagne

Where the Morning Begins

Christina Wilbur

In the quiet corners of a home
where morning light slips through the window like warm honey
on the floor,
my cats wait.
Curled in a perfect circle of softness, tails tucked gently, eyes half-
closed to the world
yet watching everything.
They stretch toward the sun as if greeting an old friend.
And somehow the day begins gently, because my cats are there.
They settle beside you, a small, warm weight of quiet trust, purr-
ing contentedly, bringing soft peace to the room.
No rush. No noise. Just sunlight, and soft rhythms.
In a world that spins too fast,
my cats remind us how to live,
to find warm places,
to rest without apology,
to welcome the morning,
and to love simply by being near.



Photography-Faculty

Caitlin James-Mastronardi



Art - Faculty

Mary Catherine Wilbur



Digital Art - Faculty

Mary Catherine Wilbur

In Response to Addonizio's "What Do Women Want?"

Tiffany Charleston

I want to game.
I want to game all night
in nothing but a t-shirt
with a glass of Riesling wine
and a bag of Cheeto puffs.

I want e-boys to choke
On their gross words:
"Can I eat you out
like Chinese takeout?"
I want them to know
we share a rank in a game,
but I am out of their league.

I want to game
until my wrists
click with arthritis.

until my eyes scrape
against their lids.
until my back

bends into a slouch.

I want my higher rank
in a game that never ends.
I want to game.



Art - Faculty

Mary Catherine Wilbur



Photography - Faculty

Chelsey Galloway

Love Letter to the Moon

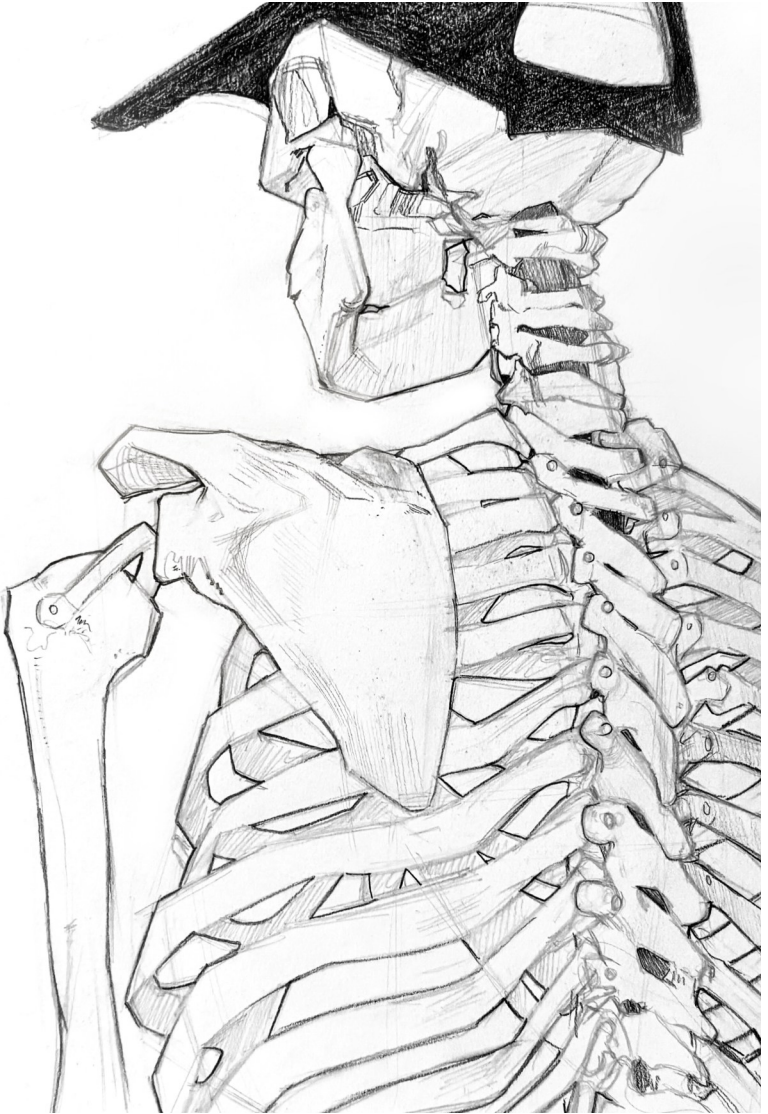
Caittin James-Mastronardi

Cara Luna,
It's 2am and I cannot sleep.
That is the first truth I offer you.
Lunar insomnia.
The second is a confession,
Shaped like gravity.
How would astronomers measure perpetual longing?
By mathematical units of mass, distance, and desire.
Maybe.
I am lost in your orbit, ferried toward
Silence and the dark side
Of your cyclical blaze.
You are every memory translated
Into light
You are oceans of grief vanishing
On the horizon
Tides crashing to the totality of joy.
Our milk-spilled goddess
Nailed to the night,
The palest archivist of human hymns-
An unwilling witness to burning battlefields,
Bone white light shining over mass graves.
Fold this letter into the pocket of your phases,
Centuries of endlessness-
For I shall love you "to the moon and back"
And ask for mercy over and over again.



Photography-Faculty

Caitlin James-Mastronardi



Art - Faculty

Mary Catherine Wilbur



Photography - Faculty

Chelsey Galloway



Photography
Faculty

Zebulon Lowe



Art - Faculty

Mary Catherine Wilbur

Photography-Faculty



Caitlin James-Mastronardi

Dear All,
From
Michelle Whitney Judice

After years of deadlines and demands, I have finally reached the Bartleby stage of life: “I would prefer not to” (“Bartleby, the Scrivener” by Herman Melville, is about a document-copying clerk in a law office in the 1850s and is worth reading if you have time for a wonderful short story about human nature, society, and morality). This pithy line, which the main character repeats throughout the story, has repeatedly popped into my head for the past few months.

After 25 years of teaching English, I am going to retire. I am excited but well aware that I will miss certain aspects of teaching. I think that what I will miss most is not what people might expect. It is not the stacks of essays waiting patiently - then impatiently - on my desk in the past but now in the queue online, nor the early mornings or late afternoons and weekends. I will also not miss administrative work, faculty meetings, grading stress, student drama, technological headaches, committee work, classroom management, academia’s pace, budget and resource frustrations, and miscellaneous duties.

Instead, what I will miss are the moments that cannot be measured or scheduled: students’ quiet breakthroughs and hard-earned successes, the shared laughter (and tears-theirs and mine!), and their voices. Just as deeply, I will miss colleagues who made working at Lamar State College Port Arthur (LSCPA) not only possible, but joyful.

There is a particular kind of magic that happens in a composition/literature classroom when a student finally understands something that once felt out of reach. It might be the moment a

theme becomes clear, or when symbolism stops being an abstract concept and becomes real and meaningful to them. These “lightbulb” moments are small but enormous in impact, for the students and for me. I have been fortunate to witness these again and again, each a reminder that learning is not just about information but about transformation.

Even more meaningful than these moments of understanding are the voices that emerge over time. When the semester begins, students cautiously write, unsure of themselves, hesitant to say too much. But slowly, with practice and encouragement, something changes. “Your thoughts and voice are just as good and important as mine,” I tell them. Their writing becomes more confident, more honest, more distinctly their own. Watching them move from silence and uncertainty to clarity and expression has been the greatest reward in teaching. They don’t just learn to write, but they learn to be heard – many for the very first time in their lives (and are so proud of themselves for this accomplishment, maybe as proud as I am of them).

I will also miss the conversations. English classrooms are, at their best, places where ideas are explored and challenged, where stories open doors to deeper discussions about life, identity, and perspective due, of course, to the different lenses we each wear. Some of the most memorable moments of my career have come not from what I had planned but from unexpected student insights and conversations. They have, since I began, taught me as much as I have taught them. I have told many classes that I would have done this job for free.

Literature has been my constant companion throughout the years. Every time I taught a story it slightly changed because the students examining and explicating it changed. Looking at the texts through their eyes meant seeing how they dealt with people and situations. I welcomed and respected their unique perspectives. They taught me to be patient, listen closely, and, as the Chair who first hired me at LSCPA, Dr. Beverly Parker, said, “Remember that everyone brings something to the table.” I feel so lucky to have met the students I have met.

Beyond the classroom, there is another group I will miss just as much: my colleagues. Over the years, they have been my

sounding boards, collaborators, and friends; some have become family. We have shared assignments, last-minute ideas, brief hallway conversations, long faculty meetings, frustrations, and victories. We have witnessed each other's cussing and crying, births and deaths, and all of life's events in between. There is a special bond that forms among those who do this work – people who understand the challenge of reaching students, the exhaustion of grading, the quiet satisfaction of a class that truly connects, and the pride of seeing our students graduate. Whether through laughter in the office, thoughtful debate in faculty meetings, words of encouragement on a difficult day, or after-hours telephone rants, my LSCPA colleagues, past and present, have sustained me in ways seen and unseen, and for them I will be eternally indebted.

There is an energy in a classroom, a department, a campus that is difficult to describe but impossible to forget. Like everything, that energy ebbs and flows, it waxes and wanes. It is found in the rhythm of discussion, the shared laughter, the exchange of ideas, and the sense that something meaningful is happening. As I step away from teaching, I do so with gratitude – for the lessons (personal and professional), the challenges (hurricanes and pandemic), and the countless moments that made this work into a worthwhile career. I carry with me not only the memory of student growth, but also friendships and professional bonds that enriched my life.

In the end, teaching college English was never just about grammar, essays, or literature. It was about the people – students and colleagues. It was about shared purpose, shared effort, and shared humanity, and, for these, I am immensely thankful.

Now, as Bartleby, the Scrivener might say (had he taught English), “I would prefer not to grade another paper, attend another meeting, or wrestle with another tech glitch.” But, unlike Bartleby, I leave with gratitude – for brilliant students, beloved colleagues, and all of the laughter, learning, and chaos that made this work worth every minute. I prefer to remember it all fondly.

With warmest regards and sincere appreciation,
Michelle

Thank you to all
contributors
and
congratulations
to those
published in
Expressions 2026





Expressions 2026

We would like to acknowledge our judges:

Dr Michelle Judice

Dr. Christina Wilbur-Cammack

Chelsey Galloway

Mason James

We would like to give a special thanks to:

Brinlee Bush for her Administrative Assistance

Data Transcriber: **Ryan Meyer**

Assistant Editor: **Chelsey Galloway**

Design & Technical Editor: **Peter Mastronardi**

Editor in Chief: **Caitlin James-Mastronardi**

Statement of Editorial Policy

The editorial staff would like to thank all of the students who submitted work for consideration to EXPRESSIONS 2026. Unfortunately, not every entry can be published. In order to insure fair and impartial judging and publication selection, a copy of each submission without the author or artist's name is sent to the judges. The judges at no time see the copy which identifies the individual.

We are proud of the entries published in this issue and appreciate the support of all students, faculty, and staff who contribute to and enjoy the tradition of this magazine each Spring. As editor, I make changes to reflect proper grammar and usage to enhance entries as well as the academic quality of Expressions.

Caitlin James-Mastronardi, Editor in Chief

Lamar State College-Port Arthur, a Member **Texas State University System™**, is an equal opportunity affirmative action educational institution and employer. Students, faculty, and staff members are selected without regard to their race, color, creed, handicap, age, sex, or national origin, consistent with the Assurance of Compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Executive Order 11246 as issued and amended; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Inquires concerning application of these regulations may be referred to the Vice President of Academic Affairs.



The logo features the letters 'LSCPA' in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. A light blue, curved swoosh or underline passes behind the letters, starting from the left side of the 'L' and ending with a small arrowhead pointing to the right.

LAMAR STATE COLLEGE ★ PORT ARTHUR