



ALABASTER ECHOES



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Alabaster Echoes

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Literary Magazine
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**Faculty Editor
Brendan Stephens**

Cover by Rose Negelein

Alabaster Echoes publishes original work by NWOSU students. The editorial board values work that demonstrates imagination, mastery of form and style, or fresh uses of techniques. We hope the publication represents and speaks to the delivery of the NWOSU community.

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Curiosity Must Die

Ash Crites

Curiosity slides through words with bright yellow,
They wonder, “Should I mark that which gives me worth?”

Curiosity sits in underfunded cages,
Looking through dusty bars:

Behold!

A glorious future where color does not dance,
Or think
Or puke
Or cry

Curiosity stains its virtue,
(can i go outside?)
They do this to themselves,
(i’m so hungry)

Curiosity must die.

Lock and Key

Hunter Eads

Don't lose the key because what if you want to let him out? And don't lose the lock, just in case we must use it. From his cell he can be heard and seen, his wicked smile spreading whenever thinking of vapid ways to end someone. His long unkempt hair was stained with many bodily fluids, most of which were his own. The guards don't ask questions about the others. They don't get close to the cage either for fear of his crazed behavior and intense smell. Despite all this, he and the warden seem to have an agreement. Every once in a while, the warden with his office clothes and press-ready hair makes the long trek to the peak of his caged insanity. Some say that the warden and his prisoner are related or were once friends before the lockup. Besides this the warden's mood improves with each journey to his prisoner, humming different and off-key songs as he walks. There was no one allowed near the cage, and there were no cameras or any way for anyone to pry at their quiet conversations. The prisoner would leap with joy when he was notified of the warden's arrival. The other constituents of the prison feared the power that the warden possessed. How could he handle that wild man? Why would he want to? What did they talk about? No one knew. One day some of the prisoners felt rain out in the yard and soon realized that it was blood. Horrendous laughter could be heard as well as manic murmurs making the drone of normal life in the prison all but invisible and inaudible. This became a regular occurrence; the warden would make his visit, and then it would rain. It was a transit prison for all but the warden's prisoner. Eventually, there were some complaints of missing prisoners that arrived from the other prisons, but nothing ever came about from them. The more important question that terrified all of those who passed through was whether they themselves would make it to their transfer date, or, worse, if anyone would care if they didn't. Soon, the days of rain became fewer and more far between. This only made everyone fear for their lives more, and the maniac atop would screech for the entirety of most nights. After three months of the drought, it rained again. The next day there was what looked like a bloody flag hanging from the cage on high. The early morning sun soon revealed a mangled warden gently swaying in the breeze. It seems that his reign wasn't to be underestimated. The maniac was the only one locked up at all times and yet he was freer than those who walked on the outside. He wanted to be here; he wanted the pain seeping from all of the

common captives cast here from society. Was he our punishment? Were all of us sent here to witness the peak? Would the rain continue? Why ask when we knew the answer, and eventually it did, again and again. And again, and again whenever the warden tried to control the weather, we got another warden and a new flag. Many years later after the prison was abandoned, once a complaint made it out into the light, residents of the nearby towns reported strange weather and hearing disturbances. The authorities thought it most humane, for them at least, to not move the prison's most 'secure' occupant. Those who ventured too close to its rusted red ramparts saw in full the foul festering mass of mangled corpses covering the once 'clean' cage. Many of those who witnessed what the previously confined undesirables had to live with, left laughing loudly. What was so funny? What did they see? Why would some not leave? Could they? I haven't, and neither will they... I like the rain... and I haven't showered in ages.

Not for Human Consumption

Rose Negelein



Fragments of Creation

Naomi Soderstrom

A canvas is used by the artist
To spread a message of love and hate,
Of justice and injustice, and
To make a memory last longer than one lifetime.

Art can be beautiful in its simplicity,
In its many mediums and meanings.
But it can also be impactful in its complexity,
In its essence and entirety.

It's used to capture a moment
That people centuries from now
Will look upon in awe and wonder,
Forever taken by the sight of a masterpiece.

The Flower Field

Jordyn Field

I was walking in the flower field outside of town, looking for the little insects that would help my garden flourish. The wind gently blew in my hair as I sat in the flowers, walking on my knees to get from place to place. I make sure I can see Fritz from the corner of my eye. Watching as she leaps with the grasshoppers, trying to catch them in her mouth.

Then I felt the wind suddenly pick up, causing my hair to blow behind me. I watched as the insects I needed to catch buried themselves back under the dirt. Cursing under my breath I looked up at the sky searching for a sign of storms, but the sky was clear. I looked in the direction of the wind and saw an airship, though it was nothing like the ones I've seen around here. Airships are normally made from wood and leave a trail of magic that powers them. This one is made from metal, and there wasn't any sign of magic. Whoever was in it was definitely not from around here. I quickly grabbed Fritz, holding the small creature to my chest as I dropped down amongst the flowers. I lay on my stomach as the airship landed in the field. Sending the loose dirt flying into the air. I cover mine and Fritz's eyes to stop the dirt from getting in them.

Once the dirt settled, I peeked over the flowers as I watched several people get off the airship. From the looks of them, they look human. I could hear one of them speak, he sounded like a tour guide. I stay hidden and low to the ground as I watch the group walk towards town. Refusing to let go of my pet until the group was out of sight. I sat up shortly after letting Fritz go, sitting on my knees before hearing mumbling from the airship. Looking up I see a short and scrawny looking human.

I quickly looked for Fritz, but it was too late. I could hear the little menace making her way to the stranger. I winced as I heard her chirp like a hunting cat. She then climbed up his leg and his torso, causing the man to scream and try to swat her away only to miss every time. I cursed under my breath as I got up and quickly rushed over to my awful pet and the stranger. "Fritz! Get off him!" I scolded the small dragon as she perched on his head. "You don't know where he has been!" I gently took her off of his head. Making sure her claws did not grip his skull. I looked down at the stranger, realizing how tiny he was compared to me.

He looked smaller than other humans. "I am so sorry," I apologized to him as I held Fritz, "She's just a baby. She can't even blow fire yet. She's still in training." I explained with a smile.

The stranger just stared up at me with wide eyes, yeah definitely not from here. When he finally spoke up his voice was shaky, "You're an Orc."

"Only a half," I responded with a smile, trying to ease his nerves. Though from the way he was shaking, I could tell it wasn't working.

He started to look around for what I assumed was the rest of the people from the airship. He mumbled something under his breath before asking, "Did you happen to see a group of people around here? And where they went?" He had a nervous tone. I couldn't tell if it was because he was lost, or if he was just scared of me. Either way, I answered his question with a nod and pointed toward the town. He grumbled some more under his breath before taking a deep breath and asking another question. "Do you know where the library here is?"

"Yeah, I can take you there if you want?" I offered, "It's the least I can do since my dragon climbed you like a tree." Fritz chirped at him again and a puff of smoke escaped her mouth.

He glanced at the dragon and back at me. He sighed and nodded his head. "Yes, please," he sighed out. He holds out a shaky hand for me to shake. "I'm Miles."

I look down at his hand and take it. My hand engulfs his, my green undertone more noticeable next to his pale skin. "I go by Z."

Gandalf

Carrington Kline



Big Mer

Richard Hudson

Her pink nose was cold with eyes tightly closed
I picked her up and held her one last time
She lay as if asleep, arms stretched in pose
Though she came for afar, she became mine

I held her then, she finally let me
Flea bites from the past of pests now long gone
When she came home starved, she said, "Come pet me."
She would eat and purr then out comes a yawn

She had a Nightmare once; he's still around
Tigerlilly is there too, looking like mom
Mer was a loner, only cat in town
Her kittens showed up after that big Tom

As mean as she was, she played my heartstrings
My angel, my harp, my everything

There's a Person Standing in the Window

Riley Shires

There's a person standing in the window. Staring back at me from where I sit. Eerily clear in the otherwise blackened abyss. A stark white shirt contrasting long black overalls met by shoulder-length hair. Nose elongated, but eyes, black unmoving sockets staring straight into my greens. The inner lights and movements do not seem to affect him. I wave to a friend. He does not stir. Until suddenly, he turns and runs. Not seen from his window into the next, I fear his return. And I less than eagerly await the viewing.

The Mind

Aleya Johnson



Quarry

Rose Negelein

Fossils further immortalizes around my neck
Tiny prehistoric pieces
Scavenged from their gravel grave
Where they were scattered to fill holes in cobbled county roads
But more holes take their place
And more of our ancient ocean inheritance
Is blasted to pieces along with limestone and granite
Before it's thrown down by uncaring machines
And only salvaged by those who care to look closer
At something as plain as a gravel road

Fairian

Kevin Kaumans

It was hot today in the abandoned city of Colorado Springs. When the outbreak first happened in America, this was one of the first cities to be overrun by the infected. I didn't remember exactly how many people the news said had died, only that the city became devoid of human life within just four days, whether because the survivors managed to get out of the city on time or met the same fate as the dead.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead as I straddled the over-packed backpack around my shoulder. Following alongside me was Hurion and Julia. The two vampires were wearing sun hats covering their paper-pale skin. It would be a humorous sight if not for the fact both of them were standing over six feet tall with black leather covering their entire bodies. Hurion had broad shoulders as well as scars all over his face from centuries of fighting. Julia was nowhere near as big as Hurion muscle-wise but still possessed an athletic build that allowed her to move at the speed of light, which proved useful when needing to kill hordes of zombies in small areas that didn't allow a lot of movement.

"We're wasting our time," Hurion said bluntly. "Even if your sister is somehow still alive when you two got separated, this city is nearly two hundred square miles. There's no way we'll find her before nightfall. If she is even still in the city, that is."

I shot a look at him. "We had a deal. I would become your coven's feeding mule if you helped me find her. I've held up my end of the deal haven't I?" I retorted, lifting up my shirt. "I got needle marks all over me from the past three nights where you all used me like a blood donor!"

"Calm down, I'm just telling you the facts. We've seen how fast those damn infected can run. And unless your sister came across a doctor by some chance, there's no way in hell she made it far with a bloody leg."

Julia spoke up. "Let's go back to the others already. The only blood I've been able to pick up all day was yours."

"Bullshit," I argued. "What about all the zombies and dead humans we came across today?"

Julia had a disgusted look on her face. “I meant blood that was still pumping. Trust me, we vampires can tell the difference between the blood of still-breathing humans and that of the undead, the latter isn’t exactly the most pleasant smell in the world.” She sighed, pinching her nose. “Look, I get wanting to find your sister. Believe me, I do. I was human once; I know how much it hurts to outlive a family mem-”

“We haven’t found anything that points to her being dead yet!” I shouted.

Julia narrowed her eyes on me. “We can’t just spend the rest of our lives wandering around this city. It’s only a matter of time before your government decides to nuke this place like the other cities that became overtaken by the infected. I don’t care how resilient you think you are just because you managed to kill a few zombies, you aren’t surviving a bomb being dropped on you.”

I glared at her, pulling out my pocket knife and holding it to my neck. “I could kill myself right now, and since your kind can’t drink the blood of the dead without dying yourselves, something tells me you don’t want that. So either shut it and keep walking, or find another food source.”

Hurion glared at me. He didn’t bare his fangs like he did during our first meeting, but he didn’t have to. The animalistic look in his cold eyes could remind me who he and Julia were if I were to forget somehow. “I’m faster and stronger than any living being you’ve encountered. I could knock you out in a single strike to your thick head before you can blink and drag you back to our cave.”

If Hurion had said this when I first met him and the rest of the coven, this threat would’ve probably worked on me. But not now. “Sure,” I said calmly. “But keep in mind, you’re strong enough to punch through steel beams like it’s paper. If you’re not careful, you could easily end up breaking my neck, crushing my skull, or punching my head so hard it flies off my body. Then you would have to go back to your vampire friends and tell them that you just probably killed their last sustainable food source and pray to whatever god you believe in that they don’t decide to send you to Hell with me. And the fact that you haven’t attempted to do this yet suggests you probably don’t know if you can control your strength enough to knock me out without killing me.”

Hurion and Julia exchange glances with one another. Hurion looked so red in the face I thought for a second he was transforming back into his human self. Julia, on the other hand, had a calm, calculating look on her face. She turned to look at me. “Fairian won’t be happy if we don’t get back by sunset. You know that right?”

Fairian was the leader of their coven. He’s one of if not the oldest vampires still alive. He was in the Caribbean when the golden age of piracy took place. He was in England when Æthelstan was crowned king. He was in Italy when the Roman Republic was founded. I even overheard some of his coven theorizing that Fairian was there when the city of Uruk was built. Supposedly, none of the other vampires know exactly how old Fairian is, as even his oldest members were only “recruited” three hundred years ago.

I’ve only ever seen him in person a few times, and even then I couldn’t tell you much about him; I rarely ever heard him speak, only opening his mouth to drink from the blood bags during supper. It wasn’t like he was a scrawny, frail old man either. Like all the other vampires in the coven, he was tall and muscular, and at oldest looked to be in his early thirties. The only time I’ve ever had a conversation with him was when he assigned Hurion and Julia to accompany me to Colorado Springs. His voice was soft and gentle, yet carried a wisdom that I couldn’t comprehend.

“You let me worry about Fairian. Now come on, let’s see if we can find anything in the children’s hospital up north.” I said, throwing my backpack to Hurion and walking ahead of them. I heard Hurion mutter something in Latin to Julia, but I paid him no mind. My plan for escaping these monsters could wait. Right now, all that matters was finding Lelia.

Universally Drained

Maddie Fuksa



A Friend

Aleya Johnson

A friend, a dearly beloved friend.
Through rain and storms
Through fear and strangers, you were there.
We were there.
Protecting the land was our duty, yours before mine.
You were there when no one else was.
We fought every battle together, me right by your side.
You never judged me. You took me in and we thrived.
It will never be easy without you here, everything and
Everyone keeps me on edge.
I don't have my guard anymore.
It's just me, protecting the land.
Protecting the people.
I won't forget you, dear friend.
Instead, I will live on and fulfill your duties you couldn't
Stay to finish.
You vanished one day, and I didn't know why.
I miss you, friend. Though I never knew your name.

Gametime

Allison Schieber



Please Don't Forget Me

Jaden Matthews

I stand in a bustling crowd. The sounds of laughter and togetherness fill the air.
People pass, some ask me how I am. I share my magic. I'm impressive.
Wow look at you *so* successful! Right?
Then they leave.
The spotlight shines and burns my eyes. I bare my soul and then I'm done.
The applause is deafening. I shine. For a moment.
And then they leave.
Sunday morning 10:30-11:30
You're so talented! What a beautiful voice.
And then they leave.
Room full of friends, joking, playing a game,
I'll be right back! Whoa when did you slip in?
I wasn't there?
Alone in a crowded room. Surrounded by those you love.
I *beg* for your attention. I do *everything* I can. *I shine!*
But I'm still alone.
Sorry, too busy right now. okay.
I love you. You do? I love you too! Forever? Forever.
Never mind.
Okay.
Infinities fill the meta-verse!
I dive in hoping. Pleading. Begging. For something. Someone.
To fill the space.
The emptiness.
That the spotlight can't seem to touch.

King's Rise Prince's Fall

Jessica Schieber

He wasn't always like this. He remembered a time where he would laugh and smile, a time where he would connect with his people. He remembered a time where he allowed the ones under him their own free will, but not anymore. How could he after what had happened? How could he trust them? How could he befriend them? Was he ruthless? Was he a monster, as they so often claimed? No, he couldn't be, at least he didn't think he could be. He was protecting himself, protecting them. How could they think he was evil? He ran a hand through his silver hair, there was no denying he was growing older. The king sighed as his son walked over to him.

"Father, maybe you should forgive your people," his son suggested as he reached his throne.

"You've no idea what they tried to do to us, Malcolm," the king warned.

"Then maybe you should tell me. All I see out there are innocent civilians who have lost their hope. Innocent civilians who are starving. Innocent-" the king roared, cutting him off.

"Those people are far from innocent!"

"How are you so sure?"

"You saw what they did to me. What they tried to do to you." The king sighed.

"They were upset you were ignoring them."

"I was not ignoring them-"

"You were father! You were ignoring them, and you were too focused on yourself to even realize it! Had they not done what they did you'd have never seen past that," his son argued, knowing arguing with him was like arguing to a brick wall.

"You are too naive Malcolm." The king shook his head in disappointment.

"You have been neglecting your people."

"You know nothing Malcolm."

“I know there are people starving in the streets that you refuse to help! I know that there are people that need a king, and you... you’re a tyrant to them!”

“Enough Malcolm!” the king demanded and stood up. “I have had enough of this attitude of yours. You think these people are innocent? Then you can live amongst them.”

The queen gasped from her throne and stood to calm the king. “You don’t truly mean that. He’s your son, the crown prince. You don’t truly want him on the streets.”

“See how much of a tyrant I can be. I hereby declare Malcolm Nuan is no longer part of the crown. His jewel shall be removed at once.”

“Fine.” Malcolm spat as he removed his crown and tore the emblem of the kingdom from the collar of his shirt. “But when your people revolt, know I will be the one leading them.”

Malcolm left the castle with nothing but the clothes on his back and his cloak. He had no idea what he was going to head into but he knew he couldn’t stay near the castle. Everyone in the castle town knew him, these people he figured would be the worst. So he traveled outwards. He knew, deep down, that what he was doing was for the good of the people in the kingdom. Then why did it feel so wrong? Why did he want to just run back into the castle and apologize to his father until he forgave him? He shook his head, steeled his mind and headed out into the castle village. He pulled his cloak hood over his head, the dark brown giving him some shield from his face. This, this was it. This was his beginning. He had heard countless stories of his father and the old kings of their beginnings. But this one, he carried a sense of new found pride, this was his.

He wasn’t exactly sure what he was doing or where he was going, but he knew he had to get far away from this place. So he walked; he walked until his feet were too sore to take another step landing himself in the middle of a forest. He gazed towards the sky and staring back at him was a bunch of glistening stars. It was only then he decided to rest for now. He’d wake up and keep moving tomorrow.

With a heavy sigh Malcolm found a tree and rested against it. The bark scratched at his back and the grass itched everywhere, but he knew there was nowhere else. He knew that he’d have to suffer through this pain, and that it would only get worse from here. Sleep found him only after a few minutes of shifting and shuffling. The night grew peaceful as he slept. Crickets chirped their songs, owls occasionally sang out as well, and the wind whistled amongst the leaves.

Malcolm woke up the next day, still sore from his long day of traveling, ready to continue heading out further from the castle he once called home. While on his journey he found random materials he made into a makeshift weapon. A sturdy decent sized branch and a rock he had sharpened. He knotted the two things together into a spear using a strong vine. He wasn't sure what he was going to face and protection seemed like a good plan. With that he continued onward, stopping only once he reached a small farming village. The people of this village were odd, none addressed him which brought the question if his cloak truly hid him.

"Excuse me, you there!" an older village man called to him. Malcolm turned around and looked confused, pointing to himself.

"Me?"

"Yes," the man nodded. "You know how to fight?"

Malcolm wanted to scoff. Of course he knew how to fight. He had been trained since he was six. Instead, he nodded. "Uh...yes, yes I do."

"Good. Perfect truly. My daughter had left the village at sunrise and had yet to return. There are guards everywhere these days, and yes, I could ask one of them but no one trusts them. Those who blindly follow the king do us no good. Can you find her? I need to know she is safe."

The man seemed extremely worried about his daughter, and Malcolm had a heart of gold, his weakness, his father often said. So Malcolm nodded and asked a simple question. "What is her name?"

The man lit up. "Lyra. Lyra Estren."

Malcolm gave the man a nod and headed off into the woods where the man said she went into to search for this girl. Malcolm knew that this would gain favor amongst the old man and quite possibly the entire village. He wasn't as helpless as his father had likely thought. He knew that if he were ever to return home he'd have to have an army ready to fight alongside him, so he went to find the girl.

"Lyra!" He called as he ventured further into the woods.

Untitled
Kevin Jaquez



Unattainable Temptation

Azucena Carrillo

Not knowing
Stay away and it shall be okay
Temptation starts in the eyes
First glare at jealousy
Made of dirt
But just below glowing snow
Stay away and let masculine try to find a way
Tears of failure on thighs
Sharpness of genuine feelings
Very unwise it was going to be
Really wanting this shot of Hennessy
Playful games at first
Now it just hurts
Smile comes second
As if eyes can not speak loud enough
Infection of laughter
The attention getter
From afar though
Mile after mile it is hard it is reckoned
Soon to call the bluff
Afraid of regretting it after
Alcohol trying to not forget her
It is like being from the same dough
The heart is purest
Personality is attentive
Comments as the purest love story
Attitude filled with moxie
Walking with blessings
Can drugs ever top that?
Language is so sensual
Lips of the softest rose petal

Oh the privilege to be a hummingbird
Suffocation of symphonic sounds
Beating as to be next to the feet hitting the floor
Swinging arms in no comparison to anyone
Fingertips smoothing out where the scarf
Dripping wet of the paradise in between
Thoughtful of sharing with a mirror
A broken one and yet made to feel at peace
Doing Everything in power to finish
Passionately caressing the valley
Such a beautiful mountain
Do not let the emotions swirl out of the trail
Stay on the dirt path to freshly filled hope
What he called soothing
It is only temptation
Temptation waiting to fail.

Lost

Logan Hicks

I sit and listen to the constant chatter of those around me. The people, laughing and talking to one another like birds cooing when they greet each other throughout the day. In all this noise around me, I realize where other people would hear laughter, and talking I notice the only noise that haunts me is the silence. I hear nothing as if trapped in a soundproof prison, the one between me and this world. With only the sound of my heart beating and my breath, I start to panic as if I'm in a dream state reverting into a nightmare that I can't wake from.

To my horror when I realize my eyes are open and awake my nightmare has become reality. It's not that I do not hear and see what's going on around me but the realization that I am Lost in my own reality and Lost in the cold, stuck in this prison that is fortified with soundproof walls. Banging against the walls and screaming to be set free. As I bang one last time and shout one final shout as my voice grows hoarse from all the shouting, I lower my head and see that no matter how hard I pound the walls of my chamber or how loud I scream no one can hear me or see me. No one is coming to break me free from the walls of the prison that hold me captive. I close my eyes and accept the fact that I'm Lost, alone in this prison fighting to be set free, waiting for someone anyone to finally hear, see, and release me

Oklahoma Sunrise

Dani Parker

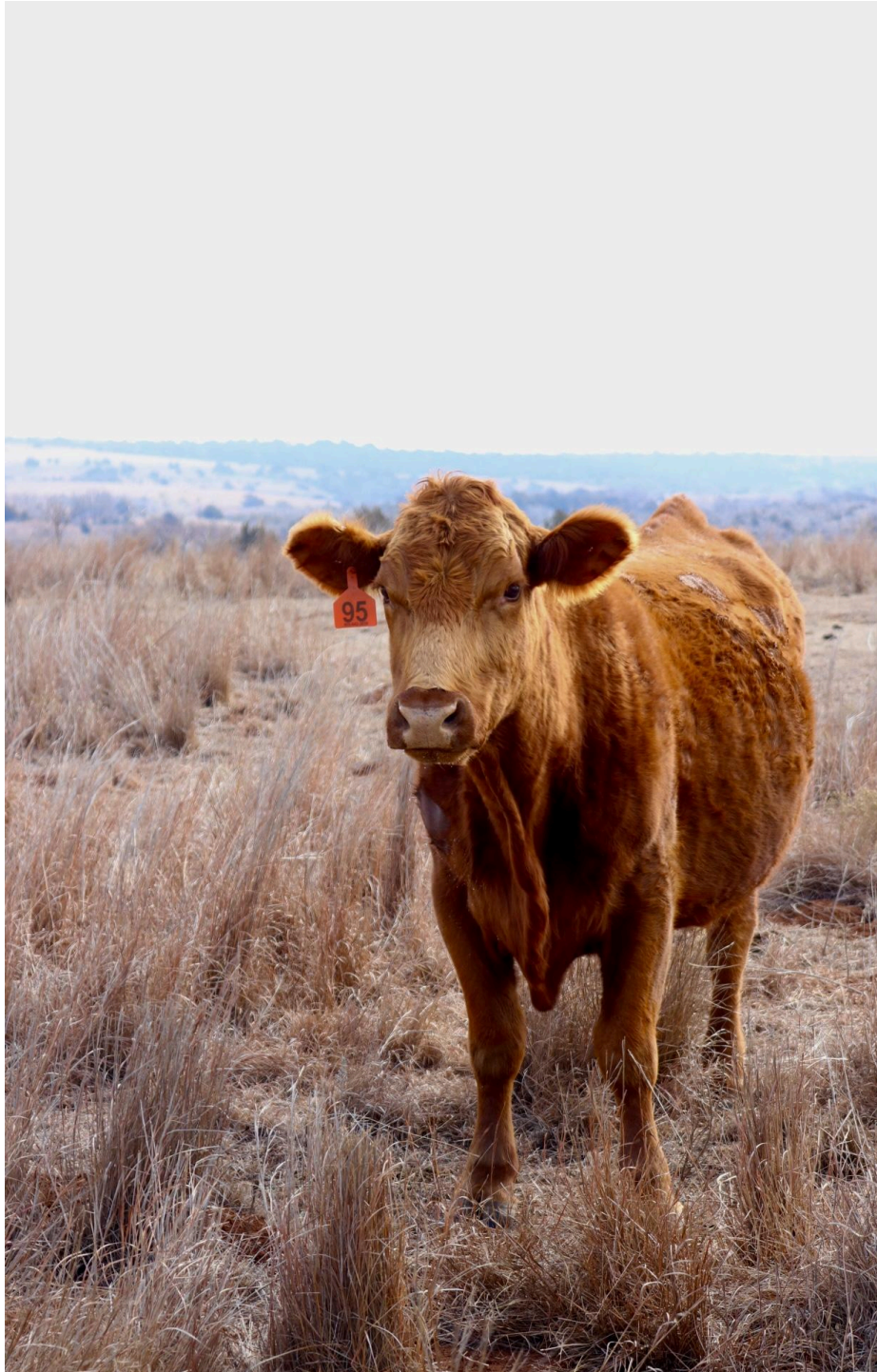


Poetry Lost

Noreen A. Wagner

I once had the ability to write poetry,
It came to me while I was in high school.
This is what I used as a tool.
My poetry appeared in the high school newspaper.
High school peers gave an invitation to join a poetry club,
I accepted gladly with a nub.
One poem that came to mind,
A poem about a boy named Troy.
Troy got shot by a gang.
His body is full of lead,
Killed and made him dead.
Fifty-one years are left in the past.
The memory did not last.
The ability to write poetry was...no more.
This tore me up.
Poetry was lost,
Alas, poetry lost.

Houk Farm
Kelsie Doane



Secret to Success

Lee Weaver

The back of the house of La Dame du Lac was a symphony of chaos, steam billowed from pots and the massive stainless-steel kettle, knives clashed against cutting boards, and the clatter of dishes echoed off the red-tiled walls. In this culinary cacophony stood the grizzled figure of the old chef de cuisine, his face weathered by years of heat and stress, his eyes darkened by the shadows of a lifetime spent in the kitchen's relentless grind. The new hire unrolled his glistening, German steel knives from their pristine leather roll and smoothed out his apron then exhaled a deep breath as he approached the ruler of the smothering hot and humid atmosphere, he was now to call his home.

"Chef, can I talk to you for a moment?" The younger man began.

"Sure, what's on your mind, kid?" The older chef replied, his voice gravelly from years of chain smoking and inhaling the oily evaporated mess that wafted from years of pans and fryers he had handled.

The young chef hesitated, his bright eyes searching for guidance in the depths of the old chef's weary gaze.

"Well, I've been thinking a lot lately about my future in this industry. I look up to you, you know? That is the main reason I applied at The Lady in the first place. You have been through it all, worked your way up from the bottom. I want to know, what is the key to success in this line of work?"

"Success? Ha!" The older chef nearly shouted, startling the younger man as his laughter devolved into a short fit of coughs. Stifling them with a calloused fist, he managed to regain his composure and, through a sardonic grin he answered the new guy. "You wanna know about success in this goddamned kitchen? Success is a myth, kid. There ain't no glory in slaving away over a hot stove for hours on end, just to serve up plates of food to ungrateful bastards. Sure, they're going to tip the pretty young thing that brought that plate of your hard work and they're going to tip that smooth-talking hipster with the fresh haircut behind the bar but the only time you're getting any recognition is if your name is on the door or you fuck up a plate. Right now? That's my name on the door right now, but let's say I let you or one of the other guys in here

send out one too many hot plates of disappointment. The owner would scratch it off in a heartbeat and get the next one etched tomorrow. We do this because we love it. Any other reasoning is just lying to yourself.”

The young chef recoiled slightly, taken aback by the bitterness in the old chef’s words. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had expected. Words of wisdom? Some cliché advice? Nothing this dismal or disheartening.

“But... I thought...”

“You thought wrong, kid. This ain’t some fairy tale where hard work pays off and dreams come true. It ain’t *Ratatouille*. Gordon Ramsay ain’t around the corner. This is the real world, and in the real world, this shit eats you alive.”

“But you have made it this far, Chef. You’re running the show at one of the best...I mean, the best restaurant in Lafayette!”

“Yeah and look where it’s gotten me. Covered in scars, drowning in booze just to get to sleep, two divorces, a couple of kids I’ve barely ever seen, and with nobody to call family or friends, aside from the other idiots who aren’t suited for anything but this life. This kind of work doesn’t exactly have a proper retirement plan, and I haven’t met a lot of old chefs. Why do you think that is? Is that your idea of success?”

“I... I had not thought about it like that,” the younger chef stammered.

“Of course, you hadn’t. You’re still young and naïve, full of hopes and dreams and all that nonsense. But let me tell you something, kid. The kitchen is a cruel bitch. She will chew you up and spit you out without a second thought. You are just another chunk of meat in the grinder.”

“So, what do I do, Chef? How do I survive?”

“Survive? Jesus, kid, you sound like a rube! You wanna know about survival in this hellhole? You learn to embrace the misery, kid. The long hours, the thankless service, the shitty conditions. You can hate it all you want, and believe you, me, you will but you’ve gotta accept it, grit your teeth, and learn to love it. You accept that this is your life now, and you learn to find solace in the chaos. You wanna be me one day? That is the trick. Be the eye of the damned storm. Be the calm general on the battlefield, knowing you and your men might die any second.

Whatever analogy gets through to you, you've gotta find peace when you're up to your eyeballs in tickets, your grill guy just cut his fingertip off, the prep kid dropped the entire prime roast on the floor, and you're out of desserts an hour into service. You be that guy."

"But surely there is more to it than that? You cannot just *be* that guy!"

"More? What, you want some grand revelation?" the chef de cuisine said, spreading his arms wide. "Some magic formula that will make it all worth it? Well, here it is, kid: there ain't no secret ingredient. There is just the grind, day in and day out until you are nothing but a husk of a human being.

"That's... that's depressing, Chef."

"Depressing? You think this is depressing? You ain't seen nothing yet, kid. Just wait until you've been in this game as long as I have. Then you'll know true despair." He smirked, shaking his head.

"I... I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, kid. In fact, shutting up is the smartest thing you can do. Just remember what I told you. Keep your head down, work hard, and, just maybe, you'll survive day one in this goddamned kitchen. Then you'll do it again. And again. And so on and so forth."

The old Chef's voice took on a darker tone as he continued, memories resurfacing like a fat rising and waiting to be skimmed on a bubbling pot of broth.

"Let me tell you about the first chef I worked under, kid. He was a cruel Frenchman with a harelip, a real piece of work. His name was Alain." He sneered as he said his former boss's name and spat in a nearby trash can. "He'd keep metal tongs hanging from the drawstrings of his apron and dip the ends into a hot fryer just to burn the hands of anyone who dared to use a knife without tucking their fingers. And God help you if you didn't make a dish *exactly* how he showed you. He would throw it in the trash. It did not matter how hard you had worked on it. He would make you start all over again, like some twisted game of culinary torture."

The young chef's eyes widened in horror as he listened to the tales of kitchen cruelty.

"That's... that's terrible, Chef."

Dishes clattered in the pit behind the younger man, sending a shudder up his spine as a waitress dumped a bus tub full of plates, bowls, and glasses into the receiving area earning her a stern, cold glare from the stone-faced man in the most unforgiving station in the place.

“Terrible? C'est la vie! Laissez le bon temps rouler! It's the nature of the beast. We do NOT do that shit these days. I'm not that mean of a prick, but I expect your work to be perfect, the first time, every time, and if I tell you to do something, I don't wanna hear anything but, 'heard' or 'yes, chef.' So, if you want to survive, you better toughen up and learn to deal with it. I can't tell you how many strikes it takes before you're out but three had better not happen too quickly.”

“Thanks, Chef. I think,” the younger chef said dejectedly.

“Don't mention it, kid. Now get back to work!” the old chef said with a sort of menacing smile, and he heartily slapped the new hire on the back. “And remember, keep those damn fingers tucked and I'll buy the first round after shift!”

Sweet Dreams

Mara Miller



Contributors

Azucena Carrillo is a student athlete competing in track & cross country while pursuing her graduate degree in Counseling Psychology. She has never published her work before but hopes to reach those needing and wanting to feel understood.

Ash Crites is an English Education major. They're a junior at NWOSU. They've been a member of Writer's Roundtable since their freshmen year, and the Vice President for NWOSU's Sigma Tau Delta's chapter for one year.

Kelsie Doane is a sophomore studying English Education. Born and raised in Okeene, she often visits home on the weekends to see her family.

Hunter Eads is a senior and Psychology Major. He is a proctor at the Woodward Campus of Northwestern. This is his first published flash fiction.

Maddie Fuksa is a sophomore and a psychology major. She is from Enid, Oklahoma and uses aspects of life to inspire her work.

Logan Hicks has worked hard to make people feel what he feels with his writing, taking the phrase "nothing speaks louder than words" to a whole new level. He hopes you enjoy his poem. Ride ranger ride!

Richard Hudson is a junior and an English major. He is an Otoe-Missouria tribal member and hopes to write poetry and creative nonfiction about his community, his wife, and his pets.

Aleya Johnson is a sophomore choir member. She is planning to become a biology major. This is her second appearance in Alabaster Echoes.

Kevin Kaumans is a sophomore that's majoring in English literature. He has self-published two books in his *Wolves of the Tundra* trilogy under the pseudonym Samuel Seeker, which can be found on Amazon.

Carrington Kline is a freshman who's majoring in psychology. She is a part of NWOSU'S eSports team and does live streaming work for NWOSU's sport teams. This photo was taken for a project on practicing photography by letting her cats roam around freely.

Jordyn Lovins is a Sophomore and English Education major from Booker, Texas. She is a part of Writer's Roundtable, and this is her first published short story.

Jaden Matthews is a junior and a Speech Theatre major. She's the president of Castle Players. Her favorite thing to do is spend time with her cat Dobby.

Mara Miller is a senior about to enter her student teaching semester this Fall. She is an English education major and a member of OAEA. This is her first published photograph.

Rose Negelein is a senior Biology major and Visual Arts minor. She is a member of Writer's Roundtable and has a passion for both arts and science.

Dani Parker is a freshman planning on majoring in Vocal performance and minoring in creative writing. She is currently in the NWOSU Chorale and hopes to join Singers. She loves to capture the beauty of nature and all the breathtaking wonders around her.

Alli Schieber is a senior mass communications major. Alli is in Delta Zeta as well as the Editor in Chief of Northwestern News. She doesn't know what her plans are for when she graduates, but she knows she would like to work in sports land. She loves photography.

Jessica Schieber is a sophomore English major from Okeene. She is currently working on a book in hopes of self-publishing it.

Naomi Soderstrom is a junior and an elementary education major. She is the president of Writer's Roundtable and loves reading in her spare time. This is her second published poem.

Lee Weaver is a forty-two year old semi-retired chef aspiring to become an English professor. He is currently in his junior year and this is his first published piece of prose.

Creative Writing Club

Writer's Roundtable is a club welcome to all creative writers interested in poetry, short stories, creative nonfiction, and more. There are no requirements to join besides having a desire to express yourself. If you have a story in your head or a poem in your heart, this is the club for you.



FEATURED AUTHORS/ARTISTS

AZUCENA CARRILLO
ASH CRITES
KELSIE DOANE
HUNTER EADS
MADDIE FUKSA
LOGAN HICKS
RICHARD HUDSON
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ALEYA JOHNSON
KEVIN KAUMANS
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JORDYN LOVINS
JADEN MATTHEWS
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