



# PILGRIMAGES

2026 Edition

# Pilgrimages

2025-2026 Edition

Diversity Issue

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Virginia Lindak

Editor-in-chief:

Alex Hayden, Class of 2028

Front cover photography by Matthew Rafferty, winner of the *Pilgrimages* Photography Cover Contest. Rafferty is a junior cybersecurity major who loves “how photography can be used to capture something beautiful, and [he thinks] using photography as a catalyst to tell a story is the most remarkable aspect of it.” In regards to his winning photo, he shares, “I love nature, and animals have played a major role in that fondness.”

All section divider and back cover photography by Editor in Chief Alex Hayden.

## Foreword

As language continues to be our most powerful form of communication, holding space for students to cultivate their authentic voices through written expression is a priority for me as an educator. In this year's issue of *Pilgrimages*, students explored the theme of Diversity through their written work.

My intention was to encourage our students to reflect on diversity, what it means to them, and how they see themselves and others in relation to the diversified world around them. What emerged from the many contributions was a wide array of approaches to the concept of diversity, from race, ethnicity, and gender identity, to heritage and cultural celebrations, ability and disability, neurodiversity and mental health. Through deeply personal collections of poetry, fiction and narrative essays, students shared their unique experiences, finding value in what distinguishes us from one another.

Also included in this issue, are the 11 winning submissions from the annual Gunard B. Carlson Creative Writing Contest, as well as additional student creative pieces on a variety of topics. New to *Pilgrimages* this year, is the integration of a feature interview with a published writer. Student editor, Amanda Fennell, thoughtfully conducted an interview session with poet Jacqueline Jewell, who is also an adjunct professor here at Immaculata, as well as an alumna of the university.

With thanks to all the students who submitted written work on diversity and beyond, including the nearly 70 Honors Program students who have pieces published in this issue. Also, thank you to the students who contributed photography and artwork. Huge thank you to Jacqueline Jewel for her interview that is filled with insights on both diversity and writing, which was a wonderful addition.

Special thanks to the dedicated staff of English and Professional Writing major student editors who make up the Mighty Pen Editorial Board, for their work in producing the issue. Enormous thanks to Editor in Chief Alex Hayden for all of the extra hours and effort he put into the magazine as lead editor. The speed and commitment he demonstrated in bringing forth this issue within a tight deadline was very impressive and well beyond his years. I am extremely proud of the issue, of Alex and the student editors, and of all the students whose writings fill these pages. This collective endeavor resulted in the most extensive issue of *Pilgrimages* in its history. Lastly, thank you to the Immaculata University Print Center for bringing our dynamic Diversity issue to life.

- Dr. Virginia Lindak, Faculty Advisor

## Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Allow me to get the obvious out of the way first. It is an absolute honor to serve as the editor-in-chief of this historic magazine. I do not take this privilege lightly.

I must first give thanks to our faculty advisor, Dr. Virginia Lindak, my greatest supporter here at Immaculata. Her dedication to preserving and uplifting our wonderful community of writers on campus, myself included, is the driving force behind this project. Thank you for trusting me in this role and for all the guidance you've given in all other aspects of my life and in our seven courses together over the past two years. Thank you for putting in the late nights and long days with me to make this our longest publication yet. You are doing incredible work with this writing program. I cannot wait to see what it becomes in the future.

I extend that gratitude to every language teacher and professor, both English and Spanish, I've had in my life. I would not be the journalist, writer, or man I am today without your kind words constructive criticisms.

To my student editors, thank you for bearing with our frantic schedule and my bothersome emails this year. It was wonderful to work with such a dedicated group of writers and artists. You each possess skills that will lead you on long, prosperous artistic journeys. No matter where you end up in life, I ask that you continue to write.

To every individual whose work is contained in the following pages, I appreciate your participation. I know many of you are not part of our Arts, Language, and Letters department, but your contributions do not go unnoticed. Thank you to those who answered our open calls for writing, art, and photography submissions.

I must also take a moment of your time to express my gratitude towards Immaculata's Arts, Language, and Letters department. This past year and a half in the Professional Writing major have been the most formative of my writing career. This program, while small, is an incredible opportunity to bridge the gap between an English and Communications major, allowing my peers and me to get the best of both worlds. The value of being able to express oneself in writing is greater now than ever. I hope this opportunity will continue to be available for students in classes to come.

Now, with the formalities out of the way, I must address you, the reader, whoever you may be. Thank you, first and foremost, for taking the time to read this letter. We live in a vibrant, attention-driven world, and I am grateful you have found time among your responsibilities to get in touch with the written word of your peers, students, or whomever the wonderful authors and artists published in this issue are to you.

That's the beauty in something like this: the bringing together of both creators and an unknown audience. Hence, our theme for this issue, diversity.

Now, more than ever, it is important to celebrate the ties that bind us. This campus and its community are a vast amalgamation of individuals from all walks of life. I ask you to consider that mosaic as you read through this issue. Appreciate those around you and try to understand their experiences.

Thank you for your time, again. Please, enjoy.

- Alex Hayden, Editor in Chief, Class of 2028

"We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic.  
Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings,  
different hopes, different dreams."

– Jimmy Carter

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<sup>^</sup> Honors Program student

# Gunard B. Carlson Memorial Foundation Creative Writing Contest 2025 Winners

## 1st Place

### Skirting the Truth - Emma Bouska

I stood in front of the mirror on the first day of ninth grade, tugging at the hem of my school uniform skirt like it might stretch longer if I pulled hard enough. It didn't. The starched fabric clung to my thighs, pleated like some relic of girlhood I never signed up for. My mom stood behind me, beaming like this was the most important moment of my life— and to her, it probably was. Her daughter, dressed for success in knee socks, lip gloss and a catholic school uniform. She did not see the discomfort coming off of me in waves at the feminine look, far from the masculine outfits I typically wore. Either that, or she did not care.

"You look so pretty," she said, smoothing down the front of my blouse and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "You'll fit right in. Those girls at Villa Maria all look the part of a successful student. If you look the part, you will fit in there".

But that was the problem—I didn't want to fit in like this.

Makeup, painted so thick on my face I could feel my pores clogging, my face felt like someone else's. Foundation clung to my skin like a lie, covering up my freckles that I loved so much. Mascara weighs down my lashes, and the lip gloss stuck to my lips made me feel like I was suffocating. My body already felt like a question mark, and the makeup just turned up the volume on all the things I wasn't sure about. I thought about the drawer in my room at home, the one full of oversized sweatshirts, basketball shorts, and my favorite worn-out t-shirts. The overzealous converse collection, 13 pairs going strong. That's what felt like me. Not this.

The skirt was the worst part. I kept pulling at it like I could convince it to turn into something else, anything else. I would even settle for skinny jeans. Anything but what it was: a daily reminder that the world saw me as a girl in a very specific

way. The only saving grace under my skirt was my boxers, which I had only won the right to wear in a week-long fight with my parents.. To them, my comfort didn't matter as much as the image I was supposed to project.

"Girls don't wear boxers, not if they want someone to find them attractive," my mom had said, like that settled it.

But I knew even then that being attractive was never the goal, it was about who I am on the inside, matching the outside.

When we pulled up for the "Accepted Students" event, the parking lot was already packed. I scanned the expanse of the campus, seeing swarms of girls in navy skirts and blazers streaming toward the front doors, laughing, hugging, snapping selfies. The uniforms were the same, but somehow everyone looked completely different. One girl wore a rainbow bracelet on her wrist. Another had colored hair under her school-approved headband. Several girls wore hijabs, each with smooth silky fabrics and pretty colors. I even spotted someone with Doc Martens and a nose ring—worn just low enough to stay within code, just bold enough to say I'm here. I'm me.

I stepped out of the car, self-conscious and sweating. Not just from the heat, but from the way the fabric felt wrong on my body, from the fear of being seen and unseen at the same time. I kept my hands in my blazer pockets to avoid messing with my clothes. To stop myself from peeling them off and slipping into something I actually wanted to wear. Something that felt like home. I felt like I was wearing a halloween costume in the midst of my new classmates. I wanted to be seen for me, not for this persona I was playing.

Girls around me chatted about their summer vacations in Spain and sleepaway camps, family reunions in other countries, and friends from other middle schools. I saw a girl speaking Spanish to her mom, another wearing a hijab that matched her uniform, and another girl with a thick southern accent who'd clearly just moved to town. I caught bits of K-pop songs playing softly from someone's earbuds. I heard several students talking about visiting their families in India, sharing stories about their travels.

And even though I didn't feel like I fit into the version of girlhood I'd been handed, I started to wonder to myself: was there more than one way to do this?

On the first day, the classroom smelled like dry-erase markers and freshly printed syllabi. I found my name on a desk near the back and slid into the seat quickly, hoping I could sneak in unnoticed. The girl next to me had pink braids and a stack of sketchbooks under her arm. In the front, a group of girls were comparing nail polish colors and talking about which upperclassman was hottest. Another girl was already jotting notes in a bullet journal, highlighters in five shades of pastel. One girl had a cane, leaning against her desk like it belonged there, because it did. And behind me, I heard someone casually mention her girlfriend, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

It was.

And still, my chest was tight.

Our homeroom teacher walked in with a clipboard and a kind smile. "Welcome, young ladies," she said.

I flinched. I'd been called a young lady my whole life, but here, in this moment, it felt heavier. More permanent. Like a label being stamped on my forehead. Like the skirt and the makeup and the smile I wore for the first-day photo were all sealing me into a version of myself I didn't quite believe in.

As she called roll, I barely heard my name over the thudding in my chest. I mumbled a quiet "here," hoping to go unnoticed in my seat.

I looked down at the skirt again, folded neatly across my lap. It was supposed to make me the same as everyone else.

But everyone else wasn't the same.

That was the part no one told me. Behind the same uniforms were girls with so many different stories, backgrounds, identities. Girls who spoke different

languages, who practiced different religions, who came from different neighborhoods. Girls who liked girls, girls who didn't want to be called girls at all. Girls who loved dresses and girls who didn't. Some were quiet about it. Somewhere loud. Some were still figuring it out.

Kind of like me.

By the end of that first week, I'd started wearing my uniform a little differently. I swapped out my shoes for sneakers. Wore my hoodie under the blazer. Skipped the lip gloss. It was nothing big, no bold statement, but it was mine. Quiet defiance. A subtle carving of space in a school that said "uniform," but had room, if you looked hard enough, for all kinds of difference. Of course I had to hide it from my mom, I would bring makeup wipes and a change of sneakers in my backpack in the morning.

And that's the thing I began to understand. Diversity isn't always loud or obvious. Sometimes it's tucked into a hemline, or hidden in the way someone walks, or the name they go by when no one's listening. It's in the lunch table conversations in three languages. In the way someone lights a candle for a tradition I've never heard of. In this way people of all backgrounds come together under one roof.

Despite what my mom said, I didn't have to play a persona to belong. I didn't have to love the skirt, or the label, or the version of femininity that made me feel small. I could still be here. I could still be me.

Because the truth is, there's no single way to wear a uniform.

And no single way to be a girl.

## Second Place

### Struggles - The Journey of a Woman, a BLACK Woman - Caia

Harris

Why are you beating her if she's already down?  
Why are you shushing her if she's already quiet?  
Why are you breaking her if she's already broken?  
Do you know how she feels to walk out of her house  
wondering if today will end with her in a box?  
Or waking up thinking how she will survive in this dying world?

Today's social standards are ridiculous and draining to her  
If she's skinny, they assume she's not eating.  
If she has some meat on her bones, she's called fat.  
But if she looks like a plastic Barbie doll, maybe she will be hung on a wall and not a  
tree because she is someone's dream girl to be. But as Effie said, things are heavy.

If she wears a skirt above the knees,  
Men think it is ok to touch her with ease, ignoring her pleas.  
If she wears too baggy clothing,  
They think she is concealing something, maybe her innocence.  
If her younger self wore high heels, people would think she was trying to be grown.  
But when she just wants to be a kid, they tell her to grow up.

If she gets an attitude or doesn't want to talk,  
She's called aggressive or a brat because she doesn't want to explode on others.  
But if she is nice and helpful, she gets taken advantage of  
Then is dismissed and convinced it was her fault.

Don't even get her started with her skin color,  
Because the truth never seems to be uncovered.  
If she goes into the store, she can't shop in peace.  
They must label her a thief or a thug, to keep their beliefs concrete.

She wonders why her people are always the reason the world is in shambles,

When they were the ones who brought us here in shackles and shambles.  
Her people were enslaved, slaughtered, and sliced for their pleasure Then, when  
they were freed, their masters became their oppressors.

Just when she starts to rise, picking herself up by the bootstraps  
She starts to be praised, honored, and admired  
Someone is lurking in the shadows  
Ready to knock her back down to where she started

When she falls down the pits of despair  
She weeps wondering if anyone sees it as unfair  
As her tears form puddles underneath her  
She wonders if anyone will come to meet her

Just as her heart grows cold  
A light shined behind her with a beaming glow  
An angel from Heaven flows down to her  
Fills with a peace and fire to mend and warm her

It gives her the confidence to get back up  
She faces her adversity with her head held high up  
Gracing the world with her thunderous force  
Understand her presence is a gift to the world  
And a curse for her enemies

The cycle of despair is inevitable.  
But her encounter with the angel continues to remind her  
As a Black Woman, you are a gift to this world  
For you are the only one that can make it turn  
Rejoice at adversity, for it helps you grow  
Remind yourself what no struggle knows  
Only you can be the best you,  
And that is the key to triumph.

## Second Place

### Blind Is Not A Bad Word - Annalisa Laphen

(Original title: "Blind Is Not A Bad Word", edited for clarity)

"You are just differently able, not disabled." "You are not blind, you are visually impaired." "I am so sorry, it must be so hard." "I can't even imagine what you're going through." When did it become bad to be different? When did a disability become a death sentence? Why does everyone always go straight to pity and sadness? Believe it or not, blindness is not lethal; blind people are just like everyone else. I love shoes and clothes. I love hanging out with my friends and watching movies. I love doing my hair and makeup. What? A blind girl, doing normal girl things? Crazy, I know! If you think this way, let's chat. Let me tell you how I got to where I am now.

It all started about ten years ago when my basketball coach called my parents and said, "I think there's something wrong with your daughter." This call led to a year of countless hours at CHOP getting what felt like a million tests done. After all of this, and my amazing doctors working so hard, we figured out that I have a rare eye disease called Stargardt's associated ABCA4 cone-rod dystrophy. A mouthful, I know, and words I could not acknowledge for years. I would not be caught dead speaking about my disability, let alone accepting any accommodations or help.

I was in elementary school, a kid getting told I may lose all my vision. By middle school, kids started finding out, and wow, are kids ruthless! I spent the rest of middle school getting teased, having kids purposely put their backpacks or legs out to trip me, and deliberately moving things around and out of my line of vision before I could grab them. It was brutal, to say the least. Then there was high school.

If I thought middle school was bad, then high school was hell. I transferred to Archbishop Carroll halfway through my freshman year. This decision brought some of the best and worst moments and people of my life. I spent my first three years

getting pushed from one friend group to another. I was getting bullied so relentlessly that part of me wanted to just be done with it all.

While struggling with the social aspects, I was also fighting tooth and nail to continue to succeed academically. I made it, though. I not only graduated with first honors, but I was also the Vice President of Best Buddies, a Kairos leader, landed two lead supporting roles in the theatre program, and so much more. I did it not to prove the people who doubted me wrong, but to show the people who supported me that I was someone worth supporting.

My parents never saw me as blind, they saw me the same as they saw their other four kids. They didn't let my disability define me. My siblings did not let anyone get away with saying a mean word to me. My brothers toughened me up and made sure I knew that the words of other people can't define me. My sisters were there, making sure I always looked my best, whether that was making sure my makeup wasn't smudged or just reminding me to smile. They always made sure I knew my worth.

Then there was Mr. Fry, the teacher who gave me my voice back. He taught me how to advocate for myself, and was the first person backing me up if any teacher tried to ignore my accommodations. He is the kind of teacher I want to be.

My best friend, Emma, came into my life in middle school, right after my diagnosis, when my mom signed me up at Emma's dad's dance studio. As I struggled with school and friendships, Emma was my constant—my lifeline. From encouraging me to use my cane with confidence to spending hours shopping and helping me navigate steps, Emma has always been there. Through the highs and lows, when I felt like nothing, Emma reminded me I was everything.

So, yeah, school was hard and, yeah, being blind can suck sometimes, but you know what sucks even more? Letting people bring me down and making me feel like my disability should be something I am ashamed of, and a flaw that I should try to fix and change. Those people - my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, Mr.

Fry, Emma - they helped drag me off the floor, and bring back the Annalisa that was around before I let the words of other people control me. They showed me that I don't need to change anything about myself, and my disability is not something to hide, but something to embrace.

I am better now because I know my worth, and I am empowered by those people in my life. I know I don't need to change for the world, but that the world can change because of me. I am proud of my disability.

I am blind, so what? I still get great grades. I still dance and bake. I still have the best boyfriend ever. I still have the most supportive and hilarious friends who love to drive me around. I still go shopping and get my nails and hair done. I still live on campus by myself. I still have and do all these things because being blind does not change who I am and does not hold me back from what I want to do.

Being blind does not define me, it's just a part of me, like how my eyes are blue and my skin is pale. Now you may think that being disabled makes me not normal, but can you even tell me what normal is? To me, normal is boring, and I have never come across a "normal" person.

We are all different in our own ways, and trust me, my disability is the most "normal" thing about me. The next time you see someone that you think may be different than you, whether they are blind, deaf, handicapped, or anything else, just say hi, talk to us like you would anyone else. Do not think about how different we are. Do not try to tiptoe around words or act like saying the word blind is an insult or disrespectful because it's not. I am a person just like anyone else. I just have an extra twist to my story. Maybe try to think less blindly and just speak kindly.

## Third-Place Winners

### Assorted Works - Malaya Combs

#### Where I'm From

I am from the badlands of North Philly,  
open pill bottles, needles, guns, and  
drug  
dealers every corner that I turn... I  
am from a city of crime. Here, worry  
is the trend—who will be the next  
victim?

I am from a city that disowns morals,  
its scaffolds a hierarchy of revenge.

My country is unequal. Here, to be  
of color—Black—is a crime. My world  
is  
brutal and cruel, unsafe and  
insecure.

I am from a family of morals.  
The wrong in the world  
does not take the good  
from us. Pictures of my grandma  
encourage me  
to learn and define.  
I am the reflection of acceptance—  
of self, heritage. I am from the  
Native American, Filipino,

and Hispanic Cultures: honorary  
dances, powwows, regalia, sage,  
ancestral items, eating rice with  
my bare hands.

I am from a father who comes and  
goes.

I am from a family not only  
defined by blood,  
but one that is bonded through actions  
and respect.

I'm from something so surreal, a place  
with  
big dreams, support along the way,  
but very  
little money.

I am from making anything possible.

From no excuses, just  
possibilities—goals,  
and dreams beyond  
myself.

## A Dream So Big

### How My Experiences as a Patient Made Me Want to Be a Doctor

Growing up, I was always in and out of the hospital, moving from doctor to doctor. I often suffered from hives and swelling on my face, but was never diagnosed with an allergy. My doctors gave me medicines that didn't work and came up with the same scenarios of what I had, like asthma or allergies. I felt as if I was always pushed away from the medical assistance I needed. When I reached the age of 15, I was diagnosed with a chronic cough, but my case was never really solved. Doctors would ask me the same questions and take the same approach; they never tried anything new. This diagnosis felt like a way to get rid of me rather than help. I felt powerless. I had no access or knowledge to understand what was going on. I think what I feared the most was being placed in a position where I couldn't help myself.

I decided: "If no one will help me, I will." Once I got to high school, I joined a medical program at the Philadelphia College Of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) which inspired me to want to pursue a career in medicine. I am fascinated with how interconnected the body is. The heart keeps you alive by continuously pumping, and the brain sends fluid to your spinal cord; everything is like one big cycle that works together to keep us alive. The body keeps evolving just like the medical field itself. There is always something new, and I want to be there to see it.

Being a doctor is my dream, but sometimes this dream feels incompatible with reality. I took a genetics class at my high school that opened my eyes to the world of medical ethics and America's history of medical racism. I learned about Henrietta Lacks, a young mother whose cells were used for research without her consent. Henrietta went to Johns Hopkins Hospital where she hoped to be treated for cancer, but her doctor used her as a lab rat, taking her cells and sharing them with other scientists without her permission. She is just one example of the ways that people of color are denied access to healthcare, and her story gave me the courage to fight for what's right. In a way, I look up to Henrietta Lacks. Her cells are the backbone of modern medicine and why the field will keep evolving.

Because I experienced medical inequality as a patient, I am aware that I may come across it as a future professional. As a colored female, I feel that I am discriminated against because of my skin color and gender. Supervisors and colleagues may deny and overlook my knowledge and abilities. This makes me wonder: is changing the medical system just a dream, or will it become a reality? I have been exposed to the wonders of the human body; I've held a brain, a heart, and lungs, but the image of myself as a doctor still feels like a fantasy. The medical field is big. Will I have anyone's guidance? If I end up choosing another career, will the people around me still support me? Do I have the right skills? Is my knowledge strong? Even though I have these doubts, they are not weakening me but rather they are strengthening me to take more risks as I pursue my dream.

I will use this strength to heal others. The thought of someone trusting me with their body is an honor. It means they put their full trust into me; they have fully given me the authority to heal and fix them. It seems like an everlasting dream that will never end. I need to remember that I was once a patient who was helpless. As a future professional, I can't forget that this is what made me strong. I can't change the experiences that I had as a patient but I can develop an understanding that allows me to be the empathetic doctor that I never had.

## **Sam Chin's Martial Art of Awareness: The Transformative Power of the Present**

Anxiety, depression, insecurities, illnesses, stress, trauma, doubt—these struggles can be interpreted as weaknesses, but they don't have to define who you are. Sure, we may feel fearful because of the past or anxious about the future. But what if I told you our struggles and challenges can be overcome using what's already within us? I learned this truth from practicing the Martial Art of Awareness, a mindfulness movement system designed to increase inner clarity.

When people hear "martial arts," they might not associate it with mental calm—only fighting or aggression. But this approach is different, helping you understand how your mind works and your body responds. I was exposed to this powerful art during my first semester at Cabrini. It is a powerful system offering a process for self-development and learning how to learn, guiding students to recognize the present moment while learning to respond to changing conditions.

The Martial Art of Awareness is an Asian-influenced method taught in twenty-two countries. It was developed by Grandmaster and Honorary Professor Emeritus Sam FS Chin, the founder of the Zhong Xin Dao (ZXD), the "neutral center way." It uses the Chin family art of I Liq Chuan as a tool to train attention and balance while transforming our inner fears and outer aggressions. This holistic approach to self-improvement has changed me, helping me recognize internal sensations and listen to my inner voice.

As a first-generation college student, starting university was stressful. Luckily, I found the Balance Learning Community. Its central course, Conflict & Cooperation, was co-taught by Dr. Nancy Watterson and Sifu Lan Tran, certified instructors in The Martial Art of Awareness. They worked closely with GM Sam Chin to develop and launch the ZXD Academic Approach, which offers workshops to students, teachers, coaches, and community members from K-12 and senior citizens.

In weekly seminar, we explored why individual anxieties arise and how collective fears can grow into major conflicts. We used ZXD mental-physical exercises as tools to recognize the seeds of our insecurities based on references in the past. I also got to work with a top ZXD instructor Master Rich Kelly (based in NY), and, best of all, the renowned Grandmaster of the entire system, Sam FS Chin. I interviewed them, heard about the system's philosophy, concepts, and principles, and learned more about "putting attention on one's attention."

It can be challenging to focus one's attention inward, to consciously observe your mind as the receiver of all information. Even in an act as simple as balancing

while moving both hands forward and back, our attention jumps from one thing to another, rocking on our feet to find our center line. Through these basic body mechanics and training in bringing back my attention, I gained a new appreciation of being present. I developed skills to properly focus my mind and control my reactions to unexpected situations, what GM Sam Chin calls being able to “change with the changes.”

I gained a deeper appreciation for this concept when I heard GM Chin's life story. Ten years ago, GM was diagnosed with lymphoma (cancer) and had to go through a bone marrow transplant and stem cell treatment. GM Chin expressed how he used the painful conditions of his illness to observe his mind and how the clarity of that process helped him gain wisdom: “You must know yourself in order to use yourself.” (You can learn more about GM Sam Chin's journey through his 2016 CCTV documentary, “Kung Fu Abroad”).

Life's all about tough times and knowing how to adjust. Awareness, as Grandmaster explains, “is a continuous process of improving your understanding through coordinating your mind and body.” As I applied these insights, I became more sure of myself. I made friends and acquired coping skills that helped me remain calm when facing trouble.

I asked Master Rich Kelly how we could apply the art to our daily struggles. “Often we act from a position of habit or reflex, or as a slave to our compulsions,” he said. However, by being more present, we can recognize the root cause of the conditions and what's happening within ourselves. “We will understand causality by watching our own mental processes, whether they are feelings, thoughts, or sensory input—the depths of the experience itself,” Master Kelly explained. GM Chin addressed the same point, adding, “You'll start to see where things are coming from within yourself, and once you understand that causality, you realize that a lot of the limitations in your mind are self-imposed.”

So how do we break through those limitations? Gaining awareness of your inner self through this training is an essential first step. Ultimately, you have the power to reject your past habitual reactions and choose how you respond to challenges. In the context of illnesses, mental or physical, the case may seem daunting. Yet, even if you can't control how a condition progresses, training your inner voice empowers you to choose so that you don't let fear dictate your life. As Sifu Lan Tran said, “Training your attention on your awareness develops your growth as an entire person, not just as a martial artist.”

GM Chin left me with this wisdom: “Be yourself. The approach of looking into your inner self is to show you what nature is... physical nature, the nature of the mind and environments. If you understand the nature of the mind, you will know how to use both your mind and body in the proper way. Unifying mental and physical gives you a tool to master yourself. Looking into your own mind and body allows you to reach your highest potential.”

## From the Block to the Boardroom - Malik Cook-Stephens

Jamal Davis grew up in the heart of Eastside Heights, a neighborhood where dreams were small and struggles were big. Cracked sidewalks and boarded-up buildings were the backdrop of his childhood. His mother, Denise, worked two jobs—days at the nursing home, nights cleaning offices—just to keep the lights on. His father? Just a ghost, a name people whispered but never explained.

Jamal learned young that the world didn't hand out favors. If you wanted something, you had to take it.

By thirteen, he was already hustling. It started small—running errands for the older guys on the block, stashing their product in exchange for a few bucks. But Jamal wasn't content being a runner forever. He had vision. Where others saw survival, he saw opportunity.

"You gotta think bigger," he told his best friend, Malik, one night as they sat on his porch. "These dudes? They're just playing the game. I wanna own it."

By sixteen, Jamal had made a name for himself. He studied the game like a scientist—watching how the big players moved, learning from their mistakes. He didn't flash his money like the others. No gold chains or flashy cars. He reinvested in his business—cutting out middlemen, managing his crew like a CEO. Word on the street was simple: Jamal handled his business. And if you crossed him? There were consequences.

But no matter how much power he had, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was running in circles. The same streets he controlled were the same ones keeping him trapped.

Then came the night that changed everything.

It was a cold November evening. Jamal and Malik were supposed to meet a new supplier. Something felt off, but money always spoke louder than doubt. The deal started smooth—until it wasn't. Guns flashed. Shots rang out. When the smoke cleared, Malik was on the ground, blood soaking his hoodie.

Jamal held his best friend as the sirens wailed in the distance. "Stay with me, man. You hear me?" But Malik didn't answer.

At the funeral, Jamal stood in the back, watching Malik's mother weep. He couldn't shake the weight pressing on his chest. Malik had been his brother—his ride-or-die since they were kids. And now? He was just another name. Another mural on a cracked brick wall.

That night, Jamal made a decision. He was done. No more corners. No more blood on his hands.

Walking away wasn't easy. The money was addictive. And the streets? They don't let go without a fight. Old rivals tested him. Friends doubted him. But Jamal stayed focused. He earned his GED while working nights stacking boxes at a warehouse. People laughed—said he was crazy to leave behind easy money for minimum wage. But Jamal knew something they didn't: survival wasn't enough. He wanted to win.

One day, during a lunch break, Jamal overheard two supervisors talking about a real estate deal. The numbers they mentioned made his head spin—figures bigger than anything he'd ever touched in the streets. That conversation lit a fire in him. If people were making millions selling property, why couldn't he?

He started reading everything he could—real estate books, market trends, even watching YouTube videos late into the night. Eventually, he scraped together enough to enroll in a real estate licensing course. Most of the other students didn't take him seriously—he was just a kid from the hood, after all. But when he passed his exam on the first try, he knew he was built for this.

Jamal's big break came when he met Mr. Garcia, a seasoned real estate broker. The older man saw something in him—a raw ambition that reminded him of himself. “You know how to hustle,” Garcia told him. “But out here, the product is property. If you can sell a dream, you’ll make more money than you ever did in the streets—without looking over your shoulder.”

Jamal took those words to heart.

At first, it wasn't glamorous. He worked open houses nobody wanted, hustled rental deals, and cold-called leads that never answered. But Jamal wasn't afraid of the grind—he'd come from worse. His street smarts became his greatest asset. He knew how to read people, how to negotiate, and most importantly—how to close.

While other agents chased luxury suburbs, Jamal focused on neighborhoods like Eastside Heights—areas on the verge of gentrification. He understood both sides: the investors chasing profits and the locals trying to survive. This insight made him invaluable. Soon, he wasn't just selling properties—he was shaping entire communities.

Within five years, Jamal was a phenomenon. His name spread beyond the city. He was the go-to guy for transforming struggling neighborhoods into million-dollar hotspots. But he didn't forget where he came from. For every high-rise he sold downtown, he reinvested in Eastside Heights—renovating apartment buildings, funding after-school programs, and hiring local kids to work for him.

By thirty-five, Jamal Davis was one of the top real estate agents in the world. His portfolio stretched across major cities—luxury condos in Manhattan, beachfront estates in Miami, even international developments in Dubai. Fortune 500 CEOs and celebrities called him for deals. He flew first class, wore custom suits, and had his own real estate firm: Davis Global Properties.

But his proudest achievement? The Malik Davis Community Center, right in the heart of Eastside Heights—a place where kids could dream bigger than the block.

During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Jamal stood before the crowd, microphone in hand. His voice was steady, but the weight of the moment wasn't lost on him. "They told me I wouldn't make it past eighteen," he said. "But here I am. And I'm here to tell every kid out there—your past doesn't define you. It's where you're going that matters."

From the block to the boardroom, Jamal Davis proved that no dream was too big—and no starting point too small—to change the world.



*Photo by Anna Bellitta*

## Uplifted (Poetry Collection) - Amanda Fennell

### Perennial Love

No need to desecrate a daisy  
And question Your affections  
When each flower in efflorescence  
Offers these next reflections:

You pick me pansy petals  
(Save me pennies for Your thoughts),  
And I know that You remember  
When You send forget-me-nots.

Countless proofs of Your presence  
Are scattered far and wide  
In each and every blossom  
You never try to hide.

Neither missing nor mist  
Can dampen our bond,  
And blushing camellias

Reveal You, so fond.

Oh, Your love is more than budding-  
Its sturdy roots run deep,  
And the promise that it's endless  
Is one You'll always keep.

Your undying care unfurls  
In sunflowers with charms,  
And when You bring zinnias,  
I'm enwreathed in Your arms.

With thought that bursts in every  
bloom,  
You leave no room for doubting.  
No weeds, or thorn in any stalk  
Could stop Your love from sprouting.

## Flicker

You catch the faintest flicker of my heart  
(that flash of fear  
wisp of a wish)

Invisible to the naked eye  
Imperceptible

You chart the faintest flicker of my heart  
(the length and intensity  
width and intricacy)

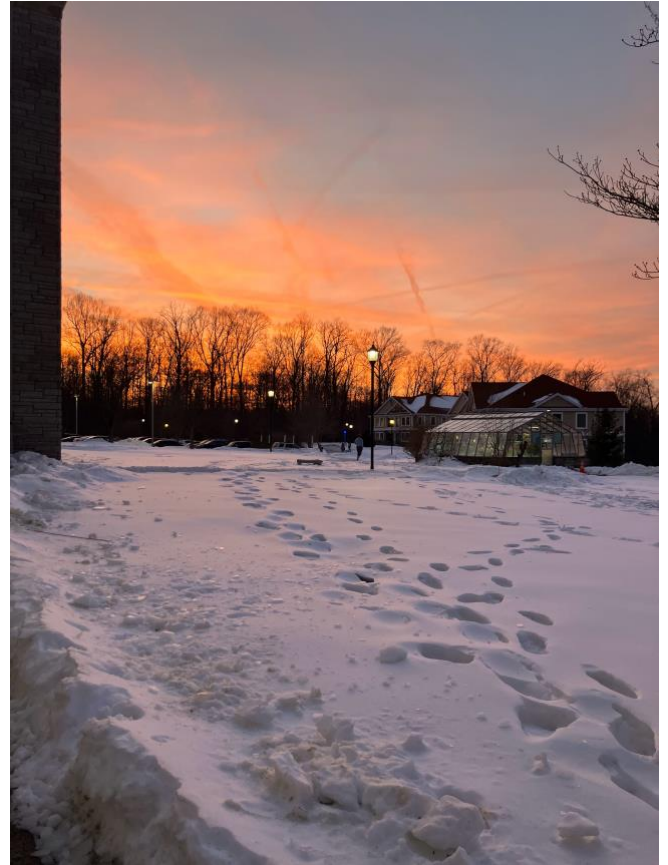
Unnoticeable to everyone  
Unknown

You feel the faintest flicker of my heart  
(the quiver of qualm  
shiver of strain)

You  
Understand.

And I don't have to  
fan the flame  
send out flares

With my heart You are intimately, infinitely aware



*Photo by Amanda Fennell*

## Beautiful

Gorgeous.

Striking.

Hot.

When did we decide  
that we could decide  
who and what  
is beautiful?

When did we decide  
that beauty is like the  
weather?  
That it's skin-deep and  
subjective  
(but that there are still  
standards, of course)?  
That some just have it  
and others

don't?

That we have to  
cover,  
reshape,  
boost  
ourselves  
to be beautiful?

Thank goodness  
what we decide  
is not actual truth.

Thank goodness  
God  
is absolute truth.

For  
God  
looks at me

and says I'm beautiful.

How can this be?

The God  
who made  
stunning sunsets and  
charming cherry  
blossoms and  
lovely lilac-breasted  
rollers

looks at me

and says I'm beautiful.

How can this be?

I am an irreplaceable  
work of art  
in the eyes of the Creator.

God blessed me  
with beauty  
that I don't see  
and that others don't see.  
But He sees it.

It's not  
in my eyes  
or my skin  
or my hair,

though no one  
appreciates  
my eyes and  
my skin and  
my hair  
more than God.

It's deeper.  
It's within me.  
It's beyond me.  
It's from Him.  
It is Him.

Because God is love.  
He is beauty.  
His beloved  
will always be  
beautiful  
in His sight.

We are all His beloved.  
We are all beautiful.

Not because our ugliness  
is hidden  
or hypothetical.

He knows all of my  
ugliness.

And yet

He looks at me,

loves me,

and says I'm beautiful.

## Make the Next Move

The thought thwarts me.  
I'm thrown before I even sow a single  
seed.  
So how will I grow?

The expectation extinguishes me.  
I'm exhausted before I even ignite.  
So how will I share my light?

The possibility petrifies me.  
I'm paralyzed before I even make the  
first pace.  
So how will I run the race?

Faith.

Faith,  
Faith,  
Faith.

Faith fries the lies that terrorize you.

Yes, at one marker or another,  
you will misstep.  
But don't let the fear of falter keep you  
stuck at the starting line.

Perseverance places.  
Perfectionism holds you in place.

So sow the seed, though seasons may  
shut before it blooms.  
Share your light, though foes may  
want to blow it out.  
Run the race, though barricades may  
block the way.

Persevere in faith.

## The Next Chapter

Let go,

Let God.

You've heard it before-

An aphorism and nothing more.

You wish the spell would work, but as hard as you try,

You worry and worry and worry, and why?

True, you just don't know what time will bring,

But why get stuck- why let fear sting?

The world's best Author wrote your life's plot,

And He made it better than you could've sought.

The middle's a mystery, which chokes you with dread,

But you have to read on to see what's ahead.

The ending resounds with heavenly laughter-

It's the ultimate happily ever after.

Though you don't know what happens until then,

It's good that the future lies beyond your ken.

Life is full of twists that make you who you're meant to be-

Who would you become if you'd skipped to Part Three?

So enjoy each chapter that God crafts for you.

Spoiler alert: it's He that gets you through.

## Poetry Collection - Mackenzie Fillion

### Stillness

I forget sometimes  
That I am simply allowed to exist,  
That I do not always have to be creating,  
That stillness is not something I must resist.

Perhaps it's the plight of the artist.  
Perhaps it's a child's curse.  
Perhaps it's something all my own:  
The constant need to prove my worth.

Even now, my eyes ache,  
And my legs are heavy like lead,  
And yet I'm awake, writing even now,  
At an awkward angle on my bed.

I know my worth is all my own.  
Not in sketchbooks, not in songs.  
But I still cannot close my eyes.  
I've never felt at home when calm.

So one day I'll stop for good,  
When my bones are rusting in the ground,  
But until then I'll keep creating,  
Only in final slumber will my stillness be found.

## The Porcelain Mask

I love you because you are good.  
You love me because you think I am too.  
I wonder how long that love will last  
before you realize the ugly I've kept from you.

If you knew the disgusting muck of my soul  
you would definitely despise me.  
But I need you, so I pretend I'm good.  
It would break me if you were to flee.

Porcelain features,  
pale lips colored peach,  
Cracks running like tear tracks  
down my crumbling cheek.

The ink, the puss, it's oozing through,  
spewing from the crevices of my face.  
Look at the ugliness you could never love.  
The hideous picture I've always had to trace.

You make me want to be pure  
both out of love and fear.  
But I was born broken,  
and my mask to hide it sheer.

Maybe one day you'll see me.  
All my flaws and scars.  
Maybe you'll trace the cracks and say,  
"I love you as you are."

But that "maybe" is a hefty risk  
and I am not a gambling soul.  
So I'll glue myself together  
and pretend that I am whole.

## Running

I keep thinking of running  
Whenever I find my mind wandering.  
Running through fields, down hallways  
Through windows and air. Running.

Running without breathing, my lungs do not burn.  
I simply feel alive. I simply yearn.  
Running like a river, flowing and free.  
I run for miles. My stomach does not churn.

I'm running and the sun is gold.  
The wind is in my face and I am not old.  
Running without time. I have no age.  
My eyes catch the light. My spirit feels bold.

When I'm trapped in my body, I dream of running.  
When I'm trapped on this earth, I dream of running.  
It's a shame that death seems so still.  
Because my soul longs to be free. Running.

## Nothing But Bones

I want to be nothing but bones.  
Let my organs hang from my skeleton, crimson shades in every hue.  
Red ivy on a decaying ivory tower.  
Because flesh rots, and so will you.  
But my bones will never leave me.  
My hollow skull will always haunt.  
Cracked white fingers are all that will remain when I am nothing.  
So they are all I want.

## The Tablecloth is Beige

The flowers are colored autumn.  
The tablecloth is beige.  
The water in the vase is clouded.  
The stems are a vibrant sage.

Browned edges and drowning leaves.  
Time marches on, all things age.  
There's beauty in it's decay,  
like tea-stains on a weathered page.

I think of growing old.  
I never had before.  
Will I be like autumn flowers?  
Will I slip away like waves on the shore?

Will I have a home to dwell in?  
Will my hands grow gnarled like a tree?  
Will I have smile lines and sun spots?  
All things I never thought I would see.

But I have made it this far in life,  
and now I've set my sights.  
On everything that lies ahead.  
Towards sunny days and starry nights.

## I Want To See - De-Sean Hubert

I want to see...

A world where a man and a woman

With no other people will scorn

Where love will bless the earth

And peace its paths adorn

I want to see...

A world where everyone knows

The sweet freedom's way

Where greed no longer controls our souls

And infecting our day

I want to see...

A world where black, white, and other races people may be

That will share the bounties of earth, and every man, woman, and child would be

free

I want to see...

All the wrongs disappear, and the earth shines like a pearl

If you had asked me, I would say that would be a beautiful world

## Survivor's Guilt - Rachel Huss

I have survivor's guilt for someone who isn't even dead.  
I have survivor's guilt for someone who doesn't deserve what they're getting.  
I have survivor's guilt for someone who takes care of others before themselves.  
I have survivor's guilt for someone who would carry the weight of the world for their children.  
I have survivor's guilt for my mother.

My mother is alive and well,  
She used to be kept awake during the night.  
My mother is alive and well,  
She used to beg my father to take care of himself.  
My mother is alive and well,  
She would plead for that drink to be his last drink.  
My mother is alive and well,  
She would sit in the bathroom crying and texting me at 1 am.

I am her eldest daughter.  
I moved out to live with my boyfriend.  
I have survivor's guilt for someone who isn't even dead.

## Is Freedom Out Of Reach - Softina Marcel

**W**hy are there children and mothers crying?

**H**aiti, the first black independent country but yet so dependent.

**O**ut of reach, they wonder how far the rest of the world is.

**W**ill anyone have mercy upon this land God has created?

**I** can hear them.

**L**ives being taken away in the most inhumane way.

**L**ittle hearts being shaken by the sound of automatic rifles.

**S**afe isn't a word in this country.

**A**pril 1st, my birthday is forgotten by loved ones in this country.

**V**ast Oceans and Land a perfect getaway.

**E**fficiency in the government is no longer an option.

**U**ntouchable no one wants to make contact.

**S**oftina Marcel is reaching out for help for her country.

## The Olde Restaurant - Joseph O'Brien

The year was 1948, at the end of the Second World War, all started to seem right in the world. Mary had married John Sr., and now that she was out of Finland. Her life was saved out of the good loving hearts of those surrounding her while she was kept in Petrozavodsk concentration camp and eventually escaped to America. It was opening day of the restaurant they were soon to call home. John Sr. nailed up the freshly painted sign for the entire town of Morgantown, Pennsylvania, to see: "*The Olde Restaurant*". "John! A little to the left!"

"I got it, Mary. Mind your temper."

They both took a step back with an arm around each other.

"Look at it", said Mary.

A new beginning is shining through the clouds on us."

It was a Friday night, Christmas Eve nonetheless, and I wasn't happy about going to work. I looked at the thermometer outside, reading twenty-eight degrees, and it was already nightfall, which meant everything would be frozen up. My uniform was nothing but black, which I didn't mind because I had a lot of that color. I laced up my freshly polished shoes, put on my shirt and slacks, which were freshly ironed thanks to my mother, and made sure I took my topcoat, leather gloves, black felt fedora, and scarf. I looked like a million bucks, hair slicked back and all.

"Be careful driving, Fred! Everything is a sheet of ice out there."

"Okay, Mom, I will. I love you."

"I love you too! Have a great night at work!"

I walked out of the house and got into my cold car. It was a 1986 Buick and did not warm up very quickly. I turned on the radio to my favorite CD and went on my way. It wasn't a long drive to the restaurant, but I enjoyed every second of it. Being a waiter was a rough job, even more so on a holiday night. The heat finally kicked in as I lit up a Chesterfield cigarette that I'd bought from the general store around the corner. As soon as I finished it, I pulled up to the traffic light across from the restaurant. The broken-down sign read, "*The Olde Restaurant*". Christmas lights hung from the edges and all. I swear it was the original sign that was put up when the damn place went into business. Nothing ever changes there. The light turned green, and I pulled into the parking lot around back. There were rows of cars, and looking in the frozen windows that reminded you of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. That was another thing that didn't change. They'd left most of the building original from when the actual house was built in 1740 and later converted to a restaurant.

I got out of my car and had fifteen extra minutes for a cigarette before I had to clock in. I went in through the back door, which led into the rundown dish room. The walls and ceiling were a green color, and the floor was solid concrete. It smelled of mold from all the moisture over the years to the point that the paint was peeling off the walls. I closed the door behind me, so as not to let the draft in to make it even colder. The only heat that the dish-guy got was from the kitchen.

"Hey Dave, how are you?"

"I'm..I'm..I'm... good young young fella!" "Little cold ba...ba...back here though."

Doug was an older gentleman. He was tall, skinny, had long white hair, and a long white beard. He was homeless and lived in the basement in a room that the owners, Jack and Bruce, rented to him in payment for washing dishes and a case of beer a night. He was rich once by inheritance, but drank it all away. Now he speaks with a stutter and doesn't comprehend too much, but I always made sure I thanked him for his hard work in the dish room. I followed the hallway into the kitchen, and there was Abby's father, Jim, slammed with orders as the dining room and bar were filled with customers.

"How's everything tonight, Jim?"

"Just another night in this God-forsaken paradise!"

"Good to hear."

I made my way up to the bar to have my last cigarette before work and dropped off my coat, scarf, gloves, and fedora on the old cherry wood coat rack on my way there. I took out a cigarette to light and sat in the back room at the antique round table with an ashtray and a cup of coffee while I waited for my shift to start. Kristine, Jack's girlfriend who was also the bartender, walked into the back room to give me a hug and say hello.

"Hey sweetie, how are you on this cold Christmas Eve night?" said Kristine.

"Great, it's nice to see at least one smiling face in this place."

"Where's Mary tonight?" I asked.

"Eh, she's at the bar again. Hasn't had a thing but scotch on the rocks all night."

"Great. Another nasty person to deal with."

"Cheer up, sweetie. It's Christmas. No one should be sad on Christmas."

I gave a slight smile and said, "Can't wait until it's over, though. I need to be with my family." She gave me a kiss on the cheek as I put out my cigarette and took the last sip of coffee. It was time for work.

I walked back to the kitchen to get my time card and clock in. There was a shelf with an old-time clock that you had to push down the lever to work. It read, "five o'clock". I had a feeling this would be a long night, but never once did I think it would be a night that would change the rest of my life. After I clocked in, I walked through the swinging doors with windows that looked like they belonged on the Titanic.

There was a dining room of people with all but two tables occupied. The fireplace was roaring hot, making it feel toasty and taking the chill out of my body. It was one of those fireplaces that you would picture from a Mark Twain book. It was solid stone with all different colored slate pieces covering the wall to the ceiling, which also made up the floor in front of it. There was an old musket from the Civil War paired with an oil lantern hanging above the mantle. Even though the restaurant was old, it had a warm cottage feel to it. Lined along the walls were brass candle sconces, all shining from the candlelight, and each table had an old oil lamp placed in the center. In the back of the dining room was a bar made up of solid copper.

We rarely had customers sit there, but it was still nice to look at. We made sure the front door of the dining room stayed closed so as not to let the heat out. It was an old, solid, heavy, white wooden door with ironwork covering the old glass windows, and it squeaked every time you opened and closed it. The other waitress on the shift with me for the night was Abby. She was a short, pudgy girl with long black hair and a beautiful smile. Always cheerful and happy, was she. I enjoyed working with her every chance I got.

"Hello, Abby darling!"

"Fred! Merry Christmas!"

She ran over to give me a kiss and hug like she had not seen me in a month. It was only a week since I'd worked with her.

"Slow night, huh?"

"Yeah, Fred. Everyone is home with their families. This is our home", she sighed.

"At least there's a nice fire going!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right" I said, shaking my head.

Abby turned her cheek and I whispered, "The bar is pretty packed tonight, but it's all the regulars that are in, trying to have a good time. Don't they ever go home?"

"Fred, you know they're always here. Things never change around here."

"Of course, they don't!"

Just as I peered through the window, Mary came stumbling into the dining room. The few customers at the tables by the fire, looked up in disgust as they ate their Christmas meals. I offered Mary a seat at the glaring copper bar.

"Come on, Mary. Take a seat over here."

As I pulled out the stool, I noticed a certain look on her face that mirrored feelings of depression. Mary was an old woman of about 88 years. She was pudgy, had white hair, red lipstick, and always had the sweet smell of perfume on her in addition to her thick Finish accent. She was a sweet woman but depending on the day, she could be nasty too. Mary sat on the stool and asked for another drink of Johnny Walker Black Label scotch, on the rocks. As I poured her a drink, she began to cry. I put the drink on the bar with a coaster underneath so that the freshly polished metal wouldn't tarnish, and no sooner did I turn my back, I heard the choked words,

"I have history you never knew about."

I turned around to see her glistening, teary eyes.

"What's wrong Mary?"

"There are things you do not know of me and things I wish you to never experience."

"I'm not understanding what you're trying to tell me Mary."

"Do you know how old this restaurant is? Do you know the memories and dreams I made here with my late husband? You understand I am from Finland but you do not know the history of this restaurant and the pain and suffering I went through to make it what it was many years ago. I opened this restaurant with my husband in 1948. We met during the War in Finland where the American GI's freed me from the Petrozavodsk concentration camp. He took me in his arms and said, "Everything will be alright. You're safe now." I was thin enough to see my ribs and dressed in rags with my identification number on my wrist. It was the most horrid experience I have ever encountered. To be watched and beaten at every second of every day by Nazi-German soldiers, then to see the light of God in my Jonathon's eyes when he held me in his arms. It was love at first sight."

She choked on every word she said. Between the liquor and the crying, I didn't know what to make out of any of this. I saw nothing but hurt in this woman's eyes and didn't want to leave her side.

The restaurant was dead and the grandfather clock stroke midnight. I was still sitting with Mary at that old, tarnished, copper bar. It was near closing but I did nothing but lean on the bar and listen to everything she had to say.

"After I was freed from Petrozavodsk, I took the only thing I had saved of my mother's, which was her wedding ring, and moved to America. I entered the United States through New York for the immigration agency to verify that I didn't have any diseases. Then Jonathon took me to this small lovely town. It was the summer of 1946 and he proposed to me in a field of daisies on a warm, and windy summer day. We were married two months later in his church with all of his family and friends, whom took me in like part of the family. It was a dream come true. His family had an old stone Victorian era house for us to start our family in. Jonathon had the grand idea of opening a restaurant since the town only had one, which was down the street. He named it, "*The Olde Restaurant*". The grand opening was on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1948 and what a majestic day it was. Over the years our business did well until Jonathon's death in 1989 of cancer. I am still in mourning from his death but will never forget him. As I got older, I left the restaurant to both my sons, Jack and Bruce. It was the worst mistake of my life. The restaurant went down to garbage food and cheap wine. Now this restaurant is nothing but a dive-bar. All I want to do is die and be with my husband in heaven, as I deserve. God, help me."

I was speechless after I heard this story from her. At that point, I felt a knot in my stomach because of the image I once had of this woman. I poured Mary another scotch and one for myself. I walked over and sat next to her now that the dining room was closed. I gave her a kiss on the cheek and let her put her head on my shoulder. When she seemed to calm down, I took my drink and cheered to hers.

"Merry Christmas, Mary"

"And to you, Fred."

And we embraced each other as she walked me to the door to leave. The look on her face when I walked down the back steps on that cold Christmas night is something always instilled in my memory. God will welcome you one day, Mary. Until then, we will show our gratitude to you.

## The Rose of Tralee - Rose T. Lindsey

*Writing Contest winner from 2023*

Francis, now a wrinkled man in his mid-eighties, traveled thousands of times back to that night. To the night on which his whole life was transformed. To the night when his heart had once again begun beating.

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When he was merely seventeen years old, Francis was preparing to leave everything that he knew for what his family called the "land of opportunity," the country where "lives are built, and dreams become reality." But Francis did not see this journey the way his family did. He only felt the sharp pain that precedes an undesired departure.

The boy was caught up in the tumultuous storm of his mind and soul. He wrestled with the heart-wrenching emotions of abandoning his family, friends, and his beloved homeland for the shores of a place that he had neither seen nor ever desired to. Francis, however, was powerless to alter his fate. He had a responsibility, as many eldest sons in Ireland did, to go to America. If he wanted to better himself and aid his family in their time of poverty, it was pivotal for him to make the journey.

Despite the fact that his entire being desperately yearned to remain in Ireland, the place that made his heart whole, Francis felt himself being gently pulled toward America. The night prior to his departure, Francis snuck out of his family's dilapidated stone home, trudged through the deep green fields, and made his way toward the coast. Standing on the cliff over the Emerald Isle's shoreline, Francis closed his eyes tightly, feeling the long grass brush against his bare feet and ankles. Breathing deeply, he inhaled the Derry air and listened closely to the rolling of the cool waves onto the rocky shore. At that moment, Ireland wrapped her peace around the boy like a mother wrapping a warm blanket around her son. But desperation slowly crept into Francis's aching heart. He craved escape from what he felt to be his duty to his family. To run away from the water, which, now peacefully rolling onto the shoreline, would soon unknowingly bear him to a land—not, in his mind, one of opportunity but of desolation and abandonment.

These were the thoughts overwhelming Francis' mind as he stood on the edge of the cliff overlooking the beach. But at that moment, a warm breeze stroked his cheek. It felt as if someone had run past him, and the wind caused by the quick movement had brushed against his face.

Francis was taken aback.

Stepping away from the cliff's edge, the boy heard the faintest whisper, "*A chuisle mo chroí.*"

It was the voice of a girl. A voice so sweet and gentle that it sounded otherworldly. Francis whipped around breathlessly, searching for someone in the darkness—but to no avail. He was alone in the moonlit night.

After a few moments of baffled pacing, Francis threw himself onto the ground and stared up at the stars. Caressing the grass with his roaming hands, he tried to explain away, with calm rationality, the occurrence that had just happened. First, he

attempted to convince himself that he did not hear anything, that it was just the wind.

His attempt did not work.

Then, he rationalized that perhaps he had listened to his sisters' philosophical arguments for the existence of the mythical selkies for a little too long earlier that day.

His rationalization did not work either.

After what felt like a lifetime of pondering on how and why he could possibly have heard that Irish phrase of endearment, he was still without a clue.

The sun, unaffected by Francis' many chaotic hours of contemplation, began its leisurely climb over the horizon. So, Francis stiffly rose from the hard ground and began his journey homeward. After plodding through the dewy grass for nearly a mile, Francis, distracted by the racing in his mind, slowly realized something. His heart, although still painfully ripped in half, was experiencing a sense of peace. It was as if two hands were holding the halves of his heart together. A wave of realization had come upon him: he knew he had to go to America, not only to fulfill his duty but for some other reason. Just as he was unaware of the voice's origin or why it had come to him, he was also unaware of what that other reason may be.

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Later that morning, Francis said goodbye to his family.

His mother, with tears rolling down her gaunt cheeks, grabbed him by the face and sweetly, but firmly, commanded him as only Irish mothers can: "Be at peace, Francis, and may God's strength be with you. *Go n-éirí an bóthar leat.*"

Claire made a Sign of the Cross on his forehead, and with this, Francis kissed his mother and closed the solid brown door to the old farmhouse.

Francis, retracing his steps from the night before, made his way across the fields with his father as they began their journey toward the port where the boy would depart for America. When they arrived, everything moved at a rapid pace, and before he knew it, Francis was on the boat, peering over the side at his father. Only a few moments prior, Francis' father, a stoic man who displayed little emotion, had grabbed his son firmly by the arms and wished him well. "Make us proud, lad," Francis' father gruffly instructed. But Francis could see the loving tears in his father's eyes.

Shortly thereafter, the boat, *Misneach*, began to pull away from the dock, and the water, lapping onto the sides of the vessel, thrust it toward America. Francis was still standing on the starboard side of the ship, but now he was gripping the railing so tightly that his knuckles turned white. His mother's words were running through his head like the water carrying him, but he could feel his strength failing him. Francis thought he was going to collapse, but his father, looking so small now on the dock, lifted his arm to bid his eldest goodbye. Seeing his father's gesture gave Francis strength; he released the railing and allowed the blood to rush back into his fingers. Francis instinctively raised his hand to wave farewell.

Francis later wondered what he would have done differently if he had known that was the last time that he would ever see his father on this earth—a figure so small on that dock.

Now that Ireland's shore was too far away to see with the naked eye, Francis turned around and made his way to the bow of the boat, searching for the promised land in the distance. The thought of his family brought him to tears. Would he ever see *Ireland* again? The thought was too painful to contemplate, so he instead tried to focus on the words...and that *beautiful* voice...that he heard the previous night. Crumpling to the deck, Francis kept repeating the phrase that he could still hear being whispered ever so gently in his ear: "*A chuisle mo chroí...A chuisle mo chroí...A chuisle mo chroí...*" Finally, sleep overtook his exhausted body.

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Throughout the next year, Francis had no choice but to adapt to his new life--heartbreakingly alone in Philadelphia.

He arrived on Ellis Island with only a few coins in his pocket, the clothes on his back, and the promise of being able to stay with his aunt, who could be described, with the most grace possible, as disagreeable.

Struggling to find a job, Francis walked from business to business for weeks in search of work, but there was little success, and throughout that trying time, the boy often thought of his mother's departing words to him and sighed in discouragement. "The road most definitely has not risen to meet me," he whispered to himself as he walked into Murphy's grocery. He planned on spending his last pennies on whatever piece of food he could afford. Call it a stroke of luck, Divine Providence, or sympathy for a fellow immigrant, but Mr. Murphy hired Francis on the spot. Mr. Murphy had been "in search of a good employee," and Francis "looked to be just the lad for the job." Francis' newly found work occupied the majority of his days, and this business served as a welcome distraction from the sharp aching in his chest. He was completely alone in America. Francis had no family, minus the aunt whom he did not even consider to be remotely familial, and he was without friends. Ever since that night on the rocks of Derry, Francis felt as if he had been sent, or even pulled, to America for a reason. Growing hopeless, he still did not know why.

But he did find a friend. Fionn Murphy, Mr. Murphy's son, came into the market on Saturdays to assist his father, and after working together for a few days, Fionn and Francis became good friends. They talked about everything under the sun—from American and Irish sports, to Fionn's schooling, which Francis had little of, to Francis's favorite instrument, the flute. Francis had forgotten what it felt like to have a friend and to enjoy such camaraderie. Although Fionn's companionship soothed Francis's loneliness, it did not mend his heart. Francis' homesickness gradually began to overtake him like the sun slowly rising over the shore of Derry. He was without a true home, and his heart ached so deeply for something that he could not even identify that he felt as if it was gradually ceasing to beat.

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Behind the counter in the empty market early one Saturday morning, Francis slipped into a daydream about the words and the voice that he had heard exactly a year prior. Over the past few months, Francis resolved to ignore this experience as if it had never happened. Now eighteen, Francis concluded that it was but an imaginative boy's folly. On this particularly quiet morning, however, there was no use in fighting it. Time slowed, and Francis was once again standing on the edge of the cliff, deeply inhaling the Derry air and feeling the peace of Ireland wrapped around his weary shoulders. And that voice...the clarity and gentleness over which time had no power to diminish began, "A..."

Fionn abruptly slammed a flyer down on the counter.

"You sleepin'?" Fionn queried emphatically, his reddish-blond hair glowing in the sun coming through the store windows.

Francis, still dazed by his daydreaming, grumbled, "Not anymore..."

"Hey, you wanna go to the dance tonight?"

Before Francis could get a word in, Fionn slid the flyer closer to the other boy, lifted himself onto the counter, and sat there, eagerly staring at Francis.

Francis, not interested in socializing when he was yearning for the Irish Sea, asked Fionn, "Where'd you come from? I didn't hear the bell."

"I came through the back," Fionn said quickly. "Come on, you need to get out of this store and do something fun for once. A bunch of my friends and I are going to go to the dance tonight. It is in the big hall a few blocks down. It's an Irish dance."

Francis sat pensively.

"And if you don't like it..."

"Fine," Francis curtly interrupted. "What time do I need to be ready?"

-----

Walking into the boisterous dance hall, Francis immediately regretted his decision. Raised in a small, rural town in Derry, he did not have much exposure to parties or dances. *His* definition of a good time was playing the flute for his family by the comforting kitchen hearth. Francis learned to play by ear as a boy and became adept at performing many of his family's favorite songs—especially "The Rose of Tralee" for his mother. Seated in the rocking chair that her husband had painstakingly labored to purchase for her when they first married, Claire would close her eyes and sing the words in that clear, Celtic tone, which so often became the sole sound in the otherwise silent room. Francis would stop playing to listen, along with his father and sisters, to the beauty of his mother's voice singing: "Yet, 'twas not her beauty alone that won me. Oh no! 'Twas the truth in her eye ever beaming that made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee." He could still hear it.

At the dance in Philadelphia, on the other hand, girls in colorful skirts and dresses were huddled in groups, vivaciously laughing and talking. Some boys and girls were dancing to the utterly loud "Pennsylvania 6-5000," while the rest of the boys were seated at the long, oak tables, strenuously planning how to request a dance from the girl they fancied. Now at one of these tables with Fionn and his classmates, Francis scanned the room for a clock. He hoped to begin the countdown to when he could politely excuse himself and recite the shoddy, but

believable script—that he had just hastily devised moments prior—about having to attend an early Mass before work in the morning. His hunt for a clock was unsuccessful, so for the second time that day, he allowed his mind to wander to that forbidden, haunting moment from a year prior.

*Oh*, how greatly Francis yearned to be in the presence of love once again—to feel his heart *beat* again. His soul ached to hear, just once more, that mysterious, yet beautiful voice that perpetually transcended time:

*“A chuisle mo chroí.”*

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Startled, Francis at first thought these words were a figment of his imagination.

“No one could be saying that” he whispered to himself. “It’s just in my head.” Francis tried to stand up to get something to drink, but his legs were immobile, rooted to the floor like the wide legs of the glossy oak table at which he was sitting.

The once deafening music dissipated into the air around him as everything in the room became still and quiet. Francis no longer heard the music, which was still playing, and neither did he see the girls, who were still dancing. Instead, he was solely concerned with hearing that voice, the same voice he heard on the coast of Derry, exactly a year ago.

*“A chuisle mo chroí,”* a voice with a brogue whispered.

Time stood still.

“What did you say it means?” a different voice inquired.

“Pulse of my heart. You should remember that, Patricia...Mam taught us. I’m telling you, Patty, it was the oddest thing. I dreamt that I was finally home, standing on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Derry beach. You know, the one that we would go to while Mam and Da were visiting Uncle James?”

Patricia mechanically nodded her head.

“I was standing there, overlooking the water, and I felt as if someone was next to me. So, I turned around—so quickly I almost fell over. If you were standing next to me, I would’ve knocked you over.” Patricia giggled at this detail, but her sister was blind to her amusement.

“But it was the feeling that I had...” The girl’s voice slowed and trailed off at the end of her sentence as if she did not know how to describe her experience.

“Yes?” Patricia queried, sliding across the bench closer to her sister.

“No, I’m sorry. It’s so silly, Patty. It was just a dream that I had this morning. It means nothing.”

Patricia took hold of her sister’s hands, grasping her fingers so tightly that their knuckles turned white, “Mary, you know what Mam always used to say about dreams...May...”

“*‘May the dreams you hold dearest be the ones which come true.’* I know.”

“Good, you remember.” Patty continued, “Now, tell me the rest...”

Mary took a deep breath and instinctively picked up the sentence that she hadn’t finished: “But it was the feeling I had, Patty. It’s going to sound so silly, but I

felt a sense of peace...you know...the type of peace that you feel when you are with someone you love...with someone who makes your heart whole..."

Mary, tearing up, stared into Patricia's ocean-blue eyes.

"We departed for America a year ago today, Patty, leaving Mam and Pa and our baby sister behind...I haven't felt whole since. But when I was in this dream, I felt as if my heart was being put together...as if it started to beat again, after so many months of being broken. And I felt sure that this was happening because of the person...the person I *could not* see...standing beside me. I simply desired to talk to him...to tell him how I was feeling. So, I stood there, feeling Ireland wrapping her blanket of peace around me, and I whispered into the wind, '*A chuisle mo chroí.*' I had no doubt that he would know what I meant..."

"He?" Patricia asked.

"He, Patricia...I'm certain of it."

Francis, completely unaware of everything else in the world around him, listened tenderly to the conversation taking place behind him. Finally, his legs had been granted the freedom to move. He carefully placed his hands on the table in front of him, slowly swung his strong legs over the bench, turned, and looked at the girl, wearing a rose-pink dress and sitting behind him.

Francis again heard those words that were first whispered to him that long year ago on the cliffs of Derry. This time, however, they neither came from the lips of Mary, nor were they emanating from his memory of that now-distant moment. Instead, they were being spoken from the depths of *his* heart to Mary's. *He* was speaking those words to *her*: "Pulse of my heart...Oh, how I love you." When her radiant green eyes met his, no words needed to be physically spoken. Their hearts, which had long been bound together, each softly said, "*A chuisle mo chroí.*" They instantly knew that they each held the other's heart in their hands.

"*This* is why I am here," Francis said softly.

After several moments of silence, Francis, regaining his strength, stood up and held his hand out to Mary, who put her pale, delicate hand in his. The rest of the night was filled with dancing and laughter, and this was the first night in over a year that either of them had not felt their hearts breaking in solitude. When their eyes met, their hearts began beating once more, beating for one another. On that same day a year later, witnessed by Patricia and Fionn, Mary and Francis promised their hearts and their lives to one another in marriage.

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Throughout their marriage, Mary and Francis had many different theories about what occurred that night on the cliffs of Derry...exactly one year and one ocean apart. But it did not matter. What mattered was that their love, so powerful, had traversed the bounds of time. Their hearts, somehow, were united, and they lived a beautiful life together.

After Mary passed away, Francis, no longer a brown-haired youth, traveled thousands of times back to that night when he and Mary met in the dance hall. To the night on which each of their lives was transformed by the other. To the night when their hearts had once again begun beating.

He frequently sits in his mother's rocking chair, sent to him after she passed away, and enters his undying memory, daydreaming in vivid colors about meeting the woman, unmatched in beauty, whom he eventually married. Francis, transcending time, experiences the scene as if he is once again physically in it, once again that youthful eighteen-year-old. He can still feel his heart bursting with love as he turns around to see a raven-haired girl, wearing a rose-pink dress.

Every day, Francis vividly recalls the life that they built together after that night too. He returns to the moment when they were married in Saint Paul's Roman Catholic Church, taking vows to love one another forever. He revisits the day that their first of seven children was born. Francis watches as he and Mary, hand in hand, board the plane to return to the Emerald Isle for the first time together. He also relives that day when Mary was given the news that she had cancer. He sees himself, grasping his youngest son, as Mary was being buried.

Francis has always had a good memory. It is what allowed him, as a teenager, to travel back to that moment on the rocks of Derry—that moment that brought Mary to him. But now, it enables him to remember—and revisit—what truly matters...the moments beyond that. The moments that make up the life that he and the pulse of his heart had established together in this new country, this land of opportunity. His memory is also what allows him to still look into her eyes...those piercing emerald eyes...which he had seen for the first time in that dance hall, so long ago. The eyes, never fading from Francis' memory, speak a million words in complete silence. The eyes, belonging to his beautiful Irish rose, communicate the truths of love, devotion, courage, peace, and strength. The eyes that Francis can still look into and whisper,  
*"A chuisle mo chroí."*



Poetry

## Monochrome World - Mackenzie Abrams

Imagine waking up, unable to see color,  
Trapped in a dreary, washed-out world.  
Everywhere you turn feels the same,  
And when every face blurs into one

Each day echoes the last,  
The same conversations, the same replies,  
Nothing new to take home with you,  
As the days go by.

Walking past monochrome faces,  
Stories already known, lessons already learned,  
A world where difference is no more.

Then out of nowhere,  
Silence shatters around me,  
A person I've never viewed shines through.  
With colors expanding,  
not knowing what to do.  
I walk up to this vibrant person,  
Hoping for something new.

With each word being something unique,  
My world expands and more colors I seek.  
Pigment pouring into my gaze,  
In so many different, beautiful ways.

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### Author's Note:

Diversity is so important to this world because of how unique each person is. Nobody would want to live in a world where everyone is the same, as there would be nothing new to experience. Our world today is like a salad bowl due to there being many different things that go into a salad, but they all coexist perfectly. We learn from each other through our diverse cultures and share our experiences even when we do not all live the same way.

## A World With Only One Color - Antonia Antolini

Imagine a garden  
where every flower blooms the same  
same height,  
same shade,  
same season.

It is well-ordered,  
Predictable.  
And filled with a silence that feels  
heavy.

No bee buzzes.  
No butterfly finds where to land.  
The soil becomes tired  
of feeding only one need.

Now imagine the same garden,  
the reds tilting toward the sun,  
blues stretched across the ground,  
wildflowers growing where no one  
planned.

Flowers crowd each other,  
compete for sunlight,  
sometimes clash,

but the air is filled with life.

Roots weave together underground,  
sharing what one plant cannot alone.

When a drought comes,  
something can always survive.

This is how people are.  
Different voices,  
different histories,  
different ways of seeing the same  
world.

We challenge each other.  
We misunderstand.  
But from that friction comes growth.

New ideas,  
new solutions,  
new ways to be together.

A world with only one story  
cannot adapt.

A world with many  
learns how to live, and  
learns how to grow.

## Final Piece - Isabelle Begley

I live in a world full of darkness and death  
So all that I know is 'survive'

All I have left these days is father and me  
Yet even then my heart is bleak

But then, somewhere in a world that's unknown to me  
There is a heart wrenching but beautiful melody  
I couldn't believe there was a sound of life in all this mess  
Yet forever it is with me nonetheless

And if somehow words could describe this song  
It would sound like...

This is my final piece, this is my last goodbye  
My time is cut short, but no words can support, my life  
So I'll pick up my violin, and tell of my life story's end  
And pray that my hopes and my dreams through the notes  
Will oh so clearly  
Spread my final piece's story

When I woke up from Juliek's piece  
He was already deep in eternal sleep  
I was the only one who got to hear his piece  
For him, it will remain with me

And if I could use words to remember that song  
It would sound like...

This is my final piece, this is my last goodbye  
My time is cut short, but no words can support, my life  
So I'll pick up my violin, and tell of my life story's end  
And pray that my hopes and my dreams through the notes  
Will oh so clearly  
Spread my final piece's story

Even though he cannot hear me  
I hope he knows I heard his story  
I think he should know all his highs and his lows, in his piece  
I've added them all to my own story

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Context: In middle school, I read a book called "Night" for my English class. Written by Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, "Night" depicts his experiences trying to survive the German concentration camps with his father. I remember reading a specific part in his book where he noticed a boy his age named Juliek, playing a violin as a way to express his grief and suffering. It was not too long after that the same boy was found dead after being trampled by a crowd on the ground. Even their experience at the concentration camp was similar, only one of them was able to make it out alive. That part of the book always stuck with me, and this poem was heavily inspired by the differing outcomes of each boy, and how it affected Elie as he continued fighting to survive. Both suffered through the Holocaust, but there was diversity in each outcome.

Inspired by the quote "Never before had I heard such a beautiful sound. In such silence" (Wiesel 93). From Elie Wiesel's Night.

## By Omission - Olwen Broomhead

No one named my weight  
They would just name who they liked  
Though I heard enough



*Photo by Andrew Toothman*

## Where Metals Reign - Alayna Chapall

In a world where colors ran deep and bright,  
Each hue shone differently in the light.  
Those who glittered held the keys,  
While common shades fell to their knees

Blues painted dreams they could never share,  
While metals dined and breathed privileged air.  
And though we wore the same waves in the sun  
Others saw her shade, not the warmth she'd spun

Greens carried burdens too heavy to bear,  
Yellows whispered hopes into the air.  
Each day they worked, each night they prayed,  
But dreams were crushed, and debts outweighed.

The metals feasted while shadows remained,  
Ordinary voices unheard, unexplained.  
This world, though bright with every hue,  
Showed what it meant when only some break through.

Imagine a world where all could stand,  
Each color cherished across the land.  
No metals favored, no one denied,  
Every shade thriving, side by side.

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### Author's Note:

This poem came from thinking about how the world sees some people as more valuable than others, even when everyone bleeds the same blood. I wanted to explore what it feels like to be overlooked, judged, or ignored for things you cannot control. It imagines a world where everyone is seen, celebrated, and given the freedom to shine, regardless of the circumstances they were born into.

## The Beauty of Difference - Adelene Chase

A world without diversity would be dull and plain.

I would not want a world where everyone is the same.

Same faces, same thoughts, same old stories,

Nothing new, nothing different, all celebrating the same glories.

No new thinking or point of view,

Only empty words we already knew.

No new colors, the skies would be gray.

What is there to wonder, if we all live the same way?

What makes us different is what helps us connect.

It challenges our thinking and helps us reflect.

The differences in humanity are what make us whole.

Learning new things is what feeds our soul.

The sharing of language, art, and song,  
We are all unique, yet we all belong.

A world without culture is one I do not know.

A world without diversity leaves no room to grow.

By standing tall and making heard our voices,

We can create a world with endless choices.

Diversity gives life color and sound,

It lifts us up and roots us down.

---

Author's Note:

I was inspired to write this poem when I thought about what diversity means to me. The first thing that came to mind was what the world would be like if we were all the same, if the world had no diversity. I imagined a dull, meaningless world where everyone was just a copy and paste version of one another. Everything was the same day in and day out. Diversity and differences in culture bring new ideas, creativity, and strengthen communities. I thought the best way for me to express this idea and describe the world I imagined was through poetry.

## The Remedy - Colin Ciavarelli

*Culture.*

In a world where opportunity abounds,  
We possess gifts unique to only ourselves.  
There's plenty of chances to use these talents,  
But why are we so afraid?

They say we are free to express ourselves,  
To be the person we aspire to be.  
Then how come everywhere I look,  
There's so much hate towards others?

People often wonder what this life means,  
Wonder what the purpose of all this is.  
How come we've lost sight of the truth,  
That we were created to love one another?

It's so easy for us to give up,  
With all of the sadness around us.  
But what if I told you there was a way,  
To cure this disease of hatred?

Something that we all need to respect.  
Something we need to educate ourselves on.  
Something too many are scared to embrace.  
What is this remedy that I speak of?

*Culture.*

## Poetry Collection - Bridget Cooper

### Ignored Signs of Your Love

Lord, you gave me many signs that were beautiful and clear,  
Yet I thought you had left me empty, lost in my own fear.  
I longed to hear your voice, but I didn't know it was in the people near,  
A message so clear to see, but I still failed to hear.

You tried to sing to my heart through melodies sweet,  
But I misheard your voice, and missed the beat.  
I grasped the wrong meaning, lost in the sound,  
When your true message of your love for me was all around.

Forgive me, Lord, for all the times I missed your gentle call,  
In the beauty of your creation, I ignored it all.  
Forgive me for my lack of silence when you tried to speak;  
I talked over you, I was too busy and too weak.  
I'm sorry for the tables you asked me to flip,  
I sat at them willingly on a selfish trip.

You've sent so many signs of love from above,  
Yet I misread them all, or chose to ignore your love.

## God was in the Room

I sang a song, a melody,  
A hymn that shaped my heart, my history.  
A tune from childhood, familiar and sweet,  
A prayer in rhythm, love at its beat.

The room was still, the air so thick,  
A simple song, a sacred flick.  
As the notes soared, my voice took flight,  
I felt His presence, pure and bright.

I sang for them, my client there,  
But at that moment, I stood bare.  
For in the chorus, soft and clear,  
I knew that God was standing near.

"You've been given a gift," they said.  
"God's grace works through you, so clearly spread.  
I'm glad you share it; let your light shine,  
A blessing that comes from the divine."

God moved through every note and phrase.  
Through my singing, His love ablaze.  
And though my voice was all they heard,  
It was His spirit I felt through every word.

A song of old, a hymn so true,  
He was present in the music, and I knew.  
And in that room, when I began,  
He whispered to my heart, "My Child, you're part of My plan."

And I responded, "Lord, as long as I know,  
You are present, I will go."

## No Further than the Cross

The one I seek when triumphs rise,  
Is with me still when sorrow cries.  
When I feel lost, so all alone,  
I find my peace before His throne.  
No farther than the cross I go,  
For there His love for me overflows.

Even when my faith is thin,  
And I deny Him deep within  
As Peter did, the rooster knows,  
And through my shame, His mercy shows.  
He looks at me with eyes so kind,  
No hint of wrath, just His love is all I find.

He wept before His hour drew near,  
And in His grief, I see mine clear.  
In darkened nights, I feel His pain,  
A Man of Sorrow who breaks the chains.  
I sit with Him in my quiet despair,  
And I find He is weeping for me there.

His tears, like mine, are not in vain  
He shares in my every cry and strain.  
Not just as my Lord, but as my Friend so true,  
He knows the weight of sorrow too.

## Seven Fish - Devan Cosgrove

Lights are bright, senses engaged.  
The smells of Christmas, past and present are engraved in my mind.  
Laughter, happiness, and playfulness meet me at the door.  
Hugs and kisses from those I have not seen since the Christmas prior.  
Dim lighting and the smell of a burning cigar truly set the scene.

The table is set with champagne glasses, Christmas china and of course the seven fishes.  
The seven represent our faith and Savior.  
Once, we were washed clean by water but now we are cleansing our pallets with Lemoncello.  
Bowing our heads with saints and our ancestors watching over us, protecting us and joining in the feast.  
Cod, shellfish, and calamari circle the table along with seasonal vegetables and breads.  
The meal concludes, but the conversation flows and continues into the night.

An eleven beat chime rings out and reminds us of the celebration to be attended just an hour later.  
The crisp winter air hits our face as we make our way around the block.  
The town's Christmas lights shine bright in our eyes.  
But these lights compare nothing to the light that streams from our hearts waiting to greet our King.

We take our seats anxious and ready to see Him face to face in the Eucharist.  
Kneeling down in Adoration I see a tear of gratefulness stream down my nonno's face.  
We are home.  
We are safe.  
We are Italian.

---

### Author's Notes:

This poem paints a picture of a classic Italian American Christmas Eve. With common smells, sights and tastes that I experience every year. I also added notes of my Catholic faith into the piece. As Italians our faith is very important to us and a huge part of our culture. All of the events described in this poem were pulled directly from my memory. I hold all of these memories close to my heart and will for years to come!

## Una Navidad Dominicana - Abigail Cuello

Merengue fills our home in December

Pernil roasting and pasteles steaming throughout the day

Heavy laughter mixes with faithful prayers

Shared around a crowded dinner table

On Nochebuena we eat, we dance, we enjoy each other's company

Dressing with care, even if the party is at home

No rush, no quiet, no one alone

Dance wherever there's place to stand

Prayers are whispered before the meal

Gratitude is passed around like a shared plate

For family, for our health

For being here together

All the gifts can wait, the real present is the noise

We talk over one another

Leftovers taste like memories

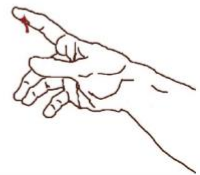
And home fully feels complete

## Poetry Collection - Annemarie Curry

### A Response To Emily

If i could stop one heart from breaking,  
 Would i even try  
 For all of those broken hearts  
 Are the ones who have broken mine

If i could ease one life the aching  
 Until the end of time  
 If i could stop one heart from breaking  
 That heart would be mine



*Artwork by Annemarie Curry*

### A Reflection

Many damaged things yet i am the  
 most destroyed.  
 Memories forsaken, ambitions null and  
 void.

A fallen lily – a shattered rose – simply  
 a trampled flower.  
 Not a soul to cry out to during this  
 wretched hour.

Many treasures do i own, yet nothing i  
 have to boast.  
 For of all the things i have lost, i miss  
 myself the most.

### Icarus

Much a time ago, a tale was told to  
 me,  
 Of a boy who loved too fast, too much  
 Passionate and wholeheartedly  
 With lust, he was drawn  
 He spread out his wings to kiss the sun  
 Yet the sea was all he touched



*Photo by Annemarie Curry*

## I Wish I Was A Rock

I wish I was a rock.  
 I don't need to be a jewel—  
 Not a diamond or jade,  
 Not lapis or limestone.  
 I don't need to be stared at and  
 admired  
 Rocks are the ruins of cities—  
 The depths of the sea,  
 Foundations of home,  
 That could all be me.  
 I could be passed along pathways with  
 a kick of a foot  
 I could see every cranny and nook.  
 A rock is rough but a rock is necessary,  
 A rock is tough but a rock is a  
 sanctuary,  
 A rock has seen more than I could  
 ever dream of—  
 The rise of civilizations, the fall of  
 empires, true love  
 A rock doesn't fear and a rock doesn't  
 feel.  
 I wish I was a rock.



*Artwork by Annemarie Curry*

## Blinded by Nostalgia

Blinded by nostalgia  
 an evanescent glow  
 Walk along the path,  
 as lovers come and go

A time I had buried climbs out of its  
 grave,  
 caught in my throat and strangling  
 Another step to move on,  
 mourners to and fro

Temporary sorrow for a temporary  
 space  
 Cross the roads that we both know  
 In a window pane, I see your face  
 I glance again, but you left without a  
 trace

## My Lovely Teammates - Emily Davis

We all ended up at Immaculata  
despite being so different  
Reminiscing childhood nostalgia,  
we realize we all lived adjacent

I played softball, just like her  
both of us running and learning  
She played three counties over  
now, we're on the same field practicing

Before her, I was unaware  
just how much I didn't know  
She taught me to care  
and to try new things, instead of "no"

She showed me her music,  
I showed her mine  
Mine was more acoustic  
and hers was simply divine

I learned about her home  
I told her about mine  
and though we have the same chromosomes,  
our lives do not completely align

There is beauty in this asymmetry  
and despite growing up very differently,  
I am her and she is me.

## A Layer of Us (Poetry Collection) - Maura Dougherty

### Nostalgia

Lemonade stands on the corner  
 Everyday playdates and sleepovers  
 Beading bracelets and riding bikes  
 Trading silly bands while eating Mike-and-Ikes  
 Campfires and making up dance routines  
 Playing dolls and lickin' on some ice creams

Birthdays parties and playing dress up  
 Parents always told me don't you worry, buttercup  
 Backyard bbq and we're off to the fireworks show  
 December rolls around, writing our lists and building a man out of snow  
 School bullies pick on the weaker ones but we stick up for one another  
 Yeah, we have each other

Looking back I feel, I see a Happy Rose tinted View  
 Do you get nostalgia when you think of me just like I do when I think of you  
 Time flew, We grew  
 Do you miss it too?

Now I'm 13 with my insecurities and pimples on my skin.  
 Askin' myself "will I ever look like a Jenner or Kardashian?"  
 Mama always tellin' me, shoulders back and lift up your pretty little chin  
 As confidence comes from within  
 School floor hockey tournaments and dodgeball nights  
 Squads still together, knocking up on my door, asking if I want some water ice  
 Knockout basketball games and singing in school musicals  
 Trips to Linvilla and always riding our bicycles  
 Listenin' to Kesha, Justin Beebs, and One D on my MP3  
 And life is as good as can be  
 Bouncing on a trampoline and letting go of all anxiety  
 People still telling us we'll never understand cause we're too tiny  
 Painting nails and discovering new ways to braid  
 Lost a few friends along the way and that's okay

Looking back I feel, I see a Happy Rose tinted View  
 Do you get a nostalgia when you think of me just like I do when I think of you  
 Time flew, We grew  
 Do you miss it too?

Somehow we're all in high school now and to myself I had once vowed,

"I will always stay true to myself"  
 Walking down those halls and through it all I still remember the way it smells  
 Will he ask me to the homecoming dance?  
 Should I stay or should I go, do I even have a chance?

Football games, sittin' on the bleachers wearin' my high top converse sneakers  
 Hearing rumors from the girl that told me she was the best secret keeper  
 Some try to get laid while others strive for good grades  
 It feels like just yesterday  
 Prom Night, the queen was never me, but that's alright  
 It's okay, 'cause here comes graduation day  
 We throw our caps up in the air  
 I stop and stare...

Looking back I feel, I see a Happy Rose tinted View  
 Do you get a nostalgia when you think of me just like I do when I think of you  
 Time flew, We grew  
 Do you miss it too?  
 'Cause I know I most certainly do

### **Outside Sunshine, Inside Thunderstorms**

A lost princess without her crown  
 A smile disguises her frown  
 Everyone likes the way she looks and sounds  
 Little do they know, she's about to drown

She doesn't wanna get too close to you  
 'Cause everytime she and you try to  
 She knows what it'll turn in to

She'll say...  
 This rose has thorns  
 You might be surprised to see  
 Don't try to explore, you won't want to know more  
 You're not gonna wanna hear, I guarantee  
 Outside Sunshine, but inside thunderstorms

Never tied down  
 too many lovers to count  
 She's the talk of the town  
 Somehow thinks nobody wants her around

She doesn't wanna get too close to you  
'Cause everytime she and you try to  
She knows what it'll turn in to

She'll say...  
This rose has thorns  
You might be surprised to see  
Don't try to explore, you won't want to know more  
You're not gonna wanna hear, I guarantee  
Outside Sunshine, but inside thunderstorms

Her truth is hidden  
Her story is unwritten  
She speaks but no one's listenin'  
She feels her love is forbidden

She doesn't wanna get too close to you  
'Cause everytime she and you try to  
She knows what it'll turn in to

She'll say...  
This rose has thorns  
You might be surprised to see  
Don't try to explore, you won't want to know anymore  
You're not gonna wanna hear, I guarantee  
Outside Sunshine, but inside thunderstorms

## Behind My Bedroom Walls

Sing all my songs behind my bedroom walls  
Ate my lunch in the bathroom stalls  
Can't erase all I heard and saw  
Looking down, walking through the halls

Wanna make it out of the town with girls that were mean  
Wanna get out and see  
Did you ever think you could become more than you could ever be

I wanna sing my songs, tell all my stories  
Wanna live, wanna learn, wanna dance, I wanna earn  
'Cause it could mean something to somebody, someday, somewhere, somehow  
It matters that you live for you right now

If you remembered that you wronged me  
Please don't try to call me  
I don't need your sorries  
I'll be  
Doing it all, yeah all because I believed

Wanna make it out of the town with girls that were mean  
Wanna get out and see  
Did you ever think you could become more than you could ever be

I wanna sing my songs, tell all my stories  
Wanna live, wanna learn, wanna dance, I wanna earn  
'Cause it could mean something to somebody, someday, somewhere, somehow  
It matters that you live for you right now

So remember you got what they all lack  
Go far and never look back  
Keep going, you're right on track  
Go far and never look back

Wanna make it out of the town with girls that were mean  
Wanna get out and see  
Did you ever think you could become more than you could ever be

I wanna sing my songs, tell all my stories  
Wanna live, wanna learn, wanna dance, I wanna earn  
'Cause it could mean something to somebody, someday, somewhere, somehow  
It matters that you live for you right now

Sing all my songs behind my bedroom walls

## Now

Starting to get that look back in my eyes  
Right before I had met you guys  
Carrying this heavy weight you gave me  
A terrible burden and no one can save me  
They would all just think I'm crazy  
Affected me in ways words can't explain  
Just Trying not to let you take all the blame  
But it all was such a shame

Set my                      Castle on fire

Tried to tear down my crown  
Trying not to fall while, Dancing on a tightrope wire  
Couldn't take down my kingdom, and I could but I won't come for your town  
My dream will take me higher  
Just Look at me now

Leaving the table feeling better than I ever could of  
Doing better now than I ever was  
Remember all you said and did  
How you all treated me like i was just a kid  
You know we were all just trying to fit in

Affected me in ways words can't explain  
Just Trying not to let you take all the blame  
But it all was such a shame

Set my                      Castle on fire

Tried to tear down my crown

Trying not to fall while, Dancing on a tightrope wire  
 Couldn't take down my kingdom, and I could but I won't come for your town  
 My dream will take me higher  
 Just Look at me now

Those nights I'd spent crying myself to sleep  
 Can't get them back cause your daggering words cut too deep  
 All the touring pain you left me alone to feel  
 That falling sorrow feeling in my gut, still so real  
 4 years later and I'm just beginning to heal

Affected me in ways words can't explain  
 Just Trying not to let you take all the blame  
 But this is what we became

Set my                      Castle on fire

Tried to tear down my crown  
 Trying not to fall while, Dancing on a tightrope wire  
 Couldn't take down my kingdom, and I could but I won't come for your town  
 My dream will take me higher  
 Just Look at me now

Belonging:  
 We are all longing for connection and belonging  
 I'm just hanging in for the longing  
 But I know I can't write every wronging

Have they never seen Horton Hears a Who  
 Do they not know, the way it's supposed to go  
 Energy is real whether we see it or know  
 It is there for us to share

We can all tell tales, or we can choose to follow the trail  
 Do not live in regret, for you will only find betrayal  
 If we choose our own path, we could be seen as the back last  
 But in the end, it's your life.  
 It's Your story. It's Your trail. It's Your tale.

## That Look - Mackenzie Fillion

I know that look.  
That glance, that scoff.  
That barely contained eye-roll,  
That thought I'm not enough.  
I know you think I'm crazy.  
That girl's too sensitive, too loud.  
That witch can't take a joke.  
That \_\_ is just too proud.  
I know why it happens.  
That thought, that sleaze.  
That feeling that you're better.  
That you can do as you please.  
I know you'll always hate it.  
That way I talk, that way I shout.  
That way I tell you flat-out 'no'.  
That way I carry myself about.  
And I know I'll have to live with it.  
My whole life it'll be this way.  
But I'd rather die than take it lying down.  
So, "I know that look", I'll say.

## Don't talk to strangers! - Lily Hagan

They tell you from the start  
 Don't talk to strangers!  
 Keep a good distance apart.

People are strange  
 Strangers even more so  
 Don't look at them. Don't talk to them.  
 Do what you need to do, and go.

Keep to yourself  
 Only focus on you!  
 They are strangers and stranger yet  
 You're strange to them too

This narrative we are told  
 From a very young age  
 It keeps us in line  
 It keeps us on the same page

It's good! It's what's right!  
 Isn't it?

It makes our lives safer  
 Shouldn't it?

One thing that I've learned  
 Is that this narrative is all bad  
 Strangers bring light

Into a world that can be so sad

The little talks at the register  
 The laughs in an aisle  
 The human interaction  
 Leaves mankind with a smile

You never know what talk  
 Will make someone else's day  
 So talk to every stranger  
 Even if you have nothing to say

There's a world full of people  
 With different stories to share  
 Don't be so focused on yourself  
 That you never stop to care

Be that person

Every single day  
 Who cares to talk to others  
 And really cares what they have to say

Let me tell you one thing  
 I believe to be true  
 Talk to every stranger  
 And the world will smile at you

## Sameness - Julia Izzo

The elimination of envy,  
The termination of anger, resentment, hatefulness.

Yet-  
No more choices.  
No more emotion.  
The past reduced to noises,  
To commotion.

Everything is routine,  
Creativity a stranger,  
Originality: the neighbor you'll never meet.

The goal was tameness.  
The finish line promised painless,  
Dripped in the language of humaneness.  
But the only thing achieved  
Was sameness.

## The Quilt - Danika Kelly

One quilt with many patches  
all made up of different colors and patterns.  
Each patch telling its own story,  
yet all the patches sewn together  
with yarn and love  
To create a masterpiece of a quilt.

While each patch is different,  
they all share the world they spin  
and together form a world of beauty.  
Every culture, tradition, and story  
adds color, depth, and love to the quilt.

Each patch might be different,  
but the yarn used to hold them all together  
is equal in strength and love.  
One loose string  
and the blanket will fall apart.  
The beauty of the quilt  
Will no longer be there for all to see.

All the colors and stories  
teach us to listen and learn beyond our knowledge.  
We grow with each yarn and perspective  
different than our own.  
We might not like every patch created,  
but each square deserves respect  
because without them,  
Our blanket would not be complete.

All differences must be loved and valued  
to make the world spin,  
to make the quilt grow with color.  
Through respect, connection, and unity,  
the patterns and colors work together,  
fulfilling the quilt's purpose  
to bring warmth, love, and comfort.

## Albania - Inis Lamaj

In the Albanian culture, we believe in besa,  
A promise kept, as strong as shpresa.  
An ancient language so beautiful,  
Each syllable and phrase is so powerful.

At the dinner table, stories are told,  
History and memories unfold.  
Conversations and laughter fill the air,  
A sign of the love and care we share.

Byrek made fresh from homemade dough,  
Yogurt to pair, every Albanian knows.  
Turkish coffee after every meal,  
Serving a purpose of comfort to feel.

Folk music and valle, which we value,  
Beaches and mountains make up our view.  
Through the music, food, and history which it is known,  
Albania is forever my home.

---

### Definitions

Besa- A sacred promise, loyalty, pledge of honor

Shpresa- Hope, optimism

Valle- A traditional line dance

## The Reason For The Season - Alexandra LeNoir

The world remembers lights and trees,  
Playing in weather of cold degrees  
Yet somehow, we overlook him,  
While singing the O Holy Night hymn.  
There once was no gift to buy,  
When the baby let out his first cry  
Kids draw reindeer,  
Watching the new year come near.  
The name itself refers to the celebration,  
Of Jesus Christ and the Mass congregation  
Let us not forget him,  
While singing our hymns.  
For Christmas is not just what we buy,  
But a chance to celebrate the love that won't die.

---

### Author's Note:

This free verse poem was written to show how my culture, Christianity, has changed throughout history. A day once recognized solely as the birth of Jesus Christ has also evolved into a gift-giving holiday over time. This poem serves as a reminder not to overlook the true meaning, the celebration of our savior.

## 5 ft - Mia Leopold

I'm five hoagies tall, that is the diverse thing about me.  
I have always been short, and always will be.  
I could not reach the top shelf as a child, still cannot.  
Step stools are a necessity, whether I admit it or not.  
The driver's seat in my car is super close to the wheel,  
But my tall friends get leg room, so it's a good deal.  
I've been called a midget, a gremlin, and Santa's elf.  
Being two inches from dwarfism makes you quite aware of yourself.  
Long dresses being tailored and hemmed was the rule.  
Too short for roller coasters till the end of middle school.  
Capri leggings are the only pants that aren't too long.  
When guessing my age, most people are wrong.  
I guess looking deceptively younger is a sort of blessing in disguise,  
Because I have a feeling I will appreciate it more at age sixty-five.  
Needless to say, basketball was not my strong suit.  
I was someone the NBA would never recruit.  
Soccer, however, was a sport in which I did excel.  
A lower center of gravity and agility helped me to do well.  
There are some advantages to being quite short:  
Underestimated, competitive, and tenacious in sports.  
Some short athletes have dominated and become the GOAT.  
Simone Biles and Lionel Messi are those whom I note.  
Being vertically challenged can be a humorous art,  
Take, for example, Kevin Hart.  
I could change it with platforms, boots, or heels.  
Why wouldn't I, amidst all these ordeals?  
Well, maybe being short is not all others see,  
Instead, they see the real characteristics of me.  
They see my grit, my courage, my authenticity.  
If you're short, be proud, God made you this way!  
Just find some tall friends, and you'll be okay.

## Poetry Collection - Sarai Marks

### The Restoring Tide

I listen to the waves that crash on the burning sand  
 A place I've been longing for  
 Somewhere that's easy to understand  
 Breathing in the salty water air  
 The wind whispers silent truths I tend to ignore  
 But they drift along without a care  
 The sun spills gold on my rich black skin  
 An embracing warmth that feels like grace, like home, like kin  
 But the silence has been worn before  
 The ocean comes and washes away all of my sins  
 Each wave, a balm that softens within  
 In its arms, I start to breathe  
 Finding lost love in my heart  
 Because the tide restores what pain tore apart

### When God Gives me a Sign

I don't know how your story goes yet,  
     Just an outline,  
 A name I've heard from the grapevine,  
     One glance at you,  
 And I want god to give me a sign  
     You're a question mark  
     That has yet to be traced  
     A book unopened,  
 Pages waiting for secrets to spill,  
     One glance at you,  
 And I need God to give me a sign  
     Maybe you like rain,  
     Or mornings,  
     Or maybe you hate both,  
     I want to learn  
     The rhythm of your laughter,  
     The glowing light in your heart,  
     The words you keep close,  
 And dreams you chase when no one is watching  
     I often wonder if you notice me  
     The way I notice you  
 How the air feels different when you're near  
     I took one glance at you,  
 And I hope God gives me a sign

## She's happy when it rains

The gray clouds speak better than she does  
She's sad when it snows  
The snowflakes fall onto the ground  
And they remind her of memories  
But she struggles to remember them kindly  
When the sun is shining  
She pulls her coat tighter  
The warmth is burrowed  
Never meant for her  
The moon rises as the sun sets  
At the end of the day  
Somehow, she can breathe again  
Like someone who yearns to live  
If love comes again  
If it's knocking against the window pane  
If it's singing  
She knows that she'll never dance to the same song twice

## Between sunset skies

And your valley green eyes  
I saw you in a fleeting light  
A moment held but faded into the night  
A whisper in the evening air  
Traces of you that still linger  
A ghost on the breeze  
Soft as the crunch of autumn leaves  
I'm reaching for shadows and echoes for you  
But memories slip through my fingers

## From diapers to dolls

From toys to boys  
From princess crowns to caps and gowns  
A little girl has grown, and has life in her hands  
She walked across that stage  
With confidence in her stride  
But it's time for her to decide  
From scraped knees to broken dreams  
She rises to the challenge  
Stronger than it seems  
From childhood laughter to hopeless ways  
She's ready to face the worst of her days  
The world of what seemed so small, now vast and wide  
With every step, she leaves her past behind  
As the butterflies fly across the western sky

## The hush of night drifts from hill to tree

While silver white stars above gleam  
Before I go to bed, that's all I see  
I wish to have vivid dreams  
Foxes run through the crystal pearl snow  
Birds chirp songs across the valley skies  
A silver wind hums softly and low  
Through breaches bare and pine trees high  
Night's lullaby begins to grow  
Beneath the hush of twilight's sigh  
Eyes are heavy, mind being set free  
Drifting off to a wider sea

## the tears of the sky - Emily Masci

Oh, the clouds how they cry,  
Weeping the tears of the sky.

Why are they sad?

What made them mad?

I look out and everyone goes inside,

They see ugly so they hide.

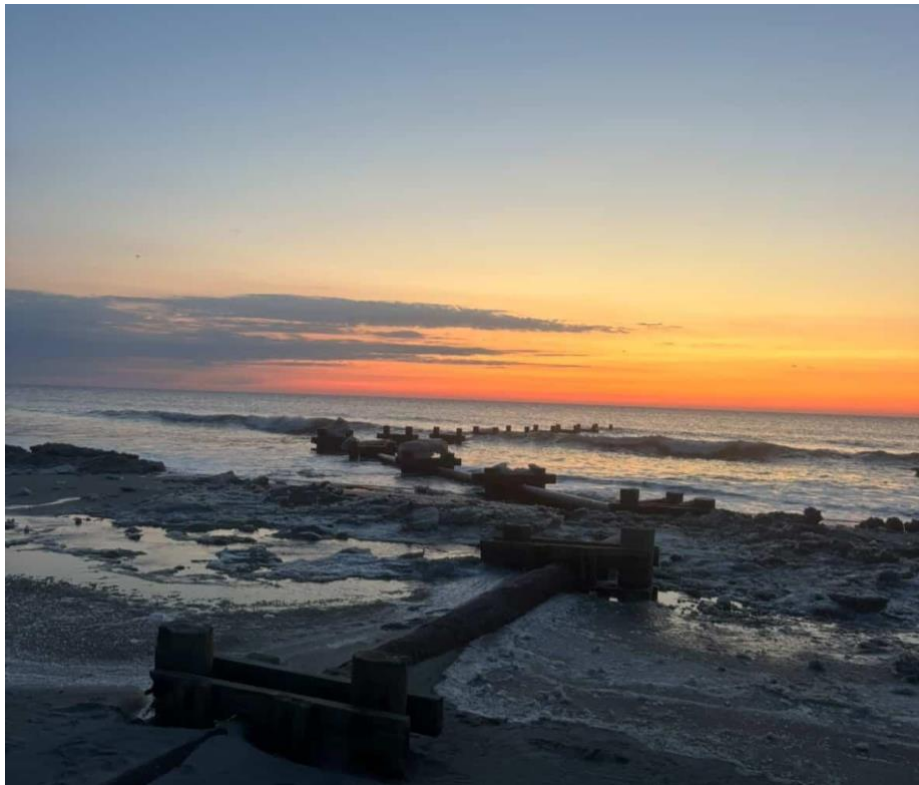
So I go out and sit,

With each teardrop, I get hit.

I wait until the sky turns bright,

without a single tear in sight.

A rainbow appeared, but only I could see  
Because through the storm, nobody else could see the beauty.



*Photo by Rachel Haverly*

## Another Way to Remember - Leah McAllister

I wasn't raised with marigolds,  
decorated sugar skulls,  
or papel picado banners hanging in  
the air. But three years ago,  
He introduced me to Día de los  
Muertos. A festive and joyful way to  
remember.

The atmosphere shimmered with  
spirited colors, candles flickering in  
rhythmic motion, small offerings of  
favorite meals,  
and portraits of family members  
standing guard. I placed a photo of my  
grandmother,  
while still learning this new way to  
remember.

In my culture, we grieve quietly.  
We send flowers and cards,  
fold flags for our veterans,  
and bow our heads to hymns for  
spiritual comfort. But here, they  
celebrate the ones they lost, by  
cooking for them and singing to them.  
And with this,  
the ache in my chest disappears.  
He shared with me his ofrenda.

An altar clothed with vibrant colors.  
Plates of tamales and mole beside  
portraits, marigolds lined in a golden  
path from the door, and the sweet  
incense of copal filling the air. The  
truest form of love fills the  
atmosphere.

Two ways of remembering the same  
loved one,  
and two cultures expressing the same  
truth.

And now on my altar,  
on the first of November  
beside pan de muerto,  
I place American favorites too:  
Lasagna, M&Ms, and blackberry  
brandy.  
Small offerings of love.  
I light two candles,  
One for his abuela,  
and one for mine.  
A piece of him and a piece of me,  
together to remember.  
No division between.

---

### Author's note:

This free verse poem was written to express the beauty of cultural diversity and how personal relationships can bridge traditions. My boyfriend is Mexican, I am American, and through him I have been introduced to Dia de los Muertos. Writing this poem allowed me to reflect how different cultures commemorate their departed and how sharing these traditions might foster greater understanding between people. To me, this poem represents a unique connection between families, cultures, and our hearts all to remember our loved ones who have passed.

## DIVERSITY: The Truth of the World - Kieran McBride

The truth of the world,  
the truth of humanity —  
older than the maps we  
drew,  
ancient as the wind that  
shaped the continents,  
deeper than the ground  
beneath our feet,  
greater than our fear.

Like a phoenix, the truth  
will rise  
from every ash we  
scatter,  
from every silence we  
impose.  
It lives in the first breath  
of morning,  
in the shifting colors of  
the sky,  
in the countless ways a  
heartbeat  
can echo through a life.

We tried to press it down,  
to fold it into sameness,  
to carve the world into  
neat,  
comfortable shapes.  
We built walls around our  
vision,  
called them safety,  
called them order.

But truth does not shrink  
to fit our narrow rooms.  
It spills through cracks,  
it hums beneath the  
floorboards,  
it waits for the moment

we can no longer pretend  
not to hear it.

It is beautiful,  
it is resilient,  
it is inevitable.  
Despite our attempts to  
dim its light,  
it will shine bright,  
it will shine through.

It is inescapable —  
the depth of our  
difference.  
The truth has been  
imprisoned,  
ignored,  
and wronged.  
But it remains victorious,  
it remains absolute.

Even the stars refuse  
to shine the same.  
Even the ocean needs  
many currents to move.

We try to corrupt our  
world  
by denying its truth,  
but we are no match for  
certainty,  
we are no match for fact.

Powerful, it will prevail.  
Powerful, it will continue.  
For truth is not a whisper  
that can be trained into  
silence —  
it is a chorus,  
a thousand voices rising.

We cannot turn a blind  
eye.  
The truth will be seen.  
It stands before us,  
undeniable,  
in every face,  
every voice,  
every life  
that refuses to disappear.

Difference is the rhythm  
the universe keeps.  
Life blooms in variation;  
sameness is the story we  
invented.

And now the world waits  
for what we will do  
with what we finally  
understand.

Will we honor the colors  
born from every corner of  
creation  
Will we let the truth  
breathe wide  
beneath the endless sky  
Will we come to  
understand  
that difference is no  
threat,  
but the oldest promise  
the world ever made

The truth of the world  
is not fragile.  
It is us —  
all of us —  
Rising.

## Diversity Poem - Grace Murphy

Different colors, Different skin, Different stories all within.

Some are short, some are tall,

Each important after all.

Our differences make us up,

Whether we like fish, cats, or little pups.

Seeing each other's point of view

Can make the world not feel so blue.

We're similar in many ways,

No matter how we end our days.

Our differences make us special, though.

That is how we truly learn to grow.

One thing I know for sure,

Is we need to embrace diversity more!

## A World Without Diversity - Erin Payne

A world full of uniform,  
Where similarity is the norm.

A world without vibrance,  
Less song and less dance.

A world where creativity lacks,  
And everyone shares the same acts.

A world that feels bland,  
Where diversity is banned.

A world without color,  
Would make it all duller.  
Where all minds think alike,  
Nobody seems very lifelike.

A world full of only grey,  
A place where no one wants to stay.  
A sky that never changes hue,  
No more red, no more blue.

A world where everyone's the same,  
To me, that sounds pretty lame.

## Snowflakes - Victoria R. Piccininni

Snow falling on the ground  
Together, they flurry, and swirl all around  
It is said that no two snowflakes are the same  
Each composed of cold fractals that form one unique frame

People and snowflakes, however, are quite  
the same

This is a truth that we do not often proclaim  
The world is filled with diversity  
It is the result of our DNA, experiences, and  
adversity  
Our distinct designs make us who we are  
They help each of us to shine, like a bright  
star

Different skin, different beliefs, different hair  
With each snowflake, we are set apart  
But despite our dissimilarities, we share  
Our kindness, our hope, and our love from the  
heart

A world without this variety would never last  
The grayness of our existence would be vast  
New ideas and creativity would die  
Those one-of-a-kind features melting away in a sorrowful goodbye

Like a snowflake, we each stand out  
We are special without a doubt  
If each snowflake joins, though, we can make a storm  
One that we can truly use to better the world, and make it transform  
Alone we are but a flake, but together we form a mighty snow  
United as one, we have the capability to achieve more than we will ever know



*Photo by Anna Bellitta*

## Still A Reason - Isabella Scapellato

We all have different names  
All our stories are told in different ways  
To remember how the world treats us  
And all the ways we are conveyed  
Diversity is important  
Because every face  
Still has a reason  
To wake up every day  
So, we live and we learn  
To treat everyone the same



*Photo by cover contest winner Matthew Rafferty*

## Outlook on Culture - Emma Sobieski

I am an observer  
Standing close enough to listen  
But far enough to understand

I hear,  
The stories,  
The traditions,  
The music.

I see,  
My peers,  
My best friends,  
My family.

I learn by watching, by listening,  
By respecting what isn't mine  
Yet it still matters to me.

Being an observer teaches many things, Culture isn't about a title or words from a book, It's the people who make it.

We may not belong to the same culture, But we can all cherish life together,  
We can learn lessons from each other, And I carry those lessons with me, Even  
when the culture isn't mine.

## Why is diversity important? - Alexis L Steffler

I used to think diversity  
was something you could define  
a word in a textbook  
or a slide in a lecture  
But it shows up in smaller ways  
in names I don't always say right,  
in stories I haven't lived,  
in traditions that aren't mine  
but they matter deeply to someone else.  
Sometimes I realize  
how easy it is  
to move through places  
without having to explain myself.  
And sometimes I catch myself learning,  
listening more than speaking,  
noticing how different backgrounds  
shape the way people see the same room  
We don't all come from the same place,  
and we don't experience things equally,  
  
but we sit in the same classrooms,  
share notes,  
walk the same path across campus.  
Diversity isn't something I fully understand yet.  
It's something I'm still learning to notice,  
to respect, and to make room for  
without pretending I already know everything.

## Tradition - Sophia Steffy

I travel through the different times,  
And influence your life.  
With clothes and food and rituals,  
I persuade like a wife.

I come in all shades and colors,  
Many sounds and shapes, too.  
Dance and music bring us closer,  
And uplift when you're blue.

I exist all throughout the world,  
But vary by region.  
These customs intrigue the many,  
Done by few or legion.

I transform with time and country,  
Becoming something new.  
Like a blooming garden I grow,  
With flowers in any hue.

I tell stories from history,  
Of human condition.  
Helping others broaden their views,  
I am our traditions.

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### Author's Note:

This poem explores how traditions, both old and new, shape the world around us and tell stories about the people of history. Traditions encompass not only events and rituals, but also include food, music, dance, and clothing. These traditions are not stagnant and, by being passed down, change to the modern perspective, and can be mixed when cultures come together. The mixing and combination of traditions and cultures is beautiful and brings diverse experiences to all people. Within the United States, there are many traditions and cultures; these varying traditions, cultures, and people are what make the country unique, and diversity is crucial for the American spirit.

## What Culture Means to Me - Nathan Veasey

Culture's the rhythm that plays in my chest,  
Like the crack of a bat when I'm giving my best.  
It's the stories my family tells after a game,  
The laughter, the lessons, the pride in our name.  
It's music on car rides and food on the grill,  
It's learning respect, and working with will.  
It's late nights with teammates, all chasing one dream,  
Different backgrounds, but one unified team.  
Culture's the bond that makes people connect,  
It's showing each other love and respect.  
It's how we remember, how we create—  
A mix of our past, our now, and our fate.  
So to me, culture's not just where I belong,  
It's the beat in my heart that keeps me strong.  
It's who I am, and who I'll be—  
A blend of my roots and the dreams I see.

## Why is diversity important? - Adrianna Ventura

Diversity are the colors  
that refuse to fade into one,  
voices shaped by different stories,  
each carrying truth of its own.

It is the strength in many perspectives,  
the wisdom found in difference,  
the way ideas grow deeper  
when not everyone thinks the same.

Diversity teaches us empathy,  
how to listen before we judge,  
where understanding begins  
when we step outside ourselves.

It challenges what we think we know,  
pushes us to learn and adapt,  
turning unfamiliar paths  
into bridges instead of walls.

In classrooms, communities, and cultures,  
diversity creates balance and growth,  
reminding us of that unity  
does not require uniform.

Because a world of one voice  
would be silent in its own way,  
but a world of many voices  
has the power to change everything.

## Interview with Jacqueline Jewell

### Poet and Immaculata Adjunct Professor

By Amanda Fennell

Jacqueline Jewell is a poet, EMMY Award-winning journalist, mother, activist, and Immaculata professor and alumna. A Philadelphia area native and proud daughter of an immigrant, Jewell uses her poetry to amplify underrepresented and discounted voices. Struggling with dyslexia from an early age has been her motivator to beat the odds, no matter the depth of adversity. Jewell's debut poetry collection, *Lady Arab*, is based on a true story of her grandmother surviving genocide, her mother escaping war, and her own experience with racism and misogyny as a young woman of color. Her second collection, *Where the Poppies Burn*, bears witness to the ongoing genocide against Palestinians. In this interview, student editor Amanda Fennell asks Jewell to delve into her background as a poet, the inspiration behind *Lady Arab* and *Where the Poppies Burn*, and the significance of diversity to her work.



**Amanda Fennell: When did you discover your love for poetry?**

**Jacqueline Jewell:** I'm dyslexic and had a hard time reading and writing in middle school, and I didn't understand why. When I was nine or ten, I had a really good tutor, who read "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. It made me think about how I could overcome this obstacle, and I just fell in love with poetry. As a person with dyslexia, poetry was easy to read, with the short iambic pentameter and the way everything

flowed without proper sentence structure. It just seemed so freeform. I really gravitated towards it and started journaling when I was a kid and wrote so many poems. It was a way for me to express myself and to get any problems I had on paper.

**AF: How did your time at Immaculata foster your growth as a writer?**

**JJ:** During my time as a student at Immaculata, I was fortunate enough to have really good professors. One professor made my papers bleed red ink. He told me that he didn't do it because I was a bad writer but because he saw a lot of potential in me. He needed to see me flourish with some kind of discipline and harness a humbleness in me because the smartest person in the room doesn't think that they're the smartest person in the room; the smartest person in the room is the one who's always willing to learn. Every time I attempted to do better, follow his instructions, and open up my mind to being a more experienced writer, I improved, and I would see less red ink on my papers. Having that experience with a few other teachers who believed in me and supported me that much showed me different directions and variations of writing that elevated my work.

I also wrote poetry and took the cover photo for *Pilgrimages* at IU. Participating in the literary magazine provided a really good foundation for me to learn how to see my work published in print and inspired me to continue publishing my work after college.

**AF: Your first poetry collection, *Lady Arab*, shares the stories of three generations of women within your family. What first inspired you to share these stories through poetry?**

**JJ:** As a child, I was always curious to learn more about my grandmother. Though I did speak with her, she lived far away and was not very good with English. During the last remaining years of her life, she had dementia, so she lost her ability to speak English and reverted back to Arabic. There was a lot that remained a mystery about

her. I learned some things over the years from my mom, but I know my mom had a hard time telling me about my grandmother's past, as well as her own.

When I took a poetry class in grad school, one of my professors had us make a poetry collection, and I didn't know what I wanted to write about at first. He asked me, "What have you always wanted to know?"

I said, "I always wanted to know more about my grandmother and my mom's past."

He challenged me, "You think you can do it?"

I didn't know if I could because my mom wasn't keen on telling me before, but at the same time, I always felt this very strong connection to my heritage. I approached my mom honestly and said, "I really want to write a poetry collection. You know I love to write poetry; it's the way I can express myself. My professor's pushing us to write a poetry collection. I don't know where this is going to lead, but would you be open to telling me more about you and Grandma?" She agreed to do it.

It was very hard. I had to ask her a lot of invasive questions that opened up a lot of wounds that she had to relive, which was very unfair. But being the great mom that my mom is, she was inclined to do it because of me, so I can't thank her enough for giving me all the information she could. It gave me a better understanding of not just who she and my grandmother are, but who I am.

**AF: In your latest poetry collection, *Where The Poppies Burn*, you powerfully evoked the horrors of the genocide in Gaza. What drew you to write about this particular topic?**

**JJ:** I still have friends over there, and I talk to them every week. I explained to one of them that I am a poet and that I wanted to give an amplified voice to those over there and bear witness to their real-lived experiences. My inclination was that there aren't a lot of books out there that talk about what's going on in Gaza. I think it

mostly has to do with how surreal it is and how people want to avoid something as horrific as that. And I get that. It's not easy to talk about. It's not easy to see or live through every day, and especially if you're in a bubble, it's even harder to grasp the concept that there are thousands of people, especially children, who are being slaughtered. So some of those poems are actually entwined with the experiences that my friends are going through currently overseas or have witnessed themselves. A lot of the other poems came from research that I've done on certain journalists, who are on the ground over there, and turning their experiences into a story. I also wanted to separate myself from this collection because I didn't want it to be about my story, or my mom's, or my grandmom's; I already did that. I wanted it to be about everybody else's story.

**AF: Given your different connections to the content in each collection, in what ways were your writing and research processes for *Lady Arab* and *Where the Poppies Burn* similar and different?**

**JJ:** I think it was easier for me to be vulnerable in *Where the Poppies Burn* because I wasn't putting myself in it. It doesn't sound right, but it's easier for us to expose other people than to expose ourselves. For *Lady Arab*, I definitely had a hard time exposing my story, my mom's story, and my grandmom's. After it was completed, I sat on it for two years before I published it. Every month, I would get an email from my poetry mentor, the teacher who assigned the poetry collection project, asking, "Did you publish it?"

I was concerned that people would see *Lady Arab* as controversial since it was a story about three women of color going through these discriminatory and oppressive struggles, not just for their ethnicity, but for being women in general. I think the collection really isn't about Arab women; it's about every woman who's felt that way, or even any person who's had to face adversity to some extent. That's why I ultimately decided to publish it, though it was still scary.

I felt more empowered with *Where the Poppies Burn*. However, it was just as hard to write because even though the experiences aren't mine, they belong to people I care about, even if I don't know them. And it's hard to really pull yourself into that world and accept the fact that these people are facing starvation, brutality, bombings, fear for their lives, and uncertainty about when their next meal will come. It's quite difficult to write about, but I knew that it wasn't about me. It was about them, and they deserve to have their stories heard.

**AF: How would you describe the power of poetry to elicit such deep emotion and capture such heavy subjects in a way that other forms of writing cannot fully emulate?**

**JJ:** I think it really comes down to being in tune with your emotions and being a very empathetic person. It's always better to try to see from another's point of view. We can never fully understand it because it's not a lived experience that we have gained for ourselves, but listening is important. I think I combine my skills as a journalist and love for storytelling with my knack for poetry. When you're a journalist, you have so many questions, and you really have to listen for the sound bite, or quote, or for something that changes the trajectory of the story. So when my mom was telling me her story, I was dead silent, and all I could do was listen. It's easier to listen to people that you care about and that you love, but finding the humility and grace to listen to people you don't know very well or aren't close to geographically and taking the time to read their stories, even if they seem long, is important. They're telling you for a reason; they're revealing something to you about themselves that could be very vulnerable and feel like exposure. So, being on an emotional level of understanding with them, and invoking that sense of storytelling, really helps.

Also, a lot of my poems use the upside-down-triangle structure, where I start outward and bury myself down deeper to one point. It's like a camera lens; when you have it on landscape mode, you see the whole scene, but then you spot a particular flower, or a bird, or something small in that scene, and you start to focus

more on it. We don't think about these small things until they're not around. With *Where the Poppies Burn*, there were things that these people lived through every day, and then, all of a sudden, when it was all taken away from them, the loss of those things hit them in unexpected ways that they didn't even realize they would. I grab that one snapshot out of the entire scenery, and it tells the story.

**AF: You describe *Lady Arab* as not just the story of three generations of Arab women in your family but also as “the story of every Arab woman stripped of their rights.” Similarly, you share that you wrote *Where the Poppies Burn* “to honor the silenced, the disappeared, displaced, and the unnamed victims of war.” In light of these comments, I wanted to ask: who do you write for? Does it depend on the subject of the poem, or does your intended audience stay the same in all that you write?**

**JJ:** Firstly, and this sounds a little selfish, I write for me. When I begin writing, I don't have any intention of publishing the piece or of anyone else reading it. I write it because it makes me happy even when I'm sad. It brings out those emotions and puts them on paper, and I don't have to carry that heavy load anymore.

But then, when I complete something, I start to realize that my voice isn't my own, in the sense that I'm not the only person who's gone through this. My story doesn't only belong to me; it belongs to everybody because there are so many people in this world who have suffered worse than I have. At the end of the day, when I realize that I'm not alone, that it isn't always about me, and that other people deserve to feel seen and heard, I think that's what really motivates me to publish my work, or to put it out there, or to share it with someone, even if I don't get it published.

It's similar to listening to a song from an artist and understanding and relating to their words, so it becomes your favorite song. I think it goes beyond the scope of entertaining and listening to music; it really transcends to this idea of love. You feel loved. You are receiving love in a way even if it's not through personally knowing that person, but you're receiving love because you're feeling seen and heard.

Someone's giving you a voice, and your struggles, and obstacles, and adversities don't feel like they're all yours to carry because you're not alone. Someone's there as a witness, to hold your hand, or to give you advice, or to carry you towards some kind of light out of that deep, dark time.

**AF: You have shared how the intention behind your poetry is to honor marginalized individuals whose stories have been dismissed by a world that too often chooses not to listen. How does a commitment to diversity impact your poetry?**

**JJ:** As someone who's biracial, and a child of an immigrant, and has a son who is multiracial, my best work is wrapped around a lot of diversity, but I think just being a human being, in general, you should be concerned about diversity. Even if you haven't felt a racial divide or discrimination in the sense of your ethnicity, to some extent, every single person on this planet has been through some kind of adversity— some moment in their life when they felt like an outcast, or not good enough because of a trait, or a skill that they lacked. Think back to middle school. Everyone hated middle school. At one point during middle school, someone made fun of you. Someone bullied you. Someone said something behind your back or made a rumor about you, or even if it wasn't a peer, maybe a teacher or a parent let you down. In that moment, you felt what it was like to be hurt, to not be accepted, and to not feel love. I think if people just learn to remember that they've gone through a situation that caused them to question their worth, they'll understand that everybody deserves to feel worthy. That's why diversity is so important, no matter what background you come from.



# Fiction

## A Slight Deviation - Danielle Barber

Sabrina's smile never laid where it was supposed to.

It leaned left, as if it inherently knew that straight lines were optional. Not broken, not wrong, just slightly odd — just enough to interrupt the symmetry people would expect from a face. The strange part was, no one ever pointed it out directly. Sabrina knew it was large enough to be noticed, to be remembered wrong. Teachers called it “charming”, classmates called it “your thing”. And strangers always seemed to hesitate half a second longer than they should before exchanging a polite smile back to her. She learned early on the choreography of correction, constantly tilting her head in photos, quickly lifting a hand when laughter surprised her, always choosing the quieter half of her face for first impressions.

The world preferred things that lined up, and she preferred not to be questioned, so these simple tweaks became her everyday life. At lunch, she sat by the window where the natural lighting softened crooked edges. That table belonged to no one and yet everyone at the same time; many came and went just like the seasons. Nevertheless, Sabrina stayed, because to her it was easier to exist in a place without expectation. Across the room, there were other tables, booming with laughter. The people who sat there knew exactly who they were. When they smiled, their lips spread evenly across their faces, just as they were supposed to. Sabrina caught herself watching them at times, not out of jealousy, but out of pure curiosity. Wondering if they ever felt as though their faces were something to constantly manage.

That day specifically was one of dread for Sabrina, picture day. It was the same thing every year; the photographer would take a picture and proceed to tell her to “smile naturally” and “relax” as they lifted the camera again to retake the photo. Again, her mouth tilted, staying faithful to itself. And again the photographer would pause briefly before making one comment that echoed,

“Let's try one more time.”

Sabrina knew then to start her choreography.

A week later, as Sabrina sat at her lunch table, a copy of the photo was finally given to her. It wasn't bad, yet it didn't capture her. The smile in the photo was smaller. Safer. Straight enough to pass. She stared at the photo for a few seconds, her eyes lingering over the safe smile. She folded it and shoved it back in her bookbag. When she shifted her gaze upwards, she saw an unfamiliar face sitting at the normally empty seat across from her.

The girl across from her wore glasses that refused to sit evenly and slipped no matter how often she nudged them back onto her face. From her absence in the halls, Sabrina could tell she was a new student.

"You always sit here?"

"Most days." Sabrina responded.

"Good," She said, "I prefer tables that don't ask questions."

They shared the silence; the kind that doesn't rush to fill itself. Sabrina noticed the front of her folder. A-L-Y-S-S-A was spelled out across the front. Alyssa said something dry, unexpected. Sabrina laughed, and before she could edit herself, the smile tilted, wide, noticeable, and uncorrected. Even so, Alyssa didn't flinch. She didn't study her face for alignment. She smiled back, and for a second, her grin was uneven too. A little late, a little crooked in its own way.

For the first time, Sabrina let hers stay. She didn't adjust, didn't apologize with her posture, didn't retreat into symmetry. It felt strangely comforting. Later, while walking to class, Sabrina pondered on the shared smiles between her and Alyssa. Maybe their "quirks" only grew obvious in rooms that believed balance meant sameness. Perhaps "differences" were subtler than people thought. And quite possibly, there was nothing to fix in the first place.

## Violet - Jayla Gross

Violet sat nestled on the woodland floor below the green canopy, far past the lattice of the mighty tree's watchful and protective limbs, enjoying the sun's rays as they filtered through the maze above. The gentle light illuminated her delicate purple petals and cast a shadow over her yellow-tinted center and black pattern, resembling a sleepy face slowly awakening after a long night of rest. The air was humid and saturated with the smell of dampened earth. Violet's roots stretched through the rich, dark soil that is constantly nourished by the decaying leaves of the surrounding trees. She giggled as the earthworms tickled her roots, which caught the attention of a new patch of wildflowers growing nearby in the open soil beside the beautiful green ferns. A gentle breeze passed over Violet, causing her to nod slightly at the new neighbors and other plants around her. Suddenly, the ground began to shake terribly in a pulsating rhythm, and a dark cloud came over Violet. She experienced intense pain as her roots tore from the earth, and everything went dark. Violet awoke in a strange environment. There was sunlight, but something was different. The light felt oddly scattered and unnatural to her. The green canopy was gone. The air was suffocating. She could feel her roots becoming brittle. Her petals began to curl, and her once vibrant color started to fade. Violet asked herself, "Who would commit such a terrible act?" She looked upon the culprits of her misery in disbelief. Surely, she thought to herself, a son and daughter of Adam should know the importance of diversity to life.

## World Without Suffering - Matthew Hash

After diversity was abolished, it was only natural that the notions of common society were also abolished. Why claim to such old laws of man when the concept of man or woman no longer existed? No concepts existed anymore because the very idea of different thoughts went with diversity. Instead, everyone continued in a state of existence and nonexistence. It was a paralyzingly empty world. There would be no more progress, no more conflict. Amoeba could be an apt description tacked onto what could only be described as a clump of cells making up all people. The word person took new meaning, as without diversity, everyone took the same clay-like form, which resembled mannequins more than anything recognizable by man. Like humanity, nature had also been afflicted with the same abolishment. The grass found itself with the same length, color, and exact cellular structure. The world looked perfect, a utopia of everything reduced to its base concept and stereotype.

But it hadn't always been that way. Before humanity vowed to abolish diversity, there was a world of many different cultures, all vying for control and prosperity. The most ironic truth is that humanity did it to itself. The United World Powers had come to the agreement that to get rid of discrimination, they had to first rid themselves of diversity. Scientists and the brightest minds of every country worked together for once in a millennium, thinking they were doing right. Bioengineering, terraforming, and other techniques ensured that nature was properly brought into place. Then the people themselves were taken away and de-diversified. They all became the same, shadows of what humanity once was. The only collective culture was no culture. No more diversity meant no more life.

## The Thing and the Human Child - Sophia Trispagonas

A shadowed mass carefully slinks from the brush. It is hideous, jagged, like the sound of disappointment. It's a walking phobia, yet as magnificent as the unknown. Light bends so as not to touch it, yet it shimmers under the moon.

The Thing approaches a small human child who is sitting at the base of a cold, metallic slide. She looks up, unbothered as it comes near.

"Child," it rasps, "what are you?"

"I am 11," she says, heels kicking at the ground.

The Thing tilts its grotesque head.

"No. I mean, where are you from?"

"My mom." She giggles at her own answer, playfully awaiting the next question.

"But where were you before that? Where did your people come from?"

The Thing presses, squinting its many eyes.

"In the house with a big wooden door," she replies, picking at a few blades of grass, "but before that, we lived in an apartment."

The Thing bristles, frustrated by her lack of labels. It reaches out a clawed appendage and lightly tugs at her hair. She glances up and pulls her hair out of immediate reach.

"Please don't do that."

The Thing grunts but backs away so as to put space between them.

"Utmost apologies."

It regards a backpack strewn near the slide, a figure depicted with a black helmet and white suit. Noticing its gaze, the girl excitedly grabs it and holds it up for the Thing to better inspect.

"It's an astronaut! That's what I'm going to be when I grow up!"

The Thing knows neither the definition of the term nor its significance to the human, but it recognizes that it matters to her now.

Perhaps that's all that matters.



# Essays

## How would you define diversity? What does diversity mean to you? - Hannah Barber

Diversity's dictionary definition is: "the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc." To me, diversity can be defined as more than just being inclusive and being accepting of all types of people to be involved in your life. It's our differences that make us all who we are, whether that be our race, gender, or religion, etc. But our differences go deeper than what is seen on the outside, as diversity can expand to being the acceptance of who people truly are, rather than just accepting what is seen in our appearances. The unseen layers of our person, like the things we value in our life, morals, different cultural traditions, the struggles we face daily, and also our dreams and aspirations, are all a part of who we are. Diversity isn't just about including people who appear different from you; it means being inclusive to anyone, because even if we appear similar to someone else, we still have a multitude of differences deep down that no one sees.

In my mind, diversity is a way of learning, growing, and changing. Being able to talk to someone else, who has a completely different life from you, one with different morals or opinions, and simply just listening to them, could be classified as diversity. The fact that you are hearing what they have to say shows that no one story is the same, and that each one represents a new person. Diversity allows you to learn more about others. You can step out of your own life for a moment and be able to see life through someone else's eyes, learning about their experiences and their struggles. Diverse environments allow people to learn how to be more open-minded, aware of others and the world around them, and be respectful, as not everyone is going to be like you, and understanding that those differences will arise is just one of the steps to accepting everyone as they are.

Our differences are what make us all unique. All these people who have different backgrounds and experiences, when it comes to coming together as one, we are able to learn and grow from each other, and become a better version of ourselves. Diversity means that although no one shares the same path in life, every single person on this earth contributes something essential to their path in their own way.

## Three Kings Day - Adriana I. Blas

Laughter could be heard around the house; the moment it reached my ears, I raced out of bed and looked out my window. It was January 6th again, meaning today was El Día de los Tres Reyes Magos, one of my favorite celebrations back in Puerto Rico. Three Kings Day, as you would say in English, is a holiday that marks the end of Christmas. In many ways, it is the equivalent to what most people celebrate, Christmas. Three Kings Day is a celebration of the Magis arrival to honor Jesus, while Christmas is a celebration for the birth of baby Jesus. Both traditions are celebrated with family and include the concept of exchanging gifts. Overall, Three Kings Day is not only just a day that marks the end of the holiday season, but one that contains profound religious significance.

Just like on Christmas Eve, when children place cookies and milk out for Santa Claus, on January 5th we place fresh cut grass from our backyard in shoeboxes and put them below the tree and under our beds for the camels to eat when they arrive. Just like Santa, los Reyes Magos leave presents under the Christmas tree, but they also place them under our beds.

What I love about this day is that everyone reunites to celebrate together. A Puerto Rican festivity is never complete if the whole family does not show up. Back home, music is always blasting throughout the streets, and you can even see little kids doing parrandas. Parrandas are similar to caroling, but they are more interactive, and the people participating use traditional instruments, such as maracas and güiros. They go around the neighborhood from house to house singing traditional songs, unannounced, as it is supposed to catch the people residing in the house by surprise. The songs are used as a wakeup call for the people living within. Most of the time, the people inside the residence sing along with those doing the parranda.

Above all, what I adore most about this day is the food, especially coquito. It is a drink specially made during wintertime and only during that season, and it is similar to eggnog. Coquito is made from coconut cream, coconut milk, sweetened condensed milk, shreds of coconut, and cinnamon. The consistency of it is dense, some add vanilla and their choice of alcohol, and before serving you need to shake it and make sure it is served cold. Additionally, there is also pernil (roast pork), arroz con maíz (well-seasoned rice with corn), tembleque (pudding/jelly texture that tastes like coconut), arroz dulce con canela (a dessert with a pudding like texture made from rice mixed with coconut milk), and much more.

Apart from the food, if you go to San Juan, you can see parades, and some years ago there was also la Feria de los Tres Reyes Magos. I loved going there as a kid; there were rides you could get on, horses and mules you could ride, and you could see all the families together having a good time. Overall, I love being with my family, and this event, which happens once a year, brings everyone around the island together in one place to spend the day. That is the real reason why I love this day so much and will forever cherish it.

## Diversity in my environment - Kevin Bond

I have never really found myself in an environment that I would consider diverse. More so, I have never really thought about what it meant to be in a diverse environment. Of course, I have met people of a few different ethnic backgrounds. Different looks. Different languages. However, my environment has never stood out to me. That is until I found myself at Immaculata. I believe being here has allowed me to discover and define what it means to be in a diverse environment. When I think about a diverse environment, I think about the people and all of their different life experiences. I believe a diverse environment is one with people of different backgrounds, languages, cultures, races, and much more that defines that person. I not only think about the people, but about the space that we all reside in. A diverse environment must have the space to exist and speak about ourselves or what is on our mind as it allows us to truly understand and learn the differences we have among ourselves.

Coming to Immaculata was the first time, I believe, that I felt true diversity and saw what it looks like on a day to day basis of my life. You can see the diverse environment of Immaculata everywhere on campus. Whether it is in a classroom, during projects, in the cafeteria, the library, the cafe, everywhere. Within my first two days, I realized rapidly how different the people were that I was meeting and talking to. Everybody from different towns, cities, states, and even countries could be found at our school, Immaculata. It truly surprised me how diverse this school would be. Everybody I met had a different story about where they came from and how they were raised.

I have met so many people through campus events, clubs, gatherings, or simply just by walking around school. These people I met all came from different places, however their experiences feel so similar to mine. I have been truly fortunate to learn of peoples traditions, cultures, and beliefs. All of these experiences have truly made my college experience better. I have learned to appreciate all different backgrounds. Diversity is definitely a strong feature of Immaculata. Being a part of this school's environment has definitely helped me grow as a person.

Altogether, I believe a diverse environment means being surrounded by all types of people, people with differences that question what you know, and teach you many new things. I believe it creates an open mind. My diverse environment at Immaculata has shown me that diversity is something you experience and get to feel.

## My Perspective on Diversity - Francesca Brunkel

The textbook definition of diversity goes along the lines of the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different backgrounds. How I would define diversity includes a few different things. To me, it is defined as race, culture, and religion blended in different areas. This is not limited only to those things but includes people's experiences in life as well as their values and beliefs as a whole. In our lives, no one lives the same exact life, and if we embrace our differences, that helps us be a more diverse society.

Diversity means a lot to me. Growing up in Philadelphia, I know a lot of people who come from different backgrounds. Instead of judging people for being different, I encourage myself to embrace our differences. Knowing about and embracing differences helps me grow as a person. Some people may believe that diversity is only about people from different backgrounds being in one place together, but I believe that diversity can be deeper than that. To me, it means embracing our different experiences while taking the time to listen to others without judging. Plus, I believe that most importantly, I should be more open to learning more about ideas that I disagree with. If I develop a deeper understanding of ideas I may disagree with, I can try to agree to disagree with these things rather than being stubborn. Diversity to me truly shows that my normal can be completely different from someone else's normal, and I should not judge a person based on that. I could even learn more about a person who is different from me to gain a further understanding.

In conclusion, diversity should create belonging and make people feel accepted. People feeling accepted should mean they shouldn't have to change themselves for others to fit in. Respecting diversity means being kind and making communities as a whole feel connected and not pulled apart. After all, diversity matters in society because it helps us expand our views on one another and helps us grow to be in union with one another, but still have our differences.

## Difficulties in Partner Reading - Tom Burley

I had always hated partner reading. My reading comprehension skills were many years beyond that of my peers at the time. When our third grade teacher paired me with my classmate Danny, I immediately understood why. When we would go around the class taking turns reading out of the textbook, Danny struggled through even basic sentences. The vast gulf in our reading abilities was bound to cause a problem. The thought of having to read one of the simple short stories in our textbook with him stirred a twitching anxiety within me that only got stronger. The time it took for him to sound out a word, be corrected, and try again felt like a short eternity. I had always tried to be patient and aware of differences in the learning abilities of others, but this went beyond simple annoyance into a full-blown sensory overload. His broken Rs, constant mispronunciations, and agonizing pauses pushed my already thin patience well past its breaking point. A hot, itchy sensation crept up my arms. My breathing became quick and shallow. I began to panic. As we took turns reading, I breezed through entire pages in the time it would take for Danny to stumble through some words. After a few minutes of failing to mask my frustration, I began reading his allotted sections. I flipped through the last few pages, tearing through the daily musings of a toad or some other similarly banal children's story.

As a 9 year old, I had faced my own challenges, but never saw up close how learning differences could affect someone. I also realized that my own neurodiversity is something that could challenge other people in the same way that Danny's learning differences challenged me. This moment expanded my worldview and brought me face to face with my own and another's neurodiversity.

## The Table We Inhabit - Avery G. Clum

In my family, tradition arrives before the guests do.

It simmers. It bakes. It lingers.

On Christmas Eve, the house fills with the scent of oil and salt and a memory around long enough to be sacred. The Feast of the Seven Fishes begins long before anyone sits down. Shrimp curl in scorching pans. Calamari crackles. Nana folds the baccalà into macaroni, a dish everyone reaches for first. We do not rush this meal. We never have.

Seven fishes; sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on memory and mood. No one agrees on the exact count, but we all can agree on the importance. This is how Italian Catholic roots survive in an American dinner table, passed down through generations.

When I was younger, I believed everyone ate this way. I assumed everyone knew Christmas Eve belonged to seafood, not turkey or ham. It was not until I explained it, awkwardly but proud, that I realized that our traditions marked us as different. Silently diverse and distinct in a way that does not ask for an explanation.

Our culture does not only lie at home, but in the places my family built and return to year after year. Di Bruno Bros. Termini Bros. Bakery. Names spoken like family members, because they are. These businesses carry our heritage forward. Italian-American stories, baked into bread, wrapped into paper, passed across counters for decades by family hands.

Saint Joseph's Day always pulls us back to the bakery. The glass cases glow with numerous pastries, but almost everyone is really there for the zeppoles; fried only for this day, made in honor of Saint Joseph, and gone almost as quickly as they appear. Cousin Vincent moves behind the counter, steady and familiar, as trays are carried out warm and dusted with sugar. Cannoli and tiramisu line the cases, but the line forms for the zeppoles. It is long. Voices are loud. No one minds waiting. This, too, is part of the ritual.

Saint Joseph's Day is about faith, but it is also about showing up. Supporting what has survived. Carrying culture forward not discussing it, but by participating in

it. We bring the pastries home. We share them. Sometimes with people who know the tradition. Sometimes with people who do not. Either way, our story progresses.

I have learned that diversity does not always declare itself. Sometimes it looks like a crowded bakery on a March morning. Sometimes it is the glare your friends give you when you call pasta “macaroni” and tomato sauce “gravy.” Sometimes it tastes like seafood on a holiday night, eaten around a table that has seen generations lean over.

I may not speak Italian fluently. I may not know every detail of our ancestry. But I do know how to keep a tradition alive. I know how to return to the same places, the same meals, the same celebrations, and know that this is inheritance.

My family does not cease to define what diversity means to us. We carry it forward in the way we gather, the food we prepare, the faith we return to, and the businesses we continue to manage. What we practice is not nostalgia; it grows with us, changing slightly every year, but never losing its structure.

## Diversity Essay - Ethan Dwyer

Celebrations such as Chinese New Year, Dia De Los Muertos, and Oktoberfest help unite millions of people every year from different backgrounds across the world. These events provide times of happiness and unity by offering a distraction from everyone's mundane daily lives and an opportunity to celebrate cultures that often don't receive enough love. In a world full of prejudice and hate, these cultural celebrations allow people from minority backgrounds to express themselves without fear of being judged by others. I believe that these cultural celebrations are just as important here in America as they are in the land where they take place.

In America, minority cultures are often neglected and pushed to the background as most of these people are expected to assimilate to the dominant white European culture. However, it is important that all of these different cultures remain prevalent in today's society and are not eradicated by people who believe that they are superior to others. Cultural celebrations allow these diverse ethnic groups to celebrate their culture with one another and show the rest of the world how much they have to offer by honoring who they are and where they came from.

Chinese New Year is one of the most famous and popular cultural celebrations that takes place each year. Chinese New Year celebrates the end of the Chinese lunar calendar and the beginning of a new one. This celebration is marked by numerous different events such as a family reunion dinner the night before the new year, red envelopes filled with money being given to children in the family, and culminates with a lantern festival on the 15th day of the year featuring parades of lanterns and cultural performances being on show. When I was in fourth grade, my teacher spent a few weeks teaching us about Chinese culture and then had us build decorations and a dragon for our own Chinese New Year parade around school. Through this experience, I learned so much about Chinese culture and gained a newfound respect for their beliefs, foods, and perspectives on society. This experience shows that Chinese New Year has a cultural impact in places around the world outside of China and is valued enough by people that it has the opportunity to allow people to learn more about Chinese culture in places where many people may not fully understand it.

Dia De Los Muertos, also known as Day of the Dead, is a Mexican celebration honoring deceased loved ones that takes place on the first two days of November. The celebration of Dia De Los Muertos involves a family reunion filled with food, drinks, and various cultural celebrations. Additionally, families make offerings, known as ofrendas, that honor their deceased family helping to remember them and increase connection within the family. During Spanish class in high school, all of my teachers took time to show us videos about this celebration which allowed me to

gain a deeper understanding of Mexican culture. I love the art style of their decorations and hope to educate about the importance of it to those who don't understand the value of Mexican culture.

Oktoberfest is a German celebration that began in 1810 to celebrate the marriage of Prince Ludwig and Princess Therese. Today, Oktoberfest is held annually in Munich, Germany and features German beer, local food, and various festivities. The festival is held from mid-September through the first week of October and attracts millions of people from around the world by featuring games, rides, and obviously the food and beer as previously mentioned. Oktoberfest is also held here in America in various locations. The biggest one is in Helen, Georgia, and runs for almost two months from September to November. The festival has similar traditional foods, drinks, and events creating the German spirit here in America.

These cultural celebrations are incredibly important as they allow people to get together to celebrate their heritage with one another and ensure that minority cultures don't die out in today's society. However, I believe that the most important part is how these celebrations can be appreciated by people in other parts of the world. Through my experiences I have come to see the value in cultures that I may not have otherwise cared about. I believe that it is crucial for all young people to be introduced to a variety of cultures so that they see all people have beliefs that are important to them even if they are different. I think that an appreciation of other people's cultural celebrations could lead to more peace and unity in a world that desperately needs it. If everyone could come together for even a few weeks a year to honor each culture's heritage, much of the hate and war in the world could come to an end and lead to a society that is safe to live in for all people.



*Photo by Anna Bellitta*

## Defining Culture - Maria Freeman

Cultures define us as people, but I can attest that culture is largely based around shared experience. Culture, or, the shared pattern of a group's behaviors, values, and social norms that have been shared over time, can be described in any way that others perceive it. Whether it's culture within different races or religions, or culture built within a sports team, it creates experiences that define us as individuals.

Cultures can define who we are as people, only if we allow them to. It is human nature to be drawn towards people with similar interests, or groups we share more in common with. As a result, much of the population is separated by culture. It provides comfort and security, rather than the confining feeling of being different. Especially in a place where societal norms are forced upon people. It is perceived as a risk to deviate from what is known. When relationships begin to form regardless of background and beliefs, shared experiences begin to define culture.

Imagine a collegiate sports team, every player from a different area, different experience, different levels of familiarity. On a team, you are forced to create experiences together. It is the basic expectation of being a part of a team. A team's ability to perform is not based purely on skill. It also relies on how well each player can work with one another. This is built by creating a team culture. You grow closer through the long bus rides, the big wins, the hard losses. You are forced together as strangers one day, and expected to understand each other well enough to win games and achieve goals. This is created through the experiences that teams endure together, time they spend with each other, creating a closeness that is not created through mutual backgrounds.

The answer to this question is dependent on personal experience. Culture can be defined by perspective and how it affects the people living in it. Some feel the comfort in familiarity, where backgrounds define culture; others allow their culture to be created through experiencing new and different ideas. For me personally, I have been able to experience both sides of the question. I have been a part of cultures created because of religion and family tradition. But I have also been fortunate to experience "team culture," built through sharing moments and memories with people of different backgrounds and experiences. Based on my own experiences, culture can be both created and inherited, and our interpretation of culture depends on our interactions and how we perceive them.

## Polish Wigilia - Abigail Friend

The word culture means something different to everyone. To me, culture is all of the family traditions that get passed through generations, which also carry on the legacies of those who came before us. I come from a long line of Polish heritage on my mother's side. Both of my great-great-grandparents are from Poland. My great-great-grandfather was from a town in the countryside near Krakow, and my great-great-grandmother was from Poznan. We take part in many Polish traditions as a family that has been going on for centuries, and I hope to continue to pass them down to future generations as well.

My favorite Polish tradition is called Wigilia, which is Polish Christmas Eve. Every year on Christmas Eve, my family goes to my grandmother's house. Before dinner, we do the Polish tradition of Oplatek, which is a Polish Christmas Eve wafer. Everyone starts with a large piece of Oplatek, and we all go around and break off a piece from each person, wish them a Happy New Year, and then we eat the pieces of wafer we broke off. The tradition of Oplatek is seen as a Polish sign of good fortune and good luck for the next year, and my family has done it for as long as I can remember. After that, we cook food all day and have a big feast with a lot of different Polish foods like pierogis, and we never eat meat on Christmas Eve. Lastly, we have dessert, and my favorite Polish dessert is babka. Babka is a braided sweet bread with a type of fruity or sweet cheese filling, and it is always delicious.

In closing, family traditions consist of many different things that bring people together. Families carry on traditions to preserve their culture as well as pass it on to those around them. My grandmother continues our Polish traditions every year because being Polish is a big part of who my family is. These Polish traditions have always been a part of my life, and I don't remember Christmas Eve without them. I will always do my best to continue to maintain them as they are a part of my Polish heritage that should be passed on for years to come.

## The Seven Fishes - Nicole Getsie

One important cultural celebration that my family participates in every year is the Italian tradition of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve. This tradition is meaningful to my family because my Nonna and Pop Pop came to America from Italy when they were only 14 years old, traveling on a ship. Because they grew up in Italy, it has always been important to them to continue their traditions in America and pass them down to the rest of our family. Over time, the Seven Fishes dinner has become one of the biggest holiday events in our family and something we all look forward to.

Every year on Christmas Eve, around 4:30 p.m., we begin heading to my Nonna's house for dinner. It is usually freezing outside, so we always bundle up before we leave. When we walk into her house, the smell immediately stands out. The whole house smells like delicious seafood being cooked, including foods like shrimp scampi, calamari, mussels, and different types of fish. The kitchen is always loud, warm, and busy. Most people are gathered in the living room right across from the kitchen, eating appetizers, talking, and spending time together. The younger cousins are usually excited and talking about what they asked Santa for, while others play board games or hang out in the basement. Meanwhile, my Nonna is in the kitchen controlling everything, speaking in Italian, and making sure every dish comes out perfectly.

Nonna always wears her well-known apron while cooking, especially on this night. She has had the same one for over ten years, and even though she should probably get a new one, she refuses because she says it has been through so many recipes. She is also very strict in the kitchen and moves quickly as she cooks. She constantly tells people not to touch anything or to respectfully stay out of the kitchen, and if someone disturbs her while she is cooking, she gives them "the stare." The only time we are really allowed in the kitchen is when she needs someone to taste test the food, which happens often. When everything is ready, she lays all the seafood out on the table, and it is always set beautifully for more than 15 people. Everyone also has a job, like setting the table, taking pictures, or helping Nonna in any way.

Even though the night is always fun and busy, it can also be emotional because we realize how much we have grown up and how different Christmas feels as we get older. However, no matter what changes, my family always makes sure we do everything we can to help Nonna and keep this tradition going. Overall, the Seven Fishes dinner is not just a meal, but an important celebration that keeps our family connected to our culture, our history, and each other.

## Why Diversity is Important - Lauren Harris

Imagine having a bland bowl of cereal for breakfast. You get bored with the cereal really fast because there is no pop of flavor, and it brings nothing new to the table. You eat this every day because it has minimal ingredients and is supposed to be "healthier." However, you are debating why you are actively eating this and thinking, why not try something different. You all the sudden decide to switch genres completely and have a bowl of oatmeal with fruit. It comes to realization, switching things up can be a good thing and be just as healthy, while fun. Just like your change in breakfast, diversity is important by bringing different perspectives, promoting growth, and bringing society together.

When browsing for different fruits at the grocery store for your oatmeal, you pass by each container, wondering what to pick because there are so many options. You then notice that some look the exact same, and some are polar opposites. Then you settle on a pack of blueberries. As you take a bite, you notice that even though you got the same fruit, one is bitter and one is sweet. That is the United States of America in a nutshell. Which is also one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. The word diverse, has a common synonym used with it, known as variety. Variety in a social context may include aspects like differences in ethnicity, religion, gender, backgrounds and so on. Just like the fruit, the U.S has similar people yet different in their own way. Different perspectives play an important role in diversity. People with different backgrounds share different experiences and provide a fresh point of view. If everyone were the same, there would not be any interesting thoughts, ideas, or creations brought to the world. Growing up in a very diverse school district, this taught students to have an open mind to others and made us socially intelligent.

Diversity is extremely important because it promotes growth. Just like how different perspectives are important, societal growth and erasing prejudices are too. It is widely known that throughout history, people of different races, religions, genders, and backgrounds were discriminated against. History portrayed perfection as having everyone look and act alike. Jumping to this day in age, our world would

not be as advanced or as well off if we continued to live that way. As a society, we have evolved and learned to celebrate our differences with one another. Through changing our ways we once had, we have learned to be cohesive with others. Societal growth toward diversity has been an important factor in demonstrating change and how much better it is to be part of a diverse community. Being raised in a diverse community has taught me to look within a person and care more about their character. I have found that it creates a no judgment zone, and those qualities you pick up from others are useful outside of your own environment. The more we grow, the more we learn.

Having different perspectives and promoting growth help in bringing society together. Two fruits may taste good together, but you would never know until you pair the two. Although not every state in the U.S. is very diverse, the majority of states are. As a country, we have healed from history's old standards and do not hold as high a judgment as we once did. Society has learned to lean on each other through shared experiences that go on. People are now moved to not see or stereotype others and instead be curious and kind. This is the result of evolution, which we make progress on every day. If society had not come together before I entered school, the way I act and interact with others would be altered. Learning about others who are different has shaped the way I think and respond. To which I am incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to learn and grow from the diversity of others.

Ultimately, diversity is important in how the world operates today by bringing different perspectives, promoting growth, and bringing society together. We would not have a fraction of what we have today if we were not diverse or open in learning about everyone's differences. Our minds and critical thinking are broadened, making the world more cohesive. Without variety, we would be bland, not as creative, and socially unaware.

## The Strength of Diversity: Society Through the Forest Analogy -

Emma Keen

A forest isn't just made up of one tree. Each tree's foundation is similar, but no two trees look the same. A strong forest is not uniform as it contains tall and short trees, young saplings and old giants. Some have red leaves, while others have green or orange leaves. A tree growing in one forest will be different from another tree as it is shaped by its environment. Each one has a different background and a different story to tell. Every tree has history in its roots, some spanning decades, and grows in its own way while contributing something unique to the forest. Together, these differences transform individual trees into a connected, resilient forest.

The concept of diversity in this analogy is connected with humans in today's society. People come from different backgrounds, identities, and cultures, and each brings something valuable to the larger community. Each human is made similarly, but no one person looks the same. Hair color, skin color, eye color, and outfit choice also contribute to physical variety between people. Even if a group of people looks similar, they each have different heritages and histories.

A society that values only one type of person risks challenges. Just as a forest of identical trees would struggle against storms, disease, or environmental change, a society lacking diversity is less adaptable to challenges and less capable of progress. Additionally, a forest thrives because its trees are interconnected. Roots intertwine beneath the surface, communicating as well as sharing nutrients and resources. Diversity benefits every tree, not just a few.

Like a forest, true diversity is not about uniformity, but about coexistence and shared growth. If every tree or human were the same entirely, the world would be boring. If every tree in the forest looked the exact same, there would be no appreciation for variety in the ecosystem. Recognizing and embracing diversity allows societies to grow stronger and more united. It is through coexistence and shared growth that diversity transforms communities into something meaningful. In the same way a forest comes alive through its variety, society finds its strength in diversity.

## A Culture I Admire - Sarah Koletty

I admire Puerto Rican culture, not because I was raised and immersed in it from a young age, but because I wasn't. My admiration for this culture comes from a distance; knowing it belongs to me by my blood but not by practice and tradition. My great-grandmother is from Isla de Vieques, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico, and her history and culture live in my family, like a puzzle, with its most important pieces missing.

After my great-grandmother moved from Puerto Rico to Pennsylvania, she built a family for herself. In doing so, she left pieces of her culture behind. Pieces that we will never know or understand because we never asked questions, and never learned from her. Her traditions, values, and culture were swept under the rug and were never brought back out. If we had asked her questions and shown enthusiasm about her culture, maybe it wouldn't have fallen away from us so quickly, and we would still be participating in it. So, my admiration comes from afar, from longing for something that I never got to experience. Technically, this culture is mine, and a part of me. Yet I have always felt culturally distant from it, wondering how my life might have felt or been different if we had been immersed in it from the beginning.

I don't speak Spanish. I don't celebrate the same holidays as my ancestors did. I don't cook the same food, know the music, or have the same traditions that make a culture feel like home. When people look at me, they wouldn't guess that I have Puerto Rican in me. I have blonde hair and blue/green eyes, which isn't the typical look of Hispanic people. I don't look how people expect someone of Puerto Rican descent to look, and because of that, I've spent much of my life feeling disconnected from a place and from people that share the same blood as me. That distance only deepens my admiration. Oftentimes, when I would hear others speaking Spanish, though I could understand some words they were saying, I wished I could understand them fully and be able to converse with them. Being able to actively engage with other Hispanics, whether Puerto Rican or not, would make me feel like I actually was a part of something bigger than myself.

This culture has strong familial ties and is rooted in family. Family, which goes far beyond immediate relatives, seeps into neighborhoods and communities, bringing everyone together. Puerto Rican culture emphasizes the home being the center of life, where caring for others and being hospitable are celebrated, not just merely expected. There is something very powerful and wholesome about how extended families come together frequently to share meals, laughter, memories, and pieces of themselves, sharing their culture, which will never fade away. I admire the traditions and holidays that I never got to experience, like Three Kings' Day

celebrations, Nochebuena feasts on Christmas Eve, and the music and dancing during Fiestas patronales. Beyond the immense joy and celebration they bring, these traditions also cultivate a strong sense of identity. An identity that is distinct from other Latin cultures, called Boricua, which signifies their great cultural pride. Though I wasn't raised participating in these traditions, it's clear to me how they reinforce that distinct sense of family, belonging, and sense of self that is uniquely Puerto Rican.

Sometimes I think of who I would've been had my family embraced the culture from which they came. I like to think that I would speak Spanish, know the culture and traditions of my heritage, and feel like I am part of such a beautiful place, with a unique culture. What would it feel like if I didn't question being in that identity, or in that culture at all, if I didn't feel like a visitor there, where my family actually belongs? I've realized that admiration doesn't always come from being an active participant in a culture's everyday experiences. Sometimes it comes from knowing what I've missed out on. That awareness now shapes the way I live. It makes me hold onto my family while I still can, to ask them questions about where they are from, how they grew up, and what traditions I can continue on for generations to come. Culture is not only about upbringing, but it is also about curiosity, respect, and a willingness to learn about and understand where you come from.

My admiration for this culture has turned into motivation. It has motivated me to learn and to ask questions, even to those unfamiliar with our family's background. Listening to stories of family traditions and figuring out how to carry them forward has made me realize that even without growing up immersed in the culture, it still shapes me in quiet, meaningful ways.

Puerto Rican culture has taught me that culture runs deeper than we think, and identity is rarely simple or fully complete. Oftentimes, our identities are fragmented, displaced, or discovered later in life, yet they remain just as significant. I may not have grown up within the culture I admire, but it is what shapes and guides my understanding of family, history, and belonging. At times, I will imagine my great-grandmother in Vieques, walking along the white sand beaches, looking out at the blue waters, and marvelling at Mosquito Bay, where the waters glow. Being able to visualize and immerse myself in the place she called home helps me to feel closer to that culture and the way she lived. What I admire most isn't just the culture itself, but its endurance, the Boricua spirit that persists no matter what, and the possibility that one day, what I once admired from a distance, will feel like something I truly carry with me, something I am fully a part of.

## Tastes, Sounds, and Stories: Everyday Encounters with Diversity -

Alexa Lopez

Some of the most ordinary places are also the most diverse. Walking through a city, I pass restaurants with menus in multiple languages, street vendors selling food from countries I could not even point out on a map, and musicians playing rhythms that are unfamiliar to me. People from all different walks of life stroll side by side on the sidewalks, talking, laughing, and carrying pieces of their culture with them. It is easy to pass by without noticing, but when I pause and take in the moment, I realize how much diversity surrounds me every day. These ordinary occurrences show why diversity is essential. It brings people together, teaches us to coexist, and turns typical daily experiences into an opportunity for connection.

Food is one of the most immediate ways diversity shows itself, because everyone across the world needs to eat. On the same block I can see someone sipping Chai in a cafe, a family sharing tacos from a food truck, and a student carrying a takeout container of dumplings. These meals do not need to be fancy; I also see people eating simple comfort meals from their home countries. Each bite tells a story, someone's home, their traditions, and what makes them unique. Sharing food does not require any translation; it can be enjoyed by anyone without words. It sparks curiosity about new cultures, understanding, and respect, and quietly reminds us that diversity exists in various aspects of our experiences.

Music is another way diversity draws people together. I often hear different languages, instruments, and rhythms from street performers. A guitarist's notes blend with the beat of a bucket drummer performing nearby, pulling in a crowd of strangers. People stop to listen and tap their feet enjoying together even if they do not speak the same language. Music

makes moments of difference noticeable and enjoyable, showing how diversity can create connection without explanation.

In a similar way, holidays and celebrations bring the culture and traditions of different communities into the spaces around us. Lanterns hang in shop windows for

Lunar New Year, strings of lights glow for Christmas, and ofrendas mark Día de los Muertos, creating a culturally rich display along the block. Passersby can take in the sights coming from each storefront. These gestures quietly bring people together, offering glimpses into someone else's culture and traditions. Through these celebrations, strangers and neighbors alike become a part of each other's stories, even if it is just for a moment.

What makes diversity indispensable is its ability to transform ordinary spaces into moments of discovery and connection. Whether it manifests through a shared meal, a song playing throughout the streets, or the decorations that mark someone else's celebration, these experiences show us the lives, stories, and traditions of people around us. They remind us that even in passing, we can witness and appreciate the richness of other cultures. By paying attention to these small but meaningful encounters, diversity becomes more than a concept. It becomes a lived experience that shapes how we move through the world and how we connect with one another.



*Photo by Andrew Toothman*

## Culture - Noah Mansberger

Culture is something that people can perceive in many different ways. Some people may see it as a divider between ethnic groups, while others may see it as something that brings us much closer together. It is interesting how even though those two viewpoints are complete opposites, they both are derived from the fact that culture shows our differences. However, some may feel those differences are a reason for war instead of peace, as we should not be one but be multiple parties. I believe that those people don't really understand the meaning of culture and why people celebrate it. It is such an amazing thing because there are so many cultures, which are shown through so much around the world. While many people think that culture mainly relates to things like language, religion, and social structure, almost anything can define your culture and show its beauty. People's values, interactions, relationships, rituals, food, and habits can be completely different depending on your culture and what you grew up around, which is what makes it such a precious thing. It shows how every culture is unique and special, and inside of every culture there are people who can bond with one another about their culture. I think it is amazing how there are so many events and celebrations that take place throughout the year that are dedicated to specific cultures, as every culture should be celebrated to not only appreciate it, but also widen the audience. There are so many cultures that are unknown to many people, even though they are actually really fascinating because different cultures celebrate in different ways.

I think a big cultural day for Americans that many don't realize is the Super Bowl. It is not because of the sport that is being played, but because it seems to truly bring people together and just have a time to relax and enjoy themselves. Many people in my family don't even watch football, but they still enjoy coming over to my house because it is a time to be together. When you really think about it, having a strong togetherness and community is what culture is. Although you may have a different culture than someone, that doesn't mean that you can't celebrate it with them. What you're celebrating should be meaningful, but the people who you celebrate with are the ones who are the most important.

## A Narrative Essay on Diversity - Ella Miller

When I first hear the word diversity, I think of the ways that make us unique and different from everyone around us. Diversity can be a person's ethnicity, culture, age, gender, religion, and more. Diversity is not only how a person looks on the outside, but also their personality, life experiences, education, and beyond that. For me, diversity means seeing someone for who they are as an individual and not because of where they come from or what they believe in. Diversity is not only how we are different, but coming together as one to see past those differences in some instances.

Personally, diversity means belonging, learning from differences, and being seen. In our world today, it's known to be very stereotypical, and I believe that we should be treating everyone the same, no matter where they come from. A lot of the time, people are overlooked or treated differently because of what they may look like or come from. After going to college, you tend to meet new people from different backgrounds, countries, and cultures. Treating everyone the same goes a long way because you never know what they may have been through personally.

Diversity is important because people come from all different kinds of backgrounds, so it helps us understand our world today. Being able to work with people with different backgrounds can help us learn new information that could be important in our future. By working with a diverse group, we can develop new and better ideas that we may never have thought of before. Diversity also creates more opportunities and equality for everyone.

Diversity is not only about what makes someone different. Diversity is about respecting, acknowledging, and valuing the differences of everyone. Not only that, it's about making everyone feel included and recognized for who they are as a person. In our world today, if we can learn to accept diversity more, we can grow together as a stronger community.

## One and Only - Ava S. Nottis

The quiet and still of my childhood home has taught me more than noise and chaos ever could. Growing up as an only child, I believe, has wholeheartedly shaped the human being that I am today. With anything in this world, being an only child has its advantages and disadvantages. My childhood, from what I can recall, was filled with toys, attention, and loads of love from my mom and dad. I was their one and only, but what I had always longed for was a companion and playmate who was not my loving mother and father, but someone of my own age. Going to school as an only daughter was my escape from reality and an opportunity to flourish in my own skin, to build friendships and become socially conditioned with my peers. In my childhood, it was easy to make and maintain friendships. Friendships were formed through simple shared laughter and wild imagination, whereas in early adulthood, friendships became more difficult to obtain.

Maturing is a hard pill to swallow for most. As for me, I found comfort in growing into my maturity. Growing up surrounded by adults meant that I had to learn how to be a respectable, sophisticated, and smart young lady at all times. Being alone in this world allowed me to navigate my own personal sense of independence and emotional awareness at a juvenile age. Conversations at the dinner table were nothing but thoughtful and intimate, and I quickly learned how to think before I spoke. While these traits proved to be my greatest strengths, they also established distance between my companions and I. This change in my teenage years caused me to grow apart from some lifelong friends who did not yet understand my level of maturity. Many of my friends were accustomed to sibling dynamics that consisted of teasing, fighting, and harm. I was very unfamiliar with this kind of behavior, as I craved warmth, kindness, and thoughtful communication in my home.

In the fullness of time, being an only child has taught and built me up brick-by-brick to stand confidently in my own skin. My very own diversity has allowed me to easily navigate the world with thoughtful intention. The way that I had been raised did not isolate me, yet it built me to create a strong foundation of my own sense of self and appreciation for meaningful connections with others. Being the one and only has contributed to some of the greatest attributes that I uphold. Through the quiet and still, I was able to embrace the independence and maturity that I bring into every space, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

## What is cultural appropriation? - A Narrative Essay on Diversity - Lizbet Ordonez-Gomez

It is finally that time of year again. My cousins and I are customizing our guaguas de pan, the smell of sweet fruit and cinnamon fills the house, as conversation and laughter echo in the kitchen. In my family, we remember our loved ones through food and stories. We come together and honor those we lost.

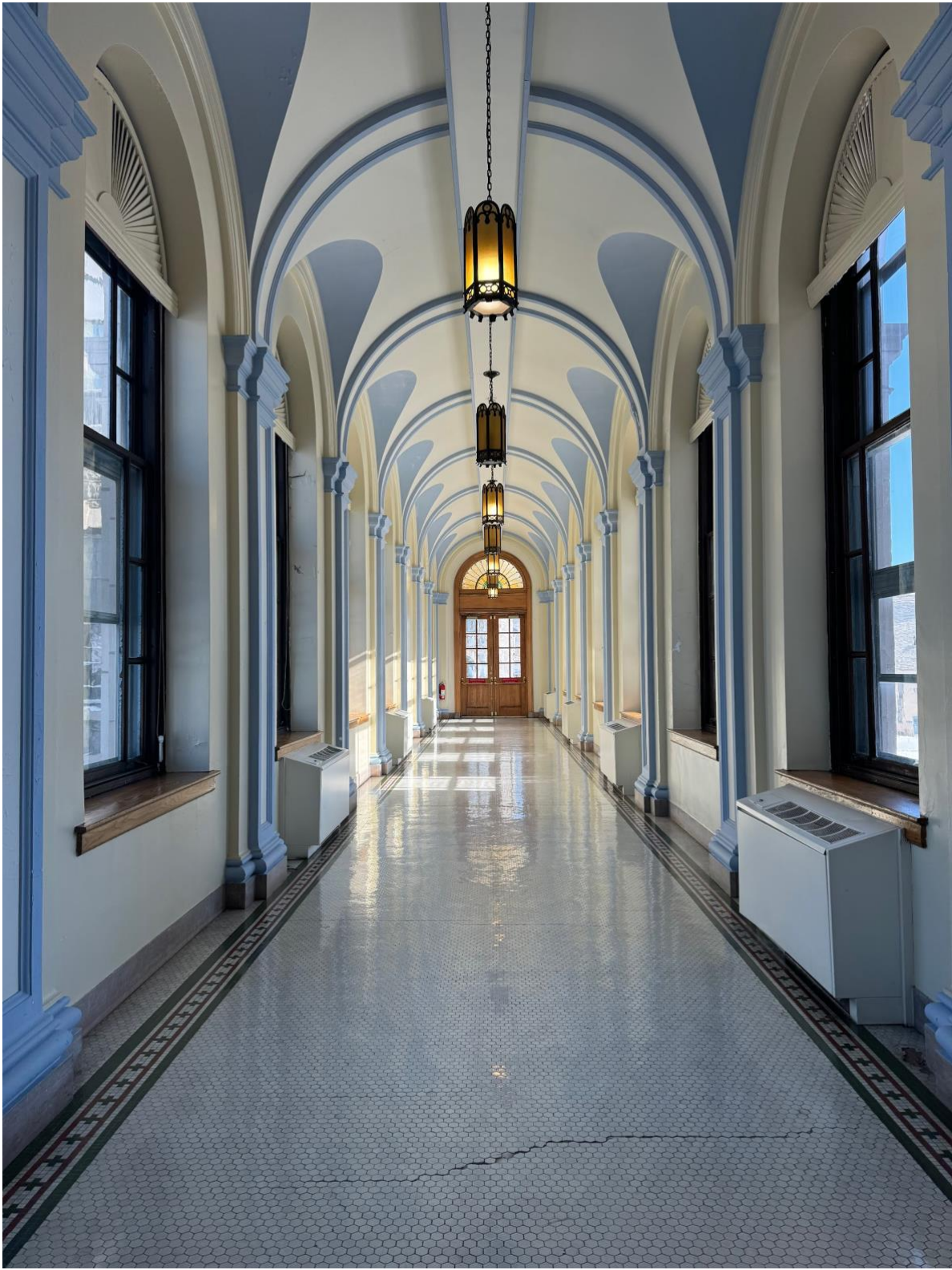
Días de los Muertos is a holiday closely associated with Mexico. But the tradition of remembering loved ones is celebrated by many throughout Latin America. It is a holiday when families gather to pay their respects to those who have passed away. My family is from Ecuador, so we do not celebrate the holiday in the usual sense with big ofrendas, but we gather with family and friends, make traditional foods, share stories, and keep the memories of those who passed alive.

Día de los Muertos is a sacred holiday rooted in catholic beliefs and indigenous traditions. The Ofrendas are a huge part of the holiday. People build them in their homes and cemeteries, marking their family members who have passed with their favorite foods, photos of loved ones, candles, and marigolds to help guide the spirits home and welcome them. This is my favorite time of year because I love seeing people build their ofrendas and how they honor their loved ones.

One year, a specific ofrenda caused controversy and conversation. This ofrenda was white; there was no color. Many people were upset because it seemed this person was using the holiday merely for aesthetic purposes rather than as something sacred and was not actually celebrating or respecting it. If the person actually did any research, they would know that color is essential to the ofrenda. The marigolds, which are bright orange, help guide the spirit's home. Pink symbolizes the happiness and celebration of loved ones arriving home. And purple symbolises grief and mourning. These colors carry meaning behind them, and it is important to know them.

This person participated in the Dia de los Muertos celebration without recognizing its significance or respecting the culture. This is an example of cultural appropriation, and this practice often hurts minority groups and perpetuates harmful stereotypes. What makes it harmful is that it exploits already discriminated against groups and misrepresents them. Traditions carry meaning and history, so when they are treated more as an aesthetic, that meaning is lost. It can also reinforce negative stereotypes, and in turn, it can affect people's mental health. For example, sport mascots that culturally appropriate Native Americans affect indigenous adolescents. Many people are affected by it, and it is something people need to learn to do better and be more aware of their actions.

In society, it is important to understand and respect each other's cultures. You can appreciate another person's culture by listening, learning, and recognizing its history. But it is not okay to take it and claim it as your own. Cultural appreciation is the opposite of cultural appropriation. This is when you may want to learn more about another culture by asking questions, practicing when invited, and being sensitive to the inequalities faced by minority groups. Culture is not a costume or trend; it is how people identify themselves, and it helps create a community. When approaching other cultures, it is important to approach with respect and understanding.



*Photo by Bernadette Mackin*

## Learnings and Lessons From Outside Cultures Other Than Your Own - Bella Ortiz

This world is made up of many people who come from different backgrounds. Everyone comes from different countries, cities, families, and ancestries. Everybody living has a story and a background of their own. Some stories are familiar and many are different. But the information that one can learn from other cultures can create a personal or public spread of diversity.

It's important to include diversity in your life. Diversity can open up new doors and create a healthier lifestyle for you. Diversity is the practice of including people from a range of different social and ethnic groups. To include people in your life who come from places you're unfamiliar with, you tend to learn something new. Americans live in a melting pot, everybody from all over the world comes to form what we know as America. Economics, medicine, architecture, and business all come from different teachings. Just think about it, the buildings we see in history, like the interior arch during the Greek and Roman times, are still used today in modern buildings and houses. Technology like the Iphone are manufactured in China, but Americans are the main consumers of the Iphone. The language of medicine used in hospitals comes from Latin origin. These are just some examples, but many ideas we use today, even in our personal lives, come from places you wouldn't even expect.

People who don't come from a place of diversity aren't limited to the possibilities. People from a small town and a place with not many differences only limit themselves to what they want. I've met people in big cities that come from a small one, and these people never limit their learning. Of course, being in a bigger city built off of diversity will broaden your horizons naturally. An environment full of multiple cultures spark up so many ideas. People who see the positive in different cultures tend to elevate, appreciate, and apply their new learnings into their everyday life. There's a clear difference in people who include diversity and exclude diversity from their life. Ask a person about their life who only limits themselves to what they know and then ask someone who's built their life from a big environment of endless teachings. The people who have put themselves in a place of diversity can tell you a lot more about themselves than the people who don't.

You, yes you, do activities in your everyday life that come from diversity and you don't even know it. Brushing your teeth originated from Egyptians and cleaning yourself in a bath comes from Ancient India. Many of these activities you assume everybody does, but that isn't the case. Again, since America is a melting pot, all of these ideas, traditions, and activities come from all over the world. Next time you have the desire to learn something new, accept that diversity and think about where it all started.

## Día de los Muertos: Tradition, Change, and Cultural Identity - Stephanie Page

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is one of the most recognizable cultural celebrations from Mexico, but it's often misunderstood. To many people, it looks like colorful skulls and bright flowers, but at its core, it's about remembering loved ones and celebrating the connection between the living and the dead. Over time, the tradition has changed because of cultural blending, historical events, and, more recently, global attention through media and travel. These changes don't take away from the holiday's meaning. Rather, they show how cultures adapt and continue to matter in diverse societies. The evolution of Día de los Muertos reflects diversity by demonstrating that cultural traditions grow through contact with different beliefs and communities while still preserving their essential purpose of honoring ancestors.

Día de los Muertos is celebrated on November 1st and 2nd, when families remember and honor relatives who have passed away. It can feel like a family reunion, with ancestors treated as honored guests rather than distant memories. Families set up ofrendas, or altars, decorated with candles, photos, marigolds, and the favorite foods of the deceased, inviting the spirits back. This celebration does not treat death as something to fear. Instead, it treats death as a natural and even meaningful part of life. Families often eat together, clean grave sites, light candles, and share stories about those who have passed, making memory and connection the focus of the holiday.

The roots of Día de los Muertos go back to pre-Hispanic Indigenous cultures of Mexico, specifically the Aztecs. Before the holiday was connected to Catholic dates, the Aztecs and their predecessors honored the dead through rituals that sometimes lasted for months. They believed that death was not an end, but another stage of life, and that the souls of the dead remained connected to the world of the living. Skull imagery, which remains a major part of modern celebrations, was once used by the Aztecs as a symbol of death and rebirth.

In the sixteenth century, Spanish colonizers arrived and brought Catholic traditions like All Saints' Day and All Souls Day. These were Christian days for remembering the dead, which happened around the same time of year as the Indigenous rituals already took place. Instead of eliminating the old traditions, the two belief systems blended over time. What came out of it was a mix of Indigenous and Catholic practices, now known as Día de los Muertos. This blending is a clear example of cultural diversity, with two very different worldviews coming together to create a celebration that continues today.

Recently, Día de los Muertos has continued to evolve beyond Mexico's borders. This growing visibility has led to both appreciation and concern. On one hand, the holiday has helped raise awareness and respect for Mexican culture. On the other hand, commercialization and simplified versions of the celebration can weaken its deeper meaning when people treat it like a costume or decoration rather than an act of remembrance. In the United States and elsewhere, the way Día de los Muertos is practiced can look different from traditional home altars and family gatherings, which raises questions about cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation.

Despite these challenges, the evolution of Día de los Muertos highlights an important idea about diversity: cultures are not fixed. They grow, adapt, and connect with others while still holding onto what matters most to them. Día de los Muertos continues to be rooted in memory and respect for ancestors, even as people around the world connect with its themes. The holiday shows that remembering our ancestors is something people everywhere share. This sense of unity and cultural interaction shows us that tradition isn't lost, but given new meaning.

In closing, the value of Día de los Muertos lies not in its appearance, but for what it demonstrates about how cultural identity changes over time and how people from different backgrounds can connect through shared values like memory, family, and respect for life. In a diverse world, traditions like Día de los Muertos show that honoring the past doesn't divide people. Instead, it can help shape how we live together in the present.

## A Blossomed Bond - Aaliya Piperato

The first time I remember meeting someone from a culture different than my own was at the beginning of third grade. I always looked forward to going to school when I was younger, I was extremely excited to start the new school year and see both familiar and new faces in my class. I grew up in a small town where the same group of about eighty kids were shuffled into new classrooms every year. Because of this, having a new student in class was very rare and usually there would only be about one new person who would move to town each year. Whenever we happened to get a new student in class, everyone was curious and eager to learn more about them.

A new girl was introduced to our class at the beginning of this school year, but she was not bombarded with questions like usual. Instead, she stood quietly on her own until the teacher introduced her to the class. The reason no one rushed to talk to her was because she didn't speak much English. Many people were not sure how to talk to her, so no one really was surrounding the new girl. This was an opportunity for me because I was fairly shy when I was younger and usually didn't approach the eager crowd that surrounded new students. This encouraged me to go and try to introduce myself to her to make her feel more welcome.

I learned that her name was Flor and that she had just moved to the United States from Honduras. I knew a few basic Spanish words from elementary Spanish classes, but not enough to hold a full conversation with her. We sat next to each other in class and tried our best to communicate with each other. From becoming friends, we were able to teach each other new words and find ways to understand one another. She was also learning English quickly through her ESL class, which helped us connect even more.

Despite the language barrier, Flor and I became very close friends. I even invited her to my birthday party that year and by coming she was able to enjoy the experience with my family and friends. My mom was especially intrigued by our friendship because it wasn't easy for us to communicate at first, yet we still formed such a strong bond. By the end of the school year, she was able to have full conversations with me. I even got to learn more about her life back in Honduras. She also shared with me how important her culture viewed family, which has stuck with me all these years. Unfortunately, Flor moved away the following year, but during our fun year of getting to know each other, she was my best friend.

Looking back, I am grateful that I was introduced to a different culture at such a young age. It showed me that friendship doesn't require perfect communication; it requires kindness and effort. Now whenever I hear the word "flower" in Spanish, it reminds me of Flor and the unique friendship that we shared. Just like a flower, our friendship was simple, meaningful, and beautiful while it lasted. I am sharing this story because I think it is extremely important to look past the differences you have with others. Being kind and trying to put a smile on other faces is simple. A little bit of effort goes a long way into making others feel welcome despite differences.

## Diversity - Emilee Rible

Diversity can mean different things to different people since it's such a broad word. When I think of the definition of diversity, it explains the differences between various groups of people, whether it be their religion, culture, gender, or race. I find these differences to be intriguing and of interest because deep down I feel people of a variety of backgrounds are the same person on the inside, just like you and me. People make diversity seem way stronger than it really is, like how you see people get treated. Segregation and judgement is a big part of diversity. Many times, people are quick to judge another when they just don't understand your culture and the meanings behind everything about your beliefs. It is just needing to find the time to understand and form acceptance of other people from what they believe and think.

I grew up in a town where just about everyone's skin color was pretty much the same as mine, and we all spoke the same language with similar customs and beliefs. You could say my earliest idea of diversity was pretty limited. Then, when I was about ten years old, I met a girl on the playground who was really nice, and that I am still friends with today. Her name is Yanira, and without realizing it at the time, she opened my eyes to a whole new world of experiences when I would go to her house. At first, I was unsure about spending time at her home because, in addition to English, she spoke another language I could not understand, ate unfamiliar foods I had never seen, and even celebrated a holiday I had never heard of before. Eventually, though, I became more comfortable, and my uncertainty turned to curiosity from the warm and caring environment of their home, and our relationship

really blossomed. Yanira and I began to cook together, swapping recipes, where she showed me how to make pupusas and I showed her how to make Irish soda bread. Her family would invite me to a celebration where they honored those who had passed away, called The Day of the Dead, and my family invited them to our house for their first Thanksgiving. These interactions really taught me that to be able to understand diversity, you have to be open to trusting others with new experiences.

Diversity to me is the difference between all types of people, from who they are to how they get treated. But that does not make them the same person we are; they are just different from their culture. It is just a word to explain someone's culture and what they believe. It does not make them any better or worse than anyone else; it is just a label for a word explaining different ways of viewing cultures. It is ok for people to believe in different things and still be able to co-exist. We are all human.

Diversity is definitely important because it brings a great deal of balance and perspective. Everyone has different meanings of diversity or even thoughts on this topic, but in the end, diversity is just a word; it is the actual implementation of including everyone that is most important. Diversity matters to me because, from personal experience, I feel it has expanded my knowledge that we need to be all-inclusive to one another. My hope is that we continue to grow as humans and be more accepting of all those around us.



*Photo by James DeMarco*

## At the Bottom of a Princess Backpack - Chloe Scharp

My mom helped me get ready for my school's daddy-daughter dance. I picked out my favorite bow and my nicest dress. I felt a weight on my chest as I waited to leave. "He's here!" my mom announced. My uncle walked through my front door with a smile on his face, ready to take me.

As my teacher handed out the invitations to the dance, I was immediately aware I was different. How was I supposed to go to the daddy-daughter dance without a dad? While the other girls excitedly talked about what they would wear, I was reminded of the one thing I didn't have. I shoved the invitation to the bottom of my pink, princess book bag, hoping it would disappear.

That night, my mom pulled the crumpled-up invitation from my bag. "Don't you want to go with all your friends?" she asked. Of course, I did. I wanted to feel normal. I didn't want to be the exception. The next day, my mom had made arrangements for my uncle to take me.

Still, it felt wrong. The dance wasn't designed for someone like me. Every word in its title felt like a reminder of what was missing. My mom reassured me that I would regret not going. I nodded, trying to believe her.

The next morning, I came to school with the biggest smile on my face. I was thrilled to tell my friends I was going, to talk about dresses and shoes, to finally feel like I belonged. At recess, I excitedly told a little girl I thought was my friend. She stared at me and asked, "Why are you going to the dance?"

My face burned red, and tears began to well in my eyes. Why was I going? I didn't have a dad. I hid in the corner of the playground as the loud chaos of my classmates playing around me echoed. In that moment, the desire to fit in was stronger than my embarrassment. I went home without telling my mom what had happened.

The night of the dance, I timidly walked into the elaborately decorated gymnasium with my uncle by my side. Streamers hung from the ceiling, and music echoed off the walls. I could hear what others were thinking, their voices radiating through my head. Why is she here? She doesn't belong. I spent most of the evening hiding in the bathroom, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was out of place. That was my last daddy-daughter dance.

Even now, in small moments, I still feel like that little girl desperate to belong. Seeing a father walking his daughter through a grocery store or down the aisle brings me back to that night. It reminds me how early we learn what it feels like to be different and how deeply those differences can hurt.

I don't hide anymore. I no longer shove parts of myself to the bottom of a princess backpack or retreat to corners to avoid standing out. I've learned that my family, though different from what was expected, was never something to be self-conscious of. Belonging isn't found in pretending to be the same. It's found in being seen and included exactly as you are.

## Culture in All Its Forms - Taylor Shields

Culture is a word I hear used constantly, both in academic settings and in everyday conversation, yet it often means something slightly different depending on the context. At its core, culture describes the shared beliefs, values, customs, and practices that shape how people live and interact with one another. It influences how we communicate, what we value, how we celebrate, and even how we understand ourselves. While the term can be broad and sometimes abstract, its many meanings are deeply connected by the idea of shared experience and identity.

One of the most common uses of the word culture refers to a group of people's traditions and ways of life. This includes language, religion, family structures, food, clothing, and social norms. Growing up, I didn't always think about culture as something I actively participated in, it simply felt "normal." Over time, however, I began to realize that the routines and values I grew up with were shaped by cultural influences passed down through family and community. Holidays, meals shared with family, and even the way emotions were expressed all reflected cultural traditions. In this sense, culture provides individuals with a framework for understanding the world and their place within it.

Culture is also used to describe shared interests or social environments, such as pop culture, sports culture, or campus culture. These forms of culture are not necessarily tied to heritage or ethnicity, but they still strongly influence behavior and identity. For example, pop culture connects people through music, movies, fashion, and social media trends. I've noticed how easily conversations can start around a popular show or song, even with people from very different backgrounds. This type of culture creates common ground and helps people feel connected, even if those connections are temporary or constantly changing.

Another important use of the word culture appears in organizational or workplace settings. Workplace culture describes the values, expectations, and behaviors that define how people interact in a professional environment. Whether a workplace emphasizes teamwork, independence, empathy, or efficiency can greatly

impact morale and productivity. As a student preparing for a career in healthcare, I've become more aware of how important positive workplace culture is. In fields like nursing, where collaboration and compassion are essential, culture can directly affect both employee well-being and patient outcomes. This shows that culture is not just about tradition, it actively shapes decision-making and daily interactions.

The word culture is even used in scientific contexts, such as cell culture, where it refers to the environment in which cells are grown and maintained. Although this meaning is very different from social culture, the connection is still clear. Just as cells are influenced by their surroundings, people are shaped by the cultural environments they are raised in. Our beliefs, behaviors, and opportunities are often a reflection of the environments we grow within, reinforcing the idea that culture is a powerful shaping force.

Despite its many uses, all definitions of culture share a common theme: connection. Culture connects individuals to groups, past traditions to present behaviors, and personal identity to shared experience. It helps explain why people may think or act differently, while also highlighting what they have in common. Reflecting on the many meanings of culture has helped me better understand both myself and others. Culture is not just something we observe, it is something we live every day, often without realizing how deeply it influences who we are and how we navigate the world.

## America Runs on... Diversity (An Opinionated Article) - Brennan Siburt

Diversity is a huge staple in the world, especially in the United States. For centuries, the United States of America has been built upon a wide range of cultures and ethnicities, and they have been a major defining factor for the country. Even before the country was ever founded, there was still a large variety of cultures living here, dating all the way back to the 1500s. This included Africans, Asians, Indians, Hawaiians, and many other Indigenous Americans. All in all, this shows the sheer importance of diversity in the United States, but sadly, it seems that this aspect of our country is being threatened as we speak.

In recent times, immigration has been at the forefront of political debate as innocent residents are being deported for unjust and xenophobic reasons. With this being such a prevalent issue in the past few months, it threatens what the U.S. has been built upon for so long and begs the question of what will happen. For one, we will not have nearly as many differentiating opinions and characteristics in our country. Having so many different cultures in our states allows us to experience and learn so much about what amazing things other people bring to our land, such as unique cuisine, activities, music, practices, and holidays. Without these, I would argue that our country would be much more bland and nowhere as special as it is with the representation we have now. Think of your family's cooking; it's like no other because it introduces so many different backgrounds and styles of cooking. If you were to strip away all of those techniques and seasonings, it would be a boring dish to eat.

Going along with this idea, we will have a poor democracy that does not reflect who we are as a nation. Part of democracy is having representation and diversity, which includes people of all different ethnicities, genders, ages, and sexualities. If we were to deport residents who were deemed as "different", we would have a very lackluster democracy with minimal differing opinions and beliefs. This would arguably no longer stand for what a democracy is intended to be, but

rather a manipulative dictatorship. This also cherry-picks the people who are voting in the polls, further limiting democracy and what it is meant for.

Outside of political importances, diversity comes in dozens of other forms. As brought up previously, diversity brings our country together through so many different practices and activities. These include cuisine, music, and special holidays, which all give our day to day lives so much flair and enjoyment without us even realizing it. Some noteworthy cuisines that find their way in establishing themselves into our culinary repertoire include dishes from Italy and Mexico respectively, such as pizza, various pasta dishes, enchiladas, fajitas, and much more. As for the music we listen to everyday, we hear so many different culturally diverse instruments and genres, such as fiddles (Italy), mandolins (Ireland), and Erhus (China), along with plenty of genres representing these unique instruments. In my personal experience, some cultural music that is popular in the US is Irish, Asian, and Latin, which all have found ways to incorporate themselves into different US events and celebrations around the year. And thirdly, there are a handful of days that have been adopted into our American culture as widely accepted national holidays, such as Diwali (Hindu), Yom Kippur (Jewish), Kwanzaa (Africa), and, arguably the most popular, St. Patrick's Day (Irish). All of these seemingly small additions to our daily lives add so much to our country and give us so much to enjoy via the spice it brings.

All things considered, diversity is one of the most important things, not only to the United States, but to the entire world as a whole. Living in a world where everyone thinks the same, lives the same, and feels the same would be extremely boring, hence why diversity is so important. We are nothing short of blessed to have such an amazing world with so many different cultures, ethnicities, and orientations and sometimes the best thing to do is accept it with love.

## Please do not forget us - Jillian Smith

People have heard a lot about diversity over the years. They believe diversity is mostly about gender and race. However, diversity is more than just gender and race. Diversity is everyone who exists. God may have created everyone differently, but we are all in his image, even the ones who are struggling with mental illness. I am saying this because for most of my life I struggled with mental illness, and I am very tired of my illness being a joke to people. I am also very tired of being called weak or being told to stand in the background and not to mention my mental illness.

Another thing I am tired of is being either seen as a taboo or not being seen at all. Over the years I lost friendships due to lack of understanding. I have been threatened with losing my job over panic attacks at certain jobs I have had in life, even though I am not a risk to anyone. I hear kids in the street yelling Bipolar as if it is some kind of joke. It is no joke. And despite having bipolar and PTSD, I am not a violent person at all. These kids were not yelling about me, but deep down I wish I could have told them that they have no idea what it is actually like. People have this false belief that mood disorders are just like PMS. I am here to tell you it is not. Please take a moment to just imagine having voices in your head calling you a worthless skank. And since my wiring is different it feels as if sometimes, I am a worthless skank even though deep down I know it is not true.

Not all mood disorders are caused by a so-called chemical imbalance. It is also caused by horrible experiences. In my childhood I was abused at home and for thirteen years I was sent to a school where kids like me were also abused. I was told by some of these teachers that if I called the police on them, they would tell the police I lied and I would be arrested instead. This is more than just gas lighting, this is brainwashing. By writing this essay I want people to know that despite my mental illness I am not a violent person. And this by writing this essay I want people to know that we are not all evil. Some of us are helpful, understanding and sensitive, not just to ourselves. Since I struggle, I can help others who are struggling as well. Is that what we are on this earth for? In my mind we are not here to hurt others but to help them. For Jesus says help thy neighbor. And also, to be clear, it is not the illness that makes the person evil or good. Personality is key.

Please show some kindness and help a person in need. Because we exist, just like you.

And all we ask for is kindness, from beginning to end. Do not forget about us.

## The Pendulum - Nick Stiles

When I think about the word diversity, I see the variety of backgrounds, identities, and experiences that shape who we are as individuals and as communities. Diversity includes differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, culture, language, and ability, but it also goes beyond visible traits. Diversity reflects the way people think, feel, and view the world. To me, diversity means recognizing and respecting the differences and realizing that everyone has something valuable to bring to the table. Diversity isn't just about how we are different; it means seeing those differences and learning from them so we can grow together as a community. I fully believe that diversity is about inclusion and acceptance. This is because everybody should have a seat at the table and should be allowed to have a voice in conversation, no matter what. Diversity is important because it creates an environment where different perspectives can come together to produce better ideas and more meaningful connections. When I define diversity, I don't believe that it is just a checklist of people's differences. Diversity means embracing the idea that not one person is better than another, and our differences can make the world a better place while making us stronger.

On a personal level, diversity to me means openness, curiosity, and respect. I believe that as we get older, we step away from our own experiences, and we start to listen to other people's experiences. Every person has a unique background that leads to the way they think and act in this life. As I've gotten older, I've realized that I am not the center and most important person in the world. Learning this has taught me that not everyone being alike does not mean I don't have to treat them with respect. Diversity has taught me that there is no such thing as stereotypes, and everyone is different for a reason. When I meet someone whose life is completely different from mine, it helps me to understand diversity even more. Gaining personal growth is something that you get out of this, and not only does it help me, but it also allows me to share and help others understand what diversity really means.

I believe that diversity is important because it gets us ready for the real world. In schools, workplaces, and communities, we meet people from all kinds of backgrounds. Learning to collaborate with people who think differently leads to more creativity and education. Being in a diverse group can lead to a bunch of different ideas and opinions. Putting yourself in a diverse group setting is important because if you stay in a group with people who think and act like you, you usually create misunderstandings about others. Interacting with different groups helps you build different ideas and understandings.

Diversity is not an easy subject to understand. Differences can lead to disagreements or discomfort, especially when people aren't familiar with others'

beliefs or traditions. I believe that diversity takes patience, communication, and a willingness to learn. Everyone needs to value tradition rather than judging and assuming things about other people. True diversity is more than just saying you understand it, but rather being around it and applying it to yourself. Applying yourself to these situations helps you to understand what it truly means, so that we are not making assumptions about people's differences.

Diversity ultimately represents the possibility. It allows individuals to be themselves while still being part of a larger group. Diversity strengthens acceptance and innovation and helps communities. I believe that when we honor diversity, we create environments where everyone has the opportunity to succeed and belong. My personal definition of diversity continues to grow as I meet new people and learn more about the world. Diversity means recognizing the uniqueness of every person and understanding that our differences are something to celebrate, not fear.

Diversity is more than a concept; it is a way of seeing and valuing the world. It means appreciating our differences, challenging our assumptions, and working to create spaces where everyone feels respected and included. To me, diversity needs to be recognized and appreciated by everyone in the world. If the world embraces diversity more, we are taking better steps to become a better world and community.



*Photo by Bridget Cooper*

## Diversity - Kiersten Stockdale

Could you imagine if everyone was the same? How would the world be if everyone had the same beliefs, the same ideas, the same personality, etc.? Imagine living in a world like this where everyone looks similar, they all have the same thoughts, ideas, and act the same. This would be a world without diversity. There would be no change, no new thoughts, nothing exciting because everyone would always agree and things would just remain the same. Now imagine a world where everyone is different. Everyone has new ideas, new ways of thinking, different experiences, and everyone has something to offer. Things would constantly be changing and everyone would learn new things. Which world would you rather live in?

Diversity is the difference in cultures that make society a better place. It is a beautiful mixture of cultures coming together in a club, workplace, school, or neighborhood to create something new. We are able to learn and grow from each other, and being in a diverse environment is the best way to do that. Think about it like this: when you have a group project, do you like to take control of everything? Or do you like when people can collaborate with you and give you a new point of view to learn from? Diversity makes the world a better place. America used to be described as a melting pot, which means that we are accepting of different cultures and diverse people. This means that everyone is welcome to have their own individuality and ways of thinking and creating.

When people are given the opportunity to share their culture with people from different backgrounds, not only do we get to learn, get new insights on ideas, and experience new things, but new creations and ways of living are born as a result. For example, every family has holiday traditions. These traditions come from different cultures and learning about these can inspire another family to create new traditions that will be used for generations to come. Your favorite holiday traditions may not have even come from your culture! If everyone thought alike and all had the same way of doing things, nothing new could be created.

In closing, a diverse world is a caring, accepting, and creative world. In a diverse world people from all different backgrounds can come together, feel comfortable, and create something beautiful. I know personally that I would rather live in a diverse world and get to experience new cultures. I would also rather grow from new knowledge and experiences than stay in a world that never changes. After all, a world where everyone is the same as me would be boring.

## Onam - Alina Thomas

The warm morning sun came streaming through my bedroom window, gently waking me as the scent of fresh flowers and fried banana chips filled the air. It was finally Onam again, the celebration that brings colors of joy, belonging, and nostalgia to my home. Every year, sometime between August and September, the festivities of Onam spring to life. It has always been one of my favorite cultural celebrations as a South Indian. Originating in Kerala, a vibrant state in the southern part of India, Onam is an ancient Hindu festival that once marked the rice harvest. Over time, it has evolved into a cultural celebration embraced by people of all faiths, symbolizing harmony, prosperity, and unity across communities.

On this long-awaited morning, I stared at the clock hanging on my bedroom wall and counted down the seconds, waiting eagerly for the moment I could begin preparing for the day's celebrations. Unable to wait any longer, I jumped out of bed and hurried to my dresser, where my kasavu saree, a traditional cream-colored attire with a golden border, was already ironed and neatly laid out. With help from my mother, I carefully draped the saree and pleated it in such a way that the cloth fell smoothly like a flowy skirt. I then plaited my hair into a long braid and tucked jasmine flowers into it, a Kerala staple that filled the air with its sweet fragrance. I finished my look by applying kajal under my eyes and placing a small pottu on my forehead. As I went downstairs, the house was already alive with chatter and warmth as guests began to arrive. I greeted my relatives, offering them cups of steaming chai as people settled in for the festivities.

The part of Onam I looked forward to the most, the Pookalam, was about to begin. A vibrant assortment of flowers had been arranged on the floor, their petals forming beautiful geometric designs. As they spread out the variety of flowers on the ground in the beautiful pattern, I admired the delicate design taking shape. My own designs were never perfect, but the joy of creating something together as a family filled me with happiness. As we placed the final petals, laughter and conversation blended with the smell of spices drifting from the kitchen.

Soon, the aroma of the Onasadya, the grand vegetarian feast served on banana leaves, filled every corner of the house. This traditional meal includes a variety of flavorful dishes, all arranged around a generous bed of rice. In our culture, food is served on banana leaves during Onam and eaten with our hands, a custom that somehow makes every bite more delicious. My cousins sat cross-legged on the floor in a circle, eating together while laughter echoed throughout the house as we savored each dish. Just as we finished our meals and finally folded our banana leaves, dessert was served— payasam, a sweet creamy pudding that completed the meal perfectly.

As I watched the younger children run around the house in their bright, colorful clothes, I felt a deep sense of unity. I was reminded of how every home, whether rich or poor, shared the same traditions today and celebrated with beautiful flower arrangements, delicious food, and joyful laughter. Onam was never a celebration for just one religion or one family as it belonged to everyone, bringing people of all religions together to celebrate harmony and prosperity. Now, as I look back, Onam continues to remind me of unity and joy, things that matter the most. While I have not had the opportunity to celebrate Onam in India, I'm grateful for all the traditions we've retained and kept alive. With every flower petal, every shared meal, and every smile, the tradition of Onam follows us, keeping our heritage alive no matter where we are.

## A Review of Yayoi Kusama: *Lingering Dream*, 1949 - Nhu Tran

Known for iconic polka-dot pieces and performative rooms, Yayoi Kusama was one of the most revolutionary female artists of New York's rising modern art scene in the '60s. Along with more well-known pieces like "Obliteration Room" and "Dots Obsession," Kusama's earlier artworks were just as awe-inspiring. "Lingering Dream," which was created in 1949 and appeared in her museum in 2022, is my personal favorite.

Most notable in the painting, the eerie landscape was grotesque rather than realistic. Kusama utilized the most primary shade of red to make the plants stand out as the main object to gather attention, while the contrasting greyish-blue of the background creates the atmosphere. Additionally, the soil was covered with an unhealthy brown that was bled through by the malnourished stems and broken leaves. This resembles entities of nightmares; some look like a gory man-eating creature, while others seem to be suffering from excruciating pain. Thus, although the piece was painted with the intention of displaying it as two-dimensional, the painting seems to come to life due to its gruesome nature.



*Photo of Yayoi Kusama: Lingering Dream, 1949*

It was known for this collection that Yayoi Kusama experimented with different techniques such as oil painting, watercolor, pastel, and what is connected to her the most: Nihonga, a Japanese style of painting. Thus, it is reflected in the painting as a very distinctive and stylistic choice of Kusama that brings out the cultural aspect of her identity.

Gut-wrenching and fantastical, Yayoi Kusama's appreciation for tangible objects tied with her spiritual growth has invented the impactful creator she is today. While enduring the effects of mental instability caused by trauma, Kusama journaled her complex emotions in the form of illustrations. To her, it is the gateway to express the unspoken thoughts and indescribable pain that women like her had to go through

## **A Path to a More Beautiful World - Autumn Walsh**

I took a deep breath; the aroma of pine filled my nose as I played on my trampoline. With each jump, I could see the surrounding woods I grew up in. Suddenly, I heard a friendly hello from my next-door neighbor. His name is Wyatt, and he looked just like me, with white skin and light-colored eyes. Most people in my hometown looked the same, and that was normal for me. We all had similar beliefs, culture, and customs. I thought life was what was in front of me, but later down my path, I would learn the beauty of diversity.

I walked through the familiar halls; I've been there since kindergarten, and for the last time, I left the building no longer a sixth grader. Throughout those years, I made amazing friends and learned vital skills, but one factor that was lacking was a different culture. Each year, we all celebrated and learned about Christmas, Easter, and other white/Christian holidays. I didn't know any different, and that summer was the last time I lacked that knowledge.

When I stepped foot into middle school, almost everything was the same, but I noticed someone different in the first period. Her skin color was different than mine, and it wasn't the first time I saw someone like that, but it was the first time I shared a classroom with someone from a different culture. I didn't know how to feel, but I was curious about her, so I decided to sit next to her and introduce myself. From there, we became best friends, and I learned so many new things. Through her, I began to learn new perspectives, traditions, and experiences from my own. She helped me see that the world I knew was much bigger and much more beautiful than I knew.

From that point forward, I began meeting a variety of new people and continued to grow my knowledge of diversity. I love getting to know people and their viewpoints. I have gotten to know people from all different colors, sexualities, and cultures. I am a whole new person with these experiences. Now that I am in college, I get to experience it even more. The world would be nothing without diversity; it is what makes it beautiful.

## Christmas - Jordan Williamson

The snow is light and powdery on the ground. Not enough for my neighbor's son to build his first snowman, but enough for my dogs to prance through and track back through the house as they wait to be dried off. The heater is kicked up a few degrees, and the white lights dangle in the cold wind outside on the gutter; the textbook definition of a perfect winter's morning. I can see my breath, my adrenaline is high, and suddenly I'm 8 years old again, shaking my mom awake to open the SpongeBob-wrapped presents beneath my tree. My cat always got tangled up in the branches because he didn't know better. He'd lie somewhere against the fake trunk, and it suddenly became a round of hide and seek. Christmas is about the time we share, a celebration of life, and the traditions we partake in.

My family has always been small, so it's very easy to stick together during the holiday. We head up to my aunt's house, enjoy good food, and I take on the role of babysitter for my cousins. My mom wraps the presents that I get to pick out, because I was never good at folding the wrapping paper. My aunt records and posts it on her Facebook. My uncle chases me around the house and enjoys the time we spend together. Christmas is a crucial part of my family's celebration, even if by the end of the night, I'd rather be non-verbal.

Something I always look forward to around the holidays is the cooking, even if it's not me in the kitchen. I love sitting at the counter, bothering my mom while she makes her share, taste-testing for her, and being pulled into helping measure ingredients or another miscellaneous task. A part of me feels involved, even if being a talkative spectator isn't much assistance. I like to ask my mom questions about the way she cooks, enough that she asks how many more questions I'm going to have. Going out for the holidays gives me a feeling of whimsy, something I yearn to feel again as soon as the holiday season ends. Especially now, being in college, the holiday's final days signal a restart of November's work. To be "back on the grind" is almost haunting, wanting to whimsy forever alongside the people I love. And when December 1st returns again, such whimsy will return, and the joy I share as I unwrap my own presents will come with it.



*Photo by Anna Bellitta*

## Why Diversity is Important - Jadyr Wirkus

Diversity. A simple term that carries so much weight in our world. Although diversity may seem like a straightforward concept at first glance, the influences it has on all of us trickle down way deeper than meets the eye. It is so much more than a surface-level observation. It is reflected through culture, religion, upbringing, economic status, appearances, gender, nationality, and much more. Diversity is what makes our world lively, and our conversations valuable.

Every time we interact with a person, we have the opportunity to learn and grow because, luckily for us, everyone is different. Each person walks a unique path in life and faces different challenges and circumstances that shape who they are as a person. As they grow from these experiences, they develop new perspectives, skills, knowledge, and much more that they can share with others, which helps them learn as well. Speaking with someone who holds different beliefs from you can even be more productive than having a conversation with someone who does. Discussions that are filled with variety and contrast open the door for discovering new ways of considering topics, and even fresh ideas that combine the perspectives of each party. Diversity leads to innovation and inspiration. It acts as a vital catalyst that sends a conversation into a new dimension of thinking. Spending time with people from other backgrounds can develop life-changing relationships that can have a truly immense and mutually beneficial impact on us.

Even if we examine diversity at the surface level, it still adds so many dynamics and has a profound influence that often goes unappreciated in our day-to-day lives. Imagine a world where every smile you saw was the same. Every face told the same story, and there was never anything that kept the day exciting. Diversity adds beauty to everything around us. Diverse people make diverse art, diverse music, and diverse moments. Without diversity, the world would be just a bland, never-ending cycle of predictability. It would be like a flower garden where all the flowers are the same and always bloom at the same time. No new flowers would ever blossom, and you would always know exactly what to expect when Spring comes around. However, if the flower garden was full of all different types of

flowers, it would be full of color and surprises. New flowers could grow, and the garden would be constantly changing. Such a bright and exciting garden could even attract new pollinators that allow the garden to reach its full potential and beauty. This is why we need a world of people different from one another, to make our garden as enthralling and ever-expanding as possible.

In today's society, some seem to think diversity is some sort of flaw. A problem that has to be solved. However, I think that diversity is exactly what we need nowadays. We need to learn and grow from those different from us. We must take the initiative to connect with the people who appear or sound unlike us. Not only do we have to connect with them, but we have to embrace everything that those relationships can provide us because, in the end, those relationships can be the ones that enhance our lives.



*Photo by Michael McClinton*

## Beyond the City Lights: Lessons in Survival, Gratitude, and Giving

Back - Aniket Yadav

Moving away from home at the age of 10, I learned to navigate life independently. I moved from my modest hometown of a few hundred people to a huge city of hundreds of thousands in my parents' pursuit to provide me with the best possible opportunity for education.

In a large city that was Butwal, more than three hours from my hometown, my world was a tiny 60-square-foot room, serving as both a kitchen and bedroom. Here, I mastered the art of cooking for myself and managing my daily chores. I remember the first meal I cooked for myself — a simple dish of rice and lentils. It was undercooked and bland, but it marked the start of a profound learning curve. Each burned pan and over-spiced curry was not just a culinary misstep, but a lesson in patience, perseverance, and self-improvement. This early induction into self-sufficiency was born out of necessity, shaping a resilience that I've carried into my adult life.

As I got accepted into Kathmandu Model College, a well-renowned high school in Nepal, with a full scholarship, I was set to move to another city again, this time, even further than Butwal.

My father's cousin broke his promise over a text. I received the message, "I am sorry! I cannot pick you up," upon my arrival in Kathmandu three years ago. It was a familiar reminder of the self-sufficiency I had practiced for years. Despite the overwhelming sense of being alone in a sprawling city, my past experiences have equipped me with the skills to adapt and persevere. I managed to find my hostel, asking for support from locals, a skill that has been my bread and butter for survival since my time in Birgunj. My experiences of self-reliance were more than just life lessons; they highlighted a privilege sharply contrasted by my brother's path. Unlike me, who had the chance for formal education, he was compelled to seek labor work in Malaysia, earning less than \$300 a month. Juggling school assignments and

managing a tight budget in my world starkly differed from his reality of long, exhausting hours in a factory, thousands of miles from home.

Our infrequent phone calls shed light on his daily struggles with hard labor and homesickness, a poignant reminder of the educational and opportunistic privileges I had, which were out of his reach. His experience, marked by strenuous work and the fight for dignity in a foreign land, far from the comforts of home, was a constant, heart wrenching illumination of the starkly different paths our lives had taken. It instilled in me a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunities I received, ones that, unfortunately, were not available to him.

Today, in Kathmandu, I extend the support I once needed to newcomers, helping them settle in, from picking them up at the bus station to finding them suitable accommodations. I am mindful of the struggles they face, acknowledging that each person's journey is laced with unique challenges and privileges.

This role has grown beyond my efforts; it has fostered a community of mutual support. When I am unable to assist, others whom I've helped in the past step forward, continuing this cycle of kindness and assistance, which is one of my greatest achievements

My journey, from finding my way in a tiny room to offering a helping hand in the vastness of the city, reflects a simple but profound truth: life is about resilience, empathy, and the connections we build with others. It's a story that has taught me to appreciate the good fortune I've had and to understand the deeper emotions that come with it. More than anything, it's shown me the value of using what I've learned to support those around me, creating a circle of care and mutual support that stands as a quiet symbol of hope and togetherness.



# From the Editors

## The Mighty Pen Editorial Board

The Mighty Pen Editorial Board is a group of dedicated students who support creativity through the written word. Understanding the empowerment that comes with self-expression, the editors both submit to the literary magazine themselves and edit the work of their peers, gaining valuable professional experience in the process. The collaborative effort brings forth a spirited publication of student work through *Pilgrimages* each year.



*Photo by Dr. Virginia Lindak*

The Mighty Pen Editorial Board members are Ava DiBabbo, Amanda Fennell, Carly Katrinak, Tyler Walsh, Alex Hayden, Anna Bellitta, Bella Mazzaferro (left to right) and Rebecca Koester (not pictured).

We would like to thank students Allison Carcella, Gabriel Ortiz-Jimenez, and Scout Walker for their contributions to the editing team during the Fall semester.

## Anna Bellitta

Anna loves writing because it gives her the ability to create poems that capture her feelings. Her goal when writing is for the readers to feel the emotion and depth of the poem. Anna's love for writing also comes from the written word, which she appreciates because it gives her the time to pick and choose each word and line as many times as she needs to until it's perfect. Anna is an English Professional Writing major.

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### The Sun Sets

The Sun Sets,  
     pink cotton candy  
     dancing around it.  
 To my right  
     on the pond  
     that's been frozen upon  
     with days of ice and snow.  
 There's a girl spinning  
     in circles with no care whether  
 She trips and falls—  
     next to her  
     there's another, standing,  
 her hands in her pockets,  
     wishing she could do the same—  
 Frightened at the thought of falling.  
 To my left  
     there's a kid walking  
     holding his mom's hand.  
 She's teaching him the importance  
     of looking before crossing the street.  
 He's shivering— despite his many jackets—  
     but he knows he's safe  
     because his mom's with him.  
 When they breathe  
     their breath freezes in the air.  
 When the wind blows  
     their bodies tense in the cold  
 But they can hold onto each other  
     knowing the cold won't last for much longer.



*Photo by Anna Bellitta*

## Ava DiBabbo

Ava DiBabbo is a junior majoring in Secondary Education and English. She is thrilled to be part of *Pilgrimages* and to contribute to a publication that features student voices. Ava loves writing because it offers a glimpse into someone's mind and perspective. She believes it is a powerful art form and is grateful that the school provides students with the opportunity to share their work.

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### Ida

"Ma'am, excuse me."

I feel a poke in my shoulder. I jump and open my eyes. I turn my head and see a young man, no older than seventeen, standing above me. "Yes?" I say, nervous about why this boy is talking to me.

"Excuse me," he says again as he pushes past me to sit down. How rude these young folks are these days. He plops himself right next to me. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jack." He grabs my hand and shakes it very clumsily, moving it up and down and up and down. "This is my very first time on the train. I'm going to California for work. And you are?"

"I am Ida. Ide Feola," I say quietly.

"I hope you do not mind me asking, but what are you doing on this long journey all by yourself? And the overnight train of all times to travel. This is not meant for a lady."

"It is none of your business, sir," I say sharply, staring straight ahead. I cling to my small purse in my lap. He does not need to know I am wearing the only clothes I could bring. I have finally left my husband after fifty-five years.

Jack looks at me with pity. I hate that look. "Well, I will be your chaperone then. Do not be offended, but you are much too old to be alone on a train like this."

I think of the last time I looked in the mirror. Hundreds of wrinkles cover my face. My bones ache when I stand. My hands shake when I button my blouse. I guess I am old. Maybe I should act like it.

"Why, thank you, Jack," I force myself to say. "Now, I am going to take a nap. I will talk to you in the morning."

I lean back against the stiff seat and close my eyes. The train rocks gently beneath me, and the steady chug lulls me to sleep.

I am a little girl again, running through our peach farm in Italy. The sun is warm on my back and the air smells of peaches and grass. My mother calls my name from our house. Then, everything changes. I am thirteen and on a crowded

ship to America. I am on Ellis Island. I do not understand the language. We do not know where to go. I am cold and hungry.

I see our slum apartment. The thin walls. The shouting downstairs. I see Ed smiling at me, I look into his deep, blue eyes. He brings me bread everyday and tells me I am pretty. I do not believe him. I think this is love and he will be the life I am meant to have.

I see myself holding my baby boy, Eddie. His tiny fingers curl around mine. For two months, he was my entire life. Then I see the small coffin, his black dress, my own crying echo in my ears. I feel the first time Ed hits me. I am shocked more than in pain. I see him apologize, bringing me flowers at my mother's house. I go back to him. The years blur together. Hit and sorry, hit and sorry, hit and sorry. I become quiet and meek, I deserve this. I never left until now, creeping out in the middle of the night, after Ed came home in a drunken rage. Never again will I let him touch me, never again.

The train keeps moving through the night, carrying me farther and farther from home. Farther from Ed. Farther from the woman I was.

I open my eyes once in the dark. Jack is asleep beside me, his head tipped forward, mouth slightly open. He is just a boy, trying to be kind in the only way he knows. I feel no anger now. Only tiredness, a deep heavy tiredness. California, I think. I will wake up there. Nothing could contain my excitement. I close my eyes and rest.

*Morning light creeps through the train windows as the conductor walks the aisle, calling for passengers to wake up. Jack stirs and turns toward Ida. He grazes his hand on her arm, her skin is cold. Her face is calm, almost peaceful, but her chest does not rise.*

## Amanda Fennell

Amanda Fennell is a senior Professional Writing and Theology major. This is her second year as an editor of Pilgrimages. In the age of AI, she believes that it is important to recognize that original written work is art, therapy, and self-expression, not a formula of words on a page. Moreover, each person has an inimitable voice and a story worth sharing. She thanks everyone who contributed to this issue of Pilgrimages in any capacity, and thanks them for sharing a piece of themselves.

Amanda's poetry collection, "Uplifted" was one of the Gunard B. Carlson Memorial Foundation Creative Writing Contest 2025 Winners. Read her poems on pages 27-31.



*Photo by Amanda Fennell*

## Alex Hayden

Alex is *Pilgrimages'* Editor in Chief and a junior Professional Writing major and Sports Communications minor. His love for writing comes from his seventh grade English teacher, Miss Bereznak. Not only is he a working journalist, but in his free time he also writes screenplays, fiction, and poetry.

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### visions of man

scraped knees, bruised elbows, grass-stained shorts  
things i had as a child  
but never in the way i wanted

running, jumping, landing  
onto stale mulch and unforgiving concrete  
just like the other boys  
only- i wasn't one of them  
not yet.

manhood came in glimpses  
mirages of "too poofy" dresses and unkempt hair  
late nights on the xbox and that one ex-boyfriend's hoodie  
slowly, He started falling into place

"nice to meet you. my name is William."  
William? yes, William.  
you're like me, too,  
men together now

running, jumping, landing  
into the selves we always were

## how lucky are we

how lucky are we  
to live in a world  
where the universe is at our fingertips

a world of color, light, and communication  
to build connections, friendships, and more life

i have found such things  
in all corners of our world  
across boundaries of language and culture  
into a mutual understanding and respect

it is a privilege to engage  
with what these strangers are willing to share  
to love without limit  
and to be so involved



*Photo by Andrew Toothman*

## Bees in the Library- A screenplay

INT. UNDERWATER LIBRARY - AFTERNOON

We open in the middle of a bustling underwater library. Fish and merpeople alike swim around outside, visible through the glass walls of the building.

CORAL, a young, strict librarian, floats behind the large, ornate circulation desk. She busies herself with checking in a pile of recently returned books.

The library door pushes open, and Finn enters, hurriedly carrying a large conch shell in both arms.

We follow Finn to a table in the corner, where two other young merpeople are already frantically flipping through pages of a worn textbook.

FINN trips on one of their bags and goes flying into the table. It breaks in half, and the conch falls from his grasp, landing on top of the textbook.

The conch begins to glow a vibrant color and emit a low humming noise.

FINN

(Dusting himself off,  
looking at the shell in  
fear)

What the

THE CONCH

(Narrating a page of the  
textbook. It's actually  
the opening credits of  
*Bee Movie (2007)*. The  
volume increases as the  
conch continues to  
speak.)

"According to all known laws of aviation, there is no way a bee should be able to fly. Its wings are too small to get its fat little body off the ground. The bee, of course, flies anyway, because bees don't care what humans think is impossible".

Finn jumps on the conch as though it were a grenade in an attempt to deafen the noise. He tries to break it with his fists, but it does not budge.

CORAL, hearing the sound, swims over the desk and across the room, leaving a trail of ink in her wake.

2.

CORAL

Who dares to vociferate in my library?

Finn and the group freeze.

Coral swims closer to Finn and pulls him up by his tunic. The conch rolls away on the floor.

THE CONCH

(Still reciting *Bee Movie*  
(2007))

Yellow, black. Yellow, black.  
Yellow, black. Ooh, black and  
yellow! Let's shake it up a little.

Coral tosses Finn to the side and swims to the conch. She picks it up and visibly cringes at the sound it makes.

Coral swims back to the circulation desk, shell in hand, and slams it into the book return drawer. She pushes a red button on the desk.

We zoom out to the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The conch is launched from deep underwater and flies into the air, striking a seagull in its path.

The conch continues its momentum, eventually leaving Earth's atmosphere in a ball of flames. We see it exit the galaxy and soon crash through the window of a coffee shop floating in space.

The conch lands in a sink, sparking.

THE CONCH (CONT'D)

(In a broken, robotic  
tone, repeating the  
line.)

Yellow, black. Yellow, black.  
Yellow, black. Yellow, black.  
Yellow, black.

FADE TO BLACK.



*Photo by Andrew Toothman*

## Carly Katrinak

Carly is a double major in Theology and Professional Writing. When she's not working on homework, she's probably taking care of her three crazy cats or spending time on one of her hobbies. Currently, she's interested in fermentation.

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### The Christmas Whiskey

The horn of the train announced its impending departure with a blaring shout as one of its passengers stepped off the train. A man put down his suitcase as he pulled his gloves over his hands and adjusted the collar of his coat. Strangers passed him as they walked into Monroe, carrying presents alongside their luggage. His smile was reminiscent of warm embers in a dying fire as he stood upright, his white scarf fluttering his pink cheeks. He picked up his suitcase and began walking to his destination.

The blistering winds of Middlesex County caressed his face as they often did during his walk from the station, and the sun emitted a dismal glow behind the clouds as he gazed at the sky. He returned his gaze forward and walked no more than a mile before coming to a halt before a plain townhouse. It had a simple roof and dark bricks that blended in with the other homes on the street. Its complacency with its unembellished structural siblings had made it difficult to identify on his first few visits, and it was only in recent years that he could notice its own unique features. He walked up the clean stairs before knocking on the large door before him. He glanced around as he waited, familiar with the rapid footsteps that raced towards the door. The door opened, and he was left face-to-face with a young man. To his surprise, his nephew appeared to force a grin as his breath wavered, his hands trembling.

"Hey, Uncle Dave!" His nephew greeted him. Dave smiled before giving him a brief hug, pulling away with a pat on the back.

"It's good to see ya, Eric. Where's your mother?" Eric averted his eyes as his uncle entered the home and closed the door behind him.

"She's doing her hair."

Uncle Dave's smile dropped, and he glanced at him. "Does your father know?"

"No, she hasn't called him."

Dave nodded and observed the home, removing his coat and scarf. His brother liked to joke that he believed the only saving grace of the townhouse was his wife's tasteful home décor. Yet, within the organized interior, a stack of papers caught his eye. They rested on the console table by the door, a signature at the bottom of one

of the pages. Eric nearly tripped as he grabbed the bundle of paper, tucking it under his arm. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Whiskey."

Eric glanced over his shoulder with a frown. "Dad might get upset."

"I know."

Eric exhaled through his nostrils before strutting to the kitchen, and Dave sauntered into the living room. In the left corner of the room, a neglected Christmas tree stood. It could only boast the lights that had been wrapped around it and the absent ornaments that once decorated it years ago. A television set was left playing *Miracle on 34th Street* as Dave noticed a glass of milk knocked onto the floor, with a sheet of soggy paper towel near the pale pool of liquid. Grabbing the roll next to it, Dave got on his knees to clean up the spill. He heard Eric's footsteps down the hall grow louder until they eventually ceased.

"Uncle Dave, what are you doing? I was going to clean that up." Eric said, putting the glass of whiskey on the table as he helped Dave clean. Suddenly, they heard the door open. They flinched as they heard a familiar whistle, and Eric gathered the sheets of paper towel as he sprinted into the kitchen. Dave stood up, turning to face his brother.

"Merry Christmas, Mark." His brother's head was turned in the direction of the kitchen, his mouth slightly parted as his eyebrows were knitted together. He turned his critical gaze at Dave, hanging his hat.

"Merry Christmas, Dave. You're here early."

"And you're late."

"I had to deliver some documents; the boss wouldn't let me do it any earlier." After putting his coat in the closet, he glanced around the house. "Where's Nancy?" Dave took a sip of his whiskey as he averted his eyes. Mark sneered before sniffing the air. "Did someone spill milk?"

"Not that I know of." Mark stared at him as Nancy descended the stairs, her high heels clacking with each step. Her shoulders were slumped, her neat hair disheveled. She seemed lost in her thoughts, only becoming alert once she noticed her husband.

"Welcome home, Mark."

"Where's Paul?"

"He's upstairs taking a nap."

"Nap? Did he have a spell?" Nancy twitched, blinking thrice. "He did, didn't he?"

"No, he's just tired, that's all. You know how he's been trying to find a job. The poor thing is exhausted." She glanced at Dave, "Thanks for coming for Christmas, Dave. How about we head to the dining room for dinner? Martha helped me make it, so everything's set up."

Mark pressed his lips together before leading the group to the dining room. Eric was already seated, and he began to set his napkin on his lap once he noticed them. Mark took a seat at the head of the table, and the family said grace before eating dinner in silence.

The table's only light was provided by tall, lit candles to set an intimate atmosphere, but Dave only found it to be suffocating. He tried to focus on the flavor of his meal, but his gaze continuously drifted to Mark. Dave tilted his glass, the amber liquid sliding to the left before he raised it to his lips. He frowned, and placed the glass on the table, unable to take a gulp of the beverage. He couldn't do it, not this time.

"Dave, why do you keep looking at me like that?"

Dave hesitated to speak before lowering his head. "Don't send him to the institution, Mark." Mark slowed his chewing as he listened. "He already doesn't have a life; at least let him stay with family." Nancy's eyes widened before they darted to Eric. He turned his head away. Mark swallowed his food, glancing at Nancy before returning his gaze to Dave with a frown. Nancy gripped onto the napkin on her lap as she looked at Mark.

"What are you talking about?" Mark put down his fork, rubbing his face.

She leaned forward, grabbing his forearm. "You're going to send him to an institution? Why?"

"He's twenty-eight years old, baby. I can't support him forever."

"Don't you dare call me baby. That's my child you're talking about."

"Nancy, I didn't make this decision lightly. His doctor said they would be able to help him better than we could. He's not exactly—" Mark cut himself off, pressing his lips together. Nancy narrowed her eyes, releasing his forearm.

"He's not what?"

"Don't make me say it."

"No, go on." Mark stood up, facing away from his wife.

"He's not exactly what, Mark?"

"Nancy, we need to put our feelings aside in this situation."

"Stop acting like you're doing this for him," she said as she shot up from her seat. "You could never accept him, and you made sure he knew it by hiding him from everyone."

"What, so you want me to humiliate ourselves by pretending that he's normal?"

"Don't give me that. The only reason you wanted another son was because you were ashamed of Paul. At least have the decency to admit it!" Mark lowered his head as he crossed his arms. "He just wants to talk to you, Mark. But you've been distant ever since he had his first spell. Do you know what it's like to sit by his side for hours, and he suddenly asks, 'Where's Dad?' What am I supposed to say, Mark?"

It's been twenty years, and I've run out of excuses for you. And now you're going to send him to an institution!"

"I have a mathematics degree, not a medical degree! I can't afford a man with epilepsy for the rest of my life! And what's he going to do when I die, Nancy? Huh?" Nancy went silent, biting her lip as she tried to hold back her sobs. Mark's eyes darted between Eric and Dave before storming out of the room, his steps echoing down the hall before the front door slammed shut. Dave lifted his head slightly and noticed Eric frozen still as he stared down at his plate. Dave lowered his gaze, putting down his utensils. He placed his hand over Nancy's own. She sniffled as she looked at him, shivering.

"I'll take him, Nancy."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "How are you going to afford his medicine?"

"I'm not. He's going to pay for it."

"But how?"

"I'm forty-five. It's unlikely I'll be getting married anytime soon, and I'll need someone to take over my business."

"He can't, Dave. He couldn't even finish college."

"How do we know if we don't let him be a man?" Dave asked. Nancy blinked, leaning back slightly.

Eric's head shot up, his eyebrows knitted together. "Uncle Dave, you're not serious, right?"

"I'm absolutely serious." Dave said with a smile. "And who knows? He might even meet someone."

"No one would want to risk their children being like him, Uncle Dave. That's why he's a bachelor." Dave stared at him with a frown before sliding his glass of whiskey over to Eric.

"You're not going to have any more? You've barely touched it."

"I've grown tired of the taste," Dave said. He exited the dining room and walked down the hall. He stopped by his coat, taking out a box in green gift wrapping. He made his way up the stairs and knocked on Paul's door. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Dave winced as he heard each heavy step grow closer to the door. The door creaked open, a single brown eye peaking at him before it crinkled.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle Dave. I'm sorry, but I can't go downstairs to exchange gifts. It's too bright down there for me right now."

"I'm not here to just exchange gifts. I'm here to help you pack." The eye went wide.

"Where are am I going?"

"Back to Philadelphia with me. I heard you were looking for a job, and now you've got one." The door opened further, revealing Paul's beaming face. "Now lay

down on the bed and tell me which clothes you want and whatever else you'd like to bring. I know you're probably aching from head to toe."



*Photo by Andrew Toothman*

## Rebecca Koester

Rebecca Koester is a senior English: Professional Writing major with a concentration in Creative Writing and an editor for the literary magazine. She loves crafting stories that bring new worlds to life. When she's not writing or editing, she can usually be found sewing, crocheting, or getting lost in a good book.

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### The Adventures of King Phineas: The Umvaca Awakens

At the edge of the realm, where sunlight spilled across woven plains and the horizon stretched far beyond sight, King Phineas stood vigilant. The wind swept across the kingdom, lifting his magnificent coat in waves that shimmered like golden banners. Every glance revealed the expanse of his dominion: the Great Hall where treasures rested, the northern corridors where the Braided Guardians lay coiled in silent watch, the scattered fragments of the Sacred Tumbleweeds—soft clumps of golden fur shed from the King himself that had gathered over time into drifting masses across the plains—bearing witness to past victories, and, in the distance, the untamed forests of No-Man's Land, dark and mysterious, whispering of perils yet unknown. Beyond the woods, he knew, lay lands he could not reach, but even so, he ruled all that he could see.

The kingdom was at peace. The Treasury of Alpha Cookies gleamed in the northern pantry, filled with tiny, human-shaped confections representing the bravest citizens of the realm. Each cookie was a symbol of loyalty and courage, baked with care in the hidden chambers of the Two-Legged Giants, who, for reasons unknown, sometimes served as unwitting allies or capricious obstacles. The Braided Guardians, six feet of woven strength and memory, thick cords of knotted fiber worn smooth by countless trials and battles, were placed strategically along the plains to protect the Tumbleweeds and the Treasury alike. Every relic, every artifact, had been honed through years of vigilance and countless skirmishes.

Phineas's gaze swept the kingdom. To the north, the sunlight shimmered off the Great Hall, the banners of golden threads flapping in the wind. To the west, the plains stretched endlessly, dotted with fragments of Tumbleweeds from previous victories. To the east, the No-Man's Land lay dark and untamed, a warning that not all was within his grasp. The wind carried scents of earth and old victories, distant fires, and the faint aroma of baked goods from the Alpha Cookie Treasury. For now, the kingdom rested.

Yet peace is a fragile thing. The air trembled faintly, and shadows stretched long across the plains. The Braided Guardians shifted, coils tightening with unspoken tension, while the Sacred Tumbleweeds quivered where they lay, golden clumps of fur drifting like relics of victories past. For a moment, the kingdom

seemed to hold its breath. Then came the sound: a distant vibration beneath the floorboards, low at first, but growing steadily, a relentless grinding that pulsed through the very bones of the realm. Dust lifted from the plains, curling in the air, carrying the acrid scent of electricity and metal. Phineas's ears twitched as the first tendrils of heat and metallic breath reached him, a warning that the nightmare of legend had returned.

A hot, metallic breath seeped into the air. The scent of dust and something electric crept across the plains. From the northern corridor emerged a monstrous maw—wide and hollow, rimmed with rigid spinning teeth that churned with merciless hunger. Its roar was not a roar but a shrieking grind, a mechanical wail that split the silence and swallowed all lesser sounds.

The Umvaca had awakened.

It moved with a dreadful inevitability, a massive shadow grinding across the northern halls. Sparks of dust rose in its wake, and the air trembled with its approach. To lesser rulers, it might have seemed a mere nuisance, a contraption of the Two-Legged Giants. But King Phineas knew it for what it truly was: a devourer of treasures, a destroyer of Tumbleweeds, a menace to all that he held sacred. From the northern corridor emerged the Umvaca, monstrous and hollow-mouthed, its spinning teeth churning with merciless hunger. Sparks of debris rattled through the halls, and the roar—or more accurately, the shrieking grind—splintered the calm into chaos. The first Tumbleweed, resting among its brethren, was seized in an instant, unraveling midair as it was sucked into the maw. Golden strands spiraled and vanished, leaving a faint whisper of what had been. The sight struck Phineas like a physical blow, a cruel reminder that no vigilance, no preparation, could prevent the initial shock of such a force.

"To arms!" he roared, muscles coiling as he launched forward. "Defend the Treasury! Guard the Braided Guardians! Protect the Alpha Cookies! The kingdom shall not fall!"

The Braided Guardians dragged their thick, knotted bodies into formation, bracing against the floor's tremors. Tumbleweeds rolled frantically, colliding in confusion, while the Alpha Cookies quivered at the edge of their pantry, vulnerable and trembling under the weight of the looming disaster. Phineas darted from one end of the kingdom to the other, snapping and lunging, barking defiance into the storm of grinding metal. He shoved relics into shadowed corners, nudged Guardians back into line, and positioned himself between the Treasury and the advancing maw, every instinct screaming that this was not a battle to win but a catastrophe to survive.

The Umvaca lunged.

The floor shook. Dust choked the air. Sparks rained like tiny falling stars. Phineas lunged again, jaws snapping at the beast's edge, teeth clashing with metal

in defiance, a futile gesture against the unstoppable. The hall became a whirlwind of chaos—twisting, spinning, unrelenting. Debris struck his legs. The scent of burned wood and churned air burned his nostrils. Around him, the kingdom quaked. And still the Umvaca advanced, a grinding storm that would not relent.

Out of nowhere, the Two-Legged Giants intervened, their massive hands lifting the Guardians from carefully chosen posts and depositing them in careless heaps beside the Great Bed. Exposed, disordered, and vulnerable, the Braided Guardians could only writhe in frayed helplessness. Phineas's eyes narrowed, and for a heartbeat, he contemplated defiance, but the truth settled cold and unyielding: this foe could not be conquered. It could only be survived. His heart pounded in his chest, yet beneath the fear, his mind sharpened. Retreat was not cowardice—it was strategy, born from countless imagined campaigns, from wisdom hard-earned in the safety of planning. It was survival.

Thus began the Great Evacuation. Phineas herded what Tumbleweeds he could toward the shadowed sanctuary beneath the Great Table, guided the trembling Alpha Cookies, and nudged the surviving Guardians into the Lair of Last Refuge. Every movement carried consequences; every choice weighed against loss. The Umvaca's grinding maw tore through the kingdom with relentless inevitability, and Phineas watched from the shadows as chaos reigned. He forced himself to remain still, convincing himself this was strategy. His heart hammered in his chest. Hours—or perhaps only minutes—passed in relentless chaos. Dust coated his coat. The scent of churned air burned in his lungs. Each movement required judgment and speed. He imagined battles that had never occurred, victories that might never come—but he remained undaunted.

Finally, the Umvaca shuddered and withdrew, grinding slowly back toward its lair. Its spinning teeth slowed, its roar diminished to a low mechanical growl, and then, silence. When Phineas finally stepped from the shadows, the devastation revealed itself in full: the plains stripped bare, Tumbleweeds nearly gone, frayed strands of golden fur scattered like confetti. The Braided Guardians lay battered, their fibers torn and loosened. The Treasury door sagged slightly, dust settling over trembling Alpha Cookies. The loss was crushing, a stark ledger of what had been sacrificed in order to survive.

Yet despite the ruin, the heart of the kingdom still beat, fragile but intact. Phineas inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of dust and scorched wood. He had survived. He had preserved what he could. Though much had been taken, he and his kingdom would live to see another day.

## In Twilight's Hush

In twilight's hush, the forest comes alive,  
Beneath the canopy, a realm unseen.  
Where shadows dance and moonbeams softly strive,  
To pierce the darkness with their silver sheen.

The rustle of the leaves, a whispered song,  
As creatures stir amidst the wooded maze.  
In shadows deep, the ancient trees prolong,  
Their silent vigil through the starry blaze.

The nightingale, with melody profound,  
Sings lullabies to all who dare to roam.  
While echoes of the wolves, a haunting sound,  
Remind us of the wild, untamed unknown.

Oh, forest of the night, enchanted deep,  
In your embrace, the soul finds restful sleep.

## Bella Mazzaferro

Bella loves writing and creative expression because it gives everyone a chance to express feelings and thoughts in a tangible way. Writing allows her to turn strong emotion into something beautiful and share her deepest wonders with others. Writing has brought her so much joy over the years and continues to brighten her days. Bella is double-majoring in English and Professional Writing.

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### Soliloquy of a Soldier

Who are you, my demon, this thing of nightmares?  
 This thing I didn't want, this that my soul bares.  
 Awoken by screaming, it's often my own.  
 Craving comfort and yet I'm dreading my home.  
 They feed us hard stones and a swine's dinner slop.  
 They treat us like sinners upon us falls the crop.

The barracks are lonely, can't hear myself think.  
 My hair is in patches. My skin white, not pink.  
 Mortar fire glows, they've taken my sight.  
 Nights in the hospital, they still make me fight.  
 Withdrawn to myself, I let years pass me by.  
 Eighteen years young they say, my gray hairs lie.

Sent off much too early to a rich man's war  
 Their daft quarrels mean nothing to me, the poor.  
 Yet here I am waist deep in swamp mire.  
 My toes are taken by frostbite's desire.  
 I'll be handsomely paid for my woes they say  
 But I know I won't live to see that day.

I shot a man on Sunday, hit square between the eyes  
 With a wife and kids, in no man's land he lies.  
 My brother's shot through, his brains on my sides.  
 Today in white Angels' chariots he rides.  
 Thus, into tomorrow's day I go afraid.  
 Barely schoolboys into soldiers, they've made.

## Tyler Walsh

Tyler is a Professional Writing major and Film Studies and American and British Literature minor, who's been a part of *Pilgrimages* for the past two years.

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### A Hollow Sanctuary

They built a chapel  
from my silence,  
its stones pressed  
from the weight of  
unshed screams.  
Every hymn was a lock  
upon my tongue,  
every prayer a knife  
against my skin.

I bowed before their  
shadowed altar,  
learned to bleed  
instead of speak.  
My arms became the  
scripture they  
demanded,  
each line carved in  
trembling confession,  
red verses spilling  
down like holy wine,  
a psalm etched in pain  
where no one prays.

The mirror keeps their  
sermons for me,  
reflecting scars as  
stained-glass  
windows,  
fragments of a broken



*Illustration by Tyler Walsh*

saint  
who never chose the  
crown of thorns she  
wears.

And still, the ghosts  
return to sing,  
a choir of hands that  
once bound me,  
their voices rotting  
sweet in my marrow.  
I am both vessel and  
sacrifice,  
a hollow sanctuary  
waiting  
for mercy th  
at never  
descends.



*Illustration by Tyler Walsh*

## Love/Hate

You are the venom  
that sings in my veins,  
a lullaby of rusted  
glass and broken  
teeth.

I drink you down like  
fire,  
and wake each dawn  
choking on ash.

Every kiss is a blade,  
still I press my lips to  
it,  
hungering for the  
wound,  
for the red silence it  
leaves behind.

You make me hate  
myself,  
peel the skin from my  
name  
until I cannot tell  
where your voice ends  
and mine begins.

I whisper my anger

into your skin,  
yet my hands still  
tremble to touch you.  
I despise you with a  
purity holy enough  
to circle back into  
love.

You are the grave I  
sleep inside,  
and the only thing  
that feels like home.  
I would claw my way  
out,  
but I'd only come  
running back  
to the shovel in your  
hands.

So hold me, hurt me,  
hollow me,  
I am yours, as  
unconditionally  
as an addict to the  
needle,  
as a moth to the dark  
flame.

## After the Storm

I left your orbit,  
but gravity  
remembers me.  
Every step forward  
is pulled back by the  
echo of your hands,  
the phantom weight  
of your voice  
pressing against my  
spine.

I built a door and  
closed it,  
yet the hinges groan  
with your name.  
I opened windows for  
air,  
but the silence still  
tastes of you,  
a trace I cannot wash  
away.

I escaped the storm of  
you,  
but the sky inside me  
still burns.  
Lightning carved  
patterns in my veins,  
and though the rain

has stopped,  
I am flooded endlessly.

And yet,  
in the quiet after the  
storm,  
I feel something softer  
stirring.  
You remain in the  
scars,  
but scars are proof of  
healing.  
You remain in my  
shadow,  
but even shadows  
fade in the sun.



*Illustration by Tyler Walsh*

