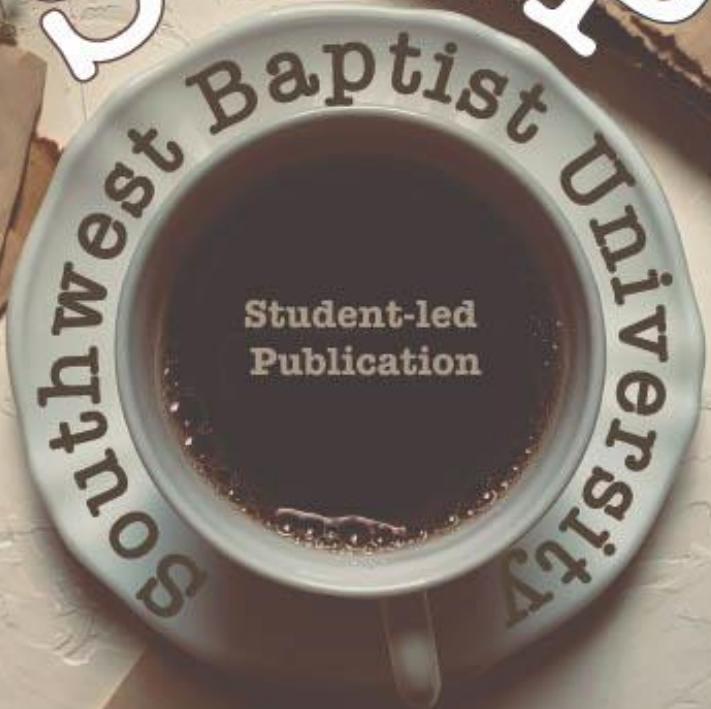


“Exploring different types of writing expanded the scope of my creativity.”

Kristalyn Riefer

SSCOP



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VISUAL ART

"Reflections on the Trinity" - Reagan Gerton

POETRY

"Silence" - Chandler Hathcock

That man was not designed to be alone
Is truth as old as time and stars above
But narrow is the road which leads to love
And at its end, a wall of bitter stone
Its shadow chokes out every seed I've sown
And silent is the song of every dove
From which the tale within my dream was wove
O echo of that day let me be shown!
The stones give way to grant a vision true
A glimpse of one so elegant and fair
Her smile sweet and eyes of clearest blue
All framed amidst a sea of auburn hair
I reach my hand to her... then stones renew
My hope is gone and silence fills the air.

"Bead of Beauty and Blitz" - Kristalyn Riefer

There's a spot on the wall

With eyes that shine,

Its little body

As green as pine.

It watches as I inch

Closer still,

Curious of the way

It sits so chill.

Then it jumps.

Chaos ensues.

"Unwritten" - Leah Wirth

The fire in my quill will quell when put to paper

The ink, like living blood, dries and drifts like vapor

The paper, white as bone, stays barren as a grave

For many things have lived there and always pass away

A battlefield of stories, each eager to be made

But killing all the others is a heavy price to pay

Ideas, like smoke, form a blurred and nascent guise

And only clear away when the writing passion dies

The hollow spot inside my heart is where dismay has fitten

And all who hold a pen know this:

The pain of "have not written"

"Broken Sonnet" - A. F. Youngblood

Opening grave plots scatter around me,

Yawning wide their dirty mouths.

They call me and call me, gnashing and weeping,

Wailing of sorrows with garbled tongues.

I run to each; I soothe and murmur

Sweet comforts and future advices,

Till slowly, softly, they fall back asleep

Under the spell of my graces, faces

That I keep in pickling jars in my heart.

So I wander the sleeping graves at night,

Brushing away cobwebs and nightmares,

Tending the garden deep in my soul

And burying old dreams there.

"Conversations with Insanity: Again, Again, Again" - Kayla Coltrin

Insanity, doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

It's a cycle, isn't it?

I shape myself to fit this world–

speak softer,

stand taller,

speak louder,

shrink smaller–

and yet, I watch

from the edge of it all,

a spectator in a life I can't touch,

no matter how hard **I try**.

They move,

they breathe,

they laugh,

and **I remain** here,

shattering and repairing,

like a doll abandoned on the shelf,

too fragile to be held.

"Talk to them like they're human," but am I even human?

They say it's just talking,

as if I haven't mapped out entire conversations

like war plans

only to lose them

the moment someone says, "Hi."

Is it really a learning curve or just a cliff?

Are they really just skills or is it innate,

a piece that makes the puzzle whole?

I search for answers

only to find echoes reminding me of what I'm not.

Every mistake splinters my surface.

Yet, **I gather the pieces,**

trying to rebuild what never stays intact.

I need it to work.

I have to **believe** it will.

I tell myself **it will get easier.**

That if I find the right information,

the right words,

the right version of myself,

something will finally click.

Maybe my cracks will heal.

Maybe I'll find the hidden bolt

that makes me work the way I'm supposed to.

Maybe, just maybe, this time,

I'll be who I should be.

Maybe that's insanity–

to think **I can** ever **be what I want to be.**

But I can't stop. Not yet.

"This Poem is Bad" - Alyson Alcantara

This poem is bad.

It's boring and gross, and quite frankly, it's sad.

It's not rewarding writing, there's no rhythm or rhyme,

So lock me up, because my writing's a sin.

The format's all wrong, and what's even worse,

the punctuations so bad i think its been cursed.

The alliteration is awfully awkward and often, well, just not good,

And I think my personification ran off to rule the neighborhood.

The lines are on strike,

as they dance

off the page,

And it seams my diktonariy's bin loked in a cage.

My similes are like... um... well, shoot.

All this figurative language is a thorn in my boot!

THE TONE HAS BEEN MURDERED AND LIES BLEEDING OFF TO THE SIDE,

And them rules of grammar ain't somethin i abide by.

You see, I'm not a poet, and no matter how hard I try,

My poetry's so bad it could make a grown man cry.

But isn't the point of writing to grow?

To make little mistakes that let your flaws show?

A perfectly pristine poem may show polish and poise,

But learning from your mistakes helps you find your voice.

So make bad poetry and bad writing, but whatever you do,

Grow from your mistakes to make a better you.

"Freeing Trapped Thoughts" - Leah Wirth

Break my skull open

Stories flow and bleed on paper

Painful, quick, but free

"Where My Soul Travels" - Laura Dixon

Does your soul seem to travel with music,
Its pieces detaching and surfing the trills of flutes,
Or battering down on the rhythmic thumping of the drums,
As the melodies cross the limitless boundary of the sky?

It carries me to lands I could never see.

The lilting Celtic tunes take me to mythical lands,
To places where the grass comforts and the air lets me breathe,
Where little people with hairy feet welcome me home.
There are places where a prince sweeps me up in his arms,
And places painted with the souls of those whose hands long to sing.
All of these are places where magic can catch me when I fall.

There are places where my hand rests in another that strives to protect,
And my arm links with one firm in chivalry.
There are places where my shoulders carry only triumph and camaraderie,
And my chest feels the expanse of repose and deep devotion for those I love.

There are places where my body fears no frailty and flourishes in fortitude,
And my boots write fleeting stories of their many adventures.

It carries me to places where I don't have to be me.

Does your soul seem to travel with music,
Only to shatter ever so slightly when you come back,
Passing once again across the limitless boundary of the sky
Having realized you never crossed the sky at all?

"A Gnome's Lost Pie" - Kayla Coltrin

The sky was blue and the grass bright green.

There she sat, a child— age three.

Thoughts of fairytale worlds filled up her mind.

Her name was Sarah and she was so kind.

Sarah stared up at the sky,

But suddenly something caught her eye.

She stood and stared at the source: a gnome's piece of pie.

Wobbling, she walked to it nearby.

Sarah picked up the happy surprise.

This piece of pie was small in size.

It looked like rock, but Sarah could tell

That it was no rock. No, it was a spell.

"A gnome must have lost his dessert," she thought.

She stared at the sprinkles that sparkled a lot.

Turning it sideways, she saw all its faults.

The triangle's edges and layers all knots.

With a quick thought, she sniffed and smelled,
But the pie's sweetness had not prevailed.
Even the texture would have befooled;
It wasn't sticky and already cooled.

Sarah thought for a moment but decided quite quick
That with the spell's smartness, she better not lick,
Not wanting to taste something like brick.
She set down the pie and it made a faint click.

Her thoughts still on fairytales, she wobbled away,
Daydreaming of gnomes wanting to play.
"Maybe the gnome will come back for his pie,
But for right now, I'll leave it goodbye."

"Passionate but Imperfect" - Leah Wirth

Another page was finished

But always blemish bitten

Further plots abandoned

And once again rewritten

So many hopes, dreams, delights

A fountain from my pen

But every day, I lose my flame

And fail to write again



VISUAL ART

“Sent into the World” - Makenzie Zimmerman

“The photo captures one of the most recognizable landmarks at the heart of Southwest Baptist University’s campus. The open Bible, resting upon a globe, serves as a reminder how SBU is deeply rooted in faith and committed to equipping students to carry out the

Great Commission beyond these walls and into the world.”

SHORT STORIES

“Lemon Raspberry” - Chandler Hathcock

Everyone knows that the flavor of death is lemon raspberry. And that was exactly what I tasted this morning at breakfast.

You see, it had been thirteen years since Archipelago had turned on the Machine. I can almost remember the news broadcast, watching men and women in long white coats shuffle around the massive chrome wall. Then someone flipped a lever, and the wall lit up with a thousand red and green bulbs as gears began to turn inside the Machine.

And then came the towers. The Machine itself is topped with a large metal spire, covered in satellites and constantly emitting a mechanical whir. It wasn't long before every street in the world had their own tower installed, courtesy of Archipelago. It only took a few months before the low hum became normal in our ears. And ever since, we all spend the first few minutes of every morning wondering what our water will taste like. Wondering what our fate will be.

Archipelago calls it science, but the rational among us know that it's probably magic. They go on and on about “axiomatic neurons” and “targeting proto-receptors in the velar region,” but they might as well be casting incantations in Latin.

No matter what Archipelago did with the Machine, we all know how it works. A couple of PSAs at school was enough to tell us all we needed to know. Just drink your water, think about the taste, and check the guidebook. Except nobody needs to check the guidebook anymore. Thirteen years of flipping through the pages every morning with your breakfast was enough to know just about everything.

The last couple days for me had been mint, and sure enough, I had gotten good grades on my geometry homework. Three weeks ago, I tasted apple, and I found a \$20 bill on my walk home from school. The system worked. The Machine was always right. Always.

That's why, when I tasted lemon raspberry this morning, I knew better than to scream and cry. "Mom!" I call up.

Yes, sweetie?" My mother answers from her room.

"If I got lemon raspberry, can I skip school today?"

I hear a crash and thunderous footsteps as my mother runs into the kitchen.

"WHAT?" she yells, clearly angry at my flippancy.

I got lemon raspberry. I'm going to die today," I say, as if I were reading her the weather. "I'd rather not go to school. Can I go bowling and get ice cream instead?" I take another sip of my water. Death doesn't taste so bad, I suppose.

Mom looks at me with horror, clenching her fists. "Isabella Antoinette Smith," she responds angrily, "you will not talk to me that way. You're lying. You can't possibly be telling the truth. Stop it. What flavor did you get today?"

I sigh and set the glass back down. "Like I said, lemon raspberry. I'm gonna die. Can I at least have a good last day?"

My mom bursts into tears, running her hands through her hair. "Why are you doing this to me? You're either lying to me or you're not, and either way, it's awful."

Geez, Mom. I've lived with this machine for most of my life. These things happen. Nine kids at school got lemon raspberry last month. Guess what? They died. It just... it just happens." I shrug. "I can't argue with it."

How on earth are you taking this so well?" Mom asks, her voice indicating that she was starting to believe me. She sits down at one of the kitchen stools.

I'm 16, I write poetry, and I listen to Taylor Swift," I deadpan. "It's a wonder I don't actively want to die."

You make a good point," my older brother Michael says as he walks into the room. "Lemon raspberry?"

I nod.

It was nice knowing you, Isa," he says genuinely, patting me on the shoulder before grabbing an apple from the fruit basket. "I got bubblegum this morning, so I think I'm finally going to ask Sarah out."

Awesome!" I respond, happy for him. "I know it's going to go well. The Machine is always right."

He snaps and makes finger guns at me. "You know it. Welp, I'm headed off to school." He looks at Mom. "You're not gonna make her go, right? It's not like her grades matter now."

My mom just looks at both of us with sheer unbridled terror. "I... just go to school, Michael. Isabella, you can skip today. But you're not going anywhere. If you're telling the truth, I'm not going to let you put yourself in a position to get hurt."

I roll my eyes and get up from the kitchen table. "Mind if I go read?"

She sighs and grimaces, burying her face in her hands again. "Sure." As I walk away, I hear her mutter, "What did I do to deserve this..."

The morning passes without incident. Michael texts me that Sarah said yes, and I laugh when he asks, "Are you dead yet?" As per my mom's request, I spend the day reading, pausing around noon for a subdued lunch with Mom.

I know how much you love my chicken alfredo," Mom whispers, setting down two plates on the dining room table before seating herself across from me.

Thank you," I say, as I dig in for the first delicious bite. After a few minutes, I pause and take a sip of water. Still lemon raspberry. I clear my throat. "Glad it hasn't happened yet. I might get a chance to see Dad."

Mom starts sobbing and immediately gets up from the table, her fork and knife clattering onto her plate. I sigh, finish the last few bites of my pasta, and head back upstairs to finish my book.

Hours pass, and still nothing has happened. I check my watch. 4:35. Michael should just be getting out of chess club. I'll probably get another chance to see him. And Dad too.

As I sit on my bed, I begin to wonder if the Machine was really *always* right. I mean, everyone else had died on the day they tasted lemon raspberry. Why wasn't it happening to me? Sure, I don't want to die, but it was the Machine's order. The Machine was never wrong. Never. Archipelago had said so.

I hear a loud knock at my bedroom door that jolts me out of my musings. "Come in," I call out, expecting Mom. Or maybe Dad was home now. I had just heard some voices and crying in the living room.

Instead, a man and woman in starched white lab coats march into my room, their polished boots squeaking across the wooden floors. The woman carries a clipboard and pen, and the man has a gun. "Isabella Antoinette Smith?" the woman asks, her voice as clinical as her outfit.

"Y-yes?" I say warily, my eyes flickering between the woman and the gun. "And you are?"

We're with Archipelago. Lemon Raspberry Division," she replies. "You have to die."

Oh, okay..." I begin, before suddenly stopping myself. "Wait a minute. This... this isn't right."

The woman raises her eyebrows. "How so?" She checks her wristwatch. "We have a couple minutes if you have any questions."

It's just... I thought the Machine was about fate, about destiny. If you're controlling the outcome, how is that fate?" I begin to hyperventilate, and I cannot bring myself to move.

She laughs. Actually laughs. "Oh, Miss Smith, you misunderstand. The Machine is fate. And that's what makes it so tricky to control. Because fate isn't as simple as the flavor of water."

I look at her skeptically, my voice quavering as I form my response. "But I thought the Machine is never wrong."

Correct," she answers cheerfully. "And we need to keep it that way. Dr. Song, fire when ready."

No! This is all wrong!" I cry, my fists clenching and my feet finally finding their will. "You're not the Machine. You can't decide my fate." I stand up and look down the barrel of the gun as my world crumbles around me.

Oh, yes, the Machine is always right," the woman says as she steps backward.
"Sometimes it's just less right than it should be. And what are we here for if not to fix that?"

The last thing I hear is the click of the trigger.

Report: Lemon Raspberry Correction #11,453,792

Subject: I.A. Smith

Time of Death: 4:43 PM

Notes:

Subject grew angry in its final moments. Expected death by natural causes/accident.

Perhaps our methods are not perfect. I recommend staging car accidents and robberies for less jarring results. Subject's parents were distraught. They have been compensated, but we will continue to monitor the household.

Hail the Machine.

Hail Archipelago.



VISUAL ART

"Prayer to the Light of the World" - Reagan Gerton

CREATIVE NONFICTION

“Dr. Frankenstein and the Monster in My Brain” - A. F. Youngblood

I took refuge in reading. In high school, books were my comfort, my lifeline and purpose. When my world lay in ruins, with petty locker notes and absent group chats, I broke open thousands of replacement universes. I swallowed their words like an addict, drowning my depression and loneliness in their drugged influence. I ate, drank, and *breathed* books.

Then I choked.

It was a Sunday in October; I was a sophomore. I wore my gauzy autumn dress with too-big, pointy shoes to church. Holding my Bible and notebook, I began the descent down the steep stairs to the basement. My shoes were longer than the treads, so I turned my foot at an awkward angle.

I took one wrong step, and those boots, those elf-toed goblins, caught. My weight pushed me forward, slowly, so slowly, and as I fell, I managed to look up at the bright light above the staircase. That light remained burned in my eyes, even as I crumpled and rolled down the purple padded stairs. I don't remember the fall, just that moth-stained light forever in my eyes, even as I realized I was on the ground and against the wall.

My first instinct was to laugh. There goes oaf-Alieah, tripping over her big feet and falling down the stairs. The laugh bubbled up in my throat (*Stupid! Stupid Ali!*), then my mother's face slid into view. I was smiling, but she was not.

"Alieah? Alieah? Can you—"

Her words slid away, crawling into a dark hole that wormed its way into my vision and ate everything. There was a moment of quiet emptiness before I came back.

Mother was there. Why? What was she doing? Then I remembered, ah yes, I fell down the stairs! (*Stupid, clumsy Alieah!*) I laughed, and as my mouth opened, I felt air on my cheeks. They were wet. Slimy, cold. Why?

I wanted to reach up and dry my face, but my hands didn't move. That was alright, though. I felt tired, so tired, and embarrassed and cold. I wanted to sleep for a while.

Mother asked me questions, too many to bother about or understand. *Where are you? What day is it? What is your name?* I knew I was at church, because that wood paneling existed nowhere else. But I didn't know why, that was a stupid question.

The men with the stretcher came a couple years and sleeps later, and then I was in an ambulance.

"Do you want medicine?" said the men with no faces.

"No thank you. I'm not hurting," I said.

"The patient is refusing medication," one of them said to the plastic pet on his shoulder.

Now they were angry at me, I could just tell, and I didn't want them *hate* me.

"Well I don't refuse..." I said.

Then they started spitting words at me, talking about the news stations and overdoses but this isn't bad and *fentanyl*. And I hated that word, and I wanted to cry, but then the needle was in my arm and I was *actually* crying. Then everything was far away, in a very cold place, where someone else was shivering on a stretcher and begging the faceless man monsters to not cut off her pretty dress to get to her neck.

I woke up cold in the hospital. My neck wasn't broken, they said, but I may have a brain bleed.

"Keep an eye on that," someone (I don't know who) recommended. "You have a concussion. Stay home for a bit."

And so I was packaged and passed off, sent back home while shivering in a hospital gown. The only thing I felt was this biting, ravenous cold; it lasted for hours. I was cold until I stumbled into bed, and wrapped in endless blankets, I slept for 30 hours.

The world hurt when I woke up. Light broke my brain into pieces. The next couple days passed in a shadowed haze, as I stumbled from bed to bathroom, eating soups and throwing them back up.

I itched to read. I needed to escape, so I cracked open my current novel, *Frankenstein*, and prepared to fall back into that dark and rainy world of the man and his monster. We were reading it for class, and I needed to catch up on lost time. I read the first sentence, then read it again—but there was nothing, no words or images in my brain.

I tried reading it again. *What?* I thought, my hands shaking. *What is this?* The words were bone-dry jars, emptied of all meaning.

Maybe the book is too hard for me right now, I told myself, staggering to my feet, even as a new wave of pain washed over my head. *Something easier, yes, something easier will do.*

I picked up *Percy Jackson*, my first childhood love. I slightly tore the cover as I fumbled for the first page. I read the first sentence. Again, nothing. It was as if the words were ancient runes, devoid of any meaning or emotion for me. My eyes sucked them in, but my brain spat them out undigested.

I sat down on the bed and cried, even as the tears lit fires in my eyes and charred my thoughts. *Who am I now?* I kept thinking. *Who am I now?* My identity was gone, lost in the words I could no longer understand. My concussion was a creature with needle teeth and slimy claws living in my brain and eating me from the inside out.

I rotted in my bed and watched TV for the next month. Spy movies and *Band of Brothers*, endless pictures I no longer remember, numbed my heart to the terrifying

possibility that I would never be the same again. *Who am I now?* I didn't know, and I didn't want to know.

I gradually reentered school, wandering the halls in dark sunglasses, crying and sleeping in the back of my literature classroom.

"Who is the true monster in Frankenstein?" My teacher's voice floated through my dreams, carrying broken, disformed images of a man who birthed a horror. Why create a monstrosity and just *leave it?* Why allow it to wander unseen in the recesses of his life, wrecking pain and death?

My reading ability came back in chunks and ground-up bits. On some days, words strung together like a sparkling beaded bracelet; on others, they flung apart and rattled across the ground. I had to bend and gather, bend and gather, until fewer words slipped through my clumsy fingers. I fought that bloody creature that stole my words. I beat it back with sharpened words, beat it into a pulp of humming anxiety that curled up in my soul and slept. With those words, Dr. Frankenstein could finally grow into a man in my mind, like a skeleton miraculously covered in flesh.

Who is the monster? Creator or created?

The question sat in a back room of my heart for a long while, ignored. It meant more than what I was willing to say or even think. I locked it away like I hid my newborn anxiety. *But who is the monster?* My teacher whispered.

One day, as I walked down the brown hallway of my school, the answer came.

I am.

The Monster wasn't my concussion. It wasn't my loss of words—it was the whispering voice that told me my worth was found in them.

Then where lies your identity? Dr. Frankenstein's voice was hissing, disgusted.

"I don't know," I whispered back.

But I would find out.

“Distance and Desperation” - Elizabeth Grace

At the end of my freshman year of college, I was excited to go home. I hadn't seen my family in months and missed them dearly. I especially missed my brother. He had a hard year, battling with his mental health. As someone who also struggles with mental health, I did my best to help him. As I was in Missouri and he was in North Dakota, there was nothing I could do besides talk to him and pray. My brother spent his fifteenth birthday in the psych ward of a hospital while I was states away, unable to visit him.

At the end of the spring semester, I packed my things and drove seventeen hours back home. My mom had a new boyfriend and they were very happy together. So happy, it seemed, they didn't care about anyone else. My mom was obsessed with her boyfriend and he liked the attention. So, they spent every waking moment together, often neglecting my brother and me.

My brother spent every other weekend with our dad. On those weekends, Mom went to her boyfriend's house and I was left alone. When Mom wasn't at work, she was in her room on the phone with her boyfriend. Any day she had off, she and her boyfriend went out, leaving my brother, who didn't have a job, alone until I came home from work. This caused me much stress. With his mental health issues, my brother shouldn't be left

alone. I worried this was going to cause a problem sooner or later. My worries were right.

One afternoon, Mom and her boyfriend went out, as usual. Before they left, Mom told me I needed to get out of my room and do something with my brother. Though I had no intention of doing so, I said I would. I can't remember much from that day. Maybe I was tired from working, or maybe I didn't want to be around people. Regardless of the reason, I stayed in my room when Mom left.

An hour later, my brother knocked on my door. He cracked open the door as I murmured for him to come in. I remember the look of panic on his face, how his hands shook as they clung to the chipped wood of the doorframe. He whispered something I couldn't hear, and I asked him to repeat himself as I sat up in my bed, worried.

My brother said he was going to die because he had taken a bunch of pills. He told me he was really scared.

I was terrified. My brother, my baby, the boy I had watched grow up came to me for help because he thought he was going to die.

I rushed to his room and demanded he give me the bottle. I didn't know what to do. Should I call an ambulance? They were expensive. We didn't have the money for that. But we lived an hour away from the nearest town. If my brother is going to die, he needs help right away, doesn't he? I called the poison control line because that was all I could think of. My hands trembled as I dialed the number, holding the empty bottle. I tried to stay calm for my brother's sake. When the operator told me to get him to a hospital immediately, I couldn't hold myself together any longer. In a split second of pain and panic, I couldn't hold back tears from flowing freely down my face. I didn't have time to crumble, I needed to get my brother help. We rushed out to my car. My brother had grabbed my inhaler before leaving. He handed it to me saying he was worried I would need it. How silly. My brother, afraid he was dying, thought of *me*. I laughed, wiping tears as I thanked him. We pulled out of the driveway and got to town in record time. As we sped down the road, I told my brother to put on some good music. If he's going to die, he should die listening to something he enjoys. He agreed and played *Epic: The Musical*.

We made it to the hospital where Mom was waiting. A nurse took my brother back and I stayed in the waiting room. There, away from him, I let myself break down. I sobbed. I cried and couldn't get myself to stop. My baby brother, the kindest, sweetest person I knew was going to die. We were best friends for so much of our childhoods. I tried to

help him grow, to become a better person than I was. I tried to protect him and to help him. But I failed. And because of my failure, he was going to die.

Some time passed. I sat for hours in a cold plastic chair waiting for the worst news of my life. Finally, my mom came out. She told me my brother was going to be fine. The hospital was going to keep him overnight and monitor his condition, but he would be ok.

I don't think I've thanked God more for anything.

A nurse let me into my brother's room and I sat with him. He was smiling. Of course he was. He always smiled, even when hooked up to dozens of monitors, IV's, and machines. I took a few photos, my eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed as I mirrored his smile. The hospital discharged him a few hours later and Mom drove us home. We stopped to grab McDonalds. I didn't eat much, as I was still too worked up, but he ate to his heart's content. He was happy. I was relieved. My brother hadn't died. Everything was okay.

No one in my family has brought up this event; not to my brother, not to anyone. The memory of that day brings me so much pain. But it also reminds me of my favorite memories with my brother. I remember how I read to him before he knew how to read. I

remember how we would build Legos together and how we played with our stuffed animals. We did everything together as kids. My brother was always willing to help anyone who asked, without any complaint or hesitation. He was always smiling, always happy and cheerful. But inside, he was hurting. As someone who struggled with depression for years, I understand. It hurts me more than anything that my baby brother has those same struggles. If I could take it all away from him, I would without a second thought. But I can't. I saved my brother's life once, and I'll do it as many times as I need to. The most powerful thing I can do is pray that God helps him the way God helped me. Hundreds of miles away from my brother, I will continue to pray.

“How I Became a Published Author” - Lyra Thompson

I have always been a storyteller. There’s an old video of me, at age four or five, sitting on the couch with a big piece of paper covered in drawings of people and animals. In the video, I explain (in very preschooler fashion) what all the pictures mean and make up stories about how they are connected. Even then, before I knew how to fully read and write, I was producing early forms of narratives.

Only a couple of years after that video, whenever adults asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said “an author.” I don’t remember the specific moment that became my dream, but ever since I was little, I knew writing was in my future. I spent a lot of time as a kid writing stories on my family’s laggy, 2000s-era iMac. These old chapter books—all of which were unfinished—were not quality literature in any sense of the word. They were filled with plot holes, completely unrealistic details, and dialogue that read like an alien trying to fit in with humans. One was even written in Comic Sans. They may not have been bestseller-worthy stories, but they were mine.

Those early stories, and every subsequent piece of writing I produced in school and for fun, were all leading up to something bigger. With each new story I wrote and every writing class I took, I sharpened my skills and expanded my experiences. Except for a short period in middle school when I considered being a web developer (it turned out coding was only a hobby), my author dreams never died.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2022, when my best friend Callie and I decided to write a book together. It was September, and we were roommates at a weekend retreat at the Kansas State School for the Blind. At the time, we had been friends for around three years. We both loved writing, so one of us (I don't even remember who) suggested co-writing something. We came up with a loose concept, then spent almost all our downtime that weekend creating the main characters and expanding the plot. While the final product ended up a lot different from our initial idea, that was when it was born.

Our progress over the next couple of years was very slow. We spent most of the first year just brainstorming, and it took a long time before we actually started writing more than a prologue and opening chapter. Callie remembers pacing through the house, sharing ideas with me over FaceTime, while the children she babysat slept.

Part of the reason our progress was slow was that we weren't taking the project very seriously. We were passionate about it and loved the characters, but at that time neither of us had put much consideration into publishing. It was always a possibility in the back of our minds, but not one we were deeply focused on. Toward the end of 2024, however, something changed and we realized, "We can really do this thing."

By this point, we had written a little less than half of the book. But now that we were serious about publishing, our progress accelerated. Throughout the last few months of 2024 and the first half of 2025, we finished the story and began the editing process. We wrote more in only a few months than we had in two years.

That writing period was thrilling and filled with so much joy. I remember the excitement and giddiness we both felt as new developments fell perfectly into place, or we finally figured out how to fix a plot hole. Through late-night FaceTime calls, spending two days holed up in Callie's bedroom, and trying to work around our busy schedules, we had finally finished our novella.

Our book, titled *Lost & Crowned*, was only the second novella I had ever completed from start to finish, and the first I had ever edited. There was a lot to learn about the editing and publishing world. For many writers, their first round of editing involves heavy developmental changes such as removing entire scenes or rewriting character backstories. Luckily, we didn't have to do that. Our first draft was mostly solid. Sometimes we rewrote scenes, changed a character's motivation, or added a line to clarify something, but we didn't have to do a huge overhaul.

The first stage of editing involved going through the manuscript and correcting comments we had personally left as we wrote—word choices we wanted to come back to or tiny details we didn't want to worry about until after. Once that was finished, we read through it a second time and caught a few more small things. Finally, we were ready to send it to beta readers.

Both of us knew a few people who would be good beta readers. They were all writers themselves, writing teachers, or readers. The original number we reached out to

got considerably shorter as some didn't commit, but we still ended up with four solid beta readers: an old creative writing teacher of Callie's, and three of my writer friends.

The moment we hit "send" on the email to the beta readers, both of us were filled with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Even though we knew we had a good story we were proud of, part of me was scared that the first people to read it outside of ourselves would hate it. We feared that their feedback would be only critical.

Thankfully, those fears were unfounded. The beta readers loved the characters, laughed at the right moments, and got invested in the plot. The feedback they gave was very positive. When they did leave critiques, it was constructive and more helpful than either of us could have imagined. Most of the time, Callie and I saw their feedback and realized they were right; we had completely missed a small plot hole or obvious grammatical mistake. Our beta readers were instrumental in making the book the best it could be.

After our beta readers finished, we spent some time applying their feedback. When that was done, we did a few read-throughs out loud to catch typos that had slipped through the cracks. The whole process, from first draft to final manuscript, was both daunting and exciting.

While the beta readers were doing their thing, Callie and I were focused on the formatting and publishing side of things. We self-published through Amazon, so although we didn't have agents and publishers to worry about, there was still a lot to

learn. Callie was already familiar with the ways of formatting the ePub for Kindle devices, so she handled that. I mostly handled the print version. I had never formatted a document with highly specific guidelines before, so I spent a lot of time researching aspects such as margin sizes, the best fonts for printed books, and what to include on a copyright page.

The days before release were a bit of a scramble. We still had some last-minute things to fix, both with the content and the formatting. But finally, on November 20, 2025, our first book—our brainchild, a three-year passion project—was released into the world.

When I got to hold the proof copy of the book for the first time, I thought back to younger me. If my second-grade self who told her teachers she wanted to be an author could see me now, she would be so proud. The book I held in my hands was the culmination of years of experimenting, learning, and growing as a writer.

I learned so much from the experience of publishing my first book. The knowledge I gained about editing and formatting will be vital in my future publishing endeavors. I also gained confidence. I published a book once, so I know I can do it again. I used to be an aspiring writer who never finished a project. Now, I have something complete and real to my name. I am an author.

“The Prologue of My Writing Life” - Kristalyn Riefer

I am a creative writer—president of a club, beta reader for an author, but not yet an author myself. I have written other types of genres as well, such as memoirs and analysis essays, but writing creative fiction has stood out as the most fun of them all. Writing poems, short stories, and books (that are yet to be published) have become my biggest hobby. This is the literacy that has taken hold of my life. The moment my love for creative writing blossomed was in my senior high school English class. The exploration of different writing genres and prompts developed my love for writing creatively because it expanded my writing experiences and abilities.

I was jumping up and down in excitement once I read the syllabus for my English Composition I class. Twenty essays in one school year. TWENTY!! I loved writing, so this would surely be the most fun class to take! These essays varied greatly in style, prompt, genre, and length. A couple in particular had a lasting impact upon me as a writer. One of them I titled “The Old Man and His Camp.” This was a fictional, monosyllabic short story. Every single word had to be one syllable, and I was able to write five pages when the requirement was two or three. I had to be very creative with this story, coming up with words that were different from what would normally be written yet still had the same meaning. It’s hard to develop a story that flows well with these requirements, but I believe I did a great job. It remains to be one of my favorites to this day. This assignment helped me grow as a writer because I was forced to expand my vocabulary

and write in a way I had never written before. It allowed me to adopt my own style instead of taking influence from other writers.

Another essay I had to write in this class was an observational essay. Every student had to choose a different location. One went to a coffee shop, one went to a jail, but I—the book lover that I am—went to my local library. I sat at a table with a notebook, a pencil, and a water bottle, and then I started a timer on my phone. Each student had to stay in their designated location and write non-stop for two whole hours! Obviously, we could take a break when our hand got tired, but our goal was to write every observation around us—sight, smell, audio, taste, and touch—until our two hours were up. If we couldn't think of something to write about, we had to find something to write about! I found myself writing about the people around me and what books they were checking out, the smell of the dusty air, the color of the walls, and the cleanliness of the floors. I'd hear a book fall to the ground, and write it down. I'd see a man sitting in a corner reading a book, and write it down. I'd feel the smoothness of the wooden table, and write it down. I'd observe the layout of the building, walk around and explore the aisles and genres the library contained, and write it down. Later, when compiling the essay, I would mark which details to write about and which to leave out. The essay would be written with a focus on imagery, written not as a list of observations, but as a creative non-fiction piece. I wrote seven pages for this essay. This assignment helped me grow as a writer because my ability to sense the things around me and how to write

them were tested, and when I didn't know what to write anymore, I would find something to write. It worked my brain, and I believe I have grown a lot as a creative writer because of it.

Exploring different types of writing expanded the scope of my creativity. I am blessed to have been in a high school class where my teacher cared about growing our writing abilities and putting us in writing positions that really made the mind think. Now I am the president of the Creative Writing Club at college, I'm about to get a minor in Writing and Editing, and I'm making connections with real authors in the hope that I will soon become a published author, too. I would not be where I am today if it wasn't for that teacher and that class, where experiencing new writing challenges built up my skills and fueled my passion.

“Solutions I Find: A Literacy Narrative” - Kelsey Snowden

I fell in love with words on the cream couch in my mother’s sunroom, gazing outside at our nearly empty birdfeeder, the blackened oak tree, the too small pond, and the sky so blue it made me want to cry some days. Throughout my childhood, I snuggled up with a blanket and listened to my mother read Laura Ingalls Wilder, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and others. My brothers and I would beg her for “Just one more chapter!” and most days she’d graciously oblige. Later, I made a habit of propping myself up against the arm of the sofa with one classic novel or another and hiding away for a while. I met new friends, visited new places, and felt things I’d never felt before. I grew teary with *Jane Eyre* and pencil in hand, reading “I have as much soul as you” (Brontë 257) and underlining like my life depended on it. The cream couch was my time machine and my teleportation device in one. How dearly I loved my escape.

Growing up, I wrestled with loneliness. Some days I felt like an island. I wanted to see the world and carry experiences home like sea shells. I longed to grow beyond the bubble of my bedroom, to write for an audience beyond my File Explorer, but the thought of taking the first step outside of the ordinary, comfortable, and convenient terrified me. Instead, I ran to the voices of the greats and to their classic works. I experienced love, loss, envy, pride, joy, and sorrow through the eyes of their famed protagonists. Their characters were my friends when I felt lonely, my joy when I was weary, my solace when I sought comfort, and my window when I needed to remind

myself that the world extended beyond my own. The great authors inspired me, filled me with life and emotion on days when I walked around as an empty shell. Words helped me feel whole and alive. They reminded me why it's beautiful to be human.

In middle school, I reached a point where I stopped solely listening to the voices of others and began using my own. My speech came in squeaks at first, pitchy and unnatural, but I spoke nonetheless. Each year I explored a new collection of literature in my studies, and I wrote about every play or novel I read. Forced to share my thoughts and develop original ideas, I tried my hand at persuading, comparing, and creating connections between the texts and my own analysis.

Slowly my voice grew stronger. I spoke a little louder and talked a little longer. My critics, primarily my parents and teachers, encouraged me to keep speaking. They told me my words held value and carried weight. They said to keep writing, to not give up when I doubted myself. In high school, they asked, "Have you thought about what you want to do after school? You should write." Again and again I received subtle or obvious promptings from a variety of sources to continue with my words and to never silence my own voice.

Despite encouragement, writing never came easily to me. I learned to write sitting at my kitchen table clad in plaid pajama pants and frustration. The stationary cursor on my screen taunted me like a car blinker, and the longer it stalled, the more my frustration grew. I begged the line to move, to glide across my screen with ease and

inspiration. It refused, planting itself in that same blasted spot: 2 and 3/4 inches from the right of my document. While the Tale of Two Cities essay wouldn't budge, neither would I. Whether I felt sheer stubbornness or understood I truly was capable of finishing the essay, I sat in that stiff wooden chair until my legs went numb and my stomach grumbled, until I puzzled out each and every word of my essay.

For me, writing is a puzzle, a syllogism, an equation with a predictable and correct outcome or answer. There comes a point when a paragraph drifts into focus, rearranges itself, and announces, "I'm complete!" Before that moment of relief, the whole paragraph and every word it contains are all wrong, complete rubbish. I think so logically, and I'm not sure why. I hate math and science, but my brain searches for the logical conclusions in all of my dear creative fields, especially in my writing. My mind churns, seeking to paint reality in vivid colors.

Though a variety of forces shaped my voice and my logical approach to words, my beloved childhood protagonists helped to raise me. They formed me into the person I am today. Each character helped me fall in love with others' stories, with hearing a narrative and feeling its weight. Listening to the voices of the greats propelled me to use my own voice to share stories and show others they're not alone. I deceived myself for far too long, believing my words were powerless, insignificant, and unworthy. I still believe my lies at times. But I continue writing to prove myself wrong, to rebuke the lies in my mind and the doubt in my heart.

I believe I write to feel alive. I believe I read to ward off loneliness. I puzzle things together to prove that order and finality and wholeness exist. Solving, creating, and making all remind me that this life has meaning, that I'm not just a floating glob of cells fighting to be seen, heard, and known. I'm seen. I'm heard. I'm known. The solutions I find tell me so.

Works Cited

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Signet Classics, 1962. Print.

There's a spot on the wall
With eyes that shine,
Its little body
As green as pine.
It watches as I inch
Closer still,
Curious of the way
It sits so chill
Then it jumps.

Chaos ensues.

The exploration of different
genres and prompts developed
my love for writing creatively
because it expanded my writing
experiences and abilities.

Kristalyn Riefer

Chandler
Hathcock

Everyone knows the flavor of
death is lemon raspberry. And
that was exactly what I tasted this
morning at breakfast.

A. F.
Youngblood

Opening grave plots scatter around me,
Yawning wide their dirty mouths.
They call me and call me, gnashing and
weeping,
Wailing of sorrows with garbled tongues.

That man was not
designed to be alone
Is a truth as old as time
and stars above
But narrow is the road
which leads to love
And at its end, a wall of
bitter stone

Another page was finished
But always blemish bitten
Further plots abandoned
And once again rewritten
So many hopes, dreams, delights,
A fountain from my pen
But every day, I lose my flame
And fail to write again

Leah Wirth

Break my skull open
Stories flow and bleed on paper
Painful, quick, but free