The Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review has been an important part of student culture at John Tyler for more than forty years. The annual competition encourages student artists and writers to create their best work, and the Review showcases the winning entries and presents them to the College community.

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Sherwood Forest
Art & Literary Review

Each spring, a new edition of the Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review explores the world of words and artistic expression. First published in 1968, this publication gives student writers and artists an outlet to share their talent with the John Tyler Community College community.

During these 40 years, the Review has found fresh voices in art and writing through an annual art and literary contest, and like the College, it has evolved over the years. What started as a black-and-white copy job has become a full-color, environmentally responsible print piece.

Today’s publication highlights the creativity and courage it takes to put pen to paper and create something new. This is an exciting challenge for students and the kind of learning experience John Tyler Community College works hard to cultivate every day.

Inside these pages are portraits of self-expression, powerful personal experiences and moments from daily life. Congratulations to those whose artistry and hard work are honored in this publication. The results were worth the risk.
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Fleshing out demons on flesh of human beings like astronauts burning holes in history, visions of constellations—infinity—burning holes into their eyes and existence.

Seeking rights to wrongs: pedaling-backwards methodology. Adrenaline track marks, choking on fluffy cotton scarves, suffocating under little-girl mittens. Throw innocence and wives onto the funeral pyre.
I am grappling for freckle footholds
and asphalted memories.
D-e-n-i-a-l
like nights of forever-Scrabble—
double word and triple letter score.
Slide on shades, cool guy Elvis, 'cause
different coloured lenses
kaleidoscope harsh charades.

Parade around with
Colgate smiles, fake
and aching.
Deer-in-headlight, piercing eyes;
lively, tiny child-hands,
wilted blushing tomato, sugar,
strawberries red.
Scattershot shatter
porcelain purity;
young love veins pop,
nap, break:
tightening all the wrong strings.

Playful threat,
petty threat,
I'll-tell-my-mom-on-you threat,
real-life threat,
bomb threat,
death threat,
threaten me with a good time,
because it hurts so good,
it hurts the same:
lather, rinse, repeat,
melting, freezing,
melting,
freezing—
it all just feels the same.

So give way to new sensation:
twisting,
tumultuous,
neon bright-lights trapeze-ing
across my horizons.
Life glowing through the skin,
blood hot white liquid fire,
every last atom vibrating
with infinite animosity.

Refuge in chemical compounds, salvation
in molecular break down;
psilocybin, psilocin,
bceocystin, 2e-p,
LSD, DMT—
weak knee liits and caffeine shakes, gripping
like the Universal Law of Gravity.
Friends call me Imbibo.
Beats Bubba, huh?
They say I’m fun or funny until I’m not anymore.
They say I suck whiskey like a fish.
Then they just say I suck.
I come to in jail or detox.
Cops call me a pig and let me go.
Shrinks want to know:
“Do you see anything that isn’t there?”
“Some print just became black ants
and marched off the page.”
I think because I wear a cross,
“Is your body a temple of the Holy Spirit?”
I say I don’t believe in ghosts.
Once I’m out, I’m still Imbibo.
I’m fun or funny until I’m not anymore.

I don’t remember when you took me on the boat, or how I dreaded the awkward silence sure to unfold.
I don’t remember the glowing warm wood, or its rich, swirled amber pattern of light and dark, beautiful and mesmerizing.
I don’t remember the coarse furry thick rope, lying on the deck, clean and dry but wet smelling, coiled and ready for its mission.
I don’t remember the crisp white sail, or how it grew like a pregnant belly in the wind, full and ready to burst, gently delivering us over the waves.
I don’t remember the bright white sparkles skipping in the water as we silently glided over them, fearlessly abandoning all thoughts of what lay beneath.
I don’t remember the shore drifting away, the houses, people and dogs slowly vanishing as my human world disappeared.
I don’t remember the breeze grabbing my hair, whipping it into knots, abandoning any thought of future repair.
I don’t remember the clean, warm silence carried on the breeze, or the wind whispering promises, secrets, and dreams only my ears could hear.
I don’t remember realizing how I knew you my whole life but had never known you were only fully alive on the water, and had sailed the seven seas.
I don’t remember you explaining the importance of reading the winds, the water, the clouds, knowing starboard and aft.
I don’t remember your long, nimble fingers tying and untying knots, explaining how important they were. I don’t remember how important I felt when you asked me to help.

I don’t remember the long, comfortable silence, or of feeling happy and content with the realization the whole world was mine to see.

I don’t remember how, for once, you stopped calling me Amy-Do, and didn’t treat me like a child.

I don’t remember not wanting the day to end.

I write because it’s the only way to wipe the canvas of my soul clean,
A new page, a new day, a new something to say.
A way to free the rainbow of emotions that embody the voices in my head, 
Like the green midget-man who only ever wanted to be tall, 
But instead is sentenced to live life in the body of an eight-year-old troll. 
It’s a crack in the window of a stale room, 
A light when the power has been turned off, 
A morsel of bread when I didn’t realize I was so damn famished. 
I write because no one really gives a shit what I have to say, 
But the pages of my thrift shop journal beg me to stay. 
“You can live here,” they coax me, 
Even though I can see the remorse of a fresh lie in the black-stained yellows of their eyes. 
Like a breath of fresh air in a warehouse of feces, 
A vehicle to push the ugly out like a pimple on prom night. 
I write so I can live up to society’s expectations at daybreak, 
Only to retreat back into the mysterious, foggy abyss at nightfall, 
Because all I really am is a stranger without a face. 
I write to convince myself I haven’t conformed to this sick, sad, sorry excuse of world, 
Because I can still see the beauty in a dead butterfly’s wings.
I glance at the clock. It’s mid-morning and I’m lost in my homework for that creative writing class. I promised myself I would get ready on time this morning. No dawdling over hobbies. Now I’ve messed up again. I grab my breakfast dishes and head for the sink. The cat meows outside the sliding glass door. He’s still hungry. He gives me THE LOOK. I ignore him. Cats are supposed to be independent. “Go mouse-hunting,” I say.

I dash up the steps for a quick shower. What to wear? Levi’s and a new shirt from my latest splurge at the mall. It’ll have to do. I run the iron over them enough to be presentable. I grab my bag and sprint to the car. It’s a lovely fall day, leaves just starting to turn, a crisp feeling in the air. I try to focus on the beauty of nature and the possibilities of this day. But I really wish I could stay home and finish that story. I resolve to work on patience, to engage in this morning’s commitment.

I approach my friend’s house, turn into the gravel driveway, and stop the car under a huge shade tree. Marjorie is waiting for me on the front steps. She pushes herself up slowly, positions her cane, and begins hobbling in a motion that is part forward and part sideways, a strange dance of the very old and frail. She hesitates over each new step on the cobblestones. A vision flashes: the ambulance, the broken hip, explaining...
to her son how I let this happen. I open the car door and run toward her. She pauses.

“Good morning,” says Marjorie, looking up at me with joy and a gentle kindness.

“Let me help you, Marjorie. I don’t like these stones.”

“It’s not necessary, but if you’re determined to play this game... well, let me take your arm on the other side.”

We switch positions. More forward motion. Tiny steps. I hear the dog barking inside, like she wants to eat me for lunch. “What do you think of this weather, Marjorie? Glorious, isn’t it? So nice of Amy to plant those flowers around your lamppost. I like your new jacket.” We reach the car, and I help her into the passenger seat.

“That Dixie-Doodle! She is W-O-R-K,” says Marjorie, laughing out loud.

“That puppy’s still full of herself, huh? The Prozac isn’t helping?”

“No ma’am. Barks day and night. Here’s a piece of advice: don’t have a baby at my age! Dixie’s so different from our previous dogs. Did I ever tell you about Betsy, the poodle...”

We arrive at the church parking lot. There’s Barbara, who has double vision and shouldn’t be driving. She parks half in one space and half in another. I wonder how many lines she sees on the pavement. Betty Ann comes after her and does the same thing. I head for the other side of the lot, even though it means a longer walk to the door with Marjorie.

Today is the first meeting of our women’s fellowship group. The ladies come in like molasses, slow and sweet, full of smiles and cheer.

“How was your medical appointment?”

“Are your new knees working out okay?”

“Did you get the shingles vaccine yet?”

“What a cute cane. It even matches your outfit.”

“How about those great-grandbabies?”

Under the table, my foot is bouncing with the nervous energy that I can’t let them see. My impatience would spoil their day. I’m still thinking about that story I want to finish.

Jenny announces the discussion topic, which is immigration and migration. “When did you first leave home?” she asks the group.

“When I went to college.”

“When I went to summer camp for eight weeks at age ten. It was wonderful. Best days of my life.”

“When I got married on my birthday.”

“When my grandfather died and I began spending weekends with Grandma. We played checkers by the fire. She cooked hoe cakes and fresh vegetables. I loved the farm.”

They talk over and around each other. “Can you hear her?” Comments are repeated. “What did she say?” Tears flow. “I think I need a new battery for my hearing aid.”

My foot stops jiggling. I concentrate on remembering details. “Watch what you say,” says Barbara, hope mingling with laughter. “She might write about us.”

Yes, I certainly will.
Before classes every day, my friends and I hung around the cafeteria poking fun at each other and talking about our latest adventures out of school. Normally, we never paid attention to anyone outside of our group; we just secluded ourselves as the outcasts. But our group of outcasts grew larger over the years, and our faction rivaled all the others by the time most of us were seniors. I had been around the “Circle” since the start during my freshman year, so everyone looked to me and a couple of others for reference.

At the time, I might have gotten pissed at anyone who called me a geek, but looking back on it there is no denying that simple fact. Every day I wore T-shirts with prints of old horror movies or web-comics. For a few months, I had a lime-green Mohawk that eventually became purple, and then eventually I stopped putting it up. So, looking at me, people usually knew what they were getting right away. A big, angry geek.

Anyway, in November of my senior year at Clover Hill, I had been standing around with the Circle, shooting the shit and dreading the upcoming day of classes, when one of my friends ran up to me excitedly. Whitney was her name. I had been really into (obsessed, honestly) with a specific web-comic by the name of Homestuck. Please don’t ask me to explain it—I don’t have that many years to talk. Now, Homestuck had not yet caught on in Clover Hill, despite my attempts to spread its influence throughout my circle of friends.

That being said, I had successfully managed to recruit Whitney about a month earlier, so when she ran up to me and pointed out a girl I didn’t know wearing a shirt with a logo from the comic, I lost my marbles. Now I’m not going to go into all the crazy details about this girl, but she had bright pink hair, a pretty face, and she wore a graphic tee from an obscure and extremely geeky web-comic. Naturally, to a loser such as myself, it was love at first sight.

Whitney turned out to be a naturally mischievous friend, so she suggested that I go talk to this mystery girl myself. At first I pretty much shouted “Hell, no,” because I had zero confidence, but my friends were a bunch of jackasses and they pushed me towards her. Blushing, I crossed the cafeteria and approached this pink-haired girl. Despite the fact that I had about a foot and an inch on her, I still seem to remember looking up to talk to her.

What came out of my mouth probably sounded a little like: “Oh my god I didn’t think anyone else read that you’re so cool and um just wow what an awesome shirt.”

“Uh, thanks,” was her only reply. And then I ran away, not literally, but I power-walked faster than a Ferrari back to the Circle, where everyone pointed and laughed. Honestly I think we were all just a bunch of bullies who hung out at school but hey, that’s high school.

Every day after that, I passed her in the hall on my way out of first period. Sometimes we made eye contact and I felt my cheeks suddenly burst into flames. A couple months later, she added me on Facebook and asked on my wall, “Are you that guy that freaked out about my shirt?”

“Why yes, yes I am.”

Despite talking a bit and seeing each other every day in the hall, we never really became friends, and I always felt like she thought I was some kind of psycho-loser. To be fair, that wasn’t far off. Eventually, I graduated, we talked less and less, and then all contact just ceased.

Until a year ago when I messaged her out of nowhere. Now we’re dating, I am decidedly less of a geek (though not by much) and her hair is just brown.

Her name is Arienna.
Success, for some, is the long pull you take on the day’s first cigarette after an epic night out with your friends. For others, success can be summed up in a few catchy words or an enlightening proverb. Then, there are those struggling souls who naively believe in vain that they will find the immortality of success at the end of a line or the bottom of a bottle. However, I do not believe authentic success can be reduced to or replaced by catch phrases or cheap thrills.

To me, success is the drive that lives inside us forcing us to go beyond what is already known, what has already been proven, and search for those roads which are unknown and unproven in the physical world as well as the world within ourselves.

Success: forever elusive to us until that fateful day when we finally learn that we must dig deeper and strive farther than ever before. You must embrace the challenge if you ever wish to truly understand the rare element of excellence and its mysterious composition. But even once this idea has been adopted and implemented, and we believe we have cracked that fabled code that stands between us and perfection that is when we truly begin to comprehend that there are things hidden deep within the heart of a champion that could take more than a lifetime to fully understand.

Success: It’s what defines us. It’s what keeps us up at night tinkering for perfection, haunting our dreams and underlying our very existence.

It is the secret that we keep.

Success: It saves itself, in its truest form, for those few who long for the taste of blood at midnight, those few who beckon the anthem of destiny from the bloodred, wild stars above.

Success is the decorated chef being the first one through the door in the morning and staying well past last call just to make sure his team is sufficiently prepared to take on the next day’s challenges, only to wake up in four hours and do it all again.

Success is the prizefighter gracefully bobbing and jabbing in a darkened gym, lights off and everyone has left, but his combative spirit remains, training for a lifetime of war against all odds. No gripe.

No complaint. Only a consistent determination to pursue the combination for that code to be the best.

Success is when you can look into someone’s eyes and immediately know that they are the type of person who stays until the job is done. Win or lose, they wait for the dealer to flip the cards that will reveal their fortune on the other side, whether it be the mean glint of an ace that carries them to victory or the coy smile of the queen that brings them to their knees.

Success: It cannot always be measured in nanoseconds and gigabytes, zeros on the paycheck or notches on the belt. Blood, sweat and tears; pure, raw and uncut, it calls for something of a much deeper complexity than a lust for material rewards.

Success: It is not true success to win the championship only to never return to the arena again because good fortune left you conceited and corrupted, and now you are despised by the very team who brought you there in the first place. Your once honorable soul, now lost to greed and an easy win. The reward becomes fleeting and insincere, suddenly turning mirthless and cold right before your eyes, just like that beautiful girl you fell for so many years ago; the one with the backwards purpose in her eyes, who stole your love in the dead of night and then vanished from your life forever.

True and genuine success, the kind that sends a shiver down your spine, is finding a team who stands beside you on the eve of defeat, refusing to abandon you because they believe in you as a leader and also believe that victory will one day be theirs to share with you.

I once wrote chasing hopes of being rich one day. I once wrote to capture the allure of being viewed as a brilliant imaginer. I once wrote in vain to conquer the American disillusion that has plagued me since my troubled youth.

Now, I write just to feel alive again.

Now, when I sit down to write, I know failure is nothing when success could be everything.
Jessica watched as her dad plugged the iPod into the car’s port. *Great, what will he torture me with today?*

He started the car, dialing the defrosters up to four and got out to scrape the thin sheet of ice that covered the windows. She heard the familiar scratching sound of the ice scraper on the window behind her. *Why does he start on the back passenger’s side? You don’t even need that clear to see.*

Jessica waited for the ice to show signs of melting at the bottom of the windshield. She took a deep breath in and let it out. She watched her breath turn into white smoke. He stood in front of her, scraping her side of the windshield. He should have been out doing this before she came out. Now she would be pressed to get to school on time. All he had to do was just come out five minutes before and she wouldn’t be freezing right now. She pulled her shoulders closer in and stuck her face into the scarf around her neck covering her nose. The only thing the defrosters had managed to do was dry out her contacts.

The door swung open. “That should do it, sugarplum.” He fumbled with the seatbelt. He rubbed his hands together. “I told you it wouldn’t take that long.” He fiddled with the iPod.

Jessica stared ahead. The dashboard clock read 7:12 a.m. She needed to get to study hall early to get help with her calculus homework but if she complained he would definitely
drive more slowly. He had this passive-aggressive thing, that’s what her mom would call it. Of course, sometimes she called it being a dumb ass.

He pulled out of the drive and switched the music on. Some man was singing but it was hard to tell what he was actually singing because the words were all slurred together.

The car had warmed up and Jessica pulled her scarf away from her face. “Can we just listen to the radio, even NPR?” Jessica asked. “This guy sounds like he’s had a stroke.”

“You’re kidding, right?” She could see him shaking his head. “That’s Bob Dylan.”

“And?” she said, looking out the window at the trees that went by so slowly.

“He’s like, a legend.”

She turned to look at her dad. “He is one of the greatest songwriters, not to mention, singers in the world.” He was talking with his hands.

“It’s not like I don’t know who he is. I just don’t like it,” she said.

“I don’t think you are giving this a chance. Let me change it to a different song.” He reached down and swiped the screen of the iPod. Jessica looked up to see it happening but had no way to stop it. “Dad!” she screamed and grabbed the door handle. They crashed into the back of a stopped semi. She heard the squeal of tires behind them. She felt the car slam into them. After that everything seemed to stop except for Bob Dylan who continued to sing.

Blue and white striped shorts.
Gray t-shirt. White socks shyly poking out from under gray Converse. All moving sluggishly along to the rhythm of a broken heart.

The clouds overhead move quickly. The green leaves wiggle to and fro, rustling gently in the breeze. The thicker tree trunks stand solid and menacing, while the smaller ones begin to sway slightly. The last shadow of the sun is wrung from the sky, leaving a lumpy-looking gray mass of oblivion.

The path is dark, compressed, a little misty. Stray roots and rocks are scattered across it. A Converse stumbles over one of these. Once, twice, a third time sends the wearer to her knees. A cell phone slips out of the waistband of the shorts and lands on the ground. The now-cracked screen lights up.

A new text message, a plaintive “Please,” is showing. The wearer picks up the phone, scrolling through previous messages. “Talk to me,” “I love you,” and “I’m sorry,” fly by with the strokes of a finger. A solitary tear drips onto the screen, followed by a fat drop of rain. A torrent begins soon after, deluge from the welling of eyes and clouds.

She stumbles to her feet, limping to the nearest roofed shelter. Now drenched, she thuds onto a bench with the latest crack of lightning.

Blood oozes down a knee. Once-brown now-reddish dirt is smeared across her shin as well. Tentative, shaking fingers remove several rock fragments. Teeth bite down on her bottom lip. Her entire face squeezes closed, drinking in the hammering of rain on the rooftop. A calm like a blanket wraps around her, shutting out everything but the forest sounds.


The packing bag is bulging, leaning, tipping. A sweater sleeve and a headphone earbud peep out of the top, trying to escape the jumble of clothes, spare change, knickknacks, and toiletries inside.

Her eyes snap open at the sound...
of footsteps on the path. They spy a
dark figure hurrying through the foggy
downpour. The figure reveals itself as a
man. Once under the roof, he removes
his hood and runs a hand through
his messy hair. His lips quirk up in a
friendly smile.

Her own smile leaks out of her
mouth and then creeps up to her eyes.

A nod of her head; he sits next to
her. He takes in her slouch, her stuffed
bag. His focus is drawn to the cuts on
her leg. Disgust and brotherly concern
flood his features. A quizzical look is
returned with a defensive glare.

His inquiries are swatted away;
annoying flies, buzzing. He puts his
hands up, a surrender.

Her attempt to stand ends up in a
rapid sitting back down. Head goes in
hands and the tears flow again.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls
out a phone, typing furiously, all
thumbs. Her own phone's screen lights
up seconds later. Through the cracks,
she can just make out the declaration
of love and affection.

An inhale begins slowly, hitches
halfway in and stays there. Her answer
is almost lost on the breeze. He smiles
again, kisses the top of her head, and
settles closer. She puts her head on
his shoulder.

And they watch the roaring of
the wind, the splashing of the water,
the swaying of the trees.

My husband dies in February.
He leaves me the house free and clear.
I decide to stay. In June, I decide to
renovate. It’s about time. The house
is 25 years old. The house is older than
our marriage. We have let things slip
in the last few years.

From the get-go things go badly.
The crawl space of the house and all
the heating and AC vents are suffocating
with toxic mold. It’s no wonder my
seasonal allergies never abate.

The Hazmat company moves
in giant machines called air scrubbers.

With them come men, all sorts and
sizes, in total body yellow suits.

“Do Not Enter” signs are posted at
every door.

Of course, I have to evacuate for
the duration. I find a little apartment
about five miles down the
road. I scoop up the kittens, Rusher
and Becker, and relocate.

Rusher makes a decent transition.
He gives up the hunger strike on day
three. Becker does not adjust.

I come in from the grocery store,
arms loaded with groceries. I coo and
chat to the kittens. Becker comes out
of hiding for the first time. He dashes
past my feet and out the door.
think I need to mention the Xanax. He asks, “Ma’am, are you willing to take a Breathalyzer test?” I say, “No, I don’t think so.”

So, he says, “Please turn around and put your hands behind your back.” He snaps on the handcuffs. He’s not mean about it or anything; it doesn’t hurt.

He ushers me toward his cruiser. He says, “I’m sorry about the cuffs. It’s policy for transportation.” I say, “Hey, it’s okay.” I ask where we are going. He says, “Jail.” I say, “Well, that will be new.”

On our way to jail, I decide to chat up the policeman. I ask his name. He hesitates. I say, “It’s right on your jacket. I just can’t see it.” He says, “Dave, Dave Holcomb.” I say, “So, Dave, do you have a family?” He says, “A wife and three little boys.” He pauses and goes on. “The wife and I are trying to adopt a baby girl from China.” I say, “Nice. I tried to do that years ago as a single mom. It didn’t work out.” Dave is sympathetic.

We’re pulling up to the jail. The compound is a fortress surrounded by concrete walls. Feet of rolled razor wire rise above the walls. I think: “This is serious.” Dave guides me inside and delivers me to a sheriff’s deputy. Dave leaves.

The Deputy unlatches the left handcuff and uses it to attach me to a post on a wooden bench. I think it’s like hitching a horse to a post. I am alone on the bench for a long time.

Suddenly, I have to pee. I can’t catch anyone’s attention. Then, I see a white door with black stenciling. It says: WOMEN. I press together my thumb and pinky and slip off the cuff. I move cautiously toward the restroom.

When I emerge, the room is in a fracas. Now the handcuff is snapped viciously tight. A deputy releases it only for a brief photo session. I am told to focus on a blue light and not to smile. I have a row of numbers across my chest. I realize that I am now infamous.

Back on the bench, I begin to feel woozy. I haven’t eaten for most of a day. I catch a deputy’s attention. I say I am diabetic. That’s true. I ask for an orange. The Deputy is a prince. He goes to find an orange. He reports back: “No oranges. No fruit at all.” He’s apologetic.

I’m still hitched to the post when everything gets blurry. Then I don’t see anything at all. The weird thing is I can hear. I hear the handcuff unlatched. I hear a guy saying, “Do you think we should call 911?” Another guy’s voice says, “I thought we were 911.” I hear a lot of scuffling but nothing I can identify.

Later I can feel someone touching me. Someone is feeling my wrists and ankles. A new voice says, “She’s in shock. We have to get her to the ER. Get the other handcuff off right now.” Then I don’t see or hear anything else.

I wake up the next morning. It’s like waking from a crazy dream. I’m sure I’m not in my bed. But I’m not sure where I am. A nurse is undoing an IV. She tells me to get dressed. She says I can go. Then she says, “Oh, yeah. A nice cop came by in the middle of the night.” She says he seemed sheepish.

He said, “This is totally against policy, but give this to the young lady when she wakes up.” She hands me a brown paper lunch sack.

My driver’s license and my key ring are in the bag. There’s also a note with a phone number so I can find out how to get my car back. Underneath the phone number the slip of paper says: “Good luck and please pray for our Chinese baby.”
James sat anxiously in the driver’s side backseat, his eyes open wide as he stared out the window at the other cars. He was on his way back, once again, to a place they called a “home for boys.” But he knew what it really was: it was an orphanage. The thing was, he wasn’t an orphan.

He was six when the accident happened; he remembered it vividly. His mother and younger sister had come to pick him up from soccer practice. He had been listening to his mother talk, staring absentmindedly out the window, when they were struck. He lost consciousness for only a second before he opened his eyes again, or so it felt. There were times he wished he had never opened his eyes. But he did, and he saw, and he screamed. He had been the only one of the three of them to survive.

James survived because he had been sitting on the passenger side of the vehicle. The doctors told him that his mother had died instantly; she never felt it. They told him his sister passed the same way, but he knew better. He had seen her, and she had looked at him, and the doctors admitted that she had actually died in the ambulance. James made it out with minor injuries; a broken leg, cuts, bruises...nothing that wouldn’t heal quickly and fully at his young age. The driver of the truck that had t-boned them hadn’t even gotten whiplash.

His father took the losses hard. He had loved his wife and children more than anything, and James had always considered himself lucky to have such a loving family. But when James returned from the hospital, his father stopped speaking to him, stopped looking at him. James understood; it was his fault, wasn’t it? If only he hadn’t had soccer practice, hadn’t stayed a few minutes longer to talk to his buddies.

When his father did start speaking to him, start looking at him, James would wish he hadn’t. He had turned to alcohol to escape his problems. In three months he lost his job because of it. He was addicted and angry and drunk. The smell of him made James sick. In his few lucid moments he would apologize profusely and swear off alcohol, and the first few times James believed him. But when the beatings would start again, when the food money would disappear again, he realized that they were only pretty words spoken by a desperate man.

James hid the bruises for two years before he was finally struck in a place he couldn’t hide. When he arrived at school with a big black eye, his teacher pulled him aside and questioned him about it. After a long conversation, a couple of phone calls, and another long conversation, James was told he wouldn’t be going home. He came to learn later that there was now a restraining order against his father, and that his father would soon be going to jail. He wasn’t sad about it or happy about it. Truthfully, he had stopped caring about most things.

Adjusting to foster life was difficult for James. The first home he went to had other children his age, a mother, and a father. It seemed like the perfect place for him, yet whenever the father approached him, he would become frozen to the spot and start bracing himself. His fear of this man grew so bad that the family had to turn him over to someone else, but it quickly became clear that no matter what home they put him in, James was always going to be miserable as long as there was a father present.

He began spending time between foster families at the orphanage. He almost would have preferred to just stay there, except that the other boys could be so cruel. “Why are you back this time?” They would ask. “Did another loving foster father make you piss your pants?”

Whenever he was asked if he would rather stay, James would answer that he wanted to try just one more time. He was told before going to this family that this was his last chance, or else he would be staying at the home for good. And just as before, he couldn’t overcome his fears. Every time he encountered a man that reminded him of his father, James would become paralyzed with fear. He could handle doctors, teachers, and other professionals just fine, but put him in a room with an average adult male, and he would tremble at the sight.

His goodbyes to his last foster family were short, like his stay with them had been. His welcome from the headmistress was laced with disappointment, and his welcomes from the boys he would now have to live with were full of sarcasm and insincerity. He was taken to his room
and given a chance to settle in, with no
tours of the establishment necessary.
His roommate was younger than he
and not so bad as far as roommates
went. At least, he didn’t tease him.

The dormitory area had a
common room on the first floor, and
that was where James found himself
the evening of his arrival. He sat on the
floor with his back to the wall, since all
of the chairs were occupied, and pulled
his knees up to his chest. He didn’t
want to stay up late because he had
a meeting with his new therapist in
the morning, but he was not even the
slightest bit tired.

“Hi,” came a small voice above
him. James’s eyes followed the other
boy as he sat down beside him. He
looked about his age, ten, but was a
little taller with bright blue eyes.
“I’m Ichabod.”

“I’m James.” The redhead
replied unenthusiastically.

“I haven’t seen you around
before.” Ichabod commented. “Did
you just get here?”

It took James a moment to
understand him. “Yeah,” he replied.
“But this isn’t my first time here.”

“Is that so?” Ichabod asked. “I’ve
been here for a few months now.”

“I guess I never stayed long
enough to notice you before,” James
shrugged. If he was being honest, he
wasn’t in the best mood to be making
new friends. He had just returned
from what he considered another
traumatic week with a foster family,
and he had thrown himself into a pit
of depression over it since before he
even arrived. Still, it was nice to talk to
someone without being looked down
on or judged.

“How come you come and go?”
Ichabod asked innocently.

James sighed and pulled his knees
in tighter. “If I tell you, I gotta tell you
the whole story.” He said. “And you
have to promise not to say anything ‘til
I’m finished.”

“I promise!” Ichabod said
without hesitation.

He sat quietly and listened
intently as James told him his whole
story, beginning to end. Before he
realized it, the room had begun to clear
out as more boys went to bed.

“That cycle just continued for
a year or so until I ended up here,
today,” James concluded. “Now I’m
here for good.”

“Wow,” Ichabod muttered. “You
went through a lot.”

“Yeah,” James sighed. “I feel like
I don’t belong here. I have a dad; I’m
not an orphan.”

“James,” Ichabod scooted
closer and brought his face in close,
whispering, “Can you keep a secret?”

James flinched back at the sudden
closeness. “Sure,” he replied.

“I’m not an orphan either,”
Ichabod whispered.

“You’re not?” James whispered
back, his eyes growing just a little
bit bigger.

“Do you want to hear my
story?” Ichabod asked. James nodded
and Ichabod smiled.

“Aright, but you gotta promise.”
Ichabod held out his pinky. “Pinky
promise that you’ll believe me.”

“Believe you?” James repeated.
“What kind of story is this?”

“My life,” Ichabod replied. His
expression was serious.

James reached out and linked
pinkies with him. “Alright, then,” he
said. “I promise.”

Ichabod began his tale at his
birth. He was named after his father,
though, he admitted under his breath,
Ichabod was not his father’s name.
Ichabod, he explained, was his middle
name, after his grandfather on his
mother’s side. He refused to answer
when James asked him for his real first
name, saying that he was used to being
called Ichabod now anyway.

When he was still a baby,
Ichabod’s father left him and his
mother. Ichabod only knew him by the
stories from his mother and the picture
of him on the mantle. His mother, he
said, never got over his leaving. On
her good days, she held hope that one
day he would return to her. On her
bad days, she would blame Ichabod,
asking him why he had been born, or
why he hadn’t been enough to keep
his father there. Ichabod knew from
his grandfather that it was never his
fault, and that his mother was only
saying those things because she was
still grieving. Despite this, James saw a
familiar hurt behind Ichabod’s eyes.

Ichabod was left in his
grandfather’s care when his mother
took up the job she’d had before she
became pregnant with him. She was
a wildlife photographer. She started
off taking jobs only within North
America, so that she was never too far
from home. Eventually, however, she
took home and could no longer watch
him. After that, his mother decided
to start bringing him along with her
when she traveled. Sometimes, it was
fun. Ichabod liked flying, but the long
trips were still too much for him. He
took seeing the animals his mother
photographed in person, and he
recalled one trip in great detail.

His last trip with her, he
explained, was to the Middle East,
in the mountains. He vaguely
remembered the rest of the team
they were with was not happy that he
was there. He also remembered that
the climb up the mountain was very
difficult, and that his mother had to
carry him sometimes, until finally
they stopped and made camp. He
remembered that it was early morning
before the sun was up when he last
saw his mother. She had woken him
to go out and see the sunrise with
her. She took her camera and they
heard something moving behind him.

“I forgot the tripod!” Ichabod
recalled his mother exclaiming.
“Wait here for me, I’ll be right back.
Don’t move!”

Ichabod stopped abruptly and
had to take a moment to collect
himself. Talking about his last
moments with his mother was making
him teary-eyed, and his voice was
growing hoarse.

James waited anxiously for him
to continue. “Are you okay?” he asked,
placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah.” Ichabod sniffled, wiped
his eyes, and continued with his story.

His mother never returned for
him. He never knew why. He never
found out if she was even still alive,
though he assumed she was. He
assumed that this had been one of her
bad days, and that she had left him
there on purpose. And even though
he had assumed that at the time, too,
he had still stayed put, watching the
sun rise. He waited after it had risen
high in the sky, and he waited when
it began to fall. He continued to wait
when the clouds rolled in, and when it
began to snow. He waited even when he

had to relearn how to talk, since he had
adapted to growls and other throaty
sounds to communicate with the cats.
That, he explained, was why he had a
speech impediment now, and added
that he was trying very hard to lose it.

“Aftew the doc said I was
good to go, I was bwought heeuh,”
Ichabod concluded.

James couldn’t help but stare.

“Now I understand why you made me
promise,” he breathed.

“Mhm,” Ichabod hummed. “So,
y’see, I still have a fathew, and maybe
still my ma.”

“If you remember so much,
how come you don’t tell someone and
have them track your parents down?”
James asked.

“Would you?” Ichabod
responded. “Dad left me, Ma left me,
neithew of them wanted me. Who
would want t’go back to that?”

“I see your point.” James sighed.
He sat in silence with Ichabod for a
few minutes until the clock chimed
to signal curfew. When they stood up
to return to their respective rooms,
Ichabod reached out a hand to James.

“Thank you,” he said, a big smile
on his weary face.
“For what?” James asked.
“Most of the othews don’t get past introductions befo’e they start to tease me about my speech,” Ichabod replied. James took his hand and Ichabod shook it earnestly. “You nevev even mentioned it, and you listened to my whole stowy without question. Thank you.”
“Oh,” James considered the way the other boys here treated him and realized that Ichabod was probably targeted a lot, too. “Well, good night, Ichabod.”
“G’night, James. See ya tomowwow!”

When James went to bed that night, he had a completely different feeling than he had when he first arrived. He was looking forward to seeing Ichabod again in the morning, and hoped that they would be in the same classes when the school week started. He had made a friend, and by sharing stories, he had found healing. And though he didn’t know it yet, he had also found his new family.

There once was a man named Phlabby. He was a clean-shaven, relatively pudgy man (nothing too bad weight-wise though) who lived in the dark winding caverns found in the foothills of York. The Yorksmen, as they and Phlabby preferred to be called, were an itinerant yet stationary lot. Some would go as far as to claim they were more stationary than the mountains which they called their home. Considering they lived in the dark recesses of York’s great caves and any “expansion” made by the Yorksmen consisted of them digging more and more with no direction in sight, that hyperbole might not be too far from the truth.

Phlabby and the Yorksmen believed that they lived inside the body of a long slain titan. There was a large stone sculpture of a face at the base of their mountain which also led to the entrance of a cave, leading them to believe it was the entrance called Yorksneck. And all the other holes found throughout the mountain, they believed to have been a series of stabbed wounds or torn flesh that ultimately led to York’s demise. Regardless, most of the Yorksmen felt generally safe and cozy living inside the mountains near labyrinthine caves, so much so that they almost never went outside unless it was a matter of much needed sunbathing or food foraging, and they were always certain to be back by sunset. In fact, the vast majority of the Yorksmen had never had occasion to see the nighttime before. Phlabby however became fascinated by the concept of nighttime. This fascination began when he found himself lost on his way back from a delivery of Narsh eggs to the clan’s rookery located one mile east of Yorksneck. (These particular eggs needed a good amount of heat in order to hatch and the rookery was the only major facility not located deep inside the caverns of the hill.) As he tumbled left and right as directionless as you would expect from a Yorksmen on the surface, Phlabby came to realize that the sunset was nearly through and still he was nowhere near his home. He was worried for what would come next but he was also a mite bit curious.

He wondered why the light he would see peering through the holes in the caverns always disappeared with the Sun, and only tiny fragments would
stick around. Whilst he was walking and pondering, the night suddenly fell upon him. He was at once relieved but also left with a taste of anticlimax at the base of his neck. The outside world during the nighttime greatly mirrored what he had seen in the caves only much more expansive. Phlabby could see just fine in the dark just as all Yorksmen could. If you live in the shadows for most of your life your eyes become accustomed to that sort of thing. So Phlabby, oddly enough, began treating the nighttime as a sort of home away from home.

Although one oddity engraved itself into Phlabby’s thoughts and tended to baffle and fascinate him as he would gaze upward. The sky was filled with what looked like a billion little torches circling a large rock-like object somewhere in the middle. As Phlabby finally found his way back to the face carving, he seemed to note just how much all the little lights reminded him of a condensed version of the Sun with which he was vaguely acquainted. He later came to the conclusion that these lights must have some kind of relation to the Sun as if they might be its children. When Phlabby returned to his kinsmen, they congratulated him on surviving the unknown but also expressed their disdain for his general directionlessness. When Phlabby told them his story, all the Yorksmen feigned interest but deep down were only concerned with Phlabby’s safe delivery of the Narsh eggs. Not that they didn’t believe him, they just put the eggs as their first priority, and Phlabby’s tale of a clan of lost children in the sky was little more than an afterthought to them.

Phlabby’s interest in the lights’ relation to the Sun soon grew into a full-blown fixation. “If the nightlight children are born from the Sun, then why are they not in his care?” “Is the Sun mistreating them?” “Are they lost as I was on my way back from the rookery?” “Or perhaps…” Phlabby fell fast asleep and continued his theorizing in his dreams. In the realm of dreams he was greeted with the image of the Sun and the Great Sky Rock dancing merrily in each other’s orbit while the nightlight children waved their torches in glee.

The next morning Phlabby awoke from his slumber with a bolt of creative lightning still in his mind, courtesy of his dream. “The Sun and the Sky Rock…they were once lovers!” shouted Phlabby, waking and startling his fellow Yorksmen. Phlabby was familiar with the notion of romantic relationships formed for reasons other than procreation. Although he noticed that these relationships tended not to last very long given the labyrinthine nature of the caves which made infidelities all too easy. He became greatly concerned for the well-being of nightlight children knowing what kind of negative emotional impact that could have on the young ones. When he tried to explain this to his fellow Yorksmen they greeted him with even less enthusiasm than they had showed him previously given that they were still a tad disjointed from the rude awakening Phlabby had given them a few minutes earlier. So, Phlabby knew he was on his own in the monumental task that he had given himself.

The following sunset, Phlabby yet again emerged from Yorksneck and leaving the clan below, climbed to the summit of the hill which his clansmen called home. Whilst climbing he noticed that there was one star out even prior to the Sun’s full departure. He pondered on this for a while and then came to the conclusion that the Sun must have marked this child as a favorite. At York’s crest Phlabby proceeded to call to the Sun and that one star he had spotted earlier, which he had decided to name Wilco. He called to them pleading to the Sun to try and understand the unhappiness that his children must be enduring at this time and urged Wilco to provide some evidence supporting his case.

This continued until the Sun silently descended fully and the Great Sky Rock had assumed its place. Phlabby gave a similar lecture to the Sky Rock, claiming that, despite all their hardships, she and the Sun had chosen each other over everyone else in the sky and bore, what Phlabby deemed, a bountiful supply of beautiful children whose feelings they should put first. He continued with his heartfelt attempts at persuasion until he grew tired and descended to the base of the mountain. The other Yorksmen, wondering where he had been for so long, asked him what he had been doing. While Phlabby’s explanation did shed some light on the source of the strange noises that the Yorksmen
had overheard coming from the top of the mountain, the story was not well received by the others who began to dismiss Phlabby as an obsessed, pseudo-intellectual who thought he could move the sky by merely calling out its faults. When they asked, “Who are you to criticize the workings of the Sky Folk?” Phlabby responded by saying, “It is simple. I am the voice of reason.”

Phlabby awoke the very next morning and decided to give his lecture earlier in the day to afford him more time to make his plea. (Also his trip to the top of the mountain took considerably less time when he decided to use a little known tunnel.) Upon his arrival at the crest, he noticed he could see some vague outlines of Sky Rock this early in the morning. A sense of satisfaction filled his heart as he believed his pleas had, at the very least, persuaded the Sun and the Sky Rock to attempt to mend their relationship. Phlabby decided to give a slightly altered version of the lecture he had prepared for both the Sun and the Sky Rock, considering they were both present at the time. Upon making his final point, he noticed shortly afterward the Sky Rock had disappeared, possibly to contemplate everything he said to her and to leave the Sun to think things over. Phlabby took his tunnel pathway back down to his clan who were pleased to see that his venture did not take anywhere near as long this time. When they asked why, he smiled and responded, “It is simple, progress is indeed being made.”

From that day on Phlabby gave his lectures to the Sun and the Sky Rock at sunrise every morning and went to console the children every night. Fixation had mutated into a full blown obsession, as he would give his lectures and reassurances regardless of the weather or his own physical health. His tribesmen even had to drag his battered and bruised body back through York’s neck when he refused to postpone his talk with the children during a hail storm. When confronted about his blind recklessness, a bedridden and greatly injured Phlabby painfully smiled and said, “It is simple; the nightlight children need me.”

Another thing the Yorksmen noticed was that Phlabby had been marking his wall calendar with an X for every morning he saw the Sky Rock rise with the Sun. The tribes folk also observed a series of diagrams and strange scribbles beneath the calendar which Phlabby said was used for his “Astronomy.” While some of the tribesman considered Phlabby a raving lunatic whose sense of self-preservation had been a casualty of his obsession, all were wondering how this would ultimately play out. Only tomorrow knew.

Phlabby pulled himself out of bed the next morning and made haste to his usual forum at the base of York. However, when he reached his destination he beheld a sight that filled his eyes and soul with rapturous glee. The Great Sky Rock had finally reunited with the Sun, in fact they were directly in front of each other and the Sky Rock had turned black with joy. Phlabby gazed lovingly and proudly into the meeting knowing that all his labors had borne fruit and that the couple had finally embraced. A few seconds after witnessing this glorious triumph Phlabby beheld a simmering, painful radiance that, after its passing, left him completely in the dark, even in the bright of day. When Phlabby quickly deduced that he had lost his eyesight, he was stunned initially, but then he realized that since he had the layout of the caves memorized and that no sight in the world could possibly compete with the cosmic reunion he had just seen, he did not need his eyes anymore.

Having committed the trail to memory, Phlabby went back down into the caves with a huge smile on his face and a light in his heart. His tribesmen soon asked him why he looked so cheery, to which he responded, “Simple. My work is done,” and ran off to bed. As Phlabby lay peacefully in the world of dreams, he saw thousands of little Sky Children dancing merrily with both their parents. Moments later the Sky Rock, the Sun, and all their kids turned around, looked Phlabby in the eye and cheered, “Thank you.”
This journal contains the winning student submissions in the 2014 Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review contest. This annual competition is sponsored by the Office of Student Activities at John Tyler Community College.

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