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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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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>poetry</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Burst Apart</em></td>
<td>by Zoe Davis</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Untitled</em></td>
<td>by Dylan Lewis</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Remembering</em></td>
<td>by Kacey Ingram</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My Most Vivid Dream</em></td>
<td>by James Moore</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonfiction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Postcards</em></td>
<td>by Dylan Lewis</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My Son Can Feel the Sun</em></td>
<td>by Lydia Thompson</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Tender Mercy</em></td>
<td>by Tracy Hineman</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cracking Constellations</em></td>
<td>by Anna-Maria Thomann</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Year without Hope</em></td>
<td>by Alyssa Johnson</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How to Bury Things</em></td>
<td>by Brandon Johnson</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Forget Me Knot</em></td>
<td>by Frances Rauscher</td>
<td>2, back cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rebirth</em></td>
<td>by Benjamin Pullen</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deer</em></td>
<td>by Noel Wykle</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherwood Forest Art &amp; Literary Review 2015</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inside of blueberry-flavoured nightmares, 
I grab antlers and curse this colony 
under my breath. 
I hate collapsing grocery store aisles 
and distant echoes of automotive engines 
and constantly bickering with the scale.

Look to check the time: 
no watch, remember?  
I sold it for twenty-five dollars and 
an octopus brooch. 
Now just thin skin stretched taut, 
showing bloody blue like 
layered bruises.
We conspire to ignite, but flames
die out by nightfall and frost
creeps in again, spreading
to essential organs, warping
vital signs.

Enter Sadomasochistic Puppeteer, construct
totems of hatred,
display this savage dance. Broken
chains, clattering
applause.

Shreds of love and cruel words lay
on the sea of floor surrounding our island;
they’re stuck to our clothing like burs.

Awake into another cerulean reverie:
floorboard creaks and footstep falls; hear the ghosts
playing up the stairs.
Tap my neon tambourine, face my mother
on her kitchen stool. One beat
of silence and every dish in the cupboard falls,
drenching the wooden floor with
crumbs of porcelain and glass.
“Ghosties, no more mischief!” I stomp
like five years old, ‘cause
a flying dish just missed my
mother’s curly hair.

Open eyes on chemical red and kawaii factory food;
open ears to retro ringback tones, making
very-semi-not-at-all important telephone calls.
I ingest two-dollar, FDA-approved, poison-infused,
confetti-adorned toaster pastries and
I’m floating like the Dead Sea.

DÉjà vu, gripping bony antlers all over
again, this insomnia never
found sleep and three-pillows-exactly
never crowned my head:
vigilant, lucid as ever.
Just no control—
like hydroplaning
second place, poetry  Untitled by Dylan Lewis

I. I don’t remember when I learned what war was or what I thought of it at the time but I remember making lots of drawings of soldiers as a kid. Today I learned my brother’s going to war and no one’s stopping him. He was a drug addict for a while, what do you do after that? You go to war. Down the street there are children making animal noises. One is crying and a screen in my head displays an image of a cracked mirror and rusty water circling the drain.

II. You are my enemy and because I have made you my enemy you are more human to me than ever before. You are more human than the person I love most in the world. You are so human I want to give you a purpose. You will never know how human I find you. If we meet in public I will play at ignoring you though in truth all else will fall away and there will only be you and I and whatever feeling you are feeling I will then feel too. Who knows how long this will last. Maybe one day I’ll forget how human you are and we can be friends.

III. Forecast: Think of it this way—you are building a house. Just keep stacking sentences on top of each other. There’ll be rain soon.

IV. Mantra: I don’t need to be reminded how empty the sky feels when I run my fingers through it.

V. Elegy: This all means nothing; I’m so stunned by its beauty.

VI. A few times in your life you are given the chance to ruin someone. Today I made a terrible mistake. Or rather, last night was the making and today is the realization. Or it’s still being made and I’m supine and watching light move across the walls of the mistake. If I lift my head I can see the door. When you’re young no one teaches you that love is something sharp that dulls from use.
third place, poetry  My Most Vivid Dream by James Moore

The moment I went in for that first kiss
the bombs went off—
she drew back from me, the fear on her face
drowning out everything else on the scene;

and it took me a few moments before I realized
that somebody was calling my name. I had my gun
on my shoulder, ready for this, but still I remained
frozen to my spot by the one building that
was still intact after last month’s explosion.

Every night it’s the same dream—I’ve never gone to war,
but none of these images of fire can ever begin
to freeze me to my place like that look on her face,

the fear plastered in place behind her eyes where
love had dwelled just a moment before.

I don’t know where this blasted thing had come from,
but I don’t think I’ll go back to sleep tonight; maybe I’ll
go downstairs, put an old war movie on the television,
and start to question everywhere I went wrong in my last
relationship.

third place, poetry  Remembering by Kacey Ingram

I fashion a pillow alongside my back
So that in the morning
When the light hits my window frame
In the second before I’m conscious
It feels like you
It’s only for a moment
But that moment gets me through

The angst I feel the later it draws
The stiller I once was
I swear I heard you breathe
It was on a Sunday
And I had to cry
Because I really did believe
There’s a junkshop in the city that sells these great vintage postcards, some of them postmarked during World War I. They speak of ‘the rheumatism’ and dancing girls in São Paulo and a table of rowdy Austrians getting drunk ‘with the lighted lanterns on.’ Some have dashes between the phrases like a handwritten telegram. I can’t help but read them in meter. I buy so many the lady at the counter always charges me ten cents flat, even though they’re priced individually. I can tell she thinks I’m ‘funny;’ or rather, I’m something. My favorites are the ones with the threaded texture, like they’re woven from linen. I run my fingers along them and forget that I don’t like touching things that other people have touched, which is everything, as K likes to remind me. Some of the more pregnant lines echo in my head; I recite them to the tune of pop songs while driving. ‘I don’t care about that girl at Diamond Springs at all.’ ‘I have not yet found out what I stood in reading.’ ‘I guess that’s all so goodbye from John Dollyer. Write back,—.’ No stamp or address, never postmarked. Some things just can’t be worked. I get cheap thrills from doodling on the blank ones and sending them to friends across the country or the sea. They disappear in transit often but maybe that’s half the point. What’s tangible is destructible. If they reach their destination, I imagine they elicit
a warm chuckle and are quickly assigned to a desk drawer. Paper ephemera. K tells me to stop romanticizing physicality, it’s a trap of the internet age, it’s all information anyway. I tell her it’s about texture. ‘I don’t want to be informed, I just want something against my skin.’

‘Why isn’t he crying? He should be crying!’ I sobbed quietly.

‘The doctors haven’t taken him out yet,’ my husband lied to me.

‘I can feel him! Why isn’t he crying?’ I pleaded for an answer through my tears. The pressure of feeling my child being detached from my body yet still not seeing him through the sheet they had between us was heartbreaking. This was not how it was supposed to be. It was as though everyone in the bright room had a dark secret.

Just over a week before, I was feeling swollen and in pain. I had left my husband in the bed this time. There was this one time I had woken him and sworn something was wrong with my heart. Turned out what I thought was a heart attack was my first case of heartburn. This go-around I saw no sense in disturbing him to ease my hypochondria. I wobbled down the stairs to my momma who had just gotten in from work. The smell of the restaurant kitchen lingered on her clothes.

‘My fingers look like sausages,’ I whined as I shoved them in her face. ‘Should we go to the hospital?’ she questioned with equal levels of fear and eagerness. Her chestnut brown hair matched her eyes and the dark circles under them. Another worried look from me and without hesitation we bundled up and headed to the hospital.

Apparently sausage fingers are a side effect of preeclampsia. The doctors explained my blood pressure was dangerously high but we had to keep the baby within me as long as possible. Our son was not ready. I was admitted into Johnston-Willis Hospital immediately. The time ticked by as slowly as the snowflakes that floated down from the sky. The blanket of white was so bright I often had to keep the curtains of my private labor suite closed. The darkness made it seem less like a week and more like a month.

My young, small-framed, pretty doctor communicated so much to us. Her words registered in my head more offensively than they had come from her mouth. A fear that had lingered from before his conception was now coming to light. Nonetheless, I now knew my body had failed him. As a parent, I had already failed my son.
There was no more time. I had to deliver as soon as possible.

The Pitocin began working its way into my system. The side effects read more like a checklist than a list of just possibilities. I do not recall much pain beyond that of heaving over into a pastel pink plastic bed pan. Aside from the nausea, I felt grateful to have my mother and husband by my side. They combined to be all I needed in those moments. My husband proved to always be as strong as he is tall. Joe empowered me with his simple words and calmed me with his green eyes. My momma was so gentle and compassionate. The nurturer I had so often needed throughout my childhood was everything I needed her to be. The sickness subsided. The fear escaped me. For a small window of time, love consumed me.

“We are going to count backwards from ten and then you will feel a bee sting and pressure. You must stay very still,” the sweet-voiced anesthesiologist instructed with all confidence in me.

Afterwards, I lay down and watched a monitor tell me I was having contractions that I could not feel. Finally I was told, it was time to push. I was about to be more than a broken body. I was going to become a mommy. My momma stood on one side of me stroking my face and hair as she held my leg. My husband was holding my other leg with such excitement radiating from him over the birth of his first son, his namesake. The doctor said that she could see him, that he was crowning. The contractions were so strong that they could no longer be measured. With every contraction that spiked over the screen there was a negative one that fell below the screen. My contractions were so strong they were causing my son’s heart rate to fall dangerously. It was time for an emergency cesarean.

The next few minutes had so much packed into them. I was told that only one person could go into the surgical room for the birth. My mom could not hide her disappointment for not being able to be there for the birth of her first grandchild. She could not hide the sadness that her firstborn and only girl was doing this without her, yet I needed my husband. I needed his strength. I had to have a second epidural. I then amazed the medical staff by moving myself from my labor bed to the gurney. My physical strength was in no way reflective of my emotional strength. I was falling apart.

My eyes felt scorched by the light bouncing off the white walls. The bright lights of the surgical room drained me of my energy. I could not see beyond the sheet between the upper and lower halves of my body, which heightened my anxiety. My husband tried to depict the scene on the other side. He said it was similar to a deer being gutted, and that it is nothing I would want to see. That comforted me none. I felt the weight of the world on my chest. I felt I could not breathe. He relayed that to the doctor. The doctor then educated us that if I was able to say that, I was able to breathe. It was just the two epidurals. That comforted me none.

My husband, clothed in scrubs, stayed close beside me. He touched my face and he kissed my tears. I may have been the one on the table being cut, but I knew we were in this together.

In this moment, I was still. Motionless to the fear of what could be wrong with my baby boy. I was subdued as to why everyone in the room was keeping from me what was going on with my son. I kept thinking that of all people, I had the right to know.

They flashed our child at us and then rushed him to the neonatal intensive care unit. All I wanted was to hold my child. My body may have failed him, but I would not. I wanted him to know I was there. Instead he was in another room away from me, needing me. I was just lying there being sewn back together. My memories went dark.

I woke up sometime in the middle of the night in my original room. I was no longer with child yet still with no child to hold. My husband was lightly sleeping in a teal recliner near me and jumped awake when I moved. He came to my side and told me Jay was still in the NICU. He told me he was able to see Jay, to touch him. I needed that. I needed to see him, to touch him. It would not be real until I saw for myself. I called for the nurse who insisted on me resting because I was on so much...
medicine I should not be awake, much less coherent. She informed me that I could see him in the morning during NICU hours. I refused to do anything until I could see him. After realizing she was fighting a losing battle, she contacted the NICU for admittance and called for a wheelchair.

There he was. This was real. My tough boy who kicked me tirelessly for months was lying there so fragile. I was at odds with the tubes that kept him breathing because they held me back from simply being able to hold him. A lullaby of beeping equipment performed in the background. I reached up from the wheelchair and stroked his skin. The room felt chilly but his small diapered body felt so warm under the lamps. The room smelled sterile. It was not how I envisioned his first moments of life. I was informed he would be perfectly fine. His lungs were filled with a stickiness that did not allow them to open on their own. The tubes that infiltrated his body would remedy that. I looked around the room and saw tiny babies, lying under lamps. Babies even more frail lay inside clear plastic tents. I knew in that moment how truly blessed I was. I could rest now.

No matter what my family and I had endured that day, in the end, we would leave that hospital together. I will forever be grateful for what I experienced. It gave me a true thankfulness for the life I was given responsibility for that day, life that so easily could not have been. Some of the children there wouldn’t leave until well after the snow melted. Some there would never feel the sun on their skin at all.
The heat bore down like a heavy hand as the father pulled the tiny coffin from the back seat of the old Ford. It looked like a large, covered roasting pan in his arms as he began to walk up the slight hill to the burial plot, the mother and I trailing behind. The grass was sparse and withered, and our feet kicked up little puffs of dust as we walked, coating our shoes with a thin layer reminiscent of the talcum powder sprinkled underneath the satin-covered pad inside the coffin, and so recently used on the deceased child. A large mound of dark earth stood beside the small, deep hole in the ground, drying out in the sun, the air redolent with its rich fragrance.

The father placed the cheap coffin on the ground beside the open grave and we assembled around it. They were a young couple but looked much older, he wearing an ill-fitting suit jacket (probably borrowed) and she in a black sleeveless blouse and skirt, her hair tied back haphazardly from her thin face now haggard with grief. They tried not to look at the stark black hole dug deeply into the rich prairie soil but could not help themselves, and both began weeping, the mother covering her face with her hands, the father allowing the tears to course down his cheeks unheeded. Grief is an isolating wound, I thought, standing silently with my hands clasped in front of my hips, a familiar prickle starting behind my eyelids.

The death of a child was the worst scenario of my business. As mine was the only funeral home serving several small farming communities in this part of the Great Plains, over the years I had met with the devastation death had wrought in people’s lives and had never come to be unaffected by the incredible sadness of a young life cut short, or by the inconsolable grief of the parents, grief with which I was all too well acquainted. An image of my daughters flashed into my mind, of their bright blond heads close together as they dressed their Barbie dolls with concentration, considering the merits of the red high heels or the hot pink go-go boots. I took a silent deep breath and looked above and beyond the couple in front of me.

They had shuffled into my office for their appointment, their shoulders stooped under the weight of the sudden shock of finding their little daughter dead in her crib. She had been fine the night before, had played and laughed and patted the bubbles in her bath. But they had not heard her cooing to herself as she usually did on waking in the morning; thinking she was just tired and sleeping a little longer than usual, the mother waited another half hour after the father returned from working the night shift before going in to check on her. When had it happened? At what time had she taken her last breath? Would it have been during that half hour? Or just before? The guilt and grief were a crushing burden, the mother’s face so swollen with the flow of it that her eyes were almost hidden from view. She could see nothing else, and nothing else existed for her. They sat at the table in the room where arrangements were discussed, not touching, she staring down at her hands in her lap, he with his eyes fixed on me. I wished he wouldn’t do that; I couldn’t shield him from his pain.

“We want the best for our little girl,” he said. “She is—was—is our only child.”

Of course they wanted a nice casket and a first-class funeral, but I knew they were working poor. Death is expensive, and although there are some who take advantage of the grief-stricken loved ones, I was not one of those, and in this case it would...
be pointless as I would be financing a funeral costing several thousand dollars—without markup—on five dollars a week. I ran a business, not a charity, but I did not want to see this young couple go into serious debt over their first child. They would have more children, and they would need the means to support those children. We walked down the hall to the display room, past the shiny metal caskets set up next to beautifully carved wooden ones, back to a corner where a few miniature caskets were arranged. I gently steered them to the more economically-priced models, which were just as sturdy as the more expensive ones, I assured them, just not as pretty. Delicate discussion ensued and a basic casket was purchased.

I took them back to the arrangement room where we resumed our seats at the table and began going over options and costs. Gradually the reality of what they could afford became hard decisions. There would be no visitation at the funeral home, no first-class funeral; the cost of a cemetery plot stunned them to silence.

“Would you like your pastor to officiate at the graveside service?” I asked, hoping theirs would be a compassionate man who would waive his fee.

A pause. “We don’t go to any church,” the father said, then added almost apologetically, “we just never got around to it. I don’t know…” His voice trailed off and he looked at the mother for help, or affirmation, or something, but she gave no sign of hearing him or wanting to be a part of the conversation. He turned back to me. “Do we have to find somebody? I mean, would it matter if a preacher wasn’t there? She’s already gone.”

Would it matter? The memory of my little Lisa at eight laughingly holding up the first fish she caught after I taught her how to cast flashed before my mind’s eye, the way she tilted her head back slightly, the sun glinting off the silvery scales as the fish flopped at the end of her line. She was gone, too; she had had a funeral service at our parish church which had been well-attended, and people still remarked on how beautiful it had been. I couldn’t remember it, that day had been simply time during which I had walked, and spoken, and acted appropriately as far as I knew, but all the while I was existing in a bubble in which I couldn’t touch anything no matter how hard I tried.

“If you like, I can officiate for you. No charge, we offer it as a courtesy for our families,” I lied. He agreed, looking relieved, and we discussed appropriate words. Then I asked them to excuse me a moment, went into another room and called the cemetery to ask about affordable options.

We stood now on a small patch of land outside the cemetery boundary. I wasn’t sure exactly who owned it; “Arrangements can be made,” the caretaker had said. The mother recovered first. She stood erect, blotting her face with a tissue and waiting in stunned patience; in a few moments the father had pulled himself together, looking away and swiping his sleeve ineffectually across his face, snot leaving a silver trail on the black fabric. His moustache and little goatee glistened with tears left to dry themselves in the heat. There was no shade in the noonday sun; everything was exposed to the great blue of the sky with its blazing eye far above. They looked to me for direction. A trickle of sweat ran down my back.

“When you’re ready,” I said.

They nodded.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” I began. Their voices began to mumble the words just after mine, then picked up strength; they were not ignorant of the 23rd Psalm, although they weren’t quite sure of the exact words either. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” we concluded.

We stood in silence for a few moments.

“Would it,” began the father hesitantly, then glanced at the mother who nodded slightly, “would it be all right if we looked at her one last time, please?”

“Of course.”

I removed the lid of the container, revealing a tiny child with a head of dark hair on the lace-trimmed satin pillow and a perfect pink-and-white complexion, appearing to be sleeping peacefully in the heat, covered to the waist by a blanket with little teddy bears printed on it, a white plush bunny with worn ear-tips tucked under her
arm. The body hadn’t shifted around much on the ride over, the father had transported the coffin very carefully. The mother knelt in the dusty grass, gazing at the face of her child. She opened her purse and took out something small, placing it under the little girl’s hand.

“Is that okay?” she asked, looking up at me anxiously. When I nodded, she looked back at her daughter, smoothed her hair. “She loves animal crackers. I wanted her to have one, just in case…” Her voice trailed off. Silence ensued as the couple lovingly caressed their child with bright eyes.

I raised my own eyes and looked off to the east; from here I could just make out the crucifix that rose high above the cemetery next door, although it looked tiny from this distance, the agonized corpus taut in its unnatural position affixed to the instrument of torture. Which way was Christ’s face turned? Was He looking this way, or the other way? I couldn’t remember.

A stray verse from a psalm floated into my mind: “Withhold not thy tender mercies from me, O Lord.”

When the bubble finally dissolved and I was left to navigate an uncharted, hostile landscape in a demanding world under the crushing, bewildering agony of continuing to live while my daughter did not, I discovered a new-found ambivalence regarding my faith and the absolute goodness of God. My life had been divided suddenly, cruelly, into two distinct halves: in the first half, I believed with all my heart, mind and strength in the benevolent Father the nuns had presented to me in parochial school. I lived now in the second half in vague hope, but somehow unable to put the pieces together so that it would make sense. Maybe it would never make sense to me, and I would have to live on in the knowledge that that was all right. But that would take a lot of courage and a lot of trust, and I was miserably short on both. I could not afford to be absolved of my grief; it was now the only contact I had with my daughter.

I looked back at these broken people. She had been crying silently, enormous tears coursing down her face without a sound. He, too, had been crying silently, unashamedly, a flood of sorrow that originated before him, coursed through him. The mother rose, then turned away, and the father nodded to me.

I put the cover back on the casket, over the cavorting teddy bears which seemed obscene in their pastel innocence, affixing it with sealant guaranteed to be waterproof. Together we lowered the little box into the narrow hole in the ground, letting the lift cables follow gently, and we stood there as they gazed after it. I reached for their hands and they reached for each other’s then, clasping them tightly, the knuckles showing white. We prayed the Our Father, said our Amens.

The father shook my hand, the mother reached up and hugged me. “Take her back now,” he said to me.

I nodded and they looked at each other, and in that moment something burst open between them and they embraced, and whispered into each other’s necks; he took her face in his hands, wiping her tears with his thumbs, and kissed her tenderly. Then the mother turned away from the grave, away from what might have been, away from what was. I offered her my arm, and she took it. We began to walk back down the hill toward the cars.

I imagined the father turning away from us, walking around the mound of excavated earth, removing the borrowed jacket and tie, and picking up the shovel he had left there earlier. They could not afford to have the grave opened and closed; the father had come the day before, alone, to dig the small, deep hole in the ground. I would return after taking his wife home to help him, if he would let me. When we had met at the funeral home earlier this morning, he had shown me his blistered hands and confessed his tears had mingled with his sweat to water the dark, fragrant earth, offering his suffering in the hope that he would be spared this grief again. I had no doubt I would do the same.

Behind us I heard the first chuk of the shovel biting into the pile of dirt, and then the faint thudding sound of timeless heartbeat, of the mortality of dreams, of the limit of our vision. She froze mid-step, and I stopped with her. I covered her hand with mine, and our eyes met. No words were spoken, no words were needed. We touch each other most deeply through our wounds. It is, I thought, a tender mercy.
Cracking Constellations
by Anna-Maria Thomann

Have you ever looked up to the sky and counted all the constellations you could find? If you’re anything like I am, you couldn’t find any constellations to count because you just don’t have that mental capability to connect any. Now, imagine your life as a constant search to find the right star to connect to another and never being able to match your constellation to society’s. That’s my life in a nutshell.

My name is Avery Allen, and if you knew me then you’d probably know me better as That Gay Boy’s Loser Friend. Not everyone calls me that, though.

I’ve known Luke since the second grade, and he’s always been known as Gaylord. As you could probably assume, Luke has been openly gay since the fifth grade. Together we’ve made the perfect ‘Undesirables’ at our school for the past eight years.

“You shouldn’t eat so much chicken, it’ll go straight to your thighs,” Regina snarled as she leaned close to my ear and dropped one of her celery sticks onto my cafeteria tray. “I’d give you some ranch for that, but your arms tell me that’s the last thing you need.”

Regina used to be my friend and Luke’s friend. She was an outcast like us, denied the equal right to live our lives in peace because she was poor and couldn’t afford new clothes. Then her father died one day when we were in the ninth grade, and she and her mother came into a lot of money through insurance. That’s when Gucci and the other labels came into play and she was welcomed into the folds of society’s Golden Members, and the twins started following her.

“You used to be a decent human being once,” I mumbled as I looked up at her quietly.

“Whatever, losers. Try to not stink up this school with your glitter spray or odor.” Regina stalked back to her table.

Silently I looked down at my chicken and celery stick and debated if I should keep eating the chicken. “Don’t let Regina get to you. You’re perfect and don’t need to change anything for anyone,” Luke said, emphasizing every word with the wave of one of his french-fries.

“Thanks, but I’m actually not hungry,” I said before the bell rang.

That night I laid on the roof of the porch outside my window. Every night since I was in the seventh grade I would lie out here and try and figure out the constellations. Whenever I thought I was onto finding one, I’d realize that it would look nothing like the pictures I’d seen.

My stomach growled, angry at me for skipping the rest of my lunch when I knew that once I got home there would be no food to eat. Gingerly I rubbed my stomach, urging it to calm down.

Inside I could hear the drunken words of my father as he yelled at my mother for the little things in life. It was always a mental battle to be the daughter in this family. My father had never been proud of me, and he made no effort to hide that fact. I’ve always been the disappointment of a daughter. I wish I could just trade myself in for someone better. All that my mother deserves.

I ran my fingers along my arm, tracing scars from my thoughts. Whenever they healed, they became thin, pink lines that wouldn’t disappear under my pale skin.

From the roof I could hear the chime of my phone as a text came in. I didn’t need to look to know it was Luke, but I’d decided tonight wasn’t a talk-it-out night and quietly crawled through the window to lie back on my bed quietly, dreading tomorrow’s possibilities.

“If you could have one thing, what would it be?” My therapist glanced at me from above her notepad.

“There are a lot of things I want,” I replied calmly as I crossed my arms and leaned back. “For starters, a new life is a goal of mine that I can never have,” I said as I watched her carefully analyzing my words.

“Other than that?”

“I would love to figure out what’s so funny about a person that causes others to enjoy harassing and abusing another human being. Does it make them feel better inside?” My anger started to boil at the thought of Regina.

“Why do you feel so strongly about Regina leaving you four years ago?” Wendy leaned forward.

“Because…I needed someone and she decided to drop her old life.
and create a new one from not just one ruined life, but two. Her new popularity had cost her our friendship and her father’s life.” Tears streamed down my face in hot tracks of anger.

“What happened, Avery?”

“If you saw a small family at a restaurant smiling and chatting, would you dare think about what happens behind closed doors?”

“Well, I—”

“Wrong. It doesn’t matter what you would’ve said, because people have learned to put up covers to hide the pain and truth in their lives.” My eyes cautiously surveyed my surroundings in the room as Wendy listened attentively.

After my therapy session with Wendy yesterday I decided to stay back a few feet from everyone, literally and metaphorically. Luke’s been blowing up my phone with curious texts that transformed into worried texts before finally forming into continuous phone calls. I couldn’t have gone a minute without seeing Luke’s name appear.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about why anyone would want to hang out with me. Then again, I remember that he is also like me and doesn’t have anyone else to socialize with. Then I feel badly about being the one who seems to be dragging his likeness at school.

The school bell rings, signaling the start to lunch. Instead of following everyone to lunch, I decide to go sit in-between lockers and quietly watch the other students.

I’ve been taking into account what Regina did and what Wendy said. It’s all starting to make sense now. My own self is my reason for the pain. The serotonin is happening in my body. It’s. All. Me.

Reaching into my bag, I pull out my red notebook, and turn to a page without notes. Then I pull a pen out and began to write:

Dear Luke,

I don’t know where to begin this letter other than by saying how grateful I am to have had you as my friend. Your friendship is the one thing in life that I’m proud of.

Today, I actually debated writing you a letter. Wondering if it would be unfair if I didn’t and have you find out everything on your own. I finally realized that would be severely selfish of me and make me even more selfish than I already am.

Let me tell you something, I’ve finally figured it all out. It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t been your friend, then you wouldn’t be harassed at school as I am. Just like Regina and what happened with her. She needed to progress.

Behind every person’s eyes lies a secret. What they all don’t know though, is that the secret isn’t really a secret. We all want better, new lives.

I’ve decided to be that one gateway that lets so many people live the life they want to live. My parents will finally have no reason to fight and heal their relationship; you can finally be free of the harassment and become your own self; Regina will never have to take the time to harass me anymore or remember that I was real. It’s my ultimate plan…

“Aves?” I closed my notebook as Luke came around the corner of the hall and marched up to me. “Why aren’t you in lunch?”

“I’m just working on some homework,” I said as I carefully slide the notebook into my bag.

“Are you going to this stupid masquerade ball the school is hosting?”

“Maybe. Would you be my date?”

“I glanced at Luke as he teasingly bowed and held out his hand.

“M’lady it would be my undying honor to escort you to this snobby ball even though thy skirts are shielding the wrong anatomy.”

“Sorry I’m a disappointment in that category,” I shrugged.

“Most girls are, that’s why I tend not to date them,” he grinned before pulling me up and walking down the hall toward my class.

Soon enough it was finally the day of the ball. I wore a lovely red gown that Luke had made himself.

Last week Luke and I decided to just meet up at the ball since he knew how my costume would look. Leaving early, I arrived twenty minutes before anyone else showed up and was able to watch who filtered in and out of the recreated gym.

After a couple of people entered I finally saw Regina.
I walked over to her and tapped her shoulder.

Regina stopped talking long enough to glance at my face and falter before continuing, “Avery, get the hell away from me.”

“I’m sorry Regina, I just wanted to tell you that you look amazing,” I said before scuttling off.

“As if I didn’t already know,” I heard her cackle back.

“Avery!” I turned around and saw Luke pushing his way through the crowd. “Finally! I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Want to dance?”

He held his hand out to me cordially before I took it and let him sweep me off toward the dancing crowd. On that night we danced to fourteen songs, sang to sixteen, requested three of the most horrible songs of the year, and laughed for five hours straight.

After the dance, Luke walked me home, holding my hand as we quietly walked up the path to my house.

“Thanks for walking me home, Luke,” I said sincerely, “You really didn’t have to, but I appreciate it.”

“It’s fine, Avery,” he replied as we stopped outside my door. Looking over his shoulder at the driveway I noticed my dad’s car is missing.

“Are you okay? You seem kind of off lately.” He pulled me into an embrace and I took the chance to carefully slide the note into his pocket and hug him back.

“I’m fine, Luke.”

“Pinky swear,” he said as he held out his pinky.

“I promise I’m fine.” I slowly wrapped my pinky around his, intertwining them both together one last time.

“Thanks again for walking me home,” I said as I slipped into my front door and made sure not to trip on my gown going upstairs.

Going upstairs, I silently peeked into my parents’ bedroom and saw my mom sitting on the bed, her head hanging down and tears rolling down her face as she gazed on a picture from the time when she and Dad would never fight. Gently, I closed the door and entered my room.

On my counter were prescription bottles of all kinds for my anxiety and depression. I looked around my room once before gathering up the pill bottles and heading into the bathroom.

Gingerly, I popped open each prescription bottle and dumped the contents into my hand. Quickly, I threw back the pills into my mouth and swallowed them all.

All there was to do now was wait, as I turned on the shower and sat in my gown in the hot, steaming water that poured everywhere. It wasn’t long until my mother finally came out of her room to yell at me to turn the water off and saw the water soaking the carpet in the hall.

All she would find of her daughter that night was a corpse with ‘I’m so sorry’ written on one of her arms in sharpie and ‘I made it all better’ on the other.

***

I dropped Avery off at her home around ten before starting to walk towards my house. It was about eleven when I slipped my hands into my pockets because they were cold and felt the note. I’d become impressed that Avery managed to slip a small novel into my pocket. Little did I ever know that I’d find my best friend’s suicide note to me.

It will be the last time you see me take a breath. I planned to go to the masquerade ball with you as our last night as the victors and beautiful outcasts we were. If you’re reading this now then it’s probably too late to turn back and try to do something. I know you’ll want to throw this aside and come running back but you won’t. I knew you’d come with me to the ball and I knew we’d have a good time for the last time. I love you, Luke. You’ll always be my favorite person.

Always Your Sidekick,
Avery

Despite her obvious demands when she’d written the letter that night, I stuffed the letter back into my pocket. I’d been a fool to think she was fine this whole time. I’d known her for so long and she was all that I had.

I remember arriving at her door at eleven forty I’d run as fast as possible back to her house. I remember her
mother’s scream as she sobbed with her empty daughter, limp in her arms. I remember the sight of her lost eyes staring straight ahead. I remember the paramedics arriving and officially stating her time of death and beginning to wheel my only friend, now in a black bag, out of the front door. The last thing I can remember from that night is Regina’s face as she stood breathless in her sweatpants and baggy shirt witnessing her former best friend being rolled off to a morgue.

One thing I do remember feeling that night was agony. Agony for Avery and the depression she’d kept hidden from everyone. It was more than that though. I mostly felt the agony of why Avery couldn’t see that I never did want a different life because of her. Because in reality I can’t think of anything but wanting a different life now that she’s gone.

Regina shared with me that night that she’d seen the lights from down the street before sharing with me stories from their friendship and sobbing onto my shoulder. All I could think about after that were the last words Avery ever said to me.

She promised. She lied.

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In that moment when I finally began to feel myself drift off, I looked out the window across from the shower. I watched the stars in the sky as they finally moved in my favor. Each twinkling little star in the sky became as luminescent as ever and aligned to form the most beautiful constellations I could have ever hoped to see.

I’ve had better days; I’ve had worse days. My life isn’t a tragedy and it damn sure ain’t been no crystal stair. Life can give you everything at once or sometimes nothing at all. The second you get comfortable, that’s when everything changes, whether you want it to or not. It can give you pleasures that you never imagined, and then just like that they can all be taken right away. But that’s just the circle of life. Everything is in constant motion, up and down, left and right. And you can’t stop it; you just have to go with it, because you can’t win trying to go against it.

Up until about a month ago, my life was pretty mediocre. I was just an average high school junior who worked at the local Winn Dixie for spare cash. Starting for the varsity basketball team gave me, well, a fresh start. I’ve been recovering. I’ve never been used to change. In fact, I hate change. I never used to be this way though; I used to embrace whatever life threw at me with a smile. But life, unfortunately, has taken away my smile and left me vacant, bare.

It’s strange to think about how different things were a year ago. A year ago I had Hope, and now I don’t. A year ago I had friends, and now I don’t. A year ago, I was still a child, but recent changes have stripped my innocence. In just three hundred and sixty-five days, my life has become a whirlwind, a tornado or a destructive hurricane, destroying all hope in its path. I would love to say that I have had no control over the downfall of my life, but that would be untrue. The reason I am where I am today is my fault and mine alone. Every decision that I ever made has led me to this exact point.

Sometimes, I want to go back in time and change decisions and in turn have a better outcome. Sometimes, I just want to pack up and leave everything behind. Sometimes, I just want to pull the plug because I feel alone, as if I have nothing, as if I am nothing. There is only one thing keeping me afloat in this sea that is consistently trying to drown me. It is the sole reason that I breathe; the reason why I still have hope.

When Hope left, I thought she had left for good. She and I had what
I would describe as a “soul connection.” She understood me in a way that no one else ever has. She was like a firework, bright, loud, and colorful, here one moment and then gone the next. Our breakup was sudden. We had just spent what seemed like the best weekend of our lives together, and then a week later she tells me that she doesn’t want to speak to me anymore. As hard as I tried to win her back, she was just too far gone and there was nothing I could do. It had been months since I had seen her. That was until four weeks ago when she showed up on my doorstep. This wasn’t the girl that I had fallen in love with. She looked broken and hopeless. Her hair was unkempt and her eyes were dim. And her once bright smile had faded away. My firework stood before me nothing but a burnt out ember. I was so taken aback by her appearance that I failed to realize anything else until she brought it to my attention. She stood there in the doorway with a letter in her hand, a bag on her shoulder, and a car seat at her feet.

When your goldfish dies you know it’s wrong to flush him down the toilet so you bury him in a TV dinner casket. He was your best friend. People die, you bury them.

The gravedigger’s daughter learns how to bury things. You play with shovels in the sandbox, digging little graves like Daddy. Bury your hamster in one, when he joins your goldfish.

You like the graveyard. Always cool, always misty. Lots of people buried there so it’s never lonely. The graves become your friends, nicer than those kids who call you weird. Quieter.

Leaving is a part of life, like burying. People leave. Some get buried. Others leave in the middle of the night when it’s raining and they don’t hear you screaming for them to come back. You don’t cry after Mommy leaves, though. You bury it like the bodies. It’s easy to bury things. Just need a shovel.

Daddy shouldn’t dig graves all day. When he comes in, he should hug you, not walk by like you don’t exist. You bury those thoughts.

When you turn sixteen, you’re in the kitchen when Daddy gets really scared and tries to hurt you. Says you made Mommy leave. Says she was afraid of you. He starts crying because he didn’t bury Mommy and the feelings. But you did. And when he reaches for the knife, you do to Daddy what you did to your goldfish, your hamster, and those kids who called you weird. Then, you take Daddy and bury him with the feelings and you don’t even cry.
This journal contains the winning student submissions in the 2015 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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