

# QUIZ & QUILL





# QUIZ&QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT MAGAZINE | FALL 2024

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## Submission Policy

Q&Q strives to publish high quality creative work by current Otterbein students. We review all submissions blindly and take every precaution to protect our contributors' anonymity during our selection process. During review, only the faculty advisor knows the identities of the writers and artists who submit work to the magazine. The advisor only shares contributor identities for accepted work once staff has finished its selection process.

**Front Cover** | *Childhood Toys Lost* by Rachel Malek

**Back Cover** | *Down the Rabbit Hole* by Rachel Malek



# Letter from the Editors



Dear Reader,

The Fall 2024 issue of *Quiz & Quill* aims to explore the theme of Facades and Fragmentation. Through this theme, we curated pieces that seek to interrogate, deconstruct, and reflect upon the various “false faces” that we encounter during our daily lives. These pieces meditate upon the innerworkings of outward-facing displays; they seek to perform the work of excavation—that is, the “digging up” of what has been buried, what is hidden from us. The crooked smile behind the ornate mask, evidence of wrongdoing covered up by a fresh coat of paint, the door to wonderland down the mouth of the rabbit hole: these pieces strive to unravel the complex webs that conceal true intentions and—in doing so—identify the motivations, mechanisms, and consequences of their concealment. With a theme as open-ended as this, the opportunities are truly endless. Indeed, this issue integrates facades in several different contexts: ideas, concepts, identities, social conventions, objects, histories, memories—the list goes on. For this reason, this issue contains a diverse collection of poetry, fiction, essay, and visual art which—although variable in tone and theme—are unified by their collective attempts to shatter the metaphorical mask.

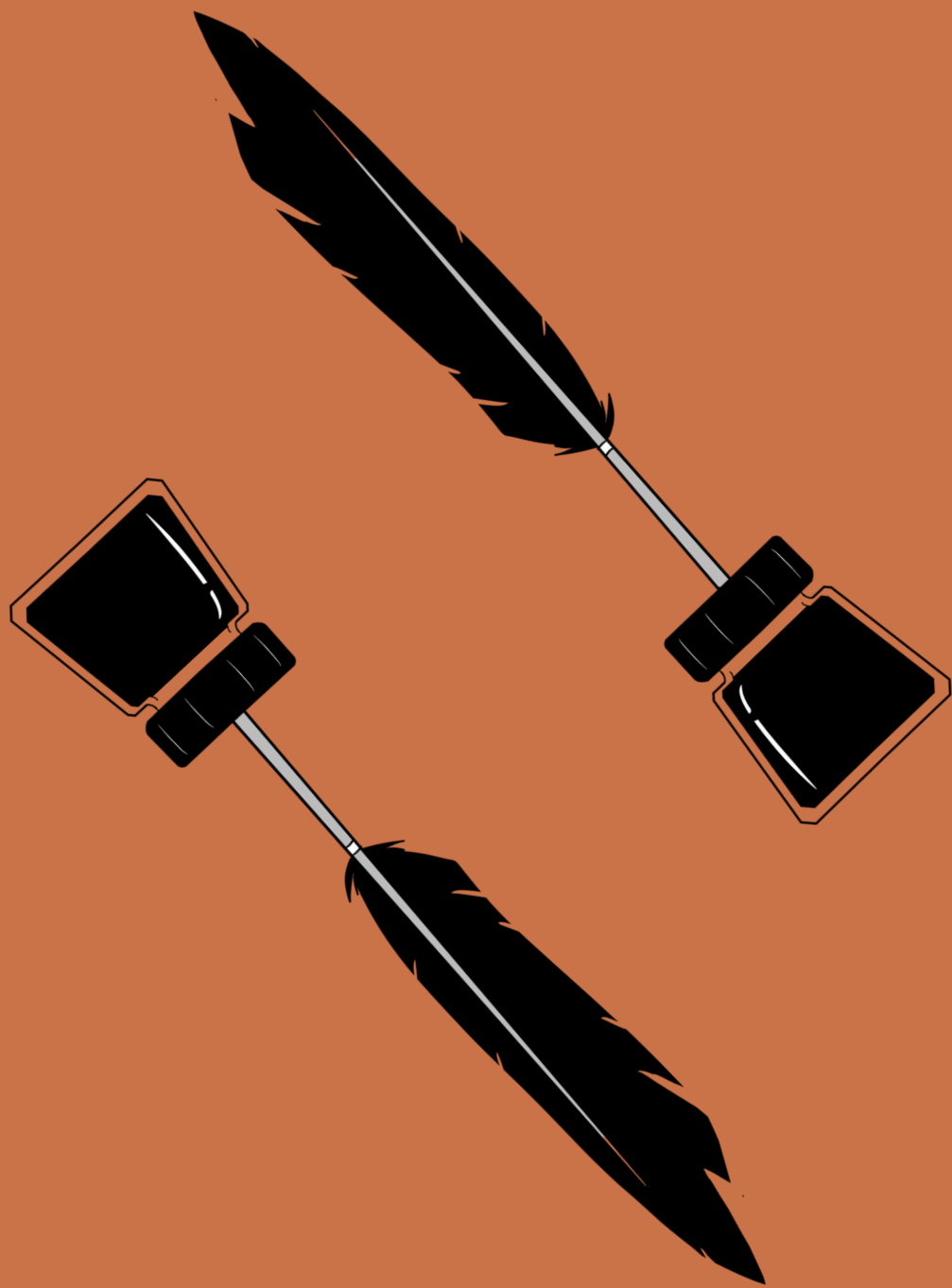
We would like to thank those who continue to make this chapbook possible. First, we would like to thank you, dear reader, for having opened this chapbook. We are grateful that we can provide Otterbein University’s literary community with a publication comprised of the exceptional written and virtual works of Otterbein students. No chapbook would exist without our talented contributors, whom we have the pleasure of publishing in this issue. To every creative who shared your work with us for consideration, we thank you for your contributions to your literary community. Finally, to the *Quiz & Quill* Editorial Board: we thank you for your time, talent, dedication, and commentary on every single one of the submitted pieces. We would especially like to thank Professor Jeremy Llorence, *Quiz & Quill*’s faculty advisor, for his support in producing this issue.

We invite you now, dear reader, to take a trip down the rabbit hole. Explore these acts of excavation; deconstruct these facades—tear into them, dissect them, shatter them, break them two—and uncover the true face behind the mask.

—Adam E. Willis and Dalton Mosley  
*Quiz & Quill*’s Managing Editors

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## Staring Out Window

A.W.

Damp asphalt lit  
by ochre lamp light,  
weathered fence—  
ashen by sun-bleach summers—

wet painted by mossy  
stains slipping green between  
rotting grain. Nude trees—  
thin-limbed, wet-trunked, skeletal—

cutting black lines into the gray sky,  
the broad uniform desolation  
cast above the neighborhood  
like a hood of gloom

over the verdant green grass  
thrice watered by Ohio winter—  
the first snow, the second snow,  
the rainfall that melts the slush.

I see myself in the reflection—a pale,  
flat-faced specter in the colorless glass,  
pearl eyes cast onto myself, into myself—  
as if staring at another person.

My brother stirs in the other room—  
shut the door, lock myself within.  
Alone—hidden in my isolated refuge—  
with the only other I can trust:

the familiar shade—my known friend—  
mirrored in the window.



## Mask of Many Faces

### Freddie Borer

Allow me to recount to you a completely normal conversation that I've had between me and a friend.

“Hey man, how's it going?” I'm asked.

“Well, that test earlier was pretty rough, but I'm good otherwise.” I answer.

“Yeahhhh, but at least it's over.”

“That's true.”

“Alright, well, I gotta get going, but it was good to see you!” They then leave in a hurry.

“Yeah. Good to see you too.” I wave goodbye at them.

Now allow me to show you what went on in my mind as I was having this conversation.

*I recognize this guy. He's in that one class I'm in. He asked me how I am. He seems to be in a hurry since he was passing by until he saw me. I need to keep it brief. Say something that he'll agree with. That test we had wasn't hard, but I'll say that it was. Good. That worked. He agreed with me. He's still in a hurry. Don't elaborate. Just agree with him. Good. That worked. He's adjusting his backpack. He's leaving now. Say goodbye and wave. Good. That worked.*

When I speak to someone, I am never the same person as I was before. As the words fall from my mouth, a mess of equations and calculations run through my head, culminating in the creation of a sentence that is sent to my vocal cords for emission. These emissions of strung together sounds are generated purely as part of my service to the person I'm speaking with: the consumer. Each consumer that I provide a service to receives a simultaneously hand-crafted yet procedurally generated conversation. My words must be what the other person wants to hear. Perhaps I believe in what I say, perhaps I don't. It doesn't matter. To

the outside viewer, all of these programs run together to create a simple mask. A mask that by definition hides my face.

Specifically, my mask looks like a theater mask, except for that where usually two faces rest: one happy, one sad, hundreds upon hundreds of faces adorn this mask. Indeed, I wear a mask with thousands of faces, each carved into the skin-colored plastic with analytics of every person to whom I've spoken. It's a grand library full of interactions, experiences, and ready-to-be-sold dialogue options. On the outside, this mask morphs and molds into whichever face best suits who I'm talking to, drawing upon past information on said person.

But this complex factory is still a mask. There should be a face behind it, right?

I remember once, on my usual and mindless scroll through YouTube, I came across a video featuring a public speaker. I do not remember the full details of the video, yet it still has a place in my mind, as it called into question the structure of my mask. The man with the black suit and the blue tie and the stupid looking hair was answering an audience member's question. This question was one that remains unanswered for many:

“How do I get someone to like me?”

Like many public speakers, the man answered with a long and tangential example. In its essence, he answered that everyone has a level of openness that they are willing to give to another person. For example, from a stranger to a stranger, the level of openness is minimal. From a friend to a friend, the level of openness is high. While the audience and I could see where he was going, he then continued his tangent in a direction I had not expected.

“Even the closest people: child to parent, spouse to spouse, do not use the maximum level of openness.”

He explained that even in relationships such as these, there still lies an infinite distance between their current level of openness and their maximum level of openness. A person is only truly the most open when they are alone, without a person to be open to, for that is when you are

truly yourself.

Inevitably, the public speaker's tangent ended and amounted to, "just be yourself". Actually, now that I think about it, the speech didn't *amount to*, "just be yourself", he said it himself. Perhaps it's on me that I expected any other answer to the question, "how do I get people to like me?" My disappointment aside, I was left wondering but one thing: what does it mean to "be yourself?" Perhaps it is a simple question with a simple answer, but in all truthfulness, I have no idea what it means.

I am horrible at meeting new people. It's a wonder that I have any friends. I can not remember any of the individual first interactions between my friends and I. Now that I think about it, every friendship that I've ever had was created over an ever-so-slow period of time. I never follow the public speaker's advice. I never try to be myself. I stay silent in the face of strangers. It is only by pure chance, do I ever interact with a stranger willingly. The opportunity must be absolutely perfect in order for me to say something. Perhaps an appropriate joke can be made. Perhaps they spoke to me first. Perhaps a friend of a friend introduced them to me.

The sentence generation process that occurs in my head relies solely on analyzed and archived data of past encounters with a person. I draw upon things I remember that they have said or done and build off of that. But if there is no data, if there are no historical entries, if there are no hand-me-down lecture notes to be accessed, then how could I possibly generate a conversation? Like I said, it is only through a slow and grueling process can I learn about a person. I observe. Like a scientist with a microscope, I watch what a person does. I stare into their soul, writing textbook after textbook about them to archive within my mask.

But if there is truly no data, I am nothing. I'm a swimmer with no water, an artist with no paint. If there is a sense of myself, it has been lost to me. With each face that is added to my mask, the plastic grows heavier and its coverage eclipses more of my face, pushing any semblance of the self into a forgotten abyss. There's too many other faces to worry about than my own. In fact, there must not be a face underneath my mask at all. There must be nothing.

There is no me.

...Wait.

That can't be right.

There is a contradiction. If I have no face, then why do people still recognize me? People who know me describe me using adjectives: describing words that speak to my character and personality. How can something be describable if there is nothing there?

I remember overhearing a conversation while I was in the library on my campus. It was between two people. One of them I knew, the other I didn't. I was more surprised that I was being talked about at all. I was behind a bookshelf so they did not see me.

“What do you think of him?” The familiar asked.

“Oh, he's fine. He's pretty chill and the stuff he says in class is pretty interesting.” The stranger replied.

This simple exchange of words defies all that I have so far stated.

If there is no me, then a description of myself should be impossible. How can a complete stranger, one who has never spoken to me directly, one on whom I have no data, one who is describing only the thing that covers my face describe something about me?

Maybe that's just it. My mask of many faces. Perhaps if I were to take off my mask it would mean destroying myself. I would metaphorically and literally tear my face off, perhaps even gruesomely ripping my own head, my own mind off of my torso. What that stranger described was indeed only my mask. But to still be able to describe me...

Me. My mask is me.

The hundreds upon hundreds of faces. All of them have their own archives, their own calculations, their own ways of telling my vocal cords what to sound like. They dot the mask on my face like stars in the sky amongst the nebulous infinity of pitch black space. They are but tiny fragments of myself that accumulate to represent my personality. Myself.

I still do not know what the public speaker meant behind his long-winded tangent and ever disappointing conclusion. I went online to look up, “what does it mean to be yourself?” and I was told that it is to, “act naturally based on one’s own character.”

If my character, if my nature, is to live with my face: my ever changing, ever morphing, ever analyzing, every studying, ever growing face, then I shall wear it, for that is myself.

**Crowdsurfers**  
Christopher Jackson



# The Dream Journal of Louise Eldridge

## Grace Smith

September 30

I resurrected this journal just in time for this nightmare. I dreamt that I was half underwater—sharp, ice-cold, and rising. I moved my legs in circles like a bicyclist but couldn't keep my stiffened arms above the surface. The whole thing felt midnight blue, but not in the usual serene way. It was the feeling right before letting go and falling away. Or just losing the sun.

October 3

I meant to write in here every morning. The past few nights, I've forgotten everything as soon as I wake up. The dreams float away before I can lock them into words, their tendrils slipping between the satin fibers of my memory.

I felt a kind of breathlessness upon waking though. My heart was racing this morning-like I had seen something I wasn't meant to.

October 4

It was a long dream last night, the kind that felt like an entire life. It twisted and distorted into several different settings—my basement, the front yard of my best friend's house, the space under my bed. I remember being whisked away to all these places without being able to move my legs. Like a baby being lifted and dropped wherever the mother pleases.

Is that a good metaphor? I want to be a poet. I know this even though I know that I am not very good at writing poetry, and I haven't read enough of it either. Maybe that's why I like it. I don't know enough to see everything I am doing wrong. That before-knowing feeling is always there in my dreams.

Just before I woke up, I was wandering on the shore of the same lake again. I was the only one there. The water shifted from blue to gray to

white. I don't usually feel temperatures in my dreams, but I remember having goosebumps.

October 6

I haven't fallen asleep yet. It is 4 AM, and I am on the armchair next to the couch where my father rests. He looks peaceful enough. I don't know what the argument was about, but I think he won because he had a little smirk on his face as he drifted off.

My mother didn't mean to meet my father, or any man for that matter. They came to her like swarming hornets, offering her their bright sharp edges. She fed them with the only things she had—her starched-white heart, her cool, clean hands, a wash of dew drops on a desert road. But my father kept us safe. He reminded me of an unnamed song, the kind you remember in snippets but never altogether. I knew he loved us, even when he didn't speak.

If I was more organized, I would write all this in a separate notebook. I have plenty of them. But I am afraid to taint it with musings. With half ideas. It fits better here, in the place where I remember the things my mind is afraid of.

October 7

It's the same lake again. I was crawling on all fours, digging into the mud, rooting myself in so I wouldn't get swept away. I've never been to a lake before, but I used to think of them as being still water, like the man-made ponds next to grocery stores. This had ocean-height waves—industrial gray and capped in white foam. I got the sense that I didn't know how to swim, even though I've had lessons.

October 10

Just woke up. Don't want to forget the details. This time, there was a boy in the water with me. Around my age, dark hair, bright white face. He looked dead even when he was still breathing, still struggling to stay



above the bucking waves. He kept trying to float on his back, just like I was taught in my swimming lessons. And then he went under.

I followed, arms paddling, breathing half-full. It felt wrong to not be cold. I knew I had been here before—beneath the waves.

And then I woke up.

October 11

I spoke to my mother about the dreams I've been having. She's never been one for breakfast-table sharing (or breakfast in general), but it was all I could think about.

"There was a boy back home who drowned in a lake once," she said, face blank, looking out the window.

I set my mug down. "What?"

"I was the first one to see it. They dredged the lake, but I don't think they ever found him." Her words were droning, stacked against each other in a tight line.

That was the end of the conversation—she quickly changed the subject and her voice started to shift back to normal. As she spoke about the forecast for the day, she buried her hands in the column of water steaming out of the tap. Her fingers swiped over each other, scrubbing at the red patches on her skin. I turned the water off to snap her out of it, and she didn't stop me.

October 13

I found a news story from that town. A tragic accident, a teenage boy. He was swimming at night and got sucked under in the flood. The water was colder than usual, and it was raining.

Only one identified witness. A young girl called the police on a pay phone. A young girl who was unnamed, unsupervised. Alone. I remember

my mother telling me about the days before cell phones, when she could explore the outdoors until dark without her parents wondering where she was. The thought always scared me.

I still dream of the lake. Now that I know where the boy is from, I see myself in the water. My mother's young face—my face—ripples over me, and she screams like a dog. I love my mother. I tell her so every morning, even when she is transfixed by the rush of scalding water over her red hands.

## three minutes

Catharina Le

*An unnamed emotion is here*

Tried to use share location with a friend who I haven't seen or talked to in

*Months.*

Location unavailable.

It's the middle of the semester.

Why do I always feel this way?

I don't even know.

Just dropped a class,

I don't have any more empathy for it.

One less class to worry about.

*Can I run away forever?*

*Can I start over?*

*Wish there was a reset button.*

Really want some Panera,

Got nine dollars to my name.

Don't feel like going home to eat.

Is life moving too fast and I'm just getting motion sick?

*Might need to set up a blood appointment,*

I hate it.

Mind's outer space.

Struggling to float.

*Am I just hungry?*

I hate this 8am...

Felt like I was gonna throw up this morning.

*What am I feeling?*

GOD I WANT PIZZA!

*Maybe I'll get a sugar daddy...*

Want to draw...

Forgot my Apple Pencil...

Does she still think of me as her friend?

Working two jobs, going to school, still seeing her posting with her  
Boyfriend.

Wonder if she's living her best life?

Haven't done Saturday breakfast in a long time.

Are we dead?

Maybe I'll text her for some coffee.

See if she's actually free this time...

She's busy...

**Pawsitively Clownish**  
Rachel Malek



## Star Dyed

Wrenne Grone

I dyed my hair with a star,  
plucked it from the sky  
with tweezers and an ice cube,  
a master of practicality, I am

Though it burned my hair to a crisp,  
the color of a dying leaf's senescence,  
it was a healing change, it sought for me,  
it hoped I'd be forever young,  
but I had already resigned  
to the forever torment of age

The star's flare grieved for me,  
grieved for the wrinkles  
that graced my skin,  
wept for the fine strands  
of silver that danced  
over my brow

But I grieved for the star,  
it did not live the life I've lived,  
and though it dyed my hair  
like youth  
and sprinkled freckles, kisses  
of sunlight on the bridge  
of my nose,  
it could not erase  
the matured youth  
that was already there

As the rich colors  
of the star died  
from my hair,  
the star was reminded,  
once again,  
of the forever  
youth.

## The Two Conjectures

Isaac Jones

Or some of humbler name, to these wild shores  
Storm-driven; who, having seen the cup of woe  
Pass from their Master, sojourned here to guard  
The precious Current they had taught to flow?

—William Wordsworth, “Conjectures”

The morning of the accident she had fashioned a cotton sail from her son’s soiled bed sheets. Unable to imagine a lighthouse, nor a shore that would harbor such a far-straying bow, she could only see herself as a pale fraction in the infinite blue. A ratio so infinitesimal that she recited Matthew 18:12 to ease her unseen trembling.

She dreamt often of ships. In her youth, she spent summers at her grandfather’s house in Maine. He was, for as long as she could remember, a stern Catholic man. Rarely smiled. As he progressed in age, he quit his job at a small staffing agency and began keeping a lighthouse. Between the inertia and isolation of a wickie’s life, he was led by the ceaselessness of the horizon to a vocation of spiritual preponderance. Her mother spoke briefly of a before time; those days he spent in an office cubicle created an agnostic, and in seclusion, to the psalms of crashing waves he had fathomed God. Soon thereafter, he divorced his wife and cut ties with his family which had strayed so far from God’s will. Believing himself alone in a world of vessels brimming with the diabolical ichor, he reflected God’s own sorrow in his weeping. Overcome by the conviction of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, he lit the lamp to edify the human spirit against the seductions of the night and the jagged rocks. With his lamp, he thought he might lead all believers to a safe harbor.

She discerned a sense of wreckage in the mirror that morning, her sons at her sides. Her head throbbed with the acute feeling that her head was below water searching for a channel to the surface. It was the small hand of her five-year-old warming a chalky trail across the light blue fabric of her Sunday best that delineated the world as it was, from the world as she

experienced it. She was then pulled from the tide and presented herself in the slobbering mouth of an honorific mutt, toothpaste and spit in a wide arc across her abdomen as proof of good brushing. There were times that she dreamt of going alone to her grandfather's house far away. Dreams where she pushed herself to sea in hopes that the family on the sailboat might retrieve her, and they did only to throw her out to the water again. She might have gone in waking life, had he wished to see her.

That Sunday she, and so her family, had been slow to start. There was no time for questions or repudiations about the sores on the back of her son's thighs. No time to ponder her ineptitude, only enough to cut her finger chopping onions for their omelets and spread lavender oil at her temple with the other. Frequently, she wished for a third hand that might have directed her sons toward the bathroom to wash themselves, so she did not have to yell. She swore she did not like yelling.

Her eldest son, her eight-year-old, the one that had "done it," attended third grade and was, on the face of it, developmentally solid. During animal reports, he did the anteater; that was not a sign of stunted progression. A zoologist friend of the professor, on the day of reports, gave one of her own, presenting a jumping tarantula, a corn snake, a chinchilla, and the class pet: a rabbit named Roman. The zoologist did not allude to anything relevant to the children and seemed a fun treat as opposed to a learning experience. This was until the zoologist gathered Roman into her arms, shot a look at the elementary schoolteacher, and said in so many words that this rabbit was not a boy. Perhaps it had occurred to her son that people could change genders because of the rabbit: Ramona, formerly Roman. That, she contrived, was why he had peed the bed.

In the sacristy, she recalled all of this to her priest with little in the way of secondary revision. Her son, after graduating high school, went to seminary by this priest's recommendation. This was the same priest who shortly thereafter spoke to the school board despite not having a child.

The conversation as she remembered it:

"How did you feel when he fell?"

"I was in shock." She remembers, smiling.



“How far up was he?”

“He must have fallen from twenty-thirty feet.”

“From a magnolia? How did he get so high?”

“It was a very large magnolia, with thick limbs.” She did not know the true height of the tree and had only the magnolia in her front yard, the one that year after year bloomed very slightly, the one she had removed with the help of her brother to base her judgments upon.

“That is a miracle in itself...” he chuckled, and she did not locate the joke before his next question. “Is there anything else you would like to talk about?” This question soon proved rhetorical.

“No, Father, but thank you for listening.”

“You are not a bad mother... Things happen, he’s young, something was bound to... A woman in the congregation—I will not divulge her name—once bounced her son Corbin—” And yet, he had divulged his. She remembered he had baptized Corbin when he was born. “So hard on her knee that he entered a coma. As she recounted this to me, her voice cracked but she didn’t ever cry... When I asked what was wrong and told her that it was brave of her to confide this, that in God she could find forgiveness, she told me that she did not remember the moment it happened. Police had come, but she was absent. Corbin did not make it out of the hospital but has instead joined the kingdom of heaven.” The police, the judge, and the stenographer all recorded an accident. “When she came to me, I told her it was an ordinary possession. The devil comes to steal, kill, and destroy, John 10:10. Your son is alive. He is a good believer, a good bride, a model young man. Try to remember that.”

He then asked if anyone was in the picture, about whether or not she had found a father for her boys. She responded no—no time for romance. *How is money?* Enough to keep a box of cereal on top of the refrigerator and a jug of milk inside. That was the end of his questions.

That night, she served dinner at 9:30. Her ten-year-old with the one-inch scar above his eyebrow sat across from her at the square table, laid a napkin over his thighs, took a fork and knife in either hand, and spoke

only to thank her for dinner. Only two years prior, he might have complained that the chicken thighs were dry, to which she would snidely retort that this was not a “Michelin Star restaurant.” She wondered now if he understood what she meant. Her eight-year-old liked to force-feed her infant daughter until mashed peas or carrots covered her highchair. She wore it tearfully as face paint. All the while, her eldest son sat in quiet contemplation of the chicken thighs or made quiet demands to his siblings to “act their age.” Had he sounded any more like his father she might have passed him a meth pipe.

After graduating high school, her eldest went to seminary school. Two years after he left, she lost the house during a writer’s layoff, and after the child support had dried up, her son stopped calling. *Only busy in his studies* was her hypothesis. This notion was interrupted by a postcard from Maine, with a picture of her skeletal grandfather and her son’s placid face framed in blonde hair and dotted with unfathomable blue eyes. It read: Praying for you, sending all my love. Sincerely, Ephraim.

Before she was laid off, her then-new boyfriend Owen, made her bare her breasts in the mirror of her work bathroom to send to him. More than once, she had excused herself from an interview to sate his appetite. On one occasion, she was interviewing a young boy with long straight black hair and a silver-blue eye. The other was an empty socket because his eyeball had been skewered by Deputy Dougherty’s German shepherd after the boy began to run. Owen texted. She looked at the boy with bandages about his face. *I have to take this.* She ran to the bathroom and in one of the stalls, sent him a blurry image of her vagina, and then another until her work was done. When she returned to the room, the patient was asleep, and she was asked to try again tomorrow.

They had moved into his home to consolidate the money they had, in hopes that it would go further. *There’s no point in going if we can’t tithe*, she remembers saying to Owen. He was not religious, and she was not either. It was a Friday, and he was a drinker. She expected him to come home late. She didn’t watch TV or do much of anything while she waited. When she wasn’t being a mother, she found it hard to find an adequate way to spend her time, so she took Zzzquil after her son and daughter were put to bed and fell asleep finding new details in the print of a sailboat and a dilapidated lighthouse. A faint rapping at the door shook her from her sleep.

“Hello, do I know you?” She said, barely exposing her face in the cracked door.

“Mom, it’s me, I’m home.” The beautiful woman with long blonde hair tied up in a scarf with nautical stripes and two slight lumps under her shirt said.

## Canoe

A.W.

it's easy to  
miss you in cat  
tails that tall

lying there in the  
grass cracked fiber  
glass rotting like  
a carcass in blue  
stem and cotton  
woods budding in  
the hull overgrown  
in the gaps of  
wooden ribs or  
boards like bent  
teeth in an off  
kilter smile deep in  
the thicket two fish  
crows perched like  
black marble eyes on  
the crooked face  
of neglect

what memories  
of patient fathers  
linger in your  
dismal grin  
what stories  
could you tell  
of their sons

how long has  
it been my  
lonely friend  
since you've  
touched the  
water

**Silo**  
**A.W.**



## Retransition

Evie Reed

At seventeen, I came out as a trans man. I knew that I wasn't a girl. That much was evident from my hunched shoulders disguising my chest and the nausea I swallowed down when someone used feminine language for me. But the term 'man' didn't feel quite right either, like a pair of jeans a size too small. I could cram myself inside and I'd fit, but with every movement I could feel my discomfort grow.

The images of willowy white figures in button downs and short messy hair never translated. I'd scroll for hours, the blue light of my phone casting a ghostly glow on my face, image after image of transmasculine people who look nothing like me. I'd grip my supple thighs, stare at my hefty chest, and trace my soft curves. I'd look at the dusty pinks and sage greens of my clothes. I loved my femininity. But I wasn't a girl and boys weren't feminine. So, I discarded it.

Soon enough, my soft curls fell to the floor in perfect ringlets. My flowy dresses exchanged for oversized tee shirts and ratty sweats. I transitioned past my comfort level. I ignored the line my own dysphoria drew. I injected testosterone until the reverberation in my chest condemned me to silence. I masculinized my chest, and instead of the elation I'd seen, all I felt was hollow. All under the guise of what being trans was supposed to be.

At twenty, I told my ex that sometimes I wished I had breasts again. Small ones. That I wanted to embrace the femininity that I discarded all those years ago. "So, you want to detransition? You're a girl?" they asked. I was in shock. My brain stuttered trying to find the words. "No," I said firmly, "I'm not a girl." They dropped the subject, but the effects of the questions lingered.

Is there only one way to be trans? Do I automatically count as a girl if I do not want everything that gender affirming care has to offer? What does it mean to be transmasculine or nonbinary? What does it mean to pass? Do I have to pass?

The more questions I asked, the more confused I felt. I didn't feel like a woman, but I was also not a man. I wasn't anything. I was a body moving through space. I was a woman in the way people say that the moon is a woman. Someone associated with femininity and womanhood, but absolutely and distinctly separate from it.

This idea of gender, the need for absolutes, weighed heavy on my shoulders. I pushed myself into the far reaches of femininity only to feel the dysphoria pressing hard on my chest once again. I needed to free myself from the restraint of the system western culture upholds.

Slowly, I started to listen to my body. I respected the limitations of my dysphoria. I stopped forcing myself into clothing that made me shrink inward. I stopped forcing myself to wear makeup. I started wearing tight shirts that showed off my waist and baggy pants that hid the curve of my thighs. I started correcting the language people used for me. I experimented with pronouns and labels until I found that 'nonbinary' and 'they/them' settled deep in my bones, granting me the euphoria I have always craved.

I found comfort in the liminal space between man and woman and made peace with the term detransition. I have not and will not detransition. The state of my body and my presentation does not define my transness. Nor does my ability to pass. My transness is mine and cannot be taken from me.

## One, Ecclesiastes

Isaac Jones

The sky was all magnolias because the sons of the woman sitting on the bench a stick's throw away—known as such because the children had gauged it—with black hair down to the shoulders and a mound of belly that embossed a semicircle into her mock-neck robins-egg dress, bounced gleefully, knocking the petals down from above. That morning, she had reared them into collared shirts and khaki shorts and herself into patches of concealer along the creases of her under-eyes. They sang Laurie Berkner on the drive over, and she recalled the banal look of the man who juggled in his underwear on the corner by the inn and the leather worker's storefront, a look she'd known well, juggling her children's anticipatory angst and a mostly full sink. The juggler was kindred and menaced her as she commuted to work or their daycare in a way only the misbegotten could. At the light, the older boy tried to detonate the car behind them with his mind, the one she had said was riding their... behind. His younger brother made faces at them, tongue like a spear protruding from his widespread mouth.

She had not been gifted the kind of children that stared politely ahead and supplemented this with coloring pages and promised trips to the park in exchange for good behavior. That morning, her eight-year-old had peed the bed he and his younger brother shared, and for whatever reason, neither was perturbed, sleeping through the night sticky and smelling of the dark, yellow stain. In church, the younger of the boys, her five-year-old, only kicked the pew of the wealthy and fine-looking family once, and his mother pretended not to notice. Today, more than most, and because the priest was in her favorite dress, she was glad to watch her children play and listen dreamily to the sough-like guitar fuzz on her favorite college radio station.

It was one of the rare balmy days when the wind blew cold from the great lakes, and the real feel was not ninety-seven degrees. It seemed to her neglectful to keep the rowdy boys in their apartment. When she took them out, however, she got looks from dog walkers in the park as they threw mulch at each other, or if it was exceeding ninety degrees.



They learned to complain quietly about how bad Jesus tasted during communion. It happened infrequently at this church; their last seemed to perform the sacrament according to whether the pastor had eaten breakfast. Her sons stayed close at hand as all the other children filtered from the pews to Sunday School, and there were no objections from the congregation. It was at their request that the boys stay where she could supervise them. One Sunday, a pre-school-aged girl asked the older of the boys where their father was. The girl returned to church the next Sunday with a string of pearls and a bald spot nestled into her blonde hair.

In the park, the mother closed her eyes, sunk into the bench for a moment, and rubbed the underside of her stomach. In this instant no petals fell from the tree; the equanimity of the rustle and blackness were arrested by the scream and proceeding thud of her older son against the hardpan. She felt the hands of her other son but bore them no mind. She recalled later to a friend that lived in Japan, that she remembers smiling. To this, they replied that they did not hear her, and asked if she could repeat it. She did not.

When her other son shook her free from what she reconciled to herself as shock, she lifted him over her shoulder to the side of his brother, withdrew a pack of tissues from her bag, and instructed the younger boy to press the wad to his brother's open skull. In the ambulance, she gazed out the window, caught between reality and the memorial flags of fallen soldiers. In the waiting room, she looked at her younger son's sleeping face and then to her stomach, eight-pound tapeworm jostling within, wishing she did not feel so alone. In church the next weekend, the altar was full of God's infinite mercy.

They did not return to the park. On a weekend when her brother had driven in, they wrestled the magnolia from her landscaping, in what she described to him as a precautionary measure. When the boys exhibited good behavior, the older boy was dreadfully shy after the fall, she took them to the local school. She knew how to bypass the lock on the gate because she attended the school in her youth, though her sons had never been there. Trees of all kinds began to induce in her a tremor. Each and every time the boys ventured too near the sugar maple or its outcropping of roots, she fought the reflex to jolt upright, to dispose of her cooing newborn in the concrete that anchored the bench.

The Sunday two weeks removed from the incident, her oldest rose from bed without reservation. He donned the collared shirt, helped his brother into his own, elected to wear the full-length slacks his mother preferred, and with sure hands, clasped the golden crucifix behind his mother's neck. He spoke very little, no longer wished for the utter destruction of bad drivers, and laid an anticipatory hand on his brother's thigh before his leg sprang into action. The eight-year-old boy circumvented, to his brother's chagrin and his mother's wary excitement, the long circuitous path to adulthood. The following week, he gave his testimony to the congregation yielding *amens* and a *hallelujah* or two. From the stone sprang the river, and the whole of his life laid out before him as evidence of a miracle. If ever he was asked whether or not he had a dad, he would reply that the Father lived within him.

## **Self-aware**

**A.W.**

snow melting  
leaving impressions of past  
photographs and  
sensations visible on the  
brown-moss grass and  
gray-water puddles floating  
like some translucent dream  
down familiar  
concrete tubes

doesn't there come a time when  
I should reach an apex  
of this cliff from which  
I must jump  
to the bottom  
where there is nowhere left  
to go

filled with or somewhat swelling with  
these images of dream violence  
that push me against the doors against  
the windows against  
the walls against  
the breath of my speechless  
lungs and withering verbiage to carry  
on the conversation in no other way besides  
screaming

# Contributor Biographies

**Freddie Borer** is a junior BFA undergraduate student at Otterbein. Sometimes he writes stuff, and sometimes he doesn't. It all depends on how confident he is in his writing in a given moment. Usually that is not a lot of the time, but if he can crack a few jokes and get people to smile, that's good enough for him.

**Wrenne Grone** is a junior English Creative Writing and Equine Pre-Veterinary Studies double major. When she's not writing, she enjoys running, hiking, helping out at rescue centers, and podcasting. She also loves brewing jasmine pearl tea and is an avid rabbit lover.

**Isaac Jones** reads and writes.

**Christopher Jackson** is a senior at Otterbein University and will receive his BFA in Studio Art and BA in Art History in 2025. He primarily works in painting and ceramics and believes that art should be an open book for expression and experimentation.

**Catharina Le** writes sometimes.

**Rachel Malek** is a third-year student majoring in both art and psychology. She draws inspiration from the interplay between intensity and lightheartedness, a theme central to her work. Rachel frequently incorporates animals into her pieces and enjoys exploring various mediums and materials to push the boundaries of her creativity. One of her key artistic goals is to master the art of evoking tension and curiosity. She is also dedicated to deepening her understanding of the performative nature of emotions, which continues to shape her evolving work.

**Evie Reed** is a Creative Writing major at Otterbein University. They enjoy writing about the queer experience and mental health.

**Grace Smith** is a fourth-year Creative Writing BFA student. She specializes in coming-of-age stories with fantasy and magical realism elements. Her story is inspired by Freudian themes of repression and the dream world.

**Adam E. Willis (A.W.)** is a writer and artist.



