

Pioneer Pen

2020

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Volunteer State Community College
1480 Nashville Pike
Gallatin, TN 37066

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Pioneer Pen is an annual student publication produced by Volunteer State Community College every spring. The magazine, founded in 1995 and originally called *Squatter's Rites*, features student creative works, including art, poetry, photography, fiction, cartoons, monologues, and more.

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Cover art "Roots" by Kimberly Shields

Pioneer Pen logo by Jeff Wilson

Text set in Baskerville

Printed by Smartpress



SMARTPRESS

Publication Number 15723-1499

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Mission Statement

To pioneer is to create and lead the way. To be a pioneer is to be one who establishes, evolves, and is the first to blaze a trail. While Pioneer Pen seeks to be a professional quality literary arts magazine, we also aim to foster a creative community so that Volunteer State Community College students have a platform to express their creativity and originality. To create any work of art is to be brave enough to take a risk. Our magazine strives to provide an inclusive publication in which students may take those risks and pen their artistic freedom.

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Finding Thankful

by Savannah Stover

20 years ago, I was a young girl in love with a boy. Despite naysayers telling us we were too young; we married our senior year of high school. And I was thankful.

3 years later, we were overjoyed to see two pink lines on a pregnancy test! Our first child was on her way! We would go on to be blessed with 6 more over the next 10 years—5 girls, 2 boys. I was honored and fortunate to be a stay-at-home mom. And I was thankful.

3 years ago, my husband accepted an exciting position in Nashville, Tennessee. So, we packed up and relocated from beautiful Colorado to the green hills of Tennessee. And I was thankful.

20 months ago, on a warm, sunny, spring day, my husband drove up to a secluded place overlooking downtown Nashville, turned our song on the speakers loudly, and danced with me. And I was thankful.

24 hours after that dance, my husband and best friend of 20 years, sent an “I love you” text to our children and told me he was going on a walk. 24 hours after that dance, my husband and best friend of 20 years unexpectedly and inexplicably, walked to a private location and killed himself.

The disorientating shock and grief tore through my insides with forceful savagery. “Why?!” the loneliest and loudest question in the universe. I was certain I would die. I was certain I would be unable to afford raising 7 children on my own, especially since he was the sole provider. I was certain only of uncertainty. I was unable to find thankful.

2020 John MacDougall Literary Award Winner

In the days that followed, strangers reached out to help. I learned of resources that would enable me to provide for my children. I steadied my children, assuring them that I would commandeer this ship and that they would be okay. And I found thankful.

I went back to work for the first time in 14 years and immediately began to thrive, being promoted within a few short months. Within 6 months, I started college here at Vol State and have somehow, despite the tragedy, maintained a 4.0. My children are doing wonderfully. I have started an outreach to fellow widows and suicide survivors and seek to encourage and inspire them in their grief and healing journey. And I found thankful.

My children tell me daily that I'm the strongest mom in the whole world; that they couldn't do it without me; they tell me I am Wonder Woman. While they credit me for their resilience, they don't truly comprehend that it is they who have given me life and courage. I tell them every single day: you're why I do what I do. And I found thankful.

The Bible tells me to give thanks in all things. I am unable to give thanks for our devastating loss. But out of the flames of tragedy, a new phoenix of truth has emerged: I am stronger than I ever knew I could be. Out of the scorched landscape of my heart, tender green shoots are budding; of hope, of trust, of love. We are thriving. I learned that my children and I are badass warriors! And. I. Am. Thankful.



Lion Contemplates Dinner *by Lee O'Kelley*

2020 Fusion Art and Design Award Winner

The Artist

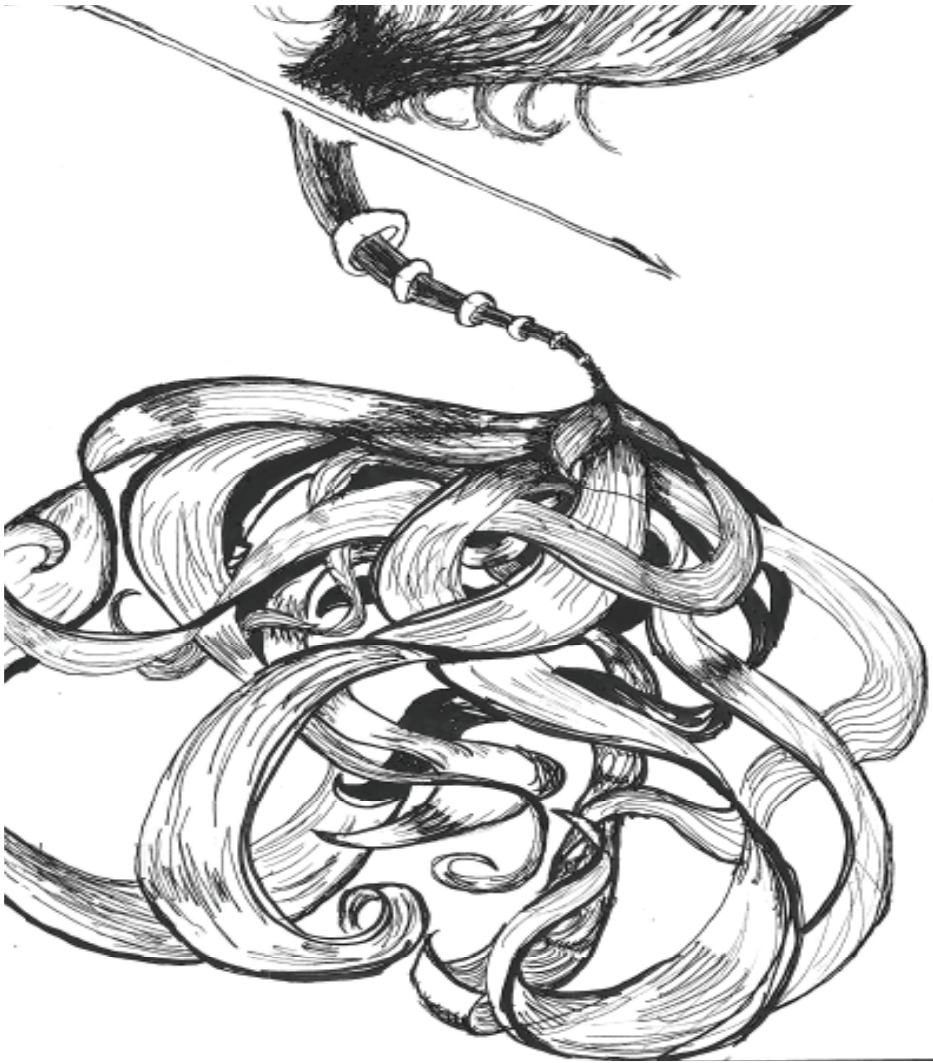
by *Trinity Smith*

Within you is a writer, burning with passion behind the pen.
Never stray from the paper, the mind loses its own thought within.
Or you may be an artist who paints his words. Just never lose your
passion. Because within you it stirs.

By the Sea
by Angelica Baskerville

Come away with me, lover, by the sea.
Where my secrets are hidden, but my thoughts have ten-
dencies to speak.
There is a high tide today as the waves crash against the
sand.
This is my world.
The world you have chosen not to understand.
Sometimes the skies turn black.
I try to flee the danger, but there is nowhere to hide.
But with you here the sky is fine.
The weather is beautiful as long as you are by my side.
For now, I feel the sun warm my fragile face
As I receive that long-awaited embrace.
The sand glistens like crystals in this wonderful bliss
When you give me that tender kiss.
Oh, my love please don't leave me here.
Let me savor what you will soon forget.
Please don't slip though my hands
For the winds will come and make it unbearable to
stand.
I feel I will be washed away by this ocean of despair.
I will be crushed by the coast's rocks.
I will be broken beyond repair.

Just stay a while longer and let me feel free.
Hold me in your arms, and let us watch this beautiful
sunset
By the sea.



Roots by Kimberly Shields
India ink pens on paper

The Morning After I Killed Myself

by Ruby Pauly

Trigger Warning (Suicide)

The morning after I killed myself, my alarm clock didn't go off.

I wake to a cold, silent home. I grudgingly creep out from under my various quilts—why hadn't my mother woken me? It's a school day; I'll be late. I hurry to get dressed, ignoring how biting cold my hands are, then step out of my room and I've stepped into a different dimension. The hallway is dim when it is normally bright with sunshine and life, and an unsettling atmosphere makes me want to fold inwards upon myself until I disappear. I stalk quietly into the kitchen; there's no light peeking through the open windows, it's stifled by curtains; there's no breakfast smells wafting around and tantalizing my senses—the air is heavy and joyless: there's no happy screaming from my five-year-old brother as he stuffs cheerios in his mouth and crashes into me for a good morning hug, a deathly stillness hangs over the whole room. My mom isn't looking over her shoulder with a smile and reminding me to eat before I leave—there is no one here but me. Somehow that's worse than the chilliness in the air.

Where had everyone gone? I grab a muffin to eat on the way to school and tell my mind that my mom and brother probably just had plans today, that no one told me about. Kind of

strange for no one to inform me, but I have been a little reclusive lately; it would make sense that they might've mentioned it and I just wasn't listening.

But why did the shadows in the corners stretch so far out today?

I slip on a jacket and go out the front door. The air outside is brisk and chilly—finally, a little bit of normalcy. I step carefully down the stairs of the porch (I've always hated walking down inclines) when I spot my sweet calico cat, Lily.

I still remember the dreary, wet evening when I found her. It was sprinkling and I was out on my routine walk; I liked the rain, though, so I didn't mind when it splashed around my feet, soaking through my shoes and socks, or when it caught me unprepared and without a raincoat and drenched the rest of my clothes. My mom always warned me that I would catch pneumonia going out like I do, but that doesn't really matter to me. A deteriorating cardboard box rested underneath the old bridge where my best friend and I would sit and share our awful, stupid stories. Usually, my walking route always took me over the bridge, but on that day, I recall needing something different, so I went beneath it. I started to ignore the dejected box, when I heard the tiniest mew. I halted under the bridge, my hooded

raincoat dripping in front of my eyes like it was weeping, and I looked inside the box. What I saw broke my heart. Who could have left such a tiny, defenseless creature out in this cold?

I gently reached down to cradle the shivering ball of multi-colored fluff—it was barely old enough to walk. I carefully wiped the miniscule beads of water from its coat, and I tried to comfort it the best I could. She mewed again and shattered my heart further. After this, I recall only snippets of memory: the wet and warm imprint the kitten made on my dry shirt; the way her bleary eyes peered up at me from the folds of my jacket; the non-committal “I’m not taking care of it for you!” from my mom; and, finally, the tiny flower pattern on the kitten’s back which served as inspiration for her name. Almost immediately upon taking her home, Lily imprinted on me. If I was away from her for any determinate amount of time, pitiful wails ensued.

It is for this reason, now, that I am confused when she doesn’t run up to me when I call her. She sits at the edge of porch, staring with vacant, empty eyes at the door I had just exited. It’s like she doesn’t see me. I call her again, but Lily doesn’t move. Her tail doesn’t even twitch in the expectation of pouncing on my shoes once I’m close, nor do her ears perk forward at the sound of my voice. Had she spontaneously gone deaf? I call her once more, to no avail—Lily exists in a level

beyond me.

What's wrong with everything today?

I shake away a nagging feeling that I've forgotten something and take a bite out of my pastry while I walk to school. I had to get to my best friend—I had to get to Harper. She would help me, would explain this to me, and most importantly, she would see me. Harper always sees me. And I see her. From the moment we met, two shy first graders with no real friends and no true understanding, we bonded and silently vowed to always protect each other. Since, we've had countless laughs, long walks, and so many meaningful conversations—she would understand; she had to; that's what best friends do. That's what I would do . . . in fact, I have done it. One dark August night, when her parents had one of their inopportune fights, I was there to comfort her. I recall the question she asked me, then, “Does anybody see anyone?” and now, that phrase haunts me.

The walk to school seems short today, and within five minutes I'm in the parking lot. A familiar scene calms me: teenagers heading into the building. With so many eyes, surely I could not go unnoticed. Life still went on as usual, here. It was only my family and my cat that were acting weirdly. I spy a friend walking by—he was one of those friends who you called a friend but

wouldn't really share anything personal with—and I call after him.

“Mark!”

He doesn't turn. Strange. I run after him and reach out to put a hand on his shoulder when—my hand goes through him.

I admit it, I scream.

And no one hears me. Not one of my laughing, dead-line oppressed fellow classmates turns to acknowledge me. Fear and confusion overtake my common sense—had I wondered if I was invisible so much that I really had become invisible? But that wasn't possible; it's not physically possible for a person to be completely invisible. Someone always notices. But not this time.

Harper. I must get to Harper. She would see me—she had to see me! I run past the various people who have now turned into my obstacles, and dart through one of the open doors to the school. I pull up short once I'm inside—where would Harper be right now? I glance at the clock; it's between classes . . . maybe she's taking a break in the restroom, or on the way to her next class. Odd that she wouldn't call me when she knows I'm late.

I am late, aren't I?

I force the questions and thoughts away and focus on finding which bathroom or classroom she's in. I begin to weave

my way around the students in the hallways—I can't touch them, that's far too alienating right now—when I spot the back of her dark-haired head going into the girl's room. I shout, but she's already on the other side of the door.

I forge my way towards it; I open it and go inside. The bathroom is surprisingly quiet—a lot like the kitchen and hallway back home. It makes me shiver, and I slowly walk up the aisle of stalls. At the very end, I can see a pair of shoes—Harper's shoes. The door to the stall isn't locked, so I gently open it and peer in.

Harper is on her knees; her arms are wrapped around her middle and digging into her skin. She sobs, but not quietly—she wails, the sounds echoing around the bathroom walls, and she looks like she wants to scream but ends up crying so hard she throws up this morning's breakfast. Watching her hurts more than Lily staring straight through me; watching her makes me remember.

I see the bottle of aspirin sitting on the bathroom counter at home; I feel the deep-rooted feeling of hopelessness and inadequacy; I smell the bitter chemical smell of the drug as I pop off the cap; I hear the voices in my head telling me to just do it, just do it, just do it!

I remember I am dead.

I sink to my knees on the floor. Everything clicks all at once—Lily, whose master will never come out of the house again—my parents and brother, probably struggling to continue with their lives—Harper, tearing herself apart because I have left her alone in this world. I have subjected everyone to this suffering; this lonely, wretched suffering. I watch Harper slowly come to grips with her emotions, wipe the tears from her eyes, then look down at her right arm, and pull the sleeve down.

Her wrists are covered in cuts.

She closes her eyes tightly and bites her other hand, as if trying to control some inner demon, then, robotically, she takes a knife from her pants pocket. It's new; she must have bought it only recently. I want to scream as she snaps it open, but my voice no longer works. I want to snatch the weapon away from her shaking fingers, but my hands will just go through her. As she makes the first incision, blood trickling out mercilessly from her skin to the toilet bowl, I moan. I did this to her—this is my fault.

She begins crying again. She slices her skin, deeper, as if a punishment for not controlling herself. I am unable to watch any longer and I drag myself out of the stall. Her cries are louder now, but the few people who wash their hands at the sink or come in to do their business do nothing more than look down

and quickly leave. How could they be so heartless? They must know Harper needs help; how are they so cowardly not to give her what she needs?

My throat constricts on me, and I swallow hard. I think, and ponder, and wonder what can I do? But I've had my time to do things, and now my time is up. Only memories of Harper laughing as I told her a joke, or of her daredevil expression when she did something risky, or her focused visage when she talked about her dreams play through my mind. Now she wouldn't smile like that ever again. All because of me. How could I have really meant that much?

I must see the body.

No, I must see my body.

I stumble to my feet, take a deep, steadying breath. I force back tears and block out the cries of my dearest friend and flounder out the restroom door. Trying to find my mom or brother is out of the question. I can't bear to face more sorrow. I can still imagine it, though.

My mom will sit alone on my bed, holding the paltry, meaningless suicide note I left behind, and she will cry even more deeply than Harper. She will wish to die herself if only it meant I could live again. Lily would meow and run around the house,

frantically trying to find me, and my mom will start to throw this painful reminder of her daughter outside, then break down before she touches the first patch of fur.

My dad will be strong around mom and my brother, but when he's alone he'll sit and stare blankly into space, numb and dying inside. He'll stay up late into the night, trying not to hear the heaving sobs from my mother and trying not to think of my birthdays or when I was born. Work will envelope his life; he'll become distant and focus on anything but the pain. All pills will be flushed down the toilet, and never replaced even if they need them.

The light in my little brother's eyes will dim, until finally it'll be gone altogether. He will struggle for a while to believe that, maybe, just maybe, when he gets up in the morning, I'll be there for him to hug . . . but eventually those childish illusions will stop. Because I killed them, so effectively. He might follow in Harper's footsteps and use physical pain to cope with the emotional pain. If no one stops him, he might do the same thing I did. But mom and dad would watch him, wouldn't they? They would be more alert for the signs after . . . me. After how I ravaged my beloved family.

I want to tell myself that this might be a good thing—but

nothing good could come from this situation. I begin to walk to the morgue. My mind buzzes with a strange energy, like how, in an empty room, the air buzzes, likely from a vent or a light fixture. I can't think. Maybe that's for the best.

The wind whips around me, but not like it's punishing me. No, more like caressing me; wishing to bring me away with it and go on to live the next part of my journey. Suddenly images of sunrises and the ocean and little millisecond snapshots of when I was completely, undeniably happy overtake my vision. The colors, the light, the meaning: all so beautiful. Why would I ever want to leave this behind?

Somehow, I find my way to the morgue, and let myself in. No one could see me, anyway—not anymore. I search until I find my name, steel myself, then open the refrigerated compartment, to find my own sightless, pale face staring back at me.

Without really knowing why I do it, I start talking. And the talking turns into screaming.

“You had friends,” I begin, “you had a family.”

My words seem to echo around the room, and all else disappears except my ghostly apparition and the body it once inhabited.

“You were not invisible. They all loved you, and life was beautiful!”

I reminded her about the sun, about finding Lily, about how much Harper and our parents loved us, about the excited hugs of a five-year-old we had barely taken the time to know, about the moments in which we were truly happy.

“Why did we forget to look at the wonderful things?”

I wait for a response, but none comes.

Because I am dead. And I’ve killed everyone else along with me.

Impact

by *Trinity Smith*

You never know how the impact of your words may be until you write them down.

They will fulfill the broken hearts and mend their souls.

Save the lost and lead the whole.

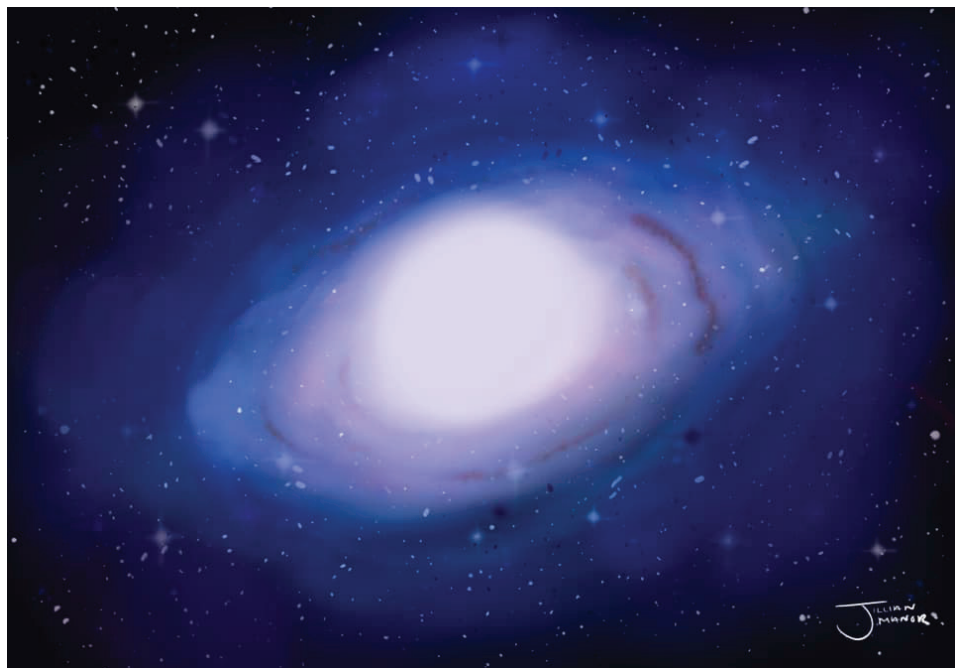
Fix the broken and redirect the stray.

They will teach the blind to see and the deaf will hear.

And during the midst of all of this, you may just find yourself.



Purple Flowers *by Ruby Pauly*



Noise of the New Nebula by *Jillian Manor*
Digital art made in Procreate

Ghosts *by Dalton Snyder*



Coffee Bean

by Edel Pace

I am a coffee bean:
born from the ground,
nourished by the rain,
kissed by the sun.

Bloom as a renewed promise of love;
in green,
sweet nectar inside;
in red,
ripped on my own terms.

My boldness forged by the sun
through trial and tribulations;
I'm becoming who you love,
a strong fluid of forces.

My skin darkened by the sun,
crushed into million pieces,
turned to a blend;
yet, I am still a coffee bean.

Take me while I'm hot,
savor me slow,
impregnate your senses with my aroma,
delight yourself in my body.

A Tolerant Man

by Zachary Clark

I am a man of kindness.
Never would I raise my voice against another.
To this end, I will allow you to assault me with your words.
Never would my voice speak in vulgarities.
A man of tolerance withstands assault without temper.
So, give me your words, my ear is yours.

I am a man of peace.
Never would I stand in opposition to another.
To this end, I will allow you to take my land.
Never would I value soil over life.
A man of tolerance places priority on the living.
So, you may have my land, it is yours.

I am a man of love.
Never would I slay another man.
To this end, you may take my life.
Never a sword has my hand held.
A man of tolerance would never do violence to another.
So, you may have my life, it is yours.

I am the ghost of a kind, peaceful, loving man.
Never would I seek conflict in life.
To this end, I harmed no one.
Never was my soul ever stained by a detestable deed.
A man of tolerance, consumed by the ire of others.
So, with nothing left, I leave you this world, it is yours.

Seeing in Color *by Jillian Manor*
Colored pencil and ink on paper





Peace in Balance by Kimberly Cheatham
Acrylic art

An Exemplary Day

by Laina Skaggs

I woke up today,
and there was rain pouring from the clouds,
soaking into the earth,
already soggy from the
saturating torrents of the night before.
I wanted desperately
to find my piece of soft, giving ground,
to lie down as the droplets twirled all around.
Instead I drug myself to my car
and worked for the money
that I think I need.
The sun was back by the time I left,
but my wipers were still on.
They threw me, the wipers.
For the life of me,
I could not remember
whether or not the weather
had changed or if they
were my own hurried mistake
from a morning I seemed to have dreamed.
All my days fall away
in a similarly forgettable haze.
Something needs to change.

The Promise

by Moxie

They promised each other they would always be together. They were eight, and third grade was in full swing. Together, they dreamt up worlds of action and adventure, of space dragons and asteroids. In their world of make-believe, they felt invincible. In the real world, they were best friends, united by a love for adventure and a passion for video games. This promise was proof of their friendship. Nothing could tear them apart.

In middle school, their promise held true. Even when he came out to his parents and watched as they readily accepted their son for who he was, knowing he could never have that with his own family. Besides, they were best friends—confessing to him would only complicate their friendship. School became their life. No more imaginary worlds or multiplayer games. Yet, even with their increasingly busy lives, their friendship still lived on.

High school passed by in a blur. They were seniors now. Life wasn't as tense with the alcohol, and for once he didn't worry about hiding his love for his best friend or his parents' wrathful reaction when he came out. He started crashing at his house since that night and had only fallen deeper. One night, shortly after his disownment, he told him, his best and most trusted friend, exactly what happened the night he showed up at his doorstep, red-eyed and covered with bruises. The confession led to tears,

which led to gentle arms around his shoulders, and continued to lead to more things until their lips met in a heated crush. For the first time in nearly a decade, he felt invincible.

They promised each other they would always be together. They had always been together, and only saw each other in their futures. So why was he wearing all black and sitting outside on a deceptively cheery day? Why was he cold and unmoving in the lacquered casket? Why did he have to die so fucking soon?! His chest burned with anguish. Their promise was just a lie. He never did stay with him forever. Those angry crimson marks were all the proof he needed. If there was something bothering him, he should have talked to him. He should have known he would listen to every word. But now he was alone in this cold world. He couldn't dream of surreal worlds with anyone anymore, and multiplayer games held no value to him. He stood by his grave even when everyone else had left. He would never truly say goodbye; there were too many memories—precious memories—for him to simply throw away. So he placed him in a special part of his heart, where nobody could ever hope to reach, and turned away. Perhaps now, their promise could live on.

John Moon

by Zachary Clark

Every morning, John Moon followed his normal routine. He began each day by waking up at seven o'clock. Following this, he would roll over onto his back and continue to lay in bed for at least five more minutes. During this time, John's cat, Cadee, notified by his alarm that it is was time for him to get up, would come into his room and begin her daily routine of sitting watchfully next to his head judging him as if to say, "Get up you lazy bum and feed me." Once pressed, he would get out of bed and follow her to her food bowl in the kitchen, where he would serve out exactly one scoop of dry food for her to consume each day. Next, he would walk into the bathroom to wash his hands, removing any bits of dried cat food that might still be stuck to them before beginning his daily grooming routine. A routine that included first putting in his contacts, followed by brushing his teeth, then finishing with a short shower. John took short showers since the time that he allotted for himself to have a longer shower was always wasted by lying in bed for an extra five minutes. Once dressed, he would then return to the kitchen and eat one dry snack bar and a banana before gathering up his bags and walking out the door to his car, which he would then use to take the highway to work. Or at least, he used to. However, since a recent gas leak in his home, John had started to have trouble dealing with things that he found stressful, such as driving at high speeds. One would think there would be little connection between a gas leak and driving a car, and, in truth, one would be right. Aside from the fact that both John's car and his fireplace ran on gas, there seemed to be nothing connecting

the two outside of his imagination. Regardless, since the incident with his poorly installed gas fireplace, he had become fearful of many things, including his daily drive into work.

This resulted in John reluctantly deciding to change his morning routine. Instead of getting up at seven, he began setting his clock to six-thirty, so he could avoid taking the highway to work. The change to John's morning routine came as a welcomed one for Cadee, however. Seeing as how she would typically wake up one hour before John (as part of her daily bird watching routine), she always subsequently had to deal with the inconvenience of waiting one hour for John to get up to feed her. The change to his routine struck her as an opportunity to set a new routine of her own. If she didn't want to wait an hour to be fed each morning—and she didn't—then it only made sense that if John was settling into a new routine, he should settle into hers. Following this line of thought, she deemed it appropriate to begin waking him up each morning at six o'clock (instead of bird watching), causing him to lose yet another half-hour of sleep each night.

John's morning routine, rescheduled by a poorly installed fireplace, and his cat's ambitions towards being fed at dawn, began taking a new shape. He now started each morning by waking up to the whistling of Cadee's nose as she sat watchfully next to his head, judging him as if to say, "Wake up you lazy bum and feed me." He attempted to shoo her away each time but could only manage to convince her to move to the corner of the bed,

just out of arms reach, where her black hair began blending in with the darkness, hiding her from sight as she sat, and whistled. He would then begin the fight to fall back to sleep, usually succeeding about five minutes before his alarm clock went off. When this happened, the sudden shriek of the alarm would jolt him awake and fill his veins with panic. At that time, he would get out of bed and follow Cadee into the kitchen, where he would give her precisely one scoop of dry cat food before going into the bathroom to begin his daily grooming routine. After this, he would walk back into the kitchen to eat his breakfast, gather up his bags, walk out to his car, and drive to work using public roads instead of the highway.

After a month of following his new routine, John started to realize that it had done little to settle his nerves. Not only that, but his problems were beginning to go beyond his morning routine. Traffic had become less predictable. He had been late for work on a few occasions, and his boss was starting notice. After a particularly stern verbal warning, John left work one night, defeated. On his drive home, he began lamenting over what had happened since the incident with his fireplace as he passed the entry ramp to the interstate. “You’re such a coward, John,” he thought to himself as he continued taking his new route home.

John began his evening routine that night as he did every night, by slowly entering his apartment, making sure to keep his right leg in front of the crack in the door. He did this to prevent Cadee from running outside in an effort to take her hobby of

bird watching to the next level. She, in truth, had rarely ever tried to run outside when he came home. However, the one time she succeeded caused him to go into a panic, forcing him to retrieve a bag of cat treats and begin shaking them to coax her back into the apartment. After that, John decided that he didn't care to take any chances.

As he entered the back door with his leg strategically placed to fill any gaps, Cadee then began her evening routine running to the back door in a full sprint and greeting him by flopping on the floormat in front of it, stretching out and rolling from side to side, gathering up all the bits of dirt, lent, and string from the mat into her fur in the process. Once he saw where she was, he then quickly made his way through the door, stepped over her, and walked into the living room to place his bags onto the floor. She then sprung up from the floormat, as if offended by him for not noticing her, and ran into the living room after him, jumping onto the back of the couch where she could stand at shoulder height next to him. She then began pleading for him to pet her.

“Meow,” she cried as John turned around to face her.

He sighed, saying, “You do this every night,” before leaning over to pick the little bits of dirt, lent, and string from her fur while mumbling, “You’re like velcro for dirt.” He placed the piece he just picked off her into the palm of his left hand, “If you didn’t shed so much, I could use you as a lent roller.” Cadee purred and nudged his left hand with her head trying to

get him to fully commit to petting her. Once he was done, he walked into the kitchen to begin cooking dinner.

After following him into the kitchen, and noticing that he was too busy to pay her any more attention, Cadee retired to her chair in the living room where she began grooming out any bits of dirt, lint, and string that John might have carelessly missed. Once he finished cooking, he filled his plate and moved into the living room to sit on the couch and watch television. Once seated, Cadee made her way over to see what he had decided to cook that evening.

“We’ve been over this, you don’t like my spicy beef stir-fry,” he warned, as Cadee sniffed his plate for a few seconds before turning around and walking over to her food bowl. After finishing dinner, the two continued watching late-night television for a few hours before going to bed.

Each evening around midnight, Cadee would begin prodding John to make his way to the bedroom so that they could go to sleep. Being as curious as any cat, Cadee couldn’t stand to miss out on anything, and as a result of her curiosity, could not sleep while others were awake. This had always been the case ever since she was a kitten. But as determined as she was to go to bed each night, John had been even more determined to stay awake. However, after a month of losing sleep, he was beginning to debate whether or not he should listen to his cat’s advice. It was at about that time when she hopped up onto his chair to begin her nightly protest.

“Is it time for bed, Cadee?” John asked in a condescending tone similar to one a parent might use when talking to their child.

“Meow!” she howled, looking up at him.

“It is?” John said, continuing to speak in a mocking tone petting her as she stepped into his lap, where she sat waiting until his attention faded back to the television.

“Meow!”

His tone fell back to normal, “I’m not going to bed right now.”

“Meow.”

“Look, I’ve had a long day, and I just want to watch TV for a little longer. You can go to sleep without me,” he began gently pushing her from his lap. As usual, she responded like a protester being arrested, lying down, and becoming dead weight.

“Quit it.”

“Meow.”

He rolled back his head and rubbed his eyes. “You’re killing me, Cadee.” It was at this time that he realized how tired he was and started thinking about the situation he had been avoiding.

“You know, you don’t realize how easy you have it here,” he said, pointing at her while she stared at his finger. “You get to

sit at home and lie around all day. I have to go to work and let me tell you something. You wouldn't like work." She put up her paw and pushed his finger aside.

"You really don't understand how difficult it is for me. There is a lot of stress that comes with going to work," he stopped there, feeling embarrassed about his current situation.

He sighed, "God, I'm pathetic. I can't even do something simple. I should probably just suck it up and deal with it, shouldn't I?"

"Meow!"

He began scratching her head, "You're probably right."

"Alright, you've talked me into it. Tomorrow, I'll try taking the highway to work. How does that sound, Cadee?" She responded by staring at him for a few seconds before tilting her head back and biting him on the hand.

"Ouch, shit!" He exclaimed, jerking his hand back.

"Fine, let's go to bed," said John standing up to follow Cadee back to the bedroom as they both continued their normal nightly routine of going to sleep.



Smile 4 Our Cameras *by Dalton Snyder*

Enemy Lines

by Angelica Baskerville

My stone walls help to protect me but keep me alone.
But this is what is needed in the front lines of the danger zone.
The only thing that is alive in the dark are the cries and screams
of my tortured heart.

My walls are beginning to crumble;
I'm slowly falling apart;
I'm defenseless now.

Bracing for the invisible bullets to penetrate my chest.
I am at war with myself, and I will fight to the death.

I am my own captive.
I am my own slave
As I kick myself in the teeth
And hiss mockingly to be brave.
This is the torture I bring to myself.
This is my personal hell.

As I sit and pretend that my mind is a jail cell.

The Destitute Flower

by *Trinity Smith*

The sun helps the flower
Grow tall and grow strong
The rain helps the flower
Flourish until night is dawn
The soil helps the flower
Nutrients in the root
The wind helps the flower
Play with her until night fall

The flower trusted the sun to help her grow
The flower trusted the rain to help her glow
The flower trusted the soil to hold her down
The flower trusted the wind to be her friend

The soil nurtured the seed and told her not to leave
She had to see the world
The sun held her hand
Pulled up from the ground

The rain falling down
Wanted to be her friend
The wind whistling by
Said hello and kissed her light

The soil bid her go
The sun turned his head
The rain drowned her
The wind whipped her down

No one was her friend
No one played with her
No one kept her safe
The day she left the world

One by one her petals fell
They kissed the soft ground
Only her thorns were left

Hell is a White Walled Room

by Nicole Shelley

Many people don't understand the true misery of a hospital. Those that do have experienced it for themselves. You walk through the sterile white corridors to enter a sterile white room, where you're hooked up to machinery that is supposed to save your life. This is the beginning of hell. You dry swallow the pills they give you, grimacing as you do so. The IV drips out a steady melody into your vein as the anxiety meds begin to work and cloud your thoughts. They don't want you fully conscious for what's to follow. They exorcise your demons by poisoning you through your IV, destroying everything inside you, good or bad. The weight of the world settles on your chest, the nausea rises to your throat. Pain splits your head in two. But worst of all, your loved ones watch you the whole time, helpless as you suffer. Now all your hair is gone, and everything you eat or drink is bland as hell. You can't remember the days anymore. Your brain is too foggy to remember details. Sometimes you think it would have been better to let your demons tear through you than live through this hell.

Then you think back, take back those thoughts. Your young one smiles softly, pain hidden well behind her eyes, but not invisible. She's staying strong for your sake. She's the only reason you've put yourself through hell. But you wouldn't dare

tell her that. You know she would just feel guilty. A girl of fourteen, you think, shouldn't have to watch her mother degrade in front of her. She shouldn't have the weight of the world on her shoulders. She shouldn't have to give up her whole life to take care of you. But she won't listen to your apologies. She wants to do this, she tells you. Because what's life without her mother by her side to see her grow? You smile softly, closing your eyes. She's just like you when you were that young. Just as stubborn and determined. Maybe hell is worth traversing, if you get to watch her grow into a strong young woman.

My Sad Truths

by Kimberly Cheatham

We're sitting in a class so silent an ant could scream and we would think it's from down the hallway. Everyone is diligently writing and methodically erasing, all the while I'm trying to make myself look busy. If I keep my head low maybe I'll go unnoticed, and we can all move past my short comings without ever realizing it.

I wish I were smart enough to already have all the information for the assignment, I just found out about a mere few moments ago, stored away in the back of my head. Silently waiting in the back alley of my mind for this precise moment to spring forth to my rescue.

Sadly, I am not.

I know we all hoped for the kind of story where I magically write a near perfect paper on a man I know nothing about because my ability to bullshit, or even cheat, is second to none.

Sadly, that is not the case.

I'm too honest to cheat and too ignorant to bullshit. So, now here we are, hoping that my ability to fly under the radar doesn't fail me.

Because that is my ability that is second to none.

My sad truths are not over. You see it is likely that I could turn this word dump in and get some points, whether it be for creativity, ballsiness, or simply having something to turn in. But I'm not ballsy and I'd rather go unnoticed.

Sadly, I'd most likely get no points at all.

Because, although creative, this doesn't pertain to the
assignment.

So, let's make sure we're all on the same page here. I have
absolutely nothing to lose, yet I still won't take the chance
because I'd rather go unnoticed.

The saddest truth of them all.



Engagement Ring Box by Zachary Clark
Photo by Michael Hitzelberger

To the Loss I Never Gained

by Kimberly Cheatham

Dear John,
March 12, 2019

Our timing was never right. We couldn't seem to get to the same page. No matter how close we got, we could never find it in ourselves to get close enough. You were in such a hurry to go nowhere. I wanted to take my time to go everywhere. The feeling was there. All the intensity of a young love was right in the palm of our hands. With your lack of understanding and commitment, combined with my lack of understanding and conveying, we crushed every chance we ever had. We left the broken pieces scattered about, and you never looked back.

No matter how many times I tried to return to them, you were nowhere to be found—slowly killing what sliver of hope was left. I tried holding on, and I tried putting them back together on my own. That burden proved too heavy as the wounds of your absence ran too deep. With every failed attempt came a new pain.

I wanted to care for you like a mother caring for her sick child, but you weren't sick, and I was the child. I couldn't let go of the mess I helped create. I reveled in my pain, waiting for you to notice and take it away. I was stuck in this fantasy-like idea that you would be my knight in shining armor. Hoping you would save me from the very pain you had caused. I had dreamt up this poetic justice to guard myself from the facts right in front of me. You would never return to the scene of the crime as I did. You

would never openly care as much as I did.

At some point between now and then, I decided to face the truth and let go of what I couldn't fix. I realized I was causing most of my own pain by holding on to false hopes. I let go of the version of you I had built up in my head and soon found the strength to move on. I still think about you from time to time, how you're doing, and if our paths may ever cross again. I can't help but hope you're doing well. I can't help but hope you're getting everything you want out of life, and I can't help but wish you all the best in everything you do. At some point between now and then, I've made peace with all the truth of our demise and have realized it was for the best in the long run because I wouldn't be where I am now. For that, I am happy. I've let go, and my hands have finally healed.

Sincerely,

Jane.

In My Death, I was Born

by Savannah Stover

In my death, I was born
The irony of the forlorn
The destruction of a soul
Is the building of a whole
Innocence is laid upon the pyre
Left to die, scorched by fire
The residue of despair haunts these woods
Blood pools where once purity stood
Around the petrified remains of naiveté
The moon weeps, shaken from her place
The stars, in shame, hide their face
Behold! A birth, a breath
Blinking, shedding death;
Naked I emerge; Dirty, cold, so young yet my soul is so old
Grainy eyes permit the light
My unsteady legs being to move, life in sight
Once hope deferred, begins to emerge
The irony of the forlorn,
In my death, I was born.

Snow
by Nicole Shelley

What beauty is there in life
If I can't be by your side to admire it?
What happiness exists in the world
When all I can think about is the moment you left?
I have no right to be happy
When my heart has been ripped apart.
I have no right to cry
Since it's my fault you're gone.
Like the first snowfall,
We were perfect.
But time always passes,
And I was the one who melted us away.



Stillness by Kimberly Shields

Sun and Moon

by Nicole Shelley

Many millennia ago, Sun and Moon were in love. Their love burned brightly throughout the universe, giving life and warmth to everything near it. Sun found Moon beautiful, despite her initial cold demeanor. Moon loved Sun with every ounce of her being, even though sometimes he was too bright to even look at. But the Stars grew jealous of their love, and they forced the lovers apart.

Sun and Moon tried every way they could to see each other again, but to no avail. Each time they came close to meeting once more, their paths failed to cross. For centuries, they only caught glimpses of each other from afar. Slowly but surely, their hearts grew lonely and they gave up on the dream of seeing each other again.

It was Sun who first thought of the idea. He caught a glimpse of the humans on Earth, happily living their lives together. Their joy resounded with a mournful pang in Sun's heart. It reminded him too much of his darling Moon and every moment he had shared with her. Then a thought formed in the depths of his mind. It could work, but if he failed, he would surely die, and the universe would follow. But he missed Moon so much that he was more than willing to risk it.

Moon noticed the absence of Sun's soul almost imme-

diately. She could see his body, glowing brightly in the infinite darkness of the universe, but his soul had vanished. She mourned the loss of her beloved, fearing only the worst. She wished she could follow him, wherever he had gone. It wasn't until she passed Earth one night that she noticed a faint, but unmistakable, presence. She peered down at the planet below and focused her attention on the location of a soul she had assumed to be dead. Sure enough, Sun's soul resided in that of a human child. Moon was overjoyed by this discovery and knew what she had to do.

The girl carefully turned the page of her book, the scent of must wafting up as she did so. She had an affinity for dark things, and seventeenth century tragedies were no exception. Voices rumbled in the background, but she had stopped paying attention to them long ago. She tucked a lock of short dark hair behind one pierced ear before returning to the story.

To look at her, one would think she was lonely. Dark hair framed a mournful face. Her uniform consisted of a black shirt and pants with black sneakers or sandals in the summer. She didn't like to take up space and she never looked anyone in the eye. On top of that, she always carried a book with her wherever she went and spoke more formally than most people her age.

She didn't care what people saw or thought; she preferred to be alone. If someone took an interest in her, rare as it was, she would make snide comments or brush them off.

“Titus Andronicus, huh? I prefer Twelfth Night, but I guess I have no room to judge.”

She looked up...directly into the sun. The boy, who appeared to be only a couple years older than she, grinned at her in such a way that reminded her of staring directly into the sun on a July afternoon. His eyes, glimmering with amusement and curiosity, were reminiscent of a stained-glass window with the way they reflected every possible color of the human eye. His blond hair was brushed back in resemblance of a lion's mane, and she held back the urge to reach out and run her fingers through it. Normally, she would ignore anyone who dared speak to her while her imagination traveled within the confines of a story, but there was something magnetic about this boy.

“You assume this play is my favorite, but I'll have you know that I much prefer Macbeth over Titus Andronicus,” she replied.

“Oh, I didn't assume anything. I was just taking an interest in your book. Sorry if I offended you, okay?” said the boy.

She raised an eyebrow before feeling the corners of her lips curl into a hint of a smile. “No offense taken. Are you a fan of Shakespeare, by any chance?” she asked.

They talked for hours after their initial introduction. The boy found that, beneath the girl’s cool and formal demeanor, she was fun to talk to and had many passions, some of which he shared. They became fast friends and spent any time not devoted to school with each other. He found something oddly familiar in her but couldn’t place what exactly that was.

The girl, on the other hand, warmed up to the boy almost immediately after their first encounter. She felt a certain pull when she was around him, something she had only read about in books until now. It didn’t take long for her to comprehend her feelings towards her friend but was hesitant to act on them lest he didn’t see her in such a way.

But that didn’t stop the two individuals from feeling a connection that felt new yet ancient at the same time.



The Streak in Nature by *Edel Pace*

Ode to My Blanket

by Kimberly Cheatham

Oh, my dearest blanket
You are my first best friend,
My fiercest protector,
And deepest lover.

Your comfort was the first I felt
As I took my first breaths
And the last I feel,
Every night,
As you cradle me off into my dreams.

It is your tender touch,
And your soft hands
I crave,
Through the hardships
To the day's end.
To melt the fears away.

You saved me
All those years ago
From every monster under my bed.
Now, you save me
From every monster in my head.
For all you do,
I must Thank You.

Shadow

by Angela Easterling

She hides in the over-sized shadows of her sisters.

Following them everywhere—mimicking their every move.

They are the Golden Girls. She is called Shadow.

Shadow searches for her identity in desires and potions- leaving her hollow and empty.

She welcomes the numbness the bottle brings. Hoping this time it will consume her.

The world opens up, and seemingly unnoticed, she disappears.

When the pain resurfaces, she takes up her brush, and paints with all her heart, amused with the beauty she creates.

Over time, a colorful person begins to emerge. Her art brings peace to her mind.

The roots of her feet are still shallow and weak, but she is tall and beautiful- a weeping willow swaying in the breeze.

Still not complete. There is work to be done.

Shadow sees herself in her mother. Fear explodes into rage.

Fighting and struggling against the visions, her roots tear from the ground, exposing her.

Humbled and weary, she digs her feet back into the ground.

Taking what she can use and leaving the rest, she sculpts her new self.

This soul is taking shape.

Longing for the dance that kept her centered as a child, she

kicks off her shoes and begins to move.

She pours her heart out to the soft bamboo floor, allowing each beat to take her deeper into trance.

Closing her eyes, she pirouettes into the music.

Faster and faster she spins, just stopping long enough to laugh as the world twirls around her.

She is firm in her feet and sure in her mind, this young woman is confident in who she is.

Beautiful, vibrant, and strong, shining in full color, she now takes her place next to her sisters.

She smiles as she steps into her own shadow- a perfect fit.

She is whole.



The Ever Turning Memory by *Kimberly Cheatham*

Murdered Motivation

by Ruby Pauly

The apartment door creaked as she pushed it open, keys jangling on the knob. Her purse and work bag, full of colored folders and an iPad with a cracked screen, hit the floor in quick succession, then the keys and her jacket were shoved onto the otherwise bare coat rack. She inhaled deeply the homely, faint scent of old coffee and traces of bourbon and kicked her sneakers off. The dishes in the kitchen sink received a tired glare whilst she made herself a bowl of cereal. Spots of dish soap on the back of the sink mocked her, reminded her of past nights in which motivation was still her ally. She sighed and plodded to the living room, sock-feet silenced against complaining floors. The living room tripled as a dining room and guest area and she collapsed readily on her cheap couch, which had to have been made of grain sacks and used cotton balls. Milk splashed her thumb and once she had settled, she licked it off with a slurp. The crunch of raisin bran soon filled her ears and mouth, and she stared mindlessly at the dark tv screen. It had not been granted life for several weeks now—the only news she had been subject to was what little she could pick up on her car radio.

The front door opened; she didn't bother to see who came in. She listened while the other person locked the door, hung up his coat, and sighed. He walked heavily through the kitchen, then poked his head into the living/dining/guest room, with an eyebrow raised.

She raised an eyebrow back, crunching her cereal.

“The door was unlocked,” he said.

She knew he meant it as a question. He always said his questions like statements, like he was testing her to see if she could pick up on the double meaning. Even when he

proposed, he'd said, "I want to marry you" instead of the normal, "Will you marry me?"

She guessed she liked it. His oddities kept her sharp, always wondering about double, or even triple meanings. But right now, she didn't have the motivation to play his game. She had something else on her mind.

"I want to murder someone," she said.

He acted surprised enough to go from looking around the doorframe to leaning against it.

"Murder someone," he repeated.

She nodded, just once. "Someone."

He grunted, then a few clunks and tinkles later, he was offering her a glass of wine. They sat together for a few moments, sipping the dark liquid. She mixed the bittersweet wine with mouthfuls of cereal haphazardly until they finally became too much for her stomach to handle and she put the cereal aside, feeling nauseous. She cradled the wine with both hands. He put an arm around her.

"The loss of the president would cause a ruckus," he said, matter of fact.

Another question. But the suggestion didn't sit well with her. Someone else.

"More intimate than the president."

She heard him sip his wine. His arm around her shoulders tensed a little. She looked out the window at a bird hopping on the windowsill.

"That friend of yours, who ostracized you, would probably be better off dead. I hear he's a convicted rapist now."

She twitched her arms. He didn't notice. She faked a stretch, and he took his arm away.

They swirled their wine in silence.

"Still not right," she said.

"You saw it today."

He watched her with a patient gaze. She shrugged. The bird outside flew away.

"You're going to say something." Another question. So many of them.

She almost laughed. He leaned away from her, a bit less friendly now. The wine in their glasses stilled like the air in the room. Her eyes finally darted over him, rested on his hands. Where had those hands been?

She set her mug next to her bowl. "I don't have to say anything," she turned to stare; his lips parted to speak, then she said, "And neither do you."

Her words hung there in the stillness.

The tension faded and was replaced by a heaviness. He looked angry, then sad, then regretful; her face was a stone.

He gulped the last of his wine, then got up.

"Goodbye, then."

She listened to the rustle of cloth and clink of metal, feeling her resolve and strength not to cry leaving with him. She looked out the window with eyes of liquid glass. The bird was back.

And the man she wanted to murder was gone.

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Awards

Each year, *Pioneer Pen* chooses two winners from the submissions received from Volunteer State Community College students. The 2020 recipients of the literary and art awards are as follows:

John MacDougall Literary Award

The John MacDougall Award for Literary Excellence is awarded each year to a student writer who is published in *Pioneer Pen*. The award helps us remember a beloved teacher who set very high standards for both his students and his colleagues. This year's winner is Savannah Stover and her work of fiction "Finding Thankful."

Fusion Art and Design Award

The Fusion Art and Design Award is awarded each year to a student artist who is published in *Pioneer Pen* who portrays excellent use of the elements of art and design. This year's winner is Lee O'Kelley and their picture "Lion Contemplates Dinner!"

Pioneer Pen

2021 SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Volunteer State Community College students interested in being featured in the 2021 edition of Pioneer Pen should submit art, photography, poetry, short stories, fiction, cartoons, short films, animation, and excerpts from longer creative works to pioneer.pen@volstate.edu by March 2, 2021.

All entries should include contact information, a brief biography, as well as the title and medium for the work. Creative writing should be submitted in a .docx file format. Works of art should be submitted as a high-resolution .jpg. All submissions are automatically considered for the John MacDougall Award for Literary Excellence or the Fusion Art and Design Award.

Students interested in volunteering as an editor or taking Pioneer Pen as a 1, 2, or 3 credit hour practicum/humanities elective class should contact the Humanities Division Office 615-230-3200

Class information: ENGL 209P (may be listed as English Practicum). Practical editorial and/or layout experience while producing literary publications. The amount of required work varies with credit hours. Emphasis on soliciting, reading, and critically evaluating submissions, copyediting, layout, arrangement of material for literary effect and collaboration with the staff to meet publication deadlines. Designated primarily for vocational and career programs. This course may be accepted as transfer credit by some colleges and universities, but that decision is made by receiving institution. This course is collegiate level work but has been developed within a purpose, other than being university parallel course. Prerequisites: Permission of Instructor.

Credits: 1-3

For more information, contact Pioneer Pen, Professor Emily Andrews (emily.andrews@volstate.edu) and Professor Laura McClister.



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2020