



## Get hooked.

alex brennan, gretchen brown, megan brune, hope burdette, narcissa "ness" calloway,  
haviland cardinal-wyant, em davis, spence farmer, jewell gourley, rachel gray, emerald greene,  
mary claire hall, isaac hopf, whitney hyatt, hannah jones, kameron nosko,  
kenna santiago olmos, justine schopmeyer, paris wallace, rhonda wheeler



# FishHook

Volume 10

Spring 2021

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FishHook – USI's Arts and Letters Journal



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Logo by Carey Blackmore  
Cover Art: *First Love* by Hope Burdette



Volume 10

Spring 2021

*FishHook Student Literary Journal*

Proudly Presents

The 2020-2021 Editorial Staff

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Sarah Doan

**Editorial Staff:**

Hunter Morgan (Poetry Editor)

Kyla Schlink (Fiction Editor)

Violet Thomas-Cummings (Art/Photography Editor)

Madeline Woolsey (Nonfiction Editor)

**Faculty Advisor:**

Mr. Anthony Rintala

a note on *FishHook*

The student editors of *FishHook* believe strongly that USI's student art and literary journal ought to be just as unique and inviting as the work it publishes.

A fishhook speaks to Evansville's sense of place, tucked as we are in a crook of the Ohio River, and serves a rich metaphor for the process of being lured, hooked and changed by the images (whether visual or verbal) of our student literary journal.

Like a hook pulled from a river trout's mouth before the fish is tossed back into the water, the fishhook does not pull cleanly free; the barb catches, leaves an echo of its shape in the cheek of the fish.

And that, gruesome as it may sound, is how we, the editors of *FishHook*, feel good literature and art leave us: changed forever, with an echo of its image and voice deep in our flesh.

We hope you will enjoy this tenth issue of *FishHook* as much as we enjoyed compiling it. And, more than anything, we hope you will *get hooked!*

—The Editors



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*Works with the hook logo  contain sensitive topics and descriptions.*

## A Note from the Editor

A widespread pandemic. Racial injustice. Political unrest. The year 2020 seemed to be the temporal incarnation of Murphy's Law: just about everything that could go wrong did go wrong. That's not to say there were no instances of positivity; they just happened to be few and far between for most. Even after the dust has settled, we still feel the effects of the year. We will always feel the effects of it. Every moment we are living through, positive and negative, will be remembered and talked about for years to come. This variety of moments our society experienced in recent history inspired us at *FishHook* to base our new edition in a variety of concepts: identity, mental health, fragility, resilience, and hope. These ideas are some that we believe to be crucial to not only this particular set of creative works, but also the human experience of this past year in general. Even when 2020 had us fragile and questioning every aspect of ourselves, it also had us discovering both what it means to adapt and overcome obstacles in society and what it means to exist in this day and age.

This long-awaited edition would not have been possible without these wonderful people:

Thank you to the various members of USI faculty who have believed in our mission of campus-wide creativity enough to spread the word about us to their students.

Thank you to Mr. Rintala, our faculty advisor, for putting your trust in me and taking every little email and question in stride.

Thank you to the editorial staff—Hunter, Kyla, Violet, and Madeline—for choosing to join me on a completely new journey that proved to be both stressful and rewarding. This edition wouldn't exist without you and your hard work.

Thank you to the contributors, both featured and not featured, who trusted us to hold their work in our hands and treat it with as much tenderness and care as if it were our own. We appreciate your hard work and your passion for your craft.

Thank you to you, the reader. By reading, you are supporting our artists of both words and images who have chosen to display a little piece of themselves for everyone to see. That support means the world and more to them.

I hope you enjoy this year's edition.

—Sarah Doan

# POETRY

## Hell is Real

HANNAH JONES

When the sun came up and the sky was green  
we sat on the front porch rocking chairs,  
My father's coffee in his hands with steam cutting through November.  
No other Silence exists in my memory so prominently.  
It hangs in my throat like the wedding dress caught in the tallest sweetgum.  
I always wondered if the Bride found out  
Or if she ended up miles away,  
placed carefully between I-65 and the sign that reads "Hell Is Real."  
Hell wasn't on my mind back then.  
I was more worried about what was above,  
Wore my bike helmet with my sister when climbing through the neighborhood,  
A true act of caution and distrust for falling branches.

I still fear destruction.  
Even when I have seen the way we rebuild.  
I still fear the wind picking up.  
Even when I feel the roof still intact above me.  
I still dream I'm running through empty houses down streets I vaguely remember.  
Hiding from windows and stopping in front of mirrors.  
I wish the ground wasn't so fucking wet  
So I could dig a basement with my fingernails.



## Chronically Ill

KENNYA SANTIAGO OLMOS

I didn't notice my hair until I started losing it—  
no consent torn away down the drain.

Dr. X joked, "At least you can Amazon Prime wigs nowadays."  
*What a stupid joke.*

To be ripped off my scalp overnight and vanish through what I imagine  
is a slide into the Pacific Ocean.

I wondered what a hairy fish would look like—

Dr. Google said that a fish can appear hairy by a mold  
called *Saprolegnia* or "cotton-mold."  
Funny how my burden can become a fish's burden  
and how I could want to be a fish.

*What a stupid thought.*



## Depression “Caused” by Two Bone Disorders

RHONDA WHEELER

*Why don't you  
just stay in bed today?*  
Because we have work to do.  
I get up,  
get dressed.  
*You don't want to.*  
I have to.  
The weight against my chest  
gets heavier as I make my way  
out the door and to campus.  
Legs shaking,  
threatening to break with the slightest wrong move.  
*You can't even walk right.*  
It's not my fault,  
but that's no excuse.  
My glass bones can barely hold my backpack.  
I should take the bus,  
but I don't.  
Frustration builds up in me,  
causing my blood to burn in my veins,  
reminding me of my limits.  
My setbacks.  
Things beyond my control.  
Confused looks from doctors,  
looking at me like I'm a puzzle  
they just can't figure out.  
The sympathetic nods from the adults of my childhood.  
Every damn painful winter.  
A glance from the person beside me,  
when I stop in the middle of the sidewalk.  
Unbearable pain with a poker face.

A lesson learned from my mother.  
*You're useless.*  
*What kind of person can't even walk?*  
I know.  
*And you can't even talk about it.*  
*They wouldn't understand.*  
*It's a cry for attention.*  
A one in 500,000 chance for one bone issue.  
One in 10,000 for the other.  
But those are my odds.  
I remember the doctor  
telling me that those with my disorder  
tend to suffer from depression  
because of it.  
I wanted to laugh at his face.  
Depression isn't linked to my fragile bones,  
or my aching joints.  
It's the way everyone else can walk  
without a care in the world,  
knowing that it'll never be me.

## Through a Kid's Eyes

MARY CLAIRE HALL

All I want to do is grow up  
I will never once again say that  
I love being a little kid  
I remember thinking  
The future is full of freedom  
The misleading thing they all say is that  
You will miss the good old days  
Being older is so much better  
I think it is wrong to believe  
Silly things like Santa Claus  
I am missing  
All the fun that life has to offer  
I am wishing I could discover  
The bright future ahead of me  
Sometimes it's hard to see  
The perks of being a kid  
I wish I could have  
Everything adults do  
It's hard to handle  
Waiting for liberty  
I spent so much time  
Claiming my desire to grow up  
Was it the right thing to do?  
Through My Eyes  
(Now read from bottom to top)

## Red Wagon

WHITNEY HYATT

I remember you pulling me in the little red wagon,  
going block after block on our walks.  
The shiny polished wagon,  
bright red like a healthy heart.  
The same heart that beat as you rocked me to sleep.  
That wagon withstood years of rain and snow,  
and gravel and dirt clogging its tires.

After years of use,  
I outgrew the wagon.  
The wagon started to rust in the garage.

I took no notice as I had gotten older,  
but the body was slowly breaking down.

The red paint began to chip,  
as the chambers of your heart began to quiver  
with the wagon losing its pace more and more every day,  
but the red wagon continued to fight to go one last block.

But even with all the might that wagon mustered,  
it still was not enough.

The once booming heart had slowed to a mere whisper.  
Then, my whole world turned silent.



## Red Wagon

The wagon was making its final block.

Thump-tha-thump...

Your heart stopped.

The red color of the wagon and heart slipped away,  
and turned to pale gray.

And one day,

We had to throw them both away.

There was nothing but my memories left,

of my grandpa with the red heart who took me on rides around the block,

in that red wagon where my thoughts flock.

I would give anything to ride one more time in that wagon and hear your beating  
heart again.



## Happy Ever Af... NARCISSA "NESS" CALLOWAY

Why did we  
as little girls  
want to be princesses?

Dressing up  
in light blue and pink

when the beauty was raped  
and the mermaid became the sea

How crazy are we  
to want a fairytale?

Because a fairytale is death  
and I don't want to die

## Tell Me the Difference

PARIS WALLACE

Tell me the difference  
Between love and death,  
We fear them both  
As they take our breath.  
When we move on  
From one to the next,  
You can feel the beat  
Deep in your chest.  
With the first,  
It's a flutter  
And the last,  
A stutter.  
Both so different  
Yet the same all in one.  
Who beat beautifully in time,  
And keep such a rhyme.  
So please,  
Tell me the difference  
Between love and death.  
We thank them both  
As they take our breath.

## he was so nice

NARCISSA "NESS" CALLOWAY

hands shaking  
heartbeat slows to a crawl  
no eye contact

*I fear his face*

he smiled

*"It's okay, it won't change anything"*

it changes **everything**

he lets me cry  
and I know that one day  
I will thank him

but right now  
I am sitting on my bed  
crying over a boy  
wishing he wasn't  
so nice

because I just want a reason  
to not love him  
so I can stop crying

## Petals

PARIS WALLACE

Although my heart is full,  
My head feels empty.  
As tears fall from my eyes like petals  
I know I can be grateful  
because there are still flowers growing.  
Yet once my head gets through this  
And the flowers are in full bloom,  
My heart can withstand  
All the challenges at hand.  
It may take a day,  
It may take years,  
But the key is growth  
And even some tears,  
For flowers grow  
Not only by the sun.  
They grow by being watered  
Which can only happen when rain clouds appear.

## Sisyphean

EMERALD GREENE

I am an artist,  
That comes with some faults,  
For I'm also an addict.  
Two things, at odds.

My tools of the trade,  
Also my weapons of war.  
Turn them out, they create.  
Turn them in, they hurt.

I enter the battle,  
Of a studio space,  
Weave around relapse,  
Try to create.

Dodging saws,  
Evading sanders,  
Skirting torches and blades.  
Attempt an art piece  
Without losing my way.

Finally done.  
Yet far from over.  
A piece isn't finished,  
Without a border.

Mats to be cut,  
Frames to be made.  
More chance for slip-ups,  
More chance for mistakes.

It's a hard thing surviving,  
Wouldn't I know.  
My savior's my torment,  
Hair trigger waiting to blow.

Every day a battle.  
Every piece a fight.  
Trial by fire,  
A constant test to my drive.

Still I push a boulder,  
Up a hill each day.  
Struggle in a studio.  
Fight for each and every piece to be made.

It's killing me slowly.  
And sometimes I do fall.  
Yet I'd rather withstand,  
Then make nothing at all.

Creative endeavors.  
One day at a time.  
Self-harm or self-expression.  
Art heals the mind.

## Hot Car Cold Passengers

HANNAH JONES

Ah the sweet smell  
Of warm air on cold skin,  
The first true heat of the season.  
Fingertips blazing and combing in front of the vent.  
Nose freezing above clenched teeth.  
Slap the dash a few more times,  
Make sure the ghosts of July are surely dead.  
Driving home in the sleet seems stale  
When there's little to come home to,  
The knowledge that your bed is as empty  
As when you made it yourself this morning.

You can always choose to sit,  
Wait until the engine dies and the cabin cools,  
The clouds disperse and weeds grow in,  
Up through the wheels and down to the brakes,  
Hold you in place until the scene turns to stone.  
You join the other ornaments arranged in the garden.

But someone needs to feed the cat and  
your sister is out of town for the next few weeks.

So the key always turns.  
The gears always shift.  
And the wind always slows on the walk to the building.  
You remember the blanket crocheted by your aunt,  
Hiding in the top shelf of the closet.  
It keeps you from paying for the heat tonight,  
Weighs you down to mark your place.  
Sleep grateful for anchors.

## Up Above Craves Down Below

ALEX BRENNAN

In a sky full of stars and in a galaxy full of planets, the only thing I crave is to cast my gaze upon your face. Up above I lay in the dip of the moon, my fingers dangle feebly as if I were able to reach out and touch against your ever-moving surface.

I admire the way your temper courses throughout your body, how you lazily lap against the shore, in the way you simply do nothing but exist. I cannot help but be in awe of you. You seem to almost sparkle in the daylight, of which I can only catch subtle glimpses of.

I must admit I fall in love with you at night—when your waves beat to an unknown drum, when you crash against the shoreline to claw your way forward. Your currents seem to dance, pushing and pulling every which way.

Sighing, I begin to wonder what your voice would sound like.

Would it be loud and crass like your waves, ever insistent to be remembered?  
Or would it be soft and gentle like the smooth rolls of your usually untamed waves?

Perhaps you like to sing. I have seen your mere existence lure both foolish and brave hearted people alike who attempt to tame you. They write stories of sirens luring those foolish to listen, but clearly it must be you bewitching them with your voice, as you have done to me.

How foolish and arrogant they all were—the sea cannot be contained by mere mortals. But I am envious of those who try—of those who are able to feel your embrace, temperance and all.

I begin to wonder, alone on the moon, how you would embrace me.

Would you see me as an equal, and embrace me as a friend? Or would you try to see how quickly I would succumb to your wrathful ways?

Perhaps you would be just as brutal against my skin like you are against those ships? If I were to show myself to you, would you be amazed that I can survive you? That I wish to love you?

One of the only ones able to push back against your wild nature yet dare not try to tame you. The sea is best left untamed, and like so many others I am enchanted by your beauty.

Trapped up above, I begin to wonder if you ever think of me in such a way?

## Flying to Freedom

GRETCHEN BROWN

The day is warm  
and the wind is blowing  
newly fallen leaves by my feet.  
I grab the harness and feel my back straighten,  
my shoulders relaxing.  
And with a “forward!”  
we are off.

We soar down the steps,  
across the streets and driveways.  
Stopping only briefly at the textured plastic domes,  
waiting for cars.  
And when there are none,  
we can fly.

We are in the woods,  
running on a narrow paved path.  
I feel your head jerk,  
your alert eyes watching a cat.  
But I tell you  
“Hup up!” and we continue.

Our journey has ended,  
and though I would have been fine with a cane,  
I'd rather have you by my side.  
You, who give me the freedom to run without fear.  
And the freedom to fly.

## Spring is coming

PARIS WALLACE

The flowers of time  
Are seemingly perfect  
Yet each petal has a flaw  
And each raindrop leaves a stain  
But through this all  
Every hardship and hurt  
Every heartbreak and headache  
It's all worth it to see the full bloom  
Of each individual petal and  
Each flower  
Spring is coming  
Which means it's time to grow  
Out of that lousy cage called fear  
And into the lengths of the sky

# Art and Photography



*Amalfi Coast, Italy – July 2017*  
**MEGAN BRUNE**

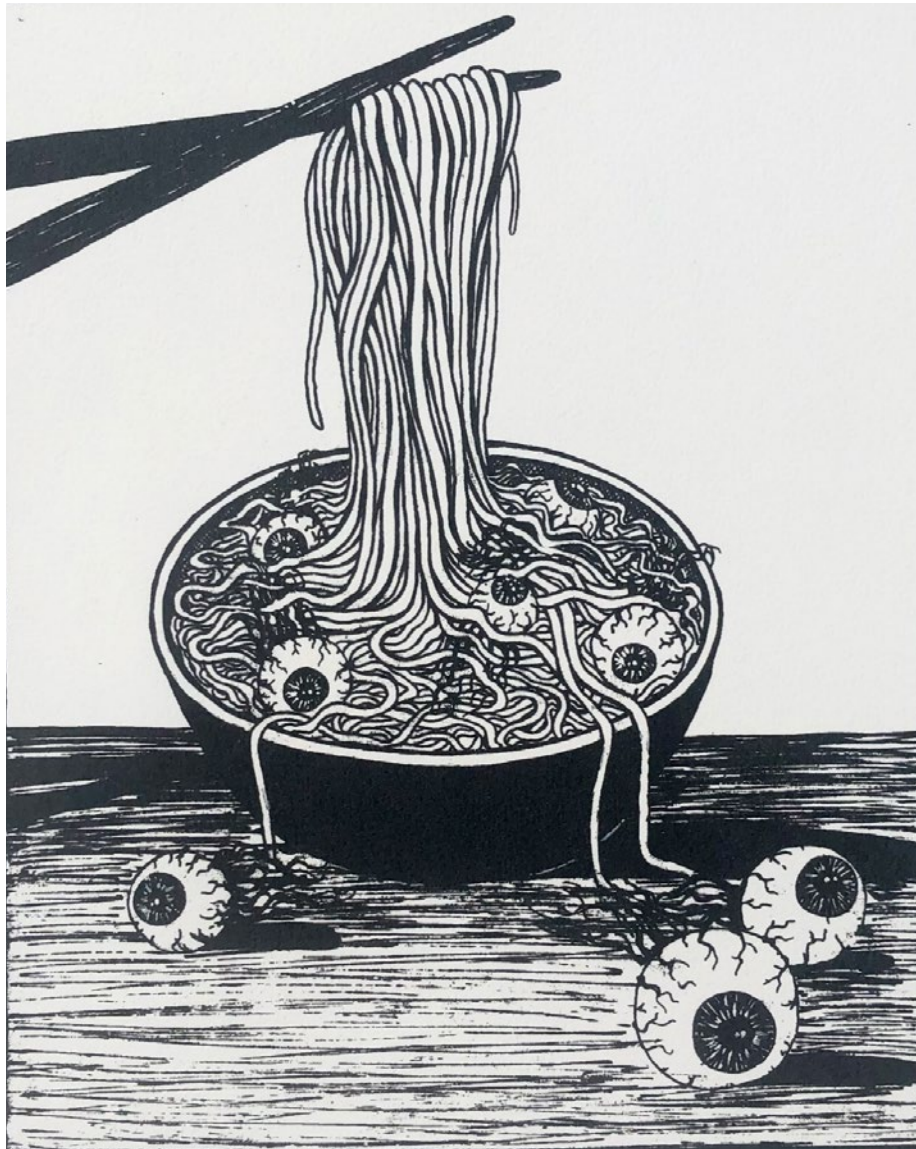


*Cooking with Rxme*  
EMERALD GREENE



*Downtown*  
RACHEL GRAY





*Noodballs*  
KAMERON NOSKO



*Meditative Mornings in the Great Depression*  
EMERALD GREENE



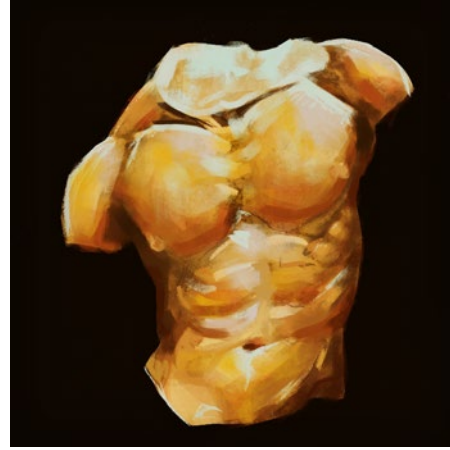
*Maybe We've Outgrown It All*  
HANNAH JONES



*First Love*  
HOPE BURDETTE



*Burnout*  
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*GOD IS IN MY SKIN (1,2,3)*  
SPENCE FARMER



*Wildflowers*  
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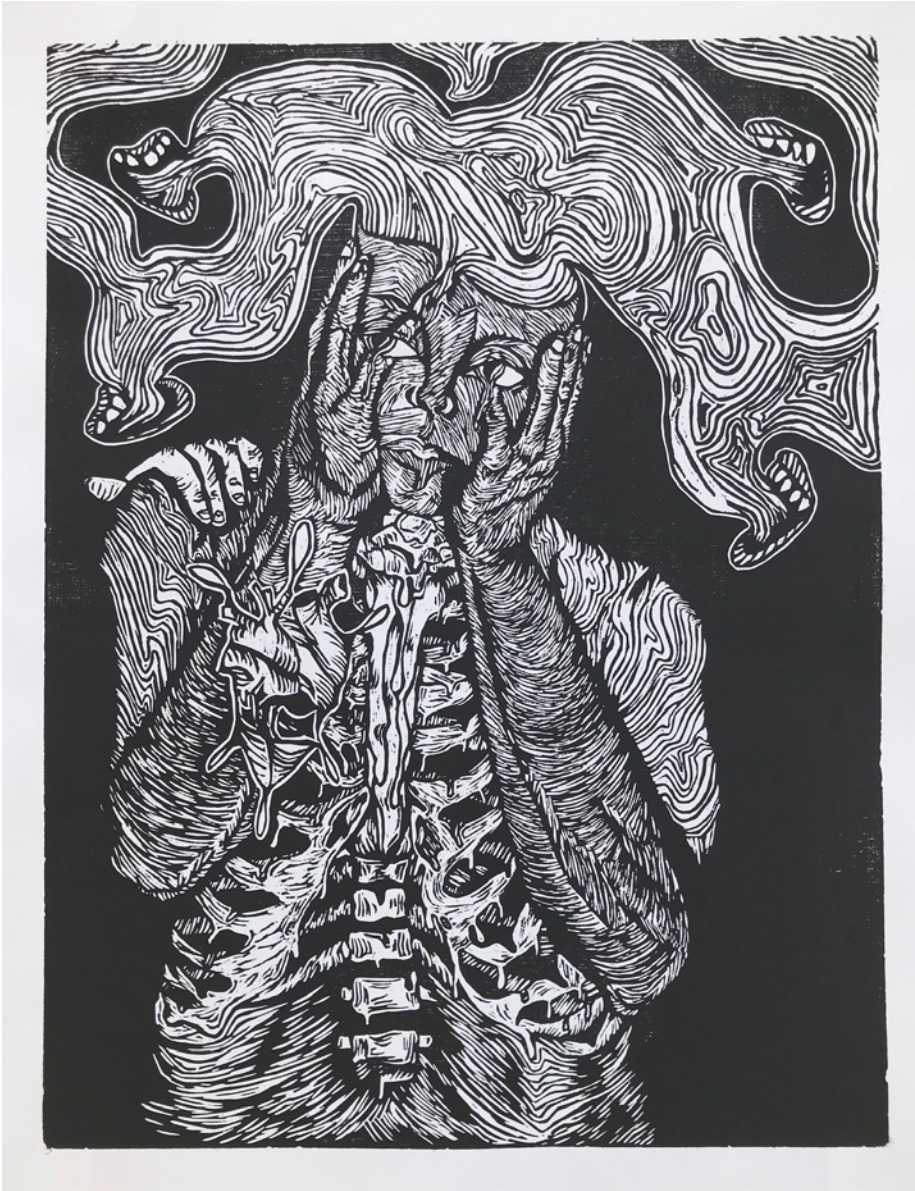
*Water Always Meets in Its Lives and So Do We*  
HANNAH JONES



*Masked Reassurance*  
JUSTINE SCHOPMEYER



*Erwha Station*  
HOPE BURDETTE



*Are the Talks Helping?*  
EM DAVIS

## FICTION

## Mind Demon

ISAAC HOPF

There's a tap on your shoulder. You hear your name.

Blinking into existence, you yell to your mom, "Mom, what time is it?" There is no reply. You turn on the couch you slept on to find the television featuring static.

"SHHHH!" it screams.

A searing pain streaks through your head.

The room is dark, save for the incessant static projected from the TV. You decide to lug yourself up off the couch. A low rumble infects the floor as your feet hit it—the rumble then stops a second later. Peering around, you find that you're not in your parents' house, but your apartment. You swore you fell asleep on your parents' couch.

There's another tap on your shoulder. You hear your name again.

Turning around, there is nothing. You move to flick on the lights. The lights don't turn on. Instead, a dim, crimson red glow fills the cracks above and below the front door, growing slowly towards you. The floor rumbles, louder this time. Running to your room, you find your alarm clock. The numbers are counting down. You look at your phone; there is only static. The calendar—completely blank.

There is slow, low laughter, "Ha ha ha ha!"

Moving back to the living room, you find a face in the static of the TV. The demon's face sneers louder. The floor and walls now rumble louder too as the crimson red glow saturates the entire room.

Your front door blasts open.

The dark laughter and rumbling could not be louder. Your head flares in pain. Managing to crawl, you peer through your front door. Below is an absolute, dark abyss. Slowly moving your sight up, you find the demon. His body fades into the abyss while his head glows with such brightness that it ignites a fire in your eyes.

You fall. The laughter never stops.



## The Impending Doom of Death and Daddy Issues

### HAVILAND CARDINAL-WYANT

There is something about myself that I can't get rid of: an urge and sentimentality that weighs me down, that keeps me going, that fuels my fight. A light that shines brightly and undeniably from my wrist compels me to take up arms and battle my way through the 'City of the Dead'. This is not the official name of the place I find myself in, for there is no title, no order, no structure, no light—just chaos, shadows, and the forever looming dread of life.

I can't remember a time before the darkness, but this light (the only light I have ever known) has a heavy and inspirational burden on my beating heart. I keep searching for the place where the light and living prosper in the midst of the constant killing, torture, and ravenous monsters that I fight every day without any advancement. There isn't any proof that this 'Land of the Living' exists, but I take it on blind faith. There must be something that resembles the dying hope inside of me.

In respect of this belief, I arm myself with the blade I forged from broken bones to face yet another timeless crusade towards the Land of the Living. I've never seen another monster like me, unless they are on a chopping block. The ones like me are weak and vulnerable. They fall for the traps of the wicked.

"Why, 'allo there fresh, beautiful meat." An old, pale brown, and greasy creature hops towards me. Between its scaly skin and sparse hair are large oozing pores. His eyes are beady, blue, and bloodshot. "Don't worry dere, beautiful meat, I'm not here ta hurt ya, but only ta bring ya a helpin' of this precious misery I've got here." His breath reeks of rotting corpses.

About 10 yards behind him in a shallow blood-creek filled with hair and fecal matter is a living monster like me. Her light is barely shining. She is bleeding profusely from large chunks taken off of her limbs. She is screaming in agony for my help. I'm not here to help her though, only to keep going. I look to the vile creature in front of me and ignore her cries. I ask, "Can you offer me a refuge from the darkness?"

He spits as he raises his raspy voice at me, "A refuge?! What is all this fuss 'bout a refuge? Of a place without our constant turmoil 'nd trauma? Ya and this precious sufferin' meat behind me, can't respect the pain that our world is! Fer that, ya deserve to suffer just as she do. Ya need to bask in the beauty that is pain." He leaps forward and rips off a chunk of my calf, exposing bone and tendons underneath my

now ragged flesh. As he chews my skin loudly my heart begins to beat faster. My fear and hopelessness are taking hold and I know that I can't be naive and soft like the victim before me. As he lunges towards me again, I stab him where his heart should be and slash my blade through his body, resulting in a corpse nearly split in two. My favorite way to kill. I'm now covered in his innards, and I'm taking on the smell of his disgusting rot. Nothing more gut-wrenching and dazzling than blending into the haunt.

I can no longer hear the screams of the girl in the creek, and no light to be seen either. I can't stay to find out what kind of revenge she wants to seek on me now. I have to run. Run away from these feelings of guilt, loneliness, and melancholy. Tears begin to drift down my face, washing away the rot of my kill. I stop and stare at the shining in my wrist. Nothing so beautiful, nothing so pure, and nothing so innocent as this beacon of reverie. The land around me is flat, lifeless, and void of monsters—just the moans of agony in the distance. I begin my trek toward the distant hills.

I approach a red ember hill. The soil is mushy under my feet, sticking to my toes and sucking me in up to my calves. The mud tugs at my eaten flesh with every step, burning and tearing it away from the bone. A leafless tree with extensive roots, like veins in my body, covers the blood-soaked bump of land. From a branch on this tree hangs a madcap man.

"Excuse me sir, may I ask you for directions away from the darkness?" He looks down at me with empty eyes and wriggles his broken neck free from the noose.

"Oh, darling. There is no escaping this darkness."

"But...but this light in my wrist, you see. This is proof alone that there is more than this... more than the grief and desolation." He looks at me and crookedly smiles.

"It's lovely, the faith you have in something that isn't pain. I used to search for the light too, but after countless slaughters and losses I've concluded that there isn't anything but destruction. There is no light." Anger and grief begin to well up inside of me.

"How do you know that there isn't anything other than this? How can you be so certain?!" I snap.

"I can ask you the very same thing, innocent girl. How are you so certain that there is anything other than the loneliness we have found ourselves in?" He took my hands in his, held them tight and continued. "I know how hard it is to give up, to succumb to the heartache. I encourage you to keep looking for the light, but these feelings of dread will only become stronger until you are taken victim of the monsters. This land will make you weaker and weaker. I know you can already feel the hardening of your heart." My hands beginning to tremble, I pull away from the madcap man and start running down the hill. The red mud sucking me in with every step, my legs sticking deeper and deeper until I can no longer run.

"AHHHHH!" My frustration becomes audible, and I start flailing my upper half to escape this ill fate. "This can't be all there is, this can't be all there is," I repeat



to myself, “I can’t be a desperate monster stuck alone for eternity.” All at once I can no longer move my body as the man restrains and pulls me out of the mud, carrying me back up towards the tree.

“I can’t be dead and alone. All I have is this light,” I say, panicking.

“Don’t worry, little thing, you needn’t be alone anymore.”

My blade is poking my side, strapped to me like a lifeline. I grab it, stab my wrist and rip through the tissue to dig out the light that has fastened me to this life of constant grief. I pull it out and hold it devotedly in my blood-covered hands. The light beats like my slowing heart: dark and dull.



## Nylon Rope

KENNYA SANTIAGO OLMOS

Walter’s Hardware Store stood on the corner of Maple and Maine right between Porkies Rub ‘N Stuff and Watson’s Pharmacy. Walter’s sign had started rubbing away and his son never cared for the store as much as he did, so for a couple of years now the middle schoolers really got a kick out of its revamped name, Water’ Hardar. When Junior inherited the store after Walter’s passing, he hired on a few of the town’s high schoolers in hopes that he’d be able to boss them around more than he could the older men who’d worked for his dad for a decade. Toddy was one of them. Average farmer boy with a broken family who was easy enough to control. Toddy had only been working at Walter’s for a couple of months when a bulky man walked into the store right before the store closed shop for the night.

“Evenin’,” Toddy said to the man while fixing the lanterns on the shelf.

The man nodded his head and walked past Toddy toward the selection of ropes. The ropes were at the end of the first aisle and Toddy rushed to move the rakes he had leaned up against the ropes while rearranging the inventory to make room for the lanterns that just came in. The man wore his baseball cap backwards and Toddy could just make out the words on it as he walked past him: *I’d rather be fishin.’* He was a tall man, had to weigh every bit of 265 pounds, and he smelled like he’d been working on a farm all day, but Toddy knew all the farmers in town and he couldn’t make out who the man was. Toddy watched as the man reached for one of the ropes on the top shelf, and the man’s popped collar on his flannel shirt gave way and revealed what looked like a fresh cut on his neck. Toddy knew better than to stare at a man’s wounds, so he shifted his focus back to the lanterns.

“Are you a fishing man?” Toddy asked.

“Excuse me?” the man said while breaking his intense gaze at the rope and turning his head towards Toddy.

“I noticed your hat. My uncle Rob had one just like it,” Toddy said while reaching to bring forward one of the lanterns that had been pushed back. However, he overestimated the distance and dropped it, the lantern shattering as it hit the floor.

“Why don’t you just clean that up and pay attention to your job,” the man said while tugging at the rope in his hands.

“Yes, sir. As soon as someone gets here to make sure no one gets hurt while I go and grab a sweeper,” Toddy said.

The man stared at the rope and let out a sarcastic laugh. The same kind of laugh that Toddy’s grandfather used to give the paper when he read politics he didn’t agree with. Then as quickly as the man burst into the moment of laughter, he stopped and wiped a tear off his cheek. The man put the rope back on the shelf and said, “Son, you can’t stop people from hurting themselves. So, you might as well give them the opportunity to if they want it.”

The man picked up the cotton rope and without shifting his gaze from it said, “What do you know about this rope?”

Toddy had been working on his uncle’s farm since he knew how to tell the difference between scouting a field for weeds and scouting a field for drainage issues, and he learned that before he could pass his multiplication test. He knew the uses for every piece of hardware in Walter’s like the back of his second-hand Chevy, but no one around town ever had to ask him about those kinds of things and the man with the thin flannel, paint-stained jeans, and muddy boots didn’t look like he needed advice from Toddy either. It caught Toddy off-guard that a man like him would need something from him, so he hesitated to say anything, but the man jerked the rope up and gave an annoyed sigh that meant he was waiting. Something a man like him usually wouldn’t do for a kid like Toddy.

“Cotton rope is real good for herding cattle,” Toddy said. “Uncle Rob and I used to use it to pull our bulls into the pen before shooting them. It’s real good rope to have around if you’ve got lots of pulling to do. Don’t burn your hands so much.”

The man stared at Toddy and smiled without showing his teeth before he laughed again. He grabbed onto the rope with his left hand and used his right hand to yank on it with a grip that turned his knuckles white. Toddy turned his head back to look at the clock behind the register and then kneeled back slightly to see if he could get Junior’s attention, but he couldn’t see him. Last Toddy knew, Junior went to take a smoke break and he figured he shouldn’t be much longer. When Toddy turned his head back towards the man, the man had gotten closer to him. The man was now so close to Toddy, he could smell the whiskey on his breath.

Toddy’s hands started clamming up and he tried to keep eye contact, but if it would have been a staring contest, Toddy would have lost. The man had deep-set blue eyes that stood vibrant against the darkness under them, and the scruff on his face was sprinkled with sawdust. Toddy saw that underneath the man’s flannel he wore a gray t-shirt that had some faded yellow and blue words on it, the same colors as his high school, but the man started to move before Toddy could tell what year the t-shirt could’ve been from. The man opened his shaking hand and put his palm so close to Toddy’s face that Toddy’s eyes had to refocus before he could begin to see what the man was trying to show him.

“What do you see?” the man said.

Toddy had been holding his breath to keep from wincing at the odor coming from the man’s underarms, and he tried to look at the man in his eyes so he could

speak to him, but Toddy couldn’t tell if he was looking at him. “Nothing, sir. Your fingertips look a little rawed, nothing that won’t fade after an hour or so.”

The man dropped his hand and sighed. He hung his head and stared at his open palms for a moment before stepping away from Toddy and walking back to the shelves of ropes.

“I want it to burn,” the man said. “So bad it could open up my callouses.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” Toddy said.

The man let out a chuckle and said, “For my bulls, like you and your uncle used, son. Seems to me this rope could slip right off their necks if I couldn’t tie it just right. I need something that’ll hurt them. Warn them that they’re gonna die.”

“It’s best to kill them without stressing them out,” Toddy said, “Too much stress will ruin the meat.”

“No,” the man said. “It’s crueller to kill them with no warning. You’d want a warning before you died, wouldn’t you? Gives you a second to say some Hail Marys.”

“Animals have no soul, sir. They don’t go to heaven,” Toddy said.

The man looked at Toddy and a tear rolled down his cheek. “Some do.”

Toddy looked away from the man and started messing with the lanterns on the shelves. He picked the lanterns up and put them down in different spots, making as much noise as possible to try and fill the silence. Toddy tried to think of what he would say to his uncle if he saw him tear up, but he knew that wouldn’t happen, so he kept filling the silence with noises while the man stared at the ropes. The man let a few more tears slip before he took off his hat and wiped his face with his sleeve. He tucked his grown-out hair behind his ears and put his hat on so that the bill would cover his eyes.

“Tell me which one to buy,” the man said with his arms crossed closely at his chest and his legs wide apart like he was trying to hold himself up.

Toddy stepped back and more obviously than he had been before looked for Junior, but he wasn’t around, so he cleared his throat and said, “Second to last shelf, third one on the right. 3/4inch nylon.” Toddy knew that 3/4inch nylon would snap at anything close to 250 pounds, but it looked strong enough to pass for something that could pull a bull or two. The man squatted down and reached for the nylon rope. He held the rope in his hands for a moment and felt at its tight braids before looking up at Toddy. The man didn’t seem to notice the tears rolling down his pale cheeks as he stood upright and started stepping closer towards Toddy.

“You sure?” the man asked.

Toddy hesitated before meeting the man’s gaze and said, “That’ll get the job done, sir.”

# Fairy Fountain

ISAAC HOPF

You peer ahead in the thick, dark woods that encompass you and press your wandering eye through the interwoven branches and brambles. The slightest ray of light flickers across your face. Attracted to the glimmer, you force yourself through living wood, squeezing your starving body in any way to achieve the faltering light.

Closer and closer.  
The trees hold you back,  
but the life of the light is so much.  
It's so hopeful.

A shockwave of the once glimmer flies outward in a ring, and you begin to push harder. The darkness fades as you gain ground and you push harder. You push harder through the dark woods. Harder and harder you push.

The trees break, and you stumble into an opening in the woods flaring with rejuvenating light in the middle of the night. The sudden shock of released resistance from the trees renders you on the ground, where the grass comforts you as you land on its absorbing body. Unable to get up, you shift your head towards a culmination of glimmers in the center of the opening. The light dances.

Another shockwave of light blows past.  
You feel your hair twirl in the turbulence.  
A smile beams across your face as you lay on the grass.

You breathe in, and the light leaves. It's gone. No trace.  
The opening in the woods has been drained.  
The world darkens again. The shadows fill the trees.

You are bright, though.  
The light inside you, rekindled, blazes as it dances.

You.  
Are.  
Bright.

# Nonfiction

## 7 Signs You May Be Agnostic

SARAH DOAN

Does the religion forced on you from birth just not cut it? Does atheism seem too extreme? Then keep reading; you may just be agnostic!

### 1. You've done enough research to know that agnosticism exists.

When it comes to religion and spirituality, people seem to think that faith only exists in a binary system: either you choose to believe in something or you choose to believe in nothing. But it doesn't always work like that, and since you're here, you've obviously realized this!

If you don't fully know what agnosticism is (or if you're like me and have spent almost your entire self-aware life looking for what describes your ideas about faith), here's the Merriam-Webster definition of "agnostic": "a person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (such as God) is unknown and probably unknowable." There is also another broader definition on that website, which is "one who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god." To put it simply, we agnostics just *don't know*. We don't know if there's a God or god that exists and watches over humankind like we're randomized Sims characters opening fridges for no reason and speaking languages that make sense to us but wouldn't to those that aren't human. On the other hand, we also don't know if the weird coincidences and déjà vu moments that everyone tends to experience at some point are purely products of nature. If we had any proof that managed to convince us either way, we'd pass through agnosticism into whatever secular or spiritual absolution would await us. However, we don't, so here we are.

### 2. Ever since you were eight years old, you've wondered on and off if something is wrong with you.

If you're someone who is agnostic, growing up surrounded by people who are certain of what they believe is EXHAUSTING. It's even more exhausting when you're the only Jehovah's Witness kid you knew that went to public school. You would look around and see kids at school giggle about their totally awesome youth group from

the night before, and you would wonder what it was like to have someone to giggle with. Or you would be stuck in between your dad and your great-grandparents at Memorial and wonder how people just *knew* they weren't meant to be part of Jehovah's Heaven-bound 144,000 that the book of Revelation so certainly describes. You'd carefully pass the stale bread for Jesus' body and the half-empty glass of wine for Jesus' blood and wait for Him to whisper to you, "No, don't eat the bread and drink the wine, you're meant for Earth after Armageddon happens." You'd hope for some sign to smack you in the face and make you embarrassed that you ever doubted Him. But it never happened, did it? That's why you're here, after all. You never heard that whisper, you never felt that smack. When everyone else sang along with scratchy piano recordings from deep in their chests, you simply mouthed the words; when everyone else closed their eyes during prayers, you just looked straight ahead.

### 3. You've had to join two different Facebook groups about thanatophobia just to deal with your crippling death anxiety.

That's right: two. If you're agnostic, you most likely don't know what happens next, after dying or passing on or whatever else you wanna call it. If you're like me, that scares the absolute shit out of you. So instead of allowing yourself to keep suffering in silence or in occasional awkwardness with a therapist who always seems disinterested, you've begun to connect with like-minded individuals. Who, you know, are also scared shitless of dying.

### 4. You've realized that you've never seemed to think the same way as your family.

Specifically your grandmother. She's always been the most zealous out of your family members, proudly going door to door and confidently living her life by God. When you were eight, she would bring you along to the Kingdom Hall, encourage you to do the weekly studies of the Watchtower magazines and answer questions and show off just how much you knew about Jehovah, just like she did. She had heard the whispers all her life; she had felt the smack of religion when she was your age. Then here she was, in her late 50s, still singing from the deepest crevices in her chest. You'd look at her and think, *why can't I be like that? Why can't I be certain?* The guilt sank in your gut even more as you got older and started having Bible studies with her, sinking so low that it would drag heavy against the ground each time you'd go to her house. By the time you were 12, you couldn't breathe from how often you had your own uncertainty shoved down your throat. That's when you knew you couldn't change. You were doomed to be different, and your quietly nondenominational mother realized this, too. The Bible studies ended soon after, but all the guilt did was morph into something even nastier. Your grandmother no longer taught you the Bible; she now taught you the heaviness of cold, hard disappointment.

**5. You get nervous looking your grandmother in the eye.**

If you were like me at that age, being a young agnostic with that previously mentioned disappointment sitting in your stomach was straight up not a good time. It's lasted for years; you still taste it sometimes when it rises in your throat and threatens to spill back out when you spend time with her. Over time, though, it's transformed into something that is both more subtle and more consistent. As you've become stronger in your uncertainty, she's become stronger in her desire to save you from dying in the Armageddon she's always been told is coming. Her oldest son, husband, and parents have all passed away, but she knows she'll see them again when those who truly believed in Jehovah are resurrected. It's you she's concerned about. What is she to do other than bring it up every chance she gets? What else could she do other than tell you how she'll absolutely leave you behind if Jehovah calls for his Witnesses to come? She wants you to believe, she *needs* you to believe so she doesn't have to worry about losing you. But to you, it's never been that simple. To you, she's using your religious insecurity as a weapon and your father and grandfather as ammunition.

*Don't you want to see them again?* she asks.

*Of course,* you murmur. You're twenty but you feel twelve years old and breathless once again.

*I don't want to have to tell them you couldn't come with me. Just... please think about it. The end is coming. Don't make me walk away from you.*

**6. You often avoid being alone with her.**

It always seems to happen, right? She always seems to back you, the morally wounded animal, into a corner you can't escape from until she says you can. But here's the thing: you can never bark back. You can never growl or hiss or scratch at her until she bleeds out all the righteous zeal she contains. You can't do it because you love every other part of her. She has one of the sweetest smiles you've ever seen, and sometimes when she shows that smile, the sides of her eyes crinkle up just right and you see the exact same face your dad used to make when you'd tell him you'd stay up to watch late-night TV with him. She's genuine in everything she does, from hugging you as hard as she can when you come over to telling you she thinks a memorial tattoo for your dad and your grandpa is a terrible idea. She tells you you're beautiful and that you need to make sure you eat enough and that if you find a neat recipe, then to let her know so you can try making it together. But then she finds some way to bring it all back to Jehovah. It all comes back to Him. There's only so much you can take before you're forced to do the one thing you don't want to do: try to avoid the situation altogether. If it means making sure to visit with only your family around, and if it means desperately trying to change topics before going down that conversation path once again, then so be it.

**7. You've realized that while she and others are comforted by religion, you may never be.**

Who knows? Maybe one day you'll stumble across something that just makes sense to you. Maybe you'll find something that slips its way into your religiously ambiguous heart and makes a home there. However, for right now, you're content with how you're running your life. You're setting yourself up for a life of following your earthly passions until your legs give out. If religion wants to find you, it will. Maybe not in the form of the Jehovah your grandmother loves so much, but in the form of another god or set of gods or even in the indifference of nature. All you know right now is that you've gotten to the end of this long ass list, and you're about to eat or take a nap or do whatever it is that feels right in this moment. And you know what? That's good enough.

## Literacy Through Sisterhood

JEWELL GOURLEY

A crisp and cool breeze escaped the vent, sending wisps of coppery hair on a journey to tickle my nose and eyelashes as they flew to my forehead. I took a deep breath of the air and smiled contently, almost forgetting I was lying on our brownish-gray living-room carpet. A flea bit my leg. I plucked it off with my little fingers and held it over one of the square gaps of the air duct below me. In the same moment I let go, I heard a little thud and clank as one of our broken crayons also took a dive down the grate.

“Be careful sissy, that was the lellow one!” She spoke with her own unique gentleness, often hindered by a slight speech impediment.

Jade’s favorite color was yellow, and I felt a twinge of guilty redness flooding my cheeks for disappointing my sister. Jade was 16 months younger than me and at the age of four, she was as cute as a button with dark brown hair and deep blue eyes. Baby fat still lingered on her little rosy cheeks, adding a round warmth to her already sunny complexion. Her warmth always juxtaposed my cool papery white skin in family photos, but at the age of five this difference mattered little to me; she was my baby sister and that was all I cared about.

I drew my attention back to my coloring book and looked just inside the cover. I had ignored the first page, which was meant to be colored in as a dragon from an old PBS Kids cartoon, and had instead jaggedly written each letter of the alphabet just the way I’d learned in kindergarten. On the bottom corner I had written all six letters of my own name. It had taken a lot of energy just to compose each letter of the alphabet, let alone analyze each crooked movement my hand made while I wrote.

I smiled at my paper with pride, knowing I was soon about to accomplish a mission I’d spent so much time (about twenty minutes) preparing for. I roughly took my little sister’s hand and pulled it towards my coloring book. It was Jade’s turn to write her name, marking the book as a sacred possession only to be utilized by the two of us. She reluctantly stopped coloring Dora’s face blue and gave me the attention I craved. Like a character on Nick Jr. or PBS Kids, I reviewed all the letters of the alphabet with her. I then hoped to help her give meaning to all of these abstract characters in front of her. I guided her hand as she wrote and sounded out each

letter of her name. We ran into our mother’s dark room and shook her from sleep, the curtain pouring light onto our book as we displayed to her what we’d done.

The lines were not masterful, and the J’s on each of our names were backwards, but Jade now understood something unbeknownst to her in her short lifetime. Not only did the spelling words on TV or in books matter, but she mattered, her name mattered—it was an object, and it too was important enough to bestow in front of an audience.

What I taught her made me feel empowered. As we got bigger, we would read many picture books and novels together, extend our vocabulary through word searches played in a church pew together, and make weekly visits to the local library together.

Of course, I am now an aspiring English teacher, hoping to feel this same empowerment for many years to come; all the while, my little sister is developing her own literacy through the field of chemistry, with no reliance on her big sister to share such knowledge. We can no longer go to the library together, nor do we read together, but we do exchange our writings every now and again, communicating a permanent desire to maintain a partnership in the world of written works.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Alex Brennan** is a graduating senior of Spring 2021 with double majors in global studies and French studies, as well as double minoring in anthropology and communications studies. They enjoy writing small fictional pieces often involving the beauty found all around. They often have a story to share but lack the proper environment to tell it. They hope that the readers of *FishHook* enjoy the glimpse into how they view the world.

**Gretchen Brown** graduated from the occupational therapy assistant program at USI in December 2020. She enjoys writing poetry on a variety of topics but mainly focuses on nature themed poetry. She also loves to explore new places with her guide dog. Her poem was written shortly after receiving her first dog.

**Megan Brune** is a senior graduating in Spring 2021 with degrees in marketing and economics. She enjoys spending time with family and friends and loves to explore new places. Megan is excited to share her picture with the readers of *FishHook*.

**Hope Burdette** is a sophomore who is pursuing a degree in art with an emphasis in graphic design. She draws her inspiration from nature, where she spends her very spare moments of free time.

**Narcissa “Ness” Calloway** is a senior at USI studying English (teaching). She works with international students who are learning English. In her limited free time, she can be found playing board games with friends or DMing a Dungeons & Dragons Campaign.

**Haviland Cardinal-Wyant** is a student at the University of Southern Indiana.

**Em Davis** is pursuing a degree in studio art and has spent the past two years concentrating on printmaking. They are from Tell City, IN and have plans to further their education post-graduation. They are excited to share an important work in their art career with *FishHook*.

**Spence Farmer** is a sophomore majoring in English teaching with a minor in studio art. He has been pursuing art as a serious hobby for a little over three years now, with an emphasis on figurative work. His updated portfolio can be found on Instagram: @spence.farmer.art

**Jewell Gourley** is a senior pursuing a degree in English teaching and is vice president of the English honor society, Sigma Tau Delta. She enjoys transcribing and retelling the stories of her family, as well as writing memoirs about her childhood. She's excited for her upcoming publication in *FishHook*.

**Rachel Gray** is a junior at USI pursuing a degree in exercise science with a concentration in physical therapy. She is on the women's soccer team and enjoys photography. She is excited to show people her work!

**Emerald Greene** is a student at the University of Southern Indiana.

**Mary Claire Hall** is a senior biology major and psychology minor from Evansville, IN. She loves writing poetry inspired by navigating life's changes, and she is very excited to be a part of this *FishHook* volume!

**Isaac Hopf** is a senior pursuing a degree in computer science and is part of the Honors Program. While his main focus is in computer science, he occasionally writes very short stories that aim to be powerful and intriguing. He is excited to share a couple with the readers of *FishHook*.

**Whitney Hyatt** is a junior English major with a concentration in creative writing. She hopes to one day be a best-selling author and bring joy to others through her words. Writing is one way she feels she is best able to communicate her thoughts and feelings to others.

**Hannah Jones** is a studio art major and current 2021 Efroymsen Fellowship recipient. Her work explores the way honesty repels the feeling of isolation. Experiences that feel so individual become the most relatable things we have to offer.

**Kameron Nosko** is a graduate of the University of Southern Indiana.

**Kennya Santiago Olmos** is fresh out of undergrad and will be starting her career as a college and workforce development specialist with the Indiana Latino Institute this summer. Her love of words remains a passion of hers, and she is grateful to share a glimpse of that through *FishHook* and their readers.

**Justine Schopmeyer** is a student at the University of Southern Indiana.

**Paris Wallace** is a sophomore pre-social work major looking at careers in child welfare. Poetry has been a main source of comfort and joy throughout time, and nature is one of the purest inspirations to come by. She is excited to share the connection our environment has to everyday life.

**Rhonda Wheeler** is an English major at the University of Southern Indiana. She enjoys writing fiction and poetry. She started writing when she was 13 and is focusing on telling about the mental impact invisible disorders can have. Her main goal is to spread awareness about invisible disabilities.

## EDITORS' NOTES

\***Sarah Doan** is a junior studying English with a creative writing concentration and sociology. Writing is her passion, along with teaching color guard and learning about languages. She is thrilled to be a part of the creation of this edition, and she hopes readers enjoy what they find.

**Hunter Morgan** is a sophomore pursuing a degree in English (teaching) with a secondary education minor and is part of the USI Honors Program. He enjoys reading and writing fiction and poetry and believes in finding stories and meaning in the smallest parts of life.

**Kyla Schlink** is a sophomore studying professional writing and anthropology at the University of Southern Indiana. They enjoy art of all forms whether it be writing, painting, photography, or textile art and engage in many forms themselves. They are excited to share the pieces found in this edition of *FishHook* with others.

**Violet Thomas-Cummings** is a student at the University of Southern Indiana.

**Madeline Woolsey** is pursuing a major in both English literature and French. She is an avid reader and prefers realistic fiction. Madeline enjoys drinking coffee or tea while reading or writing, and she is happy to be a part of *FishHook* and to present the nonfiction section.

\* denotes editors who also contributed submissions