Essence literary and fine arts magazine is a collaborative effort of Kutztown University students who share and express personal feelings, philosophies and views through the artistic medium of photography, illustration, poetry and short stories.

The works contained within are considered, by the Essence student staff members, some of the finest examples of creative art and literary expression. The Essence staff expresses appreciation to all its contributors and readers for sharing in this creative publication.
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I remember when I heard the river speak
We were listening to Bowie and watching the blue
That flared from tequila over the fire
darkness lay heavily on everything
But the fire
And the glowing paper stick we shared
That was when I heard the river speak
Though I cannot remember
What it said.

Karen Hoffman
Autumn Things

Sometimes she would wake up at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning, her head filled with crazy thoughts. At this hour she could compose long lyric poems which she forgot in the morning. The nights she placed pen and paper by her bed she slept through until her alarm at 8:00.

The dashboard was gritty under her feet. It was always like this. He drove and she sat with her feet up watching the houses and developments go by until it was just fields and cows; patchwork fields of green, brown, gold, and rust. They would drive higher and higher until she had to clench her jaw tightly and then release it slowly and almost painfully to keep her ears.

He stopped the car at a restaurant. There were tables outside with big umbrellas and they picked one of those which overlooked the small river below. She ordered coffee and tea. He reached for his cigarettes and offered her the pack. Knowing she only allowed herself two a day, he took a kind of pleasure in tempting her. She enjoyed her cigarettes most after dinner with coffee. She was like that, rationed her pleasures.

"No thanks." She shook her head.

"The problem with you is that you just can’t let yourself go." The words hung in the air. He hadn’t meant to be so abrupt and he saw by her eyes that he had hurt her. She said nothing and he felt a need to explain himself.

"It’s not that bad. It’s just that if you did what you enjoyed you might be happier."

"I am happy. My happiness is not the question here."

For awhile they sat in silence until the waitress set their drinks on the table. The breeze picked up and she could feel it between her legs under her cotton skirt. The umbrella sides flapped and she thought of flags and fresh laundry.

"Michelle’s cat just had kittens."

"Michelle?"

"Michelle. Michelle from work. Remember? Red hair."

"What do you want with a cat?"

"I didn’t say I wanted a cat. I just said her cat had kittens. Anyway, kittens are nice."

"Kittens turn into cats and scratch furniture and pee everywhere."

She was silent again. He saw that she looked tired. Her neck was long and white and he thought she could see tiny blue veins under her skin. He covered her hand with his and he felt her fingers stiffen for a moment and then relax.

"Come on. It’s ok. This is just for now."

She looked at him for a moment and then back down at his hand. She ran a finger over his thumbnail back and forth for a few seconds. His hands were not man’s hands. They were the hands of an adolescent or an artist and smooth like marble. She sighed and looked up. A breeze blew a few strands of hair over her face and a piece got caught in the corner of her mouth. He pulled the hair away and watched her face for a minute and then looked out at the river. It was narrow and shallow in this part. The rocks glinted and the water foamed around where there was a slight drop off. The sound of the water filled the silence and it was not necessary to talk.

It was late and the sun was low on the horizon. Soon it would be dark. She reached for his cigarettes and put one in her mouth. Using a match from her purse she lit it. For a second, the match died down and he thought it would go out but then it sputtered up again. She inhaled and blew the smoke to the side. This too was like her. Always careful not to be impolite.

"Let’s go watch the sunset from the mountain." He laid some money on the table and offered his hand to her. They walked hand in hand to his car. They drove a few more miles on the main road and then took a sharp right onto a dirt road. There was a cleared out space ahead and already a few cars were parked facing the valley. They got out of the car and walked to a big smooth rock. He spread his coat on the ground for a blanket and they watched in silence. A hawk flew overhead and circled. Slowly, the sky changed from pink and orange to a deep purple blue. A few lights in the valley blinked and she thought if she could connect them and make sense of them she would also know the secrets to her own existence.

On the way home they talked of trivial things. The weather, pumpkin pie and hot cider in anticipation of the coming autumn. She thought if it could only be like this she would be happy. She looked at his profile which had always reminded her of a Roman gladiator or what she thought a Roman gladiator should look like. His hands on the steering wheel gloved white. They passed farms and fields and went downhill until the lights from the neighborhoods blurred faster and faster together until they were one continuous streak. She thought about Michelle and her kittens. Maybe that was what she needed, a kitten. Maybe a little gray one or two so they wouldn’t be lonely.
Birds, (geese? ducks? I don’t particularly care) 
birds, 
go away. 
You come to me expecting me to feed you, 
but I haven’t any bread. 
I came to your pond just to sit here, on this bench, 
so just go away. 
Birds, 
why do you gather around me? 
if you think I’m hiding food, 
you are mistaken. 
Birds, 
why haven’t you gone yet? 
My hands are so obviously empty. 
Look! Over there! 
A man with a loaf of Russian Rye! 
Hurry! Before he leaves! 
Good. You are finally gone. 

Cyrta Bonkovic
The Thawing
The wind whistles in the shadows
like the confusion in my mind.
Sharp icicles stem from the roof top
reminding me of a pain deep within.
Ice crystals form on the windows
keeping me from seeing out.
It's always cold inside my world.

You make me see that life outside
is going on without me.
You give me reason
to leave my cold world behind.
You are the rays of sun melting the ice and warming my heart.

Susan Ziesar
And General Saw the Electric, That It Was Good

He stood looking at the barn. He was afraid. A month earlier they had bought it with the money they earned from their jobs, and this was the kitchen and this was the livingroom and this was the stove. Dancing had been done in the livingroom without music. Then it really wasn't dancing but moving around the space together listening, with his arm sometimes around her waist, sitting on the hay around a place where she thought there was a trap door.

Going into the barn, he wondered if he should be there without her. She was going to be away and he wanted to be somewhere that they had been together once. He walked past the door that led to the kitchen. The General Electric stove sat amongst the hay and wood on the floor, unevenly. "This room will be the kitchen because it already has a stove in it," she had said. He had not liked that room as the kitchen, but now that he remembered her saying it, he thought he might like it to be.

He entered the largest part of the barn. The left third was full of hay and the floor was covered with it. The beam high above his head was where he had sat. She wanted to come up but he said that she should stay down. Down was where they had danced and he wanted some perspective. He wanted to think and she sat on the floor thinking too. She had sat just as he had except they were on different levels but he thought that she must be thinking about the same things.

After they had been quiet for thinking, they talked about growing up. He had wanted to say that it wasn't the growing up that was so bad but the seriousness that came with it. He said instead that he thought it was a shame they had to. He had looked at the wall of the barn when he said this because he knew she was down there and that she couldn't have been anywhere else. He remembered being comfortable up on the rafter and knowing that she wanted to be with him.

He went out again, past the kitchen door, and took a right through the prickler bushes. Breaking out into the narrow clearing, he looked up and down the train tracks. When she had been there with him last time they had wondered if trains still used the tracks. They thought it would be very noisy if they did.

Stooping down he looked for the nickels they had put there. "If any trains still use this track then these nickels will be flat when we come back," he had said. He walked up and down the tracks looking closely. They were spread out so that if someone found one they might not find them all.

He found no nickels but he picked up a blue jay feather that he thought he might not give to her. Threading his way through the prickler bushes, he hoped that children had taken the coins. Twirling the feather in his fingers, he passed the door to the kitchen. He felt quite sure the light inside the General Electric stove would work once they hooked it up.

Tim Oesterle
Sharadin
Lonely echoes of a distant cough
bounce across the white, speckled
linoleum floor.
No other sound can be heard
except for the air vibrating
with the subtle hum
that emerges from the overhead
heating vents.
The building itself seems to be
breathing —
pulsing with life, learning,
and knowledge.

The stark fluorescent lights
glare down upon the
metal-backed chairs
which are scattered at random angles
in the vague form of a circle.
Their presence is a mute testimony
to the inhabitants who briefly
occupied them, shared their
thoughts, and were gone.

The air is yet filled,
however,
with the thoughts of young,
exuberant minds trying desperately
to grasp new concepts
and master new ideas.
While the building
hums, glares, breathes, and echoes,
waiting for the next day
of learning to begin.

Bridget S. Nagler
Young Sculptor
Love is like clay:
If you attack and mold it quickly,
it will come out rough and almost without shape.
But create your work slowly and with patience,
and it will be a treasure that will last a lifetime.

Twoshy McClain
I have a rose bud in my room.
See how beautiful he is?
His name is William.
William? Say hello.
He's quite shy, or rather,
he's quite angry with me,
his happier outside, on the bush in my yard.
But, never the less, I love him.
I care for him every day.
I sit with him
and tell him stories.
William is very fond of Oscar Wilde.
If you don't mind, I'll be right back, I have to go water him now.
William? William?
What are those brown spots on your petals?
William, does that mean that you are going to open for me soon?
William? Why is that brown spreading?
William? Oh, my God, William, what's happening?
You don't look so good.
It's all right, I'll get you in the sun,
I'll take you to...

Oh, William.

Are you still here?
Oh dear, something terrible has happened to my William.
He's fallen off of the stem,
but I think he'll be okay.
William! It's all right, Mommy's coming.
Don't cry, I'm here now.
Wait, look, out the window,
I see a bud on the bush.
If you'll wait for me, I'll be right back.
Oh, he's just beautiful.
I think I'll call him William.
in Ed's room
he hung
the globe upside-down
so that
he could
look down upon
the world while
lying on his back

he set the fan
from which it hung
in reverse
so that
he could
look down upon
the world spinning backwards
while lying
on his back

he set fire to
the ceiling
so that
he could
look down upon
the world spinning backwards
over the pit of hell
while lying
on his back

he found he was
much more comfortable
lying on his stomach

Jeremy Storr

Amy Rosenberg

Richard McCurdy
Incident at Dusk

Wooden porch rail
with rotting uncertainty
slowly gives way
redefining my
center of gravity;
for the briefest of moments
I hang
suspended
in the sweet
April
air.

Christina Aguil

Robin Care
Too Big to Fit Back in the Box

The parents argued a lot, and the children were scared so they hid in a closet. There in a dark corner, surrounded by the familiar smells of clean undershirts and balls of grey clay left in dinosaur shapes too big to fit back into the narrow box, they huddled, holding each other until it hurt. Sharing only a sliver of light under the door, they remained in their tiny shelter until the all-clear silence rang out.

The next day there was a picnic. She made fried chicken. The children looked enviously at the carefully dipped and breaded pieces. After setting out a checkered tablecloth near a patch of forget-me-nots, dad got out the new movie camera which was a birthday present for the boy who was still too young to use it himself.

Often while in the closet, they would talk about the camera he could not use and the paint-by-number ballerina which hung over her bed, also a birthday present; mom explained to the girl that the little numbered places were too tiny for little hands to manipulate. The mother was right, of course, for when given the brush once to try, the girl painted color 19 in the space marked 14. The brush was grabbed from the little hands by the larger, more controlled ones. Every time she looked at the ballerinas from whom she could not escape, she felt a great sighing sadness and more.

But, this was a picnic. The smell of crunchy fried chicken and steamy corn on the cob drew the family toward the feast. The children took their places and the camera rolled. "Wave to your father," mom directed, "smile." The children smiled, trying to look at the little, clicking, black box that their father pointed at them. Years later they would laugh while they watched this theatrical scene, there would be a gap-toothed girl with a crooked smile, ribbons on her pigtails, and crossed eyes trying not only to look at the camera, but also to see the inviting chicken beneath her. And there was the big hand flapping around in the corner, pointing and conducting this symphony of errors.

They got too big to fit into the closet, but it was okay. The shouting stopped. People asked the mother how she managed to raise two children who were so close, who did not fight, who played quietly without creating a racket. How proud the mother was. She could go to work and not worry about her well-behaved children. She made sure they understood what a rat their father was.

The father made sure to take the children to the toy store, but the children could never decide what they wanted. He told them that their mother was having an affair and that he still loved her very much.

Byron Heideman
Intimacy
I dwell over her lambent skin
And taste the promise of her tropical lips,
While her soft nipples
Blow tiny kisses upon my chest.
Our Love textures our intimacies
And punctuates our memories.

Drew A. Certo
"Garbage can! I'll stick it in the garbage can. She'll never find it... she'll think it ran away... she'll set milk out on the front porch and call 'here Muffy Muffy, here Muffers every night for a month and cry to me constantly that her darling muffin is missing... I'll crack under the pressure... I'll tell her the truth... She'll back her car over ME!"

Michelle stopped dead in her tracks. She knew she'd better come up with an idea quick, Joann was due back any minute. Michelle held the cat up to her face and looked it in the eye. It only had one left. She winced.

"Cat, you're more trouble than you were ever worth." She ran to the back of the house to collect her thoughts and avoid the impending arrival of her roommate.

She stood resting against the cold aluminum siding for several minutes, the cat dangling limply in her hands. There was not a single decent way to dispose of the cat. She would have to tell Joann the truth and ruin a six year friendship.

Joann and Michelle had been roommates since they were freshmen in college and now that they both had graduated and were working in the same town, they shared a small ranch house along Route 30. Michelle had always assumed they'd live together until one or both of them got married, and the way their love lives had been going lately, she figured they'd grow old together. She never thought a cat would come between them, but Michelle fully expected to find her bags on the front lawn the next morning. Maybe she could move back in with her parents or marry her boyfriend.

"AHH! NO! I've got to get rid of this Goddamned cat!" But it was too late. She heard Joann's car pull up in the driveway.

"Oh shit!"
She waited until she heard Joann go inside before she moved. She had an idea. She sneaked around the house on her tiptoes and slipped Muffy's corpse behind the left rear tire of Joann's car and went inside.

The next morning Joann backed out of the driveway the same way she had done it a hundred times before. She looked behind her. She looked to her right. She looked to her left. Fortunately for Michelle, she did not look down.

Racy Works
Full of Nothing

Blood wailing screams
and broken dreams
lay before me on my bed.
It was fire we ignited
and from that came an explosion,
grinding and dripping sweat
from every pore
and embracing a stranger
in an attempt not to be alone.
Thrills of ecstasy fulfilled her moments of thought
and emptiness bore inside of her after
I heard her plea and voice -
lured into pleasure not hidden.
She held, caressed, and touched me.
For me, as it always was,
was now for her - now.
After the last breath taken and gone
and sensations gave way to realism and reality
we left -
Alone again as we came.
It was not Love
it was nothing.

David Henry