The editors of Shapes invite you to submit your poetry, prose, and artwork for consideration for publication in the Spring 2024 issue. Poetry should be typed and single-spaced. Please keep a copy of any poetry or prose that you submit. We promise to handle all artwork with care.

Submit written work to:
Jeanine DeRusha (English Dept., JDeRusha@manchestercc.edu)
Andrew Sottile (English Dept., ASottile@manchestercc.edu)

Submit artwork to Maura O’Connor
(Graphic Design, Visual Fine Art Dept., MOConnor@manchestercc.edu)
SHAPES

is Manchester Community College’s art and literary magazine. Contributors are all members of the MCC Community.

Faculty Advisors
Editorial: Jeanine DeRusha
Andrew Sottile
Design: Maura O’Connor

art by Aaron Scott

cover art design by Jordan Brndiar
layout design by Jordan Brndiar, Fenna Lacourciere, Aaron Scott, Jordan Turner

art by Chelsea Hyatt

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there is a reason grey is all but grief,  
and yet grief is all grey. 
purgatory is all grey. 
like my neighborhood  
misty in colour  
on a cool spring day. 
fog climbs the hills to the opening in the trees. 
the valley will sink in, and a cloud 
will be bestowed upon my childhood home. 
like a black and white version of the milky way, 
to form the colour of forgotten planets, 
and stars left in the dust. 
like black holes in the heart of the universe. 
like a noir film in the modern age, 
used to dramatize the feelings of the story, 
no sounds, only big letters, 
and the pain of a hollywood script. 
my purgatory is all grey. 
and i’m left to cry in silence, 
grieving my solar systems lost, 
a childhood home with only pain. 
grief is the process of clearing up cloudy vision. 
waiting for the sun to rise high enough to burn away the pain 
with its butterscotch rays. 
and looking in the mud to see the remains.
Now I am a knot
 tied violently
 locked into place
 the forced bond slowly
 getting tighter

Once a strong knot
 stressed by pressure
 until there was nothing left to give
 Tugged back and forth
 dreaming of how free I once was
 as a single string

New grief makes you pine for old grief,
 the grief you know will mend into memories,
 that returns life to its shape, and
 unsoftens its sadness. There is an
 unspoken age when you stop
 taking pictures.
Damar Britto

Dream's Distance

Sunday nights flood with dreams about you,
The way I lust and crave for your presence.
Never did I think I would want you back
So soon, so fast. Never have I done this.
I always think about the way you were;
I remember the ways I was spellbound,
Entranced, enamored, yearning for what's next.
You are the most distant star in my space.
You are the deepest trench in my ocean.
You are still like exploring the unknown.
Because what I don’t know is where you are.
I want the right ending to our story,
But every time I wake up each morning,
I lose you, no longer in my grasp.

Teddy Dorring

Stretched Hands and Sheets

after “Gloves” by Kaveh Akbar

I wake but I do not rise just yet. Here, I wish to only count the
seconds, that my eyes can call it home in your presence. The sheets, in
due time, will stretch. They will retreat under the pull of your body when it leaves
these hills and valleys, created by this tension, only remind me of scars. Not yours, or mine, but
the ones created time and time again, in everyone wanting to vividly live in another's light.

I pray this is not as you see me.
Chanté Anderson

Move

I tried to look behind me to see how far I’ve come only to notice I didn’t like who was following me. And in that moment, my soul, famished for nurture screamed out “tend to me!” I got angry. Because I couldn’t get out of my own way.

Bound by the Roots

Our faces can change like the leaves on a tree, through the rigid path of who we are to be. Eye to eye, though we may not always see, still the roots bound below is what makes us family.
Carissa Horton

of pigs and eternity

i slice the pig’s stomach open, letting the wave of thick, sepia fluid crash onto my gloves.

my face is almost as puffy as the pillow that it’s leaning into. i’ve tried to stop the tears. i can see the grim reaper and i bury my face further.

did the pig see the grim reaper too, see her blind, cobalt eyes reflected in that rusty old scythe?

my mother is on the phone in the next room. i’m sure that she can hear my sobs, she’s sure that something is wrong with me.

i pry her eyes open and look into them, striving to see anything. i look at her bloodied nose, the clumps of fat, the pale pink wrinkles.

she doesn’t breathe or look back, but i think we understand each other.

i am 10 years old and my mother tells me i have about 70 years left. but what if i don’t? what if the black and white gets to me faster?

i couldn’t see him, but i could feel him grinning. he was ready to take me in his obsidian cloak. i was waiting for him to strike,

i was forever waiting for him to strike.

did the pig see the grim reaper too, see her blind, cobalt eyes reflected in that rusty old scythe?

my mother is on the phone in the next room. i’m sure that she can hear my sobs, she’s sure that something is wrong with me.

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i was forever waiting for him to strike.

that alone would kill me. the waiting, the inexact number, the spinning of numbers, counting down the days until i got the black spot on my ticket.

the pig scampers about, snout turned upwards to embrace the golden light above, floppy ears swatting away flies and bulbous body cheerfully covered in mud.

or so i say.

i’m not crying when i cut open her stomach, and i watch the grim reaper wink at me.
Nick Ondras

Stop Words

My heart gushes wildly down the grocery store aisle,
Beating past my rib cage and turning my chest inside out.
It’s not our job to make it fit, my other organs sneer.

I think, They’re right.
Or maybe it’s because my brain has also spilled onto the floor,
And they’re yelling for clean-up and putting down a safety sign.

While my heart and brain hold hands and pick out toothpaste,
I wonder in my crimson puddle of teeth if this is what
love feels like.

Victoria Gagnon

Flowers for Persephone

With nectar on my lips
Cherry blossoms in my hair,
Hummingbirds carry me away:
The earth, she calls to me.

With cherry blossoms in my hair,
I rise from the dirt like Persephone
The earth, she calls to me.
I am born again each spring

I rise from the dirt like Persephone
gingko roots cradle my rotten fruit flesh
I am born again each spring
body shielded by florescence, I wait

As gingko roots cradle my rotten fruit flesh
With nectar on my lips,
Body shielded by florescence, I wait
Hummingbirds carry me away.
Molly Finnegan

drowning myself in you
(i’d do it a million times over)

write me gold my eyes skim the paper and believe it
wherever our souls come from they are made the same
entered my world a walking explosion of nebulas
you fill my lungs with abundance and romance
slow dance with me until our bones are frail and aching
then once more
write me the villain I read it and become one
you spit fire watch as I explode tiny particles of glittering embers
love and loss walk hand in hand
be my forever or mine will cease to exist
bury me in a black hole of 27 red roses

Damar Britto

Alexander

Alexander, I will never understand you
What is it that makes you so fickle?
Forever changing, forever switching
All of your actions causing a ripple

One minute, we are close as can be,
Almost inseparable.
The next we are fighting it out,
And it feels irreparable

I tell my other friends what draws me to you
And I always have to explain:
I’ve fallen for you over time –
My heart, wrapped in gauze, broken veins.

You mean so much to me,
Radiating warmth like the summer sun
Strong and rigid like a steel shield.
No one else to go to if we drift apart.

It’s been almost three years
And my heart still isn’t at ease,
But I just can’t help myself –
Love is not a fatal disease.

Alexander, I will never understand you,
But you’re still my best friend.
Even now, our future uncertain,
Floating like petals in the wind.
Teddy Dorring

Well Spent

I am everything you have loved
and everything that you have lost
I am the creak in your old chair,
and what’s left of grass under frost.

I am to be desired, but unbecoming.
I am the feeling in your chest
that makes you stop running.

I fill in the cracks
chiseled by years gone by.
I am there when you are born,
and I am there when you die.

I am there when they love you,
remaining when they do not.
I watch you unlearn
the boundless lessons you have been taught.

I am this moment in which you stand,
and the unseen turn.
I am your pleasure, I am your pain,
I am the rolling thunder and the cleansing rain.

I am the mortar, I am the pestle,
and the parts to the whole which you churn.
I will hold you all within my arms,
these tireless arms that know no burn.

But you still hate me, like the letter to them
that you wish you had never sent:

for I am life,
a well-worn trail,
an untrodden path,
and all you can hope for
is that I'm well spent.

Sylvia-Ann Ulett

The Butterfly

Oh, glass-winged butterfly,
your wings, like crystal chimes,
see through the jungle
with detail and precious precision.
You fly like a bullet train, not stopping
until you reach your destination.
When I look at you, I can barely
see my reflection staring back
at me, with awe and wonder.
Instead, all I get is a blurry
distortion of myself. A butterfly effect.

art by Katherine Krabowski

art by William Harper
Carissa Horton

**flight 3701**

we just want to live freely.
the spiritless Little Rock grimaces at us
as we set off to join the 410 club.
grins creep on our faces as we cruise further.
the spiritless Little Rock grimaces at us from below,
while the universe welcomes us in its azure arms.
our grins widen as we reach our service ceiling.
we sip on carbonated euphoria as it all goes down.
the universe smothers us with azure hands.
there’s a double engine failure as we descend fifteen hundred feet a minute;
we sip on carbonated euphoria as we go down
and we ground ourselves with the snaps and glimmer of disaster.
there’s a double engine failure as we descend fifteen hundred feet a minute,
but we’ve finally joined the 410 club,
we let ourselves float away with the snaps and glimmer of disaster.
let our obituaries read that we just wanted to live freely.

Flint Kelley

**Commercial**

*after Kavek Akbar’s “Gloves”*

What would you.
Do for a Klondike Bar. How do.
You spell relief.
Words coined. Fill youth.
Minds so full. Ballooning.
Heads too wide. Have it.
Your way. Digital notes.
From speaker. To brains.
Endlessly. Why.
Do bright colors. Imbue our.
Empty stomachs.
Monetary sweat. Drips away.
As fires scream. Near.
Christmas. I’m Lovin’ It.
Grown to. Infatuation.
Of Lady Caine. She.
Opens Happiness. I can.
Not see. Much difference.
Cultured dependency. How did.
We let this. Slip by.
Can you hear me now?

art by Diane Pizzo
I avoid the manager. Closing my eyes, I sink into my office chair. I slow my breathing and finally look up at her, a piece of paper in her hands. From where I’m sitting, I can see it’s a photocopy of the suicide note I left on my desk just minutes before. She needed to document my action, how I wrote the note and fled. How I left the building. When I returned, it was to this. Small frown, furrowed brow, looking down at me. Maybe she’s sad about it. Her kind suggestion to seek long term financial support for my illnesses does little to ease my shaking knees. The paper in her hand ruffles as she moves it. She’s keeping track, she says, to cover the company. Everyone knows I need help. I’ve been on the decline for months. I understand the response but it cuts my income. I can’t figure out what’s different now, what has changed. I wonder why I’m this way. I’ve always struggled but this isn’t the same. I’ve been a good employee. Until I wrote that struggle onto a note, just a few words of intention. Then I posted it and ran.

I’m driving in the direction of my best friend Mary’s house. Speeding toward our weekly sit-down of sitcoms and beers, I sing along to the radio as I steer. I’ve let them know I was on my way. Their stilted response gives me pause but I’m in the car already. Quarter full gas gauge. Enough to get there and back. My phone rings and I answer. In a low voice, Mary explains that I can’t come over because they don’t want me to. Then it’s just a short good-bye. I set the phone down slowly. I continue to drive for a little while, staring at the road, unseeing. I know why it’s happening. I should have expected it. Too much change. Too many transgressions. It started with stealing, taking without asking. Then I lied. I would tell one friend something different from another, but I couldn’t say why. Sometimes I can’t tell truth from lies. It’s hard to tell who I am. And I don’t understand why, why I’m changing so fast. Reckless and callous. I finally turn the car around and head home. Alone in my apartment, the silence feels like a fog.
In my Jeep, thick clusters of pine trees fly past and I lean into it every time the vehicle jostles. A giant puddle appears ahead, a black soup boiling in the sun. I lean forward to look closer. I slow. The Jeep can practically swim and with four-wheel drive and a steady speed, I should be able to make it. So now it’s foot on the gas, but as I reach the other side of the mud, the Jeep stops and begins rolling backwards. It settles down into the mud. I sit back a little in my seat, puzzled. I stomp the accelerator and the vehicle hardly moves an inch. Spinning, spluttering mud in every direction. I stop, take my hands off the wheel, place them in my lap. It should have been easy to pass through.

The Jeep has conquered much worse. The sandy pits of the Pine Barrens. That time the river washed out the trail on Martha Road. But here it was, at its end, stuck in the mud. Around the dash there’s lights and switches. The radio’s static hums through the speakers. And then it’s clear: I never engaged the four wheel drive. Simply forgot. Now I’m in the right gear but it’s too late.

The tires spin. I’m sinking deeper. An hour passes. Then another. The sun dips in the sky. As the light spills away, thankfully someone notices my plight. Their truck is full of fishing rods. They’re off-roading adepts. They run the chains from their truck around a tree and connect to me. They drive. I turn my wheel, just like that my Jeep is free. I drive home where I will park it and wait for it to be repossessed because my bank account is empty.

I'm not in love with you anymore

He says it over the phone. I’m on my bed, rocking back and forth, I listen to him speak in silence. I freeze. I want to ask a hundred questions but all I do is mutter, What? He explains the obvious, that I’ve changed, that I’m not who I used to be. When he’s done he says he has to go, so I say goodbye. All that safety, all that security, all of it evaporates. I believed we could overcome anything. But I’ve wrecked it all. I’m crying now. I can’t take back what I’ve done. My mouth is dry. After a while I uncross my legs and slide off the bed. In the kitchen I fetch water jug from the fridge but when I reach for it, I stop, lowering my hand. I tuck my head a little further into the fridge. I don’t understand why this is happening. But I do. It’s two ways at once. I don’t want it, can’t control it. I close my eyes, open my mouth and scream.
Mom asked if he heard the phone. He had not. In fact, he had fallen asleep that night praying it wouldn’t ring. The only call he would have dreaded more was from the draft board.

“Where is he?”

“Paddy’s,” she said. “C’mon, you know he doesn’t like to wait long.”

Of course it was Paddy’s. On a weeknight, it had to be Paddy’s. It was across the street from the factory, right on the bus line. He only went to The Lodge or Limelight when the Packers were playing because the TV at Paddy’s got crap reception.

Mom said, “God forbid we let anything happen to him when he gets like that. You don’t want to carry that around for the rest of your life.”

He didn’t want to do it again. But of course he would. “It’s fine, Mom. Go back to bed,” he said. “I’ll rest when you’re both home safe. Now get on before you wake the baby.”

It was cold. Colder than usual. One of those nights where even if you had heated up the car before you got in, there was still a chill in the seats. Besides, his father would have killed him for wasting all that gas. Driving up to Manitowoc for Betty’s party at the shore was wasting gas. Driving to Green Bay for Packers vs. Bears was wasting gas, since you could just watch it on TV. God forbid.

Just a few cars in the lot when he arrived. He couldn’t see him by the door, so he pulled in front and waited. It seemed so dumb—he was old enough to drive but not old enough to go in and let his dad know he was there. As he waited, he wondered if any of classmates had secrets of their own. Were they sulking in a shadow somewhere right now, wishing they were somewhere else? Probably not. He had passed Don Wysocki’s house a few blocks back. It was lights out, just like you’d expect on a school night.

His father eventually staggered out with the bartender, after the lights had turned off and the parking lot had emptied. The car was nice and warm.

“Glad I checked the bathroom before I locked up,” the bartender shouted.

“I’m sorry, sir. And thank you.”

They managed to get him into the back seat. It would be safer back there and easier to clean up if he got sick. From the way he smelled, he might have been sick already. As he closed the door, the bartender stood still, but you could read on his face that he had some yet unexpressed purpose.

“Hey uh,” the bartender hesitated. “I hate to be a jerk, but your dad’s tab is running pretty high these days and the way he picks the games I can’t see it changing. There anything you can do about it?”

The question came out of nowhere, so it took him a second to understand. Once he did, he felt his face get fire mad in the cold night.

“Have you got any money on you or not?” he said. “I’d hate to have to embarrass your pops next time he’s in here. Or worse.”

He wasn’t sure what that meant but he could guess. The bartender’s tattoos were like war wounds.

He pulled out his wallet and opened it. Fifty bucks. That was all there was from his paper route that week and washing dishes on Saturday. All there was for taking Peg to the movies and hopefully more on Friday night. Without a word, the bartender reached in and emptied him out.
“Thanks, kid. That helps a lot.” He had the same stupid grin as the guy who'd sold him the ticket to see the bearded lady at the fair. What a racket.

Before he could even ask how much his dad owed or anything else for that matter, he had walked away.

As he drove home, the silence punctured only by his father’s syncopated snoring, each mile felt longer and longer the longer he drove. Everyone knew about the smoking and drinking. But he didn't know about the gambling. He wondered if Mom knew. He wondered how much he owed. He wondered if he could finally gather the courage to ask. He felt like such a fool. By the time he turned onto their street, he decided that was the last time.

Mom was waiting at the door when they got home. With her help, they danced their dance as they always did. His father wasn't a big man, not like Uncle Gene, but when he was like that—“I'll take it from here,” Mom said. You go to bed.”

What wishful thinking. Between the torpedo that sunk his plans for the weekend and his nerves about tomorrow's bio test, sleep wouldn't be for a few hours.

Next morning, the door to his parents' room was open, the bed was already made, and the smell of coffee filled the house. She always put a pot on for his dad before he left for work. “I've got eggs,” she said, “and your father left a little bit of coffee. I don't want you to go to school on an empty stomach.” His father always left some coffee. It was the one thing you could count on him for. As Mom put his place setting down and poured his coffee, his lingering shame turned to a sense of wonder. He was always amazed how after a night like that, his dad could just get up and go to work and Mom would get up and pretend everything was all right, nothing out of the ordinary. Years later he'd learn about functioning and enabling. But not yet.

After breakfast he placed his dishes in the sink, and while he stood there, he could feel his mother coming closer. As he turned to go, she reached out and gently touched his shoulder.

“Look, you don't want…”

“I don't care, Mom,” he insisted. And then he stopped.

“Look, you’re still tired, I get it. Maybe we can talk about this after school.”

Of course, they never did. Not after school. Not ever. Not when his dad tried taking the bus home and ended up in Whitefish Bay. Not when the police called and told them that with the beer goggles he wrapped the car around a light post. Not even, much later, when they were called to come identify the body. Not then either.
Molly Finnegan

**watching you fall apart**

I watch your last ounce of self love escape you
a clear droplet dripping down your face
falling from your chin leaving a trail
of evidence on your light blue shirt

the girls bathroom reeking of cheap perfume
and misplaced passion for boys
as we crowd into the same stall your lifeless body in front of mine
seeking a hideaway from the reality behind the graffiti’d swinging door

if only you could see what I see
behind your gloomy eyes exists a soul of eternal divinity
I have seen its magic unfold
on the nights we lie until 3am on the roof outside your sister’s window

you belong in the stars

---

Flint Kelley

**Acelove**

Our love has always been
a speeding train.

We’ve kept our bond,
stronger than steel,
supporting each other.
We have kept ourselves in line.

We ride in on heavy, hot axles,
bulldozing through obstacles.
60 miles per hour,
there is no slowing down.

Though we hold our arms out,
when we arrive,
people stop and stare.
We are proud of being loud.

Wave the flag out the window,
and mark the vessel we house.
Depart to the next station,
to our next platform.
Ryan Pirre

 Epilogue of a Shooting Star

I have spent years hurling through nothingness, gazing upon the caramel storms in the sky of Jupiter, scouring the desolate crust of Mars in search of a sign that I am not alone.

Earth, she is stunning.
Her forest of luscious green locks,
her sapphire complexion,
like a jewel hovering in a cosmic trench,
pulling me in closer.

I would rather die in her atmosphere
than rest in the arms of my irrational journey.
I just hope the people pointing up at me know
I made a wish upon them, too.

Victoria Steele

 Street Lamp

One solitary street lamp
giving off a dull yellow glow
penetrates only a sliver of the dark.
Head forever bowed to the ground,
its focus unable to gaze beyond
the hardened road illuminated right below.

The street lamp did not wish to act like this.

Head down,
limbs immobile,
mouth nonexistent,
eyes stunned open,
pouring out precious light.

Just before the weak glow fades
the fed-up bulb explodes.
Angry glass slaps the ground.
Sparks hiss at the night air,

finding a voice
even if it causes destruction.
We rode bikes up and down and up the neighborhood. Your mother always made you wear a helmet and we made fun of you for it. Our adolescent skin boiling with only our parents to care, and breaking each other’s bones in someone else’s yard. We both loved the smell of fresh-cut grass and you asked me how to kiss a girl. I answered confidently. Puffs of tasteless smoke, joints smuggled from my dad’s glove box, and gas station fresheners failed to mask the odor. The soft August air steadied our heartbeats and intoxicated us with feelings of infinite juvenility. A split-second Nirvana. That was a long time ago. The muted gray clouds churn while rain falls outside my window, and you lie there in wet foliage and shattered glass, with nothing above you except the endless rain that ricochets off the bruises across the bridge of your nose.

Eliot Ryan

Your Obituary

She unraveled your sinew like a spool of thread until you were nothing but a husk after harvest time clutching that pomegranate heart of yours she squeezed and she squeezed then painted herself sanguine.
Ryan Pirre

Every Story Ever Told

ended so suddenly, yet so satisfying.
But it’s hard for me to believe Rome burned down in a day.
I’m sure children were playing and laughing,
people living their lives while the danger was spreading next door.

It’s hard for me to believe Rome burned down in a day.
As I look at the Empire I call home, I question how long it will stand.
People are living their lives while the danger spreads next door.
It’s never really a threat until you are forced to look it in the eye.

As I look at the Empire I call home, I question how long it will stand.
Its structure becoming frail, weak, damaged.
It’s never really a threat until you look it in the eye.
But once the fire starts to spread, it’s already too late.

My home has become frail, weak, and damaged.
Oh, so suddenly. Oh, so satisfying.
The fire has already spread, it’s already too late.
But we’ll keep on living our lives, until the danger comes knocking on our door.

Jaylah Green

Against Aging

_after Kaveh Akbar’s “Against Dying”_

The body is just dust, energy
hot like melting ice cream during the summer
sweat dripping down our cones
and cold like the ice caps during the snowy winters
bundling up into big balls of fur.
We start as little bouts of nothing
until we turn into something
a fetus, a baby, a toddler
growing into beings we just do not know.
Life’s beautiful cycle:
love, conception, family.
Life’s ugly truth:
sadness, aging, dying.
Going through days like little ants
trooping this journey
until there is nothing left to give.
Watching the sun as it rises and sets
slowly dissolving into nothingness.
poetic scraps for i am almost nineteen

1. scribbles in the journal i keep in my back pocket.
2. i speak to him like i speak to myself, why should it be any different?
3. eurocentric beauty was my standard.
4. i don't know and i don't think you know either.
5. the entire world is poison.
6. “tell me when you’re asleep” is such a paradox.
7. good morning's in my future home...i'll kiss even the moon goodnight.
8. people’s laughter: i memorize it like the tightness of a hug, i feel it going to sleep and hear the echoes when i’m alone.
9. she’s the sun and the moon and all the stars in between but she swallowed me like a black hole.
10. i’m grateful for your presence right now, and i’m grateful for your existence forever.
11. your frustration is cute.
12. you are your own home, and sometimes we want to burn it to the ground, commit a felony and arson alike to never hear our voices echo against the wall again. and sometimes we want nothing but to see it at the end of the day, a place to rest.
13. perhaps the reality i crave could only play in movies.
14. if they stay the love fades away and i’m left with nothing. i wish on any star, that i’ll wake up to texts from that person.
15. it is hard adjusting to feeling loved having someone call your name and text you after a tough meeting, because soon enough it’ll fade, and i’ll never feel like it was enough.
16. “i give up.” it’s a sentence i’ve said more to myself than to anyone else.
17. i can’t take a shower without wanting to drown myself in the waterfall.
18. tight hugs: a chin finding its way to a shoulder.
19. a shadow and its lovesick confession.

Zoltan Saxon

Unalive

You can’t cry anymore.
Your shy blue eyes once gazed into mine.
I asked you one last time.
Are you okay? You lied.
You shouldn't've appreciated the message.
You never wanted to stay alive.
We were always together, listening to lo-fi.
I realized you weren't happy.
It was hard to deny.
I wish you continued to stay by my side instead of running away to find a place to die.
The Honorable Hon

for Paul, and anyone else I may call ‘hon’

Hon is a sweet from the hive or the heart
A gentle reminder in greeting or in part
A warm life preserver, a sticky savior
A candy given for good behavior

A tacky balm that tastes chapped lips
A builder of friend or relationships
A verbal encounter from a trip down south
Gifting you with a good taste in your mouth

Hon is an honorific
Magnified without glass
A sign of truth,
Nobility and class

A spoil of war
A vessel affectional
A verbal medallion
for the most exceptional

Hon can also be a warning
A condescending snake’s rattle
A sarcastic thumbs down
Or heavy handed gavel

A dare for the cocky
Awaiting no surprise
An annoying weight
Atop hooded rolled eyes

It’s the advent of gospel
A resounding bell
A call to gather
For a story to tell

A peppered tongue
With encouraging word
Or some piping hot tea
Or the flat-out absurd

Hon can be medicine
Activated by tears
An ancient cure-all
Enduring for years

A spell of sorts
A magical bond
Not needing hallowed ground
But perhaps... a wand

So use as much or as little
As you’d like
Measure with your heart
If the moment should strike

This sacred sweetness
Reserved for a lover
Grows in might
When shared with others
The Rinehart Method

I can’t escape the conviction that cursive—writing it and knowing how to read it—represents some universal value.

Jess Oppenheimer

We practiced cursive in third grade, not with pencil on paper but with hand in air, as we gently swung our wrists and traced circles above our desks. We’d transfer those patterns as letters to line lined paper while imagining signature flourishes. This was the Rinehart method.

One day in school a couple waltzed in, as graceful as the letters we were learning. I thought they were the Rineharts themselves. They danced up and down the aisles, evaluating our script and advising on pencil grip and spacing. Though they did not award stars, I knew my cursive was the best.

Eventually, as grades progressed, some students upended or reversed the forward slant, ballooned or compressed the shapely curves, expanded or contracted the stately capitals, or worst, reverted back to printing. But I remained faithful to the Rineharts, never cheating on them, or compromising the order their method promised.

James Gentile

South of Market

To be exactly where you want to be in life; a feeling that turns on a dime.

Stephen Campiglio

With exact change in hand, I get breakfast from the vending machine.

In the lobby, old folk slouch on chairs and couches before the TV set, droning for no one in particular; transients who are one misstep from living on the street; youth, my best asset.

 Returning to my room, I seek my fortune through poems, the work there I must meet.
Rattled by break-ins in neighbors’ houses in their sleepy Florida town, my father taped poker games and blasted them whenever they left the house.

Sure enough, as you approached the door you’d hear:

“And an eight for a pair! I’ll check!”

“I don’t like the look of that ace, Charlie!”

“And maybe there’s one in the hole, Fred! Wouldn’t that frost ya!”

Punctuated by the clinks of chips, shuffling of cards, ice cubes tinkling in glasses.

Of course it might seem odd to the would-be thief to hear a hot game of poker on a Wednesday morning and with no cars in the driveway but the idea was to fill the house with presence, with life and now, thirty-five years later, my parents long gone, at the bottom of a closet and the bottom of the shoebox he kept them in, there is my father’s laugh again and that presence is exactly what I feel.

“Pair a jacks bets two cents!”

“I’ll see that and raise you two, Paula!”

“Anyone ready for snacks?! Margie?!”

Listening to them on this old RadioShack cassette player, I wait for one of my dad’s awful puns, or some poker idiom like deuces never loses or the friendly post mortem after each hand, and my heart says, Deal me in.

It’s the mundanity that makes it, better than any oral history interview, just the normal sounds of the living, the gift of nothing happening, nothing, at least, that a straight flush couldn’t cure.

Steve Straight

The Poker Game

Listening to them on this old RadioShack cassette player, I wait for one of my dad’s awful puns, or some poker idiom like deuces never loses or the friendly post mortem after each hand, and my heart says, Deal me in.

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Steve Straight

The Poker Game
A Lovesong for Mr. and Mrs. Humanity

It is a plague upon us all.
Love is a human necessity.
Her cold touch upon my face
is like a smooth cool inhale.
Wanting more. Needing more.

Her eyes are desolate. Her face
a euphoric mirage wrapping me in chemical chains.
She looks at me only for utility,
I wander a hallway full of locked doors
searching for intimacy. I try to envelop her
but find my lips around a gun.

Forever searching a barren desert
for an ocean that's long since dried up.

For Nathan

In my dreams, Nathan talks
in blank verse, heroic couplets, single soliloquy,
easily, fluently,
about the peaks and valleys of his world.
big adventures, colossal hopes, memorable achievements.

In reality, Nathan speaks in fragments,
with dangling modifiers,
locked in repetition and questions,
“Wake up, go to school, come home,
and then?”

In Nathan's world there is a jumble of i.e.p. s and p.p.t.s,
for the “special ones,” “the differently abled.”
Brand new jargon with the same results.
Nathan hears the poignant reminders:
“Not now, Nathan” – “hands to yourself.”

In the third grade world there is no room for
Elmo or Winnie the Pooh or songs of Laurie Berkner
or time to sing, “Wheels on the Bus” or to tie shoelaces.
Third grade is straight lines and hospital corners.
With no digressions.

In my dreams, I make a wish,
that people will begin to learn from Nathan,
to catch his courage and his strength,
to be filled with the energy to help him,
finally talk to all his worlds.
One Hopeful Poem for Anne

Today I’m going to see everything as a sign, proof that this orchestra’s conductor still stands upfront, keeping time with one thin wand. A thick cake of clouds hides the sun, which is fine. How would you cherish brightness if every day unfurled as a globe of clean glass? It’s a gift, this overcast, the sky as white as paper. Tomorrow’s sun will cast its unblinking eye and heat the streets. The sheet music says so. Today I’ll warm leftovers, adobo chicken and fresh corn, this bounty of food we made for friends last night, its day-old taste richer now, having soaked for hours in seasoning. The corn is evidence of living, that each year when the ground thaws, a seed can soon yield soft, milky fruit, sweeter than you’d think. Obviously the robin’s nest in the wreath on my front door is a sign, her three azure eggs proof this house can be a quiet place, or perhaps a reminder to move around more slowly. Like a musical rest - a pause in the loud, grand composition. Anyway, it confirms that some cycle of nature – one I know exists but don’t always see – continues to turn like a prayer wheel. Today is held in the hands of a god who knows how delicate the world is. Today, things will be tended to.

Loving You Through the Seasons

Summertime brought boat rides on the river, crashing through salty waves till the sun fades. Live music from twinkling restaurants danced over the water to our ears.

Fall was introduced with a crisp sweet smell, road trips with windows down sip up Autumn air. Truck tires swirled leaves into tiny tornadoes and sunset colored trees offered us their warm glow.

Winter’s wrath raged a war outdoors. Tucked inside, our minds can find no peace, without the shining sun to bleach away the toxic words we spit.

Together we found a way to feel so alive, two hot sparks twirling above the bonfire, an ember that flickers bright but burns quick, consuming its own dark soul of ash.