

Reviewing the World We've Made: A Collection of Student Writings

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East Tennessee State University

About This Collection

The essays that follow were written by ETSU students as part of *Reviewing the World We've Made*, a reflective writing project inspired by ETSU's 2025-2026 Common Read, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* by *John Green*. Students were invited to pause and consider one aspect of the human-made world. These subjects range from the small to the significant and from the serious to the lighthearted, and each writer reflects on how that creation has shaped their life or the lives of others.

Rather than academic analysis, these pieces offer personal reviews grounded in lived experience. Each essay explores what a human creation can reveal about people, connection, community, and meaning. Some writers chose to include a rating or symbolic score, echoing the style of the Common Read, while others focused solely on reflection and storytelling.

These essays are presented in their original, unedited form. Together, they capture a range of voices and perspectives and offer an honest snapshot of how students are making sense of the world we have built and what it means to live within it.

“Greetings From...” A Review of Postcards

Author: Emra Mehmedović

Howard and Mike sent a postcard from Hardin, Kentucky in August of 1968. Mrs. Florence Schmidt of Waterloo, Illinois received it a few days after it was postmarked on the 14th. *Dear Mom, they wrote, The scenery is beautiful. We're having a good time being campers.*

In September of 2023, I realized that I agreed with Howard and Mike—the scenery is beautiful, and I, too, am having a good time being a camper. I sit by the fire, stomach growling when my hotdog sizzles and splits in the flames. This is my first time visiting Land Between the Lakes, and I wonder if it had been Howard and Mike's first visit too. I look out at the lake; its serene surface is a blend of pinks, blues, and oranges, mirroring its skyward companion. I could almost taste it—this cotton candy sherbert sky. The light bounces, traveling towards me. My pupils also mirror the sweetness of a summer night's sunset, and we all connect: the heavens, the water, and perhaps Howard, Mike, and I. Oh, and I can't forget about Phil, Mrs. Florence Schmidt's grandson. Apparently, Phil *loved every minute of his new adventure*. At least, that's what Howard and Mike said in the postcard.

Dear Phil, I also love every minute of my new adventure. Did you blow bubbles through your nose beneath the surface of Kentucky Lake? Did you see the hundreds, maybe thousands of lime-colored lily pads anchored within Little Creek? Did you notice the orange and yellow *Laetiporus sulphureus* bursting from a tree's trunk? Surely you must've seen that, it was practically a neon beacon in the forest! Folks call this fungus chicken of the woods, and I'm sure you can guess why. By any chance did you hear an elk bugle? It sounds like a rusty gate 2 screeching open, or closed for that matter. What about the bison? Did you see how massive they were?

55 years separate your visit and mine, your Land Between the Lakes might've looked completely different. Humans have a way of either destroying or preserving the wildlife that Earth spent millennia cultivating, and I'm glad we preserved this. Your father also preserved the memory of your trip. A sweet message to mom, one I came across filing through boxes of postcards at a flea market in Bowling Green, Kentucky, years before I even made it to Land Between the Lakes. Grief accompanies the question: how did this postcard travel from Hardin to Waterloo only to have its journey end in Bowling Green?

Phil sent a postcard from Cimarron, New Mexico in July of 1982. Mrs. Florence Schmidt of Waterloo, Illinois received it a few days after it was postmarked on the 23rd. *Dear Grandma, he wrote, How are you? I'm doing great. The country we are walking in is so beautiful. It's unbelievable out here.*

In June of 2024, I finally made it out West, and Phil was right—it is unbelievable out here. In southern New Mexico, I traverse among stalactites and stalagmites 750 feet below the Earth's

surface, examining what millions of years of dripping water can do. After Carlsbad Caverns, I visit the world's largest gypsum dunefield. The wind greets me with a gentle whisper as I stand atop a dune's peak, glistening white sand stretching out as far as my eyes can see. Children lose their footing as they climb the dunes, and laughter echoes throughout the desert as they race back down on their plastic sleds. I continue nearly five hours westward to hike through Gila National Forest. Searching for an escape from the New Mexico heat, I find a trickling creek cutting through the trees. The frigid water is supplied by mountain springs, so as I sit in its path, I shiver, my teeth chattering so bad I'm afraid they'll crack. Camping for days now, I yearn for a 3 steaming hotel shower. I plug my nose and rock back until I am submerged by snowmelt, its roar rushing in my ears like an avalanche. Phil went to Baldy Mountain, but I never made it there. I decided to head to Arizona instead. I wonder if Phil ever made it to Arizona.

My collection of postcards has grown tremendously. The Hall of Giants hiding within Carlsbad Caverns, the blinding dunes at White Sands National Park, the Ponderosa pines of Gila, and beyond—I have a postcard for each and every place that has reminded me of how transient I truly am. Howard, Mike, and Phil are a testament to how transient we all are, but their postcards are not. They might have been lost in a dusty box in a flea market for decades, but I unearthed them simply because I thought the picture on the front would look cool on my bedroom wall. When I flipped it over and read the looped L's and crossed T's, I got a glimpse into a stranger's life. I do not know where my postcards will end up after I am gone, but from Bryce Canyon to the Blue Ridge Parkway, I will keep documenting my adventures. I can only hope that they are filed amongst hundreds of other postcards being sold for 50 cents each. If encountered, memories that I can never get back will have a second life in a stranger's mind, if only for a moment.

I give postcards, despite the unintended existential dread they cause, 4.5 stars.

2002 Subaru Outback

Author: Eleanor Weedman

BANG, BANG, BANG!

I jolted awake in a heart-pounding terror. I lay in bed, heart in my throat, trying to identify the noise. It sounded again.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

"Housing! Open up!"

The call kicked me into action; I jumped out of bed and flung open the door. The RA who stood there was sleepy. He stared at my Yoda PJ pants and murmured, "The police are trying to contact you. Pick up your phone."

Then he shuffled down the hallway like he hadn't just dropped a bomb on me. I checked my phone and, sure enough, there were three missed calls from the police station. I distantly noted the time, 2:00 am, as I pressed redial on the most recent call. I listened to the ringing, trying frantically to think of why the police needed to contact me in the middle of the night. Did something happen to my parents? A friend? Was I in trouble?

The last question seemed unlikely; I was usually in bed with a book by 10pm, but my imagination was alight with all sorts of possibilities.

The police answered.

"There's been an accident," the receptionist chirped. I closed my eyes and fought back tears.

She continued, "Your car was damaged in the parking lot. You need to come and assess the damage."

I stammered that I would be there soon. She replied, "We'll send a squad car."

She hung up. I stared at my phone in bewilderment. In the back of the squad car, still in my pajamas, I tried to quell my panic. I worried. Would I still be able to drive? How expensive would the repairs be?

Then a horrifying thought occurred to me: What if my Subaru was beyond repair?

In the original Japanese, the word "Subaru" means "unite," and refers to the star cluster the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters. When I was six, my older sister wanted to be an astronaut. Since I

would follow her anywhere, even to the stars, I decided I would be one too. I read her books on the constellations, but the only one I could find by myself was the Pleiades. I loved that star cluster because I knew them. They are steady, something I can always find twinkling above and know that I am not so far from home.

The Subaru I loved was a brick-red 2002 Outback. It first belonged to Douglas Ericson, a nuclear engineer who worked most of his life at the Idaho National Laboratory. He was quiet, thoughtful, and had a deep love of the American West. I was a kindred spirit, especially in my desire to travel; I wanted to see the West and the stars. Perhaps that was why Mr. Ericson asked his daughter to give me his Subaru. He sold it to my parents for one dollar, and his daughter, my Aunt Diane, and her husband, Uncle Matt, kept it at their farm in Kentucky.

They spent a year fixing up the Subaru Outback. They changed the tires, checked the oil, carefully noted any problems Subarus were known to have. Uncle Matt even installed an Apple radio because they wanted me to have GPS and Bluetooth when I drove. I have known this kind of generosity from Aunt Diane and Uncle Matt my whole life, and yet it never fails to overwhelm me. These are two people who have watched me fumble and trip my way through growing up and still showed me care. Aunt Diane spent hours talking with me about whatever held my interest: the Wild West, fantasy books, where I would go when I had a car, always with a keen insight and an easy laugh. Uncle Matt taught me how to drive stick. He told me he was proud even after I stalled the engine three times in a row and then showed me how to make good Whiskey Sours for when I was grown.

At sixteen I got my license, and Aunt Diane signed the Subaru over to my parents. The car is brick-red with suede seats, and a flaking, black steering wheel that locks up in the cold. It's older than I am; the engine doesn't have a lot of "giddy-up." I could push the gas pedal to the floor, and still the speedometer would continue its steady climb to 60.

I named my Subaru Nancy, and I love her as much as a person can love anything.

And now, I was confronted with the reality that I could lose Nancy. The car that carried me through high school, college, late nights with friends. Nancy, who patiently sat through the jerking stops and starts and endured countless scrapes and bruises for every misjudged turn while I learned how to drive. Nancy, who was always steady, starting up with a comforting hum no matter how roughly I treated her the drive before.

To lose her felt unfathomable.

The squad car pulled into the parking garage. I stepped out fearfully, but Nancy was still there. On her driver's side, there was a long, black scratch in the brick-red paint, and that was the worst of it. I listened distantly to the cop explaining what happened, but I was mostly concerned with my Subaru. I wanted to turn Nancy's engine and hear her steady rumble. I wanted to sit in the driver's

seat and rub my thumb over the wheel like I do when I'm in heavy traffic. I wanted to make sure Nancy was okay.

I gave the policeman Nancy's and my information. He offered me a ride back to my dorm. Nancy's little stars on her logo seemed to twinkle like a little reassurance: she was alright. A car as steady as she could handle a scrape or two. I took the ride, it was about 3:00 am.

The policeman dropped me off at the top of a hill, even though my dorm was at the bottom. Above me the Pleiades sparkled, like Nancy's logo, constant and continuing. Nancy was alright; she would be there to take me wherever I wanted to go in the morning.

A Chipped Coffee Mug

Author: Krista Jolly

Steam rises from chipped coffee mugs all over the world, representing a morning tradition that crosses geographical and cultural boundaries. However, the use of the coffee mug extends far beyond the confines of the morning, whether it's through a new mom sipping lukewarm coffee throughout her busy day or newlyweds drinking cheap champagne on the floor of their new apartment, lacking in dishes but rich in love. Coffee mugs remain a household staple, yet they are underappreciated, often remaining unacknowledged for what they represent: memories, the unification of humankind, and our journey through life.

The first sip out of my favorite coffee mug takes me back to an elementary school Christmas party, tasting of watered-down hot chocolate and child-like wonder. I feel the coziness of my favorite pajamas, see the iced sugar cookie sitting on my bright red paper plate, and relish in the excitement of getting to watch a Christmas movie with all of my friends. With the next sip that I take, I am transported to the first big snow in my family's new house. After saying a bittersweet goodbye to my childhood home, I am left feeling shaky and uncertain, until the snow comes and marks the beginning of a fresh new start. My family and I spend the entire day outside, giggling as we sled down steep hills and lovingly throw snowballs at one another. When the day is done, we all head inside, where my dad makes me homemade hot chocolate, and, as I drink the warm and rich liquid, I finally feel like I'm home. When I take another sip out of my favorite coffee mug, I am sent to high school, a time of drastic change and tumultuous emotions. It's my birthday, and I'm opening a gift from my best friend, ecstatic to see that she got me a mug with my favorite television character on it, making me feel understood in a time of awkwardness and uncertainty. As I take the final sip out of my favorite coffee mug, I am transported back to the present, where I stare at the collection of mugs in my cabinet, representing fond memories and my journey through life. My eyes catch on the newest addition: a shiny silver travel mug.

As we age, we are told to abandon our themed mugs for sensible travel mugs, which is why I think it is important to talk about the real-life and metaphorical application of the coffee mug. This switch from fun and personable to uniform and travel-ready mugs represents society's effort to push the idea of productivity over individuality, which is troubling, especially since society is largely in need of unique and bold voices. Much like the outsides and contents of a ceramic coffee mug, humans are unique in their appearances and internal contents, like their values, beliefs, and morals, which is why it is important to acknowledge and respect these individualities, not force them into conformity. Therefore, coffee mugs remain one of our most underestimated human inventions, both for their literal and metaphorical applications, which is why I find it important to discuss how they fit into the human lifestyle. They represent human connectedness, whether through college kids meeting up to gossip over coffee or an elderly couple having breakfast at their local diner, and fond memories, like those of childhood Christmas parties and

snow days. When you reach the point where society begins pressuring you to switch to a travel mug, I urge you to instead take time to use your favorite ceramic coffee mug, using it to reflect on your journey through life thus far, knowing that you are subtly rebelling against toxic societal expectations.

A Nightly Ceremony

Author: Ashley Sanford

Anyone that knows me knows that every night, without fail, I steep a cup of tea. Most nights it's Celestial Seasonings Sleepytime Tea, but occasionally I will vary the flavor depending on the season, my allergies, and my overall mood. Regardless of the type, my nightly cup of tea has become a sort of personal ceremony. I drink it while I write in my journal, have it next to me while I take a hot shower, or sometimes I just sit, drink, and think about my day. The heat of the liquid calms me as it runs down my throat and into my stomach. It's grounding in a way.

Throughout history, tea has represented many things, from economic prosperity to intercultural connection. Legend says it was first discovered in 2727 BC by the Chinese Emperor Shen Nong by accident. It began as primarily a medicinal drink but quickly became a staple for royalty and households and followed trading routes along the Silk Road, creating connection, network, and cultural immersion. In the modern world, tea holds a significant role economically and culturally. Since 2018, Kenya has been the leading tea exporter worldwide, accounting for 80 percent of the total tea production. China has a similar story, being the second largest distributor in the world and providing jobs to over 80 million people. In India, production is also a key part of their economy, offering over 3.5 million people with jobs. Tea not only acts as an economic diffusor, but also as a cultural link. In Afghanistan, a tea called "qymaq chai" is served at weddings and engagements, and in British and Dutch cultures, tea is a staple in daily life.

Clearly, tea has long been significant before I included it into my nightly routine a few years back. For me, tea started with my father. A few nights a week, my family and I would all sit in our living room with our respective books and read together. My dad would always make a cup for himself and my mom, each with their own preferred ingredients and bags. I quickly adopted the custom and have continued it all the way through college. It is a way for me to remember home and bring my mind back to the present after a long day. One unique aspect about tea is there are so many ways to make it. You can add honey or lemon for medicinal help. It can be hot or iced. There is an entire wall dedicated to the different types of tea at the grocery store, as well as newer types of tea for coffee lovers. Now, I'm sure you're all wondering how I make my cup every night. A dollop of honey in the bottom with my tea bag is the perfect mix for me. The honey sweetens the taste just enough to enhance the flavor of the leaves in the bag. The result is a rich, comforting combination of chamomile, spearmint, and lemongrass that hums peace and gratitude in every drink.

One of the reasons I enjoy my nightly cup is because it holds so many memories. Memories of nights at home during winter with the fire burning and my family all in one room. Memories of meetings with my mentors over tea in my new favorite downtown spot, The Philosopher's House (if you haven't checked it out yet I highly recommend). Memories of nights spent with friends at

the library or other special meeting places. And memories of driving to my best friends' house late at night with my mug and tea bag ready to steep in her kitchen, just so we can spend the late hours together. The times that I feel most seen with my friends or family is when they can make my cup of tea perfectly from memory. I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the people that notice the small things about my days and take time to quietly tuck them away for later. This is what tea is for me. It's community. It's family. It's intention. It's warmth in the winter, and laughter on the back porch in the summer. It's a choice I make every night to take a moment for myself and appreciate the small joys of life.

So yes, tea is just a bunch of leaves diffused in water to create different flavors on your tongue, sending signals to your brain that create taste and recognition, but for me it is a reminder of the people I love. A reminder of the people that made me and who now give me the strength to look ahead and work towards my dreams. Life gets wild. It moves way too fast and is full of more mundane moments than exciting ones. Despite this, I choose every night to pause and find the courage within myself to keep going, holding tightly to the people around me. One cup at a time.

[*Tea: A love that has stood the test of Time.*](#) Newsroom. (n.d.).

Wickham, R. (2023, April 17). [*Chinese tea in trade and the economy.*](#) China Educational Tours.

[*Cultural selection: The diffusion of tea and tea culture along the Silk Roads.*](#) Cultural Selection: The Diffusion of Tea and Tea Culture along the Silk Roads | Silk Roads Programme. (n.d.).

Anki - Inspired by John Green's *The Anthropocene* Reviewed

Author: Brody Carmack

Anki. A word that every single person who has studied for the MCAT (medical college admissions test) or has attended a US medical school knows. It's a polarizing word; some people might start getting anxious just by hearing it, and others long for the day that they can forget about it. As someone who is currently a medical student, I think that I fit into both categories, but I'm sure you're asking, "what the heck is it?"

Anki is a free, open-source flashcard program that you can download onto your computer. It is unique in that it is designed for optimizing long-term memorization and learning through "spaced repetition" and active recall. Those interested in medicine have seized it as a tool to conquer the vast amount of material needed for admissions tests and licensure exams. Yet, it is also popular for people learning second languages, college courses in general, and more.

What makes Anki special is the spaced repetition. You get started by making or downloading premade flashcards. You read the card, and then you click the space bar to flip the card. Then you are given four options: again, hard, good, or easy. Depending on which choice you make, Anki decides how many days until they show you the card again. So, if you thought the card was easy, you might see it in a week, but if you thought it was hard, you would see it again in 15 minutes. Where Anki becomes a long-term study tool is that it remembers each time you see a card, so if you have said the card is "good" 5 times in a row it combines all of your past answers, and you might not see the card again for another year. Medical students have fallen in love with it because you can better retain what you are learning in class now, so that you can remember it in a year and a half when you have to take a big exam covering that content and much more.

The biggest catch with Anki is you can't take a day off. I mean you can, but that starts to lessen the effects of the spaced recall that makes Anki so beneficial. And, if you have 500 cards to do one day, and you miss a day, that means the next day you might have 1000. The cards will continue to pile up and up, so taking more than a few days off seems impossible. Right now, as a first-year medical student, I would say that I spend 1-2 hours on Anki every day, so I can't imagine missing a Saturday and Sunday and coming back on Monday with 6 hours' worth of flashcards.

Now, I didn't choose Anki as the topic of this essay to brag about the amount of work that I put in on Anki. I know plenty of people who use it way more than I do, and I also know plenty of doctors that have never even heard of it. I feel like most people would agree that when you are learning something new, you have to try harder. Then when you learn the basics, it gets easier. Yet one exception is personal relationships. People aren't cards to learn and move on from. So, in that aspect, life isn't always like the spaced repetition that Anki has made me accustomed to.

Right now, I am living back in my hometown, in my parent's house saving money while back in school. But for the past 5 years, I didn't live here or with my parents. Being back in a city that I left, I constantly think of all the important people in my life currently and in the past 5 years that I don't get to see often. There are people that I get to talk to every day, some I talk to every week, others I talk to every month, and a few that I talk to every year or so. Unlike Anki, the people that mean the most to me are the ones that I want to see over and over again. It doesn't matter how much I "know" them because if they were an Anki card I would hit "again" every time. But each new day, I might see or think of someone that I haven't talked to in a long time. Just because I hit "easy" last time, doesn't mean that I have to hit "easy" again. We have the ability to control who we want to see and talk to, so while the people that come back into your life might feel random, it doesn't mean that there isn't some spaced recall controlling us all.

Also, I think about how if we stop reaching out to those who matter in our life, it can become harder and harder to reach out again. Just like missing a day of Anki can double the amount of work needed tomorrow, not maintaining friends can require more work to amend those same friendships later on. So, in one way, Anki is telling us that we should continue to put in the work to learn new skills and to maintain the ones we already have.

I give Anki 3.5 stars.

Breaking the Mold: Education in Isolation

Author: Lydia Howard

In a digital landscape where we are divided across social media platforms and left to decide what is real and what is AI, it is understandable to feel conflicted about whether the internet has been a net positive for society. Today, I want to offer you a glimmer of hope and explain how digital global communication has changed my life for the better.

It starts back with my earliest memory. I remember the itchiness of that old office carpet against my legs, the smell of paper and dust mixing with the faint aroma of Glade air freshener drifting in from the hallway. Sunlight slanted in heavily through the blinds, striping the used plastic toys that sat piled in one corner, and in the background, the sound of a printing machine clacking away behind the closed door. For some, your first memories may be from daycare, or maybe from how nervous you felt on your first day of school. My first memories were of playing in a back corner office in the building where my parents worked, printing religious texts to be mailed across the world. From before I was born, my parents' sole purpose in raising me was to "save my soul", which meant utter seclusion from the outside world. No school, no daycare, and certainly no interaction with media that could be a sinful influence. This meant that my entire education would be homeschooled, with an emphasis on biblical studies, since my father was also a preacher. In their reality, they had the best intentions because saving my soul was of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, that came at the cost of neglecting my education in pursuit of that goal. For women raised in the fundamentalist cult I was raised in, our purpose was predetermined. Education was fleeting and a distraction in their mind, as being a 'Christian homemaker' was the pinnacle of success for women. Now, I am not here to discourage any person from being a stay-at-home parent, as domestic labor goes far too unnoticed and unappreciated. However, as a non-binary individual, I knew that being a wife and homemaker was not the life I wanted to live.

This brings me to my glimmer of hope, because I am here to explain how important online learning platforms were for me as a child. Without online resources like Khan Academy, a free learning platform designed to help students learn basic courses taught in K-12, and Crash Course, a YouTube series dedicated to providing short educational videos on topics like English, Science, World History, and more, I truly do not think I would be where I am today. Part of that was the challenge of taking the SAT. For educationally neglected children, how do you take a standardized test that is required at most higher education institutions when you haven't been taught the basics of algebra? This started my daily ritual of taking Khan Academy practice tests and lessons, and going through the entire Crash Course catalog on YouTube. As a result, my SAT online practice test scores slowly improved from my initial attempt to the final official test—a difference that made applying to college possible at all. I could only afford to pay to take the official SAT once, so achieving a high enough score to pass admissions was paramount. Whenever people ask me how it is possible that I am now a master's level student without a

formal education and raised in a fundamentalist cult, a critical piece of that was my ability to use online learning platforms. Crash Course videos provided free and accessible education on YouTube, which fueled my curiosity about subjects like Anatomy & Physiology, Psychology, English, and more. Once I had access to the internet around what would have been my freshman year of high school, I could finally start consuming the education I had so desperately begged my parents for my entire childhood. Unfortunately, where I grew up in Georgia, homeschooling laws still allow this level of educational neglect, so you can imagine how excited I was to find that online, there was no cost barrier to the classes a “regular” high school student in the U.S. could take. My childhood shaped me into the helping professional I am now, and if there has been a motivator for my professional and academic career, it has been working to ensure that other children do not have to go through what I went through alone. Whether that is in making higher education more accessible as a college advisor or now working as a therapist for high school students, there is nothing I can credit more than the fact that I grew up in the age of the internet, which allowed me free access to educational content built by academics who were passionate on making sure people like me did not fall through the gaps.

I give Crash Course and Khan Academy 5/5 stars.

Broader Horizons

Author: Asher Fagan

Something I use almost every day came about through technology, the human desire to share information, and the ability to now reach mass audiences. That is, the evolution of podcasts. From a very early age, I immersed myself in reading and loved to learn about a variety of topics. During my early school years, I was introduced to Crash Course videos which opened up another avenue for me to learn. In high school, I started listening to podcasts and they have become a very meaningful part of my daily routine. It opened up so many different topics of interest to me, given by people with a variety of perspectives. It can be educational, entertaining, and informative. I can listen to and learn from people around the world. Sometimes I want to hear about what's going on in the world of science and medicine, or the world of aviation, or the Transformers collecting community.

Bucksport, TN

Author: Cailin Rickman

Bucksport is a small community in Middle Tennessee for which there is no available census data. To call it a town would be misleading; a village, generous. Its Wikipedia page is more about its namesake spring than the community itself, which is found right off I-40's exit 152 as your drive toward Memphis. It does not have a post office. As far as I can tell, Bucksport consists mostly of a small gas station, a farm market, and a trout ranch. I have never set foot there. It is one of my favorite places on Earth.

I grew up outside of Knoxville, in East Tennessee, though both of my parents were from West Tennessee. My mom's parents had also moved east, but my dad's still lived in rural Hardin County, in a town of less than 2,000. My dad grew up in a place called Crump. I once mentioned this to a friend, prompting them to ask, "What country is that in?" Honestly, it was a fair question; sometimes it felt like a different world entirely. My family visited as often as we could, but each trip still felt special and magical. I loved the stretched-out landscape, the fresh air, the blazing stars at night. I even loved the six-hour road trip from our home to theirs. My favorite part was about forty-five minutes past Nashville, when we all began to look out for the big green sign reading "EXIT-152-BUCKSPORT." The first of us to spot it would cheerfully sing "Bucksport!" and receive a volley of echoes. Other than its delightful name, the most exciting thing about Bucksport was that it was located about an hour and a half from my grandparents' house, three-quarters through our drive. The clumsy chorus of "Bucksport!" meant we were almost there.

When it came time for college, I decided I wanted to go to the University of Memphis. I came to this decision for a number of reasons, many of them good. It was far from my hometown, which I felt I needed, and my brother was also attending, so I wouldn't be completely alone. Almost every time I went to or from Memphis, I was with my brother. Those drives-lasting from around five and a half to well over eight hours, depending on the weather-became something sacred. A vast expanse of time during which we had no choice but to pay attention to each other or train our collective focus on a mutual target. We shared favorite albums and podcasts and had long, roving conversations. We discussed family, friends, work, religion, the meaning of life. I came out to him on one of those drives.

Still, every time we saw the sign, we would shout out its name and smile. I would text our family chat "Bucksport!" and my mother would respond with enthusiasm and a series of emojis attempting to depict the titular cervine action. Coincidentally, Bucksport is also about an hour and a half away from Memphis. On our way east, it served as a reminder of all the time and distance my brother and I had left to cover. Running west, it was a sign that our journey would be over all too soon.

During my second year at Memphis-again for many good reasons-I decided to transfer schools. I headed to East Tennessee State University, all the way in the opposite corner of our ridiculously long state. Of all the things to be anxious or sad about with such a big change, I spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about Bucksnort. My siblings were mostly grown, we didn't visit my grandmother as often, and I wondered how long until I would hear my family shout out "Bucksnort!" with childish glee? As small and silly as it may seem, I was really going to miss it.

On the first drive up to Johnson City, I noticed a sign for Jearoldstown. The spelling prompted me to sound it out as "Jeer-olds-town," and I honestly still don't know the correct pronunciation. Jearoldstown is an unincorporated community in northeast Tennessee for which no specific census data is available. To call it a town would be generous; a village, probably accurate. Its Wikipedia page includes a picture taken from Jearoldstown United Methodist Church and not much else. It is found off I-81's exit 44 as you drive toward Johnson City. It does not have a post office. Every time I am driving in or out of town with a friend or family member, we look out for the sign. The first of us to spot it will utter an exaggerated "Jeer-olds-town," which the rest will echo back, often many times over. Jearoldstown is located about three-quarters of the way from Knoxville to Johnson City.

Bucksnort may be a unique place, but it is not one of a kind. There are a practically infinite number of small, delightfully named communities across Tennessee, America, and the world. There are friendly landmarks and little sparks of joy to be found wherever you are. You are rarely, if ever, giving up something for nothing. I give Bucksnort, Tennessee, four and a half stars.

Concerning Humans

Author: Noah Mooney

My great-grandmother lived to be ninety-nine years old. She was born in nineteen hundred and stuck around just long enough to glimpse into the twenty-first century. She lived through some of the greatest inventions of the Anthropocene. Thirteen years after she was born, Henry Ford brought the first mass-produced cars to the market. Fifty-six years later, we put a man on the moon. Sixteen years after that, she had a computer in her house more powerful than the one we used to get him there. While these technologies have certainly shaped how we live today, there is one invention that is so fundamental to the human experience that everyone creates thousands of them in their lifetimes. This invention is so powerful that it has toppled governments and cured diseases.

What is this invention, you may ask?

Well, you should know.

You just made one.

It's the question.

I never got to ask my great-grandmother what her world was like when she was younger. I wonder what she asked herself while watching a plume of lunar dust billow over the boot of a man for the first time in nineteen sixty-nine. Did she ask "How?" or did she ask "Why?"

The question is a tool we engineered out of language. "What is this?" and "How does this work?" are asked by everyone from toddlers to physicists. Anyone who became an expert at anything once stood at the edge of understanding and decided to take another step. This is the foundation of human learning. Without questions, nothing we have today would exist, from philosophy to telemetry and beyond.

But there's a different kind of question. One that doesn't seek facts about the world, but meaning within it.

"Why" has no master. If you keep asking "why," you will eventually find that no one has the answer. At any point in time, we are only a couple of why's from an unanswerable one.

Why do the seasons change? Because we rotate around the Sun.

Why do we rotate around it? Because gravity pulls us.

Why does gravity pull us? Nobody knows.

In Werner Herzog's documentary *Encounters at the End of the World*, he finds a penguin running away from his colony toward the mountains—toward certain death. Dr. Ainley, a scientist, explains that even if he were returned to the colony, he would immediately head back. Herzog's narration asks simply: "But why?"

This is a question only a human would ask. The other penguins do not concern themselves with this penguin that was found dead 75 kilometers away on top of a mountain, having seen things that no other penguin would see in their lifetime. Herzog does not provide an answer to this question. He lets the audience decide.

We will never know why that penguin left, but by applying our own experience, we discover more about ourselves. Our interpretation of this flightless bird's trek tells us why we Noah Mooney 02/08/2026 would go to the proverbial mountains. Are you seeking to live, or to die? Are you running toward something or away from it?

There comes a time in our lives when we must ask "why am I here?" Some never find an answer and decide that there is no reason to stick around at all. In those cases, one can understand why they run toward their mountain.

This question used to terrify me. When I was in high school, it brought me to the brink of annihilation. Being in a military family, my life had been unstable. By early high school, I had lost all motivation. My GPA was a 2.5. Years of moving mid-year had taken their toll.

One day, I sat through a parent-teacher conference with all six of my teachers, the principal, and the vice principal. They told me that if I had given up this early, I was going to be a failure for the rest of my life.

Sitting in my room that night, facing that fact, I asked myself an unanswerable question: "Why Continue?"

Then, in the depths of despair, an answer came: "Why not?"

The inexorable truth is that everyone is going to die someday. Why not stick around and find out what happens? My great grandma did. Through the Great Depression and two World Wars, there were times when I'm sure she felt like the world was over. The prize we get for sticking around is seeing the results of the questions asked by the best of us.

So, I stuck around. By the end of high school, I had managed to bring my GPA up to a 3.0—just enough for the Hope Scholarship and Tennessee Promise. Lost and not knowing what to do with my life, I asked myself the same question, "Why not keep going?" So, I went to community college, where I filled in the gaps that years of moving left behind. At the end of that chapter, the question came again: "Why not keep going?" My GPA was high enough for a transfer scholarship to ETSU, so I transferred and began working on my undergraduate degree. Now, at the end of my degree,

the question has found me one more time: “Why not keep going?” Yesterday, I got my second acceptance letter so far from a law school offering me an 80% scholarship. I have not gotten everything I ever asked for, but before everything I’ve gotten, came a question.

I never got to ask my great-grandmother if she was afraid during hard times or how she kept going. But I think I know the answer now.

I give the question 4.5/5 stars. Not perfect—some questions are dangerous, and some I’ll never get to ask. But before every great feat of humanity, there was a question, and that’s worth half a star shy of perfect.

Earthrise: The Photo that Changed the World (and its Humans)

Author: Sierra Arguello

Children are walking contradictions. They are wise with words yet clueless about how the world works. My credibility for this comes through my own childhood, in which I believed in the oddest of lies with unwavering confidence.

For example, I believed there were fourteen continents. The seven we could see and seven more hidden on the “other side” of the pastel-colored world map hung flat against the wall. If the Earth was round, why were we viewing it on a flat surface? My puny brain reasoned there must be a separate poster somewhere featuring the rest. Indeed, there was no other side. There were only seven continents, seven oceans, and an embarrassed child (whose age is too high for me to admit).

Though one must give credit: I never thought the Earth was flat.

My most outlandish belief, however, was that the world was once black and white, and suddenly color burst. At the same time *Wizard of Oz* released, the oldest film I had seen that blooms in technicolor. When I confessed this to my aunt, her laughter was cacophonous. What followed was a two-hour conversation that spiraled into theology. “The reason we got color,” she said, “was God’s diverse design.”

Of course, the world has always had color; however, we have not always seen Earth itself in color— at least, not from the outside.

That changed on Christmas Eve in 1968 when William Anders captured a photograph from lunar orbit during the Apollo 8 mission, the first manned crew mission. A photo that fundamentally reinvented what our previous notions of our world were. The image that’s titled *Earthrise*.

The name is literal: Earth rising. As the spacecraft orbited the moon, the crew watched Earth rise over the barren horizon. Some assume the photo was taken from the Moon’s surface. Yet it was captured in orbit. The Moon is tidally locked to Earth. From an observer’s perspective on the near side of the Moon, our planet does not rise or set. We appear stationary, shifting in phases. The “rise” was visible only because the crew themselves were moving.

A reverberant metaphor. We are the shift that changes the world.

Technically, *Earthrise* as a photograph is not perfect. In the unedited images, its composition is tilted, the exposure is bright, and the subject, Earth, is in the shape of a waxing gibbous as

opposed to its renowned globe. Compare it to Blue Marble, the first image that captured a fully illuminated Earth in its entirety.

And yet Earthrise lingers on us in a way photographic elements cannot.

Context matters. *Earthrise was serendipitous*. The crew mission was to map the lunar surface. On the fourth passing, Anders looked out a window and witnessed the rising Earth over the lunar surface. Though photographing the Earth was not on schedule, Anders hastily and miraculously took a few photographs in wonderful clarity.

Earthrise wasn't the first photo from space, but it is considered the first taken by humans that showed Earth in its marble colors. Once released, it changed our perceptions. It sparked environmentalism movements. Life magazine published the photo in a two-page spread alongside a poem by James Dickey, who wrote, "And behold / The blue planet steeped in its dream."

Dickey's dream is one of promise: that in the vast cathedral of space, we may be the ones to mount the Earth together and ride off into that suspending light. We began to seize what Anders intended to tell us through his lens. We established the first Earth Day in 1970, which I might add, years before *Blue Marble* was taken. Environmental activism gained momentum, calling out how we misuse Earth's payload. Legislative acts were made: the Clean Air Act, the Clear Water Act, and the founding of the EPA. Once glossed over, issues were made prevalent.

Yet today, our progress is rendered fragile. We emit greenhouse gases, carbon emissions, and plastic. A 2023 annual greenhouse index from NOAA revealed a 51% increase in warming influence. 11 million metric tons of plastic end up in global oceans each year according to *Ocean Conservancy*. The Environmental and Energy Study Institute says AI data centers require up to 5 million gallons of water— every day. In our current time, legislative and administrative efforts have struck down upon environmental rulings.

We have led species of animals to extinction and endangerment. We have created war, genocide, and immense prejudice. We cannot learn from our history because we are more concerned with the present, causing us to lose sight of the future. There is nothing more ignorant than denying ignorance, and we would be fools to believe that we are the mightier species in this place all beings call home.

In his poem "The City", Constantine Cavafy details a personification in which a city will always trail behind the speaker, reminding him of his failures. He writes, "You won't find a new country, won't find another shore. / This city will always pursue you." The haunting city becomes an inescapable reckoning with one's past. Earth is like this city. We cannot flee from the monstrosities we have produced nor confront responsibility.

Perhaps, my belief that the Earth was once black and white was foreshadowing a deeper message. Our Earth has always been in color, yet light waves of energy are becoming lost at shore.

Cavafy knew we wouldn't find another shore, yet it does not take a poet to realize we will not find another Earth.

However, like Plato's Allegory of the Cave, we sought out reality. Previously we knew the Earth in fragments, globes and maps, yet not whole. We accepted illusions as truth because to unshackle our chains meant to confess we were imprisoned, but when *Earthrise* appeared, we were unbounded and faced the light.

Earthrise was the first image of Earth in color taken by a human. We were meant to only capture the lunar surface. Instead, we were reminded we already have the greatest wonder, and we snap millions of pictures of it today.

In both vulnerability and illumination, the photo conveys no visible borders, empires, political divisions, or raging wars. We are on a luminous rock: a revelation we can all agree on.

For me to give *Earthrise* its full points, I would have to reckon with the fact that it becomes less of a resonating image and more like an artifact. It would take a picture of the inner core to receive a new tidal movement like *Earthrise* gave us.

Yet I only found out about *Earthrise* a few weeks ago. I do not speak for humankind, but if it can immediately lure me, then maybe it can hypnotize others.

I once believed there were fourteen continents and the Earth was black and white, yet I also hoped our Earth was vast and vibrant. That we may look beyond the surface of our thoughts to reach for more.

I give *Earthrise* four stars. Two for its influence, two for the world itself, and one redacted because we may forget that our Earth doesn't rise, but it stays. And we will not.

French Barrettes

Author: Camille Malone

When my cousins and I were in grade school, we spent hours doodling on sheets of printer paper at Grandma's house, not-so-humbly expecting each of our masterpieces to be featured on the small, tan-colored fridge in the kitchen walkway. Even though many of the pieces were drawn up in minutes by the hands of hungry toddlers and hormonal preteens, I can't recall a time our art was rejected from that intimate gallery. But to us, our mountain ranges and semicircle suns that were, for some reason, always in the top left corner of the page, received the greatest honor by being hung on that fridge—secured by an alphabet magnet, any letter 'A' to 'Z.'

Although it wasn't a requirement for display, each of the papers featured our grandmother hiding somewhere on the page with us. And regardless of the artist (cousin) or her mode of expression (crayon or colored pencil), Grandma was always portrayed the same way—with a stick-figure body, a circular head, and, to represent the bun she wore on her head each day, a small circle at the very top. The finishing touch, though, was our version of the shiny, silver French barrette she always wore just below the bun's tightly wrapped hair elastic. It would always be clasped ever so precisely, and always find its way back to the same place on her head each time she removed it and clipped it back. The pesky fly-aways all of us thick-haired women in the Buchanan family dealt with would, much like an obedient dog, sit and stay as Grandma maneuvered and firmly clicked the French barrette into place.

Seeing my grandma with her hair down was as rare as stumbling across a Gutenberg Bible, but seeing her twist and wrap up her signature bun without clamping that sturdy, metal French barrette in her hair—oh, that would be the day.

Beyond my childhood sketches, that hair clip followed me for a long while—to the track across the street as I took off my training wheels, to the luncheon program at Grandma's church, to my (incredibly intimate) COVID-style graduation, and to my tan-colored room as I packed suitcases and tote bags filled with all the necessities for a college four hours away from home. It was there. Watching. And that meant she was there, too. Watching. Waiting. Smiling.

The day came, though, when it was my turn to watch that hair accessory. And to watch Grandma. I failed to comprehend how the same French barrette that used to force a cheesy grin on my face looked so dim, even amid the fluorescent lights of the bleak, white hospital room she sat still in. How could it be that she had just fastened its metal clasps together that morning? I've known my whole life that inanimate objects don't move, have never moved, and will never move. But I'd never seen one sit so still.

For the first time, I wanted nothing more than to see her lift her arms, reach behind her head, and undo the clasp. Seeing those curly white hairs fold down the sides of her neck and the barrette in her hands would mean that she was alive.

I've certainly always loved how the barrette looked sitting in her hair. It wasn't Grandma's hair without it. But I loved the thought of her standing in front of a mirror, wooden brush in hand, tilting her head to the side as she tried to find that perfect spot for it to sit more. And I hated the thought of never watching her do that again the most. I didn't want to say goodbye to the best hair accessory I'd ever known. The best grandmother I'd ever known.

The barrette has never belonged to me, though I still try and steal it sometimes— in small glimpses in daydreams, or in scribbles and sketches on printer paper. But it's Camille Malone 3 always been Grandma's. And although I have no idea where she is now or what she might look like, I sense she has her French barrette with her. Right where it belongs. Right where we left it— buried with her. Perfectly pinned and beautiful.

I know that barrette is still shining in her long, peppery-gray locks. Even if the sun can't quite reach it anymore, light has always followed Grandma. That might be the only thing more guaranteed than seeing a French barrette in her hair.

I give the French barrette five stars. For Grandma.

Gray String

Author: Nora Honeycutt

Baby blankets. Often synonymous with a security blanket or a lovey. Popular with children. Less popular with adults. Comfort objects have been around for centuries; as long as children have experienced discomfort, there has been a security object there. Picture a prehistoric toddler and a bone rattle.

Now, let me confess something. Well, “confess” implies a sort of embarrassment associated with the subsequent disclosure, and I decided a long time ago I wouldn’t let myself feel embarrassed about most things, unless absolutely necessary. So, let me affirm something. I’m 21 years old, and I still have a baby blanket. And not the kind that you had as a kid that is now sitting in a box in your parents house next to toys you no longer play with. An active baby blanket that still has a place in the bed. A 21 year old blanket that’s still in commission.

His name is Walter.

Growing up, Walter was everything to me: a cape, a sleeping bag (when I was small enough to fit into the torn corner and slip between the two sides of the blanket), a bonnet, and even a tissue (I can’t believe I’m admitting that). I’m sure, as I aged, that my family and friends were hoping I would grow out of bringing him to every sleepover or needing him clutched between hands to get a good night’s rest. I’m sure they were hoping with every birthday that I would, one day, agree that I was too old for a baby blanket. And they’ve never confirmed this, but I’m certain they were hoping that I would leave Walter in a hotel room and never be able to get him back or that, hopefully, he might go through the wash and return too damaged to be used. But those things never happened.

My family’s aversion to Walter, apart from my age, is likely due to his appearance. Once a 4 foot x 2 foot blanket with a silk ruffle border, one side made of satin and the other of pink and white soft dot chenille squares, the years have not been kind to Walter. He has been reduced down to two main pieces: a clump of chenille squares from the corner of the blanket that my grandma stitched together 10 years ago and a two foot long piece from the satin side of the blanket, soiled now, that I endearingly refer to as the “Gray String”. To the naked eye, Walter, now, could be mistaken for a piece of wash rag or a shoelace or, if you’re feeling really avant garde, one of those questionable skinny neck scarves.

But, over the years, no matter how much Walter deteriorated, my loyalty to that tattered blanket never did. I’ve often said, in jest, that if there ever were a fire, Walter would be the first thing I grab. They say jokes are born from truth; I know this to be true. Because, the thing is, that is true. I’d grab that blanket and run. And I’ve tried so hard to come to a conclusion as to why I care so much about a dirty string, and I’ve got it. Every place I’ve ever been, so has Walter. He’s the only thing in

the world that has traveled to every place I've traveled to with me. Not my parents or my sister or a friend, but a nasty, old, matted, string. (Don't freak out; I'm going to personify Walter: his favorite location was Norway.) And every trip, he gets a little more worn. He surely doesn't look the same as when I lost my first tooth or even since I recently moved into my junior year dorm. And as I get older, I think that perhaps I wouldn't love Walter as much if I couldn't see how much he was loved, if I couldn't see how every time I was ever anxious and I tugged on Walter his edges frayed a bit more, or how with every touch of the satin, he became more patinated from the oil in my fingertips. The manufacturing company that distributed these blankets in 2004 wasn't producing tens of dozens of gray strings. They didn't make Walter like that. I did.

If I ever want to see how much I've changed or experienced, I simply need to look at Walter. Our paths mirror each other; he's grown with me over 21 years (arguably shrunk with me but changed nonetheless). He's always been there. Some would say it's time to retire the ol' baby blanket, if you can even call it that anymore. Perhaps one day Walter will find himself tucked next to my American Girl Doll at the top of my closet, but, for now, he's got a little more love left in him; he'll stay next to the throw pillow on my bed.

So, "sentimental gray string" gets five stars from me, with the caveat that it's likely *one* out of five stars from everyone else.

Pictured below: Walter, in all his glory



Literature Review

Author: Zoe Cameron

My love for books started when I was a young girl, when my mother would read me bedtime stories. She would do the different voices, get excited and sometimes bring my dad in to have different characters. She would read fairy tales and point to the princess and state, "That's mommy!," then point to a troll and say, "That's your dad." My mom is the reason I love books, why I have been such an avid reader. I still remember my most cherished books from when I was younger, one being *Goodnight Moon*, of course, and the one I made my mom read every night, *Guess How Much I Love You*. These weren't my only favorite stories, but they were the main ones in written form. My dad loved making up bedtime stories every night, sometimes continuations from the night before, and sometimes a completely new and weird story. I remember one of my favorite stories my dad would tell was about a Pumpkin eating vampire, doing the dramatic Dracula voice for the vampire. "I want to eat your pumpkin," and other phrases about a vampire trying to steal pumpkins from a pumpkin farmer. He would tell different stories to my brother, with the same amount of silliness. I remember my brother loving a story about crazy wolf pack that my dad would tell. My love of stories comes from my family, where they encourage me to read and told me stories my whole life.

It was in second grade that I found the series that reinforced this love of reading, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. When I was in the second grade, my mother forced me to pick out a book to read at the Sam's Club. She wanted me to read more books that weren't mainly picture books. I looked at the table of books at the Sam's Club when I saw *The Lightning Thief*. I picked out the book because of the cover, a young boy holding a lightning bolt in the middle of a turbulent sea, and I was entranced with the writing. Rick Riordan's writing style paired with Percy's own sarcastic personality, made me hooked on this series for life. It's still one of my favorite books to this day. Reading about Percy's own terrible school experience, made me feel better at my own school, because while math sucks, at least I'm not fighting a minotaur.

Books have always been a main constant in my life, between different friends each year, to growing up and moving out, books have always been there for me. I remember reading every day in first grade, because I did not have many friends in my class. My teacher praised me for constantly meeting the monthly reading goal, but really I just had no one to talk to. I enjoyed reading because it was my form of escapism. I wanted to not be myself, instead I wanted to be a wizard, or a demigod, or a vampire. Something more magical than my normal everyday life. I think this is the most common thing all humans have in common, dreaming about being someone else, or having magical moments in our own lives.

Today, I read more diverse genres than I did when I was younger. Expanding past the trusty middle grade and Young Adult section I stayed in, and now I get to discover books I never once

thought I would like. Of course I still read fantasy and romance, but I now get to enjoy books like *Crying in H Mart* (memoir), *Victorian Psycho* (horror), *Frankenstein* (sci-fi/classic), or my personal favorite, *The Poppy War* (this isn't only a fantasy book but an amazing critique on colonialism everyone should read). I read so much that I have a bookshelf dedicated just to books I have not read yet. Isn't it marvelous that there are now so many books in the world that no one person could possibly read them all? (At least that's what I tell myself to make myself feel better about my own To Be Read shelf).

Nowadays more people are getting into literature, which means now I have even more people to recommend my favorite books too. I think now that I'm older that's one of my new favorite parts of my love of literature—that I get to share my love with my friends, online strangers, library book clubs, and so many more. I have made countless friendships over just one book. Not to mention the joy I feel when I get to talk about what book I am currently reading. I think literature is one of the best inventions that humans have ever created. I use the term literature to convey all the stories, books, novels, poetry, fairy tales, and oral traditions that have been passed down.

Even though some books make me cry, I give all literature 5 stars.

On the Value of a Picture

Author: Austin Ball

I stood staring out across the ridge overlooking the valley. The air was chilly, and frost hung in the air with the fog. The sky was still dark, the sun had yet to rise above the soft-edged peaks of the mountains further in the distance. It's what we were waiting for, huddled together for warmth. We didn't care about the cold, the waiting, or the darkness, my friends and I. Those were the necessary preconditions for the show of radiance slowly rising to pour over the gray of the clouds hovering above us. That was the reason we were huddled and suffering the cold: to watch the sunrise. I must say it was worth it. The clouds proved stubborn at first, but then began to allow the gentle orange light to peek in-between and over top them. Before long, the clouds were left powerless to contain the explosion of pink and neon yellow light that illuminated the peaks and valleys of the mountains, and the curves of the smiles in the eyes and on the lips of my friends. I dare say it was the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen. What's more, the fog that had given the short trek to the ridge top an almost ominous feeling had finally settled into the creases of the valleys, and when combined with the soft light of the young day seemed almost like rivers of light blue water flowing between the rolls of the mountains. It was all we could do to contain ourselves, we knew we had to commemorate the moment somehow. And how did we do it? We pulled out our phones and started taking pictures, of course.

There are few things that so confound me about modern living as the sheer frequency and volume with which we take pictures of it. Videos too. Instagram posts, TikTok shorts, Snaps, I'm left mesmerized, practically dizzy, at all the different ways I can capture an ordinary moment in time. It's not so much that taking a picture or recording a video is something new, or terrible, or frightening. The first photo taken with a camera was shot by Nicéphore Niépce in 1826, of the rooftops outside his bedroom window. Before that, great painters from across history have taken great pains to capture scenes from everyday life in the hopes that their beauty could be persevered beyond their own memories. For anyone with eyes to see them. It's hardly worth mentioning the desire to capture moments of seeming significance to keep for the future. Capturing scenes of war, politics, or natural disasters is neither surprising nor very interesting as a phenomenon. It seems common sense. But there is a very human inclination to preserve the meaning of the everyday in static mediums. It's as though there is a tacit understanding that there's more value in the regular events of life than first meets the eye. At least as much as we hope to see in them.

That's the real trick to it, I suppose. The fact that we project meaning onto the ordinary. That's what we humans do, we ascribe value to things. There are philosophers who would say that being "value givers" is the most singularly human thing that we can do. If I had to guess at why we choose to give value to things which on their face seem to have little to no value, I would say it is worry that we will be forgotten. More precisely, a deeply-held desire to be remembered. And what

better way to ensure that our lives are not forgotten than to document as much of them as we can? But perhaps there is a subtler, more disquieting reason for how many pictures we take: that by taking them, it means our lives are worth being remembered. I don't have the space in this essay to expound upon the nature of meaning, of whether it even exists at all in a seemingly quiet universe. What I will say is that this desire to be remembered is something present in cultures as far back as we can find them. This feeling that there is more to our lives than the living of them, or to their end than their dying. Maybe the 2000-3000 photos in the average Gen Z's phone is the latest incarnation of this. Every selfie leaving a trace that we were here, that the filtered face staring back at us from that bright OLED screen means something.

I have to admit that I deeply dislike taking pictures. It's one of the great annoyances in my life to see images taken for no other reason than to have taken them. Yet even I'm not immune to the mimetic pull of this practice. Sometimes, it just feels right to whip out my pocket supercomputer and snap the occasional sunrise pic. And whatever my misgivings about this practice are, I can't help but share in this desire to prove to someone, anyone, that my life is valuable, that the mundane does matter. I choose to believe it does, that they all do. I don't need a picture to prove it. So, keep up the effort if you like, just don't lose the plot by trying to capture it all in real time. Cause when you think about it, most of those pictures end up lost in a cloud anyway.

7.5/10

Once Upon a Species

Author: Isabella (Izzy) Sterrett

A Most Fundamental Invention

It has been the mission of academics and laypeople alike, since the onset of civilization building, to attempt to differentiate the human species in every way possible from the rest of the animal kingdom. It requires absolutely no life experience for a modern-day human to be aware that they are dramatically separate in comparison to all other categories of life forms on earth. As an adolescent learns how to verbally communicate in their first year of life, they are already utilizing the most central feature of humanity's uniqueness: language. Language is not an *invention* of humanity, but rather exists as a *feature* of it. Our primate and hominid ancestors evolved to produce more complex systems of verbal communication; which are almost single-handedly responsible for the ability that our own species has to thus, build complex social systems.

While the ability to develop social systems is arguably at the core of the world we have since made; that phenomenon really can only account for the physical realm of development. Language, however, offers a dual utility in that it can actually be extended beyond the physical realm. The 'metaphysical realm' is another uniquely human landscape that emerged as a direct evolutionary output of complex language. Unlike any other species, humans possess the ability to look beyond the immediate and the tangible, constructing a shared reality built entirely through the power of **stories**. Storytelling transformed language from a tool used merely for survival, into a tool that can be used for creativity. Without humanity's collective imagination, complex communication would be a hollow structure; situated upon the physical realm without any need or capacity for a metaphysical one. The invention of stories provided a framework for the development of shared values and common purpose; transforming the raw experience of biological existence into a meaningful vessel of culture and belief.

What Stories Mean to Me

I am an Anthropology major and Religious Studies minor at ETSU. Stories are inarguably at the center of my academic focus, and are often the starting point for discourse in any branch of human-related study. I have learned during my time as a student that prehistoric stories were one of the first ways in which our human species began to transcend the physical world – situating collective consciousness into a plane that includes both the physical and metaphysical. Stories were told in early bands of hunter-gatherer groups; and the narratives of those stories were then displayed through artistic depictions on residential cave walls. Before any civilizations were present on earth, humans were already storytelling robustly and often enough that artifacts have been found at pre-civilized sites very distant from one another which represent the same types of worldviews and metaphysical thinking. Within the boundaries of the earliest civilizations (Egypt,

Mesopotamia, Indus Valley, etc.), stories were used to synthesize religious systems; ones which formally codified metaphysical thinking to form cohesive belief systems and cultures. Even as Christianity dominated Western culture during the Middle Ages; fairytales, legends, and fiction emerged as legitimate forms of storytelling that were both accepted by the Church and popular among broader society.

Something spectacular happened in the 20th century alongside the emergence of wide spread media technologies. Walt Disney created a company entirely dedicated to storytelling. This company would create films that tell stories on the screen; and while they would place primary focus upon children and young viewers, they would also be dedicated to reaching adults in a way that encourages them to reconnect with their own childlike spirit. The fundamental purpose of a story is to briefly disconnect from the physical world, and this is something that children are able to do far more naturally than adults. With the onset of industrialization, it would have become more and more challenging for adults navigating the now extremely complex physical world to truly understand any possible disconnection from it. The Disney company provided a clever solution for this, and broadcasted its stories in such a dynamic and approachable way that all someone has to do to escape physical reality is allow themselves to be captivated by the animated magic unfolding right before their eyes on TV.

Disney's stories have always captivated me. That is actually an understatement; as Disney magic is arguably the driving force at the core of who I am, how I see the world, and how I am motivated to use my time in it. From a very early age, I have experienced a connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds. I tend to naturally experience life in a deep and meaningful way; and this is likely rooted in the subconscious Disney-framework that nothing in the world can or should be taken at face value. I was often ridiculed and misunderstood for thinking about things deeply, but I couldn't help it. It equally troubles and fascinates me that there is always another layer to uncover – either because there is simply more yet to be understood, or because even when a topic seems to be universally unraveled – a different perspective certainly still exists. How should someone navigate a world in which every physical event seems to carry with it a metaphysical significance? For many, a sufficient response is religion – and historically, religious thinking has dominated discourse concerning the connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds.

For those of us not satisfied within the dome of religion, Disney is one of the first and best outlets for contemplating a deeply meaningful experience within the modern, Western world. For my entire life, I have taken to using the Disney-mindset as a way of coping with and attempting to understand this type of experience. *"A dream is a wish your heart makes."* *"Just around the riverbend."* *"Adventure is out there!"* – I understand these frameworks more than any religious or secular ones that have been presented to me. However, there came a time in my life that the outside world attempted to strip some of the "nonsense" away, and thus channel me into a more popularized way of both living in society and thinking about reality. Without any knowledge of how stories so fundamentally helped to construct the world that we live in today; it can be understood how a sort of spiritual connection to the fantastical would seem unproductive, and even

dangerous. Parents, loved ones, and society as a whole are not keen to let an individual stray so far from collective norms that they are unable to operate within the present, functional systems. At this point, I seemed to have three choices. Either accept a religious interpretation of the metaphysical world, abandon it entirely, or attempt to make sense of it in my own way.

A Brief Telling of my ETSU Story

I found myself in a liminal space. I felt like I knew that the Christianity I was raised with could never completely provide the understanding that I sought. At the same time, the Disney mindset was equally unsatisfying, in that I was fully aware that in no way did Walt Disney himself even come close to fully decoding the metaphysical world. Before I became a student at ETSU and during this time while I was pondering my trajectory – I labeled myself as a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Spiritualist, an Atheist, and a post-modern Christian all in the span of about a year's worth of contemplation. When asked what I want to do with my life professionally; my only answer was "I don't know" because how could I possibly, when I didn't even know where I stood in terms of understanding my own experience. I wanted to learn as much as I could about as many things as I could – all in response to my deeply rooted curiosity about the physical world, the metaphysical world, and how they so obviously relate to one another. Finding Anthropology felt like stepping onto a floating dock upon a vast lagoon. While I still had so much left to explore; I now also had a stable platform upon which to navigate that uncharted territory – and the more I uncovered, the larger the platform became.

I learned all about **stories** and how they function as the beating heart of the human world. I realized that everything we know – from family units, to religion, to infrastructure, to global civilization – is all driven by our ability to communicate with one another and share meaning through storytelling. A story does not need to be creative; it can simply take the form of detailing a past event in a way that someone not present at that event is able to fully understand it. In this way, truth and meaning can be seen as relative entities; shaping people differently across the world depending on their unique and variable relationships with everyday life. It follows that philosophy as an academic discipline seeks to enter this space; harmonizing and discerning different global perspectives about the connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds.

After being enrolled in my first philosophy course at ETSU; my path was clear. While mythology, religious studies, and personal spirituality are all still matters of great personal interest; none of them can equate to the value that philosophy as a discipline has provided in my life as a way to engage with and respond to the matters I've explored in this paper. The experience that I once felt intuitively through a Disney-framework of thinking is now something that I can explore critically – tracing connections between myth, fairytale, language, and the fundamental ways in which humans create meaning. Philosophy has allowed me to reconcile imagination with analysis, curiosity with inquiry, and personal experience with shared human knowledge. Not long after I

dove into the deep-end of philosophical discourse, I became the president of the Philosophy Club here at ETSU.

One of the first positive outcomes of my relationship with philosophy was the realization that it is relatively pointless for me to attempt to label myself within any specific way of thinking about reality. In fact, being able to think about my place in the world fluidly has catapulted my future trajectory, and is still actively shaping the very ways in which I intentionally exist within it. Another notable accomplishment of my philosophical journey is the reconciliation that I have found with my own sensitive experience; moving from a state of confusion to a state of radical self-acceptance. I now understand that my tendency to feel the world so acutely is not a burden, but a biological and spiritual gift. I move through my days with an active gratitude for the fact that slight shifts in the natural world give me goosebumps; a song can feel supernatural; and the simple observation of human connection provides me with a sense of universal belonging.

Conclusion

I have found through my own, personal journey that we need the metaphysical world to make sense of our human experience. The human mind constructs a dualistic understanding of reality through language, not simply because it seems to make more sense that way; but because it is the only framework available through our collective experience. Everything we encounter appears to carry meaning, and so we instinctively organize reality into categories (physical/metaphysical) that help us interpret and navigate that meaning. It is not a coincidence that ancient and prehistoric peoples tended to conceptualize reality in similar ways. The awareness that our species has of a realm which transcends that of the physical is manifest in virtually every early civilization; and there is evidence of that metaphysical thinking tracing back even farther into the earliest bands of hunter-gatherer groups.

Throughout the entire history of our species populating and globalizing planet earth; humans have been obsessed with stories because they act as a tangible doorway into metaphysical space. By telling stories, humans are able to construct a shared tapestry of meaning which drapes over physical existence – following course with our experience that the nature of reality is certainly much more complex than it seems to be at first glance. Personally, the Disney company's approach to storytelling fundamentally shaped the way that I experience life and make sense of my place in the world. Disney magic, the idea that the mundane is a veil for the miraculous, and the disconnection between formal religion and my lived experience were all driving forces in me reaching a place of finding Anthropology and Religious Studies within academia.

Now that I have begun treading an academic and spiritual pathway that honors both inquiry and intuition, I have come to see *kindness* not as a mere positive ideal, but as a philosophical

necessity. I have realized that the "magic" I once sought through **stories** is actually better found in the way we treat one another. If every human life is potentially a vessel for the same metaphysical depth I feel within myself, then to me, being a champion of kindness is to acknowledge the sacred narrative within every person I encounter. Similarly, I have become a huge advocate of the romanticization of life; choosing to view the world through a lens of wonder because I now understand that "meaning" is something we must actively participate in creating. I consider myself a lifelong learner who has finally validated my natural experience. I am dedicated to the idea that kindness, romanticization, and storytelling are not distractions from reality – but are rather authentic and beautiful ways of engaging with it. My heart soars at the sight of human connection because I have come to recognize that phenomenon as the very thing that built our world. In recent years, my relationship with Disney has come full circle. It is no longer a childhood escape, but now acts as my eternal flame – a reminder that the most productive thing a human can do is protect the capacity for wonder in a world that often tries to strip it away.

Orion's Constellation

Author: Emerson Couch

The night sky is one of my favorite things in the world. It reminds me that in the grand scheme of things, I am a small, insignificant speck. That might sound dismal, but I find it to be comforting. It takes away some of the pressure I tend to put on myself to do everything, because looking up at the vast sky and the steady stars, I can see that 'everything' is so far out of not only my ability to do, but my ability to even comprehend. Somehow, the breathtaking visual reminder that I'm rather inconsequential doesn't fill me with dread or despair, but a sense of calm, peace, and connectedness; alone, we are each as small and unnoticeable as a single star, but together we create a galaxy.

When I was eleven, I went on a road trip with my family to take my brother to an archeology camp in Colorado. One night, while camping in the desert somewhere before Great Sand Dunes National Park, my mother woke me and my brother at three AM to see the Milky Way. I saw it more clearly than I ever imagined possible, and the colors I'd always assumed could only be observed in NASA photographs were right there above me. I wanted to stare up at it forever, imprint it on my eyelids to remind myself that there is always something bigger than whatever I'm catastrophizing about my life at the moment. At that moment in the back of my mom's Subaru, feeling small and awestruck, I wanted a story. I think that's why constellation myths hold such a special place in my heart. The stars I'm looking up at are more or less the same stars that storytellers thousands of years before me were looking up at, and the legends they illustrate fill the same space in the sky as they do today.

Storytelling connects people to one another, pulling on common threads of emotion and human experience that tie together even the most distant of people across continents and centuries. Many stories, specifically mythology stories that are meant to explain why things are the way they are, are grounded in tangible things. The constellations were there before the stories about them; someone noticed that a pattern looked like a man, or a bear, or a scorpion, and the story came after.

My favorite constellation myth is Orion. Maybe because that's the first constellation I could pick out, with its ever-constant, three-star belt, or maybe because I loved archery as a kid and could see the bow Orion was pointing. Regardless, I didn't actually learn the myth of Orion until long after I was able to point it out.

Mythology is a form of community storytelling, rather than single-author storytelling. It is a large, interconnected monolith of lore and ideas that tend to clash and contradict itself, because all sorts of different people are telling, retelling, and changing the stories. Because of this, there are many different versions of Orion's story that vary wildly in regard to not only the plot but also his personality. Typically, it always centers around a chase that maps his movements across the sky.

The earliest fragments of Orion's story tell of his visit to the island of Chios (nearly due east of mainland Greece) where he becomes friends with King Oenopian, then gets drunk and attacks Oenopian's daughter Merope. Merope is one of the Pleiades, mythologically a group of nymphs and cosmologically a star cluster situated directly in front of Orion's constellation. In retaliation to Orion's actions, King Oenopian blinds Orion and leaves him to wander until he bumps into Hepheastus (whose forge supposedly lies in Mount Etna, roughly due west from mainland Greece). Hepheastus provides him with a servant to help guide him until they reach the sun god Helios (located in the east, where the sun rises), who then heals his eyes. Orion returns to attack Oenopian, but the King had since built an underground lair in anticipation, so Orion wanders off again, and the journey across the sky continues.

The constellations Scorpio and Orion are on opposite points in the night sky, so when Scorpio rises above the horizon, Orion dips below. Because of this, the scorpion is a common element in almost all Orion myths. In one version of his story, Gaia (the personification of Earth) summons the giant scorpion to kill him after he boasts of his plans to kill every animal in the world. Distraught, his dear friend Artemis begs Zeus to place him among the stars. Zeus does so, then also places Scorpio among the stars to chase Orion for eternity because Zeus is a dick.

Another common element in Orion myths is his relationship with the Pleiades, as the star cluster seems to be perpetually running away from him. One version of the myth tells that Orion won't stop pursuing the Pleiad nymphs, friends of Artemis, so Zeus turns them into the star cluster so Orion won't be able to reach them. Artemis, now angered that she isn't able to see her friends, has Apollo send a giant scorpion to kill him. Zeus then turns Orion into a constellation to continue chasing the Pleiades because, again, Zeus is a dick.

The only real constant to all of these stories is that Orion is a constellation, because that's what came first and that's what will always be left (at least, until light pollution renders us incapable of seeing the starry night at all). Constellation myths are a way to connect us to the vast universe above, as well as with each other across continents and centuries. I give Orion's constellation four and a half stars, though the night sky as a whole deserves nothing less than five.

Raccoons

Author: Alexis Buskirk

Late in the night, they take our waste,
Praying for something good to taste.
What they find, with hooded eyes,
Is a look into our very lives.

They see our pride, we boast around,
Our children's art, dumped to the ground.
They see our greed, in gathering things,
Will wear our pop tops on their little hands like rings.

They see our desire, our love, our lust,
Cause we all know birth control is a must.
They see our wrath at the world,
Our protest signs now furled.

They see our food wrappers, our gluttony,
Eating our leftovers without much scrutiny.
They see our envy, in our fast fashion,
Our extravagant weddings, our newest mansion.

They see our laziness, our sloth,
With paper towels, we don't wash cloth.
If they're judging us for what they can take,
They're probably chanting "Let them eat cake!"

Ruler of the Day

Author: Katelynn Mitchell

To imagine life without showers: an absolute nightmare. Showers are incredibly important to cleanliness, health, and just simply smelling nice! It is important to realize, and appreciate, being in an environment where normally stinky teenagers are not as pungent. There are many people to thank for this essential part of life. You could thank ancient Egyptians, who manually showered and created the idea of showering; you could thank William Footman, who created the first mechanical shower; you could thank modern society for the widespread public goods; all in all, it is truly important to appreciate the showers provided today. In many ways, showers are a luxury that the modern population rarely stops to consider, yet showers quietly shape this society's routines and comfort level more than we realize.

Generally, showers provide a clean body, keep people healthy, and provide a nice smell. However, showers mean more than just this. One thing to note is the routine that takes place in response to a shower. Some people take showers at the end of the day, after engaging in a calming soak, they brush their teeth, brush their hair, put on some comfy pajamas, and tuck themselves into bed. Some people take showers at the very start of the day, after waking up, they get bombarded with a stream of water, brush their teeth, brush their hair, dress for the day, and head to breakfast. Some may even engage in a mid-day shower because they had a rough morning and need a reset, after an intense exercise, and even just for the fun of it! Either way, showers mean more than just being clean and smelling nice. They provide more than just a physical aspect to a healthy life, but a mental and emotional aspect to a healthy life. For many people, the simple act of stepping into a shower signals a good start to the day and provides a constant comfort - showers provide a moment to pause, reset, breathe, and mentally prepare for the upcoming day or reversibly the end of a day.

To me, showers contribute to a healthy life in multiple ways. One of the obvious ways is showering brings me clean (not dead) hair, smooth skin, and a reduction in acne. What can not be seen with the naked eye, is the psychological effect showering has on me. At the very start of the morning- 6:00 am- I wake up to my alarm and I question: should I take a shower today? To that question, I mostly always answer yes. My response does not relate to care for my physical well-being as much as it does to my mental and emotional. A few times I have said no, and as a result, I lose my structure. What was once a morning routine (get up, take a shower, brush my teeth, brush my hair, get ready for school, go eat breakfast) ends up as, go to sleep. After engaging in my fruitless desires, my day has been ruined. I no longer have a hold of the day- I am no longer the ruler- like I would normally be. Instead, the day rules me, "Go eat breakfast, brush hair, brush teeth? Oh, I can't do that anymore". Something as small as skipping a shower can throw off my rhythm, reminding me how much stability comes from this 'tiny' habit.

Overall, showers are so incredibly important to not only physical needs, but emotional and mental needs too. A shower invokes a routine and prepares (or allows) the start or the end to a day. Considering this, showering has shaped my life for the better, and I am profoundly thankful for this luxury. It may seem like a chore or simple daily task compared to a luxury, but its impact reaches far beyond simple hygiene. Showers also induce confidence, an exceptional mood, and the sense of control that helps navigating each day with purpose.

Snow Days

Author: Rebekah Saulsbury

I know if class will be cancelled five seconds after I open my eyes. My room faces the window and on snowy mornings, I can tell by the color of my room whether I'll be peeling myself out of bed and starting to defrost my CR-V or burrowing back under my blankets. On snow days, my room takes on a new shade: the blinds become the soft white of Kleenex, there's no need to reach for the lights, and the room is washed, made new.

Despite the review at the conclusion of this essay, I'm not always particularly thrilled about snow days. At least, not after two or three of them. I'm the type of person who needs to get back to business, be productive, etc. ad nauseum, you get the gist. For two days or so, I love to curl up with a book, avoid the hour of driving I have to undertake each day, and indulge in board games and hot tea. But then, I get stir crazy. Not full-on Jack Torrence, but *antsy*.

Why can't we be still? This topic is on the minds of plenty of people and it catches me off guard every time I think about it. It forces me to realize that I can't be still. In theory, I like to think of myself as the reflective type. You know what I mean, the poetry-reading-handwrittenjournals-bookstore-coffeeshop girl, contemplating philosophy and sipping chai on her morning commute. The reality is that I, like so many others, spend most of my time jumping from one need to the next, one trend to the next, putting out fires, putting things in my online shopping cart, putting myself to bed each day after too much caffeine and maybe a few thirty-second conversations that *didn't* revolve around the day's to-do list. Last year, Avani Jain published an article on Medium.com titled "The Dopamine Hangover: Why we Can't Sit Still Anymore." In the article, Jain explains that we make excuses for our need to be entertained. Behind our hustle, "it's just overstimulation dressed up as productivity." That's a jarring statement and hits me exactly where it needs to. My need to always be doing *something* isn't some grand, productive blue-ribbon achievement. It's a sign of a deeper epidemic. A human-made epidemic.

Everything we do is entertainment. Our news, our sports, our love lives, our spirituality, *everything*. If something doesn't hold our attention, we don't consider it worth our time. And why would we? Many of us are steeped in a space where we can simply scroll for something that provides more dopamine.

But what does all this have to do with snow days? Those days when humans wake up, look outside, and don't leave the house? When businesses and schools call off the normal procedures, when, even for just a day, humans decide to *stop*. Not completely, of course, not usually a prolonged stop, but a stop, nonetheless. There's something disconcerting about snow days in our modern age...something unsettling about the stillness, the forced halt, the silence. Even as a kid, I remember being stopped in my tracks when I first stepped outside on a snowy morning. No matter how excited I was to start sledding, the eerie stillness of the world surprised me and left

me speechless. Snow in East Tennessee changes the energy around you. There are no cars on the road, no sun in the sky, and a perfect, undisturbed blanket over this planet we call Earth. You feel guilty about stepping into the snow, leaving your tracks on something so perfect, reminding everyone there's hard ground underneath that magic cover of quiet.

You can't run away from snow days. They're outside of your manipulation. Hope for them, hope against them, they come all the same, and, paradoxically, remind us of how little we humans actually control. Sure, a few of us make the decision to cancel school or tell employees to stay home, but, regardless, the act of staying home, in a weird way, isn't ours to decide. Snow days force us to step into stillness, stillness that forces us to reflect. In silence, we can't drown out the smallness we feel. We can't ignore the calls we haven't made, the family we haven't spoken to, or our insecurities. We can't explain away the past five years of burnout, the unread books on our shelves, the last time we actually just took a walk, or the months spent sacrificing ourselves on the alter of stimulation. And, in that awful (the truest sense of awful) stillness, we can't just scroll to the next boost of energy, or turn away from the environment, or ignore the killings, or disregard the fact that there's millions who can't duck away into a warm apartment when the cold becomes too bitter. We don't get to ignore ugliness, yet the world around us is beautiful. Isn't that what nature is supposed to do? It's supposed to remind us of beauty, beauty outside of our own inventions and our own accomplishments. It quiets us, tells us we're not as important as we make ourselves out to be, reminds us there's a whole world of beauty and pain outside of our self-involved, private universes.

Maybe we need more snow days. More days when humans decide, it's not worth it to venture out into our cubicles, that maybe, just *maybe*, we can miss a day of work and be ok. Remote work complicates things, but humans crave these days of quiet, even when we act like we don't. Why don't we lean into this human invention of paradoxically forcing ourselves to relinquish control? I know I need moments to reflect and to realize that my busyness is often just an excuse. If I need them that badly, I'd wager we all do. For that reason, and the forced stillness snow days provide, I give them four stars.

Soul Music

Author: Kai Winkler

Berry Gordy III was born on November 28, 1929 in Detroit, Michigan. He and I share a birthday (albeit 72 years apart), but beyond that our connection is tenuous. He was ambitious, founding the Motown record label and innovating an assembly line style of music production reminiscent of the automotive industry Detroit was already famous for. I don't share that ambition, but I can appreciate the music he helped introduce to the world.

My dad was also born in Detroit, in 1956. Motown released their first hit record in 1960, and their music was the music of his childhood. As he got older, he and his father would search for soul music on the radio stations as they made the long drive down south to visit family in Tennessee, listening to John R. playing artists like James Brown and Otis Redding. Eventually, this music became the music of my childhood, too.

My earliest memories of my dad all center around music. I remember sitting at a diner with him while he taught me the Bo Diddley beat and being strapped into my car seat in the back seat of our Kia minivan, singing along to "Brick House" by The Commodores. One of my favorite CDs is one he made for my mom before I was born: a compilation of songs I was reportedly kicking along to as a fetus that he titled "In Utero Boogie." On it are songs like "Land of 1000 Dances" by Wilson Pickett, "Respect" by Aretha Franklin, and "Dance to the Music" by Sly & The Family Stone. In those days, I was driven by a strong drum beat and a heavy bassline. Not much has changed for me in that regard.

My dad loves talking about music. We have that in common. Ever since I was old enough to understand what he was talking about, he's loved to share stories about the production of this song or the formation of that record label. Did you know that Berry Gordy rejected the song "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" twice before he eventually allowed it to be released? It was recorded by both The Miracles and Marvin Gaye, two Motown heavy hitters, but Gordy didn't like either version. Eventually, the song was recorded by Gladys Knight and The Pips, and Berry Gordy reluctantly allowed it to be released as a single, whereupon it shot to number 2 on the Billboard Hot 100. Emboldened by this success, the songwriter, Norman Whitfield, pushed Berry Gordy to release Marvin Gaye's recording as a single as well. Again, Gordy refused, unwilling to step on the success of the Gladys Knight version, and the song was buried on an album. Most radio stations at the time would only play singles, and when disc jockeys heard the song, they begged Motown to put it out as a single. Finally, Berry Gordy agreed, and Marvin Gaye's intense, moody rendition of "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" quickly shot to number 1 on the Hot 100 and became Motown's highest selling single ever at that point in time. Listening to it now, it's hard to imagine how Gordy couldn't hear the potential in this recording. But Berry Gordy is a stubborn man. My dad and I share that with him as well.

One more thing I share with my dad (although I have no idea where Berry Gordy stands on the matter) is a certain inability to connect with people. I'm socially awkward. I freeze up when faced with the daunting task of starting a conversation, and it doesn't get any easier for me from there. The natural flow of a conversation eludes me, and I can never tell when it's supposed to be my turn to talk. I've gotten better at it over the years, but the one thing I can always connect with people about is music. I've expanded my tastes considerably from the soul music of my childhood, but my love for collecting information about the music I listen to remains the same. From the production of the songs themselves to behind-the-scenes drama in the personal lives of the artists making the music, learning and sharing these stories is a way of connecting with others that feels both safe and meaningful at the same time, which is a feeling I don't get that often. From sharing playlists to telling stories about whatever 70s soft rock hit is playing on the radio, music is one of the few places I feel like I can be truly understood. As I've gotten older, talking to my dad has gotten more complicated. Who knew that stubborn people with short tempers tend to raise stubborn people with short tempers? Even now that we've made it through my (admittedly tumultuous) teenage years, there's still a lot we don't see eye-to-eye on. As a counseling major, most of my day-to-day life is centered around talking about feelings, which isn't something my dad is particularly keen on. Besides that, the field I'm entering isn't one he fully understands, and I don't always have the right words to help him get it. No matter what we struggle to talk about, though, we can always talk about music. The other day, I was over at his house, and after dinner I asked him what makes Philadelphia soul different from other types of soul music. We sat there for nearly an hour while he told me about the musical influences of Philadelphia soul, the production techniques that made it unique, the artists who were popular in the genre, on and on. When it was time for me to leave, he gave me a compilation CD called "The Sound of Philadelphia." As the soaring strings of "Love Train" poured through my speakers, I felt connected to him. I give soul music four and a half stars.

Storytelling

Author: Emerson Couch

Scientists have long wondered why humans evolved to become storytelling creatures- what evolutionary advantage did that give us? Some believe that humans became storytellers for the same reason birds developed beautiful songs: to attract mates. Whether this was the reason for our love of storytelling or not, it does work. According to a 2016 study by John Donahue and Melanie Green, women rated males with skilled storytelling ability as more attractive than poor storytellers, deeming them to be better long-term partners, be more capable of leadership, and be more admirable.

A 2018 study by Micheal Gurven, a professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, suggests that grandparents may be designed to pass stories to their grandchildren. Dr. Gurven's team studied the Tsimane, a community of 10,000 in the Amazon River basin who live as hunter-gatherers without much involvement in the market economy. They have a rich tradition of stories and songs, including myths of Dojity and Micha (the creators of the Earth) and tales of murder, adultery, revenge, and rejected love; timeless emotions and human experiences that tie cultures around the world together.

During the years of their study, Dr. Gurven surveyed the community to determine who told the most stories/sang the most songs, and who was considered the best in each category. While only 5% of the Tsimane aged 15 to 29 told stories, 44% of those aged 60 to 80 did. When the researchers asked where the population got most of their stories, 84% of them came from relatives older than parents, particularly grandparents. The preference for grandparents to tell stories may come from the anthropological concept of 'alternate generations', explaining that parents are more likely to pass on practical skills of survival, while *their* parents will pass on the big picture of how the world, and their community, works.

Humans love stories. Whether consumed or told through oral storytelling, written word, songs, or more modern mediums such as movies, it is an integral part of the human experience. When engaging with a really compelling story, you may experience a phenomenon known as narrative transportation. This is when you are so wrapped up in the story you can almost see, smell, hear, and feel what is happening- this can make you lose track of time and accidentally spend an entire day reading, as I have done on more than one occasion.

When experiencing narrative transportation, two parts of your brain are most active: your prefrontal cortex, responsible for cognition, understanding, and short-term memory, and your amygdala. The amygdala codes the information received based on the emotions you feel, and is responsible for committing it to long-term memory. The chemicals released when experiencing a story is sometimes known as the 'Angel's Cocktail', a combination of dopamine (responsible for assigning positive emotions to tasks or actions), oxytocin (known as the 'love chemical', helping

you emotionally connect to a story and feel compassion or empathy towards the characters), and endorphins (causes relaxation, happiness, and creativity, released when a narrative is funny, has a happy ending, or overall positive vibes).

One of the most common types of stories are those designed to explain the world around us, such as mythology. Mythology is usually tied to the current religion of the area, which is why gods and heroes reshuffle the hierarchy depending on the current form of political government, or how prominent storytellers of the time feel about the current government – for example, many of the Greek myths we know today were written by Ovid, a Roman poet known for being anti-authoritarian. His views on government influenced many of his stories, including themes of transformation, injustice, and abuse of power. One of his most notable stories is his version of Medusa, in which she was assaulted by Poseidon in Minerva's temple, and consequently turned into a gorgon by Minerva as punishment. Ovid's story was meant to invoke rage at the power of the deities to take and discard and punish at their will, regardless of the true fault of the mortal. Prior to Ovid's version, the story of Medusa had been a more straightforward monster, born and raised a gorgon alongside her two sisters with no human side to her. Ovid's version is now one of the most well-known versions, perhaps because that's the story that was most heart wrenching or relatable to the audience.

The thing about mythology is that there is no set story known by everyone. There's a loose list of characters (even that sometimes changes) and vague outlines of plots; but the details often get changed over centuries of retelling; either lost, forgotten, or purposely revised in order to reflect the feelings of the current audience. Mythology is a form of community storytelling, rather than a single author. It is a large, interconnected monolith of lore and ideas that tend to clash or contradict itself, because all sorts of different people are telling, retelling, and changing them over and over. There is no 'canon' or 'true' or 'original' because the point is that they change. People find stories they connect with, they want to be a part of their continuation, and they tell it again with more emphasis on what drew them to the story in the first place. Storytelling is a timeless human art, and while we might not definitely know why we evolved to become storytelling creatures, it's undeniably one of the best parts of human existence. I give storytelling five stars.

Thank You Nightstands

Author: Annabelle Krejci

As I write this, there is a brown, ordinary, and unromantic nightstand about ten inches from my right elbow. It has no nickname, and I am entirely unsure of who crafted it. On this nightstand, I have a small lamp, the book I am currently reading, a bookmark, a pencil, my shell pink water cup, which sits on top of a coaster that says "Kick it up, burn it down, dance on the ashes", and a small bathtub figurine where I dispose of my used eye contacts in an attempt to make a tiny bubble bath.

The original purpose of a nightstand dates back to the time of outhouses, where the "night table", as they called it, stored chamber pots. Evidently, the walk to an outhouse was much too far, and the original nightstand remedied this issue by storing a small receptacle in it where you could use the bathroom quite literally ten inches from your right elbow. Nightstands looked much more like cabinets than mine does, assuming that chamber pots do not bode as well in the wide open as they do locked behind some cabinet doors. As humans moved their bathrooms from way out into their yard into their homes, the need for doors on nightstands to store waste buckets transitioned into the need for drawers to store human things that are much less nasty, like antidepressants or condoms. Now, nightstands around the world hold trending water cups, soaked tissues, their accompanying tissue box, chapstick, secrets, or whatever else feels so important that it must be stored within arm's reach of your sleeping body. The number of nightstands in a bedroom can also signify the number of people sleeping in a bed. If there are two nightstands, there are likely two people using that bed for sleeping. I have one nightstand next to my bed, which works as a symbol that I do not have a live-in girlfriend.

My nightstand has no drawer for storing knick-knacks. The designer of this table thought it appropriate that I keep all of mine sitting on top. This means that my nightstand holds no secrets. It holds all the things that are private enough to be in a bedroom, but public enough to be seen by the naked eyes that are welcomed into my bedroom. My nightstand sees every bit of the 21-year-old girl that I am. I have no name for my nightstand, but it holds empty beer bottles on Saturday nights and caramel lattes on Tuesday mornings. It bears the weight of my body while I lean on it to take off my shoes. It holds the car keys and wallet of every friend or love interest that waltzes into my room to stay. My nightstand sits next to me while I cry, while I sleep, while I read books until 3 in the morning, and giggle through every page. My nightstand probably knows that I have dreamed of being a teacher since I was eight years old, that I am about six months away from living that dream, and that I toss and turn through the night worrying about if five year olds are learning their letters in time. She, and I guess I could give her a gender, might think that I am self-deprecating, arrogant at times, a little daring, but fiercely loyal. She may not think any of it, because she is just a nightstand. My nightstand may not love me for who I am, but I assume that she just does. There is probably a metaphor in there somewhere.

My hope for the world, or maybe the uncredited nightstands that exist in it, would be that humans remember their nightstand for what it does and how thankless that job can be. My message to any readers would be to offer your nightstand drawer (if it happens to have one, unlike mine) it's well earned thanks for holding your maybe lewd or maybe secret or maybe normal items. You can also apologize for being beholden to it for so long, and never taking the time to say thank you. There is a third option, which is being discourteous for even longer by not offering thanks, and hurting your nightstand's feelings for even longer than you and I already have.

I often wish that my nightstand had a more meaningful life than acquiescing to mine. I wish she could be more than that. The truth of the matter is that I am not alone in the plight of wishing that insentient objects could speak to me about their day, or tell me what they think of me, or be hurt if I don't say thank you. "If these walls could talk" has been a commonly used idiom for at least longer than my 21-year life. Turns out, caring about things that do not breathe or think their own thoughts is quite ordinary.

Although it may be kitschy to find profundity in my bedside table that exists because people were too lazy to walk outside to take a leak, I give nightstands five stars.

The Ant

Author: Kalyn Meacham

I have this ant that I adore. She has some rough edges and odd lines on her face and when she stands, she never stands straight. Instead, she leans slightly like at any moment she might fall over. She's from California and flew to Tennessee with me on my way back from my grandfather's funeral. I remember on that particular trip she set off the machines going through TSA. She's not dangerous, just odd looking and half metal.

his ant is not an aunt like a sister of my mother or father. It is an ant made of river rocks and copper wire and spray painted black. In fact, if you saw her on the shelf at a thrift store or a craft fair, you would probably leave her there. After all, she is extraordinarily strange looking and not at all professionally made. But to me she is worth more than all the money in the world.

You see, my grandfather was a creature of habitual creation. I suppose I get it from him. He was always busy in the garage tinkering away on something or other, usually building things from wood or spare nuts and bolts he found in a dust covered corner. When he would create, I would watch. When I was old enough, he taught me how to create too. We built everything you can imagine. By the time I was twelve, we had covered his back yard in slightly misshapen bird houses and handmade copper windchimes. He taught me how to solder, how to use power tools, how to measure twice and cut once, and even tried to teach me how to weld.

I remember the day he first showed me the ants. He had been creating creatures for a while out of the spare metal bits and bobs that any handyman accumulates over a seventy-year life. He told me that he was going to try to build something different than the metal dioramas he had been making. I walked into his garage after school one day to find these anticipated creations on his bench. There, perfectly lined up like little insect soldiers, stood five ants made from river rock and copper wire, half of which were painted black. Some were small, and others were close to eight inches in length. For a while after that there was a slowly expanding army of river rock ants that lined his garden like sentinels.

Time passed as it always must, and I had almost forgotten about the ants until I was a week away from moving to Tennessee. I had lived in California for twelve years and was desperate for something from my grandpa's garage to take with me. Of course, the ants were the first thing to be offered up. I, however, chose two of the nut and bolt dioramas my grandfather and I had been working on for months. Two weeks later my parents and I were settled in our house in Tennessee and those metal dioramas held pride of place on my dresser, a constant reminder of the person I missed the most.

Years marched by and with them went much of my grandfather's remaining health. In my freshman year of high school, my mother got the call that, after months of discomfort, my

grandfather had passed away. We flew out a few days before the funeral and spent those days helping my grandma with whatever she needed. The day of the funeral came and I sat in the back crying as discretely as I could.

We went to my grandmother's house the morning before our flight out of California. She and my mom spent some time talking, which left me free to walk around the house. Somehow, I ended up in the garage of all places and there on the work bench, half unfinished, sat another ant. I couldn't keep my tears back any longer. I cried myself dry on the steps of the garage where my grandfather and I had spent so much time.

When I finally made my way back into the house, my grandmother had an oddly shaped package sitting on her lap. I opened it to reveal a finished ant. She told me that it was the last one my grandfather had finished and that he had wanted me to take it back with me. Tears threatened to well over as I sat there and looked at the ant, memorizing all the little lumps, bumps, scratches, and sharp edges. When she set off the machines going through TSA, I panicked thinking that they would take her away from me. Gratefully, all they did was pull her out and look at her strangely before handing her back to me.

Now, she lives on my desk in my dorm next to a picture of my grandparents. To others, she may just be an amalgamation of stone and metal, hardly worth the time to look at. True, she is mildly ugly. There is an endearing quality, however, that is reminiscent of a child's craft project that is made with so much love you don't mind if it's a little wonky. She is imperfect, and yet to me that is why she is perfect.

To me, she is connection. She connects me to a man that helped make me who I am today. She connects me to a time where I didn't know the sorrow of losing my best friend. She connects me to a love whose equal I have yet to see again. She connects me to the hopes and dreams my grandfather had for me. Most importantly, she connects me to me. She reminds me of the power of creativity and the subjectivity of beauty. When I look at her I feel sorrow and joy, love and loss, pain and hope. She reminds me of what it means to be human: full of memories, a mess of imperfections, and full of love.

I give this ant four and a half stars.

The Da Vinci Surgical Robot

Author: Keely Morris

The first time I saw the Da Vinci surgical robot, I Googled it at two in the morning.

This is how I cope with fear: I research it until it feels smaller. It's safe to say that the pictures did not help.

It looks like a spider. A very expensive, very intelligent, vaguely threatening spider with long, jointed arms and a body made entirely of metal and confidence. It does not look like something you want anywhere near a human body, much less your dad's.

And yet.

This is the machine that helped save his life.

Which feels unfair somehow. Like life should be saved by something warmer. A hand. A heartbeat. Not what looks like a rejected extra from a sci-fi movie.

But I guess this is what the Anthropocene looks like: not just plastics and satellites and climate graphs, but operating rooms. Data streams. Surgical robots that hold human lives between calibrated instruments.

When my dad was diagnosed with cancer, the world didn't fall apart dramatically. It just... tilted.

I still went to school. People still asked about homework. The sun still rose like it always had. But underneath everything was this quiet, steady knowledge that nothing is promised. That the future is a lot less solid than we pretend.

The day of his surgery, I refreshed my phone so often it probably thought I was malfunctioning. I wore prostate cancer awareness sweatshirts like small, fabric prayers. I didn't know what else to do with my hands.

Sometimes prayer doesn't feel like enough.

Sometimes it's all you have.

The surgery went well. Then it didn't. Then it sort of did again. Recovery is less like a straight line and more like walking through fog while someone periodically shouts medical vocabulary at you.

Today his PSA is 0.0.

Which is just a number, technically. But it is also the most beautiful number I know.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, I learned his procedure had been done with the help of a robot.

A robot.

There is something deeply unsettling about the sentence “a robot performed your dad’s surgery.” So naturally, I Googled it again.

The more I read, the less afraid I felt. Which surprised me. I learned how surgeons sit at a console and translate their hands into more precise movements than human fingers alone could ever manage. I learned about force feedback and micro-incisions and recovery times. I learned that the machine isn’t autonomous at all, and how it’s more like a translator. Human intention rendered mechanical. Not necessarily less human, but *more*.

Arthur C. Clarke said any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. I used to think that was poetic exaggeration, but now I’m not so sure.

Because what else do you call a machine that gives you more birthdays with your dad?

People sometimes say technology has exceeded our humanity. I’ve seen that quote attributed to Einstein, though I’m not convinced he actually said it. Either way, I don’t buy it.

If anything, this robot feels like proof of the opposite.

It is humanity, just extended. It is engineers and surgeons and nurses and decades of careful, nerdy persistence saying, “What if we could be gentler? What if we could be more precise? What if we could save one more person?”

It is compassion expressed through metal and code.

Which is how I ended up here, studying cybersecurity and AI and robotic surgery metrics and all the invisible infrastructure that keeps these systems working. Because once you know a machine helped save your father’s life, you start wanting to help build the next one.

Or at least protect it.

Or at least understand it.

I still think the robot looks like a spider.

But now it’s my favorite spider.

It rearranged the course of my life. It gave me more time with my dad. It turned fear into curiosity, and curiosity into a career.

So, if I'm supposed to rate the Da Vinci surgical robot the way John Green rates things, on a five-star scale that is both deeply unserious and extremely sincere,

I give it five stars.

You probably expected that, and as much as I'd like to be unique and surprise you, I cannot deny the Da Vinci robot the five stars it deserves. Not because it's perfect. Not because it isn't terrifying.

But because it reminds me that the world we're building, for all its flaws and sharp edges, is still capable of mercy.

I believe in a God who heals. I just don't think He always does it with miracles.

Sometimes He does it with surgeons.

Sometimes with engineers.

Sometimes with a machine that looks suspiciously like a spider.

And somehow, that still feels holy to me.

Five stars.

The Souls of Fabric

Author: David Hervey

Stabbing is perhaps among the oldest of human hobbies. In times before history, people would stab animals with sharp rocks so they could later set fire to the remains and use their few exposed bones to further eviscerate the remains so they could suitably be absorbed into their bodies. Some of the animal remains are, of course, not very suitable to being absorbed into human bodies. The hard bits could be smacked together to make pleasing sounds, or they may also be sharpened and used as another instrument for the purpose of stabbing. The outside, hairy parts of the animal would keep their original purpose in providing warmth, but now for the human who layers it upon their own skin instead of the creature it was originally grown for. In order to make the animal carcass fit the structure of a human more effectively, it could—in true human fashion—be repeatedly stabbed. By affixing a thin string to a small sharp object, one can bind layers of material to each other with repeated alternating stabs that leave a trail of the aforementioned string which forces the skins together in some particular way. In a surprise to at least one person (probably), this process became among the most important ideas to the human way of life. It's such an important part of humanity that there are particular sounds and shapes dedicated purely to representing this process and the tools used. Though a needle and thread are seemingly simple objects, the possibilities they enable are remarkable. Certain patterns of interlocking threads create objects as simple and soft as a covering for the objects on which we entrust to support our heads during the times our senses fail, while other patterns can be used to manipulate the sky itself to hurl people across the most deadly and volatile terrain on Earth.

The world of textiles is one which everyone has some connection to. The most pervasive form of textile is that of clothing. While clothes may have originally been for Hervey 2 protection, they have become representative of culture and the values that people have. Fashion has long been used as a way to communicate wealth and status. For many years, people would spend their excess fortune to obtain the rarest and most luxurious fabrics and create clothing that flaunts their wealth. As the Industrial Revolution created and expanded the class between the aristocracy and workers, some members of this new "middle class" would purchase these fabrics (which had become cheaper due to industrialization) to communicate that they were of a 'respectable' breed. By being fashionable, people would show that they are deserving of respect and help to create an image of the modern world. Not conforming to standards of upkeep and style were indicative of being one of the others—those not fit for a modern world. Fortunately for most, these standards were not immortal. Eventually, the standards of acceptability were loosened, and conformity ceased to be the main purpose of fashion. In today's time, fashion has become primarily a way to express oneself; to communicate information about which groups in which we belong and what we personally enjoy. Whether it's a shirt that shows an interest in a particular media franchise, a cloak worn for the sake of whimsical fun, or a pin that reveals the identity of a wild Nerdfighter, the clothes people wear offer a glimpse into the colorful worlds of their lives. Although most need

not understand how textiles work in an age of industrialization, they work as a small representation of the vibrant lives that all people live. For those that learn the secrets of the textile trades, however, a world of possibility can be opened.

The potential that comes with a freedom to create is one that cannot be overstated. A weaver can craft sheets of fabric of all shapes and sizes; of all colors and textures, and all materials. A seamstress is able to create any garments they can imagine, while a quilter may use scraps as paint on a cloth canvas that will bring warmth for years to come. To make an object is an expression of love. The obvious examples are the items made for a loved one, such as sweaters given to grandsons and wives, or little stuffed rats for a particular mildly rat obsessed older sister. Items made for the self are also from a form of love: the love for the craft, and the joy of using something made with your own hands. Even a tiny homemade memento contains a tiny part of the soul of the person who spent the time to painstakingly add every little stitch, instilling the magic of a person's love.

Though it may be simple in concept, textiles unlock a world of possibilities for both an individual and humanity as a whole. Through a simple needle and thread, people can create almost anything they wish. Whether to express an interest, show belonging to a cultural group, or simply to fill a practical role, a crafted item contains a part of its maker's soul. By engaging in the ancient art of repeatedly stabbing things, we put into the world a glimpse of the magic that is being human.

The Things That Stay

Author: Meg Dotson

As humans, we tend to take things for granted. It's just part of our nature. We slip into a routine, we get comfortable, and we begin to lose appreciation for things that once felt foolish to even dream of. Everyone loves to say they can't live without a certain makeup product, a food, or a sports team. Oftentimes, living without that item would be difficult, not deadly. For instance, I eat gluten-free. Every time it comes up, people tell me, "Oh, I could never eat gluten-free, I couldn't live without gluten." I'm always puzzled by this response because I wasn't always gluten-free, yet now I am, and I'm still alive. One of these interactions made me think about what I truly couldn't live without and how it would affect my life. Then it hit me: remorse.

Remorse isn't something people usually think of when they think of things they can't live without; people don't really think about remorse at all. From a young age, we are taught about our emotions and how to regulate our feelings. There are six innate, or instinctual, emotions humans are born with: anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise. Remorse, however, is a learned emotion shaped by human interactions and accountability, from being told to apologize for spilled drinks as a child to taking responsibility for mistakes in adulthood. Social constructs and media tell us how to be remorseful and feel guilt, what situations warrant it, and, most importantly, the effects of what unresolved remorse looks like.

Many people pose the question of what remorse adds to life, but the bigger question to ask is what it doesn't add. Everyone has moments they'd like to forget and regrets that keep them up at night; feelings that linger years later about what could've been done differently to make things better or to ease the guilt. While these moments are difficult and bothersome, they ultimately lead to growth. Without remorse, there would be virtually no forgiveness or growth in the world. I have seen friendships thrown away, only to be reignited years later because of remorse for words said in anger. I have seen people go from the worst version of themselves to someone almost unrecognizable, driven by guilt over past actions.

While anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise are something we default to and are essential to our psyche, we can't grow without remorse for failure. Our innate emotions are strong, but a man can't live in his grief without living in misery. Remorse allows people to understand the intent behind their behavior, reflect on why they behave as they do, and take accountability for their actions. It allows people to grow from their past rather than run from it. Remorse allows you to bloom where you're planted and find the hope in your mistakes, instead of having to wallow in shame. Even though no one likes to be wrong, without being wrong, there can be no right; that is what makes remorse so important. Admitting wrongdoing starts a conversation and opens the door for new beginnings because the world can't exist on burnt bridges and smolders of "what could've been if". Man has developed many things, but for me,

remorse will always be one of the most significant advancements in my life and in the lives of countless others.

The Tweetsie Trail, Reviewed: Thoughts on “Try, Try Again” -ing

Author: Rachel Summers

I’m training for the St. Jude Half Marathon. Today, my plan was to run six miles. Technically, my training schedule said to run a mile and a half, since I have a local half marathon this weekend – I don’t have enough words in my count allowance to explain how the St. Jude Half is the capital-E Event and the half marathon this Saturday is just a training run – but I missed my scheduled six-mile run last weekend because I went for a hike, so I wanted to make it up today.

For reasons that will soon reveal themselves, I must take a moment to tell you about this hike – a hike that consisted of human-made stairs cut out of rocks instead of – oh, I don’t know – the naturally rolling hills of East Tennessee. I think my friend best summed up my feelings about the experience when he said, “I mean, it was like a billion stairs, and you canonically hate the stairstepper.”

For two days after (which were the last two days, for those of you temporal types), I shuffled around my house in socks, calves so sore it hurt to properly pick up my feet, since walking involved allowing them to temporarily dangle – an action that my calves made clear they detested. It was all very dramatic. I slept with a heating pad under my lower legs, and I felt like a frail Victorian child using a metal warming pan filled with hot coals to survive yet another cruel winter night.

I was relieved this morning when I noticed the soreness had subsided – except for the shooting pain my left calf sent up my leg whenever I dared move the corresponding foot. However, I decided to ignore that obvious sign that we were entering the Potential-Injury Zone™ because (student) doctors make the worst patients. Emotionally armed with little more than Nike’s slogan to “just do it,” I drove to the Tweetsie Trail, blissfully unaware of the life lessons that would soon run up behind me.

The Tweetsie Trail is a long, narrow strip of repurposed railroad that runs through my town and into the next (or through someone else’s town and into mine depending on your point of view). It’s one of those rare human-made places that feels natural now, like the gravel path and wooden bridges grew out of the ground on their own (unlike the forsaken Rock Stairs™). It’s also my favorite place to run.

Despite the immediate bad omen of dumping 200 mL of water down my back twice (because I failed to properly seal the bladder in my hydration vest twice), I started my run. I was properly Vaseline’d, fueled, and hydrated, and I was excited to see how I would triumph today! (Read: I was excited to feel accomplished by running exactly six miles today.)

My right calf decided to synchronize shooting pains with the left before I was even three-fourths of a mile in, which is not a triumphant distance for runners who feel accomplished in the very specific way only round numbers can provide. I did a quick mental cost-benefit analysis: push through six excruciating miles today or be able to run 13.1 this weekend. I turned around. I had realized that what would carry me through those six miles wasn't a healthy body but an unhealthy ego.

Still, I felt somewhat defeated, driving home, slathered in Vaseline that had not fully served its purpose. As they are apt to do, in just that moment, my own words hit the far recesses of my mind and now echoed back to me. Ironically, just yesterday, I had told my therapist (therapy would get a five-star review from me, by the way) something like this: *I don't have confidence in outcomes anymore. I can't control the future. Wanting something badly enough and working hard enough don't guarantee I'll get my way. If they did, there are things in my life that would look different. What I do have confidence in is my ability to try my best and to handle whatever happens next. I trust that the version of myself who is most capable of navigating any challenge will be born in the same moment as that challenge. I have an inner strength that shows up even when I don't want it to. What I have confidence in is myself.*

Turning around on the Tweetsie Trail, I was concerned I was committing failure's mortal sin – giving up. I now know I wasn't. I made the choice to keep myself whole, and maybe that's the metric I should use for success – not "Did I accomplish what I set out to?" but "Did I honor myself in the process?" Perhaps Hippocrates was onto something even more universal than bioethics when he said, "First, do no harm."

As for the Tweetsie Trail, it didn't care whether I ran six miles or less than one. It simply existed, patiently offering me a place to begin again when I was ready. That's the strange kindness of human-made spaces: despite being made by the very creatures who can be so obsessed with wins and losses, they hold our small, messy attempts at becoming better versions of ourselves without keeping score.

I'm grateful for moments that force me to practice what I preach – even when they're uncomfortable (which seems to be the only flavor they come in) and even when I have to swat down my ego, turn around, and wait. There's hope in the waiting – not hope that next time will be perfect, but hope that there *will be* a next time, and that I will show up for it, ready to try my best, regardless of the outcome.

I give the Tweetsie Trail – and trying, then trying again – five out of five stars.

The Waves

Author: Suzi Peter

In April, a green world springs to creation in between my honeyed blinks. Life shudders underneath the soil—I feel it in my spine through a picnic blanket. Treetops coalesce over my kneecaps. Silky clouds pull past, evanescing. Midday sun turns gold the faces of leaves and mossy stones. Robins cry, hunting, seeking. Beetles scuttle toward lush havens. Beetles run, are saved, are killed. Somewhere, water thrashes earth. I hear, or perhaps, I sense it—river strumming, summoning revival.

Springtime infiltrates the mind as it hovers closer, but I write this in late January. Snow whites out the roads and lawns, layering the sidewalks. Everything looks cloaked by mist through the coffee shop windows. It is warm inside. On my lap is an empty mug, a dying laptop, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

Remaking the world through prose, the story starts with a rumbling sun beginning its slow ascent. As the light shifts, the coastal scene it illuminates metamorphoses just like the interwoven lives of our six narrators. Aside from these short interludes chronicling the sun's odyssey through the sky, *The Waves* entirely consists of dreamlike soliloquies from the various members of a close friend group who, as they mature, crash into each other and pull apart, endlessly in motion. This is a coming-of-age narrative about death, but that doesn't matter—nobody comes to *The Waves* for its plot.

Writing in the fluid and evocative language of the human mind, Woolf traces the ebbs and flows of existence through her stream-of-consciousness style. As you read, you can't help but borrow her eyes, which deconstruct and dramatize. The tidy containers of everyday life— which make our messy souls manageable, which allow us to pass quickly through an exquisite and dangerous universe without ruminating, without lingering—crumble away. Everything is heightened and, therefore, electric.

I see with Virginia Woolf's eyes, and I am no longer the unsettled introvert who constantly feels incompatible with this iteration of Earth. Now *I am not a woman, but the light that falls...on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn. I cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people.*

I am not the one with faltering lips, stumbling through conversation, But I am fixed here to listen. An immense pressure is on me. I cannot move without dislodging the weight of centuries...Tongues with their whips are upon me.

And as I click quietly among the real adults doing their remote jobs or other students slumped over their laptops, I am astonished, as I draw the veil off things with words, how much, how infinitely more than I can say I have observed.

This level of perception disintegrates me and all of my barriers. Now, I am only a pair of eyes and a disembodied writer who wants to understand. Fluid as the water, I can rush into the mind of the girl who sits beside me or the man underneath the moon painting or the barista with her pink scarf or the mailman walking away. I can even swim back into the heart of the one who shattered my heart or the poets who restored my soul by naming every ache. There is no me or her or him, only lights and only echoes, slamming into each other, cascading.

All of this is well and good until I drop back into myself with my layered long-sleeves and two pairs of socks on. The caffeine has tunneled through my veins, and I am slightly furious. Where do I shove this great and formless energy that has possessed me in the middle of the week? How can I explain my spontaneous epiphany which erupted from a book I will soon bury in my shelves? I can see it already as the human haze descends: I will blink a few times and then forget what I knew. When I walk out of this cafe, I will remember or believe that I am lonely, individual, and I will not know the truth until I begin to write again.

For what else can we call that engine that draws the hand across the page or gives the woman typing all the grace of a piano player? I write for truth, I write for creation, and I write for compassion. I write when winter splits the skin and it hurts to speak. I write to thaw my stubborn singularity and join the all. I write to summon centipedes and butterflies and wasps, to breathe the green back into leaves and skinny blades of grass, to hear a river slushing by in the tone of immortality. I write, and I am elsewhere, and I am everywhere.

I read to inhale the briny sea scent of murderous waves rushing to claim me, and then to exhale into soft blue night cradled by undying mountains. I read to freeze the arms of the clock and hear the calamitous ticking fill my heart chambers instead. I read to consume the conviction of Joan of Arc staring into the flames and try to adopt her valor. I read, and I feel beautifully pierced by a stranger's eye gazing from nearly a century's distance away. I read, and I am seen, and I am healed, and I am redeemed. I read Virginia Woolf, and I am elsewhere, I am everywhere, and I am understood.

Time Travel as Resilience

Author: Olivia Adinolfi

It has recently occurred to me how fascinated humans are with the idea of time travel.

My mom is reading *11.22.63*. My dad is watching *The Way Home*. People are still devoted to *Outlander*. Generations grew up with *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Back to the Future*, *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*. Entire franchises are built on the possibility that maybe we could go back and fix something. Or, at least, look at it again.

My parents are both hard workers, so it makes sense that time feels urgent to them. For many generations, especially in the West, time has become a commodity. Something to save, spend, invest, waste. Time is money.

I don't think pre-industrial societies spoke about time this way. I can't say that with certainty, but I do know that the Western understanding of time is constructed. It organizes us. Motivates us. Scares us. It pushes productivity, obedience, constant motion. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, as they say.

Some people see getting as much done as possible before the clock runs out as meaningful.

But I think my generation is beginning to question it. We inherited a system built on urgency, and we're starting to feel its limits

Productivity is programmed into us early. School mirrors a full-time job once you add sports and extracurriculars. We learn quickly that being busy means being valuable.

I sometimes feel guilty for not respecting time the way my parents do. I know aging often brings regret, but I don't feel the same panic when a day is "wasted." Maybe that's immaturity. Maybe it's privilege. Maybe it's depression. Or maybe my generation experiences time as something that happens to us rather than something we're constantly racing to manage.

We still carry stress about it. We just don't feel as driven by it. When time is framed as a commodity, it can feel like another system draining you rather than empowering you.

That's why time travel makes sense to me. It's less about nostalgia and more about control.

In almost every story, something goes wrong when time is altered. A timeline fractures. A person disappears. A world collapses. Time and again, we're reminded that interference has consequences.

Maybe the point isn't that we want to change the past. Maybe it's that we want reassurance that we can't.

I once read about polychronism—the idea that time is measured by events rather than schedules. Relationships matter more than deadlines. The present and the past hold weight and life isn't measured by what the future might hold. Time cannot be “wasted” because it is lived, not spent.

What would it feel like to live like that? To let moments define your life instead of productivity?

Maybe time travel comforts us because it dramatizes what we already know: control is limited. We can revisit the past in imagination, but we cannot rewrite it. The stories fail on purpose.

In a culture where time is money, we invent time travel as both rebellion and reassurance. We imagine altering it, then choose not to.

Time is constructed. It is overwhelming. It is uncontrollable.

And maybe, in obsessing over traveling through it, we are admitting that what we really want is not control over time—but freedom from the system that tells us we are running out of it.