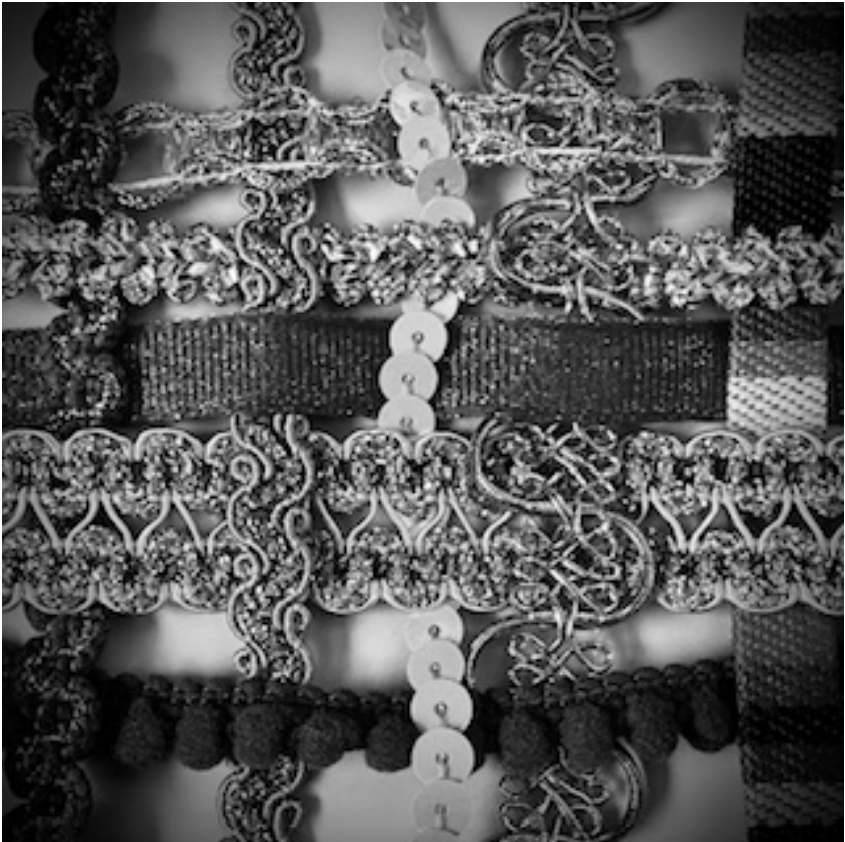


The Prompt

Princeton Writes Literary Journal



2024

Introduction

Princeton Writes is pleased to present *The Prompt*, an anthology of writing from members of Writing Space, a group of writers who also happen to be Princeton University employees. Since 2015, the group has met monthly to write, with the help of prompts and without, and to share their creative efforts with each other. We hail from diverse corners of the University, from the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, to the Center for Machine Learning, to the residential colleges, and we share a love of writing.

Our primary purpose is to keep our creative sparks ignited, remembering always to let our writer-selves out to play. We hope this anthology will prompt others to start writing or get back to it, to make room in their lives for imagination, invention, creative expression, and, of course, editing. Princeton and we are better for it!

Writing Space is big enough to accommodate any University employee who wants to join us. We are especially pleased to feature the work of 11 talented members of our group in this anthology, including Wendy Borg, Courtney Coffman, Allison Gasparini, Robyn Howard, Jeanne Jackson DeVoe, Andrea La Bella, Gwen McNamara, Maureen Riggi, Dianne Spatafore, John Weeren, and Stephanie Whetstone

This I Once Believed

Wendy Borg

Now and then, my iPhone sends me a photo from many years ago. As my children are in their 20s, these photos show them much younger, when they were completely different-looking people. These photos jar me out of the present and usually evoke a sudden feeling of wistfulness, nostalgia, or even pain, as I'm still grieving the empty nest loss.

Last week, there was one of our youngest boys, Jonathan, our Jonny, on his First Communion day at St. Anthony of Padua in Hightstown, in 2010—14 years ago! Hands folded in prayer in front of him, he looks like an eight-year-old angel boy trying to fit into his brother's hand-me-down suit.

As I scrolled through the photos of that day, there was one of him kneeling in the pew, smiling slightly at the camera. Right next to him is a fellow communicant, another well-coordinated boy, holding his clenched hands to his bowed forehead, his face scrunched up tightly as if praying to God to just get him through this day. Such a tense moment!

Then I came upon one of me. Standing in the aisle next to the boys on their knees, I am glancing wryly at the photographer. You see, I was their CCD teacher. I had shepherded them to this moment, this most important day in their short Catholic lives. It was prefaced by their First Confession, earlier that fall, a day they all feared, and one that was particularly difficult to get them ready for. They hadn't had much chance to commit horrible sins yet but were worried that their spotty disobedience to their parents had already set them up for a harsh penalty from the priest. (Most had to say a couple of prayers, and they were on their way!)

I remember I struggled with the assigned Catechism text that year, and other years, as I sought to teach the young ones what it meant to receive the body and blood of God, to be consecrated in Christ, to be killed on the cross. I tried to humanize Jesus and help them relate to the man who was supposedly sent to the world by God to save it and us and bring peace. I'm not sure I succeeded. What I did know was that the sheer practice of coming to class every week and spending time together to talk about how to be a good person and a good Christian was comforting to me, my boys, and the other young ones, who innocently opened their hearts to learn and talk about these concepts, most for the first time. We tried to

figure it all out together. (I also had to reassure them that the host had no flavor, would not make them gag, and that the wine was truly grape juice in a fancy gold cup.)

As a servant of the church, I'm not sure I conveyed the exact messages I should have, according to the religion, but I at least tried to model the behaviors and recognize them in the students when they displayed them.

I gave up my Sunday mornings for several years as my boys went through the grades up to their 8th-grade Confirmation, actually selfishly. I didn't trust that another CCD teacher would handle my children with care, as I felt the teachings were too important, and they were too impressionable, to be left in the hands of a stranger. Who knew what these people's values were; if they would teach the literal Bible; if they would scold my boys and put the fear of God in them, telling them that if they didn't follow the strict Catholic teachings, they would go to hell! Oh my God, I couldn't bear it.

Interestingly enough, as they entered high school, we stopped, as a family, attending regular Sunday services. I went if I felt the need to return to the traditions of Mass, and the kids went with me if I promised them bagels afterward. My husband rarely went. We became the ultimate cafeteria Catholics. Christmas, Easter, and Ash Wednesday.

We talked about this winding down and decided we had done our job, introduced them to the religion and its traditions, and led them along. It was their time to decide what direction they wanted to go in their spiritual growth and life. And they appreciated that freedom. Really, what is the point of demanding church attendance when you are not personally getting something out of it?

I still go on holidays if I can. I find spiritual solace in spending time in nature, as does my husband. And it seems our sons do, too. Who said you need to be in a building to pray and pay reverence? Perhaps the boys will return someday, remembering the comfort of those sunny Sunday mornings in the church school classrooms, with their mom leading the way

Is Nostalgia Post-Modern?

Courtney Coffman

On a recent cross-country flight, I found myself traveling back in time. As I used my index finger to scroll through the various titles of my in-flight entertainment, I came across what I would consider a “Top 10 All-Time Favorite Film.” Full disclosure: I consider myself somewhat of a movie buff, and it has often struck me that it feels sacrilegious to watch a cinematic work on a tiny screen among more than 300 other little screens. In fact, my usual in-flight routine—while not as extensive as, say, Naomi Campbell’s, which is worth Googling just to understand how beautiful people can also have bizarre germophobic behavior—usually consists of noise-canceling headphones, a downloaded playlist, and turning off the screen confronting my personal space. I prefer to doze rather than to gape. And yet, it’s not uncommon for me to peer at other passengers’ screens: the young 20-something woman watching *The Notebook* presumably for the umpteenth time, the teenage guy watching a formulaic superhero franchise flick, or—my personal recent favorite—the middle-aged guy streaming Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*, demonstrating the stronghold of Mormon Mommy influencers. Sometimes, I scroll through the listings just to see what titles are available so that I can try to guess which movie or show the people seated around me will select—my own pop-cultural game of Guess Who. Ultimately, I do question if people mindlessly make their selections truly for their viewing pleasure or to impress the five-hour friend they’ve made just across the aisle.

During this particular flight, however, I found myself feeling particularly self-aware as I hit “play” on Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 Shakespearean remake, *Romeo + Juliet*. My adolescent giddiness began to simmer at the opening: a black screen with a small dot of light; an old cathode ray tube television sits alone in this liminal space as a news anchor delivers the infamous monologue. “Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene,” she reports. By the time Tybalt pulls up in an ecclesiastical-blue Chevrolet Monte Carlo; exits the vehicle to stomp out his cigarillo with his silver-heeled boots custom embossed with “Prince of Cats”; delivers his powder keg line, “Peace? I hate the word as I hate hell and all Montagues”; and then parts his black suit jacket to reveal a waistcoat with a haloed Jesus, my simmering has become a rolling boil. In my mind, I’m no longer on a Boeing 777 but sitting in that strip mall theater where I first witnessed this opening scene and feeling the rush of adrenaline as extreme zooms and intentional fast-cut cinematography plunge me into this boldly colored and heavily aestheticized world.

Having an aisle seat means that others can also witness this awesomeness as it plays out just mere inches from the back of a stranger's head in front of me. When scenes like Mercutio's "Queen Mab" monologue appear, I wonder what others think. Do they see the irony of a man in drag performing on a derelict outdoor stage in a town that looks more like Venice Beach, California, than Shakespeare's fair Verona? Do they think about male fragility or the history of women being excluded from performance? Better yet, when the "swords" are recast as handguns with saints and rosaries, or the priest is wearing the most brightly colored Hawaiian shirt with a sacred heart, do they know that I'm watching a tragedy from the year 1597?

Rewatching this film, I realized that there is a timelessness to this over-the-top style Luhrmann imparts in his films. In fact, *Romeo + Juliet* had a recent micro-trend resurgence—the brightly colored Hawaiian shirts came back into style, as did the use of neon with religious iconology. For Kacey Musgraves' 2021 Video Music Awards performance, she sang the title track from her post-divorce album, *Star-crossed*. The stage set was heavily influenced by Luhrmann's 1996 film, using neon hearts with daggers (instead of crosses) to emulate the penultimate scene where Romeo enters the church to see Juliet laid to rest—an apt metaphor for the death of love. In the film, this is one of the most powerful images I hold in my memory as Romeo looks through the crack of the sanctuary doors to see the neon glow of crosses at the end of the pews within the dimly lit cathedral, the millions of candles scattered across the space and swelling up onto the altar where they mingle with white funeral lilies as a peaceful Juliet lies atop a draped pedestal. Watching this scene—its forced perspective, its *glow*—as I sit at the aisle's edge in my own forced perspective and glow from all the screens, felt oddly like the right scene in which to ruminate on this "two hours traffic," though I still had three more to go before I touched down in my own Verona: Los Angeles

What Makes Fan Girls Beautiful

Allison Gasparini

For many years, I was a fan girl.

Not just any fan girl, though. I was a *Directioner*. That is to say, I rabidly consumed any and all media concerning the British boyband One Direction. The mania inspired by the sudden appearance of One Direction swiftly drew comparisons to that which followed The Beatles (though I'll never be too big to admit the latter is an inarguably more talented and famous group).

It's easy to say *when* my obsession with One Direction began. I remember the day clearly. March 31, 2012. My little sister was watching the Kids Choice Awards on Nickelodeon. I walked into the room just as the group of five teenage boys began performing a song I'd never heard before.

This song, called *What Makes You Beautiful*, was mundane but at the same time inexplicably catchy. The lyrics appealed to *you* and *only you*—you the most *beautiful* girl in the world—though of course with descriptors vague enough to ensure this could be any girl at all.

The boys themselves wore borderline parody-of-itself London prep school attire, adorned with suspenders and blazers in shades of red, blue, and white. Each of their individual haircuts were shaped into gravity-defying topiaries of curls and gelled up locks that sharpened into spikes.

I stopped in my tracks at the sight of them on stage, trapped behind the television screen. “Who are *they*?” I asked. It was love at first sight.

Why my obsession with One Direction began... that's much harder to say. I wasn't a teenager who was easily caught up in the usual hypes bought into by my peers. I didn't care about Justin Bieber. I wasn't moved by the vampire love story *Twilight*. Team Edward or Team Jacob? Who cares? Not me!*

But One Direction was different somehow. For starters, with One Direction, it was more than just one idol thrust upon you with the demand you view him as the epitome of teenage puppy love and desire. It was *five*. And you could choose your favorite, nay, you *must* choose your favorite. (In case you are curious, I was a “Louis Girl,” easily the rarest of the five types of Directioners a girl could be.)

And it didn't just stop at whether you were a Harry Girl, a Niall Girl, a Zayn Girl, a Liam Girl, or a Louis Girl. These identifiers became something akin to astrology's sun, rising, and moon signs. I was a Louis Girl, but Harry was my second favorite. And while those two could be my favorites, I could at the same time revere and "ship" the relationship between Zayn and Liam.

What's more, each boy had his own set of special fun facts. Louis likes carrots! Niall is the Irish one! Liam is afraid of spoons! And though these media-circulated details ranged from unbelievably dull to completely absurd, they came together to form a sort of Holy Book of references that every Directioner was to understand.

In all, this overabundance of intel and content on the band weaved together a landscape ripe for all sorts of adolescent projection and self-discovery.

The minutiae of the personalities of the boys and their interpersonal relationships were just as important to a Directioner, if not more, than the music they actually put out. Which is why, even though I was a Louis Girl myself, I cried on March 25, 2015, when it was announced that Zayn "the mysterious bad boy" Malik would be exiting the band. If you are wondering, I did remember that exact date without Googling it. And if you have a Directioner in your life, ask her, and she'll remember the exact date, too. And I bet she cried that day as well.

These are the things that make a Directioner.

Being a Directioner is about owning physical objects that connect you to the boys, sure. In high school, I had a giant Louis poster in my room and a pillowcase with his face on it, too, and yes, I still have the mug that proudly declares myself the "Future Mrs. Louis Tomlinson."

But it's also about shared experiences. Like when I traveled three hours with my sisters to watch One Direction perform sans Zayn in September 2015. It's still the most joyful concert I've ever been to. Or when I snuck out of class so I could watch the music video for their song *Perfect* in the bathroom at the same exact time as hundreds of thousands of fans the moment it dropped on YouTube. Or when I went to see the One Direction concert film in theaters, and in 3D, no less.

Did I ever think the boys of One Direction are the defining musical artists of our generation? Of course not. Have I listened to every single One Direction album multiple times over till I've memorized all the lyrics anyway? Of course I have.

It was the most ridiculous of times; it was the most serious of times. In reality, the depths of my obsession with One Direction were about being a part of something bigger than me. I could lose myself in an elaborately constructed world of British boys and pop song earworms held together with the strings of lore created by both

savvy publicists and wildly invented off the cuff by teenage girls. Then I could find myself again in the ways I aligned and identified myself in relation to my favorite songs, my favorite boy, my concert DVDs, and my merchandise.

One Direction gave me a community I could understand intimately – secret words and songs and inside jokes meaningless to the outsider but everything to me and those who were Directioners alongside me.

I think we can all agree that having a community like that is what makes life beautiful.

Author's note to reader: I watched **Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part I for the first time ever in the year of our Lord 2022, and I do have to say it made me finally understand why Twilight had the hype that it did, and I am now #TeamEdward.*

Chessmen

Robyn Howard

Before “resting bitch face” entered the social lexicon, people who appeared perennially displeased were described as looking as though they were sucking on a lemon. The origins of that phrase can be traced back to the early 1900s when it was first used to describe my grandmother, who had a demeanor to match.

Although she lived relatively close by, my grandmother’s visits during my childhood were mercifully infrequent. My house was warm and vibrant, so her negative presence often disturbed our typical order and generally interfered with our joy. But, from time to time, my mother would have me stay with her at *her* home for the day—sometimes overnight, for reasons she still cannot articulate. Such days felt punishing; to waste so much time in an apartment where not a modicum of happiness could be detected was brutal.

She’d be in front of the building, ominously waiting for me, so my mother didn’t have to get out of the car when she dropped me off. We’d enter the lobby through the standard door hidden just next to the revolving doors that were reserved for people who wanted to enjoy themselves. I knew better than to push the button for the elevator—too germey—or to ask to take the stairs—too dangerous. During our short ride up, I’d daydream privately about the alternating colors of the floors above, which I’d only seen once.

When we arrived at her floor, I’d match her unrushed pace to the apartment, 1T. As she took out her keys, I’d resist the urge to press the plump and shiny black doorbell because, although no one else was in the apartment, she found it irritating by virtue of being unnecessary. As we entered, I’d giggle noiselessly to myself at the way the font of her apartment number made it look like the word “IT.” Once inside, I’d wash my hands and carefully sit down on the edge of the stiff plastic-covered couch so that the bare backs of my thighs wouldn’t stick to it. I’d wait for her to turn on the television that no one but her—not even other adults—were permitted to touch, and we’d watch something of her choosing, usually the *A-Team* or *Highway to Heaven*, which I only later realized I enjoyed because Mr. Ingalls and Mr. Edwards from *Little House on the Prairie* were comforting in their familiarity.

Some days we’d walk to C-town, her local supermarket, and I’d trail her disinterestedly through the store until we came to the dessert section where the signature white bags of Pepperidge Farm cookies stood at attention in countless rows across the aisle. My eyes would scan excitedly over the chocolate varieties:

Milano, Geneva, Brussels. Aware that I couldn't be so bold as to make an outright request, I would cheerily remark with feigned nonchalance, "I once had a Milano at a birthday party, and it was delicious." She never took the hint and, without further discussion, would inevitably choose the Chessmen. No chocolate, just a boring rectangular butter cookie with a horse head on it. And with that, the shopping trip would unceremoniously conclude, and we'd trudge silently back to the apartment building.

If it was warm, we'd go to the pool. She'd carry down her yellow webbed folding chair with the small member tag glistening off the edge and would sit in it, chatting with her friends, while I swam. Eventually, I'd walk over to let her know I needed to use the restroom. Since she wouldn't let me go up to her apartment alone and didn't want to interrupt her social time to walk me over to the cabana facilities, she would dismissively instruct me to go in the pool. Having grown up with a pool in my own backyard, I knew such behavior was strictly forbidden—by my parents, the most basic sense of hygiene, and her Homeowners Association; I'd hold it until she was done.

Once back in her apartment for the day, I'd blindly reach into the Raggedy Ann and Andy toy box that was tucked into the dark recesses of the hall closet. Although it was identical to the one I had in my room at home, mine overflowed with toys, while the one in her apartment only ever contained a single book of tedious Colorforms meant to be shared by rotating visits of five grandchildren.

My mom would usually send me with something for both of us to enjoy for dinner, such as leftover rigatoni in her homemade marinara sauce. But instead of reheating it in the oven so the edges would get crispy against the Corningware casserole dish, she'd empty the pasta into a frying pan and add enough water to make the macaroni gummy and the sauce runny, retaining no resemblance to the meal I'd enjoyed the night before on my vinyl bench seat in my own yellow kitchen.

I never saw an unwrapped Chessmen, not that I wanted one. After dinner, she'd predictably produce a half gallon of Neapolitan ice cream and no matter how much I'd implore her to just give me chocolate, at very least only chocolate and vanilla, she'd patently refuse to serve a bowl of anything other than a scoop straight through all three flavors: including the strawberry I despised. If I could get away with it, I'd stir them all together into ice cream soup to make them more palatable, but it never worked because the strawberry flavor was overpowering. Sometimes a neighbor would stop by, and my grandmother would unapologetically pull an ancient box of Russell Stover chocolates out of the freezer for the occasion. I'd unfortunately forget how awful these petrified relics tasted and would get stuck sucking on one until it defrosted and softened enough to chew.

You might think that the sleeping part of the day would be easiest, but it was the worst. We'd share her bed, but she'd put me closest to the nightstand, atop which sat a framed, glossy photo of Michelangelo's "La Pietà," which I found terrifying. If I instead looked straight past my feet, a profile photograph of her mother, whom I never met, presided sternly over the dresser looking robust and formidable. I'd shut my eyes and will the morning to come as fast as possible.

But these visits were not entirely devoid of blissful moments. One warm day we were sitting on the tiny terrace, and I furtively watched the woman on the terrace next to us unwrap a vanilla Jello pudding pop. I'd never had one, but I'd seen the commercials that depicted them as the perfect frozen treat for pudding lovers like me. When she wordlessly reached across the divide to hand it to me as though I was expecting it, I immediately planted my tongue on the cool, creamy dessert to affirm that I'd licked-it-so-it-was-mine. I'm convinced that the whole skillful maneuver succeeded only because the element of surprise left my grandmother unable to process the transfer quickly enough to refuse.

Then there was the day the neighbor across the hall fortuitously opened her apartment door at the precise moment my mother arrived to pick me up. With both doors held open as the adults exchanged pleasantries, the neighbor's tiny Yorkie tumbled across the hall and onto my grandmother's green shag carpeting in a blur of fur and joy. The whole glorious intrusion was over in less than a minute, but it was absolutely thrilling and taught me that it was possible to actively create happiness within a space where it didn't already exist.

So, on a short visit with my mom, I courageously smuggled in one of those sticky octopus crawlers you'd find in a 1980s cereal box. I'd been playing with it at home and didn't want to stop, so I innocuously slipped it into my pocket. I revealed it just as my grandmother turned her back to leave the living room we were all sitting in. The combination of shock and fear expressed on my mother's face only emboldened me, and it turned into triumphant admiration as I purposefully threw it against the living room wall. We both held our breath as it stumbled down a few steps, just like it did in the commercial, before losing its grip and dropping like a stone behind the couch, just as my grandmother returned to the room. We both acted as if nothing had happened and never attempted to retrieve it. Happiness had taken the physical form of a child's toy, which did what we needed it to do, and was left there as an offering.

Breathing in the Love of Music

Jaanne Jackson Devoe

It's been a hard day at work, and I'm scrambling to finish up, eat dinner, and run off to choir rehearsal. When I arrive, we do our warm-ups, and then the director hands out a new piece of music. "Ok, let's read through this," she says. And suddenly my day falls away, and I'm inside the music.

Sometimes the miracle of being able to read music strikes me, and I send up a prayer of thanks to my father and mother for giving me this gift. It feels like magic—a Jedi power that allows me to unlock those black notes on the page so easily. I am grateful that I could give that gift back to both my parents in their final years.

Looking back, I don't know if my brothers and I inherited our love of music or simply breathed it in like air as we were growing up. It was as natural a part of our childhood as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and playing outside after school.

My father was a serious and kind man who was tall and bespectacled and looked every inch the college professor he was. He loved classical music and blasted operas on Saturday mornings. He played thunderous Mozart sonatas on the piano and loved playing Christmas carols every holiday.

But it was my mom who taught us the joy of singing. She was impulsive, gregarious, and fun-loving. Mom's music sprung naturally from her activism in all the movements of the day—civil rights, anti-war protests, and women's liberation. She knew all the folk and protest songs, and they became the soundtrack of my childhood: Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," Pete Seeger's "Little Boxes," and Peter, Paul and Mary's "Puff the Magic Dragon" were all in our repertoire. I learned to sing rounds and to harmonize while I dried the dishes with my mom. Music was our entertainment on long summer nights on the sun porch or sitting around the campfire when we were camping.

I was a shy and bookish kid who found refuge and my own group of friends in the choir. My two youngest brothers became rock and rollers who played at local dives in our hometown and shared an impressive knowledge of rock and roll. Even after our parents split up and remarried when I was in my 20s and my brothers were in their teens, we made music a part of every family gathering at our parents' separate houses.

Our lives were shattered in 2001 when my father was paralyzed while body surfing just weeks before the twin towers came tumbling down on 9-11. My stepmother always said that she felt she and my father were just like those twin towers—their lives came crashing down just as suddenly.

My father was still in the hospital that Christmas, and we did our best to celebrate with him in a cold, bare hospital meeting room. My husband and I and our small children, along with my brothers and their spouses and children, all came together bearing Christmas cookies and gifts. We pretended not to notice the constant whir of the apparatus that was breathing for my father. We gathered around the piano once again, and this time it was my brother Tony who sat at the piano and played through the Christmas carols. My father watched with glistening eyes as my brother took his place at the piano—his expression a terrible mixture of pain and joy.

My father lived to see a flock of grandchildren playing in his yard. Ten years later, he lay in a coma taking his last breaths on Christmas Eve. My brothers and I gathered once more with him to say our goodbyes and to sing all the Christmas songs we knew. We wiped away the tears and said our goodbyes, never knowing whether he heard us or not, but we held out the hope that some part of him heard us singing him on his way. He died on Christmas Day, a fitting day for him to depart this world.

Music has continued to be our touchstone and a part of our lives when we're together and when we're apart. I still sing in the choir. Two of my brothers write songs, both play the guitar, and one plays the piano. Some of our children have become musicians, and they occasionally (sometimes) leave their video games to join in the sing-alongs. My younger son improvises on the piano or strums the guitar, a nephew joins in on the guitar, and another plays a mean saxophone.

My smart, vital mother continued working and protesting through most of her life and delighted in her grandchildren. But a few years ago, her memory began to dim, and she was diagnosed with dementia. She has declined rapidly. She knows who her children are but doesn't recognize her grandchildren. Her words are mostly just a jumble of syllables, and she often spends her days pacing restlessly through her house under the watchful eye of an aide.

We often get together at my mother's house, and when we do, out come the guitars or the music appears on the piano. We play the old songs from our childhood for my mother: "You Are My Sunshine" and "Both Sides Now." We have learned that she loves anything sung by Elvis or Frank Sinatra, and we've added some of the old standards, "Only You" and "My Funny Valentine."

And in those moments, my mother will sit and sing softly with us. She will retrieve the words and the tune from some untouched part of her brain, and we will see a glimmer of her former self. But when the music stops, the light dims, and the moment is gone.

Music cannot cure my mother. She has a disease for which there is no medicine. And it certainly could not cure my father. But it was and is the only thing we could give them. It is the delicate thread that still connects us.

I used to think that my brothers and I were giving the gift of music back to my parents. But as every musician knows, the gift of music is an exchange that blesses the giver as much as the receiver. For that blessing, I am eternally thankful

And So I Sang!

Andrea La Bella

Henry David Thoreau said, “When I hear music, I fear no danger. I am invulnerable. I see no foe. I am related to the earliest times, and to the latest.”

My mother arrived to pick me up from school, late as usual, but this time my teacher asked her to stay a moment. I saw Mrs. Oliver’s thick mitt-like hands taking my mother’s thin childlike wrist, pulling her aside so I wouldn’t hear what she said. As Mrs. Oliver spoke in hushed conspiratorial tones, my mother turned and looked directly at me. I saw dread wash over her face because she would have to tell my father what happened, and we both knew he was not going to like it.

Normally, I would have been scared.

It started out an ordinary day: math, painting, recess, and a class sing-along to end the day. It was 1968, and everyone was learning to play the guitar. Mrs. Oliver handed out Xeroxed copies of the song lyrics to be accompanied by her guitar. Eagerly, I read the lyrics. Quickly, I became enraptured (*how many seas...before she sleeps in the sand*). The song was at once deeply sad and profoundly beautiful (*how many years must a mountain exist before it is washed to the sea...*). I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I read the lyrics slowly. I felt their weight, their dignity, their impermanence, questions that will never be answered (*how many...times, years*). These lyrics touched me on a cellular level.

I heard the melody, seemingly from a distance, as if coming out of a trance. Mrs. Oliver’s meaty hands softly strumming her guitar as the class sang along (*how many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry...*), and then it happened: I realized I was crying. Out loud. Nay, I was sobbing uncontrollably. I didn’t know what to do, and no one else did either. I was a spectacle.

Everyone saw and heard me sobbing. Everyone: Anne Housler, Jennifer Borlek, Char Connors, everyone! Char Connors was so embarrassed by my messy emotionalism she had to turn away. That didn’t bother me because this song occupied every space in my mind, body, and soul. I was captivated by its terrible beauty. The absolute sorrow, desolation, and rage held in this combination of melody and lyric (*how many deaths will it take till he sees that too many people have died*) broke my heart and freed my spirit.

My mother took my hand, and we walked, like on eggshells, out of the classroom. When she started the car, the radio shrieked on. She quickly shut it down. "Don't want to start up that nonsense again." She didn't say much on the long, short ride home. "I'm a little more than concerned about you. I'll have to tell your father, and you know how he hates hippies and communists."

By the time we got home, I had composed myself long enough to get out of the car and run straight to my room. Still clutching the Xeroxed copy of the lyrics, I memorized them. I felt like I was wearing a shield. I was different: stronger, bigger, roomier; my hard edges were softening, reshaping. I could feel the transformation happening. The melody played in my mind while the lyrics danced on my tongue. I savored the moments of transformation.

I could hear my parents talking in hoarse whispers about doctors while wringing their hands and pacing the avocado green and harvest gold living room looking for answers. My older brother came running into the house like a brass band, trumpeting at the top of his lungs: MOM, DAD, SHE CRIED! SHE CRIED IN SCHOOL. CHAR CONNERS TOLD DANNY GALAVAN, AND HE TOLD RICHIE PINELL, AND RICHIE TOLD EVERYONE! Mom hushed him away for fear the neighbors might hear, but what he said didn't hurt me at all. He was not my enemy. I was invincible.

Dinner was a dirge. My brother stared at me with hard eyes and tight lips. He leaned over, and in a menacing whisper, he said, "If you cry when you are in the sixth grade and I am in seventh grade, I will tell everyone you are not my sister." I was okay with that because I saw the world in a completely different way now. I sat there, silent, glowing from the inside. My brother was invited to help my mother clear the dishes. He lamented the injustice of a boy having to do women's work, but mom persisted, and my brother relented. Dad and I sat quietly listening to the sound of dishes being scraped and stacked for washing; the rush of the water leaving the spigot with clear intent. The syncopated rhythm of routine movement was comforting.

Dad exhaled deeply, contemplating his options (*how many times must a man look up before he sees the sky*). Breaking the silence; he said, "You know, you'll feel better if you talk about it." I tried to talk. I wanted to express the fullness of spirit I felt. I needed him to know that I was different now. This song gave me courage, but I couldn't find words to speak, and so, I sang! I opened my mouth and sang out as loudly as I could! (*How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man... The answer my friend...*) My voice carried far and wide on the winds of change, and just like that, I was part of something bigger than anything I'd ever known.

There is no way to know which of the moments that make up a day will break out and transform your life forever. Up until then, I imagined life's defining moments would be elegant, born of thoughtful determination and fueled by the strength of my convictions. A legato concerto for one. It never occurred to me that a song wrapped in the ordinariness of the day would lead to a seismic shift in my personhood, challenging me with supercharged movements erupting into complete chaos; coming at me like a staccato assault with an unrecognizable refrain. I withstood its power, and when the music finished working its magic on me, it set me down gently in a beautiful open space, connected to all living things. It was glorious!

Blooming

Gwen McNamara

It was a bright and clear mid-May morning when the gardeners arrived. They came without seeds, spades, or shovels. They had no need for soil or seedlings. Instead, these gardeners cultivated with cotton, wove with wool, and accessorized with acrylic.

Fueled by hot coffee and sugary treats, they transformed Princeton University's Firestone Plaza from a cold plot of stone and metal into a kaleidoscope of pattern, shape, and color. Using stepladders, scissors, and zip ties, they magically called forth a new landscape. Macramé tendrils wound their way between and around benches. Capes of colorful knit blossoms, delicate leaves, and cozy critters draped from lampposts. A bicycle covered in crocheted yarn of every color of the rainbow parked itself by railings blanketed in welcoming works of fiber art.

For months, the members of the Women of Princeton's Knot Stress Away group knitted, crocheted, and sewed. Volunteers led collaborative crafting sessions with the Arts Council of Princeton and the Princeton Public Library. Over lunchtimes and snack-times and late-night-I-can't-sleep-times, participants brought *Blooming: A Fiber Arts Display* to life.

In recognition of mental health awareness month, *Blooming* sought to shine a bright and colorful light on the importance of wellness and the role that craft and community can play in helping so many of us stay well. As noted by groups like the Yarn Craft Council, research shows that practices like sewing, weaving, knitting, crochet, and needlework can all benefit our minds and bodies. They can be soothing, expressive, and communal.

I joined the Knot Stress Away group not knowing I would become a gardener. For me, crochet has always been simply a way to be. To be still. To be present. To be creative. To be caring. To be me. I first taught myself how to crochet in college in the late '90s. I had found a blanket made by my great-grandmother but had no one who could show me how she made it. I decided to figure it out myself and discovered, after a bit of research at the library, it was crochet. With the help of an instruction book from the 1980s that I found at my local the Benjamin Franklin craft store, a metallic golden crochet hook, and a skein of Red Heart supersaver yarn in Monet (a water lily-inspired palette of blues, purples, and greens), I was on my way.

Now, literally hundreds of blankets, scarves, hats, mittens, fingerless gloves, sweaters, vests, bags, holiday ornaments, tea cozies, decorations, towel holders, and even a bedspread later, crochet continues to bring me joy and help me find peace during even the most chaotic of times. It was crochet that came to the rescue when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer while I was pregnant with my first child. Together, we worked on baby blankets—she during chemo; I while on bedrest. During the height of the pandemic, when work collided with home, and work and home collided with teaching two elementary school children in the same place at the same time, crochet quite literally kept me sane by providing some small modicum of escape.

So, when I heard about *Blooming*, I jumped at the chance to be part of a physical manifestation that would celebrate the power of craft, connection, and community. Digging into my treasure trove of leftover scraps from previous projects, I created a patchwork garden of colorful daisy granny squares surrounding a singular pink heart, all stitched together in sunshine yellow. The resulting rectangular creation represented what I think of when I think of blooming—possibility. In my patchwork garden, no two daisies were the same. They each had their own unique color combinations and complemented one another. The heart brought a touch of love, and with love and support, anything is possible.

Princeton University has amazing gardens. They are meticulously pruned, weeded, and carefully maintained throughout the seasons. Tour groups admire them, and happy couples snap wedding photos in them, even during the height of construction. But *Blooming* offers a different kind of garden. One that's more participatory. More spontaneous. Maybe even somehow more organic and alive. For me, it broke through Princeton's typical veneer and served as a reminder that we all need gardens of our own to thrive. We need others who can tend to us when we need more sun or maybe a little less water. How might we inspire more people to be gardeners? To cultivate connection in new ways? To take over spaces and places by allowing creativity to come alive?

This May when the fences begin to sprout in preparation for Reunions, keep an eye out for the gardeners. A new patch of colorful shapes and creations may just start to bloom

Thirty-Eight: An Existential Crisis

Maureen Riggi

I regret my carefree youth, the days of a flat stomach
and not wearing a single crop top.

The great irony of aging is looking back at your “fat”
teenage years and laughing to tears because now,
it’s all about shapewear, invisible panty lines
and knockoff Spanx you can wear and actually use
the bathroom, or else plan for dehydration
or a bladder infection. Why, oh why, did I not revel
in bikinis, in high-cut legs and low-cut triangle tops?

I am thirty-eight, and in crisis over a body
that has served me well, but on the precipice
of forty has ghosted me, sent a break-up text
and changed its number.

This abdomen has been through some shit,
the pure alchemy of building my son,
but that magic is now gone, buried by the uncomfortable
inadequacy of being a woman who,
gasp! looks like she has had a child.

It’s 2024, and women are still cloistered: we must
snap back, wear the tight dress days after birth,
cinch the waist and zip our lips.

We must flaunt these children as if our whole being
has not been disassembled and reconstructed
rather roughly. We are SUVs now—we carry loads
that cannot fit in the coups of youth.
And it's not just the soccer cleats and bicycles,
it's the heaviness of motherhood that requires
the good tires, the kind that self-seal around the punctures.
The nail stays in, but we drive on.

Amazing

Dianne Spatafore

The door closes, and I am alone. I turn on the ignition, and music fills the car. I let my shoulders relax. It has been a long morning, and it took all the patience I had. By the time I get my son on the bus, I am ready to call it a day and go back to sleep. Instead, I turn on the car, and the radio instantly comes alive. “I want to see you be brave...,” Sara Bareilles sings from the car speakers. I let the words wash over me. Yes, I think, I need to be brave, and I hit the back arrow for the song to play again. Today, I need music like this. A song that helps me put myself back together and prepare to face the day. Life might be challenging, but I am brave, and I can be amazing. Well, maybe...I need to play this song a few times before I am sure. These are the lyrics I need for the voice in my head—strong, capable. I need them to be louder than the sadness and uncertainty.

As the mom of a special needs little boy, I have been brave countless times. Brave while doctors gave us information about what he will not do, brave each time they wheeled him away for surgery, and brave in the face of an uncertain future. While he, all along, has been amazing. He is a happy boy who is quick with a kiss and has no sense of what his limits are. He lives in the moment, and I try to be strong enough to stay there with him and enjoy the view. I need to stay positive and calm. When I am with him, tears are a luxury I cannot afford.

In the car, alone, listening to music—that is where I can let the tears come. I can rage at the world, and I can try to sing myself into being ok (if still out of tune). Sometimes I pick the songs I know will make me cry. It is like pulling off a bandage. “I am an old woman,” sings Bonnie Raitt, and I am reminded that time is fleeting. “I love you forever now,” sings Michael Bublé, and I wonder if I will be able to be what my son needs as he gets older. “It’s knowing that this can’t go on forever,” sings Jason Isbell, and I cry at the thought of losing my husband or leaving him on his own.

It is not just the lyrics. I feel companionship and comfort in the artists. Hearing their heartbreak makes me feel less alone in mine. Listening to them sing the words I hesitate to speak validates my tender feelings and brings them to life. While the music plays, I am no longer sitting in my car alone; instead I am part of a chorus. The singer, the musicians, me, and the countless other folks who are also out here on the road singing along. I know each of us have our own interpretation of the music, but it is comforting to share the same tune. “Have you got a fast car?” Tracy Chapman asks. I may not be living the reality that she

wrote about, but I know what it's like to want, just for a moment, to keep on driving.

Sometimes it's a song from a different part of my life that allows me for a minute to remember what it felt like to be seventeen or twenty-seven. To smile at the memory of my younger self longing to go out and explore the world. To feel like anything is possible. Or to relive heartache, knowing that this was the album I listened to on repeat the year my father died. Making the two-hour drive back to my apartment, wondering how much more time we would have. Some days, even all these many years later, I have to skip past it; the nerves are too raw. But other days, when a random Frank Sinatra song pops up in my playlist, I whisper a quiet *hi dad* and listen with a smile. For a few minutes, I am not in the car alone but dancing with him in the kitchen of my childhood home. As a little girl, I sat in the church pew on Sunday morning knowing my dad was singing up in the choir loft. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was there. In this moment, I am reminded that he is still with me, just around the corner and out of my sight.

Music has helped me to process my feelings, reset my resolve, and restore my faith. I don't understand the mysteries of our universe or why bad things happen to good people, but I know that music is a gift we all get to share. I have witnessed, with wonder, the power of music to bring people together and to capture what it means to be human.

Today, I turn up the radio and put the car in drive. Today is not for crying. Today there is work to be done, and I need to be brave. It will be amazing.

Seabound

John Weeren

There's a line in *La Mer* by the singer-songwriter Charles Trenet that resonates with me: *La mer a bercé mon coeur pour la vie*. It sounds better in French, but in translation, it means, "The sea has rocked my heart for life."

I haven't lived near the sea since I was a young adult, but I'm drawn to it as a moth is drawn to light. No imagination is required to hear, taste, or see the rumble of the surf, the salt-laden air, or the ocean's shifting colors: grey, blue, and green. How, I wonder, can something so vast and deep be so relatable?

We speak of the Seven Seas in a futile attempt to contain the waters that cover more than 70 percent of our planet's surface, but, in fact, there's only one sea. On it and in it, we are reduced to insignificance, bound by the dimensions of the deck on which we stand or the volume of the oxygen tank between our shoulders. We are no more able now than King Cnut a thousand years ago to halt a rising tide, and as the world warms, the sea will force us to redraw our maps. International waters belong to no one, defying the human compulsion to divide the Earth into mine and thine.

The ocean is trackless, protean, and impossible to subjugate. It can even be deadly. "Now," says Gonzalo in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground."

Yet the sea is also our common birthright, the source of life itself. And while we weren't designed to swim, notwithstanding the Olympic feats of "Mark the Shark" Spitz, we do have a kinship with the ocean. Our bodies contain more water than any other substance, and the wombs in which we form are filled with fluid. Deny us water, and we will die in a few days.

Perhaps it's this affinity, interlaced with awe, that leads so many of us to visit near or distant shores. Here we test our limits—Can we still touch bottom? Can we outpace a cresting roller? Can we resist the tug of currents that so alarm the lifeguards charged with our protection?

And when our arms and legs fall short of our ambitions, we venture forth on vessels of every size, from kayaks to cruise ships, or probe the deepest and darkest regions of the ocean in submersibles. John Masefield captured this sea-fever—his term, not mine—in one of his best-known poems:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

But, in truth, few of us are mariners. Few of us will emulate Ulysses who, in another poet laureate's telling, resolved to "sail beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars." Mostly, we loiter on the margins of land and sea, scanning the horizon, as if to catch a glimpse of Japan or Ireland, while our children contemplate the dissolution of their castles below the high tide line. And as the sun appears to dip beneath the waves, its fires quenched, we know ourselves to have escaped, if only for a moment, the cares and constraints of daily life.

This is why I seek the sea. Twice a year, I travel to Nova Scotia, an island in everything but name, whose coves and bays are never more than 37 miles from any point in a province aptly known as Canada's ocean playground.

Yes, I come to visit loved ones, but I have a date with the North Atlantic, too. On a coast shaped by glaciers, where foaming breakers and granite headlands clash, I wander among the boulders that a melting ice sheet left behind and the stunted spruce and pine that somehow manage to grow in this sublimely desolate place. Humans are largely absent, and even when encountered, they quickly disappear, swallowed up by the rugged contours of the shore.

But all of this is backdrop to the sea, which dominates my senses and holds me fast. Its sonorous cycle of flood and ebb, its ever-changing interactions with the sky, and, above all, its sheer immensity open what is closed and empty what is cluttered. Here I think more clearly than in the manmade spaces that dominate my life. No library or park can equal it.

At times, however, even this is not enough. In such moments, I wend my way to a crescent of sand or ocean-polished stones. Protected from wind and wave, I brave the chilly waters that may, in August, briefly creep into the 60s. As I adjust to the cold, my body relaxes, and I allow myself to be rocked, pulled and pushed by the sea like flotsam.

Only now do I fully surrender to the water's will. My memories have not misled me. The sea is as much a part of me as I am a part of it, and in this convergence lies something very close to bliss.

Ladders

Stephanie Whetstone

I am in New Mexico in Bandelier National Monument. I have chosen to come here because of its wide-openness, its history, its promise of roaming free. Years ago, after I graduated from college, Jeff and I drove across the country, and I saw the West for the first time. I fell in love. The giant red rocks, the dry air, the huge blue sky. When we got back to North Carolina, six weeks and many miles later, the ancient Appalachians seemed small and soft and hidden compared to the pointy hoodoos and looming Rockies. I haven't been back in decades, until now.

I wanted to go somewhere a world away from gray and lit-up wintry New York, and New Mexico is as opposite from New York City as I could imagine. Here, there are oranges and bright blues, deep greens, white from the snow storm the night before. There are no lights to speak of besides the stars. There are not many people, no matter where we drive, just miles of moonscape rock and scrub bushes, just a sense of peace.

Though it seems odd to find in the middle of this stark beauty, we drive through Los Alamos National Laboratory to get to Bandelier, through the checkpoint, past streets named after nuclear weapons and their creators. Yes, Oppenheimer is one of them. The three or four inches of snow melt quickly in the bright sun, and by the time we get to our destination, most of it is gone, paths are clear, and if it weren't for a few small drifts on the shady side of the park, the snow might never have happened.

The Pueblo people lived in the cliffs of Bandelier, in spaces dug out of the volcanic ash-rock, called tuff. They were high, off-the-ground spaces, accessed only by wooden ladders. This is a problem for me: I want to see the Alcove House, where the council met, and take in the view from there, but it would mean climbing 140 feet on ladders leaned against the rocks.

Jeff and I have traveled a lot, from Mexico to Paris to Italy, and I never go up to see the vista, wherever it is. I am afraid of falling from an exposed height. Glassed in places: fine; airplanes: fine; places you could fall to your death: not at all fine.

In Israel, a few years ago, I thought I could conquer my fear. Again, there were places people had sheltered in the rock; again, there were ladders. Small children were doing it. Old ladies in hijabs were doing it. I could do it! I thought. Until I had

a bit of a panic attack halfway up one of the many ladders stuck into the rock and had to be coached, very slowly, rung by rung, to safety. Never again, I vowed. I'm ok with being a ground dweller, I thought.

But now, in the magical New Mexican landscape, I decide to give it another try. How high is 140 feet anyway? Little kids are doing it. Older people are doing it. I am going to will myself to do it. Why? I don't know. I just feel like I have to try. I am getting older, and who knows how long I will be fit enough for things like this. This is my best shot. That's why.

Stupid. This is what I say to myself as I am halfway up the first ladder, the one actually attached to the ground after the stone steps. The ladder is bound to the cliff though, leaning at an angle instead of straight up—this is a plus. I decide not to look up or down, only at the current rung. Miraculously, I make it. I am thrilled, proud of myself. Ready to claim victory. I look up. There are three more longer ladders above me.

It seems just as bad to go back down now as to go up though, and I want to prove to myself that I am tougher, less fearful now, after having survived the last few years. I breathe audibly. I only look ahead. Jeff is behind me, but by this point in our lives, he knows not to say anything. I only want to focus on my body and the ladder. There is nothing else.

I float maybe. Who knows? Or fly? Probably, I just climb up the ladder like everyone else, but I am only a little bit inside my body. I make it to the top, a small sandy space with a kiva and a stunning view of the landscape. I am proud, and I know that I will have to find my way back down, but so much in life has been harder than this. If I have to climb a ladder now, I can do it. Floating or flying or climbing in the magic of New Mexico, I can do it.

Contributors

Wendy Borg serves at Princeton in the Office of Human Resources' learning and development program, bringing years of experience in government, business, and education. She is thankful to participate in *Princeton Writes*' many offerings of classes and writing groups to strengthen her skills and collaborate with other Princeton writers. A proclaimed lifelong learner, teacher, and writer, she also travels often to New England and Colorado to visit friends, family, and the mountains.

Courtney Coffman is manager of lectures and publications at the School of Architecture. She has served as a content and copy editor for various architectural publications and monographs. Her own writings explore the visual culture and relational aesthetics of contemporary architecture and design alongside alternative histories and popular taste.

Allison Gasparini is the communication specialist at the Center for Statistics and Machine Learning. Her likes include outer space, thrifting, and Tico's juices (not sponsored). Outside of work she does yoga and spends inordinate amounts of time on NJ Transit.

Robyn Howard (cover art and essay) is the program administrator at Butler College. She loves old houses, gemstones, and ethical vegans. Robyn has a Visual Arts BFA from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and funnels most of her creative energy into esoteric Halloween costumes for her rescue Cavachon, 89.

Jeanne Jackson DeVoe is a senior communications associate at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. She is involved with several community groups and loves reading, storytelling, quilting, singing in the choir, and taking walks with her husband, Syth, occasionally joined by their two adult sons, Ray and Will.

Andrea La Bella is the assistant to the director at the Center for Statistics and Machine Learning. She studied acting in Los Angeles and has recently discovered storytelling, performing at various local venues. Andrea is also an avid horsewoman, dedicated to non-violent, partner-based horsemanship. She lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania, with her husband, Rich.

Gwen McNamara is the communications strategy and digital marketing manager at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. With or without a ball of yarn in hand, she loves to craft a good story and weave together loose ends to communicate with clarity.

Maureen Riggi is a poet who has worked at the University since 2010 and has a BA in literature and creative writing from Stockton University. She writes from a well of deeply personal experiences through the lens of vivid imagery. Her current focus is early parenthood and raising her five-year-old son.

Dianne Spatafore is the college program administrator in New College West. She has spent her professional career in higher education, with a focus on event management, and loves bringing people together. She started writing after her son was born with complex medical needs, and she began navigating motherhood. She lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania, with her husband and son.

John Weeren is founding director of *Princeton Writes*, a program established to strengthen the practical communication skills of our University community. Between 2004 and 2013, he served as assistant to and speechwriter for Princeton's 19th president, Shirley M. Tilghman. When time permits, he finds a creative outlet in poetry, short fiction, and plays.

Stephanie Whetstone has always loved words. Her fiction has appeared in *Tulip Tree Review*, *Waccaman*, *Waypoints*, *Drafthorse*, the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and *Narrative*. She loves to edit stories, too. Luckily, she is the assistant director of *Princeton Writes*, where she has the privilege of helping Princeton staff and students hone their writing and speaking skills.



Thank you for reading the work of our Writing Space group. If you would like more information about *Princeton Writes*, please visit pwrites.princeton.edu. To join our creative writing and public speaking groups, please contact pwrites@princeton.edu.



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