

**Red Clay Journal**  
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**Featuring:**  
**Prose by Willow Groskreutz & Samuel J Fox**  
**Poetry by Gracie Belk**  
**Art by Willow Groskreutz and Janice Alverson**  
**Photography by L. Alicia Fuller**



The Harmonica Player: Black and White Photography, L. Alicia Fuller



Summer Charm:  
Photography,  
L. Alicia Fuller

**Are all Your Metaphors Real?**  
**Gracie Belk**

– After Aimee Nezhukumatathil

They ask me in gentle tones, editor’s comments, and emails of the like.

I respond in the same way, each time: I write fiction.

(A simpler way of saying, “Your rules don’t apply.”)

As I type, I laugh in words pulled from Austen.

So, what?

Does it matter if my life flows into a bottle of Bleu De Chanel?

Or even better, a bouquet of Tulips? I come home to him.

At night and drown in his words, every comparison I’ve made.

He lays them out for me; complicated, divine, kindred.

A judge and jury go through the evidence of a life I’ve created.

For myself, in words, in poems, in—

Guilty, guilty, guilty... It’s still Tuesday, the meaning stays.

What more do I get from writing the things I hate? Love, love, love.

A metaphor and a box of overdone clementines. So, he spins me around.

And I hold on tighter. And I keep laughing.

## Letting Go

Willow Noelle Groskreutz

In Alaska, autumn is short-lived. It's all yellow and gold from the birch and cottonwood trees. The only purples or reds can be found on the mountainsides in the late afternoon when the sun rests on the tundra. Then the snow starts creeping down from the summits.

The Piedmont gradually eases you in and out of all the seasons. The trees get burned from the top down, a spectacular display of the changing light spectrum. One section will show fall, while the others remain in summer. A larger diversity of trees in the Piedmont puts on a vibrant display of color. Bright yellows, crisp oranges, bloody reds, and deep purples. They are a delight to paint with watercolors and a healthy way to obsess over tiny details. In my time, engrossed in the veins and changes in hues of fallen leaves, I discovered that there is beauty in change and art to letting go.

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I never fully grasped what it meant to let something be until my crystal pulled a disappearing act on me.

I went for a long walk on a day when the sky was the color of robins' eggs. The goldenrod was in full bloom, and the trees blazing red. The night before was full of serious reflection, and I felt lighthearted and content about everything. I strolled along the trail bordering the disk golf course peacefully, with a smile on my face. Then suddenly, I noticed my necklace clasp came undone, and my crystal pendant fell into the leaf litter.

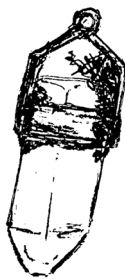
The crystal, made of delicate rose quartz, came to me at a time when I needed a constant reminder of the love and compassion rose quartz represents. I'd worn it every day for years, never removing it once. It'd become a part of me. Not only had the clasp never come undone before, but I couldn't believe I'd witnessed the split second it occurred. I instantly dropped to my knees and began sweeping away the leaves. My heart started beating faster as my attempt to find what felt like a missing piece of myself became more desperate. It was useless. There were too many leaves. The crystal was gone.

As I felt myself on the verge of panic, a crazy thought flew into my head. So what? I didn't want to let losing the crystal to ruin the day. I didn't want anything to ruin this day. And what if this wasn't random? After the past night of reflecting on how far I had come, literally and figuratively, I could see that the crystal had served me well. Maybe it is time for it to be discovered by someone who needed it more than I did.

I stood up and walked away.

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Three months passed. Autumn completed its course. I'd accepted the crystal was gone, and I would never see it again. Then one day, I visited the same trail as I do so often. I thought about the crystal, and how light it made me feel to walk away. And then I happened to glance down at the exact moment before I stepped on something small and pink.





**Janice Alverson, “Enjoy the Ride” - multimedia, 2024**

This piece was brought to life when Rad Chad asked me to design something for the T-shirts for the skatepark grand opening. Instantly I knew I wanted to do a skeleton. As the piece came together I found myself flooded with memories of my friend Mark Berkelbach. Mark was an extremely talented skater! I watched him skate on two boards, land crazy tricks, and even wipe out and eat pavement. Mark was even sponsored! Unfortunately his life was cut short when he suffered a heart attack from a lifetime heart condition. We lost him at the young age of 18yrs old. Mark’s favorite colors were teal and purple, which was the inspiration for the clothing and board. The phrase “Enjoy the Ride” to remind us life is too short to stress it. Just like Mark, we too can have our days cut short. May he be immortalized in Skatesville!

### **Decrescendo and Pop-Punk Divebombs into Uncertain Futures Samuel J Fox**

I’ve wanted to live in a world that didn’t hate me half as much as I’ve hated myself. Fall Out Boy plays one of my favorite interludes in their Infinity on High album. “Golden” plays as I drive beneath streetlamps edged around I-40. I hum along, not quite in the mood to sing. I’ve always been told I sing like Patrick Stump; however, I’d rather write like Pete Wentz.

It’s like this: there are melodies and there are metaphors consistent with the instrument our lives become. Me? I’ve more hollow-bodied and buzzing fretboard than a lead singer in a garage band become popular.



Here I am, driving to visit a friend in Raleigh, and I can't help but think about the fact that I won't be able to return to this city much more. It's the city that loves to hate me: littered glass discarded like coins for the wishing, too many of the homeless with college degrees, and music festivals that my friends have been fighting to be in for more than half their lives.

In the mix, Free Throw comes on with a song titled "Two Beers In" and, though the song is from 2014 – the same year I would start graduate school – it feels intensely relevant. The trope about feeling alone in a crowded room of friends always sucker-punches me directly in the feels. I would later drop out of my MFA in poetry but put the song on my favorites list. My heart makes divebombs rather consistently: I always expect to feel at home in this city, but, like any great expectation, I should learn to be prepared to be disappointed.

It's like this: I stopped believing in God and started wearing the shade black more. My friend Matt always corrects me about the fact that black is not a color: like the time I said I was suffering more than I ought to be. He stopped me and called me out on comparing suffering of others to my own. I never forgot that conversation. Now, he's getting married and producing music in multiple bands and I'm trying to sort out the excuses I've made for my life and try harder to find a truth that sticks.

It's like this: truth is never objective. We'd like to ascribe to believe in something that is completely true; friendship, for example, that never ends.

People grow older not knowing their lives become a decrescendo. There's no coda at the end of it all. At a stop light, "Passing through a Screen Door" comes on. Dan Campbell of the Wonder Years tells me I'll never understand flashlights and a small knife and train schedules on a bed side table. The need to always run. The question becomes this: if we screw up the trajectory of our lives, do we replace it for the music of the moment? I scream the lyrics and start sobbing. I pull into the parking lot in front of the watering hole my friends always gathered at: Cup o Joes. I sit there and sob, knowing I'm five minutes from the neon sign going dark. I don't need the coffee. I keep running.

It's like this: everyone suffers and very few, including myself, are graceful at it. We shouldn't indulge in our suffering. We shouldn't build playlists that help us reminisce about pain, but we do. I watch as my friends drink at the bar adjacent to Cup o Joes and they don't know I'm here yet. I watch them laugh. I watch them bicker and tease each other. I don't think I know who I am anymore or where I'm going but, right now, I could use someone singing Blink-182 badly in the background with a karaoke mic in their hand, a cold PBR, and someone to hold me as I compose myself back from shivering and sobbing. This life is all I have. Yes, the world can hate a burnt-out defunct grad student who works in retail and wears the same band shirts, the same plastered smile, and fail to hit on everyone who will flirt first. I must accept the decrescendo as a matter of fact, an almost truth if you will, that the music will one day be all that's left to remember me by. They say hearing is the last sense to leave us when we die. I hope that, if I do divebomb, a Pete Wentz lyric will be the final thing I hear, that there's a mosh pit at my funeral, and that it sells out and my corpse wears the first band shirt I ever bought: My Chemical Romance and the drum major, marching across the darkness, leading the Black Parade.



**A Prayer to a Failed Poet**  
**Gracie Belk**

Forgive me, for only coming to you now  
Not all the times, before  
I should be better—I will  
Those days I walked past your open door  
Aching and refusing to speak  
Anger felt easier than thought  
Much more than a conversation  
God bless the failed poet  
Words come fast and plentiful  
But they do not come simple  
Too many syllables to count  
And definitions to stretch  
Rearrange, rearrange, and rearrange  
Pray that one day it will be right  
I will have said the right thing  
God does not have to define success  
He can write poems that no one knows  
And be praised  
His words all written in red  
I choose my sins carefully  
A covenant with envy  
How dare he preach to me these things  
Things that he doesn't even get right  
Where's the love in that  
If I'm crafted in his image,  
Why are my words not an equivalent  
All I get is an unanswered prayer in a silent room.



**Fourth Place Race Horse**  
**Gracie Belk**

The words slow me down  
Until I lose sight of the finish line  
Running behind the underdogs  
Passing by until I land in mediocrity

The horseshoes miss the post  
And I forget how to run  
My legs move without mind  
Far off in a land of old age

The time of protege ended  
Passed by miles of track  
Where is the anger  
How does the rage fall  
When it's your fault

Guilt runs me to the ground  
Pushing me into apologies  
How much longer do I have?  
Can I stop here?  
Only for a moment.

Forgive me, I forget  
How to act, How to bend  
Tantrums build in my mind  
Coming out as heaved sighs  
Civility exists on a racetrack

To be so young,  
And already so failed  
Things I don't know but should  
Teach me before I lose  
Fix me before this ends

It feels all too soon  
It cannot end here  
Fourth place is good  
For a racehorse

Comfortable in Chuck Taylors:  
Black and White Photography,  
L. Alicia Fuller