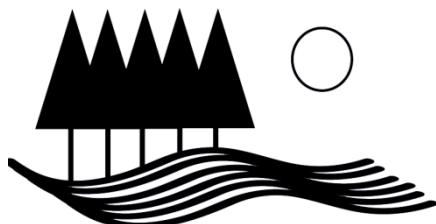


BLACK RIVER REVIEW

A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Fine Arts



Jefferson Community College
State University of New York
Watertown, New York

Volume XXXVI
Spring 2026

EDITORS & JUDGES

Christine Pristash, *Editor-in-Chief*

Erin Kuhn, *Art Editor*

April Schmidt and Brandon Maxam, *Literary Editors*

COVER ART

Abby Rudd

Just Peachy

oil pastel and color pencil

Opinions expressed by the authors and artists do not necessarily reflect those of the editors or of Jefferson Community College.

SUBMISSIONS

The editors seek original submissions for the *Black River Review* in the following categories:

Poetry: Up to 5 poems, not to exceed 50 lines each

Fiction: Up to 2 short stories, not to exceed 1500 words each

Non-Fiction: Up to 2 essays, not to exceed 1500 words each

Plays: Up to 2 one-act plays, not to exceed 1500 words each

Artwork: Up to 4 works in the original medium, such as black ink or charcoal drawing, computer graphics, b/w photographs (even if printed from color film)

Music: Up to 2 compositions 16 or more measures in length

Only submissions from Jefferson Community College students (full or part-time), faculty, staff, and alumni will be considered. Cash awards for outstanding work will be awarded.

Submitting and presenting work:

For *Black River Review* submissions, include name, address, phone number, and status (i.e., staff, faculty, student, alumni with grad class year) on each submitted work as well as a biographical note of thirty words or fewer when submitting. All submissions become the property of the *Black River Review*; submitted works will not be returned. However, after first publication, all rights revert back to authors/ artists.

Award recipients are encouraged to participate in the reading of works and presentation of awards during the *Black River Review* unveiling in Spring 2027.

Deadline for Volume XXXVII: February 12, 2027

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CREDITS

Typing and layout for this volume of the *Black River Review* is done using Microsoft Word. Prize notification and event coordination by Diane Matiland and Heather Natali. Original logo design by Dave Bowhall. Cover art digitizing by Keri Chubb (Class of 2010) and Gillian Maitland (Class of 1993). Website content production by Andrew Lackey and Erin Kuhn. Printing by Speedway Press.

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Frontispiece: **Abby Rudd** – Strawberry Fields (graphite)

Christine Pristash

Introduction

Welcome to another year of great literature, art, and music from the Jefferson community. Our writers, artists, and musicians have created works that spark a range of emotions, sometimes exuberance, at other times sadness, and still yet others some fear.

In a way, editing the *Black River Review* often feels like creating a good mixtape or playlist. Editing and arranging involves balancing competing emotions while creating a flow and upward momentum.

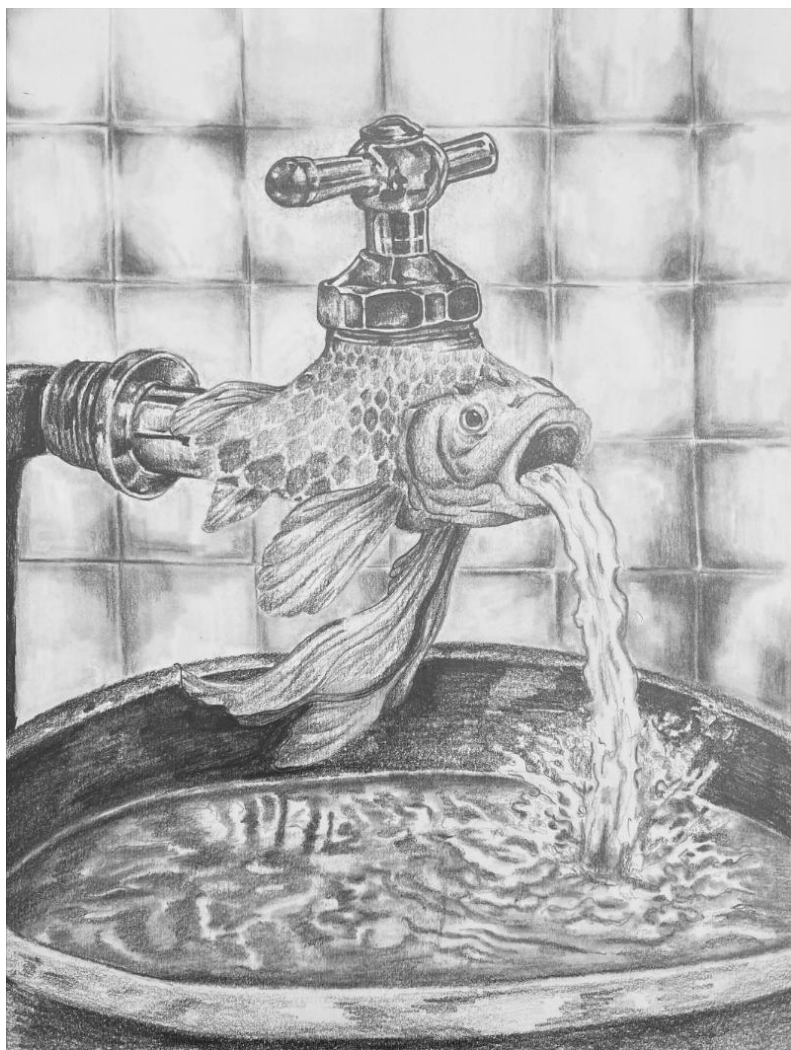
Any good mixtape needs a great cover. This year's cover artist, Abby Rudd, has created the perfect art for this year's overarching feelings and imagery. While her cover, "Just Peachy," is bright and dynamic, the abstract nature of her frontispiece, "Strawberry Fields," captures the imagination while creating something that feels simultaneously beautiful and a little ominous.

Ultimately, a good mixtape is also like a love letter. The BRR editing team hopes you enjoy the highs and lows of emotion, theme, and imagery that make up this year's publication. This mixtape is for you, Jefferson.

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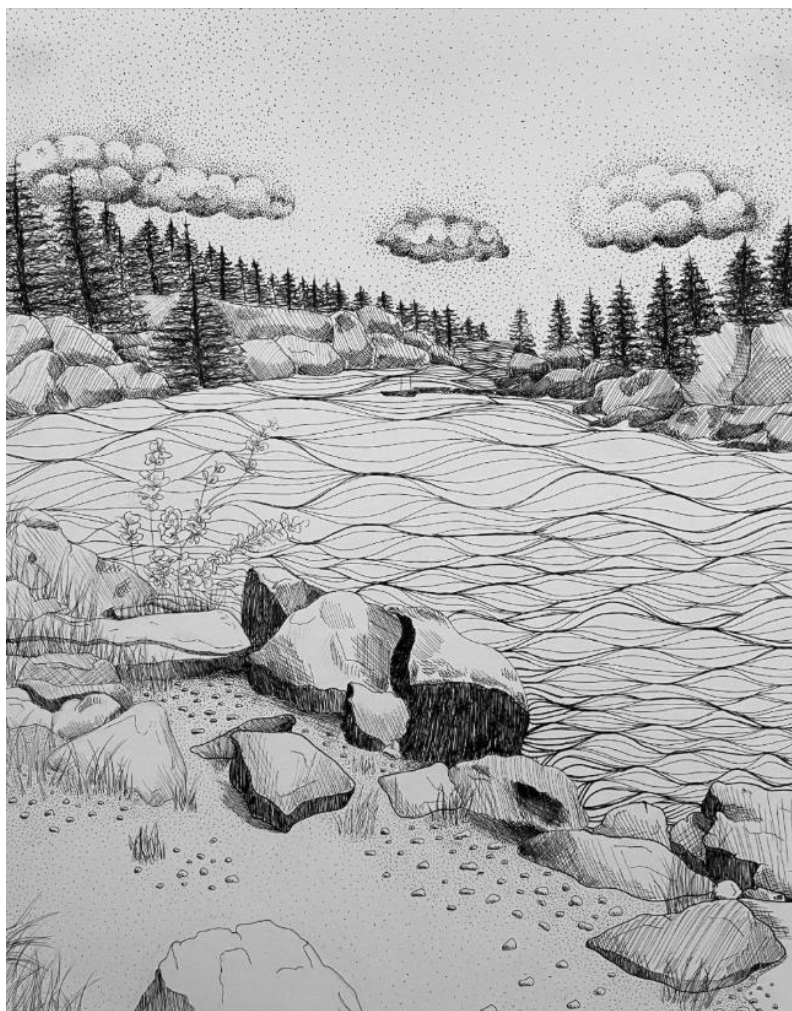
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Caela Berry – Watertown's Water (graphite)

Kenyon Wells – On the River at Season's End (poem)

Parcels of time sweep along with the current.
Light wizards among the stars
dance the can-can in the sky.
Along the darkening shore
oil lamps in cottage windows
are made muted and ghostly
through the prism of old wavy glass,
appearing from the distance of a memory
like a scattering of marbles
from long-ago children's games.
Old folks, in the rocking chairs
left out on the screened porches
to be the last things put away,
smile with thoughts of the summer soon to pass.
Evening mist begins to glide nonchalantly
in behind the vanishing sun.
Night ships traveling up and down the river,
illuminated like great floating cathedrals,
pass one another in the channel
tooting hello and good-bye.



Caela Berry – Hiking Trip (graphite)

Kenyon Wells – Below the Surface (poem)

Some poems writhe on the page
with an elegant edge
to their smooth contortions,
like water lilies
on a ruffled pond,
the roots far more complicated
than the beauty
of the floating flower.



Eric Carden – Boldt Castle Power House (photograph)

Leah Anrose – A Drummer’s Thoughts During “The Girl from Ipanema” (nonfiction)

Tick tick tick tick—boo-dat-dedada, boo-dat-dedadadada. I turn my head to the right, trying to keep the tempo, peering at the foot of the conductor tapping the grass at a tempo slightly faster than mine. My clammy hands grip my sticks tight. The sun shines on the first half of my music and in my eyes. I squint to see which part of the “The Girl from Ipanema” we’re on. *Measure ten—eleven.* My hair blows across my face, covering my already squinting eyes, and my foot, on the bass drum, shakes from raising and pushing it on every beat.

Boomboom—boomboom.

“What time are you guys getting here?” I asked impatiently.

I called my sister the morning of the concert to ask her about her plans.

“Well,” she said slowly, her mouth filled with food, putting a curved finger up to her lips. My leg started bouncing up and down as I stared at the screen waiting for her answer. “I get out of my seminar at 12:00 and Tyler is getting out of work at 11:30, but—.”

Okay, so if they get out at like 12:00, they would drive home first to meet up, so that would take maybe 30 minutes . But usually they take a while to get their things ready to leave. But they would need to leave by 1:00 because it takes 3 hours to get here. But what if they don’t make it in time? They have to watch the whole thing. And they need to be there early so they can get a spot. And they also need to bring chairs. And—

“Hello? Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah... But you also need to—.”

“We’ll be there.” She cut me off, but reassuringly.

I heard something jangle followed by a loud thud. “Okay, I gotta go. I just got to Dollar Tree.”

“Oh, okay. Bye. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Sissy!” She hung up.

I did the same with my cousin and her boyfriend the night before. I gave her a call and asked them, “What are you guys

doing tomorrow?” I tried to say it in a way that meant something more like “Don’t plan anything for tomorrow evening.”

“Do you guys want to come to our concert? My dad and I are in it.”

They nodded.

On FaceTime, I could hear a bunch of racket coming from my cousin’s square, along with a matching image of someone taking clothes out of a laundry basket. “Okay, we’ll be there.” She said hesitantly, picking up a pink shirt and folding it on her bed.

I gave the screen a half-smile.

“Okay.” I hung up.

Pssssssss...bubum-crash. About a quarter into the song, the pole behind me, holding the tent to the ground and hiding in the dirt, suddenly jumps up like a lion, pouncing on its prey.

“Ahh!” I let out a tiny, automatic yell, only for my dad’s ears to hear.

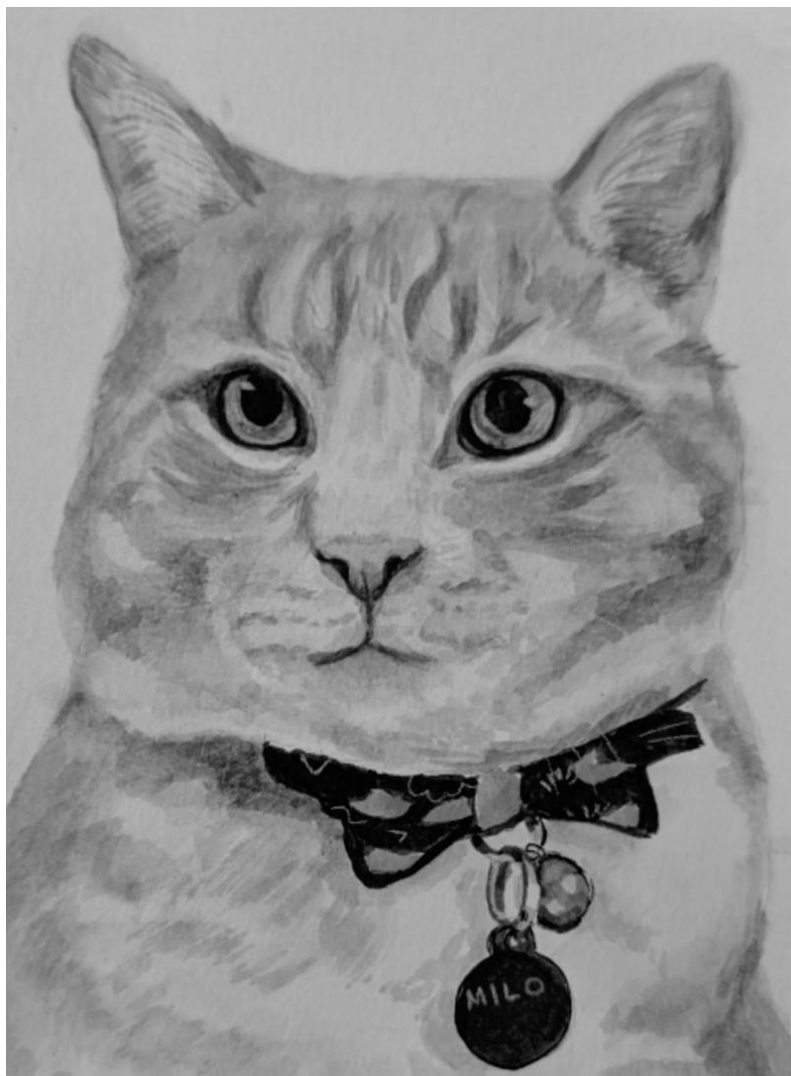
Without a word, his eyes lock with mine, and he stretches his hand out to the pole. I turn to him with a smile. He smiles back at me, his hands continuing to slap on the heads of the congas, matching my tempo. The thought about the tempo comes back to me, and I give a slight gasp. I take another glance back at the conductor’s foot, making sure I’m leading the band’s tempo alright. I was going too fast. I quickly catch back up to his tempo and the rest of the band’s.

Daga-daga-daga-crash.

About 30 minutes before driving to the concert area, my dad and I frantically looked through our wardrobes trying to find our concert outfits. I rushed back and forth between my parents’ room and my room. My parents’ room. Back to my room.

“Okay, we’ll wear these.” I held up a white hanger holding a flowy blue and green tropical Hawaiian button-up with light blue flowers for my dad and another white hanger holding a top with similar colors, a button-up that was three sizes too big for me, since the top’s previous owner was my dad.

Continued on page 8



Reanna De Los Santos – Untitled Cat 1 (watercolor)

Continued from page 6

I wanted us both to wear fun colors and cool designs and stand out and not be boring, like everyone else. My dad tried on his top and I slipped on mine, and we met each other in the hallway.

“Actually, no, we’re not wearing these,” I told him, sprinting back over to my room while he stood there about to button his last button.

“Whaaaaat?” my dad responded lightheartedly, willingly undoing all the buttons he had just spent about five minutes buttoning after I told him to change for the fourth time.

I stood in front of my closet, scanning swiftly through the color-coded clothes in my closet, as if I were looking for a book to read at the New York Public Library right after a hurricane ran through it. My ringer went off and my eyes shot straight to my phone. I ignored the new notification and tapped the Find My iPhone app. *Where were they?* My eyes jumped to the words that said, “7 minutes away.” My chest filled with a sudden pressure. I sifted back through my top options, only to leave with empty hands. I darted over to my parents’ room, still with the previous top on, to find myself a top that coordinated with my dad’s top.

“We only have seven minutes to find an outfit and then we need to go. They’re not even here yet. I told them they needed to be here fifteen minutes ago so they could be early.”

“It’s fine, Leah, just wear that.” My mom’s tone sounded slightly irritated.

I snapped back at her, accidentally. “It doesn’t fit right on me. And I want our colors to coordinate.”

My dad quietly sighed and gave me a nod. He took his polo off, leaving him with his tank and black pants, standing patiently, waiting for me to find him another button-up to wear.

Pssssssssss...badabubum-crash. I look back at the conductor’s foot, anxiously. Wrong tempo again. *Faster. Wait, no. Now slower. A bit faster.* My foot stomped on the bass drum pedal, and the drum made a deep *boom* with a slight delay. The wind makes an attack on my hair, moving it back and forth like a

mother's hand wiping the messy mouth of her child after a meal. I wrinkle my nose, holding back a sneeze, as hotdog and hamburger smoke make their way inside both nostrils. *They said they would be here. They said they would come.*

My eyes search for the people I love, as I bob and weave my head back and forth, trying to avoid the obstacles: heads, brass instruments, and the sun bouncing off the golden metal and into my eyes. My nose starts to have that tingly feeling. Watery eyes follow, but not one tear falls.

Surrounded by a sea of strangers, my gaze wanders and finds a pair of eyes. Familiar eyes. A familiar face. Her motherly stance right up front, holding up her phone, recording us with a big smile. Her head in a sunhat peeks proudly at me and my dad from behind the camera, smiling, like we're little kids on a stage graduating from kindergarten. She puts her white pointy shades back on, covering her brown eyes, breaking our eye contact. *She came. She showed up. She's here.*

My mind, it empties. My heart, it slows. The music, I finally—*feel.*

Tick...tick...tick...tick---booooo-daaat-dedadaaa, booooo-daaat-dedadaadadaa. My stiff arms soften, and my hands hold my sticks just right. My fingers readjust their grip wrapped around the wood—not too tight, not too loose. My breathing steadies. *Focused.* Both ears absorb the vibrations of the saxophones, the smooth slides of the trombones when they slur, and the short, staccato notes the trumpets make as they play the melody. *Balanced.* My face, clear of hair, finally gets to hide in the cool of the shadow, evicting the family of sweat beads on my forehead and nose. The wind loses the battle and joins the winning side. I check my tempo once again, my eyes glancing at the conductor's foot. Tunnel vision.

Crash. Right on the beat.

The thought comes back to my mind, however. *Are they still coming?* I search the crowd one more time. Strangers standing around. A few taking bites out of their burgers. Some sitting in lawn chairs. Some came to watch their friends play their instruments. Some came for the nachos and cheese from the

snack shack. Some came to listen to some nice music. But hopefully, some will soon come to see a dad and his daughter play.



Rose Slate – The Watcher (photograph)

Elena Dickinson – Ripe, Unladylike (poem)

Peeling the sticker from a nectarine like a scab
The hinge of her arm eating the barcode's abandon
Mind tremulous but abuzz none
Victim to its own lame dexterity, a head full of loose pinky
swears.

Memory's grasp akin to an ungrateful child at the county fair,
always forgetting
From her plastic bag filled with lukewarm saltwater
Watching that overpriced balloon freefall in reverse
Trying to remember something her mother said
About boys and their fondness—or was it a lack of
fondness?—for fruit.

She had wrapped it in a dish towel
Bruising it tender with an attempt at a knot
Roused much the same
From that molasses stupor
In which she usually sunbathes
Flirting shamelessly with the universe
While millennials lust over artificial sweeteners and avoid
thought.

Lapping at the window's ragged breath, her pound puppy
heart
Thudding at an angle, left to starve in this man's backseat
She is Plath's Miss Drake
Proceeding to supper
Dried juice trailing her neck
Shards of eggshell fastened to bare feet.



Jasmyn Marrero – Expectations (gouache)

Sydney Markham – Rhapsody (with Banjo!) (musical composition)

[A] Lento rit. a tempo rit. a tempo rit. a tempo rit.

Piccolo
 Flute 1
 Flute 2
 Oboe 1
 Oboe 2
 Clarinet in Bb 1
 Clarinet in Bb 2
 Bassoon 1
 Bassoon 2
 Horn in F 1 & 2
 Horn in F 2 & 4
 Trumpet in Bb 1
 Trumpet in Bb 2
 Trombone 1
 Trombone 2
 Tuba
 Timpani
 Bass Drum
 Cymbals
 Banjo
 Harp
 Violin
 Violins 1
 Violins 2
 Viola
 Violoncello
 Contrabass

Continued on page 15



Pamela Dixon – Be Right Back (photograph)

Continued from page 13

10 a tempo

18

[B]

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Obo. 1

Obo. 2

Cl. in Bb 1

Bj.

Vln.

Vlns. 1

Vlns. 2

Viola

Vcl.

Chs.

** See the online version of the *Black River Review* for the full composition and an audio recording of the piece.



Annabeth Baxter – Portrait Exchange (paper collage)

Kirsten Pratt – Standing in her Light (poem)

In life, she commands a room
the way seasoned actors command a stage—
no wasted movement,
no unfinished gesture.

Nothing left to design.
Design implies flaw.
Flaw implies permission.
She never granted that.

She never accepted no,
or can't,
or don't,
or won't.

“Women can't be doctors”
became a doctorate.
Doubt became discipline.

Worthlessness turned into precision:
makeup applied like armor,
blonde hair carried into her eighties,
shoes matched to dresses,
dresses to purses,
nothing excessive,
everything exact.

She came from nothing.
She will leave with everything.

She failed once at love,
and succeeded the second time—
lucky enough to find a partner
for life and for death.
In him, she found a father,

a lover,
a witness.

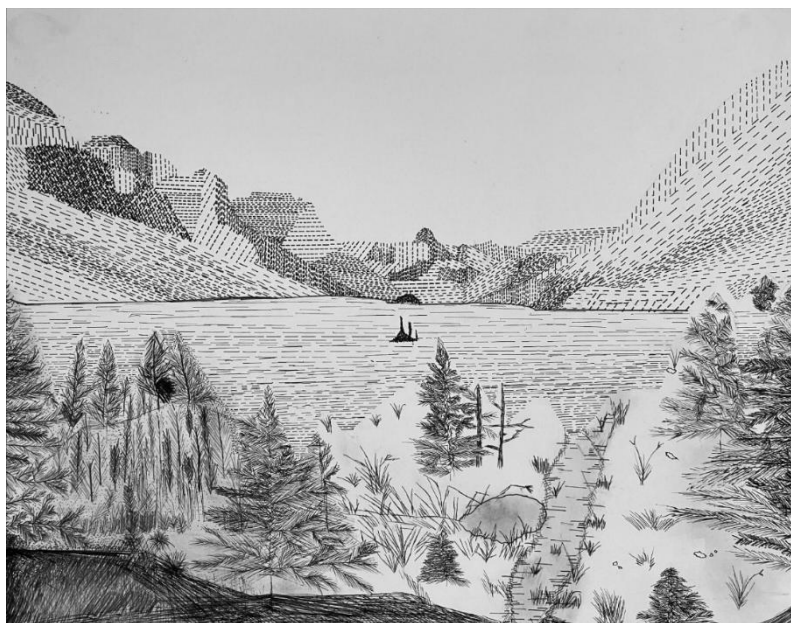
Together they raised children—
his, hers, and me.
She learned from her mistakes
and kept learning,
even now.

In dying, she treats the loss of dignity
like a battlefield she refuses to surrender.
She fights for comfort.
For choice.
For her way.

Her body has thinned,
but her mind has not bent.
She is still the woman she was—
formidable, brilliant—
only quieter now.

She is my compass.
“Do what is right, not what is easy.”
She is the reason
I chose this path.

There is nothing I can do
to stop what’s coming.
So I stand here,
in her light,
and stay.



Angel Mijares – Still Waters (pen and ink)



Kaylee Simmons-Noel – Prosperous Comeback (colored pencil)

Josh Dickinson – Oda to the Soda (poem)

Let us now praise famous soft drink
pop
Not your Coke or Pepsi, RC, nor new Hires,
We know about metonymy, every drink being called a *Coke*

No, I love more the sarsaparilla—helps me to think
On too few hours sleep, no dozing to fear
To hear those ice cubes dancingly plink
And the red—yes, red—concoction craft brewed
Made to seem so, we know the red is added. . .
Fake old-timey stuff that it is, as if a tree gives up its heart
Root in aspiration of carbonation.



Graceanne Sides – Autumn Garden Snake (photograph)

Kirsten Pratt – Where No One Hears the Cracks (fiction)

Author's Note: *This work of fiction is adapted from a longer narrative and was inspired by conversations with formerly incarcerated individuals, reflecting the mental health crisis in U.S. prisons.*

They handed me a mattress like it was a welcome packet and pointed me toward a unit I didn't know how to belong to. I hugged the roll to my chest, as if it might soften the looks cutting into my back. I didn't know what face I was supposed to wear-- tough, sorry, or nothing at all. I kept my eyes down and my mouth shut.

The door slammed behind me with a finality that settled into my bones. Metal scraped metal. Then the lock clunked, heavy and absolute, sealing me inside. I stood there holding my issued supplies tight to my chest like they could shield me from what came next.

Don't panic.

When I looked up, my cellmate was watching me. She sat on the top bunk with her elbows on her knees, studying me like she'd been issued me the same way I'd been issued this soap. Her uniform clung to her like armor, sleeves rolled to the elbow, forearms strong and tense, ready to brace if they had to. Her eyes were brown, but dulled, like someone had turned the contrast down. Not cruel. Not kind. Just practiced. She looked like this place hadn't broken her so much as carved her into something that could stay. For a moment, neither of us spoke. The silence stretched, thick and dangerous; if either of us broke it, reality would rush in. I wasn't ready for that.

I cleared my throat, reflex more than courage. "Hi. I'm Mercy. Or—Collins, I guess." My voice sounded too small.

Her gaze flicked to the bottom bunk. "Joy," she said finally, low and gravelly, like she didn't waste words on introductions. Then, after a beat, "Make your bed right. They like shit tight in here."

There was something almost kind in the way she said it.

I swallowed hard and bent down, hiding my face behind motion. Noise over emotion. Motion over grief. I'd already done enough crying to last a lifetime.

"Thank you," I muttered.

Joy nodded toward the shelf. "That's yours. Keep it clean. Don't leave trash. They'll toss your shit."

I made the bed with slow, uncertain hands, trying to remember how corners worked while my nerves tied themselves into knots. Joy leaned in once, grabbed a corner, and tucked it under with one practiced flick.

"Hospital fold," she said. Not warm. Not harsh. Just practical. She stepped back like her part was done and sat again. A silent agreement signed without ink.

In the cafeteria later, I learned the rules weren't written anywhere. They were passed mouth-to-mouth like contraband. "See that lady over there?" a redheaded woman said around a bite of bread, nodding toward a grey-haired inmate sitting alone. The woman stared at something far away, lips moving. "Avoid her."

"Why?" I asked.

The redhead snorted. "Because she's cracked. And cracked people get you in trouble just by existing near you."

Joy didn't look up from her tray. "Don't stare."

I stared anyway. The woman's hands fluttered softly, careful, like she didn't want to scare whatever ghost she held.

"Shouldn't she be in a mental health facility?" I asked.

Laughter rolled down the table, not cruel, not kind. Just tired.

"Ain't nobody care about mental health in here," the redhead said. "You can be broken. Bleeding inside. They'll either write you up for acting weird or throw pills at you till you're quiet."

The words settled in my chest like wet cement. Joy's hand clamped around my forearm, firm enough to anchor me. Her eyes met mine, warning threaded through them. "The COs are not your friends," she said. "The day they act like they are, they cross your line." *Continued on page 26*



Jade Ramirez – Creepy Chan (monster clay and wood)

Continued from page 24

I looked up at the guards lining the wall, faces blank as paint.

“You go your way,” Joy added. “They go theirs. That’s how you survive.”

That night, I lay in my bunk staring at the ceiling and thinking about boxes. A box on wheels to a box with locks to a box you breathe in. My life, reduced to boxes.

Days blurred. I learned how to sign up for showers, how to walk like I wasn’t afraid, how to keep my mouth shut even when my stomach was a fist. I learned the worst thing you could do in here was look like you needed something. Needing things was weakness.

Joy warned me once, catching me wiping away tears in the cell. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t have to. “This place don’t give a damn how you feel,” she said, slicing an orange from the commissary like she was cutting through facts.

“What about therapy?” I asked.

Joy didn’t laugh. “There’s a list. Long.” She scraped the peel away. “In here, you learn, or you drown.”

Sometimes in the yard I watched the grey-haired woman at the fence, murmuring to the empty space beside her. Once, I asked Joy what had happened to her.

Joy stared past the razor wire, jaw tight. “That girl was like you once,” she said finally. “New. Quiet. Couldn’t stop asking why.” She shook her head. “They beat the why out of her. Now she talks to shadows instead.”

I didn’t ask again.

A few months in, I understood three things. First, I was alone with my mind. Cracking meant paperwork or pills. That was “care.” Second, the rules were designed to catch you slipping up. One wrong step became a write-up, and write-ups stacked into time like bricks. Third, loneliness lived everywhere. Even beside others, there was only proximity.

The only thing that tethered me to the outside was my daughter. I kept her letters and drawings in a small box on the cell table. At night, I traced her handwriting with my finger like

I could feel her through ink. Sometimes tears slid down my cheeks so quietly I didn't notice they'd started.

I felt like I was screaming, but only inside. And no one could hear me.

The pressure didn't break all at once. It never does. It built quietly, like a kettle with no whistle.

One afternoon, the woman behind me brushed past and muttered, "Newbies who cry too easy."

I laughed—too loud, more bark than humor.

She stopped and turned. "Think something's funny?"

Something ugly rose in me, foreign and sharp. "Yeah," I said. "Your face is."

She smiled slowly. "You got a little girl on the outside, right? Hope she's well."

The words landed soft and precise. She knew I had a daughter. I didn't wonder how.

I don't remember deciding to swing. I remember sound—flesh, bone, chaos. I remember COs grabbing my arms, my body twisting in their grip like an animal. I remember blood on my knuckles, hers and mine, dripping onto the tile like punctuation at the end of a sentence.

Afterwards, I shook so hard my teeth chattered.

This place is good at turning people into monsters, I thought. Not the kind in movies. Quiet ones.

They put me in the hole.

At first, silence came with the promise of return. This was silence that swallowed you whole, a void, the drip of a faucet, your breath turning into thunder. Meals came on Styrofoam trays, no utensils. They didn't want me hurting myself. I understood why someone would.

When they finally let me out, Joy was in the cell like she'd never moved. Same bunk. Same posture. She didn't say anything, just looked at me. In her eyes I saw something like sadness. Or disappointment. Not because I was back, but because I'd crossed into the part of prison that takes more than time.

Eventually, Joy's release date finally came. She packed in silence, folding each shirt like she was folding away years. At the door she turned once and nodded at me.

"Don't let this place finish what the world started," she said. Then she walked out and didn't look back.

A week later they told me I'd be getting a new cellmate. She stood in the doorway clutching a rolled mattress like it was the only thing keeping her upright. Trembling. Eyes wide. She smelled like laundry detergent and fear. She looked at me the way I must have looked at Joy.

I noticed how her hands wouldn't stop moving. I felt something small and stubborn shift inside me. I nodded toward the bottom bunk. "Make your bed right," I said. "They like shit tight in here."

Her hands shook as she tried to smooth the sheet. I waited. Then I crossed the cell and tucked the corner in with one clean motion. "Hospital fold," I told her.

She looked up at me like I'd handed her something precious. I stayed quiet a moment longer than necessary, then nodded.

I used to believe no one could hear the cracks. Maybe it was time I started listening for someone else's.



Rose Slate – The Taking (photograph)

Kaylee Fields – Existence (fiction)

“Hey, honey,” my husband called out to me from the other room. “You have a package here. I’ll put it on the table for you.”

“Okay, thank you!” I called back, excited that the yearbook I had ordered was finally here. At least, that was what I was assuming it was. I hadn’t ordered anything for a long time.

I was beginning to think it was a scam, I thought to myself as I rose from the couch and made my way into the kitchen. My husband had disappeared into who-knows-which room. The package was nicely wrapped in red metallic paper, with a blue ribbon tied around it. *Our school colors, how ironic*. It was easy to assume that the person selling it had gone to high school with me or perhaps graduated a few years before me.

The name of the account selling the yearbook was not familiar; the person was just a fuzzy, blacked-out silhouette in my mind whenever I imagined the man’s face. Honestly, seeing the Richard’s High yearbook from my graduation year was intriguing enough, and I had not put a lot of thought into who it belonged to before me. I never bought a yearbook in my senior year, and I thought it would be nice to relive old memories from my high school days. Although, honestly, high school was not at all fun for me. I did have quite a few friends, but somehow never managed to get into any classes with them. I remembered us posing for photos together, so it would be nice to get to see those again.

The label had no return address but was clearly for me. *So weird that it took almost a year to get here*. The notion confused my tired brain and heavy eyes; the lack of sleep was catching up with me. With all the work I had been doing--college, and getting five hours of sleep over the last three nights--I seriously needed a nap. But I did not want to take a break long enough to do so; my paper had a deadline that was quickly approaching. I have never let anything be late in my life, and I would not start now, especially not with my huge eighty-page Master’s paper due by the end of the week.

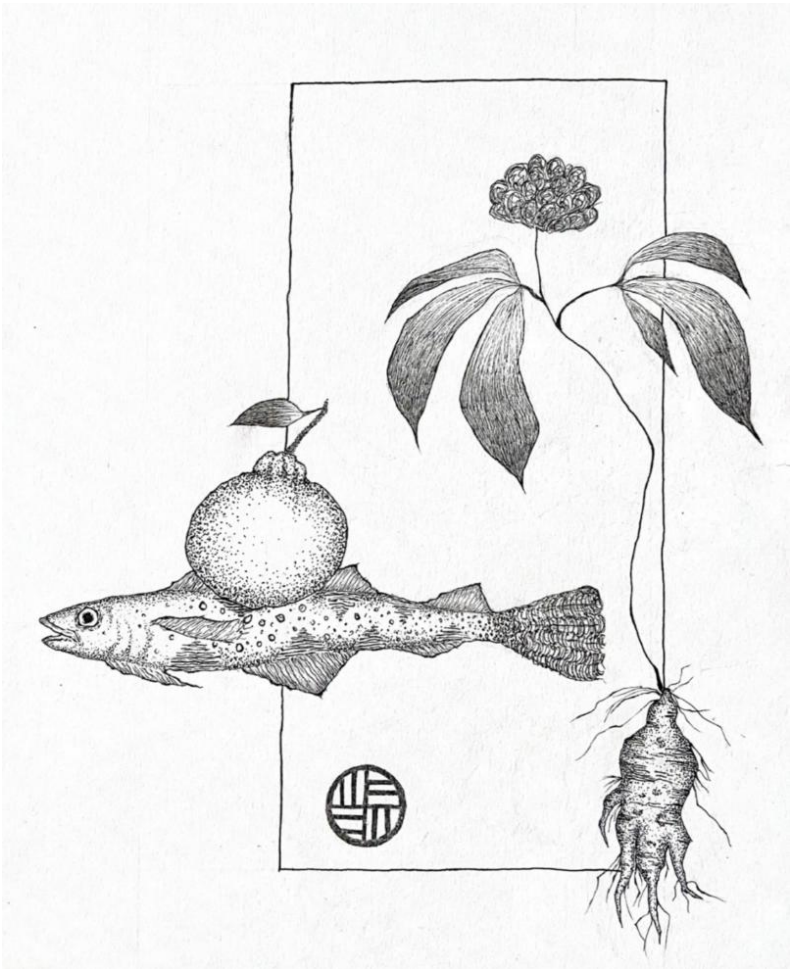
As I started to unwrap the package, I could not help but notice the palpable silence throughout the house. I called out to my husband, and when he did not respond, I turned my attention back to the book in my hand.

Where had my husband gone? I did not spend much time with this thought; my curiosity over the yearbook consumed me. Finally, all the paper was off, and I could see the familiar school mascot of a lion roaring proudly on the cover. I leafed through the pages, not retaining much of the information on them; my brain could not handle any more stimuli. My finger caught on a page that seemed to have a rip in the middle of it. *Great, this better not be a huge rip. Hopefully nothing a little tape can't fix*, I thought to myself, trying to ignore the blood prickling up at the site of the cut on my finger.

I'll leaf through it tomorrow, I thought to myself as I made my way back to the couch, setting the yearbook down on the coffee table. It did not take long for me to fall asleep, my laptop sitting open, the screen dark, right next to the book holding all my high school memories. I remember asking myself where my husband had gone, right as I drifted off to sleep.

My eyes snap open suddenly, and everything is dark and so silent that my ears are ringing. I feel as though I am floating, but I am still lying down. I know there is something beneath me, but I cannot tell what it is. It certainly isn't my couch anymore; it feels cold and hard under my back. In the distance, I can hear music from a band and cheering; it sounds suspiciously like a pep rally. I try to stand up, feeling in the darkness for something I can grab onto to support myself. My hand finds a cold surface, almost like a shelf, which I use to brace myself and rise to my feet. Everything feels too real to be a dream, but too dreamy to be real.

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Jasmyn Marrero – Hanguk (pen and ink)

Continued from page 31

I feel around for a light switch or even a door, but I cannot find one. Remembering I fell asleep with my phone in my pocket, I reach behind and grab it from the back pocket of my jeans. My finger is still bleeding, and I can feel the stickiness of my blood as I handle my phone.

The bright light of my screen saver flashing in my hand gives me an instant headache.

Immediately turning down the brightness and clicking on my flashlight app, I can see that I am in some kind of supply closet, the shelves lined with unopened cleaners, dust coating every surface, with a tall wooden door directly in front of me. I can still hear the pep rally behind the door, leaving me skeptical about exiting the closet.

Where the hell am I right now? I ask myself, the fear inside of me growing with each cheer I hear right outside the door. Knowing that I couldn't stay in this closet forever, I approached the door with angst flowing through me like cold water in my veins. As I reached the door, the sounds grew louder and the floor shuddered the magnitude of the sudden movement knocking me down and causing all the dusty chemical bottles to fall on my head. The floor began to rise, preventing me from standing, and every attempt to stand ended with me falling right back down. I gave up the notion of being on my feet and just lay back as the floor continued to rise.

The ceiling opened, causing a bright light to flash to life, making my already pounding head worse. The sounds of jubilation grew louder as the floor finally stopped rising. I was back on my couch, watching myself sleep. There was something in the corner watching too. I reached out to touch the hand of myself sleeping on the couch; the skin was cold. A scream exits the mouth of the body on the couch, and I am falling again, feeling as though I am about to die.

Gasping and sitting up, my eyes flew open so fast I made myself dizzy. I was still in my living room, but now I was me again, the yearbook right beside me, in the same place that I had left it. The sky outside was now pitch black, the moon shining

brightly through the window to my right. The living room was dimly lit by the lamp on the side table behind me. I could not see much except for the little bit of the room lit by the lamp. My husband was standing in the corner of the room, where the light did not reach, his head tilted down and cocked a bit to the left.

"Honey, what are you doing in the corner?" I asked him, but received no response. My heart started to race; this was creepier than the dream I had just had. I asked him again, and he started to slowly move toward me, still not talking and looking at me with a ghostly hunger in his eyes. When he finally reached the end of the couch, he turned his head farther to the left and just stood there, staring at me with a fierce intensity. My heart continued to race faster, his expression unsettling. When he finally opened his mouth to speak, all he said was, "I never existed," as he turned toward the yearbook on the coffee table, a smile creeping up his face. I watched in horror as he stalked toward the door, opened it, and walked out into the darkness.

The night wind ripped into the home as the door slammed against the wall, causing me to jump. I ran to the open door and into the cold night, chasing after my husband and calling out to him. He only turned back once, an expression that I have never seen before written on his face. His whole face was absorbed by his smile, his eyes being the only exception; they were hollow and had no life behind them, the moon casting shadows across his pale face.

I must have been outside all night, calling out to him and sobbing, wishing he would come back, hoping this was all a dream. When the sun rose, I decided I was dreaming and went to lie back down and think about what could be causing all these weird things to be happening. The lamp was still on, although it had begun to flicker from being left on all night, and the yearbook was still resting on the coffee table. To get my mind off my crazy dreams, I decided to flip through the yearbook, tracing the embossed cover with my index finger, forgetting about the cut. Blood from my finger ran across the pages, and I could have sworn the eyes in the pictures were watching me as I attempted to wipe my blood from the page, only making it

worse. The smiles in the pictures were eerily like my husband's when he walked away into the night, eyes lacking life.

Flipping open the book, I turned to the senior section to reminisce about my old friends and to finally see my photo smiling next to the quote that took me four days to decide on. Double-checking the school and the year on the cover of the book, I began to worry, as I could not find my photo. I looked through every single senior, remembering each of their faces from all the years of going to school with them. Examining the book more closely, I noticed that the page where my name should be had been torn out, and I could only assume it was the page I had cut my finger on. *What the hell?* I flipped through the entire yearbook, face after face with the same smile and lifeless eyes, finally finding my photo, which had been torn out and glued on the inside of the back cover, my smiling face blacked out with an X. My breathing stopped as I noticed the quote under my name had been replaced with the words:

“I never existed.”



Ashla Todd – Sumebulocr (monster clay and wood)

Kaylee Fields – Longing (poem)

Longing

While I waited for you.
The sky darkens, chilled air it brings
as the sun sets in the water blue

Thinking of all that is good and true,
A bird caws and flaps its wings
While I waited for you

The sky changes from blue to pink,
The wind lilts and sings
From the clouds, the sun broke through.

Thinking of all that is good and true,
I imagine wedding rings
While I waited for you.

As the sun continues to sink
The thought of you pulling my heartstrings
Wishing the longing would be through.

Thinking of all that is good and true,
The bird lands, then up it springs.
While I waited for you,
My love only grew.



Reanna De Los Santos – Untitled (watercolor and tinted charcoal)

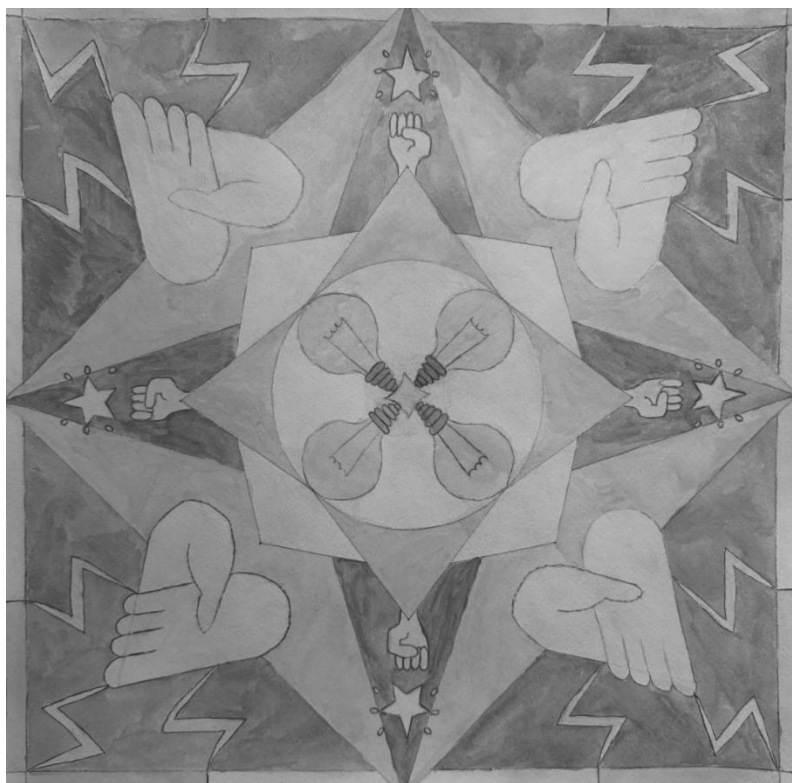
Elena Dickinson – Handdials (poem)

I climbed into the blurry stripes, the teal pillowed seat
Of the windowsill, where a bowl of orange slices
Had slept.

So stinging my cuticles,
You remind me of the living thing yesterday morning brought
Where the dyed wool of new mittens would catch
On dry, cracked lips and let land a wasp.

I stopped there on the sidewalk, convinced I could feel its five
legs
And not the sixth.
So I had been suspended, with the weather turning
Plain spinning out and I,
Just kissed,
Heard the wringing, palms rallying,
Cartoon tendrils of blue hot heat
Spitting up
Like a fat baby in an Amish bonnet
Unto doily fingers that boil eggs and haymake
Before the conscious dawn groans
And peels
From the rinds of nighttime, a blurry albedo.

So you imitate it,
Your lame college try
Stung, in your ditsy floral skirt,
Looking no further than an expired sought-to-find,
Knowing all the better that
To catch sight of your boot tips
You must take longer strides.



Noah Fulton – Yellow, I Am (watercolor)

Eiffel Vitug – a book (poem)

at which point between the
lines

will they know that
there were

signs?

if i cover my title,

one day the pages will
be seen

but until it is too late

will i be

read.



Parker Basta – Underwater Seascape (oil pastel)

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Leah Anrose Luce graduated from JCC with an associate's degree in psychology in 2023. She started a Childhood Education degree during the fall 2025 semester but has decided to switch to something more music related. This was her first time writing for the *Black River Review* and she hopes to continue writing in the future.

Parker Basta is an undergraduate student looking to pursue art education. They have been drawing as long as they can remember, and love doing traditional as well as digital art mediums.

Annabeth Baxter is a student at JCC. This year, she is taking both Basic Drawing and Color, Line and Design, exploring mixed media and different application processes.

Caela Berry is an honors student at Jefferson Community College, planning to pursue a career in Early Childhood Education. She believes art is important at all ages and loves to share her love for art with the students she works with.

Eric Carden has been a part of the JCC Enrollment Services team for over two and a half years, assisting students to apply and get accepted in the Northern New York and NYC areas. Eric moved to the Watertown area over five years ago and grew to love the area from taking pictures of beautiful nature to enjoying time with friends.

Reanna De Los Santos is a student at JCC and their projected year of graduation is spring 2026.

Elena Dickinson is an Anne of Green Gables enthusiast. She is studying Biomedical Sciences at St. Lawrence University in hopes of one day becoming a Pediatric Cardiologist. Like Anne, Elena indulges her curiosity, while remaining determined that the best lies around the bend.

Joshua Dickinson teaches writing and literature at JCC. He enjoys running, reading, soccer, and the eventual springtime that is rumored will reach the North Country.

Pamela Dixon (Class of 2000) holds an associate degree from Jefferson Community College and a bachelor's degree from Franklin University. Her work has been featured in past issues of the *Black River Review*. This year, she earned first place in the North Country Arts Council Fall 2024 show, photography category. Her artist's dream is to have her camera ready and cross paths with a moose or fox in her garden.

Kaylee Fields is a 20-year-old education major with a passion for writing and teaching. She is currently in her second year at Jefferson with plans to transfer to SUNY Potsdam in the fall. As a writer, she loves to write poetry and short stories, as well as creative non-fiction.

Noah Fulton is a current student at Jefferson who loves to draw, game, and hang out with friends. He wants to use his art and personality to inspire others to achieve their goals while he achieves his own.

Jasmyn Marrero is a 22-year-old student currently in her second year at JCC. She gives credit to the art classes she's taken since starting at JCC for rekindling her passion for creating art.

Angel Mijares is a student at Jefferson Community College, taking Basic Drawing. Their work was a landscape inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's mark-making style.

Kirsten Pratt is a psychology major, writer, and mother. She is passionate about storytelling, raising awareness of mental health challenges in society, and someday hopes to publish a novel.

Jade Ramirez is a student in their last semester at JCC, planning to pursue art education. They love to explore many different areas and mediums such as painting, clothing, design, tattooing, and sculpture, but their main goal is to continue to spread their passion and love for art to future generations.

Abby Rudd is undecided at the moment regarding her future career, but she does plan to pursue a career involving art. She loves using oil pastel, charcoal, and graphite, but she's always willing to try something new or get out of her comfort zone when it comes to different projects

and mediums. Moving forward, she wants art to be a part of her everyday life because it is what makes her truly happy.

Graceanne Sides (Class of 2021) graduated with an A.S. In Business Administration 2021 from SUNY Jefferson. She is a member of the Augusta Arts Council and her work has been featured in galleries in Denver as well as nationally.

Kaylee Simmons-Noels is a student at Jefferson Community College, as well as an experienced painter and drawer. They love making pictures with animals, preferably birds.

Rose Slate (Class of 2024) balances her studies at SUNY Empire with creating portrait work that explores identity, presence, and the quiet psychological tension shaping human emotion.

Ashla Todd is taking 3-D design at Jefferson Community College because she thought it would be fun, and it has, in fact, been very fun!

Eiffel Vitug, a current JCC student, has used writing for the last eight years as an outlet to express emotions, struggles, and interests without needing to find the right words. Eiffel is able to explore her own complexities and create a piece that won't limit her voice.

Kenyon Wells is retired from the staff of the Melvil Dewey Library at JCC. He lives in the sunny Southland now, misses his former coworkers, and thinks of them often when it snows.



Pamela Dixon – Festive Jefferson (photograph)