

Fall 2022

Lees-McRae College

# The Student Mind



Vol III

# RAGWEED

VOL III / FALL 2022



# Ragweed

A Literary Journal of Lees-McRae College

Dear Readers,

As students prepare to depart for the winter holiday, ragweed plants across western North Carolina mountains prepare to stand tall for the winter ahead, weathering Banner Elk's snow to provide seeds to animals who seek it out. Just like those animals, word-hungry readers need look no further to forage for expressions of creativity in the form of a student-led literary journal.

Lees-McRae College's literary journal, Ragweed, provides ample opportunity for students to celebrate their efforts and the efforts of others. As an amateur collection of student work fostered by members of the Creative Writing Club, readers can note that this journal is merely a seed from which many opportunities can grow. The hope that Ragweed will continue to spread rests in Lees-McRae College students. That is why Ragweed aims to support written communication skills and artistic displays by students, of students, and for students.

On a more personal note, the revitalization of Ragweed as Lees-McRae College's literary journal is more than a passion project—it is a project with love at its core. While that is a sentiment that lacks refinement, the journal is a homeplace for student ideas that readers and writers alike can hold onto for years. When both groups look through works that spark joy, learning, and responsiveness to others' experiences, it is possible for them to find something to cherish. I most certainly have.

*In Montibus, Ex Montibus, Pro Montibus;  
scribimus ad monstrare imperito ama aliis*

The college motto, "In the Mountains, Of the Mountains, For the Mountains" and the completely made-up Latin phrase "We write to show our love to others" plays on the idea that the Student Mind is a place for revisiting old ideas and adding them to express passion that can be shared with others. Whether students write to weather the frosty season, spread an idea, sprout new skills, or yield simple pleasure, Ragweed can be the soil from which these creative works can spring forth.

Now, celebrating this new, fruitful beginning is not possible without a tribute to the Ragweed community. Mikayla Hamilton, my brilliant co-editor: Thank you for everything! You have so much verve, wisdom, and generosity. This issue wouldn't be possible without you. Professor Wimberley: Thank you for being so encouraging and giving powerful counsel. Ragweed's values are informed by your dedication to student work. Lastly, the Creative Writing Club: you are all immortalized in me due to the wonderful memories we've made. The laughs, gasps, and smiles are all I could've asked for this semester.

With love,

Makayla Gregory

Dear Readers,

To some extent, this journal is an act of resurrection. The basic evidence of it being so is explicit—an effort that ceased has been reinvigorated. But I want to argue that there is even more substantial evidence; this project has ignited a spark of hope within me. And in all my experience with resurrection, that hope follows such a phenomenon is its most important constant. But what *about* hope? Hope is just like any other emotion; to some, it's fleeting, to others, predisposed, but to all, familiar.

That familiarity is what I hoped to excavate in this issue of Ragweed, which is why the theme of The Student Mind was chosen. Everyone with a mind has experience inside of it that is so challenging to articulate, even for the greatest of wordsmiths. But I wonder if the difficulty is not in the craft of writing itself but rather in the exposure, in the vulnerability, in the willingness to bare yourself even a little bit. I say a little bit because I am convinced, through all my years of loving words, that there are no words which will ever truly describe my mind with even a tinge of accuracy.

Despite that discrepancy in translation from mind to manuscript, those words are still invaluable. I believe that everyone's attempt to put their thoughts, their minds, and the meditations of their hearts into words is invaluable, and in the following pages, I hope every reader experiences, even just a little bit, the feelings of our writers because *feeling* is the one thing we all, regardless of our mental differences, have in common.

I would like to thank everyone who made this possible. Makayla Gregory, you are such an inspiration even if you don't think you are—let yourself be valued. Professor Matthew Wimberly, thank you for believing we could bring this journal back from the ashes. My dear Creative Writing Club, thank you for always being there, for being honest, for being real. And to every individual who allowed themselves to be vulnerable by sharing your sacred minds with us, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I wish I could be as courageous to articulate it as all of you were.

-Mikayla Hamilton

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# Poetry

“The Walk of Mystical Occurrences”

Poem by Mercedes Hawks

With heavy winter coats hovering over our necks,  
and a brisk chill to embrace our breathing;  
I never realized how beautiful a backyard could be.  
Filling me with the history of the stones,  
I pondered on the possibilities.  
You wanted to start a koi pond,  
own a hot tub on the back porch.  
Talking of all the wonderous things,  
and your dreams to recreate them.  
I admired the vacant art laying on the tables.  
Everything placed with chaos,  
but sat so perfectly for us.  
A sunset watching us carefully,  
but we laughed and shared stories anyway.  
Your tales of adventure  
were so voluptuous in life,  
and vibrant with beauty.  
You made me look for excitement  
in hiding absence,  
and I could simply never thank you enough.  
Every year you age,

a coward becomes brave.

You make eyes sore with kindness

and your chest never fails

to breathe in and out so angelically.

For the presence of intellect,

and knowledge has carved you

into beauty that trademarks.

So, thank you dear friend,

and to many years of treasury for us, always.

“Extremophile: Killer”

Poem by Sam Cunningham

My heart is

Where love goes to die

Where only the hardest of extremophiles can survive

You weren't weak

I'm merely a killer

The harshest of environments

Where I collect bodies

And poems alike

“Extremophile: Darling”

Poem by Sam Cunningham

You are built to be loved

For the gentlest of affections

Yet you have thrived in my heart

A harsh, cruel environment

While you are a fighter

That’s not why you have survived

You survived by holding a heart made of lava in your hands

Your lungs able to take in the sulfurous fumes

Arms left unburned from the molten rock that makes up my blood

Drinking in all of me

Immune to poison, heat and the killer in me

My Darling

A survivor

Not needing to survive me

“5. Carve”

Poem by Sam Cunningham

I will cut away my throat

Run lines from elbow to wrist

If only this feeling in me would fade

Is it guilt?

Pain?

I will have no closure

From what this is

Cannot bandage my wound

It can only fester

Left out in the open

I would carve between my ribs

Fillet my heart so it might slip through

Clean my wounds with tears

If only to hold out a little longer

Draw the line from ankle to hip

The burning there the same that's in my heart

I would make forgiveness out of my veins

Twist them into whatever you want

Doing what I can to soothe the itch

Even skin myself

Cut off the deadening parts of body and soul

To escape this feeling

Carving in

# Sudden Fiction

## “Time’s Arrow”

Sudden Fiction by Emily Wyatt

As she gazed into the mirror's reflective depths, she felt bitterness churning in her stomach. Her hands lifted to her face, brushing over the once flawless skin, now tainted by the telltale wrinkles of age. She was only thirty years old, yet here she was, already starting to resemble her late mother. There was a time when men would flock to her, offering anything for her hand in marriage. There was a time when her beauty had won the heart of the king himself. Why did age have to be so cruel to her? Why did it have to come for that which she cherished so much; her greatest weapon.

To add insult to injury, that wretched stepdaughter of hers grew more beautiful each day. With hair darker than charcoal and eyes resembling the stormy sea, she was the spitting image of the king's first wife. While the girl was still a mere child, the queen wasn't foolish. She knew that, one day, the girl would be old enough to wed. What would happen then? Would she take the queen's place as the most beautiful, cherished woman in the kingdom? Was mere beauty enough to shift the public's favor? It wasn't fair. The queen couldn't possibly hope to compete with her stepdaughter; to fight back against time's arrow.

She stopped, jaw tightening as her hands gripped the edge of the vanity. She wouldn't allow it! She wouldn't allow herself to be lowered by some child! She just needed to get rid of the girl. It would be easy; she had all the resources she needed to do so. The king was dead, having died of a "mysterious" illness three years back, and the commoners wouldn't dare accuse their queen of such a plot. No, it would be proclaimed that the princess had passed of a sudden and unexplained fever, and that would be that. The queen turned, sharp eyes locking onto one of her chamber maids. "Call upon the hunter. I have a task for him."

# Ghost Story Contest Winners

“Gnaw”

Short Story by Julie Banner

“They didn’t eat him,” Nthanda said quietly. Örjan’s mutilated carcass was tangled in a patch of dry reeds, shrouded in the morning mist that rose from the Okavango River at dawn. The Swedish ecologist’s skull had been crushed. His golden hair was matted and bloodied. A clouded blue eye had popped out of its socket, and a gray pulp that was once his brain lay exposed amidst shards of bone. Sethunya, Nthanda’s research assistant, took one look at this scene and vomited. She pushed past the team’s mammalogist, Iyawa, and fell to her knees at the riverbank. Iyawa turned away, tears already streaming down her cheeks. The women had all heard Örjan scream as the lions dragged him out of the camp last night. They heard his cries for help as his bones broke, heard his death gurgles as the big cats crushed his ribs, and heard his skull crack in the lioness’ jaws. Typically, when lions hunt, there’s little left behind. They hadn’t expected to find all of him, pale and crooked, on the edge of camp. As Nthanda processed the gruesome scene in front of her, a grim realization set in. They were stranded in the maze of braided streams and channels of the Okavango. Unseen dangers lurked beneath the surface of the delta’s seasonal waters, and the mokoro would not return to their research site for another seven days. The epidemiologist sprinted back to camp, turning over bags of clothing and cases of equipment frantically searching for something that could save them: the rifle. Iyawa followed, taking a deep breath, swallowing her tears. Her voice trembled as she spoke. “So, it is rabies.” “It can’t be. The symptoms are all there, but rabies is fatal within one to two weeks of exposure. These lions have been behaving this way for twelve months. There’s something else going on here.” Nthanda replied without looking up as she rummaged through supplies. “Nthanda, what are we supposed to do?” The mammalogist was choking back tears again. “This is a pride of thirty lions, how-” A shriek from the river’s edge punctuated Iyawa’s panicked words. “Sethunya.” Nthanda ran back to the water with the rifle, but her heart dropped when she saw her assistant. “Please, Doctor,” her assistant’s final words were a whisper. Sethunya’s body had been ripped in two. Her lower extremities lay in the shallows, her torso in the mud. Her hands clutched reflexively at the twisted knot of intestines that tethered her halves together. Her umber flesh was shredded, and blood drained from her doomed form, staining the Okavango a deep shade of ruby. There was no time to grieve. A low growl from the reeds ripped their gaze from Sethunya’s corpse. A lion, a male, the color of fallow hayfields, emerged from the foliage, fangs bared, snarling. He charged at Iyawa, trampling her under his immense weight, flattening her chest, shattering her ribcage, and squeezing the air from her lungs, cutting short a pained cry. The lion turned to face Nthanda, who now stood alone. She shook as she raised the rifle, aiming it at the beast that was padding towards her, his paws deathly silent on the soft ground, her focus wavering as he closed the

distance, each breath rattling her entire body, until she saw his eyes. Blue. Familiar. Sparkling irises that could have been carved from precious celestite. Human.

## “At First Sight”

Short Story by Mia Escalera

It happened in October. So fitting for such a loss, as the leaves withered around me in the cool stale air. That night as I walked alone in the woods, I should have recognized the muted forest as a warning. There was no choir of black-legged crickets or nightingale song, frogs resisted their croaks and the trees dared not dance in the ominous breeze. But as the path forked I saw her, standing beneath an opening to the sky like an angel in the canopy of limbs, the moonlight bathing every curve of her pale body whose bareness surrendered to the earth around her. A rush washed over me and coiled in my throat like copper wires, I could not move, I could not speak. I could only watch as she crept towards me in the night, the dry brush crunching beneath her feet as she took each tender step. She pulled me in with such elegance. Her lips tasted like earth and mud, a sweet mouthful of summer rain, quenching the dry thirst of my soul. Her hands crept up my neck, fingertips smooth and cold like stones plucked from an icy stream, she ran them along the length of my spine, gently tracing the curve of my jaw, gliding slowly to my cheek, until her palms found refuge in the soft dips of my eyes. A sharp chill buzzed in my veins, as the crashing waves of my mind became calm and still. My body a silent shore, and hers the moon that pulled my tides. Intertwined with the sparkling bliss was a dull ache in my temple as she forcibly pressed into the softness beneath my brows. Warmth trickled down my face and passed over my lips, tears that tasted of copper rather than salt. My heart pounded as the seductive mirage faded its icy blues and was replaced with milky crimson and black. Calm turned to chaos, stillness to blind panic, as, for a split second, I was able to glance at my last sight. Staring back at me through fingers and blood, were two black orbs embedded in a rigid face, skin wrapped tightly around her bones like a thin cloth of flesh, stretching over her ribs. Her lips cracked and crumbled along the sharp edge of her black gums; barring a garden of jagged teeth that sloped away from her abyss of a mouth. Scarlet red flooded my vision until everything was dark, my body lay silently in the fallen leaves. Abandoned by touch. Violated. Raped of my sight, after seeing what no one else ever would. It was a bear, I say, who plucked my eyes from my head, it was a wolf who lapped them out of my skull, a snake who sucked my irises clean from their sockets. She was everything, she was all, she was the moon and the creatures beneath it. Like the trees, I fell victim to October and was left stripped and barren like a naked elm.

## “Teeth”

Short Story by Nathan Darden

Delia had an obsession with teeth. She would take the time to brush them throughout the day. Alarms would ring throughout the night and she would stumble her way to the bathroom. She never missed a dentist appointment. That evening, an alarm on her phone shrieked with a reminder to brush her teeth. She proceeded to the bathroom. Brush, floss, and rinse. The same routine she did multiple times a day. There was a small, brown stain on one of her front teeth so Delia brushed a little harder than usual that night. She inspected her teeth once again. The small stain now seemed to have spread up her tooth and to its neighbor. Delia grabbed the mouthwash and swished it into her mouth. She did not stop until her cheeks were stinging and her eyes were welling up with tears. Yet, nothing could stop the brown stain. She trembled as she walked to bed, hoping to call the dentist in the morning.

Tossing and turning in her sleep, images of Delia with deteriorating teeth in family pictures, coworkers snickering behind her back, and her monstrous reflection looking back at her filled Delia's head. Sweat clung to her pajamas and sunlight blinded her eyes as she made her way into the bathroom. Delia gasped and covered her mouth. The stain had seeped its way to her other front teeth. A shadow passed by the doorframe yet Delia's attention was only on her teeth. She brushed them roughly and rinsed them with mouthwash until her mouth was burning yet the stain remained the same. She hurried to the kitchen and fumbled for the abrasive sponge resting on the sink. She groaned in pain as she scrubbed her teeth and tasted metal as her gums bled from the effort. Her red toolbox sat on the top shelf of her closet, where she opened it and grabbed a pair of blue-handled pliers.

With shaking hands, she ripped each tooth out. The pliers clamped each tooth and Delia fought to yank them out. She trembled as pain shot through her jaw and bits of her gums fell onto the sink. Nausea rolled over her as her mouth grew empty. Delia took the bleach from under the sink and sloshed it on each tooth. No matter how much her hands burned, she furiously cleaned every tooth in the basin of the sink. She peeked at her reflection, the blood gushing from her mouth and the paleness cast a sheet on her face. Over her shoulder stood someone else that had the same raven hair and blue eyes as her. Only this person smiled with rotting teeth and eyes that seemed to be looking into the distance. Delia shut her eyes in hopes of stopping whatever hallucination brought upon her. Nothing was behind her when she opened them again so she reached for her teeth. One-by-one she shoved them back into their wretched sockets, wincing as each one found its home. Her reflection showed Delia with crooked teeth, blood-stained lips, and ravaged gums. But at least her teeth were white.

