



**Paper Mill Press:
A Journal of Creative Arts**

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The Girl I Was, The Girl I Am

Sarah Ball

I met with my younger self today.

She walked on in, five minutes to spare
While I arrived just before,
Already so prepared

She looked at me with a slight little frown
I knew this place -
She didn't even know this town

I sipped my warm coffee
While she sipped tea
Wondering just how different life can be

I'm in university now,
Feeling more alive than before!
She's just switching towns,
Terrified what this change is for.

"This town feels so odd", she softly said
"I feel so behind...
So much left unsaid".

I lifted her chin. "You're doing just fine.
It might seem silly now,
But give it some time"

I turn myself to her, my hand on her own:
"This town feels odd now,
But it'll soon feel like home".

She let out a laugh, her worry undone,
A new girl, in a new place,
Becoming someone.

It speaks

Brooklyn Young

Listen to the wind,

It speaks to you.

You're not alone,

Listen to the wind...

It's all right there, right in front of you, right there in your own mind.

Each day the sun rises, each day the sun sets,

And each day there is meaning in your steps.

Each day, we remember.

The small echoes of children's footsteps, silenced too soon

The laughter stolen, the languages hushed,

But still if you just listen its carried with the wind,

Echoing loud and clear.

The drums may have been quieted, but never stopped.

They go on in each heartbeat, in each sway of the trees,

We remember, we don't forget.

As the wind speaks to you, reminding you, painting a picture,

Of the story,

The story of the ones, taken too soon.

They tried to bury them beneath cold walls,

But our roots grew stronger in the dark.

The wind carries, the land remembers.

Listen to the wind, it carries our truth.

It carries our strength,

It carries us home.

So listen

Listen...

The wind speaks to you

Drive Through Blues

Malach Hollahan

I cannot take that road home anymore

I can't forget at home the fridge is full

But as I pass that glowing coffee store

Tim's for me is like red to a bull

Cilantro chicken wrap and make it crisp

I can't stop this addiction I need help

A small black coffee taken sip by sip

If I drive past a Tim's I feel like *whelp*

It's only like 12 bucks it's not that much

But 12 bucks on repeat keeps adding up

I'm not aware of what I spend on lunch

Without a care my Timmies points build up

I check my bank account and I feel blue

I think I'm done spending at the drive through

Depression

Asha Snow

The tar that leaks from the cracks in my skin,
Sticks to every surface.
I can try to scrub it from my body,
It only rips the flesh off my bones.
Clawing at it hastily,
It'll all be over soon.

It intoxicates those who surround me;
The chemicals are bleeding out.
Giving my vision a darkened film,
Staining everything I see.
My blood stream now tainted,
Each movement is a battle I'm sick of fighting.

Damaging and demoralizing anyone who dares to stay;
The hurt I spread is like an infectious disease.
The epitome of evil;
A manipulative bitch.
Can't bother saying I feel "off",
When do I not?

The disappointment that radiates from my father,
Like heat from a blazing fire.
I'm overlooked and objectified by my mother,
She wraps her role around my neck in a pretty bow.
The security I can't find in a building or beating heart,
I feel it more in smudged ink and semicolons.

The screaming and arguing,
My past of slamming doors.
The clothes strewn all over the floor,
Mold growing in week old coffee cups.
Trash cans overflowing,
I can't find the strength to do anything anymore.

My face is riddled with imperfections,
And my body aches with the absence of movement.
My tank is flashing empty;

I can count each and every rib.
Trusting I can survive on my own,
But I'm hiding it all with baggy sweaters and a silver smile.

My strive for perfection,
But unwillingness to try.
It taunts me,
Suffocates me.
I accept my fate;
Maybe I'll let it happen this time.



Jeremy Wills, "Jeremy Wills 2026 (Our World is Burning Down)," January 2026,
marker, pen, and coloured marker, 6" x 6"

Moving on

Taylor Cave

She went through hell
Experienced things she would never wish on anyone
Lost friends
Fell down
Got back up
Got pushed down again
Kicked in the stomach
Bloody
Brushed
Teary eyed
Stressed
Confused
Hurt
But she got back up
She picked herself back up with help from a few good friends
Real friends
And she kept going
She kept moving
She moved on
Without a second thought
Without looking back
Without you
She
Moved
On!

One Whiskey and Three Bullets

Alex LaVallee

The doors creaked open, razor-sharp spurs jingled with each step he took. Patrons twisted in their chairs, shooting a glance before returning to their vices. “You ain’t welcome here outlaw; ain’t that you on that bounty poster?” asked the barkeep.

“What? you got some aversion toward my money?” The Outlaw responded.

The barkeep gulped and said, “one neat whiskey, then you best move on, boy.”

The Outlaw received his whiskey and planted himself down amongst the dirty men. He sipped from the cloudy glass. The whiskey burned its way down his throat and into his stomach, but it was a welcome burn - like that liquor was supposed to be there all along - a brief reprieve.

The doors burst open, and a stampede of footsteps approached him. The bar went quiet. “Up!” ordered a hoarse voice. It was The Sheriff and his lackey pair of deputies. The Sheriff’s revolver hammer clicked and cracked the tension in the air.

The Outlaw chuckled and said, “Now now, let’s not be hasty, officer. I ain’t finished my whiskey,” taking another sip. Lowering the glass, he prepared his own pistol that was stowed underneath the long, worn duster-coat that adorned him. With expert timing, he clicked his own hammer back as he slammed the glass down on the bar top, masking the gun’s anticipation.

The Sheriff and his cronies proceeded in their approach while The Outlaw began to slowly rise from the barstool. “Why can’t you just let a man enjoy his whiskey?” he asked sarcastically.

“You won’t be enjoying much else once you’ve met the hangman,” barked The Sheriff.

“You won’t be enjoying much else once you’ve met the hangman,” barked The Sheriff. They were standing just behind The Outlaw now, and in one swift motion, he made his move.

He kicked the barstool backwards, launching it into The Sheriff’s crotch, causing him to double over in pain. With him down, The Outlaw spun around and swung his pistol-grip down violently into the back of The Sheriff’s head, sending him careening to the ground. While the dumbfounded deputies scrambled for their weapons, The Outlaw shot a bullet for each of them that introduced the pair to the dusty floor. The Sheriff was clambering to get up, but it was too late. His shooting-hand was trapped by The Outlaw’s jet-black boot.

As he gazed up in fear, The Sheriff became hypnotized by the spiralling innards of The Outlaw’s gun barrel, which was now pointed directly at his forehead.

“You dumb fool, you expect to kill lawmen and get away with it!?” asked The Sheriff desperately.

“As long as there is a next town, and a next bar, and a next glass of whiskey, they’ll never get me.” The Outlaw coldly replied: “I’m bored of you boys anyways,” as he squeezed his index finger, signalling the hammer to slam into the gunpowder filled bullet, ejecting it from its cylinder and executing The Sheriff.

The barkeep and his patrons looked upon the massacre in awe. “Sorry ’bout the mess,” The Outlaw said, flicking a few gold coins on the bar top as he departed. The jingling of his spurs receded as the doors swung shut behind him.

Art Disease

Abby Brady

Some say Van Gogh cut his ear off because
the paint made him insane.
I think he cut his ear off because the canvas
did him in.
Do you see it too? The white plane?
It's so blank, it could be anything.
Every possibility rushes through my mind,
overtaking my own thoughts.
Forget sleeping, eating, breathing.
I have to create.
I am no machine, but I can synthesize any
feeling one after the other.
I am a storyteller, a therapist, an activist, an
artist.
I must create.

Old Things We Had

Abby Brady

I miss the way the breeze cooled me down
that night, standing in the parking lot with
my brother. The sun was setting and the sky
was this ethereal shade of purple I had never
seen before. He was smoking a cigarette,
something our mother always warned us of,
but he was much older at that point, much
wiser. It could do him no harm.

I miss the feeling of being up on that stage,
blinded by lights and camera flashes. It
made me dizzy and anxious, but the feeling
of everyone watching me, just for a
moment, was vibrant. Just for that short
minute I was actually seen by everyone in
that dirty little town, even if it wasn't a real
image.

I miss the damp chill of the wind on my face,
climbing snow banks like they were Mount
Everest, racing my baby brother to see who
could climb the fastest. Scorned by our
mother for taking so long in the cold, but
knowing we would do it again the next day.

I miss the feeling of home. The feeling that
only seems to come these days when I see
every single person I love under the same roof.
Love disguised under teasing and sarcasm,
reassurances that I don't have to act a certain
way to belong here. I reminisce often on the
things I had. I especially miss the people
I shared them with.



Keziah Turney, "City Lights," November 2024, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 30"

Not Too Late

Megan Andrews

Twenty-five is painted as an age of certainty,
a milestone where everything is supposed
to fall neatly into place.

By now, the world says
I should be done with school,
thriving in a chosen career,
married, settled,
maybe even thinking about children.

But my life moves differently.
Twenty-five finds me still learning,
still questioning,
still discovering who I am
before I commit to who I am meant to become.

I wish someone had told my eighteen-year-old self
that it was okay to take my time,
to wander without guilt,
to pause without feeling like I was falling behind,
to breathe before diving into decisions
that shape entire futures.

Instead, I rushed forward
because that is what everyone said adulthood
required.

And now I am finishing my education later than
expected,
sorting through uncertainties,
discovering that delay is not defeat
but simply a different path.

I have someone I love,
someone I see a future with,

but even love does not erase the worries,
the questions about careers that have not fully
begun,
money that has not arrived yet,
and choices we hope will prove themselves right
in the years to come.

Around me, expectations hum quietly,
unspoken, assumed,
woven into conversations and comparisons.
They whisper that my life should be further along,
more polished, more certain,
more like the picture everyone recognizes.

But I am learning to trust my own timing.
To believe that life does not need to be finished
by twenty-five to be meaningful.
To know that my choices are valid
even if they look unfamiliar to others.

It is not always easy.
The pressure is real,
the comments linger,
the weight of “should” presses down.
Yet I know things will come together,
not on a schedule
but in their own quiet, steady way.

Twenty-five is not the end of the figuring out.
It is the beginning,
the place where I choose my own pace,
my own becoming,
my own life.



Keziah Turney, “Port de Grave,” April 2025, acrylic on canvas, 36” x 24”



Jeremy Wills, "The Glowing Frogs I Saw in my Dream
at the End of a Dark Path," January 2026, marker, pen
and coloured markers, 6" x 6"

Before I Knew

Megan Andrews

I wish I could go back to the girl I was
before I had the language,
before the diagnosis at twenty,
before I understood that my mind was not
broken,
just wired differently.

Back then, I learned to hide parts of myself
to look "normal,"
to blend in,
to seem easy and steady
instead of the storm I carried inside.
I did not know that the things I apologized for
had a name,
a reason,
a rhyme of their own.

I did not know why my motivation lived in
extremes,
all or nothing,
burning bright or flickering out.
Why noise felt like chaos under my skin,
why one social night meant a full day
of recovery in silence.
I did not know how to explain the thousand tabs
open in my mind,
the way I would text back in a burst of dopamine
and then disappear
because my energy vanished as quickly as it came.

No one told me that exhaustion does not
guarantee sleep,
that wanting to rest and being able to rest
are not the same thing.
Some days I am hyper organized,
colour coded,
structured.

Other days I am a small universe
of chaos and undone tasks.
I make lists to feel in control
and then crumble under every item on them.

I wish I could tell my younger self
that interrupting is not rudeness,
it is urgency,
thoughts slipping through my fingers
before I can catch them.
That transitions are their own kind of
exhaustion,
shifting from one task or place or mood to
another
feeling like stepping between worlds,
needing a moment to let one version of myself
fade
before the next one begins.

I would tell her that feeling someone's mood
before they speak
is not over sensitivity,
it is awareness sharpened to a blade.
That forgetting people exist when they are not near
is not cruelty,
just object permanence playing tricks
with connection.

That verbal instructions turning to white noise,
overthinking eye contact,
reliving the same mistake again and again and again
do not make her impossible.
They do not make her unlovable.

I wish I could explain to the world too
that I am not distant,
not cold,
not lazy,
not unmotivated,
not a mess.

I am someone trying,
always trying,
with a brain that runs on a different current.

I love deeply,
even when it does not look the way people
expect.
I care fiercely,
even when my energy betrays me.
I am not failing
I am navigating.
I am learning.

And I am finally beginning to understand
that the way I am
is not a flaw.
It is simply the truth of me.



Aldo Cinco, "2013 A," 2025,
acrylic on canvas, 40" x 60"

A Universe Within Itself

Sam Ryan

I came to this campus to study the universe
To look through the telescope and see what I could find.

In the end, it was myself.

She was huddled on a couch in a student lounge,
laughing with strangers and staying up past
her bedtime.

She burned bridges and rebuilt them, plucked at the
invisible red strings that used to bind her

Now she is intertwined delicately, catastrophically,
with the people she has met

She examines the narratives and stories that exist only
within the confines of their smiles,
the reach of their arms.

They feel like fireworks and running rivers,
Windmilling arms and stargazing in a soccer field,
passing the lantern around.

Her safety net that lets her wander
the warmth of shared tea, the trust of a fellowship

She is solidifying her smile lines,
Friends passing around their stories for the others
to admire.

She is getting her colour back, while the seasons change
around them

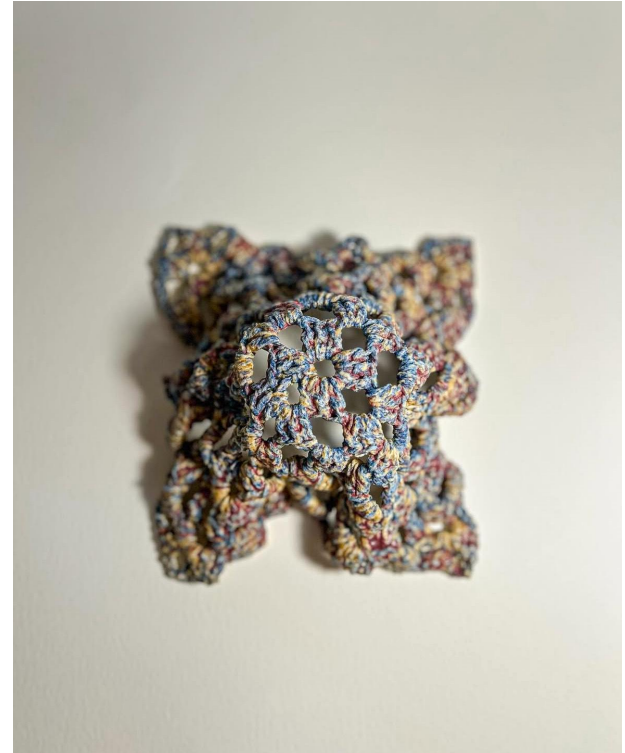
She takes the bottle that her feelings used to inhabit
And pours it on the ground around her for the flowers
to drink

When she laughs she does it with her whole body,
stomach pains and dripping tears,

A blissful and blessed brutality,
From her soul that feels softer these days.

She is grateful. She is so very grateful.
To have found something so infinite, so permanent,
this soon in life,
With the rest of hers to enjoy it.

I came here to find my future,
And it's becoming clearer to me every day
That I found what I was looking for.



Abby Strowbridge, "Repetition," 2025, Ceramic Porcelain, 5 " x 3"

Then/Now

Rain Driscoll

The first time she kissed me I pulled away.
Startled.

Out of surprise, maybe?
Or was it fear?
Did I somehow know what was to come?
I was never quite sure.
I'm still not quite sure.

It's been years since.
I don't remember much of that night.
Or even of her.

I sometimes wonder, though.
What if I hadn't leaned back in.
What if even after the anxious giggles dispersed
And her sickeningly soft words cradled me,
I didn't try again.

I wonder,
If I could go back and tell my younger self to run,
Would I?

Sure, I'd save him from years of wasted time and love.
I'd save him from being changed and molded into what
someone else wanted;
The perfect, obedient, quiet girlfriend.
I'd save him from the years of confusion and pain.
I'd save him from the cruel heartbreak when it all fell apart.

But,
What about all the lessons I learned?
All the experiences I faced?
I grew,

And changed,
And discovered.

And as much as I wonder if I would change it or not,
The reality is,
I can't.

I can't undo the decisions I've already made.
I can't unlive the life I've lost.
I can't change the past.

I am who I am because of it.
I have been sculpted by the hands of my history,
Painted by my misery.
Even cracked, chipped, flawed,
I am handcrafted by my past decisions.

As much as I wonder,
And wish,
And contemplate the what if's,
Life can only be lived once.

And the reality of the matter is,
If I hadn't of leaned back in,
If I hadn't of let myself love,
If I hadn't of been heartbroken,
If I hadn't been damaged,
I wouldn't be me,
I wouldn't be living the same life.

The people I know,
The things I've done,
The person I am,
Wouldn't be the same.
The life I'm living,
Wouldn't exist.

Unbroken me is a different person,
In a different timeline,
In a different world I am not a part of.

Pulling away,
Leaning back in,
Loving,
Hurting,
Everything has led me here.

Even damaged,
Even abused,
Even facing the cruelty of her,
Of my past,
I am who I am because of those years I faced.

I was loved,
Once,
At some point,
I think,
Or maybe,
She just loved the version of me she created.

I am loved now,
The version of me that I created,
The version of me that is true and genuine and my
own,
I am loved without condition now,

I love myself now.

I don't remember much of that night.
I don't remember much of her.

But,
I do know me.

October Snow

Aidan O'Connor

Reaper goes before me
Banshee at my back
Autumn sun is dying
The sky burnt ash black

I walk through the cemetery
Past forgotten graves
And phantoms take cover
Under stones with their names

Winter wind howls
A desolate moan
And the October snow
Follows me home

Samhain season is here
All souls day has come
The days are growing short
I hear my heartbeat drum

The vampires are sleeping
Alone in their graves
I gather the bones
Of lives once held slave

With cloth and wire
Small animal bones
And love of the dead
A body I've sown

Scarlet blood drops scatter
Blood flowers grow
And the October snow
Follows me home

A little doll made of blood
Wrapped in skin and bone
A child made of pieces
Of those I've never known

Half murmured words
From times stiffened tongue
Affixed veins to heart
Affixed throat to lung

And as chest draws new breath
A half choked moan
The October snow
Still follows me home

Eventide

Abby Brady

Everytime I see snowflakes dance,
I see the two of us,
Holding each other in the golden hue of a
streetlamp.
The rest of the world in the dark,
As we dance like snowflakes too.

We never really danced, did we?
Was it a teenage fantasy,
That I imagined as I looked out my window,
Into the grey winter evening.
The cold wind speaks to me like an old friend years
later.

I have bigger things to worry about now,
Yet the dark skies and the blankets of snow still
remind me of your frozen heart.
I know you cared about me.
I think you did.
Why didn't you care when it counted?



Abby Strowbridge, "Another Year," 2025. Ceramic stoneware, 24" x 8".

December Rain

Aidan O'Connor

Drops from outside batter my brain

My body soaked

In cold December rain

For years I wandered in October snow

Following her footsteps to that graveyard
below

My little doll made of flesh

Wrapped in skin and bone

My child made of pieces

Of those I'd never known

Your eyes are still empty

Your body like stone

For the first time I see I'm truly alone

So I return to the graveyard

Return your body to rest

December rain soaks my bloodied breast

My nails gnarled

Hands scabbed and bruised

We lay together

our bodies ill used

In this grave I find my peace

I may perish this way

As December rain turns sky above gray

Yet, in my soul there is still October snow

And I'll follow her foot prints to the graveyard
below

For December rain will freeze to ice

My flesh

The blood flowers price



*Home was never quiet.
It moved with sound—
with voices layered on top of each other,
with music that slipped through every doorway,
with the rhythm of a place that never stopped breathing.
There were mornings when the radio played old songs,
and evenings when people talked loudly over one another,
every word full of life.*

*Even now, in a different world,
I hear those sounds in my mind—
soft echoes reminding me
that parts of me still live there.*



*Somewhere between what I left
and what I found,
I began building a third space—
a place that didn't belong to either world
but still held pieces of both.*

*It wasn't a physical place.
It lived in my habits,
in the music I played on quiet mornings,
in the way two cultures mixed in my voice
when I spoke without thinking.*

*This third space felt like freedom.
It wasn't about fitting in anymore—
it was about creating somewhere
I could simply exist
without explanation.*

THIS QUESTION ARRIVES SOFTLY,
WRAPPED IN CURIOSITY—
BUT UNDERNEATH IT CARRIES A MESSAGE:
YOU DON'T BELONG HERE THE WAY WE DO.

PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE HOW HEAVY THAT QUESTION
CAN BE.
HOW IT TURNS YOUR IDENTITY INTO A GUESSING
GAME.
HOW IT REDUCES CULTURE TO SOMETHING EXOTIC.
HOW IT REMINDS YOU THAT SOME PEOPLE WILL
ALWAYS SEE YOU
AS FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE.



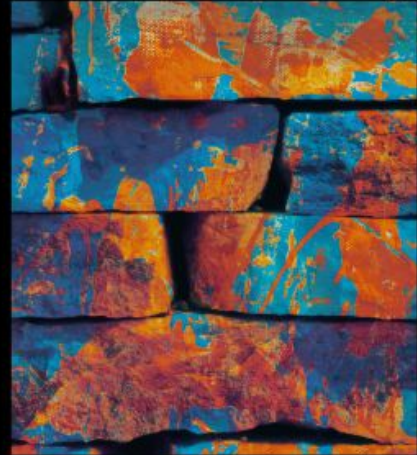
WHERE
WHERE
WHERE
WHERE
WHERE

WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

BUT THE QUESTION ALSO TAUGHT ME SOMETHING:
I AM NOT OBLIGATED TO SHRINK OR EXPLAIN MYSELF.
I AM ALLOWED TO EXIST IN MULTIPLE HISTORIES.
MULTIPLE GEOGRAPHIES.
MULTIPLE STORIES AT ONCE.

A

Code-Switching



Code-switching is a quiet
skill—
the ability to shift tone,
switch expressions,
adjust posture,
translate yourself without
ever using a dictionary.

Around family, I sound one
way
—warmer, louder, full of
rhythm.

Around others, my voice
softens,
my sentences straighten,
my accent tucks itself
behind my teeth.

It's not pretending.
It's survival.
It's adaptation.

It's navigating worlds that
read you differently
depending on how you
speak.

A

Sister

Aidan O'Connor

You're on your way home tonight
And I'm waiting for you, by your bedroom light
I'll be waiting for you, all night

She's on her way home
She's on her way home
She's on her way home tonight

It was too soon for you to go

fermenting memories like thorns grow
and though I watch you bleed tonight
by blood I'll make it right
oh, Sister
I cradled your bones
I cradled your bones
I cradled your bones
All night

Though your skin is dust
Your face is clear,
In my dreams it's you I fear
following me where I go
to raise you from the graveyard below

sitting in your room on the bed
by your ghost I lay my head
and now the memory disarms

I always remember how you came home in someone else's
arms

oh, Sister

you're on your way home tonight
and I'm waiting for you, by your bedroom light
I'll be waiting for you, all night

she's on her way home oh
she's on her way home oh
she's on her way home tonight

Sister I know we'll meet again
in the dark where it began

and you'll follow the wind across the midnight sky

with me chasing by and by
moonlight drifting, across our matching eyes

cause your on your way home oh
your on your way home oh
your on your way home oh
you're on your way home... tonight

Nothing Without You

Kimmy Brownlee

Persistent as the mandarin drake,
Unwavering in his pursuit of a bride.
Never faltering nor fearing heartache,
His love pulled her in as the moon does the tide,
Her feelings she could soon no longer hide.
The future held promise as their love shone bright,
For what is color in the absence of light?

Their love was both having and eating the cake,
But as sure as a coin has more than one side
Lady Fortune's wheel will turn, make no mistake.
Death came for his breath, he suffered, and she cried,
But it did not succeed, as hard as it tried.
They turned to love and prayer never giving up the fight.
For what is color in the absence of light?

As trees bend in the wind, but do not break,
Their love was resilient and in turn, beautified.
Their fierce devotion - even near death could not
shake, It merely reinforced the knot that they tied.
This second chance made them more unified.
True love and faith will push through any plight,
For what is color in the absence of light?

Young lovers, these lessons are yours to take
As the daisies follow the sun, let love be your
guide, Remain steadfast and always keep
promises you make. Life will not always be fair,
this I must confide, But look to Him in all your
strife, and answers will be supplied.
Cling to love and God, and hold on tight,
For what is color in the absence of light?

**Stopping by the Lab on a Snowing Evening,
with apologies to Robert Frost**

Michelle Park

Whose quotes these are I think I know.
Her lair is in the French lab though;
She will not mind me stopping here
To read her words she thought she'd never show.

The quotes aren't funny, dark, nor deep,
But she says them as if they're on repeat,
And I hear them all before I sleep,
And I hear them all before I sleep.

Get your credits and move on

*Just because they're family
doesn't mean you have to like them*

*Christ was born in a barn.
That doesn't make him a cow*

Not my circus, not my monkeys

Don't set yourself on fire to keep other people warm

Let's call a spade an effing shovel

No learning is ever wasted

*Every family has issues.
Some just hide it better than others.*

Did you read your syllabus?

You can't push a river

Every day is a gift – that's why it's called the present

Done is better than perfect

Do no harm but take no shit

Mundane is good

Comparison is the thief of joy

Tomorrow isn't promised

The P is for Proofreading, not for Pamela

No house is ever finished

Câââlisssse

Raised on guilt, cured by carbs

The smallest dog barks the loudest

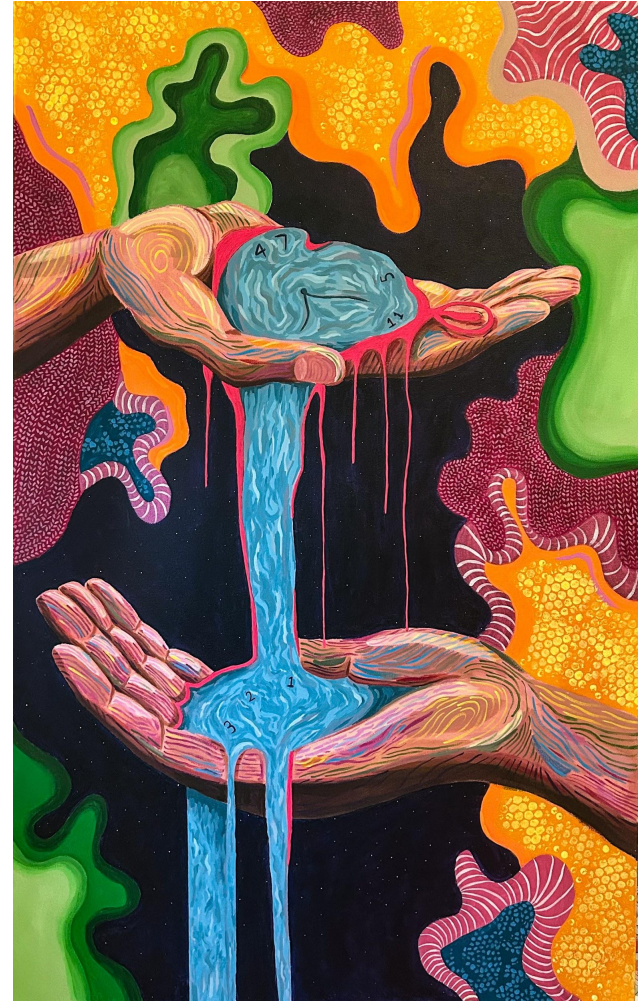
You burn your ass, you sit on the blisters

It's like trying to get blood from a turnip

Can we buy him for what he's worth
and sell him for what he thinks he's worth?

Are you here to do the work or
just to take credit for it?

Where did they get them and
why do they keep sending them to me?



Abby Strowbridge, "Running Out Of Time," 2023-2025, Acrylic paint, 48" x 30"

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