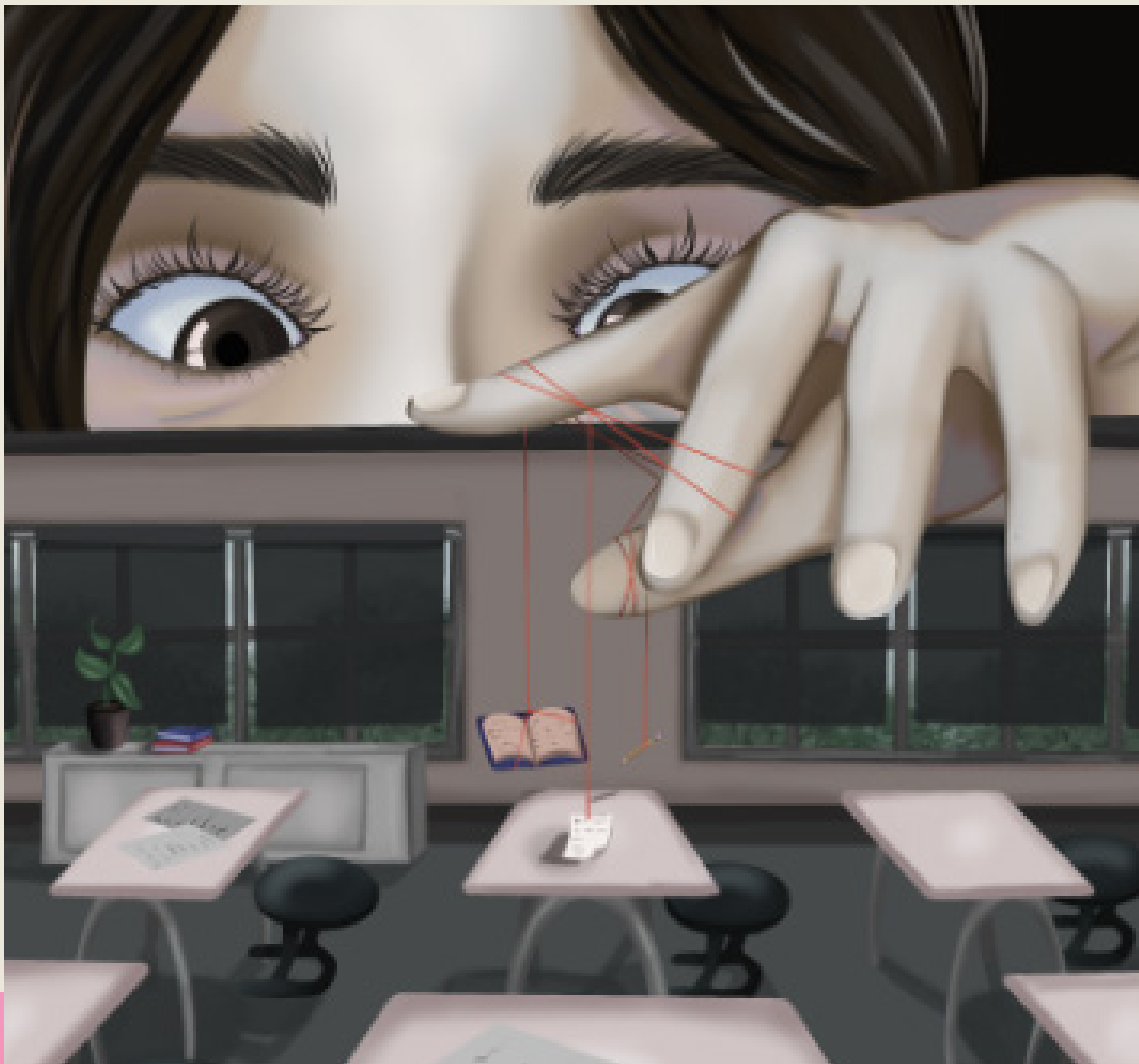




IMPRESSIONS

2022
2023



Art

Poetry

Non-Fiction

Impressions

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Perfectly “Abnormal”

A New Perspective on Autism

By: Tanner Egbert

I was not a “normal” young child according to any measure of what one may consider “normal.” I mean, before the age of one, I played with toys like a “normal” child, spoke like a “normal” child, acted like a “normal” child, etc., but for some reason when I was around one year-old, I stopped speaking. Was it cancer, a brain defect, or those vaccines that caused this problem? Maybe it was nuclear fallout that caused a genetic mutation? Nevertheless, this cessation of speaking alarmed my parents, who sent me to get tested. Doctors, psychologists probably, meticulously examined me. They had me play with toy vehicles, noting that instead of pushing the toy cars and trucks around, pretending they were driving, I lined them up into a precise, intricate, straight line. After visiting multiple psychologists from two different locations, I received a diagnosis: I displayed symptoms characteristic of Autism—terrible, life-altering, family-ruining Autism, or so people thought.

Of course, I have no recollection of any of those tests since I was so young. It does not matter though because it was blindingly clear; I was not going to be a “normal” child. I was going to have special needs; I was going to have to have a therapist come into my home to administer behavioral therapy so that I could behave “normally.” Indeed, when I was very young, perhaps between the ages of 1-3, a behavioral therapist would come to my house and work with me. Because of my Autism diagnosis, the therapist would train me to make

eye contact, to hug others, and to desensitize my hypersensitivity to sensory input. These treatments were done to counteract my deficits in those areas as those deficits are common in Autistic individuals, yet this therapy, again, I hold no recollection of because I was so young.

Another key point in my life that I also have hardly any recollection of was my early elementary school years. Although if there was one item I remember, it was the sounds. No, I did not remember the friends I made in elementary school or the childish games kids would play during recess; I remembered the sounds. I recall that it was one of my first days at school, and I was in kindergarten. Children were lining up in the gymnasium waiting for class to begin. The sound of rambunctious, chaotic children cheerfully and emphatically communicating with their new friends pounded on my eardrums like they were actual drums and not a sensitive and essential sensory organ. It sent waves of destruction to my brain, sending it into total haywire. I must get out of here, I thought. I must get out of here now. I must leave now. I swiftly covered my ears to protect myself from the auditory onslaught targeting my ears, and when I looked around, I noticed that no one else seemed bothered by this noise.

Another early memory of the sounds of elementary school was the dreaded cafeteria. The noise was tenfold. It obliterated my eardrums, and I could not focus on eating. I, again, cov-

ered my ears, but then a faculty member came up to me and reassured me that “it’s not so loud. You will get used to it.” Yeah, I am sure I will. From that point on, it was clear to me that I was hypersensitive to stimuli.



Death's grip Stephanie Znaniecki

This hypersensitivity to sensory input is a defining characteristic of being Autistic. Compared to neurotypicals, a term referring to individuals who are not diagnosed with a developmental disability such as Autism or ADHD, Autistic people are significantly more sensitive to sensory input. This heightened sensitivity can often lead an Autistic person to feel overwhelmed in specific situations as the person fails to interpret all the sensory information at once. Do note, however, that in most cases it is not the intensity of the stimuli that leads to the feelings of being

overwhelmed although occasionally the stimuli’s intensity could be the cause. Often, the complexity and mixture of several different types of stimuli, such as sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell, actually leads to the person feeling overwhelmed, not the intensity. For example, in the gymnasium anecdote from earlier, it was not the loudness of the children’s talking that resulted in me becoming overwhelmed; rather, it was the complexity of that sound. It was hard to make out actual words from the general buzzing of people talking, making it an overwhelming sound with a great deal of complexity.

While elementary school social settings were prime examples of times I have felt overwhelmed by sensory input, there is one example of feeling overwhelmed by sensory input that stands above the rest: a day at the arcade. It was a family vacation to a resort in a Chicago suburb, and my family decided to visit the arcade section of the resort to play games. Although

the arcade may be a less-sensory-sensitive child’s ideal, fun getaway, to someone who has sensory processing issues, the arcade is unfiltered, psychological torment for Autistic children. At the arcade, my ears and eyes became casualties of sensory warfare. As colorful and intense light burned holes straight into my retina, sending shocks up my optic nerve, chaotic sound effects of turbulent games filled the air, both launching a sensory attack onto my ears and my eyes. This pure, anarchic sensory environment sent my brain into calm consternation; my

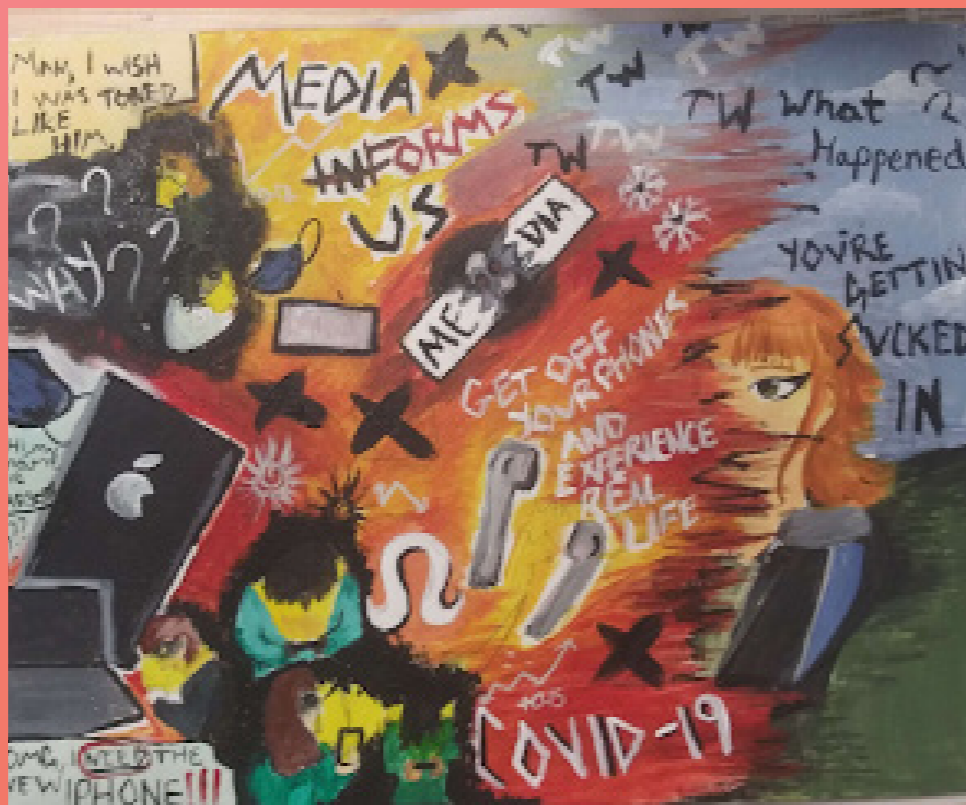
brain and my body tried to keep its composure, but I was quickly slipping into sensory overload. The lights. The sounds. They all took over. That blinking light over there. That loud buzzing, where is it coming from? Time began to slow to a crawl as every second felt like hours, my heart began racing like it was trying to win a marathon, and sweat poured over my entire body. I have to get out. I have to leave, and I have to leave now. I need to leave now. Then, tears began to stream down my face; I could no longer handle the sensory bombardment of the arcade. My parents noticed my troubled demeanor, and then took me to a quiet place so I could settle down.

What I had experienced that day can be explained as a sensory overload. Since Autistic individuals are hypersensitive to sensory input, too much stimulation can overload our brains, sending them into meltdown. You may have heard of an Autistic meltdown, which can result from sensory overload or even pent up frustration building overtime. Many people mistake meltdowns for temper tantrums, but this belief is far from reality since

meltdowns are actually an Autistic person's fight for survival. Admittedly, there are similarities between meltdowns and tantrums, including screaming, kicking, and other extreme behaviors. However, in a temper tantrum, a child has one goal in mind: getting what they want. On the other hand, in a meltdown, an Autistic person is fighting arduously to escape a distressing situation that is causing the individual to feel immensely overwhelmed to the point of desperation. Think of it like an unopened can of soda. If left alone with no external stimulus to agitate it, when opened, it will not

explode. Now, shake that can of soda and open it, and, as I am sure you know, after you open the soda can, it will explode, shooting its contents all over the room. This idea of shaking a can of soda can be applied to the causation of meltdowns. When an Autistic person is provoked so much by sensory input or over overwhelming means, the person will explode. This idea contrasts with a temper tantrum, where the child is not overwhelmed to the point where they cannot continue to function, the child is simply attempting to get what they want.

The scenario at the



Untitled Tiff Grygiel

arcade in the resort is probably one of my first real memories of having a sensory overload, but throughout my school years I recall having a few meltdowns from time-to-time. To combat this tendency to become overwhelmed, I saw a social worker on approximately a weekly basis. In these sessions, the social worker would teach me strategies that help calm myself when I feel that a meltdown is imminent. While these skills can be effective at times, however, sometimes they may fail to completely prevent a meltdown from occurring. Oftentimes, I find these skills may be difficult to implement during overload buildups. For this reason, especially at home, I may need time to myself to let the built up feelings dissipate via crying or maybe even screaming into a pillow. This method is the best way to allow an Autistic person to release their built up frustrations since it allows these feelings to escape in a cathartic fashion.

Another way an Autistic individual can relieve built up frustration is through self-stimulatory behaviors, or stimming for short. Self-stimulatory behaviors are defined as

repetitive, oftentimes hyperactive gestures. Stimming has many different looks, and is far from being exclusive to just Autism: ADHD individuals, other neurodivergent individuals, and even some neurotypical individuals do it. Have you ever bounced your leg, particularly when you were nervous? Believe it or not, but that bouncing was a self-stimulatory behavior! You may even recall how that leg bouncing soothed your anxiety. This soothing is similar in Autistic people, who stim to release built up frustration due to sensory overload. Stimming is one behavior that all people from a neurodiverse background can relate to; however, some stims are common targets for bullying. Perhaps one of the most common stims is hand flapping, and you have probably seen someone do this stim before. Unfortunately, this stim is seen as less socially acceptable, so oftentimes when Autistic people display this stim, they become targets for bullies.

Moving forward from elementary school, I believe, for the most part, that I stopped having minor meltdowns at school. At this time, I was beginning junior high school,

and I began to realize something about how I felt internally; I felt alienated by my peers. There seemed to be some sort of barrier between me and my peers. For whatever reason, it seemed like I had a horrifically contagious plague that people wanted to avoid catching from me. Social rules were a foreign language to me. Social cues were to Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics as body language is to an radio broadcast made unintelligible because of interference. It was like I missed out on some sort of class where everyone learned what to do in social situations. I had a small handful of friends throughout elementary school, but I found it increasingly difficult to form new friendships and maintain current relationships in junior high school as social rules for friendships and other relationships start to become more complicated and more nuanced.

This difficulty to make and maintain relationships with other people oftentimes is a shared struggle with many Autistic individuals. Frequently, we fail to interpret non-literal communication for its true meaning, usually taking figurative language for its literal meaning.

In addition, we often miss important cues that people send us to indicate their moods or to indicate the desire to form a friendship or even a romantic relationship. Combined, these nonverbal misinterpretations make it difficult for Autistic people to form relationships, especially with neurotypical individuals, who are not neurodivergent. On the other hand, misinterpretation also comes from the neurotypical side as well since the way Autistic people often communicate is seen as not "normal." For example, many Autistic people can come off as blunt since we prefer direct communication instead of nonverbal cues. In other words, we do not use figurative language or pleasantries; we get straight into the heart of the conversation. This frankness in communication can often be jarring to neurotypical individuals, leading them to develop negative attitudes towards Autistic individuals. Imagine

that you are a monolingual English speaker who just arrived in a Spanish-speaking country. You try your best to communicate with the natives in

your best Spanish, but they begin to look at you strangely. Then, they try to talk back to you, and you are not understanding a single word being expressed.

Maybe they are speaking too quickly for you to comprehend it, or maybe you cannot understand their accent. Either way, both you and the native are

not engaged in effective communication. Now, compare this scenario to the struggles in communication specifically between Autistic individuals and non-Autistic individuals. While both an Autistic person and a neurotypical person may be speaking the same language to each other, the nonverbal communication and tonal communication are in different languages.

Commonly, Autistic people are seen as lone wolves who prefer to be left alone. While this preference may be the case in some individuals, other Autistic people actually prefer to spend time with people, but may feel confused or disoriented in social situations. However, almost no Autistic person does not care about having friends—a common misconception held by neurotypicals. For example, I have, throughout most of my life, yearned for deep and meaningful friendships; my deep-rooted sense of loneliness often led to depression and feelings of worthlessness.

I have dreamed of having even just one good friend who I could count on to be there for me, and the sad truth is that many Autistic people feel this way as well. Many Autistic people suffer from depression and anxiety due to loneliness, feeling that the world is unwilling to accommodate them, and even bullying—often due to their perceived differences—, so therefore, Autistic people are capable of wanting friendships.

As stated previously, Autistic people are often targets for bullies. While factors such as stimming and perceived differences, such as social awkwardness, are common reasons why individuals who are Autistic may be more likely to become victims of bullying, another potential factor could be special interests. A common theme in the characteristics of Autism includes repetitive behaviors. This theme shows itself yet again in the characteristic of special interests, whereby an Autistic individual becomes fascinated



Heartfelt Dance Jasmine Arce

by a specific topic and wishes to talk about it consistently. Special interests are often a source of comfort and even creativity for individuals who are Autistic as they bring joy and stability to their often unpredictable lives; I know my interests have helped me get through even the roughest of weeks. However, since special interests are often perceived as strange or unusual, Autistic people may become bullied for having such special interests, leading to another factor that causes them to become common victims of bullying.

I am in high school now, and I am still coming to terms with my identity. I believe that as an Autistic person, I have been blessed with a unique and special perspective on life and an undying determination to pursue my interest: becoming a clinical mental health counselor. On the other hand, there have been days where I wish I could wake up and no longer be Autistic due to the ways society fails to understand Autism.

Many people do not perceive Autism as a condition of being. Instead, many neurotypicals see Autism as a terrible disease in need of curing. Many researchers have tried everything to cure Autism, from glucose-free diets, gluten-free diets, and even, as of recently, camel milk— yes, if you can believe it or not, camel milk. These treatments imply that society views Autism as a disorder in need of fixing. There, it is evident that the public views Autism as an illness, believing it to be a major problem with their child.

Perhaps it all started with the unscientific study that claimed to prove a correlation between receiving vaccines and developing characteristics of Autism. While this study was proven to be unfounded several years ago, its horrid effect still lingers in the unconscious of the public in that parents fear treating their child with life-saving vaccines because they may develop Autism. This fear of developing Autism shows itself in

many different ways as well as now it seems like just about anything is linked to Autism development. However none of these claims are true; nobody can “catch” Autism since it has been linked to genetics.

At the same time however, these researchers have Autistic individuals’ best interest in mind, attempting to make our lives as Autistic people easier by treating its characteristics. In fact, my mom tried the gluten-free diet treatment for Autism when I was younger, and I know she meant for it to help me and not change how I am. Eventually however, she decided to take me off the diet because she was not noticing any significant differences in my behavior and felt that I was not receiving the proper nutrients I needed to grow as a young toddler. Unfortunately, there is no doubt in my mind that there are parents out there who keep their children on these diets that may be doing more harm than good, even if the parents want their child to

become more “normal.”

Moreover, Autism does not need a cure. Instead, society must become more educated on the issues that Autistic people face and then be willing to accommodate for those issues, such as providing calm, safe places with minimal harsh stimuli for Autistic people to unwind. Autism is not to be feared, nor is it a terrible disease that will ruin one’s life; it is a different ability, not a disability. However, in the way society has established itself, Autistic people are disabled as much as a person in a wheelchair is disabled when there are no ramps for the person to use.

Autism is a complex condition; not one Autistic person shares the same exact experience. This diversity of experiences, with different Autistic characteristics being more prevalent in one individual compared to another, is what constitutes Autism as a



Beauty in the Dark Jay McConnell

spectrum. One person that is Autistic may not struggle with identifying social cues while another Autistic person may. One person that is Autistic may appear completely disabled, requiring many accommodations, while another Autistic person may appear completely “normal.”

One person that is Autistic may stim frequently and be prone to meltdowns while another Autistic person may appear calm. Everyone, neurotypical and neurodivergent people, possesses differences, and having that difference is okay. These differences do not mean that Autism

necessarily needs to be cured; rather, it means that being Autistic is simply having a different wiring of the brain. Having differences defines us, neurodivergent people and neurotypical people, as humans. Although current treatments for Autism can lead to better well-being for Autistic individuals, changing to this affirming, positive perspective on Autism that views it as a different condition of being instead of a terrible disorder could ultimately help lead Autistic people, like myself, enjoy more fulfilling lives.

Autism is poorly understood by many people, and many researchers attempt to explain it but fail. However, there is one excellent resource available for learning more about Autism: Autistic voices. While a researcher may be able to achieve a fair understanding of the life of an them through experiments and research studies, none can explain it better

than a genuine Autistic person. To illustrate, consider this comparison. Research has illustrated that other animals, such as certain insects, can see colors that are out of humans' visual spectrum. This research means that researchers have an idea as to how these insects see the world; however, they cannot fully visualize exactly how those insects see the world. This idea is similar to Autism research; while researchers have a fair understanding of how Autistic people see the world, they do not have a fully accurate visualization of how Autistic people see the world. On the contrary, Autistic people are not insects, meaning that one can ask an Autistic person how they see the world. A wealth of knowledge is available to you, and all you have to do is listen and ask questions.

Autistic people are not flawed; we are misunderstood. In a hostile world that is

unwilling to accommodate, Autistic people become lonely and begin to feel defective. They begin to feel like a burden to the world since the world perceives them as "abnormal," and they become targets of prejudice and discrimination because of it. Abnormality is typically viewed as rebellious or malevolent by society, instilling fear of the unknown, yet, at the same time, and as cliché as it may sound, not one person is "normal." When everyone's experience and outlook on life is different, it becomes nearly impossible to define someone's life as normal.

Hearing out Autistic voices is the first step in creating a more equitable world that is more accepting. At the end of the day, we, both neurotypical and Autistic individuals, are all humans that have many gifts to give to the world. Autistic people, such as myself, are not flawed; we just diverge from the norm.

A Cat On the Window Sill

By: Isabel Humilde

A cat sits on the window sill,
Its tail wagging back and forth,
Watching as an old woman takes her last breaths.
Her eyes wide and dilated,
Mouth agape,
Hands falling loose at her side.
She turns her head,
And saw the cat's eyes.
Within them was emptiness,
As blank as a white canvas,
It turns its head,
And stares at the outside world.
A girl,
Small as a seedling,
Had scars all over her,
Some were bleeding,
Some were healing,
Was screaming for a hand.
But when she got one,
It used her for its own advantage.
Once the thing got its desire,
She was left alone,
With more bloody scars,
Than she had before.
As the cat watches the events,
All it could think about was how annoying it was.

Hearing screams so loud,
During its sleep,
Made it angry beyond disgrace.
Consumed of boredom,
It jumps,
Landing perfectly on the floor.
Walking pass the old lady,
With no traces of life on her,
Her eyes black like tar,
Body cold as ice,
Nothing of what it once was before.
Lively,
Full of warmth,
Eyes with a glint of happiness and youth,
The way it was before.
When they both had cares.

But now,
As it walks,
All it feels is nothing,
No emotions for the old lady,
That had been feeding it for years,
Talked to for days on end,
Loved till her last breath,
And can only will herself to move on,
Waiting for its own eventual end,
The same way as her dead friend.

Unruly Games

By: Lily Jeppson

We had stood there watching as the dim sun goes down,
Holding our breath, on the cracking edge,
seeing those below us drown.

It had all been a game, it wasn't supposed to turn out like this.

The man turned towards me, looking in my eyes, and I see all he can do is reminisce.

I traced his features with my dull eyes, taking in his beauty.

His messy black hair, bright green eyes, lanky physique, and his signature hoodie. The atmosphere around us was filled with despair,
Something neither of us could ever repair.

Hundreds of people had died before us, It brings me much disgust.
My hatchet laid at my feet, his dagger glimmering in the remaining sun.
We had spent the last month on this island, trying our best to run.

The sudden ticking of a clock had begun to ring,
And there was no need for pondering.
We both knew what the sound meant,
One of us had to suffer to end the event.

My eyes welled with tears, refusing to look at the man before me.

He was as silent as can be, knowing there was no guarantee

That we were both getting out of here alive.

His eyes came into focus as he tilted my head up,

And his hands that rested on my face were cupped.

My eyes shone with fear as I heard him say, "I'll love you forever."

I screamed until my voice gave out, peering over the edge to see him falling as light as a feather.

He hit the waves with a loud crash,
My heart breaking with a sudden slash.

I watched as his head went under and didn't come back up,
And the ticking stopped with a sudden thump.

"Congratulations, darling. You made it through."

"You wouldn't have a winner if I withdrew."
Stepping on the edge, I smiled up at the drone in the sky,
Falling off the edge and hoping I can fly.

Poems

By: Lauren Kolczaski

I can't focus

I can't focus

The window and its delightful views distract me

The overwhelming thoughts in my head distract me

The stressed teacher yelling distracts me

The pencil tapper next to me distracts me

The rippling buzzing from a phone distracts me

The paper on the table doesn't distract me

"I have a question." -me

"NO!" "You should pay attention." -The stressed teacher

"But I can't focus." -me

I love you

I love you

I love hugging you

I love kissing you

I love thinking about you

I love laughing with you

I love dancing with you

I love making food with you

I love watching movies with you

I love you

Only you

Untitled

By: Jay McConnell

everyone's gets them,
the moments where you feel off.
your clothes don't look right,
your hair is out of place,
you feel disconnected.
but you have people to help you out,
they offer a helping hand,
and kind eyes.
guiding light back into your life.
light that will always stay with you,
it'll burn and burn,
brighter and brighter with time.
offer the help and let your flame dance
with sparks and passion.

Thought in your Head

By: Isabel Humilde

After years of hear how horrible you are,
You start to believe it,
Whether consciously,
Or not.
It's like a parasite in your mind,
Keeps sucking up everything it can,
Until all that's left is,
Your soulless body,
On the floor,
Wishing for it to stop,
Crying for it to get out your head,
Praying it'll show you mercy,
Even though you know the truth.
It'll never stop,
Till it ruins you,
Makes you feel worse,
Than your bleeding heart.
The only thing you can do,
To stop the pain,
Is to lose yourself,
Become numb to everything,
Let yourself go,
And never turn back.
Yet even then,
You never truly escape,
The thought engraved in your head.



Cupid Dimensions Tiffanie Grygiel