

APHS LITERARY MAGAZINE

2023



“A Crack In Everything”

The APHS Literary Magazine 2023

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *The APHS Literary Magazine 2023 Edition: A Crack in Everything*.

For this year's theme, we asked students to think about the "cracks" in life that lead to opportunities for growth, change, renewal and discovery. The responses—varied and unique—remind us that the cracks don't have to break us if we don't let them.

Thank you to all of our creators, editors, and judges who made this edition possible, and to you, the reader, for taking time to appreciate our work.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

The Growing Crack	5
Through the Dark, Together	5
Beacon of Light	6
The Time	6
Flipping the Switch	7
Her	7
The Great Divide	8
Deafening Sounds	8
Writer's Block	8
Sometimes	8
Filling a Void	9
Winter	9
Hindsight	9
Morning Sun	9
Phantasm	10
Piece of Mind	10
Summer Snow	10
A Victory Cry	11
When You Get There	12
I'm Quite Placid	13
Naturally Healed	13
Kintsugi	14

PROSE FICTION & NON-FICTION

Into the Darkness	16
My Own Light	17
My Dramatic Flare	18
The Average American Student Life	19
I Can Find Waldo but Not Myself	20
And That Has Made All the Difference	21
A Light Within the Darkness	22
Grief is Like a Riptide	25
Revitalize	25
Hermit and the Tides of Grief	26
A Fragment	26

POETRY

THE GROWING CRACK

Matthew Mizzi

The crack was conceived as far back as human nature allows it.
This crack flourishes as
The rich get richer,
The poor get poorer,
The food gets eaten,
The water gets wasted,
The wars get bigger,
The media gets blurred,
The politicians get divided,
The people get divided,
And we watch this crack grow
As it envelops our souls.

Although it seems bleak in this era,
Love can prevail,
Light can be restored.
When the Masons of the world unite,
We can mend our humanity.

THROUGH THE DARK, TOGETHER

Allison Murdoch

Yesterday we went
Out, going
Up the street.

All was well and
Right with
Each other.

Moments passed with
You.

Love
Is the
Good you bring to my
Heart and
Thoughts.

BEACON OF LIGHT

Brookelle Collins

Midnight, dusk or dawn,
Warmth is not felt at all.
In a house so dark and dreary,
Light must be weary.
Brightness exists in small forms,
In the Flowers or bird songs.

These small bright things,
Cracked skittish exteriors,
Soften harsh edges
And bring bright laughter.
These small things glow like beacons
To the dark and broken.

THE TIME

Anonymous

There was a time when
I killed a dragonfly
I hit it with my pink tennis racket
There was a time when
I felt so bad for the bug
And so I cried
I didn't mean to hurt it
There was a time when
I had to say sorry
I didn't know how to apologize
But now...
I know
Say the truth
Honest words are the best words

FLIPPING THE SWITCH

Allison Murdoch

Turn on
the light.
The darkness
frightens me.
Why must we
live in the
dark? Always
searching for answers. Always
fighting for the last bit of warmth. Always
rejecting each other. Always
hurting.
What lives
in the darkness frightens me.
Will you
please, turn
on the light?

HER

Ava Danich

Her
So much more than gorgeous,
So much more than perfect.

Right now,
I know that I'm not really worth it.

But,
If you give me time,
I could work on it.

If I find a way,
Would you walk it with me?

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Mia Hool

Love
Happy, Beautiful
Adoring, Dreaming, Caring
Marriage, Family, Separation, Enemy
Loathing, Detesting, Despising
Angry, Mad
Hate

DEAFENING SOUNDS

Madeline Every

Love is like silent
Explosions in my ears, loud,
Yet no one can hear.

WRITER'S BLOCK

Brendan Johnson

I will write haiku
Structured in five seven five.
Dang, this haiku sucks.

SOMETIMES

Mia Mancina

The absence of someone
happens to be
my only source
of unhappiness.

FILLING A VOID

Anonymous

Exhilarating joy
It abounds
Happiness, process it how?
A feeling unknown till now
A crack in the darkness
The walls are crumbling down
A smile has been found
Piece by piece the rocks are lifted
The light works its way in twisted
Admittedly this is a feeling that was missing

WINTER

Anonymous

What shines, what glimmers
A sliver of hope, it shimmers
Light peeks through
Like a faint whisper
Together, we emerge from winter

HINDSIGHT

Anonymous

One choice and my life would've changed
What more could I have given
An insurmountable pain
I'm so numb, no function in my cloudy brain
In the end, there is only I to blame

MORNING SUN

Chance Glegola

A bright sun rises....
A new day arrives. The light
Restores the land again.

PHANTASM

Lila Wright

Spheres of buzzing, white lights.
They twinkle and shimmer across
the expanse of the night.
One streak, slicing through the void,
ringed in cadmium.
Cutting a path
even inside the darkest depth.
My very own shooting star.
Me.

PIECE OF MIND

Ava Danich

What you see
Is not all you know.

We are as small as a bee.

What's real,
They will not show.

SUMMER SNOW

Noah Collins

Unexpectedly,
Like when there is summer snow,
You came back to me.

A VICTORY CRY

Amanda Abraham

I remember this:

Staring at the ground
And trying not to cry,
When a gust of wind
Stole the tears from my eye.

Out of nowhere it all came,
And, oh it came hard
Snuck up from behind
It caught me off-guard

The “easy event,” the exam, the song...
some type of active war
Like the exam, it felt far too long.

I hadn’t expected things
To become this tough;
It was me versus the world,
Somehow the world won.

And I thought the battle was over
Until the wind revealed the sun.

A crack in the clouds; a crack of light,
A soft reminder,
“It’ll be alright.”
Though things were broken
And nowhere near fixed,
A ray from the sky
Had discouragement eclipsed.

It was still me versus the world,
It was still an active war;
But the battle was no longer mine,
Not the same as before.

Motivation renewed,
Ready to fight.
Those little things that once hurt me,
Couldn’t stand against the light.

And as the wind
Blew tears from my eye,
I smiled as I realized:
This was my victory cry.

WHEN YOU GET THERE

Logan Ruble

When you finally realize *you are still here*,
remember everything.

The faces of your loved ones, the sound of their voices.

Your favorite song, and the lyrics that drew you to it.

Let me break down your walls, the ones keeping you in the dark.

The ones that twist your view, that make you think you are unimportant.

Remember.

Remember your life and all the good things. The things that made you
almost rethink your decision. Anything and everything that made you
feel something positive in that moment

And focus on it.

Everyone would miss you

Because you matter.

You are still here. You are okay.

You may feel faint, weak, and tired,

You may feel absent and unreal.

And that is okay.

Take my hand and come back. You are still here. You are still alive.

Everything is okay. *You are okay.*

Nothing is stopping you from feeling what you feel now,

Let it out.

Scream, cry, wish you had succeeded, that you were dead;

You are safe now;

Your heart is beating

Your hair is growing

Your cells come and go.

You are okay.

You don't have to come to that realization anytime soon

Just let me know when you get there.

3rd Place Winner

I'M QUITE PLACID

Estrello Flores

There's nearly no way
I'd let myself resign after this much.

Looking back,
No observation had told me "no".

I've learned to trust.

It wasn't merely an episode
Nor a mistake

But a tycoon of the loveliest of pains
One right after the other.

And it's the continuing thump of my heart that tells me,
That all is meant to be.

That all is well.

2nd Place Winner

NATURALLY HEALED

Madeline Every

Pine trees grow out of
the cracks in my wounded heart,
healing me slowly.

Nature knits me back
together, as flowers bloom
peacefully in me.

KINTSUGI

Brookelle Collins

Your Fragile fragments are stacked together,
Chipped and cracked, but not broken,
Seeping water as the holes in your soul drain you.

You will memorize every scuff and scratch on your surface.
Holding every shattered piece
Begins to shape you.

Your surface hardly holds together.
Some days you can hold a lot,
Others you cannot.

One day you'll notice you've stopped leaking;
You will no longer crumble to pieces
As Rivers of Gold seal you together.

Gold, that seems to emphasize each crack.
As they glimmer and glow,
They speak the story of your soul.

The cracks may not be gone,
They are not hidden but healed.
You have old shards and new seams,
Showing your original beauty and history.

1st Place Winner

**PROSE FICTION &
NON-FICTION**

INTO THE DARKNESS

Allison Murdoch

The Darkness was always there. Literally and figuratively. I've seen how people can change from being exposed to it. How they lose all hope and give up on life — or how they become violent and enraged.

It lurked on the outskirts of the city, always waiting for someone to wander in. Many explorers had been lost that way, trying to find some remnants of our previously glorious civilization. That's how I lost my older brother, Leora. Now, the main city was all that remained.

A moon ago, however, I saw something out there. It wasn't much, just a shimmer of light, but I couldn't let it go. It stuck in my mind like a cat with a laser. With how close our apartment was to The Edge, it wasn't all that hard to sneak out and venture closer. I had always been stealthy, and this time was no different. Mother didn't hear a thing. Looking back, I probably should've left her a note.

I reached The Edge quickly, getting as close as I dared. That's when I caught another shimmer in the distance. I was unsure if I wanted to get closer, but the choice was decided for me. With Edge Patrol© sirens approaching, I ran into The Darkness; skeptical of ever returning home.

Immediately, I sensed I had become lost. I mourned what I would miss most in the world: Mother, Stinky (my old rabbit toy I salvaged from a ruin as a child), and the rare treat of chocolate. Though, I realized I would be reunited with Leora soon.

I wandered for what could have been days, but was most likely only a few hours.

I was parched when I heard a low noise. In the distance, a hummer appeared. I get down and tried to hide myself as it approached a stop. It pulled up and I heard someone jump out.

As I prepared to leave the world at the hands of Edge Patrol©, a voice called out my name. I looked up to the most beautiful face in the world. There he was... Leora.

This has got to be a dream.

I must have spoken aloud, because Leora was quick to reassure me it wasn't. As I burst into tears at his reemergence, he pulled me into the hummer. It drove off as Leora explained where he had been.

Supposedly, when The Darkness had appeared, the outside world had gone on. There were scientists who devoted themselves to understanding what it was and where it came from, but to the majority of the world it was just a natural occurrence, like the Grand Canyon.

Leora had come back for Mother and I, unable to leave us behind and unaware of the world around us.

He went through The Darkness to find me.

He truly was my Light.

MY OWN LIGHT

Katie Watkins

What is the definition of a crack? To put it simply, it's a break without a complete separation of parts. Some people may think of me as broken or cracked. I too thought of myself as broken or cracked. I was shattered and incomplete.

I had met someone whom I thought was the love of my life. This boy had shown me the true meaning of love—pure and innocent love that warmed my heart. For months, I spent countless hours staring at my ceiling. Tracing my fingers along my blue sheets, making hearts and marveling at the silkiness and the smoothness of it all. I daydreamed of myself laying next to him, tracing hearts along his chest.

For months, everything was fantastic. We laughed and cried together, and even when we fought, we always made up because I could never stay mad at him. Not for one second could I ever hate the blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy who made me feel whole. We felt unstoppable. He made me believe we were forever.

Then one day, it was like a switch had flipped. I gave him everything, but in the process I broke myself. He stopped caring and he stopped trying. And that broke me. I tried for months and months to recuperate. Those moments when I stared at the ceiling turned into hours of sobbing and clenching those once-beautiful silky blue sheets, now stained with tears.

We were young, too adult for our relationship. We loved and we fought and we always made up with his amazingly warm hugs and his soft kisses. His pink lips always connected with mine in such a manner where it felt like we were meant to be.

I gave him everything while breaking myself. Constantly beating myself down and making myself feel less whole. Everyday, a piece of me was being chipped away. Although, I put myself through this it didn't matter because I loved him and would do anything for him.

One day, I realized I didn't need him anymore. I became my own light all by myself. I fixed myself and picked up the pieces he broke. It took me months to stop hyperventilating when I thought of him. And it took me months to stop dreaming about him and what we could've had in the future.

I had to rewire my brain and tell myself that I was my own light and I didn't need anybody else. Sure, my friends helped and my parents were godsend but nothing could compare to my own self-love. He broke me—he beat me down to a point where I thought I could never recover. But in the end, I saw the light shine in on my cracks. I felt like I was on a warm, sandy beach feeling myself breathe in the humid air while the sun shined on me, taking a deep breath for the first time in years. Although I'm still broken and it's a fight everyday to even get out of bed, I realize that no matter what, I have myself. I am my own light.

2009 was the year I lost my father. No, he didn't die, he just left. I have one of those "he left to go get milk and never came back" kinda stories, just with more trauma. That betrayal and abandonment felt excruciatingly painful and fueled my resentment and hatred towards him. His inconsideration and selfishness pushed me away. Him and I used to be like two peas in a pod, but now we live in separate worlds: mine sane, his insane.

2013 was the year I learned an eye opening attribute about my father – he's mentally ill. He has bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, which has not been managed from the age of thirteen, when he was diagnosed, through the present day. His unmedicated brain caused him to see terrors and illusions that were not reality. These terrors and illusions caused him to think irrationally which led to horrific events.

Throughout the years, my mom continued to try to keep him in my life - ultimately failing. For years, she would make me come out of my room to spend time with him; though I didn't want him in my life and I still don't.

In the fall of 2017, my life took a turn for the worse. My father's mental illness had gotten worse. One night, my father was banging on our front door, yelling and screaming in a horrified voice, which I will never forget. My mom ended up calling 911 to get him off of our property so my brother and I could get to school. We were late that day, along with many other days.

In 2019 (my freshman year of high school), life became even more traumatizing and difficult. My father, when he was out of jail, which was often due to the jury feeling sympathy for him, would try to get to me through school. He harassed me at school constantly, which made going to school anxiety-inducing. One day, he came to my school and tried signing me out, the office was going to let him, but I was smart enough to not go with him because I knew he was not medicated. I believe he was going to kidnap me to get to my mom, which was his ultimate goal. A few weeks later, I got called down to the counselor's office. As I was leaving my teacher, Mr. Jackson, said, "If you need to step outside once you get back, you can. I'm very sorry." I was very confused by this comment, which spiked my anxiety. I went to the counselor's office and was directed to a room in the back to the right. A child protective services social worker was waiting at the table to speak with me, asking questions about drugs and touching.

After this question, I finally figured out that my father had called child protective services on my mom because of the illusions and voices he had been seeing and hearing while not being medicated. I could barely get through school that day. In the fourth hour of school, I finally broke down and started crying. I will never forget that day.

People do not understand the horrors I have been through in my life. When they see a happy, smart, and funny teenager they think their life is perfect. But people aren't what they seem. The people who make others happy are usually the ones that have been through the most. I try to make the best of what I've been through and joke about it, but ultimately I was dealt the life I was because I am strong enough to handle it.

THE AVERAGE AMERICAN STUDENT LIFE

Phoenix Perez

As the end of my senior year approaches, I have so many thoughts about my last year of school. I'm happy, and then I'm sad, and sometimes I'm just angry about what the average American student has to go through. Since 2010, the year I started kindergarten, there have been an estimated 263 school shootings.

Throughout my education, I have learned so many protocols to take if a shooter got into my school. I learned to hide in the corner: let my teacher protect me and put their life on the line. I learned to put heavy things in front of the doors and try to get out if I can. If I can't, I hide. I was taught to fight back and use anything as a weapon because in the words of the local police and my teachers "anything in the class can be used as a weapon." This didn't bring the comfort they would have hoped it would.

While some people are heading off to college, I can't help but to think of what their active shooter drills will be like on such a larger campus of average American students. How will they practice the drills? Will they have to practice in the middle of lectures? Things like this have been on my mind since the active shooting on Michigan State's campus, and how unprepared people must have felt.

Yet as these events continue to happen, I see so many adults' ideas on how to keep schools safe, some as crazy as giving teachers guns to protect themselves and their students. Ideas like these from people on the outside should never be a part of the conversation on how to keep students like me safe, but as people keep adding to the problem they seem to forget what it all comes down to, which is how to prevent it from ever happening and not to keep adding new ways to what to do when it does happen.

For years I learned how to protect myself when an active shooter is in my school but not what I could have done to stop or even what laws could be put in place to protect teachers and students before it gets to this point. I believe that the idea of having teachers fight fire with fire against someone who only wants to hurt as many people as they can is the worst decision a law maker can make, but that's not the point of any of this.

There is a crack in every school in America and an even bigger one in which these events have taken place. Although I am excited to finally be done, I'm indefinitely scared for the students after me. The ones who might not be so lucky to not have to worry about what could happen. I hope soon that the average American student life is not one of fear, desensitization, and school shooting safety drills.

I CAN FIND WALDO BUT NOT MYSELF

Andrea Cruz

In a bright, semi-empty room, I sat there waiting for an officer to walk in and tell me I was free to go. It happened before, so I was sure it would happen again. Almost like a cue, an officer walked in. I started to get up.

“Wait a moment, I just want to talk.”

“Well that’s what all of you say and you guys always end up looking at me like I’m crazy, so yeah, *you* might want to talk, but *I’m* done with talking.”

“Wait, how about this, I promise I’ll keep quiet, I won’t talk whatsoever, and I’ll just listen. I want to hear you out.”

I stared at the desperate officer’s face knowing the moment I opened my mouth, I would have yet another pair of eyes to look at me with absurdity. Eyes do not lie.

“I really mean it, y’know,” the officer stated.

I stared again, but this time not at his face—I stared into his eyes. I checked for any deceit. In the end of my search, I found none.

“Fine, I’ll tell you, but only because you are a little different from the others. You’re not quick to judge.”

His quiet desperation turned to silent delight. The officer continued to walk away from the door and sit down in a chair across from me. What sat between us was two things: a table and truth to unfold.

“Everybody asks me the same thing and at first I tell them the truth. Though no matter how many people I have told, no matter how many times, they always wore a face of concern and eyes pleading I needed help beyond the powers of God. But I’ll tell you this, officer: it is not that I hate mirrors like vampires hate garlic, I hate what’s inside mirrors. I hate the lies.”

This part has always been when I begin to lose some people, so I continued because I had faith in the officer’s sincere eyes.

“To me, mirrors represent light and darkness. Much like how light allows people to see in clear view, mirrors reflect ourselves. But here’s what most people seem to overlook, in every mirror also lies darkness.”

When I looked over to the officer it wasn’t just his body on the edge of his seat, it was his eyes silently pleading that I continue.

“Darkness makes you unable to see, so you have no choice but to scour about. Mirrors force people to investigate all there is to find about themselves, but they’ll never end their search, because mirrors don’t show *every* part of you. Mirrors don’t reveal one’s reflection, they display distortion. I couldn’t tell you how many times I’ve thought I was the problem, and how my own image made me so detached from the world.”

The officer shifted in his seat, and I feared that it meant he was leaving. I sat there and found not the sound of the door opening and closing, but silence from across the table where the officer still sat. I continued on.

“Truth is, it wasn’t until I happened to accidentally break my mirror into all kinds of shapes and sizes when I realized something. As the pieces laid on the floor they glistened and gleamed as the sun’s ray touched them, I noticed something as I looked at them from above. Although one big mirror became many small ones, I was able to recognize myself for the first time. It was because I was still able to see myself in every piece of the broken mirror that I realized being myself included being *every* part of myself, even the parts I was too afraid to express. Ever since then, I haven’t bothered to look at a mirror because I know that, without looking at one, I’ll still always be myself.”

The room was still and the air was light. I waited for the expected response I always got from everybody, yet when I looked up, I found the officer the same exact way he was sitting from the very beginning. With a warm smile and gentle gaze, he got up, walked towards me and softly wrapped his arms around me. Shortly after, he got up and walked towards the door, stopping before he opened it. He said, “Thank you, you’re free to go,” and then quietly shut the door behind him.

I didn’t leave immediately. Instead, I sat there and realized two things: he had kept his promise, and his eyes never lied.

AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE *Jasmine Walker*

I finally understood what Robert Frost was saying about *The Road Not Taken*.

As I stared at my crossroads, I began to read through the poem in my mind, hoping for an answer. Both paths looked equally threatening but in different ways. One brand new, unworn, but inviting. The other worn, old, and welcoming, but intimidating all the same.

How in the world did I get myself stuck in this mess? I plopped down on the floor and wallowed in self-pity. *Why is this so hard?* There were so many decisions, so many choices, but I could answer them all just by what I do right now.

The more I looked at my choices, the more daunting they felt. *How does every choice seem so good but not right?* I feel like I always knew this day would come, the day where I had to choose between leaving or staying, but it never seemed this close or real, until now.

I sat down in my little corner and pondered more. Footsteps came towards me, familiar ones. I turned and saw my dad walking out of the kitchen. He smiled, waved, and went back to whatever it was he was doing. I stared once more at the acceptance letter I received. *It can wait another day.* I looked back towards the kitchen and flipped over the letter to go help out my dad. He just started the dishes.

The dishes were piled, and it looked like my dad had already overflowed the sink. I chuckled to myself and got the mop out, attempting to clean the mess.

“How are you doing, kiddo?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“Decide yet?”

I glanced back again at the table where I left all those college letters and my future. My eyes closed and thoughts began to dance around my mind. Dorms or dishes with dad. I opened my eyes and answered.

“Gigi Anise, where am I going next? I want to continue my training!” Fennel squeaked out, enthusiasm dripping from each word. A massive grin spread across her honey colored cheeks, brilliant white teeth gleaming in the dappled sunlight.

“Oh, just the cave,” Anise waved her wrinkled hand off to the side in a dismissive manner, as if it were nothing. All of the previous joy that Fennel once displayed was sucked out of her, as if an emotional vampire had sunk its fangs into her skin. Fennel’s cheeks flushed, the once happy smile flipped upside down, mouth parting in shock. It was then that the tiny girl noticed her heartbeat quickening. A once steady pitter-patter turning into a thunderstorm, each beat threatening to burst through her chest.

“The *cave*? No. No, no, no, I’m not going in yet!” Fennel shrieked, eyes widening to the size of saucers.

“Dear, there is nothing to be so afraid of. All you have to do is make it to the other side with—”

“No! No! I’m not doing that! I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!” Fennel took several steps backwards, nearly tripping over one of the winding tree roots.

“Fennel, listen—”

“Stop! I can’t do that. You know I don’t like the dark! And Basil, and Parsley, and Paprika, they all said there’s monsters! Something bit Clove when she went! I saw the mark, I really did!” Fennel’s words were spit out one after another. The poor girl took no breaths in between her protests.

“It’s not—”

“Yes it is! You can’t say that! I know you were going to say it isn’t that bad! It *is*! Stop trying to convince me it isn’t!”

“Fennel!” Anise snapped, eyebrows knitting together with frustration. The wrinkles across her face deepened with her growing irritation. Fennel was much too stubborn.

“I’m not doing it! If this means I won’t ever be a real witch, so be it! I’m not going in there!” The tiny girl yelled, shaking her head. Hands curling into fists, she turned, sprinting away.

“Please, come back! Listen to me on this!” Anise yelled after the child, but she was long gone. Her voice was only met with silence.

Fennel’s lip quivered in an effort not to cry as she rushed through the forest, feet striking the vibrant grass with each step. At some point (she couldn’t even recall when), Fennel had made it into the trees. With soaring leaps, she crossed from tree to tree, barely even landing on one branch before jumping to another. *Stupid cave*, Fennel thought, lips curled into a deep frown. Tears still pricked her waterline, but she refused to let them fall. She would stand her ground on this.

Eventually, the child witch found her way back to the treetop village that the coven called home. Storming inside the hut, Fennel slammed the log door behind her. Arms crossed over her chest, Fennel dramatically flopped down onto the loveseat. With a frown that completely soured her features, she sulked among the cushions. She was left alone with her thoughts until a chattering, high pitched voice floated through the doorway. It was accompanied by the slamming of a door. Fennel didn’t need to look over to recognize who exactly had just arrived.

“Fennel, what are you *doing* over there? Stop looking so down.” Paprika’s voice rang out, shrill as ever. The girl’s sister leaned over the back of the couch, auburn hair dropping across Fennel’s face like a silky curtain.

“Get your hair off of me!” Fennel huffed, falling to the side and burying her cheek into the couch cushions, mostly to avoid Paprika’s annoying presence. “Besides, you don’t even know what Gigi Anise told me to do. You would be like this too if she assigned you this!”

“Oh, *god*, what does she want our little princess to do now? Another simple lesson?” Paprika groaned in annoyance. The sisters always bickered and teased each other over anything that came to mind.

“Hmph!” Fennel side-eyed Paprika, glaring at the other as best as she could from her current position. “Well, it actually *is* something important.” As she took a pause between sentences, that familiar feeling grew again in her chest. That snake of dread, slithering up around her heart. “Gigi Anise wants me to go into the cave. All the way to the end.” Paprika was unnaturally quiet for much too long after she finished speaking. Then, laughter. Bitter, piercing, laughter.

“*That’s it?*” Paprika cackled the words. “You are so pathetic, Fennel! That is nothing! Imagine being such a baby you can’t go through some stupid cave. What, scared you’ll get eaten?” Paprika jabbed Fennel in the side with a finger. “Scared of all the *monsters* in there? You’ll never be a real witch if you’re afraid of the stupid dark! I can’t believe you. Such a baby!” Paprika doubled over, falling into another fit of laughter.

Before Fennel could even attempt to prevent tears, they were already cascading down her cheeks, cutting clear lines within the faint coating of dust that always seemed to cover her skin. Leaping up from the couch, Fennel whirled on Paprika.

“Leave me alone! I can’t help that I’m scared!” She shouted, though her voice faltered and cracked.

“Go on, Fennel! Cry like usual! It won’t get you anywhere!” Paprika yelled right back, glaring at her younger sister. “Cry like the baby you are!”

Just like before, Fennel was sprinting away from what she didn’t want to face. The ridicule of others. This time, she no longer tried to mask her sobs. She allowed her cries to ring out through the trees as she ran, and ran, and ran. There was no destination in mind. In fact, she barely processed the fact she was running. Rain began to beat down on her hat, which acted as a tiny pool. Water gathered upon it, soaking through the fibers and creating droplets that fell against her face. It rolled down skin, washing away dirt and debris, gathering down at the bottom of her chin. Tears mingled with rainwater, salt spreading to the purified drops.

Abruptly, as if she had been frozen, Fennel skidded to a stop. She rocked forward onto the balls of her feet, digging her toes into the wet soil to catch herself. Jamming balled fists into her eye sockets, she aggressively wiped away until the tears had dissipated, leaving behind skin that’s rubbed raw. Her hands dropped down, disappearing into the depths beneath her lavender cloak. As her eyes focused on what was ahead, she drew in a sharp inhale.

The gaping maw of a cave. Jagged, pewter colored stones hung over the opening, casting shadows out that touched the tips of her toes. Barely a few feet in, the darkness swallowed all light, as if a black hole had opened up in its interior to suck away all human life. What lingered beyond the border between dirt and stone was unknown to the girl.

Fennel cast a glance over her shoulder, lip curled up in defiance. She would show them. She could make it. Her gaze swept over the lush forest behind her, which concealed possibly prying eyes from her immediate sight. Turning with such force that her cloak billowed out in a great display around her, Fennel marched onwards. Black covered her small form, as if it were never there at all.

Bare feet met cold, damp stone as Fennel entered the cave. Such a stark difference from the soft grass that often tickled her skin, or even the mud that squished through her toes when it rained. This was uninviting. The girl was unsteady even setting foot on it, as if it may suddenly collapse beneath her weight.

With a simple in and out of a breath, a glow came from her palms. It was a warm yellow, reminiscent of a candle, and only growing in width. It formed between her hands, creating a ball of flickering light. Raising up to hover over her head, the ball illuminated Fennel’s immediate area. Much to her surprise, there was.. nothing. No monsters, no manic scribbles on the wall, no traps waiting to come down upon her. Everything was pure gray, the walls dipping in and out due to centuries of erosion.

Then came the sound of... a giggle. Not from anything around Fennel, no. It came from the girl herself. *This is what she was scared of the whole time*, she thought. She brushed the pads of her fingers along the smooth stone, a smile widening across her face. Crouching down, Fennel wrapped her arms around her torso, barely able to contain the laughter that took over her very being. She couldn't believe she had cried about this! Something so simple, such as a mere cave, plagued her nightmares. Yet it was nothing to be worried about. Fennel shook her head, pushing herself back to a stand. With an extra pep in her step, the girl began her journey deeper into the very thing that had scared her so, all fear having melted away.

GRIEF IS LIKE A RIPTIDE

Brookelle Collins

Grief is like a riptide, and depression is like an undercurrent. They pull you under and into the dark and cold water, which ends up shocking and frightening you. They toss you around, making it difficult to escape. Some don't make it out at all. With every heavy wave that forces you further underwater, you hit sharp rocks and shells. They tell you, "you should be over it," "it's been enough time," and they will tell you to not let it affect your schoolwork, when all you can think about is how you're drowning. Drowning in grief, drowning in self-hatred, drowning in regret, and drowning in homework. What's the point of keeping up with it or continuing if they keep putting rocks in your pockets? How are you supposed to move on when you can't even move forward? When you're surrounded by pressure, weight, and pain?

You need to find your buoys, your life jackets, or your lifeboats. The people who give you reminders of what's due or important, who remind you to sleep or eat. These are the people who can and will pull you out of the water, the people who will keep you afloat. Sometimes it's hard to find them or to rely on them. You know how to swim without them, and it feels as though you shouldn't need them. The thing is, they're not there because you can't swim, nor do they think you're incapable of doing so. They just want to give you a break, a reprieve from your struggle; they want you to make it back to shore, and they want you to have enough energy to be able to make it. It's okay to take that hand, and it's okay to ask for that help. The shore might be far away, but you have people who will help you get there, who will help you see the next sunrise. You just have to reach out.

REVITALIZE

Julie Salinas

When a door closes, a window opens and the room brightens up. I have vivid memories of sunshine and bare feet on grass. Times where speaking has given me love. I desperately tried to savor the short-lived relief I got after doing something good, morally human. I believed that this satisfaction could become my static state. But then the pandemic hit.

In 2020, I became twenty-nine people in one day. I was struggling with a deep sense of being prosaic, knowing that what I wanted yesterday was changing with each passing day. I found myself buried with mixed emotions about the future. It wasn't until I found myself between a rock and a hard place that I discovered how to overcome.

I was exhausted from the constant battle with my own mind. I knew that if I didn't do something soon, I might never accept help. I had been so focused on suffering that I had completely shut out the world. But then the world shifted again.

I can't pinpoint the exact moment, but I remember feeling a glimmer of hope, a tiny spark that told me things could get better if I let them. I started seeking out a source of light, whether it was a kind friend, a beautiful sunset, or a good book that made me laugh or cry. Gradually, I began to notice all the beauty and excitement in life, even in the midst of my struggles. I reached out to others, asking for support and was surprised to find that there were people who cared and wanted to see me thrive.

Over time, the darkness began to recede, replaced by a sense of hope and possibility. I started taking baby steps towards my goals. I learned to appreciate the simple things in life, like a nice cup of coffee in the mornings or a warm hug from someone endearing.

Now, looking back on that dark time in my life, I'm grateful for the experience. It taught me the importance of being open to the goodness in the world. I think we deserve a soft epilogue—we are good people and we've suffered enough.

HERMIT AND THE TIDES OF GRIEF

Brookelle Collins

There once was a little crab named Hermit. He enjoyed crawling across the bright ocean shore. He'd dance all night and play all day. But one day, Hermit was swept away, caught in the riptide known as Grief. Grief swept him into the Deep Dark Blue, where there was no light or warmth. He struggled to make it to the surface, but he alone didn't have enough strength; so deeper he sank.

The Deep Dark Blue was as dark as pitch. Hermit was lost, unsure which way was which. He wandered for a while as he did not want to give up, but it became too much. The darkness felt thick. There was too much pressure, and he began to feel sick.

Hermit was stuck there for a while, without light, so much so that he could not tell morning from night. At some point, he noticed a glow; it shined brightly in between the cracks and crevices of the rocks. With no guidance or reason, he followed the ray of light. It seemed to come from many directions, reflecting off of bits of sea glass or shells. As he swam, he ran into a crawfish named Chitin, and a pufferfish named Pudge and learned they too were following the glimpses of light.

Hermit asked them if he could join their group because he was by himself. On the way, they talked about many things, where they were from, what they missed, and who they were. They began to joke and laugh, which made their small light seem brighter. When they made it to the surface, they weren't in a place they knew, but they had each other. They enjoyed their new start. Once in a while, they swam a little too far from shore, but they helped one another get back to the surface to face a brighter tomorrow and little Hermit began to dance and play once more.

A FRAGMENT

Loren Minton

The rhythmic twinkle of the stars that enliven the darkness of the night sky are what makes the sight a dazzling one to behold. What makes up those stars in my night sky are a plethora of individuals I stood beside during the autumn period: their silhouettes echoing with laughter; their gaze holding perseverance, the long haul building their trepidation; and their bodies radiating their love of adventure.

I can recall the cedar smell of the late summer air, the feeling of a gentle gust against my perspired skin. Waves of harmony flowing carelessly into my ears, each instrument a perfect piece of a symphony, each player a stroke of paint to shape a work of art.

If I could live the moment over again, I wouldn't even hesitate.

“The cracks may not be gone,
They are not hidden but healed.
You have old shards and new seams,
Showing your original beauty and history.”

