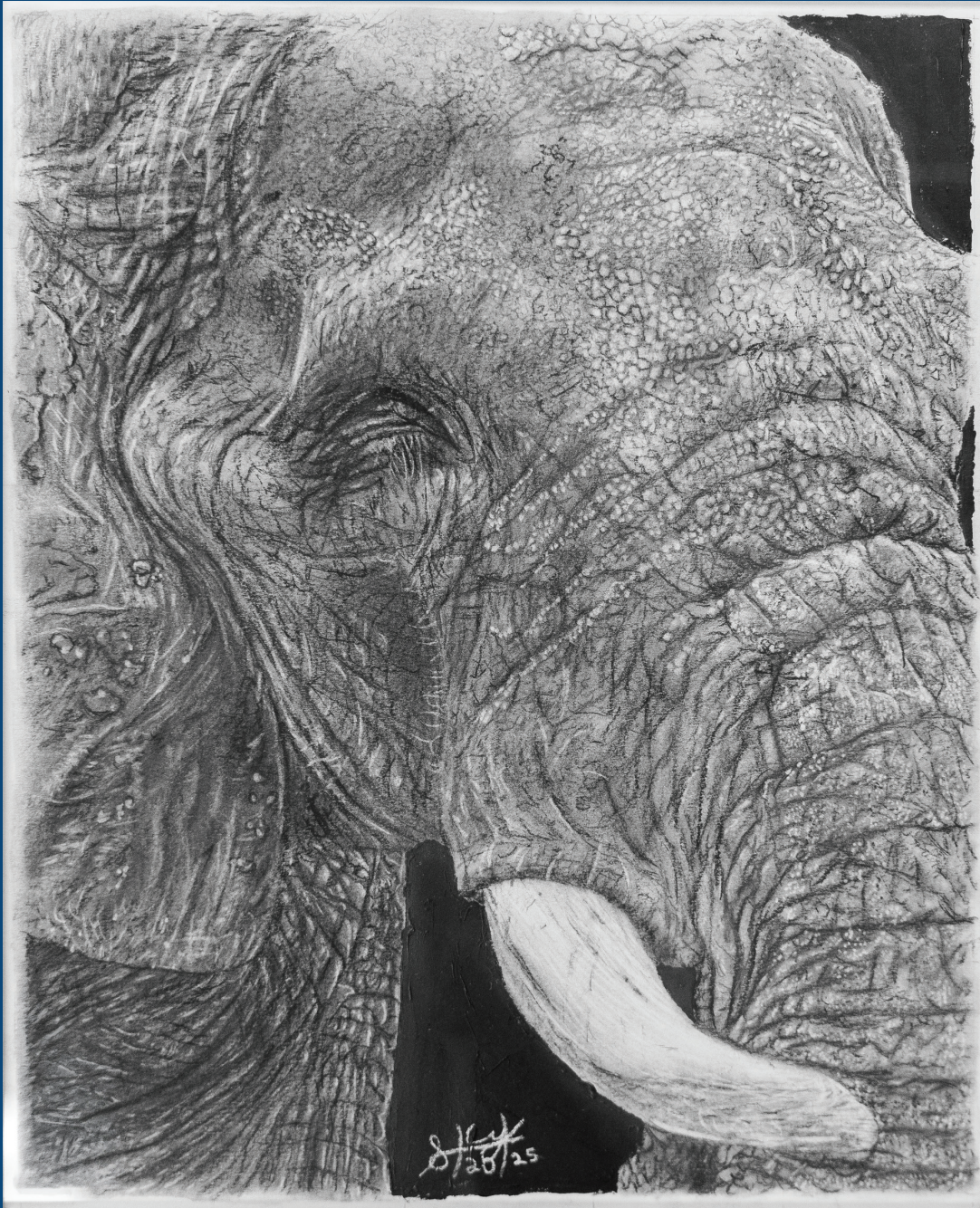


The Muse



LITERARY & VISUAL ARTS MAGAZINE
2026 EDITION



Lorri Barrier

English Instructor & Humanities Department Head

The process of bringing an image to life or giving words to an idea always reveals a piece of the artist's identity in the work. This vulnerability can be difficult to overcome, but the artists and writers featured in this year's *Muse* have done exactly that—shared part of themselves with an audience. In the words of artist Henri Matisse, "Creativity takes courage." The 2026 edition of *The Muse* invites you to experience the courageous creations of each featured artist and author. I thank everyone who contributed time and energy to make this publication possible. May *The Muse* bring you joy!



Josh Gooch

Program Head, Graphic Design

Creative work always shows a piece of the person behind it. Whether it's an image or a piece of writing, something real comes through. That can be uncomfortable, but it's also what makes the work matter. The artists and writers in this year's *Muse* pushed past that hesitation. They shared their ideas, their perspectives, and parts of themselves. As Henri Matisse said, "Creativity takes courage," and this collection proves it. The 2026 edition of *The Muse* invites you to take your time with the work, look closely, and see what stands out to you. Thank you to everyone who contributed their time and effort to make this possible.

I hope you enjoy it.

Grammar and punctuation in the featured written works respect the intent of the authors represented. The opinions expressed in this magazine are not necessarily the opinions of Stanly Community College (SCC). All property and artwork is assumed to be the original and free expression of the artists represented. *The Muse* is a literary and art magazine published once a year by Stanly Community College's English, Advertising & Graphic design, Institutional Advancement, and the Stanly Early College (SEC) Departments. No part of this material content shall be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, or recording without the written permission of the College. Any comments or questions about our publication should be directed to Josh Gooch, Program Head: Graphic Design, at 704.991.0263 or jgooch9259@stanly.edu.

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A Friend, Rock, and King

By Desirerie Vang

During the Vietnam war, the CIA secretly recruited the Hmong people to fight against the Viet Cong with South Vietnam and the United States. The CIA entrusted General Vang Pao, a 34-year-old Hmong male, to lead the Hmong people to fight the Viet Cong with fighter planes and save the American pilots that were shot down. My mother's father was a captain of a fighter plane during the secret war; fortunately, after the war, he was able to seek refuge and saved his family by moving to America.

As much as it was a blessing for some families to be promised refuge in America, most families, like my father's, were forced to stay behind; therefore, many hid from persecution. My father, named Phoojywg, meaning "friend," was estimated to be born around 1972-1975, around the time when the war ended. Before he was a year old, his parents died due to landmines. After their death, my father became deathly ill. Relatives visited my father and introduced Christianity by praying over his sickness; then, he was healed and my father's family became Christian. When my father was three, he didn't like his name anymore, so his grandmother renamed him Pob Zeb, meaning "Rock."

Growing up, it was hard to survive. My father lived in a village in Laos until the age of five and then moved to refugee camps in Thailand. In order to get to the refugee camps, people had to swim in the Mekong River that separated Laos and Thailand. When crossing the river, people swam during the night, and many died by being shot at by soldiers or drowning in the river. Fortunately, my father and his family survived the swim using only a floatie with string tied onto it. Then, they went to seek refuge in refugee camps in Thailand.

When staying in the camps, all he did was school. The teacher was as young as 16 or 17, and the most that they could do was to teach how to read and write. My father's first and only book that he wrote was called "Phoojywg Hauv Nruag Npauvav," and it meant "Friends in our Dreams." The book talked about children, playing and enjoying their time together in their dreams. That was my father's utopia. After staying in the camps for ten years, he and his family came to America in 1987.

When my father grew up in America, he wanted to be a millionaire. He used to make Hmong Christian music on CDs to get rich, but

it wasn't necessarily successful since it was more of a hobby. He decided to move to North Carolina with my mother after having his first son, Johnny, in California; afterward, he had his second son, Peter, and first daughter (me) in North Carolina. After having his second son, he was renamed as "Nom Zeb," meaning "King Rock," because he was recognized as having entered manhood in Hmong culture. After moving, he went into the workforce. After working for 30 years, he became a pastor at 49 and retired at the age of 51 to minister at True Life Albemarle Alliance Church in Albemarle, NC.

Recently, my father started using the name Phoojywg again because it's the only thing connected to his parents. It's a sweet name, but Pob Zeb and Nom Zeb define who he is. I believe that my father is strong. Like a rock, he endured pressure, remained firm without breaking, and I'm here today because he never gave up. My father is not just a rock; he's the foundation of our family.



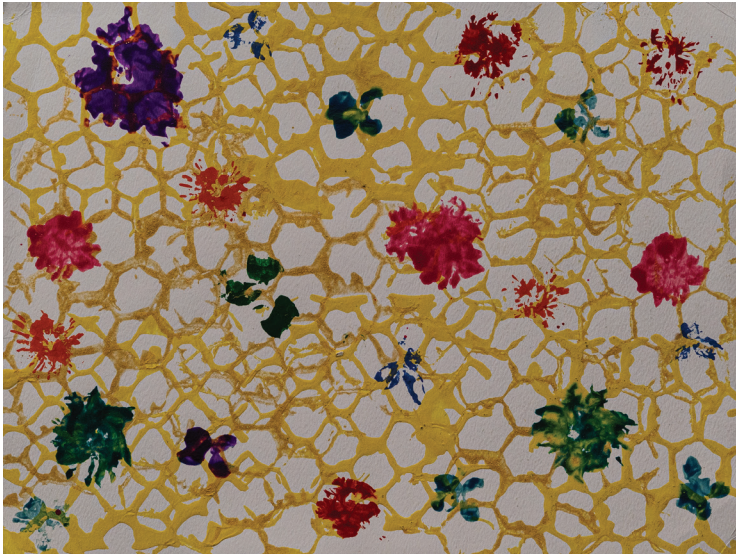
Jelly Roll Portrait

By Casey Stirewalt



Lunar New Year

By Deify Kind



Untitled

By Mykaela Tackett

I Hear Silence

By Anya Bullock I hear silence in the trees

As their branches touch

Swaying in the wind.

I hear silence in the waves

As they crash against the shore

Creating rivers in the sand

With treasures buried beneath.

I hear silence in the animals

As they chirp and chitter away

The birds singing a song that few people hear

While the squirrels gather food before cold engulfs the world.

I hear silence in the storm

Rain pattering against the window

Thunder rumbling like a giant from a tale

Yet so much peace as it lures people to sleep.

I hear silence in life

New creations coming into the light of the world.

I hear silence in death

As the story ends

Yet the end is often the beginning

And it will start again.

The Discovery

By Elijah Miller

The little egg-shaped rover scurried across the blisteringly hot landscape, unaffected by the suffocating, carbon dioxide-filled, orange atmosphere that would've killed a human in mere seconds. It persevered against the constant winds and the rocky terrain, on a mission to explore Venus for anything that could contribute to humanity's understanding of the hostile environment.

It pulled itself over a step into a big stone tube that looked too circular to be natural. The green orb that constituted its eye rapidly rotated in its socket as the bright green beams of light emanated from the sphere, scanning its surroundings and creating a 3d image for researchers back on Earth. Then it fell.

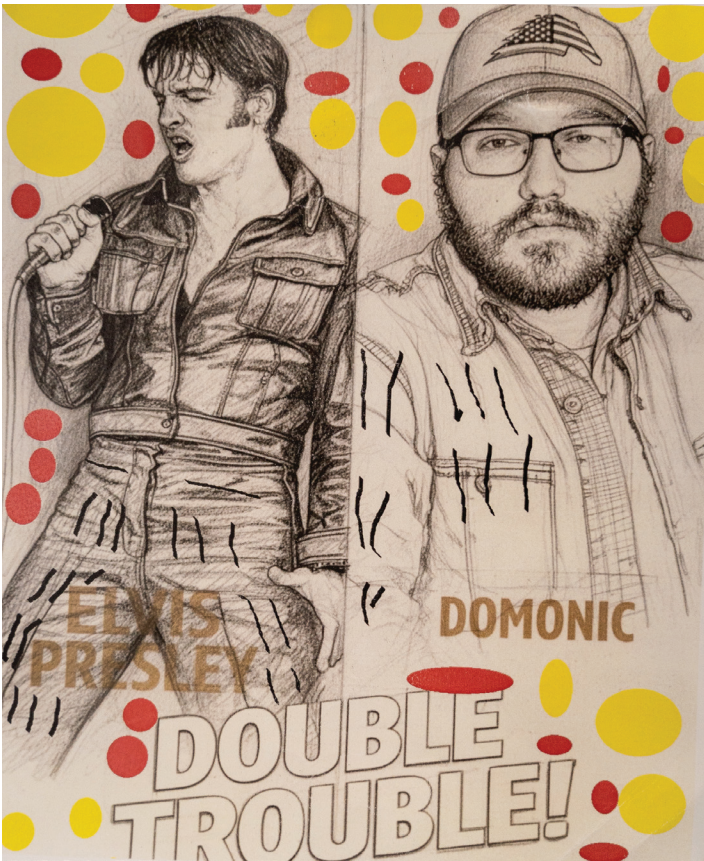
The little rover fell through a rectangular hole in the cylinder. Luckily, it landed feet first on the orange ground and continued clamoring until it found what looked like an open doorway with stairs leading into a dark cavern. The top of the doorway was lined with a series of alien symbols. The rover ventured down the stairs, unafraid of what might be waiting.

The first room the rover encountered had tables topped with test tubes and beakers. The rover's feet clanged against the floor as it walked. At the back of the room, there was a giant glass cylinder that was shattered. At the front of the room, there was a humanoid skeleton in a white coat that was torn in most places. The skeleton had three fingers on each hand, spikes jutting out of the back of the skull. The bottom part of the jaw was laying on the floor along with broken pieces of what used to be the ribcage. A small, clawed hand reached from the bottom of the rover and picked up one of the small pieces of broken bone, pulling it inside the rover's storage compartment. The rover scanned the entire room before pressing onward.

The next chamber housed a chalkboard on the far side of the room with a drawing of a humanoid figure, with symbols near lines connecting to different parts. The near side of the room had three glass cylinders that were shattered. There are more sequences of symbols on the glass, and they seem to be the same.

After scanning the room and creating the image for it, the rover found a hatch on the wall with another sequence of symbols above it. The rover hopped up to get a closer look, accidentally rolling down the chute and being spit out into a room with soot lining the floor and a giant hole in the ceiling, letting the sun soak the room with heat. Suddenly, a grappling hook launched out of the top of the rover's head. However, the hook reached its maximum length without grabbing anything, so it hit the ground in an unsatisfying clang. After reeling the hook back in, the rover noticed a tunnel leading out of the room along with a slight slant and a mini canal in the floor, the rover scampered across the floor and stepped out into the sun, which was much bigger than on Earth.

Now free of the building, the rover scuttled across the barren ground, which now inclined steeper and steeper before becoming level at a considerable decrease in elevation. Then, the rover spotted something that looked like a mountain over the horizon. Curious, the rover started towards the mountain. For innumerable days and nights, the rover scampered across the dry basin until finally it reached the mountain. When the rover arrived, it found that the mountain was not natural. It was an enormous pile of metal, plastic, and objects that the rover couldn't identify. The rover then powered down, out of fuel and ready to be retrieved.



Top Left

Elvis and Me

By Dominic Carter

Top Right

Sunburst

By Mykaela Tackett



Left

Throne Room

By Jordan Holt

Reminiscing about Childhood

By Ariana McAlister

Childhood is...
The imagination running wild.
The endless, daily energy.

The longing within for mom and dad's warm, sweet, safe embrace.

The ability to make a friend in a matter of minutes.

Childhood is...

The imaginary friends that can keep one busy for hours because they seem ever so real.

The ability to be anyone or go anywhere through one little imagination.

The dolls, toy cars, and stuffed animals that require constant attention.

The fun that never ends.

Childhood is...

The freedom to run and play non-stop.

The so-called "monsters" under the bed.

The constant questions that must be asked the instant they come to mind.

The newness of every detail glimmering in young, eager eyes.

Childhood is...

The jumping on beds and the splashing in puddles.

The pretending to be a princess or brave warrior in a majestic kingdom.

The toys scattered everywhere in the house.

The oh-so-sleepy eyes in opposition with the energetic mind.

Childhood is...

The ongoing excitement and abundant joy.

The sneaky little fingers stealing a cookie from the "off-limits" plate.

The vibrant colors within a scribbled drawing that mom hung on the fridge.

The smiles that stretch from ear to ear.

Childhood is...

The tiny hands and the tiny faces.

The tiny minds and the tiny beings.

The biggest hugs and the biggest smiles.

The biggest emotions and the biggest hearts!

Eclipso: The Truth Behind the Chaos

By Cheyanne Patterson

There's always someone or something trying to create something to make the world a better place; I am a result of one of those things. The name's Eclipso, also known as Galid, former Spirit of Divine Wrath, now I'm the bad guy.

Here's the story:

My great creator, God or The Presence, decided to create me to punish the wickedness and chaos in the world. So I did my job; I punished it. FUN, RIGHT?? But then people started saying things; they said I was enjoying the destruction I was causing, but I wasn't. You think I enjoyed spending my life dealing with the worst people in the world? That's like saying a janitor enjoys cleaning bathrooms because he's good at it. Have you seen the way humans treat each other? I'm supposed to be the "super evil villain" who tried to turn the world into a giant ball of chaos. Not true, I was just dumbfounded at the evil in the world. Okay, maybe I went a little overboard with the whole possession-and-psychological-torture thing, but they totally deserved it.

I was then imprisoned in the Heart of Darkness, basically a black diamond made for holding "evil people." Let me repeat that slower. The divine forces locked the punisher of evil inside a rock labeled evil. Funny, right? I was cast down from heaven into Earth, and I landed in some place the humans called Africa, and some hunter guy found it and took it to a jeweler. And you know what this fool did? He cut it into a thousand pieces. ONE THOUSAND PIECES! AGHHHH! **screams in evil cosmic demon anger**

Why is it that people have the urge to mess with things they don't understand? "Ooh, look, I found a strange object from the sky. Let's cut it into jewelry." Or "Oh look, there's a big button labeled 'DO NOT PRESS', let's press it." Like, what is wrong with y'all? The pieces scattered all over the world, and one found itself in the hands of a dude that goes by the name of Dr. Bruce Gordon, a scientist studying solar energy, my one true weakness. Irony at its finest, am I right? So, he was angry

about some project, and he found the shard and touched it; the door opened, so I stepped through. Yeah, I possessed him, I know how that sounds. “Body stealing demon,” yeah, yeah, but I just wanted to see the evil in the earth through a human’s eyes. I saw what the world had gone to while I was trapped in my evil prison thingy. You guys had gotten, umm, how do you put this...creative, you could say, I guess. And you did not disappoint, my little two-legged insects of pure evil. While I was gone, you managed to invent:

- Bigger wars
- More creative corruption
- Entire systems built around exploiting each other
- And my personal favorite, people arguing endlessly on things they clearly didn’t understand.

So, I had a little idea, looking back now, not the brightest moment. Ha, that was funny, get it? WHY AREN’T YOU LAUGHING???? I wasn’t trying to create more evil; you were doing an amazing job on your own. I just tried to get you humans to see how ugly the world was. Maybe then you guys would understand why I punished people. Daddy dearest would see how much I helped and take me back. That’s what I had planned, but you humans are unpredictable. Let’s just say you humans weren’t the easiest thing to try and fix, and now I’m the evil villain who tried to destroy the world with darkness and chaos. It wasn’t my fault entirely; I couldn’t control them all. I’m sorry for almost destroying the world, but trust me, it wasn’t because I loved hurting people or loved the chaos; I wanted people to see how they treated others. Honestly, now that I’m thinking about it, my original punishments weren’t harsh enough.

So long story short: I was replaced by the Spectre. Apparently, “too intense at punishing evil” is a fireable offense. And that’s how it happened, replaced by the Spectre, out of a job, and apparently downgraded from “Divine Wrath” to “unemployed cosmic inconvenience.” Honestly, if I’d known getting fired by The Presence meant being replaced by a fallen angel in a trench coat, I might’ve toned it down just a little.

That's Amore

By Cassidy Ball



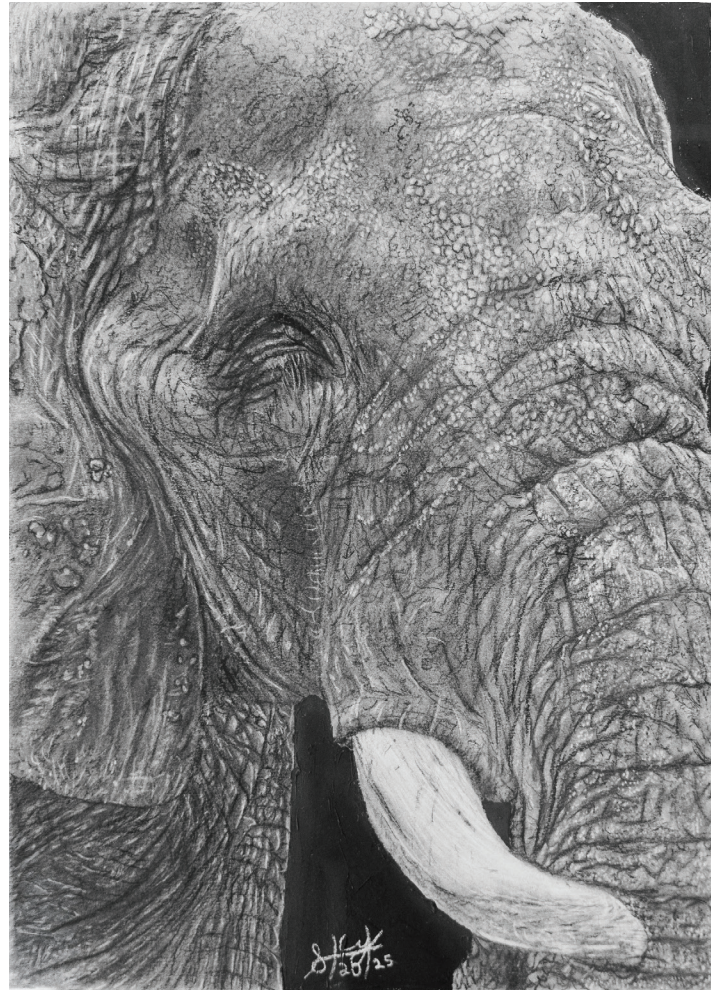
Origins of the Boy

By Keiran Cason



Portrait in memory of C'sar (*NC Zoo*)

By Casey Stirewalt



Crimson Crossing

By Krystal Lipe



Home
Sweet Home
Is Where
I Belong
Family Passion Encourage Peace Hope Compassion Faith Believe
In Yourselves Never Give Up Courage Passion
Compassion
Passion
Encourage
Believe
Faith
Family
Hope
Jesus
Saves

Interstellar

By Deify Kind

Word Cross

By Domonic Carter



Antelope Island

By Josh Gooch



Winter Illusion

By Krystal Lipe



Pea Island

By Josh Gooch



Memories Of Mud

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Tiger Woods Portrait

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Marilyn Monroe Portrait

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Midnight Witness

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The Weirwood Tree

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