

THE WORD

*a Newsletter from
the English program
at Messiah University*

October 2022 | Issue 7

READING BOOKS TOGETHER

by Nate Castellitto ('23)

"We all approach literature with our own experiences, mindsets, judgements and inner worlds"
p. 05

WORDS CHANGE EVERYTHING

by Rosey Jones ('22)

"Words have the power to change everything, if only you can wield them with grace and finesse."
p. 08

BECOMING A REBEL WRITER

by Olivia Reardon ('26)

"If I, as a writer, ever hope to create something with depth and beauty, I must learn to break rules."
p. 09

Note from the Chair | Devotional: Psalm 131 | English Club Updates | Research with Peyton Cassel ('23) | Book Recommendations | Reflections by Evelyn Kelly ('26) and Hannah Desko ('22)

Look Inside!

ENGLISH PROGRAM WELCOMES PROFESSOR RYAN RICKRODE

by Nate Castellitto ('23)

The English program is thrilled to welcome its newest full-time professor. Prof. Ryan Rickrode began his first semester at Messiah in August, and he's already settled in comfortably. He's been especially impressed by the community's hospitality and eagerness to chat in the halls, so credit to you, students and faculty.
(continued p. 02)



Rickrode is a senior lecturer in English and the current Director of the Writing Center. This Fall, he's teaching "Literary Nonfiction Workshop" and "First Year Seminar." He specializes in creative writing courses, but as a professor, he enjoys the literature and general education curricula as well.

"I love teaching the Gen Ed literature classes where you get people from all sorts of different backgrounds. It's always fun when you have like an accounting major at the end of the year say 'I really love *Beowulf*.' It's really fun to help people who maybe had a negative experience in a middle school English class or something like that rediscover a love for literature," Rickrode said.

A double major in Creative Writing and Religious Studies in his own time as an undergraduate student, he's most interested in the space where these two studies intersect. Rickrode finds that he can work through that journey right here at Messiah.

"When I first started out teaching, I was working in campus ministry," he said. "So I was working on a college campus, sort of helping college students run Bible studies and worship services on campus for their peers. And so I really liked helping college students grow in their faith. I really loved teaching and helping people become great or better writers. One of the things I really love is thinking about the overlap of faith in art, and a place like Messiah seems like a great place where I can work with people who are interested in both of those things and support people who are maybe asking similar questions to the ones I was asking when I was trying to figure out, what does it mean to be both a Christian and a writer?"

Writers who have helped Rickrode begin to answer that question include Madeleine L'Engle,

"I think what was helpful for me is realizing all truth belongs to God. Stories are a space where you can enter and encounter some sort of truth."

author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Flannery O'Connor, winner of the 1972 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction, and John Gardner, known for his retelling of the *Beowulf* myth from Grendel's point of view.

People like [L'Engle and O'Connor] emphasize that art is good in and of itself. It's a good thing to make a work of art, and art doesn't have to be, like C.S. Lewis talks about, the difference between using and receiving. He says art is meant to be received and experienced, and we can use art for things. We can use it to help us understand a time period, or we could use it to decorate a room. We can use art, but really art is meant to be taken in and experienced. John Gardner talks a lot about how fiction should create this vivid, continuous dream . . . I think what was helpful for me is realizing all truth belongs to God. Stories are a space where you can enter and encounter some sort of truth. Madeleine L'Engle says all art is religious. It's all about finding meaning," Rickrode said.

Rickrode is back in Central Pennsylvania after spending time away. He earned his M.F.A. in Fiction and Creative Nonfiction from the University of Montana. If he's not reading, writing or teaching, Rickrode hinted that he's likely walking his dog, Toby. Toby is a beagle and sheltie mix named after the short story writer, Tobias Wolff.

Rickrode's office hours are Wednesdays from 10am-11am and 12:30pm-2:30pm. His published work can be found at his author website: <https://ryan-rickrode.com>.

English Club

BY EVELYN JANSSEN ('25)

Let's be honest; college is a difficult place to be a creative. No matter how much we love our classes or our major, making space for our personal writing is nearly impossible.

The goal of the Messiah University English Club is to create that space, making time for students to write what they love.

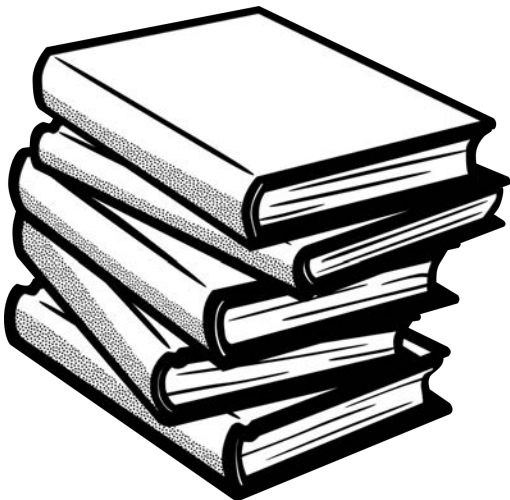
There are no restrictions on major or type of writing. We want anyone interested in practicing their craft to connect with like-minded peers and feel welcome.

Just bring your computer or some paper and write away!

We meet the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of each month from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in Boyer 138.

Contact us via email at englishclub@messiah.edu or on Instagram at [messiah_englishclub](https://www.instagram.com/messiah_englishclub)

We hope to see you there!



WRITER TALKS

Check out a new podcast from the Messiah University English program featuring student writers - and special guests - reading and discussing their original poetry and prose.

Episode 3:
Abby Smoker, "gold-washed sky"

Episode 2:
John Poch, "The Llano Estacado"

Episode 1:
Nathan Hurley, "God Messaged Me on Facebook Today"



UNFORGETTABLE WRITING

First-Year Reflection, by Evelyn Kelly('26)



" . . this is the sound of unforgettable writing: it is rich in detail, it is honest, and it is human."

The unofficial theme for my first semester at Messiah University has been memoir. Between the required texts for two different classes and the honors program's book of the year, I have been submerged in that previously unfamiliar, ancient stream of creative nonfiction. It was a cold shock, but nonetheless invigorating. This semester, I have learned to relish in written detail in personal stories as a way to connect with others and deepen my understanding of my surroundings.

A detailed story is a warm dinner roll the reader savors: a sticky, substantial experience. Instead of distancing the reader with the vivid particulars of a specific time and place, the writer draws them in and texturalises insight on the universal experience of the human condition.

For example in *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott reminisces about eclectic interactions and experiences from her unique life but through it I found profound insights on loving others and seeking to understand God. Within the book, she is brutally honest about herself. Sometimes painful yet always effective, this vulnerability led to a realization: You cannot be a good writer if you are not honest with yourself and your readers.

Like keeping your eyes wide open while someone flicks water at your face, vulnerable writing is never comfortable. In order to be that honest, you have to be awake to your own failings and blindspots. Painful? Yes. Yet this is the sound of unforgettable writing: it is rich in detail, it is honest, and it is human.



READING BOOKS TOGETHER

by Nate Castellitto ('23)

Among the distinguished traits of completing an English degree is the opportunity to study alongside peers who are just as interested in literature. Whether they are an Education, Creative Writing, Professional Writing, or Literature concentration, students of Messiah's English program are all afforded this opportunity at some point or another.

"Reading and considering a text alone is great, but so much can be gained when you study [the text] alongside your peers. There's a wealth of experience and knowledge to be contributed by each person," Junior Elizabeth Movinsky said.

Within the context of literature and even writing, substantial blocks of time are spent alone. Many readers prefer silence as they work, and the same can be said for writers. This is where craft is honed. At the same time, so much can be gleaned from a community of lifelong learners committed to the art of literature.

For Dr. Samuel Smith, this community bears three gifts. "First, we always have the gift of the literary work we're reading and [the] possibilities that text opens up for us. Second, we receive the gift of hearing what happens for other readers when they read the same

work we're reading—possibilities for understanding the work's implications for living a better life than we do. Third, when we share our own understanding of, and experience with, that literary work, we receive the gift of being heard and offering to other readers possibilities for living a better life than we do," Dr. Smith said.

A feature which students appreciate about Messiah's program is the smaller classrooms. Most English major courses host only about 10-20 students. Over the course of a semester, professors allow students to take ownership over their own learning in small groups. This close-knit mode of study encourages engagement with both the readings and other readers.

In my time at Messiah, my classmates have often opened my eyes to themes and details and ideas that I never would have found on my own. It takes humility to admit that we cannot find all of the meaning a work of literature holds on our own, but when we do, we enter into a world of richness that was not available to us before," senior Maddi Mosher said.

Julia Wittel, also a senior, added, "Most of the collaboration I experience happens, of course, in the classroom setting. Reading works of literature from a myriad of genres and discussing the themes, structure, syntax and value of the works gives space for me to engage ideas, interpretations and thought processes that are vastly different [from] my own. My peers and fellow students are critical to this process. We all approach literature with our own experiences, mindsets, judgements and unique inner worlds."

The influence that readers and writers have on each other across literary history is inexhaustible. All of the great contemporary wordsmiths, like Alice Walker and Ocean Vuong, pay homage to their heroes, Zora Neale Hurston and Allen Ginsberg, respectively, in some way

through their work. Likewise, contemporary players admire and pay close attention to what each other is doing. In a given genre, and even across genres, each work is informed by its peers and predecessors.

One example of the amalgamation students might encounter through this one-ness is a broadening of experiential awareness. Most readers select the pieces they do for specific reasons. Some prefer mirror books, which follow narratives, characters or themes they can easily see themselves in. Others prefer window books, which they can't immediately relate to but can otherwise escape to.

"Of course, what is a mirror book to me may be

a window book to another, and what we see in the mirror or through the window varies from person to person. This is why it's important to me that my study of literature is a collaborative one. When you gather together to discuss a work of literature, you get to see the different ways that people see literature and, through it, the world," Mosher said.

Whether it be an affirmation, criticism or elaboration, readers add to an expansive sphere of knowledge with each literary contribution. Their engagement is critical to the evolution of craft and, sometimes, may even become a work of art itself. As they earn their degree, Messiah's English students can be assured that their work has pivotal, timeless significance.

READING AS HOLY REBELLION

by Kerry Hasler-Brooks, Ph.D.

Reading is, as we are often reminded, on the decline. We read less and less, skimming only the shortest headlines or posts, pausing only at the most cutting words, scrolling on and on not for something important but for the thing that comes next. The written word, once a cutting-edge technology that democratized knowledge, truth, and beauty, is increasingly being replaced with audio and video content ideally capped at just 7-15 seconds. Given this cultural trend, reading literature, a book of poetry or a novel, something long and hard and maybe even old seems irrelevant. It is an outmoded, escapist, and inaccessible activity practiced only by a shrinking pool of elites

And yet, thoughtful reading of great literature may be precisely the world-changing practice we need today - as people of faith, engaged citizens, and good neighbors.

Reading, for me, can be a punch in the gut, an adventure, a philosophical rabbit trail, a fantastical retreat, a safe space of dear friends, a good joke. It is also, more often than not, a step toward the holy. Both privately and professionally, as a scholar and teacher of American literature, I read as a spiritual practice. I cherish especially the women who have written what Jessica Hooten Wilson has described as a "longing for the holy," writers like Emily Dickinson, Madeline L'Engle, Alice Walker, Ana Castillo, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, Marilynne Robinson, Louise Glück, Marilyn Nelson, and Yaa Gyasi. Their writing honors the questions and commitments, doubts and affirmations that enliven and stretch my lived experience of faith. I read them, and I am transformed.

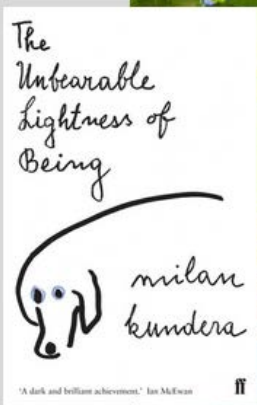
In *The Scandal of Holiness: Renewing Your Imagination in the Company of Literary Saints*, Wilson describes imaginative literature as a place "where God meets us first and shows us more than tells us who [God] is and to what life we have been called." And in this way reading can be a holy rebellion from the mundane and toward the truth, justice, hope, peace, and love we are called to make in the world.

See KHB's full review of *The Scandal of Holiness* forthcoming in *Brethren in Christ History and Life*.

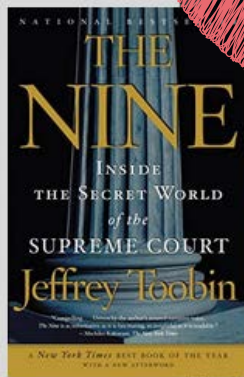
*A Note from
the Chair*



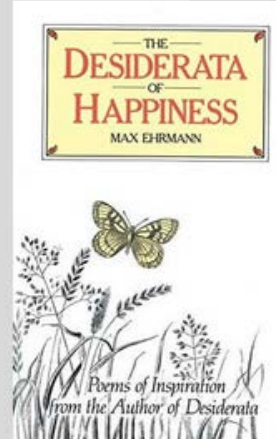
What are you reading?



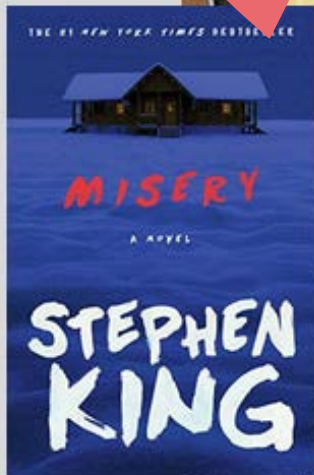
Mackenzie Christie



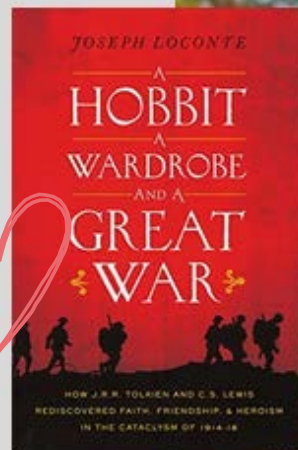
ALLIE MAST



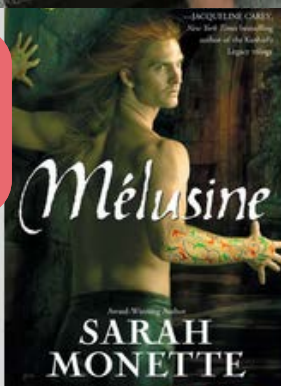
EMMA BANE



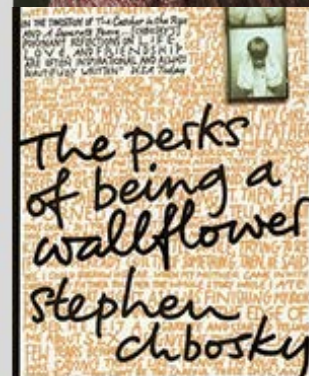
Adam Carter



Micaiah Saldaña



Caroline Hadley



Emma Bell



WORDS CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING

Alumni Reflection, by Rosey Jones ('22)

Three weeks post-grad last summer, I moved to Brooklyn to live with a friend from high school—like Rachel Berry in *Glee* sans Idina Menzel as my mother. I got two jobs: remote communications assistant by day and barista by night. I let myself breathe for a bit without school being number one in my life. I read for fun. I went to museums and to the park. I listened to music and called my friends. I watched sitcoms about adults in their twenties and laughed at their relatability. Since graduating I've found out more about who I am - beyond student - and who I am becoming.

After a month and a half as a barista, I traded my apron for dark-wash jeans and a blazer and joined Asian Americans for Equality as their Office Manager. AAFE was born in the 1970s during a fight for Civil Rights in New York City when Asians across the city rallied for the right to fair work and fair housing. In the 80s, they made themselves permanent and adopted the 501(c)(3) status. To this day, they continue the work of advocacy for Asians in New York, and I'm proud that I now contribute to that work.

Even as I begin my life as a working professional, I continue to read at every opportunity. Right now I am reading C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* series both for the first time (and I am loving them!). I always struggled with Brit lit (sorry, Dr. Smith, but those bloody Brits just use English in a way that doesn't make sense to me), but since being out of school, I've found that I can read more complex works and am able to enjoy them because I don't have the weight of deadlines stealing my focus.

Every day I am more keenly aware that English is the art of speaking and being understood and of listening and feeling empathetic. That art can be used in powerful ways. Every week, I create social media posts that share the stories of life in New York City and advocate for fairness and goodness in the lives of my neighbors and community members. Writing grants brings in funds to supply food pantries with Asian produce. Spreadsheets lay the groundwork for free books we distribute to students returning to school. Words have the power to change everything, if only you can wield them with grace and finesse.

Earlier this year, I went to this reading for Ada Calhoun's *Also a Poet* and when she signed my book, we got talking about how I'm an aspiring nonfic writer and a new grad. She proceeded to invite me to her writers' club, so now once every couple of months, I get together with Ada Calhoun and her "sob sisters" and talk about writing, editing, publishing, and life, and it's honestly SO COOL.





“[On] the rebellious path of college English, I learned that knowing the rules is necessary, but breaking them is vital.”



BECOMING A REBEL WRITER: MY INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH AT MESSIAH UNIVERSITY


First-Year Reflection, by Olivia Reardon ('26)

I sat frozen in my seat, mouth slightly ajar. My fingers nervously intertwined as I stared at my first-year English professor. He can't be serious. "That's right," he said nonchalantly, "you can use first person in your essay." I felt as if I had been knocked over the head with a book rather than handed one. And this wasn't the only rule he attacked. He pushed aside imperatives like never start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction and always give a paragraph at least three sentences. I felt utterly disarmed. But rather than dropping out, I tentatively followed my professor down the rebellious path of college English, and I learned that knowing the rules is necessary, but breaking them is vital.

It became evident that others professors shared this opinion about sidelining the rules. It wasn't until I was told to let go that I realized how closely I clung to those rules. Reason told me to drop them and run free, but pride and insecurity told me to hold tight and trudge on. In the middle of my dilemma. I read John Trimble's *Writing with Style*. It is the most informative and engaging book on the art of writing I have ever read, and it told me to break the rules. In a chapter called "Superstitions" Trimble neatly dismantled each of the rules I treasured. His clear explanations, plethora of examples, and uncanny ability to answer my objections won me over. If this great writer - who claims to speak for many other great writers - does not always follow these rules, then neither should I.

But why did I learn the rules in the first place if they are simply superstitions? There may be many answers to this question, but the way I have come to think of it is like improper fractions. When I first learned about fractions, I was taught to never leave an answer as an improper fraction. However, when I advanced in math and began to use these fractions in other problems, I stopped converting to mixed numbers and just used the improper fraction. I broke the rule that said "always convert to a mixed number," not because the rule was wrong or entirely useless, but because it was no longer relevant. I had to learn it the first way because that is all I could handle, but as I grew more able and my work more complex, I could bend and break the rule to create something more beautiful.

I have just started my journey as an English major, but I am excited to learn more about how to be a rebel writer. It is not enough to follow the rules. A machine follows rules: it produces something neat, formulaic, and decidedly boring. If I, as a writer, ever hope to create something with depth and beauty, I must learn to break the rules.

A black and white photograph of a hand, likely a woman's, with a small, dark, round object resting on the tips of the fingers. The hand is positioned on the left side of the page, with the fingers slightly curled. The background is dark and out of focus.

**“But I have
calmed and
quieted my
soul . . . ”**

Psalm 131

Devotional: Psalm 131

By Nate Castellitto ('23)

This fall, I've let a posture of uneasiness settle into my life. Graduation is quickly approaching, and I've been forced to consider purpose in a revealing fashion. I found myself wondering if my coursework will prepare me for what's ahead. I wonder if my work really matters.

At the same time, I've had a difficult period balancing my extracurriculars with classes. I'm torn between making the most of my college experience and achieving academic success. Sleeping less is usually where I make up for time lost, but it inevitably catches up. It's around this point in the semester I begin searching for relief.

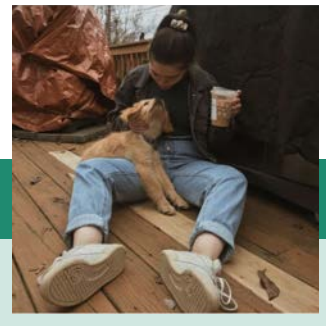
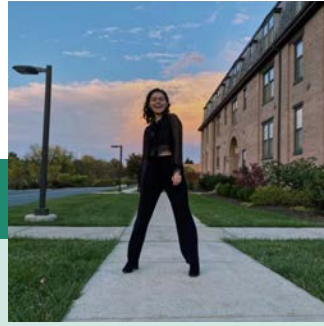
Time and time again, the answer to my search has been stillness. In Psalm 131, David ebbs toward a posture of tranquility. He says, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul...” (Psalm 131-1-2). Up against the weight of his own failure and a vengeant Saul, David is still, and he rests in this choice.

This passage serves as both a comfort and an admonition for me this fall. Each semester, I've found that slowing down and doing less almost always proves to be the answer during a brimming season. Spending time with stories or in prayerful meditation, even if it's just for a few minutes, has been the ultimate respite.

It's often when I'm writing or lost in a favorite author's work that I'm reminded of what I have to offer. I'm reminded that curiosity is what keeps me balanced. And, just like David realized, I know that if I set my gaze on what I can impress, the future is a frontier waiting to be traveled.

Senior Reflection

by Hannah Desko ('22)



Not to take too much inspiration from Rory Gilmore, my favorite fictional English major, but “I live in two worlds. One is a world of books.” I have been a resident of Mango Street, watched nightingales alongside the Romantics, strolled through Winesburg, laughed at Viola’s disguise as Cesario, and descended underground with Alette. Now in my final semester, I’m beginning to reflect on my time as a Messiah English major. I’ve been exposed to an array of texts, authors, professors, and peers. Professors have become mentors, and peers have become friends. I was lucky to experience the English community my first semester, with trips to Midtown Scholar and a laughter-filled Christmas party, before COVID hit. As the world settles into a new rhythm, the Messiah English community has grown and strengthened, and I feel blessed that peers who sat beside me in Intro to English Studies in 2019 are now friends I sit with in senior seminar.

From starting in English Education to having a communications internship to now facing December graduation, I realize that being an English student has prepared me for a variety of doors— and it’s okay to potentially enter more than one of those doors.

While my final semester is a bit stressful with the weight of decision-making, English has prepared me for paths towards communications, journalism, education, and more. I am also thankful to have professors assisting me with the search and application process for graduate schools. Yes, my appreciation for literature and words has grown through all of my English classes, but

so has my appreciation for mentors, friends, and community.

Majoring in English has allowed me to read more texts and genres than I ever thought I would. I have been a part of poetry workshops, read the works of Shakespeare and Romantic authors, discovered 20th-century women writers, been shown the importance of nature and travel writing, and had a number of adventures in creative writing (which I continue to tell people about). While many of my experiences have been enjoyable, I now realize I could not have grown as a student, writer, or person without professors leaving brutally honest comments on my essays or telling me in meetings that my ideas were not as good or strong as I originally thought. My writing and analytical skills have improved as an English major, but so has my willingness to listen to constructive criticism, something I don’t believe would have happened without my choice of study.

As I start to figure out my next chapter, it’s both anxiety-inducing and exciting. Dr. Hasler-Brooks has this great graphic on her office door, highlighting the many career paths English majors can take. When I saw it my first year, I was completely freaked out by it; however, it’s now comforting to realize how many amazing opportunities and stories are before me. While I’m not sure where I’ll go after Messiah, I know that I’ve met amazing people, made wonderful friends, and have a deeper appreciation and reverence for words. What a blessing it has been to be a Messiah English student.

Honors Research Update



PEYTON CASSEL ('23)



OF MUSES AND MONSTERS: A CHILD'S EDUCATION IN STORIES

This collection of personal essays reconstructs the childhood imagination and apprehension of the world through stories. Children, in their watchful nature, know, see, feel, and receive adult realities. The child of these essays navigates her way through those realities with stories as her companion, guide, and measurement.

I took Writing: Literary Nonfiction with Professor Perrin during my sophomore year, and in her class, I discovered the practice of writing sketches. A sketch is a rough draft that “captures the shape of something,” she told us. Sketches have a beginning, a middle, and sometimes an end. This way of approaching writing was so organic and unlike anything I had written in college before. Through this class I experienced a newfound freedom as a writer, and when the semester ended, I wanted more.

I pursued a departmental honors project with Professor Perrin as my mentor and have loved every moment of it. The writing has felt natural, effortless, probably due to the sketch approach, but also because Professor Perrin is an incredible mentor. I love bringing my writing to her to read and talk through together. This project has also become an unexpected excavating of my childhood self and a practice in trust. I'm the type of person who wants to have everything planned out, as far in advance as possible. My honors project has progressed spontaneously, with minimal planning beyond the project proposal. Writing it and working in tandem with Professor Perrin has been a joy and pleasure.

**Peyton will be presenting her project on
November 29 at 7:00 pm in Boyer 231 and on
Zoom: <https://messiah.zoom.us/j/96432905227>**