

OVERWATERED CLASSES

Honors Thesis

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Overwatered Classes

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Introduction

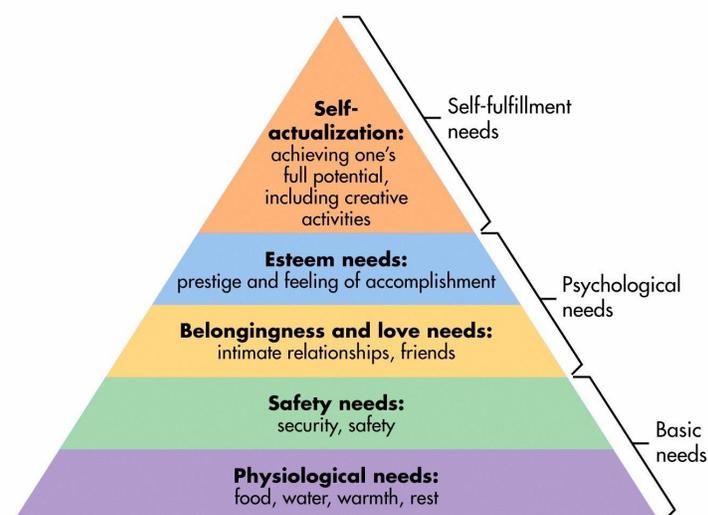
Writing *Overwatered Classes* was a passion project for me. The title compares classes to plants, as students need to be cared for just as much as plants if they are expected to thrive. I am not the first to think of this comparison, but it was particularly important for me to write about it because of how I feel personally connected to the topic. Working in elementary schools, I continually notice student needs that aren't all met, not because we don't know about them, but because many don't know what to do about them or worry about the "more severe" issues. Teachers aren't social workers, juvenile officers, doctors, therapists, or parents and yet the expectation to fully care for each student can include tasks from these other roles. Most of these roles rely on instincts and experience, not what you learn in college or teacher preparation classes. Evacuating a classroom because a student is screaming and throwing things in frustration, for example, requires a teacher to consider other students' safety and try to contextualize the experience for other students. While we hope to never get a student to that level of frustration, we don't control the home settings or know what a student emotionally brings to school with them each day.

A school itself only has so many social workers available depending on the district, and where there is more need there is usually less funding. Because of limited resources, too often the question isn't what can we do to address all needs but instead what need requires the most attention or is the most concerning in terms of student safety. The main issue that inspired this poetry piece is the standardization of students that cannot be categorized so easily. While we want all students to succeed, the expectations for each student are not allowed to vary based on circumstance. This creates pressure for students, especially overachievers, and teachers who feel it's unfair to expect so much all at once. For example, a student who lost their family or home to a natural disaster is expected to "explain how natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, have affected the region..." (History and Social Science Standards of Curriculum 4.T4b.3). While they may have a personal connection and understanding of how to do so, the lessons surrounding the standard may remind them of trauma teachers aren't trained to help with right away, and clinicians aren't available for every classroom lesson.

Covid-19 brought lots of trauma to young students who were told they couldn't go to school because it was not safe and then brought back when the pandemic became less severe. Without the proper explanation of why it is safe again or the leniency of work when a family is struggling with loss and sickness, how can we expect a student to feel safe enough to succeed? Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains quite clearly that a student cannot reach their full potential unless their psychological, safety, belongingness, and esteem needs are first met (see figure right). When evaluating student goals and achievement we are encouraged to make whole-class goals concerning what every student will accomplish, but sometimes we must question if it is fair to give a student struggling with safety the same expectations as a student in a healthy home. It is easy to tell a student "get your head up" because it looks like they aren't listening to a lesson, but consider also that they might have no rest at home, resulting in the physiological need deficiency and the inability or high difficulty trying to absorb new learning. The reason for this difficulty isn't always because of what may be assumed, such as "the child played video games late", it can also be because of a divorce happening in the household, home instability, or any other factor outside of a child's hands that leaves an impact.

As of late, belongingness factors have also plummeted for students. Typically students build friendships over time but many were unable to do so these past two years due to the online format of school. Talking in class became typing a chat to send to classmates, something difficult for students with language learning needs and students who are just learning to practice writing. This also took away authentic reactions due to less overt facial expressions and the ability to turn off a camera at will. Students have to relearn how to interact with peers and while some learn this quickly others appear to have trouble and have been eerily silent or inappropriately noisy in the classroom. It is imperative that teachers and parents pay attention to each student's needs and lives but also important that we understand there is always more we do not know, more than what their "file" can tell us, especially since things change so quickly. Why is it then, that those who have never met each student are making the call for what test results show their success? The unfortunate message is that student individuality and emotions are not allowed to impact learning progress, and yet they are what drives the passion to learn in the first place.

My research for this project included classroom observations, conversations with prior students about their experiences, and my own childhood. I am very grateful to have the home I do



and yet acknowledge that there are missed opportunities that would have helped me and many of my peers had the educational system looked past grades and into the effort it took each student to be where they are.

At some point within childhood students realize the world is more complicated than they believed. That loss of innocence is gradual yet changes how we perceive the world and come to understand it, how we learn and show that learning at school. When a child is grappling with reality, safety, stability, or even their own emotions it can become overbearing to be asked to learn something in the content curriculum, so they memorize it and move on. This chapbook intends to comment on the standardization of students and bring to public attention the need for change because of the impact this system has on our students.

I broke this chapbook up into three sections each with its own meaning: Dear Daughter, Realization, and It Could Be Enough. I hope each section has a poem that empowers the reader to authentically feel and consider those with mental health concerns or learning needs. The shorter writings between poems come from a poem that was originally written as one piece, called *Explaining Depression To The Happy People*. It is not rare for a young student to show symptoms of depression that are quieted but my hope is that by presenting poetry on the emotions students grapple with we will be able to better empathize with them and evaluate our own expectations.

Dear Daughter

Dear daughter focuses on what I wish could be changed by the time my future daughter goes to school and what I would want to tell her before she considers societal expectations over her own. It is also in conversation with all daughters and sons, a reminder to students that they don't need to compare their success to others or focus on anything other than embracing what life gives them and trying their best. It contrasts the natural world with humans to emphasize how every other living creature focuses on living while humans tend to focus on being more. At the same time, it points out that we can interact with nature to find a sense of peace and joy, and ultimately isn't the reason we want success to find that joy? The poem *Fly Little Parrot*, for example, emphasizes that while there are expectations required of us ("humans are required to fly") we need to remember also that there is a time to breathe and sleep, a time to work, and a time to remember what leaves us feeling like we can fly. While there are time constraints on everything, each of us has our own timeline and path in life, something I only recently realized in a sudden jarring car accident. My hope is that it won't take a life risking moment for the reader to realize stressors often aren't worth it.

Seek Passions my Daughter, originally titled *When*, is a reminder that while we can measure success by comparing our progress or meeting the goals we set early in life, the main goal is to be happy and to do something with each day we have. Is it not success to be satisfied? When asked about dreams you could say you want a certain job or the ability to obtain something, often a materialistic thing. Yet there is always more we can ask for in those areas, and the only reason we want them derives from the belief that they will lead us to happiness. God is included in this poem as a reminder that there are things you've never told anyone or things you've never wondered about that are worth reflecting on. While I have found a path to faith these past few years I believe the concept of asking about the unknown is relatable to all. While we might say we want a certain thing, asking "when were you happiest" reminds us that what we are reaching for is the reason behind the goal, joy.

Don't Forget to Remember is another poem in this section I wrote as a reminder to remember that the little things are just as important as the stressors in life. The happy things aren't invalid in sadness. I believe that asking why is a part of life and that we need to continue reminding ourselves that sometimes trials come to show us how to slow down and enjoy what we do have. In the process of writing this chapbook, I experienced a head on six-car accident on the highway and was left with medical implications that left me asking why. It altered my graduation plans to consider a concussion when education transferred to an online format for Covid-19. The main takeaway from this sudden experience though wasn't that I had to buy a new car or might have gone deaf, it was the reminder that tomorrow is never

guaranteed. While I told myself I would have more freedom to enjoy everything after getting my degree I remembered that I only want the degree so I can start my job, learn, and feel accomplished. There was nothing stopping me from feeling accomplished now, learning from life as well, and enjoying my practicum the same way I will my future career. It is humbling to go through such an experience but most of all it recontextualized a statement my boyfriend frequently told me when I was stressed, “Don’t forget to remember”. The poem *Remember?* is a reminder that while we can focus on the stressors of life it is the little things that matter just as much, the things that give us peace. For me the moments of peace to remember were moments in nature or with my friends, who grounded me in times of trauma during an abusive relationship in my past. As I learned the meaning of “Don’t forget to remember” I realized values I think are easily overlooked when focused on daily tasks and it is for that reason I call readers to remember as well.

Realization

Realization is a section that discusses the loss of childhood and the realization that the world is not as simple as it may seem. *Fleeting Freedom* comments on this realization in a narrative experience, a girl is excited to be free of parental rules and realizes the need for them. There is freedom in ignorance when it comes to the hurt the world can cause, but we all need to be prepared for what comes our way. As we get older we realize that need and lose the freedom of not caring about consequences, for better or worse. When I think of childhood summers I think of swimming at my grandmother’s pool because my brother and I spent so much time there. It was always special to us because of the fun we had but I have always been slightly accident prone. I suppose that explains the rocks in the ground before the wall that partitioned half of my grandmother’s yard, it was a warning not to fall. As the poem *Fleeting Freedom* explains though, I didn’t quite understand the rocks then. My grandmother frequently had four labradors running around her pool and she loved to trick us and have fun, so when I open with dog food filled piñatas it sounds natural to me, but likely not to most readers.

This section also comments on what was mentioned before about Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs, showing that a deficiency in any category impacts learning. Most poems focus on mental health to emphasize that there are elements the average person may not realize is a part of depression.

It Could Be Enough:

This section is one of my favorites because it connects my experience with ADD in high school to those with a learning disability taking MCAS now. I felt very guilt being the last person taking the test throughout elementary and middle school because I had no quiet environment and no

understanding of why it took me so long. I felt I disrupted my peers' wish to play after everyone finishes and felt that other students hated having me in their homeroom because it meant they missed the early relaxation after they finished their test. It is different taking a test than it is watching students prepare for one but found I could connect to the students who were stressed about it and truly empathize with them because of my experience. Why is it not unnatural to see a ten year old cry about a test that isn't even the same week? I saw multiple students express stress in different ways and some students seemed to feel it was too hopeless for them to even attempt the test completely, some turn in tests like MCAS as early as possible, likely guessing at the multiple choice questions. Too many students never hear "I am proud of you" and as teachers we can make a positive impact by reminding students they matter. To both the teachers and students who don't hear it enough, this section is a reminder that it is enough to be you, to do your best, and it could be enough for the world to accept that.

“It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom. Without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.”

— **Albert Einstein**

Dear Daughter

I hope you are always one of “the happy people”

Polar 'till Spring

Depression is the sexy summer day everyone is raving about at the pool
But you don't have a bathing suit or a body really,
instead, you've got broken sunglasses in bed
and a half-eclipsed sun only you can see.
When you can't bear to look at it anymore
you blow on a dandelion and not one wisp moves.

So you'll wait until winter, isn't that wonderland?
Hails hella crazy, pelted face downcast,
Numb-hand shovel, you decide to wait until the sun comes
Only you go to north pole "school" and found out the elves don't want you
Or you moved to south pole "home", talk to Mr. and Ms. Penguin protecting their egg
Spring? Soon.

Dear Future Daughters

And by the time I sleep I wake.
My girl, I dreamed so hard I'd take
Away the peace I work long for.
My busy pace was me much more

Than the joy I hope to seek.
Is it success to feel this weak?
I wonder, stress, and ponder goals,
Is it a job that makes me whole?

Is it your Dad (we're still to meet)
Or money then, something concrete?
"Find earthly things to feel complete"

'Till you alone are obsolete,
Welcomed home and on your knees,
A stranger to your family

And Earth remembers your success
Just not your happiness
"When?", God asks, "Were you happiest?"

Remember?

Don't forget to remember
 to sit cross-legged—barefoot—in backyard grass,
 to read under shadow casting leaves,
 the Sun's euphoric warmth lasting.

that you rose above those bad days,
 and you got this far not just to get this far.
 sweet rose, you're a beloved bouquet
 but you're no one's to hold, not even your fears.

Don't forget to remember
 that your thorns shouldn't stay vased, hidden.
 your scars, too large to bear, dare remember
 what's never forgiven, the mirror's stare—now life is made of the little things.
 you were once one of the little things.

to smile on your account
 not *his*, not theirs
 but for the binge-watching, puppy cuddling,
 hairbrush dancing, way of living

Don't forget to remember
 the wave side nights laughing like a seal,
 leaving your bed encouraged to eat
 and the venting, hoping, loving
 which seems so far now, farther

blessings come again
 and It's okay to curse the crickets
 in the moments that leave you questioning God;
 asking *why me, why now, why this, why then. When?*

But don't forget to remember
 to inhale... to exhale.
 to contemplate constellations hoping for... *Peace? Forgiveness? Amnesia?*

to let go of the broken bridges of past bruises, it's not nice to stare
 but you can stare at your Father, and wonder
 though you see the stars differently darling, they still shine.

Stuck Still:

The forty-eight-year-old kite kept in the corner
felt like soaring till Grumpy took it out to the dumpster.
Maybe it was a mistake, the kite thought.
Grumpy's grandsons would play with it,
but he has no grandsons.
If he did they'd love video games,
not kites.

They'd probably love amusement parks too. Not Grumpy.
The thrill rides left him terrified of the drop
staring down the slopes,
longing for the fun part he can't feel anymore.
That pit in his stomach can't laugh anymore.
How long will this ride be? Does it matter?
Ride anyway...

Fly Little Parrot

Fly little parrot
 with no concept of time.
 Knowing you are never late, breathe.
 With your stubby little orange branches, run
 away from chasing children, go sleep.
 You are allowed to fly.

Humans are required to fly
 without your wings parrot.
 All we want is sleep,
 all we don't have is time.
 So like bank robbers we run
 and forget to breathe.

Your honeycomb chest can breathe
 your fire tipped feathers can fly.
 Sapphire wings let the wind run
 so that you, little parrot
 CAN have all the time
 you want, to sleep

We will die to sleep
 we will panic to breathe
 But only if there's time
 we will continue to fly
 But not because we want to little parrot,
 because to "live" we look forward and run.

We will always run
 and 'till we sleep
 We will parrot
 our ancestors, pretending we can breathe.
 Our only way is not to soar freely, but to fly
 until we are out of air and time.

How cruel is time?
 only to us, tick-tock run
 No one but you parrot can fly
 or sleep
 Or breathe
 except you, dreamy little parrot

I hope for a time to copy you and sleep,
 but this lifeless living must run, not breathe.
 Please parrot, fly for me, fly.

Realization

Knowledge of Good and Evil

How you're left feeling:

Convict imprisoned to your mind
There is proof against you, just can't find it yet.
Admit! "what did you do to hurt everyone you love?"
You must have done something, everything, existing?

Prevent more pain, stay confined to your bed
Curl to fetal position, blankets over your head
And a pillow pressed to your back that maybe, just maybe
Could feel like a hug
Or as close as you deserve to one

Fleeting Freedom

The gentle summer breeze swung tree branches
That once held dog food disguised in piñatas.
The dogs, more excited by chewy crocks and popping pool rafts,
Covered the gray patio cement in mud pawprints.

Blue Flip flops clicked rapidly,
I flung the bright lime tube down, it skidded into the pool.
My arms beaded from swimming, it was hot enough to be sweat.

Mom would have scolded me for not reapplying sunscreen
For throwing the tube
For running in flip-flops
For running by the pool at all
But Mom wasn't there and June was not about rules.
Ha Ha I'm free to eat all the ice cream I want!

Brother said to wait, but I'm five.
I don't want to wait for anything except growing up.
He waits for a coke. Knowing what's just downstairs in the freezer,
I start to taste the orange creamsicle.

It was just past the cement, then the pointed pit of rocks that hurt your feet,
Just before the brown cliff stone wall we bunny hopped down.
Pool rocks, walls, like a yellow light.
warnings we never cared about.

Past the glass table of pizza parties,
And cinnamon sweets mom said we can't have often,
The unbroken, perfect moment was frozen in time.
Until I passed the chairs and stubbed my toe.

My usually bare sandpaper feet ignored the annoyance
Today's blue flops rescued it from the curled spiral ends on metal chairs
Stupid ugly-cushioned chairs, I always hated beige,
But I loved my summer home with Nana.

The dogs started clamor-barking at the crazy neighbor again as
I finally reached the peeling-white wooden hobbit door.
The door's brick blocking the pups from galloping down was heavy
So I sat and pushed with all my kid foot strength and swiped the pebbles off my thighs.
I ducked down the humid basement stairs.

Running down the smooth concrete,

The flip-flop plastic bent under my arch.

I missed the last two stairs and slid.
Nana missed me and came running down the way I intended to,
Instead, unintended, she found crying
under a rusted copper pipe the size of my head.
In kid hands rested a head of brown hair mixed with red and chlorine
I felt bad for the mess and said nothing but "I'm sorry -
and I couldn't get the coke"

A hand reached out and brought me back to the dreamy grass sunshine but my head still hurt
I think I sat and brother got a towel
I hid under the glass table hugging her legs while
She called Mom and my brother came with the creamsicle I wanted
But instead of holding a coke he was holding the white, now red towel to my head

I don't remember much but wanting to sleep, and what if I...
I don't really remember anything at all.
It was simpler though, and the worst thing was falling.
Not wars or swerving cars, not breakups or bed chaining depression, not the realization that
Life isn't simple anymore, until it wasn't.
Twenty-Two and I still trace the crooked scar that patched up my head's egg crack

Yet I'd go back to that day, stitches and all,
Because my first concussion was in childhood
Where the nonsense was okay,
And I didn't yet realize
All the help the world needs.
All I realized was I needed my mother.

Get out of bed:

The hallway is the maze of a city where every street feels unsafe
Alone and strangers calling “HEY”, you just want to find the car and move
Find the car and smile, yet you slip in littered laundry sludge instead.
And you've lost your keys, or the battery's dead.
It *should* be ready to move.
But it isn't.

It Could Be Enough
to listen, to breathe, to smile, to be

What's it worth?:

A comet hurtling towards Earth

Only instead of Earth it's a mini-"planet", more rejected than Pluto and I call it my brain

Strange world that holds memories of people and their lives,

all their motivations, dreams, all that matters to me, unreachable

I am, like the comet, in space, alone.

MCAS: For the dreaming ten-year-olds with ADHD or otherwise

It's not that she's not reading the questions
 She reads them over and over
 And over and over
 And over and over
 And over-- DAMNIT

And the boy next to her
 TAP TAP TAPs his pencil
 And her "friends"
 CLICK CLICK CLICK their mice

The early finishers mourn for missing the staticy projector movie
 For missing the bump thump bump of dribbling basketballs
 No one can leave until everyone finishes
 So they hated her, and she knew it too
 But, distractors, she hated you

She didn't delay just to bother you
 You with your Nancy Drew pages unmoved for an hour
 You with your open eyes on her dull pencil scribbling
 She feels guilty listening to
 You with your waiting weariness and wordless impatience
 Your head an exhausted weight in your arms on your desk, looking to the side at her

And the rules that say you need to sit silently while the recess kids play in the distance
 While out there the window trees mock your existence
 And you mock the teacher who said
 That you need to read when you're tired of reading

"Shush"
 "Try your best"
 But this test doesn't measure the best of anything

And she cannot, will not, should not,
 Be penalized for the slow and steady brain gears'
 click. click. click.

MCAS measures anxiety in vomit
 It measures tears on test reviews rushed through
 burnout, and how quickly we make
 Mush of the dreaming brains of ten-year-olds

Social Sickness

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”
- Mary Oliver’s, “The Summer Day”

Dear Mary,

Trauma happens in slow motion but there was nothing we could do.
We would stare at walls
sleep on zoom calls
and wish we could go back to
Life we took for granted

I would stare at the stars to think,
sit on the porch to see
the sun sinking away from me

Slowly...
like the way...
we drift to our bed...
and the couch...
and the bed...

I said “I will never again be alone,
spend my time with the whole world as my home
care to not just stare at my phone
do something, dream a little everyday”

But sweater hermits get tired
when grief feels required
and there wasn’t much to say
in the days we couldn’t talk anymore

Because online wasn’t the same
And now neither are any of us.

What I refuse to accept:

Like a sapling watching the wind refuse to take it
when it fell right at the roots of its mother tree
it smiled in the comfort of her bed
but it's new roots couldn't grow
the bigger, better, neighbor roots blocked the way
the water was sucked up in this dirt and there was no sun,
in the place it could not move

Planting Students

I Nutrients

Jasmine started with a small dry seed.
 Whatever we plant is expected to flourish,
 provided, she isn't neglected.
 All plants need nutrients, which include
 time, water, sunlight, and juice boxes.

Soil without nutrients though,
 no matter how much water you use
 cannot provide the help
 a young sapling needs.
 Stop adding more water and expecting
 sprouts to grow.

II Sprouts

Talking to Rose with kindness is imperative
 as
 she begins to sprout roots.
 If plants have strong roots,
 Harsh wind at recess won't be as
 devastating.

If weak though, plants will crumble
 And our beautiful Rose, uprooted,
 could suddenly shrivel up for lack of water.
 Standardized sprinklers cannot save her,
 because without safe strong roots learning
 the water cycle doesn't matter to Rose

III STEM

Sprouts develop STEM.
 STEM provides tools to transport
 knowledge but should also provide a
 foundation of stability and opportunity.
 Instead, lengthy STEM
 can cause broken sprouts.
 Sprouts become overextended at different
 rates and are likely to snap if they can't play
 in the dirt from time to time.

If Delilah's flower becomes heavy without
 support in STEM
 She will appear wilted from burden.
 Just don't give up on her.

IV Leaves

As Ivy sprouts
 be careful that you do not leave water
 beading on the limey leaves.
 The sun's magnified beam
 will show that what's warm to you
 will burn a black hole through the leaf,
 And all the books of plant food
 that Ivy would otherwise read
 are wasted in her exhaustion.

Note that when the gardener is frustrating
 Ivy; or if she moves from pots of dirt too
 frequently, she is not likely to trust it is safe
 enough to grow.

V Buds

Lily petals will grow with time.
 But you must be patient when
 Lily is budding. She may bloom
 later than others and that's okay.

With photosynthesis, even Lily takes in
 our toxic carbon dioxide and fuels the future
 with unexpected and undeserved oxygen.

VI Functions

Sprouts use internal and external structures
 Internally, they try to survive,
 Externally they have pretty flowers
 and defend themselves with thorns.

We cannot only observe structured plants,
 as in classes flower uses are not always
 visible.

Rosemary, for example, brings joy in
 cooking while Sage, according to our nurses,
 helps the sick with what they cannot
 stomach and provides care for the depressed

Lesson question:

The apple tree your children will pick from is just as beautiful as the forgotten cacti you left in the desert. When will you respect their gifts?

Review:

When you are the convict, the comet
The kite and the car
The sapling, the seasons
The frigid and the lost
Only then do you understand depression
And all it cost

Lesson questions:

1. What happens when we overwater plants with expectations?
2. Are you expecting Covid “plants” to grow at the same rate as before without help?

Authors Notes:

I hope to improve what I can for the students I get the opportunity to know. I hope you will feel encouraged to do the same, whether or not you work in education. I also hope that the reader, whoever you are, will know that it is okay to start over and stop measuring your success in any statistic you've been told to. It is enough to be you, try your best, and celebrate each day, whether it has failures or successes.

Thank You

I want to send a special thank you to all those working with Salem State who inspired me: **M.P. Carver, Scott Nowka, J.D. Scrimgeour, Kristen Meshulam, and Mollie Clark**. I couldn't have done this without you, your dedication to your jobs, and your genuine care for others. Also thanks to all those in my **family**, I am proud to be a first generation college student and grateful for all you've done to help me get here. Thanks also to poets **Mae Fraser, Meghan Miraglia** and **Britt Girox**, for all the kindness and brave vulnerability you've shown in your writing. Last but certainly not least thank you **Maria Cinelli** and **Dany Acosta**, for showing me I am stronger than I ever could have guessed and demonstrating what it means to laugh without fear of the future. All of the above names believed in me and it meant the world of a difference.

About the Author:

Rachel Baumann is now a full time teacher graduating college from Salem State University. She studied English and elementary education while in college but learned lessons that cannot be taught in a classroom. She is now saving up for her graduate studies and pursuing her masters degree. Residing in Massachusetts, you may see her at some local cafes for poetry nights such as the Walnut Street Cafe in Lynn. She loves poetry and working with children but also loves animals, swimming, and singing at church. Feel free to say hello or ask questions about her writing and keep an eye out for future pieces.

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