



Spring 2025

STORYTELLER AWARD

Winning Submissions



**Athabasca University
Students' Union**

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42 Degrees

By Annpreet Khangura

In the hush between dawn and dreams,
I build a future, thread the seams.
With little hands curled by my side,
And sorrow I no longer hide.

I rise not in spite, but due to
love, loss, a silent pause.
Grief taught me strength I never knew.

No towers tall, no crowded halls,
Yet wisdom answers when it calls.
Each course a step, each word a spark
A light that guides me through the dark.

My kitchen table holds my dreams,
Where coffee, books, and laughter meet.
Where children see their mother grow,
And learn from love the things I know.

This journey isn't neat or straight—
It's forged by grace, rebuilt by faith.

I've learned that learning makes us whole,
It feeds the mind, it frees the soul.

So here I stand, alive, unbowed,
With every loss, I've grown more proud.

For in this path I've come to see
Education is love's legacy.

Description: *This poem is a reflection of my academic journey at Athabasca University as a grieving wife, mother and determined learner. It's a tribute to the love that fuels me, the resilience I've built, and the transformative power of accessible, flexible education. The title is a play on both the age that I am seeking out a degree and also the education I gain throughout the years both formal and via life experience hence; 42 Degrees.*



Behind the Screen

By Linda Huynh

The screen blinked to life at 5:45 a.m.— just like it had the day before.

Jade stared at the glowing portal on her desk, her coffee still too hot to drink. Outside her apartment window, the city was sleeping, the sky still navy with night. She pulled her blanket tighter around her shoulders and clicked into her virtual classroom.

There were no friendly greetings. No chatter. No instructor yet. Just silence—and the odd flicker of a black square labeled with names she'd never spoken aloud.

She had chosen distance learning because life hadn't left her much choice. There were bills to pay. Mental health to manage. The kind of independence that wasn't a luxury, but a requirement. But some mornings—like this one—it felt less like a choice and more like exile.

Her cursor hovered over the course outline. Philosophy of Education. The irony wasn't lost on her.

She thought about the journey that brought her here—how she had graduated years ago, full of plans, but carrying so much invisible weight. She'd pressed pause

on those dreams, thinking she'd get back to them in a year. Maybe two. But healing took longer than ambition allowed, and before she knew it, she was older than the other students, with more scars and fewer answers.

Still, something had called her back.

It wasn't a grand epiphany. No "aha!" moment. Just a quiet tug—like the whisper of gravity—telling her she still had something to learn, and something worth giving.

The virtual instructor arrived. Class began. Jade took notes. But her mind wandered—briefly, then sharply—until it landed on a memory.

She was fifteen again, in a cramped high school classroom, watching her teacher talk about postmodernism like it mattered more than air. No one else seemed to care. But Jade had leaned forward, caught on a single phrase:

"Everything can be interpreted. But not everything is heard."

That was it. That was when it started.

The belief that education wasn't about memorizing dates or citing theorists. It was about finding a voice in a world that often didn't listen. It was about learning to speak clearly—not loudly—and hoping, maybe, someone else would hear and feel a little less alone.

Back in the present, the class discussion moved on. Jade typed her contribution into the chat, thoughtful, measured. The professor highlighted it, asked her to elaborate.

And for the first time that day, she felt seen.

Not entirely. Not fully. But enough.

Later, when the lecture ended and the sky was pink with sunrise, she didn't log off right away. She stared at the screen—frozen on her own name—thinking of all the people who had studied like this. In kitchens. In bedrooms. In cars. Fighting their own silent battles. Wanting to quit, but not.

She remembered the jobs she'd worked, the diagnoses she'd lived through, the fear she'd swallowed. And she realized something:

She was communicating her story—every day—even if no one saw the whole picture.

She was telling it through every assignment submitted at midnight. Every question asked despite anxiety. Every grade earned through sheer persistence. The story was written between words, in spaces no transcript could capture.

It was a story of slow resilience. Of unfinished chapters. Of a woman reaching toward something bigger than herself—not for applause, but because learning was the only thing that ever made the world feel connected.

And somewhere out there, someone might read that story. And recognize their own.

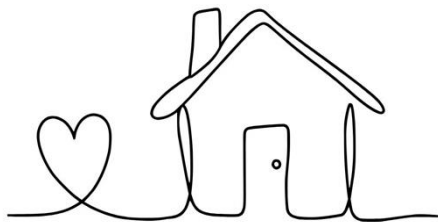


Original Artwork by Megan Lopatka

Description:

For me, university has inspired creativity and pushed me to pursue what I love. The landscape of my painting begins on the left with a barren landscape. As it progresses, the land begins to bloom with budding flowers, green grass, and a

growing tree. This transformation is meant to demonstrate education and learning bringing growth, color, and meaning to the path ahead. The slight hills and valleys symbolize highs and lows felt throughout my educational journey. The golden field of wheat behind the figure represents the university stage of education, a symbolic representation of “an endless field of opportunities”. The figure itself represents where I am now in my academic path. The starry night sky shows curiosity and wonder. The glowing oversized moon ties into a phrase I’ve heard many times during my education, “Shoot for the stars, and you’ll land on the moon”—everything might not go perfectly, but aiming high will still take me further than I thought possible. University has challenged me to study harder and explore more. If things don’t go according to plan, there’s still growth in the process.



Finding My Way Home

By Audrey DeWinter

I stood frozen in the middle of the grocery store. The shelves towered above me like giants, their bright labels swimming together in a blur. I could barely breathe. My heart thudded so loudly it drowned out the buzz of fluorescent lights and the murmurs of shoppers. I had been here before—but never alone. My mother's hand had always been there, steady and reassuring, guiding me through the maze of aisles. But today, I was by myself. Lost. Forgotten.

Could I make it home on my own?

Panic curled in my stomach. I knew our phone number. I could call from a payphone, but I had no money. I could ask someone for help, but my voice felt trapped in my throat. Nothing seemed simple. I was too young to feel this independent—but too stubborn to give up.

So, I walked. Past the sliding doors, into the blinding sun. I breathed. Slowly, the fog of fear began to lift. I had done this before, hadn't I? With each step, I found my bearings. A sidewalk appeared. Then a road. Then the familiar sight of my school. And finally, home.

I was safe.

My confidence swelled. My curiosity sparked. I wasn't afraid anymore. I was ready for the next adventure.

Years passed, but the feeling returned. Not in a grocery store—but in front of a glowing screen. A grown woman, yet still that little girl inside. Lost. Overwhelmed.

The world of online education was a whole new wilderness. Before Athabasca, all my learning happened in the comforting setting of a traditional classroom—rows of desks, the quiet buzz of classmates, and a professor's voice echoing from the front of the room. There were people to ask questions, friends to compare notes with, and staff to lean on when my learning disabilities felt like too much. I had always managed.

But this? Learning alone, at my own pace, with no one else in the room? No lectures to attend, no live discussions, no familiar faces? It felt impossible. The platforms confused me. The isolation was deafening. I cried. I doubted myself. I broke down. How could I be in my thirties and be this troubled by technology? Am I the only student feeling this way?

But like that lost girl so long ago, I kept walking.

Step by step, I adapted. I learned how to navigate the unknown. I discovered that I liked learning on my own terms, in my own time. I found freedom in it. My confidence grew with every hurdle I cleared—every assignment submitted, every new concept understood.

I could work while I learned. I could balance life and school. I could do this.

Athabasca University has been more than just a place of study for me—it's been my proving ground. A reminder that what seems impossible rarely is. That we grow not despite adversity, but because of it.

I am still that determined girl, finding her way home. Only now, home is wherever I choose to grow. And I know I'll always get there.



Why Not?

By Amanda Parson

“Why bother?” I sighed dramatically as I rested my chin in my hand.

“Well, why not?” The sassiest of my three cats, Lilian, jumped down from the window and walked over to a spot in the sun on the hardwood floor.

I sat up in my chair and crossed my legs while I thought about all the reasons why not. “I don’t even have my bachelor degree and I need a masters to become a counsellor. That will take years and money that I don’t have. How will I work, attend university, and pay to live in Vancouver while I do all this?”

If cats could raise their eyebrows, all three of them responded this way.

“Okay, I know what you’re thinking. I can apply for student loans and scholarships. I could work part-time at a less stressful job. Even if I could make the pieces fit, you have to remember that I’ve only been sober for a few months and I probably fried my brain from years of addiction. I also have ADHD! How am I supposed to make this work with a mind like this?”

Bootsie, my other cat, huffed and said, “these all sound like excuses to me. You’re sober now. You have the freedom to live the life you have always dreamed of. So do it.”

Luna jumped down from my bed to join Lilian and Bootsie on the floor. They all stared at me, waiting for me to come up with another excuse.

“Well, I would need a flexible program to make this work. I also haven’t been in school since 2013. I think I need help with this.” I swivelled back to my desk in my chair and began my search. “Oh look, Athabasca University is online and I can study part-time. They even offer financial assistance and I can book time with a counsellor to discuss my options.”

The cats looked satisfied with this answer. “So, what next? Are you going to apply?” Luna seemed eager.

“I don’t know if I can do it.” I still wasn’t sure.

Bootsie jumped up onto my desk. “You won’t know if you don’t try. Why not?” As she jumped back onto my bed from the desk, she knocked over my pens. As I bent down to pick them up from under my bed, I noticed an old card laying there. I picked it up and opened it. It was a card from my mom and it said “I am so proud of you for getting sober. You can do anything you set your mind to. You are strong. You are worthy. You are enough. You are loved.”

I applied to Athabasca University and was accepted. I started my first courses in January of 2023. My cats get in the way sometimes, but they are also the best study buddies. The card from my mom is covered in little bite marks from all the times Bootsie carried it over to me when I felt like I couldn’t do it anymore.

Five years later: I'm sitting in my office inside my home early in the morning, taking the first sip of my coffee before my client arrives. I look at the cats and chuckle as I think about how they didn't realize they would also be working when they convinced me to go back to school. Not only are they my emotional support animals, but they support my clients too.

My first client of the day expressed fear about going back to school. She doesn't think she can do it. I looked at the cats and then back at my client and asked her, "Why not?"



Pupil Dilation & Cognition

By Hayden Harrison

Hayden Harrison, a Bachelor of Sciences student, offers a fascinating take on pupil dilation following cognitive exertion and shares effective strategies for motivation, offering particularly insightful advice for fellow AU students. [Click here to watch his video.](#)



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