

2023

young voices





We Stand Together

Elise Su, 18

welcome to young voices 2023

get published in Young Voices 2024

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front cover

Courting the Sky
Cas MacDonald, 16

back cover

Psychedelic Roomscape
Anne Santiago, 16

Every year, teens across Toronto pour their hearts and souls into the writing and art found within the pages of Young Voices. This magazine is a vibrant tapestry of the ideas that matter to young Toronto creators, woven from their creative, thoughtful and critical perspectives, where prosaic and artistic mastery intertwines with imagination to transport, move and inspire readers. Our city's next generation of writers and artists reflects upon a plethora of subjects, from jarring critiques on social issues to meticulously crafted works of fantasy. You may find some of the topics challenging, so be mindful and explore with care.

Teams of teen volunteers and adult mentors selected the pieces to publish, and we thank them for their hard work and dedication. We also congratulate all the creators on their excellent work.

Enjoy your time with Young Voices – we promise it will make you think and smile and marvel.

Sarah Pan, Sundari Sumbramanian and Rain YeYang
Young Voices Teen Council volunteers

our selection team

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young voices 2023

contributors

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Cas MacDonald

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Interior back cover

Jojo Fawkes

Back cover:

Anne Santiago

Not, Not, Not

“You are not very funny...” Petra says.

For sharing time, I told a joke that I made up on the weekend about a camel who drums, and when I told it to my dad he chuckled so hard that I thought he would never ever stop. Petra did not laugh at all.

I think about how that very morning, I woke up and it was so sunny and I imagined the sun wearing humongous sunglasses because she is so bright. That seemed pretty funny to me.

Petra’s words are in my brain for most of music class, and then a bit of science, but then I forget about them quick because we are building models out of toothpicks and marshmallows. I finish mine fast before everyone, so I take 5 marshmallows and 3 toothpicks and make a little marshmallow-stick person. I decide his name is Andy, after Andy Warhol, like the guy who did the painting that my mom put up in the living room two Mondays ago. I start to giggle because I can imagine marshmallow-stick Andy talking in a posh British accent which is so silly and definitely funny.

That’s when it hits me! Petra is confused. She must not really understand the full meaning of funny. That makes sense, because when we did our spelling quiz on Tuesday, she got a mark off for saying that Incinerate meant to guess, but she was confusing it with Insinuate. So I think she might have trouble with the meanings of words.

“Not Funny, not funny,” Andy says in his posh British accent all the way home and I laugh and laugh because Andy is just so funny and I can’t wait to do his voice for Mom.

At recess, Cathy-Anne says I am not too smart because when she asks if I know my 8 times tables, I say no.

Except, I don’t think that Cathy-Anne knows that I memorized all the words to Little Red Corvette by Prince, and I even wrote an entire story about a wolf who howls all the time because she lost her mate, and everyone is mad at her because she is howling all the time. But then, one wolf thinks it’s actually very beautiful and they become friends. I actually think that is very clever and smart.

But those words don’t make it out of my mouth fast enough, and Cathy-Anne just bounces away, and I can see her braids going swoosh-swoosh, left-right. I could have also told her that I knew my left and rights by the time I was 3.

Also, Mikey asks me to play dragons with him and I say no.

“Not nice,” echoes as he runs away.

I don’t even get a chance to explain that I can’t play dragons because it is super sunny out, so I have to climb to the top of the slide to get close to the sun. My Tia Luisa says that sun will make you live longer which is really important to me because I need to help her pick out her glasses when she is old, since the eye doctor says she will definitely need them. I need the sun to make sure I’m healthy and alive for that.

Mr. Coles calls home in the evening to say that I was not considerate about our art assignment. Because it was Thanksgiving, we had to draw what we were most thankful for. I drew a big toilet paper roll and everyone laughed and laughed, but I think that was because they thought I was talking about going pee.

But I actually wasn’t, because on really rainy weekends, me and Henry (who is my favourite imaginary friend) find all the toilet paper rolls in the whole house and we make a giant fort where we hide from Mila (my meanest imaginary friend). And when we’ve been hiding so long our tummies rumble, Dad makes us super big chocolate chip pancakes, and we all watch the most perfect rainy day show called, The Price Is Right. So my toilet paper roll wasn’t really silly, I don’t think.

I couldn’t really explain it to Mr. Coles though, because then he might steal my special rainy day things.

During the night, I have a really scary dream where Petra, and Mikey, Cathy-Anne, and Mr. Coles are all super creepy, whispering, “not funny, not smart, not considerate, not nice, not, not, not.” And I wake up fast and my back is all sweaty.

But then, I hear something coming from my bookshelf, the one where I put all the stickers I get from the doctor.

A very posh British voice coming from the tippy-top of my shelf says, “Don’t listen to them, silly goose, you are all of those things and much, much more.”

“...Thank you Andy,” I whisper to the marshmallow-stick man.

I fall back asleep except this time my dream is so funny and nice and quite clever also. It is me and Henry, my best imaginary friend, making chocolate chip pancakes in a toilet paper roll castle, adding lots of teaspoons of sunlight, so we live long, and we hear the sad wolf’s beautiful howl, to the tune of Little Red Corvette.

Mia Fernandes, 15

Life should be a POEM

it can be difficult to find
something that makes you want to ignite
yet life should be
composed of
rhythmic sounds
breathtaking sights
a force of feeling
suffusing from your heart to mind
making you weep
sometimes making you sigh
rising
fond memories of the past
as it stealthily flies by

one cannot have lived life to its fullest
without having breathed and felt
fresh roses in the rain
salt morning air
in much the same way
poetry cannot be poetry
if when read,
no feeling penetrates your heart

although meaning varies
day by day
if you practice reading poems
in more than one way
you will find meaning
where there was none
and feeling louder
than the drum of drums

if you practice
reading poems such as this
reading words, movements, and everything in between
you will slowly realize
life is a poem
and if you seek out
a poem is not all that difficult to find

Lara Filippone Santos, 17



hello/how are you
Amanda Guan, 18

Melting

Elise is melting on a hot summer day

and I know it's just my eyes but I'm still waiting for the moment she slips beneath the horizon of her lawn chair

We lay in the garden and laugh because we are young and have no other life for the moment

The sun is kissing my face, far too hot,

and I think soon it will embrace me and I will melt too

Chloe Dynin, 17

Prairie Dogs (An Ode to First Loves)

Kiss me

Like a prairie dog

Soft and gentle

With dirt and grass and sun

Blinking eyes

And huffs of snouts

Are all I need to feel alive

Interconnected

From the places we carve

To meet

In the middle

Warm like the rising midday sun

Gentle like wind in reeds

Communal in the way we exist

Symbiotically

In my soul I know

This is the only thing I need for peace

Kira Mei Trent, 16



Text Me and We Can Chat
Melissa Quynh-My Lu, 13

The Woman who raised me

I was raised by a Woman
who kneads dumpling dough with timeworn palms
reminiscing her youth as a dancing swan
captivating flocks of men like Schumann did Brahms.
But this dancing swan tired out her wings
for two daughters and a fake wedding ring
flying 9 400 kilometres away for a new beginning
with nothing but hope and blessings.

I was raised by a Woman
who is unafraid to use her voice
in a country that doesn't give her much choice
and teases her broken English like kids with toys.
Yet her heart is strong as tempered glass
and beautiful like lilies in a liquor flask
despite the mocking cacophony of classist brass
that diagnoses her with "uselessly uneducated outcast."

I was raised by a Woman
who trekked hours in Canadian snow daily
to the minimum wage job supporting her two little ladies
avoiding public transportation to reach financial safety.
Now the older little lady is off on her own
making more money than the woman would know
And the other spoiled little lady is almost grown
prestigious private school and vacations she shone.

The dreams of the wingless swan finally do not seem so far:
a future for her daughters to fly without steel bars
contrasting from her own like plastic kazoo and rosewood guitar
love-filled and educated and prosperous and healthy and happy

they are

All owed to the
Confident.
Hard-working.
Talkative.
Romantic.
Encouraging.
Adventurous.
Caring.
Vivacious.
Beautiful.
Loving.
Yellow-skinned.
Immigrant.
Woman
who raised me.

Yijia Fu, 16

Mum

we've never met but i know you
too well to be strangers
i see you in the mirror, through the hoods of my eyes
the curl of my lips
the spiral of my hair
the speckles of contrast on my naked body
that i could never really hide from you,
or anybody for that matter

i know we've never met but i know you
through sips of tea (made with so much love) soft giggles,
tales begging to be told, over, and over, and over,
again
don't you remember?
i hoped you would.
through songs of sorrow, loss, and love
my nana sang to me

we've never met but i know you
nana yearned for you ever since she left,
you know
your budding, rolling pastures
the sea birds that always seemed to fly so freely,
despite the resistance from the gusting winds
of your ocean bays
she visited you in desperate need of your embrace,
in which she always called home.
but she could never stay
but don't misunderstand mum
she proudly carried you in her made home here,
in pictures, pillows, plates full of nourishment and of course,
an almost constant soft hum from the people that loved you before
you know the songs

now similar to the makings of your cloudy skies
that all the heavens looms over
has been passed down from you,
mother, from mother, from mother, from mother, to me
i yearn for you

and though we've never met, mum
we are not strangers
teach me the magic of your nature
and maybe, just maybe love me like you loved nana
cause you know how much she loved you

Emma Ward, 18



Lunch!
Annika Arizala, 17

Question: Do Lights Ever Fade?

MOONRISE

Twelve years ago, sitting on the railing of a rundown concrete bridge perched over the sparkling L.A. skyline, Dorian Pass wanted to be a musician. Though he would never admit it, his eyes were indisputably those of a dreamer.

“What’s there to worry about?” said the blonde adolescent sitting next to him, his eyes glimmering in the distant city lights. “I mean, look out there,” he nodded towards the skyline, “each one of those tiny lights is a person. Another person from the Californian suburbs chasing their dreams all the way to La-La Land—”

“Like you,” Dorian interjected.

“— like *us*. There has to be something they see out there, right?”

“But there’s so many possibilities, Lyden,” Dorian said, gripping the strap of his guitar case. “And the future isn’t going to wait. If I screw up...”

Lyden flashed a cheeky smile. “The city’s not going anywhere, Dori. And it doesn’t matter if you take your time. Any decision you make can’t be bad.”

Dorian reached over and smacked Lyden in the arm.

“Ow! What was that for?”

Dorian looked at his friend with irritation. “What did I say about the flattery? You’re just as accomplished as me, Lyden — you’re the best performer I know. And...” He played with his hair, trying to hide the flush in his ears. “Music is *our* dream, right?”

Lyden turned to his friend, surprised. He broke out a dopey grin. “Okay, okay, I got it,” he conceded.

So the two boys turned back towards the skyline, indulging in their dreams and the ever-bright, ever-brilliant lights of Los Angeles.

Answer: No, ~~not for now~~

SUNFALL

Two hours ago, sitting in the sterile darkness of his cramped studio apartment, Dorian Pass wanted to die.

It had been a thought itching in the back of his mind for a while now. All of his hundreds of identities wanted to die at some point.

Dorian Pass, the romantic, wanted to die when his only friend left their shared dream behind.

Dorian Pass, the musician, wanted to die when he was rejected from every performing arts program he applied to.

Dorian Pass, the student, wanted to die when he realized that he had no love for the subjects he had spent the last three years studying.

All the Dorians above were thrown into a furnace and cremated when his childhood “friend” waltzed into the industry with a master’s degree and an invitation to play at the Monterey Jazz Festival.

Still, Dorian Pass’s many identities never all died at the same time; there were always more to replace the last few that passed away. But, as he sat on the floor of the apartment he had lived in since he dropped out of university, which still didn’t feel like home, Dorian Pass realized how much he had fucked up.

When he still wrote songs, he liked to say that there were no wrong directions for a piece of music to go; each note and chord opened a doorway, a new opportunity.

But, somehow, Dorian had missed every single door, every single chance he had at a happy life.

There were no more opportunities. His guitar had lost all of its strings.

Answer: Yes, ~~forever~~

GOLDEN HOUR

One hour ago, feeling peckish and on the brink of killing himself, Dorian Pass wandered around, looking for a place to drink.

Somehow, he arrived at a bridge. As he walked, the L.A. skyline came into view, a ribbon of lights stretching out into the sea. Shining lights marked every inch of what would have been an ocean of darkness.

“Dorian?”

Dorian knew who he was before he even turned to look at him.

“Dorian,” Lyden said, a smile spreading across his lips. “It’s really you.”

Lyden rested his hands along the bridge’s well-worn railing. “It’s nice seeing you again. How’ve you been? You look...” Sensing Dorian’s disinterest, he trailed off.

“I’m not going to waste your time.” Lyden sighed. “You loved it, Dorian. Music. More than me. Why would you throw it all away?”

Dorian looked away. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“What kind of shitty question is that?”

“Just — answer me, Dorian. Say anything.”

Dorian sighed. “Does it look like I have the answer you want?”

Lyden gripped the railing tighter, avoiding Dorian’s eyes.

“Not a great ‘answer’ from you, either.” Dorian laughed, but his voice rang hollow.

It was silent.

“Dorian,” Lyden said, “do you remember what I said on that bridge when we were seventeen? I said that this city wasn’t going anywhere. Right? I lied, goddammit. I didn’t know how much a city could change.” Lyden turned to Dorian, his eyes hardening. “But there’s one thing that never does: these lights. They will always be here. No matter how much you try to hide from them, no matter where you look, there will always be more out there for you.” Lyden exhaled. “So, remember that, alright? Want a smoke?”

Dorian burst into laughter. “That’s what you end with? A *smoke*?”

“W-what, I can’t smoke?” Lyden said, blushing.

A tender smile played on Dorian’s lips. “I didn’t say that. Pass me a cigarette.”

Lyden reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He lit two cigarettes and passed one to Dorian. The two friends watched the cityscape, a sea of shimmering lights against their cigarette smoke, which shone like red stars in the night sky.

Dorian had always wanted to be someone else — a better musician, student, friend — a better Dorian.

But exactly 0 years, 0 months, 0 minutes, and 0 seconds ago, for the first time in his life, Dorian Pass wanted to be himself.

Even for Dorian Pass, who missed every chance and made every mistake, the beckoning lights of Los Angeles did not stop shining. Despite everything, each little one was bursting with opportunity.

Answer: Yes, they will fade. But lights will never die.

Annie Ma, 13

Of Liberty

Have you ever been told to stay as still as a statue?
It's harder than you think.

Have you ever felt exhausted from staying quiet,
doing nothing?
feeling nothing?

Have you ever had broken wings,
just when you get the chance to fly?

Have you ever watched the world whisk by,
and tried to keep up,
but ran out of breath?

Have you ever watched people walk freely?
Freely, when you are set as stone and glued to the ground?

I think the most tiring
is doing nothing at all.

I think that crying
is easier than smiling and
silently
watching.

I wonder.
Does someone care about this statue?
Do they really care?
Or do they just pose
for a quick picture?
I wonder what that feels like.

I wonder.
How it feels to be seen and respected,
and stand tall.

I wonder
if it feels invincible.
Because no matter how hard you scratch it,
no matter how much you shatter and sever it,
it never bleeds.
it never cries.
And when metal statues rust,
from the constantly falling rain,
how do they bear their own existence?

How do they feel the sun's warmth on a cloudy day?
How do they hold themselves,
hold themselves so proudly?

And when night falls
and the stars swallow the sun
And the doves and songbirds flit away,
Who will sing?

But maybe
if it has no friends,
then,
just maybe,
it hasn't experienced heartbreak,

No heart to break anyway.
So chip away at it, deface it
deface us

it will stand tall
we will stand tall
and forever our shards will remain

of liberty, they say,
of hope
of fight,

of peace

and yet,
so far
from free

Esme Hong, 13



Telephobia
Alida-Joyce Cuevas, 18

Masks

From the moment we are born, we wear a mask.
We do not realize at first we are wearing one,
Some never do
But it is always there.
The first one we wear is the purest.
It is the truest, the most honest, the one closest to our true selves.
It shows the most soul.
The most truth.
We do not yet know how to lie.
It shows our tears, our joy, our disappointment, our envy, everything
It shows us what pure emotion and truth are
The second mask we put on is the easiest.
It is the most self serving.
It whispers fibs and white lies through your mouth
Excitement and greed are displayed,
Punishments softened because of round cheeks, bright,
hopeful eyes and pudgy little hands
It teaches us to get what we want.
As time goes on the mask slowly changes with our needs
Becoming smoother and more efficient as time goes on
More polished,
More shiny,
More sleek,
More silvery,
Until it becomes a mirror.
Reflective of what you want others and yourself to see.
Then one day...
It slips.
You have lived your life.
You found a partner, raised a family, watched their masks develop overtime,
watched their children do the same.
You're tired all of a sudden.
Tired of pretending,
Tired of wearing your mask.
Tired of the obligation.
So you stop.
You lower the mask.
You allow yourself to display... Everything.
Your sorrows, your joys, your pains, everything.
And you're freer for it.
Better.
Slowly, over time, the people around you lower theirs in turn.
So you go through life, open, free, better.
And as you lay on your deathbed,
surrounded by all who've loved you and all you've loved,
you whisper your final words, your final request:
Lower your mask... and let me see
You die with a smile on your face, masks lowered.

Dripping Ink

The ink is sloshing through my mind.

Creeping down my throat.

Dripping and oozing out of my mouth as I try to talk.

The words I let out turn into gurgling noises, making it hard to breathe.

Drip, drip, drip, it leaks onto my pristine white sheet of paper.

Turning it into an ugly splotchy mess.

I look at myself, the inky mess I have become, it's disgraceful.

I look at my paper, the inky mess it has become, it's dreadful.

Will I ever be able to speak?

Will I ever be able to feel?

Ayaa Al-sultany, 15

Mysteries of the Pigeon

Do you want to know a secret? Street pigeons are domesticated. That's why they can live among humans without flying away at the mere sight of us. You can even pick one up and take it home. In fact, cities are a better habitat for pigeons than much of the wild; the ledges of buildings resemble cliffs, the ancestral habitat of common pigeons, and the closest thing to a natural danger are cars. They are the only doves — an arguably bigger secret — that are naturally able to adapt to the city.

By virtue of being a bird, pigeons are celestial and divine, despite having an urban quality that most other birds don't have. However, unlike more traditionally regal birds, they rarely receive this acknowledgment; the freedom of doves, the ones freely granted dovehood, is thought to indicate peace and goodwill, whereas the freedom of pigeons is thought to indicate poop stains on the sidewalk. Doves are popularly imagined to be white, the colour of purity, simplicity, and cleanliness, contrasting with the ambiguous greys of pigeons. Pigeons symbolise the compromises made in modern life while doves are timeless and ubiquitous. The Charles-Augustin de Coulombs and Cristoforo Colombos of the world imagine their surnames to mean "dove-keeper," not "pigeon-keeper." But pigeons can live in the exact same conditions that humans can.

You've never seen a baby pigeon in person. Well, even if you have, you didn't like the experience. They're born ugly and develop a mould-like colour before becoming adults. It's almost as though their parents have spent enough time around humans to know how we would react to the sight of their children, so pigeon chicks are hidden until they're mature enough to leave the nest. This is indicated by their greyed plumage and rotisserie-chicken plumpness. (Pigeons are also edible, by the way.) However, these birds are mere fledglings; not fully mature yet, at least not in the ways that matter in the wild.

Fledgling pigeons have a natural urge to explore the world beyond their nest, as any recently matured animal does. Unlike the city-dwelling street pigeon, the wild young adult pigeon has the opportunity — or misfortune — of being surrounded by and only knowing cliffs. The same goes for pigeons who do *not* nest on cliffs: just like humans who have developed their own feathers and left their nests, they always find a structure that resembles their home and make a life there. Before developing feathers and robust wings, they question life beyond the nest, inventing mysteries of what the real world is like. After pursuing the answers to their mysteries, they recreate the nest.

Pigeons and humans are eerily similar. We mate all year round and live anywhere that provides our lower-echelon needs: food, water, shelter, and community. Our hair or feathers become greyer as we mature. We live longer when cared for by humans. However, they spend less time yearning than us: pigeons live in the nest for only the first few weeks out of their few-year-long lives before flying away and never going back. Keep in mind that most of them die only knowing concrete ledges and their mysteries end unsolved. However, they spend the last years of their lives in search. That's why the pigeon should be your dove of choice.

Omoarebun Akhigbe, 16

long egg

Something round and slightly unusual.

I was presented with an egg by my father.

I wrapped my eager hands around it, my mind full of excitement. I was so ecstatic over an egg.

An egg that was a little weird.

I've seen, held, and smelled eggs before, but this one was different.

Allowing the fragile beauty to rest in my palms, I brushed my thumbs against the shell and felt its silky smooth texture. It was certainly fresh, and had arrived with more eggs just like the one I was holding now.

It wasn't alone, of course, because cartoned eggs always came in groups. Even though the egg had company, I couldn't help but separate it and observe it on its own.

Now that I think about it, this egg was lengthy. Usually eggs weren't this long. Usually eggs weren't this heavy, either.

Finally, I decided to suck it up and ask my father.

"Does this egg have two yolks inside?"

"Open it," he responded, a command given to me, and a command that I didn't obey immediately.

I didn't want to hurt the egg just yet. I didn't really have a use for it either, so it would just be a waste.

Soon my father brought out the typical product.

This is a generic egg, because it's a regular shape. Nothing like the long egg. My long egg was resting on the table now. My dad put the generic egg next to the long egg, and we observed the size differences.

Height.

Width.

Uniqueness.

These are two eggs, but clearly, one is bigger than the other. No, one is *better* than the other.

But why, I wonder, was it much superior? It's just a product, isn't it?

In fact, long eggs were not that uncommon anymore. In Canada, you could buy a whole carton of double yolk eggs. Those were not that long, but they were large in size, compared to the regular egg.

Debatably, I suppose one could call them long.

Long egg.

I looked at both eggs on the table. I had just finished taking photographs of them. One was longer and bigger and the other one was just smaller and shorter.

It's not fair.

Weren't double yolks supposed to be uncommon?

Wait. Let me correct myself. Weren't *long eggs* supposed to be uncommon?

I was beginning to think I had made such a big deal out of it.

Eventually, my elation turned into dismay, and so I decided to put the eggs back where they belong.

The fridge.

The fridge had many eggs, in one spot, in one compartment, each one piled on top of each other forming what seemed like a ball pit.

Small eggs, and long eggs. I was once again fascinated by how many eggs there were.

And then, there were two more.

The long egg, and the generic egg.

I had loved this lengthier egg so much that I didn't realise it wasn't as unique as I thought it was. I had felt bad too, because I had inflated its true value too much. Did I really do that, or was I just not aware?

Not aware that these eggs were no longer uncommon? Not aware that it was just a product modified by people? Not aware that it wasn't worth the attention?

Well...I suppose it didn't really matter. It's just an egg, isn't it?

I wiped away my imaginary tears, and left the eggs in with the rest.

One more glance, and it was in the fridge.

Just a bunch of eggs.

Joanne Li, 17

My I

i.
an all nighter
 caffeine-induced insanity.
the sky bowing into darkness, light sculpted
soft in the flickering of a computer screen.
swallowing the truth and
 spitting it back out.
the desire to be reshaped, reborn
into something holy. you cry until your body stops
trembling, until your hands have been scrubbed
clean of depravity, the night just as miserable
 as the last lit streetlight.

ii.
want spirals into
 guilt spirals into violence.
the church pews are empty in your dreams.
you ask for forgiveness in the silent
hum of an abandoned building. crosses
form on your skin through painted glass windows
 and you take a knife to each one.
the heart, homicidal.
the soul, inconsolable.
you swallow gasoline and let it ignite,
feverish in repentance, something blistering
at the back of your throat.
you wake up,
 still on fire.

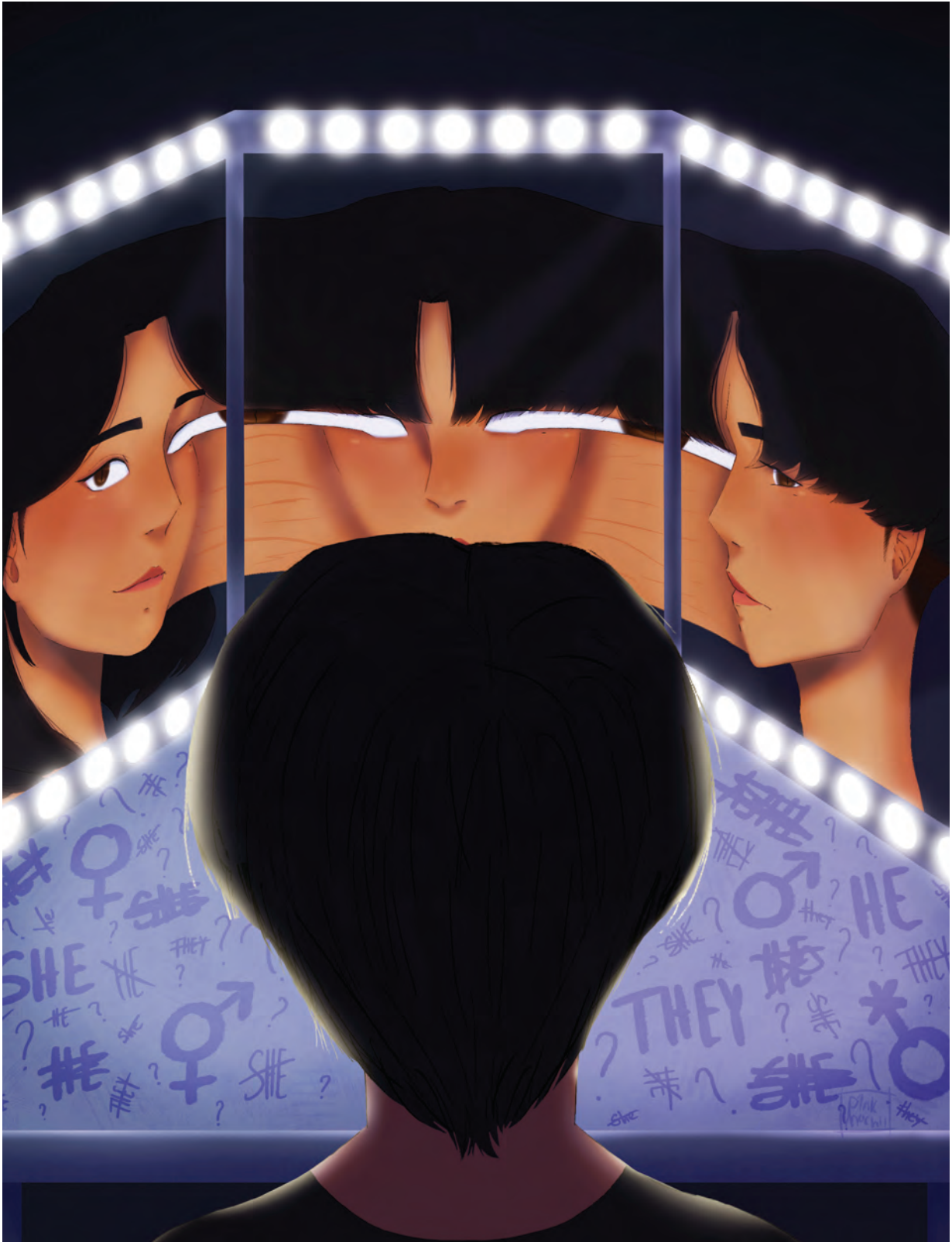
iii.
salvation comes in the form of
a stranger by the ocean, two years later.
 she tastes like oranges, florida heat,
citrus spilled sticky on skin and every wave
kissing our ankles starved for human touch.
august like an impossible runner's high.
you want to keep the moment strung up in
 golden thread, tattooed somewhere
in the spaces between each heartbeat so you won't
forget.
you learn how to coexist with your body again.
 she leaves the next day like a ghost
 on the shore.

iv.
you bury any last hopes of roses on your doorstep.
you will never be her boy,
 you will never be the girl
 your parents wanted you to be, and you will never
be the princess in the castle
 waiting for the prince to show up and slay the
 dragon.
you're not even the prince.
 you're just the dragon, breathing flames of
 destruction,
 devouring everything good and beautiful and so,
 so far out of your reach.
sometimes, you grieve for the child
you will never have. sometimes,
tenderness like a heart attack hurts
 more than you can handle.

v.
there are so many things i want to tell you
 but i still can't say them out loud:
how her voice turns to daisies under the endless
 night sky, how i can say *lesbian* without choking
on the word, how love — warm and honeyed
and peach-bruised — has conquered all of me.

how i love you still,
 even if you have never loved yourself.

Tianyi Li, 16



Genderfluidity
Pocky Aquino, 17

Irish Exit

“You seem to really like him,” I say. I know I’m doing a good job at looking pleased because I almost convince myself that I’m happy for her.

“I do.”

She looks back at the guy with her quiet smile. He doesn’t notice. He sits at the table, entrenched in a conversation with Anaïs. A blush crawls up her neck as she takes a sip of her gin and tonic.

“Hm,” is all I say.

The bartender presses my coke onto the counter, wet and fizzing on the grey stone. I wish it would explode and shatter the granite into tiny pebbles. Maybe then, I wouldn’t have to walk back to the table.

We’re still waiting for Anaïs’ drink. When I asked the guy if he wanted anything, he said: “No need for all that sugary crap.”

No need for me to be nice to him either.

“You’re looking well,” I say. There’s more than just skin stretching over her bones.

“Thanks,” she says. “We’ve started going to the gym actually.”

“Wow, that’s very normal.” I try to say it like I approve, but we both know it’s not a compliment.

“Yes, it is.” She narrows her eyes. “I like it.”

It’s good that she’s getting herself together; I feel bad. Going to the gym with No Sugar Ken has to be an improvement from whatever we were: two racing trains waiting for one strong wind to shove us off the rails. I just wish she missed me.

“You look good too.”

I grin. “Oh yeah?”

She eyes my coke pointedly. “Yeah.”

Ah.

“I’m trying this new thing: restraint.”

“I hear it’s great for your skin.”

“Oh it is. And it’s done wonders for my sleep schedule.”

She lowers her smiling eyes to her drink. I look back at the guy. He’s staring at his phone.

I’d watched them carefully while we discussed what to drink, how their bodies found each other: she touched his arm, brushing the tangled hairs there, he held her hand, right on the table. We had never publicly indulged in that many points of contact. Our hands only grazed under tables, her eyes swallowing me from afar, the distance between us always thick with longing and never closed.

“You’re more affectionate.” I clear my throat. “With him.”

“Well. It’s different.”

“Different, huh?”

She frowns, scraping her thumb over the ridges of her glass. She’s annoyed that I don’t get it.

I laugh. “Yeah, it’s different. White tee and clean shaven over...What did you call this again?” I motion to myself. “Runny mascara chic?”

She had always been ashamed of me, of us. But I could never tell if she was ashamed because I was a girl, or because I was a dirtbag.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I should’ve realized you would take this badly.”

She stares at her glass, her thumb nail diligently carving into the side. The bartender arrives with Anaïs’ martini, avoiding eye contact.

“I’m not doing this to upset you. I just thought it was better you meet him like this than at some random party.”

“Right.”

She finally looks at me — in the same way she’s always looked at me — waiting anxiously for a reaction. It’s funny to imagine the tenderness I thought I saw there.

“We were terrible together.”

She says it kindly, like it’s a consolation for the coffin she just nailed shut. I don’t think we were terrible together. I think we were just terrible people at the time.

“Why don’t you go back to the table?” I can’t look at her. “I need a minute.”

“... Okay.”

She takes the martini with her, glancing at me briefly, before returning to her spot beside her boyfriend. It’s not like I would’ve drunk it anyways. The itchy urge to down the martini and ask for another is fleeting. I’m not the same person that she expects me to be.

She’s not the same person either and maybe that’s a good thing. We can finally let go of each other and see which way we shoot off.

I take a sip of my explosive coke and walk out of the restaurant like a piece of fizzing shrapnel. I’m going to find a good place to land.

Milena Gareau, 18

Oxygen Debt

With all that I have
All that I own
All that I love
Your heart is what you owe
A hospital visit
Scars to your wrist
Although I forgive
And always forgot
Loving you was all that I got
A scream for joy
A scream for help
Nothing helped me escape
My tender words
Your hands around my neck
My love and sorrow
My oxygen soon left
Your sorrys
My letter
The purple stayed for days
A night to never forget
As stars shone bright
The moon glistens
My cry was not loud enough for help
For many days
With all that I have
I loved you with all my faith
For many months
I soon to grow old
I couldn't find my face
All of my pain
And all your excuses
You left without a trace
For many days
The dove in the cage
Finally felt embrace
Not from you or myself
The help of others, my mother
Recognized my mistakes.
The dove in the cage
Got on the stage
To find her face
And stop the chase
Replace the headspace
With all that I have
All that I own
All that I give
All that I love
I will always forgive
You were a threat
And I'll never forget
The oxygen debt

Charmaine Poon, 16



Lump in the Throat (unpeeled)
Steven Johnson, 15

A Dream (sandcastle)

In this memory, my mother takes me to the beach.

The castle is 12 heartbeat-footsteps from the line where the water dances a tango of memory with the shore. The squiggle where sloshing pasts reconnect with the gritty present, kissing hello just as soon as lips turn to waves, goodbye.

In this memory, it's the final/first time in my life that my toes clench footfuls of this beach's sand. It's a quiet beach; small, secluded, surrounded by moss and cliffs that hide it from eyesight. Enough that only 8, maybe 9 sets of soles would brush their way across its sand each year.

In this memory, I am seven — the sum of my (5) small fingers wrapped around her (2) long spindly ones — and my short legs set her pace as my mom leads me to the fortress of sand. When we get to the castle, I stagger out towards the water as I sip the image in. In front of me looms a huge-doored, five floored sandcastle, rows of windows squatting over sand-sculpted layers. A miniature moat circles the home, water endlessly flowing, funneling into a stream that trickles towards the shore. The tallest tower comes up to the sharp-bone-point of my mother's collarbone.

In this memory, my mother tells me (wide-eyed) that her mother (strong as spider silk) molded the mansion herself. My grandmother, my Avó, glued the structure together with water from her past-life-immolation/her immigration across the sea. She collected buckets of water, litres of fluid/fastening serum. Running off the boat, her body was sticky, humidity/home dissolving into fresh air/foreign land. She planted herself into this land/life. Took rough handfuls of North American sand and used foreign-collected water to fuse a palace/possibilities.

In this memory, my mother tells me to taste the stream coming from the door. Bend down. Get on my knees. Praying in the pews of this puddle, I tip the touch of my tongue to its surface. Salt. Crystallizing, cleaving sodium branches on the bed of my tongue. Tears. This river is sadness. This river is sacrifice.

My mother tells me that her mother sacrificed herself for this home she crafted, now lives inside it. Her mother built it around herself like a prison, the bars on the windows like ladder rungs, hoisting her children (4 of them: my mother, her sister, 2 brothers) onto the tallest tips of her castle. A grave for her, a birthing point for her children. My mother tells me this is the result: a cold, prickly lake of tears, pouring from the castle.

In this memory, I ask my mom if her mother had ever shown that she was proud of the heights her children have reached in this country. She barely breathes before the *No* slips from her limp lips, eyes glazed but set on me. No. *She never said it, at least.* Silence gets only slight breathing room before she pushes it aside and tells me to look through the sand-crust window. I press my eye to the arch and stare at the pebbled room inside the castle. Vaulted ceilings and grand archways surround a small folded figure on the floor.

In this memory, my grandmother looks up. The grainy ground is wet underneath her. Her cheeks are stained with sadness. Eyes empty, each a vast room with walls that bounce echoes between themselves. I see Portugal all over her, how it's nestled itself into her being. Sun-stroked skin, beach-blown hair, sand-worn feet. She's carried it here. But she's shrunken, out of place, out of habitat.

"Why are you crying?" I ask, my voice lifting her towards it. A breath. 6 thumps of a heart.

"My children hate me. Your mother hates me. They do not love my palace, they don't love me." I notice the way English bubbles off her tongue, a diluted stream; 1 part *here*, 2 parts *there*. "My walls have crumbled for them. I am in here, they are out there and they feel nothing. What have I done for *this*? What have I done all this for?" Her arms splay in front of her, fingers spread in asking, caramelized strands of hair falling onto her eyes. She is exhaling tears.

I reach through the window and with my thumb I wipe one from her tiny cheek. I don't know what to say, and my mother calls me halfway through my attempt to get my tongue to curl, to gather words. Instead, in silence, I just walk away. On the way to my mother, I drop down and dip 4 dry fingers in the tear-river. I drag my wet hand over a wound in one of her walls, hoping the sand-mud speaks a language that reaches her. I make sure to patch most of what has crumbled before standing and turning my back to the castle as my mother already has.

In this memory, at the end, we walk away from the palace. Mother and son, hand holding hand. Quiet. As she paces, slow, beside me, I walk a tightrope tread, toe brushing the heel of the foot ahead of it. In my head, I'm promising to come back.

In this memory/dream, at the end, I walk forward (to home), glancing back (to the castle, to Avó), thinking about what I'm here for/from.

Steven Johnson, 15

Burtuqala

If you shake a closed jar that's packed with too much of something, you'll realize that you can't really mix its contents. I was born and raised in Scarborough, Canada, a suburb brimming with diversity. But Scarborough was a jar so full it couldn't be shaken well, and I'm living proof of that: in my neighbourhood, I was always the only Chinese student of my grade.

I guess my neighbourhood happened to be "brown" — my favourite neighbour was Sri Lankan, my two best friends are Iraqi and Indian, and unsurprisingly, most of my classmates were brown. I've never had an issue with looking different from my peers. It was my normal.

I vividly remember going to a school barbecue as a first grader. There was an assortment of kebabs, fattoush, smoky chicken tikka biryani — spice and everything nice. But I was a fussy eater, so what really caught my attention was a woman wearing a burqa, applying henna on girls' hands and arms. Of course I lined up to get a henna tattoo. The burqa is a full-body veil, so I could only see the woman's hazel eyes as she drew intricate patterns on my hands, staining my skin with the plant dye.

My mom was always confused about my interest in cultures other than our own. Once I got curious and tried to wrap a hijab using a towel. My mom jokingly asked, "Are you even Chinese?" It didn't help that my sun-kissed skin was several tones darker than the Chinese beauty standard. But that never bothered me. My best friend, Rahaf, comes from Iraq, so whenever I went to her house, I was greeted with the smell of Arabian incense and Middle Eastern spices. And like any immature bilingual kid, Rahaf taught me plenty of Arabic swear words (of course, I returned the favour and graced her with Cantonese swears.) She also taught me "mish-mish," which means "apricot."

I was part of my school's snack program: every day, students in the program would be provided with a nutritious (but not necessarily delicious) snack. When I was in the eighth grade, we often got digestive biscuits that looked like cardboard, except the shade of brown was so unsettling that only the brave would consider touching them. One bite and you'd see your ancestors beckoning you into the light. Sometimes we'd get lucky, and the snack deliverer would walk into the classroom with a large paper bag full of greasy, savoury samosas, their aroma engulfing the room in seconds. We also had fruit often. One day, we got crackers and oranges.

As I walked over to the designated snack table, two of my classmates, Mohammed and Mohamed (I told you, the jar wasn't shaken well enough) were already there, making conversation.

"Hey, Mohammed, how's your Arabic going? Do you know the word for orange?"

I had a bad habit of answering questions not directed to me. But responding just this once wouldn't hurt.

"*Burtuqala*," I said.

"Wha... what? How do you know that?"

Mohamed asked.

I didn't answer him. I just smiled, grabbed my crackers and *burtuqala*, and walked back to my desk. I hope Mohamed was as flabbergasted as I was proud.

Rahaf was the one who taught me that word. One day at school, she randomly broke out in song and laughter. It was an Arabic song about oranges, and I couldn't understand anything except for "*Al burtuqala, al burtuqala*,"¹ which ended up imprinted on my mind forever.

I'm Chinese. I stereotypically play the piano, use chopsticks for *everything* (I ate ice cream with chopsticks once) and have a fear of forgetting to cook the rice before Mom comes home. But, I also enjoy kebab just as much as I like dim sum, and I'm familiar with other Eastern cultures as much as I am with my own. Of course Mohamed would've been shocked that I, a Chinese person, knew the Arabic word for orange. Out of all the words in the world, why did it have to be "orange," and why in Arabic? I guess the universe conspired for that very silly moment which proved how the ingredients in a seemingly unshakeable jar can still get mixed up all the same.

A small note: according to Rahaf, "burtuqala" is the Iraqi dialect's singular noun for "orange." In many other Arabic dialects, "burtuqal" is the singular noun for "orange," but is the plural form in the Iraqi dialect. Confusing, right?

Chelsea Wang, 19

¹Translation: "Oh orange, oh orange."



Cultura
Thalia Leticia Ruiz, 19



Lifeline

Sean Chen, 16

Ocean

If I close my eyes, I can almost hear it.

Not the crowd.

I'm gonna die.

Not the drunken countdown.

I'm gonna die.

Not my pounding heart.

I'm gonna die I'm gonna die I'm gonna die...

With my eyes closed, I could swear it's right there. So close, I could reach my hand out and touch it.

The ocean.

There's an ocean somewhere. Salt, sand, seashells, rays of sun. Somewhere out there, rushing in to greet the shore in reliable patterns of tide, there are waves.

And she's there, too.

I'm going to die.

Somewhere out there, there is a version of me who was never broken up with. Who was never *broken*. Who never came to this godforsaken party. Who never would have touched that last drink or agreed to this kind of ridiculous stunt.

But that person isn't me. I'm here. On a roof. In my Vans, about to jump into a backyard pool from two enormous stories up, because a bunch of deadbeats I spent four years hating will get a kick out of it. Because I might just be the most idiotic person who ever set foot on this planet.

I'm going to die.

I inch closer to the roof's edge and peer down toward the pool I'm supposed to aim for when I jump. You know, assuming I don't want to crack open my head on the concrete.

God.

I didn't think anyone I knew could afford a place this nice. There's a *fountain* in the front yard. Whose house even is this? I don't remember coming here. I don't remember choosing to get in my dad's car and drive to the ritzy part of town to waste gas money — and what is probably the last night of my life — on a class of washed-up losers who couldn't make anything out of themselves.

I'm including myself in that category.

But not her. She wouldn't be caught dead at a party like this; it's not her scene. It's like, the opposite of what she likes.

Beer. Music with a deafening bass. Proving your life has worth by risking it; proving you're not lost by putting on a face and throwing back shots.

Not her. She proved her life's worth by treating it like it was worthy. She proved she wasn't lost by actually going out and *finding* herself. Too bad doing that grew to mean losing me.

Not too long ago, it meant sneaking down to the beach to skip rocks and soak in the summer. Forcing me to bring a blanket for her because she could never manage to get warm after dunking her head in the ocean. Coaxing me off the sand and into the brilliant blue one kiss at a time, until I was jumping in the water with her, laughing and screaming without caring how icy cold it was. Afterward, we would huddle under the blanket together, and everything would stay silent for a while. The tender and purposeful kind of quiet that says more than words ever could. With goose bumps materializing on our shivering arms and the July sunset painting the sky orange and magenta, we would hold each other and listen to the nothingness sing us to sleep. *Safe*, it would whisper, every time. *Loved*.

Home.

I shake my head, bringing myself back to the rooftop and out of my memories. Ordering myself to stop reliving those sacred moments so I don't taint them with the mess I've become. But I can't stop doing it.

I shouldn't be here.

I can hear her voice in my head, over the ocean scene my mind has conjured, telling me that I don't have to do this. I can almost feel her hand resting gently on my shoulder, pulling me away from the edge and saying that it's okay to... to sit in the emptiness that's been engulfing me since she left. To rest in the shadow that she cast over my life. To curl up in it and stay awhile. Sad, but safe.

I'm going to die. I shouldn't be here.

I'm right on the edge. The empty air ahead of my feet is just a step away. It won't even take a second to cross the span of these few inches and make it all stop, even for a second. I'll barely have to move, and they'll stop *looking* at me. Stop jeering me on.

There's a difference between jeering someone on and cheering them on. Jeering is *come on, don't be a pussy. Be a man. Just do it*. But cheering...

She was my cheerleader. She was gentle nudges forward when I was afraid, holding my hand as I tiptoed through the fire, kissing the bloody bruises and scrapes wrought on me by life and replacing their red with her lipstick. She was rousing applause and triumphant screams when I crossed the finish line. Didn't matter what the finish line looked like that day — getting out of bed. Getting something to eat. Getting my hopes up just one more time, because maybe the world would be kinder. Because maybe that day I could figure out my place in it.

But she's not here. She's not. She's...

I can't be here. I can't do this.

I am going to die. But not today.

I step back. I retreat from the edge.

They're booing me, all of them — jeering, chuckling, screaming, hurling insults and burnt food, but I don't even hear it. There's a silence that's demanding my attention. It's singing to me. Somewhere out there is an ocean. Mysterious, mystical waves. Sunbaked sand, little glass treasures made smooth by the sea. Starfish and seaweed and seagulls and...

If I close my eyes, I can see it all. I can hear it, taste it, smell it, *feel* it.

Safe.

Loved.

Home.

I'll find my way back again.

Hate Towards the Trans Community

Join me on an adventure
Down screaming silenced souls;
Each layered with the prints of bruises.
Unwanted stamps given to us by society
Told we aren't meant to be.
It hurts.

Yet mocked in films and portrayed as crazy
Maybe crazy is fair. I'm starting to feel that way...
Crazy that we can't just be ourselves without backlash
Crazy that people care more
About what's below our waists
Than what's in our hearts and minds,
Crazy that our rights and lives are fun topics for debates.
It hurts.

Throats dry and hoarse with shouts
That produce a dizzying metallic taste on our tongues
Dripping words mixed in blood from our pain;
Words left unheard
Dribble in dark red down the drain
It hurts.

We get hate from other minority groups
Members of **my own** black community
Feel as if I'm part of a mutiny
We even get hate from other members
Of the LGBTQ+ community
"Forget the T!"
It hurts.

We feel the burning resentment peeling our necks
Pooling our tired flesh
Created by the searing gaze
From our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers
And many others
"Just Shush"
Look us in the eyes
Yet you still cannot see how badly
It hurts.

Leathery hands wrap around blue, pink, and white necks
Squeezing with every might
Hoping that the fiery flaming flowers,
Though plucked one by one,
Don't pick up the courage to fight
The unjust seemingly forgotten deaths
No heavier weight carried,
Knees are buckling
Trying to stay steady
As we watch more dead-deadnamed bodies left unburied
It hurts.

But wait
There's always more
Now you bring in super straight
Just one day.
Will there ever be an end to the neverending hate?
It hurts.

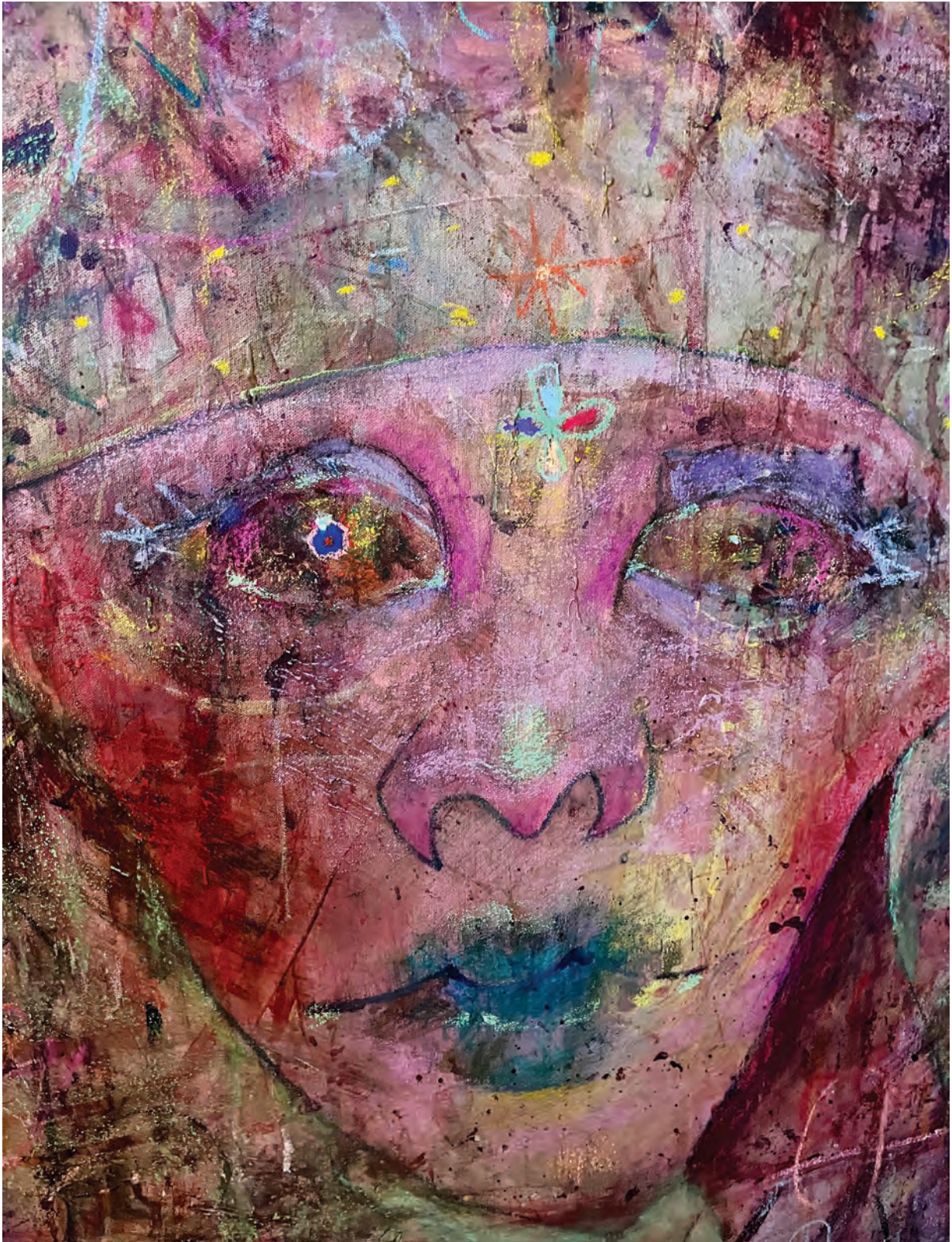
Fear is the hunger making our stomachs sink in
Just let that sink in
That all we're craving is to be heard
That's absurd
**We're starving
While you're eating.**
Wait, stop. Now it hurts too much.

It doesn't have to hurt though...
If we together make an effort to protect black trans women
And defend trans youth
We can all live in harmony
So please step out of your close-minded booth
Get rid of prejudices and just accept everyone's truth...

Stop shaming a community already filled to the brim with pain.
Do you want to hear something insane?

We are humans too
We didn't choose this life
And, honestly, neither would you
So be weary of your words and actions
Don't forget that everything you do has an impact and
Spread love not hate
Maybe then
One day
It won't hurt.

Dez Williams, 17



Maskara
Liam Vu, 16

I Am the Understudy in My Own Play

I am the passenger in my own car. I am the sidekick in my own movie. I am the understudy in my own play. There is no one who can shift the positions. I am stuck here. My mind is run by an assortment of little chess pieces. Maybe it's because chess is a complex game or maybe it's because my vision is washed in black and white. Sometimes a piece or two decides to fall over. Hopefully, shifting the game board, my position. No, it's playing with my mind. Now I'm breathing heavily. Now I'm questioning my own thoughts because I don't own my thoughts. Other people do. Their opinions matter more to me than this very moment. A moment that could be savored if I wasn't second in my mind. I'm the understudy in my own play. A play that is somehow written in a different language. Everyone else understands while I stare at the page. A page that even in English was never written for me. I was ordered to stand on stage, stiff. A puppet with strings is what I am. The fear of them snapping snips through my mind. A mind that is full of ideas and dreams and goals. A mind that brought me here. Questioning the pressure. Why is there pressure? Why am I applying pressure? Now I am relieved that the game has two winners. I'm somehow the second. Why am I always second? My whole life I have been others first. Are we all just seconds in our own stories? Pick up the pace, walk faster. If you don't catch up they are going to trample you, leave you stranded. Picture yourself on a stage except that dream you had is a nightmare, that is my nightmare. A dream I don't tend to shake. An experience that keeps me up at night. Is there a place for me? Or do I take up too much of the board? Am I already out? I circle the table of people. We are all just people. Why are some treated worse than others? If we are all just people. If we are all just seconds. Drip drop, here go the seconds as they fall through the slim hourglass. I want to smash it. Break the endless cycle of humanity. Change the way that people look at things. Be an important spot on the board. I feel second so I feel lost. Feel as though I hear others but their ears shut down when I speak. Do I need to feel this way? Or do I not have a choice? I don't get a choice because I'm second. Not good enough to be first but not terrible enough to be third. Somehow, I feel closer to fourth than third. Who even made the finish line? Why are we all racing toward a stop sign? That's all it is. What happens when we reach the mark? The glory only lasts for a moment before the race begins again. Sure, there are trophies and medals, but does a piece of gold really tell my story? It's the hurt that does. Maybe that's the point of being second. Being first never gets people anywhere. They are trapped in expectations. Eyes on them, their every move watched. I am on the board. I am optimistic that one day I will move up. Past first. Past the doubt and confusion. Past the entire board itself. So I will stay second, but I will stand taller than most because I, unlike others, am aware that a position or a score does not define me.

Kylee Toner, 12

Silent Wishes

seventeen birthday wishes, eleven wishes wasted,
because all i wanted was to get rid of the personality I hated.
if I don't talk enough,
if I'm not loud enough,
then my dreams I'll never reach, because society makes it

so hard to be a "leader" for those of us who speak quietly
when all we can do is agree and nod politely.
culture of character to
culture of personality,
replacing moral rectitude with charisma and likeability

is why we mirror the most dominant person in the room.
"best talkers have best ideas," as we assume
that extroverts are leaders,
so introverts must change,
because in our world there is no room

for my fortress of solitude where my mind can be freed
from distortions of group dynamics — for a moment I can be
my very own leader
and prepare myself
to march back out and share the creativity

hindered in this so-praised "groupthink" system
where autonomy and freedom are succumbed.
looking back at my
six-year-old self
who believed i wouldn't succeed unless I became

louder, outgoing, the leader of the group,
mask my true self and abandon my natural milieu.
and so i wished
again and again
to become an extrovert — but it never came true

no matter how many times I've tried to change.
the more outgoing i was, the less hopeful i became,
because being someone else
is truly exhausting.
yet, i still smiled so they won't know how afraid

i felt if i would ever disappoint all of them
if, one day, they discovered my quiet persona.
and as much as i
hate to admit,
i had given up yet again, as this is just one

of the countless times i've questioned... What good is trust
when, since the beginning, my wishes have already turned to dust?
yet, i still keep making the
same old wishes even though
i'm so sick of this repetitive cycle, because i just

couldn't keep up with who i kept coming to be,
as my pseudo-extroverted character depleted me.
i changed how i acted,
i changed how i talked,
But i couldn't change my personality..

how many times should i fail before i give up?
in less than a month i'll be an adult.
i've wasted the childhood
that i should've treasured
because never have i thought about what i want

for myself, but instead the judgements of those around me.
everything i had done, i did so they would like me.
but it costed the love
that i had for myself.
i hated not knowing who i genuinely wanted to be

because i ask myself if i'm the only one
burdened by being the person i want to become.
if it's true that nearly
half the world is introverted,
i often wonder where they have all gone

as i think about all the introverts i couldn't see.
maybe they disguise themselves, as they desperately
want their voice
to be heard,
when ironically i think what we truly need

is the courage to speak quietly.

Kelly Hong, 17



Whimsical Treehouse
Hania Ahmed, 14

Aspen

“Stop,” says the frog, sitting on a tree branch.

The toad, who is really a frog, but refuses to admit it, widens his eyes until they are dinner plates, and the frog, who is really a frog and has no trouble admitting it, picks up a fork and spoons out a healthy amount of marmalade.

“Mmmm.”

“Delicious.”

“Such is reality,” says the toad, whose eyes are still dinner plates.

The frog spits the marmalade out. It drifts down the river and over the edge of the waterfall.

“I think I would like to go over that waterfall,” says the toad to the frog.

“Was it orange?”

“Yes.”

The frog thinks on that.

“I like orange.”

“You did not like the marmalade,” the toad says.

The frog thinks on that.

“I do not like reality.”

“Neither do I,” the toad says, attempting to pull the fork out of his dinner plate eye.
“Stop,” says the frog.
“I am blind,” the toad says.
“You are blind either way.”
The toad thinks on that.
“Yes, I am.”
The toad’s eye bursts. Red liquid trickles down his face.
“Open your eyes,” says the frog.
“They are open,” says the toad, watching the blood drift down the river and over the edge of the waterfall.
“So you can see,” the frog says.
“Yes.”
“I thought you could not.”
“There is,” says the toad, “a difference between being blind and being unable to see.”
“Is there?”
“One is situational.”
“I see,” says the frog, whose eyes are also open.
“So you do.”
The frog sits in silence.
“Perhaps I ought to taste that marmalade,” says the toad.
“You have already tasted it,” says the frog.
“So I have.”
The frog sits in silence.
“Did I like the marmalade?”
“I do not remember,” says the frog.
“What about the waterfall?”
“We are still here,” says the frog.
The toad starts crying.
“Stop,” says the frog, swimming in the toad’s tears.
“Where does the waterfall lead?”
“Let me check.”
The frog swims up to the toad’s eye and back down again.
“Nowhere.”
The toad stops crying. The frog sits back down on the tree branch.
“You are looking the wrong way,” says the frog.
“I am looking ahead,” says the toad.
“Face the other way,” the frog says.
“I do not have a face,” says the toad, who does not have a face.
“So you do not.”
The toad smashes his head in. Bits of porcelain flatter the ground below.
“The ground looks better now,” says the frog.
“So it does.”
The frog thinks on that.
“The ground is not better, is it?”
“No,” says the toad.
“My eyes are open,” says the frog, whose eyes are open.
“There is,” says the toad, “a difference between seeing the truth and seeing what you want to see.”
“Is there?”
“One is painful.”
“I see.”
The frog and the toad sit in silence underneath the aspen’s branches.



Pleading
Clara Scott, 16

The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things

He reeked of sadness. It was an aura that pervaded him, coiling and spiraling around him in thick dense clouds. Through transparent layers of cotton candy we watched him as he walked around carnival games. His back was hunched with age. His long sinewy arms hung like branches. We stared motionlessly at him. Terrified of his aura.

“What is he doing?” we whispered to each other.

But he piqued our curiosity. He was an outsider among kids and parents, and we were nosy. We craved to learn more.

Then he sat down and started begging. Chapped lips opening and closing, calloused hands gripping an old coffee cup. He asked passersby for loose change in a pathetic feeble voice.

We bit our lips to keep ourselves from openly gagging.

This was our big mystery?

People ignored him. Sure there was the occasional apology, and even rarer, the people who do give money. We hear the clatter of the coins as they drop in.

He walked and we followed. One hand holding the cup with coins, the other in a pocket. We moved together, a subterfuge. A few feet behind him. He breathed with effort, his chest rising and dropping like a slow motion video of the tide. As the mere crabs on the beach, we scuttle to safety from incoming dangers.

With a grunt he sits down on a bench in a dense, crowded area. A girl propped up on the opposite side scowls and in one irritated, sweeping action stands up and rushes away. He acts blasé. He reaches into his beat-up jean pocket for a half-smoked cigarette and lights it on his third try. He inhales deeply. And exhales. The smoke dances in the air, hugging it and polluting it into a darker gray.

We felt the palpable boundary between us. While he was an immediate prey to time, we would live in the years he would be gone. Time’s arrow wasn’t marching straight anymore but instead it bowed down in our presence. That’s when it started.

Our friend was the first to go. She rushed up, breaking away from the group. She bent over and grasped a stick on the pavement. It was jagged and old. She cast a smile at us that mocked us,

“Are you scared of this?” She hurled the stick at the man. It made contact. The man’s eyes contorted in brief shock and confusion. He touched his face where the stick grazed it with a tender anger.

What would he do now? We ogled as other kids started gathering around, laughing with their arms bent under their stomachs. Hiccupping with ear-to-ear grins and snot racing down their faces. They took his cup and dumped the contents on the floor. They blew dirt in his face. The beggar seemed to be trying to sink into his clothing.

Then we started doing it too. We were drunk not with the power but the exercising of it.

Something might be wrong with us, or was everyone else at fault? The key didn’t fit the lock. Was the problem with the key or the lock? When the adults don’t even bat an eye, how could the locks on our heart-shaped boxes be contained? In a parallel universe they would have asked him, “Why don’t you just get a job?” In this universe, our hearts told us that we were right to do this.

So teasing turned to pinches turned to slaps turned to kicks turned to endless torment. From the bench he fell to the floor when a rock hit his face.

“Fucking loser,” we swear like our fathers.

There was a satisfying click as he fell to his place. Streaks of blood flowed down, kissing the dirt on his cheeks. With his lighter we lit the end of a trashed cigarette and burned symmetrical holes on his hand. He mumbled but we couldn’t hear.

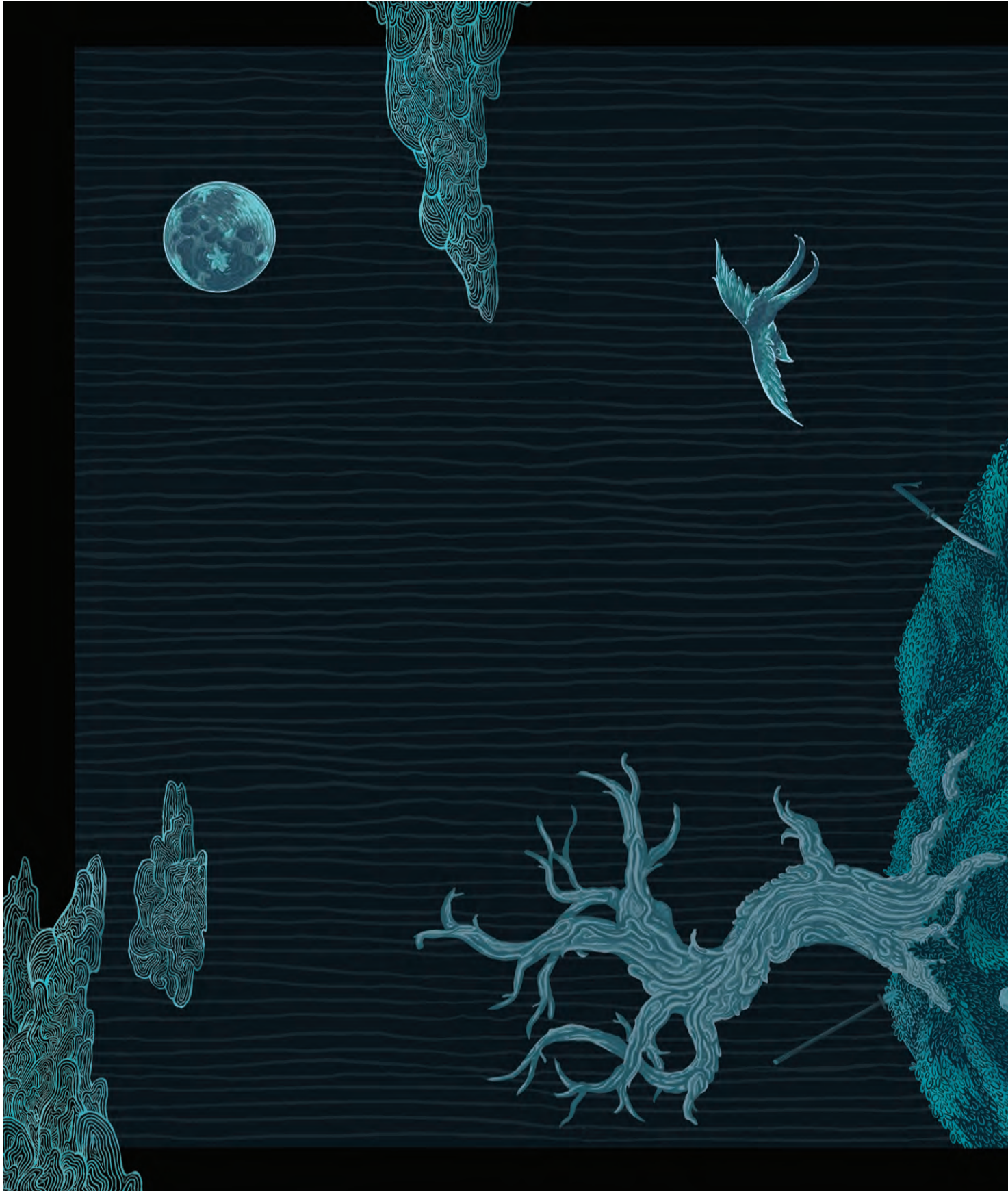
We know that when it’s all over it’ll not be kids being kids but the kids turning into adults, staying scumbags. The lights in all their fluorescent glory branded the scene in our minds. The thing on the floor. Alone. The candy apple booths in the background. We set out to buy them, stealing coins from what remained in the cup.

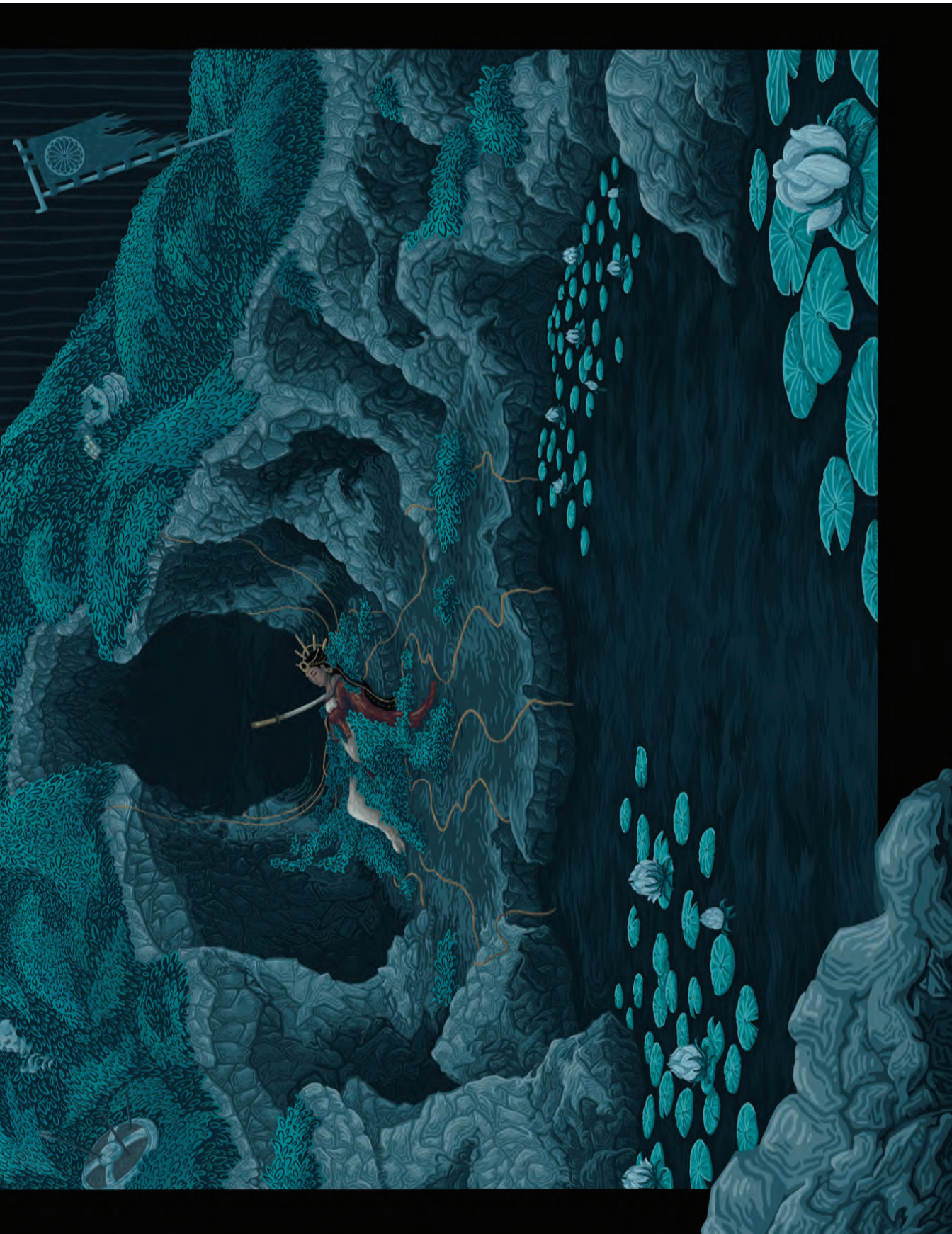
We would forget all about the thing shivering on the floor before we even took a bite.

The heart is deceitful above all things.

Who can understand it?

Patricia Zhang, 15





The Rising of the Sun
Hana Aurora Wilson, 17

The Brook

There was the village of thatched cottages with the church, there was the dark pine forest, and there was the brook separating them both. The small church stood in the centre of the village, its bell tower reaching upward to the heavens, a reminder of the villagers' faith and hope. Surrounding the village lay fertile green fields, undulating with a gentle breeze beneath the bright golden sun.

The dark pine forest stretched as far as the eye could see and was covered by eternal grey clouds. Nothing stirred in the forest, not even the wind. The trees stood tall and silent, like sentinels guarding an ancient secret. A faint mist hovered around the bases of the trunks. The forest was mysterious and eerie, as if an unseen presence lurked in its depth.

The old men of the village told tales of wolves living in the forest. Even though centuries had passed since wolves had been seen, one could occasionally hear howls echoing from deep within the trees on a still night. No villager ever crossed the brook that protected the village from the forest.

The dense, dark forest had no defined paths, but she was inexplicably drawn to the same place at the edge of the forest beside the brook. She kept to the shadows, deep enough in the trees' embrace to be invisible from the village. Wistfully, she hid and waited, listening to the familiar water trickling and birdsong filling the air.

On the other side of the brook, a boy from the village appeared and settled himself on the nearby rocks, as he did every day. He had a kind face and wide, sad eyes. He would spend hours there, sitting in the same spot and staring forlornly into the trees, his eyes searching for something unseen. She watched him as frequently as he watched the forest, her heart aching with the loneliness she saw in him.

The boy visited the same place by the brook every day, the same place he and she both loved. Each day he hoped she would be there waiting for him. The smell of the blue flowers and the sound of the gentle ripples of water brought back happy memories of when they used to sit here together. It had been exactly one year since she had vanished. People said she fell into the brook while trying to pick one of the exotic blue flowers growing on the opposite side. Sometimes, if he stared hard enough into the woods, he thought he saw her, her long silver hair, her steel blue eyes shimmering in the woods.

On that grief-stricken day, as the sun was setting behind the trees, longing and sorrow filled his heart as he leapt across the brook to pluck a single blue flower. The aroma of the flower was sweet and calming, and for a moment, the grief he felt seemed to lift. Ahead of him were even more beautiful blue flowers. Caught up in his memories, he found himself deep in the forest's stillness, making him feel peaceful and content. He lay down in the grass, curled up, clutching the blue flowers close to his chest, and drifted off into a deep sleep. He awoke sometime later, unsure of who he was or where he had come from. But, still, he felt at peace, surrounded by the tranquil beauty of the forest.

He lay there, eyes shut in a moment of perfect peace, trying to remember his past when the procession silently entered the clearing. Wolves and half-wolves with human heads and wolf bodies, and wolf heads with human bodies; at the end of the procession was the most beautiful girl, with long silver hair, steel blue eyes, and a wolf's body. She had a gentle, familiar smile that beckoned him, and he joined her. He felt strangely comforted, and his heart filled with contentment.

Life in the forest was good, yet the same dream visited him almost every night — an elusive dream about a village and a brook. Sometimes she also dreamed of this place, as if they had shared the same dream. The dreams were so real that they felt like memories, but that was impossible since no wolf from the forest had ever crossed the brook to visit the village.

Leah Zander, 13

A Cure

I felt it as soon as my mom told me. A scratch in the back of my throat. I feel it still on the car ride over. Walking towards the building my clothes are heavy and tight. I'm fussing with my cardigan while my mom pays for parking. The front of the building is covered in glass windows, the hallway inside is lined with plants. It's open and light, and clean. But when we walk into the memorial room, it's tight and dim, and tense. The air is restricted and hot. I stand in a crowd at the back, where each breath I take is an unsatisfying gasp while surrounded by her friends and family. Speeches from her best friend, her sister, her husband, all ensure the pain in my stomach and the persistence of my nausea. I am not emotional; I'm uncomfortable.

I always viewed Hera as a good person, better than me. One of my favorite memories of Hera takes place every summer, when my cat Sulu would sit on her porch. She would talk to him, and he would meow at her. She talked to him like a person, genuine and kind. She was so happy to be with him talking, it didn't matter to her that he can't speak English, as opposed to the way I laugh at Sulu when he meows at me. I pretend to speak to him and make fun of the way we both know we don't speak the same language, but still try. It's ironic how I'm still a child, but she was all grown up and went through life with a sense of childlike wonder and awe in a way that I never have. Since her death I have been haunted by these memories. I left her funeral with an infection that had been festering, and would continue to grow inside of me for the next few weeks. It was like a fever that wouldn't come down.

I was not raised with religion, so I rely on logic to navigate the world. My approach to trying to resolve my discomfort was no different. I thought if I could find a reason why she died I would feel better, that it would be the ultimate cure. I viewed Hera as a good person, so it didn't make sense to me why that goodness would deserve death. But weeks turned into months of sitting with this question and I didn't have an answer. All I had was that same itch in my throat that I got in October, when my mom told me that Hera's cancer had returned.

I couldn't find an answer to why she died because the question is in and of itself faulty. I assumed there must be an answer, a reason, a method, a truth to death. But if that was the case then people wouldn't pray, they wouldn't write poems or songs, to find solace. Dissonance with

death is human nature, but so is understanding. I figured that in my understanding of death I would discover peace. A relief from the emotions twisting and knotting themselves inside my stomach, my nausea trying to force them out. Relief from the lump in the back of my throat, clawing to be released. But attempting to understand death does not resolve grief. Death is a constant in life that is not guided by any truth. It isn't an equation and it's not an entity. It cannot be understood. Like death, for grief there is no reason, no method, no truth. Grief just is, and must exist. I carried my grief like a secret I swore to never tell and I kept it so good I didn't know it was there. In order to find a cure for my sickness I had to accept that I might be sick.

Amelia Riley, 16



When the Son Grew Up
Tianyang Jiang, 17

Sight-Reading

In the library, which is the world of humanity, people are almost always judged by their covers. With the never-ending stacks of novels, library ladders forming parallel lines that meet high in the sky, it is difficult to choose which books you should dedicate your time to. So, you take shortcuts, glancing at titles, reading synopses, observing the outside before you spend your hours discovering what lies within.

My cover is this: a relatively short girl with dark hair that flows long and straight, the first hint at my ancestry. Other clues include the cool tone of my skin, the warm almond eyes that crack into slivers when I smile, and the flat bridge of my nose. These clues, like puzzle pieces pieced together, bridge the distance from the bookshelf to your hands. This cover appeals to you; it is made of worn leather that feels familiar under your fingertips, the welcome scent of parched paper, and the gold tint on the edges of the pages that hints at a valuable tale within. This is how I am perceived before the first page is flipped, before the plot twists and you realize the cover has deceived you. The conclusion you drew from the outside was simply an introduction to the words held within.

With the scenes depicted on my novel's cover, I am granted access to a club of straight-A students and piano prodigies. But music lessons cannot prepare me for the sight-reading I must do to keep my membership card. While my friends communicate in allusions to their parents and their traditions, I must make connections to connections to translate their words. It feels like a performance where I'm constantly sight-reading a piece everyone else has memorized by heart. The audience pins me under the spotlight, watching as I weave a story of belonging, waiting for an inescapable missed note, a dissonant chord. I am waiting too, fingers flying over the keys, sweat from the heat of others' gaze carving a river down my back as I try to delay the twist in the story for just one more day.

Inevitably, I will hit a wrong note, miss a beat, and my true identity will be revealed. For every person who assumes something about me based on the colours splattered across the front of my book, there will be a moment of discovery and disappointment. Like an archeologist, they will brush away layer after layer of silt. A layer is removed when I reveal the water in my bottle wasn't filtered through a hundred-degree kettle. A chunk of rock is chipped off when I'm asked, "Mando or Canto?" and, eyes averted, I respond, "Neither." The last sheen of dust is blown into the stale air, dissolving into specks in the light, when I mention that my parents barely glance at the letters on my report card. Finished, the archeologist will draw back to observe the skeleton

they've discovered. My bones laid bare, I am ready to be re-catalogued as another species.

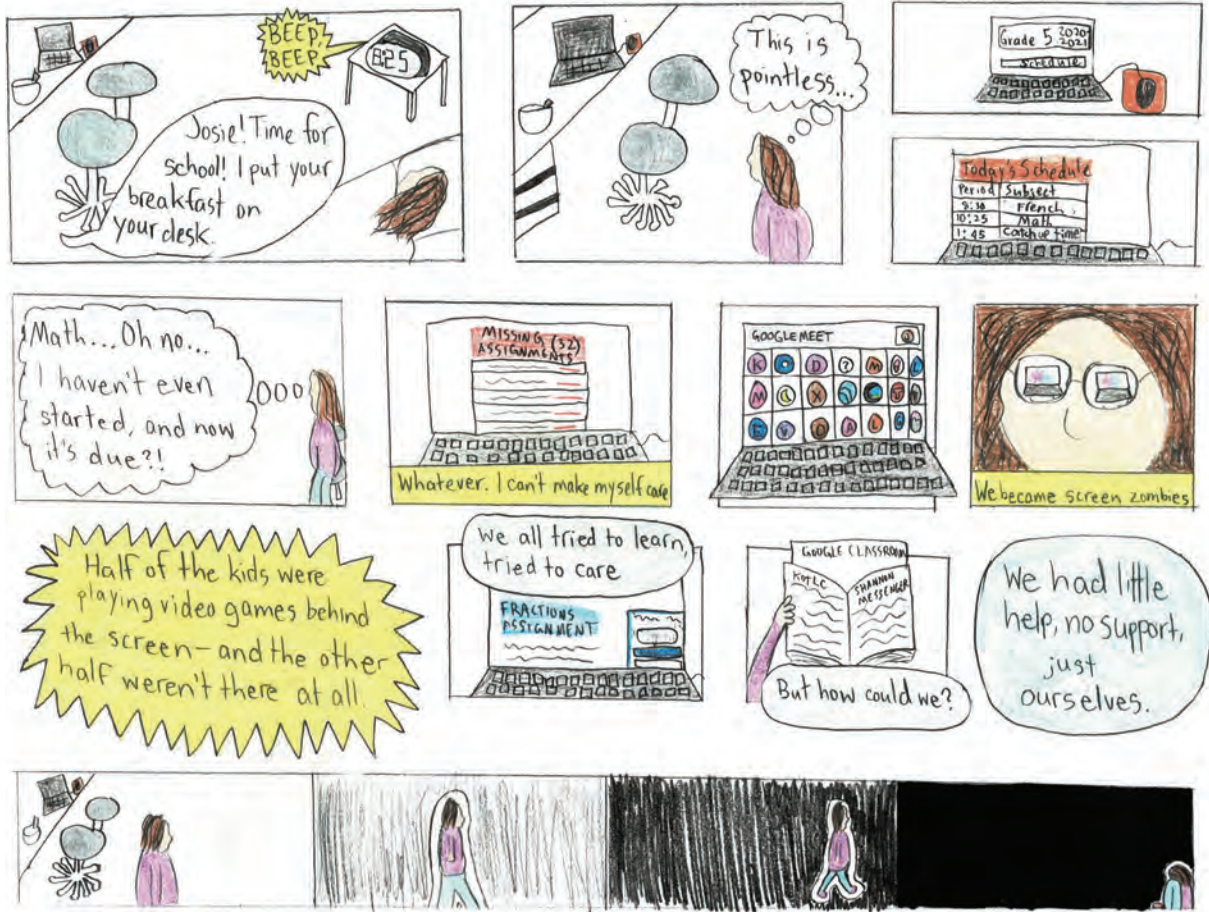
A new chapter begins, then. The reactions to the grand reveal vary from disappointment to disgust, disgust being the easier emotion to bear. I can simply sit still as a stone, unmoving as the torrent of words pour over me – you're a banana, you don't belong, you are not one of us. The shockwaves from the shock they face wash their initial opinions of me downstream. Disappointment is different, more difficult than the brief battle of disgust. It is an endless uphill war to prove myself when I have nearly no evidence to back the case. Your disappointment remains when I eat my lunch with a fork instead of chopsticks. Your disappointment remains when I have sandwiches just as often as rice. Your disappointment remains when the only Mandarin words I know are "wǒ bù zhīdào" – "I don't understand."

In the footnotes, the message is spelled out for you: this story is not what you thought it was. This girl is not one of yours.

With the turning point of the story complete, the climax rolls into falling action. Your assumptions and subsequent reactions work like two hands, scribbling notes in my margins to prepare others for the surprise that lies ahead. I will add a preface to my novel, so you can decide whether to put the book back on the shelf rather than let the suspense place pressure on the reveal. The preface will read as an explanation of my generation. First, I will say, I am the third generation. This is enough to explain that I've 'just been assimilated.' I cannot try to learn the language, the culture, or the traditions, that I am expected to innately understand. There is no learning what must be memorized at birth — I am stuck at the end of the line like a hastily added period, a dot after long scrawls of text.

This is the final period, the final punctuation mark, marking the resolution of the story. The conclusion is clear now: the girl was not one of your own. She does not understand you like you had thought she would. The gold lining the pages was rubbed off to reveal the blanched paper within. However, when you replace the book on the shelf, the story has been shared one more time than before, the pages turned one more time over, and the words scanned one more hour. Perhaps the resolution at the end of the novel is worth the tempest of emotions faced during the story. The last sentence makes it clear: a story is told by the words in the novel, not by the images decorating the cover.

Isabella Wong, 16



Into the Dark
Josephine Winter, 12

Never Give Up

When the road ahead is long and rough,
And the trials seem too much to bear,
Remember that the journey is tough,
But giving up is no choice to dare.

When the storms of life are raging strong,
And the winds of change are blowing,
Hold on to your faith and keep pushing along,
For every struggle will eventually pass.

When the sky above is dark and gray,
And the world seems to be falling apart,
Don't lose hope, don't lose your way,
For even the darkest hour will fade.

When the voices around you say it's time to quit,
And the weight of the world is on your back,
Stand tall, hold your head up, and don't submit,
For persistence is the key to another day.

So when you're feeling lost and alone,
And challenges seem insurmountable,
Remember that you're stronger than you know,
And not giving up is truly commendable.

For every step you take is a step forward,
And every obstacle can be overcome,
Believe in yourself and trust in the Lord,
And you'll achieve and become.

Sujal Thakur, 14

Mother Earth and her 8 (billion) Children

I have seven siblings,
And we love each other, of course
But we have a hard time showing it.

we get into fights sometimes.

Mom tells us not to,
But it's hard when there's only one mom
To share among us.

I know that it's tiring her out,
But that's a problem for another day...
we have our own problems to deal with.

I have seven siblings,
And we all know one thing.
Mom isn't going to live forever.
That's why some of us took advantage of her
kindness.

Mom was disappointed.
She was stressed.

And hurt.

I'm not sure if they notice, though.

We try to pay attention to her.

But we're growing up.

I try to tell her,

We have more responsibilities...

Like what? She asks.

Like making money, I say.

I have seven siblings.
One of us makes less than \$2 a day.
Two of us are able to buy a fridge.
Three of us can bike to school.
Four of us share a home.
But there will soon be five.
Six of us cannot afford a car.
There were seven of us,
But there are 8 of us now.
And soon 9.
and maybe even 10 by 2050.
10 billion, to be exact.

Note:

I wrote this poem about a family, where the mom represents "mother Earth" and the eight siblings each represent a billion people. I try to reference current social issues subtly throughout the poem: the siblings often get in "fights" which reference wars, and the second stanza talks about how the economic level 4 cause the most damage to the environment, despite it only consisting of 1/8th of the population. The last stanza talks more about general statistics: 1 billion people live on level 1 - making less than \$2 a day, 2 billion live on level 3 - which means they are able to afford a fridge, 3 billion live on level 2 - where the most common method of transportation is by bike, and 1 billion live on level 4 (the only economic level that can afford a car). 4 billion people live in Asia, although experts predict it will soon be 5 billion by 2040. Lastly, the UN expects the world population to reach 9.8 billion by 2050.

Elise Su, 15

Despair

This isn't sadness, sadness is somber and dim
The very thing that weighs heavily on your shoulders
The feeling of despair is ruthless, dark
This monster, paralyzing your movements, making you meek

This demon, slowly squeezing, coiling like a remorseless snake
The feeling, smothering the ability to feel elation, elevate your mind
Desperate to free yourself from this dreadful nightmare, this petrifying hell
Pulmonary and cardiovascular systems, working overtime, breathing quickly, heart beating faster and faster

But the suffocation stops, dead in its tracks
Why did it stop?
WHY DID IT STOP?

Agonizingly close to drain you of life
So close, that you may feel like giving up
You may ask the feeling to complete the task
Envisioning the finishing of yourself

But this abomination, this grim emotion
It isn't impossible to overcome
Focus on your breathing
Count each breath if you have to

In.
Out.
In.
Out.

You slow down your lungs, calm them down
4. 7. 8.
You slow the train of thought, calm your brain
4. 7. 8.
You slow your shaking, steady your hands
4. 7. 8.

Finally, the beast retreats, letting go slowly but surely
It will come back some day
To take over your mind, to summon the grim reaper
But not this time, not today

Jana Alexis Villaceran Carrao, 12



Sullen Girl

Edie Hodgson, 16

The Crow

Its beady, watchful, eyes —
Always lingering on me.
Its glistening wet-black feathers,
Drawing me in.

To cut or not to cut?
That is the question.
One slice is all.
And after a few minutes,
Everything would dull to darkness.
No more thoughts to fight,
No more battles with my mind.
It would all halt to a stop.

Perhaps — in that stillness —
I may find the peace I pine for.
Once it's finally all gone quiet —
That voice in my head silenced —
Maybe solace will come find me.

Should I cut,
I would cease to be the coward —
One that feared living,
But never had the guts to die.

The crow lurks,
Waiting to peck at my corpse.
I draw blood,
And with that I welcome it —
Inviting the crow to feast.

Arshiya Hossain, 17

The Bird and the Squirrel

The bird curses himself as he stumbles down the hill that he will inevitably have to climb back up.

“This is stupid. If I were larger, I would stomp my foot on every hill to flatten them down to dust,” the bird grumbles as he rolls to a stop a few meters away from the hill and lies there. There’s no point in getting up. There never was. There never was because he knew that when he inevitably got up, he would have to climb back up that hill, and the next hill, and the next hill, and the next. And so, the bird lay there. He lay there until the sky turned orange, then turned pink, then turned purple, then turned blue, and then the stars. The stars were out.

Lying at the bottom of the hill, the bird maps out the stars in his mind. Oh, how he loves the stars. No matter how many constellations he draws in his mind, there is always a new patch of the sky that he has never seen before. The stars know everything about the bird because every night when he sits underneath them, the stars steal his thoughts. They know all about climbing hills and stomping them down, falling out of the skies and lying in the grass because the stars steal those thoughts. The bird decided that hills could stay because being at the top of a hill meant that he was closer to the stars. Watching the stars from the hill is his favourite thing to do, no matter how hard it is to climb up it. The view is perfect. The bird was content with the view he has. He was — really, he was.

“Hello. Are you stargazing? Do you mind if I join you?”

It was a squirrel. Bright eyes that twinkled in the starlight looked young despite their undeniable old age.

“No, I’m just lying on the grass, hoping the universe will finally spare me and send a fox to end me.”

“Oh, you are funny,” the squirrel chuckles as he slowly lowers himself onto the grass next to the bird. His bones creak like branches in the wind as he gets himself comfortable. The bird shows no interest in the squirrel and continues to watch the stars.

“You know,” the squirrel starts suddenly, “I always wanted to fly to the stars. I imagined myself as a star and the forest as my night sky during my youth. I ran through the forest free of limitations because I thought I didn’t have boundaries. My brain thought I was up there, dancing through a limitless sky. But alas, I am a squirrel; no matter what, the forest ends somewhere, and I, regretfully, cannot dance.”

Oh, this old squirrel has gone mad, the bird mentally sighs.

“You know, I really tried everything to get up there. I looked for and climbed the tallest tree, but even on the highest branch, I was still far from the stars. I gathered feathers to build myself a pair of wings. I barely got two feet off of the ground with them. It felt hopeless. Do you know why? It is because I am merely a squirrel who cannot fly, let alone fly to the stars.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, I see you lying at the bottom of this hill every night, staring at the sky. You remind me of myself, but you are a bird. I think you and I share the same dream, but you are a bird. You are everything I wished I could be. If I were born a bird, I would fly to the stars, so why aren’t you?”

“I am afraid of falling.”

“How do you expect to fly to the stars when you are afraid of falling?”

“That is exactly why I do not fly to the stars.”

“But, do you want to fly to the stars?”

“Yes.”

“And you are capable of flying to the stars?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, fly to the stars.”

“I can’t. I am afraid of falling.”

“Why look down at how far away you are from the ground when you can be looking at the stars?”

“Well, I have to look at how far I am away from the ground to know how much it will hurt if I fall. I need to know when to stop flying because falling from any higher up will get me killed.”

“How will you ever touch the stars if you think like that?”

“I won’t.”

“But you are not content with the view from the top of the hill because I know I was not.”

“You’re right.”

“Let’s go together. Let’s fly into the sky together. Maybe in my next life, I will be born with wings, or maybe there will be someone who invents pairs of wings that actually work for squirrels to use. Maybe I will be born into a world where everyone is born with wings, or maybe into a world where all the birds work together to create a world where the stars are just as accessible to squirrels as they are birds. Unfortunately, this world was not any of those. Promise me that when I am gone, you will try and make the stars just as accessible to squirrels as they are birds.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

The bird and the squirrel continue to stargaze. The squirrel, who had not said another word, had gone limp. A new collection of stars appeared to the left of the sky, dancing, sparkling, and twinkling. The bird looks at the cluster of stars and maps it out in his mind. He knows that he will look out for this cluster every night, but he will never see it again because it is already leaving, running like a mad squirrel in an endless forest.

Emma Jiang, 16

Bubble Breath

tied to the ground, a force from below
no voice or sound, nobody left at home
pack up my clothes, and unplug my phone
whisper little bubbles breaths and run with the crows

cut the bags of sand, up, up we go
above the vast land, higher we float
whisper little bubble breaths and make no trace
leave everything behind and start a brand new phase

through clouds we get, now the sky’s all bright
milky, orange sun with a silky pastel light
whisper little bubble breaths and set the flames alight
whisper little bubble breaths and burn the world alive

fire down below, no returning any soon
fire in my eyes, lifting up the balloon
float a little longer, we’ll arrive by noon
whisper little bubble breaths, escape all truth

Sophie Keogh, 13

Cat's Cradle

When my grandma can no longer entertain my boredom, I stand behind my grandpa as he sits in his bird-watching chair, a place I have been taught not to bother him. There is a stillness to the house not built for a child, and I decide to reach out to a man content in his solitude.

My grandfather is a quiet man, not dependent on words. When driving up to the family cottage with just my grandparents, the car ride is filled with my grandma's familiar engaging voice as my grandpa drives silently, only a few words and chuckles escaping his mouth.

As the car slows and we turn onto the property, the smooth sound of concrete turns to tires rolling on gravel. The house is secluded and calm, reflecting my grandpa's presence perfectly. Walking inside, the house is still and scented with a homey mix of pine dust and freshly vacuumed upholstery. It takes a while to settle in and reacquaint.

Grandma and I rest in the kitchen as we hear the quick zoom of hummingbird wings beating at feeders outside. I fiddle with an elastic band, weaving my fingers over and under the stretched rubber. Abruptly Grandma blurts, "Do you know what Cat's Cradle is?" She smiles, glancing at my fingers.

"Don't think so." She pulls an old piece of twine from an unorganized drawer, ties a tight knot and begins to remind herself. I watch her long, calloused fingers repeat the quick motion. She takes my hands and shows me the steps, telling me stories of her youth as I mimic her. I repeat slowly until my fingers become quick and confident as if I had learned from a group of giggling girls in the summer sun. Letting muscle memory take over, we continue the game until she has to start dinner, chopping vegetables and turning on stovetops.

I wander around the house, with no appreciation for silence. I grow impatient and pester my grandma. She shoos me off, "Go, bug Grandpa." I peer into the living room, catching him in his chair. He's silent, staring forward at the birdfeeders in the garden. I debate whether to bother him but my antsy-ness takes over. I walk up to him, fingers

already tangled in the first position of Cat's Cradle.

"I've been tasked to leave Grandma be. Mind helping me?" I extend my hands out to him.

He looks puzzled and huffs, "I don't know how to play." Cocking an eyebrow, he concisely changes his monotone voice to play into my boredom.

I shape his fingers, noting how his hand dwarfs mine. He begins to laugh, chuckling as I criticize his participation, "Come on, you're not even trying." His hands are limp to my manipulation, waiting for instruction whilst not keeping their shape after. I scold him jokingly causing more of this sweet chuckle, almost silent but rewarding. His body physically moves with each muted sound of happiness. Soon he uses a corner of his shirt to dab under his glasses, leaving a visible wet mark behind. He had been laughing so hard his eyes were watering. I calmed my excitement as he struggled to catch his breath. Then Grandma called for dinner.

Once the evening turned late, I decided to call my mom goodnight. Grandma dialled the landline and handed the phone to me, going back to the dishes with Grandpa. I finally sat still as the phone rang.

"Have you ever made your dad laugh-cry?" The words bubble out of me.

"He loves you so much."

Anna Evans-Cook, 17

THE TIME WE'VE SPENT

DEAR YOU,
THERE IS SO MUCH THAT I
COULD NEVER SAY, SIMPLY
BECAUSE I CANNOT EXPRESS
IT WITH THE RIGHT WORDS.

YOU MAKE ME WANT TO SPILL
MY HEART OUT JUST TO
SHOW YOU HOW YOU LOOK
IN MY EYES.

YOU GIVE OFF SO MUCH
LIGHT, AN INDESCRIBABLE
AMOUNT OF WARMTH. IT'S
JUST EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU,
FROM YOUR TINIEST HABITS
TO YOUR BIGGEST DREAMS.

THANK YOU,
FOR BEING
YOU.

2022	10. 27.	11. 25.	2023	01. 04.	01. 29.
	10. 31.	12. 15.		01. 11.	02. 01.
	11. 02.	12. 20.		01. 19.	02. 06.
	11. 11.	12. 22.		01. 24.	02. 07.
	11. 24.	12. 29.		01. 27.	02. 14.

My Time With You
Erin Manalo, 16



Sticky Fingers
Isabella Perri, 14

Up and Out

Up and out – just like how I was taught
Every morning and night
Up, my fingers push the clay to form the
bridge of the nose – slim and straight
Pinch it before you sleep
Out, my fingers slide across the forehead
smoothing out the bumps and creases
Don't miss a day
Up and out my thumbs create the contours and lines
Just like finger painting the waves of an ocean
See, you won't need surgery
The practice is as familiar to me as tying my shoelaces
– trying to sculpt the bones and flesh on my face

Up and outside, I step,
Seeing the big screens flash girls –
finished polished pieces with:
 porcelain skin
 sharp cheekbones
 crystal eyes
Features angelic. Flawless and dainty.
As if a brush of wind could only push
their upturned noses even higher

Up and outlined are the ways to reshape my face
to replicate the girls on the screens
To fix the unfinished projects of:
 harsh lips
 wide noses
 lustreless eyes

And up and out I look to the girls
who despise their noses just as much as I do
Complaining that it's too –
 bulbous
 crooked
 big
They hide behind masks and paint and hair

But our flesh and bones are not as malleable as clay

They are unpliant – fierce
crafted over centuries by our ancestors who've
Breathed in the thin air of the Pacific,
as they cleared and farmed fields
Traveled through hot deserts,
pin-straight, long lashes protecting eyes from sand
Navigated the seas looking up to the stars
to guide them home with curious and clear eyes
Years of toil and travel and tales
cannot be erased with the swipe of a hand
Our flesh and bones
are not unfinished projects for them to
finalize, reconstruct, and mold

Up and outward our beauty flows
overflowing the world with our rich stories and
original ceramics varnished and
handmade

Up and outraged
we defiantly flaunt our
 slopes
 valleys
 curves
 hills
the histories of our lives blatantly displayed on our
faces

Alyssa Nicole Famera, 17

The Hands

I remember when I first saw those hands – grotesque, pale hands with the skin cracking and peeling away. The fingers were calloused, the nails a yellowish green. Smoker’s hands, I thought.

That was my first impression. I know now that impressions can be misleading. I saw those hands do something disgusting, so I saw them as disgusting. Perhaps they were really beautiful, creamy hands with bright red painted nails. A model’s hands.

I don’t remember the age I was when I saw the hands, but I remember I was living with my uncle at the time. He wasn’t really my uncle; he was just some man tasked with raising me per my father’s will. I guess I had been fairly young, though I had to be older than ten. I was walking through an alleyway, a short-cut to my flat that afternoon. A woman was walking in front of me. I thought she was beautiful and sophisticated. I didn’t think she belonged in an alleyway; she belonged in a hotel lobby with chandeliers and lounge chairs that look like thrones. I wondered why she was in the alley and where she was going.

I was staring at her when it happened. Someone put their hands around the woman’s neck. They wrapped around the woman’s throat and tightened until her face convulsed and turned white. I felt paralyzed, intoxicated by the sheer power and strength of the hands. I didn’t bother to look at the hands’ master, because I felt they were their own master, willed by the notion of destruction.

I don’t know what happened next. I blacked out. I had a tendency to do so whenever I was scared. It happened at the doctor’s office, at school, and sometimes at home. My uncle said it was because I was cowardly. Maybe he was right.

When I came to, the woman was gone and so were the hands. I felt dizzy and confused. I vaguely remembered the woman and why I was in the alley. I got up and headed home.

That night, I told my uncle I was late coming home because I tripped and blacked out. He laughed. I knew that if I told him the truth he would not believe me. It was an impossible story, and I was known for having a wild imagination. I refrained from telling the police for the same reason. I don’t know what happened to the woman’s body, or if she was ever found.

I left home some years later and found work as a shorthand typist. I was somewhat efficient and had done similar work for my uncle. My job, although tedious, was a great relief. It distracted me from the hands.

Those hands haunted my dreams, ghoulish and taunting. Each night they became more grotesque and evil, until finally I was afraid to sleep. Then I started seeing them when I was awake. I saw them on the cashier at the grocers as she bagged my items, on my landlord as he inspected my flat, on my employers as they began to dictate their letters. The hands only stayed for a moment, but it always felt like an eternity.

Sometimes I would read in the paper about senseless killings. An article in the tabloids claimed that some woman poisoned her wealthy husband with morphine. Would it not be those same hands that killed that woman, daintily dropping a deadly dosage into a glass of scotch? I read about gang violence and deaths from fights. Perhaps it was the hands I knew too well that had struck the fatal blows.

Once, I was walking down a busy street when I saw a beggar with an empty jar. I dropped my pocket change into it, and the man smiled.

“Thank you, miss,” he said.

Then he scratched his nose and I saw his left hand. I screamed and ran.

When I arrived at my flat, I was out of breath. I realized that I was desperate and delusional! I had seen the hands again but this time I had not waited for them to go away. I had shown my fear; that could not happen again.

As I walked up the stairs to my flat, I felt lightheaded, as though I would black out like I did in my youth. I had to get away. I was supposed to have tea with a friend that day, but I called her and canceled. I said I felt ill, which I did, in mind, spirit, and body. I was a wreck, the wretched slave of the hands.

That night I could not sleep. I was in a boat drifting aimlessly out to sea, stuck in the abyss. I was seasick, looking over the rails, hoping to arrive at my destination, but I would never reach it. I was lost forever.

Eventually, I gave up trying to fall asleep and turned on my bedside lamp. Then I saw them. They were clearer than ever before; they looked almost real. They seemed to separate from me and to become an entity of their own. I had to stop them, stop evil and death.

They lunged toward me, powerful and deadly.

“You are vain,” I told them, “you cannot survive without a master.” I laughed a hysterical, sick laugh.

You cannot survive without a master. Should they not die? If they took my life, I took theirs. If my fear had given them their strength, would my death take it away?

“Take me, cowards! Take me!” I challenged.

Slowly but surely they wrapped around me and viciously stole my breath. I plunged into a vat of nothingness, pleasantly empty and free. As I fell, I saw them for the last time, insignificant and crippled. They didn’t matter anymore. After all, they were just hands.

Charlize Stanley-Archibald, 14

Snow

There’s a crunch beneath the snow.

It’s cold out, and hard. My fingertips stained red, cheeks rosy, nose pink.

In fact, it’s freezing. So cold I should’ve worn a thicker jacket, so cold anyone left out here wouldn’t survive, death by exposure.

I speed up, hoping to get inside sooner. My house isn’t far from the woods, that’s why I’m in it so frequently, That’s why I chose it.

I don’t hate the winter that much.

Sometimes it brings joyful things, like Christmas.

It’s just the cold I hate, I swear.

I’ve been swearing a lot of things recently,

I swore I wouldn’t do it again.

I wasn’t going to, but then she saw me,

And I had to make sure no one saw.

I tried to bury her under the snow, but she’s starting to poke out now

I hope it stays cold long enough for me to run away.

I keep walking over her, I think avoiding one spot would seem more suspicious.

The blood was still all over my hands.

Her blood.

My fingertips stained red, cheeks rosy, nose pink

There’s a crunch beneath the snow.

Olivia Del Zotto, 15



The Woman in the Jacket
Kevin Parada, 16

A Line One Love Story

I cross the barrier.

The gates welcome me from crowded chaos to tranquil transit.

North or south? I can't decide.

The vessel arrives with a gust of wind. It perfectly paints hair and loose clothing, and induces sighs of relief, dissolving the anticipation of the platform. The blaring, cacophonous screech of the wheels against the tracks prickles my ears, but I can't be happier.

The sliding doors welcome the outside world to a realm of no connection, no signal, no interaction.

My mind wanders to the gentle back and forth, the blinking lights of the map posted above the doors, and the advertisements of clinical studies and mattress sales plastered to the walls.

I watch strangers sit cross-legged, as their lifeless bodies push and pull. They are illuminated by artificial light until they become gray. Cellular amusement becomes useless.

The narrative in my lap comes to life.

You walk down the aisle of the vessel.

I glance over, and you're illuminated – pink.

You aren't gray.

You are bright pink, and fluorescent, but not because of the artificial light. Your heart glows periodically, radiating something I am not familiar with. Something I don't think I'll ever understand.

You sit *perfectly* near me, unaware of my presence.

Suddenly, acting naturally becomes unfamiliar. I cross my legs, I sway back and forth with the movement of the vessel.

Somewhere between those moments, you notice. It's obvious. But you do not dare make it so.

I force my eyes to watch you through the reflection of the dark window on my other side.

So that you don't know,

that I want to run over and just talk.

Oh, how we would click instantly.

Alas, we remain in a realm of no connection, no signal, no interaction.

My heart glows periodically like the flashes of the map posted above the doors

It takes flight and floats down the vessel, following your plaid windbreaker, big headphones, frayed denim, and dusty converse.

It takes a seat right beside you,

suddenly I glow bright pink.

I feel my shoulders fall.

Everything begins to fall into place.

I take another glance at you, but you're illuminated artificially – gray.

The sliding doors separate and you are swallowed up by the daily dissonance of the outside world.

You cross the barrier.

Juliana Marfa, 17

The Light in My Heart

“Birds and cats aren’t supposed to be together.”

He was silence.

In the clear little pond near my owner’s house, plants grew and fish thrived. I’ve always loved to spend hours staring at the ripples in the water, moving and spreading little by little.

My owner was an old man, too old to move even a bit. So, I had to take care of myself. But the good point was that I could always sneak out of my house and explore the vast and beautiful world.

The outside was indeed way more interesting than the house I lived in, but it was boring. No one talked to me.

Everything changed when one day, I saw a middle-sized bird come to the pond. It had silky brown feathers, and it was bathing itself in the water.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The bird jumped and stared at me for a second before answering.

“I came from somewhere far away.”

“That’s all?”

“What else am I supposed to say?”

What an arrogant bird.

I took a deep breath, and decided to forgive him for his attitude.

“Well, you’re supposed to say, for example, ‘Hello, my name is Casey. I’m a cat. I came from the house that’s right beside this pond. A pleasure to meet you.’ At least say that!” I exclaimed.

“Oh well, okay. Hello, my name is Casey –”

“No not that! That was just an example! You’re supposed to introduce your name to me!” I shouted.

Ugh!

“I don’t have a name.”

His lucent black eyes stared at mine. He seemed like a bird that had overcome so much hardship and pain in his life.

“Well, why don’t I give you one. Hmm... I’ll call you Lux then!”

“I’m fine with that.”

That was our first encounter. It felt quite funny, a dumb bird and a gregarious cat.

From that day on, I kept visiting the pond. Lux was always there. Sometimes he was catching fish to eat, sometimes he was bathing himself again, and sometimes he was just sleeping on the tree that was providing shade to the whole pond.

Days passed. Spring left and welcomed summer.

One day, during a brisk midnight, I snuck out of my house and went to find Lux. I still can remember the scenery of the pond that night.

The wind was blowing the willow tree’s leaves. The grass was dancing about with its fresh scent in the air. The fireflies were flying around on top of the pond. Everything was quiet, except for the cicadas that chirped in a calm rhythm. The water seemed to glow under the lights of the fireflies. It had a Bermuda colour, and the water was clear enough for me to see the bottom.

I lay down on the grass, grasping the comfort beneath.

“Why did you come here? It’s the night and you should be sleeping,” a sudden voice said.

“Well, of course, to come and see you! Who knows, you might drown and no one would know. Just in

case something happens, I'm here to save your life," I explained.

Lux chuckled.

"More like the other way around. You don't even know how to swim."

"Hey, that's not nice!" I said while my face blushed.

"Ha-ha, when are you nice to me?"

"You!"

I got up from the grass and went towards the pond.

"So, what are you here for?" Lux asked.

"I can't sleep."

"That's what happened?"

"Yes."

"Want me to tell you a story?"

"Yes..."

"Sigh, okay. Let me think. Once upon a time – ha-ha, you are indeed quite tired. Already asleep?"

A few months passed, summer became fall, and fall became winter. And that year's winter left me with the most unforgettable memories of all time.

As usual, I went to find Lux. The pond had changed. The water froze, and everything was covered in snow. The willow tree's leaves had come off the branch, like a teardrop and fell onto the ground.

"You came. I have something to tell you." That was the time where I realized his expression. It was different from before. Sadness and loneliness filled his eyes.

"What?"

"I need to go. I wanted to say thank you. Even though you are a cat, you still became a friend. Before, no one ever really cared about me, except for you. You gave me happiness and warmth. Thank you for being with me for so long."

Tears streamed down my face.

"You don't need to cry... I'm sorry..."

"You know why I named you Lux? Because Lux means 'light.' I won't say anything," I said, smiling, "because I do know the point that birds and cats aren't supposed to be together."

Lux looked at me. He was surprised that I said something like that.

"I won't forget you, Lux, my dear friend." I smiled again.

"I will be back. I promise."

Once upon a time, there was a little pond. In the pond, an anomalous story happened on a sweet summer day.

Xinyi (Sophia) Ran, 13



Little Moments
Salina Guo, 19

is this a clementine or a confession

there are about ten slices of fruit in a clementine. however, you can eat them in bigger sections, in two or three bites, if you're in a hurry. or you can slowly separate the slices, peeling them back from one another and savouring each piece. it's indulgent and domestic to eat each slice one at a time. you look down and consider every one, hold only its small being in your hand for a moment.

if you're with someone, how do you offer them parts of your clementine? do you separate it right after you peel the fruit and hand them half, giving them full autonomy over their section? now they can decide whether to eat it all in just two or even one bite, unhinge their jaw and the fruit disappears, or chop their section in half, lengthwise, or to squish out the juice or pick off all the white pith. and then do they discard it? let it float off their fingers and away with the wind while you two are walking in a park? do they gather it up in a uniform column, with care and appreciation for the compost, or do they flick it off their fingers as if they're repulsed?

some people peel off the waxy skin of the slices. the fruit looks raw, exposed, ready to burst. other people are too lazy to attend to the fruit in any way before they eat it — their portion will be gone in less than ten seconds. they might look at your remaining slices a bit mournfully after they've devoured their bit. some people will see you struggling to open the peel and will ask if you need help, or just take it from you and open it with their pocket knife, perhaps accidentally breaking the clementine's skin and spraying the acid in their eyes — or yours — or they'll know to roll the fruit around first, feeling to see if it's dry or full of juice, if it's worth opening in the first place.

do they savour the fruit? do they insist you keep your half? do they take it without thinking and then ask for more? do they buy another clementine to share with you? do they share clementines with others?

is it better to just keep the fruit to yourself? to be simplistic, reserved, err on the side of caution. is it better to keep the pretty, vibrant, untouched fruit you know and can hold, close to your chest?

but there will be someone, about one in every hundred, who will eat their clementine the same way you do. maybe they also dislike the left side of the clementine like you — or better yet, they prefer the left side, and the two of you can perfectly split a whole clementine. maybe they also have to eat two every time they have one, or they prefer slightly drier clementines, the ones with wrinkles, because they're chewier and last longer. maybe they also hate when the clementine's skin gets under their nails and their fingers smell like citrus for the rest of the day. maybe they haven't eaten clementines since they were a kid, maybe they never eat them now because they're sick of them. maybe they just like them because they like clementines.

but what else are the ten slices of clementines for? the very structure of the fruit encourages you to split it cleanly and share, divide a whole into sections — half or more — to consider another as you eat the fruit. it calls for companionship. just for the time it takes to finish the fruit — five or ten or thirty minutes, however long you and the other so wish — and no explicit rules regarding how to share. it's up to the involved parties — perhaps a 50/50 split, or a back-and-forth until it's done, or an awkward three slices but then, oh, you need two more, no, keep those ones, i insist.

once the fruit is eaten, the temporary bond is gone. there is no more clementine to offer and no more to accept. it does not mean all is over, just that another method of sharing must be addressed — the vague prophecy of another clementine you can almost taste, the hope they'll bring one for you, or accept your slices once again. but that is not now. so savour what you have. savour the ten slices of fruit. on your own, thinking of another, or perhaps with them, if both allow. peel the skin and press your fingers into the juice, appreciate the sweetness of the clementine for what it is.

Miran Tsay, 18

Blue Promenade

She wanders, the sound of sirens singing in her ears. The CN Tower gazes down at her, as if it knows all her secrets. Here, in the Great White North, things are different. The bombings and deaths are a distant happening, like a dream, almost. Some days, she feels she's living in a dream.

She wanders.

Everywhere she looks, they're here. They surround her, following her every move, entrapping her in their web of misery, like a spider entraps their prey. Their web spreads across borders, across the world, through time and space. They're here.

She wanders, and she wonders: will she ever be free?

She is powerless. Without a voice. Without a will.

As she meanders, the crowds bustle about their day in a familiar dance, as if they've traced these steps thousands of times. And she wonders. She's blinded by their blindness—the web that captures her mind, soul, everything but her body, which is invisible to them. They may not sense the web, but do they feel it? Do they feel it slowly squeezing the life out of them, stealing their rights, their freedoms, their voices? How long will it take them to see?

She inhales and the sticky, humid air invades her, makes her feel stuck, out of place, living in a stranger's skin. A stranger's life.

She remembers a time, so long ago, it feels like a different reality. A time when smiles flowed as freely as the water in the oceans. A time when the words “depression”, and “PTSD”, were just murmurs from a foreign language, syllables strung together to make meaningless, harmless sounds.

A time when the world wasn't filled with ear-splitting sounds of war: children's cries, the screams of those who lost it all and of everything that's ever been said and done, and of everything that hasn't been said but thought to have been said coalescing into one moment, the world crashing and burning in victory and defeat, beauty and destruction.

And she's frozen. Unable to do anything.

And when she can, she runs. She flees with tears streaming down her face. Tears run with her. But her tears have nowhere to go. They have no place in this world. All that really matters is where they came from—a world of pain and suffering. Tears fall, they evaporate, and they become majestic, great bodies of oceans, but eventually,

they find their ways to become tears again in another's eyes. They are the cycle of life, stuck in an endless cycle of suffering.

She runs until she's across borders, across oceans, where the air is clear, crisp, unpolluted with the smoky scent of death and destruction, and yet, she feels like she never left.

Someone bumps into her. She falls. Falls through the cracks of the limestone sidewalk, through the rich barrier of the Earth. For a moment, she feels the searing heat of the Earth's fiery core against her face, threatening to pull her into the abyss of flame. She knows if they catch her, she will never be free of the web.

She feels a hand on her shoulder, shaking her.

She is lying on the sidewalk. The masses evade her, going about their day. Someone shakes her again and the next thing she knows there are hands around her, helping her up.

She looks up, and a young girl smiles at her as she walks down the opposite side of the street, and soon, the girl is swept back into the crowd.

As she walks away, she feels a long-forgotten feeling embracing her, the words to a melody long forgotten rushing back to her.

She walks among the crowds, and she can feel the determination in their step as they scramble to reach their goals. She feels the heartbeat of the crowd, fighting another day against the odds and for the first time, she feels a melody with a will, a voice, emerging.

For a moment, she hears the lost voices, calling to her.

She wonders if the crowd hears them, too.

She wanders, until she's back where she first started on her promenade.

She stares at the CN Tower, and it gazes back, just like before.

She smiles.

Lillian Guo, 14



The Empress
Elly Peng, 16

This Whitecoat Isn't Yours

Like the stars,
we rested.
Out of reach, out of danger.
Till we fell...
Down, down, down
into the darkness.
Reaching for our thoughts,
they yearn for our souls.
Slowly, we give in
To the warm sweet light.
Warmth...
Then darkness.
Bitter, cold darkness.
Gasping for the air,
we won't receive.
Fighting back for what's yours.
Brothers...
Sisters...
Friends...
Gone.
They took their coats.
They tried to steal their souls.
"Give back what isn't yours!"
They can't, won't,
hear your screams.
But the stars...
they hear you
& they call.
Take a breath,
And...
Break free.
You run, for the
freedom you deserve.
Freedom they deserved.
Amongst the stars
they lay.
You run,
to the home of peace.
It's where your loved ones stay.
Danger behind, but far away.
Once I'm gone,
like they.
A star I will become,
in peace, I shall lay
And those hands...
never again will they take
what isn't theirs.

Gloria Klekot, 14

Green Grass and Blue Skies

The grass is always greener on the other side, right?

The blare of the alarm was too loud,
a big crowd,
the Japanese too proud,
they vowed,
they were only here to collect resources.
But the planes said otherwise.

Everyone pushing,
eyes widening,
heart racing faster than the incoming plane.
Trying to stay alive.
To survive,
longer than the person behind you.

The eerie silence.
It was too late.
She stood still
dropping her eyelids
and wished to see the green grass and blue skies
as the world around her dies.

The silence was too loud.
Ukraine warriors scattered the streets
constantly telling us we're safe, the hard part is over
but my friends' bodies scattering the street said otherwise.

Eyes darting,
corpse's rotting,
silence jarring

But we're safe.
We're safe.
We're safe-
But why does safety feel so unsettling?
All he wished was to see the green grass and blue skies
One last time.

I play frisbee on the green grass and blue skies.
You wake up to see the green grass and blue skies.
We live on the green grass and blue skies.

I hope you never look at the green grass and blue skies the
same way. Do it for her. Do it for him.

The grass is always greener on the other side, right?
Wrong.
Across the globe
Everyone else's grass is already dead.
While we're here comparing whose grass is the brightest green.

Danielle Kong, 14



It's Kind of a Cultural Thing

Teo Rivas, 16

boy who survived

I am only a seventeen-year old boy,
A mere teenager
But I have been to and through hell and back,
shoulders slumped against the weight of this world.
A one-year old baby put all high up on the pedestal,
While scars and bruises multiplied,
cursed and broken bones,
A martyr's death for a glorified hero.
Lighting struck in poison green fumes,
a warrior's birth,
a child's death in a gilded emerald tomb.

The boy who lived?
No, the boy who survived,
bouncing back from death just to be thrown into a
burning white fire.
Pain at every step,
camera flashes awaiting each turn,
A phoenix of death with not enough life to
Burn.

Archie Shah, 15

Gum

Monday

I walked down the street,
The one with glittering glass
And fulgurate gowns pressed to the pane.
It's a nail salon now.
A pale pink sign with a rose,
Its black petals,
where the smug yellow cheese used to sit.
But, god,
I loved that old sign.
It's been like that for years,
I just forgot.
And I think I hate it,
the pink.
It makes me wonder if I imagined it,
our laughter,
and the Parmigiano.

Tuesday

I was at my Grandparent's house,
looking for something.
I'm half convinced it was you.
It feels suffocating.
The memories,
tucked into the pockets of that photographed polka-dot dress.
Pressed between the pages
of a weather book.
I'm trying,
So desperately,
To hold on to what it used to be.
I used to be
but I know too much,
too much,
too much about you
everything is different
And you are gone.

Wednesday

They cut down the trees,
I can't go
outside,
I can't breathe.
Remember the summer
I tried to map the wilderness,
hot blood,
painting red lines on my face
as the sharp twigs

tore it from my skin.
I smiled,
the trees full of whispers,
eternal forest swallowing the sky.
Now,
the branches are gone
and the world feels
too small.

Thursday

I bought a pack of gum.
It came in a bag,
all the pieces jumbled together,
words enmeshed knots
in my throat.
Choking.
We used to buy those
small cardboard boxes,
pink and green.
Saving
cents in a peter rabbit piggy bank,
the ridges of the coins,
cradling a soft suspense.
I haven't seen that gum in years,
the bright light of the store dulled
by the cascading days,
coating joy in the dust of time.
I googled it,
Glee gum,
someone is selling it now,
those boxes
'vintage'
they are labelled
as if 2011 was so long ago.

I'm losing track of it now,
The time.

Mondays slipping into Fridays
All over again
Until I blink and I'm seventeen
Almost eighteen
like water through my hands,

I'll never want to let go
but maybe I should,

Friday

I stand outside
the classroom,
late.

I can hear the
soft whisper of poetry,
words
strung in the air,
a welcome banner,
home.

I can smell
the frayed wood as it is
worn down
year by year
hand by hand.

There are stories on the walls,
painted lockers
conspirators in lungless secrets.

It's so familiar,

This
empty hallways,

This
the beating of my heart.

I just
Breathe.

Saturday

I'm walking home from work,
snow dusting the street,
a red flush brushed on
her cheeks
we stop.

Waiting for the light
and I look up.

Everything is covered in ice,
branches, stop signs, poles,
plated in delicate drops
of frozen light.

I can't move,
I don't want to move,
the world feels so still,
Peaceful silence
as it pauses,
marvelling in its own wonder.

The childish voice in my head whispers
"It's magic"

And maybe it is.

Sunday

I'm backstage
brown eyes
stare at me

in the bulb-framed mirror,
air electric with anticipation,
music, overflowing,
muffled by the sharpie-scrawled walls.

I can see the three-year-old,
with fire in her eyes,

who begged
to dance.

I see the wrinkles,
as time slowly marks my face
with its blade.

So many people,
all at once,

In the whisper
of leather-soled shoes
on rubber floors.

The past,
the future,

and,
the music.

I let go,
a song calling
in my veins.

Me.

Sofia Szabo, 17

The Roommate

One might think having a roommate that ignores you can feel lonely, but for me that's not the case. At first, I was totally opposed to the idea of sharing my living space with another person. But, my landlord, Jeff, didn't care about my opinion, and two days later, my roommate was getting a tour of the place — she moved in about two weeks later.

I have been an introvert all my life. When I was fourteen, my parents shipped me off to boarding school with no warning. To put it simply, the kids there didn't like me, and when they decided they didn't like someone they made sure to make their life a living hell — and they made no exception for me. So, I quickly learned to keep my head down and be invisible, it's one of the reasons I chose to live here. Our house stands crooked at the end of a secluded trail, surrounded by dense forest. Lots of trees, barely any people. It's perfect.

We have a good dynamic, her and I, despite the fact that we don't talk to each other. For example, when she first moved in, she kept forgetting her keys when she left for work. Jeff kept having to come by the house in order to let her in, and I hate when he's here. Anyways, after that I made sure to place her keys by the front door, so she wouldn't forget them and struggle getting back inside. I always see her hesitantly pick up her keys from the foyer table, look around behind her, then quickly leave. I know she appreciates it, though. She's a good roommate, she really is. I just wish she wouldn't bring Jeff around the house so much. At first, he only came by when there was a leaky tap or a squeaky door hinge to fix, but now he comes over for her. It makes me sick. He acts so charming — but it's exactly that, an act. His act dropped with me last summer. At first, she played hard to get, pretended she didn't like him, but now she's head over heels and she shows it.

It's now mid July. The fact that it is nighttime hasn't broken the heat. It's windy. Warm wind, but nonetheless windy. Outside, the smaller trees are snapping and falling to the ground. The acres and

acres of larger trees are blowing and flailing in every direction, as if they are trying to run from the looming storm but their roots hold them firmly in place. The lights begin to flicker. This house was built in the 1930s, and its electrical system probably hasn't been updated since. Jeff is here, holding her tight by the fire. She is sitting in his lap, cozying up to him as he runs his hand through her hair. She shouldn't be with him. He shouldn't be holding her, he shouldn't be combing through the soft chestnut waves of her hair. His fingers stop running, and he whispers something in her ear. She looks up at him and nods. They get up and make their way to her room hand in hand. I can't let it get this far. No, no, I can't. I quickly stand up, running to them, but the door shuts firmly in my face. No, no, no.

"Stop, please don't, please don't, no!" I scream in between sobs, frantically banging on the old wooden door.

"Please, please come on! This isn't the time to ignore me, please!"

I hear her let out a blood curdling scream. As I gasp for air, I stand back from the door and throw myself against it, begging for it to open. I try again, this time using the whole side of my body instead of just my shoulder. The door swings open and the momentum hurls me to the ground. I look up, and though my eyes are blurry with tears, I can still clearly see the horror before me. I'm too late. She lays there with her eyes open, dead, a petrified look on her face. Her blood slowly seeps out of the gashes in her chest, like a calm river, and stains the mattress beneath her. He looms over her, knife in hand, admiring his work.

I don't know why I let myself get so worked up. There was nothing I could have done. I know she couldn't hear me, but still, I tried. All I could do was watch helplessly from the walls as he did to her what he had done to me last summer. At least now I will actually get to talk with my roommate.

Soma Savage, 17



Division
Jeffrey Chang, 17

Disappear

Paul was afraid. Things began to vanish when he turned 83 last fall. So far, half of his apartment had begun to vanish; the only thing left was a weird thick fog left in its place. He didn't know what to do when it all disappeared. He would probably stay with his daughter, Clara, who lived in Minnesota.

Paul walked back into his living area as two more things vanished: his brown leather couch he was okay with disappearing, it was a wedding gift (one which he hated) and a handmade stool his father had made. Paul cried. He loved that stool, he took it when he left home. As Paul looked around all he could see was a white thick fog where everything had disappeared. He walked to the door and kissed the doorpost goodbye. Step after step the stairs vanished and the white fog followed.

His thoughts drifted as he walked down the street. Occasionally people waved to him and he would wave back to see their faces being engulfed by the fog. He looked to his right and saw a small flower shop. Was it new? He couldn't remember but as he walked in he could immediately smell all the flowers. Paul looked behind him and noticed the fog was afraid of this shop. Paul left the flower shop and listened to the bell above the door ring. He finally walked off holding a bouquet of pink daisies.

A young man started to walk with Paul. His name was Jorge, he was new to this neighbourhood. Jorge tried talking to the old man but Paul wouldn't listen. He had to visit someone. When Paul arrived at Blackberry Cemetery he walked down the paths and stopped at a very old moss-covered gravestone. He plopped down in the empty spot next to it and looked at the stone with tears in his eyes.

"Oh Ada! I hope you're doing well. The doctors are worried about my health. They say I have Alzheimer's disease. I just hope you'll be here with me".

As he stood up the bouquet fell and pink petals fluttered to the ground. He began to cry and cough violently. Jorge rushed to him as he dropped to the ground. The daisies left by Paul were now wilted and the soil next to Ada now bore another old, worn-down body.

Talya Hyman, 13



To Clean Endlessly
Maria Saghatelyan, 18

Petrichor

The sickness clings to your skin
like rain beating down on you —
persistent and desperate
to infiltrate your bones,
to rot you from the inside out.

The scent of despair follows you around —
you wear it like armour, like an umbrella.
Can't you smell it?
The damp melancholic air
tinged with the scent
of an indescribable sorrow;
it surrounds you like screams,
like the thunder shouting her anthems of rage —
the same rage that you harbour, child,
longing for a reaction, for an outlet,
for something that your faceless
bedroom walls cannot provide.

Time floats on by, indefinite,
blown by the ever-changing winds.
Shades of grey contorting
and melting into white,
cotton clouds replacing
the gloomy overcast;
the sun has come out —
you didn't even notice, did you?
Feel Her joyful rays dance on your skin,
evaporating the rain that has soaked your bones.

Wake up and smell the petrichor,
that earthly aromatic hymn
of the calm *after* the storm.

Breathe in, breathe deep,
let the dewy air enter your lungs
and embrace you like a mother.

The black sludge that lives
in your chest is evaporating,
fading, fading, fading,
until it is almost entirely gone —
reduced to puny tendrils of parasite,
suspended in futile attempts
to cling onto your rib cage;
and in its place, a sphere of light
amongst the likes of which
you have never felt before:
a blazing, all-consuming light,
but not blinding, no —
you've never seen so clearly;
the veil of fog has lifted.
The world is so vast,
its corners unfolding before your eyes.

The storm has been long and harsh —
you deserve this happiness, child.
So, breathe out slowly, lie down,
feel the grass tickle your bare skin
(don't be afraid of the earth,
we are all an extension of Her, anyways),
breathe in the petrichor,
the promise of blossoming life,
and start anew.

Enya Dragana Jovicik, 17

Dandelion

The cold wind blew hard once again, pulling, tugging me away. I hold on watching as the others fly away tumbling, flipping-puppets to entertain. The wind brings clouds and the mountain clings onto them. Trapping us as if in a plastic bag. Cold droplets of water swirl and the wind howls. Suddenly there is a sharp burst of wind and I lose my grip. I fall, completely at the will of the wind. Flipping over in the air, I catch a glimpse of the only stem on the harsh mountain. The only home I ever knew.

Below me I hear the waves crashing onto the shore. Slamming against the rocks and breaking into a million little pieces. I no longer recognize where I am, nothing around me looks familiar, surely nothing I could have ever seen from my mountain. And yet the wind pushes me forward through places of dark and gloom, stuck in a never ending storm. The little fluff on my head that kept me floating has long been soaked and hangs down in wet strands. The rain pellets down on me, a drop taking me out. I lie on the ground as the world swirls.

It is dark and suffocating but warm. Like a heavy blanket draped over you. For the first time since the wind, it's calm. Lonely, but still and peaceful. I sit and wait in the darkness. I lose track of time, but suddenly the warmth becomes too much and I'm suddenly longing for the wet rain of yesterday. I sit and it's cramped. Finally it cools and a dribble of water comes. A couple drops reach me and I stretch upward. Feel the cool taste of it as it soothes my parched skin. The water stops and soon it's warm again. I reach further, pushing the darkness around me, letting myself unfurl. Somewhere in the distance is a light.

The light blinds me. I keep my head furled in letting it warm me instead. There's a cool breeze that combs through the loose hairs on my head, the ones that shield my eyes. The air is fresh like the whole world was soaked and cleaned. I lift my head and let my petals of hair unfurl and finally take in my surroundings. The first thing I notice is that it's green. After I look past all the grass I see myself. But it isn't me. It's someone else and there are thousands of them. Everyone with the same golden yellow hair, a few with streaks of white. The first thought I have is 'home.'

Anna Asimov, 14

The Eclipse

The Blood-Star covers behind the White God's face, turning the sky and land and seas to pitch. Helpless light strains and begs behind its cover, but fate has long since delegated this fragment of day to night, and fate does not waver.

The darkness blanketing the world is not cold, but the whisper of air still shakes the boy. He sits on the cliff's edge, eyes closed. The winds and waves have gone quiet in their appeasement, and so he breathes in the memory of salt and sea spray from a hundred feet above.

Unnatural night hangs in the air as the crickets strike up an uncertain chorus, chanting to themselves in the grass. Their chirps wax as deceptive darkness stretches on. They fill the space with repetition, until repetition is just another facet of silence.

Uneasy branches quiver, though there is no wind to blame it on. No small animal to point to as a cause, nor any other visible force. None save fear. Fear of a slippery daylight, escaping the sky like water from a closed fist. But night, too, is slippery.

A second dawn crawls in like honey, sickly and dragging, to wash away inferior stars. The Blood-Star lingers behind the edges of the White God as he pulls away, their brief marriage coming to a close. The boy muses on this separation, outstretched on that cliff, gradual light growing behind his closed eyes like a gradient. He wonders at the mercurial Star and his companion, of reflected light hiding light and losing itself.

Dawn is flowing from the clouded Star like violent water now, scalding the sky in red and rage. The day and night might once more cycle in harmony with time, but their bringers mourn the growing distance between them. Soon they must release the winds and waves from their frozen stupor, must let go their hold upon the lands and give time back to destiny. But first, the White God weeps, and the Blood-Star bleeds.

Sebastian State-Ezust, 18



Peaceful Mind Level 5
Emily Tat, 17

Something is Crawling Up My Ear!

There's a small twitch in the hollow of my ear, two legs and two arms. *My creation*, it whispered.

I was ten when my mother died. I was cradled in my bed, her black silk pillows embroidered with pink carnations resting beneath my head. My red swollen eyes had no more tears left.

Something whimpered in my ear. Quiet drops of black blood cried onto the pillow. I felt no pain. My mourning for my mother morphed into distress as long nights were filled with hushed whispers and black blood dripping from my ears.

But eventually, the bleeding stopped and the incomprehensible whispers became clear.

A monster had infested my ear, itching to strike my eardrum and render me deaf—had offered to be

friends. Something cold struck my heart.

Her name was Dagmar. She sang to me when I was hanging alone in the nape of the big oak tree. She whispered test answers and gossiped about my bullies. But only I heard her.

She laughed at my late mother's lame jokes, and complained about my father when he set off the fire alarm while trying to make breakfast.

She warned me about my terrible friends.

How my peers would become drug dealers and carry rifles. How they'd stroll across the streets at night with tattoos of feathers and hares. How they'd scowl at children and eat too many sweets.

Soon she became my only friend, but she was wise and good. She taught me how to fry eggs and brush my hair. She consoled me and brushed against the baby hairs in my ears whenever my mother's death burrowed a hole in my heart.

But hunger bloomed in the pit of her belly. An unforgiving, unstoppable starvation. With an urge to leech off of human flesh.

She nibbled at my ears, scratching at my skin. Tugging at my ear drums until I bled—again.

My father rushed me to the hospital. Fear bloomed in his chest at the thought of losing someone else.

The doctor wore round glasses.

I was laid down on a white bed as a white light shone into my ears, cold metal scraping around the insides.

His hand shook against my scalp. A quiver in his voice. He placed something pink extracted from my ear in a tissue on the plastic table by the bed.

"You should rest," the doctor whispered.

"What was in my ear?" I mumbled back.

"We can discuss it later," he said. He poured some ointment into my ear and placed a cup of water on the plastic table with painkillers. He gingerly held the edges of the tissue like a hammock and inspected it. Sweat beaded down his pudgy face. Spider-like veins in his eyes twitched.

I pushed my back into the cotton sheets of the bed and rose, hand itching towards the glass of water.

I sipped it slowly. The doctor frowned at me.

"I'm not sleeping," I grumbled between gulps of water.

"You must," he wiped his glasses lenses with a blue cloth. "Only way to heal."

"What is in the tissue?" I slurred. "I'm not gonna sleep until you tell me."

He placed his glasses on the table, sighing. Cradling the tissue between his fingers, he tilted it towards me.

Inside the tissue was a lithe woman the size of a paperclip. She had my brown hair and freckled cheeks.

Where the tweezers were, a pink scar swelled around her neck and small drops of black blood fell out of it.

It was my mother.

"There once was a god called Orphanus," Mother had rehearsed her favourite bedtime story. "He had a daughter named Infortunio. She was beautiful and had a kind and gentle voice. She graced all those worthy with fortune and beauty. She was worshiped more than her father." Mother waved her arms around and threw the pillows up in the air. "In a burst of jealousy her father cursed her with an inconsolable starvation. But the goddess of revenge rebirthed Infortunio into a mini-human and led her to crawl up her father's ear. "She whispered into his ear until he went insane and cut his ear off."

"Ew," I squeaked, "Mama, this story sucks. I don't wanna sleep alone anymore!"

"Just wait until I'm done!" Mom giggled.

"Fine," I pouted.

"Anyways, she had snacked on his ear. For the first time since she was cursed, she felt full. The only way to temporarily diminish her hunger was to feast off a loved one's flesh. Her offspring were born whenever she fell in love. They too, thirsted for love until they died of starvation and were rebirthed into a parasite as well."

I cried. Shedding fat hot tears onto the pillows. Such a revolting story.

"Do you want to sleep with me tonight?" Mom asked, tearing a hangnail off my thumb and nibbling on it.

I cried even harder, a sliver of red trailing down my thumb.

My mother glared up at me, her scowl full of hate but her eyes full of love.

She curled up into a ball, neck twitching. The child that cried over a torn hangnail begged me to hold her. Made me hope the wound on her neck was nothing but a feverish nightmare and the next day she'd wake me up with breakfast.

A flutter in her eyelashes, and then—

Nothing. Just the skin hugging her rib cage loosened a little. Even in her dying breath, she was dressed with anger. Even someone one loves can become something one fears.

Maggie Jingfei Liu, 13

VI



DKF

THE LOVERS

Tarots
Ash Tran, 17

love is a fickle thing

I ask you –
What is love?
The Greeks had 7

Eros
Some say love is a game
They warn me to get ready for pain
This love could be labelled poison
But they tell me this is love

Philia
Some say love is magical
Like when you lose a tooth
And you're missing a part of yourself
Your friends still love you anyway

Storge
Some say love is metaphysical
No matter how bad you screwed up
No matter how much you hate them
They love you

Agape
Some say true love is just a myth
This is a sacrificial love so unconditional
We don't know each other
But I'll pay the love forward

Ludus
Some say love is magical
The innocence of a lily
Sugar-coated words
And rose-tinted glasses

Pragma
Some say love is unbreakable
A promise of a bond never to be broken
To commit and endure
Through everything

Philautia
Some say love makes you feel invincible
To know yourself
And accept yourself for who you are
Why do you love everyone but yourself?

So I ask you –
Is this love?

Eden Wong, 13

just in case

I'd wear my hair loose
half up, half down
the way I think suits me best
just in case

I'd choose the right necklines,
wear the right necklaces
just in case

I'd read the books you read,
listen to the music you'd listen to
any excuse to talk with you
just in case

It's funny,
how suddenly
no one turns into someone,
how suddenly
nothing turns into something,
everything.

Pitying,
how hard I'd try

Delusional,
to hope for the love story on screen

And yet,
some of us
go around hoping

just in case.

Julia de Leon, 16

The History Quiz

Stupid boys forget the face strap. Mama didn't raise no stupid boy. The strap pushes the gas mask to my face and makes vision go blurry — better blind boy than dead boy. Better dead boy than stupid boy 'cause stupid boys caused many dead boys. I am not stupid boy 'cause I go to school.

I get to school like yesterday. Teacher is half-man, half-bike, except wrinkly. He has mouth on his neck connected to glowing backpack with thick tube. His wheezing makes short hair on my skinny neck stand up. He gets around on motor chair with wheels. Must be nice not to walk anywhere. His voice sounds like two rocks wrestling, weaker under gas mask. He has tiny metal flag stuck to his left boobie, and his jacket says United States Army on the back.

My tooth hurts again. Mama says pain makes me strong. Better stay strong to not turn dead. School has no doors like my house, so sometimes wind breaks in. I am lucky to be in school because dead boys killed so I can go to school.

Other boys look ahead with no light in their eyes. The room was full last day. Now, some chairs sad and empty. Must be 'cause of the history quiz. I sit far away from Teacher because boy on lightbox told me to. I hear light footsteps in the hall. Big boy with clean gas mask and full set of clothes walks in.

"You're late again, Dave," says Teacher to big boy. "Do you know being late is bad?"

"My deepest apologies," he answers without looking at Teacher.

"You're just in time for the history quiz, Dave. Hope you studied," groans Teacher, rubbing where his legs should be. "Stone, please pass out the quizzes on my desk."

Stone is skinniest boy I ever seen. He wears no shirt and pants with no holes. He gets up and puts on fancy gloves. He does not look at my eyes when he tosses me my paper. This paper has old-world words, such as, "mutually assured destruction."

"Focus, now," Teacher wheezes like sick dog.

The quiz is three questions. Number one asks, "Define mutually assured destruction," and it worth one mark. This one easy. I write, "Mutually assured destruction is why you do not mess with country that has nothing to lose."

Number two is tough and worth two marks. It says, "Where would you go first in the old world and why?" There is too much to say, like McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and Disney Land. I say McDonald's because it kept the people in old world strong, rich, and happy.

Number three is only worth one mark, and it asks, "Who destroyed the world?" I do not know the answer because I do not remember the other country names. The only one I remember is the one that gave me life to live. Teacher will not like me putting that one. Just as I give up and drop pen, Teacher says time is gone.

"We're going to be marking our own papers today for public health reasons," Teacher announces. "Be honest because none of this matters anyway. Can anyone tell me the definition of mutually assured destruction?"

I read out my answer, and the teacher goes, "Why not?"

Next question. Other boys want to visit Wal-Mart to see the big high-definition lightboxes. We all do well on the quiz so far, except Dave because he rips the quiz in two.

A sharp wind slices through classroom before Teacher asks who destroyed world. Stone says China destroyed world. Grinning Teacher says correct. I sneakily write China on my paper and give myself the mark because none of this matters anyway. Other boys moan around me, including Dave.

"THIS TEST IS UNFAIR!" Dave yells through his gas mask, like soldiers on lightbox. "THE WORLD WAS NEVER DESTROYED!"

I do like Dave's voice and full set of clothes. Teacher looks so tired, more than usual. We been here before.

Teacher says, "Take your gas mask off, then."

"THE PEOPLE WERE NEVER MEANT TO BREATHE THE AIR! ONLY GOD CAN! THERE WAS NO WAR!"

Dave looks like he gonna pass out and become worm food. Worms are what they call boys sometimes, and I'm hungry.

"If I were your father, you'd have turned out better," Teacher whispers.

"Well, thank God you're not. My father is the prophet and king of this town. Unless you change this quiz, he will ruin your worthless life!"

"There is nothing left for him to take from me," Teacher responds, wheezing between words. "I've sacrificed everything for you. I'm not changing my country's history for your delusions."

Dave bolts out of desk like bullet and walks up to Teacher. Dave looks like big man on lightbox, except without killer boomstick.

He turns to us and asks, "Are we going to let this relic determine our future?"

I don't know what relic means, but I like the way his energy makes heart pound. Other boys get out of desks to join Dave.

One of them screams, "No way China destroyed world! It had to be those crazy Canadians!"

I change my answer to Canada, just in case. I'm the only boy at his desk. Teacher is surrounded by hungry boys united by Dave.

"I'm done fighting," Teacher says. "Do what you want."

Dave turns to me quick before ripping Teacher's gas mask off his wrinkled face. His gasps for air make his eyeballs jump out. Dave pulls the tube out of his neck. Teacher won't stop wheezing. He not done fighting.

Dave yells, "THERE IS NO OLD WORLD!"

Everybody repeats it together under the ash-white sky and ripped-up flag. Teacher looks directly into my eyes before closing his for good.

Noticing my silence, Dave smiles and asks me, "Who destroyed the world?"

With boys' hungry breath on the short hairs on my neck, I whisper like mouse, "We did."

George Yonemori, 18



Man From the Future
Michael Zinchenko, 15

Bye Bear

Winnie the Pooh had been forgotten.
What would he do without his boy, Christopher Robin?

Robin couldn't help that he was growing older,
He started giving his bear the cold shoulder.

He'd glance at the clouds, a lost look in his eyes.
Pooh would often catch him staring outside.

But Pooh Bear didn't want his best friend to leave,
He loved spending afternoons playing hide and seek.

At night, he would beg, and pray to the stars.
He'd cry, "Please let this moment stay ours!"

But, soon the day came as Pooh had always known:
Christopher Robin, well, he stopped coming home.

Without him, nights were colder and winds felt sharper.
Pooh did not know what to do, other than cry harder.

For a bear who could never grow up,
It was hard, dealing with a truth so abrupt.

Christopher Robin had moved on, he'd never return.
Just the thought of it made Pooh's stomach turn.

Still, he knew that there was nothing he could do.
"I just miss you," said poor Winnie the Pooh.

Celine Lai, 15

graveyards

What are we but graveyards?
Best friends buried six feet under,
Coffins sealing shut insatiable childish wonder,
Abandoned dreams etched into tombstones,
Littered with the dirt and bones
Of the people we swore we'd one day be,
We're just adult graveyards of childhood debris

Varshaa Maxwell, 19

Rotten Fruit

I am afraid to love you
To melt
And to wear my skin like a beg-pardon
I do not wish to build a home for you out of my body if you do not wish to stay.

My father never taught me how to build
And my mother never taught me how to love
What tradition shall I fertilize our fruits with when they bear?

I do not wish to disregard my pen of memories
Or wash the ink off my stained palms
And if the words of my poems crumple
I cannot live

You will French kiss my thoughts and swallow them whole
Love will kill me
Just like my father did my mother

I am scared to grow into her
A shriveled up potential of happiness
Leave me lone

Kala Rison, 17

Une Boule d'Argile

Un tas inerte sans vie,
Avec quoi à découvrir,
S'attend pour que je puis,
L'écraser et l'aplatir,
Le sculpter, tailler, et graver,
Pour créer, construire, et bâtir.

Fin jusqu'au touche,
Graisseux et doux,
Qui déplace et cède,
Sous les mouvements d'une main tiède.

Comme la toile blanche du peintre,
Comme la feuille blanche de l'écrivain,
C'est l'argile molle du sculpteur.

En fait,
Ne sommes-nous pas tous des boules d'argile?
En attendant d'être modelées par les mains de la société?
Pour faire ou devenir quelque chose, quelqu'un d'utile.
Ou est-ce que nous sommes les créateurs de notre propre destinée?

Catherine Jiang, 14

artist statements

Cover **Courting the Sky, Cas MacDonald**

This is my sister. Her loyalty to my artistic expression has never failed; in some ways like a dog, falling in love with the results, carrying flowers like a bone.

Interior front cover **We Stand Together, Elise Su**

Especially with the rise of discrimination and hate crimes, I wanted to create a piece that would serve as a representation of unity of our communities. I aim to raise awareness about discrimination and racism in our society and convey a message advocating for change and reform to our system.

3 **Map of My Life, Sofia Lebovics**

My work was inspired by my childhood growing up in NYC and immigrating to Toronto. I took a genuine map from Central Park, and printed on it images from top to bottom of my childhood progressing from when I lived in the US to when I moved to Canada.

6 **hello/how are you, Amanda Guan**

This collage represents how I felt while listening to a song, hello / how are you by nanou on repeat.

8 **Text Me and We Can Chat, Melissa Quynh-My Lu**

We live in a digital age. Where communication is difficult, despite living close to each other. In the real world you have to hide, on the internet you can be quirky all you want. I struggle with talking to my classmates, but online it's easier for me to make friends.

11 **Lunch!, Annika Arizala**

Lunch explores the underlying effects of lack of representation in media on one's self. I've rarely seen Filipino foods represented as everyday meal options in the media I've consumed, creating a fear of eating Filipino foods in public. This fear of expressing my culture created a disconnect from my heritage.

15 **Telephobia, Alida-Joyce Cuevas**

"Telephobia" depicts an experience I've had while talking on the phone. When I need to make a phone call, my body becomes frozen and my head goes through so many questions. When dealing with anxiety, sometimes the littlest task can be so overwhelming.

21 **Genderfluidity, Pocky Aquino**

This work is about how I view the feeling of being gender fluid. Ever changing perception of yourself, identity, pronouns, and constant confusion.

24 **Lump in the Throat (unpeeled), Steven Johnson**

This self portrait unpeels the history of anxiety in my family. That nervous lump in my throat (like an orange) traces back to the roots of the stress, to the streets of Portugal where orange trees grow in abundance, and my grandmother and great grandmother grew anxiety within them.

- 27 **Cultura, Thalia Leticia Ruiz**
This was at an event called Dia de los Muertos and it was amazing to see a representation of my beautiful culture, this picture is of an Aztec dancer during Ceremony.
- 28 **Lifeline, Sean Chen**
I really wanted to share this photo as photography was a coping method for me during the pandemic. Using photography to capture the moment to share, is truly special. Taken at Ontario Place, I wanted to highlight the beauty even downtown, and that there is hope in the future!
- 32 **Maskara, Liam Vu**
Maskara is a play on the words mask, mascara and massacre. Growing up in a homophobic household as a gay, Vietnamese boy; I always feared yet sought comfort with makeup. This painting visualizes my experiences of willingly wearing makeup knowing that I am putting myself in danger.
- 36 **Whimsical Treehouse, Hania Ahmed**
This is my sketch of a whimsical treehouse in the woods. I chose this piece because of its wondrous look and feel. It's as if a fairy or other mythical creature lives in it since it doesn't look like an ordinary treehouse. The textures and details add to the look.
- 40 **The Rising of the Sun, Hana Aurora Wilson**
Using patterns inspired by 和柄 (traditional Japanese fabric patterns), I reimagined the myth of the Shinto Sun god, Amaterasu. Betrayed by her brother, Amaterasu falls into a depression, hiding herself away. In her absence, the world falls under an endless night. Only with her awakening can it begin to heal.
- 44 **When the Son Grew Up, Tianyang Jiang**
Before I turned 10, my dad was my hero and the person I aspired to be like. However, as the teenage angst started to hit, our relationship suffered. Looking back now, I wish I had spent more time with him because I truly loved him.
- 46 **Into the Dark, Josephine Winter**
This comic expresses how students felt in the pandemic lockdown. Making it, I realized I'd locked away feelings that accompanied memories from then – and it helped express myself in a way I didn't know was possible. I've finally emerged from this mess; only now can I see how big it was.
- 49 **Sullen Girl, Edie Hodgson**
This photo is from my series on girlhood and sadness. My photographs illustrate the cultural view of young girls as feminine and delicate, but with an underlying feeling of sadness and loneliness. I aim to show the veiled depression girls often go through when growing up.
- 53 **My Time With You, Erin Manalo**
I made this piece to remind everyone of the beauty in those around them and the warmth that another's presence can offer. A simple interaction can make someone's day. The dates at the bottom are significant as they hold fond memories. I hope that it reminds people to cherish others.

- 54 **Sticky Fingers, Isabella Perri**
My illustration is my take on how society places value on beauty standards. Youth have altered their faces (e.g., social media filters) for likes and approval. The fingers are taking away a piece of a person's outer beauty to fit everyone else's idea of what beauty is.
- 58 **The Woman in the Jacket, Kevin Parada**
"They're not mistakes, they're just happy accidents," said the late Bob Ross. That perfectly describes this shot; a work of art isn't without mistakes or strange timings, and that's exactly what happened with this shot; I was on my way to school.
- 62 **Little Moments, Salina Guo**
Between classes and extracurriculars, being able to spend even 5 minutes sketching out something or someone in my day has kept my grasp to my creative side. This allows me to cherish the little moments that fly by every day.
- 65 **The Empress, Elly Peng**
The piece is a photograph of a dress I designed and created. "The Empress" is a garment created as a celebration of femininity and power. Inspired by the elegance and regality of empresses throughout history, this piece embodies a sense of strength and confidence that is both timeless and contemporary.
- 67 **It's Kind of a Cultural Thing, Teo Rivas**
3"x24" a textile piece to do with reconnecting to familial roots, the Jaguar representing strength and a willingness to overcome what has passed.
- 71 **Division, Jeffrey Chang**
As future technology subsumes the organic world, the contrast between human industrialism and nature has grown more pronounced in recent years. We risk losing relationships with the natural world and the fundamental aspects of being human as we depend increasingly on machines and automation to carry out our agenda.
- 73 **To Clean Endlessly, Maria Saghatelyan**
Perhaps the job would be easier if the bucket wouldn't endlessly spill out an ocean.
- 76 **Peaceful Mind Level 5, Emily Tat**
Artworks that I make are usually the direct result of fatigue. It gives me the capacity to create works that reflect concepts of distorted imagery that I would not be able to portray visually otherwise. There's a certain peace that can be felt when perceiving something beautiful yet unsettling.
- 78 **Tarots, Ash Tran**
Raising awareness for the LGBTQIA+ community and breaking the binary gender construction of society.

young voices

get published!

Deadline for the 2024 magazine is March 24, 2024

Young Voices Magazine publishes writing and art created and selected by Toronto teens. We'd love to see what you've been creating! We accept submissions year-round and the deadline for the next issue is March 24, 2024.

Who can submit?

Teens ages 12-19 who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

What can you submit?

Up to two pieces each year: one piece of writing and one visual art piece.

How do you submit?

Use our online form or attach this form to your work and drop it off at any Toronto Public Library.

Need Inspiration?

Read past issues of Young Voices online! You can also get a copy of the most recent issue from your local library branch.

*Before you submit, please review the submission guidelines at tpl.ca/youngvoices

Please fill out this form and attach it to your submission. Please use a separate form for each piece you submit.

Full Name _____

Home Address _____

Postal Code _____

Email _____

Phone Number _____

Age _____ **Today's date** _____

Name of library branch where you submitted

Title of your submission

Young Voices publishes work by teens who live, work or go to school in Toronto. [check box for each option]

I live in Toronto

I work in Toronto

I go to school in Toronto

Type of Submission [check box for each option]

Poem

Review

Comic

Fiction

Photograph

Other _____

Opinion

Drawing/Painting

Optional: Attach a page to tell us about the inspiration or the idea behind your work. (max 50 words).





Cat on a Hill
Jojo Fawkes, 17

